

## **The Battle of Midway: Sixty-five Years Ago**

During the first six months of World War Two, after their successful attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese completed their great victories with the sinking of the British Battleships PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE. The Japanese juggernaut swept down through French Indo-China and across Thailand; they marched through Malaya, Burma, Ceylon and captured what once had been called the impregnable Port of Singapore. They took the Philippines and lost no time in adding: Sumatra; Java; Borneo; and, the Celebes to the imperial reign of Hirohito. They occupied New Britain, New Ireland and small groups of islands, known as The New Hebrides opposite the Dutch East Indies, and when they took the Solomon islands, only New Guinea stood between them and their projected conquest of Australia. Before their final drive they paused to consolidate and regroup.

Their tactics were relatively simple as they drove South against token opposition. They built air fields along the way to extend the bomb line for their aircraft. In the early days, when the Japanese were not making mistakes, no land or sea forces moved without air cover. They took their objectives with high precision and little loss of life. There were no massive attacks with men marching shoulder to shoulder, no frontal assaults like World War One. Instead the allies found themselves fighting an invisible enemy that hid behind retreating Allied columns, blocked roads, staged ambushes, and when the battle got too hot disappeared into the jungle. It was the simplicity of their tactics, more than anything else that made them a formidable foe, and they were more than a match for an unprepared enemy. As they succeeded, the myth of their invincibility was perpetuated by their propaganda and by the many war correspondents who wrote about their victories.

In order to boost the morale of America which was sorely in need of some tangible victory, President Franklin Roosevelt asked his joint chiefs and planners to come up with a plan to attack the Japanese mainland. The assignment was given to Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle (later Lt. General). On April 18, 1942, sixteen B-25 bombers, which were 850 miles out at sea from Japan, took off from the aircraft carrier HORNET to bomb Japan in what is now known as the Doolittle Raid. While the raid did not cause much damage, and from a tactical point of view was not successful, it caused the Japanese to rethink their strategy—as the

Japanese military had promised the emperor and the Japanese people that their homeland would never be attacked.

The original thinking of the Japanese planners, which was taught at the Japanese Naval War College, had been to draw the American fleet into a big confrontation where the Japanese Navy would defeat the Americans in an all-out battle, similar to the battle of Jutland in World War One. One of the main purposes of the attack on Pearl Harbor had been to disable the American fleet, but much to the Japanese chagrin, the carriers had not been there. In the fight for New Guinea, the Japanese had been stopped twice: once at the Battle of the Bismarck Sea and later in the famous Battle of the Coral Sea; but in neither battle had the Japanese laid their superior force of eight aircraft carriers on the line.

While the Coral Sea had been a tactical victory for Japan, as they traded the carrier SOHO for the carrier LEXINGTON and severely damaged the carrier YORKTOWN. In reality, it was a strategic defeat. They had lost the use of two other carriers that they needed for future operations. While not sunk, SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU were put out of action and were unavailable for the Battle of Midway. In order to prevent another attack such as the Doolittle Raid and to extend the bomb line so that they could control the whole western Pacific, Yamamoto came up with a very complex plan.

While the Japanese had superior well trained forces and their spirit was high, their plan would need the utmost coordination, precision, luck, and surprise. It was divided into several parts. Part one was to capture Tulagi, New Caledonia, and Port Moresby thus isolating Australia. Second, the primary force of aircraft carriers commanded by Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo consisting of the four carriers that attacked Pearl Harbor: the AKAGI, KAGA, HIRYU and SORYU and their assorted escort ships was to attack Midway on 4 June. After the carrier task force completed its mission of softening up the defenses to prepare Midway for an assault, five thousand troops waiting on transports would deploy for landing on 6 June. Two battle ships, four heavy cruisers and four destroyers commanded by Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo would support the troops landing on the island, thus extending Japan's bomb line in the Pacific. Third, while the Midway operation was going on, another force commanded by Rear Admiral Kajuji Kakuta would strike Dutch Harbor and a small group of three thousand men would capture Attu and Kiksa in the Aleutians—neutralizing the area. This, the Japanese believed, would keep the Americans from using the Aleutians to bomb

Japan and enable the Japanese to, maybe someday, use the islands to bomb the American mainland. Next, a guard force consisting of four battleships, two cruisers, and several destroyers were to take their position between Hawaii and the Aleutians in case Nimitz should send part of his fleet north to counter the Japanese Aleutian attack. Finally Admiral Yamamoto, himself, would lay northwest of Midway with three battleships -- including his flagship YAMATO--, the old small carrier HOSHO, and several screening destroyers. From here he could move to support either the Midway or the Aleutian attack forces as the operation unfolded. A fleet of submarines would lay off the coast of Hawaii waiting for the American ships to sail and when they did they would be attacked.

The Japanese knew that they could not win a protracted war, but in a single, all-out battle with superior forces, they thought they could win. Moreover, the Japanese were reading the American press and they knew that many in this country were against the war, including such men as Charles Lindbergh; and they believed that a decisive victory might cause America to sue for peace.

The plan at first glance appeared to be brilliant; however, what the Japanese did not know was that the Americans had broken their JN25 code, and were reading everything. Thus the American code breakers at Pearl Harbor (Station Hypo) led by Captain Joseph Rochefort knew the attack was eminent, but they just did not know where and when. From interceptions they learned that the Japanese code word for the attack was AF, but where was AF? Rochefort convinced Admiral Chester Nimitz to send a message, in the clear (not encrypted), that Midway was having trouble with its desalinization plant and was running low on water. Two days later, a decoded message from the Japanese reported that AF was running low on water, the target was now confirmed.

Nimitz, now armed with what he believed to be excellent information, prepared for the battle. Because the LEXINGTON had been sunk in the Battle of the Coral Sea and the YORKTOWN had been severely damaged, it left Nimitz with three carriers of which one was the crippled YORKTOWN. He divided his forces into two task forces—Task Force 16 and Task Force 17. Task Force 16 consisted of the carriers HORNET and ENTERPRISE and several support ships and was commanded by Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance. It was initially commanded by Vice Admiral William “Bull” Halsey; however, Spruance replaced Halsey after Halsey developed a skin irritation, which covered his whole body and confined him to hospital.

Task Force 17, which consisted of the damaged YORKTOWN, was commanded by Rear Admiral Jack Fletcher. As a senior officer Fletcher was in command of the entire operation. Fortunately for the Americans, the Japanese made a major error in the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Besides failing to knock out the oil depots, they did not destroy the dry docks and this enabled the YORKTOWN which had been severely damaged (the Japanese had thought that they had destroyed it in the Battle of the Coral Sea) to return to sea within in three days with 1500 repairmen aboard working feverishly to repair her. As it had been estimated that it would take over three months to repair the Yorktown, this was an amazing feat.

Task Force 16 deployed on 28 May followed by Task Force 17 on 30 May. The rendezvous point was Point Luck, located about 325 miles northeast of Midway. The Japanese subs arrived on 3 June -- five days too late to be effective. On 3 June, Dutch Harbor was attacked and the islands of Kiska and Attu were occupied by the Japanese. On the same day, Nagumo attacked Midway Island. Because the Americans were reading Japanese messages and were warned of the attack, all US planes were airborne and all runways on the island were deserted when the Japanese attacked. The Japanese destroyed the oil depots, docks, and many buildings, but no aircraft on the ground. In the process they lost several planes from anti-aircraft fire.

In the meantime, Nagumo lacking radar and good intelligence could not find the American carriers. Hearing from intelligence reports that not enough damage had been inflicted by his planes at Midway, he decided to attack the island again. He had held back many of his planes from the original attack to ensure that they would be armed with torpedoes for use against any American naval force that might be sighted. This meant he had to change the planes' armaments from torpedoes to bombs for the second attack. This is a time consuming operation that involved lowering each plane into the hanger deck. However, to speed things up, torpedoes were left on the deck instead of being properly stored below in the magazine.

Soon Nagumo's carriers came under a series of uncoordinated attacks conducted by planes from Midway Island. Four army B26s and six TBF torpedo planes attacked. Two of the B26s and five TBFs were shot down. This attack was followed by sixteen SB2U marine corps dive bombers and fifteen Army B17s. Bombing from 20,000 feet, the B17s failed to score a single hit. Eleven more

Marine SB2 fighters followed the B17s. Anti-aircraft and Zero fighters fended off these attacks and no hits were scored on the Japanese ships.

While this was happening, scout planes from Nagumo's force were searching the area for American carriers. At 0728 hours one of these planes reported back to Nagumo that a force of ten ships was approaching from about 200 miles away. The pilot did not identify the ships by type and without knowing whether American carriers were present, Nagumo could not be sure whether he should continue with the second strike on Midway or divert his planes to attack these ships. He decided that the American ships were a more important target and ordered the rearming of his torpedo bombers stopped. He would go ahead and attack the ten ships with whatever bombs his planes had in their racks. However, at 0758 hours, the scout planes reported a US force of five cruisers and twenty-five destroyers. Not until 0820 did the pilot inform Nagumo that one of the ships appeared to be a carrier. This news made a timely attack vital. But as he prepared to attack, planes from the first raid on Midway began to return. As they hovered overhead, Nagumo had to make a quick decision. Recover or go. He decided to recover these planes immediately. Instead of launching his strike at the new American contacts, the ready planes were stored below; the Midway planes landed and began the rearming and refueling process.

While this was occurring, 116 US planes of various types descended upon him. Fifteen torpedo planes from the HORNET'S famous Torpedo Squadron 8 attacked in force; however, all fifteen were shot down – and only one American pilot survived, Ensign George Gay. Moreover, not one torpedo hit its mark. Twenty-five torpedo planes from the YORKTOWN and fourteen planes from the ENTERPRISE also attacked and while they were not all destroyed like squadron 8, none hit their target. In the end, while none of the aircraft inflicted much damage, the attacking squadrons had sacrificed themselves, as they kept Nagumo carriers maneuvering to avoid torpedoes, which prevented him from launching his airplanes.

Nagumo's fighter cover had done a good job, but because they had to drop down low to intercept the Torpedo planes this permitted the American dive bombers to come in from above catching the carriers unprotected. The Americas were able to inflict hits on all three, setting off massive fires and explosions from the armed and fueled planes and torpedoes still sitting on their decks. Within

three minutes all three carriers were ablaze and out of commission. The SORYU, AKAGI and KAGA later sunk and the pride of the Japanese Navy was gone.

Rear Admiral Tamom Yamaguchi of the HIRU learned that the YORKTOWN was nearby. He sent two flights, one consisting of eighteen Val dive bombers and six Zero fighters followed by an additional flight of ten torpedo bombers and six more fighters, after the YORKTOWN. After a heroic fight, the YORKTOWN was sunk from the HIRU attack planes and a nearby Japanese submarine (I169) and the USS HERMAN, a destroyer who was escorting the damaged YORKTOWN, was also sunk. In the meantime, the Americans went after the HIRU and sunk the HIRU along with its commander RADM Yamaguchi. Spruance, who took command of the US forces that was passed to him by Admiral Fletcher when the YORKTOWN was sunk, decided to retire rather than pursue the Japanese whom he knew was a potent force. Yamamoto also decided to do the same. Thus ended one of the great naval battles of all time.

### **Results of the Battle**

	<b>American Loses</b>	<b>Japanese Loses</b>
<b>Sailors &amp; Airmen</b>	305	2500
<b>Carriers</b>	1	4
<b>Heavy Cruisers</b>	0	1
<b>Destroyers</b>	1	0
<b>Aircraft</b>	147	332

Japan suffered heavy damage to one cruiser and medium damage to two destroyers not counting the two cruisers MOGAMI and MIKUMA which collided and slight damage to a battleship, a destroyer and an oilier. The Americans captured a Japanese Zero in the Aleutian campaign which enabled American experts to exploit its vulnerabilities in future campaigns. On the other hand, the US lost Attu and Kiksa for a period of 17 months, but experienced little damage at Midway and moderate damage at Dutch Harbor.

### **Final Word**

In the final analysis, the American victory at Midway was both brilliant and lucky. The Japanese made many mistakes. Major ones were overconfidence and a plan that violated many the principles of war such as: mass, concentration,

economy of force, simplicity, security, and unity of command. Had the US not broken the code and learned that AF was Midway; American ships may have been out of position. In the end, US leadership was better. One of the breaks of the battle may have been that Vice Admiral “Bull” Halsey, because of his skin disease had to be replaced by Raymond Spruance, a man who had little training as carrier leader, but who was a great commander and became the unsung hero of the battle for his brilliance. The Nimitz, Spruance, and Fletcher team appeared to be better coordinated than the Yamamoto--Nagumo team. The timing of the attack and the fact that the dive bombers were at maximum range when they finally found their targets were lucky breaks for the Americans.

In due respect, two of the major Japanese players, Minoru Genda and Mitsuo Fuchida, while present were physically incapacitated and thus did not take part in the battle. Their participation may have made a difference. The Japanese were cocky. Every one that this author talked to including: Masataka Chihaya, Mitsuo Fuchida, and Minora Genoa told me in interview after interview that they thought they were unbeatable and had what they would call ‘victory disease’.

Finally, as my mentor Gordon W. Prange told me, one must consider the intangibles. What might have happened had the Japanese won is very debatable and open to speculation, but had they won and had the Americans lost their carriers at Midway, Australia would have been next and with the aerial striking power of the US fleet out of the running, there would have been little to stop them. Had the Japanese won it would have been open season on US forces. Japan would have been in total command of the Pacific, including possibly the US west coast. Fortunately, this did not happen. As Captain Edwin T. Layton pointed out to Prange, “at Midway the Japanese lost or left behind a naval air force that had been the terror of the Pacific—an elite force, an overwhelming force that would never again come back and spread destruction and fear as it had over the first six months of the war.” This is the meaning of Midway.