

Testimony on the Historical Significance of Midway Atoll

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The Battle of Midway: A Global Turning Point

Within approximately two years, the United States will commemorate the 65th anniversary of the Battle of Midway. This was a crucial battle for the U.S. Navy; it was a showdown between the triumphant aggressor, the Japanese Imperial Navy and the U.S. Pacific Fleet. This struggle would determine the course of World War II. If Japan won this battle and followed up its victory, the U.S. could lose its control of the Hawaiian Islands, probably the Aleutians, and the fleet would have to retreat to the West Coast. Not only that. The Panama Canal would be threatened and so would our westernmost states. But, there was even more at stake. If the United States were unable to gain this victory over Japan in the Pacific, what would happen in Europe? The Battle of Midway, as events were to prove, would become the lynchpin for Allied victory over the Axis in World War II.

Two days after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Nazi Germany declared war on the United States. German armies had already over-run the Poland, France, Belgium, and Holland. The British expeditionary army might have been exterminated had not their evacuation from Dunkirk enabled it to fight another day. During the Battle of Britain, the Royal Air Force had beaten back the savage German air attacks that were a premonition of invasion. In those dark days, the Anglo-American alliance was just gathering steam. President Roosevelt, his congressional allies, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had created a "Europe First" strategy that would deal with German military threat across the Atlantic while defensively holding Japan at bay. Thus, the onset of the Battle of Midway raised a global crisis.

The Pearl Harbor attack of 7 December 1941 awakened the United States not only to the ruthlessness of the Japanese Empire but also to the importance of carrier aviation in mid-20th century warfare. The capital ship of World War II was to be the aircraft carrier, not the battleship. A less heralded weapon was the American submarine, which would also change the nature of warfare in the Pacific. Operating independently for the most part, these dark, silent vessels would eventually cut off Japan from its sources of supply.

The naval strategy pursued by Admirals Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations and COMINCH (Commander in Chief, U. S. Fleet), and Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, after Pearl Harbor was to shove the Japanese off balance. At the same time, American naval leaders worked to strengthen their forces on the line of communications between the West Coast and Hawaii-Midway and that between California and Australia via the island groups of the South Pacific. Japan had fortified bases reaching into the Caroline, Marshall, and Gilbert Islands, but not yet so far as the Solomons.

To protect U.S. - Australia line of communication, Nimitz established a carrier covering and raiding strategy. By January Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher's Task Force 17, centered on the carrier Yorktown, sailed into the southwest Pacific, escorting transports carrying troops ordered to American Samoa. On 1 February carrier units raided the islands of Wotje, Roi-Namur, and Kwajalein. Soon afterward, other task forces launched raids against Lae and Salamaua, on the northern New Guinea coast. This was a rude intrusion into the area that the Japanese thought they controlled. Meanwhile, Rear Admiral William F. Halsey's carrier group hit Wake and Marcus Islands, both located about 1,000 miles from Japan. This hit and run strategy reached its climax with the dramatic and innovative Halsey-Doolittle raid.

In late March, sixteen B-25s were lifted on the flight deck of the carrier Hornet in San Francisco. Departing in complete secrecy, this unit rendezvoused with Halsey's battle group in the North Pacific. On 18 April, Halsey launched Doolittle's bombers. When Japanese vessels reported sighting the task force. While the raid on Tokyo did little damage, it did cause embarrassment to the Japanese high command, diverted Japanese defense forces into search activity, and boosted American morale at a critical time. It also hardened the Japanese decision to strike at Midway Atoll.

Meanwhile, Admiral King's cryptographers learned by deciphering the Japanese naval code that the enemy was planning a major fleet penetration of the Coral Sea and an attack on New Guinea's Port Moresby. These forces would pose a grave threat to American bases at Samoa and New Caledonia and the U.S. Australia line of communication. U.S. intelligence also learned that the Japanese planned to establish airfields at Tulagi in the Solomons. In response, Admiral Fletcher led the Yorktown and Lexington carrier groups into the Coral Sea in search of the enemy. On the morning of 7 May, the American and Japanese sent their air units out. Each side made contact with and sank or damaged a few ships. The following day, however, the Japanese put two bombs and two torpedoes into Lexington, mortally wounding her, while hitting Yorktown with one bomb. The U.S. lost 43 planes and the Japanese, 77, in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

As a result, the Japanese did not press their naval advance toward Australia. Even before the Coral Sea fight, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, decided to lure Nimitz's fleet into battle in the Central Pacific and destroy it. This was to be a major fleet battle in the Mahanian sense. The Japanese admiral planned to attack Midway Atoll by air and seize it with amphibious forces, thereby inducing a counter-move by Nimitz in force. Simultaneously,

other Japanese units attempted to divert American attention by thrusting toward the Aleutian Islands in the North Pacific. Thinking that Yorktown as well as Lexington had been sunk in the Coral Sea battle, Yamamoto was convinced that he could destroy the fighting power of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific, attack the Hawaiian Islands again, and then resume the South Pacific offensive that Fletcher had so rudely interrupted.

The U.S. fleet was outnumbered before Midway, but American intelligence and the element of surprise evened the odds. Initially, however, Nimitz's and King's cryptographers differed in their analysis of Japanese moves. King's analysts thought the enemy planned to attack south toward the American-Australian sea line of communications while Nimitz's staff believed the Japanese intended to strike at Midway. Fortunately for the Pacific Fleet, the latter interpretation held sway. Anticipating when and where the Japanese fleet would arrive off Midway, and in what strength, Nimitz sent three carriers under the overall command of Admiral Fletcher to intercept. To command the Enterprise task group, the hospitalized Halsey recommended Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance, a "black shoe" sailor who had never served on board a carrier but whose other qualities recommended him highly.

Yamamoto's fleet was truly formidable. It consisted of Vice Admiral Nagumo's carrier striking force with four carriers, and 350 miles behind, the Main Force centered on the battleship Yamato, five smaller battleships, ten cruisers, twenty destroyers and two light carriers for air defense. The Midway Occupation Force, made up of troop transports (containing some 4,600 infantry), steamed in parallel hundreds of miles south of the Main Body. To meet the Japanese, the American fleet was comprised of two task forces, Task Force 16, under Rear Admiral Spruance, including the carriers Enterprise and Hornet, screened by six cruisers and eight destroyers, and accompanied by two oilers and their two destroyer escorts. When Task Force 17, commanded by Fletcher in Yorktown, sortied it had a screen of but two cruisers and five destroyers. Fletcher, the senior and more battle-tested admiral, was in overall command. The imbalance of these combatants was significant: Japan had 86 surface fighting ships as compared with the American force's 28, and as for aircraft, the Japanese carriers had 325 planes as against the American carriers' 233. If one adds the Midway-based aircraft, the American total swells to 348.

On Midway Atoll, our thin defenses included the Marine 6th Defense Battalion and a Marine Air Group, armed with seven Grumman F4Fs, 16 obsolete Brewster Buffaloes, and 18 SBD bombers. For reconnaissance, Midway had 22 PBV long-range patrol planes. In addition, there were six Navy torpedo planes that had arrived too late at Pearl Harbor to depart with USS Hornet. Eleven PT boats were ready in case the Japanese invasion force came in close, and the Army Air Forces contributed four torpedo-equipped B-26s and fifteen B-17s. For shore defense, the atoll had five tanks, eight mortars, 14 surface guns, 32 anti-aircraft guns, and 3,632 defenders. The Midway communications station was equipped with underwater cable for secure message contact with headquarters at Pearl Harbor.

After Navy cryptographers at Pearl Harbor had identified Midway as the Japanese target and the intended attack date as 4 June, Nimitz's planners prepared an ambush for Nagumo's carriers. The admiral paid a visit to Midway on 2 May; he inspected the entire area, and interviewed the Navy and Marine Corps commanders. During the next month he poured reinforcements into Midway Atoll. It paid off. Between 0530 and 0545 on 4 June, Navy patrol planes reported contact with Admiral Nagumo's carriers. As Japanese planes headed for Midway, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy planes operating from Midway Atoll took off to strike at Nagumo's carrier task force. While these attacks did not hurt the enemy, they upset the timing of Nagumo's attack and caused him to order an additional bombing strike against Midway. For the Japanese, it was the land-based striking power of the forces on Midway that gave them pause. Admiral Nagumo was obsessed with the need to obliterate the airfield on Eastern Island and other defenses before the invasion of the atoll could take place. He was initially unaware that the U.S. Pacific Fleet carriers were within striking distance.

Enterprise and Hornet launched their aircraft, followed about an hour later by Yorktown's. The torpedo planes from Hornet, Enterprise, and Yorktown, flying low and under constant attack from ships and planes, failed to hit any carriers while taking heavy losses. Their attack, however, had drawn enemy fighters down virtually to sea level, so when dive-bombers from Enterprise and Yorktown appeared over the Japanese carriers and they faced little opposition from Japanese air defense. Akagi, Kaga and Soryu soon were ablaze amid fuel and ordnance explosions and all three would sink within 24 hours. Planes from Hiryu, the last operative Japanese carrier, followed the American bombers back to Yorktown and severely damaged her. A Japanese submarine later sank her. The U.S. pilots soon found the sub and sent her to the bottom. The only U.S. submarine near the battle was Nautilus whose tactics and torpedo firings made its presence known. Despite a lack of hits, Nautilus's presence distracted the enemy and contributed to his confusion. By the end of the battle, Japanese suffered four carriers sunk and one heavy cruiser sunk, 325 aircraft destroyed, and 2,500 men killed or missing. Among these casualties, the Japanese Navy lost some of its best naval aviators. Japanese industry could not easily replace the carriers lost at Midway. American losses included one carrier, one destroyer, 163 aircraft, and 307 men killed or missing.

The "what-ifs" of history stand out when one considers the alternatives: what if Nimitz's intelligence appraisals had not been followed; what if superb navigation had not brought the American bombers over the Japanese task force simultaneously? What if, despite having sunk the enemy carriers, Spruance had pursued westward into the big guns

of Yamamoto's Main Force battleships? What if we had lost our carriers and the Japanese had occupied Midway? Would it have put the Hawaiian Islands in jeopardy and forced the American defense perimeter back to the West coast? How would this have affected Allied forces in Australia and Europe? To be sure, the war would have been lengthened, and America's will to win would have been put to the test.

Fortunately, a combination of intelligence, skill, bravery, and luck turned the tide. Although much vicious fighting remained ahead, the Battle of Midway marked not only the major turning point in the Pacific War, it was a watershed event for World War II because it freed the United States from shifting to a "Pacific First" strategy in order to protect the West Coast and our nearby Pacific Territories, Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands. This, in turn, allowed what historian Samuel Eliot Morison called the "Two-Ocean War" to go forward. The invasion of North Africa, the first stepping-stone for Allied landings on the European mainland, was soon thereafter scheduled for November 1942.

Had we lost the Battle of Midway, despite Anglo-American entente and sentimental attachment to England, the real threat to American life, liberty, and property would have been seen as Japanese military power close to our shores. Nothing less than a complete harnessing of national will, blood, and treasure would have been mobilized to defeat that threat. England would have been thrown back on the diminishing resources of the British Empire; plans for a Second Front would have been postponed, as well as our invasions of Africa, Sicily, and Italy. The American victory at Midway made a huge difference in the way World War II was fought, globally.

It is for these reasons that I appear before you, representing the International Midway Memorial Foundation, to ask your consideration of the reopening of Midway atoll to public visitation. Citizens of the United States should be welcome to visit the ground where fellow American Sailors and Marines gave their lives for their country. I would also ask that you consider replacing Fish and Wildlife management with that of another agency. For a while in the 1990s, Midway was open to a limited number of visitors under the partnership of the Midway Phoenix Corporation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While Midway Phoenix was operating the Atoll, Midway Atoll was not a great burden on the American taxpayers. But the Fish and Wildlife Service reversed itself and made life and work difficult for Midway Phoenix, discouraging visitors and effectively forcing Midway Phoenix out of business on Midway. The airstrip is now all but closed and facing ruin despite its strategic value for U.S. airline carriers. The historic buildings have been allowed to decay and many have been removed.

Almost all traces of a once proud presence have been eliminated. I say almost, because, there is still, I hope, a remnant of the work contributed by IMMF remaining on Midway, dating from 1995. It is a granite monument dedicated to the personnel of all services who worked here during World War II. Its engravings and names record the great work done there. But what is a monument without visitors, and where is the historical interpretation of the once efficient airfield that launched flights of U.S. Army Air Force B-17s, Marine Corps fighters and bombers, and Navy torpedo planes and bombers? Where are the wayside markers to indicate where the dugouts, gun emplacements, and communications buildings once stood? There is almost nothing left of historic value, and that has been, we believe, the intention of Fish and Wildlife staffers since Midway Phoenix departed. This is not the way it should be, and I would urge this committee to think of how it could be handled differently by another agency, committed to both wildlife conservation and the preservation of a noble historic tradition. It could, I submit, with the right philosophy and the right people under the direction of the Department of Interior.

The Navy Department today commemorates nationally only two events each year. One is the Navy's Birthday, October 13, 1775. The other is the Battle of Midway, on June 4, 1942. In a speech given two years ago, former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger provided the most eloquent reason for why we should commemorate the Battle of Midway: "Midway was far more than a decisive naval victory. It was far more than the turning of the tide in the Pacific war. In a strategic sense, Midway represents one of the great turning points of world history." I leave you with this thought. If this event can be considered so important, Americans should be able to recognize and commemorate it at the Battle of Midway National Memorial on Midway Atoll. Thank you for your kind attention and consideration.