



World War II sea power required airpower. At Midway, the US sent four Japanese carriers to the bottom of the Pacific.

The Battle of Midway

By Barrett Tillman



“Midway Island” is a misnomer. Scene of the American naval victory in June 1942, Midway is actually two islands some 3,800 miles west of California and 2,500 east of Tokyo. But its near-center position in the Pacific Ocean was less important than its proximity to Pearl Harbor: Midway is 1,300 miles northwest of Oahu.

The strategic stage for Midway was set long before World War II. For more than 30 years, American and Japanese planners envisioned a decisive fleet engagement in mid-Pacific, a scenario with battleships as the major players. But aviation worked a stunning change.

The Japanese carrier striking force (Kido Butai) that ravaged Pearl Harbor in 1941 was unlike anything the world had ever seen. Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo's six flattops put 350 aircraft over Pearl Harbor, announcing with convincing violence that sea power now included airpower. Successive operations throughout the Pacific only reinforced Tokyo's military prowess.

Meanwhile, the US Navy was forced to rely upon its few carriers. At the start of the war, America possessed just seven fleet carriers—fast ships capable of more than 35 mph, embarking 70 or more aircraft.

Initially, Adm. Chester W. Nimitz's Pacific Fleet owned three flattops, USS *Lexington* (CV-2), *Saratoga* (CV-3), and *Enterprise* (CV-6). The need for another flight deck was undeniable, so *Enterprise's* older sister, *Yorktown* (CV-5), hastened to the Pacific.

The next months were spent in hit-and-run carrier raids from the Gilbert and Marshall Islands, to Wake Island, to New Guinea, and the Solomons. More significantly, in mid-April the newly arrived USS *Hornet* (CV-8) launched Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle's B-25s against Tokyo.

The Imperial Navy was at once embarrassed and outraged. America's carriers had to be destroyed.

Then, in early May, something completely unprecedented occurred. The two-day Battle of the Coral Sea pitted *Lexington* and *Yorktown* against three Japanese flattops in a carrier versus carrier engagement. For the first time ever, neither fleet sighted the other, the battle being conducted wholly by aircraft. *Lexington* was lost and *Yorktown* damaged, while a small Japanese carrier was sunk

and the larger *Shokaku* damaged. The air group of her sister carrier, *Zuikaku*, was mauled, and would be unable to deploy anytime soon.

Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Combined Fleet, predicted Japan would run rampant for six months, but subsequently nothing was certain. Therefore, he knew seizing Midway would threaten Oahu, forcing Nimitz into battle.

Fortunately for the US, American code breakers identified occasional plums of intelligence and began piecing together enemy intentions. They handed Nimitz the priceless advantage of advance notice of Operation MI, Japan's plan to occupy Midway.

Catalinas and B-17s

In all, Japan deployed more than 120 vessels in five task forces. They included Yamamoto's powerful “main body” trailing well astern of Kido Butai with 17 ships, none of which played a role in the battle—nor did the invasion and support forces with scores of vessels, plus submarines.

Nagumo deployed four veteran flattops, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu*, and *Hiryu*, with 15 escorting battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. The Battle of the Coral Sea had reduced the forces that Kido Butai could commit to Midway, but the overall Japanese advantage appeared insurmountable.

Tokyo's dispersion lessened the odds faced by the US at any specific point of contact, but the odds were still long. Nimitz's two task forces totaled three carriers with 23 escorts. They departed in late May, *Yorktown* still bearing Coral Sea bomb damage.

(Simultaneous with the Midway attack in early June was Tokyo's operation against the American-owned Aleutian Islands. Some accounts still describe the Aleutians as a strategic diversion, but it was a serious effort intended to succeed on its own. Occupation of Attu and Kiska was expected to secure Japan's northern flank and draw off American assets from elsewhere. The Alaskan offensive included two carriers that would be sorely missed at Midway.)

Despite the huge disparity in ships, the Americans were far better matched in what mattered most: airpower. With 225 carrier aircraft and 125 more on Midway, Nimitz's assets matched Yamamoto's 248 tailhook aircraft and 16 recon floatplanes. Another daunting problem: At the time, Japanese designs invariably outperformed their American counterparts, especially Zero fighters

versus Grumman Wildcats and Nakajima B5Ns (later Kates) versus Douglas TBD-1 Devastator torpedo aircraft. The opposing dive-bombers—Douglas SBD Dauntlesses and Aichi D3A Vals—were both proven ship killers.

Nimitz crammed every available aircraft onto Midway, America's first fully joint operation of the war. Thirty-two PBY Catalina patrol aircraft operated mostly from Midway's seaplane base on Sand Island, while Marine, Navy, and Army units used all the ramp space on Midway's Eastern Island. The Marine air group flew a mixed squadron of SBD and Vought SB2U Vindicator scout-bombers, while the fighters mainly were Brewster F2A Buffalos with Wildcats.

The Navy debuted six TBF Avenger torpedo airplanes alongside the Army's B-26 Marauder torpedo bombers.

The Army Air Forces' main contribution was significant, comprising 19 B-17Es from the 5th and 11th Bomb Groups.

The ungainly, long-legged Catalinas made first contact with the enemy. On the morning of June 3, they sighted lead elements of the Japanese force more than 450 miles out. Late that afternoon, Lt. Col. Walter C. Sweeney Jr. was over the enemy with nine B-17s. He sent a contact report, then led a high-altitude bombing attack that predictably failed.

Hitting moving ships from 20,000 feet was a huge challenge that the Army fliers seldom trained to do. Nevertheless, the Flying Fortresses made their first contribution to the battle.

Early on the fourth, three PBYs attacked the enemy transport force and torpedoed an oiler. The ship and the attackers survived, knowing they faced a full day of battle. More Catalinas and the B-17s rose before dawn, flying long-range searches to re-establish contact.

Nagumo's air plan began with a 108-airplane attack. The formation was seen by airborne Americans who sent a warning: “Many planes heading Midway.”

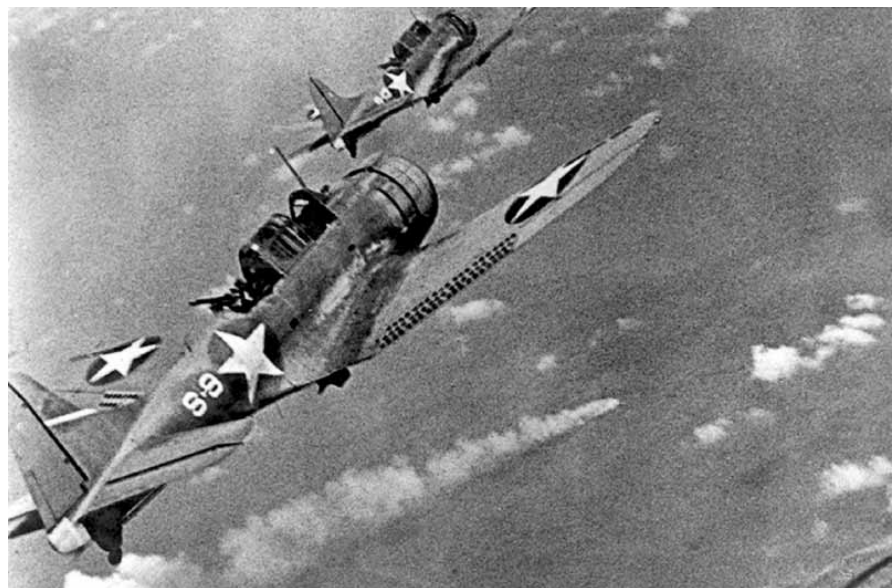
Beginning around 6 a.m., Midway began scrambling everything: 25 Marine fighters; 10 Army-Navy torpedo airplanes; and 28 Leatherneck scout-bombers. The pilots of Marine Fighting Squadron 221, led by Maj. Floyd B. Parks, barely managed to engage the raiders. Committed piecemeal, caught at an altitude disadvantage by superior aircraft flown by experienced pilots, the Marines suffered terribly.

In a few minutes, nearly all the Buffalos were shot down, with Parks and most of his pilots killed. For decades

Left (top): *Yorktown* during the Battle of Midway and **(bottom)** on fire. It was torpedoed and attacked by Japanese dive-bombers.



Left: An aerial photo of the two islands comprising Midway. Eastern Island is in the foreground, Sand Island in the back. Below: Dauntless aircraft from USS Hornet approach the burning Japanese cruiser Mikuma during the battle.



thereafter, the Buffalo was considered a “death trap”—but under those conditions, a full squadron of Wildcats would likely have fared little better.

The Japanese lost a dozen airplanes to the defenders—mostly to anti-aircraft fire—but did a thorough wrecking job on Midway. They destroyed hangars, the power plant, fuel stores, and ordnance facilities. As the strike leader departed he signaled, “There is need for a second attack.” Back at the strike group, Nagumo ordered another bombing mission readied.

Meanwhile, Midway’s hodgepodge strike group neared the Japanese force. One of the Avenger pilots was Ensign Albert K. Earnest, who described a running battle over the last 15 miles. Fast, slashing Zeros knocked down five TBFs, leaving Earnest to press his attack with a dead gunner and wounded radioman.

He recalled, “My elevator wires were shot away. I released my torpedo at the nearest ship, a light cruiser, as I thought I was out of control, but regained control with the elevator tab.” He returned his riddled airplane to make a one-wheel landing at Midway.

An AAF contribution came from Capt. James F. Collins Jr.’s flight of four speedy B-26 Marauders. They pressed their attacks to the limit. One B-26 nearly crashed on the flagship *Akagi*’s flight deck, and ultimately only Collins’ and Lt. James P. Muri’s Marauders returned.

Next came the Marine bombers. Only partly trained, VMSB-241 was limited to glide-bombing attacks rather than steep dives. Eight Dauntlesses were lost

attacking *Hiryu*, while the Vindicators fared no better. Unable to close on the carriers, they went after battleships, losing four airplanes to no avail.

Shortly, Sweeney was back with 14 B-17s attacking in small formations that fountained the sea around enemy carriers but scratched no paint. As if that weren’t frustrating enough, the submarine *Nautilus* drew a bead on the carrier *Kaga* and scored a hit—with a dud torpedo.

By that time, Japanese scouts were aloft. A cruiser floatplane radioed alarming news: An American force was “accompanied by what appears to be a carrier.”

A Flight to Nowhere

Nagumo now realized that he faced a serious threat at sea and ordered bombs on his Kates to be exchanged for torpedoes, costing precious time.

Of the two American units, Rear Adm. Raymond A. Spruance’s Task Force 16 was first off the mark. Replacing the ailing Vice Adm. William F. Halsey, Spruance had *Enterprise* and *Hornet* begin launching their air groups when the range closed to launch distance. Meanwhile, Rear Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher, in overall command from *Yorktown*’s Task Force 17, waited to recover his scouts before proceeding southwesterly. In the pivotal carrier battle, neither American admiral was an aviator.

Due to staff problems, “The Big E” and *Hornet* failed to coordinate their efforts, and both launches dragged out. *Enterprise*’s air group commander, Lt. Cmdr. C. Wade McClusky, circled with

his two SBD squadrons for nearly an hour before being ordered to “proceed on mission assigned.” He led 30 Dauntlesses toward the expected interception point, separate from his torpedo squadron.

Meanwhile, *Hornet*’s squadrons followed their enormously unpopular air group commander, Cmdr. Stanhope C. Ring, who led them on what has been called a “flight to nowhere” heading almost due west.

Torpedo Eight skipper Lt. Cmdr. John C. Waldron finally broke off to port, knowing that Kido Butai had to be to the southwest. The SBDs continued to the extent of their fuel before returning to *Hornet* or diverting to Midway, while the inept fighter group skipper ran 10 aircraft out of fuel with two pilots lost.

Waldron found the enemy, and about 9:30 a.m. led his 15 Devastators into Kido Butai. An unescorted daylight torpedo attack on an alerted fleet could only go one way: Some 40 Zeros awaited the attackers and quickly destroyed the squadron. All the TBDs were shot down with one pilot surviving; no ships were hit.

Next appeared *Enterprise*’s Torpedo Six. It suffered nearly as much as Torpedo Eight. Lt. Cmdr. Eugene E. Lindsey was killed at the head of his group of 14 Devastators, only four of which returned.

All the while, McClusky’s SBDs searched. Reaching the briefed contact point, he found empty sea and continued several miles beyond. Shrewdly reckoning that Nagumo had to be northerly, McClusky began a box search. In fact, the Japanese had turned off their southeast course to avoid successive attacks.

Burning fuel, the Dauntlesses continued the hunt.

The third and last American torpedo squadron was *Yorktown*'s Torpedo Three. Launched later than the other units, Lt. Cmdr. Lance E. Massey arrived just as the smoke was clearing from the previous interception. The squadron's dozen Devastators were all lost, but they kept the pressure on Nagumo.

Then the sky rained Dauntlesses.

In an unintentionally coordinated attack, *Enterprise*'s SBDs arrived over the target just as *Yorktown*'s dive-bombers appeared. McClusky had taken a heading from a Japanese destroyer harrying the submarine *Nautilus*, and struck gold.

In the next few minutes, the Big E's squadrons experienced an aerial traffic jam as the scouts and most of the bombers went for *Kaga*. McClusky's pilots hammered her 36,000 tons into shambles.

The Bombing Squadron Six skipper, Lt. Richard H. Best, was left with only two wingmen, but he destroyed *Akagi* with a perfect center hit. As they pulled out amid the flak, *Enterprise*'s fliers saw a third carrier burning: *Soryu* was victim of Lt. Cmdr. Maxwell F. Leslie's *Yorktown* SBD dive-bombers.

In a matter of minutes, the battle had completely reversed course.

Enterprise lost about half her Dauntlesses on the mission. The Yorktowners initially got off lightly. However, the surviving Japanese carrier, *Hiryu*, quickly launched dive-bombers that crippled

Yorktown and left her adrift. Lt. Cmdr. John S. Thach's Wildcats exacted a heavy price for the success, but neither side was ready to quit.

Meanwhile, a *Yorktown* scout found *Hiryu* and provided her position. The remaining *Yorktown* and *Enterprise* SBDs integrated and prepared to finish off *Hiryu*, but not before *Hiryu*'s Nakajimas attacked and put two torpedoes into *Yorktown*, forcing her abandonment. Shortly thereafter, the Dauntlesses were back, wrecking *Hiryu* and depriving Nagumo of his final flight deck.

Sweet, Sweet Revenge

Stunned at the reversal, Yamamoto realized that without air cover, he would lose more ships.

Operation MI was called off, yet the battle continued for two days.

Spruance assumed overall command from the displaced Fletcher and authorized search-strikes to pummel the retreating enemy. Still, very little came easily. On the fifth, three squadrons of SBDs found a lone Japanese destroyer that evaded every bomb and shot down a Dauntless to boot.

During the night, two Japanese cruisers collided, leaving them limping westward. They were soon discovered and pounced upon by *Enterprise* and *Hornet* dive-bombers which sank *Mikuma* and clobbered *Mogami*. By the afternoon of June 6, it appeared the battle was over.

However, a Japanese sub captain thought otherwise. The 1,400-ton *I-168* penetrated *Yorktown*'s protective screen and fired a devastating salvo. Torpedoes ripped the bottom out of the destroyer *Hammann*, secured alongside *Yorktown*, and inflicted mortal damage on "Old Yorky." She lingered until the morning of the seventh, and with her sinking, the Battle of Midway finally ended.

The Midway scoreboard showed a decisive American win. Four Japanese carriers and a cruiser were destroyed, with some 3,000 enemy killed, including irreplaceable aircrew. For the US, principal losses included one carrier and destroyer, with 307 aircrew and sailors killed.

For decades after the war, conventional wisdom held that Midway averted a greater Japanese triumph in the Pacific. Two standard references were Walter Lord's *Incredible Victory* (1967) and Gordon W. Prange's *Miracle at Midway* (1982), which typified the battle's public image.

Over time, though, a more measured assessment has arisen. A Japanese victory at Midway never had the potential to end the war on terms favorable to Tokyo. Loss of two or even all three US carriers would have delayed the Central Pacific offensive, but not thwarted it. American resolve was unshakable following Pearl Harbor, and public opinion demanded a reckoning. V-J Day might have been delayed, but perhaps only one year.

In any case, Midway remains a source of intense pride for its participants. None expressed it better than SBD pilot Best, who had dropped the bomb that sank *Akagi*. "Midway was revenge, sweet revenge for Pearl Harbor," said Best. "The Italians say that revenge is a dish best served cold, and after Pearl Harbor, it was six months cold."

The battle may not have marked an indisputable turning point in the war, but it had enormous strategic importance. Midway was Japan's last major offensive of the war; afterward it ceded the strategic initiative to the United States. Only two months later, US marines landed at Guadalcanal, beginning a six-month battle of attrition that ensured Japan could not win and America could not lose. ■

Barrett Tillman is a professional author and speaker who has flown a variety of historic aircraft and has received six writing awards for history and literature. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.



A Japanese aircraft carrier burns after dive-bomber attacks. Four Japanese aircraft carriers were destroyed at Midway, and some 3,000 Japanese were killed.