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AN UNSINKABLE CARRIER:  
THE MIDWAY-BASED FORCES AND THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

by

HUBERT R. "RANDY" CROOMS

(Under the Direction of Charles S. Thomas)

ABSTRACT

The Battle of Midway is remembered as one of the greatest military victories in American history and marked as the turning point of the Second World War in the Pacific. The victory has long been celebrated as a great US Naval victory, brought about by the US Navy's Carrier Task Forces. Remembering the battle solely as a carrier victory overlooks the contributions of the Midway-based forces. In truth, the Midway-based forces performed invaluable roles and contributed greatly to the overall victory, and historiography of the Battle of Midway is incomplete without their inclusion. This study documents the contributions of the Midway-based forces and seeks to rectify their omission in the history of the Battle of Midway.

INDEX WORDS: Midway, Midway atoll, Battle of midway, Midway-based forces, Midway naval air station, 6th Marine defense battalion, Fleet marine force, 14<sup>th</sup> naval district, Cyril t. simard, Harold d. shannon, Jack reid, Robert a. swan, Ira l. kimes, Floyd b. parks, Lofton r. henderson, Walter c. sweeney, jr., Landon fieberling, James f. collins, jr., Benjamin w. norris, Wade mcclusky, Marshall a. tyler, Richard e. fleming, Chester w. nimitz, Brewster buffalo, Grumman wildcat, Vought vindicator, Douglas dauntless, Grumman avenger, Consolidated pby catalina, B-17, B-26, War plan orange, Second world war, World war II

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HUBERT R. "RANDY" CROOMS

B. A., Georgia Southern University, 2007

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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2011

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Emerson T. McMullen

Electronic Version Approved:  
May 2011

## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to Commander Robert A. Swan, USNR, Retired and all the Midway Land-Based Forces - the men of the United States Marine Corps, the men of the United States Navy, and the men of the United States Army and Army Air Corps. Their service and sacrifice during the Battle of Midway tell this story far better than I could ever hope to recount.

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I would like to acknowledge and thank a number of the Georgia Southern University faculty and staff for the incredible impact they have had on my academic career and life. I cannot thank them enough for the personal growth they helped me experience - From the History Department: Dr. Craig H. Roell, Dr. Anastatia Sims, Dr. John W. Steinberg, Dr. Lisa L. Denmark, Dr. James M. Woods, Dr. Donald Rakestraw, Dr. Paul A. Rodell, Dr. Johnathan O'Neill, Dr. Sandra Peacock, Dr. Jonathan Bryant, Ms. Fran Aultman, and Ms. Joyce Baldwin. From the Foreign Language Department: Dr. Michael McGrath, Dr. Leticia McGrath, Dr. Jorge Suazo, and Professor Linda Collins. From the Political Science Department: Dr. Krista Wiegand and Dr. Patrick Novotny. Thank you all more than I can ever express!

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## Introduction

The Battle of Midway ranks as one of the greatest military victories in the history of the United States. At the outset and the early stages of the Second World War, Japan was unimpeded in its maneuvering for control of the Pacific. The Japanese appeared destined to dominate the Pacific, overpowering America and its allies, on land and sea. Midway stymied Japan's Pacific success; indeed, Midway reversed it.

By the end of the war, Midway was already marked as a turning point and possibly, the most important American victory of either theater of operations. As western allies celebrated the defeat of the Axis, Midway became a symbol of American power and recognized as one of the United States' shining moments.

Because of Midway's importance and fame, accounts and narratives of the battle quickly became a part of the American literary landscape. In the subsequent years since the battle, Midway's historiography largely maintained two central themes, with only minor deviations within each theme.

One theme highlighted the great American naval victory, particularly, activities of the American aircraft carriers and their attached vessels. These accounts routinely followed similar patterns and either held that victory resulted from superior American performance, superior American intelligence, or just plain American luck. Notable histories illustrating these ideals include, Volume IV of Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions May 1942-August 1942* and *Midway: Turning Point of the Pacific* by William Ward Smith.

Sometimes, there was a blending of the three patterns, such as *Incredible Victory* by Walter Lord or *Miracle at Midway* by Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine

V. Dillon. However, for the most part, new additions to Midway historiography pursuing the "city on the hill" portrayal of American superiority offered little substantial new information and merely cited previously unquoted veterans' recollections of the battle or told the same story in a modernized and fashionable tone.

The other key theme of Midway histories focused exclusively on Japan's failure to win and struggled to indicate why. Early offerings attempting to explain Japan's failure blamed Japanese commanders, particularly the leadership of Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. Prominently at the forefront of this group is *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan, The Japanese Navy's Story* by Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya.

In more recent years, narratives such as *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* by Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully and *Midway Inquest: Why the Japanese Lost the Battle of Midway* by Dallas Woodbury Isom, focused on the Japanese loss, rather than the American victory. Each presented technical information and offered justification for Nagumo's actions. Following the idiom of American luck, these apologies for Nagumo do connect the two main themes more than previous offerings. Even so, they fall short of covering essential elements of the battle.

For the most part, all histories of the Battle of Midway are generalized narratives and offer nothing more than a sidebar or a happenstance mention of the forces stationed at Midway. Even those routinely concentrate on the sighting of the Japanese fleet by Midway-based search planes. Towards the end of the century, Robert Cressman and several contributors presented *A Glorious Page in Our History: The Battle of Midway*. Regarding the forces stationed at Midway, Cressman's effort proved an improvement over earlier works; all the same, the vast majority of the work recounts the battle carried out by the US carrier forces and furthers the trend of

overlooking the Midway-based personnel. Until this omission of the Midway garrison's contribution is rectified, the historiography of the Battle of Midway is, and will remain, deficient.

Arguably, Midway's land-based forces sowed the seed of American victory. Essentially, these forces served as an unsinkable carrier task force. They conducted reconnaissance missions and reported their findings. They discovered and engaged the enemy offensively. They manned defensive garrisons against an enemy attack. Their long overdue account warrants recognition. Most importantly, the detailing of their history launches another facet of Midway historiography, and recounting that history forms the mission of this research.

## Chapter One - Early United States History of Midway

The American connection with Midway Atoll pre-dates the Second World War by almost one hundred years. Additionally, by the time of the famous battle that bears its name, Midway's official connection to the United States Navy approached fifty years. In 1859, Captain N.C. Brooks, a merchant on a sealing and searching expedition, discovered the atoll and named it Brooks Island. Eight years later, Captain William Reynolds of the U.S.S. *Lackawanna* officially claimed the atoll for the United States, under the rights granted from the Guano Act of 1856.<sup>1</sup>

Then, as now, the main inhabitants of the atoll were birds - particularly, the albatross. While in the mid-nineteenth century guano and bird feces were widely used agricultural fertilizers, it is unsure whether or not Brooks or Reynolds sought Midway for this purpose. Seemingly, Brooks had commercial, not strategic plans. With hopes of selling the atoll, he contacted the North Pacific Mail and Steam Ship Company, which was searching for a mid-Pacific coal depot for their ships crossing to the Orient.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, one thing is clear. By 1867, Midway already carried strategic value to the United States, predominantly the Navy. The value the Navy placed on the atoll led to Reynolds' expedition, landing, and claim for the United States. While there, Reynolds surveyed the islands and the lagoon. From his findings, he recommended that the Navy initiate improvements so that

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Interior, Office of Insular Affairs, "Midway" n.d., < <http://www.doi.gov/oia/Islandpages/midwaypage.htm> > (20-July-2010). It is noteworthy that other histories of Midway, including some from official United States reference sources, consider Middlebrook Islands as the name given to Midway by Captain Brooks. The contrasting view is used here, illustrating that Midway potentially had a variety of names, even by the United States.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Ellis, "The History and Strategic Importance of the Midway Islands", United States Army War College, 2002, p. 3. < <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA404725&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> > (17-December -2008).

the atoll might be used as a staging area.<sup>3</sup> It was during this period that the US Navy renamed the atoll Midway Island because of its location between California and Japan.<sup>4</sup>

Just two years following the United States' official claims, surveying, and renaming of Midway, the Navy obtained Congressional appropriation of \$50,000 for a ship channel between Sand and Eastern Islands.<sup>5</sup> The Navy dispatched the U.S.S. *Saginaw* and a construction crew for the dredging detail. The work detail marked the first time that Midway was intentionally inhabited. Ultimately, the attempt at the harbor deepening failed, and the United States temporarily abandoned the work, though not its claim on Midway. Afterwards, Midway entered a phase where only Japanese feather hunters or shipwreck survivors frequented its shores.<sup>6</sup>

Technology played a significant role in the next chapter of Midway's American history. By the end of the nineteenth century, American corporations sought entry into the world's business arenas. One of the technological weapons in this struggle for economic domination was the telegraph, and it was in the opening years of the twentieth century that a trans-Pacific telegraph line came to fruition.

In 1901 the Commercial Cable Company, the Great Northern Telegraph Company, and the Eastern Telegraph Company combined to form the Commercial Pacific Cable Company. The new company's goal was the world's first trans-Pacific telegraph line.<sup>7</sup> In an article written

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<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan", June 1999, p. 2-4. < <http://www.fws.gov/midway/MidwayHPP.pdf> > (01-September-2010).

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Interior, Office of Insular Affairs, "Midway".

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume IV: Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions, May 1942-August 1932*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1959), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71 and United States Department of Interior, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan", p. 2-4-2-6.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Burns, "History of the Atlantic Cable & Undersea Communications", *The Commercial Pacific Cable Company*, Last Revised: 19-February-2010, < <http://www.atlantic-cable.com/CableCos/ComPacCable/> > (01-September-2010)

in January 1903 for *The Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*, Professor Alexander G. McAdie wrote of the projected telegraph cable:

The total length of the new Commercial cable will be nearly 10,000 nautical miles, running in sections from San Francisco to Honolulu (laid by the Silvertown Company), and from Honolulu to Midway, Guam, Manila and Shanghai (to be laid by the Greenwich Company [Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company of Greenwich].) It is interesting to note that one of these trans-Pacific routes is about three times the length of an Atlantic route, and the other two and one-half times.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, after just over a quarter of a century of inactivity, Midway was economically important to the United States once again. The new telegraph line rekindled the United States Navy's interest as well. On January 20, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt issued Executive Order 199-A declaring Midway under the jurisdiction and control of the United States Navy.<sup>9</sup>

Roosevelt's undertaking meant that for only the second time since the United States claimed the atoll, Americans purposely resided at Midway. In April 1903, the Commercial Cable Company dispatched Ben W. Colley as the first superintendent of the Midway cable station. Temporary houses and other wooden structures were built. By 1904, concrete buildings, including the cable station were finished. Over time, the company added additional concrete buildings such as a mess hall, a library, offices, superintendent's and staff quarters, an ice plant, a cold storage facility, and a billiards room. Each concrete structure featured modern plumbing and electricity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander G. McAdie, "The Laying of the American Trans-Pacific Cable", *The Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*, Vol.13, No. 1, (January-December, 1903): p. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Executive Order 199-A", *The Almanac of Theodore Roosevelt*, n.d., < <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/executiveorders/trexecutiveorderswikisource.pdf> > (01-September-2010).

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan". p. 2-7,2-8.

In addition to the first inhabitants since just after American annexation, the cable company changed Midway in other ways as well. In an effort to make the island more hospitable and self sustaining, the company brought in shiploads of soil and foreign flora. This botanical transformation brought irreversible ecological changes to the island.<sup>11</sup>

Members of the private sector were not the only Americans dispatched to Midway. In 1903 the Navy also stationed a 20-man Marine unit there, built a lighthouse on Sand Island, and placed mooring buoys for docking ships.<sup>12</sup> These Marine sentries marked the first time the United States garrisoned Midway with defensive intentions but it would not be the last.

By the time of the Second World War, the telegraph cable and the Midway linking station had proved extremely useful to the United States. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt's telegraph message around the world on July 4, 1903,<sup>13</sup> the cable proved invaluable to the Americans. It would demonstrate this value again during the great battle of 1942.<sup>14</sup>

For all the importance of telegraphic communications in transforming Midway, however it was aviation technology that would have the foremost impact in transforming the island. Pan American Airways initially played the greatest role in this new chapter of the history of Midway. The company's famous Clipper Ship service carried mail and later, passengers.<sup>15</sup> Like the Commercial Cable Company and the Pacific telegraph cable before it, one of Pan America's key

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<sup>11</sup> David Pinyerd, "Preservation Education on Midway Atoll", *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, 1999, p. 9, < [crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/22-9/22-09-4.pdf](http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/22-9/22-09-4.pdf) > (26-August-2010).

<sup>12</sup> Morison, *History Volume IV*, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan". p.2-4.

<sup>14</sup> Morison, *History Volume IV*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Asif Siddiqi, "Pan American's Flying Boats", U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission, Last Updated:28-August-2009, < [http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Commercial\\_Aviation/china\\_clipper/Tran5.htm](http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Commercial_Aviation/china_clipper/Tran5.htm) > (20-July-2010).



goals was to develop and exploit trans-Pacific communications. As might be expected, Midway was the center point of the route planned for voyages across the Pacific.<sup>16</sup>

In 1935, Pan America started construction of a refueling station at Midway, which functioned as a key stopover on Pacific routes.<sup>17</sup> By 1936, Pan American's expansion and construction efforts on Midway included a hotel, company offices, a refrigeration plant, a radio station, a radio beacon, a machine shop, a power plant, a golf course, tennis courts, and baseball fields. Each week, they fashioned Midway into a haven for the wealthy along their Pacific trek from San Francisco to Manila, Philippines.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan". p.2-12.

<sup>18</sup> This information arises from a compilation of information from United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan" p. 2-12, 2-13 and David Pinyerd, "Preservation Education on Midway Atoll", p. 9

## Chapter Two - The Inter-War Period, War Planning, and Midway

Not only did the decade of the 1930s witness changes in aviation and world travel, it also observed changes on the world's socio-political scene. Though it may seem strange, Midway Atoll played a key role in America's response to these changes. The Great Depression and the collapse of the world economy brought financial chaos to virtually every nation. Industrial and developing nations sought new and diverse opportunities for expanding their manufacturing needs. In the 1930s, few nations illustrated this more than Japan.

After the United States entered the First World War in 1917, essentially they became the allies of the Japanese. While joined in the Great War in a united front against common enemies, they were far from intimate afterwards. After the war, Japan acquired all of Germany's Pacific island colonies north of the equator and emerged as a potential threat to Western possessions in the Pacific, including those of the United States.

Seeking stability, or at least a status quo, the United States, Japan, and other nations agreed to arms limitations treaties following the war. Limitations established by these treaties prevented expansion of existing bases or construction of new ones throughout most of the central and western Pacific, including Midway.<sup>19</sup>

Japan's invasion of Manchuria following the Mukden Incident in September 1931 and the subsequent deterioration of the United States' relationship with Japan brought the possibility of hostilities in the Pacific to the forefront once again. After the military incursions into China, Japan, in the minds of American political and military leaders, seemed poised for Pacific aggression. Suddenly, the existing telegraph cable and the introduction of Pan-American air

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<sup>19</sup> United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: 1922, Volume 1*. "Conference on the Limitations of Armament, Washington, November 12, 1921-February 6, 1942", p.247-266. n.d. *ibiblio.org*, < [http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pre-war/1922/nav\\_lim.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pre-war/1922/nav_lim.html) > (25-July-2010).

traffic on Midway not only amplified the atoll's economic value, but also carried added strategic responsibility and concern for the United States. Soon, old military plans were revisited, revived, and revamped. The United States, too, began war planning and researching Pacific development.

Midway's strategic significance offered reason for the American bolstering of its defenses. By 1938, “a two-year project for the construction of an air base at Midway was started under both Navy and Army auspices.”<sup>20</sup>

At least some of the theoretical underpinnings of United States war planning went back as far as Alfred Thayer Mahan, who numerous works on naval history posited for possession of naval power and sea bases as the preconditions for national greatness.<sup>21</sup> It was two works from the interwar period, however, that more directly shaped the way that planning for Midway evolved in the late 1930s, particularly in the way Mahan's bases should be defended. In 1921, United States Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Earl Hancock Ellis developed *Operation Plan 712, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia*. Concerning the defense of a forward base, such as Midway, Ellis urged four strong considerations:

- a. The defense must be such as to leave the greatest possible mobile sea and air force free for its legitimate work: the destruction of enemy sea and air power.
- b. The primary object of the base defense is to prevent the enemy from damaging property within a certain area (anchorage, port facilities, etc.), not necessarily to destroy enemy craft. The defense required is only that necessary to render an enemy attack so dangerous as to be unreasonable, taking into consideration the conditions under which the enemy is operating.
- c. In order to simplify training and supply and to maintain mobility, the material used should be light standard Army, Navy or Marine Corps and be capable of the widest use.

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<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Barnes, “U. S. Navy Report Urges Strategic Pacific Network”, *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (January 19, 1939), p. 19. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3022497> > (25-July-2010).

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, Fifteenth Edition, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1898), p. iii-29.

d. The defense considered must consist of the materiel which we now have or which we may reasonably be expected to have at the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1930s, when America committed to the defense of Midway and called upon the United States Marine Corps for the duty, Ellis' doctrine and a new *Tentative Manual for Defense of Advanced Bases* went into action with the Marines stationed there. The *Tentative Manual for Defense of Advanced Base*, later called *Defense Manual*, appeared tailor-made for strategic bases such as Midway. As with Ellis' earlier Micronesian operational plan, the *Defense Manual* contained prophetic passages, describing potential profits for good preparation and also giving valuable warning against latent pitfalls.

a. The main advantages will be:

A distinct superiority of position, in view of the difficulties of attack from the sea against a prepared position;

Knowledge and choice of terrain with excellent fields of fire;

Highly organized fires employed in conjunction with obstacles especially at the water's edge;

Excellent observation;

Assailant's lack of information and the difficulty of conducting preliminary reconnaissance while still at sea.

b. The main disadvantage will be:

Surrender of initiative;

Limitations imposed on maneuver;

The assailant's superior mobility prior to landings;

Difficulty of distinguishing between enemy's main and secondary landings;

Dispersion of forces as differentiated from the forms of defense normally employed in land warfare.

c. The time factor will operate to the advantage of the defense dependent upon when the attack is made.<sup>23</sup>

Noting advanced base defense, the manual posited, "The defense of advanced bases, usually being weak in means in comparison to the areas to be observed and defended, will require the

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<sup>22</sup> Earl Hancock Ellis, "Operation Plan 712, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia", 1921, *www.ibiblio.org*, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/ref/AdvBaseOps/Advanced-3.html> > (17-December-2008).

<sup>23</sup> David J. Ulbrich, "The Long Lost *Tentative Manual for Defense of Advanced Bases* (1936)", *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (July, 2007), pp. 894-895 < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30052894> > (25-July-2010).

highest order of skill and ingenuity in economizing, organizing and disposing the forces for the purposes of presenting an insuperable front to a landing force.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, weakly guarded positions required steadfast and dedicated defenders.

In time, Midway Atoll received just such defenders, but securing them took wrangling in Congress and a special research committee. In 1938, Congress tasked the Secretary of the Navy, Claude A. Swanson, with the creation of a committee of select navy officers to investigate and report back to Congress on American coastal and territorial defense needs. Swanson assigned Rear Admiral Arthur Japy Hepburn as director of the group. Regarding Midway, Hepburn and his committee reported in January 1939, and the information they provided introduced the momentum necessary for the completion of a base on Midway.<sup>25</sup> The report valued Midway as an advanced military base of operations, so much so, that the committee considered only Pearl Harbor higher in importance than Midway.<sup>26</sup> Leaders in Congress took the report seriously and quickly appropriated \$63 million for constructing a naval air base on Midway.<sup>27</sup>

After the appropriation and decision for the naval base, the Marines deployed men to Midway. Steadily, they constructed and enhanced Midway's defenses. Occasionally, they acted as longshoremen. During this time, their numbers ranged from a handful of officers and men to figures approaching a couple of hundred. War preparation picked up after the Hepburn Report and appropriations for the naval base.

To all intents and purposes, though unfinished, Midway displayed resemblance to a military establishment. However, it was indeed a construction project in progress, and by the

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<sup>24</sup> Ulbrich, “The Long Lost *Tentative Manual*”, p. 897.

<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Cressman, et al. *"A Glorious Page in Our History" Adm. Chester Nimitz, 1942: The Battle of Midway, 4-6 June 1942*, (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, Inc., 1990), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations*, p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan", June 1999, p. 2-14. < <http://www.fws.gov/midway/MidwayHPP.pdf> > (01-September-2010).

latter part of 1939, US Army Engineers had partially dredged Brooks Channel and heavy construction was well underway on Sand Island. The Hepburn Report suggested housing two patrol plane squadrons on Midway, and clearly work progress gave the appearance of fulfilling the proposal.<sup>28</sup> All the while, Pan-Am Clippers continued flying in and out of Midway, bringing in tourists and trans-Pacific travelers. Additionally, telegraph crews continued sending and receiving messages. The atoll bustled with men, far more civilian contractors than servicemen. As many as 1500 construction workers were on Midway during peak construction periods.<sup>29</sup>

With most of the construction work completed, the United States Navy commissioned Naval Air Station Midway on August 1, 1941, and Commander Cyril T. Simard reported as the overall base commander. Simard arrived to a new Midway, with paved surface roads, street lights, and working telephones. Eastern Island was home to the airstrips, and Sand Island housed the officer's living quarters, including the married officers' quarters, administrative and logistical support buildings. Lieutenant Colonel Harold D. Shannon, USMC, and advanced elements of the 6th Defense Battalion of the United States Marines arrived by mid-August. In September, the remainder of the battalion arrived, along with the unit's commander, Colonel Raphael Griffin, USMC. Soon, Griffin departed and Shannon took command.<sup>30</sup>

Soon after the battalion's arrival, Midway's extensive defense positions were largely complete and manned, with occasional positions added here and there. Yet before the Marines considered Midway preparations fully complete, one final element was necessary. Dating back to early discussions regarding outlying garrisons and the introduction of military use of airplanes,

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<sup>28</sup> Robert D. Heintz, Jr. "Marines at Midway", p. 3, *Marines in World War II Historical Monograph*, 14-February-1998, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-M-Midway.html> > (20-July-2009) and Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page*", p. 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Historic Preservation Plan", p. 2-14.

<sup>30</sup> Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page*", p. 15 and Charles D. Melson, "Condition Red: Marine Defense Battalions in World War II", *Marines in World War II Commemorative Series*, 1996, < <http://www.nps.gov/archive/wapa/indepth/extcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003133-00/sec15.htm> > (1-July-2009).

aviation was realized as an equally vital ingredient for the balanced defense for Midway and similar bases.<sup>31</sup>

Midway's initial air support came in the form of Consolidated PBV patrol bombers - sometimes referred to as flying boats. Like the rest of Midway, the PBVs' existence on Midway was an evolution. At first, they launched and landed exclusively on the water. Later, they had a seaplane hangar and ramps were used to launch and retrieve the planes.<sup>32</sup>

Even so, construction progressed steadily on the landing strip. In October 1941, a squadron of United States Army Boeing B-17 bombers used Midway as a staging point along their route to the Philippines. Regarding the airstrip at Midway, United States Army Major David R. Gibbs, the commanding officer of the 19th Bombardment Group, noted: "Eastern Island possessed an excellent all-weather, hard-surfaced field, with parking areas of crushed, graded coral that could support an airplane in any weather. Up to three planes could be fueled at one time, and 'ample' accommodations existed for 25 crews."<sup>33</sup>

In the waning days of peace in the Pacific, the sense of urgency was apparent. Preparations for hostilities continued, not only at Midway, but everywhere. Never a large fighting force prior to the Second World War, during the interwar years, Marine Corps ranks dwindled. Now, the Corps sought to rectify their shortages and urgently sought a "few good men." Slowly, the numbers increased. By November 1941, the Marine Corps Defense Battalions still numbered less than 5000 strong. However, Midway's 6th Defense Battalion boasted 33 Officers and 810 Enlisted Marines - roughly 20 percent of all those designated as

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<sup>31</sup> Heintz, "Marines at Midway".p.9.

<sup>32</sup> United States Department of Interior, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "Midway Atoll in World War II", last updated 22-March-2010, *Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge*, < <http://www.fws.gov/midway/worldwarii.html> > (01-September-2010) and Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page*", p. 9-12.

<sup>33</sup> Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page*", p. 15.

Defense Battalion Marines.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Midway received 18 Vought SB2U "Vindicator" dive bombers of the Marine scout bomber group, VMSB-231.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding Midway, the Marines perceptibly approached the Hepburn Board Report with rigor and formality. They intended to defend Midway Atoll to the last. As December 1941 arrived, Commander Simard and Lieutenant Colonel Shannon continued to make wartime provisions and urged constant vigilance on the part of their pilots and Marines. There was no time for holiday cheer; all the news from home and the defensive measures confirmed the perilous nature of the situation. On Midway, instead of searching for the "Rising Sun" in the east, American sentinels stared westward toward Japan.

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<sup>34</sup> These figures come from three sources: Henry L. Shaw, Jr. "Opening Moves: Marines Gear Up for War", *Marines in World War II Commemorative Series*, n.d., < <http://www.nps.gov/archive/wapa/indepth/extcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003115-00/sec4a.htm> > (1-July-2009), Leo Niehorster, "Administrative Order of Battle, 14th Naval District (Hawaii), Midway Island Command, 7 December 1941", *World War II Armed Forces Orders of Battle and Organizations*, last updated 15-June-2001, < [http://niehorster.orbat.com/013\\_usa/\\_41\\_usn/41\\_us\\_is\\_midway.htm](http://niehorster.orbat.com/013_usa/_41_usn/41_us_is_midway.htm) > (20-July-2009), and Charles D. Melson, "Condition Red: Marine Defense Battalions in World War II", *Marines in World War II Commemorative Series*, 1996, p. 5-6. < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-C-Defense/index.html> > (1-July-2009). Shaw listed 5 Marine Defense Battalions, with a total of 4,399 men. Niehorster established the figure for the 6th Marine Defense Battalion stationed at Midway at 33 Officers and 810 Enlisted, for a total of 843 men. The percentage is an approximation from the combined figures. The actual percentages would fall between 19 and 20 percent. Melson listed the total number of Marine Defense Battalions by late 1941 at 7, with 5 serving in the Pacific. Of the two remaining, one was deployed in Iceland and the other trained and served in California.

<sup>35</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 17.



### Chapter Three - The East Goes West, The Slash of the Samurai

Sunday, December 7, 1941, was important for Midway Atoll for at least two reasons. First, almost as an afterthought, two Japanese destroyers broke off from the Pearl Harbor attack force as it retired from the Hawaiian islands and made for Midway. Second and most importantly, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the intended destruction of the American aircraft carriers failed. So long as the American carrier group roamed the Pacific, a threat to Japanese success existed. This fact guaranteed an eventual confrontation for carrier domination. From that point forward, planning for this engagement was a focal point for the Imperial Japanese Navy. Midway, demonstrated as a key point of interest by the attack of 7 December, became a focal point of Japanese planning early in the war.

Cruising westward, after supporting the attack on Pearl Harbor, the two redirected IJN destroyers had an additional assignment: the bombardment of Midway - either into a state of neutralization or complete prostration. At approximately, 9:30 p.m. local time, the two vessels - the *Ushio* and either the *Sazanami* or *Akebono* began their attack. After a perfunctory bombardment that damaged the power plant on Sand Island and ignited the seaplane hangar there, the Japanese sailed away. During the engagement, the Americans returned fire, but damage to the destroyers, if any, was unknown. The attack left four of Midway's defenders dead and ten more wounded.<sup>36</sup> Although, the Japanese failed to neutralize Midway, they discovered valuable information for future planning. They discovered Midway was defended, at least somewhat. They also came away believing that they could get within striking distance of Midway without American shore batteries opening up on them. The first tidbit of information

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<sup>36</sup> Robert J. Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page in Our History*", p. 19-20 and Robert D. Heinl, Jr. "Marines at Midway", p. 14, *Marines in World War II Historical Monograph*, 14-February-1998, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-M-Midway.html> > (20-July-2009). Note: Cressman and his co-authors list *Sazanami* and *Ushio* as the two destroyers that attacked Midway on December 7, 1941. While Robert D. Heinl, Jr. agrees that one of the destroyers was *Ushio*, Heinl lists the second destroyer as *Akebono*.

they already believed, the second, possibly, influenced IJN planners in their Midway attack plans. During operational plans, concerns arose more about supplying the newly captured American base than the effort of gaining its control.<sup>37</sup>

The ensuing weeks saw the attention of the Japanese Navy directed elsewhere, toward the Philippines, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies, where the Japanese gained unprecedented and unforeseen success. Nevertheless, Japanese interest in Midway did not entirely abate. Japan's leading naval strategist and the overall commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, desiring and searching for a plan that would give Japan a decisive battle against the American Navy, charged his trusted protégé, Rear Admiral Matome Ugaki with developing a plan for further success. Ugaki developed and studied three options - a western move in the direction of India, a southwestern move toward Australia, or an eastern move with Midway as the target. Though he diligently studied the Australian and Indian options, his thoughts continuously returned to Midway.<sup>38</sup>

Deliberating the options in January, Ugaki decided upon Midway and set June as the month of action. Regarding the place and date, Ugaki recorded in his diary, "we should occupy Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra, send our air force forward to these islands and dispatch the Combined Fleet with an occupying force to occupy Hawaii and at the same time bring the enemy fleet into decisive battle."<sup>39</sup> Yamamoto agreed and used his influence with Naval General Staff for the selection of the Midway Plan.

Initially, the plan ran into objections from many on the Navy General Staff, who at this stage were not as convinced of the necessity or desirability for the Midway operation. Several of

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<sup>37</sup> Gordon Prange, et al. *Miracle at Midway*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), p.30

<sup>38</sup> William Ward Smith, *Midway: Turning Point of the Pacific*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), p. 2 and Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan, The Japanese Navy's Story*, (Annapolis, Maryland: United States Naval Institute, 1955), p. 48-63.

<sup>39</sup> Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 14.

the ranking members of the General Staff opposed the plan as frivolous and wasteful. They felt that Midway was too tiny for their use as a major installation. They used the same logic in their claim that the Americans would almost certainly not risk their carriers in its defense. These doubters argued that other options for success needed serious consideration. Yamamoto was not swayed. Convinced that the Japanese had at best a two year window of opportunity for securing their Pacific empire and that the American carriers lingered as a threat to those dreams, Yamamoto continued advocating for an attack on Midway.<sup>40</sup>

The unexpected Doolittle Raid on Tokyo in April 1942 created a new sense of urgency for the protection of the Japanese homeland, which suddenly seemed vulnerable as never before. "Admiral Yamamoto regarded the raid as a mortifying personal defeat. All opposition to the Midway operation on the part of the Naval General Staff abruptly ceased."<sup>41</sup> The Naval General Staff turned to Yamamoto and quickly acquiesced to his plans. With the operation plan's approval, Yamamoto organized his forces, selected leaders, designated assignments, and got down to the serious business of invading Midway Atoll.

The Naval General Staff selected Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo and his First Carrier Striking Force as the invasion's spearhead. Nagumo's and Yamamoto's political opinions had differed on more than one occasion prior to the Midway operation and they likely did not like each other on a personal level. Rifts between them dated to the Washington Naval Conference of 1921/1922. At that time, Yamamoto supported the Conference, whereas, Nagumo, like many Japanese patriots, claimed the accords failed to elevate Japan to its rightful place.<sup>42</sup> However,

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<sup>40</sup> Fuchida, *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan*, p. 50-63 and Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations*, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 13 -15.

they agreed on one thing. Each placed a high value in the Japanese capture of Midway. As noted, Yamamoto began campaigning for its seizure almost as soon as he learned of the American carriers' escape in December. As for Nagumo's opinion of Midway, the Vice Admiral claimed, "Midway acts as a sentry for Hawaii. Its importance was further enhanced after the loss of Wake and it was apparent that the enemy was expediting the reinforcing of its defensive installations, its air base facilities, and other military installations as well as the personnel."<sup>43</sup>

Despite American efforts to augment the defense of Midway, Nagumo felt confident about a Japanese victory and claimed that the US military personnel stationed there "lacks the will to fight."<sup>44</sup> Anticipating Japanese success, he believed, "after attacking Midway by air and destroying the enemy's shore based air strength to facilitate our landing operations, we would still be able to destroy any enemy task force which may choose to counter attack."<sup>45</sup>

Time restraints prevented organized joint training between vessels of the First Carrier Strike Force and the rest of the Combined Fleet. Later, Nagumo claimed this hindered operations. Even so, the Japanese prepared well and they were cautious. They wanted and expected secrecy. At the time, no Japanese commander complained of poor planning. Yamamoto placed his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Ukagi, in charge of ensuring the entire operation received the preliminary rehearsals necessary for success. Nagumo required mock battle training to the limits capable of being conducted, and each group managed this to their capacity. This pre-attack preparation included torpedo attacks, high altitude bombing, dive bombing, aerial combat, carrier landings, and night maneuvers. In contrast to previous missions, as they completed final preparations, many Japanese naval officers demonstrated their

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<sup>43</sup> Chuichi Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002 - Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Pamphlet 32-1002, The Japanese Story of the Battle of Midway*, (Washington, D.C., Department of the Navy, 1947), p. 2., < <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/special/midway.htm> > (21-June-2007).

<sup>44</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 2.

confidence of success by bringing personal belongings such as cameras, pictures, and recreation items with them. All the while, the Japanese continued gathering intelligence on Midway and the status of the US Navy.<sup>46</sup>

Designating the forthcoming sortie *Operation MI*, the Imperial Japanese Navy coordinated its attack and launched from three separate origins - the Port of Ominato from the northern tip of Honshu, the largest Japanese island, the port of Hashirajima, also on Honshu, just south of Hiroshima, and Saipan and Guam in the Marianas islands. On board the *Akagi*, Nagumo sailed from Hashirajima on May 27, 1942. By the end of May, all of the Japanese vessels participating in the Midway attack and the complimentary attack upon Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands were on course for their targets.<sup>47</sup>

Nagumo's departure date of May 27 was symbolically important to the Japanese. To the Japanese people, not only was it the day their great admiral set sail to destroy the American enemy; it was also "Navy Day, the anniversary of Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō's spectacular victory over the Russians in 1905 - a good omen for victory if ever there was one."<sup>48</sup>

Victory was fully expected, and no available resource was forsaken. In all, approximately two hundred Japanese ships of war and support vessels participated in the Midway and Aleutian operations.<sup>49</sup> Essentially, the two operations committed the sum of the Imperial Japanese Navy. All of the carriers and battleships were included. All but four of the

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<sup>46</sup> Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 166 and Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> This information originates from three sources: Fuchida, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, p. 73, 111-115., Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002, Table 1, Track Chart and Table 2, Action Chart.*, and "West Point Atlas for the Second World War, Asia and the Pacific", *The History Department at the United States Military Academy*, n.d., < <http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlasses/ww2%20pacific/WWIIAsiaGIF/WWIIAsia15.gif> > (20-July-2007).

<sup>48</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Pacific War Historical Society, "Preparations for the Midway Operation: Japanese Planning and Preparations for the Midway Offensive", *The Pacific War*, last updated 23 November 2009., < <http://www.pacificwar.org.au/Midway/Preparations.html> > (21-June-2007).

heavy cruisers, along with virtually all of the lesser combat vessels and military support ships were included.<sup>50</sup>

Steaming towards Midway, Nagumo estimated American air resistance as less than formidable. His intelligence indicated that Midway had two squadrons of flying boats, a single squadron of army bombers, and a single squadron of fighter planes. He believed that Pearl Harbor and other Hawaii airstrips had approximately 60 additional flying boats, somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 bombers, and about 200 fighter planes, which might reinforce Midway fairly quickly. As for the Midway-based shore defenses, Nagumo knew that the US Marines were there and that they offered a strong resistance for the planned invasion.<sup>51</sup>

Cautiously, the Japanese armada maintained strict radio silence on orders from both Nagumo and Yamamoto. The duty of advanced scouting fell to IJN submarines. Their orders were for constant reconnaissance in the direction of the target and the establishment of cordon lines once the trap for the American carriers sprang. Once the Japanese were within range, the battle plans called for the reconnoitering of Pearl Harbor by seaplanes. More than just a reconnaissance tool, the Japanese hoped the seaplanes would serve as enticing bait, meant to lure the US Navy into their trap.<sup>52</sup>

The massive Japanese fleet streamed simultaneously in two directions, a portion towards the Aleutian Islands and the bulk towards Midway. Again, they anticipated surprise. Their goals were clear; they were to destroy the American carriers, thereby assuring Japanese control of the Pacific. Regarding their goals, their orders too, were clear. "The Combined Fleet operation

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<sup>50</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 51.

<sup>51</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 6 and Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 50. Historians Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully uncovered this previously unreported usage of the seaplanes while researching *Senshi Sōsho*, the Japanese history of the Second World War. Quoting *Senshi Sōsho* they noted, "It was strongly believed that after six months of war, the Americans were now sufficiently weakened and demoralized that they would only sortie from Pearl Harbor with some coaxing." p. 118.

order gave first priority to the destruction of enemy forces, and clearly stated that the landing was secondary."<sup>53</sup>

However, it is important to note that for success, all of their goals and planning required complete accuracy in their assumptions. In these assumptions, the IJN was completely wrong. Surprise turned against them. Surprise became the ally of the Americans. Worse for the Japanese, the US did not require coaxing from Pearl Harbor, nor were they sitting idly by on Midway.

Two events in May 1942 particularly underlined American aggressiveness and initiative. The first of these events was a personal visit to Midway by Admiral Nimitz. On May 2, the entry for Midway Naval Air Station log stated, "Four (4) PBV-5A's landed on Eastern Island runway, bearing Admiral C.W. Nimitz, Rear Admiral N.L. Bellinger and party for informal inspection."<sup>54</sup> The declared purpose for Nimitz' trip was for the decoration of a few servicemen stationed at Midway, the promotion of Commander Simard to Captain, and the promotion of Lieutenant Colonel Shannon to Colonel. The admiral's main objective, however, was the determination of Midway's combat readiness.

Nimitz toured Sand and Eastern Islands. He recognized and commented on the Marines' effort in getting Midway prepared for defense. Even so, the Admiral remained concerned for Midway's defense, and the men discussed Midway's needs. Simard and Shannon plainly told Nimitz what their vision for Midway's defense was:

'If I get you all these things', Nimitz asked, 'then you can hold Midway against an amphibious assault?' Shannon responded unequivocally and confidently, 'Yes sir.' The manner in which the colonel, a veteran of fighting in France with the 6th

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<sup>53</sup> Craig Burke, "The Principle of the Objective--Nagumo vs Spruance at Midway", n.d., *Imperial Japanese Navy Page*, < [http://www.combinedfleet.com/prinob\\_f.htm](http://www.combinedfleet.com/prinob_f.htm) > (01-December-2009).

<sup>54</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary, United States Naval Air Station, Midway Island: May 1942*, site last updated 2010, *Midway, 1942 Visual Research Multimedia Project*, < [http://midway1942.org/docs/usn\\_doc\\_12.shtml](http://midway1942.org/docs/usn_doc_12.shtml) > (19-October-2010).

Marines in World War I, responded, elicited a smile from the admiral. Nimitz then told Shannon to list his needs. He promised that if it was available, Midway would get it.<sup>55</sup>

Within days, Simard and Shannon dutifully submitted their list to Nimitz. The admiral responded in kind. From the US Marines 3rd Defense Battalion, then stationed at Pearl Harbor, Nimitz dispatched three 3-inch anti-aircraft batteries, a 37-mm anti-aircraft battery, and a 20-mm anti-aircraft battery. From the US Marines 2nd Marine Raider Battalion, he dispatched two rifle companies. To these troops and matériel, Nimitz added five light tanks. To this point, Marine Air Group-22 flew Brewster F2A-3 "Buffalo" fighters and Vought SB2U "Vindicator" dive bombers. Nimitz bolstered them with an additional sixteen Douglas SBD-2 "Dauntless" dive bombers and seven Grumman F4F-3 "Wildcat" fighters.<sup>56</sup>

The second indication of American initiative in May that proved invaluable to American success at Midway was the American breakthrough in code breaking. Intercepted Japanese radio activity increased from April forward, indicating Japanese offensive actions. American cryptographers believed that Midway was the likely target, but they were not certain. By mid-May, Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, Jr., commander of the United States Navy's code breaking station in Hawaii, felt reasonably certain that as much as 85 percent of the IJN Combined Fleet's operational order was completely deciphered. On May 19, Nimitz set his own trap in motion. Simulating a frantic cry for help, he had Midway broadcast that the island's desalinization plant was inoperative. Making the distress call more believable, Midway sent it by radio in clear text.<sup>57</sup> A Japanese listening post stationed on Wake Island overheard the fake

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<sup>55</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 31.

<sup>56</sup> Robert D. Heinl, Jr. "Marines at Midway", p. 22 and Nick Kolyadko, "Midway, 1942: Ships and Aircraft", last updated 2010, *Midway, 1942 Visual Research Multimedia Project*, < <http://midway1942.org/specs.shtml> > (19-October-2010).

<sup>57</sup> Paul J. Jaeger, "Operational Intelligence at the Battle of Midway", (Newport, Rhode Island: United States Naval War College, Joint Operations Department, 1998), p. 10 < <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA351751&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> > (20-July-2007) and Parshall, *Shattered Sword*, p. 93.



American message and quickly relayed Tokyo "AF sent the following radio message: quote, at present time we have only enough water for two weeks. Please supply us immediately.

Unquote."<sup>58</sup> This message, coupled with another message instructing the Japanese that a water treatment ship be attached to the invasion force, confirmed Midway was the target.<sup>59</sup>

The news further invigorated Nimitz. He wrote a personal letter to Captain Simard and Colonel Shannon warning them "in detail the prospect of hostile attack in store."<sup>60</sup> While developing final plans, he quickly issued eight directives, four of which centered upon Midway Atoll. On May 18, Nimitz decided to

(1) reinforce Midway with part of a raider battalion, (2) station four submarines off the atoll, (3) operate Army bombers from Midway to enable them to strike enemy carriers, (4) conduct searches with a dozen PBVs, (5) employ *Yorktown*, if ready, in support of TF16, (6) move TF1 (battleships) along with *Saratoga*, (7) form the North Pacific Force - TF8 - and dispatch it to Alaskan waters and (8) expedite repairs to all ships then lying in the navy yard.<sup>61</sup>

The raider battalion Nimitz referred to may very well have been the raiders he pledged earlier to Simard and Shannon or they may have been additional ones. The submarines too, may or may not have been additional measures, for Midway already had submarine support and had since before Pearl Harbor. By the time of the June battle, nineteen submarines of three separate task groups patrolled the Pacific between the Aleutians and Midway, with Pearl Harbor as the axis point.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ronald W. Russell, *No Right to Win: A Continuing Dialogue with Veterans of the Battle of Midway*, (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2006), p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> Heintz, "Marines at Midway", p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations*, p. 97 and United States Navy, Department of History and Heritage Command, "Battle of Midway, 4-7 June 1942, Composition of U. S. Forces, United States Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas", *US Forces at Midway*, 11-May-2009, <<http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq81-5.htm> > (20-July-2009).

Meanwhile, on Midway, Colonel Shannon placed his leathernecks on full alert. By the end of May, all the reinforcements had arrived and joined the Corps defenses. The disposition of US Marines on Midway now included the 6th Defense Battalion; a Seacoast Artillery Group - made up of seven separate batteries; a 3-Inch Anti-aircraft Group - made up of three batteries; a Special Weapons Group - made of two batteries; a Searchlight Battery; Battery D, Battery E, and Battery F of the 3-Inch Anti-aircraft Group, 3rd Defense Battalion; Separate Batteries, Company C and Company D of the 3rd Defense Battalion; 2nd Raider Battalion Detachment; and two companies of the 23rd Provisional Marine Companies.<sup>63</sup> (Table 3-1, page 27)

All the Marines worked around the clock strengthening Midway's defensive positions. While the aviators worked at sighting the enemy, the Midway guardians prepared for a Japanese air attack, as well as, a Japanese amphibious assault:

By now Sand Island was surrounded with two double-apron tactical wire barriers, and all installations on both islands were in turn ringed by protective wire. Antiboat mines made of sealed sewer pipe, and obstacles fashioned from concertina-ed reinforcing-steel lay offshore. The beaches were sown with home-made mines consisting of ammunition boxes filled with dynamite and 20-penny nails; although electric detonation was planned, every such mine also had a bull's eye painted on an exposed landward side, so that it could be set off locally by rifle fire. Cigar-box antitank mines were filled with dynamite to be fired on pressure by current from flashlight batteries, and whiskey-bottle molotov cocktails of high-octane gasoline and fuel oil stood ready at every position. A decoy mockup airplane--dubbed a JFU ("Jap fouler-upper" [sic])--was prominently placed on the seaplane apron. Finally, all the underground fuel storage on Sand Island was prepared for demolition by the adjacent planting of large charges of dynamite.<sup>64</sup>

As for PBY patrols, Midway Naval Air Station initiated those prior to the code breaking revelation and without new or additional orders from Nimitz to do so. In fact, according to the

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<sup>63</sup> Robert D. Heinl, Jr. "Marines at Midway, Appendix VII: Staff and Command List, Marine Corps Units Participating in Battle of Midway ", *Marines in World War II Historical Monograph*, last updated 24-June-1996 < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/Midway/USMC-M-Midway-VII.html> > (20-July-2009).

<sup>64</sup> Heinl, "Marines at Midway", p. 24.

station's log, searches with no designated purpose, such as recovery searches, dated from May 18, 1942. The patrols listed from this date searched a radius of four hundred miles.<sup>65</sup>

By June, the Marines were as ready as possible, and the PBY patrols reached the station's maximum capacity. The 4:30 a.m. log entry for 3 June noted, "All planes in commission in the air."<sup>66</sup> In all, as many as 32 PBY-5s and PBY-5As were in the skies above Midway.<sup>67</sup> The PBYs flight search patterns enabled an overlapping search.

In order to cover the assigned sector we would fly out 680 miles [and then] turn left or right depending on our position in the big arc we were covering. Our planes would be about 300 miles apart at the end of our pattern and it was important that we get as close as possible to the plane next to us so that we would have the possibility of rescue by a friendly squadron mate if we should get shot down.<sup>68</sup>

Patrolling in PBY-5A, No. 04982 was pilot, Ensign J. H. "Jack" Reid, co-pilot, Ensign G. H. Hardeman, and navigator, Ensign R. A. Swan. The crew consisted of Aviation Machinist's Mate, Second Class R. J. Derouin, Aviation Machinist's Mate, Third Class P. A. Fitzpatrick, Aviation Machinist's Mate, First Class J. F. Gammell, Aviation Machinist's Mate, Third Class J. Goovers, and Aviation Chief Radioman, F. Musser.<sup>69</sup>

Routinely, when the PBY patrols reached the outer limits of their search and made their left or right change in the flight pattern, they encountered Japanese Mitsubishi 96 "Nell" bomber planes. In the encounters, both the Americans and the Japanese normally were at their fuel limits; therefore, firefights lasted mere minutes. The Midway patrols never lost any PBYs in

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<sup>65</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

<sup>66</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary, United States Naval Air Station, Midway Island: June 1942*, site last updated 2010, *Midway, 1942 Visual Research Multimedia Project*, < [http://midway1942.org/docs/usn\\_doc\\_20.shtml](http://midway1942.org/docs/usn_doc_20.shtml) > (19-October-2010).

<sup>67</sup> Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, p. 92.

<sup>68</sup> Robert A. Swan, Letter to author, October 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Office of Naval Records and History, *Glossary of U.S. Naval Abbreviations, OPNAV 29-P1000*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Navy Department, April 1949), < <http://www.history.navy.mil/books/opnav20-p1000/index.html#title> > (19-October-2010) and Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 54.

these engagements, though, they often received extensive damage and wounded crewmen. On the morning of June 3, Jack Reid and his crew's assigned sector gave them a heading directly toward Wake Island, currently under Japanese control. With their patrol zone, they hoped for and assumed they might meet a Japanese plane of some sort.<sup>70</sup> Despite that, as they took to the skies, they could not be certain their wish would come true. Even more, little did they know or expect that they would usher in the most decisive battle of the Pacific War.

Table 3-1: US Marine Dispositions - Midway Atoll

<b>6TH MARINE DEFENSE BATTALION (REINFORCED)</b>						
<b>FLEET MARINE FORCE</b>						
Battalion # 1		Battalion # 2		Battalion # 3		Battalion # 4
<b>Seacoast Artillery Group</b>						
Battery A	Battery B	Battery C	Sand Island 7-Inch Battery	Eastern Island 7-Inch Battery	Sand Island 3-Inch Navy Battery	Eastern Island 3-Inch Navy Battery
<b>3-INCH ANTI-AIRCRAFT GROUP</b>						
Battery D		Battery E			Battery F	
<b>SPECIAL WEAPONS GROUP</b>						
Battery H				Battery I		
<b>SEARCHLIGHT BATTERY (G)</b>						
<b>3-INCH ANTI-AIRCRAFT GROUP, 3RD DEFENSE BATTALION</b>						
Battery D		Battery E			Battery F	
<b>SEPARATE BATTERIES, 3RD DEFENSE BATTALION</b>						
Battery K (37-mm)				Battery L (40/20-mm)		
<b>2ND RAIDER BATTALION DETACHMENT</b>						
Company C				Company D		
<b>PROVISIONAL MARINE COMPANIES</b>						
2 Companies of the 23d Provisional Marine Company						

<sup>70</sup> Swan, Letter to author.

## Chapter 4 – The Eagle Defends Its Nest

By the end of May 1942, Midway Air Station was home to 4 US Army B-26 bombers, 17 US Army B-17 bombers, 19 US Marine Corps SBD-2 dive bombers, 17 US Marine Corps SB2U-3 dive bombers, 21 F2A-3 fighter planes, 7 F4f-3 fighter planes, 6 TBF torpedo bombers, and 16 PBV-5A patrol planes. Daily fuel consumption was 65,000 gallons. As such, each patrol plane had an allotment of fuel.<sup>71</sup>

At this stage of the war, PBVs had limited navigation equipment; therefore, flight and navigation were by primitive means. The sheer travel distance of their missions out, then left or right, depending on the plan of the day, and finally, back to Midway, caused grave concerns about whether or not the allotted fuel supplied enough for a safe return, especially, if they encountered Japanese planes. At least one PBV crewman was determined to take no chance. As navigator Robert Swan relates, each time PBV-5A, No. 04982 went out, one of his crewmates secretly added an extra 150 gallons of fuel, 50 gallons each for the man's wife and two kids.<sup>72</sup>

On the morning of June 3, as Swan's plane flew toward Wake Island, everyone on board fully expected to encounter enemy planes. In fact, they hoped to do so. The evening before, over a beer with some newly arrived B-17 pilots, Swan had complained that whenever they came across the Japanese "Nells", their .50 caliber guns could not bring them down. In a playful mood, the Army pilots told Swan about "blue-tipped" .50 caliber bullets their B-17 had, adding that the blue-tipped ammunition was explosive and that one hit would blow up any Japanese plane. Swan had pleaded for some of the blue-tips, even just a handful. The B-17 pilots conceded and gave Swan 5 rounds of the "miracle" bullets. Swan confidently shared the bullets

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<sup>71</sup> Robert D. Heinl, Jr. "Marines at Midway", *Marines in World War II Historical Monograph*, last updated 6-October-1996, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/Midway/USMC-M-Midway-3.html> > (20-July-2009) and Robert A. Swan, Letter to author, October 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Swan, Letter to author.

with his gunners. Armed with their special ammo and extra fuel, the determined crew sought to complete their patrol and find and shoot down an enemy plane.<sup>73</sup> Anxiously, they followed their heading, their eyes desperately scanning the skies for a big red circle, the identifying mark of a Japanese plane.

Meanwhile, the Marines on Midway had their own jobs, and they took their assignment seriously. Days earlier, on May 30, 1942, Colonel Shannon issued details and "marching orders" for the expected Japanese invasion attempt. In *Battalion Instruction Memorandum, 3--1942*, Shannon spelled out the situation as he saw it and bluntly explained his expectations. The memo contained seven simple points - some one-liners, others more detailed. However, these seven statements illustrated the gravity of the situation and what was on the line:

1. Information available indicates that the Japanese plan an all-out--attack on Midway with a view to its capture. This attack may start any hour now.

2. Our job is to hold Midway. We are to have assistance of other forces to help us do our job. Our aviation forces have been strongly reenforced [reinforced]. Daily long range patrols are made to locate hostile forces and track them to within striking distance of our air force. One of our most important jobs, therefore, is to protect our aircraft on the ground and in the water against hostile attack. As long as we keep our aircraft flying they can work on hostile carriers, transports and other surface craft. We must not let our aircraft be attacked while on the ground taking off or being serviced, We must also be careful not to fire on our own planes. Keep cool, calm, and collected; make your bullets count.

3. Once the air attack starts, it is likely that the Japs [Japanese] will try to make it a succession of bombing and strafing attacks in order that our planes will have difficulty refueling. It is our job to make these attacks as costly as possible by accurate fire and destruction of hostile planes. At night we will probably be bombarded. Our torpedo boats will help attack hostile ships.

4. After the Japs [Japanese] figure that our air force is out and that defensive installations have been sufficiently weakened, they will attempt a landing.

5. This is the first time the Japs [Japanese] have attempted to take an American fortified place so far from their bases. This time they are coming to us

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

and we have the opportunity of a lifetime to reflect glory on our Corps and ourselves by not only accomplishing our mission but also by the damage and destruction we can inflict on the enemy. The better we do our job, the sooner the war will be over.

6. Be alert and on your toes. Don't unnecessarily expose yourself or fire prematurely. Keep cool. There will be a lot of banging and booming but don't let this confuse you. In a battle the odds may seem to be against you for a time and things may appear to be going badly for our side, but always remember that the enemy is in a worse fix than you are. A torpedo, bomb or shellfire may sink a ship or boat but our islands will still be here when it's all over. It is the tenaciousness on the part of the individual soldier and the will to win, coupled with cool and deliberate action and shooting that wins battles. Don't fire land mines prematurely. Much of the effect of land mines depends on the firer keeping his head and firing the right string at the right time. We must also be alert against parachute troops and troops endeavoring to infiltrate by boat.

7. Our President, our Country, our Corps, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet are depending on us and we will not let them down.<sup>74</sup>

Roughly six months removed from the Japanese assault on Wake Island and the Alamo-like stance of the Marines stationed there, the Midway Marines needed no prodding or schooling in the importance of their assigned task. In that they were certain, and their aim was the fulfillment of Shannon's pledge to Nimitz - to hold Midway.

Throughout their flight, the crew of PBY-5A, No. 04982 scanned the air around them for Japanese planes. As they approached the outward limits of the patrol, they marveled that their morning was amazingly quiet. Their hopes of blowing a Japanese plane from the sky with their new magic bullets appeared lost. Navigator Swan and flight gunner Musser chatted privately and then urged Jack Reid for a little more time. Because of the extra fuel in their tank, they took a calculated chance and extended their outward flight by fifteen minutes. When they saw nothing, they extended another fifteen minutes.<sup>75</sup> Ensign Swan recalled,

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<sup>74</sup> Harold D. Shannon, "Headquarters, Sixth Defense Battalion, Fleet Marine Force: Battalion Instruction Memorandum", *Midway, 30 May, 1942: Source Documents*, last updated 2010, < [http://www.midway1942.org/docs/usn\\_doc\\_19.shtml](http://www.midway1942.org/docs/usn_doc_19.shtml) > (19-October-2010).

<sup>75</sup> Swan, Letter to author.

We were about ten minutes into the second extension when I heard the general quarters horn blow and knew we had sighted the enemy. I dashed up between the two pilots and looked up[,] searching for the enemy plane. Both pilots tapped me on the shoulder and pointed down. I lost my enthusiasm. I ran back to the navigators table and encoded a message. "enemy Main body heading Midway."<sup>76</sup>

According to the Midway Air Station log, Swan transmitted the "Main Body" sighting at 9:25 a.m. local Midway time. Two minutes later, the PBY supplied the Japanese heading and distance from Midway - "bearing 26, distance 700."<sup>77</sup> Reid continued lurking on the fringe of observation radioing as much information possible about the Japanese as possible. All the while, he maneuvered and set his sights on getting behind the Japanese ships, trying to get the closest look possible. Prior to disengaging his first sighting for a different approach, Reid listed 6 large ships in the grouping. He turned his PBY and went north about thirty miles and got behind the Japanese. According to the Midway logs, at 11:00 a.m., Reid reported another group of eleven ships, with similar Midway bearings and a speed of nineteen knots. After relaying this information, Midway Air Station ordered Reid back to base.<sup>78</sup>

On Midway, Captain Simard launched a B-17, specially rigged with extra fuel tanks to track the progress and movements of the enemy fleet. He dispatched a naval observer with the B-17 for enemy ship identification. It took off at 11:58 a.m. The plane's mission was a simple one. From the known coordinates and bearings, it was to relocate the Japanese and relay as much information as possible back to Midway. Just behind his reconnaissance bomber, Simard planned a bombing run on the Japanese with his other B-17s.<sup>79</sup> At noon local time, Flight 92, six B-17s, each equipped with four 600 pound bombs and a bomb bay gasoline tank for extra range,

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<sup>76</sup> Swan, Letter to author.

<sup>77</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary, United States Naval Air Station, Midway Island: June 1942*, site last updated 2010, *Midway, 1942 Visual Research Multimedia Project*, < [http://midway1942.org/docs/usn\\_doc\\_20.shtml](http://midway1942.org/docs/usn_doc_20.shtml) > (19-October-2010).

<sup>78</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary* and Swan, Letter to author.

<sup>79</sup> Cressman, et al. *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 54.



left Midway Air Station en route for an attack on the Japanese. At 12:40, Flight 93, composed of three additional B-17s, departed Midway, with similar orders to attack the enemy. In all, between Flight 92 and Flight 93, Simard dispatched nine B-17s on the bombing mission.<sup>80</sup> At 4:11 p.m., Flight 93 reported enemy ships, and at 4:40 p.m., Flight 92 delivered its attack "in three high level attacks from 8,000, 10,000, and 12,000 feet."<sup>81</sup>

The initial results appeared promising. Lieutenant Colonel Walt Sweeney, Jr. reported hits on a Japanese battleship and near misses on another.<sup>82</sup> Among the ships attacked by Sweeney's squadron were

2 or 3 heavy cruisers and about 30 other ships, including destroyers, transports, and cargo vessels. . . . Antiaircraft fire, although consistently behind our planes, was so heavy that it was considered unwise to stay to observe results. However, a heavy cruiser and a transport were reported to have been hit and a second cruiser was believed hit at the stern.<sup>83</sup>

After the war, Captain Yasumi Toyama, chief of staff, IJN Second Destroyer Squadron, of the flagship *Jintsu*, confirmed Sweeney's attack, but admitted only near misses to three IJN destroyers in the convoy.<sup>84</sup> More important than any actual damage to Japanese vessels, the key point in this attack was how the Americans caught the Japanese unaware. The Americans, it was clear, were assuming the tactical initiative.

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<sup>80</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary* and Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p.54, William Ward Smith, *Midway: Turning Point of the Pacific*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), p. 73, and Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 54.

<sup>81</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary* and Gordon W. Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 172.

<sup>82</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*, and Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p.54-55., Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 172.

<sup>83</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, "The Battle of Midway, June 3-6, 1942", last updated 28-February-2003, *HyperWar, U.S. Navy in World War II*, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/USN-CN-Midway/index.html> #CONT > (1-July-2010).

<sup>84</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey (Pacific), "OPNAV-P-03-100, Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Interrogation NAV No. 60, USSBS No. 252", last updated 28-December-2007, *HyperWar, U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II* < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/USSBS/IJO/IJO-60.html> > (17-September-2010).

At 9:15 p.m., Flight 44, consisting of four PBY-5As, took off from Midway Naval Air Station for a night torpedo run on the approaching Japanese convoy.<sup>85</sup> Lieutenant William L. Richards commanded the group, which consisted of three planes from VP-24 and one from VP-51.<sup>86</sup> The PBYs discovered the convoy continuing its course and attacked. At 2:43 a.m. on the morning of June 4, PBY 1V44 radioed, "Attack completed, hit large transport bearing 260, distance 500, course 080, speed 13, ten ships."<sup>87</sup>

In contrast with the earlier inflated claims of the B-17 pilots, this report was essentially correct. Somewhat surprisingly, the PBYs had managed to locate the Japanese in the middle of the night. Even more surprisingly, one of the lumbering Catalinas, never prized or praised for their bombing prowess, had managed to get a torpedo hit. The victim was the Japanese oiler *Akebono Maru*, which sustained damage to its port bow and lost 22 men killed and wounded. This attack is significant in that it was the only successful American torpedo attack, either aerial or submarine, of the entire battle. Remarkably, however, historians remain divided over which pilot carried out the successful torpedo run. Some reliable sources credit Ensign Gaylord D. Propst, while others, just as reliable, claim that Lt. Richards dropped the torpedo.<sup>88</sup> Regardless of who made the successful attack, one fact was now apparent to the Japanese. Midway was continuing to act aggressively in its own defense.

While the PBYs headed for home, all hands on Midway continued their predawn work. At 4:30 a.m., Simard dispatched a new flight of search planes.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Nagumo and his crewmen prepared for their own day of work. At approximately 4:30 a.m., the admiral "gave the

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<sup>85</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

<sup>86</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 55.

<sup>87</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

<sup>88</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 114.

<sup>89</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

order, ‘Kūchū kūgekитай wo hasshin seyo’ (Launch the air attack force).”<sup>90</sup> The Japanese aim steered them eastward; the Americans' steered them westward. Just ten minutes after the Midway search plane launch, Flight 92, consisting of sixteen US Army B-17s, left Midway, en route for a bomb run on the approaching Japanese.<sup>91</sup>

The defense garrison was also hard at work. No doubt mindful of Colonel Shannon's earlier admonition that there would be “a lot of banging and booming,” Marines readied their anti-aircraft guns and prepared for the impending attack.<sup>92</sup> Then, at 5:45 a.m. local time, Midway Air Station’s radio received a report from an outgoing plane, “Many planes heading Midway, IMI Midway, bearing 320, distance 150.”<sup>93</sup>

Just five minutes later, Midway’s radar picked up the incoming Japanese planes, less than 100 miles from the atoll. After another two minutes, a PBY radioed in the first sighting of Japanese carriers – two carriers. Like previous sightings, the pilot, not knowing exactly how many ships were in the Japanese invasion forces, used the term main body. The sky was full of incoming Japanese attack planes, and now the garrison knew from where they came. At 5:55 a.m., just ten minutes after the first sighting of the morning, Midway’s air raid sirens sounded. By the top of the hour, all flight-worthy Midway-based aircraft were in the skies around Midway. At 6:00 a.m. Midway Air Station, as might be expected, instructed the Army B-17s to target the Japanese carriers.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 127.

<sup>91</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

<sup>92</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 135.

<sup>93</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*. Exactly what is meant by “IMI Midway” was not disclosed in the radio log. Since Midway was preparing for and expecting a Japanese attack by this point, possibly, it meant the attack of Midway was eminent. The glossary of acronyms used by the United States Navy during the Second World War has no listing for IMI. United States Navy, “Glossary of U. S. Naval Abbreviations”, Naval Historical Center, 20-March-2000, < <http://www.history.navy.mil/books/opnav20-p1000/I.htm> > 07-November-2010.

<sup>94</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

Among the Midway aircraft in the skies now searching for the "many planes" were fighters of Marine Fighter Squadron - 221, hereafter referred to as VMF-221. Twenty Brewster "Buffalo" F2A-3s and four Grumman "Wildcat" F4F-3s made up the American fighter group. They pointed their planes in the direction most likely to ensure they intercepted the oncoming Japanese and prepared themselves mentally for what would come next.<sup>95</sup>

No Midway fighter pilot radioed first contact with the Japanese. It seems safe, therefore, to assume that it happened fast and furious. The Executive Officer's after-action report of the battle listed the first fighter contact at 6:15 a.m. The first confirmed contact of aerial fighting came at 6:17 a.m. when Midway's Easy Battery radioed "two aircraft falling in flames."<sup>96</sup> In the report, the battery gave no indication on whether the planes were American or Japanese. At 6:22 a.m. Midway's radio log recorded, "Two planes on fire 25 miles to north."<sup>97</sup> Perhaps, these reports were for the same sighting; however, that would mean Midway's clocks were not synchronized - with as much as a five minute deviation. This is conceivable. On the other hand, it is just as likely that the casualties of the mid-air combat mounted quickly and that these were two entirely different sightings.

Marine Captain Kirk Armistead soon realized that the Japanese planes far outmatched those of the Americans. At 14,000 feet three Japanese Zero fighters got the edge on Armistead and heavily damaged the wings of his Brewster Buffalo. To escape, Armistead forced his mangled plane into a corkscrew dive and managed to save his plunging plane when he reached

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<sup>95</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 60.

<sup>96</sup> Verne J. McCaul, "Executive Officer Report." "Executive Officer Report, Marine Air Group-22", 7-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010. < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/mag22xo.pdf> > (17-December-2008).

<sup>97</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

barely 500 feet above the waves.<sup>98</sup> In a separate engagement, Marine pilot R. A. Corry quickly saw two Buffalos shot down. Corry observed that at least one of the pilots managed to bail out of his doomed plane, only to be strafed by the Japanese Zeros.<sup>99</sup>

The Marines desperately fought to save their island and to save themselves. With Midway only 20 to 40 miles behind them, the tiny group of 24 US Marines defied the bombing of their home base. In their frenzied struggle, they engaged two groups of enemy pilots, with each Japanese attack wave consisting of approximately 45 planes.<sup>100</sup>

At first contact, it is reasonable to assume that all of the aircraft were operating at optimum levels, meaning that when the VMF-221 moved to cut off the approaching Japanese, the enemy aircraft were fresh, ready, and had no damage to undermine them in any way. Midway's Marine fighter pilots bore the brunt and the scars of first contact and the cost was high. By the time the dogfighting ended, Midway's VMF-221 had lost fifteen planes of the fighter squadron, a higher casualty number than any other American fighter squadron at Midway.<sup>101</sup>

Marine Second Lieutenant Darrell D. Irwin reported, "Their [Japanese] gunnery was very good and I doubt if on any run that they missed hitting my plane. On several occasions, I heard bullets strike the armor plate in back of my seat which is only shoulder high, and several times I ducked my head as far as I could in the cockpit when a fighter was firing on me."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Kirk Armistead, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008).

<sup>99</sup> R. A. Corry, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008).

<sup>100</sup> Armistead, "Statement"

<sup>101</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 220.

<sup>102</sup> Darrell D. Irwin, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008).

After-action pilot statements and reports from the Americans gave objective praise for the performance of the IJN pilots and somber comparison information about the American and Japanese fighter planes. Corry reported, "The 00 Fighter is by far the most maneuverable plant that exists at the presenttime [present time]. You cannot compare them with our service type ships."<sup>103</sup> Captain Philip R. White claimed, "The F2A-3 is not [emphasis White's] a combat aeroplane. It is inferior to the planes we were fighting in every respect."<sup>104</sup>

Armistead, the group's commander, made the strongest case for the insurmountable odds VMF-221 faced. In his report, he declared,

The Zero Fighter is exceptionally maneuverable, with an astounding rate of climb. It is capable of closing the range on an F2A-3 in a climb to such an extent that it seems useless to even try to make more than one pass at any target. It is my belief that they can climb at least 5,000 feet a minute...The Zero Fighter is faster in level flight than the F2A-3. It is much more maneuverable than the F2A-3. It can out climb the F2A-3. It has more fire power than the F2A-3."<sup>105</sup>

Before the aerial melee ended, as the fighting reached the fringe of the shores of Midway, observers on the ground noticed the terrible peril the Marine fighters faced. Second Lieutenant Hyde Phillips noted, "Zero Fighters outnumbered our fighters, had greater speed, and vastly great maneuverability. The Japanese planes were flown with skill and daring. Brewsters and Grumman were no match for the Zero Fighters."<sup>106</sup> Second Lieutenant Charles S. Hughes, from the ground noted, "I saw two Brewsters trying to fight the Zeroes. One was shot down and the other was saved by ground fire covering his tail. Both looked like they were tied to a string

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<sup>103</sup> Corry, "Statement"

<sup>104</sup> Philip R. White, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008).

<sup>105</sup> Armistead, "Statement"

<sup>106</sup> Hyde Phillips, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008).

while the Zeroes made passes at them. I believe that our men with planes even half as good as the Zeroes would have stopped the raid completely."<sup>107</sup>

The struggle in the skies lasted mere minutes. By 6:30 a.m., as the dogfighting bled over into Midway's shoreline and it was easily discernable that the Japanese would reach the atoll, Shannon issued an order for all of Midway's surface positions, "Open fire when targets are within range."<sup>108</sup> Within a minute all guns had opened fire, and within another minute of that, one of the attacking Japanese aircraft was seen to be on fire.<sup>109</sup>

At 6:35 a.m., the Japanese attack bombers reached Midway.<sup>110</sup> As they arrived, IJN Lieutenant Jōichi Tomonaga, the air strike commander, broke radio silence and issued attack orders to his assault group. The orders served two purposes. First, they confirmed their arrival at Midway. Second, Tomonaga provided last-minute, real-time instructions for his pilots. He ordered, "Assault Method No. 2, wind 90 degrees, nine meters, approach course 270 degrees."<sup>111</sup> Tomonaga's coordinates placed the group attacking from the east, with the sun behind them.<sup>112</sup>

On Midway, all hell broke loose. Within minutes the base's laundry, hospital, and contractor canteen had been hit and the hospital and canteen set afire. By 6:40 a.m. about 30 planes were bombing Eastern Island. Aerial attacks, even in the days of propeller driven planes, were speedy confrontations. The fast action kept the observation post busy. Caught up in the

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<sup>107</sup> Charles S. Hughes, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008).

<sup>108</sup> Harold D. Shannon, *Record Log, Marine Sixth Defense Battalion*, as quoted in "Office of Naval Intelligence, Combat Narrative: The Battle of Midway, June 3-6, 1942", *HyperWar Foundation*, last updated 1-March-1993, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/USN-CN-Midway/USN-CN-Midway-5.html> >, (20-July-2009).

<sup>109</sup> Harold D. Shannon, *Record Log*.

<sup>110</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*.

<sup>111</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 145.

<sup>112</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 145.

maelstrom, the log noted that the Eastern Island airplane hangar was on fire and that a Japanese attacker had been shot down on the ramp.<sup>113</sup>

After the 6:41 a.m. notation from the observation post, entries for Shannon's log spaced out somewhat. Up to that point, the action had been fast and furious. Since the initial attack came in three waves, the break could have marked the approximate time of the Japanese squadron's regrouping. Or, possibly, the break in the action confirmed that the American defense had started taking a toll on the attacking Japanese. Either are possible explanations for the temporary lull, and it is also possible that a combination of these two suppositions occurred.

Midway's respite did not, however, last very long. By 6:47 a.m., Shannon's observation post announced a new attack: "Planes coming in toward the island flying low from 200°. Appear to be enemy planes. 2 enemy planes have crashed in water to north."<sup>114</sup> As with the previous attack, the Marine anti-aircraft batteries almost immediately made their mark. At 6:48 a.m., "OP [Observation Post] to Bn [Battalion]: '1 enemy plane has crashed on Eastern Island. 1 enemy plane has crashed near C battery.'"<sup>115</sup>

Within another few minutes it was all over. Having dropped their ordnance and being somewhat depleted by the fire of the anti-aircraft guns, the planes of the Japanese attack force turned and headed for home. At 6:48 a.m. the garrison noted many enemy planes leaving. By 6:56 a.m., the observation post's radio messages included: "All enemy planes have left the area" and "2 friendly planes, fighters, have landed."<sup>116</sup>

The radio messages between the observation post and Shannon's headquarters provided quick and concise information. Only the facts were spoken and recorded. There was no time for

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<sup>113</sup> Harold D. Shannon, *Record Log*.

<sup>114</sup> Harold D. Shannon, *Record Log*.

<sup>115</sup> Harold D. Shannon, *Record Log*.

<sup>116</sup> Harold D. Shannon, *Record Log*.



more, and nothing more was expected. Observers familiar with military jargon and the real-time speed of such a struggle, understandably, need no further description of the defensive struggle for Midway and the garrison's resistance.

However, in many ways, personal and eyewitness accounts recreate the picture in a more lifelike manner. While the observation post's reports provided quick and vital reference information regarding the defensive struggle, personal accounts contribute ancillary information that accentuates the action and defense of Midway.

Among others present at Midway that day was the famous Hollywood director, John Ford. Aware of Ford's talents and the likelihood of the Japanese attack, Admiral Nimitz had dispatched the Navy Commander cum videographer to the atoll just prior to the battle. Nimitz wanted Ford to capture on film as he could.

Ford fulfilled Nimitz' request and then some, although it nearly cost him his life. Halfway through the bombing, he received a minor wound and was knocked unconscious, but not before he witnessed the strong defense of the anti-aircraft batteries and aerial combat of the American pilots. Ford, speaking as a navy man and not as a Hollywood star, frankly recalled, "The planes started falling, some of ours, a lot of Jap planes."<sup>117</sup>

Other less famous members of the garrison also recorded their memories. Marine mechanic, Walt Grist of the US Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron - 241 manned an anti-aircraft position during the IJN attack on Eastern Island and some years later recounted:

I had a ringside seat across the runway opposite the tetrahedron that was at the intersection of the two runways running west to east on Eastern Island. There was also a .50 caliber water-cooled machine gun alongside, manned by men from the VMSB-241 ground crew. A Zero flew down the runway about 40 feet altitude and all guns trained on him. The impact area was about thirty yards past the north-south runway that the fighters used. The plane was demolished and

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<sup>117</sup> Department of the Navy, "Oral History-Battle of Midway", n.d. *Naval Historical Center*, last updated 9-February-2001, < <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq81-8b.htm> > (21-June-2007).

everybody tried to get a piece of it. The pilot was buried in the late afternoon, and as far as I know he is still there. There were several planes shot down over the island that VMF-221 [the Marine fighter squadron] led in, and they impacted on Sand Island or in the Lagoon. Others had to ditch away from the atoll. I don't know just how many went down on the island or in the lagoon. I personally only saw the one go down on Eastern Island.<sup>118</sup>

Corporal John V. Gardner, a field communications specialist with the United States Marines, 6th Marine Defense Battalion, reported, "Several of the attackers were shot down, four or five or so."<sup>119</sup> During the height of the attack, Ford noted, "The Marine gunners and our Navy gunners were really excellent, I have never seen a greater exhibition of courage and coolness under fire in my life and I have seen some in my day. There was no spasmodic firing, there was no firing at nothing. They just waited until they got a shot and it usually counted."<sup>120</sup>

In all, the initial assault on Midway consisted of 108 Japanese planes. They attacked Eastern Island and Sand Island in three separate waves.<sup>121</sup> The attack lasted only 35 minutes, from 6:35 a.m. to 7:10 a.m. In the bomb run, according to American counts, the Japanese dropped fourteen counted bombs - four 1000 pound bombs and ten of the 300 or 500 pound variety. By 7:15 a.m., the Marines were already appraising the damages to Eastern Island.<sup>122</sup>

The assessment revealed the destruction of the Eastern Island powerhouse, along with damage to the main gasoline lines adjacent to the powerhouse. Eastern Island's Command Post, Mess Hall, and Post Exchange were destroyed. Bombs hit in the environs of the sick bay and the

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<sup>118</sup> Ronald W. Russell, *No Right to Win: A Continuing Dialogue with Veterans of the Battle of Midway*, (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2006), p. 54. \*While this eyewitness account came after the war, several of the comments included make it plausible and credible. First, the aging veteran clearly remembered the events, including how the Japanese pilot flew directly down Eastern Island's runway, an act of bravery that likely was not to be forgotten. Second, Grist, a member of the Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron 241, recalled the identity of the separate from his own and the weapon they used. Finally, if Grist's account was an exaggeration, it is unlikely that he would have admitted to only one Japanese Zero being shot down in his presence. He mentioned only second-hand knowledge of other shot down planes. For a fabricated story, the declaration of multiple kills would have been far more exhilarating.

<sup>119</sup> Russell, *No Right to Win*, p. 54.

<sup>120</sup> Department of the Navy, "Oral History."

<sup>121</sup> Heintz, "Marines at Midway."

<sup>122</sup> McCaul, "Executive Officer Report"

engineering tents of the VMSB. A weapons cache for the Marine Air Group received a bomb hit, detonating eight 100 pound bombs and the 10,000 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition stored there. As for the all-important airstrips, Runway One received a hit, damaging the center of the eastern end. There was also a small crater about 500 yards from the runway's eastern end. In addition, Runway Three received some shoulder damage adjacent to the junction with Runway Two. Finally, the remains of a Japanese Zero were on the northern end of Runway Three, and debris from all the explosions littered much of the island.<sup>123</sup>

Sand Island also sustained intense damage from the attack. Captain Simard's after-action report, dated June 18, reported damage to Sand Island's fresh and salt water lines and storage facilities, damage to fuel oil tanks, damage or destruction to several buildings, including laundry facilities, barracks, warehouses, maintenance buildings, a mess hall, a dispensary, an airplane hangar, and damage of varying degrees to a number of contractor buildings.<sup>124</sup>

Almost certainly, the attacking Japanese recognized that their attack caused quite a bit of damage across Eastern and Sand Island. Even so, Lieutenant Tomonaga realized that the Japanese attacks did not accomplish the IJN goal of neutralizing Midway and softening it for the impending invasion. To the contrary, at 7:00 a.m. Tomonaga straightforwardly radioed his estimation of Midway's defensive posture and stated, "There is need for a second attack wave."<sup>125</sup> Tomonaga, a veteran pilot<sup>126</sup>, likely recognized the strong resistance of the Americans

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<sup>123</sup> Ira L. Kimes, "Commanding Officer Report, Marine Air Group-22", 7-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/mag22co.pdf> > (17-December-2008).

<sup>124</sup> Cyril T. Simard, "Commanding Officer Report, U.S. Naval Air Station, Midway Island", 18-June-1942, *Midway, 1942 Visual Research Multimedia Project*, last updated 2010. < [http://www.midway1942.org/docs/usn\\_doc\\_13.shtml](http://www.midway1942.org/docs/usn_doc_13.shtml) > (19-October-2010). Sand Island received extensive bomb damage during the IJN raid. For specific details regarding the magnitude of the damage to military and civilian property on Sand Island, consult the full details of Captain Simard's After-Action Report

<sup>125</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 149.

<sup>126</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 125.

and understood that Midway was far from prostrate. Moreover, presumably, he knew of the planned amphibious assault of Midway and expected the cost to be too high at this point.

In the intense bombing and strafing, the Marines gave as good as they got. In his after-action report, Admiral Nagumo admitted at least four planes lost to Midway anti-aircraft fire. Hits on his planes varied from group to group. In one group, he noted three hits; another group had four. In another group, he reported nine hits and in one group he reported every plane was hit. Of these, he listed at least 2 planes as totally inoperative upon their return.<sup>127</sup> Simard's after-action report contained similar numbers. He credited the Midway-based forces with shooting down ten Japanese planes and damaging another two.<sup>128</sup>

Back in the skies, the action and sacrifices of the Midway Marine fighter pilots make it easy to forget that there was other aerial action simultaneously underway or inevitably close to commencing. In the air for roughly two hours before the first Japanese bombers struck their island, Midway's B-17s were themselves on a collision course with the approaching Japanese fleet. Earlier in the morning, as soon as the PBY alerted Midway of the approaching Japanese planes, Flight 92 was redirected for their attack. Likewise, the other bombers squadrons, the Army B-26s and TBFs, were directed to "attack enemy carriers bearing 320 degrees, distance 180 miles, course 135 degrees, speed 25 knots."<sup>129</sup>

The hodgepodge of American planes included the six Grumman TBF "Avengers" of VT-8, originally meant for the USS *Hornet*, but sent to Midway after the carrier left Pearl Harbor.<sup>130</sup> Also a part of Midway's integrated attack squadrons were four US Army B-26s, specially rigged

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<sup>127</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 42-45.

<sup>128</sup> Simard, "Commanding Officer Report."

<sup>129</sup> Verne J. McCaul, "Executive Officer Report."

<sup>130</sup> Walter Lord, *Incredible Victory*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1967), p. 55.

for torpedo duty. And finally, the Marine Scout Bombing Squadron, VMSB-241 with sixteen Douglas SBD "Dauntless" aircraft and twelve Vought SB2U "Vindicators" closed out the list.<sup>131</sup>

A few minutes after Tomonaga's announcement that the Japanese neutralization attempt on Midway failed to soften the atoll enough for a successful amphibious assault, two things that directly affected the outcome of the Battle of Midway occurred. First, Nagumo, acting on his own intuition and Tomonaga's report, ordered the vast majority of the bomber planes of the Mobile Force be refitted for a second attack on Midway. Suddenly, planes prepared for a strike on any sighted American ships had to be changed from torpedoes to high explosive land bombs. This was not a simple process and would take time under the best of circumstances.<sup>132</sup>

Second, and at roughly the same time as Nagumo's decision, the Midway bomber squadrons finally sighted their targets. Lieutenant Langdon K. Fieberling, Midway's leader of the 6-man VT-8 Avenger group, and his US Navy pilots spearheaded the attack on the Japanese. Unfortunately, the Japanese spotted the approach of the covey of American planes, assumed a defensive posture, and steered directly toward the oncoming the attack.<sup>133</sup>

The TBF bombers proceeded to run a gauntlet of enemy fire. This was the first combat experience for all six pilots and their aircraft, with one pilot, Second Lieutenant A. K. Earnest, having less than a year's flight experience of any kind. Even so, the TBFs managed to break through the Japanese combat air patrols and deliver their ordnance. By the time Earnest released his torpedo, his plane was a mangled mess; he had no working instruments and no expectations of survival, as his altitude was a mere thirty feet above the choppy seas. Nevertheless, he

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<sup>131</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p.61.

<sup>132</sup> Dallas Woodbury Isom, *Midway Inquest: Why the Japanese Lost the Battle of Midway* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 111-112.

<sup>133</sup> Gordon W. Prange, p. 209 and Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 69.

managed to make it back to Midway. Earnest and his crippled plane were the lone survivors of the TBF group, and he belly landed his plane, unable to lower one wheel.<sup>134</sup>

Right behind the TBF attack came the four US Army B-26 aircraft. Like their TBF brethren, their descent through the Japanese combat air patrols and anti-aircraft defenses was met with extremely heavy anti-aircraft fire. As the Marauders pressed their attack, Japanese combat air patrols quickly fell upon them. For certain, two survived the Japanese attack planes. US Army Captain James F. Collins, Jr. and US Army First Lieutenant James P. Muri somehow reached their targets and dropped their torpedoes. The screen of the combat air patrols and the heavy anti-aircraft fire forced a hasty delivery. Confronted with the defensive maneuvering of the ships, neither Collins nor Muri made a successful delivery. Though more symbolic than effective, Muri strafed the deck of the *Akagi* with machine gun fire as his plane lumbered down the length of the ship.<sup>135</sup>

In the years since Midway, popular American histories of Midway suggest that the only Collins and Muri came anywhere close to their Japanese targets. However, Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully suggest otherwise. While chronicling Collins' near miss and Muri's dash down the length of *Akagi*, they also offer evidence that a heavily damaged and doomed B-26, they believe piloted by US Army First Lieutenant Herbert Mayes, attempted to steer directly into the bridge of *Akagi*, narrowly missing the mast and island of the ship before crashing into the sea.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Isom, *Midway Inquest*, p. 110, Lord, *Incredible Victory*, p. 112-114, Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 207-211, and Verne J. McCaul, "Executive Officer Report."

<sup>135</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p.70-73, Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 207-212, and Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 152 .

<sup>136</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p.152, 549.

At this point in the battle, even with Midway's planes making incessant attacks on them, Japanese Commander Minoru Genda felt the battle belonged to the Japanese. "We don't need to be afraid of enemy planes no matter how many they are!...This is a winning battle."<sup>137</sup>

For Nagumo, however, the "U.S. Midway-based planes proved the base was still in action."<sup>138</sup> The attacks of the Avengers and the Marauders, coming as they did within minutes of Nagumo's receipt of Tomonaga's radio report on the Japanese air strike, provided ample proof to the admiral that Midway required a second attack. Although the American planes must clearly have left the island well before the Japanese attack, the surviving American aircraft could be replenished and attack again as long as the base remained in operation.

More American attacks were soon forthcoming. At roughly 7:55 a.m., Midway's Douglas SBD "Dauntless" aircraft of VMSB-241, led by Lofton R. Henderson, discovered the approaching Japanese Mobile Force. Just behind the SBDs were the Vought SB2U "Vindicator" dive bombers, also of VMSB-241, led by Major Benjamin White Norris. Norris and his group sighted the Japanese at 8:20 a.m.

From the outset, the deck appeared to be stacked against Henderson, Norris, and their squadron. Destiny selected them for a daunting and unforgiving task. Ten of the pilots committed to the attacks had joined the bomber squadron just one week earlier. Making this worse was the ongoing shortage of fuel on Midway, which severely curtailed training in the final week before the battle. In fact, records indicate that ten of Henderson's and Norris' pilots arrived on Midway just one week prior to the battle. With fuel shortages and the base already on alert, Norris' bombers logged only two hours of training and Henderson's only one hour.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 252.

<sup>138</sup> Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 215.

<sup>139</sup> Information regarding the attacks of the Midway-based Douglas SBD aircraft of VMSB-241 come from two sources. M. A. Tyler, "Commanding Officer's Report, VMSB-241", 12-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway*

Spying the Rising Sun painted on the flight deck of one of the carriers, Henderson selected a target of choice, the *Hiryū*, and initiated the group's dive. Almost immediately, Japanese combat air patrols intercepted the oncoming Americans and established a near impenetrable barrier for the ships. The anti-aircraft guns of the Japanese ships also started hammering them with blistering fire. Henderson and his squadron continued their dive, and the Marines manning their onboard machine guns returned fire and some hit their mark. In balls of flame, at least four Japanese fighter planes fell from the sky, with a couple more possibly destroyed. All the while, the Japanese fighters kept coming, and they heavily outnumbered the unsupported Americans. Doom awaited many of the Americans.

Through the rain of fire, Henderson tried holding together his formation to maximize their success. Soon, however, Henderson was gone. As his SBD burst into flames and fell out of the attack, Captain Elmer G. Glidden, Jr. assumed the lead of the dive run. Like Henderson, others started to fall. By the time the attack concluded, one half of the squadron was lost.

Despite that, they steadied their bombers and their will, even to low altitudes, some coming in as low as four hundred feet above their target vessels before releasing their 500 pound bombs. As they dropped their ordnance, they quickly scattered as best they could. Desperately trying to save their own lives and the lives of their flight crew, most did not know the fate of their friends.

Neither, given the confusion of the events, did they know the fate of their foes. VMSB-241's survivors initially reported that their efforts produced successful results. The Executive

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*Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmsb-241.pdf> >, (17-December-2008) and Verne J. McCaul, "Executive Officer's Report of Marine Air Group-22". The after-action reports listed only the last names of the military personnel involved. Identification and clarification on the names come from military tables listed in Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p.75,78. Interrogations of IJN Officers after the war revealed information regarding the success of the Midway-based attacks on the Japanese Mobile Force. This and all subsequent accounts regarding the success of the Midway-based attacks come from these interrogations.



Officer's report erroneously noted three direct hits on *Hiryū*. The poor intelligence is understandable when examined in the light of all the facts of the attack. One survivor forcibly landed his plane with only one wheel of his landing gear. When inspected, his plane was found to have over two hundred bullet and shrapnel holes in it. Henderson and his men attacked the Mobile Force with no fighter support. Nothing else could be done. Earlier, any hope of a combat air patrol was lost when Midway's fighters disengaged and desperately attacked the enemy en route to bomb the atoll. Almost from the time of their launch, providence was the only protector of the SBDs.

After Henderson's SBDs, but just prior to the attack upon the Japanese by Major Norris and his group of SB2U Vindicators, Flight 92, the B-17s of Lieutenant Colonel Walter C. Sweeney, discovered the Mobile Force and conducted their horizontal bomb run. Sweeney divided his bombers into three attack groups and designated a separate carrier for each group. All of the B-17s carried 500 pound bombs, and in their attacks they dropped them from heights reaching 20,000 feet. In contrast with earlier and later low level attackers, the altitude B-17s enjoyed relative immunity from Japanese anti-aircraft fire, sustaining only one minor injury to a tail gunner. Alas, their own bombing was even more ineffective than the Japanese counter fire. Although the green pilots believed they had recorded hits on the Japanese carriers, these claims were incorrect. At 9:00 a.m., Flight 92 reported their attack completed.<sup>140</sup> However, like the previous American attacks, even their near misses caused the Japanese ships to act defensively and hindered IJN search efforts.

As stated, Major Norris and his group of Vindicator's search for targets of opportunity, mainly Japanese carriers, paid off at roughly 8:20 a.m. That is when they came upon the

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<sup>140</sup> The account of the United States Army Air Force, B-17 attacks come from Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 80-81 and Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 225-227. The 9:00 a.m. report of the completed bomb run comes from United States Navy, *War Diary*, the radio log of the Midway Air Station.

Japanese Mobile Force, already heavily engaged by the earlier attacks. At this point, no hope for surprise existed, and before the tiny group of Vindicators commenced their attack, the Japanese fighter planes attacked them in a frenzy. Instead of diving on a carrier, as their pre-attack plans stipulated, the group, as if realizing they would never reach the carriers, concentrated upon a Japanese battleship.

With only two hours of practice together as unit, the unproven and unpracticed Americans utilized a high speed, low altitude glide run as their method of delivery. Those who made it through the anti-aircraft fire and the combat screen maintained a rigid formation, as best they could, and released their bombs at extremely tight intervals and very low altitude. To escape, Norris and his pilots continued a low flight pattern close to the water and disappeared into cloud cover whenever possible.

Like the groups before them, they believed their efforts paid off with hits on Japanese ships. As with the others, they too were wrong. The SB2U aviators also claimed confirmed victories over two Japanese combat air patrols and the possibility of two others, although the accuracy of these claims is impossible to determine. Also like the previous groups, with the exception of the B-17s, some of the Voughts did not make it home. Two of the Vindicator pilots ditched their wounded planes en route back to Midway and required rescuing. One of the forsaken planes took with it a dead crewman to the ocean floor.<sup>141</sup> And with this sacrifice, so ended the initial defense of and attacks from Midway.

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<sup>141</sup> Information regarding the attacks of the Midway-based Vought SB2U aircraft of VMSB-241 comes from two sources. M. A. Tyler, "Commanding Officer's Report, VMSB-241", 12-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmsb-241.pdf> >, (17-December-2008) and Vern J. McCaul, "Executive Officer's Report of Marine Air Group-22".

Table 4-1: Naval Air Station, Midway – 14<sup>th</sup> Naval District – Aviation Order of Battle<sup>142</sup>

Naval Air Station, Midway 14th Naval District Aviation order of battle				
Commanding Officer		Operations Officer		
Captain Cyril T. Simard		Commander Logan C. Ramsey		
Patrol Wing 2 [Detachments]				
Air Group	Aircraft Make / Model	Number of Planes Assigned	Number of Planes Available	Commanding Officer
VP-23	Consolidated PBY-5 "Catalina"	14	13	
VP-24	Consolidated PBY-5A "Catalina"	3	3	
VP-44	Consolidated PBY-5A "Catalina"	8	7	
VP-51	Consolidated PBY-5A "Catalina"	3	3	
Marine Air Group - 22				
Commanding Officer - Lieutenant Colonel Ira L. Kimes				
Air Group	Aircraft Make / Model	Number of Planes Assigned	Number of Planes Available	Commanding Officer
VMF-221	Brewster F2A-3 "Buffalo"	21	20	Major Floyd B. Parks
	Grumman F4F-3 "Wildcat"	7	6	Captain John F. Carey
VMSB-241	Douglas SBD-2 "Dauntless"	19	18	Major Lofton R. Henderson
	Vought SB2U-3 "Vindicator"	21	17	Major Benjamin W. Norris
Torpedo Squadron 8 [Detachments]				
Air Group	Aircraft Make / Model	Number of Planes Assigned	Number of Planes Available	Commanding Officer
	Grumman TBF-1 "Avenger"	6	6	Lieutenant Langdon K. Fieberling
7th Army Air Force [Detachments]				
Air Group	Aircraft Make / Model	Number of Planes Assigned	Number of Planes Available	Commanding Officer
	Boeing B-17E "Flying Fortress"	16	15	Lieutenant Colonel Walter C. Sweeney, Jr.
	Boeing B-17E "Flying Fortress"	6	6	Major George A. Blakey
	Martine B-26B "Marauder"	4	4	Captain James F. Collins, Jr.

<sup>142</sup> Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p.220 and Nick Kolyadko, "Order of Battle of Midway and Aleutians, 4-7 June 1942", *Midway, 1942 Visual Research Multimedia Project*, <<http://midway1942.org/order.shtml>> (19-October-2010).

## Chapter 5 – The Aftermath and Achievements

At roughly the same time that the Vindicator pilots ditched their planes in the sea, shortly after 9:30 a.m., Midway's B-17s returned home. The pilots discovered the island's appearance was drastically different from the predawn image they remembered. Midway had been heavily bombed, and damage and debris were everywhere. Be that as it may, they did not discover the men of Midway idle or cowering in fear. To the contrary, they found all hands industriously toiling in an effort to ensure that the island base stayed operational. To a man, those physically capable assumed a role or a task.

There was plenty to do. Lingering fires posed the most immediate problem for the men on the ground. Billowing columns of smoke constituted a significant operational hazard for returning American aircraft. Conversely, smoke and fire might also serve as target beacons for additional Japanese attacks, either by day or by night. Fires and bomb damage also hampered the continued operation of the base's medical and mess facilities. Nevertheless, Midway was soon returned to some sort of working order as individuals and teams of men took the initiative into their own hands. Marine fighter pilot Hyde Phillips, whose unserviceable plane had kept him from joining the air attacks on the enemy, scrambled to the bombed out sick bay and saved six boxes of blood plasma.<sup>143</sup> Marine Private Chester R. Rush saved much of the base's food supply by extinguishing the fire in the Mess Hall. Afterwards, members of the Mess Hall, overlooking their own needs and sleeping for only minutes at a time for three days, diligently provided nourishment to everyone on Midway.<sup>144</sup>

Of equal importance to putting out Midway's fires and paramount in the overall mission of keeping Midway actively engaged in the battle was the need to keep the base's aircraft

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<sup>143</sup> Cressman, et al. *"A Glorious Page in Our History"* p. 66, 81.

<sup>144</sup> Tyler, "Commanding Officer's Report.

operational. The Japanese bomb attacks had disabled normal fueling operations, and ground crews turned to drums and hand pumps. The men labored at refueling all aircraft in this manner for the remainder of the battle.<sup>145</sup> At the forefront of this effort were Master Technical Sergeant Hubert E. Rodgers and Staff Sergeant Earnest C. Henry, who fueled, refueled, parked, and launched planes for 72 hours without sleep or rest. Private Richard D. Predmore fulfilled every request for 60 hours without rest.

Commander Tyler, in his after-action report, claimed everyone realized their responsibility and pitched in accordingly. However, understanding the value of having aircraft in the battle, he singled out the contributions of eight Marines. Tyler credited Sergeant John R. Grow, Sergeant Glenn S. Deal, Corporal Albert B. Smith, Corporal Harold W. Whitaker, USMCR, Private, First Class Leslie O. Brakes, Private, First Class Stephen Mayer, Private, First Class Gail L. Roberts, and Private, First Class Lee A. Cassity with bomb handling and rearming Midway's aircraft and keeping them ready for attack launches. Tyler reported that the men worked around the clock from June 4 through June 6, with only an occasional nap for rest.<sup>146</sup>

The work of these and other support personnel encompassed a myriad of activities during the remainder of June 4. The fighters, dive bombers and torpedo aircraft of Marine Air Group 22 had been decimated, but the surviving aircraft and their crewmen had to be made ready in the event that the Japanese launched another attack on the atoll. Neither of the surviving B-26s was flyable, but the B-17s were in decidedly better condition. As soon as the big bombers returned from their morning sorties, ground crews began scrambling to refit them for additional missions. At noon, eleven planes from the USS *Hornet* made emergency landings on Midway in order to refuel. The arrival of the carrier planes was a reminder that the battle at sea was ongoing; it was

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<sup>145</sup> Heinl, "Marines at Midway."

<sup>146</sup> All of the accounts of specific contributions to recovery efforts come from M. A. Tyler, "Commanding Officer's Report."

also a harbinger of the way that the island garrison's mission would evolve into a subordinate, supporting role in the days to come. As the clock struck midnight and closed the business of June 4, 1942, Midway's PBYs reentered the skies in search of Japanese targets of opportunity.<sup>147</sup>

By that time there were decidedly fewer of these targets. Earlier that day, at approximately 9:30 a.m., aircraft from the carriers *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, and *Hornet* had located the Japanese attack force. The carrier pilots' success in finding the Japanese built upon the earlier reconnaissance efforts of Midway's pilots; the fate of the carrier torpedo planes paralleled that of their Midway counterparts. Within a matter of minutes, 35 out of 41 of the antiquated Devastator torpedo planes had been destroyed, and one squadron, VT-8 of the *Hornet*, lost every plane and every crewman except one, Ensign George Henry Gay. At approximately 10:25 a.m., however, American dive bombers from the *Enterprise*, led by C. Wade McClusky, successfully attacked the Japanese carriers *Kaga* and *Akagi*. Almost simultaneously, SBDs from the *Yorktown*, led by Maxwell F. Leslie, hit the *Sōryū*. A Japanese riposte from the *Hiryū*, the fourth Japanese fleet carrier, put the *Yorktown* out of action. Late in the afternoon the *Hiryū*, Japan's last remaining fleet carrier, was also fatally damaged and went under earlier on the morning of June 5.<sup>148</sup>

Although the destruction of the Japanese carriers was ultimately decisive to the outcome of the battle, their sinking did not end the engagement. Indeed, the last significant encounter of the Midway operation did not occur until the afternoon of June 6 when, ironically, the Japanese

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<sup>147</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary*. Note: The order for refitting the B-17s came at 9:45 a.m. The times cited for the Midway-based attacks for the remainder of June 4, as well as, June 5, June 6, and June 7 come from Midway's War Diary. Specifics related to carrier-based attacks come from Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page in Our History*" p. 143-151.

<sup>148</sup> Lord, *Incredible Victory*, p. 150-170, Smith, *Midway*, p. 96-113, 127-129, and Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 285-291. Early histories of the battle claim that *Sōryū* and *Kaga* sank outright from damage inflicted by the Americans and list the *Akagi* and *Hiryū* as being scuttled to avoid their capture. Recent histories, with more detailed Japanese focus reveal the possibility that all four were scuttled by the Japanese. Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 333-339, 353, and Isom, *Midway Inquest*, p. 228-229.

gained their one major triumph of the operation by torpedoing the already crippled *Yorktown*, which finally succumbed to her injuries on the morning of June 7, and sinking her consort, the destroyer *Hammann*. Between these two events—the destruction of the Japanese carrier group on June 4 and final denouement of the battle—the Midway garrison continued to play an important though subordinate role.

The day of June 5 began oddly. At 1:30 that morning, a Japanese submarine surfaced and shelled Midway. The shore batteries returned fire and claimed hits on the enemy sub, which were never confirmed. Japanese accounts claim the sub returned to the depths and departed, with neither adversary causing damage of any kind.<sup>149</sup>

At 4:30 a.m., Simard launched Midway's B-17s into the predawn skies above his airbase. He wanted to ensure his heavy bombers were not caught on the ground, and he intended to maximize every opportunity to harass or further damage the Japanese. By 5:30, Simard sent the PBVs out on additional search patrols. In roughly one hour, the search planes discovered and reported two Japanese battleships just over 100 miles from Midway. The ships turned out not to be battleships, but the heavy cruisers, *Mikuma* and *Mogami*, which had collided with each other while trying to evade an American submarine.<sup>150</sup>

Immediately, Simard ordered an attack mission, and dispatched VMSB-241 to carry it out. Six SBD-2s, led by Captain Marshall A. Tyler, and six SB2U-3s, led by Second Lieutenant Richard E. Fleming were en route by 7:00 a.m. Quickly, the B-17s were also rerouted in the direction of the "battleships" with the intention of a high altitude bomb drop.

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<sup>149</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 348.

<sup>150</sup> The account of the discovery and attacks on the *Mikuma* and *Mogami* come from three sources: United States Navy, *War Diary*, Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page in Our History*" p. 143-151, and Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 348, 369-381.

Just after 8:00 a.m., the Marine aviators caught up with the *Mikuma* and *Mogami*. Tyler's group dive bombed the ships first, followed by Fleming's group in a glide bombing pattern. Even though both were already heavily damaged, the two cruisers directed a withering barrage of anti-aircraft fire into the attacking Americans and shot down Fleming's *Vindicator*. Neither attack scored successful hits on either ship.

The B-17s arrived shortly afterwards and dropped their payloads onto the cruisers from the protection of 20,000 feet. The bombers reported hits on one of the Japanese "battleships" at 10:00 a.m. However, like their Midway counterparts, they too had only near misses. The attacks, however, further slowed the escape of the crippled cruisers, and later in the day, dive bombers from the carrier groups overtook and successfully attacked the *Mikuma*. The ship sank, taking with it 700 officers and men.

American patrol aircraft undertook other missions as well. That same morning Midway PBYs reported two other Japanese cruisers approximately 175 miles from Midway; at 7:19 a.m. they discovered and reported five Japanese ships 200 miles from Midway; at 7:35 they reported five ships and gave their coordinates; and at 8:00 a.m., they reported two battleships, three heavy cruisers, and one burning carrier, which turned out to be the *Hiryū*<sup>151</sup>

Army bombers also continued their missions throughout the day. At 1:20 p.m., Midway B-17s again launched in search of Japanese carriers reportedly crippled by US Navy forces. At 6 p.m., the B-17s reported near misses on enemy cruisers, and at 7:30 p.m. Flight 93 attempted a fire bombing on the Japanese by dropping bomb bay fuel tanks rather than bombs. Novel though it was, this tactic was no more effective than the earlier B-17 attacks had been<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> United States Navy, *War Diary* and Cressman, et al. "*A Glorious Page in Our History*" p. 144-145.

<sup>152</sup> The June 5 afternoon attacks by Midway's B-17s and the June 6 PBY mission come from the United States Navy, *War Diary*.



On June 6 at 4:15 p.m., a PBY from Midway rescued two men of the USS *Hornet* approximately 137 miles from the atoll. In the same general area, they observed empty Japanese life boats. One of the rescued Americans, a US Navy Ensign, reported having seen three heavily damaged carriers during his lengthy stay in the water. By June 6, everyone on Midway and the surviving members of the US Navy Carrier Task Forces began to understand the magnitude of their success. Without question, the ensign's report provided a clear indication of the overall American success in the battle.

That success was indeed remarkable. In terms of human and material losses, the soldiers, marines, and sailors of the United States Pacific Fleet and the Midway garrison had inflicted grievous losses upon the Japanese navy. Estimates of Japanese personnel losses—particularly within the precious pool of carrier trained aviators—vary wildly, but one of the more carefully considered recent studies puts the total of Japanese fatalities at 2181.<sup>153</sup>

Material losses are easier to assess. In addition to the four fleet carriers the Japanese lost the heavy cruiser *Mikuma*, sustained heavy damage to the heavy cruiser *Mogami*, and suffered light to superficial damage to a number of other warships and auxiliaries.<sup>154</sup> The strategic implications of Japan's setback at Midway were equally significant. Contrary to Yamamoto's expectations, the United States Pacific Fleet was intact, and Midway, the sentinel preventing access to the Hawaiian Islands, remained in American hands. Just as importantly, the strategic initiative in the Pacific war was now palpably shifting towards the Allies, as the limited Allied offensives at Guadalcanal and in New Guinea would demonstrate later that summer.

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<sup>153</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 476.

<sup>154</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 330-385 and Isom, *Midway Inquest*, p. 206-228. Initial damage estimates by Admiral Nimitz put the Japanese losses four fleet carriers, two heavy cruisers, and three or four destroyers sunk and two or three battleships, one light cruiser, four troop transport ships and one cargo vessel damaged. Chester W. Nimitz, "Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet report, Serial 01849", 28-June-1942, *Navy Historical Center*, 09-January-2007, < <http://www.history.navy.mil/docs/wwii/midl.htm> >, (17-December-2008).

Credit for this spectacular success—one that historian H. P. Willmott has termed “the first irreversible Allied victory of the Second World War”<sup>155</sup>—goes to a large number of people. It was the pilots of the Dauntless dive bombers from the aircraft carriers that inflicted the fatal hits on the Japanese, but their success built upon the much more costly sacrifices of the three American carriers’ torpedo pilots and the bloody efforts of Midway’s aircraft earlier that morning. Indeed, between their discovery by a Midway based PBY at approximately 5:45 on the morning of June 4 and the decisive attacks by the dive bombers between 10:25 and 10:30 a.m., the Japanese carrier group had to endure a gauntlet of bombings and torpedo runs by land based and carrier based aircraft. As has been shown, the material damage inflicted on the Japanese by the earlier attacks was either minuscule or nonexistent. Nevertheless, the cumulative effects that more than three hours of aerial attacks had upon the tactical deployment of the Japanese fleet, its combat air patrols, and, above all, the decision making ability of its leader, Admiral Nagumo, would seem to have been substantial, if not exactly calculable.

It was in this latter capacity—the decision making ability of Nagumo—that the role of Midway would appear to have been most evident, for in the most basic sense, Midway’s continued existence as an operational base gave the Japanese admiral one more complication than his American counterpart had. Each and every plane that the Japanese diverted to Midway, either for a bombing mission or for a combat air patrol, was one less that was available for missions against the American carriers. Moreover, each aircraft that was lost on the Midway mission was one that was permanently stricken from the Japanese inventory.

It is in this latter question that one encounters one of the most vexing problems concerning the battle of Midway, for it is exceedingly difficult to arrive at an exact accounting of

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<sup>155</sup> H. P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Strategies, February to June, 1942*, (Annapolis, United States Naval Institute Press, 1983), p. 521, cited in Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 339.

Japanese combat losses over the atoll. In his after action report, Nagumo acknowledged the loss of only six planes as a result of the morning attack on Midway.<sup>156</sup> Midway's Marine pilots claimed that they shot down many more planes, and soldiers and Marines of the anti-aircraft batteries certainly believed that they had inflicted a heavy toll on the Japanese as well.<sup>157</sup> One postwar history places the Japanese aircraft losses over Midway as high as thirty-eight, with thirty more so heavily damaged as to be unavailable for follow up missions.<sup>158</sup> As the Japanese ultimately lost all of the aircraft on their four fleet carriers, the exact number that went down on the Midway mission, that fell during the combat air patrols over their own vessels, or that were destroyed with the carriers will probably never be known. Neither Nagumo's claims nor Midway's can be determined with certainty; however, recent studies focused more on the Japanese than the Americans, reveal evidence marking the number of lost Japanese bombers in the Midway strike at eleven.<sup>159</sup>

As important as the debate on respective air losses over Midway is, however, it should not mask the larger contribution of the Midway garrison to the outcome of the battle. This contribution became evident the moment Japanese leaders realized that the airstrip and base had survived their initial attack, for when Lieutenant Tomonaga radioed Admiral Nagumo that there was need for a second attack, he inadvertently helped to set in motion a complicated chain of events that would lead to disaster for the Japanese. When he received Tomonaga's report, Admiral Nagumo committed to a second air strike on Midway. Undoubtedly, he was already aware that his own aviators were in a struggle above him and since no reliable evidence existed

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<sup>156</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002*, p. 42-45.

<sup>157</sup> Kirk Armistead, "Statement in Commanding Officer Report, Marine Fighter Squadron 221", 6-June-1942, *The Battle of Midway Roundtable*, last updated 8-July-2010, < <http://www.midway42.org/aa-reports/vmf-221.pdf> >, (17-December-2008); Heinl, "Marines at Midway", p. 42.

<sup>158</sup> Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of The Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)*, (Annapolis, Maryland: United States Naval Institute Press, 1978), p. 152.

<sup>159</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 524.

regarding the presence or absence of American carriers in the area, the Americans must have come from Midway. What is more, at roughly the same time, the Midway bomber squadrons arrived and began breaking through with their own attacks.

These developments—Midway’s survival as a battered but operational base and the attacks by Midway aircraft on the Japanese fleet—were disturbing contradictions to Nagumo’s earlier assertions that his adversaries “lacked the will to fight.” They also underscored crucial considerations that must have been evident to an officer as experienced as Nagumo was.

Midway was still a functional air base and a threat. Furthermore, successful invasion of the atoll required the base's neutralization to avoid unwanted casualties. It is likely that Nagumo realized that any additional attacks on Midway needed to have enough brute force to complete the job. Surely he figured he was losing some measure of pilots and planes in the action at Midway and overhead. Without knowing exactly how many pilots might return for refitting and rearming, he could not wait. Therefore, in the midst of the attacks from Midway, he directed that the planes which were currently fitted for attacks on yet to be located American ships be refitted with high explosive land bombs for a another attempt at breaking the island's defenses.<sup>160</sup>

What this decision meant, though, must be understood. Changing a plane's payload configuration from torpedoes to land bombs or vice-versa took time. Ordnance had to be removed and repositioned, and the replacement ordnance had to be retrieved. Even if these tasks were going on simultaneously, they were not speedy processes.<sup>161</sup> The frenzied battle conditions brought on by attacking American planes made the slow and trying effort more time consuming.

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<sup>160</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 153.

<sup>161</sup> Isom, *Midway Inquest*, p. 7. In his study, Isom acknowledged that American experts claimed that this process would have taken about an hour. However, he challenged that *Senshi Soshō*, the official Japanese history of the Battle of Midway, provided evidence that in a drill in the Indian Ocean, the process took as much as an hour and a half to change from torpedoes to land bombs and up to two hours to change from land bombs to torpedoes. These times are accurate if the planes and the ordnance were actually already in the hangar and ready for the change.

American bullets and bombs were going off all around the Japanese sailors, and their vessels were heavily engaged in their own defensive actions. The noise and evasive maneuvering almost without question worsened an already bad situation.

Tomonaga's report came at 7:00 a.m. Nagumo's order to refit came soon after. At roughly 7:45 a.m. Nagumo received a report from a search plane from his cruiser *Tone* which had spotted American planes converging on the Japanese Mobile Force somewhat earlier, at 7:28 a.m.<sup>162</sup> Suddenly, the need to neutralize Midway took a back seat to defending against or attacking the American carriers. In his after-action report, Nagumo cast the blame for Japanese misfortune with the 15 minute loss of time. He claimed, "The delay in the delivery of message from *Tone's* #4 plane greatly affected our subsequent attack preparations."<sup>163</sup>

It was in the midst of these conditions that the US carrier forces finally slipped through the Japanese combat air patrols. The Japanese carriers were busy refitting planes one type of ordnance to another. Armaments, torpedoes or heavy land bombs were strewn everywhere or being moved. Planes were being refueled. *Akagi*, *Kaga*, and *Sōryū* were in this most vulnerable condition when the Americans got through the combat air patrols and struck the decisive blows to the Japanese carriers.<sup>164</sup>

All of this arose from Tomonaga's one line transmission declaring that Midway stood firm. The threat to Midway ended with another one line Japanese radio transmission, one sent back to Japan from the fleeing Mobile Force. That message was plain, "The Midway Occupation operations have been temporarily postponed."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 159.

<sup>163</sup> Nagumo, *OPNAV P32-1002* p. 42.

<sup>164</sup> Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, p. 152-170, 206-214.

<sup>165</sup> Heinl. "Marines at Midway"

Even so, the American triumph came with cost. The United States Navy lost the USS *Yorktown* and the USS *Hammann*. According to Nimitz, twenty Americans perished with the *Yorktown* and 81 were killed in the loss of the *Hammann*.<sup>166</sup> On Midway, the cost of victory was also heavy. The Japanese air attack on June 4 cost the garrison 49 killed and 53 wounded. In terms of fatalities, the toll among Midway's airmen was even heavier. With a total number of 15 lost planes, no American fighter squadron paid a higher price than did Midway's Marine fighter squadron. Additionally, Midway's bomber squadron losses numbered 14 planes, a total that was surpassed only by the USS *Enterprise*, with 20 and the USS *Yorktown*, with 15. Of the 186 American pilots killed during the battle, the number lost from the land-based Midway pilots stood at 82. The United States lost a total of 144 planes at Midway with 40 of those coming from Midway.<sup>167</sup>

These losses were evidence of the ferocity of the Japanese attacks on Midway, the tenacity of their defense of their own vessels, and, of course, the courage and tenacity of Midway's own soldiers and airmen. Back in May, Captain Simard and Colonel Shannon had laid out Midway's plan of action clearly. Their job was to hold Midway, at all cost. Shannon had challenged his men to make the Japanese pay dearly for an attack on their island. They had fulfilled this mission to the limits of their capability.

Admiral Nimitz, for one, hastened to acknowledge this achievement. Shortly after the battle he wrote Midway's Marine aviators a note of condolence for the loss of so many of their comrades. His words apply equally to all personnel and all units that were involved in the battle that June:

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<sup>166</sup> Isom, *Midway Inquest*, p. 229.

<sup>167</sup> Heinl, "Marines at Midway", p. 41-42, and Cressman, et al., *A Glorious Page in Our History*, p. 220.

Please accept my sympathy for the losses sustained by your gallant aviation personnel based at Midway. Their sacrifice was not in vain. When the great emergency came, they were ready. They met unflinchingly the attack of vastly superior numbers and made the attack ineffective. They struck the first blow at the enemy carriers. They were the spearhead of our great victory. They have written a new and shining page in the annals of the Marine Corps.<sup>168</sup>

Back in May, Admiral Nimitz, during an impromptu visit, had asked Midway commanders if they could hold the atoll against an attack. They had promised that with the right equipment they could. On the morning of June 4, 1942, they held true to their pledge and more. Not only did they hunker down, endure, and fend off the Japanese attack; they aggressively attacked their would-be conquerors.

The story or the idea of Midway's defense certainly did not originate with Nimitz's visit in May. Twenty years before, on the heels of the First World War, US Marine Lieutenant Colonel Earl Ellis urged preparations for a major conflict in the Pacific. Two of his maxims epitomized the value of Midway to the United States and the contributions that the garrison there would provide to the war effort. First, he argued that an advanced base must prevent damage to vital property within reach of the area. Ellis emphasized that the defense of the advanced base was not an all-cost effort, but one that would render an attack on the vital property too dangerous for an enemy to risk.

Japan's preemptive attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 plainly demonstrated the strategic importance of the Hawaiian Islands for the United States position in the Pacific. Almost immediately, the Japanese understood the value of Midway as well and longed for its capture. Japanese Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo called it the "sentry of Hawaii." Likewise, the United States would not forsake it. Pearl Harbor was essential for conducting a Pacific war. Midway was essential for holding Pearl Harbor.

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<sup>168</sup> Heinl, "Marines at Midway", p. 42

Midway and the base there had the genuine appearance of exactly what Colonel Ellis' dreamed of in an advance base of operations. Under attack, Midway bent but did not break. The defense put up by Midway freed up the US Navy carriers so that they could fall upon the Japanese and destroy their only chance of Pacific domination.

The other major point of Ellis' doctrine that fit Midway so well was that an advanced base must be able to defend itself and allow mobile sea and air forces to act as designed—as he put it, “to do their legitimate work.” Additionally, American pre-war planners recognized Midway's value when they stated, “Midway had to be held, or, if lost, retaken.”<sup>169</sup>

Whether they realized it at the time or not, the leaders and Marines at Midway would have made Ellis proud. Moreover, their stalwart defense and the United States Pacific Fleet's subsequent destruction of the Japanese carrier force obviated the need to retake the base at all. When Japanese Lieutenant Jōichi Tomonaga candidly radioed that there would be need for a second attack on Midway, he proved that the Midway garrison had held off the substantial Japanese attack. Immediately, the Japanese began preparations for another attack, and it was during their time of preparations when they were caught by US carrier forces, doing [their] “legitimate work.”

It was not luck that enabled the US Navy to fall upon the flanks of the Imperial Japanese Navy at Midway. Nagumo was not the inept commander that his critics claim him to have been. The overlooked and simple truth is that the Midway land-based forces—the US Marines and their attached US Army Air Force and US Navy personnel—stood firm in the face of adversity. Their effort contributed greatly, far more greatly than has been acknowledged, to the irreversible defeat of the Japanese.

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<sup>169</sup> Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945*, (Annapolis, Maryland: United States Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 49-51.



Until Midway, the Japanese ran roughshod against the Allies in the Pacific, with little checking whatsoever. After Midway, the Americans assumed the strategic and tactical initiative all across the Pacific, and the Japanese assumed mostly a defensive posture in the hope that the attrition of American forces and the consequent weakening of American determination might save their empire. Never again were they as close to triumph in the Pacific as they were just before Midway.

As for the victory at Midway, Nimitz complimented the Midway land-based forces for "spearheading" the victory. However, in his pre-battle orders of May 30, Colonel Shannon described Midway's ultimate contribution to the American victory there better than anyone, before or after the battle when he said, "A torpedo, bomb or shellfire may sink a ship or boat but our islands will still be here when it's all over." It is time that the Midway land-based forces and their unsinkable carrier receive equitable recognition for their effort and sacrifices and assume their rightful place alongside their celebrated US Navy counterparts in the history of the battle.

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