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# The Battle of Midway

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Outgunned and understrength, the US Navy nonetheless turned a deadly Japanese ambush into a crushing victory. Andrew Lambert examines the decisive battle of the Pacific war.

## Decisive battle

At 10.26am on 4 June 1942 the course of World War Two in the Pacific changed utterly. At that moment 37 Douglas Dauntless bombers from the USS *Enterprise* peeled off into a dive attack on two Japanese aircraft carriers. Within minutes both ships were ablaze, their death throes punctuated by the explosion of fuel lines, badly stowed ordnance and aircraft petrol tanks. Within six hours the other two carriers in their fleet had also been destroyed.

The force that had dominated the Pacific for six months was in ruins, extinguishing the hopes of an empire. Midway was that rarest of engagements - a truly decisive battle.

## Starting point

After their success at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy's six large aircraft carriers, operating over 400 aircraft, had rampaged around the Pacific, sinking British warships in the Indian Ocean and hammering Darwin in Northern Australia.

They were finally halted in early May 1942 at the Battle of Coral Sea, when two of them were damaged in an inconclusive battle with American carriers. By this stage of the war the whole force was exhausted, and desperately needed a refit.

But the American 'Doolittle' raid, a propaganda air attack on Tokyo launched from the carrier USS *Hornet*, prompted Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto to plan a final showdown with the remnants of the American fleet before letting his forces rest. The raid had been an insult - it had threatened the life of the emperor.



Illustration of Pearl Harbor attack ©

## The raid ... had threatened the life of the emperor.

Confident that he had the advantage in numbers and quality, Yamamoto wanted to destroy the American carrier fleet. He planned to confuse the enemy with a diversionary attack on the Alaskan coast, drawing the Americans north, only to launch his main attack on Midway Island the following day, which would see the Americans hurrying south, into an ambush.

The focal point of his plan, the aptly named Midway Island, was used as an Allied air base, halfway across the Pacific, some 1900km (1,200 miles) west of Hawaii.

## American lack of strength

Yamamoto's opposite number, American Admiral Chester Nimitz, commanding from Pearl Harbor, had few ships, but he gained a priceless advantage when his Intelligence Service deciphered the Japanese radio code.

With the Japanese fleet widely dispersed, Yamamoto was forced to transmit his strategy by radio. And thus the Americans were able to recover about 90 per cent of the plan. With the information they had, it was not hard to confirm that the target was Midway.

Yamamoto's plan was complex. He relied on a submarine-launched air reconnaissance to locate the American carriers at Pearl Harbor and a submarine ambush to sink them as they responded to his attacks.

## ...there was a massive imbalance between the two fleets...

In the event, the submarine reconnaissance was thwarted by an American warship, and the submarine ambush arrived too late to ambush the American fleet. The Alaskan diversion proved to be a waste of resources, as the Americans failed to respond to it.

Furthermore the Japanese plans were laid in the belief the Americans had no more than two carriers, confident they had sunk the USS *Yorktown* at the Coral Sea. Instead the damaged ship was repaired in just two days at Pearl Harbor.

Even so, there was a massive imbalance between the two fleets. The Americans had three carriers, eight cruisers and 15 destroyers in two task forces. Yamamoto commanded four large and two medium carriers, eleven battleships with numerous cruisers and destroyers, in addition to the amphibious task force with which he planned to seize Midway.

## Tactics

With great over-elaboration, typical of Japanese military planning, Yamamoto divided his force into three main groups. There were four big carriers, the battlefleet, and the invasion force. These three groups were too far apart for mutual support. The Japanese carrier group operated in close order, commanded by Admiral Nagumo, who had led them for the attack at Pearl Harbor.

Nimitz, for his part, could not hope to win a direct engagement. He had to stake everything on exploiting his intelligence windfall, and try to ambush the enemy. He secretly reinforced the air units on Midway, using the island as an unsinkable aircraft carrier. His sea-going carriers were positioned to the north-east of the island, waiting to ambush the Japanese carriers when they arrived for their assault.

**Nimitz ... could not hope to win a direct engagement.**

The American tactics relied on the peculiar characteristics of carrier warfare. Nimitz knew the first attack would be decisive for either side, carriers being full of fuel and ordnance, hence highly vulnerable to bombs and torpedoes. The American tactical commanders, admirals Frank Fletcher and Raymond Spruance, also knew they were playing for very high stakes. They kept the two task forces separate. Spruance, a late replacement for another officer, would become the hero of the battle.

## Japanese wrong-footed

On 3 June American bombers from Midway attacked the Japanese invasion fleet as it approached the island, but did little damage. The next morning Nagumo, far ahead of the Japanese fleet, launched 100 planes against the island. Fifty US planes from Midway defended but without success. This meant that the Japanese strike was initially effective, although Midway remained operational.

Now the fundamental flaw in the Japanese plan became apparent. The carriers were expected to strike Midway and engage the American fleet when it eventually arrived, but Yamamoto had not expected the American fleet to be in position before his forces arrived. This left Nagumo in two minds.

His scouts had reported hostile warships, but had not seen the American carriers until after the attack on Midway had begun. The vital scout plane detailed to cover the sector where the American ships were waiting had been delayed. With two critical tasks in hand, both seizing the island and attacking the American fleet, Nagumo hesitated when he should have acted. His indecision turned the battle.

**Nagumo's indecision turned the battle.**

Spruance and Fletcher had only one task, to find and destroy the Japanese carriers. Once they had been located, Spruance launched a full strike from the *Enterprise* and the *Hornet*. Fletcher hesitated, but then sent half his strike force.

Nagumo had decided to attack Midway again, preparing his second strike bombers for the mission. But then the American carrier *Yorktown* was located, and he decided to change his aircraft's armament back to torpedoes and attempt to sink it.

He also had to recover planes that had bombed Midway, and refuel his fighters. It was a careful response, typical of an old-school gunnery officer like Nagumo. But it was the wrong response.

## American attack

The American attack on the Japanese force was planned as a combined assault, mixing low-level torpedo bombers with high-level dive bombers. Escorted by fighters, the idea was for them to attack at the same time in order to overwhelm the defenders. Instead the squadrons became separated, and some of *Hornet's* inexperienced units missed the battle.

The torpedo bombers were the first to reach the Japanese force. Flying in at low level, they were badly mauled by fast, manoeuvrable Japanese Zero fighters. Between 9.30 and 10.24am, 47 out of 51 American torpedo planes were shot down.

Nagumo must have believed he had won the battle. So far he had weathered numerous attacks, emerged unscathed and delivered a heavy blow to the Midway air base. Now he would launch a big strike and finish off the Americans.

But it was the Americans who had all the luck that day. The dive-bombers from the *Enterprise* were lost, but found their target by following a Japanese destroyer, which was steaming at high speed to rejoin the carriers after driving off an American submarine. Its broad white wake signposted the way to the target.

**... the Americans had all the luck that day.**

The bombers arrived over the Japanese carriers just as the last American torpedo planes were being shot down. The Zero fighters were thus out of position, unable to counter *Enterprise's* dive-bombers. Exploiting an empty sky and a perfect position, the experienced pilots carried out a text-book dive-bombing attack on the big Japanese ships.

The Japanese were caught unawares because they did not have radar, relying instead on the human eye to spot the threat. It was not enough. In five minutes the carriers *Kaga* and *Akagi* had been hit, starting uncontrollable fires. Their decks were cluttered with bombs, torpedoes and hoses charged with high octane fuel, while every plane was a huge petrol bomb waiting to explode. It took only three or four 1,000lb bombs to set these massive ships ablaze.

*Yorktown's* bombers followed, and dealt with the carrier *Soryu*. Only the carrier *Hiryu* escaped, hidden in a convenient rain squall.

Within minutes Nagumo had ordered the forces on *Hiryu* to launch a hastily assembled half-strength strike of 40 planes. They headed for *Yorktown*, the only American carrier the Japanese actually located during this battle.

## Tide of war turns

Despite radar warnings, the purging of its fuel lines with carbon dioxide and well-organised fighter defences, *Yorktown* was torpedoed twice and hit by three bombs. The Japanese success contrasted sharply with the much larger, but less effective, American attack. The Japanese squadrons lived up to their reputation as the masters of carrier warfare.

Although seriously damaged, *Yorktown* did not catch fire and remained afloat. The United States Navy had invested heavily in damage control, fire-fighting and safety systems. They had also learned a costly lesson at the battle of Coral Sea, where a carrier exploded. The *Yorktown* was thus saved, and its planes landed on the other carriers. But now *Hiryu* had revealed itself, and would be caught and destroyed by American dive-bombers six hours later.

Once he learned of the disaster that had struck his carriers, Admiral Yamamoto, still hundreds of miles to the west with the main battlegroup, reversed course. Spruance was cautious, fearing a trap, and did not give chase. On 6 June the Americans sank a heavy cruiser. The following day *Yorktown* was sunk by a Japanese submarine.

### **Spruance was cautious, fearing a trap.**

In total the Japanese lost four carriers, a heavy cruiser, 3,500 men and 270 aircraft during the battle. Many of the pilots survived, but the highly trained aircraft maintenance teams, who made the ships so efficient, did not.

The Americans lost one carrier, 100 men and 130 aircraft. In return they had halted the mighty Imperial Japanese Navy, and gained the initiative. The tide of war had turned.

## **Find out more**

### **Books**

*Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan* by Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya (Hutchinson, 1957)

*Miracle at Midway* by Gordon Prange (McGraw Hill, 1982)

*The First Team* by John Lundstrom (US Naval Institute Press, 1990)

## **About the author**

Andrew Lambert is Laughton professor of naval history at King's College, London. His three-part television series 'War at Sea' was broadcast on the BBC in 2004.