

Battle of Midway

The Battle of Midway was a decisive naval battle in the Pacific Theater of World War II which occurred between June 4th and 7th, 1942, only six months after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and one month after the Battle of the Coral Sea.

After the first recorded landing on the atoll in 1859, Midway became a United States possession in 1867. A trans-Pacific cable station was established there in 1903. In 1935, Pan American Airways used Sand Island as a stopover on its new seaplane route between the U.S. and Asia. A 1938-39 study of U.S. defense needs recommended Midway as a base for Navy patrol planes and submarines. Soon thereafter, construction began on a seaplane hangar and other facilities on Sand Island and an airfield on the smaller Eastern Island.

Midway occupied an important place in Japanese military planning. According to plans made before Pearl Harbor, the Japanese fleet would attack and occupy Midway and the Aleutian Islands in Alaska as soon as their position in South Asia was stabilized. Two Japanese destroyers bombarded the Navy base on Midway on December 7, 1941, damaging buildings and destroying one patrol plane. In the spring of 1942, flush with victory after victory in the Pacific and southeast Asia, Japan prepared to establish a toehold in the Aleutians; to occupy Midway and convert it into an air base and jumping off point for an invasion of Hawaii; and to lure what was left of the U.S. Pacific Fleet into the Midway area for a decisive battle that would finish it off.

The Americans had their own plans for the little atoll. With the fall of Wake Island to the Japanese in late December 1941, Midway became the westernmost U.S. outpost in the central Pacific. Defenses on the atoll were strengthened between December and April. Land-based bombers and fighters were stationed on Eastern Island. U.S. Marines provided defensive artillery and infantry. Operating from the atoll's lagoon, seaplanes patrolled toward the Japanese-held Marshall Islands and Wake, checking on enemy activities and guarding against further attacks on Hawaii. There were occasional clashes when planes from Midway and those from the Japanese islands met over the Pacific.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, inspected Midway in early May 1942, conferring with the local commanders, Navy Capt. Cyril T. Simard and Marine Col. Harold D. Shannon. Based on reports coming from U.S. intelligence, Nimitz believed the Japanese were planning an attack on Midway. The Japanese Combined Fleet depended on a complex system of codes to communicate by radio. The codes were regularly modified to avoid detection, but in the confusion of the rapid Japanese expansion in the South Pacific the change scheduled for early 1942 was delayed. In Washington, DC, and Hawaii, codebreakers worked around-the-clock to interpret every detail of the complex secret messages. By the spring, they were having some success--picking up words and phrases that gave them clues to Japan's naval strategies. One communication from the Japanese navy suggested they needed supplies for a powerful long distance strike. Were they planning to hit Hawaii again? The west coast of the United States? Midway? The abbreviation "AF" appeared frequently in radio communications. Navy intelligence in Hawaii concluded that Midway was the target and they convinced Admiral Nimitz.

Top Naval officers in Washington were not so sure. They could not believe that the Japanese would send a huge fleet to take a little atoll. It would be like fishing for minnows with a harpoon.¹ Lt. Comm. Jasper Homes came up with a brilliant idea. Knowing that Midway depended on desalinated water, he used the old undersea cable to send a message to the military there. He asked them to send out an uncoded radio message stating that the purification system had broken down: "We have only enough water for two weeks. Please supply us immediately."² A few days later, the code breakers picked up a Japanese message saying that AF had water problems. That made it certain. They now knew that the Japanese would send a small force to the Aleutian Islands, as originally planned, but that the main target would be Midway. American cryptographers were able to determine the date and location of the planned attack, enabling the forewarned U.S. Navy to prepare its own ambush.

Nimitz asked Simard and Shannon what they needed to protect the islands. They reeled off a long list. He asked Shannon: "If I get you all these things you say you need; then can you hold Midway against a major amphibious assault?" The reply was a simple "Yes, sir."³ Within a week anti-aircraft guns, rifles, and other war materiel arrived at Midway. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz placed available U.S. carriers in position to surprise the Japanese moving up for their air strikes on Midway Island itself. Eastern Island was crowded with Marine Corps, Navy, and Army Air Force planes--fighters, small dive bombers, and larger B-17 and B-26 bombers. Every piece of land bristled with barbed wire entanglements and guns, the beaches and waters were studded with mines. Eleven torpedo boats were ready to circle the reefs, patrol the lagoon, pick up ditched airmen, and assist ground forces with anti-aircraft fire. Nineteen submarines guarded the approaches from 100 to 200 miles northwest and north. By June 4, 1942, Midway was as ready as possible to face the oncoming Japanese.

Reading 1 was adapted from Erwin N. Thompson, "World War II Facilities at Midway" (Midway Islands, U.S. Minor Islands), National Historic Landmark documentation, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1986; Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon, Miracle at Midway (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982); Edmund L. Castillo, Midway: Battle for the Pacific (New York: Random House, 1989); Edwin T. Layton, Roger Pineau, and John Costello, And I Was There, Pearl Harbor and Midway--Breaking the Secrets (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985); and the [Naval Historical Center Web site](#).

¹ Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), xiii.

² Edwin T. Layton, Roger Pineau, and John Costello, *And I Was There, Pearl Harbor and Midway--Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 422.

³ Prange, *et al.*, *Miracle at Midway*, 74.

By early June, the Japanese attacks on the Aleutians and on Midway were underway. The Midway attack force was divided into three parts. First the aircraft carriers would approach from the northwest and knock out the islands' defenses. Coming in from the west and southwest, the Second Fleet would invade and capture Midway. Admiral Yamamoto's battleships would remain 300 miles to the west, awaiting the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Because of the work of the American code breakers, the United States knew Yamamoto's plans in detail by the middle of May: his target, his order of battle, and his schedule. When the battle opened, the U.S. had three carriers waiting in ambush, 200 miles to the east of Midway. The two opposing fleets sent out search planes; the Americans to locate an enemy they knew was there and the Japanese as a matter of ordinary prudence.

Seaplanes from Midway also were looking for the expected enemy fleet. One of the planes spotted the Japanese carrier force at about 5:30 on the morning of June 4. The plane also reported Japanese aircraft heading for the atoll. Marine Corps planes from Midway soon intercepted the enemy formation. However, the Marines were hopelessly outnumbered and their planes were no match for the Japanese "Zero" fighter planes. They were able to shoot down only a few of the enemy bombers, while suffering great losses themselves. The torpedo boats and anti-aircraft fire from Midway's guns were somewhat more successful in disrupting the Japanese attack.

One hundred and eight Japanese planes hit Midway's two islands at 6:30. Twenty minutes of bombing and machine-gun fire knocked out some facilities on Eastern Island, but did not disable the airfield there. Sand Island's oil tanks, seaplane hangar, and other buildings were set afire. The commander of the Japanese attack radioed that another air strike was required to soften up Midway's defenses for invasion.

The Japanese carriers received several counterstrikes from Midway's torpedo planes and bombers. Faced with overwhelming fighter opposition, these uncoordinated efforts suffered severe losses and hit nothing but seawater. The only positive results were photographs of three Japanese carriers taken by the high-flying B-17s, the sole surviving photos of the day's attacks on the Japanese carriers.

Meanwhile, a Japanese scout plane had spotted the U.S. fleet and reported the presence of a carrier. Japanese commander Nagumo had already begun loading bombs into his second group of planes for another strike on Midway. This news forced him to rethink his strategy. He decided to wait for the planes returning from Midway and rearm all the planes with torpedoes for an attack on the U.S. ships. He almost had enough time.

Beginning about 9:30, torpedo planes from the U.S. carriers *Hornet*, *Enterprise*, and *Yorktown* made a series of attacks that, despite nearly total losses, made no hits. Then, about 10:25, everything changed. Three squadrons of dive bombers, two from *Enterprise* and one from *Yorktown*, almost simultaneously dove on three of the four Japanese carriers, whose decks were crowded with fully armed and fueled planes. By 10:30, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, and *Soryu* were ablaze and out of action.

Of the once overwhelming Japanese carrier force, only *Hiryu* remained operational. Shortly before 11:00 she launched 18 of her own dive-bombers. At about noon, as these planes approached *Yorktown*, they were intercepted by U.S. fighter planes, which shot down most of the bombers. Seven survived, however, hitting *Yorktown* with three bombs and stopping her.

The *Yorktown's* crew managed to repair the damage and get their ship underway. Two more groups of torpedo planes and fighters from *Hiryu* soon spotted the *Yorktown*, which they mistook for a second U.S. carrier. Despite losses to the defending fighters and heavy anti-aircraft fire, the Japanese planes pushed on to deliver a beautifully coordinated torpedo attack. The stricken ship again went dead in the water. Concerned that the severely listing vessel was about to roll over, her captain ordered his crew to abandon ship. Late on June 4, U.S. carrier planes found and bombed *Hiryu*, which sank the next day. Two days later, a Japanese submarine located the *Yorktown* and the U.S. destroyer *Hammann*, which was helping the *Yorktown* return to Pearl Harbor for repairs. The submarine torpedoed both vessels. The *Hammann* sank immediately, and the *Yorktown* finally sank the following morning.

By the end of the battle, the perseverance, sacrifice, and skill of American pilots, plus a great deal of good luck, cost Japan four irreplaceable aircraft carriers, while only one of the three U.S. carriers was sunk. The Japanese lost 332 of their finest aircraft and more than 200 of their most experienced pilots. The Japanese carriers were caught while refueling and rearming their planes, making them especially vulnerable. The Americans sank four fleet carriers – the entire strength of the task force – *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu*, and *Hiryu*, with 322 aircraft and over five thousand sailors. The U.S. lost only the carrier *Yorktown* and a destroyer. American losses included 147 aircraft and more than three hundred seamen. Deprived of useful air cover, and after several hours of shocked indecision, Yamamoto called off the Midway operation and retreated. The Japanese navy never fully recovered from its losses. This marked an important turning point in the Pacific campaign. Six months after it began, the great Japanese Pacific War offensive was over. From June 1942 to the end of the war three years later, it was the Americans who were on the offense.

Reading 2 was compiled from Erwin N. Thompson, "World War II Facilities at Midway" (Midway Islands, U.S. Minor Islands), National Historic Landmark documentation, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1986; Sidney C. Moody, Jr. and the Associated Press, War Against Japan (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994); Edmund L. Castillo, Midway: Battle for the Pacific (New York: Random House, 1989); and the [Naval Historical Center Web site](#).

Battle of Midway Comic Strip Directions:

1. Using the *Battle of Midway* reading, put the events below in chronological order on your comic strip.
 2. Draw and color an image that relates to each event to complete your comic strip.
- * Then, about 10:25, everything changed. Three squadrons of dive bombers, two from *Enterprise* and one from *Yorktown*, almost simultaneously dove on three of the four Japanese carriers, whose decks were crowded with fully armed and fueled planes. By 10:30, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, and *Soryu* were ablaze and out of action.
 - * This marked an important turning point in the Pacific campaign. Six months after it began, the great Japanese Pacific War offensive was over. From June 1942 to the end of the war three years later, it was the Americans who were on the offense.
 - * American cryptographers were able to determine the date and location of the planned attack, enabling the forewarned U.S. Navy to prepare its own ambush.
 - * The Battle of Midway was a decisive naval battle in the Pacific Theater of World War II which occurred between June 4th and 7th, 1942, only six months after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and one month after the Battle of the Coral Sea.
 - * The U.S. lost only the carrier *Yorktown* and a destroyer. American losses included 147 aircraft and more than three hundred seamen.
 - * Admiral Chester W. Nimitz placed available U.S. carriers in position to surprise the Japanese moving up for their air strikes on Midway Island itself.
 - * One hundred and eight Japanese planes hit Midway's two islands at 6:30. Twenty minutes of bombing and machine-gun fire knocked out some facilities on Eastern Island, but did not disable the airfield there.
 - * The Japanese carriers were caught while refueling and rearming their planes, making them especially vulnerable. The Americans sank four fleet carriers – the entire strength of the task force – *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu*, and *Hiryu*, with 322 aircraft and over five thousand sailors.