

In early June 1942, the Japanese began an assault on a small atoll in the Pacific named Midway. The Japanese plan was to capture the island from the Americans while U.S. forces were distracted by the Japanese assault on Dutch Harbor, Alaska. Their goal was to use the island as a base of operations to attack other U.S. controlled islands and continue imperial domination of the Pacific. The fight over this small island became a turning point in the Pacific theater of World War II as it halted Japanese expansion and established the U.S. Navy's dominance in the Pacific¹. The Battle of Midway demonstrates the heroism of the American pilots and officers and the ingenuity of the codebreakers who, without their combined efforts, the Battle of Midway would likely have been lost.

Intelligence gathering played an important role leading up to the battle. On June 3, 1942, at 0900, Ensign Jewel H. Reid, pilot of a Midway-based PBY Catalina flying boat, reported to U.S. Navy Admiral Frank J. Fletcher aboard the *USS Yorktown* that the Japanese fleet was only 700 miles away from Midway Atoll. Although Fletcher was skeptical, he still acted on this information and reasoned that, though no carriers were reported, the Japanese still must have brought a carrier and would come from the northwest². Incredibly, the Japanese brought three. Later that day, U.S. Navy Admiral Chester W. Nimitz sent an encrypted message to Fletcher warning of the impending arrival of a Japanese strike force from the northwest. Fletcher than corrected his course to the southwest which put him in a good position for the battle². While the Americans were gathering more information about the Japanese location and intent and placing themselves in good strategic position, the Japanese remained unaware as evidenced by Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) Vice

¹ Paul Dowswell, Ruth Brocklehurst and Henry Brook. [The World Wars: An Introduction to the First & Second World Wars](#), London. Usborne Publishing, 2016. 173.

² Rice, Earle Jr. [The Battle of Midway](#), San Diego, CA. Lucent Books, 1996. 42-43

Admiral Nagumo's statement on June 4, at 0245, "The enemy is not yet aware of our plan."³ Thankfully, this was not the case.

At the U.S. fleet radio-intercept unit at Pearl Harbor, Station Hypo, cryptanalysts played a vital role in Admiral Nimitz's report. Without them, Midway very well may have been lost to the Japanese. Lieutenant Commander Joseph Rochefort and his team of cryptanalysts and linguists were excellent at decrypting enemy naval broadcasts in Japan's naval code dubbed by the Americans as JN-25b.⁴ After Rochefort intercepted a Japanese weather report for an island known as "AF,"⁵ he realized the report matched the weather at Midway. From this, he deduced that the Japanese were going to attack Midway. Still the high-ranking naval commanders in Washington doubted his claims, so he sent a broadcast in a code he knew the Japanese had broken stating that Midway was in need of fresh water. Soon he intercepted a Japanese message reporting that "AF" was in need of fresh water.⁶ That was enough to prove to his commanding officers that "AF" meant Midway. By late May of 1942, Navy cryptanalysts had intercepted and decrypted IJN Admiral Yamamoto's shrewd ambush strategy in detail.⁴

³ Rice, Earle Jr. The Battle of Midway, 44

⁴ Pruitt, Sarah History Channel. "How Codebreakers Helped Secure U.S. Victory in the Battle of Midway". A&E Television Networks 2019. Accessed April 7, 2025
<<https://www.history.com/articles/battle-midway-codebreakers-allies-pacific-theater>>

⁵ "The Battle of Midway: 4-7 June 1942" Naval History and Heritage Command. The Navy Department Library 2020. Accessed April 7, 2025
<<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/battle-of-midway-4-7-june-1942.html>>

⁶ "Codes and Cyphers: National Museum of the American Sailor Activity". National Museum of the American Sailor. Accessed April 7, 2025
<<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/nmas/education/Codes%20and%20Ciphers%20Activity.pdf>>

Additionally, pilots played a vital role in the outcome of the battle. Without them, Midway would have fallen to the Japanese. In an optimal scenario, torpedo bombers would be escorted by fighters and would fly low and bomb the hull of the ship while dive bombers would target the deck of the enemy ship. Unfortunately, during the Battle of Midway, there was no time to lose, and U.S. torpedo bombers were sent without escorts.⁷ Due to this lack of protection, they knew they would not return, but they bravely departed on their missions anyway. Some of the first brave pilots were the men of the Torpedo Squadron 8. They were led by Lieutenant Commander John C. Waldron, a navy pilot and a proud Native American. He wrote in a heart-wrenching letter back to his wife, “If I do not come back—well, you and the little girls can know that this squadron struck for the highest objective in naval warfare—‘To sink the enemy.’”⁸ He knew this was a suicide mission and that he would not even have an escort, but he believed in the cause for which he was fighting.

Dive bombers were also vital to the mission. Dusty Kleiss, an intimate friend of Waldron, was one of the best dive bomber pilots. He was the only pilot to sink 3 enemy ships. He would aim for the Rising Sun emblem on an enemy ship and bomb it. This would cause a chain reaction in the ship’s magazine, thus annihilating the enemy vessel.⁷

In conclusion, there is much to be learned from studying our past including the Battle of Midway. The pilots teach us that even when circumstances are far from favorable, you can push forward with courage and determination. The officers teach us that you should trust your subordinates and listen to their reporting. The codebreakers teach us that intelligence is vital to the military. A combined effort and teamwork are essential to every operation. Personally, this makes

⁷ *Battle of Midway: The True Story*. Smithsonian Channel. 2019. Documentary

⁸ Rice, Earle Jr. *The Battle of Midway*, 61

me even more proud of my dad who worked for the National Security Agency. This summer, I would like to go back to the National Cryptological Museum with my dad and further learn about the role of intelligence during WW2, and particularly, the Battle of Midway. After studying the Battle of Midway, I think I would like to work as a cryptanalyst or cryptographer at NSA or join the Navy as an officer. I am inspired by the heroics of the brave pilots and sailors as well as the triumphs of American intelligence. Without the heroes at Midway, democracy would have been lost to imperialism. I think we should venerate the valiant heroes at Midway and never forget what they did for our country.

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