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Sacrifice and Freedom: The Battle of Midway Lives On April 23, 2025 Words: 1799

Throughout history, certain battles have played crucial roles and turned the tides of war, battles that provided not only strategic victories but also moral ones. The Battle of Marathon where the Athenians routed the Persians, the victory of the Union over the Confederacy at Gettysburg, and the WWI defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad all prove that one battle can change the outcome of a war. World War II also had its share of pivotal battles. D-Day, the famous Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France, may be one of the best known. One battle, however, impacted the outcome of the war just as much as D-Day, perhaps arguably more: the Battle of Midway. Even though not as well-known as some of the other WWII battles, Midway played a crucial role in defeating the Japanese navy and ending the war in the Pacific. The Battle of Midway gave America the moral victory needed to win the war, and it endures as a shining example of bravery, determination, and freedom.

To understand the impact of The Battle of Midway and its legacy, it is important to understand what led to the battle. Midway came six months after the Pearl Harbor attack launched the U.S. into war with Japan. Because Japan's goal to permanently disable the American Navy at Pearl Harbor was not fully successful, Japan continued to fight. During the months after Pearl Harbor, Japan experienced success in multiple campaigns and captured the U.S. territories of Wake, Guam and the Philippines<sup>1</sup>; but they failed to disable the United States and its navy. Consequently, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, the mastermind behind the Pearl Harbor attack, devised a plan to deliver the killing blow. He wanted once-and-for-all to incapacitate the U.S. Navy and take control of the Pacific. Isoroku's plan revolved around the atoll of Midway, a

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<sup>1</sup> "Attacks on the Philippines, Guam, and Wake" *Naval History and Heritage Command*. [www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/philippines.html](http://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/philippines.html). Accessed 29 March 2025.

strategic U.S. base located halfway between Hawaii and Australia. While Japan would launch a feigned attack of the coast of Alaska to draw Allied attention,<sup>2</sup> Isoroku would launch a three-stage attack on Midway, first bombing the islands, then sending in ground troops to seize it, and finally bringing in his full naval reserves to ambush incoming American reinforcements. This surprise attack would simultaneously weaken the U.S. presence in the Pacific and set up a base of operation from which Japan could strike the western coast of the U.S. It was a bold and brilliant plan. Like Pearl Harbor, it was designed to catch the Americans off guard and cement Japan's superiority in the Pacific.

America, however, had other ideas. Having learned the lesson of Pearl Harbor, American leadership not only increased their focus on gathering intelligence but also prioritized the use of existing military intelligence. The Communication Intelligence military branch COMINT and its Navy division, OP-20-G, were the primary center for the military's intelligence operations at the time. While both COMINT and OP-20-G existed before Pearl Harbor, their importance skyrocketed after the attack.<sup>3</sup> The man in charge of the COMINT unit in Hawaii, Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, and the military intelligence liaison, Lieutenant-Commander Edwin Layton, were in direct contact with the new Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz. In the months preceding Pearl Harbor, Rochefort oversaw several intelligence breakthroughs, providing Nimitz with vital information. The most important breakthrough was

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<sup>2</sup> Haskew, Michael E. "Turning Point in the Pacific." *Warfare History Network*. [www.warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/turning-point-in-the-pacific/](http://www.warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/turning-point-in-the-pacific/), par. 13. Accessed 22 March 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Schorreck, Henry F. "The Role of COMINT in the Battle of Midway." *Naval History and Heritage Command*. [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/r/the-role-of-comint-in-the-battle-of-midway.html](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/r/the-role-of-comint-in-the-battle-of-midway.html). Accessed 15 March 2025

the partial cracking of the Japanese military code, JN-25, allowing the U.S. intelligence to keep tabs on Japanese correspondence.<sup>4</sup> Before Midway, this breakthrough proved invaluable during the Battle of the Coral Sea. Even more importantly, this development allowed the U.S. Navy to intercept and piece together parts of a plan for a large-scale Japanese attack: the attack on Midway. One crucial aspect of that plan, however, remained a mystery: the location of the attack. All Japanese communication referred to the mysterious target as “AF;” though some intelligence pointed to AF being Midway, COMINT lacked sufficient evidence to back this theory up. That changed, however, when, in a flash of genius, Rochefort advised the troops at Midway to broadcast a report stating that they were low on fresh water. When the Navy later intercepted a Japanese message stating that “AF is low on water,”<sup>5</sup> Nimitz was convinced. The Americans knew what was coming.

Yet even with the knowledge of Japan’s plans, the U.S. Navy was still at a significant disadvantage in terms of personnel experience, quality of equipment, and simple, raw numbers. On May 17, Nimitz ordered his fleet, currently near Australia after the Battle of the Coral Sea, back to Pearl Harbor to be in position to sail to Midway. According to an article by the U.S. Naval Institute, “Nimitz...committed his forces despite being severely outnumbered. The three American flattops were joined by just 17 destroyers, eight cruisers, and a dozen submarines. The Japanese force, however, boasted four fleet carriers, two light carriers, 65 destroyers, 22 cruisers,

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<sup>4</sup> Haskew, Michael E. “Turning Point in the Pacific,” par. 8.

<sup>5</sup> McFarlin, Capt. Robert. “Five-Star Leadership: Lessons from Fleet Admiral Nimitz and the Race to Midway.” *U.S. Naval Institute*. [www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/march/five-star-leadership-lessons-fleet-admiral-nimitz-and-race-midway](http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/march/five-star-leadership-lessons-fleet-admiral-nimitz-and-race-midway), par. 27. Accessed 18 March 2025.

11 battleships, and more than 15 submarines.”<sup>6</sup> It is incredible that America even had three aircraft-carriers in the battle. For just a month before this, The *Yorktown*, America’s third carrier, had been critically hit in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Nimitz’s order to have it repaired in time for the battle defied the predicted 90-day repair time, and, in an incredible show of efficiency and dedication, the navy dock workers had managed to repair the ship in only 72 hours.<sup>7</sup> Despite this dedication, however, Japan’s forces were much more experienced than the American pilots and sailors, having seen action since Japan’s invasion of China in 1931. Additionally, the Japanese planes, called Zeroes, were superior to American planes. So it was with a smaller force, with inferior equipment and less-experienced men, that the U.S. Navy sailed to confront the Japanese.

The battle itself began on June 4, when Japan’s onsite commanding officer Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo launched the attack on Midway. This attack was meant to cripple the islands’ defenses without actually destroying them or the runway infrastructure. The attack, however, was largely unsuccessful; while there was significant damage to Midway, its defenses were still mostly intact. Consequently, Nagumo ordered a second attack. Before he could do so, however, U.S. ships struck the Japanese fleet. The *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown* had launched a surprise attack on the enemy. Because of the swiftness of the attack, the U.S. bombers flew uncoordinated and without fighter protection; many of the U.S. planes were shot down, but others took their place and continued to bombard the Japanese. Though the attacks did little damage to the Japanese fleet, the bravery and sacrifice of those pilots played a critical role in the battle.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, par. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Wukovits, John. “The Battle of Midway: Turning the Tide in the South Pacific.” *Warfare History Network*. [www.warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/the-battle-of-midway-turning-the-tide-in-the-south-pacific/](http://www.warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/the-battle-of-midway-turning-the-tide-in-the-south-pacific/), par. 15. Accessed 19 March 2025.

Nagumo now had a choice. He could either launch a second ground attack on Midway, forcing his first attack force to stay in the air while the launch was completed, or he could risk delay and a window of vulnerability by landing his planes and re-arming them for a sea attack on the newly-spotted U.S. fleet. He chose the latter. Knowing the threat that the recently-discovered carriers represented, Nagumo gambled and started re-arming his planes for an attack on the U.S. ships instead of on Midway. His plan seemed to be succeeding as the Japanese Zeroes successfully fought off the American torpedo planes. However, just as Nagumo thought he was safe, bombers from the USS *Enterprise* and the USS *Yorktown* arrived and struck. With a large number of the Japanese force temporality immobilized and the remaining Japanese fighters busy fighting the American torpedo planes, the U.S. dive bombers met no resistance. In less than six minutes, three Japanese carriers, the *Akagi*, the *Kaga* and the *Soryu*, were all destroyed.

Though the fighting would continue for two more days in multiple skirmishes and the sinking of Japan's final carrier, *Hiryu*, the battle had already been won. Through bravery and determination, the U.S. forces had defeated the enemy. The casualties of the battle were staggeringly one-sided: the U.S. forces lost one heavy carrier, one destroyer, 150 aircraft and 307 personnel; Japan, on the other hand, lost four heavy carriers, one destroyer, one cruiser, 248 aircraft and 3,057 personnel.<sup>8</sup> That bravery and determination was found all throughout the U.S. forces. Lieutenant Commander John Waldron sacrificed his life leading Torpedo Squadron EIGHT against the Japanese.<sup>9</sup> Lieutenant Commander Richard Halsey Best risked his life and

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<sup>8</sup> "Battle of Midway" *The National WWII Museum*. [www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/battle-of-midway#:~:text=had%20sustained%20damage.,The%20Battle,ilities%20only%20suffered%20minor%20damage](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/battle-of-midway#:~:text=had%20sustained%20damage.,The%20Battle,ilities%20only%20suffered%20minor%20damage) Accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Cox, Samuel J. "H-006-3: The Sacrifice" *Naval History and Heritage Command*. [www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams/h-gram-006/h-006-3.html](http://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams/h-gram-006/h-006-3.html). Accessed 20 March 2025

sacrificed his health to bomb not only one, but two of the Japanese carriers<sup>10</sup>—a rare feat for a single day of combat. The USS *Enterprise* Action Report from June 8, 1942 commends the entire crew of Torpedo Squadron SIX as “without parallel for determined and courageous action in the face of overwhelming odds” and “recommend[s] that the Navy Cross be awarded to each pilot and gunner.” That particular squadron lost twenty out of twenty-eight men during the battle.<sup>11</sup> Because of the sacrifice of these U.S. servicemen, America turned the tide of WWII in the Pacific. Japan, with its forces so diminished, would never again take up the offensive during the war. The bravery of the pilots and sailors, the determination of officers and crew alike, and the genius of U.S. intelligence gave America her victory that day.

Because of the American servicemen at Midway, Americans today can enjoy our country, our way of life, our freedom. Though it has been nearly eighty-three years since the Battle of Midway, we still feel the effects of the battle today. If America had failed at Midway, Japan would have gained unparalleled power in the Pacific, limiting America’s presence not only on the seas but also in Europe. As a result, the Allied cause may very well have failed, making the world today a very different place. Because of those men, I have a free future. I have the ability to choose to serve in the U.S. military as my dad did, study law, or work as a lineman. The sacrifice of those men gave me this freedom and allows all of us to live in a country where freedom thrives.

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<sup>10</sup> Tillman, Barret. “Farewell to Midway’s Best” *U.S. Naval Institute*. [www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2002/february/farewell-midways-best](http://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2002/february/farewell-midways-best). Accessed 30 March 2025.

<sup>11</sup> “USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) Action Report” *Naval History and Heritage Command*. [www.history.navy.mil/research/archives/digital-exhibits-highlights/action-reports/wwii-battle-of-midway/uss-enterprise-action-report.html](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/archives/digital-exhibits-highlights/action-reports/wwii-battle-of-midway/uss-enterprise-action-report.html). Accessed March 21, 2025

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These men who sacrificed not only ensured this freedom, but they also gave us an example to follow. These men lived out freedom as Peter Marshall defined it in 1947: "...not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right." In light of their sacrifice, what will I do with my freedom? I can choose to serve myself and my needs, or I can live out what freedom actually is: the chance to serve others. Those who fought at Midway, men like John Waldron and Richard Best, were willing to give their very lives to protect others. What impact would it have on our world today if we followed their example and sacrificed our own interests to serve others? The Battle of Midway, truly one of the pivotal battles of history, is a shining example of that service and reminds us of the true cost of freedom.

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