The Battle of Midway is widely regarded as the most important naval battle of the Pacific Campaign of World War II. Between 4 and 7 June 1942, approximately one month after the Battle of the Coral Sea, two months after Doolittle's Raid and six months after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States Navy decisively defeated an Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) attack against Midway Atoll, inflicting irreparable damage on the Japanese fleet. Military historian John Keegan has called it "the most stunning and decisive blow in the history of naval warfare."

The Japanese operation, like the earlier attack on Pearl Harbor, sought to eliminate the United States as a strategic power in the Pacific, thereby giving Japan a free hand in establishing its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Japanese hoped that another demoralizing defeat would force the U.S. to capitulate in the Pacific War.

The Japanese plan was to lure the United States' aircraft carriers into a trap.[11] The Japanese also intended to occupy Midway Atoll as part of an overall plan to extend their defensive perimeter in response to the Doolittle Raid. This operation was also considered preparatory for further attacks against Fiji and Samoa.

The plan was handicapped by faulty Japanese assumptions of the American reaction and poor initial dispositions.[12] Most significantly, American codebreakers were able to determine the date and location of the attack, enabling the forewarned U.S. Navy to set up an ambush of its own. Four Japanese aircraft carriers and a heavy cruiser were sunk for a cost of one American aircraft carrier and a destroyer. After Midway, and the exhausting attrition of the Solomon Islands campaign, Japan's shipbuilding and pilot training programs were unable to keep pace in replacing their losses while the U.S. steadily increased its output in both areas.

Japan had attained its initial strategic goals quickly, taking the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia); the latter, with its vital resources, was particularly important to Japan. Because of this preliminary planning for a second phase of operations commenced as early as January 1942. However, there were strategic disagreements between the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy, and infighting between the Navy's GHQ and Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's Combined Fleet, such that a follow-up strategy was not formulated until April 1942. Admiral Yamamoto finally succeeded in winning the bureaucratic struggle by using a thinly veiled threat to resign, after which his operational concept of further operations in the Central Pacific was accepted ahead of other competing plans.
Yamamoto's primary strategic goal was the elimination of America's carrier forces, which he perceived as the principal threat to the overall Pacific campaign. This concern was acutely heightened by the Doolittle Raid (18 April 1942) in which USAAF B-25 Mitchells launched from USS Hornet bombed targets in Tokyo and several other Japanese cities. The raid, while militarily insignificant, was a severe psychological shock to the Japanese and showed the existence of a gap in the defenses around the Japanese home islands. This and other successful "hit and run" raids by American carriers, showed that they were still a threat although, seemingly, reluctant to be drawn into an all-out battle. Yamamoto reasoned that another attack on the main U.S base at Pearl Harbor would induce all of the American fleet out to fight, including the carriers; however, given the strength of American land-based air power on Hawaii, he judged that Pearl Harbor could no longer be attacked directly.[18] Instead, he selected Midway, at the extreme northwest end of the Hawaiian Island chain, some 1,300 mi (1,100 nmi; 2,100 km) from Oahu. Midway was not especially important in the larger scheme of Japan's intentions, but the Japanese felt the Americans would consider Midway a vital outpost of Pearl Harbor and would therefore strongly defend it.[19] The U.S. did consider Midway vital; after the battle, establishment of a U.S. submarine base on Midway allowed submarines operating from Pearl Harbor to refuel and reprovision, extending their radius of operations by 1,200 mi (1,900 km). An airstrip on Midway served as a forward staging point for bomber attacks on Wake Island.

Yamamoto's plan

Typical of Japanese naval planning during World War II, Yamamoto's battle plan was exceedingly complex.[21] Additionally, his design was predicated on optimistic intelligence suggesting USS Enterprise and USS Hornet, forming Task Force 16, were the only carriers available to the U.S. Pacific Fleet at the time. At the Battle of the Coral Sea just a month earlier, USS Lexington had been sunk and USS Yorktown damaged severely enough that the Japanese believed it also to have been sunk. The Japanese were also aware that USS Saratoga was undergoing repairs on the West Coast after suffering torpedo damage from a submarine.

However, more important was Yamamoto's belief the Americans had been demoralized by their frequent defeats during the preceding six months. Yamamoto felt deception would be required to lure the U.S. fleet into a fatally compromised situation. To this end, he dispersed his forces so that their full extent (particularly his battleships) would be unlikely to be discovered by the Americans prior to battle. Critically, Yamamoto's supporting battleships and cruisers would trail Vice-Admiral Nagumo Chkichi's carrier striking force by several hundred miles. Japan's heavy surface forces were intended to destroy whatever part of the U.S. fleet might come to Midway's
relief, once Nagumo’s carriers had weakened them sufficiently for a daylight gun duel; this was typical of the battle doctrine of most major navies.

Yamamoto did not know that the U.S. had broken the main Japanese naval code (dubbed JN-25 by the Americans). Yamamoto’s emphasis on dispersal also meant that none of his formations could support each other. For instance, the only significant warships larger than destroyers that screened Nagumo's fleet were two battleships and three cruisers, despite his carriers being expected to carry out the strikes and bear the brunt of American counterattacks. By contrast, the flotillas of Yamamoto and Kondo had between them two light carriers, five battleships, and six cruisers, none of which would see any action at Midway. Their distance from Nagumo's carriers would also have grave implications during the battle, since the larger warships in Yamamoto and Kondo's forces carried scout planes, an invaluable reconnaissance capability denied to Nagumo.

Aleutian invasion

Main article: Aleutian Islands Campaign

Likewise, the Japanese operations in the Aleutian Islands (Operation AL) removed yet more ships that could otherwise have augmented the force striking Midway. Whereas prior historical accounts have often characterized the Aleutians operation as a feint to draw American forces away, recent scholarship on the battle has suggested that AL was supposed to be launched simultaneously with the attack on Midway.[24] However, a one-day delay in the sailing of Nagumo’s task force meant that Operation AL began a day before the Midway attack.

American reinforcements

To do battle with an enemy force anticipated to muster four or five carriers, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas, needed every available U.S. flight deck. He already had Vice Admiral William Halsey's two-carrier (Enterprise and Hornet) task force at hand, though Halsey was stricken with psoriasis and had to be replaced by Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Halsey's escort commander.[28] Nimitz also hurriedly recalled Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher's task force, including the carrier Yorktown (which had suffered considerable damage at Coral Sea), from the South West Pacific Area. It reached Pearl Harbor
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just in time to provision and sail.

Despite estimates that Yorktown would require several months of repairs at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, her elevators were intact, and her flight deck largely so.[29] The Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard worked around the clock and in 72 hours, she was restored to a battle-ready state,[30] judged good enough for two or three weeks of operations, as Nimitz required.[31] Her flight deck was patched, whole sections of internal frames cut out and replaced, and several new squadrons were drawn from Saratoga; they did not, however, get time to train.[32] Nimitz disregarded established procedure in getting his third and last available carrier ready for battle. Just three days after putting into dry dock at Pearl Harbor, Yorktown was again under way. Repairs continued even as she sortied, with work crews from the repair ship USS Vestal, herself damaged in the attack on Pearl Harbor six months earlier, still aboard.[33]

On Midway Island, the USAAF stationed four squadrons of B-17 Flying Fortresses, along with several B-26 Marauders. The Marine Corps had 19 SBD Dauntlesses, seven F4F-3 Wildcats, 17 Vought SBU-3 Vindicators, 21 Brewster F2A-3s, and six Grumman TBF-1 Avengers, the latter a detachment of VT-8 from Hornet.

Japanese shortcomings

Meanwhile, as a result of her participation in the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Japanese carrier Zuikaku was in port in Kure, awaiting a replacement air group. That there were none immediately available was a failure of the IJN crew training program, which already showed signs of being unable to replace losses.[34] Instructors from the Yokosuka Air Corps were employed in an effort to make up the shortfall.[34] The heavily damaged ShMkaku had suffered three bomb hits at Coral Sea, and required months of repair in drydock. Despite the likely availability of sufficient aircraft between the two ships to re-equip Zuikaku with a composite air group, the Japanese made no serious attempt to get her into the forthcoming battle.[35] Consequently, Admiral Nagumo would only have four fleet carriers: Kaga and Akagi forming Carrier Division 1; Hiryk and SMryk as Carrier Division 2. At least part of this was a product of fatigue; Japanese carriers had been constantly on operations since 7 December 1941, including raids on Darwin and Colombo.

The main Japanese strike aircraft to be used were the Aichi D3A1 "Val" dive bomber and the Nakajima B5N2 "Kate", which was capable of being used either as a torpedo bomber or as a level attack bomber. The main carrier fighter was the fast and highly maneuverable Mitsubishi...
A6M2 Zero.[nb 3] However, the carriers of the Kido Butai were suffering from a shortage of frontline aircraft. For various reasons, production of the "Val" had been drastically reduced, while that of the B5N had been stopped completely.[36] As a consequence, there were none available to replace losses. This also meant that many of the aircraft being used during the June 1942 operations had been operational since late November 1941; although well maintained, they were almost worn out and had become increasingly unreliable. These factors meant that all carriers had fewer than their normal aircraft complement and few spare aircraft.[37]

Japanese strategic scouting arrangements prior to the battle were also in disarray. A picket line of Japanese submarines was late getting into position (partly because of Yamamoto's haste), which let the American carriers reach their assembly point northeast of Midway (known as "Point Luck") without being detected.[38] A second attempt at reconnaissance, using four-engine Kawanishi H8K "Emily" flying boats to scout Pearl Harbor prior to the battle (and thereby detect the absence or presence of the American carriers), part of Operation K, was also thwarted when Japanese submarines assigned to refuel the search aircraft discovered that the intended refueling point — a hitherto deserted bay off French Frigate Shoals — was occupied by American warships (because the Japanese had carried out an identical mission in March).[39] Thus, Japan was deprived of any knowledge concerning the movements of the American carriers immediately before the battle.

Japanese radio intercepts did notice an increase in both American submarine activity and message traffic. This information was in Yamamoto's hands prior to the battle. However, Japanese plans were not changed; Yamamoto, at sea on Yamato, did not dare inform Nagumo for fear of exposing his position and assumed that Nagumo had received the same signal from Tokyo.[40] Nagumo's radio antennae, however, were unable to receive such long-wave transmissions, and he was left unaware of any American ship movements.

Allied code-breaking

Admiral Nimitz had one priceless asset: cryptanalysts had broken the JN-25 code.[42] Commander Joseph J. Rochefort and his team at Station Hypo were able to confirm Midway as the target of the impending Japanese strike, to determine the date of the attack as either 4 or 5 June, and to provide Nimitz with a complete IJN order of battle.[43] Japan's efforts to introduce a new codebook had been delayed, giving HYPO several crucial days; while it was blacked out shortly before the attack began, the important breaks had already been made.[44][nb 4]
As a result, the Americans entered the battle with a very good picture of where, when, and in what strength the Japanese would appear. Nimitz was aware, for example, that the vast Japanese numerical superiority had been divided into no less than four task forces. This dispersal resulted in few fast ships being available to escort the Carrier Striking Force, limiting the anti-aircraft guns protecting the carriers. Nimitz thus calculated that his three carrier decks, plus Midway Island, to Yamamoto's four, gave the U.S. rough parity, especially since American carrier air groups were larger than Japanese ones. The Japanese, by contrast, remained almost totally unaware of their opponent's true strength and dispositions even after the battle began.[26]

Initial air attacks

The first air attack took off at 12:30 on 3 June, consisting of nine B-17s operating from Midway. Three hours later, they found the Japanese transport group 570 nmi (660 mi; 1,060 km) to the west.[45] Under heavy anti-aircraft fire, they dropped their bombs. Though hits were reported,[45] none of the bombs actually landed on target and no significant damage was inflicted.[46] Early the following morning, Japanese oil tanker Akebono Maru sustained the first hit when a torpedo from an attacking PBY flying boat struck her around 01:00.[46]

At 04:30 on 4 June, Nagumo launched his initial attack on Midway itself, consisting of 36 Vals and 36 Kates, escorted by 36 Zeros. At the same time, he launched combat air patrol (CAP), as well as his eight search aircraft (one from the heavy cruiser Tone launched 30 minutes late due to technical difficulties).

Japanese reconnaissance arrangements were flimsy, with too few aircraft to adequately cover the assigned search areas, laboring under poor weather conditions to the northeast and east of the task force.[47] Yamamoto's faulty dispositions had now become a serious liability.

American radar picked up the enemy at a distance of several miles and interceptors were soon scrambled. Unescorted bombers headed off to attack the Japanese carrier fleet, their fighter escorts remaining behind to defend Midway. At 06:20, Japanese carrier aircraft bombed and heavily damaged the U.S. base. Midway-based Marine fighter pilots, flying F4F-3 Wildcats and obsolete Brewster F2A-3 Buffalos,[49] intercepted the Japanese and suffered heavy losses, though they managed to destroy four "Val"s and at least three Zeros. Most of the U.S. planes were downed in the first few minutes; several were damaged, and only two remained flyable. In all, three F4Fs and 13 F2As were shot down. American anti-aircraft fire was accurate and
intense, damaging many Japanese aircraft and claiming one-third of the Japanese planes destroyed.

The initial Japanese attack did not succeed in neutralizing Midway. American bombers could still use the airbase to refuel and attack the Japanese invasion force; another aerial attack would be necessary if troops were to go ashore by 7 June.

Having taken off prior to the Japanese attack, American bombers based on Midway made several attacks on the Japanese carrier fleet. These included six TBFs from Hornet's VT-8, their crews on their first combat operation, and four USAF B-26 Marauders armed with torpedoes. The Japanese shrugged off these attacks with almost no losses (as few as two fighters lost), while destroying all but one TBF and two B-26s. One B-26, hit by anti-aircraft fire from Akagi, made no attempt to pull out of its run and narrowly missed crashing directly into the carrier's bridge. This experience may well have contributed to Nagumo's determination to launch another attack on Midway, in direct violation of Yamamoto's order to keep the reserve strike force armed for anti-ship operations.

Admiral Nagumo, in accordance with Japanese carrier doctrine at the time, had kept half of his aircraft in reserve. These comprised two squadrons each of dive bombers and torpedo bombers, the latter armed with torpedoes, should any American warships be located. The dive bombers were, as yet, unarmed.[54] As a result of the attacks from Midway, as well as the morning flight leader's recommendation of a second strike, at 07:15, Nagumo ordered his reserve planes to be re-armed with contact-fused general purpose bombs for use against land targets. Some sources maintain that this had been underway for about 30 minutes when, at 07:40[55] the delayed scout plane from Tone signaled the discovery of a sizable American naval force to the east; however, new evidence suggests Nagumo did not receive the sighting report until 08:00, so the rearming operation actually proceeded for 45 minutes.[56] Nagumo quickly reversed his order and demanded the scout plane ascertain the composition of the American force. Another 40 minutes elapsed before Tone's scout finally radioed the presence of a single carrier in the American force, TF 16 (the other carrier being missed).[57]

Nagumo was now in a quandary. Rear Admiral Tamon Yamaguchi, leading Carrier Division 2 (Hiryk and SMryk), recommended Nagumo strike immediately with the forces at hand: 18 Aichi D3A2 dive bombers each on SMryk and Hiryk, and half the ready cover patrol aircraft.[58] Nagumo's seeming opportunity to hit the American ships,[59] however, was now limited by the fact his Midway strike force would be returning shortly and needing to land promptly or ditch (as is commonly believed).[60] Because of the constant flight deck activity associated with combat air patrol operations during the preceding hour, the Japanese never had an opportunity to "spot"
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(position) their reserve for launch. The few aircraft on the Japanese flight decks at the time of the attack were either defensive fighters, or (in the case of SMryk) fighters being spotted to augment the task force defenses.[61] Spotting his flight decks and launching aircraft would have required at least 30–45 minutes.[62] Furthermore, by spotting and launching immediately, Nagumo would be committing some of his reserve to battle without proper anti-ship armament; he had just witnessed how easily unescorted American bombers had been shot down.[63] (In the event, poor discipline saw many of the Japanese bombers ditch their bombs and attempt to dogfight intercepting F4Fs.)[64] Japanese carrier doctrine preferred fully constituted strikes, and without confirmation (until 08:20) of whether the American force included carriers, Nagumo's reaction was doctrinaire.[65] In addition, the arrival of another American air strike at 07:53 gave weight to the need to attack the island again. In the end, Nagumo chose to wait for his first strike force to land, then launch the reserve, which would by then be properly armed and ready.

In the final analysis, it made no difference; Fletcher's carriers had launched beginning at 07:00, so the aircraft which would deliver the crushing blow were already on their way. There was nothing Nagumo could do about it. This was the fatal flaw of Yamamoto's dispositions: they followed strictly traditional battleship doctrine.