

Introduction

The Battle of Midway has rightly remained one of the most important and widely studied engagements in naval history. It is, in the eyes of many, the quintessential contest between Japan and America—the decisive naval battle in the Pacific war. This is understandable, since Midway contains all the timeless elements that define a classic clash of arms—an apparent mismatch in the strength of the combatants, a seesaw battle with the initiative passing back and forth, acts of tremendous heroism on both sides, and an improbable climax. It is a battle that has rightly captured the imagination of subsequent generations seeking to understand both the engagement itself and its effects on the course of the greater conflict of which it was a part.

By any measure, June 4, 1942, was a watershed date, after which the Pacific war entered an entirely new phase. For the Japanese, Midway abruptly rang down the curtain on a triumphant first six months of war and largely destroyed Japan's ability to initiate major new offensives in the Pacific. The destruction of the Imperial Navy's four finest aircraft carriers—*Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryū*, and *Sōryū*—forever ruined the world-class naval aviation force with which it had opened hostilities. While the imperial fleet remained a force to be reckoned with, it never regained the combination of material and qualitative superiority that made it so feared during the initial phase of the conflict.

For the U.S. Navy, the Battle of Midway marked a reprieve; a chance to gather itself and turn to new tasks. If Midway checked the ambitions of Japan and signaled the destruction of its primary means of naval offense, it foretold just the opposite for the Americans. The battle of 4 June meant that the Japanese and U.S. navies would fight on roughly equal terms for the remainder of 1942. American commanders, for the first time since their humiliation at Pearl Harbor, could now legitimately contemplate offensives of their own against the enemy. It is no exaggeration to say that only a victory at Midway could have created the moral and material basis for the crucial American campaign at Guadalcanal. And if Midway itself did not harm Japan's military in absolute terms as much as the following year's worth of warfare in the Solomons would, it clearly opened the gates to this hellish attritional cycle.

For naval historians, particularly those interested in the Pacific war, Midway has lost none of its fascination over the intervening sixty years. Indeed, particularly for the

authors, both of whom have been captivated by the Imperial Navy since childhood, this battle encapsulates both the most laudable, as well as the most frustrating aspects of the imperial fleet. It is not a stretch to state that in June 1942 Japan possessed the most powerful navy in the world in many respects. The Navy had opened the war with a stunning attack on Pearl Harbor, followed up two days later by the shocking destruction of the British capital ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and then proceeded to systematically crush the Allied flotillas in the Philippines and around Java. Powerful raids against Port Darwin in Australia and then into the Indian Ocean had cemented *Nibon Kaigun's* fearsome reputation.

Japan's carrier force in particular was truly without peer. At Pearl Harbor it demonstrated a level of sophistication that the U.S. Navy would not be able to replicate for another two years. Whereas the Allies were still using their flight decks singly or in pairs, Japan had used *six* fleet carriers to sweep American airpower aside and smash a major naval base in broad daylight. In terms of their ability to use massed airpower, the Imperial Navy had no rival. Japan's pilots were war hardened, supremely aggressive, and highly skilled. Likewise, Japanese carrier aircraft—epitomized by the marvelous Mitsubishi Zero—were in many cases superior to those used by the U.S. Navy at this stage of the war.

And yet, despite these formidable strengths, at Midway the imperial fleet committed a series of irretrievable strategic and operational mistakes that seem almost inexplicable. In so doing, it doomed its matchless carrier force to premature ruin. Before it even arrived off Midway, the Japanese Navy had frittered away its numerical advantage through a hopelessly misguided battle plan. During the battle itself, the Japanese in many cases performed sloppily, almost haphazardly—a far cry from the elite force that had opened the war. The reasons why this happened are manifold and complex and defy easy explanation.

All great battles develop their own unique mythos. That is to say, they become wrapped in a set of popular beliefs—"the common wisdom"—that interprets the battle and its meanings. In many cases, this mythology centers on a pivotal event—some noteworthy occurrence that captures the imagination, thereby crystallizing what the battle was all about. History is replete with such defining moments—the breaking of the French Imperial Guard at Waterloo, Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, the siege of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. They are timeless events, and not to be reinterpreted lightly. Yet, it is imperative that such momentous happenings be understood properly, for if these are the lenses through which we perceive great battles, then it stands to reason that any flaws in these crystals must necessarily distort our perception of the battle as a whole.

This has certainly been true of Midway, whose defining moment will always be the devastating and seemingly last-minute attack of American dive-bombers against the Japanese carrier task force at 1020 on the morning of 4 June. The image of American Dauntlesses hurtling down from the heavens to drop their bombs on helpless Japanese carriers, their decks packed with aircraft just moments away from taking off, has been emblazoned on the American consciousness since the day the battle was fought. Yet, this precise version of the events surrounding the decisive attack—a rendition that would be accepted in any contemporary history book—is

but one, and perhaps not the greatest, of the misconceptions surrounding Midway. In fact, the 1020 attack did not happen in this way, in that it did not catch the Japanese in any way ready to launch their own attack. Others myths of the battle include:

- The Americans triumphed against overwhelming odds at the Battle of Midway.
- The Aleutians Operation was conceived by Admiral Yamamoto, the commander in chief of Combined Fleet, as a diversion designed to lure the American fleet out of Pearl Harbor.
- During the transit to Midway, Admiral Yamamoto withheld important intelligence information from Admiral Nagumo, the operational commander of the carrier striking force. As a result, Nagumo was in the dark concerning the nature of the threat facing him.
- Had the Japanese implemented a two-phase reconnaissance search on the morning of 4 June, they would have succeeded in locating the American fleet in time to win the battle.
- The late launch of cruiser *Tone's* No. 4 scout plane doomed Admiral Nagumo to defeat in the battle.
- Had Admiral Nagumo not decided to rearm his aircraft with land-attack weapons, he would have been in a position to attack the Americans as soon as they were discovered.
- The sacrifice of USS *Hornet's* Torpedo Squadron Eight was not in vain, since it pulled the Japanese combat air patrol fighters down to sea level, thereby allowing the American dive-bombers to attack at 1020.
- Japan's elite carrier aviators were all but wiped out during the battle.

All of these are fallacious. All are either untrue, or at least require careful clarification. Some of these ideas have been implanted in the Western accounts as a result of misunderstandings of the records of the battle. Some have resulted from a faulty understanding of the basic mechanics of how the battle was fought. Some are misrepresentations of the truth that were deliberately introduced by participants in the battle. And each has caused lasting distortions in Western perceptions of the reasons for victory and defeat. Correcting these distortions is the overriding goal of this book.

How could such misconceptions creep into the historical record? It is fundamentally because the study of Midway in the West has been conducted primarily on American terms, from American perspectives, and using essentially American sources. "Winners write the history books" is certainly true in this case. The fact that the winners of Midway by and large also had no ability to read the loser's history books certainly didn't help matters. As a result, the majority of the English-language accounts written about this pivotal battle have been built around a trio of translated Japanese sources. These are the after-action log of Admiral Nagumo ("The Nagumo Report"), which was captured on Saipan in 1944 and later translated; the interviews

with Japanese naval officers conducted immediately after the war by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (“USSBS”); and Fuchida Mitsuo’s book, *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan*, which was originally published in Japan in 1951 and then translated and republished in the United States in 1955. These three sources, augmented by survivor accounts and other fragmentary records, have formed the backbone of the Japanese account for fifty years.

Unfortunately, one of these sources—Fuchida’s *Midway*—is irretrievably flawed. The effects of Fuchida’s misstatements, which have lain undetected until recently, are manifold. In essence, every single Western history of the battle has passed along Fuchida’s untruths to at least some extent, because his errors pertain to very important facets of the engagement: Nagumo’s intelligence estimates, his search plan, Japanese flight deck operations, and the nature of the decisive American dive-bomber attack. Fuchida’s are not minor errors of omission—they are fundamental and willful distortions of the truth that *must* be corrected. Intriguingly, Fuchida’s account has been overturned in Japan for more than twenty years. Yet, in the West, he has remained as authoritative as on the day his book was first published.

This book builds a new account that not only corrects these errors, but also broadens our understanding of the Japanese side of the battle. In this, we employ three new approaches that have yet to be used extensively in any prior study of Midway. The first is a detailed understanding of how Japanese aircraft carriers operated. Carriers, of course, formed the very heart of the battle. And in this context, seemingly trivial technical details—the configuration of the ship’s command spaces and flag accommodations, the arrangement of the hangar decks, the relative speed of a ship’s elevator cycles—could have important implications for how a carrier performed its mission. These details are anything but dry—taken together, they help bring the tangible personalities of these warships more clearly into focus.

In addition to the details surrounding the carriers, we also draw heavily on the Japanese operational records of the battle. While it is true that the logs of the individual Japanese vessels at Midway were destroyed after the war, the air group records of the carriers survived. The tabular data contained in these reports (known as *kōdōchōshos*) has been used in some newer works to supply such details as the names of individual Japanese pilots. Yet, these records have never been used in a systematic way to understand what the carriers themselves were actually doing at any given time. For instance, knowing when a carrier was launching or recovering aircraft can also be used to derive a sense for the direction the ship was heading (into the wind), and what was occurring on the flight decks and in the hangars. Thus, we use the *kōdōchōshos* as tools to understand the carrier operations of 4 June in more detail than has been attempted previously.

Third, we apply an understanding of Japanese naval doctrine—in particular their carrier doctrine—to analyze how and why the Japanese operated as they did. Heretofore, American authors trying to put themselves in Nagumo’s shoes had to make the assumption that Japanese carriers and air groups functioned pretty much as did their American counterparts. In fact, though, because of differences in both ship design and doctrine, the Japanese operated very differently from the U.S. Navy. Worse yet, many earlier authors didn’t really have a grasp of how *American* carriers operated,

either. The result has been that many of the criticisms of Admiral Nagumo's actions during the battle have proceeded from a flawed basis, leading to equally flawed conclusions.

It is only recently that information on Japanese doctrine has begun to be employed in the study of the Pacific war. Works like John Lundstrom's *First Team* series contained the first solid information on Japanese air group operations and doctrine. These were augmented in 1997 by the publication of David Evans and Mark Peattie's landmark study *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy*, and Peattie's subsequent *Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Aviation*. The latter, in particular, supplied sufficient information on Japanese carrier operations to form the basis for this book.

We expand on these earlier works by drawing on additional Japanese sources particular to the battle. The core of these is the official Japanese war history series—the various volumes of the *Boeicho Boeikenshujo Senshibu* (often referred to as “BKS,” or *Senshi Sōsho*). Compiled by the War History Section of the Japanese Defense Agency, these studies are highly regarded for their comprehensive treatment of individual campaigns, as well as their general lack of bias. The Midway volume, *Midowei Kaisen* (Battle of Midway), was published in 1971 and remains the authoritative Japanese work on the topic. Beyond *Senshi Sōsho*, we also have used never-before-translated Japanese primary and secondary sources, including monographs on Japanese carrier and air operations, as well as accounts of various Japanese survivors.

Taken together, any reader of this book will emerge with a fuller understanding of how and why the Japanese Navy, and its carriers in particular, operated as it did. In the process, we hope to give our readers a better flavor of what it was like to be a sailor serving aboard an imperial warship. And while this is neither a technical design study nor a treatise on Japanese carrier doctrine, we also necessarily seek to relate (with the least pain possible to the reader) the critical points regarding Japanese weaponry, doctrine, and carrier operations that shaped the outcome at Midway.

While our work is intended as a new, comprehensive, and clarified history of the Japanese Navy at Midway, it is also a very tightly scoped work. For instance, although we are keenly interested in the carrier operations and command decisions of the Americans during the battle, we do not seek to address comprehensively all aspects of the American account. Much of this has already been covered by such works as Walter Lord's *Incredible Victory*, Gordon Prange's *Miracle at Midway*, and two other fine, but underappreciated volumes—H. P. Willmott's *The Barrier and the Javelin*, and Robert Cressman et al.'s *A Glorious Page in Our History*. Likewise, we do not deal exhaustively with such topics as American cryptography—we have nothing to add in these matters that hasn't been previously covered by works such as the late Admiral Edwin Layton's *And I Was There*. Nor do we seek to be the final word on the air combat of the battle—John Lundstrom's account holds that honor for the foreseeable future. This is not to say that nothing new remains to be done on the American side of the battle. However, we choose to focus primarily on the Japanese history, since there are clearly important new aspects of the tale that need to be clarified here.

The work is divided into three main sections. The first—Preliminaries (*Josho*)—is an examination of the strategic context of the engagement, including its origins, and

the political machinations that led to the creation of the disastrous Japanese plan of battle. The second section—Battle Diary (*Sentō Niseki*)—is a detailed narrative of the battle itself, from the morning of 4 June until the final return of the Japanese fleet to home waters on 14 June. The third section—Reckonings (*Kessan*)—analyzes why the Japanese lost at Midway, as well as what it meant to lose this particular battle within the larger context of the Pacific war. The book closes with a reexamination and clarification of some of the myths of Midway mentioned previously.

Throughout the book, our narrative perspective is almost wholly that of the Japanese. Furthermore, during the description of the actual battle of 4 June, the book is almost exclusively carrier centric in its viewpoint. Except in those cases where crucial context is required to understand the events at hand, we deliberately relate the battle's narrative in terms of what would have been either directly visible or otherwise known from the bridges of the Japanese carriers themselves.

Some might question the validity of adopting a “carrier-centric” narrative viewpoint for a battle as large as Midway. Yet, this approach lends itself well to recreating the “fog of war,” which is crucial to understanding the handicaps under which Admiral Nagumo had to labor in making his command decisions. It was on board the Japanese aircraft carriers that most of the crucial decisions of the day were made. It was the destruction of the Japanese carriers that brought the battle to an effective close, even though the bulk of the imperial fleet involved in the overall operation remained unengaged. And it was on board the carriers that the vast majority of Japanese casualties were suffered. Thus, the story of *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryū*, and *Sōryū*, in many ways, *is* the Japanese story at Midway.

This method also has merits from a strategic perspective, because it was around the operational realities of the carrier weapon system that strategy necessarily had to be crafted. Understanding the strengths and limitations of their own carrier force in early 1942 should have had a dramatic impact on the Japanese operations that unfolded during that time frame. Not only that, but as we will show, the number and strength of the carrier force in itself should have imposed a logic on Japan's strategic calculus in terms of target selection and operational timetables. Contrary to outside appearances, the truth was that, after six months of war, Japan's naval aviation arm was already balanced on a knife's edge in terms of its men and matériel. The carriers and crews were tired and badly in need of refit and repair. In the same vein, Japan's naval air groups, though still highly proficient, needed to be replenished with new aircraft and pilots.

Yet, we argue that these realities were not understood by the men vying over the right to decide Japanese naval strategy. These were Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, commander in chief of the Imperial Navy's Combined Fleet, and his various foes in Naval General Headquarters. Their political wrangling, complicated still further by the baleful influence of interservice rivalries with the Imperial Army, badly warped the process of strategy formulation. Likewise, the morally dishonest methods Yamamoto employed to ensure his victory in this process, and employed again during the operational planning phase, ensured that the Midway battle plan was flawed from the outset. Worse yet, during this same period, and despite the fact that any rational analysis should have shown that *all* of Japan's fleet carriers would be needed

at Midway, Naval GHQ continued to insist that these irreplaceable combat assets be doled out to subsidiary operations in penny packets, thereby exposing them to unacceptable dangers.

These mistakes belie an unpleasant truth, that despite the Imperial Navy having opened the Pacific war with one of the most daring military feats of all time—the massed carrier attack on Pearl Harbor—neither Yamamoto nor Naval GHQ truly comprehended the strengths and weaknesses of the world-class weapons system they possessed. As a result, they unwittingly consigned Japan's finest fleet—the product of untold years of industrial and organizational toil—to its premature doom off Midway. To have lost this magnificent force in such a miserable—and wholly preventable—fashion, was one of the greatest of Japan's failings as a modern nation. For Yamamoto personally, the defeat at Midway utterly eclipsed his very real achievements in the first six months of World War II.

At a deeper level, though, it is important to clarify that the defeat at Midway was not just the product of flawed decisions by a handful of men at the top. Likewise, Admiral Nagumo's command decisions on the day of the battle, which have widely been held up as having been the reason for Japan's defeat, were not solely to blame, either. Instead, we will show that Yamamoto, Nagumo, and indeed all the Japanese forces involved, suffered from deep-seated flaws that were a product of the Imperial Navy's strategic outlooks, doctrinal tenets, and institutional cultures. This is not to say that individual mistakes were not made, but these mistakes must be understood within the proper context. In fact, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, the seeds of Japan's defeat at Midway were not planted in the six months of easy Japanese victories that led up to the battle, but had instead been sown in the very earliest days of the Imperial Navy's development.

The Battle of Midway loses none of its grandeur when retold from a different perspective. Instead, the fundamentals of the battle's greatness remain the same. Midway is, and always will be, a tale of confusion and difficult decisions, of tremendous bravery, and of furious combat to the death. Yet, inevitably the Japanese story is also that of a mighty force brought low and contains all the grief and human suffering that characterize the losing side of any great conflict. These aspects bear retelling. Indeed, they warrant amplification from new sources. An accurate account of the Japanese travails of June 4, 1942—of what it meant to be trapped on board a burning vessel for hours on end, of the horrendous conditions encountered by the men of the Imperial Navy as they fought their own personal battles aboard their doomed warships, and of how the survivors ultimately managed to come through their ordeal—deserves to be related, for it is a tale that transcends nationality. It reminds us that all warfare, in the final analysis, boils down to a lowest common human denominator. All parties to a great battle—winner and loser—can benefit from greater knowledge of the other's story in this respect. Particularly in an age where aerial warfare is often strangely antiseptic, and where violence is inflicted from great distances and seemingly omnipotent heights, we would do well to remember what the ultimate, intimate results of such activities are.