

BATTLE OF MIDWAY 1942

The Battle of Midway was an epic clash between the U.S. Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy that played out six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The U.S. Navy's decisive victory in the air-sea battle (June 3-6, 1942) and its successful defense of the major base located at Midway Island dashed Japan's hopes of neutralizing the United States as a naval power and effectively turned the tide of World War II in the Pacific.

Japan's Ambitions in the Pacific

Japan's efforts to establish clear naval and air superiority in the western Pacific first hit a snag in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942, when the U.S. fleet turned back a Japanese invasion force headed for New Guinea. Despite the setback, Admiral Isaroku Yamamoto, commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy, was convinced his forces enjoyed a numerical advantage over the Americans.

Hoping to replicate the success of the Pearl Harbor attack, Yamamoto decided to seek out and crush the rest of the U.S. Pacific fleet with a surprise attack aimed at the Allied base at Midway Island. Midway is located in the Pacific Ocean almost directly in between the United States and Japan.

After a diversionary attack by a smaller Japanese force on the Aleutian Islands, off the coast of Alaska, Yamamoto planned a three-pronged approach toward Midway. First, an air attack on the island launched from four first-line Japanese aircraft carriers, the Akagi, Kaga, Hiryu and Soryu, commanded by Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. Second, an invasion force of ships and soldiers led by Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo. And finally, once expected U.S. reinforcements from Pearl Harbor arrived, a joint strike by Nagumo's forces and Yamamoto's own fleet, which would be waiting 600 miles to the west.

U.S. Gains Advantage Thanks to Navy Codebreakers

U.S. Navy cryptanalysts had begun breaking Japanese communication codes early in 1942 and knew for weeks ahead of time that Japan was planning an attack in the Pacific at a location they called "AF." Suspecting it was Midway, the Navy decided to send out a false message from the base claiming it was short of fresh water. Japan's radio operators sent out a similar message about "AF" soon afterward, confirming the location of the planned attack.

With Japan's fleet so widely dispersed, Yamamoto had to transmit all strategy over the radio, enabling Navy cryptanalysts based in Hawaii to figure out when Japan planned to attack (June 4 or 5) and the planned order of battle of the Imperial Japanese Navy. With this information, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, could develop a plan to combat the invasion.

The Japanese assumed that the U.S. aircraft carrier Yorktown, which been damaged during the Battle of the Coral Sea, would be unavailable at Midway. In fact, the damaged carrier was repaired in only two days at the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard and left on May 30 to regroup with other U.S. ships near Midway in preparation for Japan's attack.

The Battle of Midway Begins

After the diversionary Japanese attack on the Aleutian Islands on June 3, a group of U.S. B-17 Flying Fortress bombers flew from Midway to attack Kondo's invasion force, which they mistakenly assumed was the main Japanese fleet. This unsuccessful attack marked the first military engagement in the Battle of Midway.

Before dawn the next day, more B-17s left Midway for a second attack on the Japanese invasion force, also unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Nagumo launched the first phase of Japan's attack as planned, sending 108 Japanese warplanes from the four aircraft carriers to strike Midway. After inflicting severe damage to the U.S. base, the first Japanese attack ended by 7 a.m., leaving the airfield still useable and U.S. anti-aircraft defenses still functioning.

Shortly after that, just as his pilots informed Nagumo that another airstrike against the base would be necessary, U.S. aircraft launched from Midway began attacking the four Japanese carriers, without success. As Nagumo was rearming Japanese planes for a second air attack, a Japanese scout plane spotted portions of the U.S. fleet, including USS Yorktown, to the east of Midway. Nagumo switched tactics, ordering planes that were still armed to prepare to attack the U.S. ships once the rest of the Japanese planes returned from Midway.

Meanwhile, a wave of U.S. Devastator torpedo bombers from the U.S. carriers Hornet and Enterprise arrived to attack the Japanese ships. Unescorted by fighter planes, nearly all of them were shot down by Japanese Zero fighters. But about an hour later, as the Japanese refueled and rearmed their planes, another wave of U.S. carrier-launched bombers struck, hitting three Japanese carriers—Akagi, Kaga and Soryu—and setting them ablaze.

In response, Japan's surviving carrier, Hiryu, launched two waves of attacks on the Yorktown, which had to be abandoned but remained afloat. U.S. dive-bombers from all three carriers returned to attack the Hiryu and set it ablaze as well, putting all four Japanese carriers out of commission.

Significance of U.S. Victory in the Battle of Midway

Though major combat in the Battle of Midway was over by the evening of June 4, U.S. troops at sea and on Midway Island continued their attacks on the Japanese over the next two days.

The destroyer USS Hammann provided cover for the disabled carrier Yorktown during salvage operations, but a Japanese submarine arrived on June 6 and launched four torpedoes that struck both U.S. ships. The Hammann sank in minutes; the Yorktown eventually capsized and sank the following day.

On June 6, Yamamoto ordered his ships to retreat, ending the Battle of Midway. In all, Japan had lost as many as 3,000 men (including more than 200 of their most experienced pilots), nearly 300 aircraft, one heavy cruiser and four aircraft carriers in the battle, while the Americans lost the Yorktown and Hammann, along with around 145 aircraft and approximately 360 servicemen.

As a result of the U.S. victory in the Battle of Midway, Japan abandoned its plan to expand its reach in the Pacific, and would remain on the defensive for the remainder of World War II. The battle injected U.S. forces with confidence and drained Japanese morale, turning the tide of war in the Pacific strongly in favor of the Allies.

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