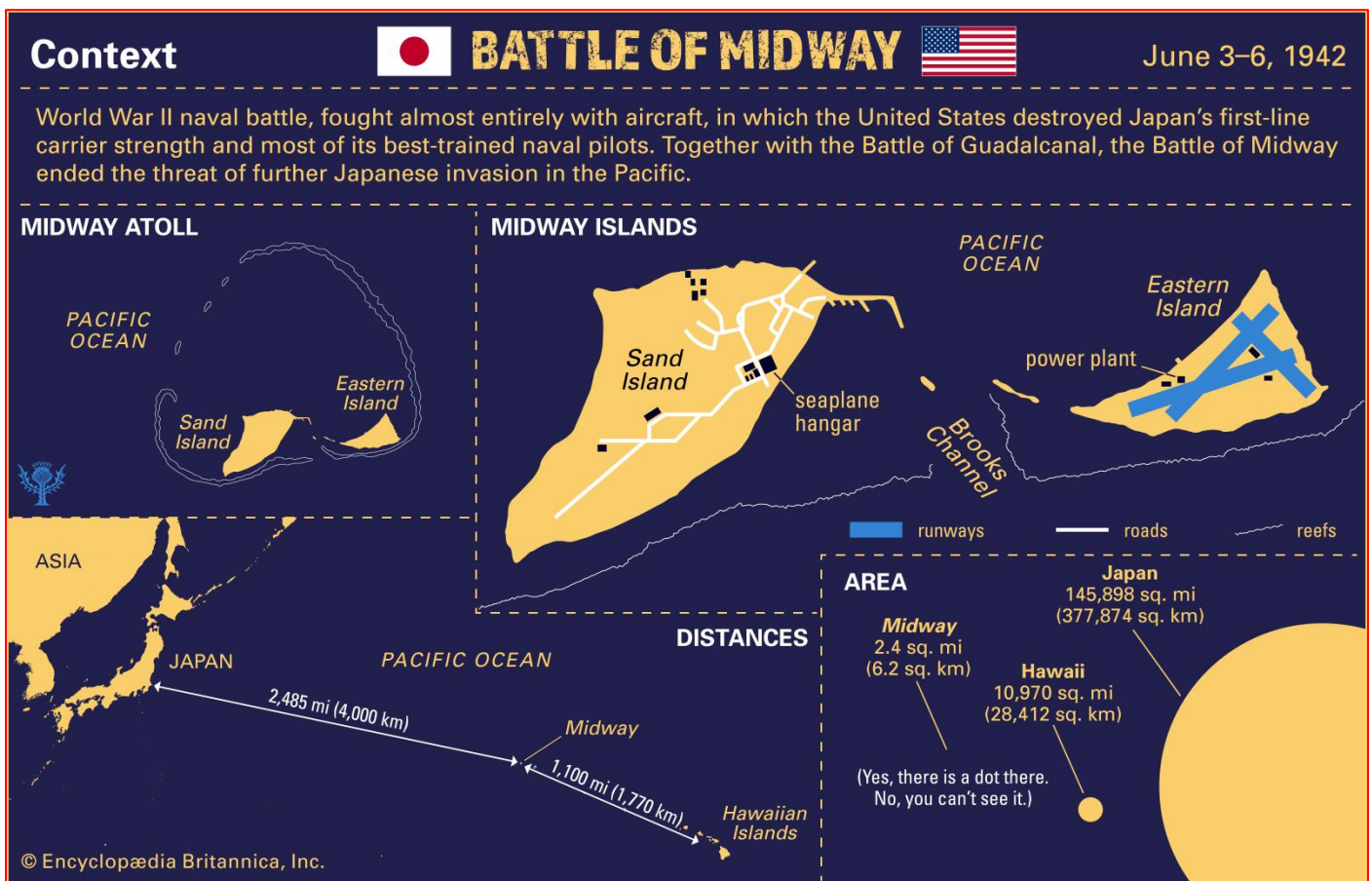


Battle of Midway

Battle of Midway, (June 3–6, 1942), World War II naval battle, fought almost entirely with aircraft, in which the United States destroyed Japan's first-line carrier strength and most of its best trained naval pilots. Together with the Battle of Guadalcanal, the Battle of Midway ended the threat of further Japanese invasion in the Pacific.

The Midway Islands were claimed for the United States on July 5, 1859, by Capt. N.C. Brooks. The coral atoll—consisting of Eastern Island and the larger Sand Island to the west—has a total land area of just 2.4 square miles (6.2 square km). Midway was formally annexed by the U.S. in 1867, and the same year a coal depot was established for transpacific steamers, but it was never used. For many years thereafter only slight attention was paid to Midway. In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt placed Midway under the administration of the U.S. Navy Department, and the atoll became a connecting point for the submarine cable being laid between Hawaii and the Philippines. It was not until the advent of air transportation that the real significance of Midway was appreciated. By 1935 the islands had become a regular stopover point for transpacific flights.

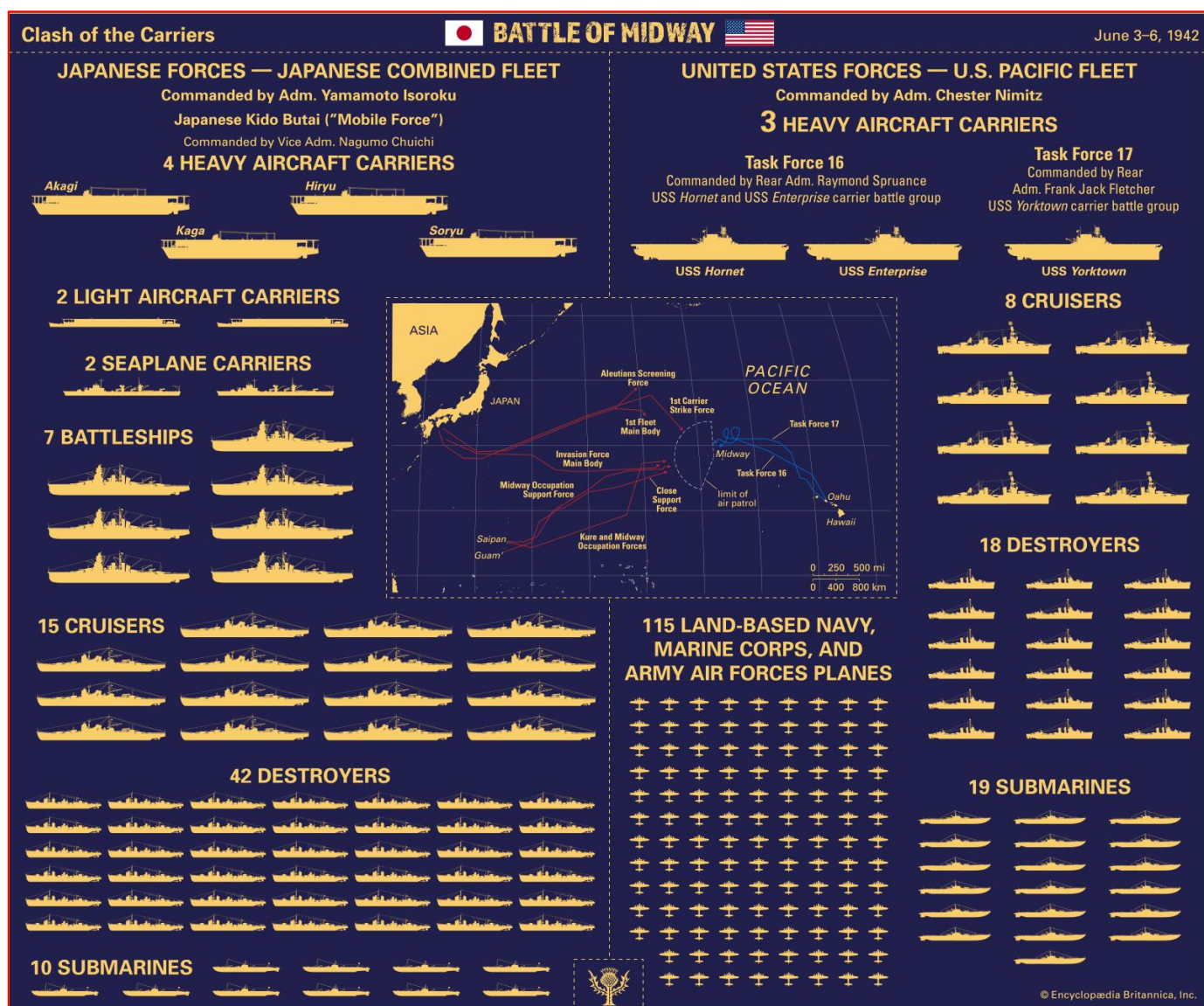


It was World War II which conclusively demonstrated the strategic importance of Midway. In 1940 the U.S. Navy began work on a major air and submarine base there. By the following year Eastern Island would boast three runways, while on Sand Island a seaplane hangar was built for a squadron of PBY Catalina flying boats. Sand Island was also home to Midway's defensive garrison as well as its power plant and radio facilities. Japan recognized that control of the atoll would be critical for its plans in the central Pacific. If the islands could be seized by Japan, then the American military presence in Hawaii, just 1,100 miles (1,770 km) to the southeast, could be seriously threatened. Furthermore, the supply lines between the United States and Australia could be severed, thereby crippling the Allied war effort and opening the southwest Pacific to conquest.

So prominent was Midway in Japanese war planning that it was included in the opening offensive of the Pacific War on December 7–8, 1941. Roughly 12 hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese destroyers Sazanami and Ushio bombarded the power plant and seaplane hangar on Sand Island. Lieut. George Cannon, despite being seriously wounded by a Japanese shell, remained at his post to direct one of the island's

defensive batteries. The Japanese ships were forced to retire, and Cannon, who died of his wounds, would be the first U.S. Marine to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor during World War II.

Clash of carriers



Disposition of forces

Despite a strategic setback at the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 4–8, 1942), the Japanese had continued with plans to seize the Midway Islands and bases in the Aleutians. Seeking a naval showdown with the numerically inferior U.S. Pacific Fleet, Adm. Yamamoto Isoroku sent out the bulk of the Kidō Butai ("Mobile Force"), a massive carrier battle group under the command of Vice Adm. Nagumo Chuichi. The 4 heavy aircraft carriers Akagi, Hiryu, Kaga, and Soryu were supplemented by 2 light aircraft carriers, 2 seaplane carriers, 7 battleships, 15 cruisers, 42 destroyers, 10 submarines, and various support and escort vessels. Their orders were to engage and destroy the American fleet and invade Midway.

U.S. intelligence had divined Japanese intentions after breaking the Japanese JN25 naval code, and the Americans had time to prepare their defense. Adm. Chester Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, could not muster a single battleship, however, and just two of his heavy carriers—the *Hornet* and the *Enterprise*—were combat ready. To further complicate matters, his most senior carrier commander, Vice Adm. William "Bull" Halsey, had been incapacitated by a serious bout of neurodermatitis and would miss the battle entirely. A third carrier, the *Yorktown*, had been so seriously damaged at the Battle of the Coral Sea that the Japanese believed it sunk, and it spent nearly two weeks limping back to Pearl Harbor. An initial damage assessment estimated that it would take three months to return the ship to service. Nimitz told repair crews that they had three days. Miraculously, after less than 72 hours in dry dock, the *Yorktown* steamed out of Pearl Harbor on the morning of May 30. It would join the rest of Nimitz's fleet, which included the *Hornet*, the

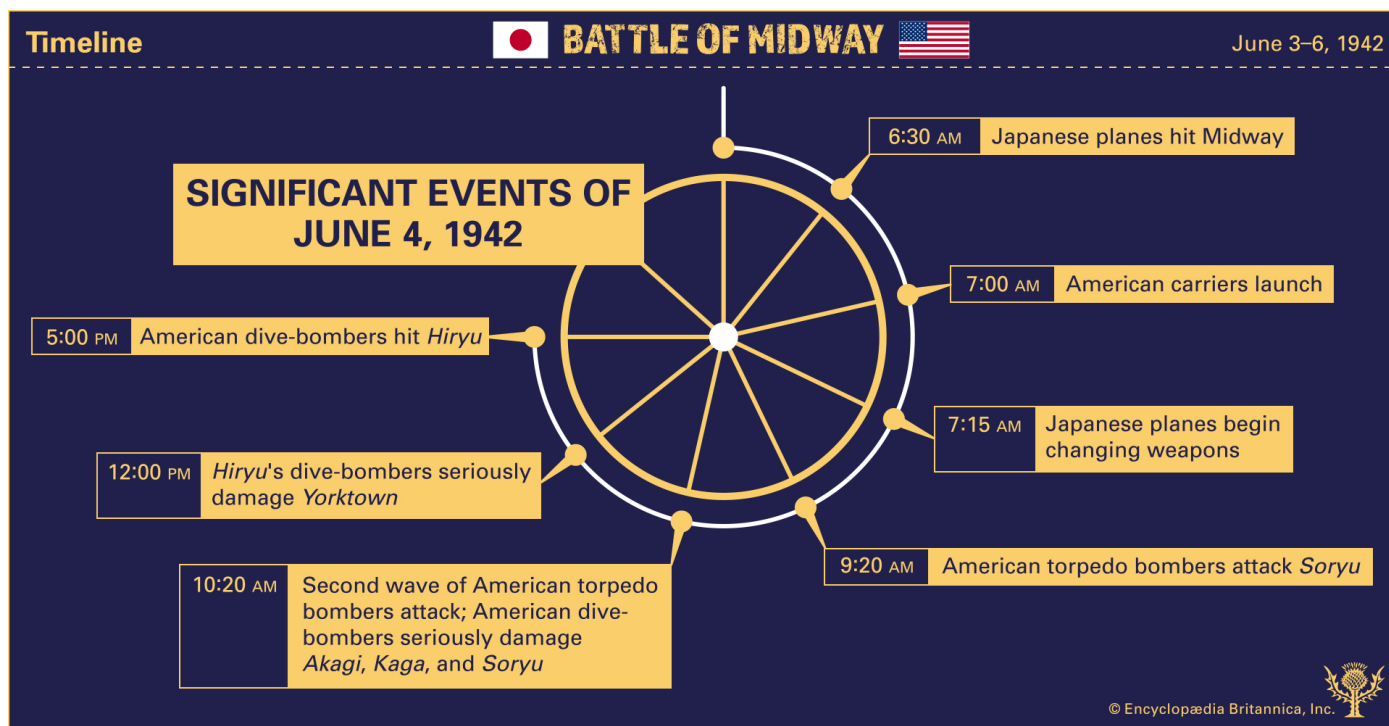
Enterprise, 8 cruisers, and 18 destroyers at a rendezvous point optimistically code-named “*Point Luck*,” 350 miles (560 km) northeast of Midway. There they awaited the advance of Yamamoto’s armada. Whereas the Japanese had no land-based air support, the Americans could commit about 115 land-based Navy, Marine Corps, and Army Air Forces planes from Midway and Hawaii. The American fleet also included some 19 submarines.

The battle began at 9:04 am on June 3, 1942, when an American reconnaissance plane sighted lead elements of the invasion fleet some 500 miles (800 km) west of Midway and was fired upon by Japanese deck gunners. A second surface contact was made at 9:25 am, approximately 700 miles (1,100 km) west of Midway, with an American pilot reporting that he had located the “main body” of the Japanese fleet. In reality, these vessels represented only a small portion of the landing and occupation force.

At 12:30 pm a flight of U.S. Army Air Forces Boeing B-17 bombers was dispatched from Midway. In the late afternoon they struck ineffectually at part of the Japanese invasion force, which was by now about 220 miles (350 km) southwest of the U.S. fleet. American strategic bombers would demonstrate limited usefulness against moving naval targets at Midway and elsewhere in the Pacific, but they proved to be excellent reconnaissance platforms. Their high operational ceiling and long range meant that they could loiter for extended periods at altitudes unreachable by Japanese antiaircraft fire, while their onboard armament presented a formidable defense against carrier-based fighters.

About 9:15 pm, before the B-17s had returned, a quartet of Consolidated PBY Catalina seaplanes was launched from Midway. This group intercepted a Japanese surface force about 1:15 am in the early hours of June 4 and carried out a torpedo attack and strafing run. One of the Catalinas scored a hit on the Japanese tanker Akebono Maru; this would prove to be the only successful torpedo attack launched by an American aircraft during the entire battle. As the Catalinas made their way back to Midway, they were notified by radio that the islands were under attack by Japanese aircraft.

June 4



The attack on Midway

About 5:45 am on June 4, a Catalina pilot excitedly radioed the uncoded message, “*Many planes heading Midway, bearing 320, distance 150.*” Within minutes, two of the Japanese carriers were sighted, and by 6:00 am virtually all of Midway’s planes were airborne and on combat patrol. Just after 6:15 am more than two dozen Marine fighters—a mixture of Brewster F2A Buffaloes and Grumman F4F Wildcats—sighted and engaged the first wave of Japanese planes about 30 miles (48 km) from Midway. Formations of Japanese Aichi D3A “Val” dive-bombers and Nakajima B5N “Kate” torpedo bombers were escorted by squadrons of

Mitsubishi A6M “Zero” fighters. The American pilots were outnumbered roughly 4-to-1. Moreover, the Zero was demonstrably superior to both the Buffalo and the Wildcat. Despite the mismatch, the Marines lightly bloodied the attackers but paid an enormous cost, losing more than half their number in the process.

About 6:30 am, with the island’s fighter screen largely neutralized, the aerial bombardment of Midway began. The Japanese attack lasted about half an hour and caused extensive damage to structures on both Eastern and Sand islands. Midway’s runways were largely unharmed, however, possibly because the Japanese were planning to use them themselves once the invasion had been completed. Between the aerial engagement and Midway’s anti-aircraft defenses, the Japanese lost fewer than 10 planes in their attack on the island.

Midway attacks and Nagumo’s decision

While Midway was absorbing the full force of the Japanese assault, land-based planes from Midway were converging on the Japanese fleet. Just after 7:00 am a quartet of U.S. Army Air Forces Martin B-26 Marauders began a torpedo attack run on the Akagi, Nagumo’s flagship. They were closely followed by six U.S. Navy Grumman TBF Avenger torpedo bombers. Most of the American planes were shot down in the attempt, and none scored hits, a fact that owed much to the dismal performance of U.S. Mark 13 torpedoes. The Imperial Japanese Navy, conversely, fielded aerial and surface torpedoes of outstanding quality, and the Japanese would retain the technological advantage in this area until the end of the war.

About this time Nagumo made a fateful decision. Midway’s aircraft were obviously still active, and an after-action report from the Hiryu’s air commander, Lieut. Joichi Tomonaga, indicated that a second attack on Midway would be necessary to suitably pacify the island ahead of the planned amphibious assault. In addition, Nagumo’s scout planes had detected no trace of an American naval presence nearby. This was hardly the fault of the pilots, as the search area was an expanse of ocean larger than the entire United Kingdom and visibility was sharply reduced by cloud cover in some areas. At 7:15 am, believing that he retained the element of surprise and that the American fleet was no closer than Hawaii, Nagumo ordered that the fueled and ready planes on the Kaga and the Akagi were to have their torpedoes replaced with bombs. The situation changed abruptly at 7:28 am, when one of Nagumo’s scouts reported sighting “10 enemy surface ships” but gave no indication of the makeup of this force. Now, faced with the possibility of American carriers in the area, Nagumo brought the rearming effort to halt. At 7:45 am he ordered those planes which had not yet had their torpedoes replaced to prepare for an attack on American naval units. The flight and hangar decks of the Japanese carriers were now covered with fueled and armed aircraft as well as unsecured ordnance.

Nearly an hour after the initial American strike at the Japanese carrier force, a second wave of Midway-based planes launched their attack. At 7:55 am a squadron of 16 U.S. Marine Corps Douglas SBD Dauntless dive-bombers targeted the Soryu, scoring no hits and losing half their number to anti-aircraft fire and Japanese fighters. Roughly 15 minutes later U.S. Army Air Forces B-17s carried out a high-level bombing of the carrier force to little effect but suffered no losses themselves. At approximately 8:20 am the last of Midway’s planes, a squadron of 11 U.S. Marine Corps Vought SB2U Vindicator dive-bombers, targeted the Japanese battleship Haruna. Most of these planes were intercepted by the Japanese fighter screen, however, and the bombing runs that they did manage to carry out were not on target. Until this moment, the Battle of Midway was an unqualified Japanese victory.

As the Vindicators were being chased away, Nagumo finally received confirmation that the American naval force did, indeed, include a carrier. This news could not have come at a worse time. The planes from the attack on Midway were returning and low on fuel, and the fighters of Nagumo’s combat air patrol were also in need of refueling and rearmament. If he chose to launch his ready aircraft for an attack on the imminent threat, he risked losing scores of skilled aviators as their planes splashed into the Pacific. Nagumo had also spent the previous 90 minutes demonstrating the futility of attempting uncoordinated attacks on a well-defended carrier battle group without fighter escort. Rather than risk the same outcome, Nagumo made a decision that would determine the course of the Pacific War. He would clear his flight decks and recover his planes before launching a concerted attack on the American fleet.

Attack by the American carriers

The American carriers were divided into two groups: Task Force 16, which included the Enterprise and the Hornet, under Halsey’s replacement, Rear Adm. Raymond Spruance, and Task Force 17, which included the Yorktown, under Rear Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher. Due to his seniority in rank, Fletcher would have overall

tactical command, but he granted Spruance significant operational latitude. This was fortunate, as Spruance was arguably the finest American naval commander of the war.

The flight of the Devastators



As the attack on Midway was unfolding, Fletcher and Spruance were monitoring signals traffic in an effort to determine the strength and position of the Japanese fleet. Just after 6:00 am, Midway radioed that two carriers had been sighted, and the American admirals acted immediately. Spruance's Task Force 16 was about 10 miles (16 km) southwest of Fletcher and Task Force 17, placing it closer to the Japanese fleet. Fletcher ordered Spruance to sail southwest and engage the enemy. Fletcher, who had scouts in the air, would recover his planes and hold the Yorktown in reserve against the threat of additional Japanese carriers. Hoping to catch the Japanese carriers before they could prepare a second attack on Midway, Spruance gambled by launching his planes at 7:00 am from a distance that all but guaranteed that many of his aircraft would not have enough fuel to return.

While the American carrier planes were attempting to close on the Japanese fleet, they were given no additional guidance on its whereabouts. The lack of communication between Midway and the carriers and between the carriers and their own planes would mean that the American strike force would arrive piecemeal if it arrived at all. Dozens of planes were forced to return to the Hornet, land at Midway, or ditch at sea without ever having located the Japanese. At 8:38 am, having recovered his scouts and believing that his fleet had been discovered by the Japanese, Fletcher began launching planes from the Yorktown.

About 9:20 am, 15 Douglas TBD Devastator torpedo bombers from the Hornet became the first American carrier planes to strike at the Japanese. The attack of Torpedo Squadron 8 on the Soryu was an unmitigated disaster. Every one of the Devastators was shot down, and the squadron's sole survivor, pilot Ensign George Gay, would spend the next 30 hours floating in the Pacific as the battle raged around him. At 10:20 am torpedo squadrons from the Enterprise and Yorktown struck with similar results. Of the 41 Devastators launched at Midway, only six made it back to their carriers, and not a single one carried out a successful torpedo attack.

The Dauntlesses turn the tide



The Yorktown's Devastators were unique in that they were the only torpedo squadron to enter the battle with a fighter escort. A half-dozen Grumman F4F Wildcats from the Yorktown accompanied the slow-moving Devastators, and the Japanese combat air patrol responded immediately. They dropped down to near sea level to intercept the American fighters, unwittingly clearing the way for a new threat.

Low on fuel and lacking any additional information about the whereabouts of the Japanese fleet, Lieut. Comdr. Wade McClusky was scanning the Pacific for any trace of the enemy. The Enterprise's air group commander had arrived at the estimated point of interception at 9:20 am, but Nagumo had changed course while they were en route. McClusky then made what Nimitz would later characterize as "one of the most important decisions of the battle." Rather than returning to the Enterprise with his squadron of Douglas SBD Dauntless dive-bombers, McClusky continued his search to the northwest, eventually spotting the Japanese destroyer Arashi as it hastened to catch up with the rest of the fleet. The Dauntlesses spotted the Kaga and the Akagi about 10:00 am and moved into attack position.

Diving out of the sun, the Enterprise's Dauntlesses struck at 10:22 am just as the torpedo attack was concluding, and quickly scored multiple devastating bomb hits on both the Kaga and the Akagi. Almost simultaneously, 17 Dauntlesses that had accompanied the Yorktown torpedo attack group dove on the Soryu. Within minutes the three Japanese carriers were in flames, and the momentum in the Pacific had shifted. Although the dive-bombers did not emerge unscathed—the Enterprise lost more than a dozen Dauntlesses—they had inflicted enormous damage on the Kidō Butai. As fires raged out of control, Nagumo was forced to abandon the Akagi, and he transferred his flag to the light cruiser Nagara.

The Hiryu strikes back

About 10:50 am, as the other three Japanese carriers burned, Rear Adm. Tamon Yamaguchi, commander of the battle group which included the Soryu and the Hiryu, ordered a hastily assembled attack force into the air. For the next half hour, until Nagumo had reestablished his flagship, Yamaguchi would serve as the effective commander of what remained of the Japanese fleet. The Hiryu's planes followed the American strike force back to the Yorktown, and, just after noon, they carried out a dive-bombing attack that left the American carrier dead in the water. Although the American fighter screen and anti-aircraft defenses had exacted a punishing toll on the Japanese, three bomb hits had seriously—but not fatally—damaged the Yorktown. While repair teams worked to patch the flight deck and restore operation to the ship's boilers, Fletcher transferred his flag to the cruiser Astoria.

An hour of frenzied work brought most of the Yorktown's boilers back online, and by 2:30 pm the ship was underway. Within minutes, however, a second wave of planes from the Hiryu pounced on the carrier. A pair of torpedo hits brought the Yorktown to a stop for a second time, and the ship began to list dangerously. At 2:55 pm the Yorktown's captain, Capt. Elliott Buckmaster, gave the order to abandon ship.

Spruance in command

By this time, however, American scouts had located the Hiryu, and a mixed force of Dauntlesses from the Enterprise and the Yorktown took to the skies at 3:30 pm. They were soon joined by additional dive-bombers from the Hornet. The American bombers would travel without escort, as all available fighters were tasked with maintaining a combat air patrol over the fleet. Just before 4:00 pm Fletcher, recognizing that Task Force 17 had ceased to be a functional carrier battle group and not wishing to waste precious time by transferring his flag to the Enterprise, turned over operational control of the fleet to Spruance.

The first wave of American bombers descended on the Hiryu about 5:00 pm and quickly reduced the Japanese carrier to a flaming wreck. At least four American bombs struck the Hiryu, and the Hornet's Dauntlesses, arriving a half hour later, turned their attention to other ships in the Hiryu's battle group. This attack caused no significant damage to the remaining Japanese ships nor did a subsequent high-altitude strike by B-17s from Midway and Hawaii.

After recovering his planes, Spruance opted to sail Task Force 16 east, away from the day's action, rather than west in pursuit of the remnants of the Kidō Butai. History would prove this to be an exceptionally prudent course, as the Japanese navy excelled at night engagements, and their surface fleet, even accounting for the loss of four carriers, remained a significant threat. Retiring to the east also kept the American ships within range of Midway's land-based aircraft. The destroyer Hughes from Task Force 17 was tasked with guarding the crippled Yorktown overnight. That evening the Kaga and the Soryu both sank.

June 5–6

On June 5 the Yorktown was taken under tow and a salvage operation was begun. The Akagi and the Hiryu, both of which had managed to remain afloat through the night, were scuttled. Yamaguchi opted to go down with his flagship, and he was accompanied by the Hiryu's captain, Rear Adm. Tomeo Kaku. While such a decision was entirely in keeping with the Japanese honour code (Bushidō) it deprived the Japanese navy of a highly esteemed flag officer as well as one of its most senior naval aviators.

On the afternoon of June 5 Spruance dispatched nearly 60 bombers in an attempt to catch the retiring Japanese surface force, but the Americans succeeded in locating just one ship, the destroyer Tanikaze. The Tanikaze had been tasked with ensuring that the Hiryu actually sunk, and despite being the target of multiple attacks, it managed to escape largely unscathed and rejoin the Japanese fleet. Spruance renewed the pursuit the following day, and Dauntlesses from the Hornet and the Enterprise found a group of stragglers from the main Japanese fleet. With no fighter escort to protect them, the Japanese ships were easy prey for the dive-bombers. The cruiser Mikuma was sunk, and the cruiser Mogami as well as the destroyers Asashio and Arashio were seriously damaged.

Meanwhile, repair crews were working feverishly to save the Yorktown. The destroyer Hammann had tied up to the carrier early on the morning of June 6, and other ships joined a growing protective ring. Scores of

men worked throughout the day to fight fires and bring flooding under control, and good progress was being made when, at 1:35 pm, lookouts spotted the wakes of incoming torpedoes. The Japanese submarine I-168 had approached the salvage operation undetected, and explosions soon rocked both the Hammann and the Yorktown. Almost immediately the order was given to abandon the Hammann, which sank within minutes. Some of the remaining destroyers launched a depth charges attack against the I-168, but the submarine escaped. The Yorktown, for all the damage it had sustained, somehow remained afloat but listing, and the salvage crew had hoped to resume work the following day. However, in the early morning hours of June 7, the Yorktown's list increased, and about 5:00 am the carrier slipped beneath the waves "with all her battle flags flying."

Casualties and significance

The material losses suffered by Japan at Midway were catastrophic. Four carriers, a heavy cruiser, and more than 320 planes were sent to the bottom of the Pacific. Approximately 3,000 Japanese sailors and airmen were killed, and, because the Japanese fleet left the action area in relative haste, there was little opportunity to recover survivors who might have gone into the water. The victory cost the United States one carrier and a destroyer, as well as nearly 150 aircraft—more than two-thirds of which were carrier-based. American personnel losses were relatively light; 317 sailors, airmen, and Marines from the Midway garrison were killed.

In the days following the engagement, U.S. Navy patrols in the area around Midway recovered several survivors, including nearly three dozen crewmen from the engineering department of the Hiryu. Interrogation of these prisoners of war would provide the Americans with vital intelligence about Japanese naval capabilities. On June 21, more than two weeks after the battle, an American Catalina flying boat spotted the two-man crew of one of the Enterprise's Devastators some 360 miles (roughly 580 km) north of Midway. They would be the last survivors of Midway to be recovered from the Pacific.

The official U.S. Navy combat narrative of the battle characterized Midway as "a victory of intelligence," and this was certainly the case. From the breaking of the Japanese JN25 naval code to the execution of a clever scheme to confirm that Midway was to be the target of the Japanese attack, American cryptanalysts played an outsize role at Midway. Intelligence alone did not win the battle, however. Both Fletcher and Spruance employed sound carrier tactics, and Fletcher's decision to cede operational control to Spruance late on June 4 ensured that the American command structure would not be disrupted at a key point of the battle.

The Battle of Midway brought the Pacific naval forces of Japan and the United States to approximate parity and marked a turning point of the military struggle between the two countries. It was also the most decisive naval defeat suffered by Japan since 1592, when Korean admiral Yi Sun-shin destroyed Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion fleet. For the Allies it was a great strategic victory: the Japanese were prompted to cancel their plans to invade New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa and lost all but the last vestiges of their earlier strategic initiative.

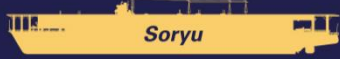
SOURCE: Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Midway>



JAPANESE CASUALTIES

4 heavy aircraft carriers and 1 cruiser

SHIPS



UNITED STATES CASUALTIES

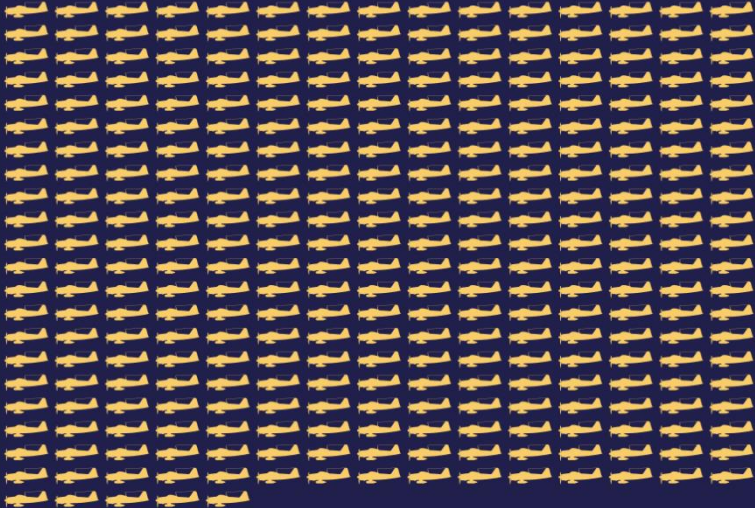
1 heavy aircraft carrier and 1 destroyer



320 planes

AIRCRAFT

150 planes



~ 3,000 sailors and airmen killed

CASUALTIES

= 10

317 sailors, airmen, and marines killed

