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The Battle of Midway

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THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

The Battle of Midway was probably the most strategically significant sea-air battle of the Second World War Pacific campaign and was the first large-scale carrier-versus-carrier battle in history. Indeed, it has come to be regarded by many as the classic aircraft carrier battle of all time and holds many lessons for students of air power, sea power, command and leadership. Fought in the first week of June 1942, just six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway changed the strategic situation in the Pacific and inflicted crippling losses on the Imperial Japanese Navy. Instead of consolidating their early gains by creating a strong foothold in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, the Japanese attempted to extend their defensive perimeter further to the east. The small, fortified island of Midway had to be seized to provide a strategic base in the Central Pacific from where the Japanese could then threaten the Hawaiian Islands and mainland USA itself. The Battle of Midway was a major turning point in the war in that it halted the hitherto unrelenting Japanese advance that had started in December 1941 and gave the USA the time it needed to rebuild its naval capability in the Pacific.

Monographs

The official history of the United States Navy in the Second World War by **MORISON** runs into 15 volumes and Volume 4 is devoted, in part, to the action at Midway (chapters 6-8). Like so many histories of the Battle of Midway, this volume also includes an account of the Battle of the Coral Sea that took place one month earlier and which set the scene for the air and sea action off Midway. Many of the later histories appear to be based on Morison's work, although in doing so they may have omitted later research on the subject. The US Marine Corps played a major part in the air defence of Midway Island and in the air attacks on the Japanese fleet and the volume by **HOUGH/LUDWIG/SHAW** gives the official Marine Corps version of the battle.

One of the best official accounts of the Battle of Midway is the British **ADMIRALTY's** *Battle Summary No.46*. This detailed account and analysis of the events is condensed from various classified US Navy reports produced during and shortly after the war. This concise volume includes two very detailed plans showing the progress of the battle, together with a detailed order of battle and chronology of events taken from the original signals of the Japanese and American fleets.

Aside from these three official histories, there are many other accounts of the Battle of Midway including several detailed and comprehensive monographs on the subject. **LORD's** *Incredible Victory* and **TULEJA's** *Climax at Midway* are among the earliest accounts but are rather journalistic with little serious analysis although *Incredible Victory* is useful for its attention to the personalities involved. More recent and more objective histories of the battle are those by **SMITH, GREENE,** and **PRANGE**. Smith's *The Battle of Midway* is a useful and very readable account. Greene's *The Midway Campaign* is perhaps more erudite but most of the book is taken up by an account of the war in the Pacific up to Midway and only 34 pages are actually devoted to the battle itself. Prange's *Miracle at Midway* uses first hand accounts to add colour to the bare facts of the events. **HEALY's** *Midway 1942* is a slim, well-illustrated but useful volume on the subject. The recent addition by **BICHENO** is one of the better works on the subject and has some very useful appendices and maps. A Naval War College student paper by **LOGAN** uses the Battle of Midway in a study of network-centric warfare by analysing aspects of command and control.

From the Japanese perspective there are several books worthy of study to gain an insight into the Imperial Japanese Navy and its air arm. **FUCHIDA/OKUMIYA** (both of whom were personally involved) give a fascinating account of the battle, not so much of the events themselves but of the Japanese plans and strategy behind them. This book is one of the most valuable works on the subject and, although not actually an official account, it complements Morison's US official history nicely. A synopsis of their history of Midway can be found in Chapter 4 of **O'CONNOR**. Originally written in the early 1950s Fuchida and Okumiya's book has recently been complemented by a very thorough and

incisive account by the American authors **PARSHALL/TULLY**. This book will probably be the standard work on Midway, at least from the Japanese perspective, for some time to come. The excellent history by **DULL** includes a major section on the Coral Sea and Midway, while the less comprehensive and less academic works by **D'ALBAS** and **ITO** are also worth attention. Ito's book is particularly useful in that it is one of the few published accounts from a Japanese source. The development of Japanese naval air power is the subject of a superb book by **PEATTIE**. The author investigates all aspects of Japanese naval aviation using a wealth of evidence from Japanese and American sources and draws many useful conclusions, some of which challenge traditionally held views.

To put the Battle of Midway into its strategic perspective, the works by **LEVINE, PULESTON** and **WILLMOTT** are particularly useful. These three books provide analytical accounts that concentrate on the strategic aspects of the Pacific War although Willmott also provides enough operational detail to give a complete picture of the battle. The vital part played by intelligence in the planning for the Battle of Midway is well documented in **LEVITE** whose main theme is the role of intelligence information and threat analysis in achieving or negating strategic surprise in warfare, using Pearl Harbor and Midway as contrasting examples. Chapter 6 of **KEEGAN** also offers a less substantial account of the contribution of intelligence to the outcome of the battle.

The importance of the Battle of Midway has ensured that it has featured as a case study or example in many books on historic battles and naval campaigns. Concise descriptions of the events at Midway can be found in the books by **BENNETT, BROWN, HOUGH** (*Naval Battles of the Twentieth Century* and *The Longest Battle*), **PEARCE, PERRETT, POTTER/NIMITZ** and **SYMONDS**. The accounts vary in detail and approach, and in length (from 10 to 25 pages) but they all provide a good introduction to the subject before tackling the more comprehensive works.

There are several books on the US Navy and carrier aviation that contain useful information on the air battle at Midway. The story of the US Navy fighter squadrons at Midway is told in great detail by **LUNDSTROM** (*The First Team*) while three works concentrate on the contribution of individual aircraft carriers: **ROSE** covers the USS *Hornet*; **STAFFORD** the USS *Enterprise*; and **LUDLUM** the USS *Yorktown*. A general account of the battle is combined with the story of the 1998 undersea search for the wreck of the USS *Yorktown* by **BALLARD**. Several Marine Corps squadrons defended the island of Midway and took part in the attack on the Japanese carriers and their story is told by **SHERROD**. The **UNITED STATES STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY** report on Midway offers an interesting insight into the air assault by providing plans of bomb and torpedo hits on the Japanese warships. The evolution of the dive-bomber in US Navy doctrine and operations is explained most comprehensively in **WILDENBERG**. The US Navy placed great emphasis on the dive-bomber as an anti-ship weapon and its development during the 1930s culminated in its outstanding success at Midway. A more general work on air attack of surface vessels during the Second World War can be found in **HAMER**, who devotes a chapter to the Battle of Midway. **WINNEFELD/JOHNSON** use Midway as one of their case studies in their excellent work on the command and control of joint air operations. This book looks particularly at the unity of command and the joint planning aspects of the Midway operation. The tragic losses and the failure of the US Navy's torpedo squadrons is the focus of the book by **KERNAN**.

Biographical information can be found on most of the US and Japanese high commanders involved in the Battle of Midway with the notable exception of the Japanese on-scene commander, Admiral Nagumo. From the American side, there are biographies available of four of the main characters. Nimitz (CINCPAC) is analysed by **POTTER** (*Nimitz*), Fletcher (the overall Midway force commander) by **LUNDSTROM** (*Black Shoe Carrier Admiral*), Spruance (Commander of Task Force 16) by **BUELL** and **FORRESTEL**, and Mitscher (Captain of the USS *Hornet*) by **COLETTA** and **TAYLOR**. Of the Japanese commanders, only Yamamoto is dealt with by in-depth biographies. **AGAWA, HOYT** and **POTTER** (*Admiral of the Pacific*) provide interesting and contrasting portraits of the Japanese strategist.

In addition to these individual biographies, there are several works that include information on some of the Midway personalities as part of collective biographical studies. Nimitz, Spruance and Yamamoto feature in **CARVER's** excellent study of military commanders. **HOWARTH's** mammoth volume on naval leaders includes Mitscher, Nagumo, Nimitz, Spruance and Yamamoto, while the last two commanders are also featured in **SWEETMAN**. Spruance and his role at Midway is studied in **ANDIDORA** while Nimitz receives attention in **WARNER's** book.

Periodical Articles

There are several useful periodical articles available relating to the Battle of Midway. Some are merely concise accounts of the battle while others deal with specific aspects such as leadership or intelligence operations. The general histories range from the 2-page synopsis by **SWEETMAN** to the very detailed analysis by **ISOM**, who attempts to explain the reasons for the Japanese failure at Midway. Two other general accounts of reasonable standard are those by **POWERS** (US Naval Institute Proceedings 1967) and **SEAL**. In a thought-provoking article, **TOYAMA** claims that Japan's failure at Midway and elsewhere in the Pacific stemmed from the misreading of the strategic naval experience of the First World War. **TILL** offers an interesting reassessment of the importance of Midway and suggest that the battle was indeed decisive but only as part of a wider Pacific campaign that started in the Coral Sea and ended at Guadalcanal. **GAILLARD** highlights the role of luck or the coincidence of random events that enabled the US forces to defeat the numerically and technically superior Japanese.

Several authors concentrate on the command and leadership aspects of the battle. **POTTER** (*Admiral Nimitz*) tells of Nimitz's part in the plans for the battle, while **BUTCHER** and **LUNDSTROM** attempt to defend Fletcher, who has suffered much criticism in the past. **BURKE**, himself a highly-regarded Chief of Naval Operations, presents a very favourable potted biography of Mitscher. Finally, **RUBEL** provides an interesting article that contrasts the battles of Gettysburg and Midway in terms of operational command and leadership. **WILDENBERG** concentrates on the role of US naval doctrine in preparing the path for victory at Midway while **RUSSELL** focuses on the attempts by the USS *Hornet's* Air Group to find the Japanese carriers and concludes that the official report on the debacle is in error. Douglas **SMITH** analyses the impact of inter-war military education on the command and leadership performance of several US Navy commanders during the major carrier battles of World War Two.

First-hand accounts by the men involved at Midway not only bring the battle to life but can also reveal useful information on the operational and command aspects of the battle. **LINDER** uses the correspondence of Commander Ring, the USS *Hornet's* CAG to illustrate problems encountered by some of the American airmen, while **FERRIER** tells the story of the handful of TBF Avengers that took part in the unsuccessful torpedo attack on the Japanese ships. A remarkable account by **TANABE** (Captain of the submarine I-168) tells how he sank the USS *Yorktown* as it limped away from Midway. More personal stories can be found via the Internet (see below).

As intelligence played such a crucial part in the outcome at Midway, specifically the breaking of the Japanese code JN-25 which enabled the Americans to predict enemy movements to a certain extent, a number of authors concentrate on this particular aspect. **ROCHEFORT** was the man credited with the intelligence success at Midway and he provides a fascinating first-hand account of how cryptography and signals analysis aided the Americans. **Y'BLOOD** also emphasizes the contribution of code-breaking and intelligence to the American success at Midway, while **LeCOMPTE** looks at the role of radar in the battle. The issue of information management in combat is discussed briefly in an article by **NAGY** who uses the battles of Midway and the Philippines Sea as examples of what is now called network-centric warfare. The slaughter of the American torpedo-bomber squadrons, dealt with in more detail in Kernan's book *The Unknown Battle of Midway*, is featured in a concise article by **POWERS** (Aviation History 2003).

Websites

There are many Internet websites that provide information about the Battle of Midway, some devoted solely to the subject. As with most historical battles or campaigns, Internet websites rarely offer anything new in the way of information or insight into the battle, but they do present the information in an attractive and easily accessible fashion and the images can be useful for presentations. The **DUDLEY KNOX LIBRARY** of the US Naval Postgraduate School has a superb bibliography that lists hundreds of items (books, periodical articles and other websites) relating to the Battle of Midway. Among the better privately-sponsored Internet sites that focus on Midway are **LANZENDORFER's Stopping the Tide**, the **WISEMAN** website and **THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY ROUNDTABLE**, all of which include useful information and images on the battle. An immense amount of information on all aspects of Japanese naval operations can be found at the **IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY PAGE** which includes information and images relevant to Midway. There are many websites dealing specifically with individual personalities, ships, aircraft, documents and units relevant to the Battle of Midway. Many of these can be found via the Dudley Knox Library Bibliography or The Battle of Midway Roundtable websites.

*Compiled by Chris Hobson
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