

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DUE DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Guide for:

**“The Battle of Midway: The Turning Point” by Ben Bradlee**

**CQ#2: How did the United States and her allies win WWII?**

**Instructions:** Closely read “The Battle of Midway: The Turning Point” by Ben Bradless. Highlight the text as appropriate. Make marginal notations next to passages that are relevant to the following prompts. Provide thoughtful written responses to those prompts.

- (1) What was the status of the war in the spring of 1942?
- (2) What disadvantages did the US face in the coming Japanese attack?
- (3) Why did the US win this battle? (This is the key question. A more in depth response is expected.)
- (4) What is the significance of this battle in the larger war?
- (5) How does this article help you answer content question 2?



THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

# The Turning Point

by Ben Bradlee

BARELY FOUR MONTHS after the devastation that was Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were riding high. Their biggest naval loss had been a single destroyer.

But the Japanese high command was split between the army generals, who wanted to consolidate and develop their new land acquisitions, and the navy, under the powerful Admiral Yamamoto, who wanted to lure what was left of the U.S. Navy into battle and destroy it forever.

Yamamoto won. On April 16, the ambitious order to invade Midway Island and the Aleutians was given. Two days later all opposition to Yamamoto's plan disappeared with the brave but symbolic daylight raid on Tokyo, led by Colonel Jimmy Doolittle flying twenty-six B-25 bombers from the carrier *Hornet*.

U.S. forces were greatly outnumbered—all but fatally outnumbered had it not been for the skills of one William Friedman and a team of U.S. cryptanalysts who had managed to break the Japanese "Purple Code." But OP-20-G,

the Navy Signals intelligence operation at Pearl Harbor, could decode only about 15 percent of Japanese Navy traffic by early 1942. The Purple Code consisted of some 45,000 five-digit numbers, further enciphered by a changing additive table. To

break the code, the cryptanalysts first had to identify and remove the additives, then painstakingly try to make some sense of the thousands of number groups. In addition to all that, the Japanese had a separate code for times and dates.

The commander-in-chief of the Pacific fleet,

Admiral Chester Nimitz, knew the Japanese were going to invade Port Moresby on May 3, and had assembled a carrier task force to look for trouble in the Coral Sea off New Guinea. They found it.

The day was May 7, 1942, the day after the surrender of American forces under General Wainwright in the Philippines.

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*Navy torpedo bombers, opposite, look for a target during the Battle of Midway in June 1942. One of World War II's decisive battles was fought here between June 4 and 7. Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Doolittle, below, here checking a bomb on the deck of the USS Hornet, led a symbolic bombing raid on Tokyo that took the Japanese by surprise.*

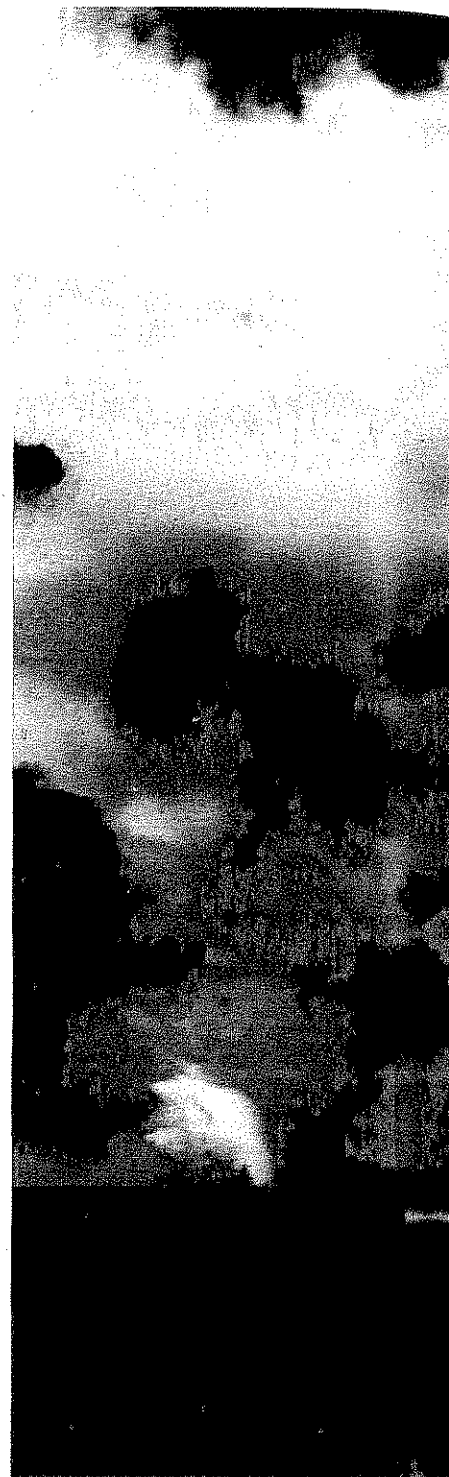


Smoke blossoms from the U.S. aircraft carrier Yorktown as it suffers a direct hit by a Japanese torpedo, right. Black clouds of anti-aircraft fire fill the sky. Damaged at the earlier Battle of Coral Sea, the Yorktown nonetheless was ready for duty after two days in dry dock.

The Battle of Coral Sea began with the loss of an American destroyer and the fleet oiler it was escorting. But at 10 A.M. ninety-three planes from the *Lexington* and the *Yorktown* jumped the Japanese light carrier *Shoho*, which sank in thirty-six minutes; it was the first Japanese ship bigger than a destroyer to disappear under the water. The next day, the Americans lost the *Lexington*, but without losing a single sailor, and the Battle of Coral Sea was over. It was a tactical victory for the Japanese because they sank another American carrier, but a strategic victory for the United States, because for the first time in the war, a Japanese invasion (of Port Moresby) had been called off. It was the first naval battle fought between carriers, and the first naval battle fought between ships that never saw, nor fired shots at, each other.

The scene was now set for the critical sea battle of World War II, the Battle of Midway.

On one side was the greatest sea force ever assembled—more than two hundred Japanese combat ships, including eight carriers, eleven battleships, twenty-two cruisers, sixty-five destroyers, twenty-one submarines, and more than seven hundred planes. The fearsome Admiral Yamamoto was in command. The size is no easier to grasp today than it was on June 3, 1942. This armada was divided into three groups: a four-carrier strike force approaching from the northwest; an invasion/occupation force approaching from the west; and a main battle force of the battleships between the other two.



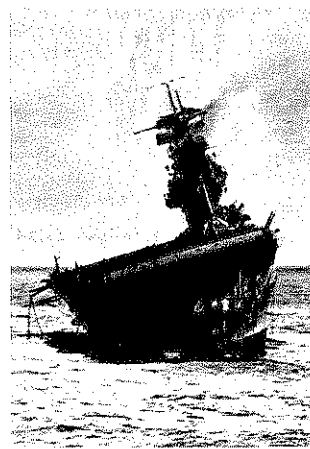


On the other side, Admiral Nimitz had only three carriers, eight cruisers, and fifteen destroyers. One of the carriers, the *Yorktown*, had been so badly damaged at Coral Sea that experts said it would take three months to repair her, but 1,400 repairmen managed to patch it up in a Pearl Harbor dry dock in two days. Nimitz split this force into two groups—one commanded by Admiral Fletcher, the other by Admiral Raymond Spruance, a last-minute substitute for Admiral Bull Halsey, who had come down with a severe case of shingles. Many students of the Pacific war consider Spruance to have been its greatest American admiral.

The Americans started with a small problem: despite their ability to read Japanese messages, they didn't know exactly where the Japanese were going to attack. Decoded, the messages described the point of attack as only "AF."

Most of the navy brass thought "AF" was Oahu. Nimitz thought it was Midway. Looking for that vital certainty, the navy sent a fake, uncoded message that described a breakdown in Midway's desalination plant. And sure enough, two days later the navy cryptanalysts intercepted and decoded a Japanese message, reporting that "AF" was low on fresh water.

Bingo. Problem solved. Yet even after tricking the Japanese into confirming Midway as the target of the massive attack, the exact date was unknown until almost the last minute. On May 25, the navy's top



*Fatally wounded, the Yorktown lists steeply to port after being struck repeatedly by Japanese dive bombers and torpedoes.*

cryptanalyst, Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, succeeded in decoding the cable that gave June 4 as the day of the enemy attack. (Three days later the Japanese changed their code, leaving Nimitz without further information until after the battle.)

Once that was solved, "the meticulous intelligence on the Japanese movements seemed almost incredible," one of the carrier officers could only say to himself, adding,

"that man of ours in Tokyo is worth every cent we pay him."

How good was the intelligence?

So good that the Americans never fell into the trap set for them by a diversionary attack on June 3 by the Japanese Second Strike Force on Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians with planes from two light carriers—*Ryujo* and *Junyo*.

So good that when the pilot of a navy PBY scout plane spotted what he thought was the Japanese carrier force and messaged Midway "main body . . . bearing 262 [almost due west of Midway], distance 700 [miles] . . ." Nimitz in Pearl Harbor immediately messaged the fleet, ". . . that is not repeat not the enemy striking force. That is the landing force. The striking force will hit from the northwest at daylight tomorrow."

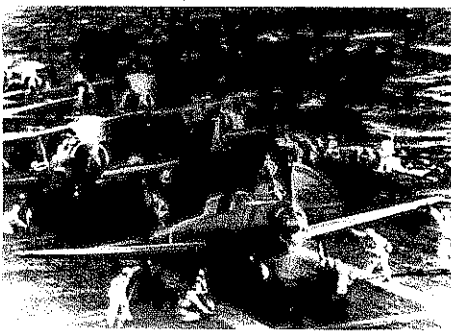
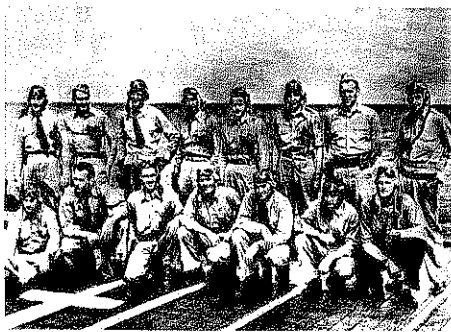
June 4 began badly for the Yanks. Japanese fighter planes (Zeros) could outmaneuver and destroy anything the Americans were flying. Only two of the twenty-five fighters who rose from Midway Airfield to meet the Japanese attacks returned to fly again. At Midway the "poor F-2 Brewster Buffalo fighter was a dismal failure . . . a stationary target for the Zeros . . . never again deployed by U.S. air forces in WW II," according to one official history. B-17s from Midway scored no hits all day on enemy carriers. Same for the lumbering dauntless dive bombers: no hits.

The first U.S. carrier plane attack didn't do much better. The *Hornet's* legendary Torpedo 8 Squadron was led by Lieutenant Commander John Waldron. All of their planes, and all but one of their pilots, were destroyed. Torpedo 6 under Lieutenant Commander Gen Lindsey, was challenged by the same Zeros that hit Torpedo 8. Out of fourteen torpedo planes, only four got close enough to launch their torpedoes. No hits, once again. The *Yorktown's* planes were the last planes airborne. Four of its dive bombers dropped their thousand-pound bombs into the sea—by mistake.

By 10:20 on the morning of June 4 eight U.S. carrier attacks had been turned back without inflicting any damage to the Japanese fleet.

But the U.S. luck was about to change. Big time.

In less than ten minutes time, the tide of the war would turn.



*Foes in the Pacific: Navy bomber pilots, top, pose prior to the Battle of Midway. All but one of this squadron will be killed, perhaps by Zeros like those, bottom, being prepared for launch from the Hiryo for the attack on Pearl Harbor.*

Lieutenant Commander Clarence Wade McCluskey and his squadron of ASBD dive bombers, on an expanding-square search for the Japanese carriers, were close to a decision to return to their ship or run out of fuel. At that moment they spotted the wake of a Japanese destroyer making high speed. And they followed that wake into the heart of the Japanese carrier fleet. Strangest of all, there was no anti-aircraft fire, and no fighter cover. Twenty-five of his dive bombers hurtled straight down at two carriers, taking dead aim before swinging their bombs at the targets from an altitude of 1,500 feet. At the same time, the *Yorktown's* SBDs pounced on a similarly undefended third carrier. Japanese planes on all three carriers were warming up for take off. Gasoline lines snaked across all three decks. Ordnance was stacked everywhere to reload returning planes.

Within minutes, planes were exploding on all three carrier decks. Men and planes were going over the sides, and holes began to appear in the wooden flight decks. According to one historian, "The *Kaga*, the *Akagi*, and the *Soryu*, carriers that only moments before had been the pride and the heart of the Japanese Navy, were doomed."

But there was more bloody battle before night fell. A fourth Japanese carrier, the *Hiryu*, had become separated from the main Japanese force during the U.S. torpedo attacks. Only eighteen dive bombers and six fighters were airworthy, but they took off shortly before the *Soryu*

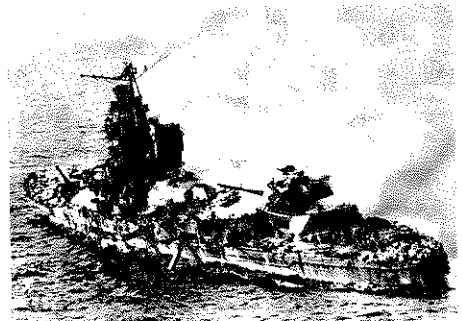
sank. Eight Japanese planes got through the *Yorktown's* defense, scored three direct hits, and reduced her speed to six knots. A second attack from the *Hiryu* scored two more direct torpedo hits, and at 14:55 she was abandoned.

But Admiral Yamaguchi aboard the *Hiryu* had little time to gloat—or even to live. Lieutenant Wilmer Earl Gallaher from the *Enterprise* took off at three in the afternoon, gunning for his second carrier of the day. Gallaher's dive bombers joined up with sixteen planes from the *Hornet*.

Things were quiet aboard the *Hiryu*, not far away. The commanding officer had decided to give his exhausted pilots ninety minutes' rest. That delay was fatal. Shortly

after 5 p.m., the Americans spotted her—unprotected by any air cover. The *Hiryu* dodged the first few attackers, but then three straight direct hits smashed through her flight deck. The damage was so dramatic that other U.S. planes switched to a new target, the battleship *Haruna*.

When the Japanese commanders finally learned the *Hiryu* was sunk, the fate of Operation MI was clear. The invasion of Midway was aborted. The tide of the Pacific war had definitively turned. The Japanese would never again be on the offensive.



Dead in the water, the Japanese heavy cruiser Mikuma is one of many casualties of Midway. The battle represented Japan's last offensive in World War II.