

"Do the Best We Can

By Robert J. Cressman

Japanese planners had cast interested glances at Midway – a place they regarded as "the sentinel for Hawaii" – since before hostilities began with the devastating surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. On December 7, 1941, two destroyers had shelled the atoll to cover Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's retirement westward. The idea of taking Midway, however, generated little urgency until April 18, 1942, when the Halsey-Doolittle Raid, while causing scant material damage, prompted a fateful decision on the part of the enemy's high command. To prevent another such affront to the sacred homeland, and draw out the elusive Pacific Fleet carriers that had operated with virtual impunity against

the Japanese "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere," Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, no longer encountered any opposition to his plan to overpower the "Sentinel." Animated by the confidence that had seen them through successive victories in the Pacific, not even the setback they had been dealt at Coral Sea – where they lost the services of two carriers – could dampen Japanese spirits.

The Japanese, while confident in their own ability to carry out their plans, knew precious little about the American dispositions. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, however, thanks to the ceaseless monitoring of the enemy's naval communications, knew the intent and scope of the Japanese

plans. To deceive the Japanese as to where his carrier strength lay, Nimitz had dispatched TF-16 – under Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., with *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *Hornet* (CV-8) – to the South Pacific in late April. Their very presence in that area led the Japanese into believing that every American carrier then in the Pacific was in the region of the Coral Sea. Overoptimistic Japanese reports of the damage they had inflicted on TF-17 at Coral Sea – that not only "*Saratoga*" (actually *Lexington*) was sunk but *Yorktown* as well (she had only been damaged) – prompted the enemy to think that no American carriers would oppose them at Midway.

Nimitz's visit to Midway on May 2 and 3, 1942, to see the atoll's defenses for himself left him satisfied that,



With What We Have"

with appropriate reinforcement, the atoll would stand a good chance of turning back a Japanese amphibious landing. Nimitz did his best to see that Midway got what it needed to defend itself. Men and materiel, transported by sea and air, strengthened the garrison.

On May 27, 1942 (May 26 at Pearl Harbor), the Japanese carrier striking force sailed from Japanese home waters. A second force, comprising transports and their escorts, carried assault and occupation troops. Enemy submarines fanned out across the sea lanes between Hawaii and Midway to intercept any reinforcements coming by sea, but, deployed too late, they missed the passage of the two task forces that Nimitz deployed to defend Midway.

Principally, the battle in the offing

boiled down to one of carrier strength. To oppose the four Japanese carriers, Adm. Nimitz sent to sea the only three he had: *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, in TF-16 – Halsey having “expedited” their return – and TF-17 with *Yorktown*. *Yorktown* returned to the fray with patched bomb damage and a scratch air group: VF-3 (actually a mix of VF-3 and VF-42 pilots), VB-3 and VT-3, and VB-5 (which became, temporarily, V“S”-5). Only V“S”-5 and some of the pilots in VF-3 (which included the VF-42 veterans of Coral Sea) had seen action. *Enterprise* carried a good percentage of veterans in her VF-6, VB-6, and VT-6, while VS-6 had had a good percentage of new pilots due to the attrition from the early Pacific raids. *Hornet’s* VB-8, VF-8, VS-8, and VT-8 had yet to see combat.

Command of the carrier task forces – since VAdm. Halsey was incapacitated by a painful case of shingles – devolved into the hands of Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, whom Nimitz called an “excellent, seagoing, fighting naval officer” and who had done a “fine job” and exercised “superior judgement” at the helm of TF-17 at Coral Sea. On Halsey’s recommendation, Nimitz replaced Halsey at the helm of TF-16 with Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, a gifted and competent flag officer who had commanded TF-16’s cruisers from the outset of hostilities. Neither Fletcher nor Spruance was an aviator, but both wisely sought the advice and counsel of aviators on their respective staffs.

Vowing “to greet our expected



While a plane guard destroyer (left) and heavy cruiser *Pensacola* (CA-24) steam in the background, sailors onboard *Enterprise* (CV-6) spot Douglas TBD-1 Devastator torpedo bombers – of LCdr. Eugene Lindsey’s VT-6 – for takeoff on the morning of June 4, 1942.

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visitors with the kind of reception they deserve," Nimitz gave Midway "all the strengthening it could take." *Kitty Hawk* (APV-1) brought out Grumman F4F-3s and Douglas SBD-2s, and pilots to fly them, to reinforce the Brewster F2A-3 *Buffaloes* of VMF-221 and SB2U-3 *Vindicators* of VMSB-241, respectively. By June 4, 1942, Navy PBVs, Army B-17s and B-26s, and Navy Grumman TBF-1 *Avengers* from VT-8 crammed the atoll. The PBVs and B-17s drew search duties; the B-26s, TBFs, SB2Us, and SBDs the attack tasks; while the F2As and F4Fs drew the duty of aerial defense. Nimitz promised Admiral Ernest J. King that the Pacific Fleet would "do the best we can with what we have."

The sparring between American and Japanese search planes began in the waning days of May. With each side seeking the others whereabouts, encounters between search planes occurred, PBVs dueling *Betty* bombers from Wake Island. Although the PBVs usually emerged bloodied, the lumbering *Catalinas*, although vulnerable, soon proved their worth. On June 3, a prowling PBV spotted two Japanese minecraft on their way to join the occupation force. B-17s launched from Midway ultimately located the inbound Japanese transport force, but their high-altitude bombing, while surprising the enemy, failed to score any hits. That night, a four-PBV night torpedo at-

Hornet (CV-8), watched by sailors on Ford Island, returns to Pearl Harbor, May 26, 1942, after operating in the South Pacific with TF-16. She would sail for the waters northeast of Midway a few days later.

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tack (three from VP-24 and one from VP-51), the first attempted during the war, holed the oiler *Akebono Maru*. One *Catalina* strafed the transport *Kiyozumi Maru*.

Nagumo had, at that point, 227 operational planes: 73 Mitsubishi A6M2 Type 00 carrier fighters (*Zeros*), 72 Aichi D3A1 Type 99 carrier bombers (*Vals*), 81 Nakajima B5N2 Type 97 carrier attack planes (*Kates*), and one Yokosuka D4Y1 Type 13 special reconnaissance plane (*Judy*). Nagumo planned to launch a strike force of 108 planes – 36 *Zeros*, 36 *Vals*, and 36 *Kates* – approximately half of those he had available to him. Nagumo's intelligence sources pinpointed only 30 fighters available to oppose them.

At 0428, 240 miles northwest of Midway, Nagumo's carriers commenced launch. By 0440, the entire striking force had gotten aloft; it took departure at 0445. Mechanical difficulties compelled only one plane, a *Kate* from *Hiryu*, to return. Nagumo retained a second strike group of 36 *Vals* (18 each onboard *Hiryu* and *Soryu*); 36 *Kates* (18 each in *Kaga* and *Akagi*); and 25 *Zeros* (seven in *Kaga* and six on each of the others). This was in case his search planes – put aloft from the heavy cruisers *Tone* and *Chikuma* and the battleship *Haruna* after his strike force had set out on its mission so that presence of Japanese scouts would not tip Nagumo's hand – spotted an American task force. Delays onboard the cruisers, however, prevented the timely deployment of the admiral's airborne "eyes." Nagumo detached a cruiser division to bombard Midway.



Ens. George H. Goldsmith, USNR, brings his SBD-3 (coded B 15), damaged in the attack on Kaga, onboard Yorktown on June 4. The SBDs from Yorktown and Enterprise inflicted the damage that resulted in the loss of all four Japanese flattops at Midway.

NH 100740



A screening destroyer off her starboard bow, Yorktown (CV-5) is under attack by Type 97 carrier attack planes (*Kates*) from *Hiryu* on the afternoon of June 4, 1942. This picture, taken by photographer William Smistik onboard heavy cruiser Pensacola (CA-24), shows bursts of anti-aircraft fire in the foreground, as well as two *Kates*.

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As heavy cruiser Northampton (CA-26) steams off her starboard bow, Enterprise (CV-6) launches a Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat of VF-6 on the morning of June 4, 1942. No TBDs are spotted on her flight deck, aft, since VB-6's SBDs, carrying 1,000-pound bombs, require a long deck run in the prevailing light wind conditions.

80-G-32224

As the Japanese bore down upon it, NAS Midway had stirred in the predawn hours. Marine F2As had covered the launch of the PBYS and B-17s and then landed, as the island stood down, planes with radios energized and engines warm. Soon thereafter, however, reports came in from the wide-ranging PBYS. A VP-23 PBY spotted something below through the low cumulus clouds and scattered showers and reported the "main body" of the Japanese fleet, thus putting Midway on the alert. All aircrews manned their planes and stood by with their engines turning over. Another VP-23 PBY, 100 miles northwest by north of the atoll, subsequently spotted over 50 planes heading for the atoll and warned, in plain language, at 0544: "Many planes heading Midway." Those reports ended the suspenseful wait.

While the Marine anti-aircraft batteries received orders to fire upon all planes not identified as friendly, at 0600, the reports of the location of the Japanese carriers, provided by the PBYS and reports of incoming aircraft, prompted Midway to clear the field of all operable aircraft. As the Japanese droned toward them, VMF-221's 20 F2As and four F4Fs scrambled to intercept. Quickly following the fighters came the six TBFs, the four Army torpedo-armed B-26s, and VMSB-241 – 16 Douglas SBDs and 12 Vought SB2Us – each carrying a 500-pound bomb. The two groups of Marine scout bombers, minus one whose cowling blew loose, met at Point "Afirm" 20 miles from the island and set course to attack an enemy carrier 180 miles northwest of Midway.

The Japanese, meanwhile, spotted the atoll about 0615. Three divisions of VMF-221 had been vectored out to intercept, while two others had been told to orbit 10 miles out, in case another group of enemy planes showed up on a different bearing. At the outset, VMF-221 enjoyed an advantage: *Kates* in the lead, with *Vals* behind and above them. The *Zeros* trailed the entire formation. Two divisions of *Buffaloes* and one of *Wildcats* flamed two of the first group of six *Kates* from *Hiryu* and sent away three with heavy damage and trailing smoke. Another formation of Type 97s from *Soryu* suffered three planes hit, one of which failed to reach its carrier. Unfortunately for the Marines, after their initial interception at about 14,000 feet and their first successful pass through the superbly disciplined enemy formations, the overwhelming number of *Zeros* quickly gained the upper hand, while the

Kates and *Vals* bombed their objectives on Eastern and Sand island targets. As a black plume of smoke corkscrewed skyward from burning fuel tanks, only a pitiful few Marine fighters returned to the Eastern Island strip.

While Midway's defenders evaluated the damage and succored the wounded, VAdm. Nagumo, although confronted with conflicting reports about the damage his flyers had inflicted and not knowing whether or not American carriers lurked nearby, ordered (at 0715) his second attack wave to be reequipped with bombs.

Shortly before the Japanese admiral reached that decision, however, part of the strike group scrambled from Midway attacked his carriers. The six TBFs led the way, followed by the four Army B-26s that arrived almost simultaneously. Anti-aircraft fire and fighter opposition downed five of the six TBFs and two of the B-26s.

Another difficulty now confronted Nagumo, and he postponed his planned second strike on Midway when a *Tone* plane informed him of a formation of 10 surface ships (with no details as to types), steaming 240 miles north by east of Midway. At 0739, shortly after his carriers had begun recovery of the morning strike, Nagumo altered course and, at 0745, ordered his carriers to "Prepare to carry out attacks on enemy fleet units. Leave torpedoes on the planes which have not yet been changed to bombs...." Two minutes later, he directed *Tone's* plane to "Ascertain types [of ships] and maintain contact...."

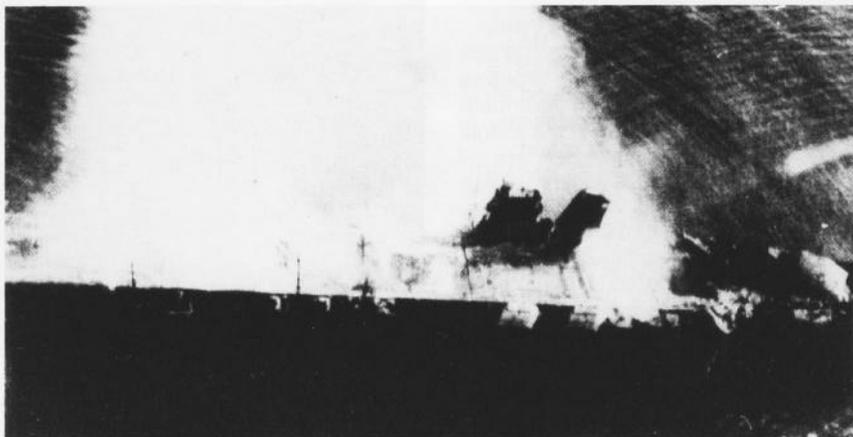
Soon after Nagumo made those dispositions of his force, Major

Henderson and his group, flying at 9,500 feet, sighted the Mobile Force at 0755. *Zeros* shot down six of the Marine SBDs. The remaining planes attacked *Hiryu* but scored only one near miss and inflicted some damage from strafing. Radio gunners in the SBDs splashed one *Zero*.

Soon after the last of the Marine SBDs had cleared the area, Nagumo received the unexpected and disturbing news from *Tone's Jake* (at 0820) that a carrier appeared to be in the American force. Nagumo's ordering his planes rearmed for a strike on surface ships, however, delayed the launch of planes to deal with the threat. In the meantime, ships in the screen dealt with the presence of the submarine *Nautilus* (SS-168), which had crept into the midst of his disposition, while Nagumo's men proceeded to rearm a portion of a strike. Soon afterward, the rest of VMSB-241 attacked the battleship *Haruna* with no success. The Army B-17s, which finally located the Japanese at that juncture, loosed their bomb loads but their targets, the carriers, easily evaded them. While neither the TBFs, B-26s, SBDs, SB2Us, nor B-17s scored any damage, they had seriously disrupted Nagumo's routine.

At 0600, as planes from Midway had been scrambling to get airborne in the path of Tomonaga's incoming strike, Fletcher had ordered Spruance to proceed to the northwest. At 0603, as TF-16 was settling on its new course, Fletcher and Spruance received the unauthenticated report pinpointing two carriers – not the four that intelligence estimates had predicted – and battleships 175 miles to the southwest.

His search planes still aloft, Fletcher



Hiryu, pummeled by bombs from Yorktown's orphaned VB-3, as well as those from planes of *Enterprise*, lies abandoned and burning on the morning of June 5, 1942, as seen from a Japanese plane.

NH 73065

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ordered Spruance to "Proceed southwesterly and attack enemy carriers as soon as definitely located," and informed him: "I will follow as soon as planes recovered." He thus kept TF-17 in reserve while Spruance and his staff decided upon an 0700 launch when the enemy would, by their calculations, be 155 miles to the west southwest of TF-16. Meanwhile, *Yorktown's* dawn search returned empty-handed. Flight operations completed, Fletcher turned TF-17 to follow TF-16, *Yorktown's* squadrons to be held in reserve.

Enterprise and *Hornet* commenced getting planes aloft at 0700. *Hornet* put up 10 fighters to escort 34 SBD-3s: 15 from VS-8; the *Hornet* air group two-plane section; and 17 planes from VB-8. Fifteen TBDs from VT-8 brought up the rear. From *Enterprise* rose the three-plane air group section, 15 SBD-3s of VS-6, and 15 SBDs from VB-6. Mechanical casualties forced four *Dauntlesses* to be struck below. Delays – light wind conditions and the necessity of spotting VT-6's 15 TBDs and the escorting VF-6 F4Fs on deck – prompted Spruance, at 0745, to order his planes to "Proceed on mission assigned." *Enterprise's* air group commander plotted his course to intercept the Japanese to the southwest. The TBDs were to join up en route.

While TF-16 was getting its planes airborne, TF-17 steamed to the southwest at 25 knots. Frank Jack Fletcher, eager to find the other two Japanese carriers believed to be a part of the enemy striking force, waited until the report of a snooper near TF-17, shortly after 0800, changed the complexion of things. Fletcher decided at 0838 to launch 17 SBDs of VB-3, 12 TBDs of VT-3, and six F4Fs of VF-3 to attack the same carriers against which Spruance had sent his planes. He would reserve the 17 SBDs of V"S"-5 for either a search or for a second attack. Although basing their estimate on the two-hour-old contact report, *Yorktown's* strike planners plotted an interception. *Yorktown*, steaming to the southeastward, then drew away from TF-16 as she launched planes.

Hornet's VT-8 located Nagumo first, unaware that their fighter escort had strayed resulting in VF-6's following

VT-8. Ultimately, all 10 of VF-8's F4Fs had to ditch. Undeterred, VT-8 bravely bore in on Nagumo's carriers. Antiaircraft fire and Zeros, however, splashed all 15 *Devastators*. Only one pilot survived – by hiding beneath his seat cushion in the midst of the Japanese Fleet – to tell the tale of what transpired soon thereafter. *Enterprise's* VT-6 came next. Although it did not suffer the losses inflicted by flak and fighters on *Hornet's* ill-fated *Devastators*, it likewise enjoyed no success.

Both VT-8 and VT-6 had, however, drawn down the Japanese combat air patrol. After the slaughter of TF-16's torpedo planes, Nagumo's carriers steamed in disarray, the morning's emergency maneuverings having broken up their disposition. *Hiryu* steamed off to the north, protected by a front, with *Akagi*, *Soryu*, and *Kaga* trailing. At about that juncture, the *Enterprise* air group appeared on the scene, having sniffed out the scent by following the speeding destroyer *Arashi* (which Nagumo had detached to stay behind and deal with the pestiferous *Nautilus*) as she headed for the main body of the Japanese striking force. Almost simultaneously, but in wholly spontaneous fashion, *Yorktown's* strike group arrived.

Both groups attacked as soon as circumstances permitted.

VT-3, from *Yorktown*, brought up the rear of the torpedo attack, but despite the valiant efforts of the six-plane escort, Zeros took their toll of Torpedo Three's men and machines.

In only a few minutes, the SBDs from the two American carriers pummeled three of the once-proud Japanese flattops into blazing and exploding junk. VB-3 – although diminished by some pilots' having inadvertently dropped their bombs en route due to a switch malfunction – knocked *Soryu* out of the fight while VB-6 and VS-6 did the same to *Kaga* and *Akagi*.

Hiryu, however, off to the north, momentarily escaped destruction, to achieve some measure of vengeance. Search planes having pinpointed TF-17's location, a force of *Vals* escorted by Zeros set upon *Yorktown*, scoring three bomb hits despite furious antiaircraft fire and a dogged defense by VF-3 planes that were augmented by those from VFs 8 and 6. Stopped dead in the water, *Yorktown* lay helpless as her screen deployed around her and her returning strike group landed on-board *Enterprise* and *Hornet*.

Spruance detached two heavy cruisers and two destroyers to lend a hand. Fletcher, realizing that he could no longer exercise tactical command, transferred his flag to the cruiser *Astoria* (CA-34) and turned over the reins to Spruance. That afternoon, a search,

Stretcher bearers onboard *Enterprise* carry off AOM2c Clifton R. Bassett of VB-3, who had been wounded in the attack on *Hiryu* on the afternoon of June 4. His pilot, Ens. B. R. "Randy" Cooner, USNR, walks beside the first aid party. 80-G-7746





Lt. William N. Leonard, X.O. of VF-3, takes off in his Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat (BuNo 5244) on the morning of June 4, as photographed by PhoM2c William G. Roy. Later that day, flying this plane (No. 13), Leonard would splash one Kate and damage a second in defending Yorktown against torpedo bombers from Hiryu. 80-G-312016

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launched by *Yorktown* earlier that day, spotted *Hiryu*. A second strike, comprised of planes from *Enterprise* (which included ex-*Yorktown* planes among them) then mortally wounded *Hiryu*, which was abandoned and sank the next morning.

Yorktown's damage control people eventually got her underway in time to be hit by a second Japanese attack – this time by torpedo planes that had been launched from *Hiryu* before the *Enterprise* pilots had found her – that stopped the ship for the second time and forced her abandonment. The screening ships of TF-17 took onboard the carrier's survivors and moved off, with Fletcher leaving one destroyer to guard the crippled flattop. Ultimately, the Japanese submarine *I-68* torpedoed *Yorktown* a second time, on June 6, while a salvage party – gathered on the 5th – labored mightily to get her underway. The gallant lady sank on the morning of June 7.

The cruiser division detached by Nagumo to shell the atoll ran into difficulty. The fleet submarine *Tambor* (SS-198) happened across the division and, in the resultant confusion, the cruisers *Mogami* and *Mikuma* collided. Search planes picked up their trail and subsequent strikes, launched from Midway by VMSB-241 and from *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, eventually sank *Mikuma* and badly damaged *Mogami*. Air strikes from *Hornet* and *Enterprise*

missed damaging the destroyer *Tanikaze*, as did a B-17 strike.

The heavy losses inflicted by the men from *Yorktown*, *Enterprise*, and *Hornet* forced Adm. Yamamoto to abandon his plans for trying to take Midway on June 4. The action on the 6th against the fleeing *Mikuma* and *Mogami* proved to be the last undertaken before RAdm. Spruance broke contact with the Japanese. Over subsequent days, PBVs rendered important service in ranging over the Pacific either aiding or affecting the rescue of survivors from both sides.

Adm. Nimitz and his subordinate commanders, RAdms. Fletcher and Spruance, knew of the enemy's capabilities and intent. Merely knowing what the Japanese planned to do, however, was not enough. The Pacific Fleet's carrier striking force, formed around the only three flattops available at that time, had to prove equal to the task of denying the enemy's carrying out its plans. That task was accomplished with a high loss of men and planes – reminding at least one participant that war was a "grim and terrible business" – but they had achieved a victory. They had written what Adm. Nimitz proudly called "a glorious page in our history." ■

Mr. Cressman is a historian in the Ships' History Branch of the Naval Historical Center.

May 15: The design of the National Star Insignia was revised by eliminating the red disk in the center of the star and the horizontal red and white rudder striping was discontinued.

May 15: The Chief of Naval Operations ordered that an Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air) be established to deal with aviation matters directly under the Vice Chief of Naval Operations and that the Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics fill the new office as additional duty.

May 26: The feasibility of jet-assisted takeoff was demonstrated in a successful flight test of a Brewster F2A-3, piloted by Ltjg. C. Fink Fischer at NAS Anacostia, D.C., using five British anti-aircraft solid propellant rocket motors. The reduction in takeoff distance was 49 percent.

Jun 10: A formal organization, Project Sail, was established at NAS Quonset Point, R.I., for airborne testing and associated work on magnetic airborne detector gear.

Jun 13: Loran, long-range navigation equipment, was given its first airborne test. The receiver was mounted in the K-2 airship and in a flight from NAS Lakehurst, N.J., accurately determined position when the airship was over various identifiable objects.

Jun 16: Congress authorized an increase in the airship strength of the Navy to 200 lighter-than-air craft.

Jun 29: Following an inspection of Igor I. Sikorsky's VS-300 helicopter on June 26, LCdr. R. A. Erickson, USCG, recommended that helicopters be obtained for antisubmarine convoy duty and lifesaving.