



In May 2021, the Navy Office of Legislative Affairs asked NHHC to provide historical support during a Senate Navy Caucus event commemorating the Battle of Midway. The event, which was supported by a display managed by the Communications and Outreach Division, included a speech by acting Undersecretary of the Navy James F. Geurts and was followed by a short brief by Dr. Timothy L. Francis, senior historian, NHHC Histories and Archives Division. His remarks, which were shaped in light of the Energizing American Shipbuilding Act then in committee, focused on the role of shipbuilding in relation to the historic battle.

Good morning Senators, Undersecretary, Admiral. As a naval historian, and senior chief in the Navy Reserve, I'm honored to speak today about the battle of Midway.

The Imperial Japanese Navy that fought at Battle of Midway was a proud force, with a long and storied history. In the many years since its creation, it had fought against larger opponents such as China and Russia and still emerged victorious.

Despite supporting a land war in Asia for most of the 1930s, it remained a formidable fighting force for the attack on Pearl Harbor, with some of the best naval aircraft in the world, veteran pilots, and an operational doctrine honed by years of practice in combat environments. The fleet that sailed into battle in June 1942 was utterly confident of victory. But, by the end of the day, four of its six fleet carriers had been sunk.

In June 1942, the United States was also a rising power, emerging from the lost decade of the Great Depression and rapidly rearming for war. Although often called a status quo power, the U.S. was in the midst of a massive Navy building program designed to protect the Western Hemisphere from any overseas threat. This was enabled by careful spending during the lean years of the 1930s, which kept shipyard capacity in existence for when it was really needed.

The Battle of Midway itself is rightly known as a crucial, dramatic victory for the U.S. Navy, the first outright success after six months of defeat. After Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had swept through Asia and the western Pacific, and had driven British Commonwealth forces back to India and Australia. To secure

their victory, though, Japan needed to defeat the U.S. carrier force and Admiral Yamamoto designed a plan to end to the war by luring the U.S. Navy into a decisive battle at Midway Island.

In the months leading up to the battle, Navy intelligence analysts intercepted Japanese radio communications and, through traffic analysis and codebreaking, were able to predict an attack toward Midway in early June. Admiral Nimitz used this estimate to plan American countermeasures that included positioning all three remaining carriers in the vicinity. But, even knowing this, they still had to win.

On June 4, U.S. search planes found the Japanese carriers first while their strike aircraft were attacking Midway island airfields. Torpedo bombers from the three American carriers attacked quickly, but were nearly wiped out by defending Japanese fighters. A second wave of dive bombers attacked next with more success, fatally damaging carriers *Kaga*, *Soryu* and *Akagi*. *Hiryu*, the one Japanese carrier that escaped destruction that morning, launched aircraft that mortally damaged *Yorktown*, but in return it, too, was sunk in a third American strike that afternoon, ending the battle in an American victory.

American naval aviators, the carrier staffs, ship and flight deck crewmen, all helped win that dramatic victory, and we rightly celebrate their role then and now. We celebrate their initiative and toughness, and their technical skills that saved many ships and lives. Effective damage control during the Battle of the Coral Sea a month earlier, for example, allowed 2,700 skilled sailors to survive the loss of *Lexington* and enabled the heavily damaged *Yorktown* to stay afloat. Upon reaching Pearl Harbor, *Yorktown* was patched up by shipyard workers in just three days, a heroic effort that allowed her to join the fight at Midway just in time.

On the other side, the destruction of his four fleet carriers compelled Admiral Yamamoto to abandon his Midway invasion plans, and the war itself soon slipped out of Japan's grasp. Never again would the IJN recover the initiative. Two months after Midway, U.S. forces landed in the Solomon Islands to start the Guadalcanal campaign, the first step in a three-year, cross-Pacific war that ended with the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay.

For that reason, Midway is also a cautionary tale. I spoke earlier of the IJN, skilled, confident, and proud, sailing into battle. The *Kido Butai*, their carrier strike force, was the elite arm of their navy, honed by years of air combat over China. But this force, which had swept across Asia and the Pacific with devastating effect, was mortally wounded in a single day. They tried to recover but attrition wore them down and their island chain defenses, isolated and cut off from supplies, fell one by one.

Unlike the United States, which added 15 carriers in 1943 alone, the Japanese did not have the shipyards to replace their losses, not quickly and sometimes not at all. They had no excess capacity to build major warships, unlike the dozen U.S. naval shipyards and their 61 dry docks. Nor could they expand their defense industrial base at any speed, had trouble finding skilled labor, and had difficulty accessing

strategic materials like steel alloys, aluminum and copper. At the same time, the IJN had virtually no forward repair capability, forcing lengthy transits back to Japan, whereas the U.S. fielded more than 70 forward-deployed repair ships, 75 salvage tugs, and 46 floating dry docks.

Unfortunately, today we face a Pacific adversary that has everything that Japan did not. Indeed, they are a lot like the U.S. was in the 1940s, a country with many shipyards, significant building capacity, and a potentially rapid battle-damage repair rate. This highlights the importance of enlarging our own capacity for battle-damage survival, salvage tugs to bring wounded ships safely to port, and increased repair capabilities once there.

We celebrate the Battle of Midway for good reason, for it demonstrates and represents the Navy's core attributes of toughness, initiative, and integrity. It illustrates the unique warfighting value of naval aviation, the role of the Navy writ large in our national security strategy, and in maintaining peace and stability across the globe. But we must also think of the role of chance and fate; with a bit of bad luck it could've been our carriers lying on the bottom of the Pacific. To help avoid such a fate in the future, the Navy will need the continued help of Congress to increase the authorities and resources needed to give our Navy the additional edge they will need against our current Pacific adversary.

Thank you.