



USS Hornet Sea, Air & Space Museum

Additional Historic Information

Battle of Midway (*Hornet CV-8*)

Compiled and Written by Museum Historian Bob Fish

HIGH NOON ON THE HIGH SEAS

Japanese political leadership and senior military commanders were stung by the Doolittle Raid of April, 1942 when sixteen U.S. aircraft bombed Tokyo and other major cities. The raid, while militarily insignificant, showed the existence of a gap in the defenses around the Japanese home islands. Sinking America's aircraft carriers and seizing Midway Island, the only strategic island besides Hawaii in the eastern Pacific, was seen as the best means of eliminating this threat. Fleet Admiral Yamamoto was tasked with creating a plan to invade and hold the island. His invasion plan was complex and included a second operation against the Aleutian Islands near Alaska, dividing his naval forces. Due to battle damage following the Battle of Coral Sea, his Carrier Strike Force consisted of only four fleet aircraft carriers guarded by just a handful of cruisers and destroyers. Achieving complete surprise over the Americans was his key prerequisite for success. Unfortunately for Yamamoto, the U.S. Navy had broken a key Japanese naval code (JN-25) and was aware of his invasion plans.



Figure 1: F4F Wildcat of VF-8 USS *Hornet* Battle of Midway.

The broken-code intelligence was invaluable. The U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander, Admiral Nimitz, calculated his three aircraft carriers, USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) and USS *Hornet* (CV-8), along with the airfield at Midway, gave the U.S. some level of parity in the forthcoming battle. He ordered his carrier fleet, plus their escort ships, to rendezvous 325 miles northeast of Midway (designated "Point Luck"). To ensure operational secrecy, they maintained strict radio silence while awaiting the approaching Japanese strike force. Admiral Fletcher was given overall command.

History

At 4:30 AM on June 4th, the Japanese launched their initial air attack against Midway using dive-bombers, torpedo bombers, and fighters. At the same time, they launched several reconnaissance aircraft to search for any possible U.S. Navy ships in the area. Due to poor



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weather, and a malfunction in one of the search aircraft, they did not locate the lurking American fleet.

Radar on Midway picked up the incoming enemy aircraft and fighters were scrambled to intercept them. Unescorted USAAF bombers headed off to attack the Japanese carrier fleet, while their fighter escorts remained behind to defend Midway. The Midway-based USMC fighters were obsolete and most were shot down in the first few minutes of combat by the faster Japanese Zeroes. At 6:20 AM, Japanese aircraft bombed and heavily damaged the U.S. base.

But the initial attack did not succeed in neutralizing Midway. American bombers could still use the airbase to attack the Japanese ground invasion force. Another air attack was deemed necessary to ensure success of the landings on June 7th.

Having taken off prior to the Japanese attack, American bombers based on Midway attacked the Japanese carrier fleet. These included six brand new TBF Avengers from Hornet's VT-8 torpedo squadron that had been transiting Midway. The Japanese air defense fought hard and destroyed all but one of Hornet's TBFs and two Army bombers.

At 7:00 AM, Admiral Fletcher ordered the U.S. carriers to begin launching their aircraft to strike the Japanese fleet. Just fifteen minutes later, the Japanese carrier crews began re-arming their aircraft with general purpose bombs for use against the remaining targets on Midway. This proved to be a fateful decision, preventing them from being able to engage naval targets.

At 9:20 AM, pilots from *Hornet's* torpedo squadron (VT-8) made the



Figure 2: SBD "Dauntless" dive bombers from USS *Hornet* (CV-8) approaching the burning Japanese heavy cruiser *Mikuma* to make the third set of attacks on her, during the early afternoon of June 6, 1942. *Mikuma* had been hit earlier by strikes from *Hornet* and USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), leaving her dead in the water and fatally damaged. Photo was enlarged from a 16mm color motion picture film. Note bombs hung beneath these planes. Official U.S. Navy Photograph, National Archives Collection.



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initial attack against the Japanese carriers. They were flying obsolete TBD Devastator bombers; every plane was shot down without scoring any hits on the Japanese ships. Only one airman, Ensign George Gay, survived. Shortly thereafter, VT-6 from the USS *Enterprise* attacked, with much the same results. Soon, VT-3 from the USS *Yorktown* appeared on the horizon.

These low level attacks kept the Japanese combat air patrol busy and flying just above sea level. Thus, when two U.S. SBD dive-bomber groups began their steep dives from high altitude, they achieved almost complete surprise and at a very opportune time. Armed aircraft filled the Japanese hangar decks, fuel hoses snaked across the decks as refueling operations were underway, and bombs and torpedoes were stacked around the hangars, rather than stowed safely in the magazines, making the Japanese carriers extraordinarily vulnerable.

Within minutes, three of the four Japanese carriers (*Kaga*, *Akagi*, and *Soryu*) had been severely damaged by bombs and were out of action. Within hours, they were abandoned and sank. The surviving carrier, *Hiryu*, launched a counter-strike that badly damaged *Yorktown*. Late in the afternoon, however, dive bombers from *Enterprise* found *Hiryu* and left her fatally ablaze.

That night, the Japanese surface fleets withdrew to the west, with sporadic attacks from U.S. aircraft sinking an additional cruiser. *Yorktown* was torpedoed by a submarine and sank on June 7th. The battle was over and Midway was still in American hands, a turning point in the war.

The Battle of Midway permanently damaged the Japanese Navy's striking power, and the loss of operational capability during this critical phase of the campaign ultimately proved decisive. In particular, the battle inflicted irreparable damage on the Japanese carrier force, such that they could no longer put together a large number of fleet carriers with well-trained aircrews. As a direct result, the U.S. moved up its efforts to liberate nations that had been conquered by Japan. Just two months after Midway, U.S. Marines landed on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.