

rienced Japanese navy. At the end of May, *Yorktown*, repaired in the miracle time of sixty-eight hours, joined *Enterprise* and *Hornet* to fight another carrier-to-carrier battle in the waters off Midway Island.

## MIDWAY

On the morning of June 3, 1942, a Catalina flying boat sighted a Japanese flotilla some 700 miles west of Midway Island. It was part of Admiral Yamamoto's armada of 165 ships heading toward Hawaii to deal a knockout blow to the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Yamamoto was in personal command of the Midway operation on his flagship *Yamato*, the world's largest battleship, bearing the sacred name of the Japanese race. Infuriated by the Doolittle Raid, he had convinced Imperial Headquarters to bring on the decisive naval battle of the war. Before Pearl Harbor, he had predicted he could "run wild for a year or six months," but that the future would be gravely uncertain for Japan once prodigious America gathered its military strength.<sup>82</sup> Now he was about to test America's naval power in hope of a swift, smashing victory that would convince America that it could defeat Japan only at an intolerable cost.

Yamamoto's carrier commander was Admiral Nagumo. Sailing under strict radio silence, he expected to surprise and slaughter the American fleet, as he had at Pearl Harbor. A diversionary force was sent toward the American base at Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians, near the Arctic Circle. It was to draw the American fleet northward, opening the way for Yamamoto to take Midway, a strategically important atoll that guarded the western approaches to the main Hawaiian Islands. When the Pacific Fleet learned it had been fooled and raced back to Midway, it would be "annihilated," Yamamoto vowed, by the greatest assemblage of Japanese naval power ever sent to sea. "Every man was convinced that he was about to participate in yet another brilliant victory," said Mitsuo Fuchida, who had led the Pearl Harbor air attack.<sup>85</sup>

This time the Americans were not caught napping. Patrol planes had been sent out from Pearl Harbor to locate the incoming Japanese fleet thanks to the heady action of a naval intelligence team under Lieutenant Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, the unsung hero of the upcoming battle. Rochefort and other military cryptanalysts had broken part of the Japanese message code, and as the first reports of a tremendous concentration of enemy naval forces in the Central Pacific came into headquar-

ters at Pearl Harbor, cool-headed Admiral Chester Nimitz, the new Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), had taken immediate action to verify them.

The Japanese code designation for the main target they intended to hit was AF, but was AF Midway or the Aleutians or somewhere else in the Pacific? Rochefort and one of his assistants, Lieutenant Commander Jasper Holmes, tricked the enemy into revealing the answer. There was a secret—and completely secure—undersea telephone cable link between Pearl Harbor and Midway and CINCPAC sent a message over it to Midway, ordering the local commander to send back by radio, “in plain English,” a spurious report that the garrison’s water filtration plant had broken down, leaving Midway without fresh water.<sup>84</sup> A Japanese listening post intercepted the transmission and radioed Tokyo that “AF” was having water problems, a message that Rochefort’s eavesdropping team picked up and decoded. The ruse had worked. The target was Midway. A few days later Rochefort broke the Japanese navy’s date cipher and gave Nimitz the exact day of the impending attack, June 4.<sup>85</sup>

Nimitz then ordered Admirals Fletcher and Raymond A. Spruance (Halsey would have been in charge but was hospitalized with a skin infection) to ignore the Japanese feint north and concentrate all available warships in the waters around Midway. *Yorktown* sailed from Pearl Harbor with repairmen still on board, B-17 Flying Fortresses were flown in from the West Coast, and the defenses of Midway were reinforced. Nimitz had guessed correctly that the Japanese wanted to use captured Midway as a base to launch a final and decisive offensive against the Hawaiian Islands, only 1,100 miles east of Midway, invading and occupying them and forcing the Americans to the peace table.

Nimitz’s greatest gamble of the war was putting quiet, self-effacing Raymond Ames Spruance, a commander with no carrier experience but with an amazing strategic mind—his men called him electric brain—in charge of one of the two carrier task forces sent out to stop the enemy. Spruance’s Task Force 17, comprised of *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, along with six cruisers and ten destroyers, sailed out of Pearl Harbor first, followed two days later by Fletcher’s *Yorktown*, the carrier the Japanese were confident they had destroyed in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Nimitz’s plan was elegantly simple: he would hide his three carriers until Nagumo’s planes hit Midway. Then he would launch his planes and destroy the unprotected Japanese flattops. It was the Japanese, not the Americans, who would sail into an ambush.

As Nimitz expected, the great battle was fought entirely by planes and submarines, in what was to become a new and decisive form of naval warfare. As in the

Battle of the Coral Sea, the opposing carrier fleets never saw each other. The Americans struck first. On the afternoon of June 3, Flying Fortresses from Midway attacked, but missed, a squadron of enemy landing ships. The Japanese knew at once that surprise was lost and Nagumo reacted sharply with a heavy bombing of Midway the following day—an attack that severely damaged shore installations but failed to knock out the island's airfields.

When the flight leader of the raiding force urged a second strike, Nagumo rearmed the torpedo planes he had intended to use against the American fleet—if it showed up—with fragmentation bombs for another attack on Midway. But by this time, the carriers *Enterprise*, *Hornet*, and *Yorktown* had come within striking distance—150 miles—of his own carriers, and swarms of planes, led by Torpedo Squadron 8 from *Hornet* and dive-bombers from *Enterprise* commanded by Lieutenant Commander Clarence (Wade) McClusky, set out to find their prey. Gilbert Cant, the *New York Post's* Pacific correspondent, describes the opening hours of this attack:

TORPEDO EIGHT, FLYING OBSOLETE DOUGLAS Devastators . . . was led by Lieutenant Commander John C. Waldron. It became separated from the other formations in the long search for the Japanese ships. A group of bombers and fighters which failed to find the enemy at the assigned position . . . had to be ordered to land on Midway as they were running out of gasoline. . . . But Waldron reasoned that if the Jap ships were not where they were supposed to be, it was probably because they had found the welcome too warm for their comfort and had decided to retire some distance, if not entirely. He therefore backtracked along their previously known course. McClusky arrived at the same conclusion, but not until after he had overshot the enemy's reported position by seventy-five miles or more. Then he too set out to intercept them to the northwest. The effect of these identical decisions made at different times was to bring Waldron's squadron within sight of the enemy. . . .

Waldron found the main enemy force with few fighter planes in the air, but his squadron had been out a long time and was running short of gas. It had accomplished part of its mission merely by locating the retiring Japanese and reporting their position. Waldron radioed his information and added: "Request permission to withdraw from actions to refuel." The admiral to whom the request was passed had an awful decision to make. To permit these planes to with-

draw might make all the difference between sinking or crippling three carriers (Waldron had not sighted the fourth) and giving them a chance once more to slip out of sight under a squall. Three carriers could determine the balance of power in this 1942 sea war, in which the carrier was a capital ship . . . of greater importance . . . [than] the battleship. . . .

Hypothetical scores of ships and hypothetical thousands of lives were on one side of the scale; on the other side were fifteen planes and the lives of their three-man crews. The admiral ordered: "Attack at once."<sup>86</sup>

Before taking off, Waldron had met with his pilots: "I want each of us to do his utmost to destroy our enemies. If there is only one plane left to make a final run in, I want that man to go in and get a hit. May God be with us all."<sup>87</sup>

Flying directly into the enemy's gun barrels, all fifteen of Torpedo 8's low-flying Devastators were blown into the sea by whirling Zeros and murderous sheets of anti-aircraft fire, "and for about one hundred seconds the Japanese were certain they had won the Battle of Midway, and the war," writes Samuel Eliot Morison.<sup>88</sup>

Ensign George Gay, the only only flier in Torpedo 8 to survive this American-style kamikaze attack, was shot down and wounded, and watched the rest of the air battle from his floating seat cushion. Two other torpedo squadrons attacked the carriers. The Zeros, flying at deck level, cut them up, too; out of the eighty-two airmen who attacked the carriers in their slow, two-seater torpedo planes—little more than flying coffins—only thirteen survived. Jack Waldron was last seen diving toward an enemy carrier, standing straight up in his cockpit, which had been turned into a blazing furnace by exploding gasoline.<sup>89</sup>

Not a single Japanese ship was hit in this massacre. The torpedo planes, however, had been unintended sacrificial lambs. With Nagumo's protective cover of fighter planes preoccupied with them at sea level, Clarence McClusky's dive-bombers appeared suddenly overhead. They, too, had initially failed to find Nagumo's fleet, but had accidentally located an enemy destroyer, which had been pursuing the American submarine *Nautilus*. Abandoning the search, it had headed back to the fleet, creating a foaming white wake, which the fast-thinking McCluskey had followed. The Japanese destroyer had led the American squadron straight to its prey.

Ensign Gay watched as McClusky's dive-bombers came pouring out of the sun "like a beautiful silver waterfall."<sup>90</sup> They were about to catch Nagumo's carriers in their most vulnerable position, without their protective fighter "cap" and with their

decks crowded with planes refueling and rearming, this time with torpedoes, for an expected wipe-up attack on the American carriers. *Akagi* was the first to be hit.

“At 10:20 Admiral Nagumo gave the order to launch when ready,” Matsuo Fuchida recalled. “The big ship began turning in the wind. Within five minutes all her planes would be launched.

“Five minutes! Who would have dreamed that the tide of battle would shift completely in that brief interval of time.”<sup>91</sup>

At 10:25 A.M. McClusky’s dive-bomber group was about to deliver what historian John Keegan has called “the most stunning and decisive blow in the history of naval warfare.”<sup>92</sup>

Lieutenant Clarence E. Dickinson was in McClusky’s *Enterprise* group:

AS I PUT MY NOSE DOWN I picked up our carrier target in front of me. I was making the best dive I have ever made. . . . We were coming down in all directions on the port side of the carrier, beautifully spaced. . . . I recognized her as the *Kaga*; and she was enormous. . . .

The target was utterly satisfying. . . . I saw a bomb hit just behind where I was aiming. . . . I saw the deck rippling and curling back in all directions exposing a great section of the hangar below. . . . I dropped a few seconds after the previous bomb explosion . . .

I saw the 500-pound bomb hit right abreast of the [carrier’s] island. The two 100-pound bombs struck in the forward area of the parked planes. . . .

Then I began thinking it was time to get myself away from there and try to get back alive.<sup>93</sup>

When McClusky’s dive-bombers bore down on the Japanese carriers, Matsuo Fuchida learned what it was like to be on the other end of a surprise air strike. He was on the *Akagi* but was not flying that day, having come down with a case of appendicitis:

AT 10:34 THE ORDER TO START launching came from the bridge by voice-tube. The Air Officer flapped a white flag, and the first Zero fighter gathered speed and whizzed off the deck. At that instant a lookout screamed: “Hell-Divers!” I looked up to see three black enemy planes plummeting towards our ship. Some of our machine guns managed to fire a few frantic bursts at them, but it was too late.<sup>94</sup>

Within less than a minute the ship was turned into an inferno. Nagumo, with tears in his eyes, had to be forced by his officers to abandon the doomed *Akagi*. Fuchida stayed behind to try to hold off the inevitable, but broke both his ankles jumping from one deck to another to avoid the explosions and raging fires. He was strapped to a bamboo stretcher and lowered to a boat, which carried him to a rescue ship.

“The [Japanese] carriers . . . resembled a very large oil-field,” Ensign Gay reported later. “The fire coming out of the forward and after end looked like a blowtorch, just roaring white flame and the oil burning. . . . Billowing big red flames belched out of this black smoke . . . and I was sitting in the water hollering Hooray, hooray!”<sup>95</sup>

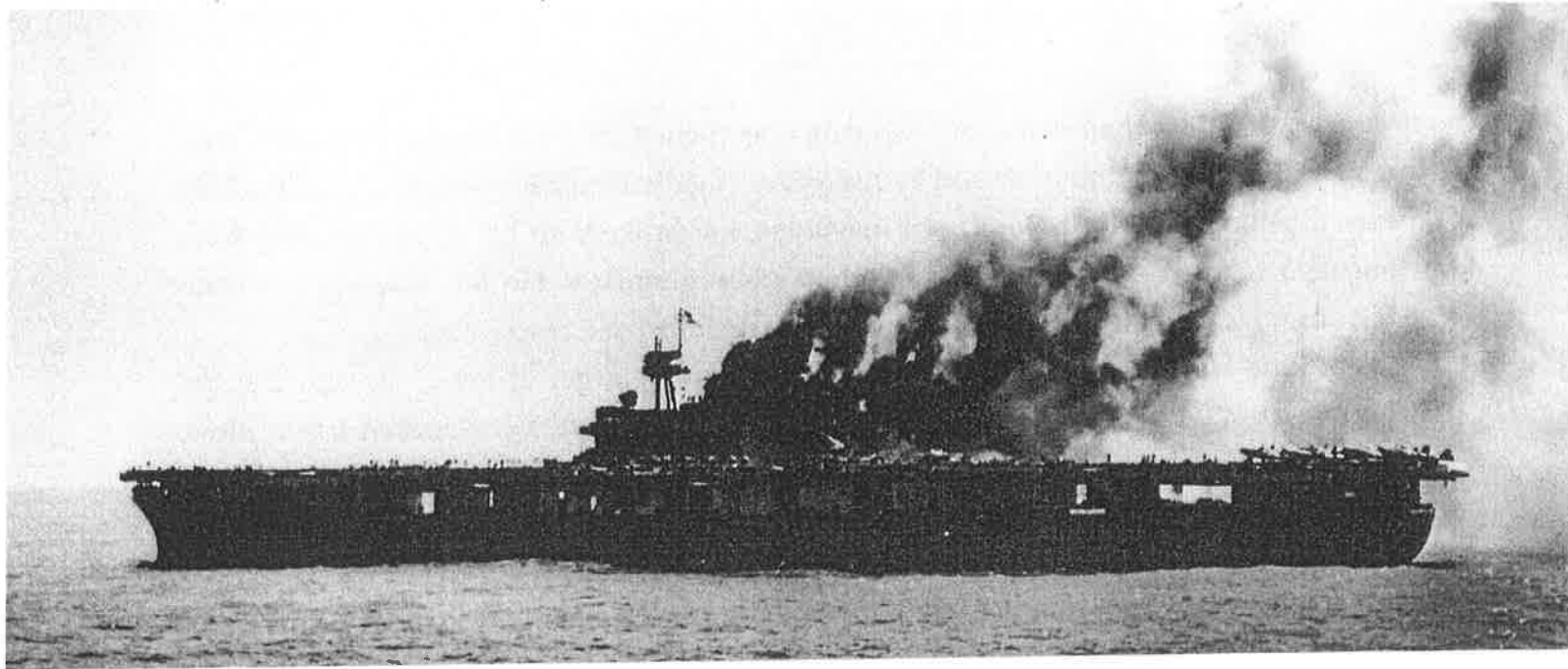
That night *Akagi* and *Kaga* both sank. A third carrier, *Soryu*, was hit by 3,000 bombs and horribly damaged. When its commanding officer, Captain Ryusaku Yanagimoto, refused to abandon ship, Chief Petty Officer Abe, a Japanese wrestling champion, was sent aboard to bring him to safety, by force if necessary. But Abe respected the will of the greatly loved commander and left him on the bridge, his samurai sword in hand, calmly singing “Kimigayo,” the Japanese national anthem. An American submarine sent *Soryu* to the bottom.

The attack had taken less than six minutes. After it was over, Ensign George Gay was pulled from the sea. He had participated in and witnessed one of history’s greatest naval engagements.

The Japanese were battered, but still capable of fight. Dive-bombers from the carrier *Hiryu*, which had become separated from the other carriers during the American air attack, struck back, fatally damaging the *Yorktown* after flying through a hornet’s nest of American fighters in an act of “Oriental desperation.”<sup>96</sup> But then around four o’clock, American planes reached the *Hiryu*, bombing and burning it from stem to stern.

“When it was ascertained that the ship was in a sinking condition, Admiral [Tamon] Yamaguchi and Captain [Tomeo] Kaku decided that they would go down with the ship,” one of their fellow officers recalled. “They all shared some naval biscuits and drank a glass of water in a last ceremony. Admiral Yamaguchi gave his hat to one of his staff officers and asked him to give it to his family; then there was some joking among them—the captain and the admiral—that their duties were finished when the ship sank.”<sup>97</sup>

When told that there was still money in the ship’s safe, Yamaguchi, one of the greatest of the Japanese naval commanders, ordered it be left alone. “We’ll need money for a square meal in hell,” he said.<sup>98</sup>



USS YORKTOWN, HIT AT MIDWAY (NA).

Not wanting to fight a night battle with Yamamoto's battleships and unknown numbers of carriers that might be in the area, Rear Admiral Spruance steamed east, away from the enemy he had hurt far more than he realized at the time.

After reassembling his damaged but still dangerous battle fleet—two light carriers, eleven battleships, eight cruisers, and dozens of destroyers—Yamamoto, still hoping for a last-minute victory, waited for the Americans to reengage. Only when he determined that Spruance and Fletcher wanted no part of him did he turn west and sail for home. It was the eighth of June, one of the blackest days in Japanese history.

The Japanese lost four fleet carriers in the Battle of Midway and the Americans only one, *Yorktown*. Abandoned by her crew, she was sunk two days later by a Japanese submarine as the Navy tried to tow her home. Midway was the Imperial Japanese Navy's first major defeat since 1592. When Yamamoto ordered a withdrawal, he turned to his worried officers on the *Yamato*: "I'll apologize to the Emperor myself."<sup>99</sup>

The Japanese people were not told of the shattering defeat at Midway. Even the Army was not informed of the extent of the losses. When Mitsuo Fuchida returned to Japan on a hospital ship, he was not taken ashore until dark "when the streets were deserted. I was taken to the hospital on a covered stretcher and carried through the rear entrance. My room was in complete isolation. No nurses or corpsmen were allowed in and I could not communicate with the outside. It was like being a prisoner of war among your own people."<sup>100</sup>

Military intelligence as well as military might won the Battle of Midway; two let-

ters, AF, changed the direction of the Pacific war. "Had we lacked early information of the Japanese movements, and had we been caught with carrier forces dispersed . . . the Battle of Midway would have ended differently," said Admiral Nimitz.<sup>101</sup> Working a twenty-hour day in a windowless basement at Pearl Harbor, dressed in a red smoking jacket and slippers, Commander Joseph Rochefort had given Nimitz the key to victory. It was the most important intelligence coup of the Pacific war.

The Battle of Midway changed the course of the war in the Pacific. The Japanese First Air Fleet, the most modern in the world, lost not only four of its most powerful carriers but, just as critically, fully a third of its crack pilots. From this point on in the war, just six months after Pearl Harbor, the Imperial navy was thrown back on the defensive by America's newest weapon, the carrier task force. "After Midway," recalled Japanese navy minister Mitsumasa Yonai, "I was certain there was no chance of success."<sup>102</sup>

Later that summer, back at Honolulu, James Jones, now a corporal, watched "the victorious carrier pilots of Midway drunk and having fist fights on the lawns of the Royal Hawaiian. . . . None of them expected to come back, and they wanted everything they could get of living on the way out, and that included fist fighting."<sup>103</sup>