

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 2 ★ Issue 7

World War II: *Midway*

DATE:
June 3-6, 1942

LOCATION:
Midway Atoll and Surrounding Waters

OPPOSING FORCES

United States: U.S. Pacific Fleet, commanded by Adm. Chester Nimitz. His subordinate forces were Task Force 16 (TF-16), commanded by Rear Adm. Raymond A. Spruance with carriers USS *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, and Task Force 17 (TF-17), commanded by Rear Adm. Frank J. Fletcher with the carrier USS *Yorktown*. Additionally, they deployed 24 cruisers and destroyers and 12 submarines. Total aircraft numbered 348, along with B-17s, B-26s, and Marines based on Midway.

Imperial Japan: The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) Combined Fleet, commanded by Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto. Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo commanded the Kido Butai (Carrier Striking Group), the force engaged near Midway. Nagumo had four carriers (*Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, and *Soryu*), 23 surface ships, 15 submarines, and 248 aircraft.¹

focused on seizing key islands in the South Pacific to cut the sea lines of communication between the U.S. and Australia. The other, favored by Yamamoto, focused on the Central Pacific and Hawaii to bring the crippled U.S. Pacific Fleet into a decisive battle. With his greater numbers and greater skill, the confident Yamamoto wanted to eliminate the American threat for good. Unfortunately for Japan, the result of this strategy debate was a fatal compromise between a limited effort around New Guinea followed by Yamamoto's push into the Central Pacific.²

Yamamoto's complex plan centered on Midway and relied heavily on surprise. His main effort (Operation MI) would use overwhelming force to occupy Midway. When the surprised Americans sailed from Pearl Harbor to retake it, he would catch them in a trap. His supporting effort (Operation AL) would be an attack against the Aleutian Islands. The Japanese army worried about future U.S. attacks from the islands, but also wanted them for their own potential use. To gain support for his plan, Yamamoto gave in to Japanese army demands and incorporated Operation AL into his overall plan.

In late May, the largest operation in Japanese naval history began. (*Map 1*) Yet, with several different task forces departing different bases, not everything went smoothly. Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo's Strike Force was a day late. More importantly, the submarine screen designed to detect American moves toward Midway was nearly two days late. By the time it was in place, the American carriers had slipped by. Surprisingly, the submarine commander didn't report his delayed arrival up the chain. As Yamamoto's massive armada moved into their final positions, everything seemed to be going as planned.

After the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it seemed nothing could stop Japanese offensive momentum in the Pacific. A string of victories and territorial conquests fueled optimism and confidence throughout Japan. But the U.S. Pacific Fleet was still a problem they had to solve. To complete its destruction and prevent further interference with Japan's expansion plans, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto devised a plan to surprise U.S. forces by seizing Midway – key strategic terrain that Japanese naval leaders were certain the U.S. would contest. The plan was designed to force the weakened U.S. fleet into battle. But a bold U.S. Navy admiral, Chester Nimitz, had other plans. Using good intelligence, and the skill and bravery of his subordinate commanders, aviators, sailors, and Marines, he turned the great Japanese “trap” into a stunning American victory – one that would dramatically alter the course of the war.

Actions by the United States: The Pearl Harbor attack was a significant blow to the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Luckily, the U.S. aircraft carriers were spared on that fateful day. As sailors and dockworkers worked feverishly to restore naval combat power, Japan had gone on the offensive. After Nimitz assumed command of the battered fleet, he looked for an opportunity to hit back. In May, using deciphered code, he saw his first chance at what would become the Battle of Coral Sea (7–8 May). At the cost of one carrier (*Lexington*) and damage to another (*Yorktown*), he had stopped the Japanese momentum. Yamamoto also lost a carrier, but



Adm. Yamamoto



Adm. Nimitz

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by Japan: After their victory at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese expanded rapidly in the Pacific. By the spring of 1942, they were close to establishing a defensive line to limit U.S. interference with their hegemonic East Asia Co-Prosp erity Sphere. Continued