

# Introduction

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An understanding of the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway in the early summer of 1942 is crucial in appreciating their significance in naval history and World War II in particular. The following Naval Staff History, including Battle Summaries Numbers 45 and 46, is an excellent aid to this understanding.

The battles represent two momentous naval events. Firstly, they are the turning point for the course of the Pacific War. These are America's first naval victories against the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and begin the long road to victory, following months of US and Allied defeats at the hands of the seemingly unstoppable Japanese 'juggernaut'. Secondly, the battles become the recognition point by the United States Navy (USN) that the aircraft carrier had become the primary weapons platform at sea, replacing the battleship that had dominated naval warfare for centuries. It is now 70 years since the battles and the carrier remains the USN's capital asset. For the first time during the actions in the Coral Sea and off Midway, naval fleets engaged each other beyond the visual sight of the ships involved. Ships no longer carried the large calibre guns, which had been the arbiter of battle for hundreds of years, but now the aircraft were the instruments of destruction, carried onboard the ships. Battle Summaries Numbers 45 and 46 follow the course of both these pivotal and ground-breaking battles, which heralded the twin age of US dominance in the Pacific and the pre-eminence of the aircraft carrier in the US Navy.

Prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War, the US and Japan had experienced a decade of ever-worsening relations. Allies in World War I, they had become implacable foes by the 1940s, due to a multitude of factors. That said, in the aftermath of World War I, the victorious powers had, by the early 1920s, moved to a series of understandings to avoid very real tensions among themselves. International agreements at Washington in 1922, and throughout the decade, were reached on arms limitations and naval disarmament, with other treaties dealing with naval power, bases, the future of China specifically and Asian security in general.<sup>1</sup> However, by the 1930s, a wave of militarism and nationalism had effectively swept away the pliable democratic Japan of the 1920s. Japan's nationalists began a search for autarky and this rapidly resulted in her annexing Manchuria and other Chinese provinces before full-scale war between the two erupted in the summer of 1937.

Four years later, the war in China was not going well, but the Imperial Navy had demonstrated considerable capabilities by seizing China's coastline, operating deep into the mainland and by absorbing French Indochina following France's defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany. This last act in 1940

and 1941 was the final straw for President Roosevelt's administration. It resulted in a series of trade embargoes imposed on Japan by the US, the British Empire and the Dutch East Indies. The embargoes would ultimately have crippled Japan's war machine. To the militarist dominated Japanese government only two options were available: relinquish its gains in the face of western pressure and lose face at home and abroad, or seize the resources the embargo denied them from the rich western-controlled territories of South East Asia. The latter option would bring them into direct conflict with the US, Great Britain, Australia and the Dutch East Indies and see World War II become a global struggle.

Prior to World War I, the US and Japanese Navies had been markedly inferior to that of the Royal Navy. However, during the world's first total war of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both the lesser navies strove to expand their size and capabilities, but both with a suspicious eye firmly on each other's actions. Following the arms limitations treaties of the 1920s, Japan's expansion plans had been drastically curtailed but she still possessed the largest naval force in the Pacific. The overall larger, but now limited, US Navy was split between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, passing an obvious advantage to the Japanese Empire. Japan's naval hierarchy built on this physical, beneficial state by exploiting the new naval technologies that had been developed during World War I; namely carrier air power and the submarine. By the outbreak of World War II, the IJN possessed the most modern submarine arm in the world, including its oxygen-powered Long Lance torpedoes and, more importantly, the largest and most capable carrier force in the world. This latter development would become a force multiplier, acting both as a widely spread power projection asset to be deployed anywhere in the Pacific neutralising enemy air and sea forces, and then as a mobile floating reserve, a sort of fire brigade, to be sent to shore up any defences in the newly acquired Empire, should the western Allies be foolish enough to try and counter Japanese actions.

Yet the IJN in 1941 was portrayed by many in the west as outdated, poorly equipped and trained, and also badly led. Genetic eye conditions meant pilots could not fly at night in western biplanes designed in the 1920s and they were only really capable of fighting other Asian countries. Their capabilities had been deliberately downplayed in Washington for a series of factors, even though reports from American advisors such as General Chennault had shown quite the opposite. Thus, when the IJN launched

the largest geographical offensive in history (in December 1941) across the Pacific, on a 6,000-mile front, employing 10 aircraft carriers and some 1,400 aircraft, it seemed unbelievable. They also seemed unstoppable.

By 1941, the IJN had more operational carriers than either the US or Britain, with more experienced and trained skilled aviators, and flying aircraft that outclassed their western naval counterparts. All of this came as a shock to the Allied forces in the Western Pacific, as the Japanese quickly gained air and sea supremacy, which led to the conquering of the islands of South East Asia and directly threatened India, Australia and the US mainland itself. Spearheading the IJN's onslaught was not their sizeable battlefleet, which stayed mostly in Japanese waters until the Midway operation, but their carrier forces and the elite air and ground crews onboard. The Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighters, Aichi D3A dive bombers and Nakajima B5N torpedo and level bombers, supported by land-based naval and army machines, swept all before them creating more than just an image of invincibility.

The IJN carriers were being operated in a doctrinal way, far ahead of anything else at the time, as a result of evolving dynamic and fluid Japanese naval thinking during the 1930s. The IJN had already realised the benefit of operating carriers in pairs and then in multiple pairs, allowing a greater concentration of offensive capability than afforded by one ship and this was clearly demonstrated in the first six months of the Pacific War. The quality of the aircraft was the result of having control of the design and procurement of these flying machines; the right people in the right places at the right time, and of the aircrews' experience of air warfare against the Chinese – and to a lesser degree the Russians prior to the war. The training regime of the Japanese aviators was extremely demanding and, at the outbreak of the war, the longest of any naval air service in the world. The result was a hugely powerful, yet flexible, sea-based asset that could achieve knockout blows, so sufficiently strong that the western Allies would be forced to accept the new Asian order. Japan now controlled their former colonies and territories in South East Asia and the Western Pacific.

The onslaught began with near-simultaneous attacks against the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor in Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands and attacks across multiple targets in South East Asia including neutral Thailand and British Malaya. Air and sea forces were targeted and subdued, allowing the numerically fewer Japanese land forces to overwhelm far greater Western ground forces. The temporary loss of the US battlefleet at Pearl

Harbor at the hands of six IJN carriers was followed by loss after loss for the Allies, as Hong Kong, Wake, Guam, Singapore and countless other islands succumbed to Japanese forces. Western sea, land and air units were neutralised, outmanoeuvred and dislocated by well-planned and timed attacks. Allied seapower and airpower in theatre had effectively ceased to exist by the end of February, allowing the IJN to threaten ever more targets beyond their initial line of advance far quicker than even they had anticipated. By the end of May, the Japanese defensive perimeter enclosed the territories of Malaya, Singapore, the Gilbert, Marianas, Marshall and Solomon Island chains, the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, the majority of New Guinea and Burma.

In April, a major IJN raid involving five carriers was mounted into the Indian Ocean in an attempt to destroy a hastily formed and somewhat motley Royal Navy fleet, to push Britain further from the theatre.<sup>2</sup> Although the British refused to give battle, the raid did achieve the desired intention of securing the Japanese western advances and protecting the key rubber and oil supplies of Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Dissension in the Japanese naval hierarchy over a Western naval policy and continued advance into the Indian Ocean – versus an eastern one with total neutralisation of the USN in the Pacific – was decided on in the late spring, as a result of a number of developments. These led directly to the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway.

Not everything had been seized in South East Asia. Australian troops had clung to the Owen Stanley mountain range in New Guinea, denying Japan the southern half of the island and an easy route from southern New Guinea into Northern Australia. Moreover, Australia was quickly becoming the forward operating base for the US and needed to be neutralised. Worse yet, the USN had begun mounting carrier raids against Japanese-held islands, demonstrating capability and resolve that should have been destroyed at Pearl Harbor. The US Pacific carriers had not been at Pearl on 7 December and so were missed by Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's carrier striking force. Ironically, some had been delivering aircraft to the US Pacific island garrisons in an attempt to forestall Japanese intentions and increase their chances of defence.

The USN realised that all they had left, following the attack, were carriers. They learnt quickly how to employ them against the newly acquired Japanese Pacific islands. Of greater significance to the IJN and their Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Isoroku

Yamamoto, the overall architect of the Pearl Harbor attack, was a US raid on the Japanese home islands. The famous Halsey/Doolittle Raid on 18 April 1942, launched from the flight deck of the carrier USS Hornet and escorted by the USS Enterprise, achieved little tangible military significance, but it proved to be a catalyst for Yamamoto. He needed to avenge the attack and destroy, once and for all, the USN's Pacific carriers and their naval capability for the remainder of 1942. The result was his Midway operation scheduled for June. In the meantime, the IJN needed to remove the growing Australian/US enclave in New Guinea and pressurise Australia itself. This would be achieved by an operation in May 1942, that led to the Battle of the Coral Sea and the world's first carrier-to-carrier fleet engagement. Both battles were intrinsically intertwined: had the outcome of the first been any different, the engagement at Midway would also have seen a differing result and the whole course of the Pacific Campaign and World War II would not have been fought as history has written.

### **The Battle of the Coral Sea**

The intention was clear to the IJN high command. The aim was to seize the port in the south of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby. This would stop the flow of allied equipment to the frontline on the Owen Stanley Range and, more importantly, act as a pincer movement catching the Australian/US forces between two simultaneous Japanese thrusts; one from the south and one from the north. The resulting victory would allow unfettered operations against northern and eastern Australia, enabling the IJN to increasingly close down US shipping and the growing forces that were heading there. That would then allow Japan's new Imperial southern flank to stabilise and become protected. Simultaneous to the seizure of Port Moresby, a series of other islands and ports including Tulagi in the Solomon Island chain would also be taken, strengthening Japan's island defensive screen and further isolating Australia.

Were any allied forces to intervene during the seizure, these would be dealt with and destroyed by superior escorting forces. This would further aid the Japanese naval situation in the Pacific. If attempted intervention came after the successful seizures, the Japanese would deal with the Allied forces by the same escorting units, now joined by the enlarged and strengthened land-based air forces as a result of taking the other targets during the operation. Either way, success would bring immense benefits to securing Japan's earlier expansion.

The IJN plans did not go as intended. Certain similarities are shared by the Coral Sea plan (Operation Mo) and the Battle of Midway. Japanese planning was overly complicated, with a large use of split forces deployed on underestimations of the actions and capabilities of the Allies, combined with overestimations of their own forces. Scant attention was paid to securing their own information traffic, while simultaneously even less attention was paid to finding out what the Allies were doing.

As the plan stood, there were six task forces to be deployed for Operation Mo. Firstly the Tulagi invasion force, which was designed to establish a seaplane base. Once Tulagi was seized from Australian forces it would enable IJN reconnaissance assets to cover the eastern half of the Coral Sea. This force, comprising a large transport, two destroyers and minesweepers was to move from Rabaul in New Britain, north-east of New Guinea and occupy the island on 3 May. The second force was designed to allow reconnaissance in the western half of the Coral Sea by seizing the island of Misima to the east of New Guinea. Two light cruisers, gunboats and a seaplane carrier provided the assets.

The third force was the Port Moresby invasion force with five transports, minesweepers and six destroyers and was planned to land troops there, seizing the facilities on 7 May. This was covered by the fourth force which included the light carrier *Shobo* and four heavy cruisers and was designed to provide air support to the invasion. The fifth force in theatre was the carrier task force commanded by Vice Admiral Takeo Takagi, comprised of the large fleet carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, both veterans of the Pearl Harbor raid. Overall, there were some 70 IJN ships involved, all coming under the direction of the Fourth Fleet, commanded by Vice Admiral Shigeyoshi Inouye.

Finally, the land based air garrison at Rabaul made up the sixth force and was designed to support the sea-going assets in the Coral Sea. Its 150 or so aircraft easily had the range to reach Port Moresby and Tulagi. The Japanese anticipated US intervention and were confident that *Shobo* attacking from the west, together with *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* attacking from the east supported by Rabaul-based aircraft, would intercept any USN units that attempted to disrupt the Port Moresby invasion and destroy them. But Admiral Chester Nimitz, the USN Pacific Fleet Commander was aware of Japanese plans through naval intelligence services, led by Commander Joseph Rochefort, at his Hypo centre in Hawaii. Americans had been

breaking Japanese codes since World War I and were particularly able at deciphering naval transmissions, if not completely, they were still able to position Japanese forces fairly accurately, in the correct time frame. Nimitz's problem was moving assets into the Coral Sea in time and in sufficient strength to stop the IJN.

Of the five carriers in theory at his disposal, *Saratoga* was under repairs from a torpedo attack, while *Hornet* and *Enterprise* were returning from the Halsey/Doolittle raid. *Lexington*, under Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch, was in Pearl Harbor receiving new guns, while the only carrier in the South Pacific was *Yorktown* as part of Rear Admiral Jack Fletcher's Task Force 17 (TF17). Four heavy cruisers, two American and two Australian, under the command of Rear Admiral John Crace, were also available.<sup>3</sup> Thus *Yorktown* and *Lexington* (TF 11) task forces together with Crace's Task Force 44 (becoming TF 17.3 for the Battle) would have to suffice as the main response to the IJN thrust and were duly dispatched to the Coral Sea, where they had combined by 6 May. Some 23 warships in total, supported by potentially 500 allied land-based aircraft, relatively few of which had the range to take part in the battle, were all that Nimitz could muster against a far more numerous enemy. Although they were dispatched faster than the IJN expected and they were larger than anticipated, Takagi was confident that three carriers and a land-based air garrison would be sufficient to destroy any US response. Unfortunately, for both the Japanese and the Americans, none of the operations went according to any of their plans.

The battle itself, which is covered in the following Battle Summaries in great detail, resulted in the Japanese calling off the offensive against Port Moresby. Both sides were hampered by surprise, poor reconnaissance, bad weather and vastly over exaggerated claims by their bomber pilots. But the USN had held the IJN's Coral Sea advance. Admiral Inouye had decided that they could not push through to the southern coastline of Papua New Guinea without sustaining even heavier losses. He felt that Takagi had insufficient aircraft to protect the invasion force because by 6 May, the light carrier *Shoho* had been sunk by US naval aircraft, to the famous radio transmission of "Scratch one flattop".<sup>4</sup> The fleet carrier *Shokaku* was badly damaged and the air group of *Zuikaku* mauled. Takagi was subsequently sent back by the Combined Fleet Commander Yamamoto to finish the USN force but failed to find Fletcher's force as he had withdrawn by 10 May. The USN, in their turn, saw the large *Lexington* sunk and her consort *Yorktown* badly damaged

and large losses in air group strength with 66 aircraft failing to return.

It was arguably a Japanese tactical victory, but strategically and more significantly an American one. However, in the aftermath, Nimitz realised they had won their first sea battle against the IJN. Prior to this engagement, no Japanese ship larger than a destroyer had been sunk. The USN now knew that even with what were regarded as inferior aircraft and less experienced aircrew, Japanese carrier forces could be held and defeated. It was going to be a lesson that would be repeated a month later off the atoll of Midway where the core of the IJN striking force would meet its end. The Japanese did not truly appreciate this setback. Their losses at Coral Sea were not regarded as prohibitive for the IJN and the subsequent Midway mission (Operation MI). The sinking of the small *Shobo* was considered a minor inconvenience, the temporary loss of *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* through damage and inability to restock the airwings more so. But the forces selected for Midway were regarded as strong enough to deal with the USN in any eventuality, but this depended on the Americans once again behaving as they were expected to.

### **The Battle of Midway**

The Battle of Midway was fought in the Central Pacific around the strategically vital American islands from 4–7 June 1942. It is now regarded as the pivotal turning point of the Pacific War. The US forces on and around the Midway islands faced a vastly superior force of IJN assets, numbering some 200 ships, including eight aircraft carriers, but spread across the Central Pacific. By sheer numbers, Yamamoto should have been victorious. The USN could spare only three carriers to face the might of the Japanese Combined Fleet. However, what should have been a rout for the IJN ultimately saw the heart of their First Carrier Air Fleet, and all four of its carriers, sunk for the loss of only one US carrier.

Admiral Yamamoto's response to the Halsey/Doolittle Raid of April 1942 had been to seek immediate destruction of the remnants of the USN. Never again would they be able to bomb Japan and threaten the Emperor. Some commentators now believe that this drive blinkered Yamamoto and greatly influenced his decisions and actions. Consequently, Operation MI, the plan for Midway became fundamentally flawed and laid the foundations for the IJN's defeat. With this, other factors combined to create a situation whereby Japan would lose its best asset to forestall defeat at the hands of the US later in the war. With the loss of four of their finest and largest carriers, taken

with Japan's industrial weaknesses and thorough, yet rigid, aircrew training system, the IJN was never able to field a force of sufficient skill or power as they did in the early summer of 1942. Whereas the USN, in 1943, would start to deploy growing numbers of larger *Essex* class carriers together with more highly trained and equipped aviators.

The failure to sink the USN Pacific carriers at Pearl Harbor had already seen Yamamoto begin planning for the decisive engagement that would see Nimitz's carriers finally dispatched. The April raid against Japan and the battle of the Coral Sea in May simply confirmed this desire. But the plan that was constructed to deal the decisive blow was extremely rigid in nature, yet again overly complicated with a myriad of split and diversionary forces to be involved. The plan took on a larger role with the Aleutian Islands chain, part of Alaska in the northern Pacific, in what most saw as a pointless diversion, splitting the IJN assets and now creating Operation AL as well.<sup>5</sup>

Operations AL and MI would see the dispatch of IJN Task forces. Separate invasion forces sailed for the Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska under the overall command of Vice Admiral Moshiro Hosogaya. A carrier striking force with *Junyo* and *Ryujo* and cruisers under the command of Rear Admiral Kakuji Kakuta – whose mission was to attack Dutch Harbor, to the west of the invasion points – were to neutralise America's main defensive base in the Aleutians. There was also a support force including four battleships under Vice Admiral Shiro Takasu's command, should the US attempt to interfere with the IJN surface ships.

The Midway forces were larger and even more widely spread. The Midway occupation and invasion forces, together with elements of the Second Fleet both commanded by Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo, sailed from Japan and Guam with battleships, cruisers and the carrier *Zuibo*. This was supported by Rear Admiral Takeo Kurita's support force with heavy cruisers from Guam and a separate minesweeping force from Saipan. These would be shielded from surprise US attack by a large submarine screen, which was to be placed between Midway and Hawaii, as well as more submarines performing other support missions in the Central Pacific. Overall, three submarine squadrons deployed in total. The island itself was to be neutralised by Admiral Nagumo's First Carrier Striking Force. This comprised four carriers, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, with the Combined Fleet Commander, Yamamoto, hundreds of miles behind him, commanding three of the IJN's battleships, the carrier *Hosho* and the seaplane carrier

*Chiyoda*. Both groups sailed from Japan. Long range reconnaissance flying boats would also have a role to play, providing updates of USN carrier movements throughout the Pacific.

Yamamoto's plan had failed to implement a key principle of war, that of concentration of effort. Of his eight carriers, he had one, *Nagumo* four, two were with the Aleutian force and the eighth with the Midway support force. Worse was that previous air losses over the last six months of operations had not been fully replaced and many that had were with aircrew that were not as experienced as previously. Had the IJN carriers been merged together, their attack, defensive and reconnaissance capabilities would have been vastly improved. Moreover, had the fleet been concentrated, the defensive firepower of the ships' guns would also have been improved and early warning of potential US air raiders made possible as the only radars in the IJN fleet were in Yamamoto's battleship force. The course of the battle, which the following Battle Summaries cover in great detail, would have been radically altered. As it was, this large, if very disparate, group of ships sailed as a result of a rigidly formulated plan to Midway, lacking flexibility and forewarning of US intentions and capabilities. A plan which, when run in exercise prior to the battle, had seen the IJN lose. It was only due to Yamamoto's force of personality and his desire to avenge the April bombings that he ensured it was adopted.<sup>6</sup>

The USN suffered none of these problems. Nimitz's main concern was marshalling sufficient assets to stop the Japanese. Through Commander Rochefort's codebreaking team, Nimitz once again knew the intentions of Yamamoto, the size of the force and the nature of the Aleutian diversion.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, he was only able to muster three carriers in response, *Hornet* and *Enterprise*, comprising Task Force 16 under the command of Raymond Spruance and the badly damaged *Yorktown*, still TF 17, which many Japanese had thought lost at the Coral Sea. *Yorktown* remained under the command of Admiral Fletcher. These three were also packed with aircraft, unlike their Japanese counterparts. Moreover, Nimitz was able to send as many personnel and Navy, Marine and Army aircraft to Midway as possible, creating a fixed fourth carrier. This would be pivotal, as at the crucial point of contact at Midway, both sides would effectively be equal in carrier numbers and the IJN would actually be outnumbered in terms of aircraft, plus Midway and the Task Force carriers all possessed radar to provide early warning of Japanese attack. Ultimately, whoever found the enemy carriers first, hit first and hardest, would win. It would be Fletcher.

To the surprise of the IJN, the USN would be there to strike at Nagumo's carriers first, as they were able to sail before the Japanese submarine cordon was in place and also to disrupt the long-range Japanese reconnaissance flights, blinding the Japanese due to the forewarning of Rochefort's team. Thus, on the morning of 4 June, the US Task Forces were off to the north east of Midway while Fletcher's aircraft and those on Midway searched for Nagumo's carriers that were to the north west. The following Battle Summaries take the reader through the immensely confusing and constantly active scenario of 4 and 5 June, that saw the exchanges between Midway and the IJN carriers and then the opposing carrier fleets themselves, that ultimately culminated in the disabling and sinking of Nagumo's four carriers and Fletcher's *Yorktown*. The latter finally sank on 7 June, following two successful Japanese carrier attacks and an IJN submarine attack.

The result of the battle was damning for the Japanese. Again they failed to maintain their effort, as after Nagumo transferred his flag to a cruiser from the stricken *Akagi*, Yamamoto passed command to Kondo who was told to finally, perhaps far too late, merge the IJN forces. However, shortly afterwards, Yamamoto changed his mind and called for a withdrawal of all forces from the theatre. Midway and the Central Pacific had been held. The IJN, knowingly or not, was mortally wounded.

There are similarities and themes in both battles that should be mentioned. Both see the IJN mounting overly complicated, rigid plans, with divided forces and diversions as a norm. They failed in both operations and also in later ones, to concentrate their overwhelming firepower. The IJN failed to deploy all their carrier assets and failed to operate with full air groups. The Japanese planners attempted to gauge US intentions and predict with certainty the actions of the USN, but they lacked the intelligence to support their contentions. Imperial naval codes were transmitted sloppily and open to breaking, yet they did not pose the same challenge to US codes. They have been accused of suffering from 'victory disease' and overconfidence. More likely, they were suffering from losses and, critically, exhaustion from six months of near constant activity against the Allies, with little hope of relief, due to the rigid and slow-moving Japanese training regime.

Nimitz and the USN displayed similar characteristics in both battles. Superior security and excellent code-breaking activities gave the US an immediate advantage. This could have been nullified, however, had Yamamoto concentrated his forces, which he did not. Nimitz and Fletcher ensured in both battles that all available carriers with full air groups were

employed. US command and control were far more flexible than the IJN. Their planning was simpler and robust; they ensured they maintained the aim in both engagements – this all helped to create the conditions for victory.

On the other hand, both engagements can be painted in the light of luck, uncertainty, poor reconnaissance, bad weather and employment of air assets. In the Coral Sea and Midway Battles, Yamamoto came within a hair's breadth of victory and Nimitz and the US Government were aware of this. Yamamoto was portrayed as America's number one enemy and following pyrrhic Japanese tactical victories in the Eastern Solomons and Santa Cruz Battles during the later Guadalcanal campaign, he was assassinated by US aircraft in the spring of 1943. This was only one legacy of Coral Sea and Midway. The other was the loss of the four IJN carriers, a number of aircrew and, crucially, the well-drilled deck crews. These two battles, followed by the attritional engagements off Guadalcanal, saw the pride of the Japanese striking force destroyed. It had dominated East Asia, the Pacific and the Eastern Indian Ocean. New ships would be built, new variants of existing aircraft manufactured and new air and ground crew trained. But none of them ever lived up to the Japanese force that had launched Japan to war in the first six months of the struggle in the Pacific. The Japanese had been stopped and the course of the remainder of the war assured as a result of the Coral Sea and Midway Battles.

### **The Battle Summaries, the Coral Sea and Midway Literature**

Battle Summaries 45 and 46 take the reader through both battles in the greatest of detail. Beginning with thorough discussions of the strategic situation prior to the engagements, they then follow the actions of the combatants including highlighting the lessons of the engagements. Appendices are included, detailing operational orders, forces employed and losses, together with relevant maps and glossaries. Published for the benefit of the Royal Navy in 1952, they are a result of combining mostly US sources, written during and post war, up to 1951. The individual sources are all still available and a number of writers including Samuel E. Morison (author of the monumental series concerning USN Operations in World War II) employ them heavily. However, these Battle Summaries are somewhat different, as they cross-refer and blend the official publications more than published works of the same era. Most narratives of the battle, published

post war, had a tendency to rely on a handful of sources and would often recount a story with inaccuracies and myths. Others can be regarded as worse, particularly Japanese-sourced accounts, because these were written deliberately for the US market and are tailored as such, perpetuating the myths further. Most notable of these was the outnumbering of the USN, when at the crucial carrier-to-carrier battles, the Americans actually outnumbered the IJN. Instead, a sort of successful ‘Alamo scenario’ is often portrayed by some writers. The Battle Summaries also employ the Naval Analysis Division of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) 1947 publication, *The Japanese Story of the Battle of Midway*, and therefore draw on the most official Japanese publication possible.<sup>8</sup> This work was the result of interviews with IJN personnel at the time of Midway.

Since 1952, much has been published – the amount of literature concerning both battles, especially Midway, is immense and more continues to be written. Some crucial information had not come properly to light, such as the role of code breaking and the Summaries make clear that the information was sourced from what was available, up to May 1951. However, controversy concerning the battle continues 70 years after the event. Various decisions, mostly IJN, are continually raked over and even some concrete facts and events are debated. Were the Japanese carrier decks full of aircraft or not? Why were IJN reconnaissance procedures so poor? Was Nagumo far too slow in reacting? We are not be able to answer all these questions, but the following Battle Summaries assist in understanding these battles, and their place as the turning point in the Pacific War – and might bring us closer to finding some answers.

## Endnotes

1. The Washington Naval Conference was called by the US to forestall a global naval arms race and attempt to diffuse tensions over China. The most famous result was the Five Power Treaty which saw reductions and limitations imposed on the navies of Great Britain, America, Japan, France and Italy, using the ratio of 5:5:3:1.75:1.75, applicable to their battleships, battlecruisers and aircraft carriers.
2. A fleet strong on paper, but not in reality, was sent following the loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* on 10 December to IJN land-based air attack. Admiral Somerville, the British Fleet commander of the new force, fully understood he was outmatched, especially once the carrier HMS *Hermes* and two heavy cruisers were sunk by IJN air attack.
3. Crace was Australian born.
4. Lt Cdr Robert E Dixon, USS *Lexington's* second Douglas Dauntless dive bomber leader, was responsible for the transmission, "Scratch one flattop! Dixon to carrier. Scratch one flattop!"
5. The Aleutians were far from a diversion. Yamamoto knew that fighting on US soil off the Alaskan mainland would be as important as Midway.
6. Yamamoto had offered his resignation in an attempt to ensure the plan remained intact.
7. Rochefort's hand-picked team in Hawaii were decrypting some 140 Japanese messages a day throughout May.
8. Available via the US Naval Historical Center.

## Further Reading

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