The Battle of Midway

The attack on Pearl Harbor had been a tremendous success for the Japanese. They had dealt a blow to the U.S. Pacific Fleet that would take months to overcome. The damage done to American naval power, along with the decision of the United States to focus on the Axis Powers in Europe (where Hitler’s forces seemed to be winning), limited the American’s ability to strike back at the Japanese.

The war in the Pacific started poorly for the Americans, with the Japanese winning battle after battle. However, after American bombers launched a successful air raid on Tokyo in April 1942, Japan’s leaders were determined to stop any future attacks on the Japanese mainland. To do this, they had to destroy what remained of the United States naval power.

Japanese military planners decided to lure the Americans into a large sea battle. The first step would be to attack the American held Midway Island, which sat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. They hoped the attack would pull the American fleet into the area. Then the Japanese could destroy it.

The Japanese had a large advantage in the number of ships and aircraft carriers they could bring into the battle. The Americans, however, had one great advantage. Naval intelligence officers had broken a Japanese code and learned about the plans for attacking Midway. Americans knew the date for the planned attack - June 3, 1942. They also knew the direction from which the Japanese ships would approach.

The Americans also benefited from the carelessness of Japanese war planners. These planners had recognized possible flaws in their plan. Yet they chose to ignore them. It seemed as though their recent success had led them to believe they could not be defeated.

They were wrong. Using his advance knowledge of Japanese attack plans, U.S. Admiral Nimitz placed his three available aircraft carriers carefully. His goal was to stop a Japanese landing at Midway and to avoid contact with the larger Japanese fleet.

Pictured above: Map of Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean (arrows indicate U.S. and Japanese movements leading up to the battle) Below: Airstrips on Midway Island

Pictured to the right: U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS Enterprise
Nimitz’s plan worked perfectly. Just as he had expected, the Japanese launched their attack in the early morning hours of June 4, 1942. The first stage was an air attack, meant to prepare Midway Island for a future landing by Japanese forces. The attacking Japanese planes took off from a group of four aircraft carriers that were leading the assault on Midway. American air defenses were waiting and managed to fight off the air raid.

The surviving Japanese planes raced back to their carriers to refuel and rearm. They were followed by American aircraft. The Japanese desperately fought off dozens of American bombers. Finally, several planes from the USS Enterprise broke through the Japanese defenses.

*Pictured above, to the right:* Painting of U.S. dive bombers attacking an Japanese aircraft carrier. *Pictured to the left:* U.S. planes attack and sink a Japanese cruiser

The American bombs severely damaged three of the four Japanese aircraft carriers. The decks of these ships had been cluttered with returning planes, bombs and torpedoes, and fuel, which blew up in the American attack. These fires and explosions destroyed all three ships. American aircraft later destroyed the fourth Japanese aircraft carrier.

During the battle, Japanese planes did manage to destroy one of the American aircraft carriers, the USS Yorktown. Nimitz, however, had placed the rest of his ships perfectly. The surviving ships of the Japanese battle fleet were too far away to threaten them. As the Battle of Midway ended, it was clear the Americans had won a tremendous victory. The plan to invade Midway had been stopped, and Japan’s navy had suffered a terrible loss. Japan’s once great advantage on the seas no longer existed and the tide of the war in the Pacific was turned in favor of the Americans.