



By early 1945, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was practically non-existent and the United States Navy (USN) ruled the Pacific. The situation was a dramatic reversal from just three years before when the IJN was on the offensive. During the early days of the war, the USN needed commanders who could make bold attacks while avoiding unnecessary risks. During that time of uncertainty, a number of strong leaders emerged, including Chester Nimitz, William Halsey, Raymond Spruance and Frank Jack Fletcher.

Fletcher was born April 29, 1885 in Marshalltown, Iowa. The military was important to Fletcher's family. His father was a Civil War veteran who had fought for the Union, and his uncle was Admiral Frank Friday Fletcher.

Fletcher, nicknamed "Flap Jack," exuded confidence but was down to earth. He carried a positive outlook and was known for his hearty laugh. He preferred to look at the big picture while allowing his subordinates to work out details.

Following in his uncle's footsteps, Fletcher attended the Naval Academy at Annapolis, graduating in 1906. He was given his first command, the destroyer *Dale* in the Pacific, in 1910.

In 1914, while Fletcher's uncle led the occupation of Veracruz, Mexico, young Fletcher whisked 350 civilians to safety while under fire onboard the mail ship *SS Esperanza*. During the First World War he participated in convoy duty in the North Atlantic as captain of the destroyer *Benham*. He was given his first command of a battleship, the *New Mexico*, in 1936.

Fletcher was onboard the heavy cruiser *Astoria* assisting the carrier *Lexington* in de-

livering planes to Midway when the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor. He was ordered to take the carrier *Saratoga* to relieve the defenders on Wake Island. He was one day from the island when told to wait for the *Lexington*. The Japanese captured the island the next day.

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

The early days of the Pacific campaign were a tense time for the Navy. Outnumbered by Japanese carriers, Fletcher and his fellow officers could not afford any major losses. American tactics focused on disrupting the Japanese advance. In May 1942, *MAGIC* (Allied intelligence) intercepted and decrypted Japanese plans for an attack on Port Moresby in New



U.S. Naval Historic Center

The carrier Lexington (CV-2) as seen from Yorktown early on May 8, 1942 during the Battle of the Coral Sea. "Lady Lex" was struck by two torpedoes and three bombs from Japanese aircraft that started uncontrollable fires. The ship was abandoned and scuttled.



U.S. National Archives

The light carrier *Shoho* burns during the Battle of the Coral Sea. The *Shoho* (meaning “auspicious phoenix”) was the first Japanese carrier sunk during the war.

Guinea. The Allies viewed the defense of Port Moresby as a necessity to prevent a Japanese invasion of Australia.

Fletcher moved his carrier task force, including the *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, into the Coral Sea north of Australia. The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first naval battle in history in which surface participants did not see one another; all the fighting was done with planes.

The Japanese invasion force was supported by three carriers: *Shoho*, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*. Fletcher’s planes found and sank the *Shoho* and damaged the *Shokaku*. Commander R. E. Dixon of the *Lexington* reported “Scratch one flattop!” as the *Shoho* sank. Japanese planes sank the tanker *Neosho* and destroyer *Sims*. The *Lexington* was hit several times but kept sailing. The Japanese invasion fleet turned back. Shortly after the battle, a leak in an aviation fuel line caused a great explosion deep inside the *Lexington*. The “Lady Lex” had to be abandoned and scuttled.

Despite losing more ships, the Battle of the Coral Sea is considered the first American victory in the Pacific, as it stopped the Japanese from capturing Port Moresby. Perhaps more significantly, the two damaged Japanese carriers were unavailable for the Battle of Midway one month later. *Shokaku*

was undergoing repairs while *Zuikaku* required time to replace pilots lost during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

The Doolittle raid on Japan in April 1942 caused little physical damage but shook Japanese confidence. As American carriers could only approach Japan from the east, Isoroku Yamamoto determined to prevent future bombing raids on the Japanese home isles by capturing the island of Midway.

Yamamoto’s plan was complex, counting on the element of surprise to capture the island and lure in the USN for a decisive battle. An attack on the Alaskan Aleutian islands intended to divert American ships was timed to coincide with the invasion of Midway. Unknown to Yamamoto, MAGIC had already alerted Chester Nimitz that an attack on Midway was imminent. It was the Japanese who would be surprised. The attack on the Aleutians would be unopposed, with Nimitz concentrating his naval



forces around Midway. Admiral Nimitz reinforced Midway with Marines, *Grumman F4F Wildcat* and *F2A Brewster Buffalo* fighters and *Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress* bombers.

More than 200 IJN ships and submarines were involved in Yamamoto's plan. Four carriers – *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu* – led the air attack on Midway. The fleet carrier *Junyo* and light carrier *Ryujo*, heading up the diversion fleet, supported 6000 troops landed on the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska.

The USN had only two undamaged carriers, the *Hornet* and *Enterprise*. The *Yorktown*, damaged during the *Battle of the Coral Sea*, was expected to require 90 days to repair. She was declared battle-ready after just 48 hours of hasty repairs at Pearl Harbor. Fletcher took the *Yorktown* to rendezvous with Raymond Spruance, already with the other carriers. On June 2, Fletcher took command of the combined fleet.

Japanese Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's carrier battle group approached Midway from the north-



U.S. Navy

The Douglas SBD Dauntless was a two-seat dive bomber capable of carrying more than 2000 pounds of bombs. Though its maximum speed was a sluggish 245 mph, no other Allied aircraft sank more Japanese ships during the war.

west while the invasion force approached from the southwest. Before dawn on June 4, a strike force of 36 *Nakajima B5N Kate* torpedo bombers, 36 *Aichi D3A Val* dive bombers and 36 *Mitsubishi A6M Zero* fighters headed toward Midway. The attack was intended to destroy any aircraft that might be on the island. While the attack did damage the base, it ultimately failed as, alerted by radar, all American airplanes were off the ground at the time of the attack.

Nagumo ordered his reserve bombers, loaded with torpedoes in case American ships were sighted, to be rearmed with bombs for a second strike against Midway. While the rearming was in process, Nagumo received a report about the American fleet. More time was lost as he tried to determine the composition of the fleet. The need to recover planes returning from the strike on Midway added to the confusion.

American *Douglas TBD Devastator* torpedo bombers were already en route to attack the Japanese carrier group sighted in the early morning by a *Consolidated PBY Catalina* patrol bomber. The American attack was launched in stages, greatly impairing its effectiveness. One squadron of *Devastators* never located the Japanese carriers. The slow, unescorted bombers that did find the carriers were easy targets for Japanese Zeros. No Japanese ships were hit, and only six of the 41 *Devastators* survived the attack. However, the carriers were forced to take evasive action, frustrating efforts to reload and launch their planes. The *Devastator's* greatest contribution was to pull the Japanese Zeros down out of their prime attack position.

At 10:28 a.m., 37 *Douglas SBD Dauntless* dive bombers from the *Yorktown* screamed down on the vulnerable carriers, dropping their bombs onto decks covered with loaded planes, fuel lines, bombs and torpedoes. Japanese fighters watched helplessly as they were unable to climb quickly enough to counter the threat. The *Akagi* was hit by three bombs. Four



U.S. Navy

The Japanese aircraft carrier Hiryu burns after being hit by four bombs from Dauntless dive bombers. The forward flight deck collapsed after planes in the hangar directly underneath caught on fire and exploded. The Hiryu sank a few hours after this photo was taken.

bombs hit the *Kaga*, killing her captain and many officers. The *Soryu* was hit three times. On each carrier, one explosion followed another as planes and munitions ignited. Each ship soon sank or had to be scuttled. In what was perhaps the most decisive five minutes of the war in the Pacific, three irreplaceable Japanese carriers were destroyed.

The *Yorktown* was attacked mid-afternoon by planes from the remaining Japanese carrier, the *Hiryu*. Hit by three bombs and two torpedoes, the carrier refused to sink and was taken in tow. A little more than two hours later, dive bombers from the *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* found the

Hiryu racing away from Midway. Four bomb hits turned the carrier into an inferno. The Japanese scuttled the ship early the next morning.

Early on the morning of June 5, Yamamoto ordered a general retreat but waited two days in a futile attempt to bait the Americans into an engagement with his battleships and cruisers. On June 6, carrier planes located and sank the heavy cruiser *Mikuma* and heavily damaged the *Mogami*. While under tow, the Japanese submarine *I-168* approached unnoticed and fired four torpedoes. One hit and sank the destroyer *Hammann*, while two others finished off the *Yorktown*.

After the battle, Japanese troops, living in miserable conditions, held the strategically unimportant islands of Attu and Kiska until American forces finally evicted them in May 1943.

Like El Alamein in the Mediterranean Theater and Stalingrad on the Eastern Front, the Battle of Midway was the turning point in the Pacific. In losing four of their six large fleet carriers, 332 aircraft and most of their experienced pilots, the Japanese lost their naval advantage. For the moment, it created a balance that would soon turn in favor of the United States as a result of its massive ship-building program. Japan would complete only a dozen carriers before the war's end while the United States would launch 23 *Essex-class* fleet carriers in addition to more than 100 smaller escort carriers.



U.S. Naval Historic Center

The doomed heavy cruiser Quincy, burning and beginning to sink, is illuminated by Japanese searchlights during the Battle of Savo Island off Guadalcanal in the early hours of August 9, 1942. The Quincy was one of four USN heavy cruisers sunk in the battle.

CRITICISM AT GUADALCANAL

Despite success in the Battle of the Coral Sea and at Midway, Fletcher has never had the public acclaim that Nimitz, Halsey and other admirals experienced. Much of this is due to his actions during a critical point in the Guadalcanal campaign.

On August 8, 1942, one day after the first Marines stepped ashore on Guadalcanal, Allied reconnaissance planes spotted Japanese ships far to the north near Bougainville. The size and direction of the task force was uncertain. About the same time, Fletcher began a planned withdrawal of his carriers away from Guadalcanal.

The ensuing Battle of Savo Island was one of the darkest moments of the war for the USN. As transport ships unloaded men and supplies onto Guadalcanal, American and Australian ships formed three protective screens nearby. During the early morning hours of August 9, Japanese Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa led seven cruisers — five heavy, two light — toward Guadalcanal. Japanese float planes spotted the



The Douglas TBD Devastator was the world's most advanced torpedo bomber when it first flew in 1937 but was outdated by the time the United States entered the war. After a poor showing at the Battle of Midway, the Devastators were immediately replaced with Grumman TBF Avengers.



first group and silently approached their unsuspecting prey.

At 1:38 a.m., the Japanese guns opened fire while their deadly Long-Lance torpedoes streaked through the water. The Australian heavy cruiser *Canberra* was hit first and quickly knocked out of action. A torpedo ripped a huge hole in the heavy cruiser *Chicago*, forcing her to retire from the battle.

Several miles away, the second Allied group, obscured by rain squalls, could hear the raging battle but was slow to prepare for combat. Japanese searchlights located the second group and surged forward to attack. The Japanese ships formed two columns on either side of the Americans. They made quick work of the heavy cruisers *Quincy*, *Vincennes* and *Astoria*; all three were soon on the seabed of Ironbottom Sound, the location of the many ships sunk during the Guadalcanal campaign. In 30 minutes, the Japanese had managed to destroy four heavy cruisers with only moderate damage to three of their cruisers. The engagement was the worst naval defeat of the war for the USN.

Despite the heavy losses, the Japanese failed to reach the vulnerable transports. Mika-

wa, fearing an air attack as dawn approached, turned his cruisers toward home. If the Japanese had succeeded in destroying the transports, it is quite possible that the developing American invasion would have been easily repelled or even abandoned.

In light of the circumstances, it can be argued that Fletcher was appropriately cautious. Fletcher did not receive the news of the Japanese movements until after dark, hours after the force had first been sighted. Second, launching an air attack on a moonless night against a foe whose exact location was unknown involved extreme risk. Third, Nimitz had previously ordered his commanders to only take calculated risks, as it would be months before any new carriers would join the fleet. Finally, Fletcher was not made aware of the battle until after sunrise, thus missing an opportunity to attack the retreating Japanese ships.

Criticism from the *Battle of Savo Island* took its toll on Fletcher's career. In 1944, he was moved to the North Pacific, an area of little significance, in which he had only a handful of ships larger than destroyers. He raided and harassed Japanese positions on the Kuril islands north of Japan. In September 1945, Fletcher was the U.S. representative to accept the surrender of Japanese forces in northern Japan.

After the war, Fletcher served in Washington until his retirement in 1947. He was decorated by the U.S. Army for "...expertly solving the many problems involved in combined Army-Navy air operation." His service was also recognized by Great Britain and Canada. Noticeably missing is any recognition by Australia, the beneficiary of Fletcher's victory in the Coral Sea. Fletcher spent his retirement on a farm in Maryland. He passed away in 1973 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *During the early days of the war in the Pacific, what was the U.S. Navy strategy?*
 - a. Go on the offensive.
 - b. Seek out the Japanese battleships.
 - c. Disrupt the Japanese advance while avoiding unnecessary risks.
 - d. Defend Hawaii until more ships arrived.
2. *Allied intelligence in the Pacific was code-named _____.*
3. *What was different about the Battle of the Coral Sea?*
 - a. It was the last battleship engagement in history.
 - b. It was the first battle in which surface participants did not see one another.
 - c. It was the first-ever naval battle involving the Australian Navy.
 - d. None of the above.
4. *Despite losing three ships, including the carrier Lexington, the Battle of the Coral Sea is considered an Allied victory because it prevented the invasion of _____.*
5. *Who planned the invasion of Midway in 1942?*
 - a. Emperor Hirohito
 - b. Hideki Tojo
 - c. Isoroku Yamamoto
 - d. Chuichi Nagumo
6. *A June 1942 diversionary attack on the _____ Islands proved fruitless due to Allied intelligence learning that the real attack was against Midway.*
7. *How many of the four Japanese carriers at Midway were sunk?*
 - a. One
 - b. Two
 - c. Three
 - d. Four
8. *Which U.S. Navy carrier was sunk during the Battle of Midway?*
 - a. Yorktown
 - b. Hornet
 - c. Enterprise
 - d. All survived
9. *The Battle of Midway was the _____ point in the Pacific campaign.*
10. *The Battle of _____ Island during the Guadalcanal campaign was the worst naval defeat of the war for the U.S. Navy.*
11. *The area where many ships were sunk during the Guadalcanal campaign was christened _____.*
 - a. Davy Jones Sea
 - b. Ironbottom Sound
 - c. Guadalcanal Graveyard
 - d. Battleship Bottom



Under terms of the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty, the Japanese converted the hull of a battleship into the fleet carrier Akagi (Japanese for "Red Castle"). The Akagi participated in the raids on Pearl Harbor and Darwin, Australia before being scuttled during the Battle of Midway.