

H-006-2

Battle of Midway: The Sacrifice

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The first American strike aircraft to reach the Japanese carriers on the morning of 4 Jun 1942 were six new state-of-the-art U.S. Navy TBF torpedo-bombers and four U.S. Army Air Force B-26 Marauder twin-engine bombers, each rigged to carry a torpedo. Upon PBY Catalina and radar warnings of the incoming 108-plane Japanese strike, every operational aircraft on Midway was launched. The TBF's (the name "Avenger" would be bestowed after the battle) and the B-26's had only arrived on Midway a couple days previously. The TBF's were led by Lieutenant Langston Kellogg Fieberling (commissioned as an aviation cadet), and were a detachment of USS Hornet's Torpedo Squadron Eight (VT-8) that had been left behind in Norfolk several months earlier to transition from the TBD Devastator to the TBF, that had made its way to Midway. The B-26's, led by Captain James Collins, were from two different USAAF Bomb Groups, diverted from their transit to Australia. None of the aircrews had combat experience, and none had ever dropped a live torpedo.

Shortly after 0600 the TBF's launched immediately after the USMC fighters that would attempt to defend Midway, and the faster B-26's launched right after the TBF's. Some accounts say LT Fieberling failed to wait to follow a plan to form up with USMC dive-bombers that launched after the B-26's. Other accounts say there was no plan for a coordinated strike. Regardless, CPT Collins independently made the exact same decision as LT Fieberling to attack immediately and separately. Armed only with a range and bearing to a reported two Japanese carriers, both strike leaders led their flights on a direct line to the reported position. Arriving at the Japanese carriers at the almost the same time, shortly after 0700, the TBF's and B-26's conducted a near-simultaneous, but not coordinated, attack. They also ran headlong into 30 Japanese Zero fighters from four aircraft carriers.

The Japanese had never seen TBF's before. (Ensign Albert "Bert" Earnest, was flying the first TBF off the Grumman production line.) B-26's had flown their first combat mission in the Pacific only a month before, at Rabaul, but the Japanese carrier fighters had never encountered one before. The Japanese were in for a rude shock as both types of aircraft proved incredibly difficult to shoot down. As the swarms of Zeroes jockeyed for position for a kill, their 7.7mm nose-mounted machine guns appeared to have little effect, forcing the Zeroes to rely on their wing-mounted 20mm cannons, which required the Zeroes to remain steady for longer because it was harder to hit a target with a cannon. This made the Zeroes more vulnerable to defensive fire. The shocking result, for the Japanese, was that the first planes shot down were a Zero by a TBF and another by a B-26. Nevertheless, the Zeroes continued to press their attacks, shooting the U.S. planes full of holes, killing and wounding defensive gunners, but were forced to fly into the anti-aircraft fire from their own ships in an increasingly desperate attempt to bring down the low-flying bombers, which identified them as ship-killing torpedo bombers to the Japanese.

Fieberling led his strike against the Japanese carrier Hiryu, flagship of RADM Tamon Yamaguchi, commander of Carrier Division Two, while Collins led his B-26's against the Akagi, flagship of VADM Chuichi Nagumo, commander of the entire Kido Butai (mobile strike force.) Had Fieberling and Collins concentrated on one carrier, they might have had a chance. By going after two different carriers, neither group had adequate numbers to execute a doctrinal "hammer and anvil" torpedo attack (i.e. attacking the target from both port and starboard bow simultaneously.) This gave the Akagi and Hiryu the opportunity to outmaneuver and outrun the torpedoes. In addition, the cumulative damage from repeated hits took their toll. One B-26 was shot down, and the TBF's began to go down one after the other. Two of the TBF's got close enough to launch their torpedoes before being shot down, which the Hiryu avoided.

One TBF, flown by wounded ENS Earnest, his instrument panel, hydraulics, and control surfaces shot away, his turret gunner dead and radioman-tunnel gunner unconscious, and believing he was about to crash, veered away from Hiryu, and launched his torpedo at the closer light cruiser Nagara (which later served as VADM Nagumo's flagship after Akagi was crippled) which missed. Just before hitting the water, Earnest discovered he could still keep his aircraft aloft with only his trim tab, and despite several more firing passes by Zeroes, managed to nurse his crippled plane to a crash landing on Midway. Earnest received two Navy Crosses, one for the attack and one for bringing his plane back despite being hit by nine 20mm cannon rounds and at least 69 7.7mm rounds. Seven other Navy Crosses were awarded to Fieberling and the other pilots and two gunners, six posthumously. Sixteen of the 18 aircrewmembers on the mission were killed. (The Avenger on display in the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola used to carry the name of ENS Bert Earnest until it was painted over in favor of LTJG George H. W. Bush.)

The first two B-26's, still under fire by Zeroes and Japanese ships, dropped their torpedoes at the Akagi, which avoided them. The second B-26, "Susie-Q," flown by First Lieutenant Jim Muri, then buzzed Akagi's flight deck, flying the entire length level with the Akagi's bridge, his wounded gunners strafing the deck, killing two Japanese anti-aircraft gunners. The third heavily damaged B-26, which may or may not have dropped its torpedo, flew directly at Akagi's bridge and missed hitting VADM Nagumo and his entire staff by a matter of feet, before crashing in the water on the opposite side. Whether the B-26 was out-of-control, or whether the pilot was trying to deliberately hit the bridge with his crippled aircraft remains unknown, but to Nagumo it certainly looked like the latter. Collins and Muri managed to crash-land their bombers on Midway; Muri's B-26 had been hit over 500 times, and all three of his gunners were wounded. The B-26 was an extremely difficult plane to fly, but able to absorb incredible punishment. (The B-26 "Flak Bait," currently being restored at Udvar-Hazy, survived numerous hits in her record 207 combat missions in Europe.) The mission by the B-26's at Midway was the first and last time U.S. Air Force aircraft ever attempted a torpedo attack.

Only minutes before the attack by the TBF's and B-26's, VADM Nagumo had received a code-word message from LT Joichi Tomonaga, leader of the Midway strike, signifying that a second strike on Midway would be required. Nagumo would not know until the strike recovered aboard just how badly it had been shot up by Midway's defenses; eleven aircraft shot down, 14 severely damaged, and 29 hit, (almost half the strike lost or damaged) and 20 aviators killed or missing. Expecting to catch Midway by

surprise, the Japanese strike was caught by surprise by the airborne USMC fighters, 21 obsolete F-2A Brewster Buffalos and seven F-4F Wildcats of VMF-221 (sources conflict on how many USMC fighters got airborne.) The Marine fighters downed and damaged three Japanese Kate torpedo bombers (being used as horizontal bombers in the strike) before the surprised Japanese Zeros turned the tables, shooting down most of the USMC fighters (13 F-2A's and 3 F-4F's). Of the Marine fighters that recovered on Midway, only two would still be flyable. The Japanese bombers were in turn astonished by the intensity of AAA fire over Midway, suffering even more losses to ground fire, while they nevertheless pummeled structures on the island. Nagumo knew none of this detail, but having barely survived being killed by the B-26, needed no further convincing that the Midway defenses were extremely dangerous and needed to be dealt with immediately. As a result of Tomonaga's message, the nearly fatal attack by the TBF/B-26's, and the fact the his scout aircraft had not located any U.S. ships (and should have done so by then), at 0715 Nagumo promptly ordered that the 107-plane reserve on the four carriers be re-armed from anti-ship weapons to land attack (i.e., torpedoes to bombs on the Kates.)

Nagumo's decision went against ADM Yamamoto's previous verbal guidance that the reserve should remain armed with anti-ship weapons in the unlikely event U.S. ships were in the area. Neither Yamamoto nor Nagumo knew that the Japanese submarine screen had arrived on station too late to detect the passage of the American carriers from Pearl Harbor to Midway. With 20/20 hindsight, Nagumo's decision became one of the most criticized in all of naval history. Yet, Yamamoto's guidance was based on the assumption that Midway would be caught by surprise and only one strike would be needed. Nagumo opted to deal with a very real, immediate, and apparently very dangerous threat (land-based bombers), rather than a hypothetical one (U.S. carriers.) The result was a chain of events that led to disaster. What Nagumo did not know was that the USS Enterprise (CV-6) and USS Hornet (CV-8) were already launching 117 aircraft to strike him from a different direction.

At 0740, the Number 4 scout floatplane from the Japanese cruiser Tone, flown by Petty Officer First Class Hiroshi Amari, reported sighting ten U.S. surface ships northeast of Midway. The late launch of Tone No. 4, due to unknown reasons, has been widely viewed as a significant contributing factor to the Japanese defeat. The reality is that had Tone No. 4 catapulted on time and flown the prescribed search route (instead of cutting it short) it would have completely missed the U.S. task groups. The late launch was actually one of Nagumo's few lucky breaks, and had he chosen caution and opened the range to the U.S. surface contacts while ascertaining the true force composition, he might have taken his carriers out of range of the undetected incoming Enterprise and Hornet strikes. Instead, steeped in the Japanese Navy's offensive mindset, he turned toward the possible threat, and closed the range. Nagumo quickly ordered the scout plane to determine if U.S. carriers were present; so urgent was this transmission that it was sent in the clear and intercepted by U.S. radio intelligence.

Around 0800, as the Japanese Midway strike force, with many damaged aircraft, neared the Japanese carriers for recovery, a second wave of U.S. bombers from Midway attacked; Sixteen USMC SBD-Dauntless dive-bombers of VMSB-241, led by squadron commander Major Lofton Henderson (whose name would be immortalized as Henderson Field on Guadalcanal,) which had launched after the B-26's but taken a long time to form up. None of Henderson's pilots had more than a few hours in the SBD and none had sufficient experience to conduct a true dive-bomb attack. Henderson was forced to lead his

squadron on a shallower glide-bomb approach, which both decreased accuracy and increased vulnerability compared to dive-bombing. Henderson was aided because the Japanese fighter combat air patrol was at a momentary low ebb, with only nine Zeroes airborne. Nevertheless, the Zeroes attacked, and Henderson's plane was the first to go down. Six SBD's were shot down during the attack, and two more were so badly damaged they did not make it back to Midway, but yet again the Zeroes had to pursue the SBD's into their own shipboard AAA envelope to do it, and the SBD's shot down a Zero in the process. All of the surviving dive-bombers pressed their attacks and straddled the carrier Hiryu with numerous near-misses, which to the amazement of even the Japanese, came through unscathed. One of the surviving SBD's, BuNo 2106, hit 219 times, is now on display at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola (after being raised from the bottom of Lake Michigan in 1994.)

Following the SBD's was a flight of 11 older, obsolete SB2U Vindicator dive-bombers, lead by VMSB-241 XO, Major Benjamin Norris. As the SBD's were being cut to ribbons, Norris prudently opted to attack the Japanese battleship Haruna, on the periphery of the Japanese formation, rather than attempt to penetrate with his vulnerable aircraft to the Japanese carriers. Norris' decision, coupled with the Zeroes being low on ammunition, enabled all but four of his aircraft to survive, two were shot down and two ditched while returning to Midway due to battle damage. However, the Haruna, like the Hiryu, came through multiple near-misses undamaged.

While the U.S. Marine attack was developing, a flight of 12 Midway-deployed B-17 Flying Fortress four-engine bombers, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Walter Sweeney, arrived overhead the Japanese carrier force and commenced high-altitude bombing. Fifteen B-17's had been launched before dawn to attack the Japanese invasion force west of Midway, which had been sighted the day before, and then attacked by the B-17's later that day without result. (Overnight, four Midway-deployed PBY Flying Boats conducted a daring nighttime attack on the invasion force, with a new and untried capability to carry torpedoes. At 0153 one of the PBY's, flown by ENS Gaylord Probst, hit a Japanese tanker, the Akebono Maru, the only U.S. torpedo to damage a Japanese ship in the entire battle.) When the Japanese carriers were sighted, Sweeney's bombers were diverted in the air to attack the carriers, and arrived about the same time as the Marine strikes. Several Japanese Zeroes attempted to challenge the B-17's but at that altitude the Zero's performance dropped off markedly, and the B-17's defensive firepower was quite formidable, and the Zeroes' weapons had little effect, so they gave up. During the course of the day, the mostly unmolested B-17's would drop over 320 bombs on Japanese ships, not one of which hit. Nevertheless, although high-altitude level bombing was already known to be notoriously ineffective against maneuvering warships, the fact is the target ships had to actively maneuver to avoid the bombs; the bombs could not just be ignored, and a wildly maneuvering carrier cannot conduct flight operations, contributing to cascading delays and disruptions on board the Japanese carriers.

As the Japanese ships maneuvered violently to avoid bombs from the SBD's, Vindicators and B-17's, the USS Nautilus (SS-168) under the command of LCDR William Brockman (the first war patrol for both sub and skipper), stuck her periscope up in the middle of the Japanese formation, and was quickly strafed by an alert Japanese fighter and then bombed by an alert Japanese float-plane. Brockman had been drawn to the location by smoke from the first attack by Midway aircraft. On his second attempt, he was depth-charged again before he finally got off two torpedoes at the Japanese battleship Kirishima;

one hung in the tube and the other missed. His tenacity was rewarded with yet another sustained depth-charge barrage. As the Japanese carriers moved away toward the northeast, the destroyer Arashi stayed behind to keep the pesky U.S. submarine under, and her last depth-charges would nearly do in the Nautilus. Arashi's high-speed transit to catch up to the Japanese carriers would prove fateful.

Also in the midst of multiple air and submarine attacks, and preparations to recover the Midway strike that had been loitering to wait out the attacks, Tone No. 4 scout plane reported sighting a carrier at 0820. Nagumo and his staff immediately grasped the grave implications of this, and he promptly ordered that the re-arming of the torpedo bombers in his reserve strike be halted, and those that had already been re-armed with bombs, be re-armed with torpedoes. Nagumo immediately understood the danger; it was obvious the Americans knew where he was, and any carrier in range would have almost certainly already launched a strike (which was true...by then two U.S. carrier strikes had pushed, and the Yorktown would commence launching a 35-plane strike at 0838, after recovering her morning scouts, which had seen nothing.)

Nagumo was faced with a number of unpalatable options. If he were to immediately spot his decks with the full reserve strike, while violently maneuvering under fire from bombs and strafing (not recommended by NATOPS) some would still be carrying inappropriate weapons. More importantly, Nagumo's Midway strike (half his aircraft) would run out fuel and have to ditch. RADM Yamaguchi actually recommended this solution, so dire did he perceive the threat. Another option was to get off a relatively small quick strike with only the ready dive-bombers, which were still struck below due to the constant cycling of fighters on the flight deck, and still had to be armed, with minimal or no fighter escort. In hindsight, this is what Nagumo probably should have done, although it violated well-established Japanese doctrine and training, which was to strike with a coordinated multi-dimensional attack (dive and torpedo-bombers, with a strong fighter escort.) Armchair historians have postulated all manner of creative solutions to solve Nagumo's dilemma (e.g. bring the carrier strike on deck, pull forward of the barricade, recover the Midway strike aft of the barricade and strike it below, pull back and launch – never mind that the returning Midway strike had many badly damaged and potentially uncontrollable aircraft, making this option a recipe for disaster too, nor was it something the Japanese had ever trained to do.) Nagumo also probably reasoned that nothing he could do at that point could prevent the launch by the one U.S. aircraft carrier he knew about, so he might as well wait until he had a full-strike package fully and correctly armed to attack the U.S. carrier, relying on his fighter CAP to protect him, which so far had been effective enough at dealing with squadron-sized attacks. By not knowing that three U.S. carriers were already waiting for him, Nagumo was in extremis from the moment he launched the strike on Midway Island just before dawn, but at 0900 he had no idea the full extent of his danger, and was about to pay for the lackluster Japanese scouting effort.

Because of battle damage to aircraft, the recovery of the Midway strike took even longer than normal, and was only completed on all four carriers between 0900 and 0910. Nagumo could now begin to spot the deck for the launch of the full carrier strike, which would take about 45 minutes. The Japanese fueled their aircraft in the hanger, but could not warm them up there because the hanger decks (an upper and lower on each carrier) were fully enclosed, which would prove a major design flaw. By Japanese doctrine, torpedo-bombers were loaded while in the hanger, while the dive-bombers were

loaded on the flight deck. However, given the urgency, some of the torpedo bombers that had not yet completed re-re-arming with torpedoes were ordered to launch with bombs.

At 0918, as the Japanese were about to begin spotting their decks to launch the anti-ship strike, fifteen low-flying aircraft were sighted coming in from the north-northeast (almost opposite the direction from Midway.) These aircraft were TBD Devastator torpedo-bombers of Torpedo Squadron Eight (VT-8) that had launched from USS Hornet, led by the squadron skipper, Lieutenant Commander John C. Waldron. Waldron was a highly respected naval aviator, proud of his Lakota Sioux heritage, whose leadership was revered by his squadron; the kind of leader people would willingly follow into hell, which is exactly what they did.

(2019: The “Flight to Nowhere” by the HORNET Air Group remains highly controversial to this day. I discuss the differences more fully in H-006.3 Battle of Midway: The Victory – Barely. What is certain is that HORNET’s torpedo squadron VT 8 found the Japanese, and the rest of HORNET’s Air Group did not. I find the “Flight to Nowhere” hypothesis more compelling, but there are some significant countervailing aspects.)

The night before the battle, the Hornet’s air group commander, Commander Stanhope Ring, had decided that all the escorting fighters would remain with the dive-bombers, over the heated objections of Waldron and the fighter squadron (VF-8) commander, LCDR Samuel “Pat” Mitchell, but Ring was supported by Hornet’s skipper, Captain (and Rear Admiral-select) Marc “Pete” Mitscher. The reason for the decision is unknown; it may have been that the F-4F Wildcats had a better chance against the Zeroes if they were high, and it may also have been a “lesson learned” from Coral Sea, where the Japanese fighters went after the dive-bombers and none of the torpedo bombers were lost. Actually, the real lesson learned was that whoever got to the Japanese first would pay the price. So, no matter what Waldron did, he would not have fighter escort.

Just prior to launch, Ring and Mitscher agreed that the strike would proceed on a course almost due west. Waldron objected again, as that course would not lead to the Japanese carriers, but was overruled again by Mitscher. The reason for this decision is also unknown, but a plausible explanation is that Mitscher and Ring were “mirror-imaging” Japanese carrier operations with those of the U.S. Navy. Up to that point, none of the PBY scouts had seen more than two carriers at once, leaving two, or three, unaccounted for (based on the intelligence estimate of 4 or 5 carriers.) Neither Mitscher nor Ring knew that the Japanese operated all carriers in a single formation, and not in multiple independent task groups as the U.S. did, and may have assumed that the unaccounted carriers might have been operating some distance behind (i.e., further NNW) than the carriers that had been sighted. If so, Mitscher did not communicate this intent to RADM Spruance, nor did Ring communicate such intent to his own air group.

Once airborne, as Ring led Hornet’s 59-plane strike on what would come to be known as the “Flight to Nowhere,” Waldron broke radio silence to tell Ring he was going the wrong way. Ring ordered Waldron to maintain course. Waldron replied with some version of an expletive, followed by “I know where the Japanese are,” and turned his squadron southwest, and led them on a beeline direct to the Japanese carriers. Waldron did not necessarily expect his squadron to arrive at the Japanese carriers first, and

alone. He may have expected that the strike from Enterprise would have already arrived on target. Had not Enterprise's dive-bombers missed and overshot the Japanese to the south, and had not Enterprise's torpedo-bombers launched late, Waldron would have been right. Waldron also did not know that he did in fact have fighter escort. Enterprise's fighters of VF-6, led by LT James Gray, had mistakenly followed Waldron's torpedo bombers at higher altitude instead of those of Enterprise. But not knowing that, Waldron did not know to call down Enterprise's fighters when he ran into trouble, not that it would have made any difference. When Waldron sighted the Japanese he radioed his position and that he was commencing attack; the Hornet Air Group heard the transmission (but Ring still held his westerly course), but the Enterprise fighters did not. The number of Zeroes airborne when Waldron's squadron was first sighted was down to about 18. However, the Japanese quickly launched more fighters (which further delayed spotting the counter-strike on deck.) So not only did VT-8 run into about 30 Zeroes, it happened that the pilots of those Zeroes were a "who's who" of Japanese naval aces.

The torpedo-bombers of VT-8 never had a chance, but many began to get uncomfortably close to the northern-most Japanese carriers (Soryu and Hiryu) as the swarm of Japanese Zeroes interfered with each other trying to get a kill, but were also somewhat more cautious due to the earlier losses from defensive fire. The Japanese carriers turned away at high speed (Soryu and Hiryu were the fastest Japanese carriers, capable of 35Kts, the same top speed of the U.S. MK13 air-launched torpedo) in order to put the torpedo planes into a protracted tail chase to get ahead of the carriers, giving the Zeroes even more time to engage. The slow TBD's (which had been "state-of-the-art" only four years previously,) were limited even further by the speed and altitude restriction of the MK13 torpedo (100Kts, 100 Ft), and they began to go down one after the other. The TBD's got close enough that Waldron ordered the squadron to split in order to attempt a hammer and anvil attack on the carrier Soryu, but the Zeroes were able to herd the TBD's back into one ever-smaller group. Despite the massacre, not one TBD pilot deviated from his attack course. All were shot down by Japanese fighters, none by shipboard AAA. When Waldron was last seen, he was standing with one leg on his wing root and one in his flaming cockpit, possibly still trying to keep his plane airborne to the last. Waldron would never know that the detachment he left behind in Norfolk had managed to get to Midway Island and had been the first to attack the Japanese, and whose young pilots had displayed the same valor and determination as if he had been with them.

As the last remaining TBD got in range of the Soryu, ENS George "Tex" Gay tried to maneuver around the Soryu for the best shot, which was taking evasive action herself; the Soryu won and the torpedo missed. Gay flew directly over the Soryu (his gunner already dead or incapacitated) and was jumped by five Zeroes on the far side and shot down. Gay had stayed true to his skipper's direction before the strike that "if only one plane is left, I want that man to go in and get a hit." Gay had done his utmost, against a highly skilled Japanese carrier skipper (Captain Yanagimoto) who knew what he was doing. For the remainder of the day, Gay prudently avoided being seen by the Japanese while treading water, thereby avoiding the fate of three other aviators from other squadrons who would later be "rescued" by the Japanese, and interrogated, tortured, tied with weights and thrown over the side to drown. Gay also had a ringside seat to the disaster that befell the Japanese an hour later.

Shortly after the Zeroes finished off Torpedo Eight, the Japanese sighted 14 low-flying aircraft coming in from the southeast around 0940. What this meant to the Japanese was that another torpedo attack was coming in, that they were up against at least two U.S. carriers, and that their swarm of Zeroes were almost 30 miles out of position. As the Zeroes raced to intercept, many with depleted 20mm cannon ammunition, the 14 TBD's from Torpedo Squadron Six (VT-6) off the Enterprise, led by squadron skipper LCDR Eugene "Gene" Lindsey, took aim at the southern Japanese carrier division (CARDIV 1, Akagi and Kaga.) Meanwhile, the carriers began to race away from the torpedo planes to give the fighters more time to engage, which were initially mostly ineffective probably due to lack of cannon ammunition. As Japanese fighters engaged, Lindsey made the pre-arranged call for support from his fighter escort, which however was orbiting much further north having followed Waldron instead of Lindsey, and never heard the call. All of the escort fighters would return to the Enterprise without firing a shot; they could see some of the Japanese carriers on the horizon, but did not know what was happening below the clouds to either VT-8 or VT-6, nor did any Japanese fighters engage them.

More of Lindsey's planes got closer to the Japanese carriers than Waldron had, and the squadron was able to execute a hammer and anvil split targeting Kaga. Just as it appeared VT-6 would put Kaga in the vice, nine freshly-launched, fully-armed, Zeroes off the Akagi and Kaga shot down Lindsey and disrupted the timing of the attack, and proceeded to do to VT-6 what had been done to VT-8. Kaga was able to first outmaneuver two torpedoes coming in from her port side, and then outmaneuver three torpedoes from the starboard side. By the time VT-6's attack was over around 1000, nine TBD's had been shot down, and five torpedoes failed to hit Kaga, although VT-6 did take one Zero down with them. Somewhat inexplicably, the Zeroes seemed to let some of the five surviving TBD's go, one of which had to ditch on the way back to Enterprise, and its two-man crew drifted for 17 days before being rescued. Four TBD's recovered on Enterprise. VT-6's impact on the battle was the same as VT-8, by forcing continuing launch and recovery of fighters, and forcing the carriers into evasive maneuvers, they furthered the disruption and delay in Japanese attempts to spot and launch their counter-strike package.

At around 1010, the Japanese sighted yet another wave of 12 low-flying aircraft approaching from the east, heading for the northern group, Hiryu and Soryu. These aircraft were TBD Devastators from Torpedo Squadron 3 (VT-3), transferred from the USS Saratoga (CV-3) Air Group to replace Yorktown's torpedo squadron following the Battle of the Coral Sea, while Yorktown was undergoing rapid damage repair at Pearl Harbor. Led by LCDR Lance M. "Lem" Massey, VT-3 had launched from Yorktown almost an hour after VT-8 left the Hornet and a half hour after the delayed launch of VT-6 from Enterprise. Unlike VT-8 and VT-6, VT-3 did have a fighter escort, two F-4F Wildcats in close proximity and four more Wildcats at higher altitude, led by VF-3 squadron skipper, the great Navy ace, LCDR James "Jimmie" Thach. It made no difference.

The initial Zeroes to intercept went after the Wildcats, quickly stripping them away from the TBD's. The two Wildcats providing close escort were badly shot up and barely managed to survive, although they shot down one Zero and flew another into the water. Thach's greatly outnumbered quartet immediately lost one Wildcat. In a desperate move, Thach executed a tactic that he had previously devised, but had not implemented or practiced with his squadron. Using hand signals with his other two

Wildcat pilots he improvised what he called a “beam defense maneuver” which later became more popularly known as the “Thach Weave.” The tactic, which relied on cooperation and discipline amongst the Wildcats, was stunningly successful, as Thach shot down three Zeroes and his wingman shot down another. The result was that more and more Zeroes, infuriated by their losses, piled into the fight. The Zeros had already shown the fatal weakness of Japanese fighter defense, which was the strong propensity to play the Japanese term for “little kids’ soccer.” With no radar, unreliable radios, and no real shipboard fighter direction of any kind, the Japanese fighters were pretty much on their own once they left the deck, and Thach’s fight with the Zeroes resulted in a further breakdown in Japanese fighter discipline in covering other sectors. Thach’s fight for survival, however, left Massey’s TBD’s on their own, and the Japanese did to VT-3 what they had done to the previous torpedo squadrons.

Virtually every Zero airborne that was not engaged with Thach went after the TBD’s, with the Wildcats and TBD’s occupying the attention of roughly 30 Zeroes. Massey led his TBD’s against the carrier Hiryu, already steaming at maximum speed in the opposite direction, resulting in yet another lengthy tail chase. Massey was one of the first to be shot down, and Zeros picked off the other TBD’s one by one. At least five got close enough to execute the hammer and anvil split, but the timing was off, and Hiryu went into an effective high-speed circle, resulting in three torpedoes from one side and two from the other missing. Like Soryu’s skipper, Captain Kaku of Hiryu knew his business. The cost was 10 TBD’s shot down, for no hits, and one Zero shot down by “friendly fire” from the Hiryu. Only one man would initially survive from the 10 downed TBD’s, however Ensign Wesley Osmus would be captured, interrogated, and later killed by the Japanese. At 1020, the Japanese were still at least 45 minutes from being able to launch a full counterstrike, the same position they had been in when the first TBF’s and B-26’s attacked just after 0700. However, with the cloud cover and their attention focused on the low-altitude fight, and strung out horizontally as well, what none of the Zeroes saw was the arrival overhead of 48 SBD Dauntless dive-bombers converging from two directions.

(Sources: See Overview)