

H-006-3

## The Battle of Midway: The Victory – Barely

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The near simultaneous arrival of three U.S. dive-bomber squadrons overhead the Japanese carriers at 1020 4 Jun 1942 was a total fluke. Sixty-to-45 minutes earlier, the “Incredible Victory” and “Miracle at Midway” was shaping up to be an unmitigated disaster for the Americans. As wave after wave of uncoordinated attacks by Navy and USAAF torpedo-bombers and USMC dive-bombers were slaughtered one after the other without a single hit, the air group from Hornet was on a course to completely miss the Japanese carriers to the north, (2019: or by original counts to the south) while the air group from Enterprise was on a course to completely miss the Japanese carriers to the south. Yorktown’s air group, minus the scout bomber squadron (VS-5) that RADM Fletcher held back, was launched almost an hour later but was on a direct course to the Japanese carriers. However with only one dive-bomber squadron and the torpedo-bomber squadron, the size of the Yorktown strike was well within the numbers that the Japanese fighters had already proven they were able to handle.

When the first contact reports on the Japanese carriers were received, RADM Spruance, in command of Task Force 16, embarked on USS Enterprise (CV-6), made the aggressive decision to launch full strikes from both Enterprise and USS Hornet (CV-8) commencing at 0700, while the Japanese force was still at close to maximum range for his strike aircraft. Spruance’s intent was to hit the Japanese while they were in the middle of recovering their aircraft that had just struck Midway Island, and he intended to close the range to the Japanese so the U.S. strike aircraft would not have to fly so far back to recover.

To launch a full strike from a U.S. carrier required two deck spots, and could take almost an hour to launch the first deckload, then bring up the next deckload from the hanger and launch it too. The coordination of the American strike began to break down almost immediately. Hornet’s two launches went relatively normally (i.e., slowly.) However the second launch from the Enterprise, which included the torpedo-bombers, took so long that Spruance ordered the dive-bombers to depart without waiting for them. (2019: Spruance would be criticized for waiting as long as he did.) Meanwhile the Enterprise escort fighters mistakenly followed Hornet’s torpedo-bombers, so neither Enterprise’s dive-bombers nor torpedo-bombers had fighter escort.

(2019 Update: It should be noted that although the “flight to nowhere” by HORNET’s Air Group as I describe below has generally been accepted by contemporary historians, it differs from the traditional view (and Samuel Eliot Morison) and provokes heated dissent from some historians. The most compelling argument against it, in my view, are reports from two HORNET fighter pilots that state they saw Kure Atoll during the flight; this would not have been possible had they flown the 265 course of the “flight to nowhere” school instead of the 240 course of the “traditional” school. There are also some questions regarding the interviews of some of the sources upon which the “flight to nowhere” is based. Without looking at original primary sources and notes, I can’t really make a determination. In my view,

the “flight to nowhere” dovetails better with Japanese reports and makes more sense to me as an explanation for why HORNET’s dive bombers and fighters completely missed the Japanese. However, I would characterize it more as a hypothesis than fact. There also some who object to the “flight to nowhere” on the grounds that, if true, it impugns the reputation of the revered Pete Mitscher, although some of those same folks have no problem criticizing Fletcher for tactical error in where he positioned the carrier task groups and Spruance for holding the ENTERPRISE dive bombers overhead too long waiting for the torpedo bombers to launch (both of which criticisms are arguably true.) Anyway, one of the challenges of reading different accounts of battles is sometimes wondering if the authors were actually writing about the same battle.)

Unbeknownst to Spruance, the Hornet Air Group commander, Commander Stanhope Ring, with the concurrence of Hornet’s skipper, Captain Marc “Pete” Mitscher, had decided to take his strike on a course that would take them well north of the reported Japanese position. Even after VT-8’s skipper, LCDR John Waldron, flying far below Ring’s formation, broke away to the southwest (followed by the fighters from Enterprise,) Ring continued to the west. Even after Waldron radioed that he had made contact with the Japanese carriers, Ring continued to the west. Even after his fighters passed the point of no return, Ring continued west in search of nonexistent ships. Too late, and without asking permission, the fighters turned back toward Hornet; all ten ran out of gas and had to ditch. Two fighter pilots were never recovered. Then the skipper of Hornet’s dive-bomber squadron (VB-8,) also running low on fuel, unilaterally decided to break from Ring’s formation and head toward where Waldron had reported Japanese carriers; unfortunately they were already too far west, and they too missed the Japanese. The VB-8 formation fell apart as three aircraft headed toward Hornet, and made it, while the others headed for Midway; two ditched short of fuel and 11 landed, after being fired upon by Marine gunners without being hit. As Ring still continued west, at 0940, the skipper of the Scout Squadron (VS-8) unilaterally turned back toward Hornet. Shortly after, Ring’s two wingmen bailed on him and turned back, and for several minutes Ring flew on alone on his westerly course, before turning back. Ring and VS-8 recovered on Hornet, barely, and the planes from VB-8 that landed on Midway returned to Hornet later in the afternoon. With the exception of Hornet’s torpedo squadron that had been wiped out, none of Hornet’s morning strike even sighted the Japanese.

Hornet Air Group’s “Flight to Nowhere” remains controversial to this day, because Hornet’s official after-action report (and accompanying chart,) signed by CAPT Mitscher, states that the Hornet Air Group flew on a southwest course toward the reported position of the Japanese carriers, but missed them to the south, in the same way that the Enterprise Air Group initially did, and that Waldron’s squadron broke to the northwest and encountered the Japanese. In the report, no mention is made that Ring nearly ran the entire air group out of gas, nor does it mention the “insubordination” of Waldron, and the flight leads of the fighter, bomber, and scout squadrons who broke from Ring’s formation. Although Ring’s wingman maintained until his death that the Hornet Air Group flew southwest, every other account by survivors of the mission says they flew west (2019: There is, however, dispute over this.) However, other than the one report filed by Mitscher, none of Hornet’s squadrons submitted a separate after-action report, which was not in accordance with standard procedure. Even an account written by Ring found in Ring’s personal papers after his death is not clear on which direction he really flew.

Probably the most significant evidence is that Japanese reports all say Waldron's attack came from a northerly direction at the northernmost carriers (Hiryu and Soryu.) It is possible Mitscher and Ring falsified their after-action report, to cover up that they had deliberately not flown toward the reported Japanese position, but presumably had flown to a position where they thought other Japanese carriers might be. It is also pretty clear that Spruance doubted the accuracy of Mitscher's report, stating in his report to Admiral Nimitz that in any case of discrepancy between the Hornet and Enterprise reports, Enterprise's was to be taken as the authoritative account. None of this kept Rear-Admiral select Mitscher from making three-stars and serving as the much revered commander of U.S. carrier task forces (TF-58) later in the war, but does explain why Spruance never really trusted him.

Meanwhile, as Ring was taking Hornet's Air Group out of the battle, the Enterprise Air Group Commander, LCDR Clarence Wade McClusky was doing the same with his 33-plane dive-bomber strike. However, in McClusky's case, this was because Nagumo had aggressively turned his force to the northeast, in response to the first report of U.S. surface ships, to close the distance to the American ships, rather than continue on his course toward Midway. As a result, McClusky was too far south and overshot that Japanese force. McClusky turned to the northwest, under the assumption that the Japanese carriers might have back-tracked from their original course, but still no sighting. Unbeknownst to McClusky, Hornet's dive-bomber squadron, VB-8, was heading in roughly the reciprocal direction from the north, but both groups were by then were too far west.

McClusky's fuel state had reached a critical point, and he faced a decision, whether to turn back toward the Enterprise or to take the shorter, and presumably safer option, to land at Midway. At that point, McClusky spotted a lone Japanese ship at 0955, transiting at high speed toward the northeast. McClusky made the assumption, proved correct, that the ship was trying to catch up to the Japanese task force. The ship was the destroyer Arashi, which had been left behind to depth-charge the USS Nautilus (SS-168) which had made multiple unsuccessful attempts to attack Japanese ships.

McClusky's 33 SBD Dauntless dive-bombers (16 in Bombing Six (VB-6,) led by LT Richard Best, and 16 in Scouting Six (VS-6, led by LT Wilmer Gallaher,) plus McClusky's command plane) approached the Japanese from the southwest and came across Carrier Division 1 (Akagi and Kaga) first. Carrier Division 2 (Hiryu and Soryu) were hidden by clouds further north, and the Enterprise Air Group never saw them. Japanese fighters were still down low attacking Yorktown's torpedo-bomber squadron (VT-3) which had launched much later than Hornet or Enterprise, but had made a direct transit to the Japanese carriers and were attacking the Hiryu. There were enough Japanese fighters airborne, by then around 45, to reach the altitude of the dive-bombers, but clouds blocked the view and neither the fighters nor shipboard anti-aircraft directors saw the dive-bombers until it was too late.

It was at this point that McClusky, the hero of the Battle of Midway, made a critical mistake. McClusky had only recently transitioned from fighters to dive bombers, and he gave an order that was contrary to established doctrine. In the event of two squadrons finding two high-value targets, the lead squadron was supposed to attack the far target and the trail squadron would attack the near target. McClusky directed the lead squadron to take the Kaga, which was the near target, while the trail

squadron followed doctrine and attacked the near target. As a result, both squadrons commenced dives on the Kaga and none on the Akagi.

(2019 Update: There continues to be a raging historic food-fight over whether it was McClusky or Best who made the error. Some accounts indicate Best got low and fast, and more significantly, ahead, of McClusky, and therefore it was his “ill-discipline” that resulted in the confusion. There is also dispute between “squadron doctrine” vs. “air group doctrine.” Since Best is the hero of the Midway movie, McClusky takes the fall.)

The first several bombs missed the Kaga, and Kaga shot down one SBD, the only U.S. plane shot down by Japanese carrier AAA fire in the battle. But then Kaga was deluged by hits, at least four, probably five before the Japanese lost count and the explosions of bombs became indistinguishable from secondary explosions aboard the ship. (One of the pilots who hit the Kaga was LTJG N. Jack “Dusty” Kleiss, who would later hit the carrier Hiryu, and then the heavy cruiser Mikuma. He was the only U.S. pilot to hit three different ships at the Battle of Midway. Dusty died in 2016 at the age of 100, the last surviving Midway dive-bomber pilot – a great account of his life is in a just-released book, “Never Call Me a Hero.”)

Contrary to most early accounts of the battle, the Japanese carriers’ flight decks were not packed with aircraft about to take off for the counter-carrier strike. The strike aircraft were still below in the hangers, as fighters cycled on and off the flight deck to deal with the stream of U.S. torpedo-bomber raids. The aircraft in the hanger were fully fueled, and in the case of Kaga (and Akagi,) some of the torpedo-bombers were armed with torpedoes and some still had bombs. The resulting explosions of fueled aircraft inside the enclosed hangers were devastating. In addition, one of the first bombs to hit Kaga was a direct hit on the bridge, which killed Captain Okuda and effectively decapitated Kaga’s leadership, with direct impact on Kaga’s ability to fight the fires.

Fortunately for the U.S., as soon as the skipper of Bombing Six (VT-6) LT Dick Best realized that both squadrons were attacking the Kaga, he pulled out of his dive, along with his two wingmen, and flew toward the Akagi, but it was too late to divert the rest of the squadron. As a result, 28 or so SBD’s dive-bombed the Kaga and three attacked the Akagi. Unable to regain enough altitude for a textbook dive-bomb attack, Best led his three-plane section into a shallower than normal approach. Best planted his bomb dead-center on the Akagi’s flight deck, which penetrated into the upper hanger deck, touching off secondary explosions amongst fueled and armed aircraft. The other two bombs were damaging near misses, one forward and one aft, and the one aft eventually resulted in Akagi’s rudder being jammed hard over. (2019 Update; By some accounts it was the second plane, flown by LTJG Sonderling, that was the direct hit, and Best’s was the first near miss.)

Unlike Kaga (and Soryu) which were so badly damaged by the initial bombs that there was virtually no hope of containing the fires, the Akagi did have a chance, and her crew waged an incredibly valiant, and incredibly costly, nine-hour battle to try to contain the fires and save the ship. Initially, VADM Nagumo refused to transfer his flag to another ship, because at first, the damage to Akagi did not seem so bad. The initial damage was sufficient to prevent further flight operations. Had it not been for Best’s quick

thinking, Akagi would have come through the attack undamaged, and her air group alone, which had suffered the least loss during the Midway strike, had enough combat power to have seriously damaged or even sunk all three U.S. carriers had she been able to launch a counterstrike.

While the Enterprise Air Group was attacking the southern Japanese carriers, 17 SBD's of Yorktown's dive-bomber squadron (VB-3,) led by LCDR Maxwell "Max" Leslie, was commencing its attack on the northern Japanese carriers, Hiryu and Soryu, and none of them saw the southern group. Yorktown's Air Group had launched much later than Enterprise and Hornet. TF-17 Commander, RADM Frank Jack Fletcher had sent ten SBD scout bombers aloft in the early morning, on a relatively short search pattern to ensure the Japanese weren't waiting to ambush him. He opted to recover his scouts before launching Yorktown's strike against the Japanese. As a result, the Enterprise strike commenced launch at 0700 and pushed shortly before 0800, and Yorktown didn't commence launch until 0838. While the Enterprise air group flew its circuitous route, the Yorktown's air group flew what turned out to be a direct route, and the near-simultaneous arrival over target was sheer coincidence.

Of the three carriers, Yorktown had the most battle experience, including surviving the battle of the Coral Sea. (Hornet, on the other hand, had no battle experience, except launching Doolittle's bombers.) As a result, Yorktown's air group was the only one that conducted some semblance of a coordinated attack. Yorktown's dive-bombers (VB-3,) torpedo-bombers (VT-3), and fighter escort from VF-3, all flew the same path and arrived at the Japanese carrier force at about the same time, the torpedo-bombers and fighters at lower altitude and the dive-bombers at high altitude. However, what Leslie did not know, because of radio silence, was that Yorktown's second launch was cancelled and the SBD dive-bombers of VS-5 held on deck. Fletcher was concerned that no scout aircraft thus far had seen more than two Japanese carriers, and Fletcher held VS-5 to have a reserve strike ready, in case other Japanese carriers turned up in an unexpected place. While prudent, this action arguably led to the almost total destruction of Torpedo Squadron Three, and had not the Enterprise Air Group belatedly found their way to the southern Japanese carriers, the Yorktown strike would have been insufficient to sink more than one carrier, which would have left Fletcher (and Spruance) facing three fully-alerted, and highly capable carrier air groups to his three (and with Hornet's fighter defenses severely depleted.) In addition, due to an electrical problem with a new-type arming switch, Leslie and three other of his 17 dive-bombers accidentally jettisoned their bombs instead of arming them (they pressed with the attack to draw fire away from those that still had bombs.)

In a textbook strike by U.S. (and Japanese) doctrine, the dive-bombers would strike just before the slower and more vulnerable (but also more dangerous) torpedo-bombers. Fighters would keep the opposing fighters off the bombers, or strafe ships for AAA suppression if there were no enemy fighters. However, as Yorktown's Air Group approached the northern Japanese carriers, Leslie led VB-3 toward the far target, the Soryu, in accordance with doctrine, assuming that VS-5 trailing him would take the near target, the Hiryu. Had VS-5 actually been there and attacked the Hiryu, and drawn away some Japanese fighters, the torpedo-bombers of VT-3 might have had a prayer as they were attacking the first target they saw, the Hiryu. With visibility unlimited at the horizon, but obscured at higher altitudes, the Japanese fighters saw the torpedo-bombers and the escorting fighters coming at great distance, but never saw the dive-bombers. As a result, while VB-3 was rolling in on the Soryu, VT-3 was being cut to

ribbons attempting to torpedo the Hiryu. Soryu took three solid direct hits from bombs, with the same devastating effect as on Kaga, while the Hiryu came through unscathed, for which the Yorktown would pay. In the space of five minutes, three Japanese carriers were turned into flaming wrecks, and the course of World War II changed.

Although only one U.S. dive-bomber was lost to AAA fire, many were damaged, and Japanese fighters were still airborne and took a toll of SBD's trying to return to Enterprise and Yorktown, and a about half the SBD's from Enterprise were forced to ditch due to battle damage or running out of fuel. Seventy U.S. carrier-based aircraft were lost in the morning strikes, 37 torpedo planes, 21 dive-bombers, and 12 fighters – 40% of the planes involved.

The undamaged carrier Hiryu, flagship of the very aggressive Carrier Division Two commander, RADM Tamon Yamaguchi, launched a counterstrike by 1040, led by LT Kobayashi, only 15 minutes after the devastating U.S. attack. The Hiryu's 18 "Val" dive-bombers had not participated in the Midway strike, and Yamaguchi had ordered them armed in the hangar rather than on deck as was standard practice, and therefore was able to launch the counter-strike very quickly. However, Hiryu's "Kate" torpedo bombers had participated in the Midway strike (as horizontal bombers,) and had suffered several losses and extensive damage, and would take much longer to re-arm, refuel and be ready for launch. Yamaguchi opted for a quick one-dimensional (dive-bomb) strike now, rather than a coordinated bomb-torpedo strike later. Eighteen Val dive-bombers and six escorting zero fighters were on the way to attack the U.S. carriers, which the Japanese knew by then to be at least three, based on how many torpedo squadrons had attacked them, and by sighting reports from their own float-plane scouts. Both carrier forces had been closing on each other while the U.S. air groups were in the air, and were only about 90 miles apart by then.

The Japanese were able to get their counter-strike off so fast that their fighter escort caught up with a group of six damaged SBD stragglers from Enterprise, led by LT Charles Ware. In a serious tactical error, the Zeroes left their dive-bomber charges and attacked the SBD's. Ware led his section through an innovative tactic that maximized the group's defensive firepower, and two of the Zeroes were badly shot up; one had to ditch and the other managed to make it back to the Hiryu. The others broke off the ill-advised attack. One of the damaged SBD's ran out of fuel and ditched, its crew of ENS Frank O'Flaherty and AMM1/C Gaido was picked up, interrogated and later killed by the Japanese (see H-Gram 004 for the Bruno Gaido story.) One other SBD was able to ditch near the Yorktown and its crew was rescued. The other four SBD's, with eight men, missed the Enterprise and vanished into the Pacific without a trace. Before the Zeroes could catch up to the Japanese dive bombers, 20 U.S. F-4F Wildcats off the Yorktown, aided by early radar detection, intercepted the unescorted dive-bombers and shot most of them down before the four remaining Zeroes could intervene. Only seven of the Val dive-bombers made it through the fighter gauntlet, but those seven would set a stunning example of dive-bombing proficiency. Undeterred intense by AAA fire from the Yorktown's escorts, the dive-bombers attacked the Yorktown from multiple directions at once.

In a perfectly executed Japanese dive-bomb attack, the first plane to roll in normally carried a bomb fuzed to detonate immediately on impact to suppress the target's AAA fire. In this attack, the first

Japanese plane to dive on the Yorktown approached from the stern, and was hit by fire from the two quad 1.1" mounts located aft of the island, but before the plane broke up, the pilot released his bomb which scored a direct hit on the AAA mounts that had just shot him down, killing almost their entire crews, 19 men. The second plane was also hit, but scored a damaging near miss off the stern before crashing. By the time the attack was over, the seven dive-bombers had scored three direct hits and two damaging near misses, leaving the Yorktown billowing black smoke and slowing down. The five surviving Japanese dive-bombers reported that they left the Yorktown in sinking condition.

Meanwhile the Hiryu was preparing to launch her Kate torpedo-bombers. However, due to losses and damage inflicted by the Marine air defenses on Midway only 10 torpedo-bombers were available instead of 18. The strike would be led by LT Joichi Tomonaga, who had led the strike on Midway that morning. His plane had been damaged in the initial encounter with Marine fighters near Midway, but he had still carried out the strike and made it back to the Hiryu. However, the damage to his plane could not be completely fixed and it was still leaking fuel. Tomonaga knew before he launched that he would not be able to make it back. More junior pilots tried to get him to trade aircraft, but he refused. Launched at 1330, Tomonaga's strike was under orders to attack one of the undamaged U.S. carriers. However, by the time Tomonaga's strike reached the U.S. carriers, the Yorktown, although severely damaged, had put out her fires, regained a fair amount of speed, and could still launch aircraft. From an approaching aircraft, the Yorktown appeared undamaged.

Tomonaga's inbound low-level strike was detected later (at 1355) and the fighter defenses were more effective than the earlier dive-bomber attack. Yorktown F-4F's downed one of the ten Kates with two F-4F's shot down by Zeroes. Tomonaga went after the first carrier he saw, which appeared undamaged, but was the Yorktown. A section of Enterprise F-4 Wildcats was directed by Enterprise's fighter direction officer to assist Yorktown's fighters against Kates that had gotten through. However, the flight leader's guns jammed, and in a hand-signal mix up, the other three fighters broke off the intercept instead of pursuing the torpedo-bombers. Equally undeterred by ineffective shipboard AAA fire, the Kates pressed their attack, splitting to attack Yorktown from different sides. At the last minute, Yorktown was able to launch several more fighters, and Tomonaga ran headlong into none other than the great Jimmy Thach, who hit Tomonaga's plane, which caught fire. Thach would later express respect for the incredible skill and bravery of the Japanese pilot (Tomonaga) who held his flaming aircraft in the air and steady, drawing fire away from other aircraft, long enough to launch his torpedo, which missed, before he crashed and was killed. Other Kates were downed by fighters, and one damaged Kate made an unsuccessful suicide run at the Yorktown. Yorktown avoided two torpedoes, but two torpedoes hit her amidships on the port side. Unlike U.S. torpedoes, the Japanese torpedoes exploded, with devastating effect. Yorktown came to a stop, and quickly developed an extremely serious list that could not be corrected. Thirty-five of Yorktown's crew had been killed in the two raids. As the risk of capsizing increased, Captain Elliott Buckmaster gave the order to abandon ship as dusk approached. RADM Fletcher shifted his flag to USS Astoria (CA-34,) with limited command and control capability, and transferred tactical control of the entire force to RADM Spruance. Five Kates and four Zeroes made it back to Hiryu.

As the Yorktown wallowed with apparently fatal damage, Hiryu's number would soon be up, as she was sighted at 1430 by one of Yorktown's airborne scouts. Spruance ordered a strike, and Enterprise launched a polyglot strike package at 1525 made up of 26 aircraft from various squadrons including her own aircraft and Yorktown aircraft that had recovered on Enterprise (VB-3, VS-6, VB-6), led by LT Wilmer Gallaher. Hornet's woes continued, as she was recovering her aircraft that had previously landed at Midway Island from the morning strike, when the order came. As a result, Hornet's 16 SBD strike, led by LT Edgar Stebbins, launched almost half an hour after the one from Enterprise.

When the combined Enterprise/Yorktown flight reached the Hiryu around 1700, the Japanese carrier was trying to launch a desperation dusk strike with her ten remaining operational aircraft. The airborne Japanese fighters put up intense resistance to defend their last flight deck, pursuing U.S. dive-bombers into their dives, shooting down two and disrupting several others. At this time the USAAF B-17's returned, six from Midway and six that had flown direct from Hawaii, and proceeded to drop their bombs through the dive-bomber formation, hitting nothing, as Captain Kaku skillfully avoided the bombs, although several of the B-17's flew low enough to hit Hiryu with machine gun fire. The Enterprise/Yorktown strike had initially divided, with half to take the Hiryu and the other half to take the battleship Haruna. However the dive-bombers attacking the Hiryu kept missing as the Hiryu continued evasive maneuvers. Concerned that the Hiryu might not get hit, the dive-bombers targeting the Haruna diverted and attacked Hiryu. In the end, Hiryu took four direct hits on her forward flight deck, leaving her burning furiously and out-of-action, but afloat and still able to make considerable speed. One of the hits was by LT Best, hitting his second carrier of the day. By the time Hornet's strike arrived it seemed that Hiryu was finished, so Hornet's dive bombers attacked the heavy cruisers Tone and Chikuma, but scored no hits, leaving Hornet's air group with a perfect score for the day, zero hits. To add insult to injury, a refugee fighter from Yorktown, with a wounded pilot, made a hard recovery on Hornet and the plane's un-safed machine guns sprayed Hornet's flight deck, killing LT Royal Ingersoll II, son of VADM Royal Ingersoll (Commander-in-Chief Atlantic Fleet) and four of Hornet's Marine detachment, with 20 other crewmen wounded.

As darkness fell on 4 June 1942, all five damaged carriers were still afloat. RADM Spruance, with delegated tactical command from RADM Fletcher, withdrew U.S. forces to the east, leaving the destroyer USS Hughes (DD-410) behind to torpedo the abandoned and listing Yorktown in the event Japanese ships arrived in the vicinity. Spruance was concerned that if he continued to pursue the Japanese to the west, he could wind up in a night fight with superior Japanese surface forces, a fight that the U.S. neither needed nor was prepared for, as demonstrated by the early battles near Guadalcanal several months later. Spruance's caution was subsequently widely criticized, but Japanese records confirm his concern, because VADM Nagumo, flying his flag in the light cruiser Nagara, was steaming easterly at high speed with his two battleships, two heavy cruisers, and whatever destroyers were not standing by the stricken carriers. VADM Nagumo's intent was to force exactly the night surface action that RADM Spruance was intent on avoiding. Further to the southwest, four other Japanese heavy cruisers, under the command of VADM Takeo Kurita, were racing toward Midway Island intent on bombarding the airfield at night to preclude any further flight operations the next day. The submarine I-168 was ordered to shell Midway Island, which it did, with minimal damage.

As the night wore on, with no sign of American surface forces, both Nagumo and Yamamoto came to the conclusion that further pursuit to the east would leave Nagumo's force vulnerable to air attack at daybreak, and Nagumo commenced withdrawal to the northwest. The same situation applied to the four cruisers en route Midway as they would not be able to complete their mission before daybreak, and were ordered to reverse course. Although all four carriers were still burning, they remained afloat because their hull integrity had not been breached, since none had been hit by torpedoes, except Kaga that had been hit by a torpedo from USS Nautilus (SS-168) that failed to explode. The Japanese still harbored hope that Hiryu could be saved, and Akagi was only given up after a lengthy fight to try to save her. Soryu and Kaga were so badly damaged that saving them was not realistic, but that didn't stop their crews from trying. Nagumo ordered Kaga, Soryu and Akagi to be sunk by torpedoes from Japanese destroyers. Yamamoto initially countermanded the order to scuttle the Akagi, considered the crown jewel of the Japanese Navy, until he too was finally convinced that she could not be saved.

Captain Okuda of the Kaga had been killed on the bridge by one of the first bombs to hit. CAPT Yanagimoto of Soryu decided to go down with his ship; his crew attempted to forcibly remove the highly popular and respected skipper, but he stared them down and he remained on board as his ship was torpedoed and sunk. CAPT Aoki of the Akagi also initially elected to go down with his ship, but after remaining alone on board for several hours while the scuttling was delayed, some of his crew went back on board to convince him to relent, which he finally did. The order to scuttle Hiryu came later, and both RADM Yamaguchi and CAPT Kaku elected to go down with the ship after a surrealistic abandon ship ceremony which included Hiryu's several hundred surviving crewmembers in formation on the flight deck listening to speeches and toasts, and singing songs, before conducting a most orderly abandon ship. Nevertheless, after the Hiryu had been torpedoed by a Japanese destroyer, approximately 30-40 Hiryu crewmen who had been trapped in the engineering spaces made their way topside. However, the Japanese destroyer on-scene commander elected to leave them behind. Upon learning this, Nagumo ordered a different destroyer, the Tanikaze, to proceed to the Hiryu's location to retrieve survivors. Meanwhile, the survivors embarked in a cutter, in which 34 survived until 17 June when they were rescued and captured by the seaplane tender USS Ballard (AVD-10.) After daybreak, an aircraft off the Japanese light carrier Hosho (Japan's first carrier, and still embarking biplanes) covering Yamamoto's battleship Main Body, discovered that the Hiryu was still afloat. Hiryu finally went down later in the morning on 5 Jun.

As the Japanese carriers were being scuttled, the four cruisers withdrawing from the cancelled Midway bombardment encountered the submarine USS Tambor (SS-198) just after midnight 5 Jun. In the ensuing evasive action, the Mogami collided with the Mikuma, and forty feet of Mogami's bow was sheared off, dramatically reducing her speed. As the Kumano and Suzuya continued west at high speed, the Mikuma remained behind to aid the limping Mogami. Fully expecting to be attacked by aircraft from Midway at daybreak, and unable to maneuver defensively, the skipper of the Mogami elected to jettison all his Type 93 oxygen-fueled torpedoes (later known as "Long Lance") to preclude them exploding on board in the event of a bomb hit. Mikuma did not follow suit, which would seal her fate the next day.

At daybreak on 5 June, RADM Spruance reversed course and began a westerly pursuit of the Japanese, but most were already out of range (hence the after-the-fact criticism.) The U.S. could only

muster about one air group's worth of aircraft from the three carriers, and only a handful of aircraft on Midway Island were still flyable. Nevertheless, aircraft from the Enterprise and Hornet scouted to the northwest of Midway looking for the possible fifth carrier that had been estimated by U.S. naval intelligence. (The Shokaku had not participated in Midway due to heavy damage at the Battle of the Coral Sea, and the Zuikaku had not participated due to Japanese inability to reconstitute her air group following losses at the Coral Sea. The Japanese were trying to figure out how to get the light carrier Zuiho (the "fifth carrier") into the battle. Zuiho had been well back covering the Invasion Force west of Midway, and her 24 aircraft (12 fighters and 12 torpedo-bombers) weren't likely to change the outcome of the battle.) Throughout the day, the only Japanese ship the U.S. carrier aircraft spotted was the destroyer Tanikaze, which was trying to catch up to what was left of Nagumo's force following a fruitless search for the survivors of Hiryu who had been left behind the night before. Having found nothing else, over fifty dive-bombers from Enterprise and Hornet (VB-3, VB-6, VS-6, VS-5), along with nine B-17's in two waves attacked the solitary destroyer. The skipper of the Tanikaze, CDR Motoi Katsumi, skillfully, and luckily, avoided every one of 90 bombs, although splinters from a near miss penetrated his after turret and killed six men. One SBD crashed diving on Tanikaze. During the attack, one of the B-17's also accidentally jettisoned its auxiliary bomb-bay fuel tank, and the bomber ran out of fuel and was lost with all hands returning to Midway. Another B-17 ran out of fuel that day on a search mission and was also lost with her crew. Some of Hornet's aircraft returned after dark, and CAPT Mitscher turned on the Hornet's lights, an action he would become even more famous for during the Battle of the Philippine Sea in Jun 44.

Meanwhile, eight B-17's and the few flyable USMC dive-bombers from Midway (six SBD and six SB2U) attacked the Mogami and Mikuma. The B-17's, flying at high altitude, hit nothing. The big, powerful heavy cruisers (the Japanese had cheated on Washington Naval Treaty limitations) put up a ferocious anti-aircraft barrage, and shot down the SB2U flight lead, Captain Richard E. Fleming, USMC. Fleming led the section of VMSB-241's remaining SB2U's after both the skipper (Henderson) and XO (Norris) had been lost the previous day. Fleming pressed his attack with great determination and crashed alongside the Mikuma. Many books on Midway, with photos of the Mikuma, identify wreckage on top of an after turret as being Fleming's SB2U Vindicator, which erroneous reports said hit the Mikuma after being damaged. The wreckage is actually not Fleming's plane. Nevertheless, for his courageous attack flying an obsolete aircraft, Fleming was awarded the Medal of Honor, posthumously, which was somewhat amazingly the only Medal of Honor awarded in the entire battle. The six Marine SDB's had attacked Mogami and the six SB2U's had attacked Mikuma. No bombs hit.

During the day on 5 Jun, Captain Buckmaster led damage-control parties back on to the still-floating Yorktown, jettisoning everything possible in an attempt to bring the list into more manageable parameters, with some success. It increasingly appeared the Yorktown could be saved, weather permitting. However, the Yorktown's position was reported by a Japanese cruiser-launched float-plane, and the submarine I-168, under the command of LCDR Yahachi Tanabe, was ordered to proceed to that position and attack. The position proved quite accurate, and Tanabe sighted the Yorktown before dawn on 6 Jun. Tanabe carefully and skillfully picked his way through the five screening destroyers, taking most of the morning to do so, apparently aided by abysmal acoustic conditions that seriously degraded

U.S. sonar. When Tanabe put his scope up for what he thought would be the final time, he discovered he was too close to the Yorktown; his calculation had been thrown off because by then the Yorktown was moving under tow. Finally Tanabe fired four torpedoes in a tight spread. One torpedo missed aft. One torpedo hit the destroyer Hammann (DD412,) alongside Yorktown, and blew her in half. Two other torpedoes passed under the Hammann and hit the Yorktown on her starboard side. Sailors on Hammann were seen to make a valiant effort to reach the depth-charge racks on the stern and disarm the depth-charges, however the ship sank too fast. When the depth charges detonated underwater, virtually all of Hammann's crew that had been blown or jumped into the water were killed, and the shock broke legs and ankles of damage control parties on Yorktown (81 of Hammann's 251 crew were lost.)

Tanabe escaped by taking I-168 directly under Yorktown, and then survived 61 depth charges with severe damage to the sub. With insufficient battery power to remain under until sunset, and leaking chlorine gas, Tanabe surfaced and prepared for a surface gun duel. U.S. destroyers initially pursued and fired on I-168, but Tanabe generated a smoke screen to obscure him from the U.S. destroyers in the dusk, and was able to get just enough charge on his batteries to resubmerge, and then make good his escape under cover of darkness. I-168 returned to Japan for a heroes' welcome, one of the few Japanese ships, if not the only one, to do so. Despite the damage from I-168's torpedoes, the Yorktown remained afloat, but too low in the water to attempt to continue the tow. The tough ship finally went under after dawn on 7 Jun.

Also on 6 Jun, U.S. carrier aircraft caught up to the Mogami and Mikuma, still trying to reach the perceived protection of Japanese aircraft based at Wake Island. The first strike was carried out by 14 SBD dive bombers off Hornet, led by CDR Ring. The strike was complicated by the fact that a previous sighting had reported a battleship in the area. (Japanese heavy cruisers were constantly misidentified as battleships by aviators and submariners throughout the war.) This time, Ring correctly identified the Mogami and Mikuma as heavy cruisers, and flew past them in a vain attempt to find the non-existent battleship, before finally reversing course and attacking the cruisers. The cruisers shot down two SBD's, and only two bombs hit Mogami and none hit the Mikuma. A second strike launched from Enterprise (a mix of Enterprise and Yorktown aircraft) also flew by the Mogami and Mikuma in search of the unicorn battleship, before reversing course and attacking the heavy cruisers. This time Mikuma sustained five direct hits and two near misses. The three surviving flyable U.S. torpedo bombers accompanied the raid, but were under orders not to attack if there was any AAA opposition at all, so all three stayed clear. The Mikuma absorbed enormous punishment but still continued her slow escape attempt, demonstrating just how hard it was to sink ships using only bombs, until fires set off Mikuma's torpedoes, initiating a massive secondary explosion resulting in the loss of the ship. Most of Mikuma's crew of 888 would go down with the ship. Twenty-three more SBD's from Hornet attacked later in the afternoon at 1500. One bomb hit Mogami, another hit the still-floating Mikuma, and one hit the destroyer Arashio, killing many of the few Mikuma survivors that had been rescued from the water. Mogami, despite severe damage from collision and air attack, and the two destroyers escaped to fight another day. Two survivors of Mikuma would be picked up by the USS Trout (SS-202.)

It took awhile for ADM Yamamoto to come to grips with the catastrophic scale of the Japanese loss, and throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of June his staff concocted all manner of desperate and unrealistic plans to salvage some semblance of victory out of a monumental defeat. In the end, the Japanese decided the best solution was to lie about it and claim a great victory, which was trumpeted in the Japanese press. The only person Yamamoto and senior navy leaders told the truth to was Emperor Hirohito himself; Prime Minister Tojo and Army leadership were kept in the dark. When they did learn the truth, the Army leaders reacted in accord with the poisonous inter-service relationship that had existed for many years, believing that the Navy got what was coming to it. To maintain the deception, neither Yamamoto nor Nagumo or any other senior officers were relieved of command. Nagumo remained in command of the Dai-Ichi Kido Butai (First Mobile Strike Force) now reduced to Shokaku and Zuikaku, redesignated as Carrier Division One, until after the Battle of Santa Cruz in October 1942. The Japanese Navy went to great lengths to isolate the survivors of Midway, especially the wounded, who were treated in an appalling manner as disgraced losers; all were barred from writing to or visiting family after the battle, before being shipped out to the far reaches of the Empire, where the great majority would ultimately die.

Although the Japanese did manage some lessons learned from the battle, the need to cover up the results resulted in many being lost. For example, the new Japanese carrier Taiho incorporated one lesson learned (an armored flight deck) but not others, like damage control, and was destroyed by the same aviation fuel line ruptures that sank the Lexington at Coral Sea and contributed to the loss of four carriers at Midway. It was not until after the war that any serious Japanese introspection began concerning the cause of their defeat at Midway (and even then they did not suspect their codes had been broken.) Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, Akagi's air group commander who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor but had been too ill to fly at Midway, attributed the loss to "victory disease." After six months of constant operations racking up one overwhelming victory after another, the judgment of Japanese naval leaders was clouded by a fatal combination of fatigue and hubris, a belief in their own superiority and invincibility that caused them to ignore all kinds of warning signs that their plans had been compromised and that the enemy was alert and waiting for them. They completely failed to understand that after the humiliation of Pearl Harbor, the Sailors of the U.S. Navy not only had the will to fight, but were prepared to take stunning losses and still keep coming without faltering. Had they taken note of how tenaciously U.S. ships had fought in the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, this would not have come as a surprise. Although I am not a big fan of the German philosopher Nietzsche, one of his quotes is applicable, "Victory makes the victor stupid and the vanquished vengeful." Or, as Commander Minoru Genda, planning architect of Pearl Harbor, remarked to Fuchida as they watched their carriers burning on 4 June 1942, "Shimatta" (roughly, "we screwed up.")

(Sources: See Overview)