
MASTER OF THE GAME: NIMITZ AT MIDWAY

The most complete and happy victory is this: to compel one's enemy to give up his purpose, while suffering no harm to oneself.

—Belisarius, 505–565

BACKGROUND

Following a series of naval defeats in the Pacific that began with the disastrous attack on Pearl Harbor and ended with a draw in the Battle of Coral Sea, the United States won its first decisive naval battle of World War II at Midway in early June 1942. The Japanese planned to attack and occupy Midway Island at the extreme end of the Hawaiian Island chain,¹ extending their perimeter in the Pacific² and hoping to draw the U.S. naval forces into a decisive battle.³ The attack and occupation were to be carried out by three major Japanese naval forces steaming independently toward Midway (see Figure 3.1):⁴

- a carrier strike force centered on four aircraft carriers approaching from the northwest⁵

¹Samuel Elliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. 4, Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions, May 1942–August 1942*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949, p. 70.

²Morison, 1949, p. 74.

³Morison, 1949, p. 75.

⁴Morison, 1949, pp. 87–93, provides the order of battle for these three Japanese forces, as well as that for the U.S. forces available for the defense of Midway.

⁵Also called the first mobile force, under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo (Morison, 1949, p. 88).

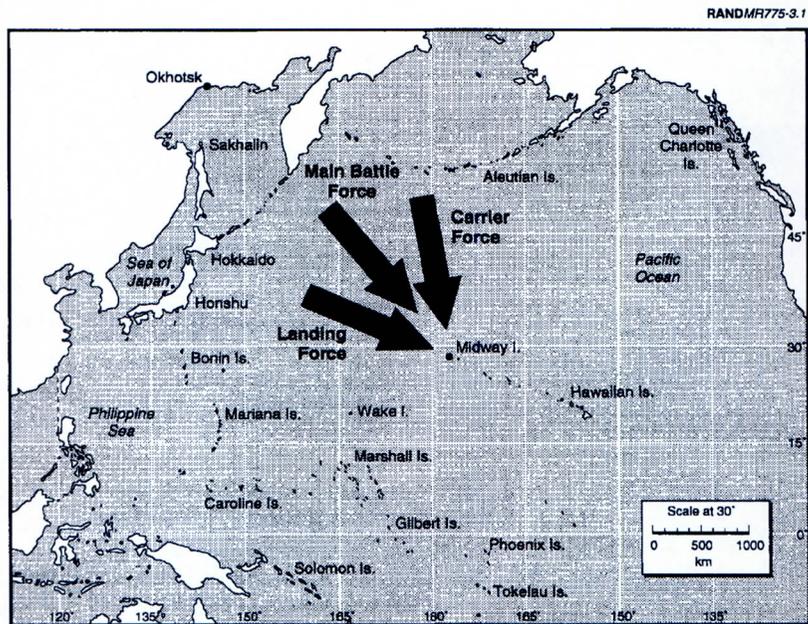


Figure 3.1—The Japanese Concept of Operation

- an invasion or occupation force with transports approaching from the west⁶
- a main battle force on battleships approaching between the first two, so as to support both.⁷

A diversionary attack by the Japanese was to be made on the Aleutian Islands at the same time. The larger plan was as follows:

⁶Also called the Midway occupation force, under the command of Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo (Morison, 1949, p. 88).

⁷Also called the main body and the First Fleet, under the command of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto (Morison, 1949, p. 89).

Admiral Yamamoto [was] determined to complete the neutralization of Pearl Harbor. His weapon would again be the airplane, but his objective was twofold. The entire Combined Fleet would accompany an invasion force to Midway Island in the western Hawaiian group. Presumably the Americans would commit their remaining two or three carriers to defend Midway. Nagumo's four carriers or Yamamoto's battleships, far superior to the enemy, would destroy the unescorted US carriers. The Japanese Army would then land on Midway, capture it, and convert the airfield into a base for . . . the systematic bombing of Hawaii. With the carriers sunk and Pearl Harbor under constant air attack, the United States might then realize the fruitlessness of trying to fight in the Pacific.⁸

The first objective of the Japanese carrier strike force was to "execute an aerial attack on Midway . . . destroying all enemy air forces stationed there"⁹ in preparation for the intended landing of the invasion or occupation force.

United States Navy cryptographers in Hawaii, working for Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of all Allied armed forces in the Pacific Ocean area (CINCPAC), were able to read fragments of the coded Japanese naval communications.¹⁰ By correlating these fragments with intelligence on Japanese forces and operations, they were able to deduce the outlines of the Japanese plans. But

Washington remained skeptical. For one thing, they still hadn't pinned down exactly what the Japanese meant by "AF." Rochefort [cryptography] was always sure it was Midway but he needed proof. Around May 10 he went to Layton [intelligence] with an idea. Could Midway be instructed to radio a fake message in plain English, saying their fresh-water machinery had broken down? Nimitz cheerfully went along with the ruse . . . Midway followed through . . .

⁸Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1968, p. 11.

⁹Morison, 1949, p. 95.

¹⁰E. B. Potter, *Nimitz*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976, p. 64, describes the code as "roughly 45,000 five-digit groups . . . most of which represented words and phrases. As a means of frustrating cryptanalysis, a book of 50,000 random five-digit groups was issued to Japanese communicators. The sender added a series of these random groups to the code groups of his message. . . . To further foil cryptanalysis, the Japanese from time to time issued new random-group books . . ."

and two days later a Japanese intercept was picked up, reporting that AF was low on fresh water.¹¹

Still, some were not convinced that the enemy would attack Midway and not Hawaii proper or even the West Coast of the United States. When Nimitz briefed Major General Delos Emmons, the local Army commander in Hawaii, Emmons pointed out that the intelligence was predicated on intent, not capabilities; and the Japanese possessed the capability to attack Hawaii. Nimitz did not back away from his staff's estimates, but, being both careful and conciliatory,

he assigned one of his staff, Captain J. M. Steele, to the specific job of keeping an eye on the Combat Intelligence Unit's material. Steele became a sort of "devil's advocate," deliberately challenging every estimate, deliberately making Rochefort and Layton back up every point.¹²

Despite General Emmons reservations, Nimitz had already "made the first vital decision of the campaign in accepting the estimate of his fleet intelligence officer that Midway and the Aleutians were the enemy's real objectives":¹³

As early as 20 May [two weeks before the attack] Admiral Nimitz issued an estimate of the enemy force that was accurate as far as it went—and even alarming. . . . Although the picture was not complete, the composition, approximate routes and timetable of the enemy forces that immediately threatened Midway were so accurately deduced that on 23 May, Rear Admiral Bellinger, the Naval air commander at Pearl, was able to predict the Japanese plan of attack. . . .¹⁴

By May 25, a little more than a week before the attack, further details of the Japanese plans were laid bare, including "the various units, the ships, the captains, the course, the launching time—everything . . .

¹¹Walter Lord, *Incredible Victory*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 23.

¹²Lord, 1967, p. 25.

¹³Morison, 1949, p. 80.

¹⁴Morison, 1949, p. 80.

the exact battle order and operating plan of the Japanese Striking Force.”¹⁵

Midway was reinforced against the impending Japanese attack, but neither the quantity nor the quality of the forces that could be stationed there was sufficient to give high confidence of a successful defense. Search plans were drawn up to detect the approaching Japanese fleets. It was at this point that the possibility emerged of a flanking attack on the Japanese carrier strike force that was expected to approach Midway from the northwest. Nimitz’s staff aviation officer noted that “the plan will leave an excellent flanking area northeast of Midway for our carriers.”¹⁶

The naval strike forces available in Hawaii were limited to three aircraft carriers, one of them recently damaged in the Battle of Coral Sea. Admiral Nimitz dispatched Admiral Raymond Ames Spruance¹⁷ with two of the carriers as Task Force 16 and, subsequently, Admiral F. J. Fletcher with the third, quickly repaired carrier as Task Force 17 to protect Midway and to inflict damage on the Japanese forces:

Admiral Fletcher, as senior to Admiral Spruance, became O.T.C. (Officer in Tactical Command) as soon as their rendezvous was effected. As he possessed no aviation staff . . . it was probably fortunate that Spruance exercised practically an independent command during the crucial actions. . . . Neither [Spruance] nor Fletcher exercised any control of the air and ground forces on Midway Island, over the submarines deployed in their area, or over [the] force in the Aleutians. The overall commander was Admiral Nimitz, who remained perforce at his Pearl Harbor headquarters.¹⁸

¹⁵Lord, 1967, p. 27.

¹⁶The staff officer was Captain A. C. Davis (Lord, 1967, p. 29).

¹⁷Of Nimitz’s choice of Admiral Spruance, Morison (1949, p. 82) has this to say: “A happy choice indeed, for Spruance was not merely competent; he had the level head and cool judgment that would be required to deal with new contingencies and a fluid situation; a man secure within.”

¹⁸Morison, 1949, p. 85.

By the terminology of that time, Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii retained broad tactical control of all forces engaged in the defense of Midway.¹⁹ By today's terminology, we would say that Admiral Fletcher had tactical control and Admiral Nimitz had operational control.²⁰

THE PLANS

On the basis of the intelligence available to him, Admiral Nimitz drew up an operational plan (CINCPAC Operation Plan No. 29-42) for defending Midway. This plan was remarkably detailed with respect to the Japanese fleet elements that were involved, their lines of approach, and timing. "This catalog of chilling details was followed by the American answer: an outline of the tactics [Nimitz] proposed to follow. Specific tasks were assigned each of the various US forces."²¹

Although some of the details were reasonable conjectures about Japanese naval practices, many were the result of intelligence gathered or correlated through cryptographic analysis of Japanese naval communications. Events would prove the plan to be accurate in all of its essentials. The plan was made available to all subordinates who were directing forces, on Midway, afloat, and even those who would take to the air:

To those eligible to see it, the meticulous intelligence on the Japanese movements seemed almost incredible. Not knowing where it came from—and perhaps having read too many spy thrillers—[one of the carrier officers] could only say to himself, "That man of ours in Tokyo is worth every cent we pay him."²²

¹⁹Morison (1949, p. 79) puts it this way: "Admiral Nimitz . . . exercised strategic and *broad tactical direction* of all American forces, naval or military, deployed in the Pacific Ocean. . . ." Potter (1976, p. 89) puts it another way: "Admiral Nimitz, acting as coordinator, was retaining *overall tactical command*—land, sea, and air." (All emphasis added.)

²⁰RADM James A. Winnefeld, USN (Ret.), in a comment on an earlier draft of this case study.

²¹Lord, 1967, p. 35.

²²Lord, 1967, p. 35.

According to plan, the three U.S. carriers were deployed to a position northeast of Midway where they could bring their aircraft to cover Midway as well as to bear on the flank of the Japanese carrier forces that were expected to approach Midway from the northwest (see Figure 3.2). They were less well positioned to reach the Japanese invasion and main battle forces, which were expected to approach Midway from more westerly directions:

[Spruance] saw at once the advantage of placing his force on [the Japanese strike force's] flank and the possibility of attacking the Japanese carriers while their planes were raiding Midway. Spruance also made the prudent observation that the US carrier forces should not proceed west of Midway in search of the enemy before the enemy carriers were substantially disabled. The Japanese might

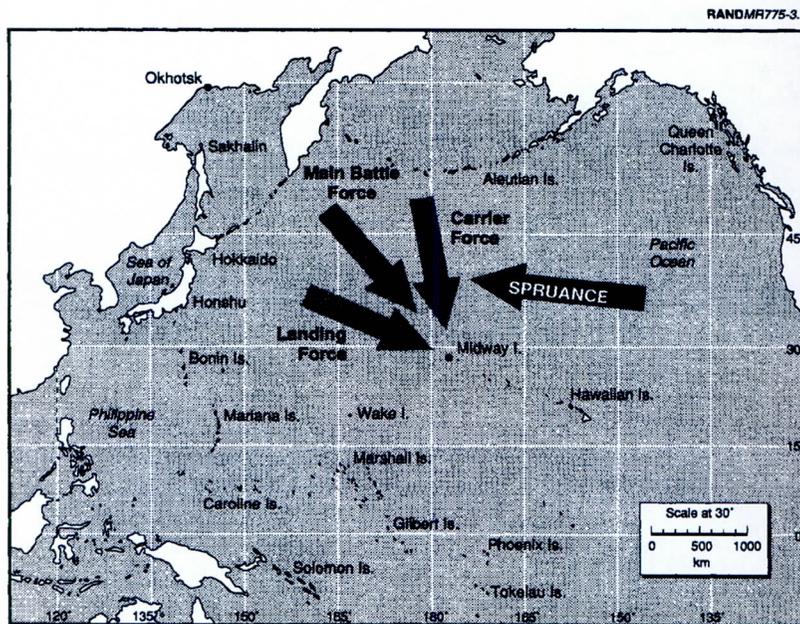


Figure 3.2—Nimitz's Concept

alter their plans and head for Pearl Harbor, in which event the American forces might find themselves bypassed and unable to intervene.²³

[Spruance] had already made certain definite decisions. He would not come within 700 miles of Wake Island, no matter what the temptation. He knew the Japanese had beefed up the place, and he did not want to mix with land-based aviation. Nor did he intend to permit the Japanese to draw him so far west that they could close in with their superior surface strength and clobber him.²⁴

The U.S. carrier forces were directed to protect Midway by finding and attacking the Japanese carriers. In pursuit of those objectives, they were generally directed to balance the risk to the U.S. carriers against the damage that might be inflicted on the Japanese:

In carrying out the task assigned . . . you will be governed by the principle of calculated risk, which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of exposure of your force to attack by superior enemy forces without good prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage on the enemy.²⁵

THE BATTLE

The three Japanese fleets approached Midway as anticipated by Nimitz's intelligence and operational plan. On June 3, 1942, with the Japanese carrier strike force to the northwest of Midway still undetected under the cover of seasonal fog and overcast skies, the U.S. aircraft based at Midway discovered the Japanese invasion fleet approaching from the west. The message sent into Midway from a Navy flying boat said, "Main body . . . bearing 262 [almost due west of Midway], distance 700 [miles]. . . ."²⁶ Upon hearing this, Nimitz took the precaution of relaying the message to his carrier forces in the event they had not heard it directly themselves and then added the

²³Potter, 1976, pp. 84, 85.

²⁴Gordon W. Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982, p. 112.

²⁵Morison, 1949, p. 84; Lord, 1967, p. 36.

²⁶Potter, 1976, p. 91.

warning, "That is not repeat not the enemy striking force—stop—That is the landing force. The striking force will hit from the northwest at daylight tomorrow."²⁷ Army bombers based at Midway then attacked the invasion fleet, but with only modest success.²⁸

The main show was expected the following day, on the morning of June 4:

It was assumed that the Japanese Striking Force would begin launching at dawn—attack planes southward toward Midway, search planes north, east, and south. At that hour the American [carrier] task forces, on course southwest through the night, should be 200 miles north of Midway, ready to launch on receiving the first report from US search planes of the locations, course, and speed of the enemy. With good timing and good luck they would catch the Japanese carriers with half their planes away attacking Midway. With better timing and better luck they might catch the enemy carriers while they were recovering the Midway attack group. That the Americans might catch the Japanese carriers in the highly vulnerable state of rearming and refueling the recovered planes was almost too much to hope for.²⁹

At dawn, June 4 . . . the report they were awaiting . . . came, an urgent message in plain language, sent via the cable from Midway: "Plane reports two carriers and Main Body ships bearing 320, course 135, speed 25, distance 180."³⁰

Upon hearing this, Nimitz remarked to his intelligence officer (Layton), "Well, you were only five miles, five degrees, and five minutes off."³¹ By this time, the Japanese carrier air strike was on its

²⁷Prange, 1982, p. 170.

²⁸They were able to damage one Japanese tanker (Morison, 1949, p. 99).

²⁹Potter, 1976, p. 87.

³⁰Potter, 1976, p. 93

³¹Potter, 1976, p. 93. Prange (1987, p. 102) quotes Layton as having said, "I anticipate that first contact will be made by our search planes out of Midway at 0600 Midway time, 4 June, 325 degrees northwest at a distance of 175 miles." Potter, 1976, p. 83, quotes Layton slightly differently when Nimitz pressed him to be specific: "All right then, I've previously given you the intelligence that the carriers will probably attack Midway on the morning of the 4th of June, so we'll pick the 4th of June for the day. They'll come in from the northwest on bearing 325 degrees and they will be sighted at about 175 miles from Midway, and the time will be about 0600 Midway time."

way to Midway. The Midway-based aircraft had been launched at dawn for another attack on the invasion fleet to the west, but were diverted against the Japanese carrier strike force as soon as it revealed itself to the northwest. However, the results were even less than those against the invasion force on the previous day:

[The] land-based air attacks on the morning of 4 June resulted only in severe losses to the Midway-based groups and some dearly-bought experience. An examination of Japanese records and the interrogations of Japanese officers by United States Army officers after the war will convince the most optimistic that no damage and only a few casualties were inflicted on enemy ships by land-based planes, whether Army, Navy or Marine Corps, on the Fourth of June.³²

That indictment, however, does not speak to the effect of these attacks upon the Japanese. The attacks from the Midway-based aircraft made the Japanese realize that the air threat from Midway had not been eliminated and that they would have to reattack the island with their carrier aircraft. It was this threat of further air attacks from Midway that led to the undoing of the Japanese carriers.³³

The Midway air force was not, in practice, to inflict crippling damage on Yamamoto's fleet; but its existence was to invest American capabilities with a psychological menace that troubled the Japanese throughout the battle, while its intervention, on one if not two occasions, was to distort their decision-making with disastrous effect.³⁴

Meanwhile, the U.S. carriers, lurking in "the fog of war" on the flanks to the northeast, were listening to the radio reports between Midway

³²Morison, 1949, p. 111.

³³Immediately after the first Japanese carrier air strike against Midway, the Japanese air commander radioed back to the carriers, "There is need for a second attack wave." (Morison, 1949, p. 107). One of the authors (CHB) is indebted to Rear Admiral James Winnefeld, USN (Ret.), for bringing this point about the value of the land-based air attacks to his attention.

³⁴John Keegan, *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare*, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 225.

and its aircraft and prepared to launch their aircraft against the Japanese carriers:

Spruance had originally intended to launch his planes . . . when there would be less than a hundred miles of ocean for them to cover, provided the Japanese carriers maintained course toward the atoll. But, as reports came in of the strike on Midway, he decided, on the advice of his chief of staff, to launch two hours earlier in the hope of catching the carriers in the act of refueling planes on deck for a second strike on the atoll.³⁵

The U.S.-carrier-based torpedo bombers arrived first and sustained heavy losses without inflicting any damage on the Japanese carrier force.³⁶ Again, however, the effect of the attack was to be measured not so much in damage to Japanese ships as to Japanese decisions.

The dive-bombers had difficulty in locating the carrier strike force and arrived late, but they caught the Japanese at an extreme disadvantage:

- The Japanese had successfully repelled waves of attacks from the U.S. Midway-based bombers and then from the carrier-based torpedo bombers.
- Their fighter protection had been drawn down to low altitudes while engaging the U.S. torpedo bombers.
- They had recovered their aircraft from the first strike on Midway and were equivocating between arming them for another attack on Midway or a strike against the U.S. carriers, which had now made their presence obvious.

Without prior coordination, the dive-bombers from the three U.S. carriers separately and successfully attacked three of the four Japanese carriers, wrecking them and leaving them sinking. Aircraft from the fourth Japanese carrier then found and attacked the single carrier of Task Force 17 under Admiral Fletcher's command, damaging it but leaving it salvageable and its aircraft able to land on

³⁵Morison, 1949, p. 113.

³⁶Morison points out that "out of 41 torpedo planes from the three carriers, only six returned, and not a single torpedo reached the enemy ships" (1949, p. 121).

the two carriers of Task Force 16 under the command of Admiral Spruance. After this, Admiral Fletcher effectively relinquished the U.S. command afloat to Admiral Spruance.

Admiral Spruance launched a second strike in search of the Japanese carriers, found the fourth one as well as the three burning wrecks, and completed the destruction of all four Japanese carriers. He then retired to the east during the night in order to avoid a night surface engagement with the Japanese main battle force:

Although not yet sure that [the fourth Japanese carrier] had sunk, Spruance found that knocking off the last Japanese carrier left him with a problem: *What do we do now?* he asked himself. *If we steam westward what will we run into during the night?* He had no use for futile heroics, and did not care to invite a night engagement with his carriers. The Japanese had far superior surface forces, they excelled in night operations, and Spruance did not have enough destroyers to screen and protect his flattops.³⁷

Indeed, the Japanese main battle force under Admiral Yamamoto initially planned to pursue the American carriers for just that opportunity; however, "Yamamoto realized that, if he persisted in pushing forces eastward in search of a night battle, he was likely to get a dawn air attack instead."³⁸ Reluctantly, Yamamoto ordered a general retirement of the Japanese forces.

Early the next day, Spruance turned westward again and conducted further air strikes against the remaining Japanese fleets, which were now mostly retreating to the west. In his report of the action, Spruance said,

I did not feel justified in risking a night encounter with possibly superior enemy forces, but on the other hand I did not want to be too far away from Midway the next morning. I wished to have a position from which either to follow up retreating enemy forces or to break up a landing attack on Midway.³⁹

³⁷Prange, 1987, p. 301. Emphasis as in the original.

³⁸Morison, 1949, p. 139.

³⁹Morison, 1949, p. 142, citing CTF 16 Action Report, June 16, p. 3.

Prange defends Spruance's caution, noting that "his mission was to protect Midway. This he could not do by leaving it to the tender mercies of a Japanese invasion force. . . ." Moreover,

the possibility of Task Forces Sixteen and Seventeen annihilating the [entire] enemy fleet had never crossed Nimitz's mind or anyone else's. In canceling out four Japanese carriers, Spruance and his men had done all and infinitely more than was expected of them.⁴⁰

Although other air, submarine, and surface actions were involved in the Battle of Midway, the carrier strikes were the decisive engagements. Three U.S. carriers had destroyed four Japanese carriers with the loss (ultimately, to a Japanese submarine) of only one of their own.⁴¹ The Japanese plan to invade Midway could not be completed because air superiority had been lost to Midway's defenders. The battle is generally considered to have been the turning point of the war in the Pacific.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

For the most part, Spruance and Fletcher faithfully executed Nimitz's operational plan. The only discretion they exercised under that plan was deciding precisely when to launch their air strikes and when to retire or advance from the flanking position. The communications between Spruance and Fletcher prior to the battle were limited to visual signals, because of their fear of being detected through radio transmissions. Even so, the following visually transmitted message from Spruance to the ships of his Task Force 16 two days before the battle gives some idea of the clarity of the impending situation to the tactical commanders:

An attack for the purpose of capturing Midway is expected. The attacking force may be composed of all combatant types including four or five carriers, transports and train vessels. If presence of Task Forces 16 and 17 remains unknown to enemy we should be able to make surprise flank attacks on enemy carriers from position northeast of Midway. Further operations will be based on result of

⁴⁰Prange, 1987, p. 302.

⁴¹Prange, 1987, p. 396, provides a tally of the losses on both sides during the battle.

these attacks, damage inflicted by Midway forces, and information of enemy movements. The successful conclusion of the operation now commencing will be of great value to our country. Should carriers become separated during attacks by enemy aircraft, they will endeavor to remain within visual touch.⁴²

Once Spruance and Fletcher sailed from Hawaii, Nimitz had no closed command-and-control loop (two-way communications) with them; he could broadcast to them, but they could not return his calls without revealing their positions. As noted earlier in this chapter, when aircraft from Midway detected the Japanese invasion force to the west and incorrectly reported it by radio as "the main body," Nimitz, fearing that his carrier task forces might be misled, broadcast a correction, hoping his carrier forces were listening. Otherwise, Nimitz's knowledge of his forces afloat was based solely on his own plan and his assumption that it was being followed.

On the eve of the battle between the carriers, Nimitz broadcast a message to his carrier task force commanders that was not unlike the exhortation to duty in the signal hoisted by Nelson as his fleet went into battle at Trafalgar:

The situation is developing as expected. Carriers, our most important objective, should soon be located. Tomorrow may be the day you can give them the works. The whole course of the war in the Pacific may hinge on the developments of the next two or three days.⁴³

Communications between Midway and Hawaii were not so circumscribed, because a submarine cable between the two was not subject to enemy monitoring or exploitation:

Another ace up Nimitz's sleeve was the Pacific cable which since 1903 had linked Honolulu to Manila, with Midway as one of its stations. This undersea line carried the bulk of the heavy pre-battle communications exchange between Pearl Harbor and Midway—a line which the Japanese could not tap. Normal radio traffic from

⁴²Morison, 1949, p. 98, and E. P. Forrestal, *Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, USN: A Study in Command*, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1966, pp. 39, 40.

⁴³Potter, 1976, p. 92.

shore to ship thus could not give the Japanese a true picture of what the Americans were up to.⁴⁴

Moreover, unlike the carriers, radio communications from both Midway and Hawaii could not be exploited by the enemy to locate the U.S. forces; the positions of the islands were certainly well known. So, Nimitz watched the battle unfold mostly from what he heard from Midway or overheard from the sporadic reports of aviators and submariners as they detected or engaged the enemy. But for the queen on his chessboard, his three carriers, he had to rely upon his plan and upon the men to whom he had entrusted its execution.

NIMITZ'S COMMAND CONCEPT

Recall that an ideal command concept for an historical battle is a hypothetical statement that, under the circumstances prevailing at the time, would have been clearly sufficient for subordinate commanders to execute successfully the responsibilities that actually befell them during the battle, without exchanging additional information with their superior commander. For the Battle of Midway, something close to the ideal appears to have existed in writing: Nimitz's Op Plan 29-42. It may be that an ideal command concept for Midway would have been even sparer than that plan.

Indeed, the available literature suggests that an ideal command concept could be written for Midway quite easily from scratch now, without prior inspection of Op Plan 29-42. It might consist of the following:

I. ABOUT THE ENEMY AND HIS PLANS:

1. The enemy [Japan] is expected to attack Midway on the morning of June 4 for the purposes of (a) occupying Midway and (b) engaging and defeating our [U.S.] naval forces in a decisive battle.

⁴⁴Prange, 1987, p. 105.

2. The enemy attack will be carried out by three forces: (a) a carrier strike force approaching Midway from the northwest, (b) an occupation force approaching from the west, and (c) a main battle force approaching from a line between these two. All these forces will be accompanied by heavy screens of cruisers and destroyers and will be preceded by submarine and patrol aircraft operations.
3. You should expect the attack to begin with an enemy carrier air attack upon Midway for the purpose of suppressing its air defenses prior to its being bombarded by surface ships and occupied.
4. If, at any time, the enemy should detect major elements of our naval forces within range, you should expect that he will divert his forces to effect their engagement and destruction.

II. ABOUT OUR FORCE DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS:

1. We shall reinforce Midway with the purposes of (a) defending the island against occupation, (b) inflicting damage on the attacking enemy forces, and (c) locating the enemy forces so that other U.S. forces can be brought to bear.
2. We shall deploy all available carrier forces to the north and east of Midway so that they may be brought to bear (a) on the flank of the enemy carrier strike force, and (b) in support of the defense of Midway.
3. Our strategic objective is the defense of Midway, but our tactical objective is to inflict as much damage as possible upon the enemy carriers with the least exposure and damage to our own. The measure of tactical success will be disproportionate damage to the Japanese carriers.
4. If the enemy carriers can be put out of action while we retain our air operations from either Midway or our carriers, the enemy cannot prevail in his objectives. Therefore, the primary enemy targets for all of our aviation strike assets, at Midway and on our carriers, should be the enemy carriers.

5. To protect our carriers from exposure, (a) maintain absolute radio silence until their position has been unambiguously ascertained by the enemy, and (b) withhold air strikes until the enemy carriers have been located.

III. ABOUT CONTINGENCIES:

1. We should take care not to expose our carriers to superior enemy forces in the forms of (a) night surface actions, (b) battleship gunfire, and (b) land-based aviation from Wake Island.
2. Our aircraft are more replaceable than are our pilots; and both are more replaceable than our carriers. If the enemy carriers are located, press the attacks without regard to the recovery of our aircraft.
3. Be prepared, before launching air strikes against the enemy carriers, to distribute or balance the weight of your attacks among the enemy carriers that may present themselves as targets.
4. Locating the enemy naval forces before the enemy locates ours will be crucial to our success. Therefore, deploy submarine and aircraft patrols aggressively into the sectors where the enemy is expected.

ASSESSMENT

The Battle of Midway would appear to be a near-perfect manifestation of our command concepts theory:

- A commander (Nimitz) with a sound and detailed concept (thanks to outstanding cryptographic and intelligence analysis) of how to succeed in an impending battle.

- The thorough communication of that concept to subordinates through a detailed operational plan (86 copies were made of Op Plan 29-42).⁴⁵
- The need for little in the way of command and control communications during the execution of that concept, either up (advising of errors in the concept) or down (corrective adjustments in the concept).

The only departure from the ideal was the commander's intervention when he felt compelled to correct the interpretation of an aviator's sighting report about the location of the enemy's main force. The commander could as well have said, "Ignore that report, which is at variance with my concept; stick to my concept!" As it turned out, even that communication proved unnecessary: His subordinates (Spruance and Fletcher) in control of the critical forces (the carriers) knew that the sighting report was incorrect and had every intention of following through with the commander's concept. Nimitz could have gone on extended vacation when his carriers left Pearl Harbor; his concept was sufficient to carry the burden of battle and ensure the victory.

Spruance insisted after the war that "the credit must be given to Nimitz. Not only did he accept the intelligence picture but he acted upon it at once."⁴⁶ And those actions include the dissemination of a clear concept to all who needed it so that they could turn it into a reality.

Whereas much was left to the discretion of commanders hand-picked by Nimitz, the concept that is the subject of Chapter Four demonstrates a thoroughly developed planning cycle—five months spent in rehearsal according to doctrine—and a drive conducted counter to the expectations of the enemy.

⁴⁵Lord, 1967, p. 35. According to Prange (1982, p. 99), the plan was distributed to "all task force, squadron, and division commanders."

⁴⁶Prange, 1982, p. 393.