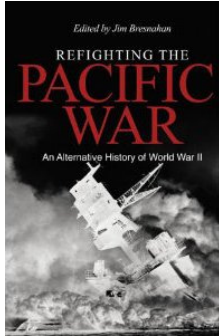


Refighting the Pacific War: An Alternative History of World War II



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Sample Chapter

Yamamoto hoped to make Midway the penultimate victory, a smashing success that would force the Americans to sue for peace or at least give Japan enough time to consolidate her new empire.

Unfortunately for Japan, Yamamoto scattered his carrier strength. While two light carriers supported operations in the Aleutians some 1,800 miles north of Midway, the four fleet carriers of the 1st Carrier Striking Force, led again by Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, was handed the job of softening up Midway for the landing of five thousand troops and support personnel. A line of submarines would patrol between Midway and Hawaii to alert Nagumo of the American response. Yamamoto's Main Force, with seven battleships, including Yamamoto's flagship *Yamato*, would sail three hundred miles behind the 1st Carrier Striking Force.

American cryptanalysts uncovered just enough information to give Nimitz an opening. Task Force 16, built around *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, departed Pearl Harbor for Midway on May 28 with a new commander, Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance, a replacement for the ailing Vice

Admiral William Halsey, who was laid up with a skin disease. Two days later, Task Force 17, with a patched-up *Yorktown*, left Pearl bound for Midway. Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, on board *Yorktown*, would be in overall tactical command of both task forces.

By the spring of 1942, Yamamoto's biggest advantage rested in his aircraft carriers. The same flight decks that wreaked havoc at Pearl Harbor--*Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, *Soryu*, *Shokaku*, and *Zuikaku*--could potentially wipe out the remaining U.S. carriers if grouped together, as had been the case on December 7.

However, Coral Sea had cost Yamamoto the *Shokaku*, which underwent repairs for bomb hits, and the *Zuikaku*, which had to rebuild her air squadrons.³ Two other carriers, *Junyo* and *Ryujo*, received tickets for the Aleutians, not Midway.

That left Nagumo with just four fleet carriers. Instead of delaying the Midway operation to allow *Zuikaku* to participate, as desired by the Navy General Staff, Yamamoto stuck with his original timetable, forcing Nagumo to make do with *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, and *Soryu*.⁴

What if Yamamoto had delayed operations against Port Moresby and brought six fleet carriers to Midway, or had used all of his carriers against Port Moresby in May, shelving the Midway plan?

Jon Parshall

If the Japanese had brought all six of their carriers to either Coral Sea or Midway, they probably would not have lost. The margin of victory at Midway, for instance, was slim indeed. With another two carriers in his fleet, Nagumo might have absorbed the losses of the morning of June

4 and still gone on to sink all his American counterparts. At Coral Sea, with six carriers to two American, the Japanese would almost certainly have walked away victorious and sunk both American carriers.

Anthony P. Tully

It is this option that provides the real key to a possible way out of the “Midway tunnel” that resulted from Yamamoto’s fixation on the central Pacific thrust. In fact, in the writing of *Shattered Sword* an opinion already held was only further confirmed. The Japanese army had made a more correct assessment that the southwest Pacific offered the best hope of both forcing a decisive battle and perhaps some kind of political solution and compromise, gained by the leverage that a threat to Australia might bring.

Coral Sea, Operation Mo, partly misfired because it was treated as a “stepchild” operation by Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet. Even the fleet carriers assigned--5th Carrier Division--were the division judged the weakest link of the Kido Butai team that had rampaged across the seas from Pearl Harbor to the Indian Ocean. If Yamamoto had not insisted on Midway, or at least had allowed its postponement for several more weeks in favor of a maximum effort in the Coral Sea, the potential picture would have changed dramatically.

Homeward bound from the Indian Ocean operation, Nagumo’s Kido Butai would have stopped over at Mako. From Mako, the *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* would have detached and proceeded to the Battle of the Coral Sea, while Nagumo’s other three carriers continued north for the homeland. In so doing, the latter would have arrived almost in time to intercept the U.S. carriers involved in the Doolittle operation, but for purposes of this speculation, this fact is important for another reason. Nagumo’s itinerary shows that it was just as possible for *all* of

Kido Butai to have proceeded to the Coral Sea, even as the Doolittle Raid attacked Japan. In other words, the full strength of Kido Butai would have arrived with killing force in the Coral Sea, with only *Yorktown* and *Lexington* able to oppose it at first, with *Enterprise* and *Hornet* to follow quickly.

Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet could have had their “decisive” carrier battle right there in the Coral Sea, in range of some Japanese air support and reconnaissance and with many of the advantages of surprise and concentration of force on their side. Furthermore, the Japanese army was almost certainly correct that the only remaining way after Pearl Harbor’s miscarriage (politically) to obtain a political solution was some kind of threat to Australia as a bargaining chip. Failing that, strengthening the defense perimeter against the inevitable counteroffensive would be better served by an “expanded Coral Sea” plan than a Midway operation.

Peter C. Smith

Any delay of the Port Moresby attack would have given the Australians and Americans a much-needed breathing space to consolidate the New Guinea defenses and would have been counter-productive to the Japanese. There was no need to send six carriers to the Coral Sea and, with Midway already well along in planning, it would never have been contemplated. Don’t forget: the whole idea of the Midway operation was to bring about the destruction of what was left of the U.S. Fleet, *not* the actual occupation of the island itself, something most postwar historians tend to overlook and which, indeed, seems to have been overlooked by many Japanese at the time. As in the Battle of Verdun in 1916, the *original* aim of the operation was lost once it was under way, and the obvious allure of acquiring real estate assumed more importance than the

destruction of the enemy. In both battles, the secondary objective took over from the planned objective in the minds of the combatants once under way.

Nick Sarantakes

If the Japanese had brought six carriers to Midway, the battle would have had a significantly different ending. There was a good deal of happenstance that ended up shaping the course of this engagement. One of the most important was the arrival of U.S. dive-bombers over the Japanese carriers while their fighter coverage was out of position. Even then, the Americans needed even more luck--only ten of their bombs hit the carriers. The presence of another two carriers would have increased the number of planes available to the Japanese and made their defenses too strong for the Americans to penetrate. The most likely result of all from having these two ships would have been a modest Japanese victory at Midway. The Americans would still have lost the *Yorktown*--there is no reason to think otherwise--but these two additional carriers would have made no difference in determining the fate of the *Hornet* and *Enterprise*. Both would have survived, while all four--or rather six--Japanese carriers survived. The most important thing about this battle would not have been the loss of Midway Island--it would have been extremely difficult for the Japanese to hold it for long--but the fact that the Imperial Japanese Navy would not have lost four carriers' worth of mechanics and maintenance crews. The death of these highly trained and difficult to replace individuals contributed in significant, but indirect, ways to Japan's loss of air superiority as the war progressed. Less maintenance and upkeep reduced plane performance, which slowly but surely lead to the loss of pilots. These individuals were even more difficult for the Japanese to replace given the rigorous nature of their flight schools.

Douglas V. Smith

If the Japanese had had the *Shokaku* and the *Zuikaku* available at Midway, they would have had an additional 144 carrier aircraft available. None of the hard choices that have been critiqued repeatedly in books would have confronted Vice Admiral Nagumo, as he would not have been placed in a position to weigh the trade-offs inherent in using his fighters to protect his strikes against Midway, defend his carriers, and protect his torpedo planes and bombers en route to the U.S. carriers once they were located. Moreover, if the Japanese had concentrated on their Midway operation and had been successful in sinking all four U.S. carriers (because in this case *Lexington* would not have been sunk at Coral Sea and would have been available at Midway), they would have achieved their strategic objective de facto at Port Moresby. There would have been no U.S. carriers (assuming all were sunk at Midway) to contest a Japanese move against Port Moresby, and thus the Japanese objective there would have essentially been won at Midway. Ironically, by deciding to risk the *Shokaku* and the *Zuikaku* for a secondary strategic objective at Port Moresby the Japanese significantly raised the risk inherent in attempting to achieve their major strategic objective at Midway.

It is true that the ultimate outcome at Midway may well have been reversed if the Japanese had achieved their strategic objective in the Coral Sea battle. This would have put the United States on the strategic defensive until late 1943 when new-construction warships, including carriers, started entering fleet service, and with U.S. submarines' torpedoes failing to work properly until September of 1943 there might well have been no choice on the American side but to come to some kind of negotiated peace while under attack throughout the Pacific. But one must consider that Admiral Nimitz probably would not have risked *Enterprise* and *Hornet* at Midway had he lost both *Yorktown* and *Lexington* at Coral Sea. This could have meant that the

overall strategic situation--only two carriers in the Pacific until *Saratoga* returned to action in early June 1942--would have been exactly the same as after *Lexington* was lost at Coral Sea and *Yorktown* at Midway, except that the Japanese would have still had the four carriers of Kido Butai available.

Could the Japanese have scratched together an air group to allow Zuikaku to participate at Midway, or could the operation have been delayed to allow both Zuikaku and Shokaku to take part?

Jon Parshall

As my research for *Shattered Sword* makes clear, yes, they could have. With a little scraping, *Zuikaku* probably could have put together an air wing of about sixty aircraft for the operation.

As for delaying the Midway operation: not unless the Japanese were willing to modify their overall operational schedule with regards to follow-on objectives in the Fijis and so on, which is just another way of saying, "Not unless the Japanese were willing to modify their entire strategic outlook on the war." Frankly, the reason they didn't have *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*'s services at Midway was because their naval GHQ and Combined Fleet didn't have the mental discipline to assign rational levels of force to the target set in front of them. They were trying to gobble up too many objectives with too little force in too quick a time. Instead, they should have been doing fewer operations, but carrying a bigger stick to each of them.

Ronald W. Russell

Yes, but Parshall and Tully have shown that it would have required a fundamental change of doctrinal mindset that the Japanese weren't going to undertake in early 1942. To the Japanese, the air group was an integral part of the ship. With *Zuikaku's* air group decimated at Coral Sea, their only focus was to rebuild it. Taking squadrons from other ships would have been the same as trying to take the engines or guns from other ships. They didn't think that way, at least not then.

There were also some timing issues at Midway Island concerning the tides, the moon, and so forth. June 3–4 was optimum for an amphibious assault, or so the Japanese thought. As for *Zuikaku*, I don't know how much time was required to reconstitute its air group, and I think *Shokaku's* serious damage at Coral Sea didn't get fixed until August.

Peter C. Smith

No, they had hoped to, but it was just not possible; there were insufficient trained aircrews on hand. According to one Japanese signal they even intended to add *Shokaku*, if she proved fit to fight on return to Japan, to the Northern Force, *not* to Kido Butai. In fact, her injuries proved to be much worse than they originally thought, and she almost capsized on the way home. By overestimating American losses, the Japanese naval high command considered Nagumo had sufficient strength to carry out *both* missions with just four carriers.

Due to conditions of moonlight for the planned bombardments, and tides for the invasion craft to get over the reefs, and other essential (but overlooked as not glamorous) considerations, the Japanese landing on Midway, if it was to take place, had to be done when it was done. Delay would have brought *Saratoga* into the scheme of things, and a long delay probably the *Wasp* as

well. This would have negated the arrival of the patched-up *Shokaku* and the replenished *Zuikaku* with freshly trained air groups.

In sending his carriers to Midway, Nimitz was risking precious assets. He later told Ray Spruance that while Midway was important, the U.S. carriers *were not* expendable.⁵

What if Nimitz had allowed Midway to fall?

Jon Parshall

That would have been a perfectly reasonable decision on Nimitz's part. Midway was completely irrelevant to the defense of Hawaii, since it was outside the range of most land aircraft.

Furthermore, it's my strong opinion (as stated previously) that the Japanese landing forces slated to attack the place didn't have nearly enough muscle to wrest the atoll from the Americans. (See *Shattered Sword* for a more detailed treatment of that subject.)

Even if the Japanese had managed to take the place, their ability to keep it in supply was marginal at best. It was exposed to submarine attacks against any ships bringing in supplies. Its own airfield was relatively small, and couldn't house a terribly large air group. Nor could those aircraft be adequately dispersed and sheltered from air attack. The Japanese themselves, as confirmed in a study done by their naval GHQ's Plans section in March 1942, didn't think they could hold the place. Nimitz, then, could have taken it back practically at will at any time the slender Japanese logistical thread looked like fraying.

Frank Snyder

Nimitz took two actions with respect to the defense of Midway: he beefed up the defenses at Midway, and he committed his three operational aircraft carriers, ostensibly to help defend Midway, but he actually positioned the carriers so that they would ambush the Japanese carrier force rather than interdict the initial Japanese air attack against Midway.

If he had taken neither action, Midway would have fallen to the Japanese. But if he had beefed up Midway itself, but had not committed his aircraft carriers, the outcome of the Japanese operation would have been in some doubt, and somewhat dependent on several other factors, including whether or not the fruits of the code-breaking were available, whether or not the U.S. submarines assembled off Midway were actively managed against the Japanese invasion fleets, whether or not the patrol torpedo (PT) boats added to the defenses of Midway were effective against an invasion force, and whether or not Japanese carrier aircraft could work effectively with Japanese ground troops.

The Japanese invasion of Midway might have succeeded, but it could have failed.

For more information, please visit <http://ww2db.com/refightingthepacificwar/>.