

Battle of Midway Remembered

By USS Midway Museum



Two World War II veterans reflect on the battle that turned the tide in the Pacific

Few military campaigns of World War II have been more chronicled than the Battle of Midway. And it's obvious why.

The American triumph after a brutal three-day engagement with a massive Japanese naval force in early June of 1942 turned the tide of the war in the Pacific. Noted military historian, Rear Adm. Samuel Eliot Morison, referred to it as six minutes that changed the world.

"At 10:24 Japan had been on top," said Morison. "Six minutes later on that bright June morning, three of her big carriers were on their flaming way to death."

The U.S. Navy's ultimate success at Midway came on the heels of the utter decimation of three torpedo squadrons launched from the aircraft carriers USS Hornet, USS Enterprise and USS Yorktown in the initial phase of the battle.

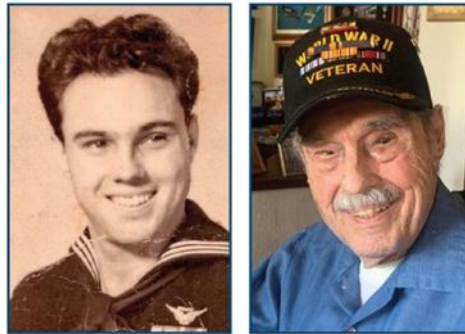
Flying obsolete Douglas TBD Devastator torpedo bombers, these slow and deliberate aircraft were no match for Japan's highly maneuverable Zero fighter planes. Shortly after 9 a.m. on June 4, and without fighter escort, 41 Devastators commenced their unprotected attack on the Japanese carriers. Enemy Zeros quickly blew them out of the sky.

Of the nearly four dozen Devastators that attacked the Japanese fleet that morning, only six managed to limp back to their carriers. For the USS Hornet's Torpedo Squadron 8, all of its aircraft were shot down. Only one pilot, Ensign George Gay, was spared after crash landing his bullet-riddle bomber into the sea.

Nearly 80 years later, two sailors from Torpedo Squadron 8 still remember the Battle of Midway as if it was yesterday.



"I wasn't very confident," said Ervin Wendt, a 105-year-old retired aviation ordnance-man who served with Torpedo Squadron 8 during the battle. "We were outmatched in the air with their Zeros against our TBDs. We were outnumbered all the way across the board in ships and planes."



"I was sorry to hear that several of my buddies were among those killed," said radioman Chuck Monroe, now 98 years old, after finding out that all of his squadron's planes were lost.

Despite the horrific loss of men and aircraft suffered by Torpedo Squadron 8 and its two sister squadrons, their sacrifice set up the highly-effective Dauntless SBD dive bomber squadrons to inflict lethal damage to three of the Japanese carriers.

"We caught the Japanese at the right time when they were taking torpedoes off their planes on the flight deck and replacing them with bombs. Our planes came in and sunk three of their carriers and later a fourth," said Ervin. "Although we lost our squadron first, we later caught them flat-footed."

"I felt avenging our fellow flyers was important," said Chuck. "Our Navy flight personnel were well trained and were more than capable of defeating the Japanese." On paper, the U.S. Navy was not positioned for victory at the Battle of Midway. The Americans were also still reeling from the heavy losses suffered six months earlier during the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor where more than 2,400 servicemen were killed, and 19 ships and more than 525 war planes were destroyed or damaged.

Although U.S. military planners rallied to bring as much naval combat power to bear, the Japanese battle force had a numerical advantage in the size of its fleet. Unbeknown to the Japanese, however, the Americans had advance knowledge on their invasion plan for Midway Island.

"The advantage for the U.S. was that we were notified," said Ervin. "We knew that Japanese were coming and where. It gave us time to get our forces together which helped a lot."

Since early 1942, the U.S. military had been decoding Japanese messages that indicated they were planning an operation against an American target in the Pacific that would later be determined as Midway Island, a tiny atoll nearly 1,300 miles west of Hawaii. U.S. Navy code breakers ultimately were able to uncover the Japanese battle plan as well as learn the timeframe for the attack.

The fight was tenacious and over the course of three days, the Japanese Navy lost four fleet carriers along with all of its aircraft. More than 3,000 Japanese sailors and aircrews perished.

"Even though Pearl Harbor was a Japanese victory, after their heavy losses at Midway, they were disgraced by their own country," said Ervin. "This took a toll on them emotionally. It played on the Japanese psyche."

"Midway set the stage for future successes," said Chuck. "I was absolutely sure we would win the Pacific war."

While the Americans' ability to break the Japanese code, and the courage and sacrifice of thousands of U.S. sailors and Marines carried the fight during this crucial battle 79 years ago, both Ervin and Chuck know that fortune also played a part in their victory at the Battle of Midway.

"It was a lot of good luck too," said Ervin.