The Battle Of Midway In The Pacific Essay, Research Paper

The Battle of Midway in the Pacific

Nothing distinguished the dawn of June 2, 1942, from countless other dawns that

had fallen over tiny Midway atoll in the North Pacific. Nothing, that is, except

the tension, the electric tension of men waiting for an enemy to make his move.

On Midway’s two main islands, Sand and Eastern, 3,632 United States Navy and

Marine Corps personnel, along with a few Army Air Force aircrews, stood at

battle stations in and near their fighters, bombers, and seaplanes, waiting for

the Japanese attack they had been expecting for weeks. The carrier battle of

Midway, one of the decisive naval battles in history, is well documented. But

the role played by the Midway garrison, which manned the naval air station on

the atoll during the battle, is not as well known. Midway lies 1,135 miles west-

northwest of Pearl Harbor, Oahu. The entire atoll is barely six miles in

diameter and consists of Sand and Eastern islands surrounded by a coral reef

enclosing a shallow lagoon. Midway was discovered in 1859 and annexed by the

United States in August 1867. Between 1903 and 1940, it served both as a cable

station on the Honolulu? Guam?Manila underwater telegraph line and as an airport

for the Pan American Airways China Clipper (Miracle 5). In March 1940, after a

report on U.S. Navy Pacific bases declared Midway second only to Pearl Harbor in

importance, construction of a formal naval air station began. Midway Naval Air

Station was placed in commission in August 1941. By that time, Midway’s

facilities included a large seaplane hangar and ramps, artificial harbor, fuel

storage tanks and several buildings. Sand Island was populated by hundreds of

civilian construction workers and a defense battalion of the Fleet Marine Force,

while Eastern Island boasted a 5,300-foot airstrip. Commander Cyril T. Simard, a

veteran naval pilot who had served as air officer on the carrier USS Langley and

as executive officer at the San Diego Air Station, was designated the atoll’s

commanding officer. Along with the naval personnel manning the air station was a

detachment of Marines. The first detachment was from the Marine 3rd Defense

Battalion; it was relieved on September 11, 1941, by 34 officers and 750 men

from the 6th Defense Battalion under the command of Lt. Col. Harold D. Shannon,

a veteran of World War I and duty in Panama and Hawaii. Shannon and Simard

meshed into an effective team right away. World War II began for Midway at 6:30

a.m. December 7, 1941, when the garrison received word of the Japanese attack on

Pearl Harbor. At 6:42 p.m., a Marine sentry sighted a flashing light out at sea

and alerted the garrison. Three hours later, the Japanese destroyers Sazanami

and Ushio opened fire, damaging a seaplane hangar, knocking out the Pan American

direction finder and destroying a consolidated PBY Catalina flying boat. The

Japanese retired at 10:00 p.m., leaving four Midway defenders dead and 10

wounded. On December 23, 1941, Midway’s air defenses were reinforced with 17

SB2U-3 Vought Vindicator dive bombers, 14 Brewster F2A-3 Buffalo fighters, and

pilots and aircrews originally intended for the relief of Wake Island. The

Buffaloes and Vindicators were cast-off aircraft, having been replaced by the

Douglas SBD-2 Dauntless dive bombers and Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat fighters on U.S.

aircraft carriers. The Buffaloes became part of MarineFighter Squadron 221 (VMF-

221), while the Vindicators were put into Marine Scout Bombing Squadron 241

(VMSB-241), both making up Marine Air Group 22 (MAG-22) under Lt. Col. Ira B.

Kimes. Midway settled into a routine of training and anti-submarine flights,

with little else to do except play endless games of cards and cribbage, and

watch Midway’s famous albatrosses, nicknamed gooney birds, in action (Stevens

56). Then, in May 1942, Admiral Isoruku Yamamoto, commander in chief of the

Japanese Combined Fleet, came up with a plan, called Operation Mi, to draw out

the U.S. Pacific Fleet by attacking Midway. Using Midway as bait and gathering a

vast naval armada of eight aircraft carriers, 11 battleships, 23 cruisers, 65

destroyers and several hundred fighters, bombers and torpedo planes, Yamamoto

planned to crush the Pacific Fleet once and for all. Alerted by his code-

breakers that the Japanese planned to seize Midway, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz,

commander in chief, Pacific Command, flew to the atoll on May 2, 1942, to make a

personal inspection. Following his inspection, Nimitz took Simard and Shannon

aside and asked them what they needed to defend Midway. They told him their

requirements. “If I get you all these things, can you hold Midway against a

major amphibious assault?” Nimitz asked the two officers. “Yes, sir!” Shannon

replied. It was good enough for Nimitz, who returned to Oahu (Robertson 58). On

May 20, Shannon and Simard received a letter from Admiral Nimitz, praising their

fine work and promoting them to captain and full colonel, respectively. Then

Nimitz informed them that the Japanese were planning to attack Midway on May 28;

he outlined the Japanese strategy and promised all possible aid. On May 22, a

sailor accidentally set off a demolition charge under Midway’s gasoline supply.

The explosion destroyed 400,000 gallons of aviation fuel, and also damaged the

distribution system, forcing the defenders to refuel planes by hand from 55-

gallon drums. All the while the Marines continued digging gun emplacements,

laying sandbags and preparing shelters on both islands. Barbed wire sprouted

along Midway’s coral beaches. Shannon believed that it would stop the Japanese

as it had stopped the Germans in World War I. He ordered so much strung that one

Marine exclaimed: “Barbed wire, barbed wire! Cripes, the old man thinks we can

stop planes with barbed wire” (Miracle 27)! The defenders also had a large

supply of blasting gelatin, which was used to make anti-boat mines and booby

traps. On May 25, while the work continued, Shannon and Simard got some good

news. The Japanese attack would come between June 3 and 5, giving them another

week to prepare. That same day, the light cruiser St. Louis arrived, to deliver

an eight-gun, 37mm anti-aircraft battery from the Marine 3rd Defense Battalion

and two rifle companies from the 2nd Raider Battalion. On May 26, the ferry USS

Kittyhawk arrived with 12 3-inch guns, 5 M-3 Stuart light tanks, 16 Douglas SBD-

3 Dauntless dive bombers, and 7 Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters, along with 22

pilots–most of them fresh out of flight school, May 29 saw the arrival of four

Martin B-26 Marauder medium bombers from the 22nd Bomb Group. These planes were

specially rigged to carry torpedoes and led by Captain James Collins. That same

day, 12 Navy PBY-5A Catalinas joined the 12 PBY-5s stationed on Midway.

Beginning on May 30, Midway’s planes began searching for the Japanese. Twenty-

two PBYs from Lt. Cmdr. Robert Brixner’s Patrol Squadron 44 (VP-44) and

Commander Massie Hughes’ VP-23 took off from Midway lagoon, then headed out in

an arc stretching 700 miles from Midway in search of the Japanese. Midway got

further air reinforcement on June 1 when six new Grumman TBF torpedo bombers,

commanded by Lieutenant Langdon K. Fieberling, arrived. None of the TBF pilots

had ever been in combat, and only a few had ever flown out of sight of land

before. The TBF would later be named Avenger in honor of its combat introduction

at Midway. By June 1, both Sand and Eastern islands were ringed with coastal

defenses. Six 5-inch guns, 22 3-inch guns and four old Navy 7-inch guns were

placed along the coasts of both islands for use as anti-aircraft and anti-boat

guns. As many as 1,500 mines and booby traps were laid underwater and along the

beaches. Ammunition dumps were placed all around the islands, along with caches

of food for pockets of resistance and an emergency supply of 250 55-gallon

gasoline drums. Midway had practically everything it needed for its defense.

Along with the 121 aircraft crowding Eastern Island’s runways, Midway had 11 PT-

boats in the lagoon to assist the ground forces with anti-aircraft fire. A yacht

and four converted tuna boats stood by for rescue operations, and 19 submarines

guarded Midway’s approaches. Even with those preparations, there were problems.

The air station’s radar, an old SC-270 set installed on Sand Island, showed many

blips that were more often albatrosses than aircraft. Also, there was no plan

for coordinating Midway’s air operations, which were dependent on a mixture of

Army Air Force, Navy and Marine pilots and crews. With that in mind, Midway’s

commanders believed their only chance was to attack the Japanese carriers when

they were located, in the hope of catching them with their planes on deck. “This

meant exquisitely precise timing, a monumental dose of luck, or both,” Admiral

Nimitz explained. “Balsa’s [Midway's] air force must be employed to inflict

prompt and early damage to Jap carrier flight decks if recurring attacks are to

be stopped….” By June 2, the Pacific Fleet’s three aircraft carriers–

Enterprise, Hornet and Yorktown–were in position northeast of Midway, but only

a few key officers were aware that Midway’s defenders would be supported by them.

Midway’s Navy pilots were told not to “expect any help from the U.S. carriers;

they’re off defending Hawaii.” Midway’s only chance was for Nimitz’s carriers to

take the Japanese by surprise. Early on the morning of June 3, the PBYs of VP-44

and VP-23 took off on their 700-mile search missions, joined by B-17 Flying

Fortresses on their own search and attack missions. The remaining aircraft on

Midway were armed, fueled and waiting for orders to take to the air once the

Japanese carriers were located. At 9:04 a.m., Ensign Charles R. Eaton,

patrolling 470 miles from Midway, sighted three ships and got a burst of anti-

aircraft fire for his trouble. Eaton quickly radioed Midway with the first enemy

ship contact report of the battle. Seven hundred miles west of Midway, Ensign

Jack Reid flew his PBY-5A across a largely empty ocean, nearing the end of the

outward leg of his patrol. He found nothing of interest and started to turn back.

Just as he did, Reid saw some specks on the horizon 30 miles ahead. At first he

thought they were dirt spots on the windshield. Then he looked again and shouted

to his co-pilot, Ensign Gerald Hardeman, “Do you see what I see?” “You’re damned

right I do,” Hardeman replied (Miracle 49). At 9:25 a.m., Reid radioed, “Sighted

main body,” to Midway and began tracking the Japanese ships. Midway ordered Reid

to amplify his report, and at 9:27 he radioed, “Bearing 262 degrees, distance

700.” At 10:40 he reported, “Six large ships in column…” At 11 a.m., “Eleven

ships, course 090 degrees, speed 19.” At 11:30, Reid was ordered to return to

Midway (Stevens 96). At 12:30, a flight of nine B-17 bombers, each armed with

four 600-pound bombs and led by Lt. Col. Walter C. Sweeney, took off (Lucas 28).

Three-and-a-half hours later, the B-17s found the Japanese ships 570 miles from

Midway and attacked from out of the sun. Sweeney reported seeing two ships

burning after the strike. In reality, Sweeney’s B-17s scored no hits on the

Japanese ships, and the return flight to Midway proved every bit as harrowing as

the attack itself. With their fuel almost exhausted, the B-17s came within sight

of Eastern Island at 8:30 p.m. The last Flying Fortress landed at 9:45 p.m.

While Sweeney’s B-17s returned from their attack, another strike of four PBY

Catalinas, each armed with a torpedo and led by Lieutenant W.L. Richards, left

Midway at 9:15 p.m. to attack the Japanese. All four PBYs returned safely,

claiming three torpedo hits. One torpedo hit the bow of the tanker Akebono Maru,

killing 13 sailors and wounding 11; the transport Kiosumi Maru lost a few

crewmen to strafing. June 4 began for Midway’s defenders at 3:00 a.m. with

reveille. All gun positions on both islands were manned as pilots and aircrews

stood by their planes. At 4:00 a.m., six F4F Wildcats from Major Floyd B. “Red”

Parks’ VMF-221 took off on combat air patrol. They were followed by 11 PBYs from

VP-44, searching for the Japanese carriers, and 16 B-17s led by Sweeney that

were to attempt another attack on the Japanese transports. At 4:30 a.m., the

carriers of Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo’s First Striking Force–Akagi, Kaga, Hiryu

and Soryu–launched their aircraft. Fifteen minutes later, 36 Nakajima B5N2 Kate

torpedo bombers, 36 Aichi D3A1 Val dive bombers and 36 Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero

fighters were on their way to Midway. At 5:30, Lieutenant Howard P. Ady emerged

from a cloud bank and spotted Nagumo’s carriers. Ady radioed Midway, “Carrier

bearing 320 degrees, distance 180.” Ady ducked back into the clouds and circled

the Japanese fleet, radioing again, “0553, Two carriers and main body of ships,

carriers in front, course 135 degrees, speed 34.” Fifteen minutes after Ady’s

sighting, Lt. j.g. William Chase, flying south of Ady’s sector, saw a formation

of Japanese fighters and bombers. Chase quickly radioed: “Many enemy planes

heading Midway bearing 320 degrees, distance 150.” On Midway, radar on Sand

Island picked up the approaching Japanese planes at 5:53. Air raid sirens wailed,

and all personnel raced to their dugouts and gun positions. Major Parks’ 21

Buffaloes and six Wildcats scrambled into the air, followed by Lieutenant

Fieberling’s six TBFs and Captain Collins’ four B-26s. Major Henderson’s dive

bombers were last to take off. By 6:16, all 66 of Midway’s aircraft were

airborne. While the bombers headed toward the Japanese carriers, Parks led six

Buffaloes and three Wildcats to intercept the 108 oncoming Japanese planes.

Captain John Carey, leading the three Wildcats in Parks’ flight, was first to

sight the Japanese. “Tallyho! Hawks at angels twelve!” Carey radioed. The

Japanese bombers flew in a large V formation, trailed by gaggles of Zeros. Carey

rolled his Wildcat and screamed into the V, blowing a Kate apart with his

four.50-caliber machine guns, then zoomed up for another attack. Japanese rear

gunners raked his Wildcat, riddling Carey’s legs. Second Lieutenant Clayton M.

Canfield followed Carey into his attack, destroying a Kate. Canfield saw Zeros

diving on him. A 20mm cannon shell damaged his Wildcat, and he pulled up into

the clouds and lost his pursuers. Coming out of the clouds, Canfield joined

Carey and led him back to Midway. Captain Marion E. Carl, flying the third

Wildcat, was jumped by several Zeros after attacking the Kates and was forced to

break off his attack. While the Wildcats fought for their lives, Parks led his

six Buffaloes in an attack on the Kates. The Marines managed one pass before

they were overwhelmed by the Zeros. Parks and four other Marines were killed.

Only Lieutenant Daniel J. Irwin survived. He managed to fly his damaged Buffalo

back to Midway with Zeros after him all the way. “Their gunnery was very good,”

Irwin reported, “and I doubt if on any run they missed hitting my plane.” VMF-

221’s 12 reserve fighters, led by Captains Daniel J. Hennessy and Kirk Armstead,

also attacked the Japanese planes (Lucas 104). Hennessy’s six Buffaloes smashed

into the bombers and were jumped by the escorting Zeros, which destroyed four of

them. Only two of Hennessy’s men survived. Armstead’s Buffaloes intercepted the

Japanese a few miles from Midway and downed three Kates before the rampaging

Zeros destroyed three of them. Observing the dogfight from the ground,

Lieutenant Charles Hughes said that the Buffaloes “looked like they were tied to

a string while the Zeros made passes at them.” The Japanese pushed relentlessly

toward Midway. To Marine Pfc Phillip Clark at D Battery on Sand Island, the

Japanese formations looked like “three wisps of clouds far out on the horizon.”

On Sand and Eastern, the Marines and sailors waited for the attack. An observer

marveled at the “very calm?lackadaisical air” with which the defenders waited

for the strike, “as though they had been living through this sort of thing all

their lives”(Stevens 98). “Open fire when targets are in range,” 6th Battalion

headquarters notified all guns at 6:30 a.m. One minute later, Midway’s guns

opened fire. A Kate erupted into flames and dove straight down. A second Kate

crashed into the lagoon, missing the PT-boats. The remaining Kates struck Sand

Island, destroying three oil tanks and setting fire to a seaplane hangar. The

attack on Eastern Island began with an unforgettable incident. “Suddenly the

leading Jap plane peeled off,” an eyewitness wrote. “He dove down about 100 feet

from the ground, turned over on his back and proceeded leisurely flying upside

down over the ramp.” The Marines watched for a few seconds, then opened fire and

shot him down. Val dive bombers struck VMF-221’s arming pit, killing four

mechanics and exploding eight 100-pound bombs and 10,000 rounds of .50-caliber

machine-gun ammunition. Another Val demolished Eastern’s powerhouse, disrupting

Midway’s electricity and water distillation plant. Japanese efforts to render

Eastern’s runways useless were unsuccessful; only two small craters were left on

the landing strips. Midway’s defenders fought back with everything they had.

Major Dorn E. Arnold of the 6th Defense Battalion fired a Browning Automatic

Rifle at the enemy; a sailor on Sand Island used a Colt .45. Second Lieutenant

Elmer Thompson and another Marine fired a .30-caliber machine gun from a

crippled SB2U. The Japanese attack ended at 6:48 a.m. The all-clear sounded on

Midway at 7:15, and the process of picking up the pieces began. Kimes ordered

VMF-221’s fighters to land. Six Buffaloes staggered in. Including four aircraft

that landed during the raid, only 20 U.S. fighters had survived. Of those, only

one Wildcat and a single Buffalo were fit to fly. Fifteen Buffaloes and two

Wildcats were shot down, and 13 pilots were killed. Eleven Japanese aircraft

were downed by the fighters and anti-aircraft fire, while 53 were damaged.

Colonel Shannon’s trenches, bunkers and revetments proved effective. Only 11 of

Midway’s ground defenders were killed and 18 wounded. None of Midway’s planes

were caught on the ground except for an old utility biplane and a decoy plane

made of crates and tin roofing called the “JFU” (Jap fouler-upper)(Robertson 15).

While Midway repaired its damage and its defenders licked their wounds, the

aircraft that were sent out to attack the Japanese carriers made contact.

Lieutenant Langdon Fieberling’s six TBFs reached the Japanese fleet at 7:10,

dropped to low altitude and bore on toward the carriers. So many Zeros swarmed

around the vulnerable torpedo planes that the fighters got in each other’s way.

Two TBFs were destroyed in the first attack, followed by three more. Realizing

that he could not reach the carriers, Ensign Albert K. Earnest loosed his

torpedo at a cruiser, then broke away with two Zeros after him. Earnest flew his

shot-up TBF back to Midway, navigating “by guess and by God.” Close behind the

TBFs, Captain James Collins led his four B-26 Marauders into a gauntlet of anti-

aircraft fire and six Zeros. Collins led his planes down to 200 feet above the

water and, followed by Lieutenant James P. Muri, pressed on toward the carrier

Akagi. Collins released his torpedo 850 yards from the carrier and pulled away.

Muri released his torpedo at 450 yards, then turned and flew down the middle of

Akagi’s flight deck. Once Muri’s B-26 was clear of Akagi, the Zeros attacked

with a vengeance, wounding two crewmen and riddling the landing gear, fuel tanks,

propeller blades, radio and the top of one wing. Despite that punishment, Muri

and Collins were the only survivors of the four-plane B-26 group. Then, at 7:48,

the TBF and B-26 attacks were followed by VMSB-241’s 16 Dauntless and Vindicator

dive bombers led by Major Lofton Henderson. Henderson had divided the squadron

into two flights, leading the SBDs himself while Major Benjamin W. Norris led

the Vindicators. As Henderson led the squadron northwest, the faster Dauntlesses

soon left the Vindicators behind. Henderson’s SBDs got their first look at the

Japanese carriers at 7:25, and he radioed his Dauntless pilots, “Attack the two

enemy CV on the port bow.” Henderson had led his squadron down to 4,000 feet

when the Japanese combat air patrol attacked. The Dauntlesses also met with

heavy anti-aircraft fire from the Japanese ships. Henderson’s plane was hit, and

his port wing caught fire. He tried to keep his burning Dauntless in the lead,

but finally lost control and plunged into the sea. Captain Elmer C. Glidden

quickly took command of the Dauntlesses. “Fighter attacks were heavy,” he wrote,

“so I led the squadron down through a protecting layer of clouds”(Stevens 102).

The Zeros followed the Marines into the clouds. Glidden came out of the clouds

and found two Japanese carriers, Kaga and Hiryu, 2,000 feet below. The 10

remaining Dauntlesses dived to 500 feet or lower before releasing their bombs,

then sped away at full throttle, hounded by Zeros. Three SBDs crashed at sea

near Midway. Their crews were later rescued. The remaining six, some badly shot

up, reached Midway. Eight SBDs, including Henderson’s, were lost, with the

Japanese sustaining no damage. Sweeney’s 15 Flying Fortresses arrived over

Nagumo’s fleet at 8:10, as the Dauntlesses finished their attacks. Seen from

20,000 feet, the Japanese fleet was “an astonishing sight,” recalled B-17 pilot

Don Kundinger. “A panoramic view of the greatest array of surface vessels any of

us had ever seen–they seemed to stretch endlessly from horizon to horizon.”

Each three-plane B-17 element attacked on its own. Lieutenant Colonel Brooke

Allen’s element unloaded its bombs on the carrier Soryu, but all fell short.

Sweeney targeted Kaga, bracketing her stern with, he believed, “one bomb hit?

causing heavy smoke” (Robertson 22). Three Zeros ganged up on Captain Cecil

Faulkener’s bomber, riddling its fuselage and wounding the tail gunner. Another

Zero dueled with Captain Paul Payne’s Fortress but never closed in. “The Zeros

barely touched the B-17s,” Captain Paul Gregory reported. “Enemy pursuit

appeared to have no desire to close on B-17E modified”(Young 25). The B-17s

finished their attack by 8:20 and returned to Midway. Sweeney believed his B-17s

had hit at least one of the Japanese carriers. In reality, they had not. Shortly

after the B-17s left, Major Benjamin Norris’ 11 Vindicators arrived and Zeros

swarmed over them(Miracle 45). Norris, with no illusions about his old

“Vibrators,” decided not to press on toward the carriers. He led his men into

some clouds. Coming out of the cloud cover, Norris discovered a battleship below.

It was Haruna, supposedly sunk in December 1941. “Attack target below,” Norris

radioed, and he led the Vindicators into a high-speed glide. Anti-aircraft guns

on Haruna opened fire with an “extremely heavy and troublesome but inaccurate

barrage”(Stevens 121). Only two of Major Norris’ Vindicators were lost during

the attack. Three ditched at sea near Midway because of battle damage. Despite

reports that they had scored two direct hits and three near-misses, the

Vindicator pilots had not even scratched Haruna. If the Battle of Midway had

ended with the return of VMSB-241’s Vindicators, it would have been another

victory for the Japanese. Midway had sent 52 aircraft against the Japanese and

lost 19 without scoring a single hit. “From the time of the attack and the known

position of the enemy carriers, we estimated they would be back in three or four

hours,” Kimes wrote (Stevens 54). Only six Dauntlesses, seven Vindicators, one

Buffalo and a single Wildcat were left to oppose the Japanese. The defenders of

Midway steadied themselves for another air raid. Nothing happened. The only

aircraft to show up were 11 Dauntlesses from the carrier Hornet at 11:00 a.m.

Some Marine gunners, believing they were Japanese planes, opened fire on the

SBDs before recognizing their silhouettes. The Dauntlesses were refueled and

back in the air by 2:00 p.m. At 3:58, Midway’s defenders received an indication

that the Japanese were taking a beating when a PBY pilot reported “three burning

ships.” At 5:45 he reported, “The three burning ships are Jap carriers.” The

stricken vessels–Akagi, Kaga and Soryu–were the victims of SBD Dauntlesses

from the American carriers Enterprise and Yorktown. At the same time out at sea,

B-17s from Midway, along with six more Flying Fortresses from Hawaii, attacked

the Japanese carrier Hiryu, which had been damaged and set afire by dive bombers

from Enterprise and Hornet. The B-17s claimed hitting the burning Hiryu, as well

as a cruiser and battleship, and sinking a destroyer. In fact, the land-based

bombers were no more successful in the afternoon than they had been in the

morning. With all four of Nagumo’s carriers destroyed, Yamamoto decided he could

not proceed with his plan to occupy Midway, and ordered his fleet to withdraw.

Midway’s defenders, however, still expected the Japanese to invade. Captain

Simard dispersed his PBYs, evacuated nonessential personnel and warned his PT-

boats to expect a night attack. At 1:20 a.m., the Japanese submarine I-168

opened fire on Midway with its 5-inch deck gun. Batteries B and E on Eastern

Island, along with Battery D on Sand Island, returned fire with their 3- and 5-

inch guns, lobbing 42 shells at I-168, which lobbed eight shells back. The brief

exchange resulted in no damage to either side. Most of I-168’s shells fell in

the lagoon. The submarine submerged at 1:28, the Marine gunners ceased firing

and Midway settled back into uneasy silence (Miracle 68). June 5, 1942, began

for Midway’s defenders at 4:15 a.m., after Sand Island’s radio picked up a

report from the submarine USS Tambor of a large enemy force possibly within

striking distance. The Midway garrison still had every reason to believe that an

invasion was imminent. Within 15 minutes, eight B-17s took off from Eastern

Island to counter the threat. The Army pilots could not locate the enemy ships

in the early morning fog, and by 6:00 a.m. the B-17s were circling nearby Kure

Atoll waiting for information. At 6:30, a Midway-based PBY reported, “Sighted 2

battleships bearing 256 degrees, distance 125 miles, course 268 degrees, speed

15.” Two minutes later the PBY added, “Ships damaged, streaming oil.” The

Japanese ships were retreating, and the island’s defenders breathed a collective

sigh of relief. Marine Aircraft Group 22 sent up two flights from VMSB-241, six

Dauntlesses under Captain Marshall A. Tyler and six Vindicators led by Captain

Richard E. Flemming, to attack the two “battleships,” actually the heavy

cruisers Mikuma and Mogami, damaged in a collision the night before. Forty-five

minutes later, the Marine pilots spotted the oil slick left by the damaged

cruisers and followed it to Mogami and Mikuma. Tyler led his six Dauntlesses

into an attack on Mogami amid heavy anti-aircraft fire. The Marines dropped

their bombs, scoring a few near-misses. At 8:40, minutes after Tyler’s attack,

Flemming led his Vindicators out of the sun, through heavy flak from the

Japanese ships, against Mikuma. Captain Leon M. Williamson, a pilot in

Flemming’s flight, saw Flemming’s engine smoking during his dive. As Flemming

pulled out, his Vindicator burst into flames. Flemming–either by accident or

design–crashed his blazing Vindicator into Mikuma’s aft 8-inch gun turret. The

crash started a fire that was sucked into the cruiser’s starboard engine room

air intakes, suffocating the engineers. After the Marines finished their attacks,

the eight B-17s from Midway, led by Lt. Col. Brooke Allen, appeared and dropped

their bombs, scoring a near-miss on Mogami. The damaged cruisers continued

limping westward, and Mikuma sank at sunset the next day after attacks by

aircraft from Enterprise and Hornet. At 10:45 on June 6, 1942, Captain Simard

dispatched 26 B-17s from Midway in search of Japanese cruisers reported heading

southwest. The bombers did not locate the cruisers, but six B-17s dropped their

bombs on what they thought was a Japanese ship. The pilots reported that they

had hit a cruiser, which “sunk in seconds.” It was actually the submarine USS

Grayling, which submerged when the Flying Fortresses dropped their bombs. While

Midway’s bombers continued attacking the retreating Japanese, Simard had his

PBYs and PT-boats searching for downed pilots. Between June 4 and 9, Midway’s

PBYs picked up 27 airmen. By June 7, it had become apparent that Midway was

secure. The island’s garrison, for all the damage it had suffered, had

contributed its fair share to the victory over the Japanese. This Battle had

ended the Japanese offensive in the pacific ocean.