



Commander U.S. Pacific Fleet

Battle of Midway Commemoration Speech

USS MIDWAY Museum

Admiral Patrick M. Walsh

6/5/2010

Distinguished guests, Fellow Flag and General Officers, Midway survivors, World War II veterans, families, and friends...

Earlier this week we flew the flag at half-mast – and in public ceremony as well as in private settings – we paused, reflected, recognized, and memorialized the men and women who had given their lives for our country. We are fortunate to know that in times of turmoil, tumult, crisis, or calamity, we can rely on fellow citizens – people we know, not by name, but as Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen – to take great risk to themselves and their lives to protect us. They ask for little in return...simply to appreciate their sacrifice and to remember their loved ones.

My remarks begin with you: our veterans, our friends, our extended family... because the days pass too quickly, our opportunities with each other too fleeting, our reunions too limited, to miss out on a chance to express our personal gratitude to each other...for each other. Tonight is important...for many reasons that cut across and connect several generations. Whether we realize it, sense it, or recognize it completely, we are part of a great circle of community, history, and tradition, where one generation cares for and nurtures the next. Those whom we commemorate tonight did that for us 68 years ago; on the anniversary of this great battle, it is our charge to carry their example forward with honor. Now we gather to remember and pay tribute to the men and women who fought in the Battle of Midway, and especially, those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country.

This setting is poignant, notable, and especially fitting because the memory of this historic battle, memorialized by this ship, represents the pride of a generation and the soul of our Navy. Those



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who fought at Midway answered the call of a wounded nation, led a life of consequence, took action, and took risks for a cause far greater than self. This annual event gives us a rare and unique opportunity to learn more about our history, our culture, and our inheritance and speak as well to the next generation of Sailors in an enduring way that personifies moral character, personal sacrifice, self-less commitment, and courage under fire. Tonight is especially significant because it is an opportunity for us to express our appreciation to what history fondly remembers as the greatest generation. We have the honor and the privilege to stand in the presence of those members and their families who gave so much of themselves, their lives, and their livelihoods, so that we could have lives of promise, potential, and opportunity.

At the dawn of World War II, the nation was under assault and we had lost every battle that we entered. The damage to the nation was more than the physical destruction contained at Pearl Harbor; it was psychological, which according to historians, was far more widespread and debilitating. One author, Craig Nelson, described the country “in a state of panic by Christmas 1941. It was a time when most Americans thought the war was over, that the Axis had already won.” By early 1942, imperial forces had moved quickly through the Pacific and controlled most of the Asian land mass and island chain from Manchuria to the Dutch East Indies.

The nation – wounded, weak, and recovering, and despite daunting setbacks – was emotionally primed to retake the initiative. Historians have provided extensive analysis about the strategic importance of the battle itself in early June 1942; the tactical and operational lessons learned by the Navy; the ascendancy of naval air power; and the mistakes of the Japanese forces. However, those who lived it provide the most inspiring and fascinating historical narrative.



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It is important to understand what they experienced and to know the humanity of their stories. Their biography inspires us; it gives us the insights into their indomitable spirit, strength, commitment, character, and resilience so that we understand the role that we must play when our country calls.

This story begins when men reached beyond themselves, pushed their machines beyond their limits, and risked everything beyond imagination, understanding, or comprehension. It began with a battle; one that historians would later claim, “that by any standard, we had no right to win.” The stone inscription on the National WWII Memorial tells us: “They had no right to win. Yet they did, and in doing so, they changed the course of a war... even against the greatest of odds there is something in the human spirit – a magic blend of skill, faith and valor – that can lift men from certain defeat to incredible victory.”

Even today, scholars, historians, and journalists continue to write about the miraculous American triumph “against all odds.” Historian Samuel Eliot Morison described the Battle of Midway as “a victory, not only of courage, determination, [and] skill...but of bravery, wisely applied.” Renowned aviation artist R.G. Smith depicted the battle in his painting titled, “Turning Point” to describe its strategic importance. Indeed, the struggle at Midway was of David vs. Goliath proportions, for the U.S. forces, greatly outnumbered, but not outclassed, capitalized on strategic surprise to defeat Japan’s Imperial Navy and force them into defensive actions, foreshadowing the outcome of the Pacific War.

Code breakers gave us the element of surprise. Admiral Chester Nimitz used that intelligence to mastermind the battle. Men and women worked around the clock to build and repair battle



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damaged ships and aircraft. Valiant sailors, aviators, and Marines risked everything to fight the battle. Sadly, we will never know the stories of so many others, but all had a hand in winning the battle at Midway.

Coming off a devastating battle at Coral Sea, USS YORKTOWN badly damaged, and many thought it would take months to repair... but Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard worked around the clock to repair her in just three days. She sailed to Midway for her last battle and contributed heavily to the enemy's defeat.

Thousands of American men and women who could not take up arms instead took up rivet guns in the shipyards and factories to support the war effort. Thanks to their tireless efforts, the U.S. outpaced Japan in aircraft production 25 to 1. From 1942 to the end of the war, for every major warship Japan built, the Americans raised 16. By August of 1945, Japan had manufactured seven aircraft carriers, while America produced 100 – including the one in which we gather this evening.

However, for all the long-term advantage bought by mass-producing weapons, Nimitz did not place his trust in these instruments of war. Even in the face of tremendous risk, he knew that men on the deckplates, on the ground, and in the cockpits would find the path to victory. The Admiral said, “our armament must be adequate to the needs [of battle], but our faith is not primarily in these machines of defense but in ourselves...I have always been optimistic regarding the eventual result of the war. Having seen the people on the spot, I have every reason to continue my optimism.”



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The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote, "For history is to the nation as memory is to the individual." Just as one person learns from his experiences, so, too, do we as a nation grow and mature when we reflect on our collective past. So many brave souls contributed to the success at Midway, and there are far too many acts of heroism to tell here...However, I do think that it is important to share with you the stories of three men in particular who went beyond the call of duty - not once but several times in the service of their country.

By the time he found himself at Midway, Lieutenant Clarence Dickinson, Jr., already had received two Navy Crosses for various acts of heroism in December 1941. During the attack on Pearl Harbor, several Japanese aircraft engaged Dickinson's scouting plane. His gunner killed and the plane forced down in flames, he escaped by parachute, landed on Ewa Airfield and proceeded to Ford Island where, because he did not report his recent near-death ordeal to his superiors, they immediately assigned him to a 175-mile aerial search operation at sea. Three days later, Dickinson sighted a surfaced enemy submarine and, against anti-aircraft fire, dove and dropped a bomb, resulting in its sinking.

At Midway, Lieutenant Dickinson was the Executive Officer of Scouting Squadron Six (VS-6). In the face of withering anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighter opposition, he scored a direct hit on the Japanese aircraft carrier KAGA, which subsequently sank. Due to a fuel gauge malfunction, Dickinson ditched his plane near the destroyer PHELPS, which then rescued him. For his actions at Midway, Lieutenant Clarence Dickinson, Jr. became one of the first people in history to receive three Navy Crosses.



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Not all heroes at Midway were seasoned combat aces. In fact, young Ensign Albert Earnest had completed flight training as a torpedo plane pilot only six months before his first taste of combat. A member of the VT-8 land-based detachment, Earnest took off from Sand Island in his new TBF-1 Avenger, which, like him, had not proven itself in combat. He participated in an unsupported torpedo attack conducted in the face of concentrated fighter opposition and anti-aircraft fire. A Japanese Zero had killed his gunner, Airman Third Class J.D. Manning; his radioman, Airman Third Class Harold Ferrier, was rendered unconscious by a wound to the head; and Earnest himself sustained a shot to the neck. His compass and bomb bay doors were inoperative; one wheel of his landing gear unusable, and his elevator-control shot away. He flew over 200 miles back to Midway and performed a safe landing on one wheel!

Overcoming tremendous difficulties in extremely hazardous conditions, Ensign Earnest performed both his mission to carry out his attack on the Japanese fleet, as well as his duty to return his aircraft; and for that, he was awarded two Navy Crosses. Earnest would go on to receive a third Navy Cross for four separate combat actions near Guadalcanal.

Dickinson and Earnest survived their near-brushes with death and went on to live fruitful lives after the war. However, today we also remember the 307 brave souls who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our nation. One of these valiant men was Captain Richard Fleming, the first Marine Aviator to receive the Medal of Honor in World War II, and the only man honored with this distinction at Midway. On June 4th and 5th, Fleming carried out three separate missions with “extraordinary heroism and conspicuous intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty.”



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His award citation reads: “When his Squadron Commander was shot down during the initial attack upon an enemy aircraft carrier, Fleming led the remainder of his division with such fearless determination that he dived his own plane to the perilously low altitude of 400 feet before releasing his bomb. Although his craft was riddled by 179 hits in the blistering hail of fire that burst upon him from Japanese fighter guns and antiaircraft batteries, he pulled out with only two minor wounds.”

“Then, on the night of 4 June, Captain Fleming brought his own plane in for a safe landing at its base despite hazardous weather conditions and total darkness. The following day, after less than four hours’ sleep, he led the second division of his squadron in a coordinated glide-bombing and dive-bombing assault upon a Japanese battleship.” “Undeterred by a fateful approach glide, during which his [plane] was struck and set afire, he grimly pressed home his attack to an altitude of 500 feet, released his bomb then crashed in flames.”

Captain Richard Fleming did everything he possibly could, gave his life in the service of his country, and he did so with extraordinary valor and selfless disregard for his own safety. He represents the invincible spirit that filled “the miraculous Men of Midway” -- men whose actions proved that they were stronger, more resilient, and capable of more than they realized or imagined.

In the end, Japan lost four carriers, 332 aircraft, over 2,500 men, and the Imperial Fleet sustained severe damages to many of its remaining ships. They lost their momentum, and we gained the offensive. The bravery, valor, and selfless sacrifice that took place at Midway defined us as a



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strong and resilient navy... and the victory achieved there turned the tides of the war and charted the path for a revitalized nation.

It is at this time and place in the narrative that history offers the opportunity learn from many perspectives and pivot forward. The lessons learned from the Battle of Midway, in many respects, depend on the lens that you look through and the analytic outlook that you take – here is a short sampling of different points of view examining the same battle.

The Western view

Historian John Keegan called the Battle of Midway, “as great a reversal in strategic fortune as the naval world has ever seen.” We learned important lessons from every aspect, every level of warfare, and across the spectrum of operations. This momentous engagement taught us about the importance and accuracy of timely intelligence, and the value of joint operations. In many ways, Midway was the tipping point, when leaders looked risk squarely in the eye and put everything on the line when time and opportunity demanded. Midway reaffirmed for us the absolute power of clear, decisive leadership.

The Japanese view

Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, a Japanese veteran of the Battle of Midway, wrote the book, *MIDWAY – the Japanese Navy’s Story*. He presented another view of the Battle of Midway and its importance. It is a review of the battle, but from the perspective of a Japanese self-assessment. It is a brutally honest, concise, step-by-step critique of pre-war Japanese investment decisions as well as the Japanese strategic campaign planning effort after the commencement of hostilities.



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Captain Fuchida describes failures in operational leadership and tactical execution. In my view, the author reserved his most pointed comments in a sub-section of the historical analysis entitled, “Arrogance” where he analyzed the spread of ‘Victory Disease’ because of so many quick, relatively easy, rapid victories in the Pacific. Captain Fuchida writes that by the spring of 1942, a ‘virus’ infected the thinking of Imperial Japanese leaders, where, recorded in his own words, “we had become blind to the possibility that the enemy would act differently than we expected.”

My view

One year ago, the Department of the Navy announced that I would serve as the Commander of the Pacific Fleet. Immediately I received congratulatory calls, cards and letters. I received these wonderful accolades without having reported to my first day at work. Why was that? I inherited the legacy that you left behind, I work with the descendents of your team, and I live with the consequences of your actions, which continue to bring peace and prosperity to the Pacific today. I follow a long line of distinguished leaders who passed to my generation, a fleet that overcame diversity, a team of officers and enlisted -- active duty and reservists -- men and women in uniform -- and civilians in the shipyard...who beat all the odds. The reason why many congratulated me upon selection to this storied command was that they were thinking of you, your work, and your sacrifice that wrote the history.

You may not realize how you have shaped the world in the Pacific or the impact of your efforts. Today, the quintessential gift that you have given to my generation is our proud, very strong relationship with our counterparts from the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. It is a friendship that you made possible; it is relationship that exists now between families, based on



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trust, mutual respect, and an inner strength...understood and respected by the descendents of former combatants and warriors. I have stood side-by-side with them at Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima; at these events, I have witnessed survivors on both sides together and watched the cathartic effect of their meetings.

History is important for us to understand, especially since those in our profession are witness to it as we help to shape it. We develop insights into human behavior; we learn how nation states view themselves; and how...as well as why...states act on historical impulse, grievance, cultural identity, or sovereign passion. The parallels in history to modern day issues are striking; oftentimes we can find both the challenge and solution for today rooted in an analysis of past events.

Today, we remember Midway, with respect and honor. When I think about the age of those locked in this great battle, I am reminded by the view of the venerable Lord Byron who once described how the burden of national sacrifice in combat often falls upon the shoulders of the very young when he said, "The days of our youth were the days of our glory." Because they gave so much of their youthful vitality to the nation, veterans have earned the right to serve as the conscience of a nation...and in the words of Winston Churchill, "A nation without a conscience is a nation without a soul; and a nation without a soul cannot function."

Each individual biography is a part of our collective history – a shared memory that endows us with a deeper understanding of our common humanity. Men such as Lieutenant Clarence Dickinson, Ensign Albert Earnest, and Captain Richard Fleming and the actions that they



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took...won the war. Their legacy appeals to the better angels of our nature, embolden our hearts with the necessary courage, and bolster our resolve to do what is right.

Senator Robert F. Kennedy described how one man and the actions that he takes, can impact history: "It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. That ripple builds others. Those ripples - crossing each other from a million different centers of energy - build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and injustice."

The people who fought this battle revealed their true character when they answered the call to service early in their respective lives. Sadly, it was at a time when adversaries thought that horrific acts would dampen our spirits or lessen our resolve. However, it was the loss of innocent life that summoned the most powerful force known – the American volunteer, who rose up, stood tall, and ran to the sound of guns, ready to serve amid the tragedy, the chaos, and confusion following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The story of the American navy in the Pacific is incomplete without mention of where it began. Our story begins in the American school that shapes and molds the minds of engineers. Engineers and manufacturers build the platforms that we use; families provide us their sons and daughters – our national treasure – who become Sailors. Sailors use those remarkable machines with strength of conviction and valor...but that is not the end of the story...the Navy story is about strength but it is also about generosity and humanity...it is about what we must destroy in war and what we can build in peace as a guarantor of freedom and a force of last resort.



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Those who fought in the Battle of Midway were, by any measure, an extraordinary team, at a remarkable time in history when together they turned a page in history. Our Sailors represented the pride of a generation who gave more than they received and positively affected the lives of more people than you will ever know...and that, ladies and gentlemen, is our naval heritage and tradition.

Tonight, we remember. We remember the distinguished service of those who fought in the Battle of Midway...we remember the honor that they have brought to the navy and the nation, we remember those who have served and continue to serve...and we remember those who have supported us. God bless you and your families, our country, and all who stand with us. We will not forget your sacrifice and your service... and the world will never forget how many are free because of you. Thank you on behalf of a very grateful Navy.

In honor of our veterans, I would like to present this replica of the original nautical chart used by Fleet Admiral Nimitz to record the significant events leading to the Battle of Midway. In red ink are the specific pieces of communications intelligence, organized by date of intercept and decoding by cryptanalysts. This critical information proved timely and accurate, as it informed and influenced the command decisions of Admiral Nimitz. Nimitz plotted U.S. force movements over the course of those incredible three days in blue ink, with the outcome of the battle recorded at the top.

This chart, simple and neat in its presentation yet complex in the summation of ideas, efforts, people, and events that it represents... is an example of the naval planning process at its finest,



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from inception to concept development to intelligence gathering to analysis to decision-making to execution and assessment. This is a unique piece of history, which captures the continuum of past, present and future at the same time. It is a testament to the importance of learning from the past, both immediately after the event or decades later. It has enabled generations of naval minds to learn the warning signs of an impending attack... to identify key elements of information required to aid the Commander's decision-making...and to assess the development, execution, and impact of a naval operation.

On the surface, it appears to encapsulate Nimitz's ultimately successful plan and execution of the largest naval ambush in history. However, on a deeper level, its very existence encompasses the spirit of Navy teamwork and its ability to overcome great challenges.

To succeed in a sometimes stark and harsh environment, naval leaders learn, just as Admiral Nimitz did, to draw upon the capabilities, talents, insights, experiences, and creative energy of all those serving with them because oftentimes the success of the mission and the very survival of our forces depend on it. To succeed, leaders have to create a resilient, sustainable team from a very diverse group of talent and experience. The strength of the team has given the long blue line the ability to persist forward, against difficult challenges and overwhelming odds.

Ladies and gentlemen, please accept this gift which symbolizes the spirit of teamwork that triumphed at Midway and lives in the hearts of every member of the American armed forces.