



**Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
Admiral Scott H. Swift
Battle of Midway 73rd Anniversary Commemoration
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*As prepared for delivery***

Distinguished guests, fellow Flag and General officers, Master Chiefs, Sailors of the Year, fellow aviators, veterans, families, and friends, good evening.

Before I go any further, I just wanted to say what an honor it was for me to speak with Midway survivor Slim Moore. Honoring those who participated in what I think was the most important battle in the World War II Pacific campaign is why we are here tonight. Those who made naval history at Midway 73-years ago created the heritage that guides our Navy today. We can't ever thank enough heroes like Slim Moore who answered the call of a wounded nation, and in the process, shaped who we are today. So how about another round of applause for Slim and for all of those World War II survivors who are here with us in spirit.

It's a privilege to be with all of you patriots this evening. As you know, I just took command of the U.S. Pacific Fleet last week. So I am honored that my first public speech as the new commander is here, during the San Francisco Bay Area's annual commemoration of the Battle of Midway. I know about the strong military ties to this region, a fact that my PAO, Captain Darryn James, and my Aide, Lieutenant Commander Leonard Leos, reminded me of on the plane ride from Hawaii. Both of them were born and raised in the Bay Area, carrying on a long tradition of service to our country from this community.

My father was born and raised in San Leandro. My brother was born there as well. My father attended Berkeley for a year before the event of December 7th, 1941 led him on a new life vector to the Naval Academy. My uncle, a Navy vet himself, lives in Fremont. My first cruise as an ensign and every subsequent at-sea period through department head, started and ended at NAS Alameda. So the personal roots for me, the Pacific Fleet staff, and in fact, Admiral Chester Nimitz and Admiral Raymond Spruance, run deep in the Bay Area.

And I'm glad that Leo's mom, Deborah, could join us this evening. There has always been one truism for our nation's fighting forces – we just couldn't get the job done without the support of loved ones. So a special thank you to our families and friends who have joined us this evening and for enabling our service through your sacrifice.

Many in this room wore the cloth of our nation and have blazed a path for others to follow. Seeing the outstanding Sailors of the Year here reminds me of what Senator Feinstein said during last October's Fleet Week – that San Francisco has always been a Navy town. Based on the phenomenal reception our Sailors and Marines received when we commissioned USS America during a Blue Angels flight demonstration, and the warmth in which you've greeted me tonight, I know San Francisco will always be a Navy town.

The Bay Area has a special place in the hearts of all fighter pilots like me, for it was here in 1911 that naval aviation at-sea was born. With ropes and sandbags serving as the first tailhook arresting system for landing, Eugene Ely donned a padded football helmet and a bicycle inner tube vest, and landed his biplane on the deck of a moored Navy cruiser just a stone's throw away from here in San Francisco Bay.

From those humble beginnings, no one could have possibly known that only 31 years later, naval aviation would change the course of a world at war.

Obviously, all of us are steeped in the specifics of the Battle of Midway, arguably the most significant naval battle in American history. But if you'll indulge me for just a moment, I want to reflect on some of the details and what they personally mean to me.

After the devastating surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, our nation and our Navy were at their darkest hour. Imperial Japan had rung up a string of victories and America desperately needed a win. The U.S. Pacific Fleet had to accomplish that goal with fewer carriers, older airplanes and no battleships. The Imperial Japanese Navy believed the United States to be demoralized and that the next battle would bring a quick end to war in the Pacific. Many Americans thought the Axis powers had already won the war. And as the calendar turned to 1942, Imperial Japanese forces controlled much of the Pacific.

This was the chaotic environment that Admiral Nimitz found himself in when he took command of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

During Battle of Midway remembrance ceremonies at Pearl Harbor this week, I had the great opportunity to listen to Naval Academy Professor Craig Symonds talk about Admiral Nimitz.

As the professor tells it, Nimitz was not a flashy leader or given to self-promotion – something I would like to think he and I have in common.

A genial man of humor, many thought he was frosty and hard to know. But in reality, the Admiral was just good at keeping his emotions under control and remaining calm under pressure – something I would like to have more in common with my legendary predecessor.

After the losses at Pearl Harbor, Nimitz took over a fleet of four carriers and a handful of cruisers and destroyers. As a submarine officer himself, Nimitz believed that the subs at his disposal could help take the offensive.

But he also had a secret weapon in the form of a cryptologic and intelligence team that was able to decipher Imperial Japanese communications. Working day and night in the basement of an old Pearl Harbor building that still exists today, Commander Joseph Rochefort and his team cracked some of the daunting code consisting of 45,000 five-digit numbers. This group turned data knowledge into predictive analysis, revealing that the Japanese ships were spread remarkably thin.

Yet for all the extraordinary success of the Pacific Fleet intelligence and cryptologic team in 1942, it is important to remember that they never produced a complete picture of the adversary. They could never offer certainty.

What they did provide was enough insight into Imperial Japanese capabilities and intent to offer predictive opportunity – opportunity that a gifted commander and skilled Sailors, Marines, Airmen, Coast Guardsmen and civilians would turn in to game-changing engagements, beginning at Coral Sea near Australia.

In May, Nimitz deployed two of his four carriers to Coral Sea to stop the Imperial Japanese conquest of New Guinea. He did so because of information that Rochefort provided about Japanese movements and plans. Although the Japanese landing was prevented, the carrier Lexington was sunk and the carrier Yorktown was severely damaged.

Even before the outcome of the Battle of the Coral Sea was known, Rochefort was back again telling Nimitz that the next Imperial Japanese attack was going to be Midway in June.

Now I love this next part of Professor Symonds story, because it demonstrates that the more things change, the more they stay the same – especially when it comes to doubts expressed from Washington D.C.

Not everyone accepted Rochefort's Midway prediction. Analysts in D.C. suspected that the next big Japanese push would target the West Coast — Washington state or California. This skepticism about Rochefort fed the doubts of Nimitz's boss, the Chief of Naval Operations, Ernest King.

As memorably depicted in the movie Midway, I'm sure everyone here knows the story of the fake drinking water message—how this supposedly allowed the Americans to find out the Japanese target was Midway. While the message was real enough, that story is only partly true. The target of the Japanese offensive, according to Rochefort, was coded "A.F."

To prove that "A.F." was Midway, the radiomen were instructed to send out a fake message that their distillers had broken down and that they were short of drinking water. As expected, the Japanese picked it up and reported to Tokyo that "A.F." was short of water. But believe it or not, this was not done to find out if Midway was the target —Rochefort and Nimitz already had concluded that fact. The message was sent to convince Admiral King and the Washington D.C. doubters that Midway was indeed the target, and allow Nimitz and his staff to get on with their plans.

I have a strong feeling that dealing with bosses in D.C. will also be something I'll have in common with Admiral Nimitz as well. I can only hope I have his same thoughtful acumen. Both of us came to the Pacific Fleet having just worked for the C.N.O. So hopefully, I bring the same advantages from that aspect to the job that he did.

After the loss of one carrier at Coral Sea, Nimitz could have played it safe – he certainly had a lot of pressure to do so. But instead, he boldly chose to commit his limited forces to take advantage of opportunity provided by his intelligence and cryptologic team. But first he had to get the badly wounded Yorktown ready to fight.

Despite estimates that the carrier would require several months to repair, Nimitz took another calculated risk by disregarding established procedure to ensure that his third carrier was ready for the projected battle. More than 1,400 Pearl Harbor shipyarders worked 24 hours a day. Just three days after putting to drydock, Yorktown was bound for Midway with shipyard work crews still aboard. Somewhere between Pearl and the Midway Atoll, the shipyarders boarded small boats and were transported back to Hawaii.

Nimitz had unity of command by employing his forces with clear authority in pursuit of a common purpose.

Nimitz had unity of effort, with everyone cooperating to achieve a common objective. He selected the commanders, provided them the best, most prepared forces available, gave them simple commander's intent, and then trusted them to lead in combat.

And so, 73 years ago this week, three U.S. carriers faced four Imperial Japanese carriers. Nimitz was in the same headquarters I occupy today, following the battle by long range radio. And, although it must have been tempting to try to micro-manage from afar, he did not intervene. He had faith in those he commanded and they had faith in him. Admiral Nimitz's ability to take calculated risk to achieve a game-changing moment is the legacy of the U.S. Pacific Fleet team that won Midway.

That said, no one is selected for responsibility such as that of the Pacific Fleet commander based on personal merit or performance alone. It is a reflection of the collective success of many, not one individual. I am no exception, and neither was Admiral Nimitz.

While our Navy leadership was strong, our triumph at Midway is rightly attributed to the courageous men at the deckplates who took critical actions in combat while battle fires raged. Men such as Slim Moore. Others were deck seaman and privates just thrown into the war with the barest of preparation. Their on-the-job-training commenced during a fight against the enemy, but their courage matched the moment.

Thankfully, we also had experienced military men, like class of '32 Naval Academy graduate and aviator Richard Halsley Best. A skillful dive bomber, Lieutenant Best was credited with scoring crucial hits resulting in the sinking of two Japanese carriers after being separated from the rest of his squadron.

No man who fought goes unappreciated. Midway was an all-hands effort, including Marines, the ships' engine room Sailors, gunner's mates and squadron maintenance crews. From the flag officers to the fighter pilots, Admiral Nimitz declared those who battled at Midway wrote "a glorious page in our history."

USS Yorktown, the destroyer USS Hammann, and 145 planes became casualties of war, along with 307 Sailors who would never return home. We continue to honor these brave Americans with namesakes such as the USS Midway and Chicago's Midway International Airport. But no single commemoration can adequately honor the selfless sacrifice our brethren made for their country, and to the principles to which we all hold dear – liberty and freedom.

Noted 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 level of warfare and across the spectrum of operations. This momentous engagement taught us about the importance of predictive intelligence and the value of taking calculated risks. Candidly, in the zero-defect mentality of today's military, I'm concerned that we are too risk averse. In my opinion, we need to expose ourselves to risk in peacetime in order to build the warfighting muscle and memory that will be needed at the critical moment – when ultimate failure is not an option.

The Battle of Midway should always be remembered as the prime example of when warriors looked risk squarely in the eye and did not flinch. They went all in and put everything on the line when time and opportunity demanded. Midway reaffirmed for us the power of decisive leadership and how calculated risk, as the inscription on the National World War II Memorial tells us, “can lift men from certain defeat to incredible victory.”

Today, I ask that you remember those military and civilians who served during this monumental battle. As the fight for freedom continues, I ask that you keep your hearts and heads high in support of your Navy's ongoing effort to keep our global waters safe and secure.

Now you know our history, so let me tell you about our future.

About six months ago, when it was announced that I would have the honor to serve as the Pacific Fleet commander, I immediately received congratulatory calls, cards and letters. I received these wonderful well-wishes without having served a single day in the position. Why was that?

It's because I stand on the shoulders of giants – Americans who overcame adversity, a team of officers and enlisted, active duty and reservists, men and women in uniform, and civilian shipmates who beat the odds. The reason why many congratulated me upon my selection to this storied command was that they were thinking of the hard work, sacrifice and accomplishments of those who made history. I inherit their legacy of a peaceful Pacific that all nations have enjoyed for 70 years now.

As I look into the future, the Indo-Asia-Pacific region will drive the global economy for at least the rest of this century – an area that just so happens to have the largest maritime crossroads of international trade in the world.

America has always been, and will always be, a maritime nation – a Pacific nation. To maintain security and stability which underpin economic prosperity, we rely on the seas for movement of commodities and information. We must ensure that free and unfettered access to the maritime domain is guaranteed to all. That responsibility falls to the Sailors of today's U.S. Pacific Fleet.

The greatest generation of Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen and Coastguardsmen not only won a war, they also gave us the priceless gift of setting the conditions for bitter enemies to become the closest friends. I was reminded of this tremendous legacy earlier this week when I spent time aboard a Japanese ship visiting Pearl Harbor to celebrate our great alliance.

For decades, we've worked with allies like Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, Thailand and other partners in the Pacific to maintain stability and peace. Today, as America continues our strategic rebalance to the Indo-Asia-Pacific, we remember the service and sacrifice of those who went before us. Now that it is our turn to defend American interests, I can assure you that the United States Pacific Fleet remains a credible and capable warfighting force – ready to answer our nation's call whenever and wherever needed.

On behalf of the men and women of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, thank you for the honor of speaking with you tonight. May God bless you, our veterans, our country and all those who stand with us. Thank you.