

2026 History Essay Contest

Homeschool Highschool Winner

The Battle of Midway

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In the six months after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' subsequent declaration of war, Japan won victory after victory ("The Battle of Midway"). Armed with the JN-25 naval code and the third most powerful navy in the world, they carried out a series of successful attacks against Allied territories in the Pacific, taking control of the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, and the Dutch East Indies ("The Battle of Midway"). Determined on removing the United States as a Pacific power, Japan set its sights on the Midway Islands, whose strategic location, if conquered, would enable Japanese forces to pose a serious threat to America's military in Hawaii and to Allied supply lines between the United States and Australia (Ray). Japanese victory at Midway appeared inevitable, but the battle would prove to instead be the turning point of the war in what historian John Keegan called "as great a reversal in strategic fortune as the naval world has ever seen" (Mullen).

The attack on Pearl Harbor—the day President Roosevelt claimed would "live in infamy"—seriously wounded the American forces ("Pearl Harbor Attack"). All of the United States' eight battleships were hit, five of them were sunk, and one was left severely damaged ("Pearl Harbor Attack"). In addition, three destroyers were sunk, and numerous other ships were sunk or heavily damaged ("Pearl Harbor Attack"). By the end of the battle, 220 aircraft were hit, 140 of them destroyed ("Pearl Harbor Attack"). The attack left 2,330 military personnel killed and the nation united against the Japanese ("Pearl

Harbor Attack”). Despite the patriotic fervor that spread across the nation, the United States military continued to lose ships, aircraft, and personnel throughout the first half of 1941 while the Japanese suffered minimal losses (“The Battle of Midway). In an effort to turn the tide of the war, the United States reworked the command structure in the Pacific theater, dividing it into the Southwest Pacific Area and the Pacific Ocean Area, the former under the command of General Douglas MacArthur and the latter under the command of Admiral Chester Nimitz (Ray).

As the new commanders assumed their positions between mid-April and early May, the Japanese made plans to attack Midway (Ray). The Midway Islands, comprising of Eastern Island, Sand Island, and Spit Island, have a total land area of just 2.4 square miles, yet Midway’s strategic importance cannot be underestimated (“Midway Islands”). Situated just 1,100 miles northwest of Hawaii and almost exactly halfway to Japan, it was a regular stopover point for transpacific flights and hosted a major United States Navy submarine and air base, which included three runways and a seaplane hangar (“Midway Islands”). Control of Midway was clearly crucial to Japan’s plans in the Pacific; thus, in early June, the Japanese sent out the bulk of their fleet—consisting of numerous aircraft carriers, seaplane carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines—with orders to destroy the American fleet and conquer Midway (Ray).

The primary code used by the Japanese to send military messages was the JN-25 code, consisting of approximately 33,000 words, phrases, and letters (Stillwell). Since the beginning of the war, a unit of American code-breakers led by Commander Joseph Rochefort had been hard at work in the basement of the 14th Naval District Administration at Pearl Harbor (Stillwell). Lieutenant Commander Thomas H. Dyer was the lead code-breaker on the team, often staying awake for more than twenty-four hours, and once for forty-two hours continuously, to work on cracking the JN-25 code (Stillwell). As a result of the relentless work of the code-breakers, the Allies learned of the planned attack on Midway (Ray). In the words of the Intelligence Officer of the American fleet, Commander Edwin T. Lyaton, “The Japanese would come on the 4th of June. The message was clear” (Nguyen). Admiral Nimitz mustered a force of heavy carriers, cruisers, destroyers, submarines, and aircraft 350 miles northeast of Midway, at a point fittingly code-named “Point Luck”; there they waited to ambush the Japanese (Ray).

On 4 June 1942, planes from the Japanese carriers *Akagi*, *Soryu*, *Kaga*, and *Hiryu* set out to bomb

the base on Midway (Ray). However, the Americans' advanced knowledge of the attack enabled them to launch their planes from the base, leaving the Japanese an empty airfield (Ray). While the Japanese bombed the base at Midway, American unescorted land-based planes attempted to torpedo and dive bomb the enemy fleet, suffering many losses as a result of poor communication and superior Japanese aircraft (Sons of Liberty Museum, Military History Team). The Battle of Midway appeared to be in the hands of the Japanese, until bombers from the American carriers *Enterprise*, *Hornet*, and *Yorktown* spotted the Japanese carriers ("The Battle of Midway"). As the bombers found their targets, all the Japanese carriers, save the *Hiryu*, were destroyed ("The Battle of Midway"). Lieutenant Richard Best, the pilot who dropped the bomb that sank the *Akagi*, later said, "It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen—bombs exploding on the flight deck" (Nguyen). Below, wounded on the deck of the *Akagi*, Captain Mitsuo Ruchida said, "I never expected the Americans to fight so hard" (Nguyen).

The *Hiryu*, the only surviving carrier of the Japanese fleet, deployed its bombers, which soon found and attacked the American carrier *Yorktown* ("The Battle of Midway"). Although American aircraft intercepted the bombers, the *Yorktown* was severely damaged and eventually sank (Ray). Meanwhile, bombers from the *Enterprise* found the *Hiryu*, sending it up in flames (Ray). In the early hours of 5 June 1942, the attack on Midway was officially called off, and the Japanese forces retreated, American aircraft following close behind (Ray). The Battle of Midway had ended, and the tide of the war had turned.

The battle cost the Japanese four carriers, a heavy cruiser, over 320 planes, and an estimated 3,000 military personnel while the United States lost only one carrier, a destroyer, approximately 150 aircraft, and 317 men (Ray). For the rest of the war, the Japanese would remain in a defensive position, abandoning their plan to conquer the Pacific ("The Pacific Strategy, 1941-1944"). In the most decisive Japanese defeat since 1592, the Americans took an offensive stance in the Pacific for the first time since the bombing of Pearl Harbor, bolstered by newfound confidence (Ray). The victory at Midway enabled the Allies to begin rolling back the power of the Japanese empire as they initiated the island-hopping campaign that would last for the remainder of the war until Japan's 1945 surrender ("The Pacific Strategy, 1941-1944").

The Allied victory at the Battle of Midway, accomplished through a combination of advanced intelligence, strategy, and resolve, was a shock to the confident Japanese forces (Sons of Liberty Museum,

Military History Team). A Japanese pilot later recollected, “In the morning we were the hunters; by noon we were the hunted” (Nguyen). This can be applied not only to Midway but to the entire Pacific war. From the bombing of Pearl Harbor to the day before the battle of Midway, the Japanese held the advantage and were certain of success, but as the Japanese carriers sank, so did Japan’s hope. The Battle of Midway was crucial to the Allied war effort, a fight that would define the rest of the war. Its importance was expressed perfectly by Winston Churchill when he said of Midway, “this memorable American victory was of cardinal importance, not only to the United States but to the whole Allied cause...At one stroke, the dominant position of Japan in the Pacific was reversed” (Nguyen).

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