

For Want of a Shoal: Yamamoto and Midway

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There are two big questions about the Battle of Midway: the first is why the battle was fought and the second is how did Admiral Yamamoto, the chief architect of the Japanese plan, manage to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? The answer to the second question has to do with pre-battle reconnaissance, specifically with Operation K, a planned reconnaissance of Pearl Harbor. But, to put that operation in context, we must first understand why the battle was fought, and that takes us into the realm of Japan's strategy.

It is surprising to learn that Japan and Germany were pursuing identical strategies, but not simultaneously. Since 1935 the two axis powers had been engaged in joint planning for a two-front war against the Soviet Union.¹ The two countries proclaimed their common objective the following year when they signed the Anti-Comintern Pact. Between 1937 and 1939, as Germany encroached into Eastern Europe, Japan and the Soviet Union fought an undeclared war; and Stalin's foreign policy was sharply focused on avoiding a two-front conflict.²

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¹ James Morley, ed., *Deterrent Diplomacy: Japan, Germany, and the U.S.S.R., 1935-1941* (New York: Columbia, 1976).

² For the record of Stalin's broader efforts to avoid a two-front conflict, see the author's *China: A Political History, 1917-1980* (Boulder: Westview, 1982), chapters four and five.

Broadly speaking, Germany's and Japan's strategies were to consolidate a defensive perimeter on one front and then turn and attack the Soviet Union on the other. Hitler started the war, consolidated the Atlantic wall, and then turned to invade the Soviet Union. Japan sought to do the same. But Tokyo's problem was comparatively more complicated, having to build a defensive perimeter in the vast Pacific as part of a broader strategy of enlarging and sustaining its empire.

From 22 June 1941 onward, with the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Japan's leaders debated the terms under which they would join in the attack. This debate has been mischaracterized in the west as one between the Imperial Army and Navy Commands, the army wanting to go north to attack the Soviet Union and the navy wanting to go south to expand Japan's Pacific empire and obtain needed resources, particularly Dutch East Indies oil. The implication is that it was an either/or question, but that is incorrect. The actual debate was over the circumstances that would have to obtain for Japan to join in the war against the Soviet Union.

In fact, in the weeks after the German invasion, Japan's foreign minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, urged an immediate attack on the Soviet Union without first building a defense perimeter. That option was rejected in mid-July and Matsuoka dismissed. Japanese leaders informed their German counterparts that Japan would attack as soon as Moscow fell, or if Stalin removed enough troops from the Far East to give Japan a 3:1 advantage in troop numbers.

These circumstances seemed to be occurring in mid-October 1941, as Moscow was evacuated and Stalin began moving troops from the Far East to defend his capital. Accordingly, General Hideki Tojo, whose known preference was for Japan to join the war against the Soviet Union, was appointed to head the government. But Moscow did not fall and even though Stalin withdrew half of his thirty divisions from the Far East there were still fifteen divisions there to Japan's twelve in Manchuria. And so Tojo demurred.

Japan's decision was to build its defense perimeter first, and only then to join the German attack. The timing of the attack on Pearl Harbor was thus governed by the German army's drive on Moscow. Japan wanted to have its defense perimeter in place when Moscow fell, as expected. The Pearl Harbor strike, accompanied by a vast campaign stretching from Burma to Wake Island and including Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines, was the first phase in Tokyo's plan to construct an impregnable defense perimeter.

Tokyo's problem was the failure to destroy America's carriers, which, whether by chance or design, had been removed from Pearl Harbor just before the attack. If by chance, then luck was with the U.S. Navy. Both the *Enterprise* and *Lexington* were several hundred miles from Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack.³ If the *Enterprise* and *Lexington* had been at Pearl Harbor they would have been sunk; and if they had been close enough to attempt to engage the Kido Butai, they would have been sunk. The plain fact was that the Japanese strike force was far superior to anything the United States could put up against it at that time.

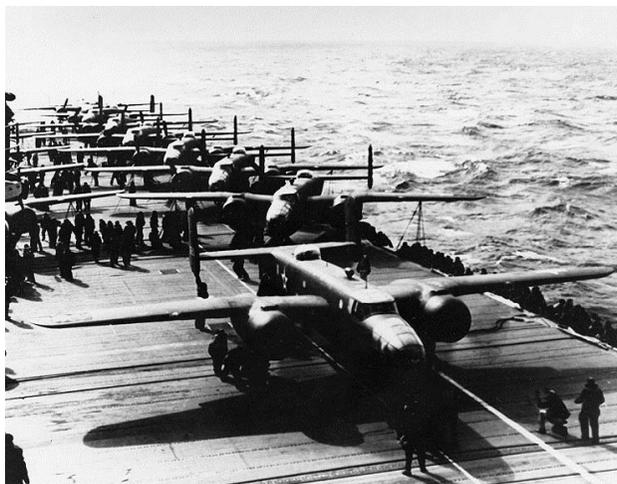
Carrier task forces were the new face of naval warfare, able to project power rapidly over radii of hundreds of miles, as the Japanese had just demonstrated. The American carriers were a nagging and festering concern to Tokyo, as they roamed inside Japan's defense perimeter striking targets of opportunity.

In late March of 1942, the Japanese deployed a five-carrier task force into the Bay of Bengal, sweeping aside the British defense presence, sinking one carrier and raiding Colombo and Trincomalee. Japan's success prompted a new request from Berlin. German leaders urged Tokyo to extend the Imperial Japanese Navy's area of operations to Suez. They pointed out that the mere presence of the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Arabian Sea would severely disrupt

³ A third carrier, the *Saratoga*, was in San Diego preparing to depart for Pearl Harbor.

American efforts to ship lend-lease material to the Soviet Union via the Persian Corridor, the main supply line at that time, and gravely weaken the Soviets.

The renewed possibility of German-Japanese cooperation greatly alarmed FDR, whose overarching objective was to prevent Japan from joining in the attack against the Soviet Union, which would be the worst of all worst cases. Therefore, even though American forces were still reeling from Japanese attacks, Roosevelt determined upon a desperate maneuver he hoped would dissuade Japan from cooperating with Germany. He sought to demonstrate not only that Japan's defense perimeter was not secure, but also that the Japanese homeland itself was vulnerable to American attack.



B-25s prepare to take off from the USS *Hornet* on the Doolittle Raid, April 1942 ([U.S. Navy](#)).

The President accomplished this objective with the daring Doolittle bombing raid of April 18 on Tokyo and other Japanese cities. The sixteen B-25 medium bombers inflicted minimal damage; they carried only four bombs each and some carried only incendiaries. Nevertheless, the attack stunned, outraged, and perplexed Japanese leaders, who strained to determine how their defense perimeter had

been breached and where the raid had originated.⁴ The President himself offered no clues. At a press conference trumpeting America's ability to strike the Japanese homeland, he said only that the raid had originated from "Shangri-La."

As the B-25 was a land-based medium bomber the idea of a carrier-based raid did not immediately occur to Japanese analysts. They had determined that stripped down, the B-25 on a one-way mission could reach Japan from two places: Midway Island, the westernmost island in the Hawaiian Island chain, or Kiska and Attu, the westernmost points of the Aleutian Islands, both some 2,500 miles distant. Thus, they quickly, but erroneously, concluded that the United States had breached their defense perimeter with an attack originating from one or both of these two points, and decided to seal the breach by attacking and occupying both of them. Operation MI, as the Midway-Aleutians plan was known, was hastily decided on May 5, two weeks after the Doolittle raid.

Yamamoto's plan was to kill two birds with one stone. He not only sought to attack and occupy both Midway and the western Aleutians, but also to set a trap for the remaining U.S. carriers, which he was determined to destroy in a decisive fleet engagement. Only thus would Japan's defensive perimeter be secure. Accordingly, in mid-May the Japanese informed their German allies that they would not shift forces to Suez, but, instead, would move to secure the perimeter.⁵

Operation MI was decided upon just as Japanese forces were in the midst of attempting to cut off and isolate Australia with a landing at Port Moresby in New Guinea. From Port Moresby, Japanese air power could threaten to deny northeastern Australia to the United States as a staging area. At the very least, this would protect Japan's important base at Rabaul, which came under air attack from bombers

⁴ Edwin T. Layton, *And I Was There* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 387.

⁵ See Johanna Menzel Meskill, *Hitler and Japan: The Hollow Alliance* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966), n52.

based in Australia and New Guinea as early as February 1942. If the United States was forced to establish its forward operating bases much further south, this would gain both space and time for Japan's defense.

American signals intelligence, so vital to all naval operations, had intercepted Japanese plans. Not only had U.S. foreknowledge enabled the American and Australian navies to concentrate scarce resources to prevent the Japanese landing at Port Moresby in the series of running engagements called the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 6-8), but it also gave Admiral Nimitz the opportunity to turn the tables on Yamamoto's plan to trap and destroy the American carriers at Midway.

The losses both sides suffered in the Coral Sea had a direct impact on Operation MI. The United States lost the carrier *Lexington*, but *Yorktown*, badly damaged, managed to limp back to Pearl Harbor for repairs. Japan's losses, however, reduced by three carriers the force Yamamoto would be able to assemble for Midway. The light carrier *Shoho* had been sunk, *Shokaku* had been damaged and was undergoing repairs, and *Zuikaku* was out of action, awaiting replenishment of planes and aircrews.

Thus, although Yamamoto assembled a large, two-hundred-ship, strike and occupation force for Midway, six times the size of the Pearl Harbor task force, it was not as large as he hoped it would be, with only four carriers. (The Pearl Harbor task force had included six carriers; the Bay of Bengal force five carriers.) That, however, would not be his only disappointment, which brings us to Operation K.

As part of his preparations for Midway, Yamamoto had ordered a reconnaissance of Pearl Harbor by two long-range floatplanes that were to fly from Wotje in the Marshall Islands to French Frigate Shoals, an atoll located halfway between Pearl Harbor and Midway. The range of the planes, Kawanishi H6Ks, was over three thousand miles. Submarine refueling tankers would precede the

planes to the atoll. After refueling they would fly on to Pearl Harbor to determine whether America's two remaining aircraft carriers, *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, were there. (The Japanese believed incorrectly that *Yorktown* had been sunk in the Coral Sea battle.)

Yamamoto's plan was not simply to seize Midway, but also to ambush the American carriers when they steamed out to render assistance to the beleaguered forces on the island. For this plan to be successful, knowledge of the location of the carriers was paramount.



French Frigate Shoals is a large atoll, approximately 20 miles across, with many reefs and sandbars. It lies between Hawaii and Midway. ([NOAA](#))

Yet, the vital reconnaissance of Pearl Harbor never occurred. When the submarine refueling tankers arrived off French Frigate Shoals early on May 30, they found two U.S. Navy seaplane tenders, *Ballard* and *Thornton*, at anchor in the lagoon. When informed of the U.S. presence, Yamamoto promptly cancelled Operation K, and proceeded with the Midway plan with no certain knowledge of the whereabouts of the carriers.

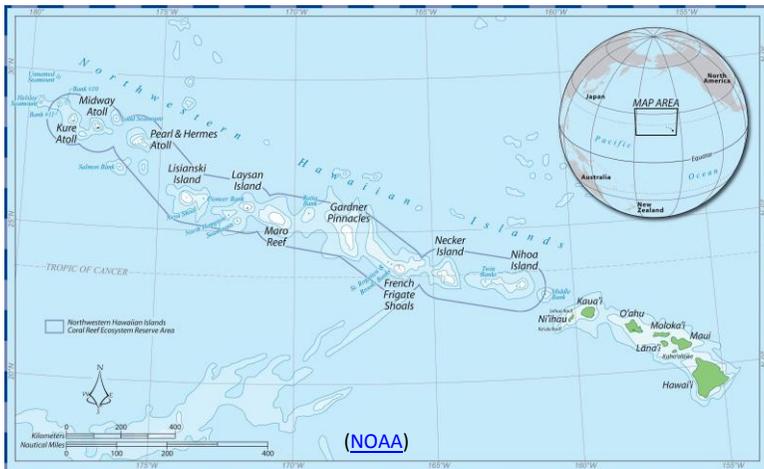


The Kawanishi H6K flying boat had a range of over 3,000 miles. ([AirVectors](#))

There are conflicting accounts of when the U.S. learned of Japan's use of French Frigate Shoals as a refueling station. One was that the same radio intercepts in early May, which divulged Yamamoto's plan to attack Midway, also convinced Admiral Nimitz of the need to secure control of the atoll. Another was that the atoll had been secured two months earlier in mid-March after the Japanese had used the Shoals to refuel the two flying boats that unsuccessfully attempted to bomb the ten-ten docks at Pearl Harbor, in the first Operation K. Still a third story was that even earlier, in the summer of 1940, the U.S. Navy had come upon a Japanese detachment on Tern islet in the Shoals testing radio communications. In the ensuing encounter, U.S. Navy forces detained the Japanese and secretly copied their codebooks.⁶

⁶ Anson Stage, "During a Little Known Raid, Japan's Newest Four-Engine Flying Boat was Put to a Challenging Test: a Flight of More Than 3,000 Miles to Attack Hawaii," suggests that the idea to employ submarine tankers to refuel aircraft at remote atolls came from a fictional story written by a U.S. Navy Lieutenant, W.J. Holmes, assigned to Station Hypo in Honolulu. Holmes' story appeared in the August 1941 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. In fact, however, the Japanese had employed forward deployed submarine tankers to refuel aircraft since at least the mid-thirties, not only militarily, but also commercially.

In any case, it is clear that Admiral Nimitz and naval intelligence at Hypo were alert to Japanese interest in and use of French Frigate Shoals. One could well argue that there was no luck involved here. Nimitz anticipated that the Japanese would attempt to use the Shoals in the coming Midway operation just as they had earlier in March and so preempted, blinding them to the whereabouts of the carriers. Maintaining intelligence security was part of his plan to set a trap for Yamamoto at Midway.



But that doesn't explain Yamamoto's reaction. The puzzle has always been: Why did he scrub an absolutely vital reconnaissance mission? The Japanese were experienced practitioners of refueling floatplanes at sea, having perfected this technique for both military and civilian use during the thirties throughout the islands of the Pacific. As the above map indicates, there were many other locations where planes could refuel in the 1,500 mile-long chain of atolls and islets between Midway and Pearl Harbor. The United States could not guard them all.

Could he not have moved the refueling rendezvous to nearby Necker, or Nihoa Islands, or to Gardner Shoals? Did he think that the submarine screen he had also deployed in the area of French Frigate Shoals would provide sufficient warning, if the carriers were at Pearl

Harbor and moved toward Midway? There was also the alternative of using seaplane-carrying submarines. The Japanese had employed them for three reconnaissance flights over Pearl Harbor in January and February. There was at least one seaplane-carrying sub, I-25, that was on its way to the American west coast at the end of May, and could have been diverted to within range of Pearl Harbor.

Did he believe the U.S. Navy's disinformation campaign that the carriers were operating somewhere in the South Pacific and therefore were over two thousand miles from Midway? In fact, Halsey's Task Force 16, centered on *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, had attempted to join *Lexington* and *Yorktown* in the battle of Coral Sea, but only arrived after the battle was over. Halsey then went northeastward to defend the islands of Ocean and Nauru.

On May 14, Nimitz sent Halsey a message ordering him to allow his force to be observed by enemy search planes. The next day a Japanese search plane observed his force. The following day, May 16, Nimitz ordered Halsey to make a high-speed return to Pearl Harbor. Japanese intelligence, based on the sighting, assumed that American carriers were still in the vicinity of the Coral Sea, over two thousand miles from Midway.⁷

This naval deception may have colored Yamamoto's reaction to the report of June 3 that Japanese intelligence had detected an American carrier force "in the vicinity of Midway."⁸ Maintaining radio silence, he did not inform Admiral Nagumo, who was in charge of the carrier flotilla advancing on Midway, of this development. Perhaps he assumed, as Nagumo was an addressee on the message, he had already received it. Or, was it simply "victory disease," as some have said, that persuaded him that there was no need to execute the most

⁷ Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 139.

⁸ W.J. Holmes, *Double-Edged Secrets: U.S. Naval Intelligence Operations in the Pacific during World War II* (New York: Berkeley, 1979), 107-8.

basic and fundamental step in military operations, pre-battle reconnaissance?

Whatever Yamamoto's reasoning, his assumption had to have been that the carriers were too far away to present an immediate threat, and that, of course, was his grave mistake. Scrubbing Operation K compromised the plan for Midway by failing to eliminate the possible locations of the American carriers. Conflicting intelligence reports aside, the failure to reconnoiter Pearl Harbor meant that there were three possibilities: the carriers could be at Pearl Harbor; they could be somewhere in the South Pacific; or, they could be at Midway.

Had a reconnaissance been undertaken, by floatplane refueled elsewhere than at French Frigate Shoals, or by submarine-launched seaplane, and Yamamoto discovered that there were no carriers at Pearl Harbor, the odds would have been reduced to fifty-fifty. The carriers would either have been in the South Pacific, or at Midway. On the other hand, if the planes spotted the carriers at Pearl Harbor, the odds would have been reduced to zero.

In fact, however, a close look at Operation K discloses a much more ominous probability. The floatplanes were scheduled to arrive at sunset on the 30th, refuel, then set out after dark for Pearl Harbor, arriving there about one in the morning.⁹ In other words, the floatplanes would have been observing the five-hundred-mile stretch of water between French Frigate Shoals and Pearl Harbor the evening of May 30.

This reconnaissance mission would have missed *Hornet* and *Enterprise*. Task Force 16 under Admiral Spruance, assuming command for Halsey, who had been taken ill, had left Pearl Harbor two days earlier, on May 28, and so had already slipped past both the planned aerial reconnaissance and the submarine screen, which did not get into position until June 4.

⁹ Fuchida and Okumiya, 150-151.

But Admiral Fletcher in Task Force 17 was a different story. *Yorktown* did not depart Pearl Harbor until the morning of May 30. Repair crews were still on board as it got under way at less than full speed. In other words, although *Yorktown* left early enough to elude the submarine screen, she would have been in the five-hundred-mile stretch of water between Pearl Harbor and French Frigate Shoals just as the Japanese floatplanes were passing overhead.

There is, in short, a high probability that Operation K, the planned reconnaissance of Pearl Harbor, if undertaken, would have spotted *Yorktown* as it traversed the waters between Pearl Harbor and French Frigate Shoals that very night of May 30.¹⁰

Had Yamamoto discovered *Yorktown* heading for Midway he undoubtedly would have deduced that instead of luring the Americans into a trap, they were setting one for him. He would have known for certain the whereabouts of the carriers; they were not three thousand miles away in the South Pacific, they were not at Pearl Harbor, they were at Midway.

Furthermore, the knowledge that the American carriers were already in the vicinity of Midway would have prompted him to modify his battle plan. There would have been no need to attack Midway in order to draw the carriers into the decisive battle. Instead, he would have gone after the carriers directly. In other words, to put it simply, instead of arming his planes with bombs he would have armed them with torpedoes.

But that was not to be. There is a perfect metaphor for Operation K, from a story called *The Nail*, by Alan Davis and Mark Farmer. It goes like this:

“For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the knight was lost; for want of the knight the battle was

¹⁰ Holmes, *Double-Edged Secrets*, 107, comes to the same conclusion.

lost; and so it was a kingdom was lost, all for want of a nail.”

Had Yamamoto’s plan succeeded in destroying the American carriers, not only would Japan’s perimeter have been secured, as Midway would have fallen and Hawaii itself threatened,¹¹ there would have existed no deterrent against either the Japanese army’s attack on the Soviet Union in Siberia, or the Imperial Japanese Navy’s shift to Suez. Either act would have fundamentally altered the course of the war.

As it turned out, of course, defeat at Midway forced a permanent change in Japan’s strategy, extinguishing any possibility of joining forces with Germany in a two-front war against the Soviet Union. From mid-1942 onward, Japan would be locked in a ferocious defensive struggle with the United States. The rest, as they say, is history—and so it was an empire was lost, all for want of a shoal.



The loss of Japan’s carrier strike force, including the *Hiryu* shown here, along with many experienced aviators, inflicted a devastating blow on Japanese offensive power and forced a permanent change in Japanese strategy. (U.S. Navy)

¹¹ See John Stephan, *Hawaii Under The Rising Sun: Japan’s Plans for Conquest After Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).