

Two Minutes That Changed the Pacific War

ANYONE who likes to observe exact anniversaries and turning points in history would do well to stand by for two minutes on June 4, 1952, at 10:24 A. M., zone "Yoke" (Greenwich plus 12) time. It will be 3:24 P. M. (standard) in San Francisco, and 7:24 P. M. (daylight) in New York. Exactly ten years earlier, to a minute, occurred the crisis in the Battle of Midway, and in the Pacific war. At 10:24, if you had been an air observer over the battle area, as Father Zeus watched the wars of the Greeks and Trojans from Mount Olympus, you wouldn't have bet a thin dime on the Americans' chances of winning.

Consider the situation. Admiral Nagumo's carrier striking force, the spoiled children of successive victories from Pearl Harbor to Trincomalee, were about to hang up another Yankee scalp—Admiral Nimitz'. As spearhead of a massive Japanese offensive the carrier striking force, early in that morning, had delivered a severe bombing raid on Midway Atoll. Next, the carriers had beaten off four assaults of Midway-based bombers without receiving a single hit themselves. In the last

In that interval of the battle of Midway ten years ago, Japanese hopes for victory were snuffed out.

By **SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON**

forty-five minutes their combat air patrol of lively, deadly "Zekes" had wiped out the torpedo-plane squadrons of the only United States carriers within 2,000 miles.

LIEUT. COMDR. LANCE E. MASSEY was gone, with twelve out of thirteen Devastators of Yorktown's Torpedo Squadron 3; Lieut. Comdr. Eugene E. Lindsey was gone, with eleven out of fourteen TBDs of Enterprise's Torpedo 6; Lieut. Comdr. John C. Waldron was gone, with every one of Hornet's fifteen TBDs. At 10:24 the four Japanese carriers—intact, unhit, superb, confident—were preparing to launch a strike against the three American flattops.

A few hundred miles southwestward, Vice Admiral Kondo with eight heavy cruisers, two battleships and a flock of destroyers was escorting twelve fast

transports with 5,000 picked Japanese troops, ready to take Midway next day. A few hundred miles northwestward, Admiral Yamamoto, the supreme Japanese naval commander, in the fabulous eighteen-inch gunned battlewagon Yamato, with six more fast battleships and another flock of destroyers, was ready to pounce on any United States force that turned up. Away up north, Rear Admiral Kakuta with a light carrier force was lurching through a fog-mull to make a second bomber strike on Dutch Harbor, and behind him two groups of transports were moving into Kiska and Attu. It was about time to begin drafting a victory dispatch to the Emperor.

What were the Japanese trying to do? In the first place, to set up an air-patrolled defensive perimeter from Kiska via Midway, Wake, the Marshalls and Gilberts to the Solomons,

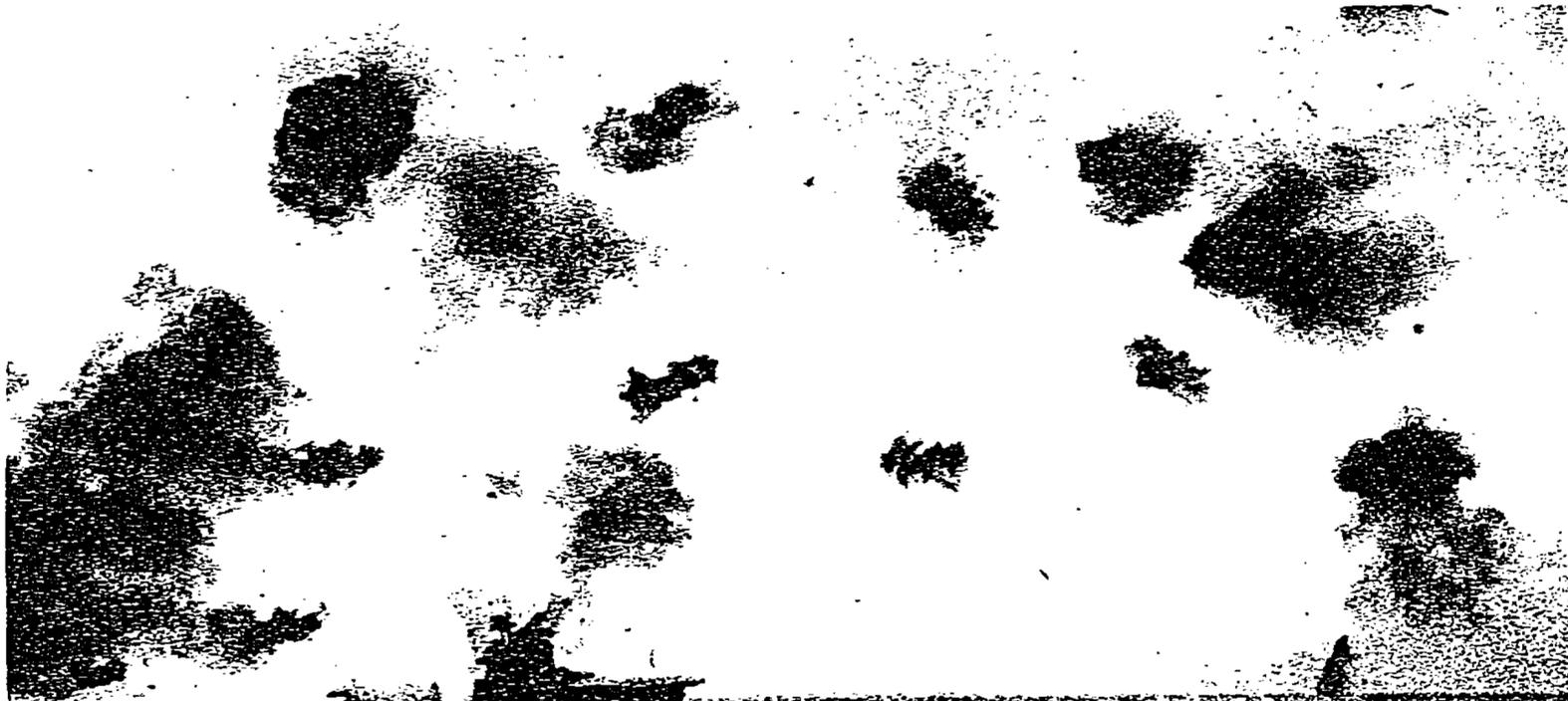
through which no future Halsey-Doolittle raid could penetrate undetected. Secondly, to set up a bomber base on Midway from which Pearl Harbor, 1,135 miles distant, could be harassed and, if need be, invaded. Third, and most important, to tempt Admiral Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the United States Pacific Fleet, into a fleet action. Cincpac could not deploy more than three large carriers, against the Japanese four, or six, if you include Kakuta's. He had no fast battleships, and Yamamoto had eleven. He had eight heavy cruisers to oppose the Japanese fourteen, and he could spare only fifteen destroyers from convoy duty to screen his carriers, while Yamamoto had forty-five. Yamamoto knew that if he took Midway, the Pacific Fleet must come out and fight, and with such overwhelming force he ought to wipe it out. That was his prime objective.

THE Battle of the Coral Sea, on May 8, was the "right jab" with which Yamamoto opened this campaign. The carrier-plane raid on Dutch Harbor on June 3 was a feint with his left, hoping to catch Nimitz off balance. Midway was to be the "haymaker" with the whole Japanese fleet behind it. Frank Jack Fletcher stopped the right jab in the Coral Sea, but that did not worry Yamamoto, since he had taken Tulagi and sunk our "Lady Lex." Now he hoped to catch Nimitz with his guard down. But Cincpac, as Winston Churchill has written in "The Hinge of Fate," "was vigilant and active." His Intelligence kept him well informed, even as to the date when the expected blow was to fall. Although he could not be quite sure whether the plan against Midway "was a blind to conceal * * * an advance toward the American continent, Midway was incomparably the more likely and greater danger, and he never hesitated to deploy his strength in that direction."

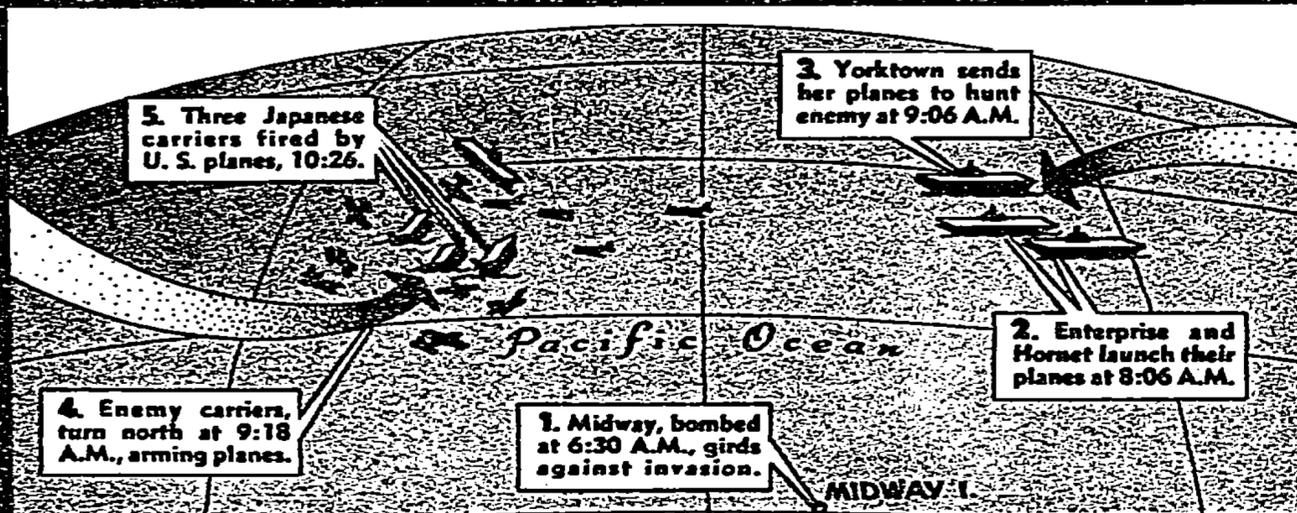
Yamamoto did not expect that. He planned to have Midway in the hands of his landing force before Nimitz knew what was cooking. He assumed that by the time the Pacific Fleet got up there, Midway would be the bait in a gigantic trap of overwhelming gunfire and air power, which would not leave enough of the Pacific Fleet to be worth repairing. The Japanese could then move into Oahu at their leisure, take the Fijis and Samoa, isolate Australia and New Zealand, and wait for Roosevelt to make peace feelers.

ADAMIRAL NIMITZ at Pearl Harbor was indeed vigilant. He promptly decided to send his fast carrier forces out to challenge the Japanese before they could take Midway. Available were Admiral Halsey's Task Force 6, Enterprise (Capt. George D. Murray) and Hornet (Capt. Marc A. Mitscher). Halsey had fallen ill from the strain of the last few months, but for his relief Nimitz made the happy choice of Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, whose qualities of (Continued on Page 44)

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JUNE 4, 1942: KEY ACTIONS AND THE CLIMAX AT MIDWAY



The map shows action leading to destruction of three Japanese carriers; the picture is of the Yorktown, hit later in the day.

Two Minutes in the Pacific War

(Continued from Page 10)

cool, intelligent decision were just what this occasion demanded.

They departed Pearl Harbor May 28. Yorktown, flying the flag of the gallant Rear Admiral Fletcher, sailed at 9 A. M., May 31, to rendezvous with Spruance northeast of Midway, on the afternoon of June 2. Fletcher, being the senior, then became O. T. C.—(officer in tactical command). But, as each task force had its own screen and staff, he wisely gave Spruance complete latitude during the battle, after a sound initial directive.

FORTUNE first favored the Japanese. Nagumo's carrier striking force approached its launching point for Midway through a belt of thick weather. Search planes from the American carriers and from the Midway airdrome and lagoon—none then radar-equipped—could not locate it. Day had broken on the fateful fourth before Nagumo's carriers were sighted. At 5:34 Fletcher's and Spruance's communications officers picked up a laconic message from a searching Catalina: "Enemy carriers!" And at 6:03, "Two carriers and battleship!" with their course (SE) and a reasonably accurate position. That was all—I repeat all—the information that Fletcher and Spruance had as to their enemy's course, composition and location until their own planes reported them at 10 o'clock. But it was enough. And at



Detail of a painting by Albert E. Murray.
Adm. Raymond A. Spruance.

6:07 Fletcher ordered Spruance, commanding the Enterprise-Hornet force, "Proceed southwesterly and attack enemy carriers when definitely located. I will follow as soon as my search planes are recovered."

Midway Atoll was about to catch it. Admiral Nagumo's strike group of 108 planes had been launched at first light. Search radar on Midway picked them up ninety-three miles out, and by the time they struck, every American land-based plane that could fly was in the air. Maj. Floyd B. Parks' Marine Corps squadron of twenty antique

Buffaloes and seven period Wildcats was vectored out to intercept. Hopelessly outnumbered and outclassed by the Japanese "Zekes," seventeen of them, including the squadron commander, were shot down. The Japanese bombers flew on, and gave Midway a good working over, exploding oil tanks and burning hangars. The enemy won this first round in the battle, at the cost of about twenty planes.

And they won the second round, too—the Midway-based counter-attacks. At 7:10 seven new Navy Avengers and four Army Marauders attacked the Japanese carriers. All but three were shot down, and not one hit was scored. At 7:55 sixteen Marine Corps SBD's, under Major Lofton R. Henderson, attacked; eight were shot down, six others damaged, and not a hit scored.

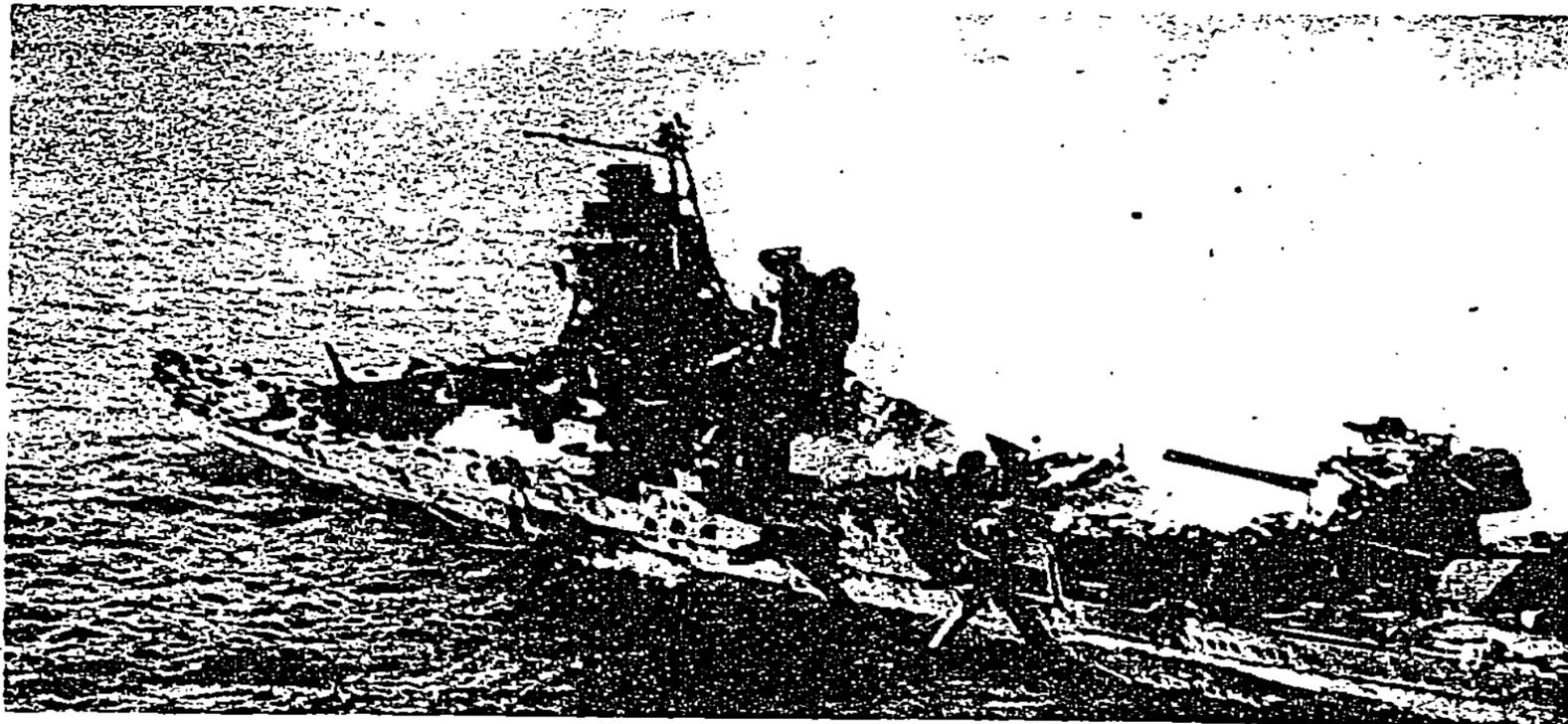
AT 8:10 fifteen B-17's, under Lieut. Col. Walter C. Sweeney, U.S.A., bombed the carriers from 20,000 feet altitude, claimed four hits, but did no better than near-misses. Even the slow, old Marine Corps SB2U-3's, the Vindicators, challenged; but the Zekes drove them off. All that these four attacks accomplished was a slight delay to the carriers' advance; but we may hope that the first of them, at least, had some effect on Admiral Nagumo's judgment, since before it was over he made the bad command decision that cost him the battle.

It happened thus. When he launched the attack group against Midway, Nagumo reserved ninety-three planes, armed to strike any United States ships that might be discovered within range. But his search for such ships was half-hearted because he didn't really believe there were any within a thousand miles. According to the Japanese plan, the Pacific Fleet should have been at Pearl Harbor, or scurrying up to the Aleutians! So Nagumo dispatched only a few cruiser float planes to reconnoiter; and before he had heard from any of them, he received a radio message from the commander of his Midway Island strike, "There is need for a second attack on Midway Island."

IMMEDIATELY after, the Avengers and B-26's attacked him, showing that Midway was still capable of fighting back. So, at 7:15 Nagumo made his fatal decision. He ordered his ninety-three bombers and torpedo planes struck below, to have their armament changed from bombs and torpedoes for hitting ships, to incendiary and fragmentation bombs for a second attack on Midway. And that process then required at least an hour's intensive work.

Not until 8:20 did the Jap-

(Continued on Following Page)



When the U. S. carrier planes struck—Japanese cruiser Mikuma after attack by dive-bombers.

(Continued from Preceding Page)

Japanese admiral learn that a search plane had located American carriers, but now he could do nothing about it. His flight decks must be kept clear to receive the attack group returning from Midway. Another forty minutes passed, the planes were recovered, and at 9 A. M. Nagumo gave the order, "Proceed to the northward. We plan to attack and destroy enemy task force." His carrier force changed course from southeast to northeast at 9:18, the crews frantically changing the bomber planes' armaments again, so that they could deal with ships. It was too late. Fletcher and Spruance had been making some better command decisions than Nagumo's.

ON board the American carriers the aviators and crewmen breakfasted that morning at 1:30. Their planes had been warmed up two of three times. On the advice of his Chief of Staff, Captain Miles Browning (who had a slide-rule mind), Spruance decided to continue his southerly course and commence launching at 7, which Browning calculated would enable our planes to catch the Japanese carriers with all planes back on deck. And that is exactly how it turned out. It was a crucial decision.

At 8:06 the launching from Enterprise and Hornet was complete: twenty fighters, sixty-seven Dauntless dive-bombers and twenty-nine Devastator torpedo bombers. Yorktown was just starting to launch. Admiral Fletcher, recalling how at Coral Sea he had been baited into sending everything he had against one light carrier, was not going to be caught that way again. So he waited until his search mission returned, and then launched only about half his planes—another excellent decision.

That fourth of June, 1942, was as cool and beautiful a summer's day as you could find in lat. 31° N, long. 176° W. A pilot flying at 19,000 feet could see all around a circle of fifty-mile radius. The empty Pacific looked like a

bowl of wrinkled blue Persian porcelain. Could the enemy be located in that vast space?

Every flight leader had to calculate, as well as fly and fight; for his latest report on the enemy's position had come at 8:03. Communications from Midway, whose land-based planes had tracked Nagumo almost to his turning point, had failed; and communication failures have lost more naval battles than one can count. Fletcher's and Spruance's navigators had to assume that Nagumo would continue on his southeast course toward Midway, and calculate the position where the American planes might find him.

But Nagumo, as we have seen, turned northeast at 9:18, and no American saw him do it. So Hornet's SBD's missed their target, and the fight. Her TBD's—Torpedo 8—became separated from the rest, but Waldron turned north when he found no ships at the estimated point of contact and was actually the first to find the enemy, at 9:30. As we have seen, the entire squadron was slaughtered. The same thing happened to Lindsey's Torpedo 6 from Enterprise. Massey's Torpedo 3 from Yorktown, arriving some forty-five minutes later, fared only a little better, saving four planes out of fourteen because "Jimmie" Thach with six intrepid F4F's protected it.

ALITTLE over a hundred seconds ticked away on the clocks in the Japanese chart rooms—between 10:24 and 10:26—and in that brief time Japanese prospects were glorious. But they had not yet heard from the American dive-bombers. At a few seconds before 10:26 thirty-seven of them struck, unheralded by radar, unseen by combat air patrol, which was down low, chasing the surviving torpedo planes.

Lieut. Comdr. Clarence W. McClusky, skipper to Enterprise's Air Group 6, led two squadrons of Dauntless dive-bombers in 70-degree dives on carriers Akagi and Kaga. At 10:26 bombs exploded in Akagi's hangar and on her flight deck in the midst of

readied planes. In a few minutes she was a burning hulk. Kaga, whose name means "increased joy," ran out of it all at once; four bomb hits by the McClusky team left her a mass of flames, she had to be abandoned, and that evening sank hissing into a 2,600-fathom deep.

Almost simultaneously Lieut. Comdr Maxwell F. Leslie appeared on the scene with seventeen more SBD's from carrier Yorktown. The third Japanese carrier, Soryu, which had just slaughtered Massey's torpedo squadron, was turning into the wind to launch planes when Leslie's men planted three 1,000-pound bombs in the midst of the spot. The ship burst into flames; within thirty minutes she was abandoned, and early in the afternoon U. S. submarine Nautilus gave her the coup de grace.

LUCK and good judgment had brought McClusky with the "Big E" dive-bombers to the target—he reached it by flying three sides of a box. After overshooting the enemy's estimated position he decided to turn northwest; and on that course he was so fortunate as to spot a Japanese destroyer hightailing northeastward. McClusky, guessing correctly that she was catching up with the carriers, took his course from her, the course that carried him right to Akagi and Kaga, at 10:26.

By half past ten on that June morning, three out of four of Nagumo's fast carriers were on their flaming road to death. But the battle was not over. The fourth carrier, Hiryu, which happened to be several miles ahead of the others, was untouched; and this respite gave her time to rearm her bombers with the right kind of eggs to hit ships. Nagumo, after abandoning his flagship, got word from a search plane of Yorktown's position. He promptly passed the word to Hiryu, "Attack enemy carrier." Her captain blinked back, "All our planes are taking off now." Her attack groups hit Yorktown at noon and at 2:42; and between them they made hits that knocked out her engineer-

(Continued on Page 47)

(Continued from Page 45)

ing plant and gave her such a list that Captain Buckmaster ordered her abandoned, lest she turn turtle.

Yorktown had to wait only an hour for her revenge. One of her scouting pilots, Lieut. Sam Adams, reported Hiryu's position at 2:45 P. M. Spruance promptly ordered an attack group of twenty-four SBD's, including refugees from Yorktown, assembled on Enterprise's flight deck. At 3:30 they sliced off, led by Lieutenant Gallaher, without fighter escort; none could be spared. At 5 P. M. they jumped the carrier and made four direct hits; she burst in flames and was abandoned in the small hours of June 5.

AT 3 A. M., June 5, Yamamoto bowed to the logic of events and ordered a general retirement. He was destined never to have the big fleet engagement which he so ardently desired; some four-score American aviators had seen to that. He had lost four fast carriers together with their entire complement of planes, and almost all his first-string aviators. Never was there a sharper turn in the fortunes of war.

Midway even more than Coral Sea emphasized the vital role of carrier-borne airpower in modern naval warfare. Yamamoto had to abandon his mission despite the possession of vastly superior gun power and without firing a shot from his main batteries, because Fletcher and Spruance, with two well-directed thrusts, had destroyed the Japanese air component while preserving most of their own.

It was a victory of brave and skillful aviators, of intelligence intelligently applied, and of wise command decisions. Fletcher did well, and Spruance's performance was superb.

THE Japanese knew very well that they were beaten. "I felt bitter," recalled Nagumo's chief of staff; "I felt like swearing." Before the ships reached home, "Tokyo Rose" and other official broadcasters began making the usual claims that an incredible number of United States planes and ships had been shot down, sunk or damaged, but these loudspeakers were soon muzzled, and word went out from Imperial Headquarters that Midway was taboo. It thrust the Japanese war lords back on their heels in a defensive role as unwelcome as it was unexpected. And never again would they regain the offensive.

So, reader, if you choose to devote a moment's thought to the two most crucial minutes in modern naval history—10:24 to 10:26 on Thursday, the fourth of June, 1942, think not only of the great commanders, Nimitz, Fletcher and Spruance, but of the two-score and ten young aviators who gave their lives that day to win the mastery of the Pacific for their country.

The New York Times

Published: June 1, 1952

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