

The SBD Dauntless & the Battle of Midway I

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PART ONE OF TWO PARTS

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On December 7th, 1941 Japanese bombers and fighters executed a plan devised by the Commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy, Naval General (Admiral) Isoroku Yamamoto, and attacked Pearl Harbor causing great destruction, sinking five major U. S. Navy warships, and decimating our military aircraft stationed at Honolulu. U. S. Carriers were out to sea and spared damage.

The plan was to dramatically weaken U.S. Naval forces in the Pacific and take control of the Southeast Asia and gain the rubber and petroleum of the region. With a weak Navy, the U.S. Navy would be unable to prevent Japan from conquering at will while holding the U.S. at bay.

Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo and the Japanese Army Generals pushed Yamamoto into attacking the United States. He is reputed to have said “ I fear all we have done today is awaken a great, sleeping giant’.

He expected to run free and attack at will for six months to a year, and then, he said he “would be unable to predict a way to win a war with the United States”.

Yamamoto’s prediction came true when a trap he had set for the U.S. Naval fleet went terribly wrong on June 4th, 1942, almost exactly six months from the attack at Pearl Harbor. An attack on the island of Midway was set to draw the U.S. fleet into the area where a waiting superior Japanese naval force would destroy them. What they didn’t know was that the U.S. had broken the Japanese codes and were fully aware of the plan.

The attack on Midway began and American aircraft stationed on Midway Island counterattacked, but were unable to damage any of the three Japanese carriers launching the initial attack.

As the Japanese aircraft were being rearmed for a second round of attacks, a scout plane reported spotting the U.S. fleet. Now the Japanese Admiral had to reload his planes to launch an attack on the American fleet. He almost made it.

U.S. Navy planes from the carriers Hornet, Enterprise, and Yorktown began a series of attacks, initially by squadrons of TBD torpedo bombers that were almost entirely shot out of the air. Although they scored no hits, they delayed the reloading on the Japanese carriers and

diverted attention from the squadrons of SBD dive bombers, one from the Yorktown and two from the Enterprise simultaneously attacked three of the Japanese carriers just as their aircraft were attempting take off. Diving at a seventy degree angle the dive bombers were unstoppable.,

In minutes the Akagi, Kaga, and Sorvu were ablaze and forced out of action. The fourth enemy carrier was bombed a few hours later and forced to retreat with its fleet and Admiral Yamamoto called off the operation.

Six month after it was initiated, the Japanese Great Pacific War would be over. The Americans had won the greatest sea battle in modern history. The Douglas Dauntless SBD dive bombers had turned the tide of WWII and in two battles, the battle of the Coral Sea and the battle of Midway, the Japanese lost 195,000 tons of warships, including six carriers, a number of destroyers, at least one submarine, and a battleship mostly attributable to the SBD,s.

On April 18, 1943 U. S. long-range P-38 fighters caught Yamamoto in -flight during an inspection tour of Japanese held bases. The light bomber he was traveling in was shot down and the Admiral killed.

His flight had been announced to the U. S. in coded messages decoded and presented to then President Roosevelt, who ordered an attempt be made to kill the Japanese Admiral if possible.

The Battle of Midway Naval Battle was finally over and WWII went on, but the Douglas SBD Dauntless and their brave crews had earned a stellar place of honor in aviation history.

Altogether there were just a few less than 6,000 Douglas SBD Dive bombers built and there are still a few flyable restorations around with many more un-airworthy craft on display at aviation museums. The Naval Museum at Pensacola Florida has a particularly nice restoration. As a volunteer at the San Diego Air & Space museum I watched much of the restoration of the SBD that is now on display in the WWII section. The sheet metal guys had to cut hundreds of 3” diameter holes in the new split dive flaps. The wings did not fold and were attached to the center-section with flanges and a hundred or so fairly small bolts with self -locking nuts. Removing, or replacing a wing, took a long time.

You will find a more detailed description of the SBD in part II of this article located in the “scale articles” section of the Club web page.

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