

Virginians at War

Battle of Midway

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II: 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific theater. Six months following the devastating attack by the Empire of Japan on the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy soundly defeated the Imperial Japanese Navy at the Battle of Midway.

Midway, a tiny atoll located in the center of the Pacific Ocean, 1,300 miles northwest of Honolulu, was considered strategic for the control of the Pacific. The Japanese were using the attack on Midway as a tactic to lure the Pacific fleet into a trap and then annihilate it. This time, the U.S. Navy knew that the Japanese were coming, and had a trap of its own.

World War II – Battle of Midway: Turning the Tide in the Pacific

OP/INTEL

SHOWERS: In the Pacific, during World War II, Commander Rochefort, Commander Holmes, Commander Layton, and all of the people working in communications

intelligence and in the intelligence structure, small as they were at the time, designed and executed the system which we now call OP/INTEL. That was the birth of OP/INTEL, and we learned as we went along. We got more proficient in recovering code groups, we got to the point where, by the middle of 1942, including the Battle of Midway, where we could read enough of the Japanese message that we could almost read them verbatim. When Admiral Yamamoto issued his OP order for the Battle of Midway in the latter part of May, 1942, we read it almost verbatim, and were able to provide Admiral Nimitz – two weeks in advance of the battle – the complete order that Admiral Yamamoto had issued. So he knew in advance what he was faced with, and in time to get his forces out, meager as they were. Japanese forces coming to Midway numbered over 120 ships. Admiral Nimitz had 36 ships. Total. It was a battle of calculated risk, because operators still were not sure that this intelligence was for real.

SETTING THE TRAP

LAPRADE: We got into Pearl with the *Yorktown*, which was badly damaged, and *Yorktown* went into the yard immediately on arrival, with an estimate of something like three or four months to restore her to battle operations. She was out of the yard in three days.

ASBURY: Well, we were in Pearl Harbor three days, and we were resupplying and doing everything we could to get the ship back together. When they got everything below deck patched, and they got us out, we could only do 18 knots, so we went to Midway.

LAPRADE: The *Yorktown* and *Portland* and the rest of the ships in the group then steamed on out of Pearl, and on up through to the north and northwest of the Hawaiian Island chain. On June the 3rd or 4th – dates, you know, have a tendency to get a little fuzzy – the Japanese launched an attack on Dutch Harbor. And we were, theoretically, we were on our way to the Aleutians. But as soon as that attack occurred, low and behold, darn if we didn't turn around and start steaming in the southwest – other direction. This was a case where the intelligence knew a heck of a

lot more than us peons in the wardroom knew. The following morning was the attack on Midway, so we were there and the Japanese didn't know it.

CRAWFORD: All officers were called to the rather spacious area called "the wardroom." A senior officer pulled down a very large map of the Pacific. And then, he proceeded to lay out, in all detail, the whole expected Japanese Order of Battle. We knew, I mean, we knew – or at least all the officers knew – as of that time, just what was ahead. We also knew that we only had about 37 ships, and if you could do any rough estimate you knew that they had to have had over 100 in those four forces. It didn't seem to faze the people aboard *Yorktown* at all. Well, they may know generally what's gonna happen, but I can't believe they know all this that they're telling us. And yet, it turned out to be astonishingly true. Astonishingly true.

4 FOR 4

FAZIO: Everything was pretty quiet until the 4th. Of course, that's the day that the Battle of Midway started. I think it was about 8:30; we found the Japanese carries, and about 8:30 we launched TBDs and SBDs – TBDs being the torpedo bombers and the SBDs being the dive bombers – we launched them to attack Japanese carriers.

LAPRADE: Well, there were three separate attacks by these TBDs, the torpedo planes by Douglas. These torpedo planes eventually found the Japanese task force and practically all of them were shut down. There were no hits scored by any of the American planes on any of the Japanese ships. So the Japanese – at this particular point in the early morning of Midway – they were in good shape.

SHOWERS: The pilots that were making the attack on Midway, at the time of the Battle of Midway, were exactly the same pilots and the same airplanes from the same carriers that attacked Pearl Harbor on the 7th of December.

LAPRADE: Japanese made their attack on Midway. Midway was waiting for them, all loaded and primed. And the attack, while it caused some damage... the estimate by the Japanese was, they needed a second strike immediately.

HAGEDORN: While the Japanese fighters and everything were knocking off these obsolete torpedo planes, our dive bombers brought the team over the sea because they were up real high. And all their job was to do was to get the carriers.

LAPRADE: And they were in the process of changing their ammunition when the dive bombers from the two task groups from Spruance and Fletcher came over, and saw the carriers down below, they just immediately went into the dive and they were lucky. Right off the bat, they got three of the four carriers, all within the space of about five minutes.

HAGEDORN: Then the Japs had the counterstrike. They hit the *Yorktown*, the one that had been repaired, and it was in pretty bad shape. And while they were hitting *Yorktown*, our dive bombers got the last Japanese carrier.

ABANDON SHIP

ASBURY: We didn't get hit by the Japanese until about 1:00 or 1:30. They announced that there's 37 Japanese dive bombers coming in, coming in on us, and our CAP – our combat air patrol – was out, and they shot down all but about six of them. The battle report, I think that we got hit three times. And of course, we were standing still in the water. They'd blown out our boilers again, and put the fires out. The concussion would hit the fires of the boilers and would just blow it out, gone. And then they'd have to light the boilers off again to get them going. They blew general quarters again and said, "We're under torpedo attack."

FAZIO: About two hours later, we got hit by torpedo planes, and that's what did us in. Two torpedoes hit us on the port side. The ship started listing. It listed to about 13 degrees and then it listed to 23 degrees. And when that happened, then the flight deck was... it almost felt like the ship was going to capsize. I think it was about 15:00 that he ordered that we abandon ship.

ALLEN: Fires burning, couldn't get all of the fires out, 'cause the ship started... we were listing and we had reached the critical mass of listing, where from then on it's

subject to capsizing, so we finally got the order to abandon ship. I got up as high as I could and dived off, and swam underwater as far as I could. I came up – I came up in a great, big oil slick. I stayed in the water, I suppose... somewhere, I know it was somewhere between six and eight hours.

ASBURY: So they passed the word of mouth, but I never heard anybody say abandon ship. All I saw was people going over the side, sorta swimming toward the destroyer. And this was around 4:00, I think it was... around 4:30 or 4:00, something like that. And anyway, they got a submarine alert, and they took off. So I'm sitting out there, just paddling along in the salt water, riding those big waves, and went down. It didn't bother me, but then when I started getting tired, I said, "Well, I don't need these pants anymore." So I took 'em off, and I let my wallet go, and everything was in my pants. I let it go, dropped my pants, and I took my shirt off. After a while I was stark naked, I'm just out there swimming along, and as I got tired I just laid back and float, and I was covered from top to bottom in number one crude oil. Some guy reached down and grabbed me by my hair, and he grabbed me by my armpits, and two of them threw me up on the deck, and being stark naked and I hit that hot deck... I mean I was like a piece of bacon jumping around in there.

SAVING YORKTOWN

ASBURY: 144 of us went back aboard the *Yorktown* as a salvage crew, and we worked on... we got back aboard on the 5th, and we worked on all day the 5th, and the 6th. And we were working on the 6th, and about 5:00 in the afternoon on the 6th the *Hammann*, the destroyer, was tied alongside of us and it was giving us electrical power and pumps, and help pumping out. A tugboat came there, and it threw a line to us and we started getting underway, and we got an alert. Somebody hollered. I didn't hear any noise, all I heard was just somebody just hollering, "Torpedoes!" And we looked up and there's four torpedoes coming in on the starboard side, hit it right straight at us. Two of them hit the *Hammann*, cut it right in two, and it went down in about a minute and a half. One hit the *Yorktown*, one went under us. It didn't hit us. But when the *Hammann* went down, somebody was either putting the safety back on the mines, and he went down with it and went under it, and those mines went off about 50 feet down, and they blew the whole stern out of the

Yorktown. Blew the bottom out, and caved it in. Just about all of us got out on the tugboat just by going over the stern, we didn't have to get in the water that time. We sat there on that tugboat all night long, and the next morning, in the sunrise we was watching the *Yorktown*, and then we could see it begin to... it was still sitting there, and we thought sure that it wasn't gonna sink. We thought we were gonna go back aboard it, because it didn't look like it had moved. And then about 5:30, well it was about 6:30, it started rolling, and gradually rolled and started going down by the bow. And it rolled over and rolled right upside down and went down at 6:59. Almost to the minute, six months after the war started. Just like watching your house and everything you own go down, burn up and disappear. It's like losing everything you had. You lost your security, you lost all your possessions, and you lost a lot of friends. It's just a blank. You sit there... and there wasn't a dry eye on that tugboat.

SURVIVORS

MEYER: We didn't even know a battle was going on. Pearl Harbor was just as calm as anything you wanted to ever see. The 4th of June, 1942, we had just got off work and were just cleaning up, and they had a movie topside. And I recall the movie. The name of the movie was, "Sergeant York." And we were up there, and had halfway through the movie, and the word came. They shut off the movie and passed the word: make preparations for getting underway. It was in two hours, we had cast out the lines from the growler which was alongside of us, the submarine, and we were heading out and we got underway at 22:00. We had two destroyers that were escorting us, and we passed the word that we were going out to pick up some survivors from the Battle of Midway. And we met up with the *Portland*, which was the heavy cruiser *Portland*, and a couple of other destroyers. And we were taking aboard more survivors, more of the wounded, and as soon as they hit the deck while we let them out, some of these guys had no, hardly any clothes, some of them were just mostly naked. They had been aboard the ship, but the *Portland* wasn't able to do much for a lot of them at the time. The guys on the *Portland* tore their blankets in half and gave each man a piece of blanket to wrap themselves in. As soon as we got all aboard, we headed for Pearl, and we took off at a massive 17 knots which was pretty good for a submarine tender. And a lot of the *Yorktown*

survivors down there, they started singing. And God, they had a spirit that wouldn't stop, and they were very patriotic songs. They were just full of spirit, ready to go, and none of them were disheartened at all. They hated to lose their ship. They couldn't wait to get back, for action, you know. They made our hearts feel good, and we gave them – I know I did – I gave a lot of my clothes to the guys who came aboard without any clothes.

THE TURNING POINT

SHOWERS: During the battle, I sat at my desk for 72 hours without a break. We were getting the Japanese intercepts, and we were also getting the U.S. Navy reports of action. And we were the only place in the world to have that advantage. We knew, for example, we knew from radio interceptions that three Japanese carriers had sunk because the Japanese reported it in their radio traffic, and we knew it. But that was top-secret code word so we couldn't advertise that to the press or to the world that day.

HAGEDORN: So what really, in effect, what they did is they wiped out the four carriers, but primarily, which was the biggest lost to Japan, was their trained Navy aviation personnel. They lost so many of their highly-trained Navy pilots and crewman and their support people for their aircraft carriers. And that's the real... after that, as far as the Japanese Navy was concerned, it was all downhill.

SHOWERS: None of us, at the time of the Battle of Midway – which was pretty early in the war, I mean we were still all neophytes – none of us realized at that time how significant the Battle of Midway, the victory of Midway, was. We knew that we had sunk four Japanese carriers and that was a big deal, but that's as far as our appreciation went at that point. As time went on, and we saw that the Japanese were never able to recover from that, and were never able to build enough carriers – we built carriers by the dozen, you know – and they never really recovered capability. Military capability-wise, they never recovered from the Battle of Midway, but we didn't realize that really until after the war.

HAGEDORN: The Japanese Admiral, High-Admiral, Admiral Yamamoto, he told the Japanese warlords that when we started the war, he could run wild for about six months or a year, and after that he said he couldn't predict and Japanese successes because he had seen the United States, he had seen how big a country we were, and how well-industrialized we were. And he realized that Japan just couldn't stand up to us.

FAZIO: It was known as the turning point of the war. After the Battle of Midway, we put down the shield and picked up the sword. Up until that point, they were chasing us all the time. They were calling the shots. But after the Battle of Midway, we were chasing them.

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