

# Virginians at War

## World War II: Intelligence

### Transcript

*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 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.*

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor launched at the beginning of World War II was a crushing defeat for the United States, and was a result of a lack of military intelligence. Six months later, the Battle of Midway, fought 1500 miles northwest of the Hawaiian Islands, was a resounding victory for America, turning the tide of war in the Pacific. This triumph was a direct result of an abundance of sound military intelligence.

Rear Admiral Mac Showers was a member of the US Navy Intelligence Team, located in Hawaii, known as HYPO. His inside perspective gives a revealing look into the world of intelligence.

#### **WWII INTELLIGENCE - TURNING THE TIDE**

Showers: On December 7, I was in Seattle, Washington, and when the attack occurred, to the best of my ability to reconstruct, I was in church. I had gone to church 11 to 12, when I came back to my apartment at about 12:00, I turned on the radio and I heard H.V. Kaltenborn, he was a famous news commentator of that day, announcing the news that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

Sasse: This is no drill, man your battle stations.

Krawczyk: Looking up, I could see these planes barreling over the field with their huge identifying rising sun insignias on the fuselages and on the wings. And incredibly, in the blink of an eye, we realized we were at war.

Showers: I knew it was a serious situation, and of course we knew we had lost our battleships which was the core of the Navy at that point, and it was pretty grim.

FDR: Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy. The United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

Sasse: How come we didn't have any alert, no intelligence, no nothing that anything was going to happen whatsoever?

Showers: And I was ordered to Hawaii in January of 1942, immediately after the war started, and the next morning I reported to the combat intelligence unit commanded by Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, and on that day I began my naval career. And for the subsequent 42 years, I worked in genuine Navy Operational Intelligence. As soon as the war started, HYPO was retasked to work on the Japanese Navy operational code known as JN-25. And there was minor progress made; they had recovered, of the forty or fifty thousand code groups that made up this code, they had probably recovered something between 8 and 10%, but that was not enough to read the text of messages, you just would get an occasional word that you could find. So we weren't really deriving much intelligence from JN-25, so even had we been looking for evidence of the Pearl Harbor attack, we couldn't read the code sufficiently to have found it. We did however, find out later, after WWII, that the Japanese executed the Pearl Harbor raid in total radio silence. Commander Rochefort, who had been in command of this unit on the 7th of December, felt that he had failed his commander on the 7th of December, by not being able to give him warning of the attack against Hawaii. And he dedicated himself and his unit thereafter to convey to the fleet commander, Admiral Nimitz,

every piece of intelligence that he had that might have any bearing whatsoever on the conduct of the war.

## **MARCH 1942**

Showers: We recovered code groups at a fairly rapid rate, so that by March of 1942, only three months after starting, we probably had recovered 25% of the code groups in JN-25, and we were beginning then to read enough message text so that we could find out what the message was talking about. So we had three major and all capable centers working on this code, and working diligently 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. So as time went on, and not very much time, we increasingly could read more and more messages.

Hagedorn: Everything was done manually, they didn't have computers in those days. That's why they needed a lot of people!

Showers: By the latter part of March 1942, we who were analyzing the intelligence, analyzing the text of these Japanese messages began to see evidence of the buildup of a new Japanese operation.

## **MAY 1942 BATTLE OF CORAL SEA**

Showers: We found out about this operation in sufficient time to advise Admiral Nimitz what was developing, what we saw in the traffic. And to give him time to deploy three aircraft carriers to the South Pacific, Southwest Pacific, and meet this Japanese force, and this is what resulted in the Battle of the Coral Sea in the first week of May 1942. Tactically, the battle was a draw. But, the Japanese had to retreat, so it was a strategic defeat for the Japanese and was our first victory in WWII in the Pacific. And it came only four months after Pearl Harbor.

## **JUNE 1942 - Battle of Midway**

Showers: We were reading increasing volumes and recovering increasing numbers of code groups and reading more complete texts of Japanese messages. We began

to see evidence of Japanese planning for an even larger operation than the Coral Sea operation had been. Little by little, we learned that the operation was aimed at a target known as AF, initials AF. We didn't know what that target was, but circumstantially over time we surmised that it was Midway Island which is about a thousand miles West-Northwest of Hawaii, and is actually part of the Hawaiian chain, it is simply a coral atoll but a pretty big one, and we had an air base there and we had a submarine base there, and it was an important outpost of our defense perimeter. There were going to be six carriers involved, the same six carriers that had attacked Pearl Harbor six months earlier. There were going to be battleships involved, cruisers, destroyers, a big combat force, there was going to be a landing force, and a base development force. But in all the Japanese were going to put over a 100 ships, I think it was 120 ships were being assembled in Japan and in Saipan, Saipan Island in the Marianas, which was a Japanese base. But we had the Order of Battle, we knew what their plans were, but we didn't know initially was the date that they were going to do it. The date and time was super encrypted in this code. Washington was working on this problem also, as were the unit in Melbourne, Australia. And as time went on, and I'm talking only days here, Washington also became concerned that Midway was not the target. And the reason they were is because it was such a large force. Six aircraft carriers and battleships and 120 ships...Washington reasoned that it was too large a force to go to a small atoll in mid-Pacific. They reasoned that Oahu, Pearl Harbor, in Hawaiian islands was more likely the target. Or possibly a target of the West Coast of the United States, San Francisco area, San Diego area. The US Army looking at the same intelligence in Washington reasoned that they thought the target could be the Panama Canal. About the time that Admiral Nimitz was ready to sail his ships to defend against this attack, Admiral King, the Chief of Naval Operations and Commander in Chief of the US Navy sent Admiral Nimitz a message saying that unless he could prove beyond a doubt that AF did represent Midway Island, that he forbid him to sail his limited number of ships against a superior force that was coming across the Pacific.

Hagedorn: Admiral Nimitz and most of our COs put their neck on the line saying it was going to be Midway because Washington, our people in Washington, our bosses, and the Navy Intelligence were saying it's going to be the West Coast. And

some of our people in Melbourne were saying it's going to be Hawaii, so we had three schools of thought.

Showers: So Nimitz called in Admiral Layton, then Commander Layton, the intelligence officer. Layton called Rochefort over at our unit and said we've got to find out some way, got to figure out some way to prove AF is Midway. Prove to the world. Commander Rochefort approached and said Jasper, we've got to figure out a way to prove to the world that AF is Midway, And Jasper Holmes, my immediate boss, he knew as a result of the of this work that a critical thing at Midway Base was fresh water supply. Atolls don't have any supply of fresh water, so they have to take seawater and evaporate it into fresh water like they do onboard ship. So his suggestion was, we can send a message to Midway Island, send a message out by cable directing the commanding officer at Midway to come in with a plain language message on the radio saying he had suffered a major casualty to his evaporators and he only had a ten day water supply. We did it that afternoon, and the next day the commanding officer at Midway did send in his message saying he'd suffered a major evaporator casualty, and he had a ten day water supply and we waited for a response. The following day, the Japanese radio intercept station on Wake Island originated a message saying that the commanding officer of the US Naval Station at AF had reported to his superiors in Hawaii that he had suffered a major evaporator casualty and only had a ten day water supply. So that cinched, absolutely cinched that AF was Midway. Admiral Nimitz then was free to go ahead and deploy his forces.

Simmons: Then the officers club at Pearl, the rumor was that the Japs were approaching... or about to approach Midway, and that we would be...[so a team] to go and defend ourselves at Midway.

Showers: So we had three carriers and supporting ships, but his total force was only 36 ships, against the approaching Japanese force of 120 ships. We had a grossly inferior fleet, but we knew what the Japanese were doing. And the rest is history.

May: We caught them with their britches down at...see, they thought that the Yorktown was still in Pearl Harbor being repaired so they couldn't figure out where the Yorktown was.

Showers: They launched their initial strikes against Midway Island. The Japanese didn't do as much damage on their beginning strike as they had hoped to do. Admiral Nagumo determined that a second strike was necessary, so in the end they only had four carriers. They were the same four carriers which had been part of the Pearl Harbor attack force. Airplanes were on the decks of the aircraft carriers being rearmed and refueled for a second strike on Midway, and that's when we struck them.

Hagedorn: Our dive bombers were [] over the sea, he real fast told them all, spread out, don't you all aim at one, get them all!

Showers: Three of those carriers were sunk within twenty minutes by divebombing attacks. The Hiryu, the fourth carrier, got away, but she was attacked that afternoon and she did sink that night. So in the first day of the attack, the Japanese lost all four of their aircraft carriers. They lost all of their aircraft and their experienced pilots. They had no air cover, and that night Admiral Nagumo had to order a retreat. The rest of the war, mind you, this was only six months after Pearl Harbor, we're talking the first week in June 1942, the Japanese were never again during the duration of the war able to assemble a big naval force sufficient for a major offensive operation.

Showers: There was a Chicago Tribune reporter who was on the Lexington when she was sunk. Crew survivors were put on a transport to go back to San Francisco. And while they were sailing to San Francisco, the Communications Officer from the Lexington showed this reporter, they had befriended each other, showed this reporter a classified message that Admiral Nimitz had sent out which was preparing for what became the Battle of Midway. And it was evident in there that we were reading the Japanese code and we knew what was going to happen at Midway. But as soon as he arrived in San Francisco, he filed the story. By that time, the Battle of Midway itself was over. He did file and the Chicago Tribune did print the story about

us reading Japanese code, and publicized how the United States was able to be so successful at Midway. The end of that story is that in those days, in 1942, we didn't have CNN, we didn't have satellite communications, we didn't have television, we didn't have rapid communications, and most importantly the Japanese did not subscribe to the Chicago Tribune. The Japanese never saw or became aware of that story being published in the United States until after the war. So we were lucky...we were lucky. We simply told people to keep their mouths shut. Loose lips sink ships, that was the motto of the day. And we had a sign in our office that said "when you leave here, leave here what you do." Don't talk about it when you leave, and we didn't, and we had good loyal sailors and officers and they observed that.

Meyer: The Battle of Midway was the turning point as historians say anyhow, that stopped the movement of the Japanese fleet. From that time on, they never advanced anymore.

Showers: But had we not been successful in the intelligence we were able to provide to Admiral Nimitz, our part in the Battle of Midway would not have occurred. And Admiral Nimitz said in his communique following the battle that had it not been for the good intelligence that he was given, that we would have read about the occupation of Midway in the morning newspapers. And that's absolutely true. It changed the war.

**Interested in learning more? Join us at [vawarmemorial.org/learn](https://vawarmemorial.org/learn) for more films and resources! Contact [education@vawarmemorial.org](mailto:education@vawarmemorial.org) with any questions or if you have a correction for this film's transcript.**