

To what extent did the code breaking efforts by the U.S. contribute to their victory at the Battle of Midway?

History Internal Assessment

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Section One: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation seeks to answer the question, “To what extent did the code breaking efforts by the U.S. contribute to their victory at the Battle of Midway?” Source A, *Doctrine Matters: Why the Japanese Lost at Midway*, is a journal article analyzing the Japanese aircraft carrier doctrine that was used at Midway. It is crucial as it examines the problems with Japan’s doctrine at Midway. Source B, titled *Was there something unique to the Japanese that lost them the Battle of Midway*, examines if specific circumstances caused Japan to lose Midway. It is critical as it evaluates the effects of flaws in Japan’s performance at Midway.

Source A is a journal article written by historians Johnathan Parshall, David Dickson, and Anthony Tully in 2001.¹ Its origins are valuable as they wrote this article years after Midway occurred, giving them access to primary and secondary sources illustrating the U.S. and Japan’s perspectives on Midway. However, the origin is limited as this is a secondary source, preventing the authors from fully knowing the perspective of both belligerents at Midway due to the loss of original documents. This source was originally written for military students at the Naval War College to explain why Japan lost the battle, focusing on their battle doctrine.² This purpose is valuable as it illustrates the shortcomings in Japan’s procedures at Midway. However, this is also a limitation, as the authors overemphasize criticizing Japan’s doctrines, and fail to recognize the laudable performance of the U.S. The content of the article asserts Japan’s carrier procedures were inefficient; this is valuable as they support their claims with photographs of Japan’s ships.³ However, its content heavily focuses on discrediting another historian, stating, “a major error in

¹ Jonathan Parshall, David Dickson, Anthony Tully, *Doctrine Matters: Why the Japanese Lost at Midway*, (U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2001).

² *Ibid*, p. 140.

³ *Ibid*, p. 147.

the Isom article” and “Isom presumes that...,” blurring the article’s focus and limiting its validity.⁴

The origin of Source B is a journal article written by researcher James Levy; it is valuable as he is involved in academia giving him access to materials only available to researchers.⁵ However, its origin is limited since it was written 70 years after Midway. The source was written for military students that are familiar with historians that study Midway (since Levy references several historians such as Hailey Garret, H.P. Wilmott, and Ronald Spector) to determine if Japan lost due to a singular factor.⁶ This purpose is valuable as Levy discredits misconceptions raised by historians about Midway.⁷ However, the purpose is limited as Levy makes several assumptions about Japan to discredit these misconceptions without supporting them with evidence. Its content focuses on Japan’s performance during Midway and it is valuable as the author suggests what Japan could have done to improve their outcome at Midway, rather than harshly criticize their performance. However, this content is limited as he admits Japan’s carrier doctrines had flaws without elaborating on them and places a great deal of faith in the doctrines’ effectiveness, stating, “one can argue that certain actions for which the Japanese have been chastised were in no way bizarre or patently incorrect.”⁸

Word Count: 500 words

⁴ Ibid p. 140

⁵ James Levy, *Was There Something Unique to the Japanese that lost them the Battle of Midway*, (U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2014).

⁶ Ibid, pp. 119-120.

⁷ Ibid, p. 120.

⁸ Ibid p. 121

Section 2: Investigation

Introduction

The Battle of Midway was a naval engagement in World War II in June 1942 between the U.S. and Japan, resulting in an American victory.⁹ Desperate to maintain their strategic advantage over the U.S., Japan invaded Midway Island and suffered defeat.¹⁰ Few historians doubt the efforts by the American code breakers contributed to their victory. However, America's victory at Midway was a culmination of several factors. America's ability to crack the enemy's code was significant, but Japan mishandled the lower quality information they received, and their efforts were further hindered by their attack doctrine. Therefore, code breaking efforts by the U.S. played a role in their victory at Midway to a certain extent.

American Cryptanalysis

Deciphering Japan's encrypted messages was a significant factor that helped America win the Pacific. Carl Hodge asserts in his work, *The Key to Midway, Coral Sea, and a culture of Learning*, that the contributions of the U.S. code breakers were enormous as the U.S. received information and about the Japanese in the Pacific.¹¹ Furthermore, historian Sean Judge states in his book, *Strategic Initiative in Modern, Conventional War*, "... analysts predicted the scale and timing of Yamamoto's attack, allowing Nimitz to counter his every move."¹² Judge agrees with historian Ronald Lewin who states in his work, *A Signal Intelligence War*, "it was intelligence painfully assembled from such decoding... that allowed Nimitz to anticipate a Japanese trap..."¹³

⁹ Thomas Wildenberg, *Midway: Sheer Luck or Better Doctrine?* U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2005, p. 121

¹⁰ William Y'Blood, *Point Luck: The Battle of Midway*, Air Force Historical Foundation, 1992, p. 3

¹¹ Carl Hodge, *The Key to Midway, Coral Sea, and a Culture of Learning* U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2015, p.122

¹² Sean Judge, *Who Has the Puck? Strategic Initiative in Modern, Conventional War*, Air University Press, Montgomery, Alabama, August 2009, p.75

¹³ Ronald Lewin, *A Signal-Intelligence War*, Sage Publications, London, United Kingdom, July 1981, p.505

Judge's perspective is valid since he utilizes several primary and secondary sources. He uses the diary of a Japanese officer, which shows the Japanese perspective, but may be biased to downplay America's advantage. Yet his perspective is valuable as the diary is unlikely to have information omitted. Lewin's fails to include sources to support his assertions, limiting his work's credibility. According to historian David Kahn, author of *Codebreaking in World Wars I and II: The Major Successes and Failures*, the orders that Japanese Admiral Yamamoto sent were deciphered by U.S. cryptanalysts, causing the U.S. Navy to trap Yamamoto as they deciphered his plan without his knowledge.¹⁴ Therefore, the code breakers allowed the U.S. to set trap Japan instead of getting trapped.

Japanese Intelligence

The Japanese had lower quality information than the U.S., contributing to their defeat. Judge states the Japanese intelligence effort was small so Japan obtained information from sources like American broadcasts.¹⁵ Historians Anthony Yully and Lu Yu, authors of *A Question of Estimates: How Faulty Intelligence Drove Scouting at the Battle of Midway*, state Admiral Yamamoto cannot be blamed for intelligence he did not have, but his staff should be blamed for their handling of information they had.¹⁶ They cite instances such as Japan failing to report a spotted U.S. submarine to its admirals.¹⁷ They also failed to report the detection of a U.S. aircraft carrier radio signal, and an attack on the Japanese ships by a U.S. aircraft, depriving Japan's admirals multiple opportunities to learn of America's plans.¹⁸ However, Yully and Tu contend

¹⁴ David Kahn, *Codebreaking in World Wars I and II: The Major Successes and Failures, Their Causes and Their Effects*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, September 1980, pp. 625-626

¹⁵ Sean Judge, *Who Has the Puck* pp. 85-86

¹⁶ Anthony Yully, Lu Yu, *A Question of Estimates: How Faulty Intelligence Drove the Scouting of Midway*, U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2015, p. 92

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 92

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 93

that this may not be significant as "...this had been expected...."¹⁹ Their perspective is valuable as they utilized multiple sources, such as Japanese naval reports that illustrated Japan's perspective. Also, their paper was published by the U.S. Naval War College, an academic institution specializing in military strategy. Dallas Isom, author of *The Battle of Midway: Why the Japanese Lost*, also says the Japanese naval high command failed to relay important information to Admiral Nagumo; nearly every senior Japanese naval officer knew of the presence of U.S. ships except for him.²⁰ He says Nagumo believed Japan held the element of surprise hours before Midway.²¹ Since Isom published his work with the Naval War College, his perspective is valuable as this is an academic paper. Furthermore, he cited interviews from Japanese witnesses which can elucidate their perspective as many Japanese records were destroyed or had information omitted. His points agree with Judge's, increasing their validity, as Judge says Japan experienced a serious deterioration in the quality of intelligence in this stage of the war, and their attempts to offset this were thwarted.²² In summary, Japan's quality of intelligence was nowhere near that of the U.S. by this part of the war, with the quality problem being compounded by mishandling of intelligence.

Doctrine at Midway

Many historians such as Isom find fault with Japan's carrier doctrine used at Midway. Isom states it involved the use of all types of aircraft they had at Midway, so American aircraft attacked the Japanese carrier decks when their planes were loaded with fuel and

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 93

²⁰ Dallas Isom, *The Battle of Midway: Why the Japanese Lost*, U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2000, p. 93

²¹ Ibid, pp. 93-94

²² Sean Judge, *Who Has the Puck*, pp. 85-86

ammunition.²³ According to Isom, many planes were on deck and these inflicted further damage to the Japanese ships as they burst aflame from the American attacks. Jonathan Parshall, David Dickson, and Anthony Tully, authors of *Doctrine Matters: Why the Japanese Lost at Midway*, dispute these statements and cite photographs (taken by U.S. bombers) showing little to no aircraft on the decks of the Japanese carriers.²⁴ They further contradict Isom's assertion that several planes were on deck by citing Japanese carrier procedures, stating, "In fact, both Japanese doctrine and the operations of the Japanese combat air patrol fighters would have kept the reserve strike planes securely below in their hangars until they were definitely needed... it is unlikely many of these second wave aircraft were spotted on the flight decks."²⁵ Japan having many aircraft on deck, which would be destroyed by American attacks, is the basis of Isom's claims. Therefore, these historians' viewpoint is more valuable as they cite photographs and procedures to show that few aircraft were on deck, directly disproving the basis of Isom's claims. Like Isom, they find fault with the carrier doctrine, saying that it allowed the Japanese little flexibility when trying to launch an integrated attack and lowered the amount of available defense aircraft.²⁶ But, historian James Levy, author of *Was There Something Unique to the Japanese that lost them the Battle of Midway*, argues these points exaggerate the failure of the carrier doctrine without applauding the Americans' actions during the battle.²⁷ Levy says there were faults with the carrier doctrine (such as its use on two primary objectives at Midway), but he credits the Americans' superior handling of intelligence, not Japanese incompetence, as the

²³ Dallas Isom, *Why the Japanese Lost*, p. 65

²⁴ Jonathan Parshall, David Dickson, Anthony Tully, *Doctrine Matters: Why the Japanese Lost at Midway*, U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2001, p. 146

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 140

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 147-148

²⁷ James Levy, *Was There Something Unique to the Japanese that lost them the Battle of Midway?* U.S. Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2014, pp. 120-123

reason for the American victory.²⁸ Levy also writes, “However, since the doctrine of massed strikes for decisive results is that espoused as the correct one by carrier enthusiasts then and now, and since the British have been roundly criticized for not adopting such a doctrine, it is a bit disingenuous for historians to blame the Japanese for sticking to it.”²⁹ Simply put, Levy illustrates that many historians and carrier enthusiasts criticize other nations for not adopting Japan’s doctrine, yet they criticize Japan for using it, illustrating the self-contradicting nature in their arguments. His perspective is more valuable than that of Parshall, Dickson, and Tully as he acknowledges the faults of the Japanese doctrine, but he recognizes several historians have placed too much blame on it and fail to adequately credit the laudable performance by the U.S.³⁰ Therefore, Japanese carrier doctrine contributed to their defeat but not as much as the Americans’ applications of their intelligence.

Conclusion

Japan had faults in their planning such as using an inflexible doctrine when being attacked. Their element of surprise was nonexistent as the U.S. had placed a trap for them. The inferior quality and poor handling of their intelligence also hindered their efforts as they did not know of America’s plans. These were some of Japan’s operational flaws that hindered their planning, but they still had a large advantage. The code breaking by the U.S. and their superior intelligence caused the Japanese to lose the crucial element of surprise. Therefore, code breaking at Midway contributed to the Japanese defeat to a certain extent because Japan had inherent

²⁸ Ibid, p. 122

²⁹ Ibid, p. 123

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 120-123

flaws in their doctrine, and they had poor quality intelligence. These Japanese disadvantages combined with the key American advantage resulted in the U.S. victory.

Word Count: 1300 words

Section 3: Reflection

This investigation has demonstrated many nuances faced by historians when evaluating the past. One method that was essential to the investigation was the analysis of multiple sources and their authors' perspectives. This shows that history is arguably more complex than subjects such as math and science, since it requires historians to analyze multiple perspectives, authors, and timeframes. The investigation has demonstrated that historians differ in their interpretations of the past, so there is no "correct" answer to a question in a historical investigation. However, the use of evidence and agreement between sources lead to the formation of a perspective that is as objective as possible.

Throughout the investigation, the perspectives of the historians whose works were included would differ, even if they wrote about similar main ideas. In section two, an excerpt from Dallas Isom was included where he noted the failures of the Japanese carrier doctrine, such as the fact that Japan's doctrine involved the use of "all three types of planes."³¹ Parshall, Dickson, and Tully agree with the theme of Isom's article: the Japanese carrier doctrine hurt them at Midway.³² However, they differ from Isom, as he claims that the Japanese carrier decks were loaded with aircraft that burst aflame from the American attacks, but they state, "Again, his [Isom's] statement is at odds with the photographic evidence... which shows no strike planes whatsoever on either carrier's flight deck."³³ Thus, section two of the investigation has exhibited the potential for massive differences in historians' perspectives, even if they partially agree with each other.

³¹ Dallas Isom, *Why the Japanese Lost*, p. 65

³² Johnathan Parshall, David Dickson, Anthony Tully, *Was There Something Unique*, p.146

³³ *Ibid* p. 146

A challenge faced in the investigation was the lack of primary and secondary sources that focused on the Japanese perspective of the battle. However, there was an abundance of sources related to the American perspective of Midway. This is likely as the U.S. won Midway against all odds. Therefore, they are inclined to write about their successes, and Japan would be less inclined to release primary materials from their naval officers at Midway, as it was a defeat. However, several secondary sources – many that included Japanese primary documents – were valuable, as they elaborated on both the U.S. and Japanese perspectives, and were included in this investigation. One example is Isom’s article, which included citations from Admiral Nagumo’s journal, as illustrated in his footnotes.³⁴ Thus, an evaluation of both the U.S. and Japanese perspectives that was as objective as possible was included in this investigation.

Word Count: 399 words

³⁴ Dallas Isom, *Why the Japanese Lost*, p. 100

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