

Farmer's Notes – the Myth of Midway
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The Washington Naval Treaty established a navy “size ratio” for the American, British, and Japanese navies. The ratio was 5:5:3. There were also restrictions within that overall ratio on certain types of ships and the total tonnage by class. That the Japanese did some working around the treaty is clear but, overall, it wasn't massive. As an example, to skirt the aircraft carrier tonnage, they build some “seaplane tenders” and those were designed for rapid conversion to carriers.

The population of Japan in 1940 was 73 million. The population of the U.S. at the same time was 132 million. The largest city in Japan at that time was Tokyo with 6.7 million. Second was Osaka with 3.2 million. The largest city in the U.S., NYC, had 7.4 million with Chicago having 3.3 million. That is where the divergence starts. The 37th largest city in Japan, Shuri, had 17,000 people. Little Rock, the 100th largest city in the U.S., had 88,000. Whereas the U.S. was highly urbanized Japan wasn't. It's said that the industrialization of a country results in the population starting from a 90/10% agriculture/urban split to that being reversed to 90/10% urban/agricultural. All the “mid-size” cities in the U.S. were the result of that process already having completed. In Japan over 50% of the residents were still in agriculture. The Japanese economic boom of the 1950s to 1980s was the result of that industrialization, and the migration of the population to cities, completing. In 1940 the 17th largest city in Japan, as noted, was Shuri with 17,000 people. Today there are 190 cities in Japan with populations of 100,000 to 1 million inhabitants – in addition to 13 with over 1 million. Japan, in 1940, was running at maximum capacity in making munitions and no significant increase was really possible as they didn't have the required urban centers – with the factories and trained factory workers which would be found in those non-existent centers.

Newport News Shipbuilding completed 8 Essex class carriers during WW2: the Essex (CV-9), Yorktown (CV-10), Intrepid (CV-11), Hornet (CV-12), Franklin (CV-13), Ticonderoga (CV-14), Randolph (CV-15), Boxer (CV-21) and Leyte (CV-32). Contract NOD-1442, given in July of 1940 (as France fell) is listed as “AIRCRAFT CARRIERS CV.” Another contract, OD-1532, was given in September of 1940 – also “AIRCRAFT CARRIERS.” Reviewing the two contract amounts, and later amounts, CV-9, CV-10, and CV-11 are included in the first contract with CV-12, CV-13, and CV-14 in that second order. That's 6 Essex class carriers ordered within three months of the fall of France. Looking at Newport News Shipbuilding, 6 of the 8 Essex class carriers they built were under order in 1940 – the wartime additions produced the other 2.

Newport News wasn't unique. Within three months of the fall of France (June of 1940) the administration in the U.S. had ordered the largest air force and navy the world would ever see. What is

clear from those orders is that the administration had decided to go to war. I suppose one could claim that those massive orders were for “defense.” The B-29 bomber has no defensive purpose. The B-29 is a strategic bomber. The orders placed after the fall of France were at a volume that the existing facilities in the U.S. could never hope to complete them. Companies receiving war contracts were given orders of the following types: 1) money to expand their existing plants, 2) orders to keep those existing plants, greatly expanded, at full production, 3) money to build new plants in locations with available labor, 4) orders to keep those additional plants at full production. Boeing, with their factory in Washington, was given the money to build an entirely new factory in Kansas and orders to keep it in full production, when it was built, building B-29s. In June of 1941, order W-535-AC-19673 was placed with the Boeing Wichita plant. \$207 million for B-29s. In January of 1942, in order to ensure the flow never stopped, another \$265 million was added to that AC-19673 contract. For the order to be placed in 1941 the factory was already far enough along for the order to be placed. Those two amounts, totaling \$472 million, are well over half of the total order value placed with that factory.

Japan started the war with a navy smaller than the U.S. navy. Japan, not heavily industrialized, had no ability to increase production greatly over what it was already doing. The U.S., heavily urbanized, had the ability to expand production to massive levels – and did. Starting right after France fell. What does one do with the largest air force and largest navy in the world? One with a heavy focus on offensive operations? “Fight a war.” That the administration in the U.S. intended to enter the war is clear from the contracts. Whether they should have or not can be debated but that they intended it is clear.

When the German forces overran multiple countries in Europe, among two that were taken were France and the Netherlands. Both were colonial powers and both witnessed citizens fleeing the country and setting up “governments in exile” while governments in the countries, now occupied, were set up. The French controlled Indo-China whereas the Netherlands controlled the Dutch East Indies. The Japanese, Germany’s erstwhile ally, had the government in occupied France “request” that they take over Indo-China. The Japanese wanted Indo-China to cut off China from any assistance from flowing through that area (ports) and it gave them another flank against the Chinese forces. Using that agreement as a pretext, the administration in the U.S. seized all Japanese assets in the U.S. and imposed an oil embargo against the Japanese. Joining the embargo was the Netherlands government in exile – in control of the oil rich Dutch East Indies. Having the largest air force and navy the world would ever see on order, the administration was provoking the war.

I guess it could be said that the Japanese could have simply said “our bad” and pulled out of China and Indo-China. In my opinion it would take ingestion of some pretty powerful chemicals to believe that was a realistic expectation. The really good illicit chemicals of today mainly weren’t available at that time so I’ll assume that members of the administration weren’t consuming them and thus were reasonably aware that war would be the result of their actions. To believe otherwise one would need to be high or particularly stupid and I don’t believe they were either. Again, as above, it’s pretty clear that they were provoking a war. Whether they should have provoked a war or not can be debated but that they were is clear.

George Gobel was a well known comedian from the 1950s until his passing. During WW2 he was an instructor pilot in Oklahoma. He had a comedy blurb about his service which included the statement that he was very successful. The punchline was “not a single Japanese bomber got past Tulsa.” A Japanese submarine did manage to shell a refinery in California but then again a German submarine actually landed agents – not exactly a full blown invasion of the continental U.S.. Let’s ignore the “air raid wardens” hassling people over light leaking out of windows in Chicago, 4,399 miles from Berlin

and 6,296 miles from Tokyo, and accept that the Japanese, deeply involved in the quagmire that was China, had zero intention of invading California. What were the Japanese war aims and strategy?

The Japanese war aims were twofold – protect Japan, including territory they control, and grab the resources they needed. The resources they needed can be abstracted to “the Dutch East Indies.” With the “resources” covered let’s review the “protect Japan, including territory they controlled” part.

Let’s take Japan and draw an arc through the ocean areas around it. Let’s draw that arc to include Saipan to the south. Let’s call that “Arc 1.” That arc contains Japan and the pre-war territory they controlled. Let’s draw another arc – this one further out. This arc, we’ll call it “Arc 2,” includes the territory they intended to take, and defend. The Dutch East Indies are included in this arc and the Philippines, between Japan and the Indies, is as well due to location. Also in this arc is Rabaul, Guam, Wake, Singapore, and various other places. The Japanese strategy can be summarized as “take the places with the resources and extend our perimeter. Then hold them while the U.S. beats itself against those.”

The taking of the places designated in “Arc 2” went faster, and easier, than expected. The eyes of the Japanese planners got larger and they added additional land – let’s call this “Arc 3.” About that time they also identified “Arc 4” but they really didn’t have any plan beyond that – even “Arc 4” wasn’t well defined. “Arc 3” included some islands in the Aleutians, Midway, New Guinea, and the Solomons. “Arc 4” would have included New Caledonia and New Zealand but not Australia; the Japanese wished to isolate Australia but had no intention of land operations there.

The Japanese Navy had aircraft with those having three roles: 1) defending naval bases, 2) providing airpower for island invasions, 3) for carrier raids. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) would use carriers to provide air assets in seizing an objective. Once the objective was taken airfields were to be constructed and Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) aircraft stationed on them.

In the Japanese doctrine the aircraft carriers were intended for raids (Pearl Harbor, Darwin, etc.) and for providing air cover on invasions. Defensively the largest role for the carriers was *to ferry aircraft to the theaters where they were used*. Given a choice between land-based aircraft and carrier-based aircraft, the land-based were preferred as one cannot sink an island.

In the “Pacific War,” after the Japanese had ceased “offensive operations,” the only significant use of aircraft carriers in an offensive role was in 1944 where they were intended to deliver aircraft and then operate as a decoy fleet. The aircraft were intended to be launched, attack the U.S. fleet, and then recover on land bases for future operation. In defensive operations, in the Japanese method, carriers weren’t valuable as they had unsinkable land bases. The only real use carriers had was the delivery of large numbers of airplanes to the proper location as a location, considered strategic, under attack might be beyond ferry range of aircraft.

Let’s return to four of the “Arc 3” locations for results. A Japanese forces, including 2 fleet carriers and a light converted carrier, were dispatched to cover the seizure of Port Moresby. The light carrier, Shoho, was sunk. The two fleet carriers, Shokaku, Zuikaku, were lightly damaged. The IJN lost an unexpectedly high number of pilots in that engagement. The Japanese had trained in night operation and launched a night attack. The planes failed to find their targets for attack and turned back to recover on their carriers. Finding the carriers, short on fuel at this point, they attempted to land. When the carriers began shooting at them they realized their mistake. I guess they could have attacked but for whatever reason, low fuel perhaps, they quit trying to land on the U.S. carriers and tried to find their own carriers. Many simply disappeared – never to be seen again. The Shokaku and Zuikaku, as

mentioned only lightly damaged, were short on aircraft and aircrew. With the failure to seize Port Moresby by sea the decision was taken to have the IJA take it overland (over the mountains). The transports carrying IJA troops for that effort were intercepted at sea and sunk – the IJA didn't have the force to take Port Moresby and never did. Footnote on that – the troops carried aboard ships for the invasion of Midway had returned from that attempt and were included in the troops in those transports heading for New Guinea.

Midway. The Japanese lost four fleet carriers, all their aircraft, but not all the pilots. In most accounts of Midway the claim is made that the Japanese lost their experienced aircrew at Midway; that is not correct.

Q: “Did any of the pilots and planes that survived the Battle of Midway come down into the Solomons?”

A: “In the Midway battle there were a great many survivors. Because our pilots were in the air when carrier sank, they were rescued by destroyers. Most of the Midway flyers were put on the carriers Shokaku, Zuikaku, and Ryojo. The pilots left from Midway were familiar with carrier operations so put them on these carriers.”

It's a myth that the experienced Japanese aircrew at Midway were lost. They ditched and were rescued by destroyers. The person answering the question is Commander Okumiya – he was a staff officer with the Rabaul Air Group. Is he telling the truth? Yes, we'll get to that later.

Solomons. Guadalcanal was never an objective in Japanese planning. Strange but true. They seized Tulagi and Florida Island. Both are really a small group of islands above Guadalcanal (Nggela Sule and Nggela Pile). The local Japanese commander went over for Guadalcanal, as a tourist more than anything, liked what he saw and decided to build an airfield over there. That airfield was noticed and it was then game-on.

The Aleutians were a success, Midway a failure, and the U.S. response at both the Solomon islands and New Guinea was unexpectedly fast and effective. This is the taking of “Arc 3” - which was an expansion of war aims over “Arc 2” - the original war aim plan.

With the IJA having airfields in New Guinea we can ignore that for IJN purposes. The Japanese had also constructed airfields around the Solomons and in the neighboring island groups. The Solomons witnessed the last IJN carrier operations until 1944. If the four fleet carriers sunk at Midway had not been sunk they would not have contributed anything to the Solomons operations as the Japanese had constructed airfields. Japanese planes operating from carriers could just as easily be flown to those airfields and operate from them. Which they did. At this time the carriers were no longer needed for offensive operations. The loss of the carriers at Midway wasn't significant. Not taking Midway wasn't significant as they also failed to take Port Moresby and the Solomons – more significant objectives.

This is where it really went off the rails for the Japanese. Per Japanese doctrine the IJA was responsible for providing aircraft for land bases in offensive areas. The IJA declined to provide aircraft for the operations in the Solomons; their stated reasons were they'd need to pull them from China and weren't going to do that. The IJN thus received responsibility for providing air power for the Solomons operations. Offloaded at Truk, ferried to Rabaul, and thence to the island groups around the Solomons. That was the route. The Japanese carriers had their aircraft removed at Truk. They then were used to ferry new aircraft from Japan to Truk. From Truk the aircraft were flown to Rabaul. From Rabaul they were flown to whatever forward base they were needed at.

As mentioned, the Japanese pilots from the four carriers lost at Midway were, by and large, recovered and assigned to other carriers – those being short of aircrew. Those carriers were then stripped of airplanes, and pilots, at Truk. Thence they were fed into the flow to support the Solomons operations. Per Japanese estimates they lost 393 IJN planes in the Solomons operations from the forward bases – 241 of those being fighters. As continuing both the Solomon and New Guinea operations wasn't viable it was decided to withdraw back to the "Arc 2" locations and abandon the Solomons operations. This wouldn't "free up" any aircraft for the New Guinea operations but would free up the IJA units. In the event that didn't work either but let's continue. With the decision to abandon the Solomons the IJN planes remaining at forward bases were withdrawn to Rabaul. By Japanese estimates they lost 820 aircraft at Rabaul – the bulk of them fighters. 820 (Rabaul) + 393 (Solomons) shows losses to the IJN of over 1,000 aircraft. As they'd continued to feed replacement planes in for pilots having lost airplanes they lost over 1,000 aircraft but, more importantly, nearly all the experienced IJN pilots. "Shot down but survived? Here's a new Zero." Rinse and repeat until none survive.

The IJN had 9 carriers available for the Philippines operation in 1944. 6 of those were "older" carriers whereas 3 were new or new/altered ships. The 6 "older" carriers included the Shokaku and Zuikaku of Pearl Harbor and Coral Sea operations.

"In March 1944 the organization of the Third Fleet (the aircraft carrier force) was revised, thereafter comprising Carrier Divisions One, Two, and Three, with three carriers in each Division." Nine carriers. "The Air Group assigned to CarDivOne had been sent from Truk to Rabaul in early November 1943 to augment the defense against United States landing at Baugainville. There it had been almost completely wiped out..." "CarDivTwo air units had suffered similar heavy losses at Rabaul when sent there in January of 1944..." "The Air Group of CarDivThree was newly formed about 1 February 1944."

The experienced IJN pilots weren't lost at Midway – they were wiped out at Rabaul; along with the experienced aircrew from the other IJN carriers. Additionally they had stripped aircrew from other islands and fed them into that grinder. After the first carrier raid on Truk the Admiral there ordered the remaining aircraft located on Rabaul back to Truk. There weren't many. The defense of the islands in "Arc 1," the islands the Japanese held before the war, were to be defended by the IJN air assets. Those had been spent in the Solomons and at Rabaul. Put another way, the Japanese lost the assets that were meant to defend "Arc 1" in trying to take Arc 3 and hold Arc 2.

"The Great Mariana Turkey Shoot." 9 IJN carriers sortied with inexperienced aircrew. Their mission was to launch, attack the U.S. fleet, and then land for further operations. That they were slaughtered wholesale should have been expected. The experienced Japanese aircrew had already been eliminated. The IJN carriers were, as shown in 1944, useless.

In the American view, Midway was the turning point. For the Japanese it wasn't. The carriers lost at Midway would not have permitted them to complete "Arc 3." Losing their experienced pilots, flying from land bases, in the Solomons and Rabaul was the turning point; they no longer had the pilots to defend the rest of "Arc 2" or "Arc 1." They attributed that to a number of points but the main one was the unexpectedly rapid, and effective, American response in the Solomons. The surprising ease with which they'd taken the "Arc 2" objectives lulled them into a sense of security and they thus went for "Arc 3" - not an original war aim. It switched from "easy" to "meat-grinder" faster than they could absorb. By the time they realized how effectively the meat-grinder was consuming their pilots they had already lost them. 820 aircraft were lost, quite rapidly, at Rabaul. A large carrier can carry anywhere

from 75 to 100 aircraft. Thus the aircraft lost at Rabaul alone would be enough to equip at least 8 large carriers. In actuality it would be more. Adding the 393 lost in the Solomons and it's clear that the aircrew from all the Japanese carriers (4 at Midway and 6 in the Philippines) which had existed pre-war were gone. And then some. Yes, some were lost at Midway. Others were lost in the Coral Sea operation. The point is when the Japanese pulled the plug on Rabaul they had lost them all – an then some.

To the Japanese Midway wasn't the turning point. The Solomons and Rabaul were.

Notes.

1st. Was the American administration preparing to enter the war after France fell? Clearly. Did they provoke the war? Clearly. Should they have? Certainly. In 1936 it was made abundantly clear that the Japanese military needed a good hard kick in the teeth. It's surprising they waited so long to start that build-up. Once the decision was made to start it the rest was inevitable. As the WW2 veterans aged they started taping them to retain their experiences. One in particular I found interesting with respect to this. As a young man, living in New York, that man went to the theater one day and, they used to show newsreels before the movie, viewed a newsreel of the recent Japanese operations in China. Included in that newsreel was verifiable evidence that the Japanese soldiers were murdering babies with bayonets. That particular young man found the USMC recruiter the next day. I suspect he was surprised that the next five years went by with no action. If he was surprised that surprise was justified. From those alive at the time they're all very clear that they already knew war with Japan was inevitable – in 1936.

2nd. As the war was in its' final phase they set up the organization to interrogate those in Germany and Japan, and the places they held, about a variety of items. Interrogations were conducted in multiple locations with a large number of Japanese and German people being questioned – military and civilian. Did they tell the truth? Mainly. Interrogate 1000 people in 100 locations on the same thing. That will result in 100,000 answers. There is no way for them to coordinate a “story” that is false. Looked at another way, if I ask one of them 100 questions I'll get 100 pieces to a jigsaw puzzle. If they're lying not all the pieces will fit together. If they all lie I'll get 1,000 different puzzles and not even those 1,000 puzzles will be consistent. If they tell the truth I'll get 1 puzzle with 100,000 pieces and the pieces will fit together. Looking at their answers it's clear they told the truth. The exception, and it is noticeable, is in one area. “Treatment of enemy personnel and civilians.” They lied consistently in that area. Let's take three answers:

- 1) “30 of the captured flyers were sent to Japan by submarine after we were cut off. I have no idea what happened to them after that as I was on the island.”
- 2) “The submarines were used to supply very small amounts of material to isolated garrisons. No personnel were returned on the submarines as they were expected to fight on the island.”
- 3) “Only Japanese submarine crew were permitted on the submarines.”

See it? The 30 captured aircrew were likely tortured and executed. In reading the interrogation answers it's clear that they lied on treatment of “enemy” personnel and civilians. Outside of that they were pretty forthright and the answers all fit together – as they should.

3rd. “The Japanese Mind.” They simply didn't look at things the same way. What was the difference between the F6F and the F4U? “The F6F was more maneuverable, the F4U was faster.” You need to look at what Japanese fighter pilots valued to really understand that answer. Let's add another. What

was the difference between USAAF and USN fighters? “The army fighters were faster, the Navy fighters more skilled.” Views on the P-40 and P-38? “Hard to intercept but, once accomplished, easy to shoot down.” Translation? “If they dogfight you they are done for but if they don’t fall for that you are toast.” “The Japanese Mind.” Reading their answers one must be careful in failing to understand that they viewed things differently. When Truk was first hit by the USN carriers they called back the few Japanese aircraft left at Rabaul. If that had been the U.S., transports (C-47s) would have been sent to retrieve whatever experienced aircrew and, as important, ground crew remained there. The Japanese didn’t think that way. When the war started they stopped building transports as only combat aircraft were wanted. They also didn’t believe in retrieving people – they were sent there to fight and fight they will. When the commander at Rabaul was asked when he realized he’d been bypassed he was surprised. “I didn’t.” In his view, the Japanese never surrendering, it wouldn’t even matter if the U.S. took the home islands – they were going to have to come after him at some point. 1960 if it took that long. He didn’t add the “1960” thing but it fits. Japanese were still holding out in 1960.

4th. “Fighting Spirit.” “The moral is to the physical as three is to one.” When the USMC landed on Guadalcanal the Japanese sent troops to evict them. Those troops were slaughtered. The decision was made to send significantly more troops for the next attempt. One of the Japanese interrogated, when asked why so few had been sent the first time, answered that “we were too used to fighting the Chinese army.” The same thing could be said of the Italian soldiers in WW2 – they didn’t fight hard. That the Chinese, and Italians, could fight hard is pretty obvious – they simply weren’t motivated. The Japanese valued fighting spirit over weapons. In their view troops with inferior weapons can win against troops with superior weapons as long as they have enough fighting spirit. The Confederates were always outnumbered, and had inferior arms, but that example is pretty stark. The Japanese didn’t see the loss of the carriers at Midway to be that big of a loss, given their strategy, and when one adds the focus on fighting spirit it’s even less of a loss to them. They expected they could seize an arc and hold it until the U.S. wearied in trying to take it and negotiated a peace. If that sounds unrealistic I guess I’d mention “the Korean War” and “the Vietnam War.”

5th. The Japanese didn’t change at all. In September of 1941 the Japanese were near-sighted bandy-legged little men flying inferior copies of western aircraft. In December of 1941 they attacked Pearl Harbor and thus became sneaky near-sighted bandy-legged little men flying inferior copies of western aircraft. Through-out December of 1941, and into early 1942, they rolled up a fair amount of that area of the Pacific and became potentially unbeatable supermen. The Battle of the Coral Sea, with the Japanese losing one small carrier sunk and two fleet aircraft carriers slightly damaged, while the U.S. lost a fleet carrier sunk and another heavily damaged, gave the USN pause. Midway stopped their advance but, well known to the US forces, the root cause of that loss for the Japanese was a broken code. From August of 1942 to the summer of 1943 they were not only stopped in their two advances but were rapidly pushed back. The measure of the Japanese had been taken and, by the summer of 1943, it was simply an engineering exercise to remove them from the war – they were no longer supermen. From sneaky near-sighted bandy-legged little men flying inferior copies of western aircraft to supermen to fanatics who would be separated from their lives at a predictable rate. Strangely the Japanese themselves hadn’t changed at all. Midway was considered, rightly, a victory by the U.S.. It came after a string of defeats from a force turning in a performance which was down-right embarrassing. The value placed on Midway, at the time, is understandable given the losses which immediately preceded it. That value has really never been re-evaluated. Midway is more myth than not. The Solomons and New Guinea campaigns were the real turning point. The Japanese advances were stopped and then, more importantly, the U.S. went over to the counter-offensive. The Japanese started losing islands, aircraft, and troops. If the Japanese hadn’t lost those four carriers the results in the Solomons and New Guinea would not have been affected in any significant way.

Losing 4 carriers isn't a trivial affair, true, but it wasn't considered nearly as significant to the Japanese as to the U.S.. The reasons for that are clear. The real turning points of the war were the halting of the Japanese offensives and, to them even more importantly, how fast the counter-offensives started grinding them up. The loss of the Solomons made clear that Japanese offensive operations were over. The destruction of their air power at Rabaul not only made it clear that they couldn't hold the second Arc but they'd lost the forces slated to defend their pre-war territory – the first Arc. When Saipan fell the Japanese knew the war was lost – it was just a question of time. A surplus of “fighting spirit” would not permit them to “not lose” as the U.S. clearly had the “fighting spirit” to push forward and seize Japan itself.