

# MIDWAY: WHO FIRED FIRST?

Plagued by defective torpedoes, the heroic USS *Nautilus* could have made the victory at Midway even more decisive. However, the “cruiser” submarine would go on to remarkable feats of glory during WWII - **BY DOUG MEARS**

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor changed naval warfare as dramatically as the battle between ironclads USS *Monitor* and CSS *Virginia* ended the age of wooden warships. The Japanese sank or severely damaged eight out of nine battleships in the US Pacific Fleet (USS *Colorado* was at Puget Sound Naval Yard) and turned airfields into smoking ruins. Any US aircraft carriers in port during the attack would have also been sunk, however they were at sea when the attack occurred. Fortunately for Americans,

the air attack did little damage to fleet-support facilities, including oil storage tanks that would fuel the US Navy to victory at the Battles of the Coral Sea and later at Midway (see an article on this important aspect of the war in an upcoming *Sea Classics*). Japanese aircraft also overlooked American submarines that soon deployed across the Pacific to destroy enemy shipping.

Japanese war-planners assumed the US Navy would wait for the arrival of warships from the Atlantic Fleet before conducting offensive operations in the Pacific, but they

were wrong. Once the smoke cleared, the US Navy was forced to go to war with what they had: three thin-skinned aircraft carriers supported by cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.

The Battle of the Coral Sea occurred only five-months after the attack on Pearl Harbor and was the first air-sea conflict between aircraft carriers, setting the pattern for future sea battles. The battle was considered a Japanese tactical victory based on the number of ships sunk but a strategic

American victory, because Tokyo was forced to cancel the invasions of Port Moresby, New Guinea, and Australia.

Within weeks after the battle, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, architect of the Pearl Harbor attack, had an even grander plan to simultaneously invade both Midway Island and Alaska. He was convinced the American Navy would respond to the threat against Alaska, only to be destroyed by superior Japanese gunnery (for the killing of Adm. Yamamoto, please see the September 2021 issue of our companion magazine *Air Classics*).

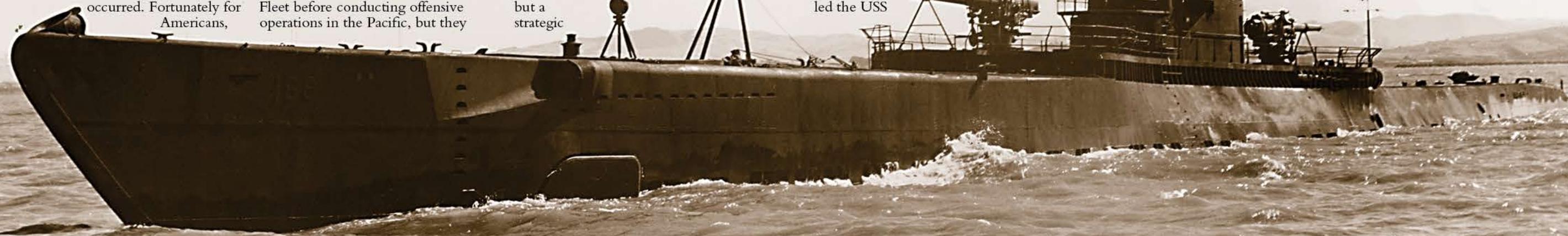
Meanwhile, American codebreakers and skillful use of intelligence assets tricked the Japanese into revealing the target of their elaborate plan was Midway Island. Americans planners marshaled every available asset to converge there and one of the vessels sent to support the fleet was a twelve-year old submarine, the USS *Nautilus*.

A decisive moment during the Battle of Midway was when L/ Cmdr. C. Wade McClosky led the USS

*Enterprise's* Douglas SBD Dauntless dive-bombers, searching the vast ocean for signs of the Japanese fleet. They were running low on fuel when McClosky spotted a lone enemy destroyer racing north at high speed, throwing out a wake visible for miles. The experienced pilot correctly determined the destroyer was trying to rejoin its fleet and turned his dive-bombers north, where they soon found the Japanese carriers and the rest is history.

Why was that Japanese destroyer racing full speed, alone in the middle of the immense ocean at that moment in time? Was it luck or a coincidence? The Japanese ship was the *Arashi*, a *Kagero*-class destroyer commanded by Yasumasa Watanabe and tragic role in that day's fighting. The Battle of Midway began dawn on 4 June 1942 when Japanese

carrier-based aircraft strafed the submarine USS *Nautilus*, forcing it to crash-dive. The *Nautilus* (V-6/SF-9/SC-2/SS-168) was a *Narwhal*-class “V-Boat” built at Mare Island Shipyard near the Napa River outside of San Francisco and was launched 15 March 1930 with L/ Cmdr. Thomas J. Doyle Jr. in command. The configuration of the “V-Boats” came about from an evolving strategic concept that increasingly focused on a naval war with Japan in the western Pacific. This, combined with the implications of the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty, suggested a demand for long-range “cruiser” submarines, or “strategic scout” submarines. Influenced by German “U-cruisers” of Type *U-139* and Type *U-151* U-Boats, the V-Boats were larger in design. The conning tower had a raised gun platform while deck storage for spare torpedoes was included under the platform and in the superstructure. Those were the days when submarines were called “pig boats” because of the ever-present stench of diesel fuel and inadequate



The purposeful lines of USS *Nautilus* seen off Mare Island on 1 August 1943. In combat from the earliest days of WWII, *Nautilus* would win 14 Battle Stars.



IJN *Kirishima* and fast carrier *Akagi* at Sukumo Bay during 1939. If *Nautilus's* torpedoes had functioned, the sinking of the enemy battleship would have been a major early victory for the US Navy. As it was, the USS *Washington* would destroy the enemy battleship on 15 November 1942 during the Second Naval Battle of Guadalcanal.



Image of the speeding destroyer IJN *Arashi*. Following her attacks on *Nautilus*, *Arashi* steamed at high speed to rejoin the enemy carrier force. Her huge wake was spotted by the Dauntless dive-bombers and this led them directly to the carriers.