

Marauders at Midway

Jim Collins and his four crews were given a mission that had never before been attempted by AAF bombers.

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IN the six months following Pearl Harbor, undermanned and ill-equipped US forces in the Pacific suffered a series of humiliating defeats, mitigated only by Jimmy Doolittle's April 18, 1942, raid on targets in the Tokyo area and by the standoff Battle of the Coral Sea in May.

Buoyed by a string of easy victories, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto sold the Japanese high command on his plan to extend Japan's perimeter by seizing the Midway Islands, our westernmost outpost in the Pacific still in American hands, while carrying out a simultaneous diversionary attack on the Aleutians. Yamamoto held all the high cards, or so he thought: numerically superior naval forces—including carrier aircraft that were also qualitatively superior, flown by first-class veteran pilots—and surprise.

He did not know that, several weeks earlier, US Navy cryptanalysts had broken the Japanese code and knew in detail the disposition and timing of the attacks. With that knowledge, Admiral Chester Nimitz judged correctly that the main thrust at Midway would be a carrier battle. He held his three carriers, *Enterprise*, *Hornet*, and *Yorktown* (which Yamamoto thought to be out of action after the Coral Sea), and reinforced Midway as best he could with some 100 aircraft, many of them obsolete.

On June 4, 1942, the decisive day

of the Battle of Midway, a US force of three carriers supported by about fifty other ships engaged the Japanese fleet of 150 ships built around four heavy carriers. Yamamoto's fleet was harassed by AAF B-17s and Navy torpedo bombers that broke up his formations, diverted his fighters, and enabled Navy dive bombers to sink the four carriers with the loss of only the *Yorktown* and one destroyer. Tales of heroism by Navy and Marine aviators, especially the torpedo bomber crews, only ten percent of whom survived, would fill a book.

Before dawn on June 5, Yamamoto ordered a general withdrawal to save what was left of his fleet. From that day on, Japan was on the defensive in the Pacific. Midway was one of the decisive battles of World War II.

Buried in the many, often disparate, accounts of the battle is the story of a unique mission flown by four AAF B-26 Martin Marauder bombers led by Capt. James J. Collins. In May, Jim Collins, assigned to the 69th Squadron, 38th Bombardment Group, had led the first flight of Australia-bound B-26s from the mainland to Hawaii, for which he was awarded the DFC. A few of the Marauders were detached in Hawaii and jury-rigged to carry torpedoes in anticipation of the attack on Midway. Collins and his crews were given sketchy instruction by the Navy in torpedo bombing, the most nearly suicidal air tactic of the war, but had never dropped a torpedo when a flight of four, commanded by Collins, was sent 1,200 miles westward to Midway on May 29.

Elements of the Japanese naval force were first sighted on June 3. Early the next morning, Jim Collins's B-26s were on runway alert when word came that enemy bombers were approaching Midway. The B-26s took off immediately with no fighter escort and headed for the

Japanese carriers that lay 180 miles to the northwest and that were protected by a screen of fighters and escort ships. As the B-26s approached their target, they were met head-on by Zeros that stayed with them right through a barrage of flak in a desperate attempt to save the carriers.

Collins led his Marauders in a circle over the carriers' screen to set up the long, straight-and-level run essential to the proper functioning of a torpedo. Before the B-26s could release, two were shot down by either fighters or the dense wall of flak erupting from a battleship, three cruisers, several destroyers, and two carriers.

Collins was hit from below, losing his hydraulic system, before he launched his torpedo at an altitude of 200 feet about 800 yards from a carrier. He and the fourth B-26, flown by Lt. James Muri, roared across the fleet with throttles firewalled and made it into an overcast, pursued by an estimated fifty Zeros. Both badly damaged bombers limped back to Midway, where they crash-landed and were junked. Collins's plane was riddled by 186 flak and bullet holes.

Captain Collins was given permission to return to Hawaii on a B-17, pick up another plane, fighter or bomber, and rejoin the battle. The next morning at Hickam Field, he was told that none of his B-26s had been expected to survive—and that the battle was over.

On August 4, 1942, Capt. Jim Collins was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for leading "the first torpedo attack ever entered into by an airplane of this type or by the US Army Air Forces." Lt. James Muri also received the DSC. According to Air Force historians, the AAF never again sent torpedo-armed bombers into combat. That mission against one of the greatest armadas of naval history is unique in the Air Force chronicle of valor. ■