The Battle of Midway: Tragedy, Triumph, and Turning Point

Emerson Thomas McMullen
Georgia Southern University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/bchs-pubs

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/bchs-pubs/15

This book is brought to you for free and open access by the Statesboro and Local Information at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bulloch County Historical Society Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.
The Battle of Midway:
Tragedy, Triumph, and Turning Point
by
Emerson Thomas McMullen
Department of History
Georgia Southern University

USN Photo

The Opening Lecture
for the Exhibit at the
Georgia Southern Museum
"Into the Wild Blue Yonder:
A History of Aviation in Art"
September 20, 1997

a publication of the
Bulloch County Historical Society
Preface

On September 20, 1997, the Georgia Southern Museum proudly opened a new exhibit entitled *Into the Wild Blue Yonder: A History of Aviation in Art.* For five weeks the gallery bustled with visitors of all ages. Some were fascinated with artists' renderings of historic moments in aviation history. Others enjoyed replicas of historic aircraft. Philatelists were pleasantly surprised to find a fine collection of aviation stamps which had been issued to commemorate crucial events.

The momentum for the exhibit was supplied by Dr. Thomas McMullen, a member of the history department at Georgia Southern University. He approached me with the idea over a year ago, and during the intervening months we met regularly for planning sessions. Quickly I realized that the exhibition was going to be a large one (over 150 pieces). Furthermore, nearly every item on display came from his personal collection of original art, signed prints, and memorabilia.

Those who attended the opening will never forget Dr. McMullen’s thoughtful and thorough presentation. He skillfully related the life and career of a Bulloch County son, Glen Hodges, to the Battle of Midway in which Hodges and many of his colleagues perished as he defended his country. In response to numerous requests, we are pleased to offer this publication under the auspices of one of the museum’s strongest allies, the Bulloch County Historical Society. On numerous occasions this exemplary organization has helped the museum achieve our goal of presenting exhibits and programs devoted to this region’s rich cultural heritage. This happens to have been one of our finest collaborations. I would like to thank the organization’s President, Dorothy Roebuck, and her energetic Executive Vice President, Dr. Kemp Mabry, for making this publication a reality.

Del Presley
Director

THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY: TRAGEDY, TRIUMPH, TURNING POINT

by Emerson Thomas McMullen, Ph.D.

Department of History, Georgia Southern University

Abstract

As Glen Hodges grew up in rural Georgia, Japanese expansion in Asia eventually led to conflict between the United States and Japan. Glen and other Bulloch County Georgians left their homes and families and went to war. They ended up in all theaters, Glen in the Pacific. He was a torpedo plane pilot who was killed in action at the Battle of Midway, as were most of the U.S. torpedo plane crews. Still, their willingness to press home desperate and uncoordinated attacks aided in the ultimate victory. The Navy named the U.S.S. Hodges after Glen in 1944. The ship and its crew, with one of Glen’s brothers on board, saw combat in the Pacific Theater.

Introduction

This is the story of how Bulloch County Georgians came to fight the Japanese in the middle of the Pacific. I also think of this presentation as a memorial, not only to those who fought, but also to their families. The person I want to especially remember is Ensign Glen Hodges, who was killed in action at the Battle of Midway. A wartime newspaper article called Glen a hero. Was he? Well, let’s see.
The title for this story comes from the pen of LCDR John Waldron of South Dakota. He was part Sioux Indian and leader of the torpedo squadron from the U.S.S. Hornet at the Battle of Midway. Before the Battle of Midway, he wrote that it could very well be the turning point of the war. He was right. The battle was a triumph and turning point for America in the war in the Pacific and that is part of the title of this presentation.

Prior to the battle, Waldron had handed out a mimeographed letter to his men that said in part, “We are the best in the world. My greatest hope is that we encounter a favorable tactical situation. But if we don’t and worst comes to worst, I want each of us to do his utmost to destroy our enemies. If there is only one plane left to make the final run in, I want that man to go in and get a hit. May God be with us all . . .” Note that he realized they could easily be shot down, but he stressed their duty to fight anyway. Unfortunately, Waldron and his squadron encountered an unfavorable tactical situation and worst did come to worst. They were the first carrier planes to arrive at the battle scene and it was an uncoordinated attack; Japanese Zeros pounced on them and indeed, only one plane was left to make the final torpedo run. Ensign George Gay was the sole survivor of his squadron. (Gay was born in Waco, Texas, but retired in Marietta, Georgia.) Waldron’s squadron was the worst hit, but none of the torpedo squadrons fared well that day. That was the tragedy of the battle, and the other part of my title.

Ensign Glen Hodges of Bulloch County was also a torpedo plane pilot who did not survive the battle and, as mentioned, he is the one I want to emphasize.

Background

After the Revolutionary War, a citizen-soldier named Joshua Hodges settled in Bulloch County. Joshua’s descendent Wade Hodges married Ophelia Nevils and together they built a home on their farm north of Statesboro in the Middleground Community. They raised four sons and four daughters and were proud that their children went on to college. Mr. Hodges was an excellent farmer and was selected one of six Georgia Master Farmers in 1941. Glen was born in this house on the family farm during World War One (WWI).

Most people do not know that Japan fought on the Allied side in WWI. After WWI, Japan acquired German holdings in China and the North Pacific. This whetted her appetite for more. In 1924, seeing the Japanese desire for territory, General Billy Mitchell predicted that Japan would strike the U.S. at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines. Mitchell’s bombers had demonstrated that planes could sink battleships. Prior to this time, the battleship was the premier naval weapon, but technology was advancing and soon the airplane would take over.

In 1932, Glen was a sophomore at Statesboro High School. At that time, Japan, following its expansionist policy, controlled most of Manchuria but wanted an even bigger empire.

In 1934, Glen graduated from Statesboro High School where he had played football and basketball. After a year, he went to the University of Georgia where he played basketball as a walk-on. In 1937, Japan invaded China and took Peking and Nanking. It arrogantly attacked and sank an American gunboat, the U.S.S. Panay, on the Yangtze River. Japan apologized and made restitution, but the reason the incident occurred in the first place, was that the local commander thought the U.S. was weak and cowardly. Many in the Japanese military and leadership held this view. One sign of weakness was that the U.S. planned to give the Philippines its freedom. This line of reasoning shows how different the thinking was in the two cultures.

In 1938 Glen continued to play basketball at the University of Georgia. In that year Japan continued to take pieces of China and even clashed with the Russians.

In 1939 Japan found China too big to conquer entirely. This incomplete war would lead to another war. That same year Glen received his Bachelor of Science in forestry from the University of Georgia. He worked for the Agriculture Adjustment Administration program in Bulloch County and was slated to become the County Agent in Camden County. Later on that year, Hitler in-
vaded Poland and this action caused my father to enlist in the U.S. Army Air Corps on 25 September 1939.

In 1940, Japan started to move into Southeast and South Asia as the European colonial powers controlling those areas fell to Hitler in Europe. Japan needed the vital resources there to sustain her economy and war machine. President Roosevelt objected to the Japanese move into Southeast Asia, but Japan continued its aggression, reasoning that if America would not defend Paris, why should it defend Hanoi? This reinforced the idea that the U.S. was weak. However, when the 1911 trade agreement between the U.S. and Japan expired in early 1940, President Roosevelt refused to renew it. Japan could not understand the U.S.’s moral objections to its aggression. The Western democracies were against war because of the carnage that occurred in WWI on the Western front. But Japan’s experiences in WWI were positive, not negative. Japan instead suggested that the U.S. divide the East Asia pie with it.

**War Clouds**

In 1940, many people were aware the U.S. would be involved in the fighting going on around the world. Besides Japanese aggression, Hitler had overrun Europe and Britain was fighting for its life. The U.S. had its first peacetime draft. Some Americans were going to Canada to join the Royal Canadian Air Force to learn to fly. They would transfer to the British Isles to help defend England against Hitler. Dan and Albert Shuman, and Barney Shelnutt of Statesboro did this. So did my stepfather; he told me that the F.B.I. was turning people back at the Canadian border because the U.S. was officially neutral at that time; therefore, he had to be careful about it. Shelnutt enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in April 1940 and was killed in action a little more than a year later. Shuman, who lettered in football at Statesboro High School, narrowly escaped death in a plane crash. Later, he ended up as a prisoner of war in Germany, as did my stepfather.

Many Georgians before this time had joined the military for economic reasons. The Depression was still having its effects and there were not many jobs. However, like Shelnutt and the Shumans, Glen apparently felt the pressure to be in the coming fight, as had my father and stepfather. In May 1940 Glen enlisted as Seaman 2nd Class at Macon, Georgia. He held this rank for three months and then was appointed an Aviation Cadet and went off to Florida for flight training. Glen graduated from the Naval Air Station at Pensacola with the rank of Ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve. He was assigned to Torpedo Squadron Six on board the carrier U.S.S. Enterprise in the Pacific. In late April 1941, eleven months after he joined the Navy, Glen reported for flying duty on board the Enterprise. He was now a citizen-soldier like his ancestor Joshua; only his weaponry was not a smooth-bore musket, but an airplane armed with machine guns, bombs, and torpedoes. That is unprecedented technological change in just 150 years/four generations.

When Japan completed its occupation of Indochina, the U.S. and Britain froze Japan’s assets in their countries, hoping this would stop Japanese aggression. The U.S. did not think Japan would choose war, but the thinking in the cultures was different. This was an affront to Japan, and she chose war. The Japanese also chose how they wanted to fight the war.

In 1894, when Japan had gone to war with China, she launched a preemptive strike, captured what she wanted, held on to it defensively, and then negotiated a peace in her favor. In 1904, she had done the same with Russia. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto and Japanese war planners decided to follow a similar strategy with America. They would isolate China, finish the war there, and keep an eye on the Russians. They would seize the resource-rich areas of Asia, cut the American line of communications to the Philippines, form a perimeter defense against the U.S., and hold on for a negotiated peace in their favor. Again, many Japanese thought the Americans were weak fighters and, in any event, would be distracted by the war in Europe. They thought their only real obstacle was the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Yamamoto was initially against fighting America, but suggested that, since they were risking war with the U.S., they might as well do it in a big way with an attack on the fleet at Pearl Har-
bor. He promised six months of victories, and then after that the war would be a toss-up because of America’s industrial might.

A more militant government came to power in Japan and in October gave Yamamoto the okay to attack Pearl Harbor. After much careful planning and preparation, he sent six carriers under Admiral Chuichi Nagumo to carry out the famous successful December 7th raid. Earlier, I said that Midway was a turning point in the war, but Pearl Harbor was a turning point in history. What Billy Mitchell predicted came to pass after seventeen years.

There were men from Bulloch County stationed in Hawaii on December the 7th. Army Corporal Woodrow Tyson was wounded by a machine gun bullet in the thigh and received the purple heart. Corporal Hunter Suddath, in an antiaircraft unit, wrote home that “a lot of the men got killed all around me, but guess it just was not my time.” Also at Pearl Harbor were Marine Private Theo Sanders, CPL Howard Smith, and SGT Jesse Quattlebaum. Quattlebaum’s niece, Irene, later married Glen’s brother, Wade C. Hodges, Jr.

The American carriers were not at Pearl Harbor. Glen and his ship were returning from Wake Island. Planes from the carrier Enterprise flew to Hawaii on their return. They were fired on by jumpy U.S. gunners and several were shot down. Glen’s torpedo squadron nearly suffered the same fate, but returned to the Enterprise instead of attempting to land at Pearl.

Coinciding with the Pearl Harbor strike, the Japanese launched simultaneous offensives on all fronts. They succeeded beyond their wildest expectations because their opponents were not prepared for war. The Philippines proved to be the toughest nut, but the Japanese finally succeeded there, too. They captured LT Leroy Cowart, Jr., of the U.S. Army Air Corps. He had graduated from Statesboro High School and was a 1940 graduate of Georgia Teachers’ College. He survived the Bataan death march, and the hell ships, but died from neglect and mistreatment during his captivity in Japan. The reason the Japanese were so brutal with their prisoners was because they thought it to be a great loss of face to be captured. They often committed suicide rather than surrender. Therefore, they had no respect for prisoners of war and often killed them out of hand, including at Midway. On the other hand, they greatly respected someone who fought to the death.

The Japanese were now terribly overconfident, even though all U.S. carriers had escaped destruction. One exception was Commander Minoru Genda, who had planned the air attack part of the Pearl Harbor raid. Since the Midway Atoll protected Hawaii, he suggested that an attack on Midway would lure the U.S. carriers into combat in which the Japanese could destroy them. However, most of the Japanese high-ranking officers were so elated over the sinking of so many battleships that they forgot the lesson the U.S. learned at Pearl Harbor: the aircraft carrier, not the battleship, was now king of the sea.

The American people were stunned by the string of Japanese victories. They clamored for the military to do something. In early 1942, Admiral Chester Nimitz, the new Navy Commander in the Pacific, sent his carriers, Yorktown, Hornet, Enterprise, and Lexington, on several raids. These hit-and-run attacks did nothing to stop the Japanese, but Glen and the other fliers received combat experience on the forays.

**Doolittle**

The big psychological blow for the U.S. against Japan was the Doolittle Raid in April 1942. The Enterprise’s mission was to protect the Hornet in case of attack. From the deck of the Enterprise, Glen Hodges and others watched Doolittle’s bombers take off from the Hornet and head out to strike the Japanese home islands. They held their breaths as each bomber lumbered down the deck, and then waved and cheered when it lifted off. Ironically, these B-25 bombers were named after Billy Mitchell, the man who had predicted war with Japan. When the bombers flew off, both carriers turned back to Pearl Harbor.

Doolittle’s attack on their home islands settled the debate between the Japanese factions over whether to take Midway. They had to; such a raid could not be allowed to happen again. This was a loss of face for the military because its duty was to protect the emperor. It decided it had to enlarge its defensive perimeter.
Coral Sea

Besides planning to take Midway, the Japanese wanted to extend their reach north to the Aleutians and south toward Australia. There had been fierce fighting in Northern New Guinea. Japan planned to invade Port Moresby, in Southern New Guinea, and the allied base on Tulagai, in the Solomon Islands. From these bases they could control the whole Coral Sea area, and cut off Australia from its allies. The execution of this plan led to the Battle of the Coral Sea, the first naval battle in which the opposing ships struck at each other without being within gunshot.

The Japanese invasion of Tulagai was unopposed on 3 May 1942, but the next day, planes from the carriers Yorktown and Lexington attacked the Japanese invaders there. Included in the action were the Douglas Devastator torpedo planes, the type of plane that Glen flew. Besides the pilot, there was a rear gunner to help defend this slow-moving plane. The raid alerted the Japanese naval forces that the American carriers were in the area, and both sides closed for the battle. The Japanese had one small and two large carriers, while the Americans had two large carriers.

LCDR James Brett of Statesboro led the torpedo squadron from the Lexington. In two days of fighting the Americans sank the small carrier and inflicted heavy damage on one of the large carriers. These American attacks were successful because they were coordinated. The dive bombers and torpedo planes attacked more or less at the same time, and there was some fighter protection. On the first day, the dive bombers hit the carrier first and Brett used the smoke from the resulting fires to help conceal his squadron as it approached for its torpedo run. On the second day, clouds concealed their approach. Afterwards, Brett closed his squadron into a tight defensive formation so that the gunners could support each other. They fought off the Zeros that attacked them and, according to Brett, shot down two.

In the Battle of the Coral Sea, the U.S. lost the carrier Lexington. The Yorktown had some near misses, but only one bomb hit her. Nevertheless, Japanese pilots mistakenly reported that they had sunk both U.S. carriers, as well as several other ships. It looked like a clear-cut victory for Japan. They were jubilant that they had won this first big naval battle in which they could not be accused of a sneak attack, as at Pearl Harbor. In spite of all this, the Japanese invasion force turned back. Its commander figured the one good remaining carrier was not enough protection against General Douglas MacArthur’s land-based bombers. Both sides sailed for home. The Battle of the Coral Sea was a tactical victory for Japan, but it was a strategic victory for America because the Japanese had not achieved their objective. A lesson the Japanese took home from the battle was that the U.S. torpedo planes had done the most damage. They would be certain to stop those torpedo planes the next time.

Midway

The fighting in the Coral Sea set the scene for the Battle of Midway. The Americans had broken the Japanese code and knew what they were planning. The Japanese expected that they could take Midway first, and then wait for what they thought were the two remaining U.S. carriers to be lured into battle and then destroyed. Instead, the Americans planned an ambush of their own.

Overconfidence led Yamamoto to squander his carrier resources. Overall, he had available to him seven large carriers and three small ones. Normally, one doesn’t divide one’s forces for a battle, but Yamamoto did. He sent a large carrier and a small carrier in an inconsequential diversionary attack on the Aleutians. Then he lackadaisically did not get either of the two large carriers from the Coral Sea into the Midway battle. This was partly because of the battle damage and because they had also lost a lot of planes. He ordered the other two small carriers to guard his battleships and the invasion fleet. The battleships were too far behind the main carrier group to help it. So the Japanese had only four large carriers leading the attack. Meanwhile at Pearl Harbor, Admiral Nimitz patched up the Yorktown in just three days and thereby got her into the fight at Midway. That made the lineup for Midway four Japanese large carriers versus three American large
The Yorktown could not move at full speed, but the Midway Atoll itself had torpedo planes, fighters, scout planes, and bombers flying from its airstrip. That made it equivalent to being an unsinkable aircraft carrier. From an aerial resources standpoint, it was shaping up to be somewhat of an even fight. Surprise was on the side of the Americans and superior planes were on the side of the Japanese.

Yamamoto had set up a picket line of submarines near Hawaii to alert him when the Americans made their move. Unfortunately for Japan, the U.S. carriers had already left before the subs took their positions. So the Japanese detected no carrier activity and thought there would be no interference with their planned attack and then invasion of Midway. Instead the Americans were sailing to be in a position to hit the Japanese carrier force from the flank.

All the American fliers were spoiling for the fight. Just the same, they wrote letters to be sent home if they did not return from the battle. They also had their pictures taken. The picture on the cover shows the pilots from Glen’s squadron; he is in the front row, fourth from the right. Fourteen of the eighteen aviators shown here actually made the attack on the Japanese and only five of the fourteen returned. The men on either side of Glen died. Directly behind Glen is LT Arthur Ely, the second in command; he died. The man on Ely’s left died. The man on Ely’s right is LCDR Gene Lindsey, leader of the squadron. Lindsey was injured just six days before the battle when he crashed attempting a carrier landing. His comrades-in-arms thought he would not be able to fly because his face was so swollen he could not wear his goggles. However, on the day of the battle, Lindsey was out of his bunk, saying this is “the thing we have trained for, and I will take my squadron in.” He did take his squadron in, and he died doing it.

Corporal Smith of Brooklet, whom I mentioned was at Pearl Harbor during the raid there, was now at Midway as part of a beefed-up force to face the impending attack and invasion. The U.S. had PBY long-range patrol planes based there. These were actively looking for the Japanese forces. On 3 June they spotted the invasion ships of the enemy fleet, and nine B-17’s took off from Midway in an ineffective long-range, high altitude attack on the transports. The Norden bombsight was not the technological wonder it was thought to be at the time. The sight required a lot of coordinated training between pilot and bombardier for it to be accurate and usually that training was not emphasized enough. Dive bombing was a more sure way to hit a moving target like a ship. The B-17 crews thought they had hit several ships, but after the war learned that they did not hit a single one. That night, four PBY’s made a torpedo attack that hit a tanker, but the torpedo must have been a dud because the tanker was able to keep up with the convoy. This was no fluke - a lot of U.S. torpedoes were faulty.

Japan Takes the Initiative

Now it was Japan’s turn to strike back. Early on the morning of the 4th of June 1942, amidst great cheers from the deck crews, the first wave of planes from the Japanese carrier force took off for Midway. After the first wave was airborne, airplanes loaded for a possible strike against enemy ships were brought up on deck. Nagumo did this because he had two objectives: one was to knock out the Midway defenses and the other was to sink any hostile ships, especially carriers. This double responsibility compromised Nagumo’s ability to do either mission very well.

A PBY spotted and shadowed the Japanese carrier group, reporting its position. A second PBY spotted the planes headed for Midway and shadowed them, radioing their position. The Midway radar picked them up too and all serviceable planes left Midway. The bombers and torpedo planes headed for the Japanese carriers in an uncoordinated manner. The fighters, which were Wildcats and aging Brewster Buffaloes, headed for the attacking planes. The Japanese shot up the American fighters, and bombed and strafed Midway.

Starting at about seven a.m., the first Americans to attack the Japanese carrier fleet were six of the new and faster TBF torpedo planes. They had a three-man crew, carried the torpedo internally, and had a power turret for the gunner. Also, there were four B-26’s carrying torpedoes. The defending Zeros shot down half of the
B-26's and all but one of the newer torpedo planes. The one that returned was all shot up. The few torpedoes the Americans dropped missed. Glen's squadron was disappointed it did not get these newer torpedo planes, but those that were at Midway did not do well. Of the eighteen crew members on these planes, only two survived, and they were both wounded.

After that, fourteen B-17's commenced a high-altitude bomb run and again missed as the ships maneuvered out of harm's way. Then sixteen Marine dive bombers made a glide bombing attack because they were not experienced enough to do any dive bombing. The defending Zeros shot down half of them and the others missed their targets. A similar thing happened to the twelve older Vindicators that went after the Japanese next.

Seeing these land-based aircraft attacks on his carriers, Nagumo decided that the first strike had not been effective enough and ordered a second wave armed for another attack on Midway. This meant the deck crews had to switch general-purpose bombs for torpedoes and armor-piercing bombs. Nagumo had been criticized for not launching a second strike at Pearl Harbor; no doubt he wanted to be sure he had completed the job at Midway. Then the planes of the first wave returned. The second strike had to be taken below decks in order to retrieve and refuel the planes from the first wave, as well as the Zeros that had been defending the carriers. Operations on board the carriers started to get hectic. So, while the planes from Midway had not hit any carriers, they had caused concern and some disarray.

This situation was compounded when a Japanese search plane reported sighting an American carrier within striking distance. This was a threat that Nagumo could not ignore. He ordered his planes to be rearmed for an attack against the carrier instead of Midway. Now torpedoes and armor-piercing bombs had to be switched back in place of the regular bombs. The Japanese carriers became extremely vulnerable. Gasoline tanks, bombs, and torpedoes were stored all over the flight and hangar decks. With the rapid changes of orders, there had not been enough time to observe proper safety precautions. This was the moment the American Navy had been hoping for. It launched its planes.

The Americans headed to where they thought the enemy carriers were. However, Nagumo had turned north in order to close the distance on the Americans. This new information had not been relayed to the U.S. planes, so there was an information breakdown. Naturally the Americans did not find the enemy carriers where they were supposed to be. They spread out in a search mode. As a result, those that did not turn back because of low fuel reserves arrived at their target in a piecemeal fashion instead of in a coordinated attack.

Carrier Attacks

As mentioned at the start of this story, the first carrier aircraft to attack the Japanese were the torpedo planes of Waldron's squadron from the Hornet. They were in an open formation, but when the Zeros from the combat air patrol dropped down on them, they started to tighten up. Nevertheless, they immediately lost some planes and eventually all were shot down. One man out of thirty total survived. Japanese destroyers laid down smoke screens during this fight. Glen's squadron saw the smoke and came in. It split in two in order to attack from both sides. Lindsey led one group and Ely led the group Glen was in. This split made them more vulnerable to the Zeros because their combined defensive fire was not as great. Two of the highly maneuverable Zeros would close behind a torpedo plane, one on each side. Whichever one the gunner fired at would break off its attack, and the other Zero would close in for the kill. Carrying the torpedo, the U.S. planes could only make 100-120 m.p.h. and were sitting ducks. When they got close to the ships, the antiaircraft guns took over. Often the Zero pilots braved their own antiaircraft fire to press home for the kill. One by one the American torpedo planes were hit and went down in flames. A bullet did hit one of the torpedoes and it detonated. There is a one-in-three probability that Glen died this way: in a blinding, mid-air explosion.

Ten out of twenty-eight men from Glen's squadron survived, five pilots and five gunners. The torpedo planes from the Yorktown
arrived next on the scene. Again the Zeros were all over them and only three persons survived out of twenty-four. The Japanese were now ready to attack the American ships. Their carriers swung into the wind and within five minutes a good number of their planes would have been launched against the U.S. carriers.

That five minutes may have just as well been an eternity. The American dive bombers had arrived at the battle more or less undetected and more or less at the same time. The Japanese carriers had no radar and there was just enough cloud cover to hide the bombers from the lookouts. The combat air patrol was down low, finishing off the torpedo planes, and had not had enough time to climb to altitude. Suddenly the dive bombers came streaking down out of the sun. The two to four bombs that hit each carrier were enough to finish them off because of the armed and fully-fueled planes, and because of the munitions and gasoline containers scattered around. The dive bombers from the Enterprise hit the Kaga and the Akagi. The Yorktown dive bombers hit the Soryu. In five minutes these three carriers were blazing infernos. The exploding torpedoes and bombs made it impossible to bring the fires under control. The battle would go on, but the Japanese lost it at this point.

The movie Midway, and several books assert that the Americans were lucky to have caught the Japanese at this moment. I do not agree. I have already mentioned one reason this situation occurred as it did: the Japanese high command did not fully realize that the battleship was no longer king of the sea.

Another reason is because of the sum total of decisions made by many individuals. Here are some examples: Nimitz decided to trust completely the information the codebreakers gave him. Yamamoto chose to divide his forces and thereby weakened his attack. The Japanese planners decided to put radar first on their battleships and not on their carriers, but then they sent the carriers in first. These carriers were very vulnerable for a long period of time because Nagumo decided to rearm his planes for a second strike on Midway. Waldron arrived early because he correctly took his squadron to where he thought the Japanese had changed course to, and then he chose to attack alone. The Japanese destroyer captains decided to lay down the smoke screens that attracted Glen's squadron. And so on; the battle occurred as it did because of individual decisions.

Things would have happened differently if the decisions had been different. For example: if Nagumo had decided not to rearm his planes, or if he had launched an attack against the American naval forces as soon as they were detected, the battle would have played out differently. No doubt there would have been greater U.S. losses and less Japanese losses. On the other hand, if Admirals Raymond Spruance and Frank Fletcher had been informed of Nagumo's northerly turn, and had kept their fliers informed, then the American attack would have been more coordinated and still would have caught the Japanese in a vulnerable position. In that case, Japan's losses would have been even greater, and America's less.

Going back to the battle, the fourth Japanese carrier, the Hiryu, was away from the other three and was undamaged. It launched eighteen dive bombers with six escorting Zeros. These followed the Yorktown's planes back to that carrier and attacked it. Six dive bombers got through and scored several hits. The second wave of ten torpedo planes and six fighters made two hits on the Yorktown, which could not maneuver well because of the earlier damage. The carrier started to list badly and the Captain ordered abandon ship. First-class fireman Billy Kennedy of Brooklet was below decks when the torpedoes hit. He worked his way topside in total darkness and then overboard. The water was covered with several inches of oil and many of the weak and wounded died in the sticky mess. Kennedy wrote home that Japanese planes strafed them in the water and this was the most terrifying thing in his life. U.S. fighters drove the Japanese off and Kennedy was picked up by a destroyer and taken to Honolulu. At five p.m., U.S. dive bombers found the Hiryu and put her out of action.

Surprisingly, the Yorktown did not capsize, but stayed afloat. On the 6th of June, the destroyer Hammann came alongside and supplied firefighting crews and power in the hopes of yet saving this gallant ship. While they were attempting this salvage job, a Japanese submarine got within the screen of destroyers around the
Yorktown and fired four torpedoes at her. Two of them hit the Yorktown and one hit the Hammann, breaking its back. The destroyer was nearly split in two and went down quickly with great loss of life. On board was Linton Evans of Rocky Ford, who made it to a whaleboat. This was fortunate for him, because the sinking destroyer’s depth charges went off at three different levels and many sailors still in the water were killed by the concussions.

The Yorktown’s hull was further weakened by the Hammann’s exploding depth-charges. These mortally wounded the carrier. That made it and the Hammann America’s only ship losses in the battle. The Yorktown did not sink until the next day, the 7th of June 1942, six months to the day after Pearl Harbor. This was the day Japan had planned to invade Midway. Instead, Yamamoto was 600 miles from the atoll, heading for home. Remember that he had promised six months of Japanese victories and then the war would be a toss up. He was a little off on his prediction. Japan’s losses of four large carriers and many experienced pilots at the Battle of Midway had fatally crippled its naval strength. From this point on, the Americans changed over to the strategic offensive and never lost it.

U.S.S. Hodges

The Navy honors people and places by naming its ships after them. For instance, in 1955 it named an L.S.T. the U.S.S. Bulloch County. The Navy did the same thing for Glen Hodges. In 1944, almost two years after he died, the Navy named a destroyer escort the U.S.S. Hodges. Glen’s 15-year-old sister, Dorothy Jayne (or Polly), then a student at Statesboro High School, christened the ship in a ceremony at Charleston Navy Yard. Matron of Honor was Mrs. Eugene Hodges Brogdon of Lyons. Glen’s entire family was there; the other two sisters present were Betty Grace, who was attending Georgia State College for Women at Milledgeville, and Martha Evelyn, a student at Auburn. The brothers present were Ensign Robert Hodges, Storekeeper Second Class Julian B. Hodges, who was then stationed at Charleston, and Wade C. Hodges, Jr., who was working on the family farm. (He was prevented from military service due to poor eyesight.)

Robert Hodges chose to serve aboard the U.S.S. Hodges. Appropriately, the ship fought in the Pacific. On the way to New Guinea, it passed near the spot where the Lexington went down. The primary combat in which the U.S.S. Hodges was involved was the retaking of the Philippines. The closest call for Robert Hodges and the ship was during a bombing raid. One engine of a Japanese light bomber was hit and the pilot dove his crippled plane toward the Hodges. It looked like the plane was going to hit the ship, but the pilot misjudged the angle and only hit the foremost. The plane crashed into the water, next to the ship.

Bulloch County men who died in the retaking of the Philippines were Navy LT Carrol Minick, who flew the new torpedo plane, Army SST’s Charles Martin and Darwin DeLoach, and PFC’s Chester Barney, Arthur Howell, and John Buie, Jr. Bulloch County residents also fought and died in other Pacific campaigns. One was Combat Corpsman John Darley, Jr., who graduated from Statesboro High School and went to Georgia Teachers’ College for one year. He survived the Normandy invasion but was killed in action on Iwo Jima. I identify with Darley because my son is a combat corpsman who served with the Marines in the Gulf War.

The U.S.S. Hodges was on patrol duty when the Japanese signed a peace treaty on board the U.S.S. Missouri. This was the end of the road for Japanese military expansion. LCDR Waldron was prophetic; the turning point for Japanese aggression was the Battle of Midway. It is tragic that he, Glen Hodges, and their comrades-in-arms died there, but they did not die in vain. Their sacrifice contributed to the ultimate victory and triumph for which they were fighting.

Now let’s address the question of whether these torpedo pilots were heroes. I bet that if Glen were standing here, he would say that he was not a hero, that he was just doing his duty. Most of those I have met who fought courageously in World War II say that. Their generation had values which included sacrifice and doing one’s duty.
I had said one reason for the battle’s outcome was the sum total of decisions that individuals made leading up to it. But this flying into the teeth of the enemy was a factor for America’s victory, too. Genda, Nagumo’s Air Staff Officer, recognized this. He said of Hodges and the others: “Their fighting spirit, repeating attacks in spite of heavy losses sustained, should also be credited for the victory.” He was right. Glen and those who did give their lives had a fighting spirit and that did help carry the U.S. to victory. They were all heroes, and it has been my privilege to tell you about them.

© Emerson Thomas McMullen

Bibliography and Sources


The Bulloch Herald, Statesboro, Georgia, 1938 - 1942.

The Bulloch Times, Statesboro, Georgia, 1938 - 1945.


The Criterion, Statesboro High School Yearbook, Statesboro, Georgia, 1930 - 1945.

Fuchida, Mitsuo and Okumiya, Masatake, Midway, Annapolis, Maryland, 1955.

Interviews: Julian Hodges, Sara Reid Hodges, Betty Hodges Barr, Polly Hodges Rushing, Fred Brogdon, Linton Evans, and William Humphrey.

Linzey, Stanford E., God was at Midway, San Diego, California, 1996.

Local History Section, and Archives, Statesboro Regional Library, Statesboro, Georgia.

The Pandora, University of Georgia Yearbook, Athens, Georgia, 1935 - 1940.

Prange, Gordon W., Miracle at Midway, New York, New York, 1982.

The Reflector, Georgia Teachers’ College Yearbook, Statesboro, Georgia, 1935 - 1945.


Wouk, Herman, War and Remembrance, Boston, Massachusetts, 1978.
About the Author

Emerson Thomas "Tom" McMullen was born in Pennsylvania, but did not stay there long. His father had enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and the family lived in several Southern states during World War II. After the war, the family moved to the West Coast. Tom joined the U.S. Air Force and worked in three different government research laboratories in the 1960's and 1970's, while holding the B.S. and M.S. degrees in engineering from Washington State University and Southern Methodist University. In the 1980's he retired from the Air Force and returned to school to earn the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in the History and Philosophy of Science from Indiana University.

He has taught at the Air Force Institute of Technology, Indiana University, and the University of Oklahoma. He is currently Historian of Science, Technology, and Medicine at Georgia Southern University. In 1994 he was a Military History Fellow at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Among the courses he teaches at G.S.U. are American Military History and the History of Flight. His book, *William Harvey and the Use of Purpose in the Scientific Revolution*, will be published soon.

He and his wife Sharon have two children, Brenden and Erin. Both of them are in the Navy and both served in the Gulf War, Brenden with a Marine Force Reconnaissance unit. Tom was a member of Clan MacMillan, but is not currently active in it.