

## Appendix 5: Japanese Amphibious Operations against Midway—An Analysis

Had the Japanese triumphed against the U.S. Navy in the naval phase of the Battle of Midway, the stage would have been set for an amphibious landing against the atoll on the morning of 6 June. Down through the years it has commonly been supposed that the Japanese would have overwhelmed the American defenders with a combination of air and gun power, paving the way for a successful landing by Colonel Ichiki's detachment and Captain Itō's Naval Special Landing Force.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is simply a natural outgrowth of the mistaken belief surrounding the relative odds in the naval conflict, that the fallacious notion of overwhelming Japanese numerical superiority should have been extended by proxy to the relative odds facing the American ground defenders. But was a Japanese victory really the likely outcome of such an encounter?

In fact, a more dispassionate analysis reveals nearly as many flaws in the Japanese plans for the invasion as beset the battle at the strategic level. Instead, a careful examination almost inevitably leads to the conclusion that the Japanese faced formidable obstacles, not only of numbers and geography, but also of amphibious doctrine, training, and coordination. As a result, Midway's defenders would likely have held the atoll, at least in the short term.<sup>2</sup>

Even postulating a naval victory, in truth the Imperial Navy was miserably prepared to support a landing against Midway. The Japanese Navy had little in the way of either an established ground attack doctrine for its aircraft, or a tested naval gunfire support doctrine. Given the hostility between the two branches of the imperial services, this is not surprising. The Navy saw its mission as the destruction of enemy warships, not supporting the landing of Army troops. The practical effect of this, though, was to render distinctly less effective any air support the carriers of *Kido Butai* might be able to provide. The positions of the U.S. Marines ashore were well sited and emplaced. In some cases, they were equipped with reinforced concrete shelters, which were nearly bombproof. Even the less well-protected troops were well dug in and protected by sandbags and natural fortifications. The attack by Tomonaga's strike force on the morning of 4 June, while destroying some of the more-visible facilities on the islands, such as oil tanks and barracks, had degraded the real defensive

capacity of the Marine defenders hardly at all. Not a single heavy gun of any sort had been put out of commission, and total personnel losses were six KIA.<sup>3</sup> There is no reason to suppose that one or two additional strikes by Japanese carrier aircraft on 5 June and the morning of 6 June would have appreciably altered this basic equation before the landings occurred. In other words, the majority of the Marines' weaponry would likely have remained intact.

By the same token, the guns of CruDiv 7—the cruisers *Kumano*, *Suzuya*, *Mikuma*, and *Mogami*—were ill equipped to perform much better. Given the rigid operational timetable laid down by Yamamoto, and the stated intention to land the troops at first light,<sup>4</sup> their bombardment of the islands could not help but be desultory. Tarawa, Kwajalein, and a dozen other sites in the Central Pacific subsequently demonstrated to the Americans that dug-in island defenses were generally proof against heavy-caliber weapons, even when over extended periods of time. A quick bombardment from shipborne eight-inch guns with no practice in target identification or selection simply wasn't going to get the job done. The Marines might have been shaken by it, but odds were that they would have survived largely undamaged.

Admittedly, the Japanese also had the ability to direct gunfire against targets of opportunity on Midway once the landings were under way and the American weapons exposed themselves. But it was unlikely that any Japanese warships would want to close the range too closely until the four seven-inch guns emplaced on the southern shores of Sand and Eastern Islands were taken out. Even then, it is extremely doubtful that Japanese fire would have been terribly accurate, since such missions were not a part of their normal doctrine. Likewise, it is almost impossible to anticipate any of the landing troops having the ability to communicate with the warships directly—the necessary doctrine and portable radio equipment simply weren't there.

Beyond these hurdles, Midway's geography also presented a very difficult target. It is almost completely surrounded by an exposed coral reef. There are gaps on the western side, but they do not constitute a useful approach, leading as they do to wide shallows of unpredictable depth. To the south, a small gap had been blasted for the ship channel, but it lay directly under the heavy guns of both islands. The result is that most of the shoreline could not be directly approached by landing craft. The tidal range at Midway is quite small, with a mean range of only nine inches, and a diurnal range of fifteen inches, meaning that there is no high tide that can be counted on to whisk landing craft over the reef and allow them access to the beaches unhindered. This, in turn, meant that the *daihatsu* barges would have had to discharge their human cargo on the farther side of the reef. This was never less than 200 yards from shore, and sometimes as much as double that. After being "landed," the men would first have had to wade onto the reef itself, exposing them to fire. From there, they would have to slog back into the lagoon toward the beaches, through water that in many cases would have come up to their chests, all the while under heavy fire. It was precisely to defeat this sort of natural obstacle that the Americans went on to develop the famous Amtrac amphibious landing craft. In June 1942, the Japanese could only have dreamed of owning such a vehicle.

Ashore, the Americans were well entrenched and numerous. Depending on which sources are consulted, there were anywhere from 3,000 to 4,500 personnel on the islands.<sup>5</sup> The majority of them, being Marines, were infantrymen by original training whatever their current operational capacity. The Americans had laid antiboat obstacles in the water. Along the beaches, rows of electrically detonated mines had been planted along with seemingly endless strands of barbed wire. The Marines had even gone so far as to create more than 1,500 improvised explosive devices for use against tanks. A platoon of M3 Stuart light tanks was hidden in the heavy underbrush of Sand Island's interior. Even before the addition of "Carlson's Raiders," the Sixth Defense Battalion's order of battle included five five-inch guns, four three-inch antiboat guns, twelve three-inch AA guns, forty-eight .50-caliber machine guns, and thirty-six .30-caliber machine guns.<sup>6</sup> The total number of three-inch AA guns on both islands was twenty-four, and was further bolstered by the addition of 37-mm and 20-mm automatic guns in the hands of an antiaircraft defense unit. "Wreck 'em on the reef!" was the motto of Midway's commander, Colonel Harold Shannon, and we have no reason to doubt that every weapon at the colonel's disposal would have been unleashed as soon as the Japanese barges reached that unfortunate aquatic terminus.

Despite their successes in amphibious operations in the Pacific to date, the truth was that the Japanese had little experience against defended beachheads. Their doctrine called for landings against undefended locales, typically at night. On those occasions when they had been forced to make daylight assaults against dug-in positions—such as those on Wake Island, as well as some minor operations against the Bataan peninsula in the Philippines—the results had been singularly unpleasant. It certainly didn't auger well for the Midway operation that neither the Army nor the Navy landing forces had apparently rehearsed their respective parts in any detail, let alone exercised them *together*, before having sailed from their separate ports of embarkation.

The most likely outcome of such a haphazard and ill-supported operation being thrown against the heavily armed and entrenched defenders at Midway was outright disaster. While alternative history can never be absolutely predictive, we need only fast-forward two months to the subsequent destruction of Colonel Ichiki's detachment early in the Guadalcanal campaign to glimpse the likely outlines of such a landing at Midway. There, Ichiki had chosen to charge a much less well dug-in Marine position on the banks of Alligator Creek. The result was that he and more than 700 of his men were slaughtered by a combination of automatic weapons fire and canister shot from the American's 37-mm guns. At Midway, the presence of some 2,500 attackers didn't alter this basic equation a whit.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Americans had vastly superior firepower to draw on, and much better fire lanes to boot. Their weapons could engage the enemy at range, while they were still well out on the reef. Even if any of the Japanese made it to the beach (in itself a dubious proposition), it is almost inconceivable that two shattered, geographically separated light infantry regiments equipped with nothing more than rifles, light mortars, and a smattering of medium machine guns would have been able to prevail against an entrenched American force backed by mobile armor. Rather, all signs indicate that the lagoon would have been

full of Japanese corpses by about the middle of the afternoon, leaving the imperial warships witness to an unprecedented slaughter.

Once the initial wave of troops was expended, there was no reserve capable of mounting a second offensive. The Imperial Navy might have had the ability to bombard the place, but it certainly didn't have the means to bring it to heel once Ichiki and the naval landing troops were dead. The best they could have hoped for at that juncture was a violent standoff, wherein the Imperial Navy's warships took what retribution they could while their logistical tether allowed. In the end, though, it is likely that *Kidō Butai* and Japan's capital ships would have had no choice but to withdraw, leaving the smashed island still in the hands of the Americans—for the time being at any rate.