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A COMPARISON OF OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP
IN THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

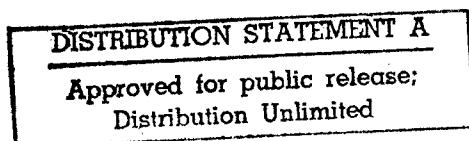
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09 November 1995

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RC Rubel 2/9/95
Faculty Advisor Date

19950417 028

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 5

1. Report Security Classification: Unclassified			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: Joint Military Operations Department			
6. Office Symbol: 1C		7. Address: Naval War College, 686 Cushing Rd., Newport, RI 02841-5010	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): A Comparison of Operational Leadership in The Battle of Midway (U)			
9. Personal Authors: Valerie A. Moule, LCDR, USN			
10. Type of Report: Final		11. Date of Report: 13 February 1995	
12. Page Count: 20			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Yamamoto, Nimitz, leadership, Midway, planning, command, control, communications, flexibility, team-building			
15. Abstract: Despite the technologies and weaponry available to a military force, it is the leadership demonstrated by the operational commander which ultimately determines the outcome of a major operation or campaign. Through such leadership, especially in the pre-execution phase, the foundation is formed for the unity of purpose and effort, vision and flexibility required to achieve success. To illustrate this point, a comparison of the operational leadership demonstrated by Admirals Yamamoto and Nimitz in the Battle of Midway is presented. Examples include how each commander selected his objective and got it approved by higher authority, how they conducted their planning, command, control and communications process, and how they prepared for possible changing circumstances in their plans. The conclusion is that Nimitz displayed far more superior operational leadership than Yamamoto in The Battle of Midway and therefore, achieved victory despite the odds. This study is relevant for current and future operations and campaigns, since leadership to form cohesion is an even greater challenge, with the increase of allied and coalition participation.			
16. Distribution/Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
18. Abstract Security Classification: Unclassified			
19. Name of Responsible Individual: Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department			
20. Telephone: (401) 841-3414/4120		21. Office Symbol: 1C	

Abstract of

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Despite the technologies and weaponry available to a military force, it is the leadership demonstrated by the operational commander which ultimately determines the outcome of a major operation or campaign. Through such leadership, especially in the pre-execution phase, the foundation is formed for the unity of purpose and effort, vision and flexibility required to achieve success. To illustrate this point, a comparison of the operational leadership demonstrated by Admirals Yamamoto and Nimitz in the Battle of Midway is presented. Examples include how each commander selected his objective and got it approved by higher authority, how they conducted their planning, command, control and communications process, and how they prepared for possible changing circumstances in their plans. The conclusion is that Nimitz displayed far more superior operational leadership than Yamamoto in The Battle of Midway and therefore, achieved victory despite the odds. This study is relevant for current and future operations and campaigns, since leadership to form cohesion is an even greater challenge, with the increase of allied and coalition participation.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to show, through a comparison of Admirals Isoroku Yamamoto and Chester W. Nimitz in the Battle of Midway, that the key word in operational leadership is *leadership*; that despite the technologies and weaponry available to a military force, it is the leadership, or "people skills" demonstrated by the operational commander which ultimately determines the outcome of a major operation or campaign. The pre-execution phase of the Battle of Midway is the main focus of this paper, since it is at this point where the operational leader lays the foundation for the unity of purpose and effort, vision and flexibility required to achieve success.

Field Marshall Helmuth Moltke Sr. defined operational leadership as "all decisions and actions by the operational commander aimed at translating national or theater-strategic goals and tasks into militarily achievable operational or strategic objectives in a given theater of operations."¹ Thus, the role of an operational leader is to bridge the strategic level to the tactical level of operations.² To be successful in this role, basic leadership skills are required. The U.S. Army's Field Manual 100-5 defines leadership as, "... inspiring and directing forces and resources toward a purposeful end; establishing a teamwork climate that engenders success; ... providing the vision that both focuses and anticipates the future course of events."³

SELECTING THE OBJECTIVE

The first step in bridging the strategic to the tactical level is selecting the objective, since this is the basis for the entire operation. The operational leader needs to coordinate and communicate with both superiors and subordinates so everyone understands his vision for the desired "ends" the operation is intended to achieve.

Even in this initial stage, the difference between Yamamoto's and Nimitz's style of leadership becomes apparent. In both cases, their superiors did not concur with their selection of the objective - the Midway-Aleutians operation. The Japanese General Staff preferred a southwest Pacific operation and Admiral King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet believed, based on initial intelligence, that operations in the southwest Pacific and not Midway, would be the next move for the Japanese.⁴ The operational commanders however, disagreed and needed to convince their superiors that their choice of objective was the best one to achieve strategic aims.

Yamamoto had his choice selected, but not by convincing his superiors that his choice was the wisest. Disagreements with the General Staff were not new; he had a similar difference of opinion when he recommended the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor. He got his way by threatening to resign if his proposal was not approved.

Since he was a powerful, invaluable figure, his threat to resign left them with no choice but to concur. As it turned out, the Pearl Harbor attack was an amazing success, gaining him even more credibility and power. Now they disagreed about choosing Midway as their next objective.

Despite his powerful position, Yamamoto could have still used team building skills to listen to their concerns and reason out their differences, thus bringing the strategic and operational levels of leadership closer together. Instead, he stubbornly refused to consider their point of view, and did not present strong arguments to quell their objections. Although the General Staff still disagreed, having no choice, they decided to give him his way, stand aside and let matters take their course.⁵ Instead of forming a supportive relationship with his superiors, Yamamoto alienated them, thus eliminating any effective strategic level supervision which, as will be seen, Yamamoto required.

Nimitz, on the other hand, supplied King with detailed intelligence data and analysis. He presented a convincing case which stood up to thorough review and analysis in Washington and it was on this basis that King agreed with his choice of Midway. As soon as they agreed, King was fully supportive of the operation.⁶

Differences in Yamamoto and Nimitz's style of leadership in influencing superiors continued in the way they interacted with and influenced subordinate commanders, as will be shown.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process is the ideal point to bring together the team to clearly understand the mission and develop a plan of action to achieve the desired ends. For planning to be effective, it must be realistic and based on actual predictions of enemy and own force capabilities. To be realistic, it is best to involve planners who can provide the most relevant information, such as intelligence analysts and the subordinate commanders who will execute the plan, since they will know best what they can and cannot achieve. Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War* discusses the importance of using realism in planning. He states:

... the wise general in his deliberations must consider both favourable and unfavourable factors. He ponders the dangers inherent in the advantages, and the disadvantages inherent in the danger. By taking into account the favourable factors, he makes his plans feasible, by taking into account the unfavourable he may resolve the difficulties... If I wish to take advantage of the enemy I must perceive not just the advantage in doing so but must first consider the ways he can harm me if I do. Advantage and disadvantage are mutually reproductive. The enlightened deliberate.⁷

Yamamoto's planning process for the Battle of Midway neither applied Sun Tzu's advice nor did it incorporate a team approach in planning. Two of his fleet commanders, Vice Admiral Kondo and Vice

Admiral Nagumo, were not included at all during the planning. They were both involved in other operations, so Yamamoto did not want to distract them. As a result, staff members, who did not have first-hand knowledge of the capabilities of these forces, drew up the plans. The resulting weaknesses were apparent even before the operation began.⁸

Yamamoto called together his subordinate commanders at the Battleship *Yamato* on May 1, 1942 for a briefing. This was the first time that Nagumo and Kondo were exposed to the plan and each saw serious problems with it. Nagumo did not argue since he felt he was already on negative terms with Yamamoto who heavily criticized him for not conducting a follow-on strike at Pearl Harbor.⁹ Kondo on the other hand, was more outspoken and voiced his concerns, but Yamamoto was not open to discussion. He told Kondo that the plan was credible since it was written by senior staff officers and he had no intentions of changing it. Kondo asked how the Midway occupation forces would be resupplied; if they could not be, they would have to be withdrawn, thus making the occupation pointless. Yamamoto's Chief of Staff admitted that it might be impossible to resupply Midway, which left some question as to its purpose.¹⁰ That same day, a major war game began during which several other flaws in the plan came to light. Yamamoto overlooked these flaws since officially his plan won, but only because the umpires fixed all of the rulings in its favor.¹¹

Thus, Yamamoto did not build a team, establish unity and inspire subordinates, nor did he realistically view the situation in developing his plan. Although his commanders understood what tasks were assigned, and understood that the U.S. carriers were the center of gravity, the plan left some serious unanswered questions. They were loyal officers however, and would do as they were ordered. In addition, since they were in a string of remarkable victories, they believed they could win even with a flawed plan since they felt they could overcome any obstacle placed in their path.¹² Nevertheless, Yamamoto already created obstacles which would be difficult to overcome.

Nimitz, on the other hand, did include his subordinate commanders in the planning process. He called his Task Force commanders, their staffs, intelligence and operations officers together with his staff to plan. Included were Rear Admirals Fletcher, Spruance and Commander Layton (Intelligence). Nimitz shared information and took suggestions from subordinates to heart. *The plan became theirs*; he increased their loyalty and motivation level through this process. Unity of purpose and effort were established and the mission, both tasks and purpose were clear, opening the path for success.

Although selecting the objective and formulating the plan is the foundation of an operation, the operational leader's role does not end at this point, it only begins. Command, control and

communications (C3) are his framework through which he can continue to influence the course of events to keep tactical efforts in line with strategic and operational level goals.

COMMAND, CONTROL AND COMMUNICATIONS (C3)

According to Captain Nielsen in his paper entitled "Command and Control:"

Command and control is the glue that binds the other operational systems together, creating a synergistic effect. Command allows leaders to impart their vision to subordinates, fix responsibilities, and empower subordinates with freedom of action. Control enables leaders to establish limits, focus effort, and give structure.¹³

A basic organizational decision is the choice of a headquarters for the operational commander. He needs to be in a position where he can keep on top of developments and control, from a big picture viewpoint, the major direction of events. He must be able to focus by staying a level removed so he will not face the distractions which often occur in deploying units. Access to communications capabilities is essential, since they are crucial to his ability to command and control. Subordinate commanders should be able to provide feedback to the operational commander so he can determine if plans need to be altered, resources need to be

shifted, or any other decisions to either capitalize on successes or reduce losses. Decision making without timely and good information passed to the right people, stands little chance of success. Therefore a shore-based headquarters is ideal.¹⁴

Yamamoto chose to have his headquarters at sea aboard *Yamato*. It was a Japanese tradition that a commander's place was at the front to inspire the troops.¹⁵ His choice of headquarters and his imposed radio silence kept him from communicating vital information to his subordinates, thus removing his ability to orchestrate the operation. Captain Rubel points out in his article "Gettysburg and Midway: Historical Parallels in Operational Command," that Yamamoto could not "promptly provide information, guidance, or even moral support once it became evident that the sought-for major battle with U.S. forces was imminent."¹⁶ Yamamoto was unable to give Nagumo vital information from Tokyo, including the discovery of U.S. carriers, leading Nagumo to make blind tactical decisions. Yamamoto put himself in a position where he could not direct and control the operation until it was too late.¹⁷

Nimitz had his headquarters, shore-based in Hawaii and later in Guam where he stayed on top of the action and was able to provide critical information and other assistance to his subordinate commanders.¹⁸ The priority he placed on communications was evident when he personally visited and inspected Midway prior to the operation. He paid special attention to checking Midway's

communications facilities - especially the critical link to Honolulu.¹⁹ Also, despite the requirement for his carriers to advance in secret, Nimitz made sure that his commanders were given the information they needed to make their tactical decisions. Even when critical reports, such as sightings of enemy carriers, were sure to have been transmitted to his Task Force, Nimitz relayed the information again, just to make sure. He not only passed information as events unfolded, but inspired his troops through communications such as, "The situation is developing as expected. Carriers, our most important objective, should soon be located. Tomorrow may be the day you give them the works... The whole course of the war in the Pacific may hinge on the developments of the next two or three days." This message could make them feel that, even though Nimitz was not deployed with them, he was behind his forces in spirit, thus achieving the same inspiration as if he had deployed at sea, without the drawbacks mentioned above.²⁰

Yamamoto and Nimitz's pattern of leadership continued through the C3 aspect of the operation. Yamamoto, who did not place a great emphasis on information sharing and communications in selecting the objective or in the planning process again did not insist on an arrangement where information flow would be available. He continued to ignore leadership principles which demand bringing

all of the elements together in harmony to increase their chance of victory. Conversely, Nimitz continued his leadership style of keeping his forces unified, focused and motivated through active participation and communication.

Even though Yamamoto placed his forces at a distinct disadvantage early on, he still might have had a chance to succeed if he had enough flexibility to change his plan in the event his assumptions were incorrect. Nimitz, despite outstanding intelligence, could also have made erroneous assumptions and needed to stay flexible and prepared for change.

FLEXIBILITY: BRANCHES AND SEQUELS

Sun Tzu points out in The Art of War: "If wise, a commander is able to recognize changing circumstances and to act expediently."²¹ Plans are based on current information and assumptions derived from that information. Things change, and to minimize risk, alternate courses of action, branches, should be planned. This builds flexibility into the plan in the event assumptions turn out to be wrong, or circumstances change which make the current plan less effective or completely useless. In addition, sequels, "what comes next" in planning, are important since what you want to do later, may guide what you do today if there is a relationship between the two actions.²²

Yamamoto was not open to questions regarding alternatives to his plan. He made some dangerous assumptions, such as believing that surprise would be achieved and that the U.S. carriers would not arrive until the Midway occupation was complete. During the war games, it was even asked if there was an alternate plan in the event the enemy carriers arrived sooner than expected. Yamamoto's answer was vague and the issue was brushed aside.²³ He was so confident in his assumptions, that "worst case scenarios" were not considered for alternate planning purposes.

In addition to not having flexibility and branches, Yamamoto's plan did not have a sequel for what would happen after the occupation of Midway. As already discussed, Kondo had questioned how the Midway invasion force would be resupplied and Yamamoto's Chief of Staff admitted that resupply might not be possible.²⁴ Yamamoto evidently did not believe it was necessary to think beyond the current operation, since there would be plenty of time to decide, once the U.S. carriers were destroyed and unable to interfere.²⁵ Since his plan did not reflect reality and did not allow for branched paths to overcome wrong assumptions or unexpected turn of events, it is not surprising that he was unable to recover during the execution phase when his predictions proved to be incorrect.

Nimitz based his plan more on reality by using the best available intelligence, but even with this information, he still considered the "worst case scenario." For example, he could have been wrong about Midway and the target might have been Hawaii. Therefore, on Spruance's recommendation, rather than sending his task forces west of Midway, he kept them east of the area, so they could discover and respond to enemy ships if Midway was bypassed en-route Hawaii.²⁶ He also left open a branch to shift from defense to offense by striking enemy units, as long as his "calculated risk" direction was met. So, Nimitz's subordinate commanders did not go to sea with one set course of action locked in that inhibited their flexibility. There was opportunity to change course if the situation called for it.

Nimitz also showed that he was thinking ahead. Since he was not initiating an offensive drive eastward yet, he did not need to plan a sequel to the Midway plan at this point. But, his "calculated risk" statement was intended to use economy of force, showing that he looked forward. He knew that he would face continued operations against the Japanese navy over the fight for control of the Pacific and wanted to save as many assets as possible.

CONCLUSIONS/LESSONS LEARNED

In conclusion, the stage was set for Yamamoto's defeat and Nimitz's victory in The Battle of Midway even before its execution phase. Yamamoto did not apply sound principles of operational and basic leadership which would have created unity of purpose and effort, and displayed the vision and team building required to develop a realistic plan that was flexible enough to adapt to change. His forces deployed boxed-in to a rigid plan based on wrong assumptions. Once at sea, there was little hope to change direction in a coordinated effort since Yamamoto was not in a position to communicate information, control events and oversee the "big picture" as it unfolded. As a result of his failure to build a close-knit team to develop a realistic, flexible plan, and an effective C3 structure to provide critical information during execution, his subordinate commanders made seriously flawed decisions which led to their defeat.

In contrast, Nimitz was in fact that "glue that binds together, creating a synergistic effect..."²⁷ He used a team building approach and involved key players in the planning process. Through this process his subordinate commanders clearly communicated the mission, its tasks and purposes. Worst case scenarios were considered and he placed himself in a position where

he could observe the progression of action and could direct changes as necessary. Through his superior leadership, the U.S. fleet achieved victory, despite their numeric disadvantage.

In conclusion, The Battle of Midway shows that, implementing the basic principles of people skills - *leadership* - in operational leadership, one can meet with success equal to that of Admiral Nimitz's victory at Midway. And conversely, being aware of the pitfalls that Admiral Yamamoto fell into, can help avoid mistakes which lead to defeat.

Although this is an historical study, the lessons span time and are just as relevant today - even more so - than they were in 1942. Today's operational leaders share many of the same challenges faced by Yamamoto and Nimitz, only now in a more complex world. In addition to having to draw together, coordinate and control one's own forces, coordination with allies, coalition forces and non-government agencies are becoming commonplace. The remarkable outcome of Desert Storm is a recent success story victory was achieved through a closely coordinated team effort. General Schwarzkopf's demonstrated the leadership qualities discussed in this paper and included his team in planning and kept them connected by the formation of a Coalition Coordination Communications and Integration Center (C3IC).²⁸ The fact that this

diverse coalition achieved unity of effort and purpose so strongly that it held together throughout the campaign, is a tribute to the operational leader, who like Nimitz, produced that synergy required to beat the odds.

NOTES

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6. Ibid, p. 303.

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9. Agawa, H, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy. New York, NY: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1979, p.308.

10. Potter, John D., pp. 182-183.

11. Willmott, pp. 111-112.

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16. Rubel, Robert C. "Gettysburg and Midway, Historical Parallels in Operational Command." Naval War College Review, Winter 1995, vol. XLVIII, Number 1, Sequence 349, p. 106.

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23. Fuchida, p. 97.

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25. Ibid, p. 185.

26. Potter, E. B., pp. 84-85.

27. Nielsen, p.1.

28. Pudas, Terry J. "Preparing Future Coalitions." Newport, RI: Naval War College, NWC 1121; reprint, Joint Force Quarterly, Winter 1993/94, pp. 43-44.

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