

WWII lessons valid 70 years later

The Virginian-Pilot
© May 6, 2012

By James V. Koch

UNKNOWN to many, this week and next month we will observe the 70th anniversary of two decisive battles of World War II: the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 4-8, 1942) and the Battle of Midway (June 4-7, 1942).

These two battles not only turned around the War in the Pacific but also established principles about how warfare would be conducted thereafter. Both battles carry lessons for us today.

Until the Coral Sea engagement, Japan had enjoyed five months of continuous victories. By May 1942, the Japanese had established a perimeter that included more than one-fifth of the Earth's surface. The Coral Sea came about because Japan wanted to extend that perimeter even further in two directions - first into southeastern New Guinea and northern Australia, and second into the Solomon Islands. Both moves were designed to isolate Australia and make it difficult for the United States to reestablish a credible military presence in the South Pacific.

By the end of April 1942, the United States was able to intercept and decipher large portions of the Japanese Navy's JN-25 code, and it learned from those intercepts what the Japanese had in mind. This enabled Adm. Chester Nimitz to position four aircraft carriers in the Coral Sea area.

The naval battle that ensued is notable for being the first in history in which neither side's ships ever directly sighted or fired upon the other. Today, we take remote battles for granted, but that had never occurred before the Coral Sea.

The U.S. sustained somewhat greater losses than the Japanese at Coral Sea but achieved its goal when the Japanese invasion forces withdrew.

This led to the Battle of Midway. Once again, U.S. cryptography was invaluable. U.S. code breakers in Honolulu intercepted a Japanese message that talked about an invasion of target "AF" in early June.

In an attempt to learn AF's location, the U.S. sent an uncoded message that Midway Island was experiencing water supply problems. The Japanese easily intercepted this message and notified Tokyo that AF was having water problems.

Nimitz now knew that the Japanese planned to invade Midway and attempt to draw the numerically inferior U.S. fleet into a decisive battle of annihilation. He quickly moved three aircraft carriers toward Midway, just before a Japanese submarine net was put in place. The carriers included the badly damaged Yorktown, which the Japanese thought they had sunk at the Coral Sea.

The U.S. did not fare well in the battle exchanges around Midway until June 6, when U.S. dive bombers from the carrier Enterprise caught the Japanese in an awkward moment of transition, when their fighter cover was close to the water and they were in the process of refueling and rearming their aircraft.

In the space of 10 minutes, three of the four Japanese carriers exploded in flames, and all were later abandoned. A fourth was destroyed the following day.

Military historian John Keegan labels Midway the most decisive naval battle in history. Certainly, the critical 10 minutes at Midway turned around the War in the Pacific and established that this was a war that the Japanese could not win.

Why are these battles important to us today? First, they demonstrate the importance of good intelligence and the need for secure communications. If future battles will feature cyberwarfare designed to disrupt communications and information, then we must ensure that we are well prepared.

Second, the Coral Sea and Midway should be seen as incremental steps in the direction of remotely controlled military conflicts where machines and robots may do battle while directed by human beings far away.

Third, both battles remind us that victory does not always go to the strongest. Strategy, cunning, topography, leadership and luck play roles. Thus, we should not make the mistake of assuming that because we have the strongest military force in world history, the U.S. is guaranteed victory.

James V. Koch, economics professor and president emeritus of Old Dominion University, has taught the history of World War II at Ball State University, the University of Montana and ODU.