

Efforts continue for posthumous Medal of Honors for Midway aviators

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Lt. Commander Lance E. Massey in a U.S. Navy Douglas TBD Devastator torpedo bomber in 1941. Courtesy of Thomas Rychlik

Editor's note: Rychlik, USMC Ret., is the initiator of efforts to upgrade the posthumous Navy Crosses of three aviators at the Battle of Midway to Congressional Medals of Honor. One of those fliers, Lance E. Massey, was born in Syracuse in 1909 and came to Watertown in 1920, where he completed two years at Watertown High School. Race has published articles on naval history and has completed a screenplay chronicling the life of aviator

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John Waldron, the main focus of this article.

Rychlik, a retired major, lives in Virginia Beach. Race lives in St. Augustine, Fla.

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The observance of Memorial Day and the 79th anniversary of D-Day provides a solemn moment to remember the enormous sacrifices our military made in World War II. One individual who never came home was little-known Navy pilot Lt. Commander John C. Waldron.

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At the decisive Battle of Midway, Waldron led his squadron of obsolete Douglas TBD torpedo bombers, armed with unreliable torpedoes, in an unsupported attack against the cream of the Imperial Japanese Navy- the formidable carrier fleet known as Kido Butai. Without scoring a single torpedo hit, 29 out of 30 airmen lost their lives in the attack. All 15 aircraft were shot down. Only recently have some historians recognized the importance of Waldron's heroism and sacrifice.

During the dark early months of 1942 in Asia and over the Pacific, Imperial Japan's army and navy stood unchecked and unbeaten in China and much of the Pacific littoral. The American battle fleet rested at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, victims of a Japanese sneak attack. Only the unprepared United States and the British Commonwealth stood before domination by a ruthless totalitarian regime.

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WALDRON RECEIVES COMMAND

Onto this world stage strode John Waldron, age 42, born of humble means in South Dakota, with Sioux blood in his veins and an absolute love of family and country in his soul. Due to a youth spent supporting his family's cattle business, his formal education was wanting. Resolving to attend the Naval Academy, he attended preparatory school in order to gain

admission. Although he devoted himself to his studies at the Academy, he still graduated near the bottom of his class. After two years of mandatory duty at sea, Waldron applied for flight training and received his wings at Pensacola Naval Air Station.

It was at Pensacola that he met his wife, Adelaide, and they soon had two young two daughters. In the years leading up to 1941, Waldron spent most of his time in the cockpit developing his aviation expertise. In 1941 at the age of 41, Waldron was given command of a squadron of torpedo bombers — “Torpedo 8” — stationed on the carrier USS Hornet. Saddled with these slow and poorly armed torpedo bombers, a roster of newly winged pilots and with little time to prepare them for war, Waldron worked his command hard but with a sense of humor and a flair for the dramatic. His was the only squadron that regularly exercised on deck of the Hornet, while the other aircrews looked on with laughter and derision.

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Waldron took advantage of every opportunity to improve the skills of his pilots and the survivability of his aircraft, installing makeshift armor plating around crew seats and doubling the defensive firepower of the rear-facing machine guns. His men revered him, referring to him affectionately as “The Indian.”

Waldron and his squadron had a ringside seat on April 18, 1942 when Jimmy Doolittle's bombers launched off the Hornet to make their audacious attack on the Japanese mainland. One could only imagine the thoughts going through Waldron's head as the unarmed and unescorted B-25 bombers slowly climbed into the air.

Not two months later, Waldron and Torpedo 8 got their chance. On the morning of June 4, Kido Butai was sighted northwest of Midway atoll, nearly 200 miles away from the outnumbered American carriers, at the extreme range of our carrier planes. Without hesitation, Admiral Raymond Spruance (commander of Task Force 16, second-in-command to Admiral Jack Fletcher/Task Force 17/carrier Yorktown), ordered a full attack from the carriers Enterprise, and Hornet on the Japanese carriers. Just prior to launch, on the bridge-wing of the Hornet, a heated argument ensued between Hornet's Commander, Capt. Marc Mitscher, the Hornet's Air Group Commander, Commander Stanhope Cotton Ring IV, and Waldron. In the run up to the attack, Waldron had been arguing for close fighter escort but had been rebuffed by Mitscher. Waldron gave it one more try, eventually even requesting just one fighter to escort his squadron; Mitscher again refused. Ring, not known for his navigational skills, insisted on an intercepting course of 265 degrees. Waldron, having done his own calculations, strenuously disagreed, arguing for a more southwesterly course. Mitscher finally interceded and ordered Waldron to fly Ring's course in company with the SBD Dauntless dive-bomber squadrons and leaving the F4F Wildcat fighter escort at high altitude with Ring. Shortly after departure, however, Waldron broke radio silence, and attempted one more time to inform Ring "you're going in the wrong direction for the Japanese carrier force."

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After a heated exchange, Waldron eventually took his squadron to the southwest, away from Ring's dive-bomber and fighter squadrons. The combination of Waldron's understanding of carrier operations, his navigational skills, and (some speculate) his reputed mystical Sioux intuition, allowed Waldron to find Kido Butai at 0920, while Ring flew aimlessly westward over the empty Pacific.

Without hesitation, Torpedo 8 dropped to nearly sea level for a torpedo run on the four carriers, all veterans of Pearl Harbor. The Japanese carriers turned their sterns to Waldron's aircraft and ran at top speed thereby forcing Torpedo 8 into a lengthy tail chase while being attacked by 24 Japanese Zeros. Waldron, surrounded by lethal Zero fighter planes and flak, was last seen (as reported by sole survivor George Gay) climbing out of his burning cockpit shortly before it exploded. As a testament to their loyalty, not a single pilot from Torpedo 8 failed to follow their leader to near certain doom. Not one torpedo hit a Japanese carrier. At this point, American chances for victory were at a low ebb.

But Torpedo 8's doomed attack was not in vain. Waldron's actions forced Japanese commander Admiral Nagumo, who now realized American carriers were in striking distance, to reverse course, and after critical hesitation, to re-arm his bombers with anti-ship ordinance. In the words of Midway historians Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully in *Shattered Sword*, "it (Waldron's attack) also delayed his (Nagumo's) spotting (bringing up to the flight deck of fully armed and fueled attack aircraft) by tying down the Japanese flight deck with yet more CAP (Combat Air Patrol) operations at low level."

Waldron's attack began a series of events that directly led to the destruction of the Japanese aircraft carrier *Soryu*, and similarly unopposed and devastating attacks on carriers *Kaga* and *Akagi*. The Battle of Midway doesn't end with an American victory without these events. Specifically, the smoke screen laid down by Japanese warships to screen their carriers and the massive amount of smoke generated by anti-aircraft fire and aircraft explosions attracted the attention of a second American torpedo squadron, Torpedo Six, led by Lieutenant Commander Eugene Lindsey, from the USS *Enterprise*. Changing course, this squadron also made a similar valiant unescorted, unsupported attack against *Kido Butai* with similar results. This attack similarly affected the re-spotting of the Japanese flight decks while they attempted to refuel and rearm their Zeros.

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Soon after Torpedo Six's attack a third American torpedo squadron, Torpedo Three, led by Lieutenant Commander L.E.M. (Lem) Massey from the USS Yorktown spotted the smoke from the previous two squadron attacks and altered course to attack Kido Butai. Unlike the first two squadrons, Torpedo Three was flying with six Wildcat fighters and directly below, the 17 dive bombers of Bombing Three. Again, the Japanese turned their sterns to the approaching torpedo bombers and 43 Zero fighters attacked Torpedo Three. Japanese CAP focused exclusively on the torpedo bombers which allowed Bombing Three, and the Enterprise's Bombing Six and Scouting Six, to make unopposed attacks on the three Japanese carriers, eventually sinking all three. Observing the destruction being visited on these carriers, Massey modified his approach to attack the remaining unattacked carrier Hiryu. Ten of 12 of his aircraft (including Massey's) were shot down making their attack, the final two had to ditch before being able to be safely recovered by an American carrier.

a turning point

It was the decisive moment of the battle and arguably the most important naval victory in American history. Most historians would agree the Battle of Midway is the turning point of the war in the Pacific. Before the BOM, President Roosevelt was under considerable pressure from Congress and the American people to avenge Pearl Harbor and devote more resources against Japan which would have significantly impacted the joint Allied “Germany First” strategy. If the US Navy had lost the BOM, it is very likely the resources to make landings in North Africa in 1942, Sicily and Italy in 1943, and France in 1944 would have been siphoned away to the Pacific, greatly delaying defeat of Hitler.

Additionally, losing the BOM would likely have resulted in the loss of most, if not all, of our precious aircraft carriers and the Midway airbase. Such losses would have exposed Hawaii to invasion and extended the war in the Pacific for at least a year or likely longer. Thus making a landing at Guadalcanal in August 1942 impossible. Included with the 161 of 162 aviators that attacked Kido Butai that morning, both Waldron and Ring received the Navy Cross. Ring, who survived the war, retired as a Vice Admiral.

response awaited

In August 2021, Congressional Representatives Cathy McMorris-Rodgers, representing Washington's 5th Congressional District; Dusty Johnson, Rep. for South Dakota's at-large district; Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York's 21st District and Steve Womak, serving the 3rd District in Arkansas, requested the Secretary of the Navy to review the cases of Lieutenant Commanders' Waldron, Lindsey (VT 6), and Massey (VT 3) and upgrade their posthumous Navy Crosses to the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In February 2022 the Navy replied that their review of their records revealed no new, relevant, and substantive information had been provided and no action would be taken. Freedom of Information Act requests were then submitted to obtain the Navy's records. The FOIA responses revealed the Navy had no evidentiary information in the records of any of the three officers to justify their 2022 response. A second letter signed by Representatives McMorris-Rodgers, Johnson, and Stefanik requesting a meeting to discuss the disparities between the FOIA results and the Navy's initial response was issued in October 2022, but at this writing, has received no response from the Secretary of the Navy.

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A U.S. destroyer named in honor of Lt. Commander Massey was launched in the summer of 1944 in Seattle, where it was christened by his widow. The USS Massey was decommissioned in 1969.

There's a memorial stone in his honor at Brookside Cemetery, Watertown. His ancestors were Watertown pioneers.

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