

Remarks as delivered by Adm. Mike Mullen
Battle of Midway Commemoration
San Diego, Calif.
3 June 2006

Congresswoman Davis, Admiral Edney, Mayors Crawford, Guerin, and Smisek. Distinguished Admirals, other Distinguished Guests, and most importantly, the veterans of Midway and the families, of Midway.

It is great to be back in San Diego. It is a great Navy town. It always has been and it always will be. And I appreciate the support of the town and the community, for our Navy, for all the young men and women who serve today and the support for their families for without which we would struggle a great deal.

San Diego has such rich, rich naval history and heritage. To echo Jim Zortman said, I can think of no better place for this event than here aboard Midway – this fantastic living memorial to the battle. Although, I am trying to get to 11 aircraft carriers, not 13 at this point. But I will tell you that she works great.

So it is a special honor, a humbling privilege to be here with ALL of you tonight.

I say humbling because I know we stand in the company of men who remember Midway not only as a heroic victory, but also as the bloody, ferocious fight for freedom that it was.

It is a fight that is emblazoned in the annals of naval history as one of the epic battles of all time.

Historians often ask: What is it that distinguishes Midway and draws so many to celebrate and remember it each year?

Perhaps it is because those who took part were so young and full of life.

Or because the margin of victory was so narrow that anyone there could claim they made the difference – and they would have been right.

Or maybe it is because the sacrifices were so large – the stakes so high and the impact so wide.

Historian John Keegan called it “as great a reversal in strategic fortune as the naval world has ever seen.”

Author Herman Wouk called it a battle that “tipped the balance of history.”

Others simply dubbed it a miracle.

Yet, I believe the most important reason we gather is to understand and to honor what I consider to be the real miracle of Midway.

It was a battle won not just by chance – or luck – or good intelligence – though those things were important. It was the miraculous character of the men of Midway that made all the difference.

Their heart, their determination, an unshakeable belief that they could win – their common commitment to liberty, to their country, and more than anything else to each other.

This – more than any other factor – is what turned the tide in favor of freedom in those four fateful days in June, 1942.

So it is to somehow gain strength for ourselves from their valor ...it is to honor their courage...and it is to express our deepest gratitude that we are drawn together each year – to share memories of and with the miraculous men of Midway.

Some of my fondest memories of those men are of when I commanded USS Yorktown (CG-48) and I would correspond with the Yorktown survivors of the CV-5 Club.

They would often ask how our current carriers are doing and as was the case back then in the mid-90s and is the case today, they are still the heart and soul of the United States Navy. More critical than ever in a very uncertain world in which we now live.

One of those survivors was a Sailor named Peter Montalvo. For me, Pete's story speaks volumes about the character that bonded the men of Midway.

"In the Navy," Pete often reminisced, "we have an old saying, 'Shipmates forever'."

He not only said it – he lived it.

Pete's first knowledge of combat came as he watched the Japanese devastate Pearl Harbor in the early hours of December 7, 1941.

Seeing so many shipmates fall, sparked an overwhelming instinct to fight back – and that is what he did.

During the Battle of the Coral Sea, Pete's station had been below decks in the aerial bombs compartment.

At Midway he wanted to be topside. He raised his hand and volunteered to help man the one point one gun, mount three.

Anyone who knew Pete, knew he didn't say much about himself – but he never ceased talking about and caring for his shipmates – especially those of gun mount three.

He would vividly describe how his gun crew was decimated by a nearly direct hit from a Japanese bomb on the first day of the battle.

He talked about how he admired the officer in charge – Ensign John Lorenz, who rallied three survivors to re-man the guns by pointing to the flag, our flag.

Lorenz would later explain:

“For the first time I realized what that flag meant. All of us – a million faces – all our effort – a whisper of encouragement.”

But as Peter Montalvo told it – at the height of desperation –when the order came to abandon ship – they remained inspired by the flag and encouraged by each other.

He spoke of Lorenz's furious search for his crew. How the Ensign found Seaman Second William Sullivan, badly wounded, in a pile of bodies, and dragged him into the water.

Then Pete told of how he himself, having a severely injured shoulder, would have never made it off the ship safely if it weren't for the help of a shipmate he had first met while at boot camp.

How they swam together in the water realizing they had probably fought their last fight together, and how later they felt great desperation when they heard how Yorktown had “slid gracefully like a lady, bow first, beneath the sea.”

It was desperation that was felt many fold on the Japanese side of the Battle.

A Japanese pilot at Midway, Haruo Yoshino described how he felt the “bitter taste of war, the bitterness of defeat.”

When he returned home he was kept a virtual prisoner, unable to contact his family or anyone else – he was told never to reveal the loss of the four Japanese carriers.

Japanese Captain Mitsuo Fuchida later acknowledged that, “the catastrophe of Midway definitely marked the turning of the tide...that tide bore Japan inexorably toward final capitulation.”

For the United States, Midway was truly an *Incredible Victory* – a “glorious page in our history,” as one of my heroes Admiral Nimitz described it.

The military lessons to be gained from Midway are also numerous, the critical importance of sound intelligence, the contribution each Service brings to a joint fight ... the enormous power of decisive leadership.

The even greater power of the will to fight for a cause that is right and just. A spirit epitomized by everyone there – at every level – from Admiral Spruance...down to the men of gun mount three.

So, to the men of Midway and their families here tonight, on behalf of the Sailors of the United States Navy, and the entire nation, let me express our sincerest gratitude.

And I would like to lead a round of applause.

Know that by your presence you honor all who served those who can't be here, those who have passed on and especially those who did not live to remember Midway at all.

Your presence honors every act of bravery.

It was the Marine and Army Pilots based at Midway who while vastly outnumbered took to the air to be the first to resist the enemy onslaught.

It was the scout planes that searched diligently to find the enemy fleet.

The Sailors who ran to their battle stations and opened fire on the attacking Japanese planes.

The crew of the submarine *Nautilus* that skillfully delivered the final blow to one of Japan's carriers.

It was the machine gunners on Midway, who under heavy attack, stayed at their batteries.

The torpedo plane squadrons that bravely took the full brunt to attack the enemy and kept the enemy off balance.

Boat crews that raced into the patches of burning oil to snatch a Sailor from a watery grave.

It was the dive - bombers that by their keen skills found a way to deliver decisive blow after decisive blow – sending the pride of the Japanese Fleet to the bottom.

And we also honor the thousands of stories that will never be told, the letters home never finished, the carrier landings never made, the watches never turned over, the homecomings never enjoyed.

Most important, we know that you will always remember the lost by name.

Yet, you bear witness that none, not one of your comrades died in vain. You not only witnessed it, you saw to it.

Together with the entire generation that lived through the war, you stayed committed to victory – to liberty – and to building a lasting peace.

To all of those here from World War II we know that we owe you for the freedoms we enjoy today.

And that legacy grows stronger with each passing year.

You fought hard to crush totalitarian regimes – and when that was done, you helped your enemies give birth to democracies.

You extended a hand, and in turn, made our enemies our friends.

You unleashed a wave of freedom.

Consider that at war's end there were but 22 democratic governments representing only 15% of the world's people. Today there are more than 120 acting on the behalf of 60% of all people.

You understood that this country is safer and more secure when others are free.

We know the best hope for the future is to emulate this great, great World War II generation.

We look to their courage, to their determination and to their commitment.

Today, our brave young men and women are doing just that you see it in Iraq, you see it in Afghanistan, you see it in other places, you see it across the globe.

I have visited them in the field , in the fleet, in the hospitals.

And I can tell you that this generation of fighting men and women are up to the challenge. Their eyes sparkle. Their resolve is as of steel.

Just as advancing freedom made the enduring goodness of what has been called the greatest generation – this generation is doing their job – because it is the right thing to do.

They know – just as the tide turned at Midway – so, too, does it turn in our favor today.

They also understand that all tides ebb and flow and that the turning points of this war may be smaller and less pronounced. They know we must stay patient and we must stay committed.

And, like generations before them, it is America's character and spirit – epitomized so valiantly by the miraculous men of Midway – that will carry them through to win this war, this very long war we are now fighting.

And then, they will gather as we do tonight, with shipmates, to remember, to learn and to honor the past, to tell sea stories and to hope for the future.

That is what Peter Montalvo always did.

He would tell the story of when they were swimming together in the waters off Midway, how Ensign Lorenz kept Sullivan's spirits alive by talking about the girl he intended to marry and by promising Sullivan – that if he would only survive – he would name a son after him.

And survive they did. When Lorenz got home he talked Delight McHale into marrying him, and they named their second son William Sullivan.

This just goes to show that Pete, John, and William – like all those who served at Midway – were “Shipmates Forever.”

This also showed every Tuesday night, when Pete would attempt to dial as many of Yorktown's survivors as he could – sometimes he would just let it ring once to remind them of their common bond.

It is that same bond he spoke of every time he visited ships and Sailors of the Navy he loved.

When he was ready to leave any function he would tell them “goodnight and goodbye.”

If someone asked him why he said goodbye, Pete would reply simply, “On June 4, 1942, there were so many shipmates that I did not say it to, and then could not say it to. It is in their memory that I do this.”

When Peter Montalvo said his final goodbye and slipped his chain to join his shipmates on Yorktown – he did so knowing they had stood together for freedom at a critical moment in history and that they had stood by each other then and ever since.

Just as we must – as all Americans must – stand together for freedom and by each other.

So in retrospect, if you ask why we gather to celebrate tonight – I would tell you it is in memory of all the miraculous men of Midway “that we do this.”

And I think it's only appropriate to close as Pete would, with “goodnight and goodbye.”

God bless you all, our Navy, and this great nation.