



Not So Fast!

Japanese Navy Mail Forwarded to Midway, 1942

by Lawrence Sherman and Maj. Ted Bahry

Had we lacked early information of the Japanese movement, and had we been caught with Carrier Task Forces dispersed, possibly as far away as the Coral Sea, the Battle of Midway would have ended far differently.

— Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, post-battle report, June 28, 1942¹

No one has yet found any mail to or from Minazuki, an island in the Central Pacific whose name was known only in the inner circles of the Japanese empire. While the storm of battle that engulfed Minazuki is well-remembered; its brief, violent postal history has been nearly forgotten. Yet that postal history played a vital role in the outcome of the battle. Here is the story.

Less than two weeks after the Battle of the Coral Sea in the first days of May 1942, Japanese naval forces were preparing to move again. Coded radio messages transmitted from offices of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) on May 12–13 included phrases tentatively identified by U.S. naval code-breakers as “invasion force” and “forthcoming campaign.” Both were linked to a geographic designator, “AF.” On

September 18, 1941 pre-Pearl Harbor air mail from civilian worker at Midway. Note “Gooney Bird Love Dance” cachet, Sixth Defense Battalion postmark, and unpublished 30¢ per ½ oz. rate from Midway to mainland.



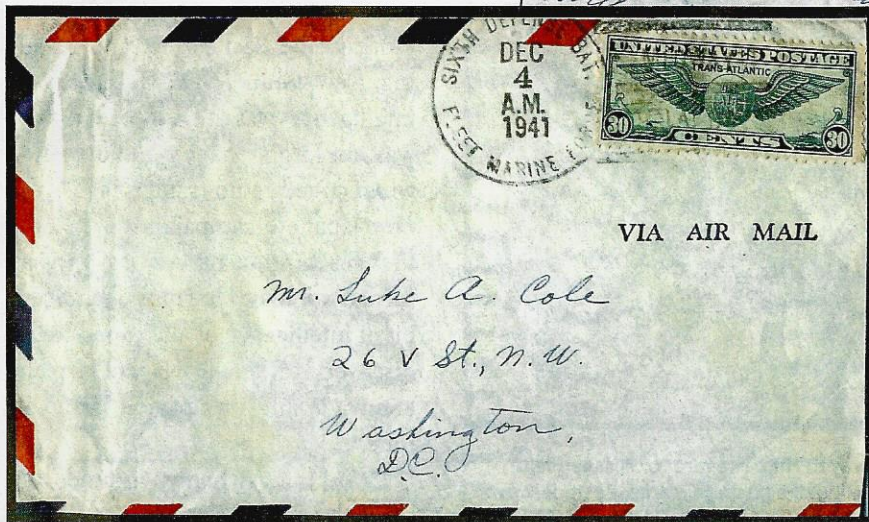
May 20, another coded radio message read: "The next address of the 14th Air Ron will be AF." A partial message, same date, began: "After the occupation of AF [remainder unreadable]." The question was: where in the vast Pacific Ocean was "AF," and how and when would it be occupied?

Working in the crowded and poorly ventilated basement of the U.S. Navy's Administration Building at Pearl Harbor were some men who knew that "AF" was Midway atoll. Lying almost in the geographic center of the North Pacific, Midway was known as home to the Laysan albatross — "gooney birds" famous even then for their entertaining mating dance. The IJN had other reasons to be interested.

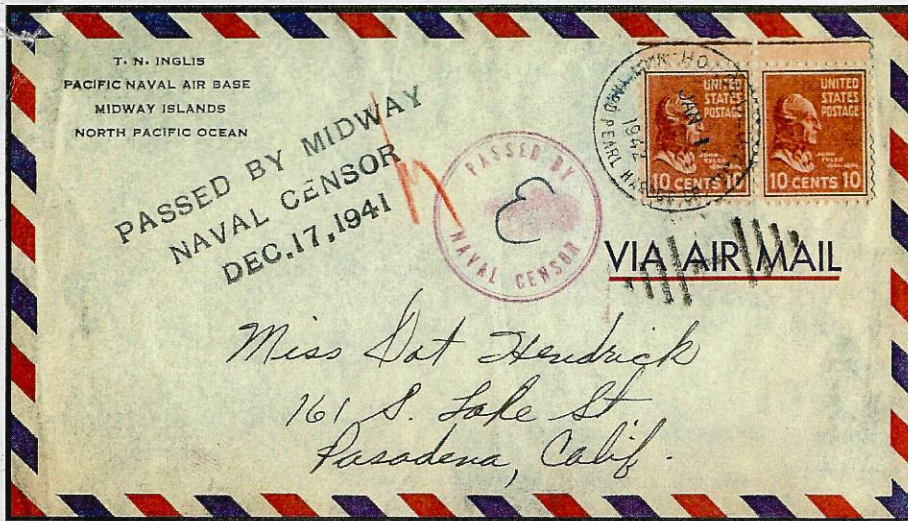
By 1937 the east-to-west route flown by four-engine Pan American Airways Clipper seaplanes included San Francisco-Honolulu-Midway Island-Wake Island-Guam-Manila-Hong Kong. After their attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japanese armed forces swiftly overran and occupied the four westernmost legs of this route—Hong Kong, Manila, Guam, and Wake Island.

In their eastward expansion the Japanese had essentially reversed the Pacific air bridge pioneered by Pan Am. Only 1,180 miles to the northeast of the Emperor's new Wake Island possession (renamed *Otori shima*, "Bird Island") lay the next in the flying-boat chain of islands: Midway atoll, westernmost of the Hawaiian chain. A roughly circular coral reef six miles in diameter enclosing a small lagoon, Midway contained two small islands, Sand Island and Eastern Island, lying at the southern end of the reef. Occupation of this small volcanic outcrop-

Sand Island, Midway Atoll.



December 4, 1941 air mail cover from civilian worker, last eastbound clipper with mail before Pearl Harbor. Above: Portion of letter that was enclosed in cover: "Expect to be leaving in a few days...."

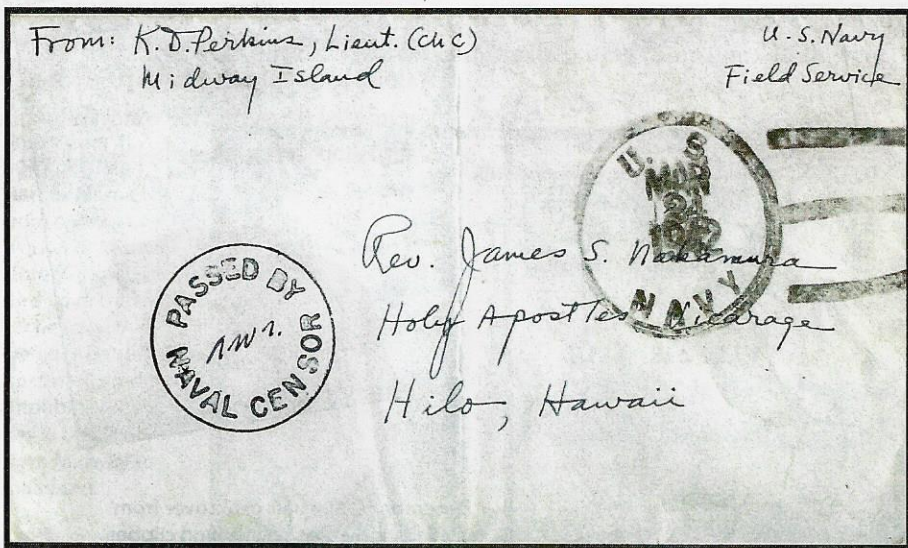


December 17 censored air mail cover from civilian employee, postmarked PH Jan 1, 1942. Note 20¢ per ½ oz. rate from Hawaii to mainland.

ping would establish a Japanese base within the Hawaiian Islands.

On the evening of December 7, 1941 two Japanese destroyers, part of a Midway Neutralization Unit, brought the war to Midway by shelling the atoll. The bombardment was meant to suppress any American air efforts to pursue the Pearl Harbor attack force. Thereafter, defending forces at Midway prepared for the worst.

In February 1942, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto developed his operational plan for the invasion and occupation of Midway. The tactical means: provoke the decisive naval battle that would eliminate the American carrier threat in the Pacific and extend Japan's defensive perimeter more than a thousand miles eastward into the Pacific. The strategic end: force the Americans to accept a negotiated settlement allowing Japan to keep its Southeast Asian conquests. A



March 24, 1942 Navy chaplain "stampsless" cover, Midway to Hilo. The rare "U.S. Navy/Field Service" endorsement in the upper right corner was in lieu of a postage stamp. Postage was to be collected on delivery. Armed forces free mail privilege for first-class mail began April 1.

mailing address — "Minazuki," classical Japanese name for the month of June — was confidently assigned to the planned occupation force.⁴ Forwarding of mail to Minazuki only awaited seizure of the island as part of Central Pacific operations aimed at destroying the American fleet and later possibly capturing Hawaii.

The men who had inferred the meaning of "AF" were the members of Station H (codename: Hypo), a naval unit "charged with peeling back the layers of encryption that cloaked Japanese radio communications."⁵ Station Hypo's language officers, traffic analysts, and cryptanalysts

were led by Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, who has been called "easily the most consequential shore-based actor in the Midway drama."

Blessed with an extraordinarily retentive memory and strong intuitive sense, the head of Pearl's decrypt unit "used his knowledge of the Japanese language and the tools of cryptology and radio intelligence to establish first, through consensus with his analysts, the target of the Japanese attack. Then he used the moral authority of his position to make that estimate stick with the officer who mattered most: Admiral Nimitz." For those reasons, "it would be hard, if not impossible, to envision the Battle of Midway unfolding as it did without the involvement of Joe Rochefort."⁶

Early in March an area denoted "AF" had been mentioned in a coded message broadcast from Tokyo to air group commanders in the Marshall Islands. "AF" had been tentatively identified by Rochefort as Midway Atoll. At a time when Japanese forces were slashing at American positions on Bataan, destroying Dutch resistance in the East Indies, and invading New Guinea, this bit of radio intelligence was little noted. But it was not forgotten. Two months later, when coded radio traffic suggested a new Japanese campaign, Rochefort's first recognition of "AF" as Midway turned out to be "the most significant bit of intelligence of all."⁷ It led to the discovery of detailed Japanese plans to invade and occupy the island in June.

Working virtually around the clock in "the Dungeon," Rochefort

communicated with Lt. Cmdr. Edwin T. Layton, Hypo's liaison with Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC). Admiral Nimitz trusted the evidence brought to him and was determined to deploy nearly all available resources, in his words, "to greet our expected visitors with the kind of reception they deserve."⁸

Though incomplete, the radio intercepts were so detailed that some wondered whether it was all a trick — one officer at Pearl confiding to his diary the fear that the Japanese might be using radio deception on a grand scale. He was not the only one. The naval brass in Washington, including Admiral Ernest J. King, commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet (COMINCH) and Chief of Naval Operations, were not yet convinced that Midway's two small islands were the next target of the IJN.

To overcome the argument by strong doubters in Washington, including the Navy's communications intelligence unit there, Rochefort proposed a piece of deception that has been raised to near-legendary status by historians. "He proposed a ruse. The local commander on Midway would be told to transmit a plain-language radio broadcast back to Pearl Harbor, reporting that Midway's desalination [by water distillation] plant had broken down, and that as a result the atoll was short of fresh water. This was done. A Japanese monitoring station on Wake intercepted the message and immediately passed it on to Imperial General Headquar-



March 20 cover to civilian contractor on Midway; moved, left no address. Voluntary departure from Midway by civilian worker.

ters in Tokyo, which in turn alerted the Combined Fleet to a freshwater shortage on 'AF'. The latter message was intercepted and broken by Hypo and the cryptanalytic unit in Melbourne."⁹ The Japanese had revealed beyond reasonable dispute that "AF" was Midway.

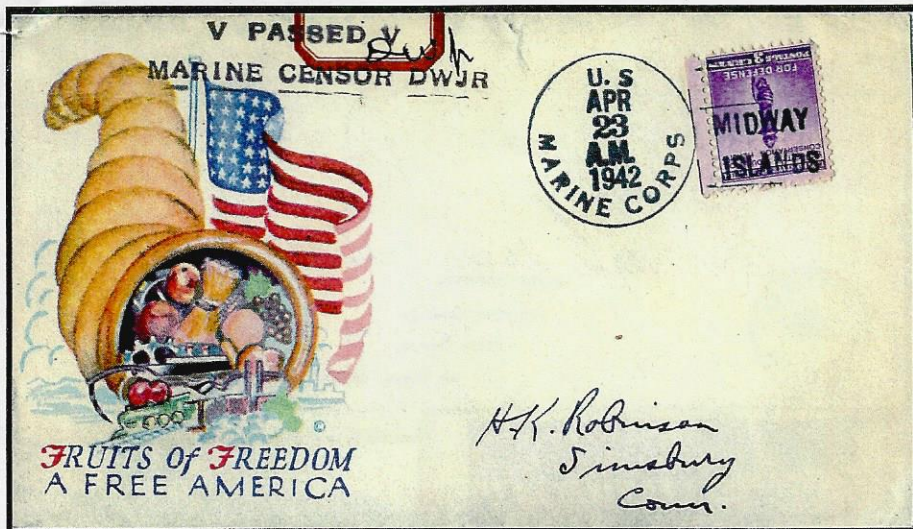
When the massive Japanese armada (the Combined Fleet) departed from Japan's Inland Sea and Saipan in the last week of May, the tip of their spear was the *kido butai*, the First Carrier Striking Force. The four aircraft carriers of the attacking force, bristling with fighters, dive bombers and torpedo bombers, were the heart of IJN's striking power. In command of *kido butai*, as he had been at Pearl Harbor, was Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. The Second Fleet contained the Midway Invasion Force and the Midway Occupation Force. Within days, Rochefort's traffic analysts learned that among the transport vessels of the Occupation Force approaching Midway were two "freshwater tankers sent along to supply an island [supposedly] rendered desperate for water following a mishap the Japanese believed had ru-



April 20 cover from Sgt. Bailey, with USMC label. Note 6¢ per ½ oz. armed forces concession air mail rate.



Close-up, USMC label on cover. Label was used for only a few days.



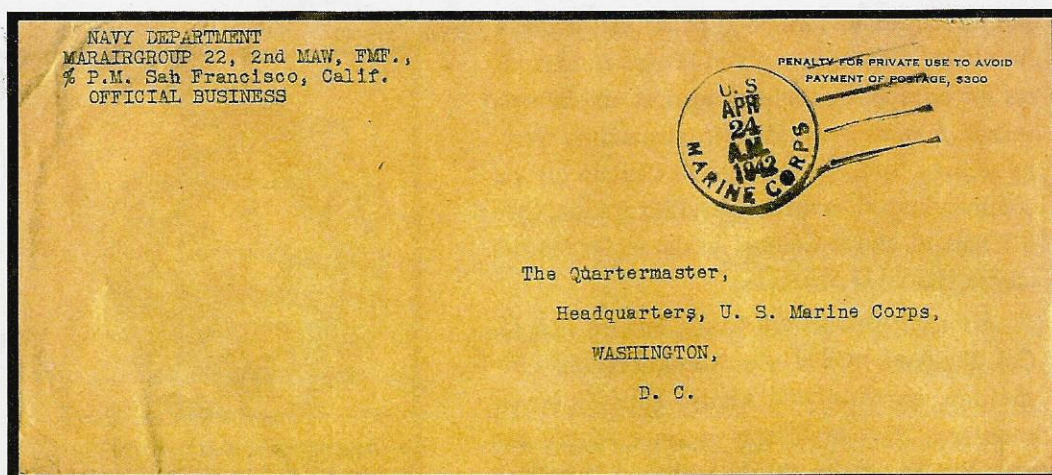
April 23 USMC surface mail, last day of "Midway Islands" between killer bars.

ined its distillation plant on May 20."¹⁰

Yet doubts persisted in the nation's administration itself. Both Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, and Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall fretted that Nimitz and his intelligence team might have fallen for an ingenious Japanese trick. The last straw for Marshall was that May 20th "change of mailing address" decrypt. In a Congressional hearing soon after the war, he confided that he and others in Washington "were very much disturbed because one Japanese unit gave Midway as its post office address, and that seemed a little bit too thick, so when the ships actually appeared it was a great relief, because if we had been deceived, and our limited number of vessels were there, and the Japanese approached at some other point, they would have met no opposition whatsoever."¹¹

The "14th Air Ron" was real. It was the Japanese 14th Air Group, stationed at Jaluit in the Marshall Islands, and a unit in the prospective shore-based air force that was to call Minazuki, the former Midway, home.

April 24 USMC official business legal-size cover, first day with wording removed from killer bars.



By March-April 1942, Sand Island and Eastern Island were bristling with defense emplacements. There were about 3,600 U.S. Navy and Marine Corps personnel (including the Marine Sixth Defense Battalion), backed by mobile armor, along with a few Army Air Force air crews. A Marine Air Group (MAG-22) was converting Eastern Island "from a small advanced air base to a major installation capable of handling as many squadrons and types as could physically be accommodated and protected."¹²

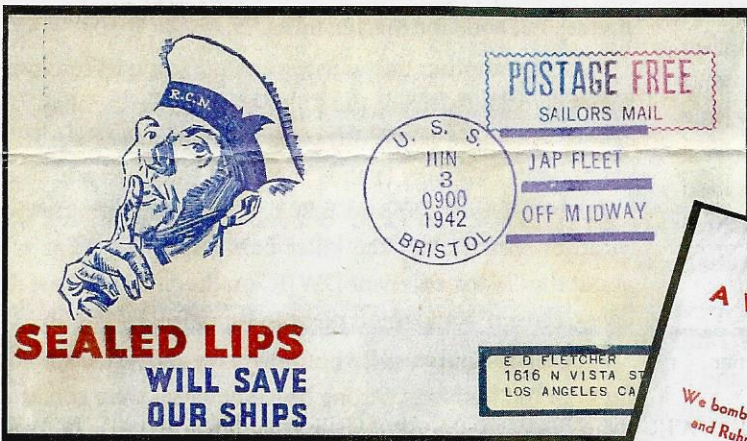
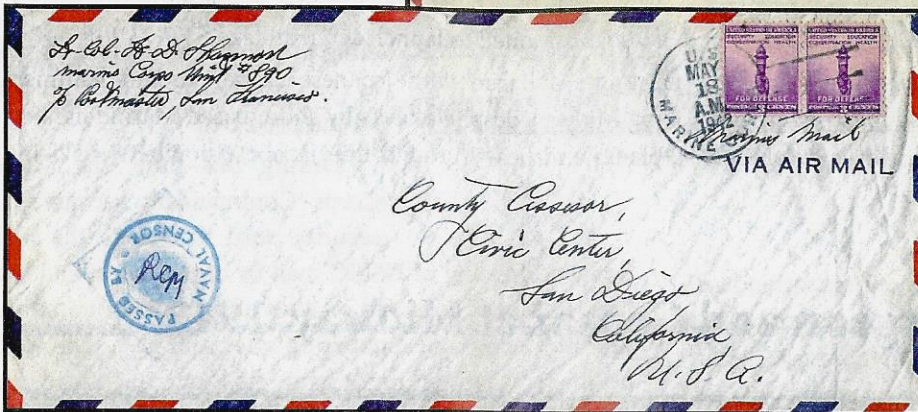
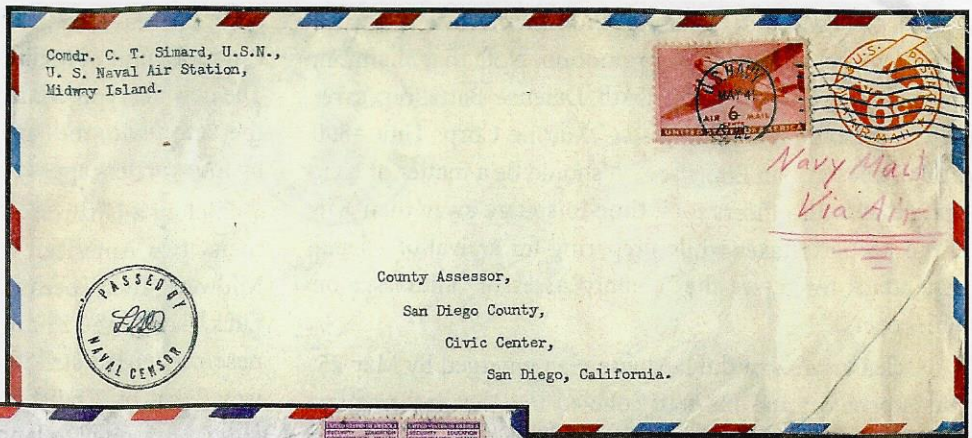
During this time, the Marine Corps Commandant recognized a security need to change the traditional addressing of USMC mail by organization and location. In March he issued a Letter of Instruction initiating a Marine Corps Unit numbering system. USMC mail would no longer have the unit's name or location; instead, mail would be addressed "US Marine Corps Unit # _____, in care of Postmaster _____." The new numbers were not postal addresses but code for Marine units.¹³

Locally, another postal usage change featured removal of "Midway Islands" from the killer bars of Marine mail. Two covers shown nearby illustrate last day of use of the handstamp with "Midway Islands" between the third and fourth killer bars (April 23) and first day of the handstamp with location absent from the killer bars (April 24). (For more about the "Marine Censor DWJR" on the cacheted "last day" cover, see our companion piece in this issue.)

Eastern Island was also home to Navy and Army Air Force fighters and bombers. Strong beach defenses were constructed on this small atoll almost completely surrounded by an exposed coral reef, another hurdle to invasion approach by landing craft. On May 2 Admiral Nimitz inspected Midway's

Right: May 4 legal-size double-rate cover from Cmdr. C.T. Simard, Commanding Officer US Naval Air Station, Midway.

Below: May 18 legal-size air mail cover from Lt. Col. H.D. Shannon, Commanding Officer Sixth Defense Battalion, Midway.

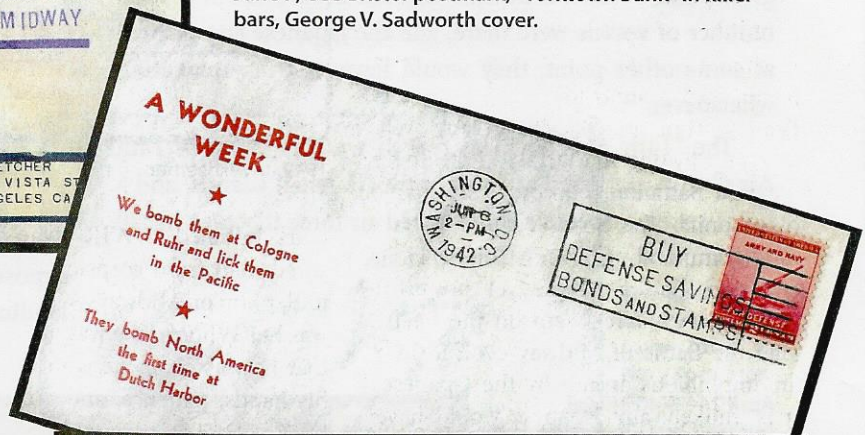


Three patriotic covers:

Clockwise from top: June 3, USS *Bristol* postmark, "Jap Fleet off Midway" in killer bars, A.M. Roberts cover.

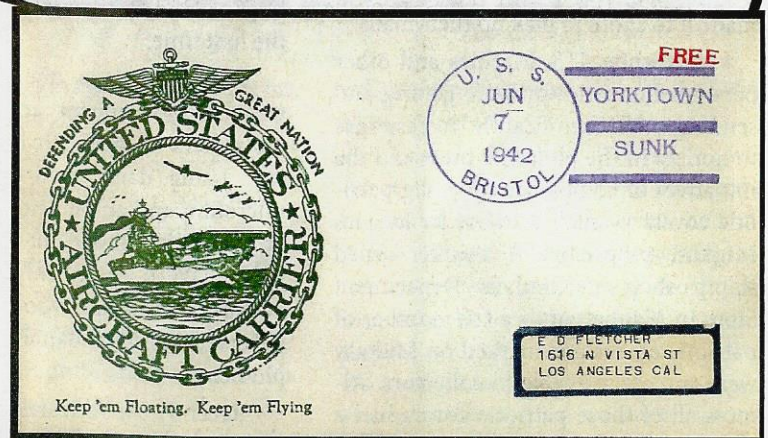
June 6, "A Wonderful Week," Fidelity cover.

June 7, USS *Bristol* postmark, "Yorktown Sunk" in killer bars, George V. Sadworth cover.



defense installations, checking fortifications, gun pits, hangars, entrenched communications lines, and underground command posts. He elicited a "needs list" from the Navy and Marine commanders for reinforcing the atoll against amphibious assault. A week later, for their outstanding work, he secured "spot" promotions to Captain for the commanding officer of the Naval Air Station, Cyril T. Simard, and to Colonel for the senior Marine officer, Harold D. Shannon.

Air mail covers from Cmdr. Simard and Lt. Col. Shannon, mailed after Admiral Nimitz's inspection, are illustrated nearby. Simard's cover, endorsed "Navy Mail," was postmarked the day after Nimitz returned to Pearl Harbor. Shannon's



was postmarked May 18, about the time he received word from Admiral Nimitz of his promotion. Note that Shannon, commanding officer of the Sixth Defense Battalion, carefully listed his return address as "Marine Corps Unit #890 c/o Postmaster, San Francisco." It should be a matter of civic pride that both officers took time to square away their San Diego property taxes while preparing for arrival of a Japanese attack force (see the "County Assessor" addressee on both covers).

A clearer view of the Japanese plan emerged by May 25, after Rochefort and his staff cobbled together information from a dozen garbled messages intercepted four days earlier, all of them dated May 20. The cryptanalysts realized that "the five-number code for 'attack' appeared in close association with the geographical indicator 'AF.' This provoked a

burst of excitement, and both Hypo and Belconnen [American radio unit in Melbourne] got to work on it in earnest."¹⁴ The new decrypts confirmed that Midway was the target and the *kido butai*, the Japanese attack force, was spearheaded by four carriers approaching that target from the northwest.

Before a Japanese naval screen was in place to discover them, two American carrier groups were positioned near Midway. Their ocean rendezvous, designated as "Point Luck," lay some 325 miles north of the atoll, while the Japanese carrier-led striking force approached from the northwest. That put the carrier groups on the flank of the *kido butai*, positioned to launch aerial attacks.

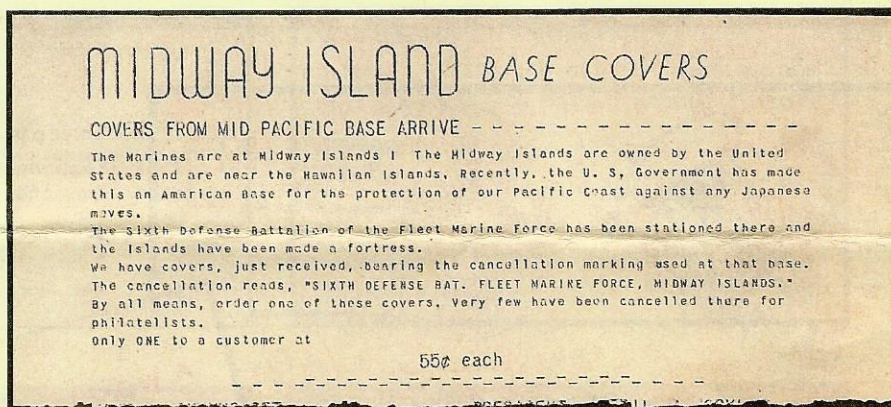
June 4 began with Japanese carrier aircraft hammering Midway, despite attacks by shore-based Marine fighting planes and heavy ground fire. Japanese bombers surviving

Who Was DWJR, Surgeon and Censor at Midway, 1942?

The Japanese Navy's amphibious attack forces planning to assault the Midway land base during June 1942 were certainly overly optimistic and premature in planning for their mail to be forwarded to Midway. After all, they hadn't yet taken the well-defended atoll from U.S. Forces. In fact, the Japanese were in for a surprise.

Midway, lying much closer to Pearl Harbor than does Wake island, and having had months to prepare after the Pearl Harbor attack, was already well defended by dug-in Marines of the Sixth Defense Battalion, reinforced by many other units. The Sixth Defense Battalion's Commanding Officer, Colonel H.D. Shannon, had a simple yet powerful fighting cry: "Wreck 'em on the Reef!" Had the Battle of Midway evolved into an amphibious assault by the Japanese, it is unlikely any Japanese would have made it to shore to pick up their mail.

Meanwhile, U.S. Marines and other personnel on Midway were getting and sending mail. Significantly, in response to notices in the philatelic press and the initiatives of companies servicing patriotic covers — such as those by Jacques Minkus, proprietor of the renowned stamp shop at Gimbel's Department Store in Manhattan — a fair number of patriotic covers postmarked on Midway were and are available to collectors. Almost all of those patriotic covers had a very distinctive handstamped censor



1942 advertisement for Midway philatelic covers.

mark initialed "DWJR," who also censored mail from corpsmen who served under him on Midway. Who in the world was he? Whoever he was, it was obvious that he was someone who had time on his hands, patience, and a desire to be helpful. His identity is published here for the first time.

Many years ago, one of the authors went to government archives seeking old rosters of the Sixth Defense Battalion. Using dark, hard-to-read, brittle microfilm and an old, rickety microfilm projector, an important discovery was made. DWJR could only be one man: Lt. (jg) Dennistoun Wood Jr., U.S. Navy Reserve, Assistant Battalion Surgeon, a physician.

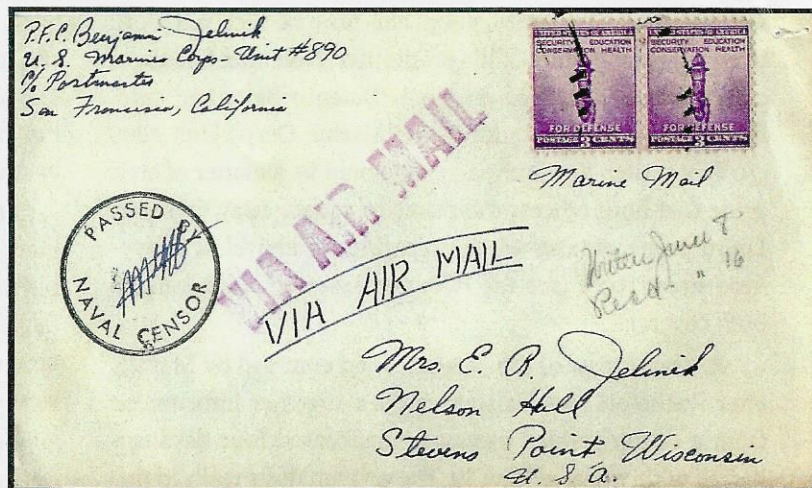
Recently, we've learned more about Lt. Wood. He was a resident of Palo

Alto, California, born in 1905. In 1937 he graduated from Stanford University School of Medicine. A March 26, 1943 article in the *Pacific Grove Tide* newspaper, headlined "Returns from 14 Months on Midway /Excitement Comes in Brief, Violent, Infrequent Jolts at Pacific Outpost," summarized a censored version of Lt. Wood's service on the atoll.¹ He arrived there in August 1941 and was transferred back to the mainland in October 1942, months after the battle. In the early morning hours of June 4, 1942, attacking Japanese planes:

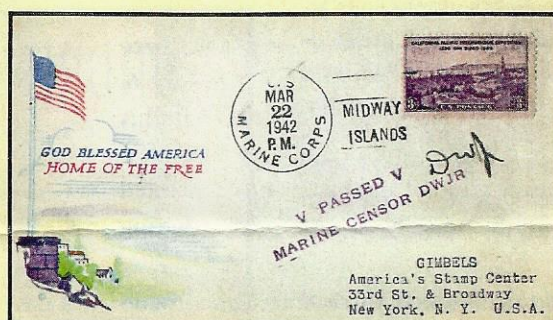
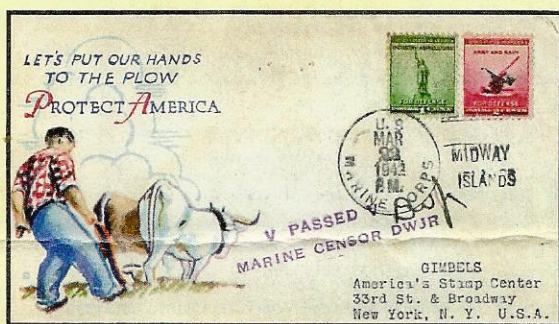
were met by planes from Midway and also by anti-aircraft fire. Many were destroyed but a considerable number of bombs were dropped.... The surprising thing, Lt. Wood states, is how few

this intercept severely damaged above-ground facilities, taking out the Eastern Island powerhouse and command post. They also smashed the post office. To get their mail once Midway was occupied, the 14th Air Group would now need to build its own post office. In another bizarre twist, in demolishing the powerhouse, the bombing disrupted Midway's electricity and its water distillation plant — the very water distillation plant whose “breakdown” two weeks earlier caused the IJN to add freshwater tankers to its invasion fleet.

“The cardinal rule of carrier warfare, the rule that ruled over all others,” a naval historian has written, “was to strike first.”¹⁵ And



Two days after the battle: June 8 air mail cover from Midway, pencil docketing — “Written June 8/Recd. [ditto marks for June] 16.”



Two patriotic covers and two covers from Navy corpsmen censored by Lt. Wood.

casualties were sustained by the Marines.... The medical department was adequate and well able to care for all cases. Those of more serious nature were sent to Hawaii when able to be transported, in keeping with the general practice in this war.

After being transferred to the mainland, and before assuming new duties at the Farragut, Idaho, Naval Training Sta-

tion, Lt. Wood traveled home to visit his wife Bess and young son, Billy,

who “grew about a foot” in the 20 months his father was away from home. And the father did some growing, too, in the form of a splendid red moustache, with curled tips and all that sort of thing.

Lt. Wood continued to serve his country in naval hospitals on the mainland. After the war he resumed his medi-

cal practice. Dennistoun Jr. died in 1956, at the age of fifty.

Alas, Dennistoun Wood Jr. was never a member of the APS. But maybe he should have been. After all, he contributed to our hobby while serving his country in war. May he and people like him never be forgotten.

Endnote

The article is now available online at www.cagenweb.org/montereybbs/, but you must be registered with the site to view it.



Midway Island today.

at Midway the first carrier-on-carrier air strike came from American ships. Ambushing the ambushers, dive bombers from *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* wrecked three of the four carriers of *kido butai* the morning of June 4, and set ablaze the fourth late in the afternoon. All four eventually sank, three scuttled by torpedoes from Japanese destroyers. On June 6, Vice Admiral Nagumo, commander of *kido butai*, "with his last carrier in flames, and lacking any aircraft beyond the few scout planes on the heavy cruisers and battleships,...directed the remnants of his command to head west into the setting sun."¹⁶

Even with the nearly total loss of three American torpedo squadrons on June 4 and loss of *Yorktown* (heavily damaged by Japanese dive bombers on June 4 and sunk by submarine torpedoes on June 6–7), the Battle of Midway was a triumph for the United States. Recognition of its meaning was swift: looking back during the war, a reporter wrote, "now that all the events of the first year of Pacific war have fallen into their proper perspective, we can see that the Battle of Midway was one of the really decisive battles of the war. It was to the mid-Pacific what the Battle of Britain was to Europe, the Battle of Moscow to eastern Europe and the Battle of El Alamein to North Africa — the turning point, the enemy's farthest reach..."¹⁷ With this first decisive victory, the United States seized and never relinquished the vital strategic initiative in the Pacific war. As for "the engagement that made everything else possible," Admiral Nimitz told his staff: "This officer [Commander Rochefort] deserves a major share of the credit for the victory."¹⁸

Minazuki, its postal facility, and all its forwarded mail were not to be. Only the message remains: "The next address of the 14th Air Ron will be AF"

There must be something about the location of Mid-

way, the warmth and texture of its coral sands, or the tastiness of squid and fish in nearby waters, for Sand Island and Eastern Island are still home to vast breeding populations of Laysan and black-footed albatross. On what is now Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, both species contentedly display their strange courting ritual — clacking bills, stretching necks, flapping wings. And today the birds travel the seas around Midway unvexed by the sounds or sights of war.

Endnotes

1. *The Role of Radio Intelligence in the American-Japanese Naval War, Vol. I, August 1941 June 1942*, SRH-012 (Washington, DC: Navy Department Library, 1942), p. 323.
2. Henry F. Schorreck, "Battle of Midway: 4–7 June 1942: The Role of COMINT in the Battle of Midway (SRH-230)," March 2006, at <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/srh230.htm>.

history.navy.mil/library/online/srh230.htm.

3. *The Role of Radio Intelligence*, p. 292, which includes this paraphrase of the earlier message of May 20: "The 14th Air Corps also requested its mail to be forwarded to AF"
4. Edwin T. Layton, with Roger Pineau and John Costello, *"And I Was There:" Pearl Harbor and Midway—Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), p. 435.
5. Ian W. Toll, *Pacific Crucible* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), p. 302.
6. Elliott Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War: The Odyssey of the Codebreaker Who Outwitted Yamamoto at Midway* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), p. 5.
7. Layton, pp. 376–377; *The Role of Radio Intelligence*, p. 262.
8. Craig L. Symonds, *The Battle of Midway* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 195.
9. Toll, p. 387.
10. Carlson, p. 367.
11. "Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack," December 1945, p. 1158, at <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/congress/vol03.pdf>.
12. Robert D. Heil Jr., *Marines at Midway* (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, Headquarters USMC, 1948), p. 19.
13. Russ Carter, *Numbered Navy & Marine Corps Post Office Locations*, 7th Edition, Volume 3 (Cypress, TX, Military Postal History Society, 2003), p. 244.
14. Symonds, p. 186.
15. Toll, p. 416.
16. Symonds, p. 336.
17. Eugene Burns, *Then There Was One: The U.S.S. Enterprise and the First Year of the War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), p. 47.
18. Carlson, p. 381.

The Authors

Lawrence Sherman, M.D., has combined his interests in American history and U.S. stamps and mail by collecting and studying American patriotic envelopes and postal history of World War II. He is a life member of the APS and APRL.

Major Ted Bahry, USMC (Retired), APS and APRL life member, has been an active contributor to the hobby for some forty years. Major Ted avidly collects the postal history of Wake Island and Midway Island, along with many other things. He also still hikes, lifts weights, and does push-ups.