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A Hero of Midway Finally Got His Due

Rocheftort sussed out the Japanese plans, but had a hard time convincing the brass.

/ Fay Vincent

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Joseph J. Rocheftort as a lieutenant, Sept. 15, 1934.

PHOTO: NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

Though he played a vital role in the U.S. victory over Japan in World War II, Navy Capt. Joseph Rocheftort and his heroics long went unrecognized.

Rocheftort, who died in 1976, was a mid-level intelligence officer whose small unit in Hawaii provided the analysis that led to the U.S. naval victory in the Battle of Midway—the turning point of the Pacific war.

Aspects of Rocheftort's story are notable even 60 years after Midway. In 1929 the Navy sent three young officers, including Rocheftort, to Japan to spend three years becoming fluent in the Japanese language and culture. The foresight of the Navy to plan decades ahead for conflict with Japan is remarkable, and Rocheftort's immersion in the Japanese way of thinking was the foundation of his later success at Midway.

In 1941 Rocheftort was sent to Station Hypo at Pearl Harbor to lead a team of code-breakers. By May 1942, Rocheftort believed he had sufficient evidence from intercepted Japanese radio traffic to convince Adm. Chester Nimitz that two

Japanese fleets of carriers and battleships led by Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto were

Japanese fleets of carriers and battleships led by Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto were at sea on their way to attack Midway Island. Nimitz was wary, and top Navy officers didn't accept Rochefort's judgment due to the scant radio-traffic data.

Rochefort and his team came up with a ploy to persuade their superiors: The U.S. base at Midway would send out a message to Navy-supply services that the Midway desalination system was failing and there was a dearth of drinking water on the island. The Japanese took the bait and immediately provided desalting materials to their landing forces, thus confirming that Midway was a target for invasion. Nimitz was convinced and Rochefort was vindicated.

After the battle, when Yamamoto learned of the loss of the four Japanese carriers, he abandoned his plans for the Midway invasion. The Japanese Navy was never able to replace those carriers, and the tide of the Pacific war had changed in favor of the U.S. just six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The surrender on the USS Missouri in September 1945 lay far ahead, but after Midway the U.S. victory was inevitable, as Nimitz confirmed after the war.

The intelligence that Rochefort's small unit provided didn't keep him from being transferred out of his unit and denied the Distinguished Service Medal that Nimitz insisted he deserved. The excuse given by the Navy was that medals were individual awards for those who serve in combat and not intended for back-office intelligence types who work in groups. Rochefort, who had enlisted in 1918 out of high school and didn't attend the Naval Academy, went on to fill routine postings despite his heroic Midway coup.

He served the rest of his career with honor, without being awarded the Distinguished Service Medal he was clearly due. That was corrected by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, when Rochefort—44 years after Midway—was posthumously given the award. Sometimes history writes with a faint hand to permit correction.

Mr. Vincent was commissioner of Major League Baseball, 1989-92.

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