

THE PACIFIC WAR 1941-1945

Early on the morning of December 8, 1941, the Second World War in the Pacific was begun with an amphibious attack by Imperial Japanese Army troops on the northeast coast of British Malaya. Within hours they pushed their way inland despite heavy transport losses at the hands of the few British aircraft that were in the area. Other attacks by Japanese forces across the Pacific followed in rapid succession, the largest of them aimed at the giant American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where it was still December 7.¹

Over the following days a meticulously planned campaign unfolded as Japanese forces launched themselves against key American, Dutch and British Commonwealth units in the Philippines, Siam, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and China, the ultimate goal of which was Japanese control of eastern Asia and the western Pacific. The Japanese government believed that once these regions were firmly under their control, the Allies – and especially the United States – would sue for peace rather than fight a bloody war in distant lands. The Japanese, however, did not anticipate the angry backlash which came as a result of their use of force at Pearl Harbor. A negotiated settlement of the type envisioned by Japanese high command became impossible. In the end, a grimly determined Allied coalition fought its way back across the Pacific, island by island, until the twin spectres of nuclear bombardment and war with the Soviet Union forced Imperial intervention and the end of war.

1941 - The Start of War

The Japanese offensives of 1941 were composed of several bold moves across the western Pacific basin, something never before attempted on such a large scale. This military solution called for the complete occupation of Southeast Asia and the Dutch East Indies in order to secure much needed raw resources. The most famous part of this plan was executed with a dawn attack against the American Army and Navy bases located on the Pacific island of Oahu, Hawaii. Most technical goals for the attack were achieved with clock-like precision by the cream-of-the-crop of Japan's naval aviators. They did not however, catch any of the priceless American aircraft carriers in port, nor did the Japanese task force commander authorize a second round of sorties which were strongly recommended by his flight officers. This second sortie could have destroyed valuable American oil reserves which lay in vulnerable surface storage tanks immediately next to the harbor. The attack itself united American public opinion in ways that the U.S. government could never have achieved. Japanese officers later acknowledged that the core damage caused by the sensational attack – the sinking of a relatively few older American battleships – was not worth the sustaining effect it had on the American war effort.

As news of the devastating raid against Pearl Harbor was telegraphed to Washington, orders were sent far and wide to American and Commonwealth forces in the Pacific "*...a state of war exists... commence hostilities.*" American General Douglas MacArthur lost a golden opportunity to blunt the effects of the pending Japanese attack on his Philippine command. Unbeknownst to him the Japanese bomber fleet in Formosa had been delayed by weather, allowing an eight-hour gap to occur in the tight Japanese timetable. MacArthur wasted this precious window of opportunity by failing to put extra fighters into the air. He didn't scramble his bombers to alternate airstrips. He did not even move the hundreds of aircraft under his command off of the open tarmacs where they were arrayed in neat rows. Virtually no action was taken despite the very recent knowledge that the German Luftwaffe had devastated grounded enemy air fleets in the opening minutes and hours of a campaign.

When Japanese bombers finally arrived late over the Philippines, they were surprised to discover no extra resistance, no extra fighter opposition, and best of all the entire American bomber fleet lined up neatly in rows. The war was certainly off to a good start for them. Within two days Japanese infantry landed in Northern Luzon and by December 22 an entire army had successfully come ashore, triggering the allied evacuation of Manila and a fighting withdrawal to the Bataan Peninsula in southwestern Luzon.

For the British and their commonwealth allies, December 8 was an equally bitter day. War sightings arrived furiously as a series of Japanese convoys landed troops along the coasts of Malaya and Siam (Thailand). The

¹ Given dates are based on local times.

first shots of the war were fired by the Japanese when they downed a British plane attempting to shadow their Malaya-bound troop convoy. The main warship presence in the area was the Royal Navy's Force Z, centered on the new battleship Prince of Wales, and the elderly battlecruiser Repulse. Both vessels were originally sent by the British government as a warning to Japan of Royal Navy might. But as of the evening of December 8, even the pugnacious Winston Churchill admitted that he had become concerned about its safety. This concern came too late, as Japanese bombers caught the two battleships as they retired to Singapore and sank both of them within a few hours. By late December, the British garrison at Hong Kong was forced to surrender, as had a tiny U.S. Marine garrison on the central Pacific island of Wake. The American Army was pinned in place on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, and the British defenses on the Perak River in Malaya were penetrated. This last loss triggered another retreat south into Singapore. The year 1941 ended on a very grim note for the Allies as Japan's military machine swept everything before it.

1942

Early 1942 saw the Japanese complete the execution of their war plan. On January 10, Imperial forces began the second phase of conquest by landing in the northern areas of the Dutch East Indies. By the middle of the month Burma was invaded and in early February after a brief defense, British General A.E. Percival surrendered Singapore to the Japanese. A disjointed defense was prepared for the southern Dutch East Indies, but this was quickly overcome by meticulously orchestrated blows delivered at the hands of the Japanese Army and Navy. The local allied fleet was virtually wiped out during the Battle of the Java Sea and its aftermath. As the sea-lanes were cleared of allied naval threats, multiple landings took place throughout the key southern islands of Sumatra and Java, completing Japan's advance to the edge of the Indian Ocean. On April 8, the American Army in the Philippines surrendered to Japanese troops besieging them at Bataan, and on May 5, the harbor bastion at Corregidor also fell.

The attainment of their main goals left the Japanese high command with an opportunity they had to exploit. They knew that the only way to win would be to build a strategic defense in depth, based on numerous fortified belts. This became necessary because contrary to expectations, American public opinion was far from being passive and weak. Indeed, it had galvanized into an angry frenzy. American citizens of Japanese descent had been rounded up and sent to remote camps, and a huge naval building program was further augmented. As a result, there would be no negotiated peace, and the various Japanese high commands were slowly faced with the prospect of a long war, something that had been considered and even planned, but for which little preparation had been carried out.

This was driven home by the unexpected "*Doolittle Bombing*" of Tokyo by a small group of American bomber pilots who flew their aircraft on a one-way mission. The Japanese tried to play down the meaning of this action, but the mere fact that enemy aircraft had flown through the airspace over the Emperor's Palace left many in indignant shock and gave more thoughtful people an early taste of Allied determination.

A first step in Japanese high command's defensive belt strategy was an advance into the southeast Pacific in order to cut the line of communication and supply between the United States and Australia. At the same time, the central Pacific island of Midway was to be seized in order to anchor the left flank of the Gilbert Islands and to forestall direct American advances toward the Japanese homeland. While offensive in appearance, these campaigns were actually defensive in strategic tone. Their goals were to complete a defensive belt which the allies would find impregnable.

The first of these operations were launched against the crucial Australian position at Port Moresby, New Guinea, and against the lightly held island of Tulagi in the British Solomons. The Tulagi-Moresby operation quickly spiraled into a major naval-air battle in the Coral Sea as American aircraft carriers which had survived Pearl Harbor intervened, losing one of their own number in the process. The end result was tactically a Japanese victory, but American intervention had damaged both of the Japanese Navy's most modern fleet carriers and triggered a cancellation of the Port Moresby invasion. This failure to secure New Guinea was to have dire strategic consequences for the Japanese, whereas the loss of one aircraft carrier turned out to have little impact on Allied fortunes.

Immediately following the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Japanese fleet again sailed toward Hawaiian waters as part of their Midway operation. The resulting defeat, in which the Japanese lost four of their largest aircraft

carriers in exchange for sinking only one American carrier was a loss from which there could be no recovery. The Battle of the Coral Sea had blunted the Japanese run across the Pacific at great loss to the allies, but the Battle of Midway cut off a part of the Japanese advance at great cost to the Japanese themselves.

Following Midway, the Japanese resumed their efforts to create powerful airfields in the Solomon Islands, the one area which their mid-1942 campaign had made tangible gains. The realization that the Japanese were preparing to develop air strikes against their eastern Pacific supply line brought a robust Allied response. By early August, American marines landed on the islands of Tulagi and Guadalcanal, quickly capturing the lightly manned airfield on the larger island. Within 24 hours the Japanese Navy responded by delivering a stinging defeat on the Allied surface fleet during an all-night battle. Over the ensuing days and nights, the American marines held on through vicious land attacks and naval bombardments. Their hard-won gain was finally made good when the first friendly aircraft landed at Henderson Field on August 20. The new arrivals immediately made their presence felt, and Japanese naval operations became increasingly gauged to the likelihood of U.S. air intervention. Indeed, the dive bombers that operated out of newly named Henderson Field learned how to attack targets at night, which further complicated Japanese planning.

By this time, many Japanese naval officers were ruefully considering the warning they had received at the beginning of the war. They had been told by their commander in chief, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, that in order to guarantee victory, each Japanese captain would have to sink five Allied ships without losing his own. Experience from pre-war maneuvers had taught veteran officers the improbability of such a success ratio, and as the reality of this sank in, Japanese naval morale began to suffer. By the end of 1942 the allies controlled parts of the eastern Solomon Islands, and even though the entire area remained contested by the Japanese, their officers on the scene were aware that they had allowed themselves to be drawn into a losing battle of attrition over this remote location. This view was not shared by high command in Tokyo, which dispatched ever higher-level commanders to the scene in order to deliver results. News that the British were attempting to reenter Burma from India further reminded Japanese planners that more than one enemy was nipping at their heels. The new year would see a further deterioration of the situation as many Japanese commands found themselves isolated by burgeoning Allied air and sea superiority.

1943

Early 1943 was a period of consolidation for both sides. The Japanese tried to prepare for the next Allied moves, and the Allies debated the best way to employ their available resources, which were being shared with the needs of the European theater. After a period of volatile debate, it was decided to follow a two-pronged advance. One advance was to leapfrog through the Solomon Islands and New Guinea, cutting off strong Japanese positions and using air-sea superiority to prevent rescue of the isolated troops. The other advance would push through the central Pacific in a series of amphibious invasions. Once these plans had been achieved, the Allies would then decide whether to split the Japanese empire in half by capturing either Formosa or the Philippines. While these plans were being formulated, Japanese Admiral Yamamoto was killed when his transport plane was shot down by American P-38 fighters over Bougainville. This was achieved through the successful American monitoring of Japanese radio transmissions, whose code the Americans repeatedly broke during the war. This vital flow of information allowed the Allies to know virtually all Japanese plans and movements before their execution.

By the middle of the year, Allied forces were pushing relentlessly up the length of the Solomon Island chain. New Georgia and Bougainville both fell to the Allies, as well as Lae, New Guinea, which fell to Australian forces on September 15. Throughout this period, forces from the United States, Australia, Great Britain, China, India, New Zealand, and many other countries continued to tie down, surround or hem in Japanese troops and ships across Asia and the Pacific. At home, many senior Japanese diplomats and government officials began to worry privately about the magnitude of Japan's overextended assets. They had actually begun the war with a shortage of shipping and fighting on multiple fronts combined with losses inflicted by American submarines overburdened the already weak system.

In November, the Allied Central Pacific drive began when U.S. Marines stormed ashore on the Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands. Within 72 bloody hours they captured this supposedly unbeatable stronghold, opening another breach in Japan's outer defenses. But imperial high command in Tokyo was coming to its senses and anticipated the loss of their outer ring. The Gilbert islands had already been written off as a loss and more

serious defensive preparations were underway further to the west. Throughout 1943, American industrial output continued to make itself felt. By the end of the year, aircraft production climbed to well over 7,000 planes per month. Japanese production during this period doubled to 1,500 per month, not enough to compete even after accounting for American aircraft sent to Europe. American ship production was equally prodigious, with over 500 destroyers and destroyer escorts launched since 1941, compared to 30 for Japan. Japanese aircraft carrier production was comparatively high, with a launch rate nearly 50% that of the American production level. But many of the completed carriers lacked aircraft and trained aircrews, and several of these priceless vessels were lost to American submarines that increasingly prowled Japanese waters.

1944

During early 1944, Allied forces continued the two main drives begun the previous year. In east Asia, the Japanese prepared to launch their long-planned invasion of India while simultaneously fending off a Chinese offensive. On February 4, American troops stormed ashore on Kwajalein Atoll in the Central Pacific, and within weeks leapfrogged to Eniwetok Atoll. The supporting U.S. carrier fleet then steamed out to Japan's main fleet anchorage at Truk Atoll and devastated it in a series of air raids which put that installation out of commission for the rest of the war. During the second week in March, the twin Japanese campaigns against eastern India and southern China finally materialized. During four weeks of desperate fighting, British and Chinese forces blunted the Japanese thrusts and slowly consolidated their positions. By early April, the campaign reached its climax after which the defeated Japanese forces slowly withdrew. British forces under General William Slim promptly counterattacked and turned their enemy's withdrawal into a rout, killing and capturing two-thirds of the Japanese troops and rendering many of the survivors unfit for further duty.

By the middle of the year, the two Allied thrusts in the central and southern Pacific were nearly ready to meet. In June American forces came ashore on Saipan in the Marianas Island. Within days a Japanese carrier fleet responded, triggering the famous Battle of the Philippine Sea, which was sardonically called "*The Marianas Turkey Shoot*" by Americans because of the hundreds of Japanese aircraft shot down at relatively little cost. As news spread of the debacle which the Japanese were experiencing in Burma, the Allies reached their next crucial decision, whether to separate Japan from her southern supply line by retaking the Philippines or Formosa. This debate dated from early in the war, when American General MacArthur promoted the idea of retaking the Philippines as early as possible. American Admiral Nimitz favored capturing Formosa instead of the Philippines. Eventually General MacArthur's proposal won out during a series of meetings held in Hawaii. One stipulation was that Formosa's substantial reserves of aircraft were to be neutralized before the Philippine operation was begun.

As a preparation to the invasion of the Philippines, American high command felt that the Palau island group 800 kilometers east of Mindinao needed to be secured, especially to prevent the airfield on Peleliu from being used for flanking attacks against the U.S. invasion fleet. Peleliu was captured during the course of a bloody amphibious attack made by U.S. Marines in the face of unexpected new Japanese tactics that emphasized defense in depth over their previous World War One style assault tactics. Their older tactics had worked reasonably well when executed by crack troops against enemies that operated on a similar tactical basis. But for many standard Japanese line units pitted against heavily armed U.S. Marines who were far more aggressive, the old-style charge tactics resulted in long casualty lists and failed operations.

By early October Admiral William Halsey, commander of the main American carrier fleet, brought his ships within striking range of Formosa and in a lightning air campaign his pilots drew much of Japan's remaining air reserves into a calamitous air battle on a par with "*turkey shoot*" of the previous June. The few surviving Japanese pilots returned to their bases with fantastic stories of American aircraft carriers and support ships sinking by the dozens. In reality the Japanese aircraft inflicted little damage – only a few U.S. ships were lost from service – and after being reprovisioned, Halsey's fleet was still capable of putting over 1,000 aircraft into the air. He did just that when the U.S. fleet withdrew from Formosan waters and headed for the eastern Philippines. Japanese commanders in the Philippines, assuming that the approaching American ships were survivors of the Formosa battle, prepared to attack and sink the pitiful remnants of their enemy's fleet. Surprise was therefore complete when Halsey's full compliment of naval aircraft made their appearance over the central Philippines and destroyed much of what lay in their path. The Japanese were incredulous that the Americans had such deep reserves as to be able to recover from supposed defeats like those suffered off Formosa.

On October 20, all doubts were cast aside when reports arrived that Americans were landing on Leyte Island, Philippines. Within days, the titanic Battle of Leyte was begun, and the Japanese Imperial Navy – sailing from as far away as Singapore – entered into its final great naval battle. By October 25, the finale of this pivotal battle decided the fate of the Philippines and the Pacific war when U.S. naval forces managed to destroy or turn away every Japanese column which converged on the American landing zone. By the battle's end, Japanese vessels sunk included such venerable ships as the battleship Musashi (sistership of the gigantic Yamato) and the aircraft carrier Zuikaku (veteran of the Pearl Harbor attack). Total Japanese losses in tonnage and aircraft exceeded ten times that of the American losses, a decisive defeat from which Japan would never recover.

In later years, Japanese officers were clear that for them, the turning point of the war in the Pacific was the successful American landing at Leyte. Still, the Japanese continued to fight back, employing kamikaze attacks with increasing frequency. These new attacks became a fearsome weapon against which Allied troops felt helpless. However, Japan had a limited supply of enthusiastic volunteers for these grim suicide missions and their numbers were never great enough to sweep the Allied fleets from the seas in the manner hoped. By the middle of November massive American air bases built in the Marianas Islands filled with air fleets of brand-new American B-29 bombers. These flying wonders – so they were called – flew their first mission against Tokyo on November 24.

1945

On January 9 of this last year of war, American forces landed virtually unopposed on the main Philippine island of Luzon. The defending Japanese commander – General Yamashita of Malaya fame – correctly decided that defending a landing zone against the Allies was hopeless in the face of massive American naval support. He instead dug his overextended command into Luzon's three major mountainous zones and forced his enemies to capture each piece of these fortified areas, tree by tree, hill by hill. This long process allowed the Japanese to hold out indefinitely within their mountain strongholds, although it also allowed much of the remaining areas to come quickly under American control. The Japanese naval commander at Manila went against Yamashita's wishes and along with his 17,000 naval infantry, he fought it out with the Americans. This of course caused many thousands of civilians to be killed in the process.

On February 19, the U.S. Marines entered into their bloodiest battle on the tiny island of Iwo Jima, which lay halfway between the Marianas Islands and the Japanese mainland. At a cost of 5,000 American and 20,000 Japanese dead, Iwo Jima was finally secured in time for the landings on Okinawa, which began on April 1. Shortly before this American B-29 bombers started their famous fire raids on Japanese industrial targets. The very nature of the firebombing caused enormous civilian casualties, but this was considered thoroughly acceptable at the time due to the brutal manner in which Japanese occupation forces were known to have behaved, especially in China where an estimated 8,000,000 Chinese civilians were killed. Also, it had been discovered that much of Japan's light war industry was scattered through countless small shops dispersed amongst the large suburban city districts. Entire cities had become industrial targets.

In early April, the Japanese response to the Okinawa landings arrived in the form of a colossal air-sea suicide campaign which involved no less than the entire naval and army air fleets of southern Japan. Hundreds of aircrews went into the fire along with Japan's prize vessel, the IJN Yamato, the largest warship in the world. All of this however, failed in its goal of destroying the U.S. fleet. In fact, although the number of damaged and sunk Allied vessels was indeed great, none of the largest American aircraft carriers were sunk, and many of those damaged were returned to service.

On April 12 American President Franklin D. Roosevelt died and for a time the morale of the Axis governments was buoyed by this news, hoping against hope that it would allow some kind of political intervention. But that hope was short lived. Allied business continued as before and in May the Japanese government learned of Germany's surrender. This left Japan's forces alone against the world as it attempted to defend an empire racked by bombing, famine and supply shortages of every kind. By this time news came in from every front telling of Japanese defeats: in Burma the British Army recaptured Rangoon and on Okinawa the Americans cornered the remaining Japanese forces despite a brutal campaign reminiscent of World War One.

Imperial Japan's armed forces prepared for the inevitable invasion of the Japanese islands which they believed must come. For many military commanders this was viewed as the ultimate trump card for Japan's defense. The mobilization of the entire Japanese population of 100 million – each of them willing to exchange their life for that of an invader – and the million troops still in Manchuria. It was hoped that these potent forces would allow the Japanese government to continue the war for another year whilst negotiations continued in an attempt to renew their non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union.

Despite these hopes, the Japanese peace party which had been so ardently suppressed during the early war again began to make its presence known. The more persuasive of them put forth questions which were not easily answered by army commanders who controlled much of the decision making. "What" they asked "will happen if the Americans simply firebomb us for the next several years? What then?" Nobody had answers to these questions, and the knowledge that the Allies might consider options other than a costly invasion allowed those in favor of peace to begin advancing their agendas.

War's End

The agenda of the entire country was dramatically changed on the morning of August 6, when a lightly escorted American B-29 bomber flew over the industrial city of Hiroshima and dropped a powerful new weapon called an atomic bomb. The resulting shock, heat wave and radiation killed tens of thousands of people who were in the downtown area at the time. Although the casualties caused by the bombing were less than those suffered during the Tokyo firebombing shortly before, the knowledge that it was caused by a single bomb was sobering even to the most ardent conservative. The density of casualties caused by the bomb was four times that of firebombing and could be unleashed by a single aircraft.

Keenly aware that American aircraft could fly where they wished over all of Japan, the country attempted to assess what had occurred over Hiroshima. Three days later another atomic bomb was detonated over the city of Nagasaki. Again, tens of thousands were killed, confirming the ability of the United States to successfully build and deliver these powerful new weapons at-will. That same day the Soviet Union opened a massive offensive against Japanese forces in Manchuria where the Soviets used their better armored formations to devastating effect, overrunning the frontline in advances that were difficult for imperial high command to believe. Japanese forces opposing the Red Army began to lose men by the hundreds of thousands with not nearly enough damage inflicted in return to make up for their loss. Japan was losing control of the mainland.

The entry of Russia into the war and the twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki spelled doom for Japan's trump card of national mobilization. Now the United States could pummel Japanese civilization into extinction without even setting foot on the home islands, and imperial army troops in China could do nothing to stop it. Indeed, the later seemed bound for extinction. All of this undeniably bad news allowed those in favor of peace – including Japanese Emperor Hirohito – to have their way and on August 15, 1945, the Emperor announced to his nation that it would surrender "in order to save mankind" from nuclear oblivion. So powerful was the Japanese military and so deep was their conviction of ultimate victory or stalemate, even at this point the Emperor barely convinced many officers to stand down and accept surrender. More than a few committed suicide rather than accept the disgrace and others took days to convince of the finality of the Imperial decision. In some areas there was armed mutiny. The final surrender was signed on board the American battleship Missouri in Tokyo Harbor, ushering in a long period of recovery for all of the nations involved.

"Our navy has lost the war by "battling" instead of "warring." This fatal confusion was due in my judgement to our erroneous education. To point out what should have been the right education is idle effort. Our navy is no more. The verdict was severe. In conclusion I wish to mention just one thing. And that is that education is important, really very important."

Masataka Chihaya
March, 1946

Epilogue

World War Two in Asia and the Pacific was fought over the largest area of any conflict in history. Japanese submarines bombarded the California coast, and Japanese aircraft carriers raided Allied harbors and shipping along the coast of India. The expanse of land and sea which lay between these places encompasses half of the planet, a testament to the determination of both sides of the conflict. The country which suffered most during this harrowing time was China, who by war's end counted over 13 million dead, most of them civilians. During the course of their effort, Japan lost over two million dead, mostly military. After the war, East Asia continued to face many long years of recovery, and in many cases, post Cold War or colonial violence which continues to roil at the surface of human affairs.

Over the long expanse of Pacific waters between Asia, Australia and North America, the islands which came to fame during the war have slowly drifted out of public consciousness. Places with odd names like Guadalcanal, Tarawa and Siam were the center of the universe for a world at war, and everyone talked of the latest news there. Little has changed in many of these places since the war swept over them and much about the war has been forgotten. Hopefully enough is remembered to prevent a repeat of the mistakes and miscalculations that led to this tremendous catastrophe.

SOURCE: War Times Journal http://www.wtj.com/articles/pacific_summary/index.htm