3. War in the Pacific: 1937 to 1945

All during the late 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt watched with intense concern as fascists marched across Europe. But the provocation that finally brought America into World War II came not from a German submarine trawling the Atlantic, but from Japanese bombers winging across the Pacific to bomb Pearl Harbor. And the bloodiest war in history would finally end not with the surrender of Nazi Germany in May 1945, but three months later, after the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Japanese cities.

The Axis Pact of September 1940, in which Imperial Japan had pledged alliance with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, was a matter of expediency as much as shared values. But the aggressor nations had this in common: they wanted to acquire territory and the resources that came with it.

The Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor was only the most destructive of several simultaneous attacks that took place on December 7, 1941. As FDR noted the next day in his famous “date of infamy” speech, the Japanese also attacked Malaya, Hong Kong, Guam, Wake Island, and the Philippines. Their goal was to advance from these initial assaults over a wide area

Japanese diplomat Saburō Kurusu, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, and Italian foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano at the signing of the Axis Pact in Berlin on September 27, 1940. With this agreement, the three authoritarian governments threw in their lots together, pledging to help one another achieve a “new order” in both Europe and Asia. © IWM (HU 75995)
of the Pacific, from Burma and the Aleutian Islands in the north to Fiji and New Caledonia in the south, seizing the resource-rich Dutch East Indies in the process. The Japanese hoped this stunning blow delivered to the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, combined with the rapid seizure of a vast territory, would so debilitate the American military and demoralize the American public that the United States would sue for peace, leaving the Japanese empire to enjoy the spoils of a sweeping domain its leaders called “the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

Japanese forces swiftly achieved nearly all of their initial goals. By the end of January, Malaya was in their hands; by the end of February, they held the Dutch East Indies. In the Philippines, American forces under the initial command of General Douglas MacArthur managed to hold out on the Bataan Peninsula and the Island of Corregidor for some months, but in early May, after FDR ordered MacArthur to leave, they, too, succumbed to the Japanese advance. Perhaps the most humiliating defeat of all, however, took place at the British island base of Singapore, where more than seventy thousand British and Commonwealth troops fell to a Japanese force of roughly half that number in mid-February 1942.

Having secured most of Burma and the northern coast of New Guinea by the end of May, the Japanese were now in a position to threaten India, Australia, and New Zealand, and, thanks to the closure of the Burma Road by which China received needed supplies, possibly even to neutralize that longtime foe.

The massive Japanese offensive that followed Pearl Harbor put the United States on the defensive in the Pacific War. But the vigorous military buildup FDR had initiated in 1939 ensured that the balance of naval power would soon turn in America’s favor. Though FDR continued to insist on a strategy of defeating “Germany First,” the United States would prove capable of sending reinforcements to the Pacific—and launching offensive operations in that theater much earlier than expected.
America Strikes Back: The Doolittle Raid

The first hint that the United States might be able to mount offensive operations in the Pacific came with the so-called Doolittle Raid. Eager to restore the American public’s morale after the devastating Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor, Franklin D. Roosevelt urged his commanders to find a way to quickly strike back at the enemy. In response, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an executive body comprising the top U.S. military leaders, put together a daring plan to ferry sixteen B-25 bombers aboard an aircraft carrier to the western Pacific, where they would carry out a bombing raid on Japan. To avoid Japanese patrols or radar, the bombers, which were not designed for use on carriers, had to be launched so far out to sea that it would be impossible for them to return to the ship after completing their mission. Instead, they were expected to fly on to air bases in China.

On April 18, 1942, the planes, flown by volunteers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle, took off from the carrier and staged a surprise strike on Tokyo and four other cities. Though the raid inflicted little damage, it did boost Americans’ confidence, much as FDR had hoped. Of the eighty aircrew involved, all but nine survived after either crash-landing their planes in China or bailing out (making an emergency escape by parachute) over Chinese territory.

The flight deck of the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Hornet crowded with B-25 bombers and smaller dive bombers during the Doolittle Raid on April 18, 1942. The aircraft would not return to the carrier after attacks on Tokyo and other cities, but fly on to China. The Doolittle Raid, though it inflicted little damage, salved American indignation after Pearl Harbor. National Museum of the USAF
Turning Point: The Battle of Midway

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, while devastating, had nevertheless failed to inflict any damage on America’s aircraft carriers, which were by chance out at sea that day. In an effort to annihilate this force and complete the job of destroying America’s offensive capability—perhaps even force the United States into a negotiated settlement—Japanese commanders devised an elaborate plan to lure what remained of the American fleet into a decisive battle.

The plan involved a minor attack on Alaska’s Aleutian Islands that would divert a portion of what remained of the U.S. fleet to the northern Pacific, and a major strike at Midway Island, where the American aircraft carriers would be engaged and destroyed. But thanks to U.S. naval intelligence, which had cracked Japan’s naval radio code, the Americans were aware of the Japanese plans.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was thus able to set a trap of his own. He sent substantial reinforcements to Midway and secretly concentrated America’s naval forces near the island. On June 4, 1942, the Americans surprised the approaching Japanese armada, sinking all four Japanese aircraft carriers in the strike force. In subsequent engagements, the Japanese would lose two additional cruisers, while the Americans lost just one carrier, the USS Yorktown, and a destroyer, the USS Hammann.

The Battle of Midway was a severe defeat for the Japanese navy. It marked a major turning point in the Pacific War, making it possible for the United States to put its enemy on the defensive.
The Fight for Guadalcanal

Having fought Japanese naval forces to a draw in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 and inflicted severe damage to the Japanese fleet at the Battle of Midway in June, Franklin D. Roosevelt and his military chiefs turned their attention to stopping the Japanese advance in the Solomon Islands. Japanese seizure of these islands might make it possible for them to cut the critical lines of communication between the United States and Australia, leaving this ally all the more vulnerable to attack.

To halt the Japanese advance, American forces launched an amphibious assault on the largest of the Solomon Islands, Guadalcanal, in early August 1942. The Japanese responded with a major effort to drive the marines off the island. Soon both sides were pouring reinforcements into the region. The battle for Guadalcanal would prove long and costly. After six months of hard fighting, with many succumbing to malaria or tormented by dysentery in the tropical jungle, the Americans prevailed. Guadalcanal was a key victory and the first step in the Allies’ long march toward Japan.
Pacific Island Advance: Campaign for the Gilbert, Marshall, and Mariana Islands

By the time American forces were engaged in the battle for Guadalcanal, American strategy in the Pacific had begun to take shape. This involved the division of the Pacific into two vast theaters of operation: the Pacific Ocean Areas, under the overall command of the navy's Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and the Southwest Pacific Area, under the command of the army's General Douglas MacArthur. This division of command between the navy and the army would come with a division of labor: American naval and marine forces would continue the step-by-step advances from Guadalcanal northwest through the Solomon Islands, while American and Australian forces under the command of General MacArthur would "leapfrog" their way up the north coast of New Guinea and through the Bismarck Archipelago.

In mid-1943, following an agreement among Allied leaders at January's Casablanca Conference to commit more resources to the war against Japan, American strategy in the Pacific was further refined by the decision to launch a drive across the central Pacific through the Gilbert, Marshall, and Mariana Islands. This offensive, under Admiral Nimitz's overall command, got underway in November 1943. By February 1944, American forces had secured the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. In June they began their assault on the Mariana Islands, which included the battle for Saipan, one of the most important of the entire Pacific War. With Saipan's fall in mid-July 1944 and the subsequent capture of Guam in August, the new American super bomber, the B-29, could reach the Japanese home islands.
With the fall of the Mariana Islands in the summer of 1944, Allied forces had pushed deep into Japan’s Pacific empire. A debate now ensued among American military leaders over whether U.S. forces should retake the Philippine Islands captured by Japan in 1942, as General Douglas MacArthur had promised, or simply bypass them and launch attacks against Formosa (Taiwan) or the Japanese home islands. Not surprisingly, General MacArthur, who had famously proclaimed “I shall return” when ordered to leave the islands in March 1942, urged a battle for the Philippines, while Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and the navy favored a strike closer to Japan.

To settle the dispute, FDR met the two leaders in July 1944 in Hawaii. There he engineered a compromise, ordering that the two-front advance across the Pacific converge in a joint army-navy assault on the Philippines.

The attack on the Philippines began at the island of Leyte on October 20, 1944. While U.S. forces under the command of General MacArthur began their landings, a massive Japanese naval armada sailed into the Leyte Gulf to try to stop them. What followed—the Battle of Leyte Gulf—was the largest naval battle ever fought, a desperate struggle in which the Japanese committed not only seven battleships and sixteen cruisers, but also the first waves of kamikaze suicide pilots. Although the Japanese were able to inflict serious damage on American naval forces protecting the landings, they could not halt the U.S. invasion, and they suffered losses that virtually eliminated the Japanese fleet as an organized fighting force.

Following General MacArthur’s successful landing at Leyte, a second invasion took place on the island of Luzon two months later. In February 1945, after a month of intense urban combat that left much of the city destroyed, Manila, the Philippine capital at the southern end of Luzon, finally fell. MacArthur’s promise to “return” had been fulfilled.
Closing In: 
Iwo Jima and Okinawa

While General Douglas MacArthur completed his assault on the Philippines, U.S. marines under Admiral Chester W. Nimitz's overall command drove even closer to the Japanese mainland, attacking the heavily fortified island of Iwo Jima. The marines landed on February 19, 1945, after American airpower had pummeled the island for seventy-two days straight.

As Iwo Jima represented a crucial link in Japan's inner ring of defense, it was honeycombed with bunkers and defended with tremendous ferocity. Americans came prepared with a force of more than 110,000 American troops and eight hundred ships. The mission was expected to take fourteen days. Instead it took thirty-six days to secure the strategically vital island, and the cost was steep. Some 6,800 Americans were killed in action; many more were wounded. Three of the servicemen pictured in the famous photograph taken on February 23, 1945, by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal, Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima, died on the island in subsequent fighting.

In the wake of the bloody struggle for Iwo Jima, Nimitz's forces moved on to attack Okinawa, which, as one of the Japanese home
islands, was considered a vital target due to its potential as an air base in support of the anticipated U.S. invasion of the Japanese mainland.

The Okinawa campaign was one of the largest of the Pacific War, involving over 1,200 U.S. warships and more than half a million soldiers, sailors, and marines. It began on April 1, 1945, when the first of more than 170,000 American troops waded ashore, largely unopposed. They soon found themselves in a fierce struggle with nearly a hundred thousand Japanese troops and militia bent on defending the island. It would take three months of brutal fighting to finally gain control of Okinawa.

In the end, more than twelve thousand Americans lost their lives, while thirty-six warships were sunk and nearly four hundred were damaged, many to the more than 1,900 kamikaze attacks carried out by the Japanese. Of the Japanese garrison defending the island, only 7,400 survived to become prisoners of war.

Left: U.S. Marines pass through a small village where a Japanese soldier lies dead, Okinawa, April 1945. The battle for Okinawa, one of the largest campaigns of the Pacific war, lasted three months, from April through June 1945. National Archives

Below: Japanese prisoners of war at Okuku on the island of Okinawa, June 27, 1945. The Japanese fought almost to the last man for this home island just 340 miles off the Japanese mainland. Of the hundred thousand or so soldiers and conscripts ready to defend the island, fewer than one in ten survived to be taken prisoner. Caught in the crossfire, huge numbers of Okinawan civilians also died. LOC
"Utter Destruction" from the Air

The advance of American forces to the Marianas in 1944 and beyond to Iwo Jima and Okinawa in 1945 brought the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) within striking distance of Japan. Now, using a newly developed heavy bomber called the B-29 Superfortress, the Americans began a devastating air campaign against the Japanese mainland.

Initially this involved the destruction of mainly industrial targets, particularly aircraft factories, using high-altitude precision daylight bombing techniques. But by the early spring of 1945, under the direction of the newly appointed major general Curtis LeMay, this tactic gave way to low-altitude nighttime incendiary raids that rained down fire on Japanese cities. One of the most devastating took place on the night of March 9, 1945, when roughly three hundred B-29s attacked Tokyo. The resulting firestorm incinerated nearly a quarter of the city and killed an estimated eighty-five thousand Japanese civilians.

More air attacks followed on Tokyo and other Japanese cities until, by the end of July 1945, the USAAF had virtually run out of targets. With millions homeless and the Japanese economy—to say nothing of its military—shattered, the emperor and civilian leadership began to question the wisdom of continuing the war. But Japan’s military leadership still refused to contemplate capitulation, and hence chose to ignore the Allied ultimatum warning Japan of “prompt and utter destruction” if it did not immediately agree to the surrender terms contained in the July 26 Potsdam Declaration.

On August 6 and 9, U.S. planes dropped atomic bombs—“Little Boy” and “Fat Man”—on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, leveling large portions of these cities and decimating their populations. The bombs killed more than 150,000 people, some by impact and fire, others by radiation. Their detonation also brought the war to a...
The destruction of much of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was coupled with a Russian invasion of the Japanese-held Chinese province of Manchuria on August 8—another blow to the Japanese, who had hoped the Soviets might help negotiate a less onerous peace with the Allies. Thus the Japanese defeat was incontestably complete. On August 15, 1945, the emperor and imperial government of Japan agreed to surrender. Two weeks later, General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and other Allied representatives signed the surrender documents aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

With this act, six years and a day after Adolf Hitler launched his attack on Poland, the Second World War, by far the bloodiest war in human history, finally came to an end.