

Chapter 16 Section 2- Japan Strikes in the Pacific

The Surprise Attack on Pearl Harbor- By August 1940, Americans had cracked a Japanese secret code. They were well aware of Japanese plans for Southeast Asia. If Japan conquered European colonies there, it could also threaten the American controlled Philippine Islands and Guam. To stop the Japanese advance, the U.S. government sent aid to strengthen Chinese resistance. And when the Japanese overran French Indochina in July 1941, Roosevelt cut off oil shipments to Japan.

Despite an oil shortage, the Japanese continued their conquests. They hoped to catch the United States by surprise. So they planned massive attacks in Southeast Asia and in the Pacific—both at the same time. Japan's greatest naval strategist, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, also argued that the U.S. fleet in Hawaii was "a dagger pointed at our throat" and must be destroyed.

Early in the morning of December 7, 1941, American sailors at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii awoke to the roar of explosives. A Japanese attack was underway! The United States had known from a coded Japanese message that an attack might come. But they did not know when or where it would occur. Within two hours, the Japanese had sunk or damaged 18 ships, including 8 battleships—nearly the whole U.S. Pacific fleet. Some 2,400 Americans were killed— with more than 1,000 wounded. News of the attack stunned the American people. The next day, Congress declared war on Japan. In his speech to Congress, President Roosevelt described December 7 as "a date which will live in infamy."

Fall of Southeast Asian Colonies- The Japanese had planned a series of strikes at the United States in the Pacific. After the bombing at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese seized Guam and Wake Island in the western Pacific. They then launched an attack on the Philippines. In January 1942, the Japanese marched into the Philippine capital of Manila. They overwhelmed American and Filipino defenders on the Bataan Peninsula in April—and in May, on the island of Corregidor. The Japanese also hit the British, seizing Hong Kong and invading Malaya. By February 1942, the Japanese had reached Singapore. After a fierce pounding, the colony surrendered. By March, the Japanese had conquered the resource-rich Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), including the islands of Java, Sumatra, Borneo, and Celebes. After Malaya, the Japanese took Burma, between China and India. China received supplies by way of the Burma Road. The Japanese could now close off the road. Now they might force the Chinese to surrender.

By the time Burma fell, Japan had conquered more than 1 million square miles of land with about 150 million people. Before these conquests, the Japanese

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had tried to win the support of Asians with the anti-colonialist idea of “Asia for the Asians.” After victory, however, the Japanese quickly made it clear that they had come as conquerors. Native peoples often received the same brutal treatment as the 150,000 prisoners of war. On what is called the Bataan Death March, the Japanese subjected prisoners to terrible cruelties.

Doolittle’s Raid on Japan- After a string of victories, the Japanese seemed unbeatable. Nonetheless, the Allies— mainly Americans and Australians—were anxious to strike back in the Pacific. In April 1942, the United States wanted revenge for Pearl Harbor. So the United States sent 16 B-25 bombers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle to bomb Tokyo and other major Japanese cities. The bombs did little damage. The attack, however, made an important psychological point: the Japanese could be attacked.

Doolittle’s raid on Japan raised American morale and shook the confidence of some Japanese. As one Japanese citizen described it, “We started to doubt that we were invincible.” In addition, Japan had won a vast empire that was becoming difficult to defend and control.

Battle of the Coral Sea- Slowly, the Allies began to turn the tide of war. Early in May 1942, an American fleet with Australian support intercepted a Japanese strike force. The force had been about to attack Port Moresby. The city housed a critical Allied air base in southeastern New Guinea. From this base, the Japanese could have easily invaded Australia.

In the battle that followed—the Battle of the Coral Sea—both fleets fought using a new kind of naval warfare. The opposing ships did not fire a single shot. In fact, they often could not see one other. Instead, airplanes taking off from huge aircraft carriers did all the fighting. In the end, the battle was something of a draw. The Allies lost more ships than the Japanese, who claimed victory. But the Allies had stopped Japan’s southward expansion for the first time.

The Battle of Midway- Japan next targeted Midway Island, west of Hawaii. The island was home to a key American airfield. However, by June 1942, yet another Japanese code had been broken. As a result, the new commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz, knew that a force of over 150 ships was heading toward Midway. The Japanese fleet was the largest naval force ever assembled. It could also boast the world’s largest battleship, carrying Admiral

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Yamamoto himself. Yamamoto hoped not only to seize Midway but also to finish off the U.S. Pacific fleet. He hoped the American force would come from Pearl Harbor to defend the island.

Nimitz was outnumbered four to one in ships and planes. Even so, he was preparing an ambush for the Japanese at Midway. On June 4, with American forces hidden beyond the horizon, Nimitz allowed the enemy to launch the first strike. As Japanese planes roared over Midway Island, American carrier planes swooped in to attack Japanese ships. Many Japanese planes were still on the decks of the ships. The strategy was a success. American pilots destroyed 332 Japanese planes, all four aircraft carriers, and one support ship. Yamamoto ordered his crippled fleet to withdraw. By June 6, 1942, the battle was over. One Japanese official commented, "The Americans had avenged Pearl Harbor." The Battle of Midway had also turned the tide of war in the Pacific against the Japanese.

Battle of Guadalcanal- With morale high after their Midway victory, the Allies took the offensive. The Pacific war was one of vast distances. Japanese troops had dug in on hundreds of islands across the ocean. General Douglas MacArthur was commander of the Allied land forces in the Pacific. He believed that storming each island would be a long, costly effort. Instead, he wanted to "island-hop" past Japanese strongpoints. He would then seize islands that were not well defended but were closer to Japan. After taking the islands, MacArthur would use air power to cut supply lines and starve enemy troops. "Hit 'em where they ain't, let 'em die on the vine," MacArthur declared.

MacArthur's first target soon presented itself. The U.S. government had learned that the Japanese were building a huge air base on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. The Allies had to strike fast before the base was completed and became another Japanese strongpoint. At dawn on August 7, 1942, about 19,000 U.S. Marines, with Australian support, landed on Guadalcanal and a few nearby islands. Caught unprepared, the Japanese at Guadalcanal radioed, "Enemy forces overwhelming. We will defend our posts to the death."

The marines had easily taken the Japanese airfield. But the battle for control of the island turned into a savage struggle as both sides poured in fresh troops. In February 1943, after six months of fighting on land and at sea, the Battle of Guadalcanal finally ended. After losing 23,000 men out of 36,000, the Japanese abandoned the island they came to call "the Island of Death."