

2 Japan Strikes in the Pacific

TERMS & NAMES

- Isoroku Yamamoto
- Pearl Harbor
- Battle of Midway
- Douglas MacArthur
- Battle of Guadalcanal

MAIN IDEA

Carving out an empire, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and brought the United States into World War II.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

World War II established the role of the United States as a leading player in international affairs.

SETTING THE STAGE Like Hitler, Japan's military leaders also had dreams of empire. Japan was overcrowded and faced shortages of raw materials. To solve these problems—and to encourage nationalism—the Japanese began a program of empire building that would lead to war.

Japan Seeks a Pacific Empire

Japan's expansion began in 1931. In that year, Japanese troops took over Manchuria in northeastern China. Six years later, Japanese armies swept into the heartland of China. They expected quick victory. Chinese resistance, however, caused the war to drag on. This caused a strain on Japan's economy. To increase their resources, Japanese leaders looked toward the rich European colonies of Southeast Asia.

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** (ih-soh-ROO-koo YAH-muh-MOH-toh), also argued that the U.S. fleet in Hawaii was “a dagger pointed at our throat” and must be destroyed.

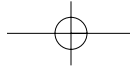
Early in the morning of December 7, 1941, American sailors at **Pearl Harbor** in Hawaii awoke to the roar of explosives. A Japanese attack was underway! The United States had known from a coded Japanese message that an attack might come. But they did not know when or where it would occur. Within two 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.”

Background

French Indochina was an area now made up by Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.



The U.S.S. West Virginia in flames after taking a direct hit during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.



The Tide of Japanese Victories 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 (buh-TAN) 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 (SEHL-uh-BEEZ). 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 had tried to win the support of Asians with the anticolonialist 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. One American soldier reported:

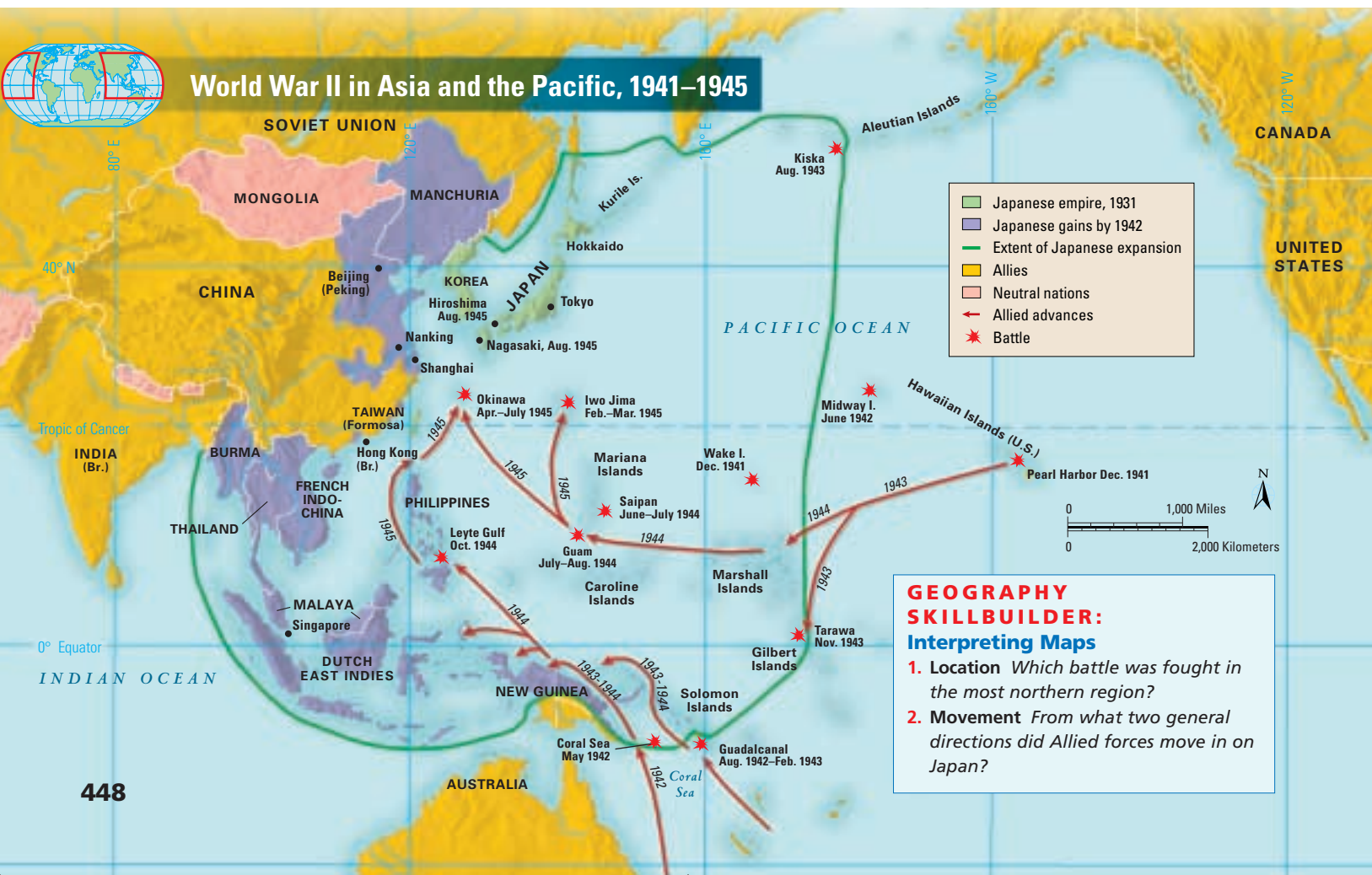
A VOICE FROM THE PAST

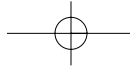
I was questioned by a Japanese officer who found out that I had been in a Philippine Scout Battalion. The [Japanese] hated the Scouts. . . . Anyway, they took me outside and I was forced to watch as they buried six of my Scouts alive. They made the men dig their own graves, and then had them kneel down in a pit. The guards hit them over the head with shovels to stun them and piled earth on top.

LIEUTENANT JOHN SPAINHOWER, quoted in *War Diary 1939–1945*

Background

According to the centuries-old warrior code called *Bushido*, a Japanese soldier must commit suicide, or *hari-kari*, rather than surrender. So Japanese soldiers had contempt for Allied prisoners of war.





The Allies Strike Back

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.

The Allies Turn the Tide of War 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.

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 (GIHN-ee). 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 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.

The Allies Go on the Offensive 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

Vocabulary
invincible:
unconquerable.

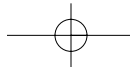
THINK THROUGH HISTORY

A. Analyzing

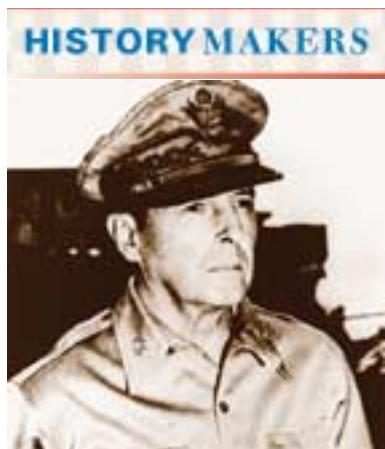
Motives What reasons might Admiral Yamamoto have had for thinking the Americans would send their entire Pacific fleet to defend Midway Island?



As happened in other battles of the Pacific war, U.S. Marines destroy a cave connected to a Japanese fort on the island of Iwo Jima.



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.



Douglas MacArthur
1880–1964

Son of a Civil War army officer, Douglas MacArthur said that his first memory was the “sound of bugles.” MacArthur yearned, even at an early age, for a life of action and adventure. With a strong will and his mother’s encouragement, he grew to become one of the most brilliant military strategists of World War II.

MacArthur believed that destiny had called him to perform great deeds. He once boasted, “All Germany cannot fabricate the shell that will kill me.” The general had his critics, but he also inspired deep loyalty among his men. One remarked, “His first thought was always for the soldier.”

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.”

To war correspondent Ralph Martin and the soldiers who fought there, Guadalcanal was simply “hell”:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Hell was furry red spiders as big as your fist, giant lizards as long as your leg, leeches falling from trees to suck blood, armies of white ants with bites of fire, scurrying scorpions inflaming any flesh they touched, enormous rats and bats everywhere, and rivers with waiting crocodiles. Hell was the sour, foul smell of the squishy jungle, humidity that rotted a body within hours. . . . Hell was an enemy . . . so fanatic that it used its own dead as booby traps.

RALPH G. MARTIN, quoted in *The GI War*

As Japan worked to establish a new order in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, the Nazis moved ahead with Hitler’s plan for a new order in Europe. Hitler’s goal was not only the conquest of Europe. He

also aimed at enslaving Europe’s people and forcing them to work for Germany’s prosperity. In particular, the Führer had plans for dealing with those he considered unfit for the Third Reich. You will learn about Hitler’s plans in Section 3.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

B. Identifying Problems If the vast distances of the Pacific caused problems for the Allies, how might they have also caused problems for the Japanese?

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

C. Analyzing Causes What reasons could have made the Japanese fight until they lost 23,000 out of 36,000 defending the island of Guadalcanal?

Section 2 Assessment

1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Isoroku Yamamoto
- Pearl Harbor
- Battle of Midway
- Douglas MacArthur
- Battle of Guadalcanal

2. TAKING NOTES

Create a chart like the one below. List four major events of the war in the Pacific between 1941 and 1943.

Event 1:	
Event 2:	
Event 3:	
Event 4:	

Which event was most important in turning the tide of the war in the Pacific against the Japanese? Why?

3. EVALUATING DECISIONS

Judging from the effects of the attack on Pearl Harbor, do you think Yamamoto made a wise decision in bombing Pearl Harbor? Why or why not?

THINK ABOUT

- Yamamoto’s goals in the bombing
- U.S. involvement in World War II
- the effects of the bombing

4. ANALYZING THEMES

Empire Building What do you think Yamamoto’s biggest problems were in building the Japanese empire in the Pacific?

THINK ABOUT

- geographical problems
- European/American interests in the Pacific
- psychological factors