

War in the Pacific Notes

SSII Exp.

UNIT THREE
1933-1945

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K. THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC

The attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour was not intended by the Japanese to draw the Americans into a large war. The Japanese thinking was that if they were going to go on a war of conquest the main obstacle in their path was the American navy based at Pearl Harbour. They reasoned that if they could knock out this enemy, then go on their war of conquest, that the Americans would be too "soft" to pay the price of regaining all that territory. Needless to say, the Japanese were wrong in their opinion of the American willingness to go to war. On 8 December, 1941 the United States declared war on Japan.

1. THE JAPANESE OFFENSIVE

The attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December, 1941 was intended to sink or immobilize U.S.A. battleships and aircraft carriers. It almost succeeded. Eight battleships were damaged, but only two were lost permanently. All three carriers were absent during the raid; by necessity they would become the major element of the U.S.A. naval forces.

The attack on Pearl Harbour was followed by very quick and devastating attacks on many parts of the Far East. By the middle of 1942 the Japanese had conquered Guam, Wake, Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, Burma, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, and parts of New Guinea. They already held large portions of China, Indochina, and Thailand before Pearl Harbour. Now they threatened Australia.

2. TURNING THE TIDE

The first military strike by the Americans was of little military value. The **Doolittle Raid**, so named after the man who led it, was a bomber mission over Japan. The simple fact that bombs were dropped on the home islands had a profound effect on morale in Japan and the United States.

a) The Battle of the Coral Sea: May, 1942

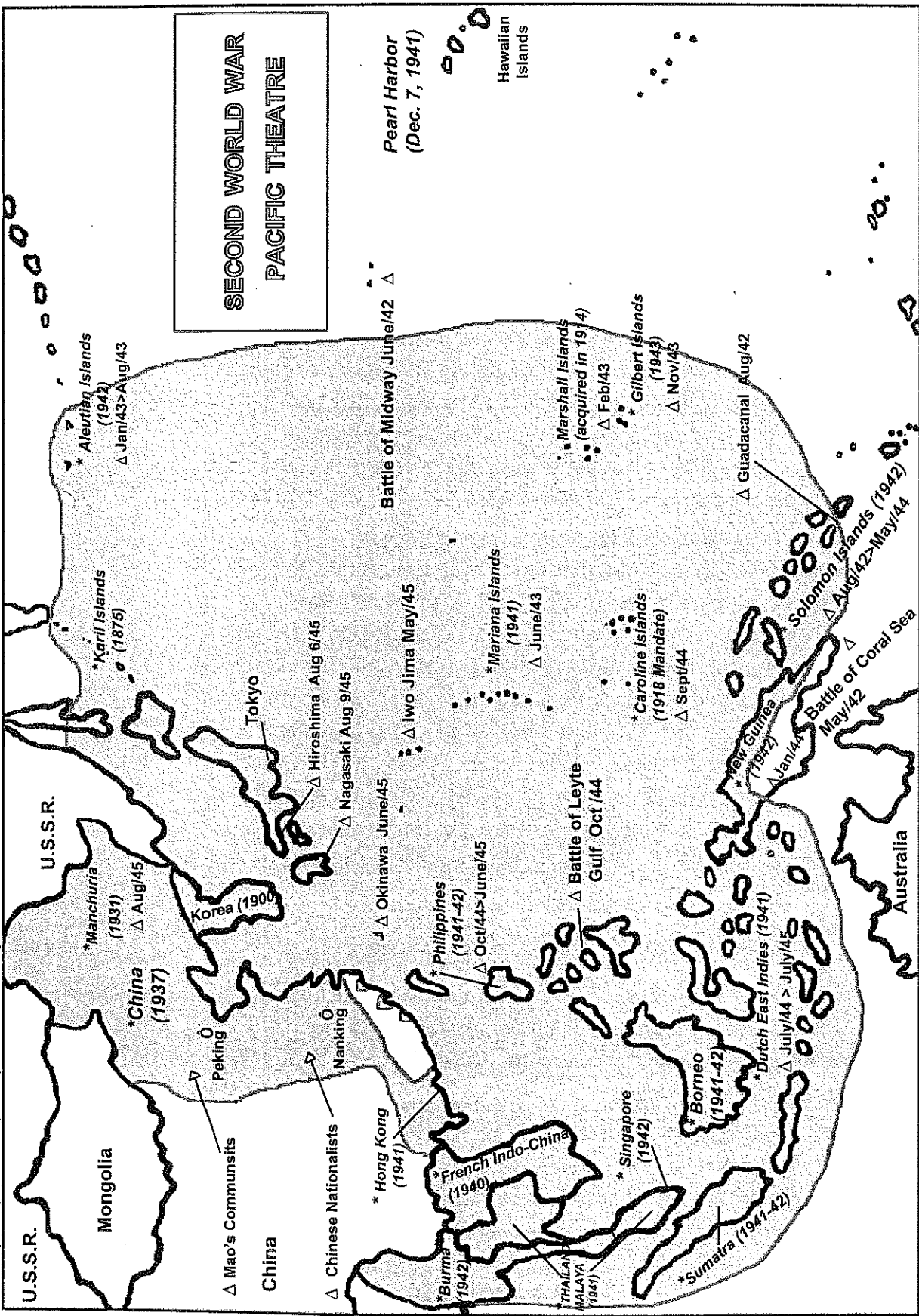
This battle is unique in that the whole battle is planes versus planes (supported by aircraft carriers). The battle itself was a draw, but could be seen as a setback for the Japanese because it prevented them from taking Port Moresby from which they could have bombed Australia.

b) The Battle of Midway: June, 1942

This is considered to be the turning point battle of the Pacific theatre.

**SECOND WORLD WAR
PACIFIC THEATRE**

Pearl Harbor
(Dec. 7, 1941)



Shaded area indicates furthest extent of Japanese expansion.

* Asterisk followed by *italic type* indicates Japanese invasion date or possession date.

△ Triangle followed by normal type indicates Allied attack followed by Allied possession.

△ Also indicates major sea battle.

Again Midway itself is not of primary importance here. What is important is that the American Pacific fleet defeated the Japanese fleet by sinking four of the Japanese aircraft carriers as well as one heavy cruiser. The Americans lost one aircraft carrier and one destroyer. Naval aviation (i.e., aircraft carriers with their planes) was confirmed as the most important element of combat in the Pacific. The Japanese had lost their irreplaceable aircraft carriers and their equally irreplaceable pilots.

c) Island-Hopping

During 1943 progress for the American forces across the central Pacific was slow. A strategy was adopted which assumed that aircraft would be the most important weapon of this war. Instead of taking every piece of land captured by the Japanese, the Americans chose to remove the Japanese from strategic islands in order to get them ever closer to the main islands of Japan. This saved them much fighting and casualties. The distance between islands taken was determined by the flying (distance) capacities of their airplanes.

d) Battle of Leyte Gulf: October, 1944

This is the largest naval battle in the history of war at sea. From the American point of view it was prerequisite to retaking the Philippines. This battle is going to pit virtually the whole American Pacific fleet against all of what was left of the Japanese fleet. It is during this battle that the Japanese would introduce the **kamikaze** pilots. The word kamikaze means divine wind. The pilots were sent on suicide missions to crash their planes (with bombs) into the American ships. This was a very difficult technique to defend against. (Later, at Okinawa 5000 American seamen would lose their lives as a result of similar attacks.) The Japanese lost one half of their fleet at Leyte Gulf including four more aircraft carriers.

3. THE FINAL STAGES OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The island-hopping strategy practised by the American forces was effective, but resulted in huge casualties. In February, 1945 (**Iwo Jima**) and then from April until June (**Okinawa**) the Americans fought against troops who would rather commit suicide than surrender. This meant the Americans had to fight until the last Japanese soldier was killed.

In March of 1945 the Americans began the systematic incendiary (fire) bombing of Tokyo. It was believed that this would urge the Japanese to surrender. The resulting firestorms caused great loss of life and huge property damage, but no surrender was forthcoming.

a) The Manhattan Project

Since March of 1943 the United States had funded a very secret, very expensive project to determine if it was possible using the modern theories

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/abomb/mpmenu.htm>

of nuclear physics to create an atomic bomb. Because the science involved in this project was so theoretical it was impossible for American strategists to count on being able to use it against the enemy. While **Harry S. Truman** (Roosevelt had died in April) was at the Potsdam Conference in July, 1945 he learned that the test of the A-bomb at Los Alamos, New Mexico, had been successful. Only three bombs had been produced in the original project. The results at Los Alamos (from a scientific point of view) were far more spectacular than anyone had hoped for. Truman now had another option for ending the Pacific war. Incidentally, in the proceedings since the end of the war in Europe Truman had been especially polite to Stalin in the hope that he could draw the Soviet Union into the war with Japan.

b) Hiroshima: 6 August, 1945

American military planners informed Truman that he could expect from 1 to 1.5 million American casualties and another twelve to eighteen months of fighting to take the home islands of Japan using conventional warfare. Therefore, Truman decided to use the atomic bomb on the Japanese city of **Hiroshima**. This city had been left untouched by earlier American raids. The city and approximately 100,000 people were instantly destroyed. It is also interesting to note that now, 8 August, the Soviets declared war on Japan.

c) Nagasaki: 9 August, 1945

Not getting the response he wanted, Truman ordered the next atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese city of **Nagasaki**. This was carried out on 9 August.

d) Peace

On 14 August the Japanese government sued for peace. On 2 September the appropriate documents were signed on board the American battleship, the Missouri. General Douglas MacArthur accepted the surrender on behalf of the Allies.