

The Southern and Eastern Pacific

Following the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 the Japanese began their campaign against the Philippines and Dutch East Indies in early 1942. The Allied command in the Southern Pacific at this time comprised American, British, Dutch and Australian forces. The Japanese sweep southward was far more rapid than expected; the British were gradually driven out of Malaya and eventually surrendered Singapore on February 15th. In the Philippines the Americans fought a three month campaign, but by April 9th their remaining troops, which had been under siege on the Bataan peninsula, also surrendered. Some 78,000 men were forced to make a 65 mile march into captivity, many of them dying along the way. Meanwhile in the strategically important Dutch East Indies attempts to stop the invasion resulted in heavy Allied losses on land and at sea. On March 8th, after talks with the Japanese High Command, the Dutch East Indies Government decided to surrender unconditionally. The rapid military success of the Japanese had thus given them control of captured territory down the chain of Western Pacific islands. Their ultimate plan was to provide a deep defensive screen controlling the Central Pacific across to Australia and north to the Aleutians. Seeking to further extend their control over the Coral Sea the Japanese now moved against Port Moresby in New Guinea, thereby isolating Australia still further. To the Allies Port Moresby was vital, not only for the security of Australia but also as a springboard for future offensives in the Pacific. The attack force left its base in New Britain on May 4th anticipating a landing on May 7th.

However since Pearl Harbour the Americans had succeeded in completely breaking the Japanese naval code and therefore possessed detailed intelligence concerning the Japanese plans. As early as May 6th the Japanese ships entering the Coral Sea had been detected and attacked by American aircraft from Australia. For their part the Japanese, anticipating a threat from the American naval task force known to be in the area, began launching reconnaissance aircraft in an attempt to locate the Americans. Early on May 7th search planes from the American aircraft carriers located the Japanese invasion fleet and sank the Japanese carrier Shoho, causing the Japanese to postpone the invasion of Port Moresby. Worse still a retaliatory air strike by the Japanese failed to find the American task force.

However by May 8th the Japanese were able to locate the American force and both sides launched air strikes. The Japanese carrier Shokaku was disabled, and the American carrier Lexington was badly damaged and eventually

abandoned. Tactically the battle had been a victory for the Japanese, but strategically it was an American victory as the capture of Port Moresby had been thwarted.

The tide was now about to turn. At the end of May, seeking to still further extend their defence perimeter, the Japanese sent two task forces against the Americans. In the north a diversionary attack was made against the Aleutian Islands, while in the Southern Pacific a powerful carrier-based force was dispatched to attack the island of Midway. For the Japanese, it was to complete what had begun at Pearl Harbour – the destruction of the American aircraft carriers. However, as before, the Americans were forewarned and were able to evade detection by Japanese reconnaissance patrols. Early on June 3rd an American scout plane flying some 700 miles west of Midway sighted the Japanese task force and passed on the information to Admiral Fletcher, whose two carrier groups were some 400 miles to the north of the island. Fletcher immediately turned his ships to the south, thus enabling him to be in a flying-off position by dawn the following day. The scene was now set for one of the most decisive battles in naval history.

Unaware of the American presence to the north, the main Japanese activity was in preparation for the attack on Midway, which went in against feeble opposition from the land-based American aircraft and ground troops. At this point a scout plane from the Japanese fleet did discover the American task forces, but failed to identify the presence of the vital aircraft carriers. Assuming therefore that they were not under any immediate threat, the Japanese admiral Nagumo ordered a further strike against the island.

Meanwhile the first strike from the American carriers was doomed. One by one the American torpedo bombers were shot down by the Japanese carrier-based fighters. Their sacrifice was not however in vain for, while the Japanese fighters were enjoying the easy pickings offered by the slow moving American torpedo bombers, high overhead and unmolested the second wave of dive bombers was about to pounce. Within the space of five minutes three of the four Japanese carriers were crippled and sinking.

Realising that only three of the Japanese carriers known to be in the area had been located and destroyed, Admiral Fletcher launched an immediate search and set up a defence patrol around his ships. None too soon, as an attack from the remaining Japanese carrier Hiryu developed and, despite fierce American opposition, the American flagship Yorktown was crippled and abandoned,

sinking three days later. Meanwhile American aircraft from the second task force operating 60 miles to the north had located the surviving Hiryu and wreaked vengeance, crippling and eventually sinking her. The battle of Midway was over.

Midway smashed any chances Japan had of further expansion and forced their planners to concentrate on consolidation. However the real defeat of Japan could only begin with the recapture of the Pacific islands and the first confrontation came on the island of Guadalcanal. On August 7th the first American Marine landings took place and the next six months set the scene for much of the Pacific campaign. Despite repeated attempts between August 1942 and February 1943 the Japanese were unable to dislodge the Americans. Large numbers of the Marines suffered from malnutrition, disease and exhaustion but they held on, and eventually, appalled by their losses, the last Japanese left the island on February 11th.

Following victory on Guadalcanal there was a relentless Allied drive along the Solomon Islands chain, through New Georgia to Bougainville, and onwards towards the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. For the Americans this meant the development of a new form of naval warfare, mounting and supplying seaborne attacks thousands of miles from their major bases. The completion of the occupation of the Gilbert Islands in November 1943 and the main atolls of the Marshall Islands in February 1944 opened the way for the drive into the Central Pacific and directly to the heart of the Japanese defence system.

The next step involved the further amphibious advance on the Marianas, which would breach the island ring of defence and cut the air route between Japan and New Guinea. For the American planners the capture of the Marianas would bring the great advantage of bases on the islands, which would enable continuous heavy bombing of the Japanese mainland as well as severing communications with the southern part of their empire. On June 11th a large task force including eight aircraft carriers began the attack, and progressively over the next few days the Japanese naval fleet gathered to oppose it. By this point in the Pacific war American radar and communications were infinitely superior to the Japanese and almost all incoming aircraft were met with swarms of American fighters. Now began a series of air battles around the attacking task force which became known as the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot." Very few aircraft were able to break through the protective screen and over 200 Japanese planes were lost. By June 19th it was all over, and the

last great carrier battle of the war came to an end with a clear cut victory for the American Pacific fleet.

Immediately following the clearance of the Southern Pacific American strategists debated the location of their next attack. MacArthur argued for a drive to reconquer the Philippines, while others favoured a more direct attack on Formosa, on the very threshold of Japan. The ultimate resolution was very much in favour of MacArthur and a return to the Philippines. The first carrier strikes against the islands began on October 20th and represented the largest amphibious assault yet undertaken in the Pacific. Clear evidence of American naval and air superiority was provided in the days that followed. Over 600 Japanese aircraft were lost and although one American carrier, the Princeton, was sunk the American landings on Leyte went ahead. Despite bitter struggles and tropical downpours, which made progress very slow at times, the Japanese were driven back and on December 25th the remaining Japanese troops on Leyte began withdrawing to other islands in the Central Philippines.

This defeat opened the way for American re-conquest of the rest of the Philippines. Despite their recent defeats the Japanese still had in excess of 250,000 ground troops available to meet the expected American assault on Luzon, which began on January 9th 1945. Now, more than ever, American air power, fire power and manoeuvrability came to the fore, and the best the Japanese could do was slow the inevitable advance on their homeland. Throughout January slow progress was made across the island, until on February 3rd forward elements of MacArthur's forces reached the outskirts of the capital Manila. Sadly almost every building in Manila became a minor fort. Streets were barricaded and mined, and for the first time in the Pacific war the Americans were forced to capture a large metropolitan area. The old 16th century citadel became a bloody battlefield that took two days to clear, but eventually on March 2nd, nine days short of three years after he had left the island, MacArthur was able to return to his former headquarters.

Now just two islands remained on the route to the Japanese homeland, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Yet again American strategists debated the value of simply bypassing these and launching a direct assault on Japan itself. Uppermost in their minds was the need for air bases nearer to the mainland, as the round trip to the Marianas was 2,800 miles and far beyond the range of any of their fighter aircraft. The pre-assault bombardment of Iwo Jima began on February 16th and lasted for three days. The initial landings were largely unopposed, but once inland the Marines faced a vicious barrage of small arms fire from

hidden bunkers and underground pillboxes. This operation was to become the most costly in Marine history. Over 6,800 men lost their lives, but not in vain, as even before the island was secured the first damaged B29's, returning from a raid on Japan, were able to land safely. On March 16th the island was declared secure, and a few days later Mustang fighters began escorting B29's on their raids over Japan.

Anticipating the forthcoming campaign against Okinawa, the Japanese had been withdrawing troops from China, Manchuria and even the mainland, to strengthen the island garrison. Unlike previous island campaigns, the Japanese on this occasion chose not to defend the beaches, and so when on April 1st the attack went in 50,000 marines landed without a shot being fired. The defenders of the northern part of the island were methodically killed off by the Marines, but as they turned south it became clear that the defences were very strong and supported by underground tunnels and bunkers. Throughout April and May massive strikes, by aircraft and offshore naval gunfire, failed to break through, and it wasn't until June 19th that, for the first time in the Pacific campaign, large numbers of Japanese began surrendering. Many however did not, preferring as before to take their own lives. The heavy American losses at Okinawa, and before it at Iwo Jima, were a dear price to pay, but they were invaluable in pressing the war against the Japanese homeland and making it clear that defeat was now inevitable.

The Allies had always recognised that to finally defeat the Japanese it would be necessary to mount a full scale invasion of the mainland. Experience of the campaigns from Guadalcanal to Okinawa had taught them that Japanese fanaticism increased as the distance to the home islands decreased. During April and May planning for the invasion to be code named Olympic began. Uppermost in the minds of the planners were the estimates of the likely casualties, which based upon previous campaigns varied between 50,000 and 1,000,000.

However by April and May firebomb raids by B29's operating from the Marianas were having a devastating impact on the populations of many Japanese cities. Tokyo had been all but obliterated by late May, and by June the offensive had been extended still further. At this stage of the war opinions on the continuation of hostilities varied. The Japanese military were fiercely anxious to continue while the Emperor was known to favour peace. Many of the Japanese leaders were well aware of the catastrophic situation facing the nation but dared not voice their true sentiments for fear of reprisal.

As August approached, the Allies made preparations for invasion and the Japanese army braced for the expected onslaught. Meanwhile in the wastes of New Mexico on July 16th the world's first nuclear bomb exploded. On August 6th a B29 operating from Tinian in the Marianas dropped one such bomb on the city of Hiroshima with devastating effect. A second bomb detonated over Nagasaki on August 9th finally convinced Japanese leaders that further resistance would be futile.