1941 to 1945

The Pacific Theater of World War II involved one-third of the Earth's surface but only 5% of its total land mass. It involved vast distances and new strategies, tactics, and weapons of war. Moreover, it involved not just Japan and the United States but Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Canada, China, France, and the Soviet Union. Caught in the middle were the people of the Pacific Islands, in whose homelands and waters the battles were fought. This chronology tracks significant aspects of the Pacific War as a framework for understanding the people and the events that accompanied it.

1941

7 December Without warning, Japanese planes bomb Pearl Harbor and Hickam and Wheeler airfields on Oahu, and within 30 minutes destroy the power of the U.S. Pacific battle fleet—except for aircraft carriers Enterprise, Lexington, and Saratoga, which are at sea. Japan declares war on the United States and Great Britain. The Pearl Harbor attack also brings the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand into the war.

24 December Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commanding United States Army forces in the Far East, begins evacuating 200,000 civilians from Batavia.

26 December Hong Kong is lost to the Japanese.

1942

Jan

1 January Japanese occupy Manila.


15 February Singapore surrenders.

27-28 February Battle of Java Sea results in the destruction of the Japanese 7th Fleet and leads to the collapse of organized Allied military resistance in that area.

18 April Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle leads 16 B-25 bombers from carrier Hornet to bomb targets in Japan.

10 December Japanese capture Guam and begin their drive to the Philippines.

23 December Wake Island is surrendered to the Japanese.

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1943

10 January U.S. troops begin final offensive to clear Guadalcanal. By February 9 organized Japanese resistance on the island is ended. The American victory opens the way for other Allied gains in the Solomons.

22 January January 5-9: Japanese kamikaze pilots prepare for a mission, 1944.

8-9 August Japanese navy sinks four Allied cruisers in Battle of Savo Islands.

14-15 October Battle of E publishing in the Philippines results in sinking of one Japanese carrier by aircraft from USS Enterprise and USS Saratoga.

12-15 November The decisive American victory in the naval battle of Guadalcanal prevents the Japanese from landing reinforcements and makes possible the final conquest of Guadalcanal by U.S. forces.

1944


1945

9 January-23 February Reoccupation of northern Philippines begins as U.S. forces invade Luzon and occupy Manila.

19 February-17 March U.S. Marine and Conquer Island of Okinawa.

28-9 March U.S. forces invade Luzon and occupy Manila.

23-31 March Battle of Leyte Gulf, the last and greatest naval engagement of the war, results in near destruction of the Japanese Navy.

24 November Allied air offensive against Japan begins with B-29 attacks on Tokyo and other targets.

24 July U.S. forces invade Tinian.

15 September U.S. forces invade Morotai and Peleliu.

20 October U.S. forces invade Leyte.

23-25 October Battle of Leyte Gulf, the last and greatest naval engagement of the war, results in near destruction of the Japanese Navy.

14 August Japan accepts Allied unconditional surrender terms.

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7 December Siege of Bataan begins. MacArthur, who had left the Philip­pines six days before, arrives in Australia. Here he utters the now-famous words, "I came through and I shall return."

8 March Japanese land in New Guinea, occupying Lae and Salamaua and threatening Port Moresby.

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7 June Japanese occupy Attu and Kiska in the Aleutian Islands.

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The Japanese conquest of Guam began about an hour after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when Saipan-based Japanese dive bombers launched the first in a series of raids on the island. At that time Guam’s total protection consisted of 15 marine Battalions, 271 U.S. Navy personnel, 134 civilian construction workers, and 247 members of the local Chamorro Insular Force Guard and the Naval Militia (the Guam). The garrison had no artillery, only a few 30-caliber machine guns, and various small arms. For two days the Japanese bombarded and strafed the island. Early on December 10, a special Japanese naval landing party of about 400 men from the 5th Defense Force landed at Dungun’s Beach in Agana Bay. At the same time, a Japanese Army unit known as the South Sea Detachment landed on the beaches of Apo, Sagua, Tumon, Toa, Apat, and other areas. The Insular Guard made a gallant attempt to stop the Japanese advance at the Plaza de Espana in Agana but was soon driven back. By 5:45 a.m., Capt. J. J. Millin, USN, the island’s governor, realized that his tiny command was no match for the invaders and began to surrender his post and the island.

The map at left shows the 1944 liberation of Guam. It followed the same pattern as several dozen similar campaigns conducted by American forces between 1942 and 1945: the opening air and naval barrages, the amphibious assault, the contested landing, and the hard jungle fighting against well-entrenched Japanese forces. The only question was how long the campaign would last and how many lives it would cost. The black lines and dates on the map signify the stages in which the Americans occupied the island and cleared it of its Japanese defenders.

Guam remained in Japanese hands for two and a half years, and Chamorros were forced to endure a military occupation in a war not of their making. For the first four months the island was controlled by army troops, who were housed in schools and government buildings in Agana. The island was renamed Omiya Jima (Great Shrine Island) and Chamorros were required to learn the Japanese custom of bowing. Japanese yam became the island’s currency, and civilian affairs were administered by the branch of a army called the minisei, which, in practice, was run by radio, phones, and cameras were confiscat ed and food was rationed until supplies became exhausted. Chamorros suspected of hiding family members wanted by the Japanese, or of aiding the few Americans that did not surrender, were harassed, beaten, or tortured, and, in some instances, executed by order of the authorities.

Control of the island came under the Imperial Japanese Navy in March 1942. The kibitsu, as it was known, governed the populace for about 19 months. Chamorros were allowed to remain on their farms and trade for products they needed. Social activities included parties, Japanese movies, and sports competitions. Mass meetings were held in Agana to reinforce the Nippon Seishen (spirit of Japan). Schools were reopened and Chamorros were required to learn the Japanese language and customs. English was forbidden.

In early 1944, with the war going badly for Japan and an American invasion threatening, the Japanese Army returned to Guam, bringing with it a new and stricter form of government—the kaitokai. Social activities were terminated, schools were closed, and Chamorro men, women, and children over the age of 12 were forced to work long hours in the fields, repair or build airstrips and defenses, and dig hundreds of Japanese shelter caves, many of which were with in the boundaries of today’s park. Chamorros laboring at bayonet point, were mistreated and, in some cases, executed after completing defense installations. Without warning, 10,000-15,000 Chamorros, young and old, were forced to march with only the belongings they could carry to concentration camps in Guam’s central and southern jungles. With inadequate shelter, little food, and no sanitary facilities, life in these camps was miserable. Despite the hardships, however, incarceration proved to be a blessing in disguise:

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The Guam operation “was brilliantly and valorously conducted and resulted in the recovery of important American Territory and the liberation of loyal people. Well Done.” —Admiral Chester W. Nimitz.