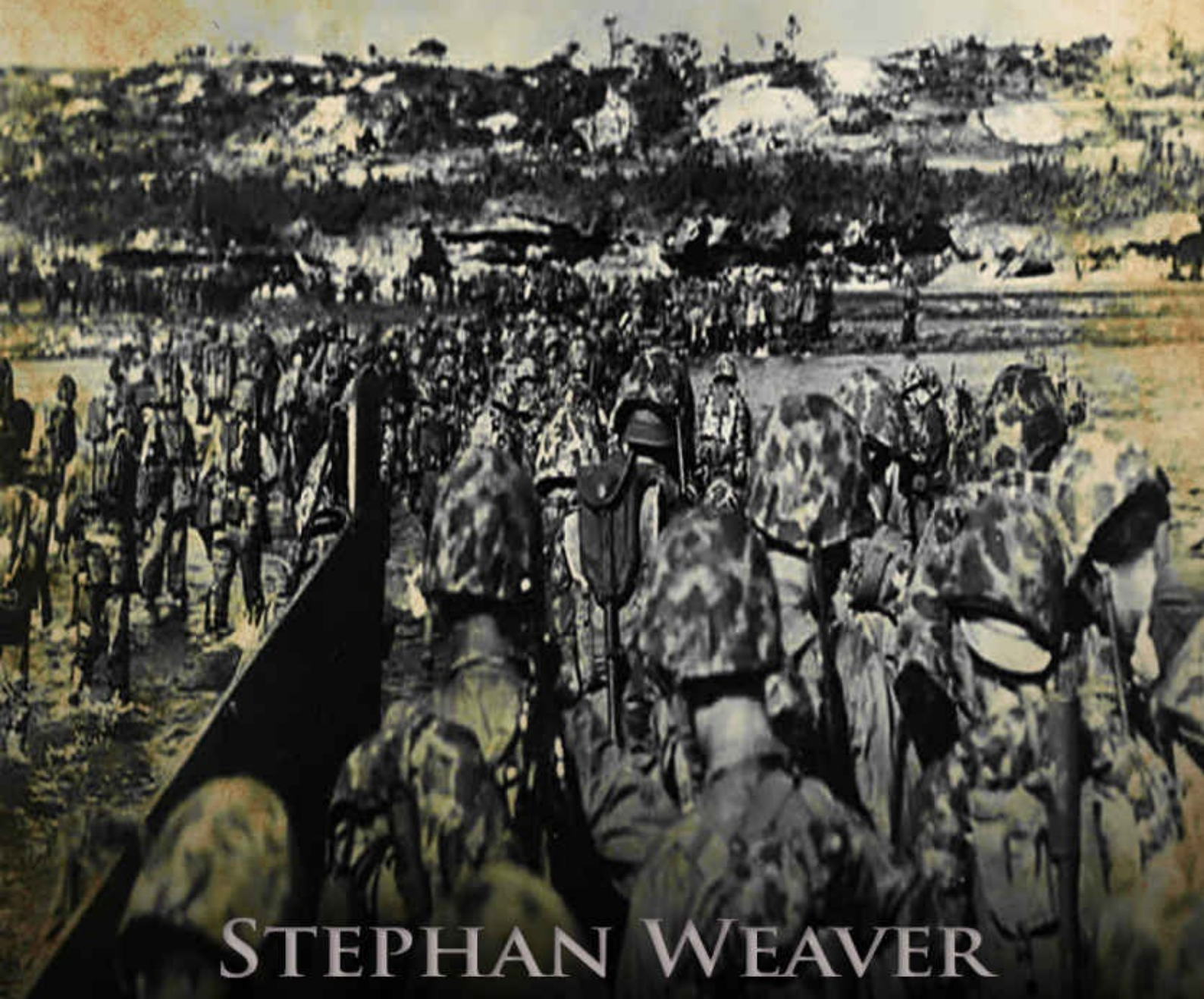


# WORLD WAR II JAPAN



STEPHAN WEAVER

# **WORLD WAR 2**

**Japan**

BY

Stephan Weaver

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# >>BONUSES<<

# Introduction

In today's world, a lot is made of the simple fact that Japan is a country known for its pacifism. However, that has not always been the case as can be seen by their participation in World War II.

Japan was a country that became infamous for attacking all of its neighbors, its kamikaze pilots, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and its horrific POW camps. Its involvement has been the subject of countless war movies with their soldiers being portrayed as fearless warriors who would defend Japan and Emperor Hirohito to the end. This particular point is regarded by many as being true, but the entire story of their involvement in WWII is rather more complex.

# The Beginning of their Story

To get to the point where Japan entered WWII, we need to first understand a bit more about the country itself, especially when Hirohito came to power in 1926. During this period, Japan was moving more towards a democratic culture, but Hirohito changed that and, over time, militarism managed to raise its head. This change in direction would ultimately have disastrous consequences, resulting in the dropping of the atomic bombs towards the end of the war, which killed tens of thousands of people.

Japan in the 1930's was a different country to how we see it today. Its economy had been on the decline for years, and there was a lot of internal trouble, leading to political leaders being assassinated and the entire country being on the brink of revolt. The country's problems were further exacerbated when the United States entered the Great Depression as they were a main supplier of a number of goods. This then put more pressure on the Japanese economy, and the country had to begin to look elsewhere for its raw natural products.

As a result, Japan believed that many of its Asian neighbors would be in a position to help, although their way of tackling the problem was not the diplomatic route. This would ultimately lead to what became known as the Second Sino-Japanese War starting in 1937.

## **War with their Neighbors.**

The Second Sino-Japanese War came about as a direct result of two things: First, there was evidence that China was working to rebuild itself as a power, and this was something that Japan could not allow while it was struggling. There had long been tension between the two countries with both vying for supremacy in Asia, so tensions heightened as a result.

Second, Japan became afraid that China would try to take over the area of Manchuria, and in particular, the railroad system. Due to this fear, Japan invaded in 1931 and established an improvised state called Manchukuo. This, in turn, led to a number of border clashes with China, culminating in war breaking out in 1937.

This war was bad news for Japan as it pushed their economy to the absolute limit. They were running short on various supplies, such as oil, iron, and rubber, and unfortunately for them, they had no obvious allies to call upon. The situation only continued to turn against Japan when they alienated the U/S. after attacking a U.S. gunboat.

Being in a desperate situation can lead to taking desperate actions, and that was the case with Japan. They knew they had to get their hands on certain resources, and they only had two options: either Siberia or the South Pacific.

First, they attempted to go to Siberia but lost at the Battle of Khalkhin in 1939. This forced their hand into the second option, which was the South Pacific, although what followed was another example of poor military decision making and not thinking through the potential consequences..

## **Misreading the Situation and WWII.**

Due to their desire to seek out oil and iron matched with their failure to reach Siberia, Japan realized that they had to turn to the South Pacific to get the resources they required to fight against China. However, they had a problem in that this part of the world had been colonized, so they would be forced to go up against one of the world super powers.

Japan did not think that this would be an issue. They had been on the side of the allies in WWI, and this had put them in a favourable position. They wrongly believed that countries owed them something in return for their earlier support.

However, Japan did also have several issues with both Britain and the United States. Primarily, they were irritated by the actions of the United States in 1939 after they placed restrictions on both oil and metals as a direct result of their war with China. This only further fuelled the fire, and this was matched in 1940 when Britain began to close down certain routes in order to restrict the materials that could reach the Japanese.

The year 1940 is regarded as a turning point in the involvement of Japan in WWII. After the British closed down the Burma Road supply route to China, the U.S. then sought to disrupt what it saw as the Japanese war machine by introducing new laws and restrictions on the export of certain materials just a few days later.

These actions further forced the hand of the Japanese who responded in September 1940 in perhaps the only way that they felt they could respond—by invading French Indochina.

## **Building Ties with Germany and Italy.**

After Japan invaded French Indochina on September 22nd, it took just five days for them to reach an agreement with both Germany and Italy via what became known as the Tripartite Act. This agreement saw the three countries come to an understanding that they would work together and that an enemy of one country was then an enemy to all three.

This act suddenly gave Japan some allies in the world whereas before they had felt as if they had no support. What would then follow over the next 12 months was a gradual build-up of tension in the area of the Pacific, which would eventually lead to the breakout of war.

# **The Attack on Pearl Harbor.**

When it comes to important moments in WWII, the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor is perhaps one of the more memorable. It is important to note, however, that even though this attack did signal the start of the Pacific War, it was not the sole attack on December 8, 1941.

Throughout the year, since the signing of the Tripartite Act, Japan had been working on a plan to dominate the South Pacific. They were still suffering from a chronic shortage of raw materials, and for them, the only solution was to capture vast swathes of both Southeast Asia as well as the Dutch East Indies.

The Japanese military formulated a plan whereby they would attack the American, British, and Dutch interests simultaneously across a vast area to gain access to those materials. However, they were under the impression that these countries would simply try to negotiate some kind of peace settlement rather than fight. It was their belief that nobody would be interested in fighting a war in this part of the world when they were so preoccupied with fighting in Europe.

Japan completely misread the entire situation.

## **December 8, 1941 – The Pacific War Begins.**

The Pacific War began in earnest on the morning of December 8, 1941 when Japan attacked British Malaya and quickly made some progress with pushing inland, despite the British still having some troops stationed in the country. At the same time, the Japanese also attacked various other locations around Southeast Asia in a meticulously planned assault. In addition, they also attacked British interests in Hong Kong and Singapore with Thailand also a target.

However, at this time, the most infamous attack took place on Hawaii—although technically speaking this occurred on December 7th due to the time difference.

The Japanese fleet had left their home port on November 26th en route to Hawaii. By December 6th, it had largely been agreed upon by a number of countries that Japan were going to attack United States' interest although the money was on it happening in some location in Southeast Asia. President Roosevelt sent a peace appeal directly to Hirohito, although it is noted that he received no reply.

We do know a number of details regarding the attack on Pearl Harbor like that it began at dawn and involved an attack by 90 bombers and 43 fighter planes on the harbor in Oahu, Hawaii. Initially, the first targets were the battleships based in the harbor as well as the airfields used by the U.S. Air Force. This was then followed by an attack by the Imperial Japanese Navy accompanied by over 400 planes. In total, the Japanese attack killed over 2,400 people with over 1,100 injured. Over 1,000 U.S. sailors were killed when the USS Arizona was hit by a single Japanese bomb igniting the magazine store.

At the same time as these attacks were unfolding, Japanese diplomats based in Washington D.C. had made their way to the U.S. Secretary of State. Their purpose? To formally provide the United States with a declaration of war.

The attack was largely a success although it should be noted that they did miss aircraft carriers that were in port, and hitting those would have led to even further damage to the U.S. war effort. In addition, the Japanese also managed to miss oil reserves next to the harbor and they failed to command a new wave of attacks that could have caused chaos.

However, what the Japanese had not thought about was the reaction from the U.S. They believed that the U.S. would enter negotiations, but instead, their attack on Pearl Harbor galvanized public support to enter into a war with Japan as revenge. In just a matter of hours after the attack, word was sent to U.S. troops across the Pacific that they were now at war with Japan and to prepare for action.

The Pacific War was now part of World War II.

# **The Japanese Plans for the Pacific.**

The Japanese formulated two plans known as the Southern and Eastern plan to obtain various raw materials while also avoiding the trade embargo placed upon them.

The Eastern plan involved the attack on Pearl Harbor as well as attacking the Philippines and trying to cut the U.S.'s contact with Guam and Wake Island. Their Southern plan would focus on attacking Hong Kong, Java, Sumatra, and Malaya, and as a result, completely isolate both Australia and New Zealand.

Japan then planned to switch from attacking to defending its newly acquired territory. However, as we have previously stated, they did not anticipate that the Allies would be willing to enter into a war in this part of the world.

Initially, the plans held by the Japanese worked well. Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese on December, and they had some luck on their side when attacking the Philippines.

The Japanese forces had anticipated some stern resistance when they went to attack the U.S., but the leader of the American forces, General MacArthur, made a number of blatant errors. He had been granted a certain number of hours to effectively prepare himself for an attack due to the weather holding back the Japanese advance, but he failed to do anything to help improve the impending situation. As a result, the Japanese forces saw very little additional resistance when they landed at Northern Luzon on December 22, 1941.

Due to the advance of the Japanese army, the U.S. troops were forced into a smaller area of Southwestern Luzon, and the capital city of Manila fell to Japan. Within less than a week, the Philippines had effectively been lost with the last bastions of resistance taking place in the Bataan Peninsula.

By the end of 1941, Japan had swept across vast portions of Southeast Asia. They had successfully attacked Hong Kong; they had taken over Thailand with the Thai army then siding with them; they had attacked Singapore, British Malay; and overall, they had encountered very little fighting. For Japan, 1941 was a wonderful year, but for the allies it was seen as a disaster.

## **1942 – The Completion of the War Plan.**

The main focus for Japan in 1942 was to successfully complete the war plan that they had created earlier in 1941. This plan continued as early as January 9th with an attack on the U.S. forces that had dug in on the Bataan Peninsula. Furthermore, the Malay capital, Kuala Lumpur, fell on January 11th to the 5th Division, and on the same day, Japan also instigated its second phase of its campaign by invading the Dutch East Indies.

The pace at which Japan was conquering parts of the Pacific was frightening. Just four days after invading the Dutch East Indies, more Japanese troops were sent to invade Burma. There were a number of reasons as to why invading Burma was such a good idea. First, the Japanese knew that it could cut-off a key supply route to China, and the hope was that it would then make it easier for them to overthrow the Chinese in the future. In addition, they also believed that it would put them on India's doorstep, and there was suspicion that people in India would side with them due to them being disgruntled with the British Raj. Indeed, they managed to persuade a Bengali politician by the name of Chandra Bose to form an army to fight against the British.

However, the British did put up at least some level of resistance, but due to the difficulty in getting supplies to them, it seemed inevitable that the British were fighting a lost cause. It would not be long until they had to admit surrender.

# **The Taking of Singapore.**

By February 1942, the picture in the Pacific was different than what it had been before. As their troops made their way through Burma, the Japanese understood the importance of trying to take Singapore. The country was regarded as a British stronghold in the region, and a number of people referred to it as being the Asian Gibraltar. This did not stop the Japanese from attacking, which they did on February 8th.

The fighting lasted for a full week before the British forces, mixed with Indian and Australian troops, were forced to surrender. In total, some 60,000 allied troops became prisoners of war, although some estimates put that figure higher still at 85,000. They then joined over 50,000 POW's from the Malay campaign, The surrender of Singapore was the biggest of its kind in British history.

However, Japan was not finished. There was a rather lacklustre defence of the southern part of the Dutch East Indies by the Allies, and the troops were overrun in the Battle of the Java Sea. Due to the lack of organization on behalf of the Allies, it did not take the Japanese long to take control of both Java and Sumatra giving them a greater hold in this part of the Pacific in line with their initial plans.

## **Attacking Australia and Further Expansion.**

Perhaps due to the speed at which they achieved their various objectives, the Japanese sought to tackle an additional part of their original plan: isolating both Australia and New Zealand. This ultimately led to a surprise attack by the Japanese 1st Air Fleet on February 19, 1942 on allied ships that were in port at both Darwin and Broome. In total, 12 allied ships were sunk, only further increasing the resolve of the Australian people who saw this is a direct attack on their lives. If Japan believed that Australia would want no part in this war, then they would were mistaken.

On March 8, 1942, Rangoon in Burma fell to the advancing Japanese army and the British army narrowly escaped being annihilated. Furthermore, in the Dutch East Indies, Japan had also successfully taken control of both Bali and Timor and invaded New Guinea.

However, Japan was still not finished with their ideas of expansion. They were now ever closer to the Indian Ocean, which, for them, was a major leap forward. Buoyed by their successes, a total of five Japanese aircraft carriers entered the Indian Ocean by April 3, 1942.

To many, this was seen as a rather bold move, especially considering that there were various British ships already stationed throughout the Indian Ocean. However, the Japanese attacks were swift, resulting in a number of British casualties and culminating in an attack on Columbo harbour in Ceylon where a total of 26 allied aircraft were destroyed in one single attack.

In less than one week, the British navy had suffered a number of losses with seven ships sunk. At this point, it appeared as if the Japanese simply could not be stopped with their battle-hardened troops and the swiftness of their advance. This belief was further strengthened when the U.S. troops in Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines finally surrendered on April 9, 1942 after four months of fighting.

## **A Change in Tactics by the Japanese?**

Japan had surpassed themselves and were further surprised by the lack of fight being put up by the Allies. This left the Japanese command in a quandary. They had the sense to understand that the U.S. were larger and more powerful than them in every way, so the only way in which they could win was to attempt to consolidate their position.

They had managed to achieve their main objectives, but they were concerned by news from the U.S. that their successes had only managed to increase anti-Japanese feelings. Indeed, Japanese citizens in the U.S. had been rounded up and sent to camps, and it was known that the U.S. had put into place a huge naval program.

This was the point when the Japanese realized that they had overthought the situation. They had believed that the U.S. would have sought to negotiate a peace settlement, but it began to dawn on the Japanese command that this would not happen. They could now only see a long war stretching out ahead of them, which was still something that they had been planning for although they had done little to prepare them for such an event so far.

One method that they believed would work was to cut off supply routes between Australia and the U.S. This involved them moving into the area under the control of the Pacific Islands and create what amounted to a defensive wall across the Pacific that could limit the ability of the Allies to strike back.

However, they had certainly not put a lot of thought into just how much effort the Allies would spend on regaining control of the Pacific.

## **May 1942 – The Allies Begin to Fight Back.**

May 1942 is seen as a real turning point in the fight against Japan during WWII. It was this month when we could see the first signs of the Allies striking back against the Japanese, even though, at first, it could perhaps not be seen as a full-scale advance.

What is known is that the U.S. managed to intercept a message from the Japanese that told them about their plans to invade Port Moresby on New Guinea. This interception of communications took place on May 3rd, and on May 4th, we have the first sinking of a Japanese ship by the U.S. forces south of Guadalcanal. However, it is worth noting that this was not the first time that the Japanese had encountered the U.S. fighting back. On April 18th, a small U.S. airstrike was carried out on Tokyo. This would become known as the Doolittle Bombing, and it showed the Japanese that their defense systems could be breached and made their population aware that the Allies were not about to fold.

Even though the Allies were aware of the forthcoming attack on Port Moresby, they were still taken by surprise after a Japanese attack on Corregidor Island. This position was important as it was a strategic access point to Manila Bay, so its loss was undoubtedly a blow. However, the Japanese cancelled their initial plans to attack Port Moresby on May 7th for reasons that are still relatively unknown.

## **Mid-1942 and the Battle of the Coral Sea.**

In just a matter of months, the Japanese took control of large areas of land from the Central Pacific to the Indian Ocean. However, the Allies had formed a central command, incorporating a number of countries that had been directly affected by the advance of Japanese forces.

The Allies first real interaction with the Japanese took place on May 7th, the same day as the attack on Port Moresby was cancelled. What followed became known as the Battle of the Coral Sea, and even though it was a naval battle, none of the four ships involved ever attacked one another. Instead, it was left to the aircraft to attack their enemy resulting in the USS Lexington being sunk and the USS Yorktown being damaged. However, the Japanese also suffered casualties as their aircraft carrier Shoho sank and another ship called Shokaku suffered extensive damage, knocking it out of action.

At the same time, the Allies had managed to observe the Japanese Covering Group escorting some of their fighting force. The Allies had no option but to attack, which they did leading to an attempt by the Allies to intercept the Japanese fleet to reduce the number of ships at the disposal of the Japanese navy. However, they were spotted by the Japanese and the intercept never materialized, but in the confusion that followed, we do know that both the USS Sims and USS Neosho were sunk by the Japanese.

In certain ways, the Allies won The Battle of the Coral Sea even though tactically Japan had the upper hand, but the loss of more ships did dampen the Allies' spirits.

After this skirmish, the Japanese sought to revert back to their original plan of creating a defensive line to limit the ability of the Allies to get close to their homeland.

## **Putting the Midway Plan into Action.**

Burma fell to the Japanese after sustained fighting on May 15, 1942, although this did not come as a surprise to the Allied forces. However, what was perhaps a surprise was the way in which the Japanese insisted on going back to their old plan to cut off Australia and New Zealand while dominating the Pacific.

The Japanese planned to use a substantial sized naval force to take the Midway Islands with them setting sail from Japan on May 25th. Within this force were four individual ones, each having their own orders as to what they were expected to achieve. One was tasked with heading to the Aleutian Islands near Alaska while the others were given the job of conquering the Midway Islands and destroying the U.S. Navy that were based there.

The action itself did not take place until the start of June when the U.S. forces were being drawn north in order to defend the Aleutian Islands, which was part of the Japanese plan. Ultimately, this led to a number of attacks taking place by both sides on June 4th and the USS Yorktown being badly damaged, although not being sunk, while four Japanese vessels were not so fortunate.

This conflict became known as the Battle of Midway, and it would go on to have a major impact on Japanese plans for domination in the Pacific. At this point, the Japanese had discovered that the U.S. was not going to just give up and allow Japan to do whatever it wanted. Fighting occurred throughout the course of the day with the U.S. winning the battle.

After their failure at the Battle of Midway, the Japanese were forced into changing tactics. They turned their attention to the Solomon Islands, and in particular, Guadalcanal, which they had successfully taken control of earlier. The Allies would go on to learn about the construction of an airfield at this location, and the U.S. in particular decided that this was something that should not be allowed to happen. This led to both the U.S. Navy and Marines being called into action. The reason they were so concerned? The Allies realized that the Japanese intended to cut off supply lines in this part of the Pacific, and they had no option but to stop that from happening.

## **Marines Landing on the Solomon Islands.**

As a direct result of their fears regarding the building of an airfield, the U.S. sent marines to the Solomon Islands with troops landing at Guadalcanal and Tulagi and successfully capturing a lightly defended airfield. The Japanese navy then responded and although it was regarded as being hard fought gains, the American Marines were able to hold tight.

The Japanese navy then looked to implement their own plans, leading to a contingent of warships heading towards the U.S. naval fleet based at Savo Island. This in itself could be seen as a turning point in the war between the Allies and Japan as it culminated in a naval battle at Guadalcanal that the Allies ultimately won. As a result, the islands of Gavutu and Tulagi were returned to Allied hands, and it effectively became the first major loss that the Japanese had suffered up until this point.

The month of August 1942 was an important time for both sides in and around the Solomon Islands. Ultimately, it took until the 20th of the month for things to settle down somewhat and that was only because of U.S. aircraft landing at Henderson Airfield. Upon their arrival, the Japanese fleet did appear to change tactics as they became aware that they were now at more risk of being attacked by the U.S., who had more aircraft and supplies at their disposal, than ever before. This fear was enhanced when U.S. bombers began to fly and attack at night, leaving the Japanese forces extremely vulnerable.

# **The Battle for the Solomon Islands.**

The end of August 1942 brought what became known as the Battle for the Solomon Islands. The Japanese managed to get land troops close to the American airfield, but they were destroyed in their attack. Because of this, their Colonel, called Colonel Ichiki, took his own life in a ritual suicide due to the shame he felt.

What followed were a number of attempts by Japanese forces to restock supplies, but each time, they were headed off and attacked by U.S. forces. The damage included losing various ships, including the IJN Chitose and IJN Shokaku.

However, these losses did not stop the Japanese in their tracks entirely, as can be seen by the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, which commenced on August 24th.

During this battle, the Japanese lost another ship, but at the same time, scored some successes, including their dive bombers seriously damaging the USS Enterprise and landing troops on New Guinea at Milne Bay. The successes paled in significance for the Japanese, as the battle ended within 24 hours and by which time it is estimated that the Japanese had lost 90 aircraft compared to 20 American aircraft.

However, the fighting for this part of the Pacific was not over, and on August 26th, Australian troops were sent to New Guinea to tackle the Japanese forces that had landed there two days earlier. By the 29th, the task faced by the Australians appeared more difficult as the Japanese were able to land another 600 troops at their location. This would pay dividends at this moment in time, although the future would turn out to be something completely different.

## **Moving on in 1942.**

By the second half of 1942, the Japanese forces had managed to successfully capture a number of islands in the Pacific, including parts of the Solomon Islands as well as the Marshall Islands and Gilbert Islands. This would become the most eastern point that they would ever reach.

In September, the battle at Milne Bay raged between Japan and Australia with estimates of more than 1,000 Japanese soldiers having been killed. Furthermore, it was becoming apparent to Japanese leaders on the ground, and across these Pacific Islands in general, that they were fighting a lost cause. To them, they were in a battle that they just could not win, and the situation was made worse after the Allies managed to disrupt their supply line, largely isolating a number of the troops.

This approach within the Japanese ranks of believing that they were indeed fighting a lost cause was not welcomed by high command back in Tokyo, so they sent higher ranking officials to the area in order to take control. Unfortunately for the Japanese, this did not change the state of affairs, and this can be seen in the attack on the Henderson Airfield on September 12th.

The Japanese came up with a plan to launch a final assault in an attempt to take control back from the Americans involving some 6,000 soldiers. However, a total of 1,200 were killed in a little over 24 hours, and the Japanese were forced to regroup once more.

In the later part of 1942, the Japanese troops' situation was worsened by the realization that the British were intent on taking back control of Burma. They had been so focused on tackling the U.S. that they were somewhat surprised to discover they had another enemy to contend with in another part of Asia. The British were using India as a launchpad for their attacks, and this new approach by the British ultimately led to the Japanese planners to go back to the drawing board in order to decide how best to tackle several battlefronts at the same time.

## **1943 – Signs of a Japanese Retreat.**

By 1943, there was a general feeling that the tide had turned against the Japanese advance. The end of 1942 was a disaster for them as they had lost various Pacific Islands thanks to an advance by both American and Australian troops.

However, it is fair to say that the year started with both sides struggling to understand how best to proceed. For the Japanese, they had thoughts of consolidation while becoming aware of the chances of an Allied advance. At the same time, they also hoped that things in Europe would divert some attention away from them, allowing them to perhaps regain some of the ground they had lost in the previous few months.

January 1943 also saw the Japanese reaching the decision to withdraw from Guadalcanal with an estimated 11,000 troops being taken from the islands by the end of the month. This was accompanied with a number of other smaller islands also falling into the hands of the Allies and the Japanese effectively accepting that they would be unable to gain control of these Pacific islands. In addition, they realized they would be unable to isolate both Australia and New Zealand in the way that they hoped, forcing them to re-evaluate their plans.

The rest of 1943 was dominated by the Allies and Operation Cartwheel. The entire aim of this operation was to regain control of the rest of the Pacific Islands and in the process of doing so effectively isolate sections of the Japanese forces. This formed a key part of a future plan held by the Allies who hoped to then island hop their way towards Japan, recapturing land as they went. It was ambitious, and the Japanese forces in this part of the Pacific may have been fearless, but they were also quite disillusioned at fighting an impossible battle.

Furthermore, the British army were preparing themselves for an assault on Burma in order to regain it from the Japanese. There had been a number of previous attacks launched from India, but in August 1943, Winston Churchill appointed Admiral Lord Mountbatten as the supreme commander in charge of this campaign. The 14th army was created, made from both British and Indian troops, and in November 1943, the Allies met in Cairo in order to discuss how to tackle the Japanese threat.

# **The Allies Fight Back Against the Japanese.**

One advantage that the Allies had over their enemy was that the Americans had been able to intercept Japanese radio signals. This meant that they were able to understand the Japanese plans and then act accordingly.

Entering November, 1943, the Japanese forces based at Tarawa Atoll were under attack by an estimated 35,000 American troops. Some seven days of aerial bombardment took its toll on Japanese positions, leading to three American battalions successfully breaking ground on the actual first day of troop operations. Just three days later, Japanese control of the Gilbert Islands had been relinquished.

As the year 1944 would prove to be even worse for Japanese forces.

There are a number of reasons as to why Japan began to suffer, although primarily it could be linked to a lack of resources and technological innovation. This might be a startling concept as Japan is now known for being ahead of the times, but that was certainly not the case at this point in their history. They were also lacking in effective training programs for their airmen and had not properly thought through their defensive strategy. The result was a number of glaring errors in their plans, and these were holes that the Allies were only too keen to exploit.

The Allies may have been focused on retaking the various Pacific Islands, but they were also aware that there were other aspects of Asia that required their attention. It must be remembered that the Japanese controlled a number of countries and that was why the Allies sought to work together to open up various fronts against the Japanese simultaneously. They knew that the Japanese simply did not have the ability or equipment to deal with a number of attacks from different areas, as their entire reason for going to war was to obtain more raw materials.

## **1944 – A Year of Gains and Losses.**

In 1944, Japan attempted to regain land it had lost while the Allies sought to continue their very own advances into enemy territory. The year did not start off well for the Japanese forces when the British army successfully managed to retake Maungdaw in Burma on January 9.

At the same time, the Japanese forces were intent on going ahead with their very own plans to invade India. They still held the belief that the people in India resented the British due to the Raj and remember they had managed to convince some Indians to fight against British rule. The problem for the Japanese was that even though their plan to attack India was well-thought-out, they had not bargained for an attack by the Chinese, opening up yet another front in the war. This would ultimately stretch their resources to an absolute breaking point, and thanks to the power of hindsight, we can point to this as the beginning of the end for the Japanese and the Pacific War.

In the first few months of the year, there was a rather complicated picture of different strategies involving a whole host of countries. In one area, the U.S. and China worked together under the banner of the Northern Combat Area Command to successfully extend the Ledo Road from India into Burma, which was, of course, under Japanese command. At the same time, the XV Corps sought to make progress along the Arakan Province in the hopes of forcing the Japanese to spread their forces across a larger area.

Furthermore, the British were looking at making their very own in-roads into Burma from India in an attempt to prevent the counter-attack from the Japanese, and in yet another front, the U.S. still sought to leap frog their way through the Pacific Islands with their troops invading Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands on January 31st. Within just a matter of weeks, they had managed to move to yet another island as part of their overall plan. However, the reaction of the Japanese was to allow the Allies to gain control of the islands with the Japanese looking at moving their troops to a more centralized location.

## **Movement in Burma.**

The capture of Burma was a momentous occasion for the Japanese as it brought them closer to the Indian Ocean, which was a primary objective. However, they were also aware that the Allies would then seek to take back control, and they were prepared to put up a fight when this moment arrived.

That moment came in February 1944 with a ground campaign commencing in northern Burma and the aforementioned attack on the Arakan Province. However, in the same month, the Japanese also sought to reinforce their power in Burma, leading to a counter-offensive along the Arakan, and they did manage to make some ground and largely prevent the Allies from progressing too far. The only problem for the Japanese was coming across some stern resistance from Indian troops who stood firm in the face of adversity.

In March 1944, what we then see are attacks by the Allies behind Japanese lines in Burma. Their aim was to interrupt the way in which the Japanese were being supplied and, in turn, weaken the Japanese forces, but they were unaware that the Japanese had their own plans for this part of the world and were looking to go on the offensive in a major push to wrestle back control of Asia and further extend their territory.

## Mid-1944 and Japan on the Attack.

In an attempt to show their real strength, the Japanese looked to launch a simultaneous assault on both India as well as China. It is not known how the Allies took to this move or if they were surprised, but it was something that the Japanese had been planning for some time.

As part of their preparation, they enlisted an additional 500,000 men, primarily for the assault on Chinese positions. This became known as Operation Ichi-Go, and it was their largest offensive of the entire war. The aim of this offensive was simple: The Japanese wanted to connect different areas under their control in order to simplify getting resources and more troops across the land. In addition, they also sought to capture airbases in Southeastern China that were being used by U.S. forces since they were aware that American bombers were launching from these locations to attack their positions.

The timing of the assault was certainly no coincidence. The Japanese were aware that a large percentage of American and Chinese troops were caught up in the war in Burma after a ground offensive had been launched at the beginning of March. To the Japanese, this meant that other areas were going to be significantly weaker, allowing them to hopefully take control without too much fighting.

At the same time, the Japanese also sought to make moves into India. This involved them crossing mountainous roads into the country in what was known as Operation U-Go. This advance took place on March 15th, and initially, Japanese troops managed to make progress towards Imphal and Kohima. However, it took them until the middle of April to get close to their objective.

The problem for the Japanese was that a division of their army had to not only cut off the supply route between Kohima and Imphal, but they also had to overrun the defences at Kohima in order to strengthen their position. This was something that they failed to do, and the situation was made worse by the fact that the Japanese supply lines were not as effective as they had to be in order to sustain an attack such as this. As a result, not only did the attacks on Imphal fail, but the troops that had managed to gain positions near Kohima were abandoned and practically starved due to a lack of supplies.

However, even though they had encountered various problems, it did not stop Lieutenant General Mutaguchi from ordering further attacks in India throughout May. To many Japanese, the very idea of launching the initial attack in India was flawed, but Mutaguchi had recently been promoted to the position of commander and it was felt by many that he was trying to prove a point as to how brave both he and his troops were and that they would still attack the enemy even under adversity.

During May, the Allies created a plan to attack the Japanese forces and push them back out of India. This ultimately led to both sides coming into contact on June 22nd when fighting broke out in order to end the siege of Imphal by Japanese forces. This operation concluded on July 3rd when Japanese troops ended their operation after losing an estimated 50,000 troops.

## **Moving Back to Burma.**

The attack in India was not the only theatre of war the Japanese were involved in at this moment in time. Instead, they were also required to deal with their own operation against the Chinese and attacks by Allied forces in Burma.

Their attack in China resulted in them losing more than 100,000 troops, but they managed to gain some significant ground before Chinese forces stopped them close to Guangxi. Both Chinese and British forces managed to repel any further advances, the result of which led to the Japanese withdrawing a number of their troops by mid-April. By this point, the tide had undoubtedly turned against the Japanese with their forces being routed by the British under the command of General William Slim.

What had initially appeared to be a well-thought-out plan had turned into a disaster for the Japanese, and it signalled the end of their attempt to overrun the Chinese. At the same time, the operation had only sought to further confuse the picture for those individuals already living under Japanese control in the area, and it is known that this confusion then encouraged Chinese guerilla armies to make their move and take back control.

Back in Burma, the Allies had moved troops across to India in order to prevent the advance of Japanese forces, but the push along the Arakan still continued. Japanese forces were stretched due to the number of troops they had committed in their two main operations, so it came as no surprise when, in the middle of the year, Chinese troops crossed from Yunnan Province and captured several key positions.

For the Japanese, the abject failure of their two main operations in the first half of 1944 set the tone for how the rest of the war was then going to pan out.

## Mid-1944 – The Beginning of the End.

After a host of impressive victories and conquests at the outset of the Pacific War, the Japanese forces became unable to cope with the restricted supplies being sent to them. In addition, the Allies had also managed to become more organized and had strengthened their forces with additional military hardware and further troops. It is also fair to say that the link between the Allies as we know them and the Chinese also played a major role in the Japanese being pushed back and forced into withdrawing their troops in a number of locations.

Despite the failure of their operations in both India and China, the Allies were still not finished with the Pacific Islands. Just a matter of days after the Japanese launched Operation Ichi-Go, Allied forces sought to retake more of New Guinea.

However, for the Allies the main build-up was actions that took place starting June 1944.

The first piece of action took place on June 5th when the B-29 Superfortress bomber went on its first campaign against the Japanese with the bombing of the railway in and around Bangkok. This was seen as a show of strength by the Allies, but their plans were primarily focused on another area as they were aware that some advances had resulted in both the Central and Southern Pacific pushes by the Allies were being connected. This was something that the Allies had to achieve since it would give them an even stronger force to push on closer to Tokyo and to eventually defeat the Japanese, who were in danger of being overrun.

This desire to unite both fronts eventually led to American forces landing at Saipan on June 17th. The size of the force was impressive with an estimated 128,000 troops being delivered to the area in a fleet of more than 500 ships. In response to this assault by American marines, the Japanese realized that they would have to act quickly before the Americans could fortify their positions. This would ultimately lead to the Battle of the Philippine Sea.

The Japanese appeared to understand the significance of the Allies landing so many troops at one time, but they were not to know that the aim was to create an airfield close enough for Allied bombers to reach Tokyo. Due to their understanding of the situation, the Japanese response was huge. Under the command of Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa, approximately 90% of the Japanese fleet was sent to the area with nine aircraft carriers, over 400 planes, and roughly 40 other ships. However, even with these numbers it was clear that the Japanese were still overpowered.

The Battle of the Philippine Sea can only be described as a disaster for the Japanese. They understood the importance of keeping control of Saipan, but the only way in which they could do this was by routing the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Their first attack took place on June 19th, but the American response was robust with a total of 35 Japanese aircraft being lost in the first wave.

Things did not get any better for the Japanese when the Americans launched a second attack on the same day. The result was 97 Japanese aircraft being shot down and then another 7 lost with the third attack. At the same time, the largest naval battle in the entire war was also taking place where torpedoes hit several Japanese ships, including IJN Taiho

and IJN Shokaku, and Shokaku eventually sank in the afternoon of the 19th. Despite these losses, the Japanese showed the U.S. that they were determined to fight to the bitter end with a fourth wave of attacks taking place, resulting in another 30 Japanese aircraft being lost in the battle. It is worth noting that American losses were minimal.

On the 20th, the Japanese forces suffered even more casualties as more ships were either sunk or severely damaged. In addition, another 65 Japanese aircraft were destroyed, and the end of the battle resulted in hundreds of Japanese aircraft being destroyed while the U.S. losses were primarily linked to pilot mistakes with landing and ditching into the sea.

## July 1944 – Further Allied Advances.

After their success against the Japanese forces, the Allies were faced with a difficult decision. On the one hand, they still wished to push towards Tokyo but were aware that the losses Japan was incurring in Burma could lead to completely recapturing the country before moving on to the next stage in their plan. However, another option was to attempt to recapture the Philippines as earlier on in the war, American generals, led by General MacArthur, had stated that there was a need to take back the country as soon as possible for strategic reasons.

It was decided that this would indeed be one course of action for the Allies, although it did also require them to nullify Japanese positions at Formosa due to the sheer number of Japanese aircraft stationed there. This was to then prevent the Japanese from attacking the Allies on the flank, but considering the state of their troops at this part of the war, it is difficult to see how they would be able to achieve this.

The end of July brought further advances for the Allies with the U.S. managing to recapture Guam, and then by August 8th they had managed to completely liberate the Mariana Islands alongside their Chinese counterparts.

The capture of these islands was strategically important, although the Japanese were, at this point, unaware of just how important it would prove to be. However, prior to invading the Philippines, the Allies came to the conclusion that they would be best served to invade and capture the Palau islands. The reason? To prevent the Japanese from launching an air attack from the airfield that was based there. This meant the U.S. sending in the Marines in what would prove to be a bloody battle. Previously, the Allies had encountered the Japanese using what could only be seen as WWI tactics that were outdated, but now they were better organized although it was still all in vain.

## October 1944.

October would prove to be yet another disastrous month for not only Japanese forces, but also the Japanese mainland. It began on October 11 when the U.S. conducted an air raid on Okinawa. This was designed to show the Japanese that they were actually within reach of the U.S. military if they wished to strike. The U.S. then conducted more air strikes (although on this occasion it was on the Japanese base at Truk).

These smaller attacks were merely a prelude to the main event of October 1944: the Battle of Leyte Gulf. This battle would go on to become not only the biggest naval battle in the Pacific War, but the biggest naval battle in WWII.

Aside from being the largest naval battle of the war, it was also the last time that battleships came into direct conflict with one another, and it involved the use of kamikaze pilots by the Japanese for the first time. There is no doubt that the Japanese understood the significance of this battle, leading them to move some of their fleet from Singapore to this new battlefield. However, it would all be in vain as the U.S. fleet either turned away every attack by the Japanese or destroyed them, leading to a decisive defeat that the Japanese would find impossible to recover from.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf would go on to be seen, even being the opinion of a number of Japanese commanders, as the moment when the Japanese effectively lost the Pacific War. However, honor and pride were strong within the Japanese psyche, so they continued to attack American positions in and around the Philippines and increase the number of kamikaze attacks.

## **The end of 1944.**

In the last two months of 1944, the Japanese tried grimly to hold onto the territory that they had conquered while the Allies continued to make advances. The U.S. in particular had begun a campaign of softening up the Japanese as well as setting into motion plans for the spectacular events that would occur in 1945.

The first real strikes were by the U.S. Navy on Iwo Jima followed by a number of B-29 bombers attacking Tokyo. This was made possible by the construction of huge airfields in the Marianas that became their base and were the very reason why the U.S. had placed such importance on claiming these islands earlier in the year. Finally in 1944, U.S. troops invaded parts of the Philippines in order to set into action their plans to reconquer the country.

## **1945 – The final year of war.**

At the start of 1945, it would have been impossible for anybody to predict that this would be the final year of the war. However, the Allies had various plans in place for the different parts of Asia still under Japanese control to wrestle back control in a number of locations simultaneously. At first, General MacArthur was put in overall command of all ground troops while Admiral Nimitz was given control of the naval fleet. Their task was simple: they were to prepare for invasions of the islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, as well as mainland Japan.

At the same time, Japanese forces were also being forced to deal with attacks by British troops in Burma. By January 4th, the British had successfully claimed Akyab in Burma with further gains to come in the near future.

January 9th would also become another important date in the war as it signified when U.S. troops landed at Lingayan Gulf in the Philippines. However, they were surprised to receive virtually no resistance from the Japanese, but that was the plan of General Yamashita who understood that it was pointless to resist at this point. Instead, his plan was to retreat into more difficult terrain and force the U.S. to fight for every single step, tree, and mountain. The problem was that not every Japanese commander was following the same plan. Indeed, the naval commander decided to take the fight to the U.S., resulting in a massive number of casualties.

The year 1945 would also see one of the bloodiest battles in this part of the war when the U.S. forces attacked Iwo Jima as momentum built to the end of the war.

## **Iwo Jima and building up to the bomb.**

The relatively small island of Iwo Jima lies midway between the Marianas Islands and the Japanese mainland, and taking control of it was crucial for the landings at Okinawa. U.S. Marines attacked the island on February 19th under the command of Holland Smith. However, the Japanese commander, Lieutenant General Kuribayashi, was aware that they would find it extremely difficult to hold onto the island, so his approach was to slow the advance of the Marines.

The outcome was a total of more than 20,000 Japanese killed alongside almost 7,000 Marines and more than 20,000 injured. The island itself was not fully conquered by the U.S. until March 26th.

March also saw a major attack by the Allies on the Philippines with the capital, Manila, being conquered on March 3rd, just a day after the recapture of Corregidor. However, the most disturbing action took place on March 27th when 279 B-29's firebombed vast areas of Tokyo. The result was a huge number of civilian casualties—although this was regarded by the Allies as being justified due to the way the Japanese had killed an estimated 8 million Chinese civilians during the war. It also showed Japan how close the Allies were and how they were at their mercy, effectively ending much of their resistance.

## **Back to Burma.**

Attention must also be turned back to Burma as the Allies had the intention of completing the conquest before monsoon season in May. Offensives were originally launched against the Japanese Burma Army at the end of 1944 with the Indian XV Corps inflicting heavy damages against the retreating forces. By February, the Chinese and American forces had linked up together and opened up the Burma road once again.

The British were also pushing further into Burma and liberated Mandalay on March 20th. This led to the Burmese turning against the Japanese and signalling the end of their control over the country. Overall, it would not be long after the capture of Mandalay that Rangoon would then fall, leading to the Japanese surrender.

Further liberations also took place in Borneo in a campaign led by Australian forces, and it is regarded as the final main assault of the war.

# The Bomb.

After the brutal invasion of Iwo Jima, the US then attacked Okinawa. This would become the bloodiest battle involving U.S. troops as it was seen as absolutely necessary for Okinawa to be taken in order to construct airfields for squadrons of bombers. Taking place on April 1st, it would also become the last amphibious landing of the war with it.

The scale of the battle was truly horrific. The Japanese had an estimated 115,000 troops on the island along with a civilian population that was happy to defend the island. It took until June 21st for the U.S. to declare that they had taken the island, but at a great cost. The U.S. had almost 5,000 sailors killed due to kamikaze attacks, 38 ships sunk, and approximately 75,000 ground casualties. However, it was worse for the Japanese with roughly 94% of their soldiers being killed as well as a number of civilians.

Considering how things were going for the Japanese, Premier Suzuki made a brave statement on June 9th when he stated how the Japanese would fight down to the last man rather than accept surrender. He believed that civilians felt the same way so there would be 100 million people ready to defend Japan should the Allies invade.

On July 28th, President Truman along with Winston Churchill and the President of China, Chiang Kai-Shek, announced the terms for the unconditional surrender of the Empire of Japan. If Japan failed to accept the terms, there would be major consequences—although nobody in the world expected the consequences to be so severe.

The Japanese response was predictable. They would not surrender and indeed a Japanese submarine managed to sink a U.S. ship, resulting in almost 900 dead sailors. To the Allies, this was all the proof they needed to show that Japan was not going to play ball.

Ultimately this led to the defining act of the war, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6th followed by another being dropped on Nagasaki on August 9th. Upon the dropping of the second bomb, Emperor Hirohito and Premier Suzuki both agreed to accept the terms of surrender. Tens of thousands of people had been killed by the bombs, and there was no guarantee that more would not follow.

# **The Japanese Surrender.**

After the bomb, the Japanese had no option but to surrender or face complete annihilation. Once the Emperor made the announcement, it took until August 14th for the terms and conditions to be put into place with General MacArthur being given the task of commanding the area. However, it would not be until September 2nd that the actual signing of the agreement took place on board the USS Missouri.

# **An Overview of Japan in WWII.**

So, how can we accurately assess the impact of Japan in WWII? What is clear is that the Japanese not only fought hard, but at first, they were extremely well-organized and had thought out their approach. However, they were also guilty of making the wrong assumptions when it came to how the U.S. would react to Pearl Harbor, and this was not the only mistake that they would make in the course of the war.

It could be argued that Japan overstretched itself too quickly and they then ran into problems with supplies as well as getting the raw materials that they wanted so desperately. Why did this happen? Perhaps due to a lack of planning or foresight into what the reaction would be for their actions although this is possibly due to a lack of understanding of global politics rather than anything else.

Japan showed bravery, they showed resilience, but ultimately, a lot of their tactics were outdated and they were eventually swamped by sheer force. There is certainly the belief that the Japanese would have effectively fought to the last man, as even after that a number of commanders refused to accept surrender and committed suicide in order to preserve their honor.

The Pacific War was bloody, it led to the atomic bomb being dropped for the first time, and it led to Japan becoming the pacifist country that we know today. Had they been successful, the world would have certainly been a vastly different place.

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