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Book Author(s): Michael Kort

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CHAPTER 3

The Pacific War

The Pacific War between the United States and Japan was not unexpected by either side. By the beginning of the 1940s, the two countries had been rivals in East Asia for close to half a century. The United States actually began planning for the possibility of a war against Japan in 1906 and over the next thirty-five years reviewed and revised that plan, known as War Plan Orange, many times. Ironically, given how the war began in December 1941 and Washington's failure to anticipate that scenario, American war plans dating from 1936 suggested that Japan might attempt a surprise air attack on Pearl Harbor. Japan's basic plan for a war against the United States, conceived in 1907, was revised in light of the new strategic reality after World War I, when Tokyo acquired former German-held islands in the central Pacific. It was given a powerful physical dimension by new warships and other modern weapons developed and built during the 1930s.

Yet neither the United States nor Japan was prepared for the great war they fought between December 7, 1941, and August 14, 1945. In some ways, it is hard to blame them. The Pacific War was contested on the largest battlefield of all time—an empty ocean vastness of millions of square miles dotted with tiny islands and, where the ocean finally ended, a string of larger islands extending from just off the northern tip of Australia to the Philippines to Japan's home islands off the northeast Asian mainland—that dwarfed even the gigantic Eastern Front in Europe, where at the same time Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union

were locked in their titanic fight to the death. The struggle for control of the sea, often contested in battles spread over an area so large that the ships of the two opposing navies never saw each other, changed naval warfare, as the aircraft carrier and its complement of modern planes replaced the venerable battleship, which had ruled the waves for centuries, as the dominant oceangoing weapon. Meanwhile, on scattered, sweltering islands—some no bigger than large parks in American cities and others covered by impenetrable jungle—hundreds of thousands of young men, their respective opposing armies squeezed together cheek by jowl, fought close-quarter, desperate battles of unusual savagery as Japanese soldiers, driven by battle ethics that allowed only victory or death, fought to the last man rather than surrender. The ferocious and fanatical Japanese way of fighting stunned the Americans, but American soldiers and marines also shocked the Japanese, who had been led to believe Americans were too soft and pampered to make formidable opponents.

In both how it began and how it ended, with destruction raining down from the sky in once unimaginable displays of air power, the Pacific War was qualitatively new. And the way it finally was brought to a close was revolutionary in the most profound and ominous sense of that word. The Pacific War, which began with a humiliating example of American political and military incompetence at Pearl Harbor and with thousands of American soldiers sent into battle carrying rifles dating from World War I, ended with an awesome display of American scientific wizardry, engineering and organizational prowess, and industrial and military power when two ultramodern American B-29 bombers equipped with an array of high-tech equipment attacked Japan with bombs whose revolutionary technology marked the beginning of the nuclear age.¹

THE ROAD TO WAR

It was Japan that made the decision to launch the Pacific War. The Japanese government opted for war for two main reasons, one based on perceived national needs and the other on a surprisingly fatalistic assessment of the empire's chances for victory. By the mid-1930s, ultranationalist military officers controlled Japan's government, convinced that only expansion overseas could solve Japan's problems and guarantee the empire the greatness and world power it deserved. To that end, they tripled the country's military budget in 1937; by 1938, this accounted for 75 percent of all public spending.² In particular, Japan needed guaranteed access to raw materials and markets in East Asia to continue to grow and become a manufacturing power capable of competing with the major European industrial powers and the United States. In their view, Japan, a resource-poor country, had to be able to exploit China without interference and get access to

raw materials in what Tokyo called the “Southern region,” an area that included French Indochina, Malaya, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies. This ultimately required that China be reduced to a Japanese dependency and the Europeans and Americans driven from East Asia. The result would be what after 1940 Tokyo called the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” a region dominated militarily, economically, and politically by the Empire of Japan.

Japan took its first major step toward its goal in 1931 by invading the northern Chinese territory of Manchuria and, in 1932, detaching it and setting up a puppet state called Manchukuo. In 1937 Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China, but by 1941 it was bogged down in a war in which it won almost every battle but could not deliver a knockout blow. A major part of the problem was the United States, which was not only pressuring Tokyo to exit China but was also providing aid on an increasing scale to the Chinese government. Meanwhile, the “Southern region” was largely under the control of European colonial powers or, in the case of the Philippines, the United States. But conditions there were in flux. By 1940, in the wake of German victories on distant battlefields, the European colonial powers that had once blocked Japan’s ambitions were severely weakened. The French and Dutch were defeated and occupied by Germany, and Britain, while still relatively formidable in the Far East, was reeling under the Nazi onslaught. Japan meanwhile was allied to Germany and Italy by terms of the Tripartite Pact it had signed with the two European fascist powers in September of that year. The Soviet Union, always a potential threat, as it demonstrated in August 1939 when its army thrashed Japanese forces along the Manchurian border, had agreed in April 1941 to a mutual nonaggression pact with Japan. Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June completed the job of ending the Soviet threat to Japanese control of Manchuria.

Therefore, by 1941 Japan—with good reason—considered the United States the main obstacle to its imperial ambitions. The Japanese leaders were under no illusions regarding American power. The United States was by far the world’s leading economic and industrial giant, dwarfing Japan and Germany. Sophisticated analysts in Tokyo understood the danger of going to war with the United States. They included Isoroko Yamamoto, the commander in chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet and the man widely recognized as his country’s outstanding naval strategist, who warned in 1940, “Japan cannot beat America. Therefore we should not fight America.”³ Still, most Japanese leaders believed that the United States had weaknesses and Japan had strengths that could negate America’s economic power. If Japan made the optimum use of its resources and struck at precisely the right time, it had a chance to win a war with the United States. Japan, its leaders believed, had a martial spirit far superior to that of the Americans, who were pampered and soft. That faith in turn had racist roots in the idea that the Japanese—or, as they called themselves, the “Yamato race”—were su-

perior to other nationalities and had a destiny to be the “leading race” not only in Asia but in the world.⁴ That belief in the “Japanese spirit” was one reason Japanese strategists underestimated the toughness and resilience of American fighting men. For example, naval strategists belittled the American submarine force because, in their judgment, Americans could not stand the physical and mental strain of lengthy submarine duty.⁵ Training methods and new weapons, the thinking went, added to Tokyo’s advantage. Indeed, the Japanese navy in particular had developed an array of weapons that were the best of their kind in the world, including a long-range torpedo and the fast and maneuverable Zero carrier fighter. As early battles of the war would demonstrate, the Japanese warships also had better night-fighting capabilities than American vessels, due in part to intensive training and newly developed optical equipment.

Timing was everything, primarily because of America’s enormous industrial strength and military potential. As Admiral Osami Nagano, the navy’s chief of staff, pointed out in July to the Liaison Conference, Japan’s top policymaking body at the time, as of mid-1941 Japan was better prepared for war than its giant rival across the Pacific. Matters became more urgent when on August 1 the United States declared a total oil and gasoline embargo on Japan. In September, Nagano told the Liaison Conference that in light of Japan’s burdens and America’s reserves, the passage of time could only work against Tokyo. He added, with what can at best be called strained optimism, “Although I am confident that at the present time, we have a chance to win the war, I fear that this opportunity will disappear with the passage of time.”⁶ That “opportunity” included the fact that the United States was focused on Europe. Washington increasingly was committed to aiding Britain and the Soviet Union in the war against Germany and, the calculation went, could not afford a major war with Japan.

That thinking, in fact, was the basis of Yamamoto’s plan to attack Pearl Harbor. Before Yamamoto suggested his idea in early 1941, Japan’s strategy for defeating the American navy called for weakening it by submarine warfare as it started to cross the Pacific, depleting it further with attacks from carrier-based planes and aircraft based on Japanese-held islands west of Hawaii, and then defeating it in a decisive battle east of the Philippines. But Yamamoto argued that the Japanese could not wait for the Americans to come to them. They would have to be more daring in order to achieve what their military doctrine said was essential to defeat a major Western power: a decisive victory in a single great battle.⁷ According to Yamamoto, if Japan’s ultramodern and highly trained navy could catch the United States unprepared and destroy its Pacific fleet, especially its aircraft carriers, at its home base in Hawaii and then seize a vast amount of territory, including a series of Pacific islands, the Americans might find themselves compelled to negotiate a peace rather than fight a long war in the Pacific. That in turn would give Japan the free hand it needed in East Asia. It would

allow the army to carry out its plan to “go south” and attack the Philippines, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies.

Japan closed its options in a series of decisions during the second half of 1941. In mid-October, Hideki Tojo, a militant advocate of war, succeeded the more moderate and cautious Prince Fumimaro Konoe, who opposed war with the United States, as prime minister. During the following six weeks, Emperor Hirohito ended his wavering and cast his lot for war. Negotiations continued with the United States, but Washington would not agree to Japanese terms that would have left Tokyo with permanent control of Manchuria and other northern Chinese territory and China itself as little more than a Japanese protectorate. Tokyo’s deadline for winning the desired American concessions was November 25. The next day, the government issued its final orders for the task force Yamamoto had gathered to sail for Hawaii and attack Pearl Harbor.

PEARL HARBOR TO GUADALCANAL

On January 24, 1941, Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, who would become the leading American amphibious commander in the Pacific War, directing landings from Guadalcanal in August 1942 to Okinawa in April 1945, issued a warning to his superiors: “If war eventuates with Japan, it is believed easily possible that hostilities would be initiated by a surprise attack upon the Fleet or the Naval Base at Pearl Harbor.”⁸ Turner’s warning was ignored, as were many other signs that precautions should be taken to protect that vital base. While a Japanese attack was widely expected, virtually the entire American military and political leadership was taken by surprise at where it took place. Indeed, both the president and his secretary of the navy thought the initial radio messages of the attack referred to the Philippines.

Aside from demonstrating American ineptitude, the Pearl Harbor attack owed its success to bold, improvisational Japanese planning (something American strategists had assumed they were incapable of), skilled execution, and a good measure of luck. However, not all the luck was on the Japanese side. The three American carriers normally based at Pearl Harbor—*Saratoga*, *Enterprise*, and *Lexington*—were elsewhere when the attack occurred. That was one of the disturbing facts noted by Yamamoto after the battle and certainly one of the reasons he wrote to a fellow admiral, “This war will give us much trouble in the future. The fact that we have had a small success at Pearl Harbor is nothing.”⁹ Still, Pearl Harbor was a most impressive display of Japanese military prowess and a devastating demonstration of how effective and decisive carrier-based aircraft could be.

Japan followed its victory at Pearl Harbor with a rapid advance toward the rich prizes of Southeast Asia and strategic islands in the Pacific. By mid-1942, its con-

quests included Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore, and the Philippines. Once again Japanese air power was on display, especially on December 10, 1941, when warplanes sank the British battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the first time aircraft acting alone had accomplished such a feat. The worst American debacle was in the Philippines, where the fall of the Bataan Peninsula in April 1942 resulted in the capture of twelve thousand American soldiers and more than sixty thousand Filipino troops, who were brutally treated en route to prison camps in what is justifiably known as the Bataan Death March. The island of Corregidor, the last American stronghold, fell in May. General Douglas MacArthur, the American commander in the Philippines, was spared the ordeal of surrender when in early March President Roosevelt ordered him to leave his embattled troops and escape to Australia. Meanwhile, Japanese brutality toward prisoners and civilians, already amply demonstrated in China, simultaneously was on display in the Philippines, Singapore, and elsewhere in Asia.

The reversal of fortune in the Pacific began in May 1942. By then the United States had a new command structure in place. MacArthur was in charge of U.S. forces in the southwest Pacific. Admiral Chester Nimitz, who had been serving in Washington at the time of Pearl Harbor, was the new Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet and the Pacific Ocean Area. He sent two aircraft carriers and their supporting ships to stop the Japanese advance southward toward Port Moresby on the island of New Guinea, from which point the Japanese could threaten the flow of American troops and supplies to Australia and even Australia itself. Nimitz knew of the Japanese plans because Allied cryptographers had broken the Japanese naval code. The Americans met the Japanese fleet in the Coral Sea, north of Australia. The ensuing battle was the first in naval history fought entirely by aircraft. The opposing ships, again for the first time, never saw each other. Although considered a narrow Japanese tactical victory in terms of losses—the most important vessel lost was the U.S. carrier *Lexington*—the Battle of the Coral Sea was both strategic and psychological victory for the United States: the Japanese advance had been stopped, making the Battle of the Coral Sea Japan's first significant setback of World War II. That said, the initiative in the war still belonged to Tokyo.

A much more decisive battle between the two mighty navies took place in June near a speck of land in the mid-Pacific appropriately called Midway Island, where the United States had a small but strategically important naval base. The Japanese attacked Midway for two reasons. First, it would firm up their defensive line in the Pacific. Second, and of primary importance to Yamamoto, who planned the campaign, the assault would draw into battle the remaining American carriers in the Pacific and give him another desperately needed opportunity to destroy the American fleet and knock the United States out of the war. Otherwise, Yamamoto was convinced, a long war would follow that Japan could not possibly win. The Japanese had advantages in the experience of their skilled

dive-bomber and torpedo-plane pilots and, it turned out, in carriers (four to the Americans' three). The key American advantage was that, as at the Coral Sea, Nimitz knew from his codebreakers about the Japanese plans. (MacArthur would derive a similar advantage when army special intelligence codebreakers, in a project called ULTRA, deciphered their first Japanese army transmission in September 1943 and began providing a steady flow of intelligence in early 1944.) Real Admiral Frank Fletcher, who had led American forces at the Battle of Coral Sea, commanded the naval strike force Nimitz sent to fight at Midway.

Seven aircraft carriers and their complement of hundreds of airplanes, supported by dozens of ships and, on the American side, land-based aircraft from Midway, began their mortal combat shortly after dawn on June 4, 1942. At first the battle went well for the Japanese and badly for the Americans. But the Japanese, who began the battle by bombing Midway itself, did not know when they launched their raid on Midway whether American carriers were in the area or, once they realized they were by being attacked by carrier-based torpedo aircraft, how many carriers the Americans had or where they were. It was America's great good fortune that at 10:24 a.m., thirty-seven dive-bombers from the carrier *Enterprise* found and surprised the four carriers of the Japanese fleet. Dive-bombers from *Yorktown* quickly joined them. In just five furious minutes, one of the most important battles of the Pacific War was decided. The American dive-bombers fatally damaged three of the carriers—*Kaga*, *Akagi*, and *Soryu*—all of which soon sank. That afternoon, planes from the remaining Japanese carrier, *Hiryu*, badly damaged *Yorktown* and knocked her out of the battle (a Japanese submarine later sank her), but several hours later American planes found and sank *Hiryu*.

Japan lost four of its best carriers and 322 planes at Midway. It also lost more than three thousand men, including many experienced aircraft carrier pilots. More than that, as Yamamoto knew too well, the Japanese navy lost its last chance to cripple the American navy and force the United States to agree to a negotiated peace. Japan still had formidable resources and had not lost the war. But the empire was no longer in a position to win it.

The short, fierce, air-sea Battle of Midway was followed by the long, bitter struggle for the jungle island of Guadalcanal, a battle that seesawed back and forth for months. Guadalcanal, one of the Solomon Islands, lies northeast of Australia and due east of New Guinea. The Japanese had landed there in May 1942 and begun building an airstrip from which they could have threatened American convoys to Australia and set the stage for further offensives. That made the island an American target, and in early August 1942 more than 11,000 U.S. marines landed on Guadalcanal, along with 4,500 more on three nearby islands. They quickly took the Guadalcanal airstrip, which they named Henderson Field in honor of a pilot who had died at Midway. The hard part proved to be holding

Henderson Field in the face of Japanese counterattacks, even when reinforced by more marines and army troops. The campaign that followed lasted more than six months and was fought viciously in numerous battles on land, sea, and air before the United States finally emerged victorious. The two navies fought seven major battles and about twenty lesser engagements and together lost nearly fifty warships. In one encounter, the Battle of Savo Island, the United States navy lost four cruisers within an hour and suffered the worst defeat, other than Pearl Harbor, in its history. Hundreds of planes went down in more than thirty air or air-sea battles around Guadalcanal. Almost 5,000 American sailors died along with more than 1,700 ground troops. The Japanese lost 3,500 sailors and more than 1,200 airmen. On land, their dead numbered close to 25,000, more than half lost to starvation and disease, by the time Tokyo decided in February 1943 to salvage what it could and evacuated its 11,000 remaining troops.¹⁰

Two months later the empire suffered another disastrous loss when American fighters—acting on information provided by navy codebreakers—intercepted and shot down Yamamoto's airplane while he was on an inspection tour, killing the indispensable admiral.

Each side learned hard lessons at Guadalcanal. The Japanese, in the words of one naval officer who fought there, learned the price of relying uncritically on the “unfounded assurances” given by the army and of the dangers inherent in “a general contempt for the capabilities of the enemy.” He added, “Thus lay open the road to Tokyo.”¹¹ The Americans learned two important things. First, they could beat the formidable Japanese on land, air, or sea. Second, those victories would come at a terribly high price. As historian Richard B. Frank has noted, “The first intimations that the Japanese would literally choose death over surrender—and not merely an elite warrior caste but the rank and file—came . . . at Guadalcanal.”¹² Japanese troops were not only fierce and superb jungle fighters, but time after time they had also fought to the last man. As one exhausted and exasperated marine told journalist John Hersey, who in 1943 chronicled a single jungle skirmish, one of hundreds, in his gripping *Into the Valley*, the Japanese “take to the jungle as if they had been bred there, and like some beasts you never see them until they are dead.”¹³ Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, who led one of the marine divisions on Guadalcanal from August to December 1942, grimly observed, “I have never heard or read of this kind of fighting. These people refuse to surrender. The wounded wait until men come up to examine them . . . and blow themselves and the other fellow to pieces with a hand grenade.”¹⁴

American soldiers did not have to wait long for confirmation of their experience on Guadalcanal. It was duplicated on nearby New Guinea, where an Allied offensive under MacArthur to drive the Japanese from the island began in late 1942. Although his campaign was largely successful, MacArthur would be

engaged on New Guinea until 1944, and the last Japanese soldiers on the huge island did not lay down their arms until mid-September 1945, almost a month after their government surrendered. In May 1943, on the frozen and desolate island of Attu, part of Alaska's Aleutian chain, a Japanese garrison of 2,350 men fought until only twenty-nine were left, a fatality rate of 98.8 percent. Beginning in November 1943, American and Australian soldiers killed thousands of Japanese fighting, often hand to hand, in the fetid jungles and swamps of Bougainville, the largest of the Solomon Islands. Thousands more Japanese, cut off from reinforcements and supplies, starved to death. Yet others continued to fight and did not surrender until after the war had ended. The bitter experience of Guadalcanal would be repeated on an even larger scale in a series of bloody island battles in the Pacific. As historian Stanley Weintraub has put it, "Japanese resistance as the home islands became threatened increased from fierce to fanatical to suicidal."¹⁵ If the road to Tokyo "lay open," it nonetheless was going to be a long, hard road, one that tens of thousands of American fighting men would never finish.

TARAWA TO THE PHILIPPINES

Now permanently on the offensive, in late 1943 the United States began to close the ring on Japan. It invaded and took strategic Pacific islands progressively closer to Japan's home islands, which finally made it possible for long-range American bombers to attack manufacturing centers vital to Tokyo's war effort. Meanwhile, American submarines, later assisted by carrier-based aircraft, gradually but inexorably sank the ships and closed the sea-lanes that brought oil, food, rubber, iron ore, and other essential supplies to the home islands. From the start of the war, Japan had lacked the economic and industrial base to match the United States in producing the modern arms and machines of war. As the war continued, that imbalance became more pronounced. Nonetheless, the Japanese fought on. At first, as outlined in a policy document adopted in September 1943, the goal was to establish a defense line that still stretched as far south as northern New Guinea and eastward to the Gilbert Islands. Prime Minister Tojo spoke for his colleagues when he told the emperor that "we have to fight onto the end regardless of how the war situation may develop hereafter. Nothing has changed in our resolve to fight until we achieve our aims."¹⁶ After American forces in the southwest Pacific under MacArthur and in the central Pacific under Nimitz pierced that perimeter, the military and the emperor turned to a new version of decisive victory: a battle that Japan would not only win, but that also would so bloody the Americans that they would agree to a negotiated peace on terms acceptable to Tokyo. Meanwhile, each island and piece of territory would

be yielded to the Americans only after extracting the maximum possible price in blood.

The first major step in the American offensive was the November 1943 attack on Tarawa, an atoll in the Gilbert Islands whose main value was as an air base. Almost five thousand men defended the atoll's main island, a chunk of coral smaller than New York City's Central Park or the Pentagon and its parking lots. It was the first amphibious assault against fortified beaches on a Pacific island, and mistakes were made, including failing to bombard Japanese positions sufficiently, an error that cost the lives of many marines who assaulted the beaches. The battle for Tarawa lasted three murderous days. When it was over, a thousand marines were dead. Of the four marines awarded the Medal of Honor in the battle, three received their medals posthumously. The Japanese again fought to the bitter end: only a few wounded men were captured, putting their death rate at 99.7 percent. When Admiral Nimitz visited the island, the sight of rotting corpses and body parts literally made him sick. To prepare the public for what they now knew lay ahead, the marines released, for the first time, pictures of the carnage to the American press, causing a wave of shock, revulsion, and fear across the country.

After securing the Gilberts, American forces took the Marshall Islands to the northwest in a series of relatively minor but still bloody battles. Once again, the Japanese garrisons refused to surrender, suffering fatality rates of more than 98 percent.¹⁷ The next major battle occurred in the Mariana Islands, one of which, Guam, had been an American possession until the Japanese seized it shortly after Pearl Harbor. The Marianas were a critically important asset because they put Japan's home islands within range of America's B-29 bombers: both of the B-29s that dropped atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 would take off from Tinian, one of the three main islands of the Marianas group.

The largest of three major battles was fought for Saipan, an island fourteen miles long and between two to five miles wide, where the Japanese had more than thirty thousand troops. There also were more than twenty thousand Japanese civilians on Saipan. The American invasion force consisted of 71,000 marines and army troops. The fight for Saipan began on June 15 and lasted for three weeks. The last major battle occurred on July 7, when about three thousand Japanese troops charged American positions in a suicide frontal attack called a *banzai* charge, the largest, though not the first, such desperate attack of the war. It left almost all the attackers dead but also inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans. It was impossible, even for veteran troops, not to be demoralized by what they had experienced. In the words of Lieutenant General Holland Smith, the marine commander, "Saipan was war such as nobody had fought before: a campaign in which men crawled, clubbed, shot, burned, and bayoneted each other to death."¹⁸

But there were shocks in store for the Americans that went beyond even the fighting. On July 11, at a cliff called Marpi Point, about a thousand trapped soldiers and a like number of civilians—including women and children—shot, beheaded, or drowned each other or killed themselves, despite attempts by Japanese-speaking American troops using loudspeakers to get them to stop. While many civilians committed suicide on their own, in many cases soldiers made sure that they could not choose the option of surrendering. Not even the pleas of Japanese prisoners, who told their compatriots that the Americans were treating them well, could stop the slaughter. As the waters around Marpi Point literally turned red with blood, even battle-hardened marines were forced to turn their heads, sickened by what they had seen and gravely worried about what the fanaticism it represented meant for them in battles to come.

Saipan also produced what seems to be the first rough estimate of what losses Americans would suffer in defeating Japan. It was part of a report submitted on August 30 to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top military body for direction of the war effort. The paper estimated, based on the ratio of American to Japanese casualties on Saipan, that “it might cost us half a million American lives and many times that number” to destroy Japanese forces defending the home islands against an invasion¹⁹ (see Document B1). This “Saipan ratio,” which would be followed by other projections in the wake of later island battles closer to Japan, had disturbing implications for American war planners. It clearly worried U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall because of the high casualties it suggested for the future operations closer to Japan and against the Japanese home islands themselves²⁰ (see Document B2).

In attempting to defend the Marianas, Japan mobilized much of its remaining naval strength. The objective was to deal the American fleet a decisive defeat and reverse the tide of battle in the Pacific. Instead, a lopsided battle took place in the Philippine Sea, the section of the Pacific Ocean between the Philippines and the Marianas. In what Americans called the “Marianas’ Turkey Shoot,” on June 19–20 seasoned and skilled American pilots flying a new and improved aircraft, the F6F Grumman Hellcat, overwhelmed the inexperienced Japanese flyers, their ranks depleted of experienced pilots by earlier battles. The Japanese navy lost about four hundred aircraft along with three carriers. While most of its ships managed to withdraw, leaving the Japanese navy with enough powerful battleships and cruisers to remain a dangerous force, the back of Tokyo’s naval aviation was broken. The Battle of the Philippine Sea, the largest carrier battle of the war, was also the last.

It also was the last battle for Prime Minister Tojo and his government, which lost the support of Hirohito and had to resign on July 18. Tojo was succeeded by General Kuniaki Koiso, who inherited the unenviable task of trying to salvage

something from the disastrous war. His government would serve for eight months, until April 1945.

RETURN TO THE PHILIPPINES

Before attacking the Philippines, marines and army troops were sent to seize Peleliu, one of the Palau Islands about five hundred miles east of the Philippines. Rugged and covered with jungle, Peleliu turned out to be the scene of yet another incredibly difficult battle. At Peleliu, American fighting men encountered the new Japanese strategy of not defending the beach. Rather than expose themselves to withering bombardment from offshore ships, the Japanese on Peleliu remained inland, then contested every inch of the way from hidden positions as the Americans tried to move inland. The battle for Peleliu lasted from mid-September to mid-October 1944, about four times longer than expected. The casualties were staggering: the First Marine Division, which bore the brunt of the battle during the first two weeks, suffered a casualty rate of 53.7 percent. Other army and marine units had rates almost as high. It was no wonder that Private E. B. Sledge, in his memoir of fighting in the Pacific, remembered Peleliu as an "assault into hell."²¹ That assault, it turned out, was not necessary. After the battle, American military planners concluded that Peleliu could have been bypassed, as were other Japanese-held islands as part of the American strategy known as "island hopping," without harming future operations.

The campaign to retake the Philippines was a vast operation that began on October 20, 1944, when the first of 200,000 soldiers landed on the island of Leyte. General MacArthur dramatically waded ashore that day in a scene he made sure was copiously photographed and that included his famous announcement, "People of the Philippines, I have returned!" Whatever the people of the Philippines thought of MacArthur's famous photo op, it was not a scene that endeared the general to American critics of his performance as a commander or those who could not suffer his enormous ego. By March, the capital of Manila on the main island of Luzon was secured and a Philippine civil government had been restored. On June 30, MacArthur announced that most of the country was liberated, but fighting went on, even on Luzon, until the end of the war.

The struggle for the Philippines included the titanic Battle of Leyte Gulf. The greatest naval battle in history, it engaged almost three hundred ships. Actually a series of encounters fought during three days in late October 1944 that extended outward from Leyte Gulf over tens of thousands of square miles of empty ocean, the battle effectively destroyed the Japanese navy as a fighting force. It also saw the appearance of the first organized attacks by squads of

kamikazes, Japanese pilots who deliberately crashed their planes into American ships, taking a large toll. On land, especially on Luzon, American soldiers faced a skillful defense, organized by General Tomoyuki Yamashita. It allowed the Americans to land unopposed; once they reached mountainous inland terrain, however, a dense web of obstacles and fortifications forced them to move slowly and made them pay dearly for every advance. The battle for Manila was ferocious, the destruction it caused made worse by a massive wave of Japanese atrocities against Filipino civilians. By the time it was over, 100,000 civilians were dead from the fighting and atrocities committed by the Japanese. The city itself lay in ruins. Although the Americans received valuable assistance from tens of thousands of Filipino guerrillas, they paid a heavy price for liberating the Philippines: almost 14,000 killed and more than 48,000 wounded. An estimated 250,000 Japanese, including civilians, died in the futile defense of the archipelago. General Yamashita retreated into the mountains of northern Luzon, where he held out with about 65,000 troops until August 15, 1945, the day after the emperor informed the United States that Japan would surrender.²²

IWO JIMA AND OKINAWA

Japan saved the worst for last: the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Iwo Jima, 660 miles south of Tokyo, is a volcanic island of about eight square miles shaped like a pork chop. Its name means “sulfur island” in Japanese, and it is a desolate place, reeking from sulfur and other noxious gases that seep from its sands and rocks as a result of low-level volcanic activity below its barren surface. Iwo Jima’s rugged topography and the softness of its volcanic rock, which allows for tunneling and building underground fortifications and shelters, made it an ideal place to defend and a dreadful place to attack. Regardless of which side one was on and even before the start of the battle, Iwo Jima was a repulsive place. To one Japanese officer, Iwo Jima was “an island of sulphur, no water, no sparrow, no swallow.” To an American marine, the island looked “like hell with the fire out, but still smoking.”²³

Iwo Jima became one of the worst battlegrounds of World War II because it was a vital part of Japan’s inner defense zone, the “doorkeeper to the Imperial capital,” as one Japanese officer put it.²⁴ Indeed, in late 1944 and early 1945 it partially blocked sustained bombing of Japan’s cities by American B-29s. Despite their advanced technology, the B-29s were having limited success in their strategic bombing campaign, which was designed to destroy Japan’s industrial infrastructure and thereby its ability to continue the war. The bombers were at the very limit of their range when they had to fly round-trip missions over open ocean from the Marianas to Japan’s home islands. Once over Japan, poor weather conditions, includ-

ing cloud cover about 70 percent of the time and winds that varied in direction and intensity, made it almost impossible to bomb specific targets with any degree of accuracy. It was, in fact, the failure of strategic bombing in late 1944 and early 1945 that led Major General Curtis LeMay, commander of the XXI Bomber Command, which had the assignment to attack Japan from the air, to turn to area bombing employing incendiary bombs. Those raids began in February 1945, but the first major attack took place in March when 300 B-29s from the Marianas attacked Tokyo. The results were devastating: more than 80,000 people were killed and at least 250,000 buildings and twenty-two major industrial targets destroyed. An area of more than fifteen square miles was leveled.

Still, the B-29s were at risk, and Iwo Jima was a big part of the problem. On their way to Japan, they faced attacks from fighters based on the island. Avoiding those attacks used up precious fuel, which for many crews meant they would run out of fuel during the return trip and have to ditch at sea, where rescue was problematic at best. Even after American bombers destroyed Iwo Jima's airfields, the island's radar provided warning to the home of approaching B-29s. Finally, the island, once in American hands, was the ideal place for fuel-starved or damaged B-29s to land on their return flight, something that happened for the first time in early March, well before the battle for Iwo Jima was over. Iwo Jima also could provide bases for new American P-51 Mustang fighters, which could then accompany the B-29s on their missions and protect them against Japanese fighters.

On February 19, 1945, the first elements of a force of more than seventy thousand marines landed on Iwo Jima. The battle that followed was the largest amphibious marine assault ever, and the bloodiest. Every day for more than two months before the actual landing, American bombers had attacked Iwo Jima. The seventy-four-day assault from the air, the longest of the war, had been followed by four days of point-blank bombardment by battleships, the largest pounding from the sea of the war. It was not nearly enough. The Japanese had built a network of 1,500 fortified caves, hundreds of pillboxes, blockhouses, and covered trenches, and miles of interconnected tunnels. Most of these fortifications survived the American bombardment, and from them, skillfully led by Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the Japanese garrison of 21,000 men fought a dogged, vicious war of attrition. Kuribayashi decided not to defend Iwo Jima's beaches. Instead, his gunners allowed the Americans to come ashore. When the beaches were crowded with troops, the Japanese opened up with heavy weapons, pounding the exposed Marines, who had nowhere to go but forward into enemy fire. By the end of the first day, with 30,000 marines ashore, more than 560 were dead and almost 2,000 wounded.

Nor did matters improve as the Marines moved inland. One marine correspondent described a tiny part of the deadly cat-and-mouse fight his comrades faced on Iwo Jima's craggy hills and ridges:

Despite their preponderance of weapons, the Marines found that there were too many holes. They would attack one only to be shot at from another one half a dozen feet away. Moreover, the ridge was not a straight wall but, in many places, curved like an S. Entranceways protected each other, so that Marines would be hit in the back from holes guarding the one they were assaulting. The interconnecting tunnels inside the ridge also allowed the Japs to play deadly tag with the Marines. They would shoot out of one hole. But by the time Marines got close enough to that hole, the Japs had left it and were shooting from another one twenty yards away and higher up in the wall. The Marines had to post guards at every hole they could see in order to attack any of them. The tunnel also curved and twisted inside the ridge. The Japs could escape the straight trajectory weapons and grenades thrown into the cave entrances, merely by running back into the interior.²⁵

The battle for Iwo Jima lasted for five excruciating weeks, into the last week of March, much longer than American commanders had expected. The Japanese garrison again fought to the end. Only about two hundred enemy soldiers were taken prisoner, and most of those were wounded. The Americans were staggered by their losses: more than 6,800 dead and almost 20,000 wounded, far more than the 10,000 casualties that were expected. Those casualties included more than 2,600 navy losses, many from kamikaze attacks against ships offshore. For the first time in the war, the Japanese in defeat had inflicted more total casualties than they had suffered from the victorious Americans. Of the twenty-four marine battalion commanders who landed on Iwo Jima, five were killed and twelve others wounded. Some regiments had casualty rates of 75 percent. Not even the medical teams were spared: twenty-three surgeons died on Iwo Jima, along with 827 medical corpsmen. Four of those corpsmen were among the twenty-seven Americans who were awarded Medals of Honor, a record for any battle, thirteen of them posthumously. Iwo Jima gave the country what was the most famous battle picture of the Pacific War: the five marines and one navy corpsman raising the American flag on Mount Surabachi on the fourth day of the battle, a moment captured by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal. Of the six, three were killed in the fighting that followed and two others were wounded. The marine cameraman who shot the moving picture of the flag raising was also killed on Iwo Jima. Admiral Nimitz summed up what happened there as well as anyone could when he wrote that on Iwo Jima, "uncommon valor was a common virtue."²⁶

Between March 1945 and Japan's surrender in August of that year, 2,251 B-29s carrying more than 24,700 crewmen made emergency landings on Iwo Jima. Because a significant number of those crewmen would have been lost at sea, and because P-51 fighters reduced B-29 losses over Japan, Iwo Jima did save thou-

sands of American lives in the months to come. That did not make the looming prospect of invading Japan any more palatable to American planners, both because of the huge overall losses the Marines had just suffered and because many of the regiments expected to play a key role in the assault on Japan proper had been battered, and some virtually decimated, on Iwo Jima.

Okinawa, 794 square miles in area, the largest island of the Ryukyu chain, lies less than four hundred miles south of Kyushu, the southernmost Japanese home island. Annexed by Tokyo in the 1870s, the Ryukyus were considered a part of the home islands by 1945, which accounted for Okinawa's emotional importance. Its strategic importance stemmed from its location: close enough to Japan proper for escort fighters and bombers other than B-29s to make the trip and to serve as the main staging area for the invasion of Kyushu, where the assault on Japan proper was expected to begin before the end of the year. Tokyo assigned its defense to Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima, who had about 76,000 Japanese troops and 24,000 impressed Okinawan militiamen for the job. Like Kuribayashi on Iwo Jima, Ushijima would win the grudging respect of the Americans for his wickedly effective defense of Okinawa. General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. commanded the American assault force of 183,000 soldiers and marines. Like Ushijima, Buckner would die on Okinawa. Transporting and backing up the assault force was a huge naval flotilla of carriers, battleships, and other craft—a total of more than twelve hundred ships and a thousand carrier planes—that one sailor described as stretching “to the horizon. . . . I couldn't have imagined that many ships existed in the world.”²⁷

The Japanese were outgunned, outnumbered, and cut off from reinforcements, but they fought with the same fury and fanaticism that their comrades had displayed in previous battles. To that was added the most extensive and lethal use of kamikazes yet seen against American naval forces. The resulting collision between the irresistible and the immovable produced the deadliest single battle of the Pacific War.

The first American troops landed on Okinawa on April 1, 1945. After meeting no resistance on the beaches, they soon ran into elaborate and well-planned Japanese defenses and soldiers who fought from them like those on Iwo Jima. The Americans who had hoped that bombardment from artillery ashore and ships at sea would rout the Japanese from their dug-in positions were to be disappointed. As one marine commander recalled, “It seemed nothing could possibly be living in that churning mass where the shells were falling and roaring but when we next advanced, Japs would still be there, even madder than they were before.”²⁸ Some of the worst fighting took place at Japanese fortifications in the southern part of the island known as the Shuri Line, which took its name from a nearby castle. E. B. Sledge, a veteran of the horror of Peleliu, described his experiences there:

The stench of death was overpowering. The only way I could bear the monstrous horror of it all was to look upward away from the earthly reality surrounding us, watch the leaden gray clouds go skudding [sic] over, and repeat over and over to myself that the situation was unreal—just a nightmare—that I would soon awake and find myself somewhere else. But the ever-present smell of death saturated my nostrils. It was there with every breath I took.

I existed from moment to moment, sometimes thinking death would be preferable. We were in the depths of the abyss, the ultimate horror of war. During the fighting around Umurbrogol Pocket on Peleliu, I had been depressed by the wastage of human lives. But in the mud and driving rain before Shuri, we were surrounded by maggots and decay so degrading I believed we had been flung into hell's own cesspool.²⁹

Offshore, the navy was under assault by thousands of planes, many of them kamikazes, which over the course of the battle sank thirty-six ships and damaged ten times that many. Kamikaze pilots accounted for all but two of the ships that were sunk. The aircraft they flew included the newly developed Okha, Japanese for "cherry blossom," a rocket-powered plane launched from a bomber. A witness described one of the most destructive kamikaze attacks, the third of the day on May 14 to hit the carrier *Enterprise*, the most decorated ship of its kind in the U.S. Navy. *Enterprise* survived the attack but sustained enough damage to knock her out of the war:

All the batteries were firing: the 5-inch guns, the 40 mm and 20 mm, even the rifles. The Japanese aircraft dived through the rain of steel. It had been hit in several places and seemed to be trailing a banner of flame and smoke but it came on, clearly visible, hardly moving, the line of its wings as straight as a sword.

The deck was deserted; every man, with the exception of the gunners, was lying flat on his face. Flaming and roaring, the fireball passed in front of the "island" superstructure and crashed with a terrible impact just behind the forward lift. The entire vessel was shaken, some forty yards of the flight deck folded up like a banana skin.³⁰

Okinawa was declared secure on June 22 and the battle itself officially declared over on July 2. The army and marines suffered almost 40,000 dead and wounded. Non-battle casualties resulting from causes such as disease and combat fatigue—the latter mainly the result of the intensity of the fighting and constant artillery and mortar bombardment—ran the total casualties to more than 72,000. Offshore, the navy suffered its largest single-battle losses in its history: almost 10,000 dead and wounded.

Far afield from Okinawa, a lot changed as the fighting raged from April through June. In Japan, the Koiso government fell. On April 8 a new government took office, with seventy-eight-year-old Kantaro Suzuki, a retired admiral

and hero of the Russo-Japanese war, as prime minister. In the United States, on April 12, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died of a massive stroke; his successor was the inexperienced Harry S. Truman. In Europe, on May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Allies, ending the war in Europe and depriving Japan of its main ally. Meanwhile, the impact of the battle for Okinawa was felt in Washington and Tokyo, although not necessarily as one might have expected. In Tokyo, some military men took heart. Their troops on Okinawa, under extremely disadvantageous conditions, had held out for almost three months and inflicted huge casualties on the Americans. They anticipated, in part by using suicide weapons (manned torpedoes, midget submarines, and human mines as well as thousands of piloted kamikaze aircraft) to attack troopships, that they could inflict such heavy casualties on the Americans in the battle for Kyushu that Washington would abandon its demand for unconditional surrender, which had been Allied policy since it was announced in January 1943, and agree to a negotiated peace, one that would leave Japan unoccupied and its present form of government intact. In Washington, the dread of that next battle mounted, even as President Truman, on June 18, authorized the invasion of Kyushu to go forward³¹ (see Document A27). At the same time, the search for a less costly way to end the war on Allied terms continued. That search would have its historic impact not only on Japan and the end of World War II but also on the entire postwar world that emerged from that horrific struggle.