

PEARL HARBOR

Japanese diplomats in Washington, D.C. had not yet broken off diplomatic relations with the United States when the first wave of the Japanese attack fell on Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941. Believing that the United States was an impediment to their empire-building plans, Japanese militarists planned the attack after the United States had placed an embargo on the sale of oil and scrap metals to Japan.

At 7:55 a.m. in Hawaii, Japanese bombers, torpedo bombers and fighters descended on the U.S. Pacific fleet. What had started as a sleepy Sunday morning, typically a day American military personnel could sleep late, turned into a bloody nightmare as planes displaying the red ball of the Japanese flag wreaked chaos on battleship row.

Expecting an attack on the Philippines or British Malaya, the U.S. Navy had withdrawn most of the Pacific Fleet to Hawaii. When the Japanese aircraft struck, the American battleships were lined up in a row in Pearl Harbor. They were without torpedo nets and their anti-aircraft guns were not ready. Torpedoes, from the first wave of the Japanese attack, struck and sunk the U.S battleships Arizona, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and California.

Japanese bombers also attacked five U.S. airfields. The American planes, lined up wing-to-wing to protect against saboteurs made easy targets for Japanese bombers.

The second wave of the Japanese attack came an hour later. By the time the attack was over, more than 2,400 American soldiers and sailors had been killed and more than 1,000 were injured. A total of eight battleships, three cruisers and four other ships were lost and 188 airplanes had been destroyed. Ships that hadn't been sunk were damaged. The American Pacific Fleet was all but destroyed. Through a stroke of luck, two American aircraft carriers were at sea when the attack took place. Japanese losses were light and they had come very close to achieving their goal of completely destroying the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

On December 8, 1941, President Roosevelt went before Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Japan.

“Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which shall live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of Japan. . . . No matter how long it may take us. . . the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.”

--Franklin D. Roosevelt

The Senate voted unanimously and the House voted 388 to 1 to declare war on Japan. On December 11, Japan's allies, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States and Congress reciprocated.

The United States, woefully under-prepared for war, now faced a war on two fronts. All talk of isolationism faded as Americans rallied to support their country, an unintended effect of the Japanese assault.

Shortly after their attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese bombed American bases in Wake Island, Guam and the Philippines and attacked British and Dutch outposts as well. For almost a year after the attack, the Japanese controlled the Pacific and Americans were ill prepared to respond.

MIDWAY

On April 18, 1942, American bombs fell on Tokyo. Launched from the aircraft carrier Hornet, the sixteen B-25 bombers could attack from a greater distance than the carrier's usual short-range bombers. The attack on Tokyo, known as "Doolittle's Raid," did minimal damage to Tokyo but boosted American morale after a stream of disappointing losses.

Doolittle's Raid also prompted a shift in Japanese priorities. The American fleet had to be destroyed. The Japanese would not risk another attack on Tokyo and the Emperor. Admiral Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese fleet, had a plan. He believed that he could lure the American fleet into battle by attacking Midway Island, the last American base in the North Pacific.



American code-breakers, however, had already broken the Japanese Navy's code. American Admiral Chester Nimitz ordered U.S. carriers to positions just off Midway. When the Japanese launched their aircraft against the island on June 4, 1942, the Americans were ready. American anti-aircraft guns wiped out 38 of the Japanese planes.

As the Japanese were preparing for a second wave of attack, American planes took off from the aircraft carriers Enterprise, Hornet and Yorktown. The Japanese were caught between attacks with aircraft, fuel and bombs exposed on the decks of their carriers. One of the Japanese carriers was sunk. The other three were barely afloat. Admiral Yamamoto retreated with his remaining vessels.

The Battle of Midway was an important American victory and a turning point in the Pacific war. The Japanese Fleet lost four large carriers and 250 aircraft, materials the Japanese could not easily replace. Japan's advance in the Pacific had been stopped. The battle of Midway marked the limit of Japanese expansion toward the Hawaiian Islands and put Japan on the defensive.

EL ALAMEIN

At Churchill's urging, American and British ground troops would hit the periphery of the Nazi empire first. This would give novice (inexperienced) troops an opportunity to develop combat experience before facing the tough battles to come on the European continent.

By July 1942 Hitler's Afrika Korps, under the command of General Erwin Rommel, stood poised to

take El Alamein, Egypt, a railway junction about 70 miles from Alexandria. Adapting blitzkrieg tactics to desert warfare, Rommel, known as the "Desert Fox," had pushed the British back from the Egyptian frontier to El Alamein and from there stood ready to take the Suez Canal and the oil fields of the Middle East. El Alamein held tremendous strategic importance. The Suez Canal was Britain's link to its empire in the east, and the risk of the oil-rich Middle East fueling the Nazi war machine was a clear threat.

Axis forces, however, had problems with supply lines. Making the most of these shortages, British General Bernard Montgomery led the British Eighth Army in defeating Rommel's German and Italian troops and then relentlessly pursued them through the desert as they retreated from Egypt and into Libya.

Meanwhile, the Americans had landed at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers and pushed east over rugged terrain for more than 500 miles. Attempting to trap German and Italian troops fleeing from the British, inexperienced American forces at first faced defeat at the Kasserine Pass. Reinforcements and air power helped the allies to rally and on May 7, 1943, 250,000 German and Italian soldiers surrendered to the allies.

The British victory at El Alamein was the turning point that eventually led to the defeat of Axis forces in North Africa by May of 1943. To the war-weary British people, who had struggled alone against Hitler for more than a year before the United States entered the conflict, the victory at El Alamein, the first real British victory of the war provided an enormous psychological boost. "Tonight you may rejoice. Tonight there is sugar on the cake," Churchill responded to news of the victory.



STALINGRAD

German troops invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Although stopped by the Soviet winter, Nazi forces took the offensive again in the summer of 1942. Hitler hoped to capture Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus Mountains and hoped to capture the major Soviet industrial center of Stalingrad. After brutal house-to-house combat, the Germans captured most of the city of Stalingrad by the end of September.

As another Soviet winter rolled in, Soviet forces launched a counter-offensive laying siege to the city and cutting off German supplies. By early February, 1943, the starving and frozen German troops surrendered. The Soviets had lost 1,100,000 soldiers while more than 230,000 German soldiers had died at the battle of Stalingrad.

Despite staggering Soviet losses, the Battle of Stalingrad marked a turning point on the eastern front. From this point on, Soviet forces were on the offensive and the Germans were in retreat on the Soviet front.



D-DAY

Almost as soon as the United States entered the war, Joseph Stalin began to pressure Roosevelt and Churchill to open a second front in Western Europe. Facing staggering losses, Stalin desperately wanted a western invasion to draw Nazi troops away from the Soviet front. The Normandy invasion of June 6, 1944 was that long-awaited second front.

Before landing Allied forces in France, the Americans and the British would (1) clear North Atlantic shipping lanes of Nazi subs; (2) bomb industrial targets in Germany; (3) attack Axis positions in North Africa; and (4) invade the “soft underbelly of Europe,” Italy. While all this was going on, however, planning was underway for an Allied invasion of France and the liberation of Europe.

British, Canadian, and American troops, the Allied Expeditionary Force, would be placed under a single commander, American General Dwight D. Eisenhower. As Supreme Commander, it was Eisenhower’s task to plan “Operation Overlord,” the greatest land-sea and air operation in history. This one operation was key to the success of the Allies’ most important war goals—the liberation of France and Nazi-occupied Europe and ultimately Hitler’s defeat.

Surprise would be an important factor in the success of the planned invasion, but hiding or disguising the presence of 3 million troops in England required elaborate deception. Using Hollywood techniques, Eisenhower set up phantom tanks and encampments that looked real to Nazi spy planes. Old landing vessels, no longer in use, were placed in British ports directly across the English Channel from the French port of Calais. In fake radio messages, designed for German intervention, Allied commanders sent orders to a make-believe army to attack the French port of Calais. At Calais, 150 miles northeast of Normandy, Hitler concentrated his elite troops and best defenses. When Allied ships approached the beaches of Normandy, German leaders were convinced it was not the real invasion and did not commit all their forces to defending against the invasion.

Despite concerns about the weather, Eisenhower gave the order for the invasion to take place on June 6, 1944. Shortly after midnight, British and American paratroopers were dropped on the French countryside behind German lines. They were to hold bridges, roads and airfields that would be critical to the Allied advance inland and prevent the Germans from getting reinforcements to the coast. Silent gliders brought Allied special forces behind enemy lines and 2,000 Allied bombers began an attack of German defenses along the invasion area.

As the first light of dawn began to rise, an armada of 4,400 ships appeared off the beaches of Normandy. Five beaches were targeted for landings. The two western-most beaches, code-named Utah and Omaha, were American landing sites. British and Canadian forces landed on three beaches to the east, Gold, Juno and Sword. More than 200,000 Allied troops under Eisenhower’s command stormed onto the beaches of Normandy.

The American landing at Utah beach went well as did the British and Canadian landings farther east, but the American troops landing at Omaha beach faced a brutal and ferocious assault. Roughly 2,500 Americans were either killed or wounded at Omaha Beach alone, but by the end of the “longest day,” nearly 35,000 American troops had landed at Omaha Beach, 23,000 had landed at Utah and over 75,000 British and Canadian troops had landed at Gold, Juno and Sword. Hitler’s Atlantic Wall (an elaborate barrier of underwater obstacles placed along the European coast from Norway to Spain) had been pierced. Through this breach poured forth the personnel and products of American factories that would defeat Hitler. Within a week, over 300,000 men and 100,000 tons of supplies were landed at Normandy. A beachhead was established in France.

IWO JIMA



The United States strategy in the Pacific was known as “island hopping;” that is, key islands were captured, and air bases built. Each captured island became a steppingstone that brought us ever closer to Japan. The territory controlled by Japan covered vast distances in the Pacific. Americans would not try to capture every Japanese-held island in the Pacific, only islands of strategic value.

Iwo Jima was a tiny, volcanic island, only eight square miles in size. It lacked a source of fresh water and smelled like “rotten eggs” from high levels of sulfur on the island. “Iwo Jima” is Japanese for sulfur island. But, it is only 660 miles southeast of Tokyo. It was an essential air base for bombing missions over Japan and as such it was heavily defended. Furthermore, the two airfields on Iwo Jima were being used as a base for Japanese fighter planes to attack American planes.

On February 19, 1945, the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions landed on Iwo Jima. Before their arrival, U.S. forces had bombarded the island with shells and bombs for more than 70 days. The Japanese were well entrenched. Months before the arrival of U.S. forces, the Japanese commander on Iwo Jima, General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, had ordered his engineers to expand the island’s caves and build an intricate system of connecting caves and tunnels that hid Japanese gun positions all over the island.

The Japanese soldiers, burrowed into hiding places, were invisible to the American marines landing on the island on February 19. At first the marines met almost no resistance. It was not until they had made their way well inside the nest of hidden enemy that the Japanese opened fire from caves and disguised pillboxes. The barrage of deadly fire cut marines in half. Surviving marines scrambled to take cover but found it impossible to dig into the island’s volcanic ash. Along with bullets, survivors were assaulted by the sickening smell of sulfur and decaying bodies. To break the impasse, flamethrowers were brought in to burn out the unseen enemy.

From the heights of Mount Suribachi, hidden Japanese guns raked machine gun and artillery fire on the marines. The ancient volcano, the highest point on the island, was eventually captured by the leathernecks on February 23. Associated Press photographer, Joe Rosenthal, snapped his famous picture of five marines and one navy corpsman raising the American flag at the top of Mount Suribachi. However, the marines still had to capture the island’s two airfields. Before the island was taken, three of the flag-raisers would die. Admiral Nimitz declared a victory on March 14, but the last pocket of enemy resistance was not cleared from the island until twelve days later.

The bloody battle for this small volcanic island was very costly. More than 6,000 Americans were killed and another 18,000 wounded. Of the 20,000 Japanese soldiers defending the island, only 1,083 survivors surrendered. By the middle of March 1945, American bombers were taking off from Iwo Jima’s airfields and flying bombing missions against Japan.

OKINAWA

By the spring of 1945, it was clear that Japan had lost the war but intense and fierce fighting continued. It appeared that the Allies would have to invade Japan. An invasion was already planned for November 1945. The Allies would need a staging area for the invasion, a place to build up the troops and supplies that would be needed.

The island of Okinawa, only 350 miles from Japan, fit the requirements of military planners. It was large enough and close enough to Japan to serve as a base for the invasion. Bombardment of the island began in the end of March 1945. On the morning of April 1, 1945, American marines and soldiers landed on the beaches along a five-mile stretch of coast near the island's two airfields. Similar to their experience at Iwo Jima, American forces met little resistance on the beaches. Even the airfields were easily taken. But as they moved inland, they met with fierce attacks from an enemy hidden in fortified caves, tunnels and camouflaged pillboxes. The Japanese defenders of Okinawa knew they had no hope of winning the battle, but they hoped to make U.S. forces pay so dearly for victory that the United States would be willing to negotiate surrender terms more acceptable to the Japanese.

While U.S. marines and soldiers faced the fury of an unseen enemy on the island, our naval vessels offshore faced the devastating attacks of Japanese kamikaze or suicide pilots. Almost 2,000 suicide attacks damaged more than 260 ships. The kamikaze pilots wreaked enormous damage because they turned their planes into "smart" bombs that could steer directly into parts of the ship that would produce the most damage. Almost 5,000 seamen lost their lives because of these attacks.

The fighting on Okinawa took a heavy toll on the Japanese. By the end of May, thousands of Japanese and Okinawans had been killed, but the fighting continued on through June 21, 1945. The United States had won the battle, but at what cost? More than 7,600 American marines and soldiers had died in the battle. The Japanese losses were much greater, 110,000 died including two generals who committed ritual suicide rather than surrender. Almost 80,000 Okinawan civilians either died during the struggle or committed suicide. The intensity of the fighting affected even those who survived the battle. Survivors suffered from psychological trauma, referred to as combat fatigue at that time.

Although the battle for Okinawa was over, the war continued. There was still no indication that the military government of Japan would surrender. Policy makers in the United States had a decision to make. If the battle for Okinawa was an indication of how ferociously the Japanese would fight, the cost of invading Japan would produce staggering casualties for our fighting men and Japanese civilians. Then as planners weighed the possibilities, news arrived from Almagordo, New Mexico in July. The world's first atom bomb had been successfully detonated. A new option was available that would allow us to avoid the bloodbath that would surely ensue if we invaded Japan. The grueling punishment and devastating losses experienced on Okinawa would help to sway that decision.