WAR COMES TO THE PACIFIC

by Edison McIntyre
Japan seemed to be itching for a fight in the 1930s. It had spent a number of years engaging in small battles with China. But in July 1937, Japan launched an all-out war to dominate that country. By 1939, it controlled parts of eastern China, but China’s determined resistance resulted in a military stalemate.

Hoping to put an end to the conflict in Asia, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent Japanese officials a warning. He threatened to cut U.S. trade with Japan if it did not withdraw from China. In February 1941, he moved the U.S. Pacific Fleet from San Diego, California, to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, as a further warning to Japan. But World War II (1939–1945) was being fought in Europe, and Germany’s invading army had quickly defeated a number of nations there. Alarmed British officials wanted help from the United States to find a way to stop Germany’s aggression.

Japan’s imperialism continued with the occupation of the northern part of French Indochina (present-day Vietnam) in August 1940. In September, Japan signed a treaty of cooperation with Germany and Italy, whose armies were overrunning Europe and North Africa. In July 1941, when the Japanese went further and occupied
the southern part of Indochina, Roosevelt ordered a freeze on trade with Japan.

As a small island nation, Japan had little oil of its own. Without supplies of oil and gasoline from other nations to provide fuel for its war machine, the Japanese Army and Navy could not fight. In October, the new Japanese government, led by General Hideki Tojo, faced a dilemma. If Japan withdrew from China, America and its allies would resume trade, but the proud Japanese military would be humiliated. If the Japanese remained in China, the American freeze on trade would remain, and Japan would need a new source of oil.

Oil was available on islands in the South Pacific Ocean. Many of those islands were territories held by the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. Japan decided to risk angering those nations and take what it needed.

Japan’s leaders knew that in a long war, the United States would have a big advantage over Japan. It had more people, money, and factories to manufacture weapons and war supplies. But the Japanese knew that the British were already deeply involved in the war in Europe. And they thought that the United States did not have the military strength to defend its Pacific territories. Japan had a large modern navy and an army hardened by years of combat in China. The Japanese thought that if they could achieve a series of quick decisive victories, their enemies might be forced to negotiate for peace. Japan would be left in control of eastern Asia and the western Pacific.

While the Japanese prepared for war, the Tojo government continued talking with the United States. It hoped that Roosevelt might resume trade with Japan. But the United States insisted that Japan withdraw from both Indochina and China.
As negotiations continued in the fall of 1941, the United States rushed to reinforce its territories in the Pacific. Military leaders warned Roosevelt that their forces would not be ready for war until the spring of 1942.

On December 1, 1941, Japan decided to end negotiations and launch an attack. For strategic reasons, the Japanese planned a lightning strike on the huge naval force at Pearl Harbor. American leaders knew that Japan was about to strike (U.S. intelligence officials had broken the Japanese diplomatic code), but they were not certain about the target. On December 7, the Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor. Their fleet included six aircraft carriers and more than 400 planes. It was the first time in naval history that multiple aircraft carriers were combined in one battle. The next day, the United States declared war on Japan.

The British and Americans had discussed the possibility of having to fight a war on two fronts (in Europe and in the Pacific). Because Germany was considered a more dangerous enemy than Japan, the Allies adopted a defensive strategy against Japan. They just tried to hold their territories in the Pacific Ocean against Japanese attacks. Over the next six months, however, Japan’s superior naval forces gained the upper hand (see page 10). Allied nations in the South Pacific were in danger of getting cut off from reinforcements and supplies.

Despite the Allies’ defensive strategy, the Americans looked for ways to strike back. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, all eight of the U.S. battleships in the harbor were damaged. (Five of those were repaired.) But the fleet’s three aircraft carriers were not there, and their survival proved to be more important in the war in the Pacific. The following spring, aircraft carriers were used to launch hit-and-run raids against the Japanese. The first one, led by Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle (see page 14), attacked the Japanese mainland.

After the Philippines fell to Japanese forces in May 1942, American and Filipino prisoners endured what became known as the Bataan Death March. They were forced to walk more than 60 miles without food or water to a prison camp. The prisoners used improvised litters to carry those who were too weak to continue.
After the Battle of Midway, Allied forces went on the attack. On August 7, 1942, U.S. Marines landed on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. For the next six months, with U.S. Navy and Army support, the Marines held their position against Japanese ground, air, and sea attacks. In February 1943, the Japanese abandoned both Guadalcanal and New Guinea.

As the war continued, Japan could not recover from the heavy losses it sustained. America’s war-time industry, however, kicked into high gear and was able to replace its losses. New navy vessels spearheaded the offensive that was launched in 1943. Using air and sea attacks, the Allied forces developed a new strategy. They skipped over locations where there was a large Japanese force and landed instead on islands where they could establish bases and launch the next westward-moving attack. The cut-off Japanese positions where allowed to “wither on the vine.”

This island-hopping strategy was used in the Gilbert Islands in November, the Marshall Islands in January 1944, the Caroline Islands in February, and the Mariana Islands in June. In October, American forces landed in the Philippines. By early 1945, Allied forces once again controlled sites in the Philippines that they had had to abandon in 1942.

The Japanese became desperate as Allied forces approached their homeland. From mid-February to the end of March, U.S. Marines fought fiercely.

U.S. Navy cryptographers also played a role. They broke the Japanese Navy’s code and discovered that Japan was planning to invade eastern New Guinea, a large island near Australia. Using this information, the U.S. Navy met the Japanese invasion force in the Battle of the Coral Sea (see page 16).

After Doolittle’s raid, the Japanese were determined to destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet once and for all. The Japanese Navy crafted an elaborate plan to invade Midway Atoll, expecting to surprise the Americans as it had at Pearl Harbor. But U.S. cryptographers figured out the plan. The U.S. Navy was alerted, and the outcome of the battle that followed turned the tide of the war in the Pacific.

Cryptographers are people who are skilled at creating or studying secret writing or encoded messages.
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