

Allied Race to Victory:**Island Hopping in the Pacific Theater**

Hello, I'm Tina Mead, a librarian here at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library in downtown Chicago. Behind me is our exhibit, the *Allied Race to Victory: The Air, Land, and Sea Campaigns that Ended WWII*. We are going to delve into the Pacific Theater island hopping campaigns, which were integral to the eventual Allied victory, but are often overshadowed by the actions in Europe. We've got a lot of ground to cover, so let's go!

The Bunker Hill is a wonderful fighting ship. We are all proud of her. Her record was built from blood and courage. We can't forget those men who died so we could be proud of her. Follows the story of my stay aboard a ship in the U.S. Navy as a gunner. My part was small. I am only one of many. ...It is impossible to write down emotional feelings that I have experienced under fire. My nerves have been keyed up for the entire 10 months to the highest possible pitch and it is a difficult task to relax completely, even now when I know I am comparatively safe. We all know we are on a lucky ship. The question we keep to ourselves is: How long can we stretch our luck??

—PFC Samuel Gevirtz, Marine gunner assigned to the USS Bunker Hill

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into World War II, American efforts in the Pacific were focused on repelling Japanese forces from further expansion in the region. Through major naval engagements with the Imperial Japanese Navy at Coral Sea and Midway, the United States Navy halted the Japanese advance in the South Pacific while inflicting severe losses on the Japanese fleet.

By 1944 Allied forces had made significant progress in pushing the Japanese out of the South Pacific, and with continued Allied success in Europe, American leaders began shifting resources towards the war in the Pacific. Although this was an Allied effort with Australian, British, Filipino, and others, the vast majority of the fleet and fighting forces were American. Offensive operations proceeded on a two-prong approach, with forces under General Douglas MacArthur in the southwest Pacific preparing to retake the Philippines, while forces under Admiral Chester Nimitz began an island-hopping campaign in the central Pacific. We will be following this path covering the campaigns to take the Marianas and Iwo Jima, but there were many other islands captured by the Allies on their path to defeating the Japanese military.

The first major campaign for U.S. forces in 1944 was to capture the Mariana Islands of Saipan, Guam, and Tinian. The islands would be essential to gain airfields from which American Air Forces could strike mainland Japan.

We call this an island hopping campaign because that is exactly what it was. Each island needed to be taken individually. The taking of one allowed the U.S. forces to regroup and then take the

next. The leadership had to adjust their plans for each assault based on the unique features of each island's coastline. To make the situation more complicated, the Japanese had been occupying and fortifying some of these islands since the 1930s. This put U.S. forces at a major disadvantage.

To balance the fight, the Americans came with a very large fleet, 274 strong, providing support for the invading Allies from both air and sea, often bombarding the Japanese for hours or days before U.S. forces came ashore.

Well, in Saipan, 'cause we were on a troop ship and we came off of the ropes on the side, you know, where they throw the ropes over the side and you came off the ropes into the [LCVP] Higgins boats, where they just jumped the front end of it, you know? And... we came off of there and headed for Saipan...[cut to next]...we went in and cause that there, that was the first time whatever, you know, I was under fire. And we went in. What I can remember: I knew this one guy; he was from the Bronx—he was a good friend of mine. And as we went in, they was dropping some mortars on us. And we never had that before. We didn't know, we didn't have experience with that. So we just tried to—you couldn't dig yourself in, you just hit the ground, you know? And they could go anywhere so you just had to move in just to keep going. And I remember as I went by, he was laying there, and he had his arm blown away. But they had given us—everybody had a little shot of that morphine on them, you know, that we carried. And he told me as I went by, he said, "Marty, give me a hand!" "I'm here," I said. So I took out my little morphine that I had and I gave him a little shot of it. I told him, I says, "They'll come pick you. They'll come and meet you here." So I moved on.

—Manuel "Marty" Martinez, 1st Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps

For the Marines landing on Saipan, Japan's years of preparation meant devastation. Carefully placed barbed wire obstacles created bottle necks, while flags meticulously set into the ground indicated distance, for more accurate indirect fire. Just a few miles inland, the Japanese used their intimate knowledge of the volcanic terrain and cave systems of the island to their advantage. The Marines were forced to advance under intense enemy fire, clearing defensive positions with grenades and flamethrowers at close range. Though the Japanese were unsuccessful in their efforts to halt the American advance, they did inflict a high number of casualties on U.S. forces over the course of the month-long battle.

Meanwhile! In the nearby Philippine Sea, the Japanese reacted to the attack on Saipan by sending nearly their entire carrier-based fleet, hoping to draw the Allies away from supporting the invasion.

...a shout went up and we looked over at the Wasp. A Jap divebomber snuck in under a low cloud cover and made a leisurely gliding dive on her... Realizing there might be others around, we looked upward. There were 2 Jap dive-bombers diving on us. We immediately trained our guns and cut loose. The 5 inchers missed, the 40m.m.'s missed. The 20m.m.'s



peppered away and the first plane broke into flames. ...We shifted targets and held the triggers down. The second plane suddenly broke in two and the forward section just missed our starboard bow by about 50 feet. We were cheering wildly. We looked around for casualties. Corporal Littlewood was dragging himself to the clipping room trying to get out of the way. He was hit by shrapnel in his left side under the lung. When he was hit he was standing about 6 feet from me. In back of us, by the 40m.m. director, First Lieutenant Gordon A. Stallings, second in command of the Marine detachment was lying in a mess of blood. He had a huge hole in his groin. He died about 15 minutes later. Killed in action...The bomb landed so close to the ship that the splash completely soaked all the Marines in Battery Six. Shrapnel tore through the hanger deck. Altogether, there were two men dead, and about 65 wounded. Many compartments on our port side are flooded. Repair men worked all day, all night, and half the next day making temporary repairs.

We had a full day. June 19th, will go down as the United States' greatest victory over Japanese air power.

–PFC Samuel Gevirtz, Marine gunner assigned to the USS Bunker Hill

While the Japanese had initiated the battle, they did not expect the speed at which U.S. forces would counterattack. With more experienced pilots and the ability to employ decisive amphibious maneuvers, U.S. Navy pilots were able to take out 2 of the Japanese's most advanced aircraft carriers along with more than a dozen destroyers, battleships, and submarines. In their attempt to prevent U.S. forces from taking the Marianas, Japanese Naval forces took heavy losses, ultimately ensuring Allied Naval and Air superiority for the rest of the war.

With victories in the Philippine Sea and Saipan, U.S. forces moved on to fight on the next island. They didn't have far to go, it's just 5 nautical miles across the Saipan Channel to Tinian.

Smallest of the three islands involved, Tinian is also much flatter, which enabled U.S. forces to bring ashore tanks and artillery with the help of the U.S. Navy Construction Battalion, the Seabees. Aided by this heavy firepower and the proximity to support on Saipan, the Marines were able to eliminate most resistance on the island and seize its airfields within just 9 days.

Although the operation to take Guam started the same day as Tinian, the fight would persist for 21 days on this the largest of the Mariana islands.

The heavy surf, reefs, and cliffs provided natural fortifications for the Japanese defenders around Guam, making for a difficult shore landing. After the strong resistance experienced on Saipan, U.S. naval commanders responded with a heavier bombardment of Guam, destroying every building and palm tree that could be used to conceal the enemy.

The newly formed Underwater Demolition Teams were brought in to clear what obstacles they could and provide a path for the invasion. Even with their efforts, some troop carrying LVTs



often got stranded on coral reefs, dropping U.S. forces several hundred yards from shore, forcing them to wade the remaining distance.

U.S. forces laboriously gained land during the day, only to face fierce Japanese counterattacks at night.

Yeah, because you're not going to see combat and then you see all those ships, somebody's lying. You know? Come on, man. It's like, when we got to Guam, they said, "Well, you know what, this island is secure. However, in the jungle behind us there are 15,000 Japanese soldiers, and they want to survive. So you're going to do suppression patrols." 15,000 Japanese are a lot of Japanese man! You hear me?

McDevitt: And none of them are going to surrender.

Fizer: Surrender my foot! First of all, we had to fight to get up off the ground, then we finally got some tents. The Japanese would come down at night, sneak into a tent, and cut the throat of one man to kill him. Not everybody, one. So that the others could go psychologically nuts. It worked, sure.

–Edwin J. Fizer, Jr., Sergeant, Montford Point Marines

By August first, the Japanese had retreated to the defensible mountainous jungle. Rain would increase the difficulty for U.S. forces, but regardless, on August 10, organized resistance ended, and the following day the Japanese leader, Lt. Gen. Obata, committed Seppuku, ritual suicide. The Marianas were officially in Allied forces' control.

So why was the capture of the Mariana islands' of vital strategic importance? It enabled bombers to be positioned within range of mainland Japan. These airfields facilitated the strategic bombing campaign which many believed was necessary to force Japan to surrender. The campaign was a costly victory however, as American forces suffered nearly 25,000 casualties, while Japanese forces lost more than 50,000; nearly the entire garrison of the islands.

The final stop on our island hopping journey is one that has become synonymous with the Pacific Theater. Iwo Jima.

This tiny island is the halfway point between American forces on Guam and Japan, and one of the few locations the Japanese attempted to counter the U.S. bombing campaign of the mainland. Taking Iwo Jima brought the Allies one step closer to the planned mainland invasion.

Water and that black sand make the mushiest stuff you've ever saw. You jump off into the sand and you're in a foot deep of some mushy sand. Its the darnedest stuff. Its great big chunks. Anyway, I go back to the beach and here's these guys still lying there and I look around, they're all dead. Every ten feet in any direction and there's people and they... when you talk about dead people, you talk about body parts flying all over the place. That's not the way a lot of the people died. They're just lying there.

–David Greene, Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps



Just a bunch of wrecked stuff scattered on the beach you couldn't hardly get through all the stuff. Things blowing up and buried into the sand. Lots of bodies. We couldn't evacuate them because we couldn't get the boats in to take them off. So there were lots of dead Marines around. Finally we got to the first air field. To me, that was the most deadly place on the island. Because to run across that air field, with no protection, nothing to jump behind, or hide in or anything of that nature, no bushes, or anything. You might find a shell crater, occasionally, that you could jump in and get some protection. But to run across that air field, was very deadly. So we lost an awful lot of Marines. When we got across that air field, that's when we got to the pillboxes.

They were self-protecting kind of pillboxes. That if you approached one, the other two, they were built in pods of three, could see you approaching, so they were self-protecting. We had tried to break through those things most of the day and we had lost a tremendous number of Marines. So he was very frustrated. And we were sitting in this big hole, and he looked over at me and said something to the effect, do you think you could knock out any of those things with a flame thrower? I had no idea what I said. None. Some of the men in the hole said that I said, "I'll try." So he assigned some Marines with me, four Marines to give me some protection, two of them had automatic weapons, and the other two were just rifle-people. So I went where we keep our flamethrowers, and I got one of those and I took those four guys with me, and I positioned them in a position, where, approaching the first pillboxes, they could fire in the aperture of these pillboxes, to try and keep the Japanese from being able to fire at me. So I began crawling up thru the sand dunes. I didn't jump up and run. I didn't charge anything. I just crawled as far as I could crawl, to get close enough that I could fire, rolling the flame into the pillboxes. Much that day I do not remember and I'm positive it was fear that took that memory away."

—Hershel "Woody" Williams, Medal of Honor recipient, U.S. Marine Corps

On February 19, 1945 Marines landed on the island, beginning what was one of the bloodiest battles of the war in the Pacific. Anticipating the American invasion, Japanese soldiers created over 11 miles of underground tunnels, bunkers, and pillboxes on the island, protecting them from heavy U.S. air and naval barrages, which lasted over three weeks. The Japanese forces waited until the Marines were completely exposed on the beaches before attacking, inflicting severe casualties.

During the battle, the tunnels would also enable Japanese forces to move largely undetected by the Marines. American strategy became focused on close combat, often within the tunnels themselves, as Marines sought to gain ground, inch by inch. To inspire U.S. forces, a squad of Marines climbed the summit of Mt. Suribachi on February 23rd, and raised the American flag, an image that would become one of the most recognizable of the war.

We've only covered a few of the many islands and battles that are in our exhibit and made up the Pacific Theater campaign of World War II. The combined air, land, and naval operations of



Allied forces in the final year of the war were able to strip the Japanese hold in the Pacific. Through the determination of American forces to counter overwhelming Japanese defenses and isolate their military from needed resources, the Allies were able to bring the war to the Japanese homeland, and ultimately, its end.

The only way to truly measure the cost of this conflict is to look to the impact it had on those in the midst of it. We thank these brave individuals for sharing their stories with us, so we may better understand. Every experience is unique and carries wisdom. We encourage you to never stopped listening and learning from the people around you.



Collections Featured

The Samuel Gevirtz Collection

<https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/explore/library/online-catalog/view/oclc/850963294> (catalog record for archival collection)

https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/holt-oral-history-program/samuel-gevirtz-pfc (diary transcripts and oral history interview)

Manuel “Marty” Martinez, 1st Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps

https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/holt-oral-history-program/manuel-marty-r-martinez-1st-sergeant-us-marine-corps

Edwin J. Fizer, Jr., Sergeant, Montford Point Marines

https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/holt-oral-history-program/edwin-fizer-montford-point-marine

David Greene, Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps

https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/holt-oral-history-program/david-greene-corporal

Hershel “Woody” Williams, Medal of Honor recipient, U.S. Marine Corps

https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/medal-honor/medal-honor-recipient-hershel-woody-williams-interview



Glossary of Terms

Allies: an alliance originally formed by the United Kingdom, France, and Poland in 1939 when Germany invaded their neighboring European countries. As the scope of the fighting grew, so did the number of countries signed onto the Allies. The 20 additional countries includes the United States and Soviet Union, and China. They would defeat the Axis countries, and the United Nations continues today as a legacy of that alliance.

Aircraft carrier: a warship designed to carry airplanes, helicopters, and other aircraft. Equipped with a flight deck capable of launching and landing aircraft.

Amphibious: taking place in, or adapted to, the water.

Artillery: weapons designed for longer range and larger targets.

Axis: A military alliance that fought against the Allies in World War II. The three countries that held the most power in this alliance were Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Battleships: large, armored warship that uses heavy artillery as their main weapon system; in terms of design, these ships are descended from the ironclads of the American Civil War era.

Bombard: (bombardment) to attack using shells or heavy artillery continuously.

Campaign: a series of operations planned to achieve a particular objective, in military terms, can refer to a location or type of warfare “an island hopping campaign”

Casualties: someone injured or killed in a battle, or an accident

Construction Battalion: U.S. Navy unit specializing in engineering. The acronym C.B. became the nickname Seabees. Originated during World War II, and is still in use today.

Destroyers: highly maneuverable, high speed warship used often used in a fleet as protective escort.

Fleet: a group of naval vessels with common ownership, and often the same location and objective.

Fortifications: location chosen for or built to be especially defensible against enemy attacks.

Higgins boat: (LCVP) Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel. This boat is designed to be used in an amphibious landing, with a front end that can open into a ramp, easing a forward exit.

Indirect fire: aiming artillery at a target using calculations and conditions to approximate the path the artillery will take. One shot is observed and changes to calculations made, as needed, for further attempts.

Island hop: choosing which islands to capture according to strategic importance; potentially cutting off supply lines to other islands, making them easier to capture.

LVTs: Amphibious Vehicle, Tracked. The tank-like tracks and armored construction made this craft more protective and maneuverable during an amphibious landing.

Maneuvers: movement to achieve an objective.

Medal of Honor: The United States’ highest military decoration that can be awarded to U.S. service members who have risked their lives and gone beyond the call of duty.



Nationalism: the belief that one's own country or interest is superior or more important, to the detriment of another group or nation.

Pacific Theater: Asia, Indian Ocean, Oceania, and Pacific Ocean areas of operation during World War II.

Pillbox: a type of man-made fortification that has very narrow slits, allowing the person inside to use small arms, while staying protected from attacks.

Seppuku: dating from the 1100's in Japanese samurai warrior culture, a ritual suicide performed by a samurai. Also called harakiri (or hari-kari), it involves using a blade to cut or stab the abdomen, causing disembowelment. This kind of death was thought to restore honor to one's family. During World War II, some Japanese officers thought this kind of suicide was preferable to the dishonor of being captured.

Submarines: amphibious craft that can completely submerge. Used for independent operations—undetected travel, information gathering, and attack.

Tanks: armored vehicle protected against small arms fire. This offensive vehicle usually features a large artillery weapon.

Terrain: the dimensional features of the natural landscape.

Underwater Demolition Team: (UDTs) originated during World War II; this unit was sent in ahead of amphibious landings to gather information and clear obstacles using demolition techniques such as explosives. This unit is the predecessor to the U.S. Navy SEALs.

World War II: Global conflict that lasted from 1939 to 1945 and involved most of the countries in the world. The countries involved aligned themselves with either the Axis powers or the Allies, who eventually would win the war.

