

# Pacific War

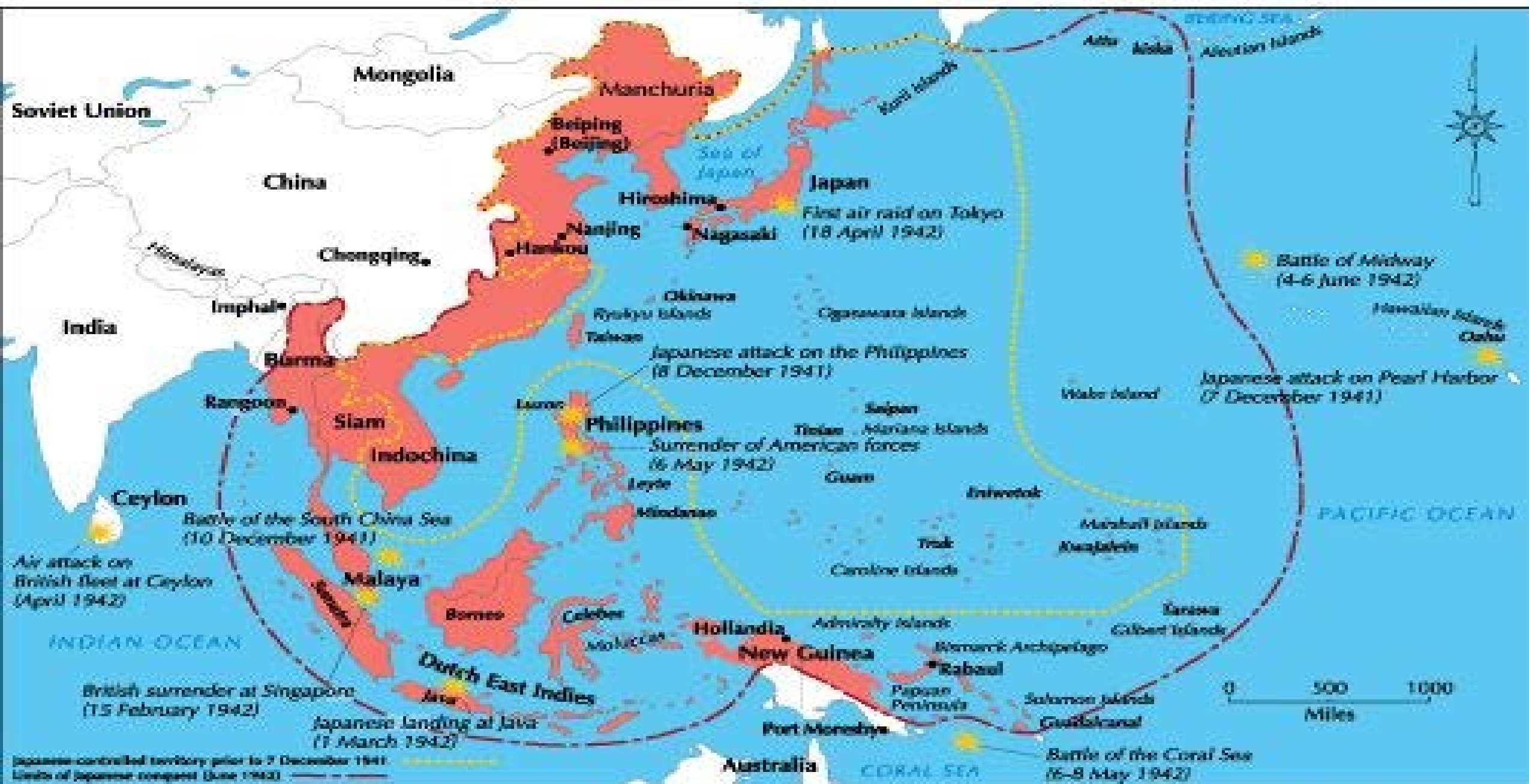
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PHYS 1040

# Prelude

- Japan was on the winning side of WWI but was denied territorial gains. The hardships of the Great Depression made people lose faith in the democratic government. Extremist factions in the military eventually took control of the country.
- The Washington Naval Treaty in 1922 limited the sizes of naval forces of the major powers. It forced Japan to maintain its fleet at a ratio of 3 compared to 5 by both America and Britain.
- Japanese leaders wanted to expand the empire and acquire raw materials in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.
- Japan had invaded Manchuria in 1931, then mainland China in 1937.
- The Japanese were still humiliated of being forced to open up their borders to the Americans back in 1854.
- The Japanese desired to have new lands and resources which were controlled by the Western Europeans and America.

# WWII Pacific Theatre of Operations (7 December 1941 – Summer 1942)



# Pearl Harbor

- To protest Japanese aggression, President FDR imposed embargoes on oil, scrap iron and other raw materials that Japan needed in its war with China.
- The Japanese had spies in Pearl Harbor photographing the ships of the US Pacific Fleet. The top admiral, Isoroku Yamamoto, went to Harvard in his earlier years and knew that war with America was unwinnable but nobody listened to him.
- On December 7th, 1941, over 350 planes took off from 6 Japanese aircraft carriers in 2 waves and attacked the ships in anchor, the surrounding bases and airfields. Over 3,000 sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marines were killed, most of the 8 battleships were sunk or heavily damaged, a dozen other ships sunk or damaged and almost 200 planes were destroyed. Luckily none of the Pacific Fleet's priceless aircraft carriers were in dock when the attack happened. Also untouched were the oil storages and the submarine pens which were vital. If the Japanese sent a 3rd wave to attack the oil and submarines, the Pacific Fleet would not have the capacity to strike back for several months or even a year.
- The following day, President FDR asked Congress to declare war on Japan, calling the attack "a date which will live in infamy."



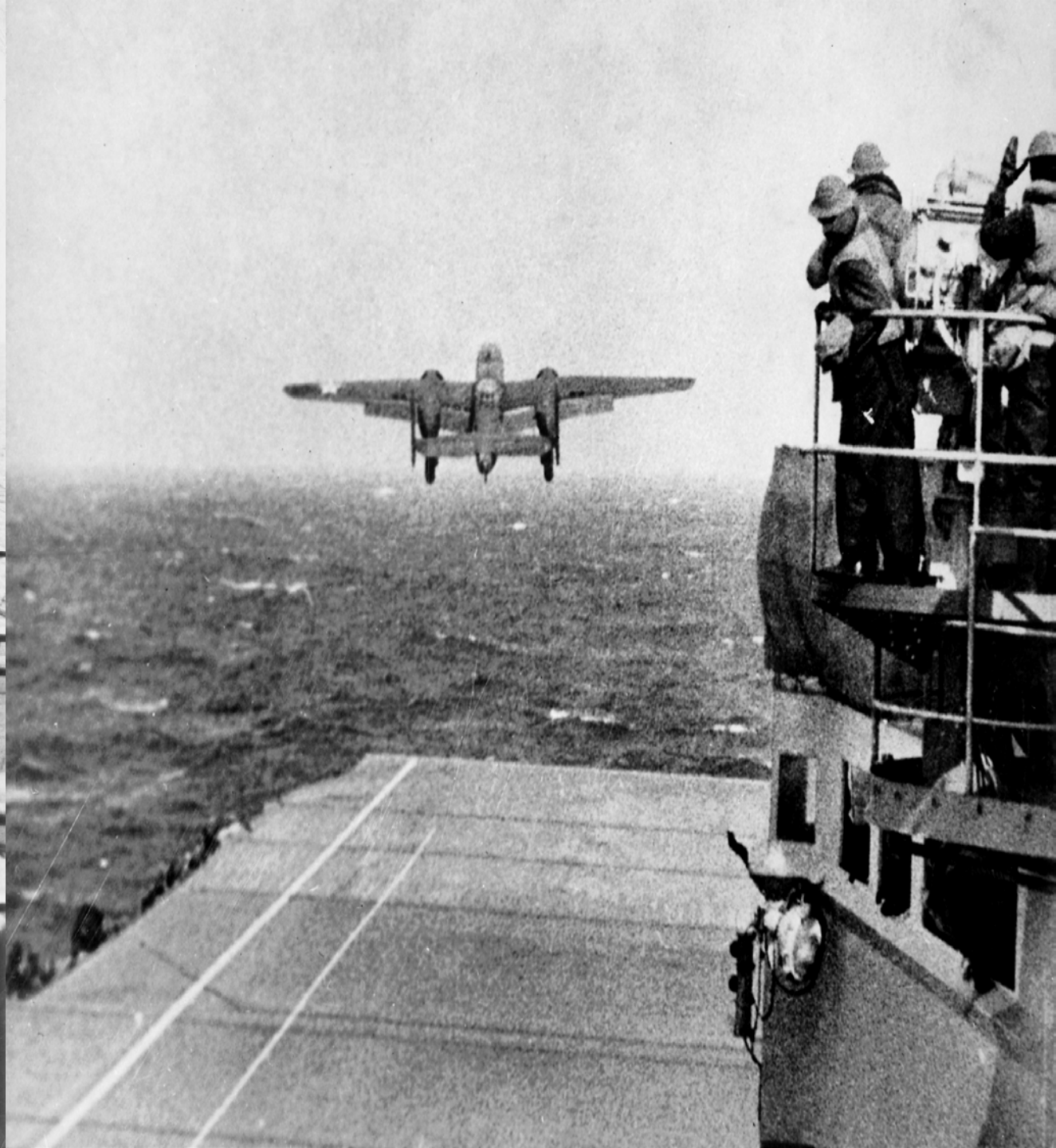
# Japan's Blitz

- On the same day Pearl Harbor was attacked, Japanese forces bombed and invaded the Philippines, an American territory. Guam fell quickly while Wake Island put up a heroic defense. Midway was bombed.
- Japanese forces invaded British territories of Malaya, Burma, Thailand and Hong Kong.
- The Dutch East Indies and much of the southern Pacific were controlled by the Japanese.
- After 6 months, the Japanese controlled a quarter of the Pacific.

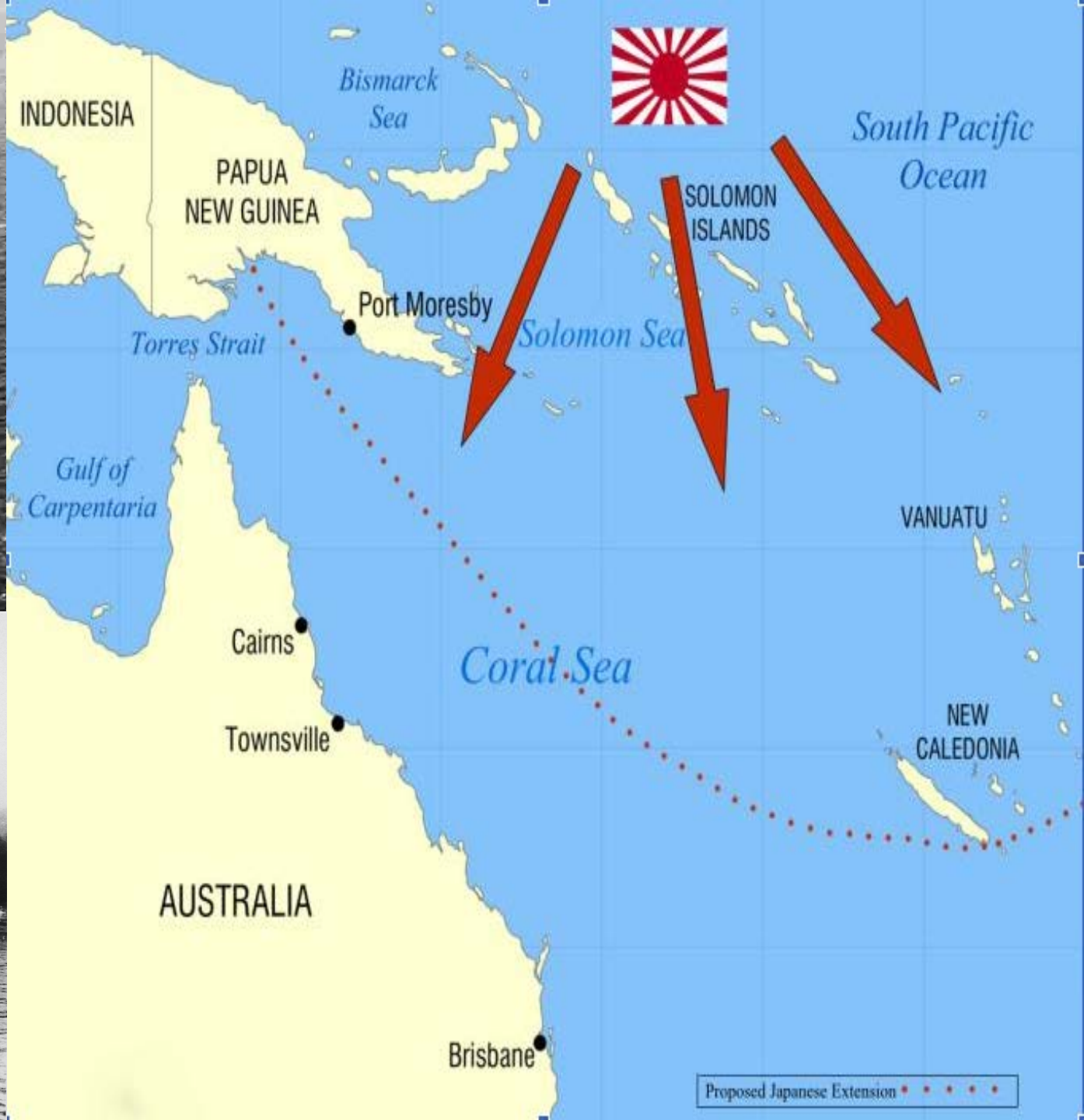
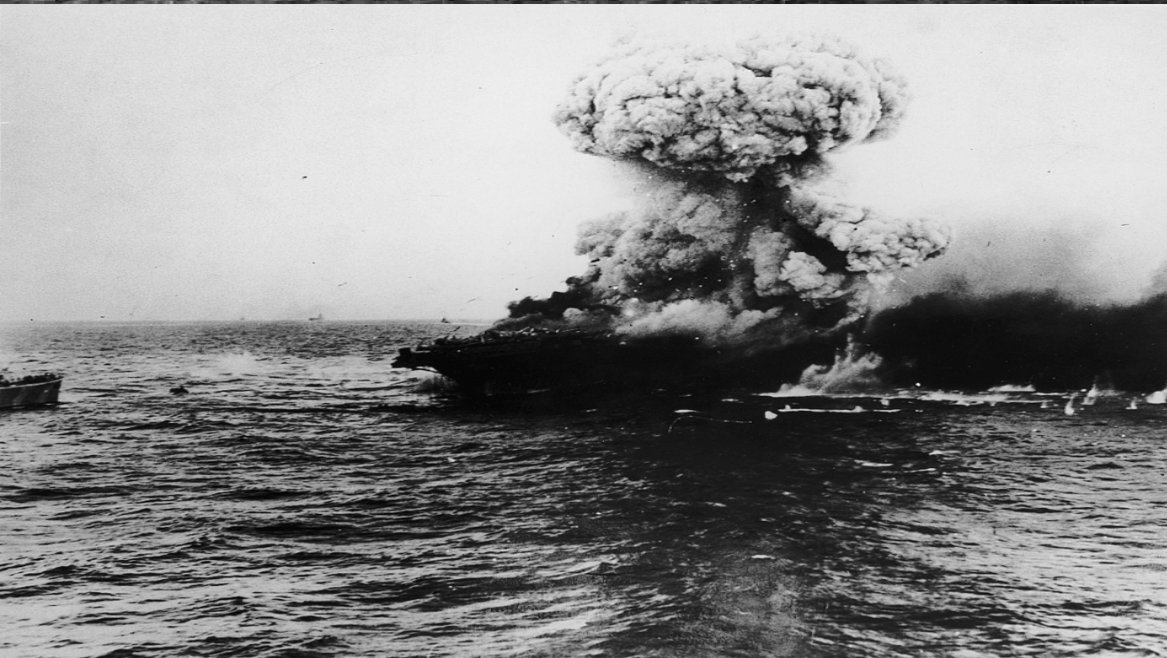
# America strikes back

- President FDR ordered attacks on Japan to give the American people morale after the disaster of Pearl Harbor.
- On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1942, 16 B-25 Mitchell bombers took off from the aircraft carrier USS Hornet, bombed Tokyo and flew to sanctuary in China or Russia. The raid, led by Colonel James Doolittle, did little damage but showed that the Japanese were not invincible. It was a huge morale boost for Americans.
- Japanese forces were sent to the Coral Sea and Papua New Guinea for a future invasion of Australia, an American ally. American forces were sent to deter them, resulting in the 1<sup>st</sup> naval battle in history fought solely by aircraft carriers. Both sides suffered losses but it was a strategic victory for the Americans.





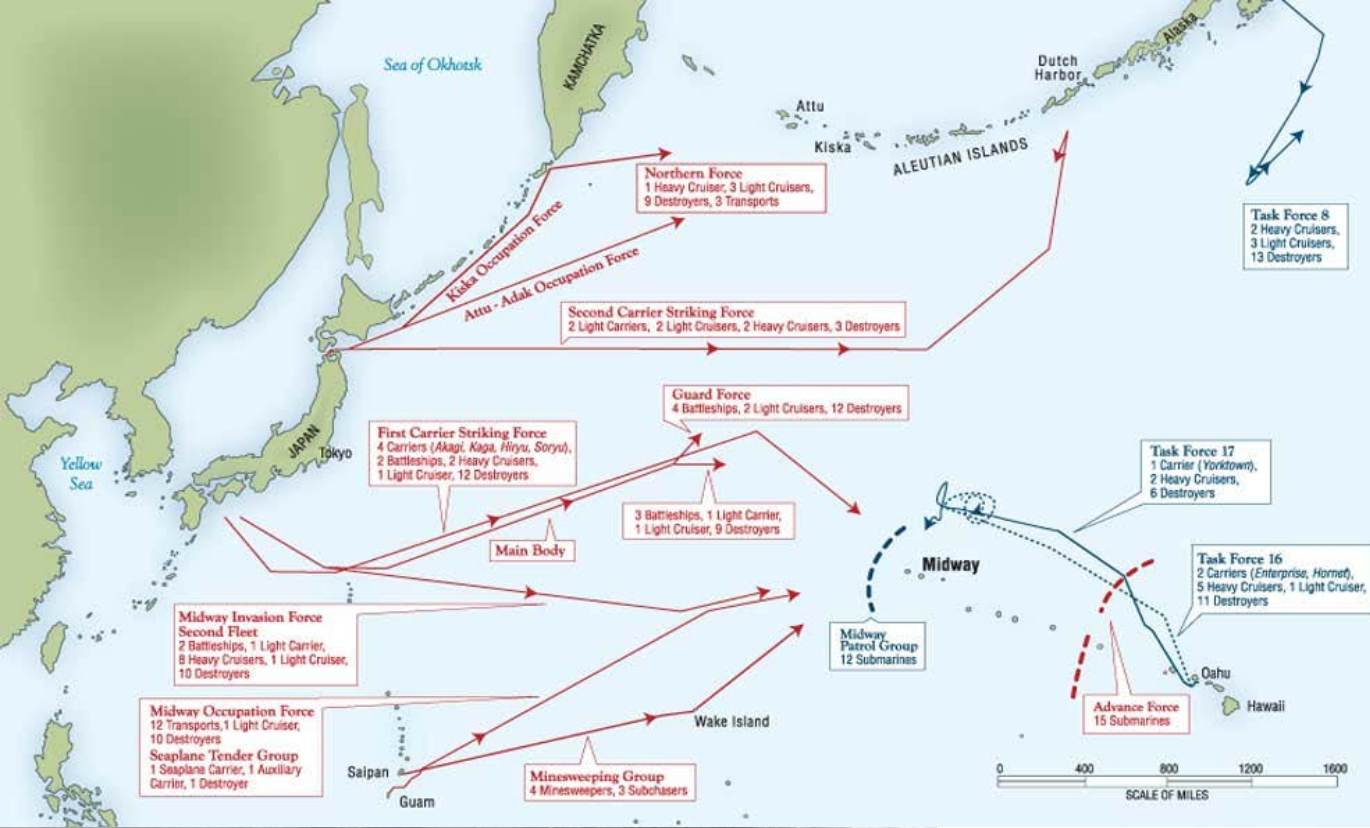




# Turning the tide at Midway

- After the Battle of the Coral Sea, the US Pacific Fleet was seriously weakened but so too were the Japanese. The Americans still had 3 carriers, including the Yorktown damaged at Coral Sea but she was repaired just in time for Midway. The Japanese still had 6 main carriers but 1 was heavily damaged from Coral Sea and another's air fleet was slaughtered. Thus only 4 could be available for Midway.
- The Japanese wanted Midway as an eastern outpost far enough to counter future threats that would not endanger the homeland. Capturing Midway could also be used as a base for a future invasion of Pearl Harbor.
- The Japanese planned to launch a diverting attack at the Aleutian islands of Alaska to draw away the main US fleet from the real threat coming towards Midway. Unbeknownst to the Japanese, the Americans had broken the Japanese naval code, JN-25 and were able to read their plans. An impending attack was intended at AF but nobody knew what AF was. The American planners, especially the Pacific Fleet commander, Admiral Chester Nimitz, were certain AF was Midway. To find out, they ordered Midway to send out an unencrypted message saying their freshwater tank had broken. A few days later, the codebreakers at Pearl Harbor led by Joseph Rochefort, reported a Japanese message saying AF is short on water. Midway was the target.
- Although outnumbered, the Americans had key advantages. Thanks to the codebreaking of the Japanese plans, the Americans could plan for the coming battle. US carriers had radar to detect threats whereas the Japanese carriers did not. The island of Midway was useful as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for planes to attack the Japanese ships and for damaged planes to land.
- On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1942, US planes were able to trick the Japanese forces with incessant attacks and finally caught them by surprise destroying 3 out of 4 carriers in 1 blow. Japanese planes from the remaining carrier struck the Yorktown but was too sunk in return.
- The Battle of Midway is considered the turning point of the Pacific War. Japan lost the cream of her naval offensive capabilities and most of her best pilots. Japan could not produce ships, planes or trained pilots as fast as the Americans could. From now on, the Americans were on the offensive.





# Guadalcanal and the Solomons

- Following their victory at Midway, the Americans went on the attack. Intelligence reports indicated the Japanese were building an airfield on Guadalcanal, a remote island in the South Pacific. If the airfield was completed, Japanese planes could menace supply ships to Australia.
- On August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942, 11 thousand Marines of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division invaded Guadalcanal and captured the airfield, renaming it Henderson Field, after a Marine pilot killed defending Midway island.
- Though not expecting the American attack, the Japanese sent in reinforcements and a tough and desperate campaign was fought for 6 months. Both sides suffered great losses in ships, planes and men, but the Americans were able to replace their losses easily unlike the Japanese.
- Despite a lack of Navy support, the Marines were reinforced by Army units who eventually took over the fighting. By February 1943, the Japanese withdrew from Guadalcanal.
- For the next year, Allied forces fought to drive the Japanese out of the Solomon islands and isolated a major Japanese base at Rabaul.
- The fighting at Guadalcanal defined how the rest of the Pacific War was going to be fought. The Americans would fight in extreme heat, harsh tropical environments and against a tough and fanatical enemy who fought with ruthless doggedness.



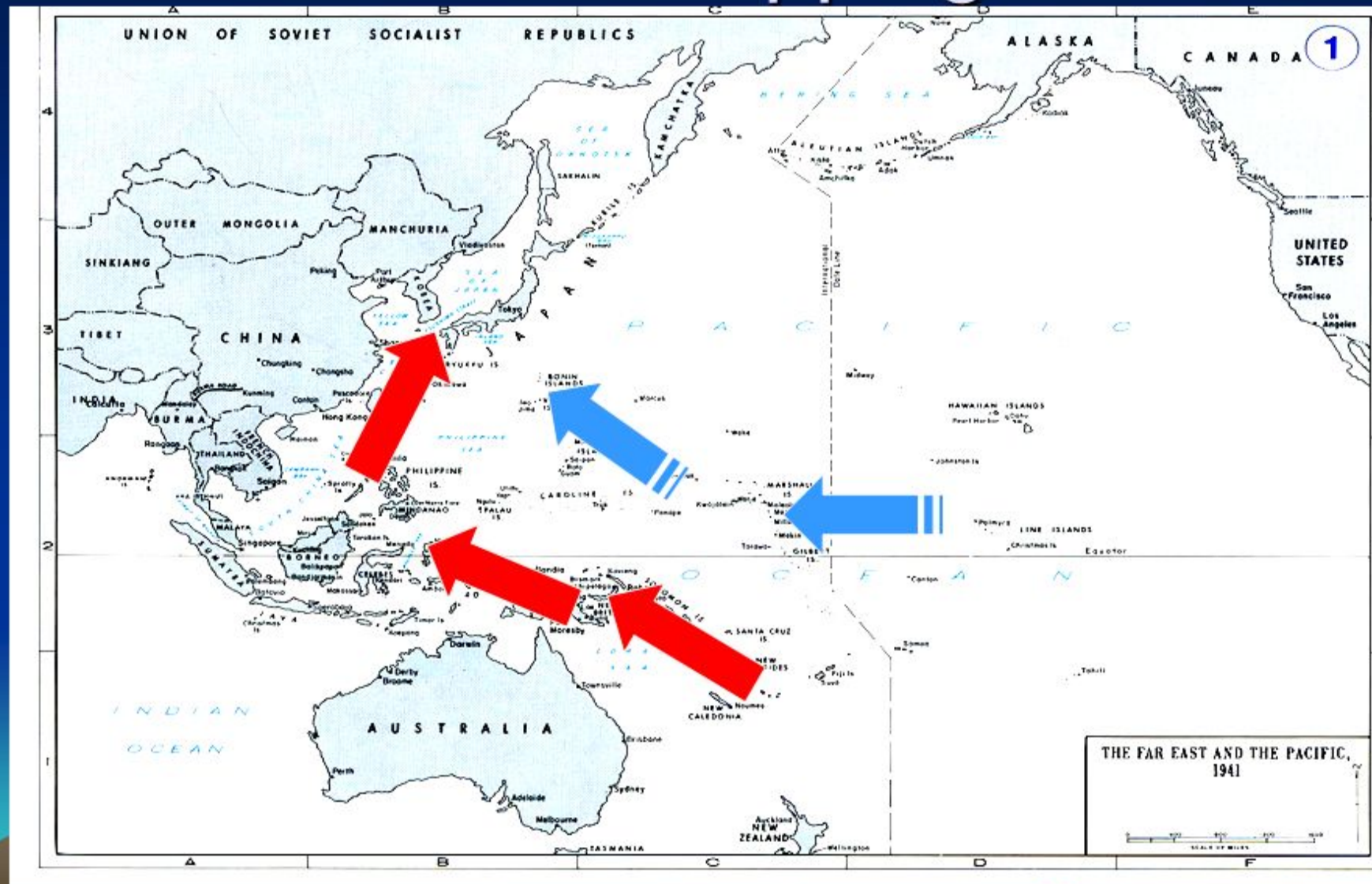


# Island-hopping Campaign

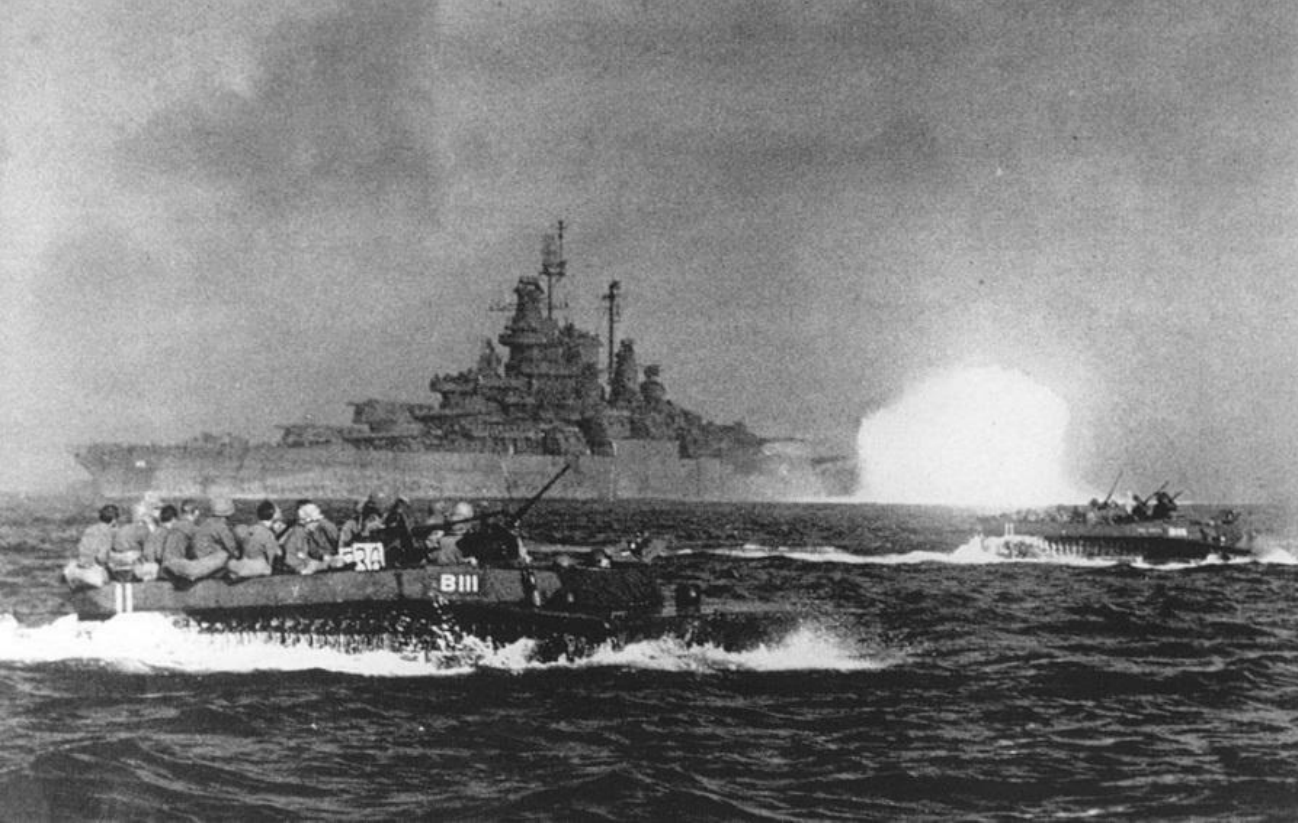
- Following Guadalcanal, the Pacific War was split into 2 different commands. The southern route led by General Douglas MacArthur, would use mainly US Army troops, Australian and New Zealand forces to take the Solomons, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. The plan intended to cut vital supplies from Burma, Malaya, French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. MacArthur had also promised to return to the Philippines after being forced to evacuate in 1941.
- The Navy and Marine Corps under Admiral Chester Nimitz would capture a string of islands including the Marshalls, Gilberts, Marianas, Iwo Jima and Okinawa in the central Pacific. They had strategic airbases and ports which could be used to support the next invasion and attack Japanese supply lines.
- Certain islands were bypassed because taking every single Japanese outpost was too costly and time-consuming. Only islands in strategic locations with airfields were important to the commanders.
- With each island captured, the Japanese defenders fought harder and inflicted more casualties on the Americans. The Japanese used suicidal banzai charges on many occasions which resulted in them suffering heavy casualties. They believed in death before dishonor by surrender. The Japanese would also stubbornly defend their positions until they died. Thus the Americans had to blast or burn them out of their fortifications.
- The fighting in the Pacific was amphibious by nature. Marines and soldiers would assault islands from amphibious landing craft and were constantly supported by naval artillery and air support.



# Island Hopping







# The Marianas and Leyte Gulf

- After capturing the Marshall and Gilbert islands in early 1944, the Americans attacked the Mariana islands of Saipan, Tinian and Guam. These islands had airfields that the new B-29 Superfortress bombers could take off from to strike Japan and later deploy the atomic bombs.
- Marines and Army troops fought the Japanese from a network of fortified defenses dug into the mountains while the Navy engaged with the Japanese fleet in a massive carrier battle. Outnumbered, outgunned and outmatched, the Japanese planes were decimated by now-superior US fighters. It was called the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.
- At the end of the battle on Saipan, many Japanese civilians were convinced by the Japanese soldiers to jump from the cliffs to their deaths rather than surrender to the Americans.
- General MacArthur was preparing to liberate the Philippines and needed the Paulau islands captured to secure his flank. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division invaded Peleliu in September 1944 and fought a hard and bitter battle against the entrenched Japanese in their caves, mountains and underground bunkers. The Marines suffered serious casualties before being reinforced by Army troops who took over the fighting. The fighting at Peleliu lasted almost over 2 months and was a drastic change in Japanese tactics. The Japanese had previously placed their defenses at the beach and were overcome by superior naval and air power. The banzai charge was not working against superior American firepower. The Japanese resorted to taking advantage of the terrain inland by digging defenses into caves, mountains and underground networks to bleed the Americans out from positions that the Americans had difficulty seeing and engaging without taking heavy casualties.
- MacArthur went along with his liberation of the Philippines as the fight for Peleliu raged. In October 1944, a huge Allied invasion force landed at Leyte in the Philippines and fought the Japanese into Manila, the capital. Meanwhile, the American and Japanese fleets fought the largest naval battle in history. Both sides suffered losses, but the Japanese navy was utterly destroyed with nearly all their major warships sunk.
- The Battle of Leyte Gulf marked the 1<sup>st</sup> time the Japanese used the suicide kamikaze as a weapon.



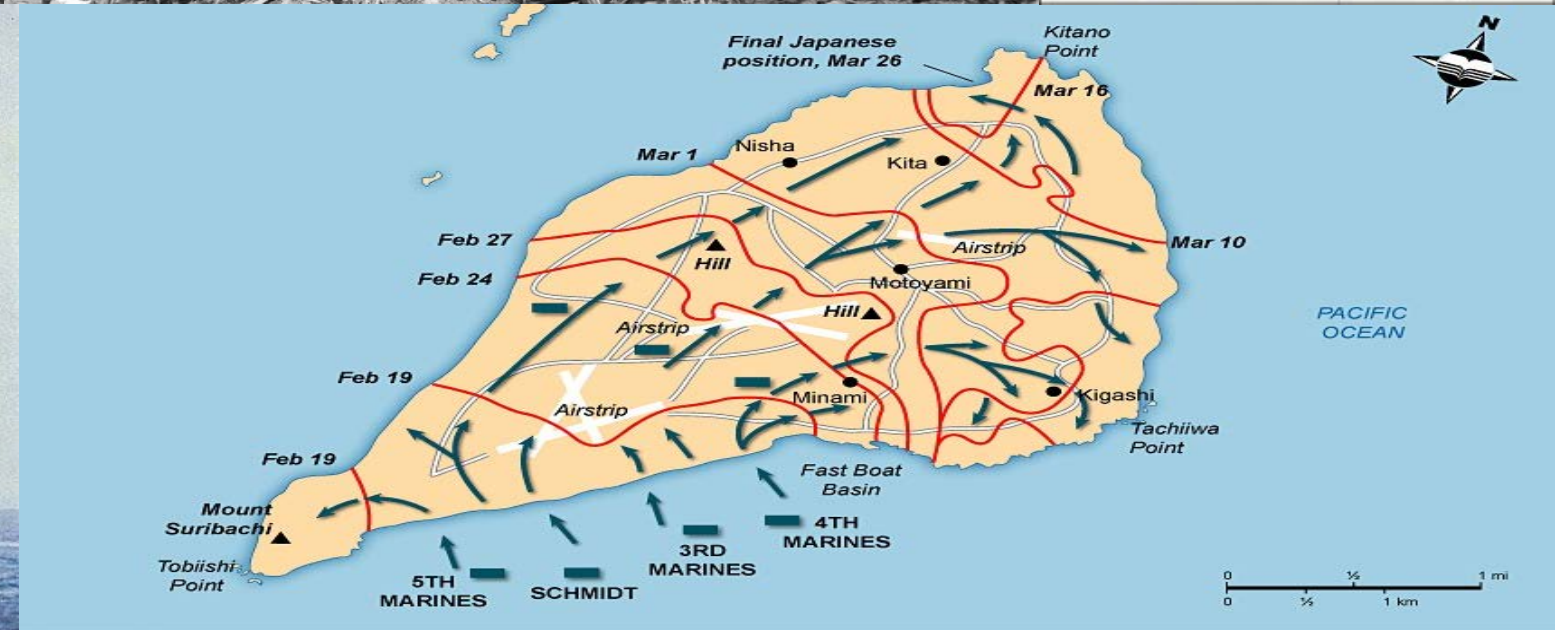






# Iwo Jima and Okinawa

- On February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the Marines invaded Iwo Jima after prolonged naval and air strikes for months. Iwo Jima was only about 700 miles away from Japan and was considered Japanese soil. The Japanese used the tactics from Peleliu and fought from entrenched underground defenses. The Marines suffered heavy losses but they took Mt Suribachi on February 23<sup>rd</sup> and raised the US flag, becoming an symbol of American resolve during WWII and a testament to the Marine Corps' heritage as a tough and proud fighting force. The Marines eventually secured Iwo Jima after a month of fierce combat. It was the only battle in the war where Marines suffered more casualties than the Japanese.
- On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945, Marines and Army troops invaded Okinawa and fought the Japanese army in an arduous and fierce battle lasting 82 days while the Navy suffered terrible losses from constant kamikaze attacks. The Japanese defended from underground networks as they previously did at Peleliu and Iwo Jima. Both sides suffered great losses but the Americans' superior numbers, logistics and naval and air supremacy ensured that the Japanese would be defeated.
- The invasion of Okinawa is believed to have been the largest amphibious operation during the war, exceeding even Normandy.



— Japanese front line

➔ American movements

■ American troops