

# THE ASIA-PACIFIC WAR

By Richard B. Frank



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World War II towers as the greatest event in human history, with a toll of some 65 million lives. The war was divided between a well-known European phase and a lesser-known Asia-Pacific phase. Today, students cannot understand the current world without knowing the history of the Asia-Pacific war.

When the Asia-Pacific war began in 1937, Western nations dominated the arc of the earth bordered on the west by India and the east by Japan. This area formed a mosaic of colonies with merely four nations with some claim to sovereignty (China, Mongolia, Thailand, and Japan). Today that arc encompasses 20 major sovereign nations with nearly half the globe's inhabitants. The roots of this transformation stretch back to World War II.

The center point of this history is China. After that nation fractured into competing regional power centers in 1911, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party emerged as the most potent. In September 1931, the Imperial Japanese Army seized the Chinese province of Manchuria. This toppled the nascent Japanese democracy and heralded the rise of fervid nationalist and militarist forces within Japan. Moreover, it set the stage for a titanic clash between Japan and Chiang's Nationalists, who sought to realize the popular Chinese aspirations for full sovereignty and restored greatness.

In July 1937, full-scale war erupted between Japan and a broad Chinese coalition under Chiang. Japanese military proficiency and superior weaponry inflicted serial Chinese defeats with stupendous human and economic

losses. But the Chinese refused to quit. Further, Chinese resistance refuted Japan's claim to be the authentic force of Asian liberation from colonial domination.

China's strategic value to the United States and Great Britain soared in June 1941 when Japan's ally, Germany, attacked the Soviet Union. Keeping China in the war suddenly became a top Allied priority since the fighting there distracted Japan from delivering a potentially fatal blow to the Soviets.

Snared in a China quagmire yet emboldened by Germany's European triumphs, Japan's leaders dramatically expanded the war in December 1941, including the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor that drew the United States into the war. Japan aimed to forge a huge empire with the resources—especially oil—to wage a protracted struggle ending in a negotiated peace on its own terms. Within six months, Japan secured an empire stretching across seven time zones and enclosing a population greater than that of Hitler's empire at its zenith. This enormous Asia-Pacific war spanned vast distances that dwarfed those in Europe. Except in China, where Japan remained compelled to station about one million soldiers, air and sea power dominated the war. Both the United States and Japan would devote about 70 percent of industrial output toward air and sea weapons.

The Japanese juggernaut was not checked until the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942, where for the first time in history a naval battle was fought entirely by aircraft and without opposing ships ever sighting each other. In June 1942, off Midway Island, the US Navy won a pivotal battle, sinking Japan's four best aircraft carriers in exchange for one US carrier. The focus of the war then moved to the South Pacific. While largely Australian forces halted then threw back a Japanese offensive on New Guinea, US Marines landed on Guadalcanal, initiating a desperate six-month struggle that ended in Japan's defeat.

With the initiative now in Allied hands and American shipyards spilling out a vast fleet from aircraft carriers to landing craft, the United States pursued twin advances in the Pacific. The Southwest Pacific Area





under General Douglas MacArthur thrust from New Guinea toward the Philippines, while the Pacific Ocean Areas under Admiral Chester Nimitz delivered blows across the north and central Pacific. The Allies adopted “Island Hopping,” a strategy of bypassing strongly held Japanese positions to strike at weakly held locations.

From mid-1943 to mid-1944, MacArthur’s forces, including many Australians, leapfrogged across the northern coast of New Guinea and through the Solomon Islands. Meanwhile, Nimitz’s forces galloped across the central Pacific via the Gilbert, Marshall, and Mariana Islands. At the same time, growing numbers of US submarines inflicted devastating losses on Japan’s merchant shipping, stifling the flow of raw materials and hobbling Japan’s industrial system.

In October 1944, US forces returned to the Philippines, which they had surrendered in 1942. Massive sea, land, and air battles erupted and continued as the United States liberated the archipelago. The desperate Japanese then commenced “kamikaze” attacks in which Japanese airmen deliberately crashed their planes into ships. The following month, in November 1944, American B-29s from the Marianas began a strategic bombing campaign against Japan that in March 1945 prioritized incendiary bombings of Japanese cities. In February 1945, US Marines landed on Iwo Jima to secure air bases to support the B-29 campaign, and in April of that year US forces assaulted Okinawa. As the fleet fought off a blizzard of kamikazes, the brutal fighting ashore produced the war’s greatest toll of American casualties for the seizure of one island.

As the Americans pressed ever closer to Japan, the nation’s leaders adopted a military and political strategy in 1945 they called *Ketsu Go* (Operation Decisive). To secure a negotiated peace far short of the American goal of “Unconditional Surrender,” Japan aimed to defeat or inflict tremendous losses during the anticipated American invasion of the Japanese home islands. During the summer of 1945, American intelligence detected a startling Japanese buildup on Kyushu to meet the initial American invasion. Additionally, American intercepts of Japanese diplomatic communication proved Japan’s

leaders remained nowhere near surrender. After two atomic bombs, Soviet intervention in the war, and increasing fear of a domestic revolt, Japan’s leaders surrendered in August 1945.

The Asia-Pacific war cost about 25 million lives. About six million of those were combatants, including about three million Chinese and two million Japanese. About 109,000 Americans died, all but six combatants. Only about one million of the approximately 19 million noncombatant deaths were Japanese. The other 18 million were overwhelmingly other Asians, including at least 12 million Chinese. Postwar United States–led health efforts saved over two million Japanese lives; still more Japanese survived thanks to American food aid.

The lingering contested issues between Asian nations remain enduring consequences of the Asia-Pacific War. The conflict’s complex interaction with prewar liberation movements also contributed to the almost complete decolonization of Asia over the ensuing three decades. But memories of the struggle continue to shape relations for good or ill among Asian nations and the rest of the world.

**Richard B. Frank is an international expert on the Pacific war. After graduating from the University of Missouri, he was commissioned in the US Army, where he served for nearly four years, including a tour of duty in Vietnam as an aerorifle platoon leader with the 101st Airborne Division. His first book, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Campaign*, was published in 1990 and won the US Marine Corps’ General Wallace M. Greene Award. Frank’s other publications include *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, which won the 2000 Harry S. Truman Book Award, and *MacArthur*. Frank also currently serves on The National WWII Museum’s Presidential Counselors advisory board.**

**A—The haunting *Downfall* gallery surrounds the visitor with scenes from the aftermath of the atomic bombs—an invitation to reflect on a moment that has spurred debate ever since. B—The China-Burma-India gallery illustrates the geographical obstacles Americans faced as they provided support for Chinese troops fighting the Sino-Japanese War.** (Images: Richard C. Adkerson & Freeport-McMoRan Foundation Road to Tokyo: Pacific Theater Galleries at *The National WWII Museum*.)

## ONLINE RESOURCES

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 [China-Burma-India Theater Video](#)