

Iwo Jima Study Guide



War in the Pacific

Rising Fear of Japan

Even before World War I, the clouds of World War II were building in the Pacific. Japan wanted control of countries with better natural resources. Since 1910, Japan had been in Korea, using Koreans for slaves. Since 1931, Japan and China had been fighting, but not calling the fighting “war.”

Japan defeated China in Shanghai in 1937. Now the fight was clearly war. The Japanese army moved on to Nanking, killing half the people left in the city, mostly civilians, in the “Rape of Nanking.” Exact counts are impossible in a devastated city, but this slaughter of about three hundred thousand people probably killed as many Chinese as the total of Japanese who later died in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the firebombing of Tokyo.¹

In Manchuria, the Japanese army conducted horrifying experiments: How long does it take a person to die if injected with this, or if that is cut off? These experiments were done on civilians and prisoners, including infants, the elderly, and pregnant women. Japanese soldiers did not

¹ Estimating 80,000-120,000 deaths in Tokyo, 70,000-120,000 in Hiroshima, 35,000-60,000 in Nagasaki, for a total of 185,000-300,000 Japanese deaths. The low and high estimates for Nanking deaths are 260,000 and 350,000. These figures are from Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 6.

value their own lives in comparison to serving Japan, and non-Japanese, especially those who had opposed Japan, the soldiers considered worth far less. During the war, about a third of US Army prisoners of Japan died in captivity, while only one percent of Army prisoners of Germany died. But American battle deaths during the entire war equaled only half of civilian Asian deaths under the Japanese in 1945 alone. In 1945, civilians in Asia were dying at the rate of over, and probably far over, one hundred thousand per month due to the war.

A group of American pilots, the Flying Tigers, acted as China's air force against Japan early in the war. To this day, the Flying Tigers are heroes in China. But most Americans after World War I didn't want to fight other countries' wars, and ignored events in the Pacific until Pearl Harbor's bombing on December 7, 1941.

Rebuilding the Navy

The Pearl Harbor raid knocked out half the US Navy in one strike. Japan knew America would rebuild, but meanwhile planned to dig in Japanese forces around the Pacific.

US shipyards worked faster than expected, turning out a destroyer in five months and a carrier in fifteen months. Engineers, inventors, generals, and admirals developed boats, landing vehicles, and strategies for what was called an "island-hopping campaign." The Japanese would be driven back to Japan, but each step was costly.

1942: Pacific Nations Fall to Japan

The world changes in 1942 were sudden and shocking. America's priority was fighting Germany, so at first America only protected Alaska, Hawaii, and Panama in the Pacific, while Japan swallowed up nation after nation.

Hong Kong and the Philippines: Japan attacked and won them within a month of Pearl Harbor.

Indonesia: Japan took just four weeks to conquer this region the Dutch had ruled for four centuries.

India: Teetered on the brink of falling to Japan.

New Guinea: Became a base for attacking Australia.

Australia: The city of Darwin was bombed while Australia's troops fought Germans in North Africa, unable to return in time.

Pearl Harbor was still paralyzed. President Roosevelt ordered legendary Army General Douglas MacArthur out of the Philippines and to Australia. General MacArthur promised the Philippines, "I came through and I shall return." But not soon, and Americans and Filipinos in Bataan had to surrender. The Japanese, despising surrender, treated the prisoners brutally. Marching sixty-five miles under a blinding sun on the "Bataan Death March," thousands of prisoners died from disease, exhaustion, or abuse from Japanese soldiers.

The war was no longer just against a couple of European countries and a few Asian islands. Within months after Pearl Harbor, the war was suddenly, visibly, a world war. Germany was in Russia; Japan in China and threatening India and Australia. Germany and Japan were changing the world overnight. Could they join up across Asia to control half the world?

America Strikes Back

On 18 April 1942, American bombs fell on Japan. American aircraft in Japanese skies? Who was winning this war?

The bombs were dropped by a sixteen-bomber raid led by Lieutenant Colonel James (Jimmy) Doolittle. The Doolittle Raid did little damage, but it showed Americans—and Japanese—that Japan could be attacked.

Most of the bombers landed in China. The Chinese smuggled the Americans out, though furious Japanese slaughtered whole villages for helping them.

Midway and Guadalcanal

The high tide of Japan's empire was the battle of Midway Island in June 1942. Japan controlled much of the Pacific by then.

Just six months after Pearl Harbor, the attack on Midway was supposed to be another catastrophic blow to the US Navy. Japan sent the most powerful fleet in Japanese naval history to get the island. But the smaller US fleet knew their plan, since the US had broken Japanese codes. The Japanese fleet lost four carriers before retreating to save the rest. After Midway, Japan was defending a shrinking empire.

The Allied counterattack started when Australian troops finally returned and newly trained Americans arrived in the Pacific. Marines invaded Guadalcanal 7 August 1942, exactly eight months after Pearl Harbor. Like many invasions to come, Guadalcanal was a hard victory. The beaches were beautiful, but the hot, muddy, and steep middle of the island was a nightmare: tangles of roots to trip on, mosquitoes carrying malaria, scorpions and snakes, animals sounding like Japanese soldiers, and Japanese soldiers imitating animals.

Pacific Island Warfare

The Allies tried to isolate Japanese strong points rather than fight them directly, as Sun Tzu advised for a strong enemy: "If he is secure at all points, be prepared for him. If he is in superior strength, evade him."²

The Army under General MacArthur took the northern coast of New Guinea. The Navy under Admiral Nimitz took the Gilbert, Marshall, Marianas, and Caroline islands. Another force of Army and Marines headed through the Solomon Islands. Many islands gave their names to famous battles. By December 1943, the US Navy could mostly move freely in what had been Japanese waters.

Bloody Practice for Iwo Jima

The Marine Corps was learning, in a series of bloody island battles, the uses of amphibious warfare. The supreme test of these lessons would be Iwo Jima.

Tarawa, in November 1943, was one of the bloodiest fights of the Pacific campaign. Tokyo said Tarawa couldn't be taken. Tarawa could be taken, and was, but the cost was 1,100

² Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, I, 21.

American lives in four days. What the Marines learned at Tarawa, they used on island after island across the Pacific.

The battle of **Bougainville**, also in November, cut off the center of Japanese airpower in the south Pacific. As later, on Iwo Jima, Marines landed to surprise Japanese fire from bunkers on the beach.

Kwajalein in the Marshalls, had been a Japanese possession since World War I. This battle, in early 1944, warned how savagely the Japanese would fight for land they considered their own. Also in early 1944, one year before Iwo Jima, the Marines took New Britain, cutting off the Japanese supply route to New Guinea and preparing for the Philippine invasion.

In the June 1944 battle for **Saipan**, in the Marianas, 3,426 Americans and 16,525 Japanese died. Saipan was costly for America, but America had replacements. Japan lost five times as many men and couldn't replace them—a bad trend for Japan. More disturbing than the battle itself was the suicide of a large number of civilians by grenade or jumping off cliffs as the Americans approached. The Japanese had told them surrender would be worse than death.

Tinian was in July 1944, and cost about 200 Americans and 6,000 Japanese. This time, Japanese warnings to the civilians were mostly defeated by an American loudspeaker. Thousands of civilians listened and finally ran to American lines for safety.

On **Guam** in August—as later, on Iwo Jima—there were snipers in caves. When a Japanese counterattack broke through American lines, even Marine cooks and clerks used their rifles.

By August 1944, the Mariana Islands were in American hands. American bombers started launching from the Marianas to bomb Japan.

Next came the Palau islands. The battle of **Peleliu** lasted for a month, from mid-September to mid-October 1944. The cost was 1,800 American and 11,000 Japanese lives. The Marines learned another lesson for Iwo Jima: how and why to get off a beach. Staying on the beach would be deadly; moving forward, however difficult, was the only option.

The greatest naval battle yet, in October 1944, was the Battle for Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. Seventy Japanese warships and 716 aircraft fought 166 American warships and 1,280 aircraft. Japanese naval power was crushed; now Japan could be attacked from the sea. But Japanese pilots started deliberately crashing into American ships, and Americans quickly learned to fear these kamikazes. In the ten months left in the war, kamikazes caused fifteen thousand US casualties while either sinking or damaging over three hundred US ships.

In Leyte Gulf, 2,888 Americans and 56,263 Japanese died—and just 389 Japanese surrendered. Finally, General MacArthur could take back the Philippines. He announced, “This is the Voice of Freedom, General MacArthur speaking. People of the Philippines: I have returned!”

The **Luzon** invasion of the Philippines, the largest US land campaign of the Pacific War, lasted into July 1945.

Iwo Jima and Okinawa

Iwo Jima in February and March 1945, cost 21,865 US casualties who lived, besides whom 6,821 were killed.³ The number of US casualties who lived was close to the number of Japanese dead.⁴

³ Total casualties who lived include 19,217 wounded, of whom 17,272 were Marines, and 2,648 combat fatigue victims, of whom all were Marines. Numbers are not as exact as they sound since combat interferes with precise

During the battle, the US started firebombing Tokyo, Nagoya, Kobe, and Osaka. In ten days, B-29 Superfortresses flattened thirty-two square miles of Japan's most important cities.

Another tremendous battle followed Iwo Jima from early April to mid-June: **Okinawa**, 350 miles from Japan with good harbors and room to prepare troops for invading Japan. Okinawa cost over 12,500 Americans killed or missing, and 110,000 Japanese,⁵ making the battle the bloodiest one the US experienced in the Pacific War. A tenth to a third of the civilians also died, partly from more Japanese-led mass suicides, and partly because it was hard to tell who was a civilian.

Meanwhile, on 5 April 1945, Japan's gigantic neighbor, the Soviet Union, warned the Japanese embassy that the Soviet Union was no longer neutral. On 6 April, General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz got orders to prepare for the war's final operations—meaning the invasion of Japan, as the atomic bomb was still an untested secret.



End of the War

V-E (Victory in Europe) Day was 8 May 1945. Some units left Europe to start training to invade Japan.

On 16 July, an atomic bomb was tested in southern New Mexico. It worked.

On 6 August, the Little Boy atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, killing 70,000 to 120,000 Japanese.⁶ Similar numbers, even of civilians, had died in other battles—but not from a single bomb.

On 8 August, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria.

On 9 August, the Fat Man atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, killing 35,000 to 60,000 people.⁷

On 15 August, Japan announced it would surrender to the Allies, but Japan fought the Soviet Union till 12 September, losing 80,000 Japanese to 8,000 Soviets.

On 28 August, American troops landed in Japan and took over.

On 2 September 1945, the Japanese signed the surrender on the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay under the same flag that had flown over the US Capitol the day Pearl Harbor was attacked.

General MacArthur, in charge of occupying Japan, created a democracy with a constitution requiring political freedom and outlawing war. Emperor Hirohito was stripped of power but allowed to live and keep the title of emperor, so he went back to studying marine biology.

record-keeping. US figures are, however, much more precise than Japanese figures. When most of the force dies, so do most of the record-keepers.

⁴ About 22,000 Japanese died on Iwo Jima.

⁵ Numbers vary with different sources.

⁶ Numbers vary widely as it is difficult to know now how many people were in the city at the time and how many died later of the results of the bomb.

⁷ Estimated to be about half the death toll of Hiroshima.

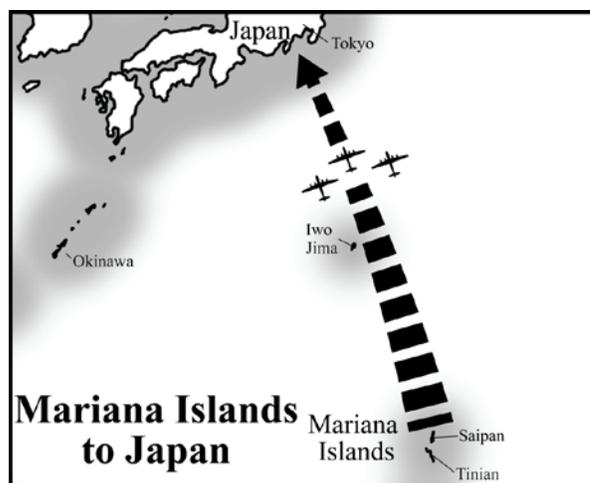
The Battle of Iwo Jima

A Speck of Land

In 1945, Iwo Jima was an unknown island of rock, sand, a couple of airstrips, and an abandoned village. Iwo Jima would still be unknown if the airplane had been invented twenty years earlier or later. Yet this island, the only landing place on the route to bomb Japan, was so important at this point in history that three thousand men died for each square mile of it.

The island is shaped like a pork chop. Mount Suribachi is Iwo Jima's southern tip. North of that tip is a narrow neck with beaches on either side. Big ships can't anchor near shore, so Marines and cargo landed in smaller craft. The beach sand is volcanic ash, much coarser than regular sand, rolling instead of packing down underfoot. North of the beaches a rocky plateau full of caves and canyons hid the core of the Japanese forces.

Iwo Jima is hard to find on a map—it's a speck of land in the middle of the Pacific. American B-29 bomber pilots climbing into their planes in the Marianas Islands were heading for Tokyo with just enough fuel to get there and back, if all went well. Iwo Jima lay beneath the flight path, halfway there; detouring around the island wasted precious fuel. Japanese fighter planes from Iwo Jima attacked the B-29s. They also sent Tokyo warning to prepare for the bombers, so the B-29s met anti-aircraft fire if they reached Japan. If the bombers survived their battle damage, they faced Iwo Jima fighters again on the return trip, hundreds of lonely miles before the nearest friendly airstrip. They might get



through. Or they might get shot down or have engine trouble or crash in the ocean.

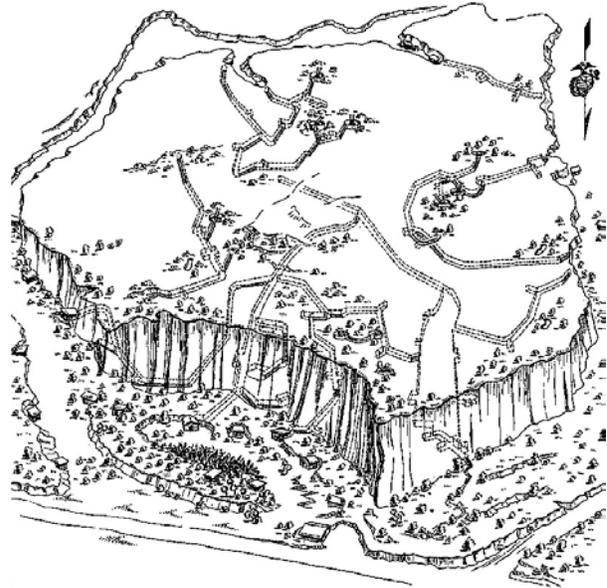
US forces wanted the island to be their safe landing site instead of Japan's early warning system. But Iwo Jima had been Japanese since before the war. Nobody else had cared if Japan claimed the small volcanic island smelling of sulfur (Iwo Jima means "Sulfur Island.") Though it was far from the main islands, Japan claimed it and considered it the gateway to the homeland.

Incredible Defenses

Beach sand was the Marines' first enemy. On landing, vehicles sank to their hubcaps in sand, and Marines carrying fifty to one hundred twenty pounds of equipment sank to their ankles, calves, or knees. Sand terraces on the beach meant a wall of sand to climb.

Defending general Tadamichi Kuribayashi, descended from generations of samurai, had visited the US and knew his enemy. He thought war with America was a bad idea. Still, he fought brilliantly and died for his emperor, winning the respect of friend and foe. Kuribayashi dug in guns above the beach on both sides, and let the first waves land before firing. The bombardment created a gigantic traffic jam as men struggling through sand died and vehicles were shattered, blocking the path for landing Marines.

A cutaway view of Iwo Jima shows the Japanese were *in* Iwo Jima, not on it. In natural caves of rock soft enough for hand tools, the Japanese cut tunnels big enough to run through upright while holding weapons. They dug an underground network of more than 750 gun emplacements, five-foot-thick concrete blockhouses, and—under Mount Suribachi—a complete hospital and four stories of tunnels. A thousand pillboxes encrusted the sides of the volcano. As they dug, the Japanese hid the dirt they excavated, probably dumping it in the sea at night, so the watching American planes and ships had no idea the Japanese were burrowing into the whole island.



The tunnels protected most of the Japanese from most of the bombing. When Marines approached, the Japanese could shoot, then disappear through the tunnels, reappearing behind the Marines. Marines rarely shot their enemy from a distance; the Marines had to get near a cave to shoot in while simultaneously being shot at from nearby—or even connected—caves.

Three Divisions, Three Battles

The battle was fought by the Marine Corps' Third, Fourth, and Fifth Divisions. The plan was to land on the beach and sweep across the island while securing the airfield. As it happened, the divisions moved less than a hundred yards some days.

Over twenty-six days, the Fourth Division landed on the right side of the beach, headed north, and later swung around east, to finish on the northeast part of the island. On 19 March, they started back to Maui.

The Fifth Division landed on the left side of the beach. Four days after D-Day they took Mount Suribachi, where photographer Joe Rosenthal took the famous picture of Marines raising the flag. The Fifth took thirty-six total days to swing around the far side of the island to the northwest point, in combat all the way. Finally, on 26 March, the Fifth Division pushed through the last Japanese holdouts to the northwest corner of the island.

The Third Division went up the middle of the island, supporting the Fourth and Fifth.

Aftermath

During and after the battle, the Seabees worked furiously, preparing the island for aircraft and building the longest runway in the Pacific. The Marines left, weeks later than scheduled, thinking maybe three hundred Japanese soldiers remained hidden in caves for the Army and Navy to deal with. Actually, there were more than a thousand.

Japan's people were stunned at losing this first piece of Japanese land. Iwo Jima was the first break in the inner defensive ring around the home islands. The loss told the Imperial Japanese Army they could not succeed in pushing back American invasion from the sea. Japan could fight, but not win.

Recommended Reading: Iwo Jima, Los Alamos, and WWII

Iwo Jima

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Sun Tzu on War

Sun Tzu, a Chinese military expert in the 4th century BC, wrote instructions for warfare in *The Art of War*, a classic guide for military students around the world. Some of the sayings are obscure to American readers of today, others are chillingly clear. Some seem to have been written specifically about Iwo Jima:

“All warfare is based on deception.” (I,18)

“Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.” (I,24)

“Hence, though an obstinate fight may be made by a small force, in the end it must be captured by the larger force.” (III,10)

“The general who is skilled in defense hides in the most secret recesses of the earth; he who is skilled in attack flashes forth from the topmost heights of heaven. Thus on the one hand we have ability to protect ourselves; on the other, a victory that is complete.” (IV,7)

“Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.” (VII,19)

“If the enemy sees an advantage to be gained and makes no effort to secure it, the soldiers are exhausted.” (IX,31)

“Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look upon them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.” (VIII,25)

“Ground the possession of which imports great advantage to either side, is contentious ground.” (XI,4)

“Throw your soldiers into positions whence there is no escape, and they will prefer death to flight. If they will face death, there is nothing they may not achieve. Officers and men alike will put forth their uttermost strength.” (XI,23)

For more of Sun Tzu's observations, see: <http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html>

Christians and War

Officers Christian Fellowship has a number of articles about the ethics of war.

Christian Perspective on War

<http://www.ocfusa.org/articles/christian-perspective-war/#.VNWWWhJ3F9Z8>

May a Christian Serve in the Military?

<http://www.ocfusa.org/articles/christian-serve-military/#.VNWXcJ3F9Z8>

Christians in Combat

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Soldier and Christian

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Mortal Enemies Become Brothers in Christ

<http://www.ocfusa.org/articles/mortal-enemies/#.VNWX353F9Z8>

