



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

World War II, 1941–1945

World War II was a defining period in Marine Corps history, transforming it from a modest expeditionary force into a critical component of U.S. military strategy. Rapid expansion, the refinement of amphibious doctrine, and hard-won experience in multiple campaigns shaped the Marines into an elite force essential to Allied success. From the first offensive at Guadalcanal to the climactic battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, Marines proved their effectiveness in large-scale, joint operations. The war not only secured the Corps' place in future military planning but also demonstrated the enduring value of agile, combat-ready forces capable of projecting power across the globe.



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- For more information, see:
 - [*Opening Moves: Marines Gear Up for War*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

The Japanese Advance



Wake Island by Edgard Franklin Wittmack.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

On 7 December 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, devastating the Pacific Fleet and drawing the United States into global conflict. Marines stationed at Pearl Harbor engaged Japanese aircraft with rifles and anti-aircraft guns, fighting from ship decks, airfields, and the shoreline. Within hours, Japan struck other U.S. positions across the Pacific—Guam, Wake Island, the Philippines, and Midway. On Guam, a

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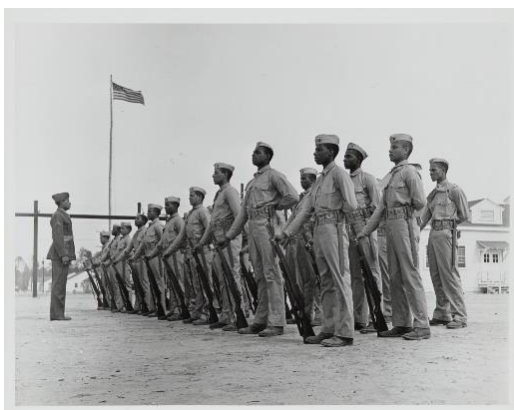
small Marine and Navy garrison fought valiantly against a larger Japanese force before surrendering on 10 December. At Wake Island, the 1st Defense Battalion and Marine Fighter Squadron VMF-211 repelled an initial assault and sank Japanese ships in the process, but a second, larger attack overwhelmed them on 23 December.

In the Philippines, the 4th Marines fought alongside U.S. and Filipino forces during the defense of Bataan and Corregidor. Although Bataan eventually fell on 9 April 1942 and Corregidor on 6 May, Marine and Allied forces successfully delayed Japanese operations in the region. Elsewhere, Marines fought to protect Midway Island, an important forward outpost and staging area. Between 7 and 8 December, the 6th Defense Battalion drove off the Japanese by firing on their ships from the shoreline at the cost of four Marines' lives. Marine defense and raider battalions and a Marine aircraft group later reinforced the island, which again came under heavy attack on 4 June 1942 during the pivotal Battle of Midway. Despite significant losses—including 11 Marine aircraft—the joint U.S. Navy and Marine air counterattack sank four Japanese carriers, halting the Japanese advance and regaining the strategic initiative.



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Meanwhile, the Corps rapidly mobilized, trained, and equipped its growing divisions for offensive operations. As late as June 1941, six months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the



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Corps remained a relatively small service, with nearly one-third of its forces deployed at remote posts across the globe. Marine Corps leadership nevertheless had anticipated war with Japan and had already begun expanding and preparing the force. The creation of the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions, along with the development of major training facilities at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and Camp Pendleton in California, laid the foundation for what would become

one of the most formidable fighting forces of the war.

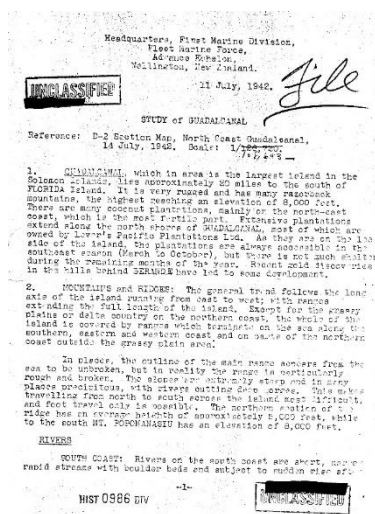


- For more information, see:
 - [*Infamous Day: Marines at Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941*](#)
 - [*A Magnificent Fight: Marines in the Battle For Wake Island*](#)
 - [*From Shanghai to Corregidor: Marines in the Defense of the Philippines*](#)

Guadalcanal

Japan had lost its strategic initiative, but it still held vast territories across the South and Central Pacific, including key island chains, threatening Allied supply lines and Australia. Allied planners selected the Solomon Islands—specifically Guadalcanal—as the site of the first major offensive.

The 1st Marine Division, under the command of future Commandant Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, launched Operation Watchtower on 7 August 1942, by landing on Guadalcanal and seizing a Japanese airfield later known as Henderson Field. The Marines quickly established a defensive perimeter and repelled repeated Japanese counterattacks over the coming days. One of the campaign’s most intense engagements



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occurred at Edson’s Ridge between 12 and 14 September. The 1st Raider Battalion, under the command of Colonel Merritt A. Edson, heroically defended the airfield from a determined Japanese assault. Several bloody engagements followed, as Marines and later U.S. Army troops fought to secure the entire island. After months of brutal jungle combat, the Allies declared Guadalcanal secured on 9 February 1943.

- For more information, see:
 - [*First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal*](#)
 - [*Up the Slot: Marines in the Central Solomons*](#)



Bougainville

A series of amphibious assaults throughout the Solomon Islands occurred in spring and summer 1943. The 3d Marine Raider Battalion and the 43rd Infantry Division, USA, took the Russell Islands, and the 1st Marine Raider Regiment took New Georgia and secured the Munda airfield. In November 1943, the 3d Marine Division landed at Bougainville, supported by a diversionary raid at Choiseul from Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak's 2d Parachute Battalion. Marine air and close air support proved critical to the success of the campaign, which ultimately allowed Allied aircraft to target the Japanese naval stronghold at Rabaul. The success of the Bougainville campaign came at the cost of more than 1,800 Marine casualties.



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- For more information, see:
 - [*Top of the Ladder: Marine Operations in the Northern Solomons*](#)
 - [*From Makin to Bougainville: Marine Raiders in the Pacific War*](#)

Tarawa



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At this point, the Allied command split the Pacific campaign. General Douglas MacArthur and his forces advanced overland through New Guinea and the Philippines, while Admiral Chester W. Nimitz's mostly naval forces launched an island-hopping campaign across the Central Pacific to seize the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. The 2d Marine Division, under Major General Julian C. Smith, landed at Tarawa Atoll

on 20 November 1943 in Operation Galvanic. The Marines took heavy losses after contending with coral reefs that stranded landing craft offshore and entrenched Japanese defenders. After 76



hours of intense fighting, Betio Island was secured at a cost of 1,100 killed and more than 2,300 wounded. Though controversial, the battle validated the Corps' amphibious doctrine and provided critical lessons for future operations.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa*](#)

Marshalls

In the Marshall Islands, the Marines continued to hone their amphibious capabilities. The 4th Marine Division assaulted Roi and Namur on 31 January 1944, securing both islands within three days and suffering 313 dead and more than 500 wounded. The 22d Marines went on to take Engebi and assist Army forces in capturing Eniwetok and Parry Islands. With the Marshalls secured, attention shifted to the Marianas—strategically critical due to their proximity to Japan and suitability for air bases for long-range Boeing B-29 Superfortress heavy bombers.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Breaking the Outer Ring: Marine Landings in the Marshall Islands*](#)

Saipan, Guam, and Tinian

The assault on Saipan began on 15 June 1944. Facing fierce Japanese resistance, the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions, along with Army forces, took the island by 9 July after facing suicidal banzai charges from the enemy. Marine casualties exceeded 16,000, including more than 3,500 killed. During the campaign, the U.S. Navy scored a decisive victory in the Battle of the Philippine Sea, destroying hundreds of Japanese aircraft in what became known as the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.” The capture of Saipan was a



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turning point in the war; Japanese leaders recognized it as the beginning of the end for the Empire of Japan.



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The III Amphibious Corps, consisting of the 3d Marine Division, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, and the U.S. Army's 77th Infantry Division, landed on Guam on 21 July 1944. Meanwhile, the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions launched an amphibious assault on Tinian. After weeks of heavy fighting, the Marianas campaign concluded on 10 August. Marine casualties were nearly 7,000 killed and wounded.

Throughout these battles, Marines continued to refine amphibious tactics and integrated close coordination with naval and air support.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Breaching the Marianas: The Battle for Saipan*](#)
 - [*Liberation: Marines in the Recapture of Guam*](#)
 - [*A Close Encounter: The Marine Landing on Tinian*](#)

Peleliu

With the Marianas in their control, allied planners began to plan for the attack on the Japanese homeland. At the same time, the 1st Marine Division was called upon to secure the



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heavily fortified Peleliu Island to support General MacArthur's invasion of the Philippines. Though relatively small, Peleliu posed a significant challenge due to terrain that privileged the defenders, especially an inland hill mass known as the Umurbrogol. Moreover, the Japanese had adjusted their objectives, aiming to attrit Allied forces for as long as possible rather than defeat them at the waterline. The assault began on 15 September 1944. It took the 1st Marine Division five days to secure the southern sector of the island. By then, Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines had become combat ineffective after repeated assaults against defenses on the Umurbrogol, suffering more than 1,500 casualties. The struggle for Peleliu continued until late November, with Marines suffering 1,250 killed and nearly 5,300 wounded. Eight Marines were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions.

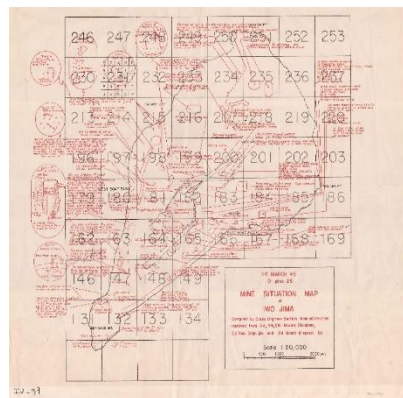
- For more information, see:
 - [*Bloody Beaches: The Marines at Peleliu*](#)

Iwo Jima

At the beginning of 1945, V Amphibious Corps prepared to assault the Japanese-held island of Iwo Jima. Planners viewed the island as important because of its strategic location, its airfields, and its role in protecting or threatening the Japanese home islands. On 19 February 1945, the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions landed on Iwo Jima, with the 3d Marine Division in reserve. At the end of the



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first day of battle, V Amphibious Corps had landed 30,000 Marines, and the 28th Marines had isolated Mount Suribachi, the highest point on the island. By 23 February, Marines from the regiment reached the summit and raised an American flag. The battle nonetheless raged on for another month. The Marines suffered nearly 6,000 killed and more than 17,000 wounded in one of the bloodiest battles in Marine Corps history.



- For more information, see:
 - [*Closing In: Marines in the Seizure of Iwo Jima*](#)
 - [*Investigating IWO: The Flag Raisings in Myth, Memory, & Esprit de Corps*](#)

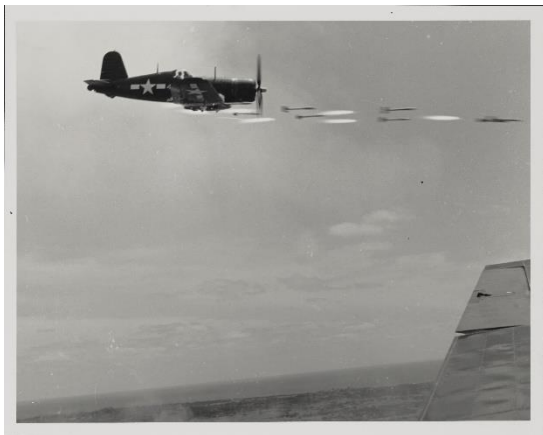
Okinawa

The assault on Okinawa, beginning on 1 April 1945, was the final and largest amphibious operation of the Pacific War. The Army's XXIV Corps and the Marine Corps' III Amphibious Corps (composed of the 1st, 2d, and 6th Marine Divisions) made up the Tenth U.S. Army, which was commanded by Lieutenant General Simon B. Buckner Jr. The landing began on Easter morning, 1 April 1945, without any opposition from the enemy. By the third day,



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the Marines had driven across the island's center and reached the opposite coastline. The 6th Marine Division then turned left and met some enemy resistance for three weeks while securing the northern sector of the island. Meanwhile, Army elements fighting in the southern sector ran into the enemy's main line of resistance at the Shuri Line. The terrain was rugged and well-suited for the defense. Some Army units quickly became combat-ineffective due to heavy



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casualties. On 8 May, Lieutenant General Buckner sent the III Amphibious Corps south to assist at the Shuri Line. For more than a month, Marines and soldiers together endured the elements, terrain, and a fanatical enemy who made the Americans pay for every meter of the advance.

On 18 June, Lieutenant General Buckner was killed by enemy fire during the battle. Marine Major General Roy S. Geiger took command, becoming the



first and only Marine to command a field army. Days later, Allied forces declared Okinawa secure. Marine casualties totaled more than 3,400 killed and 15,700 wounded.

The high cost of securing Okinawa and the anticipated losses from a mainland invasion deeply influenced President Harry S. Truman's decision to authorize the use of atomic weapons. After the bombings of Hiroshima on 6 August and Nagasaki on 9 August, Japan surrendered unconditionally. In the war's aftermath, the Marine Corps played a key role in occupation duties in Japan and China.

- For more information, see:
 - [*The Final Campaign: Marines in the Victory on Okinawa*](#)
 - [*Okinawa: Victory in the Pacific*](#)

Aftermath

During World War II, the Marine Corps transformed from a relatively small expeditionary force into a formidable, modern, and adaptable fighting organization. This evolution was rooted in years of experimentation, hard-earned lessons from the small wars of the interwar period, and a deliberate focus on developing amphibious warfare doctrine. Early Pacific battles like Guadalcanal and Tarawa tested and refined these doctrines under fire, forcing the Corps to innovate. As the war progressed, the Marines demonstrated increasing proficiency in large-scale, joint amphibious operations, becoming indispensable to U.S. strategy in the Pacific theater. The brutal island-hopping campaign proved the validity of the Corps' role in seizing heavily defended positions across vast distances. By war's end, the Marine Corps had not only secured a permanent seat at the table of American military planning, but it had also redefined the possibilities of expeditionary warfare in the modern age.



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- For more information, see:
 - *Securing the Surrender: Marines in the Occupation of Japan*
 - *The United States Marines in North China, 1945–1949*

To see all of History Division's World War II publications, [click here](#).