

Military history of the United States during World War

The **military history of the United States during World War II** covers the victorious **Allied** war against the **Axis Powers**, starting with the 7 December 1941 **attack on Pearl Harbor** and ending with the 2 September 1945 **surrender of Japan**.

During the war, some 16,112,566 Americans served in the **United States Armed Forces**, with 405,399 killed and 671,278 **wounded**. There were also 130,201 American **prisoners of war**, of whom 116,129 returned home after the war.

Admiral King put Admiral **Chester W. Nimitz**, based in Hawaii, in charge of the Pacific War against Japan. The Pacific War became one of **island hopping**, so as to move **air bases** closer and closer to Japan. The Army, based in Australia under General **Douglas MacArthur**, steadily advanced across **New Guinea** to the **Philippines**. **Strategic bombing** directed by General **Curtis Lemay** destroyed all the major Japanese cities, as the US **captured Okinawa** after heavy losses in spring 1945. With the **atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**, Japan **surrendered**.

Finally, the main **invasion of France** took place in June 1944, under General **Dwight D. Eisenhower**. Being invaded from all sides, it became clear that Germany would lose the war. Berlin **fell to the Soviets** in May 1945, and with **Adolf Hitler dead**, the **Germans surrendered**.

The American victorious military effort was strongly supported by **civilians on the home front**, who provided the military personnel, the munitions, the money, and the morale to fight the war to victory. World War II cost the United States an estimated \$341 billion in 1945 equivalent to 74% of America's **GDP** and expenditures during the war. In 2020, the war would have cost over \$4.9 trillion.

American volunteers

Before America entered World War II in December 1941, individual Americans volunteered to fight against the Axis powers in other nations' armed forces. Although under American law, it was illegal for United States citizens to join the armed forces of foreign nations, and in doing so, they lost their **citizenship**, many American volunteers changed their nationality to **Canadian**. However, Congress passed a blanket pardon in 1944.

European and North African Theaters

On 11 December 1941, three days after the United States **declared war on Japan**, **Adolf Hitler** and Nazi Germany **declared war against the United States**. That same day, the United States **declared war on Germany and Italy**.

Europe first

The two countries reaffirmed that, "notwithstanding the entry of Japan into the War, our view remains that Germany is still the prime enemy. And her defeat is the key to victory. Once Germany is defeated the collapse of Italy and the defeat of Japan must follow.

Battle of the Atlantic

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest continuous military campaign in World War II.

Operation Torch

General [Dwight Eisenhower](#) commanded the assault on [North Africa](#), and Major General [George Patton](#) struck at [Casablanca](#).

Allied victory in North Africa

In mid-April, under British General [Bernard Montgomery](#), the Allies broke the Axis defense in North Africa. On 13 May 1943, Axis troops in North Africa surrendered, leaving behind 275,000 men.

Invasion of Sicily and Italy

On 17 August, the Allies were in control of the island, US 7th Army lost 8,781 men (2,237 killed or missing, 5,946 wounded, and 598 captured).

US forces in mainland Italy suffered between 114,000 and over 119,000 casualties.

Strategic bombing

Maj. Gen [Jimmy Doolittle](#) signaled a change in how the American bombing effort went forward over Europe. .

Operation Overlord

The second European front that the Soviets had pressed for was finally opened on 6 June 1944, when the Allies launched an [invasion of Normandy](#). Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower had delayed the attack because of bad weather, but finally, the largest amphibious assault in history began.

Battle of Saint-Lô

The Battle of Saint-Lô is one of the three conflicts in the Battle of the Hedgerows, which took place between 9–24 July 1944, just before Operation Cobra.

Battle of Carentan

The Battle of Carentan was an engagement between airborne forces of the United States Army and the German Wehrmacht during the Battle of Normandy. The battle took place between 10 and 15 June 1944.

Operation Cobra

This led to a major defeat for the Germans, with 400,000 soldiers trapped in the [Falaise pocket](#), and the capture of Paris on 25 August.

Operation Lüttich

Operation Lüttich was a code name given to a German counter-attack during the Battle of Normandy. As the German commanders on the spot had warned Hitler in vain, as they were outflanked to their south and the front to their east collapsed, resulting in many of the German troops in Normandy being trapped in the Falaise Pocket.

Falaise Pocket

After Operation Cobra, the American breakout from the Normandy beachhead, the by Lieutenant General [George S. Patton](#) rapidly advanced south and south-east. On 8 August, the Allied ground forces commander, British General [Sir Bernard Montgomery](#), ordered the Allied armies to converge on the Falaise–Chambois area. Two days later the Allied Liberation of Paris.

Operation Dragoon

On 15 August 1944, the [US 7th Army](#), spearheaded by the [3rd Infantry Division](#) and [36th Infantry Division](#) and other Allied forces landed in southern France. By the time the operation finished on 14 September 1944, US forces suffered 2,050 killed, captured or missing 7,750 other casualties, on 15 September 1944

Operation Market Garden

The next major Allied operation came on 17 September. Devised by British General Bernard Montgomery, its primary objective was the capture of several bridges in the Netherlands. The operation failed because the Allies were unable to capture the bridge furthest to the north at [Arnhem](#).

Operation Queen

The battle of the Hürtgen Forest was later absorbed by a larger offensive, [Operation Queen](#). By mid-December the Allies were finally at the Rur, but by then the Germans had prepared their own offensive through the Ardennes, which was launched in the midst of an unsuccessful Allied attack against the Rur dams.

Battle of the Bulge

With about 610,000 men committed and some 89,000 casualties, including 19,000 killed, the Battle of the Bulge was the largest and bloodiest battle fought by the United States in World War II.

Colmar Pocket

The Colmar Pocket was the area held in central [Alsace](#), France by the [German 19th Army](#) from November 1944 – February 1945. In late January and early February 1945, the French First Army (reinforced by the US XXI Corps) cleared the Pocket of German forces.

Invasion of Germany

By early 1945, events favored the Allied forces in Europe. On the Western Front the Allies had been fighting in Germany since the [Battle of Aachen](#) in October 1944 and by January had turned back the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. During [Operation Lumberjack](#) and [Operation Plunder](#) in February–March 1945, German casualties are estimated at 400,000 men, including 280,000 men captured as prisoners of war.

South German Offensive

The South German Offensive is the general name of one of the final offensives of World War II in Europe. Fighting continued a few days after the [Surrender of Germany](#) on 8 May, due to German forces fighting west to surrender to the Americans instead of the Soviets.

Race to Berlin

The Germans surrendered Berlin to the Red Army on 2 May 1945. The war in Europe came to an end on [V-E Day](#), 8 May 1945. However, the state of war between the United States and Germany was not officially terminated until 19 October 1951.

Pacific Theater

The Attack on Pearl Harbor

In broader perspective, the attack was a failure. The lost battleships reflected obsolete doctrine and were not needed; the lost planes were soon replaced; the casualty list was short by [World War II](#) standards. Tokyo's calculation that the Americans would lose heart and seek a compromise peace proved wildly wrong—the "sneak attack" electrified public opinion, committing America with near unanimity to a war to the death against the Japanese Empire.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt officially pronounced 7 December 1941, as "[a date which will live in infamy](#)" and [asked for a declaration of war](#) on Japan before a joint session of [Congress](#) on 8 December 1941. Just three days later, on 11 December 1941 [Adolf Hitler](#) declared war on the United States, and had already remarked on the evening of the date of the Japanese attack that "We can't lose the war at all. We now have an ally which has never been conquered in 3,000 years".

Fall of the Philippines and Dutch East Indies

The Japanese army invaded and trapped the American and Filipino forces on the Bataan peninsula. Roosevelt evacuated General [Douglas MacArthur](#) and the nurses, but there was no way to save the trapped men against overwhelming Japanese naval power. MacArthur flew to Australia, vowing "I came out of Bataan and I shall return."

Solomon Islands and New Guinea Campaign

The Japanese seized several islands, including Tulagi and Guadalcanal, before they were halted by further events leading to the [Guadalcanal Campaign](#).

Battle of the Coral Sea

In May 1942, the United States fleet engaged the Japanese fleet during the first battle in history.

Battle of the Aleutian Islands

The Battle of the Aleutian Islands was the last fighting between sovereign nations to take place on American soil.

Battle of Midway

The Battle of Midway was the turning point of the war in the Pacific because the United States had seized the initiative and was on the offensive for the remaining duration of the war.

Island hopping

The Allies came up with a strategy known as [Island hopping](#), or the bypassing of islands. Because air power was crucial to any operation, only islands that could support airstrips were targeted by the Allies.

Air strategy

General [George Kenney](#), solved that weakness by teaching pilots the effective new tactic of flying in close to the water then pulling up and lobbing bombs that skipped across the water and into the target.

Building airfields

The goal of island hopping was to build [forward airfields](#).

Combat experience

Airmen flew far more often in the Southwest Pacific than in Europe.

Guadalcanal

Guadalcanal, fought from August 1942 to February 1943, was the first major Allied offensive of the war in the Pacific Theater.

Tarawa

After days of fighting, they took control of Tarawa on 23 November. Of the original 2,600 Japanese soldiers on the island, only 17 were still alive.

Operations in Central Pacific

In preparation for the recapture of the Philippines, the Allies started the [Gilbert and Marshall Islands campaign](#) to retake the Gilbert and Marshall Islands from the Japanese in summer 1943.

Liberation of the Philippines

The [Battle of Leyte Gulf](#) in 23–26 October 1944, was a decisive American victory that sank virtually the entire remaining Japanese fleet in arguably the [largest naval battle in history](#). General MacArthur fulfilled his promise to return to the Philippines by landing at Leyte on 20 October 1944.

Iwo Jima

The Americans did not bypass the small island of Iwo Jima because it wanted bases for fighter escorts; it was actually used as an emergency landing base for B-29s. The battle became iconic in America as the epitome of heroism in desperate hand-to-hand combat.

Okinawa

Okinawa became the last major battle of the Pacific Theater and the Second World War. Marines and soldiers landed unopposed on 1 April 1945, to begin an 82-day campaign which became the largest land-sea-air battle in history. The fierce combat and high American losses led the Army and the Navy to oppose an invasion of the main islands. An alternative strategy was chosen using the atomic bomb to induce surrender.

Strategic Bombing of Japan

The flammability of Japan's large cities, and the concentration of munitions production there, made strategic bombing the favorite strategy of the Americans from 1941 onward.

Tokyo was hit repeatedly, and during first massive fire raid of 9–10 March 1945 suffered a conflagration of about 16 square miles (41 km) in area, that killed at least 83,000. On 5 June, 51,000 buildings in four miles of Kobe were burned out by 473 B-29s; the Japanese were learning to fight back, as 11 B-29s went down and 176 were damaged. Osaka, where one-sixth of the Empire's munitions were made, was hit by 1,733 tons of incendiaries dropped by 247 B-29s. A firestorm burned out 8.1 square miles, including 135,000 houses; 4,000 died.

Kamikaze[edit]

In late 1944 the Japanese invented an unexpected and highly effective new tactic, the Kamikaze suicide plane aimed like a guided missile at American ships. The attacks began in October 1944 and continued to the end of the war. Experienced pilots were used to lead a mission because they could navigate; they were not Kamikazes, and they returned to base for another mission. The Kamikaze pilots were inexperienced and had minimal training; but most were well-educated and intensely committed to the Emperor.

Kamikaze attacks were highly effective at the Battle of Okinawa as 4000 kamikaze sorties sank 38 US ships and damaged 368 more, killing 4,900 sailors.

The Americans decided the best defense against Kamikazes was to knock them out on the ground, or else in the air long before they approached the fleet.

Expecting increased resistance, including far more Kamikaze attacks once the main islands of Japan were invaded, the US high command rethought its strategy and used atomic bombs to end the war, hoping it would make a costly invasion unnecessary.

US submarines in the Pacific

US submarines took part in the majority of naval battles in the Pacific theater.

US Navy submarines were often used for surveillance. This included reconnaissance, landing and supplying guerillas in Japanese occupied territory, and deploying commandos for missions such as the Makin Island raid. Submarines also rescued crews of aircraft which had been forced down over the ocean.

By the end of the war in August 1945, US Navy submarines sank around 1300 Japanese merchant ships, as well as roughly 200 warships.¹ Only 42 US submarines

were sunk in the Pacific, but 3,500 (22%) submariners were killed, the highest casualty rate of any American force in World War II. The force destroyed over half of all Japanese merchant ships, totaling well over five million tons of shipping. .

Atomic bombing of Japanese cities

As victory for the United States slowly approached, casualties mounted. President Harry Truman gave the order to [drop the only two available atomic bombs](#). The first bomb was dropped on an industrial city, [Hiroshima](#), on 6 August 1945, killing approximately 70,000 people. A second bomb was dropped on another industrial city, [Nagasaki](#). [Japan surrendered](#) on 15 August 1945.

[V-J Day](#) which occurred on 15 August 1945 marked the end of the United States' war with the Empire of Japan. Since Japan was the last remaining Axis Power, V-J Day also marked the end of World War II.

Minor American front

The United States contributed several forces to the China Burma India theater, such as the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) but nicknamed "[Merrill's Marauders](#)". [Fourteenth Air Force](#), and [Twentieth Air Force](#) of the USAAF also served in the theatre, including the previously mentioned "[Flying Tigers](#)".

- November 1944–April 1945 – [Fu-Go balloon bombs](#), over 9,300 of them were launched by Japan across the Pacific Ocean towards the U.S. to start forest fires. On May 5, 1945, six U.S. civilians were killed in Oregon when they stumbled upon a bomb and it exploded, the only deaths to occur in the U.S. as a result of an enemy balloon attack during World War II