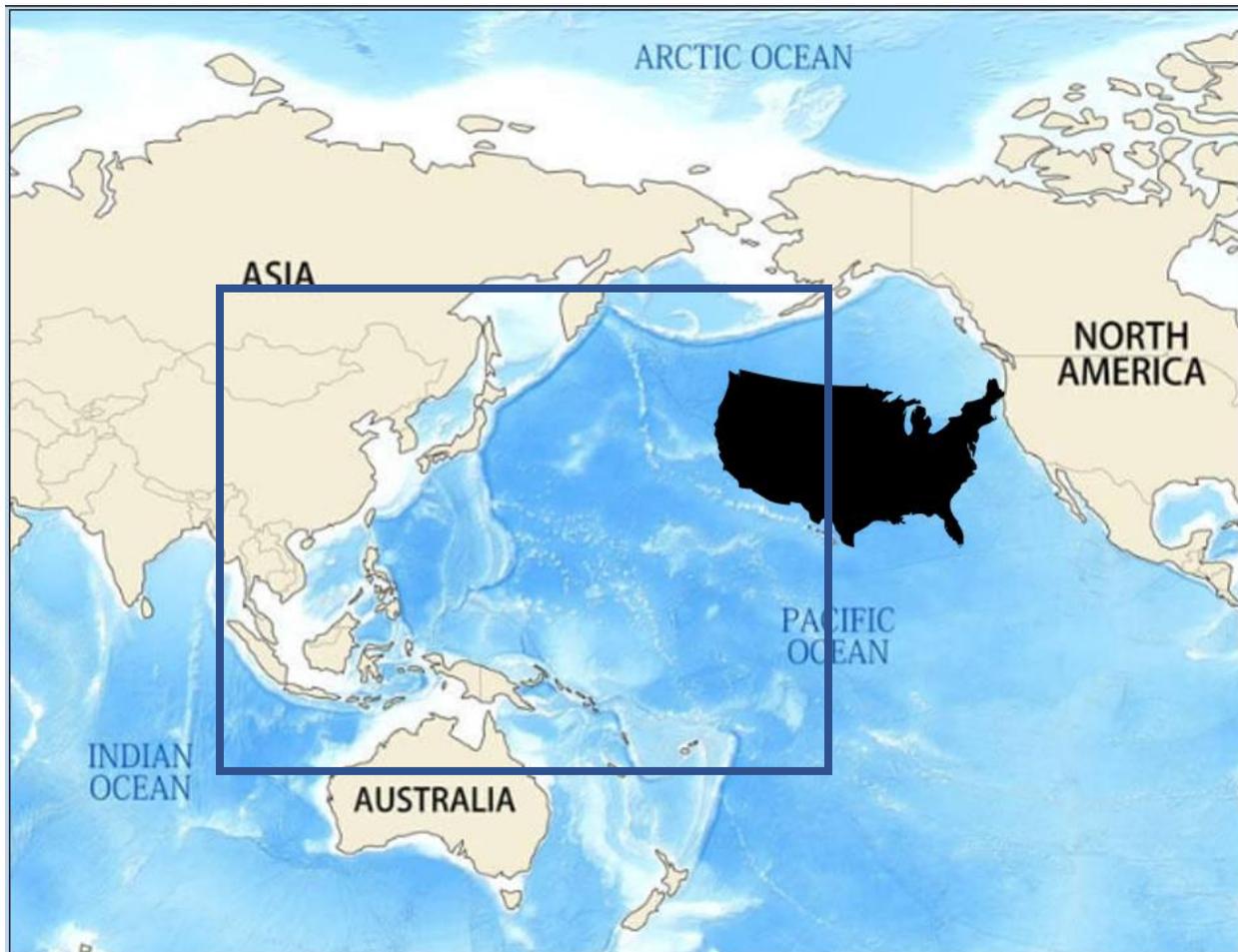


## **Asia/Pacific Theater Atlas**

The Allied war against Japan began on the Asian mainland, and much important fighting occurred in China, Southeast Asia and Burma. That said, Japan's astonishing early successes and its later eventual defeat were scattered across thousands of islands. They dot the South and Central Pacific, the Western Indian Ocean and include the four main islands that make up Japan itself. They extend from the Island Continent of Australia to the Aleutians in Alaska some 8000 miles to the north. Crucially, they include New Guinea, the second largest island in the world, The Philippines – over 7000 islands on its own – and the Marianas, where the foundation for Allied victory was finally established after two bloody years of combat.

Never having been further west than the Hawaiian Islands, I am left to examine the maps, images and surviving video footage of what the experience was like. Those who have taken my course on the Air War in Europe may remember two "Casts of Characters": The Men and the Machines. For a course on the Asia/Pacific war, we must add a third cast: The Battlefields.

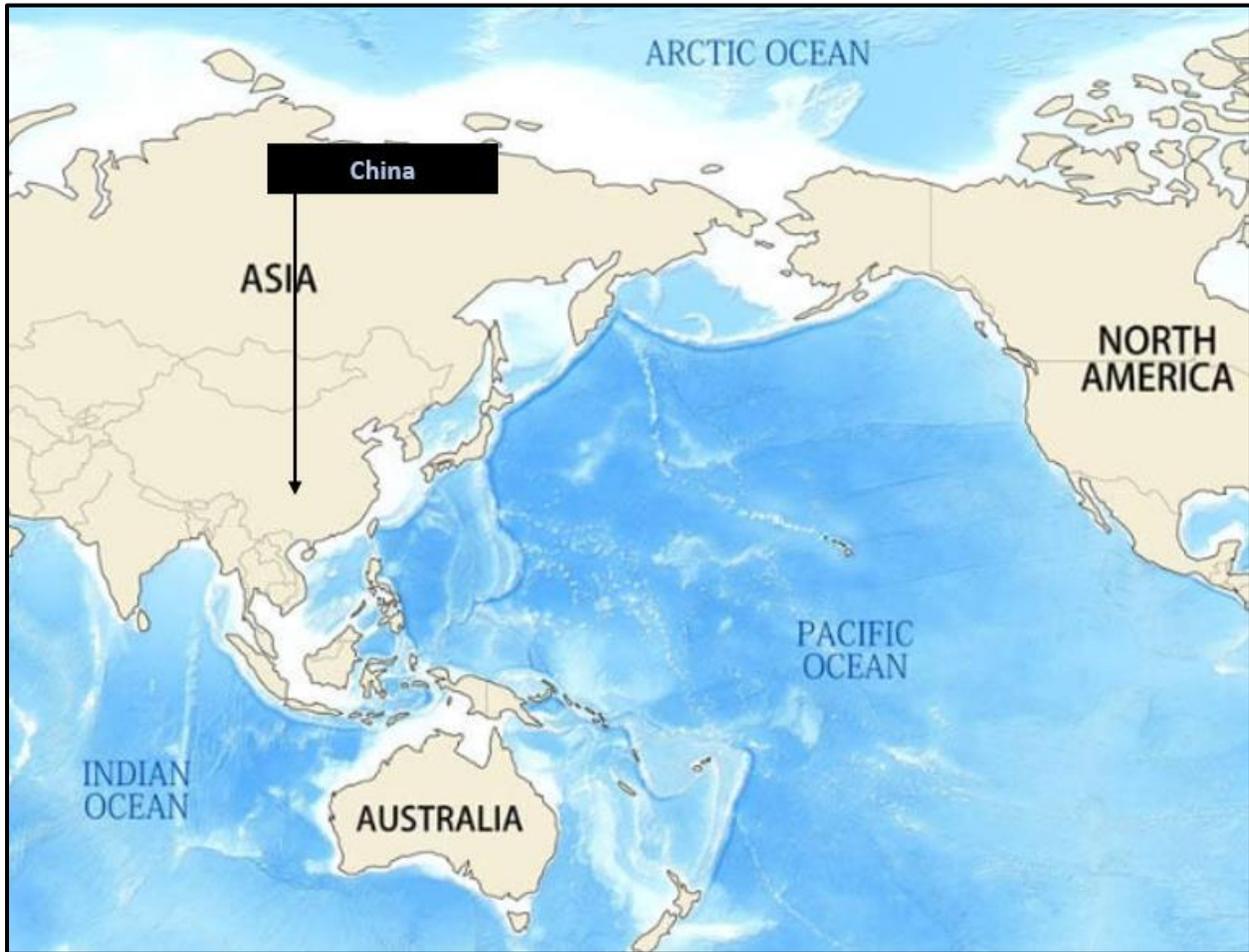
This "Atlas" is an attempt to locate and briefly describe the different islands and island groups that will be part of our story.



North to South and East to West, the Asia Pacific battlefield encompassed over 17 million square miles, more than the entire continent of Asia and over four times the size of Europe. Most of this area is oceans and seas where the sound of a shot fired in anger was never heard. But the land masses that make it up, from tiny atolls surrounding giant lagoons to the jungles, mountains and beaches of New Guinea were the scene of “The other war.” The great war to defeat Naziism, with Bradley, Patton and Eisenhower and Rommel center stage is already fading from our collective memory. The war in Asia and the Pacific barely even MADE it into memory save for those who lived through it.

The map silhouette of the “Lower 48” (all we had at the time) shows just how vast the distances were in the Pacific and Asia. Unfortunately, ALL flat maps distort distance as you approach the equator, so New Guinea looks smaller than it really is by comparison. As we will see, it is actually about 2/3 as wide across as the Continental US.

## CHINA



World War II actually started in China, beginning with the Japanese attack on Manchuria in 1931. It was fully joined with its attack on China in 1937.

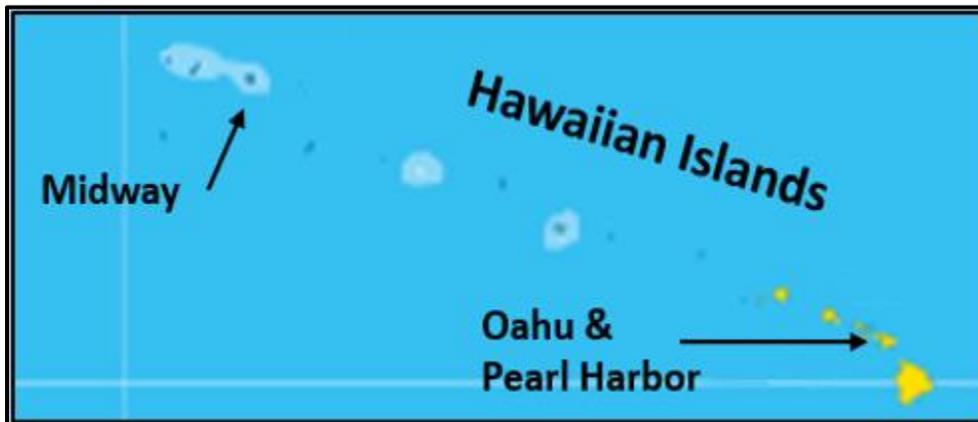
Vast US resources, mostly American, were poured into China throughout the war. But Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek had TWO wars going on – one against Japan and another against Mao and the Communists. For America, the idea was not that dissimilar from Russia. Keep them in the war, tying down and killing as many of the enemy as possible. Japan ALWAYS had over a million troops in China. Troops that the GIs never had to face in the islands.

## HAWAII



Over 1100 miles separate Honolulu from Midway, but they were the scene of decisive early battles in the Pacific war.

In Hawaii, it was all about Pearl Harbor – home of the US Pacific Fleet. Or what was left of it after the December 7<sup>th</sup> attack in 1941.



Midway Island itself would not figure significantly in the war. But the battle that took place off its shores turned the tide of the war in a half an hour of bravery and sacrifice.

## THE PHILIPPINES



The United States won the Philippines – and other possessions in the Asia Pacific theater – in the settlement that ended the Spanish American War. They comprise over 7000 islands, some so small they could fit inside a baseball stadium.

Unlike Great Britain, the US had no experience with distant colonial possessions. Anticipating an eventual war in the Pacific, US military planners agreed that defending the Philippines against any concerted attack was impossible.

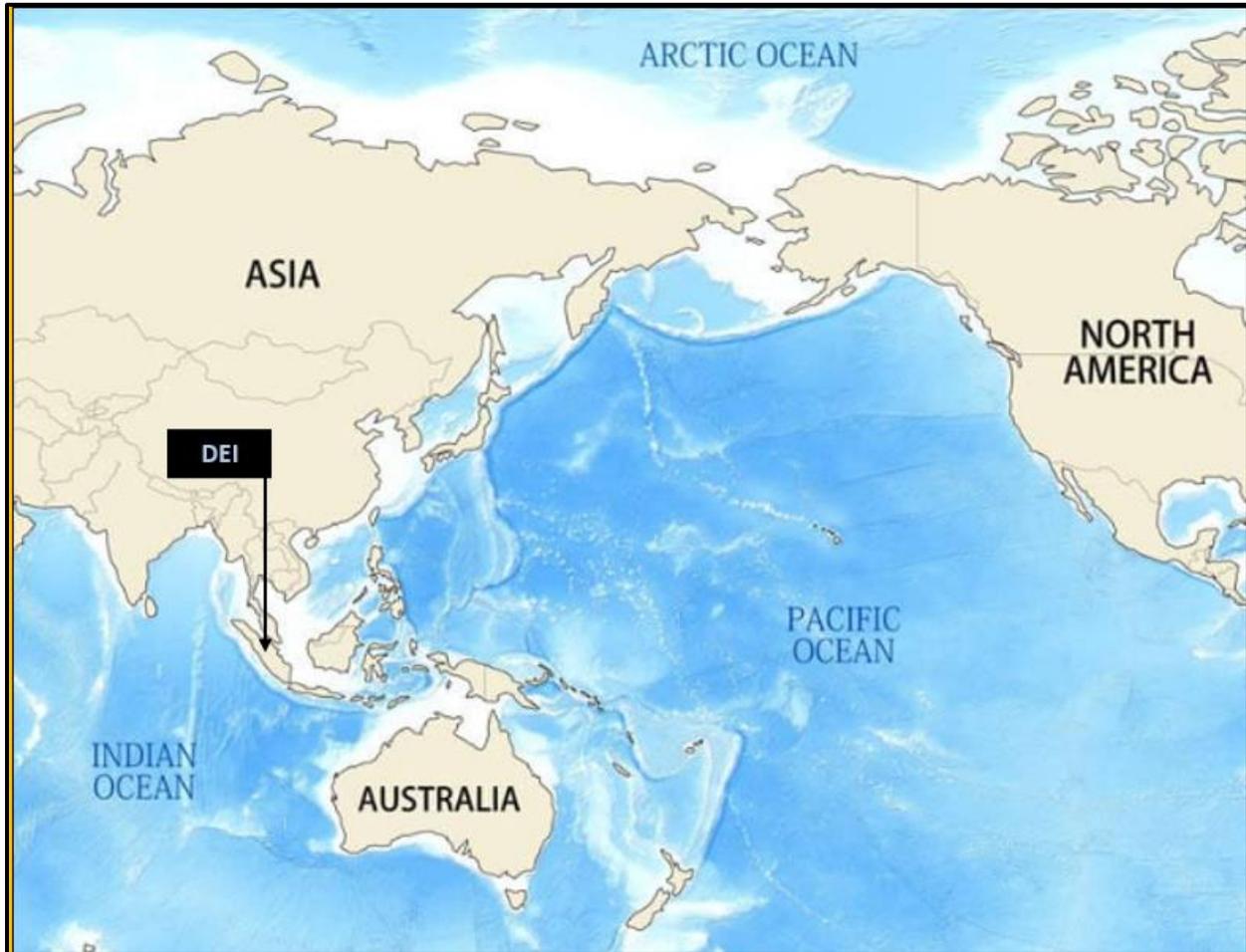
Douglas MacArthur, an icon in the American military, had a long history in the Philippines. Faced with an irresistible onslaught in the weeks and months after Pearl Harbor, he was ordered to abandon the islands by President Roosevelt while 17 other general officers became POWs. He left with the pledge “I shall return.” Most of the other generals and admirals spoke in terms of “We.” MacArthur was NOT them.



Both Philippine campaigns were incredibly costly. The US defeat led to the Bataan Death March, which claimed thousands of American lives and tens of thousands of Filipinos.

Three years later, the battle to retake the islands would be equally brutal and destructive. Throughout the period, heroic Filipino, American and other allied troops carried on an active resistance from the jungles and marshes of the archipelago.

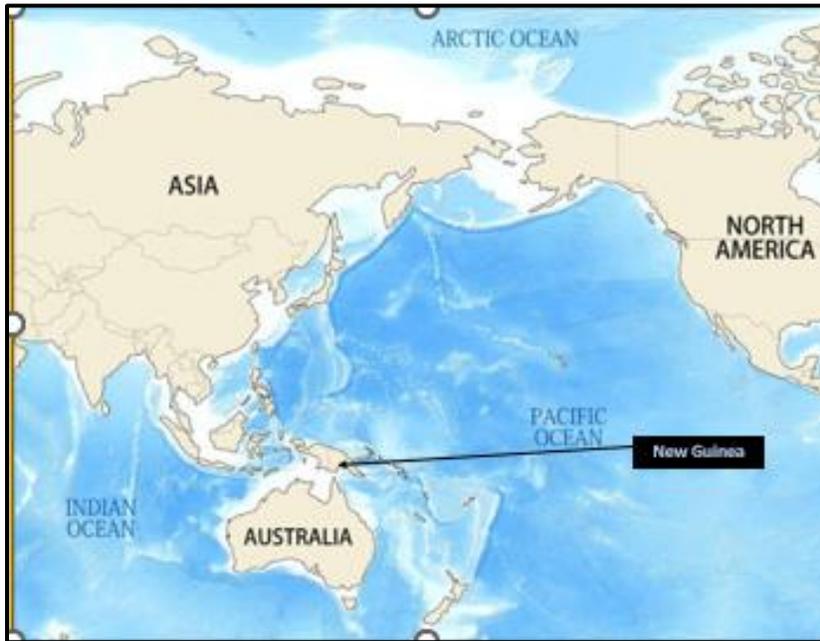
## THE DUTCH EAST INDIES



The Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) were one of the last assets remaining from the great age of Dutch imperialism that started in the 1600s. They were also a rich prize – most especially for the oil and refining assets that had been built up there over the decades.

These islands were the gemstone of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” that was imagined to be the Japanese super-empire in Asia and the Southeast Pacific. But by 1941, the “Dutch” (Netherlands) was a tiny, German occupied country in Europe and the DEI were easy pickings!

## New Guinea

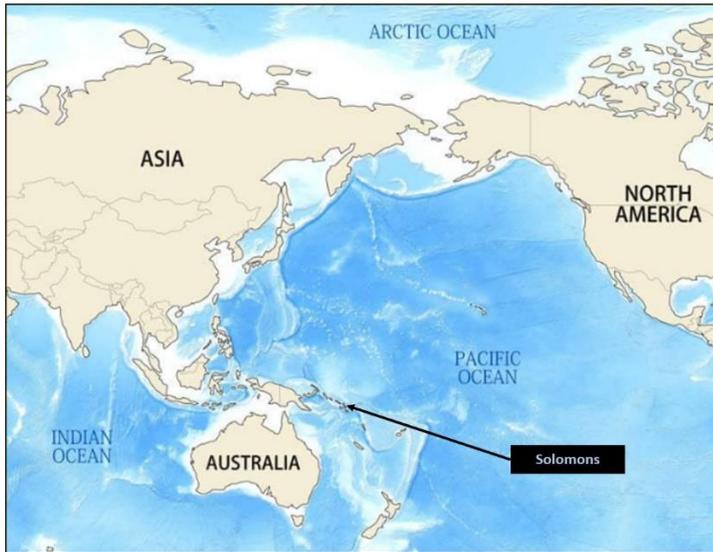


New Guinea always looks tiny on maps, but it is actually the second largest island in the world (after Greenland) and is also larger than Texas or France. It also lies just south of the Equator and has some of the most inhospitable mountains and jungles. Yet its central highlands are so remote that stone age cultures lived there – never touched by outside societies – until the 1930s.



Strategically positioned at the outside edge of Japan's empire, New Guinea – and the islands to its north and east – would prove a decisive area of operations and would claim THOUSANDS of lives. Most would NOT be from combat, but rather from disease, exposure and starvation.

## The Solomons



Franklin Roosevelt once remarked that by New Year's Day 1942, you couldn't find a world atlas in any store in the country. They had all been bought up by people trying to find out where Hawaii was. The Solomon Islands were not even in the discussion!

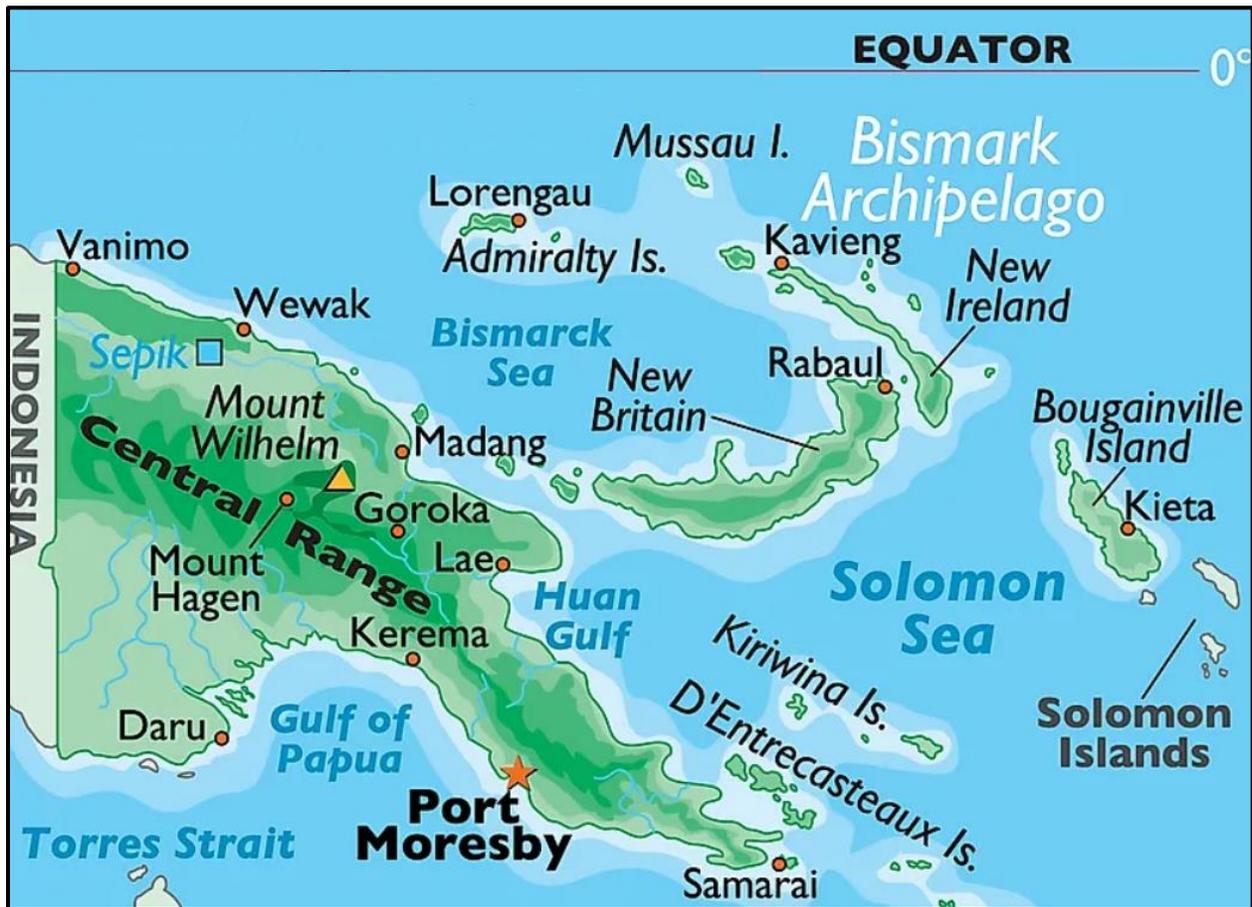
But it was in the Solomons that Allied forces, mainly American, began the long, painful task of driving the Japanese back. A number of islands were part of the story but Guadalcanal stands out as the turning point and central battlefield in the story.



New Georgia Sound on the map at left was at the top of what became to be known as "The Slot." Japanese warships would steam down the slot toward Guadalcanal to supply their troops on the island. And the waters north of Guadalcanal earned the moniker "Iron Bottom Sound" for the number of US Navy ships that ended up on the bottom.

Eventually, despite all the shortages and hardship, US forces – Marines, Sailors and Airmen – drove the Japanese off Guadalcanal and began their march to the north and west. There was still a LONG way to go.

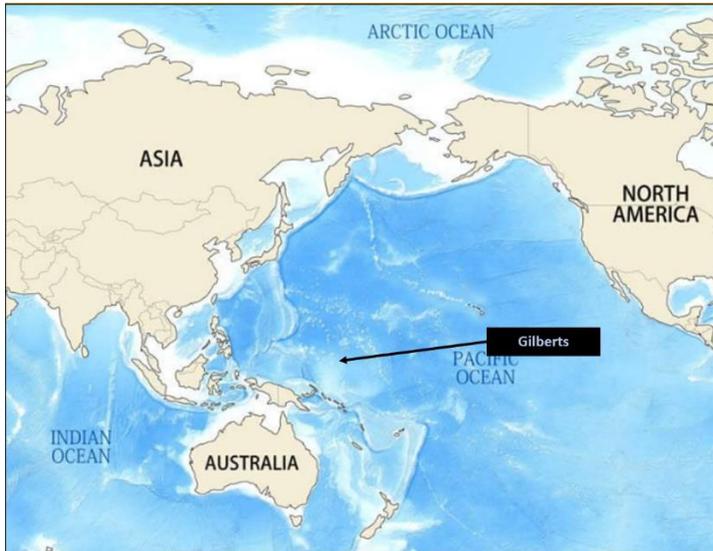
The Bismarcks (Bismark is an alternative spelling.)



Lying to the north of Papua, New Guinea – an Australian possession at the start of the war – the Bismarcks enter our story as individually named islands as each of them play a key role in the combat in the 1942-43 period. Rabaul, the most important Japanese base in the South Pacific theater, was at the northern tip of New Britain – largest of the Bismarcks and was the launch point for naval, air and amphibious attacks until it was isolated and neutralized by Allied advances. Bougainville was the first step toward the northwest for the Allies after the hard-won victories in the Solomons.

Don't plan a visit to Rabaul now! The harbor, itself the caldera of a large volcano, saw a smaller volcano rise inside it in the late 1800s and an eruption in 1994 destroyed the harbor and Rabaul itself.

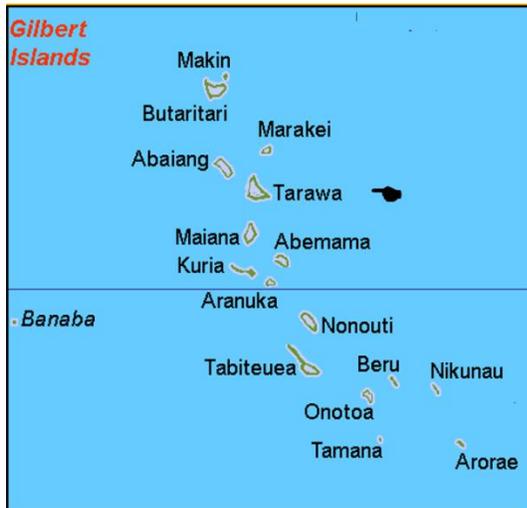
## The Gilberts



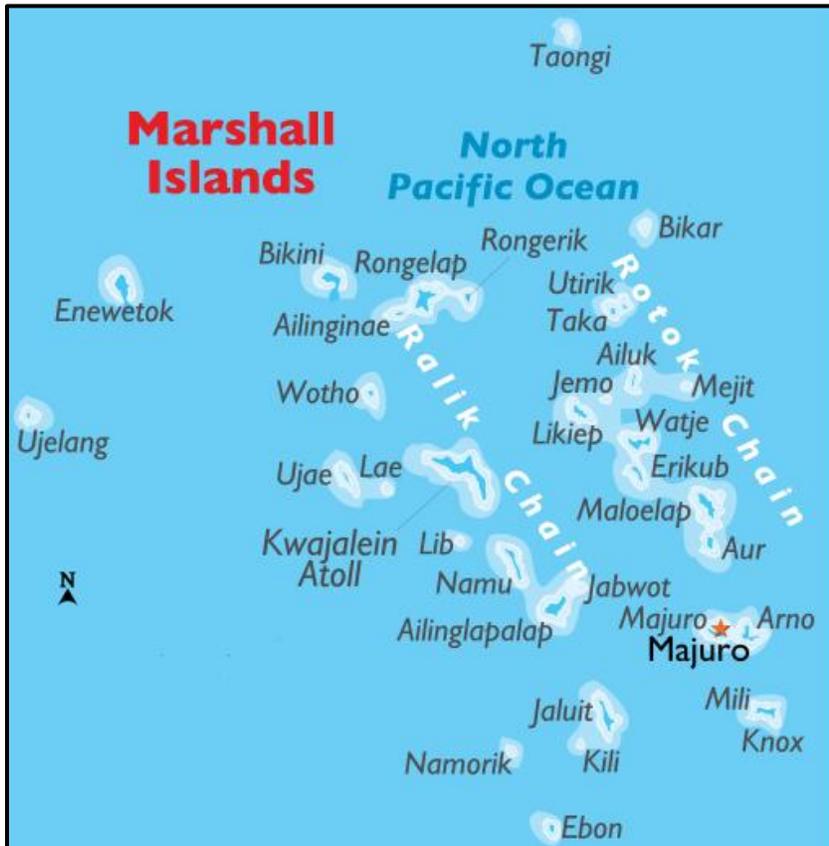
Only two islands in the Gilbert Islands mattered. Makin played a role, but it was all about Tarawa. Tarawa's airfield was a thorn in Allied plans to advance on to the Marshalls, as the range of Japanese planes would put all of the communication routes between Hawaii and the Marshalls under threat.

Tarawa was the first major amphibious operation conducted by US forces and numerous flaws in planning and tactics were exposed during the invasion. A lack of accurate information about the tides left thousands of Marines to wade ashore

from reefs over a thousand yards from the atoll itself. It was a bloody business and the Marines suffered heavily.



## The Marshalls



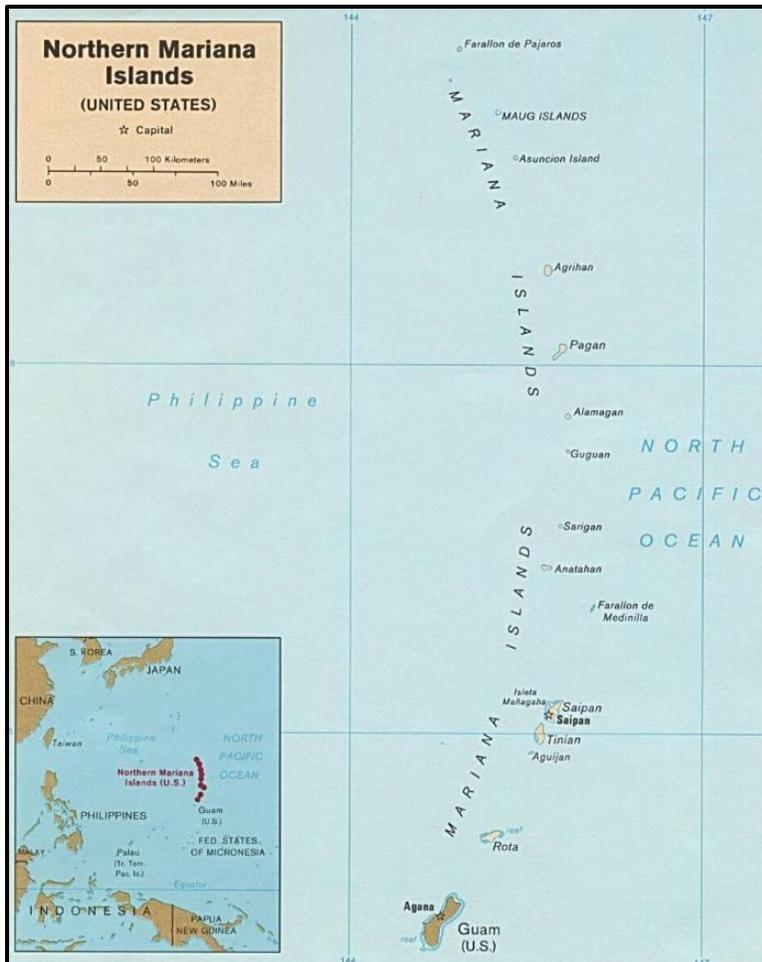
After the bloody conquest of Tarawa in the Gilberts, Allied island hopping moved to the Marshalls north and slightly west of the Tarawa in the Gilberts.

Like Tarawa, the Marshalls are coral atolls: large perimeters of relatively small islands of coral and sand surrounding much larger lagoons. The two major engagements in the Marshalls were Kwajalein and Enewetok – although the allies bombed numerous islands in the Marshalls and also landed troops on several of the islands where they encountered only minor resistance.

If you examine the map to the left – or Google some of the

island names – you will note that more than one of them is most noteworthy as a nuclear test site. (Bikini.) This reflects the nature of these islands: Many had no indigenous population and could not support agriculture. Their only value was in their strategic location.

## The Marianas



While the map title refers to “Northern Mariana Islands” it was the islands to the south – and particularly Saipan and Tinian – that represented the prize for Allied forces in the Central Pacific: They were within bomber range of Japan.

The combination of Imperialism and Post WWI division of spoils left Guam – ceded to the United States after the Spanish-American War – as an anomalous intrusion into an area of the Pacific largely mandated to Japan and it fell to the Japanese three days after Pearl Harbor after putting up virtually no resistance.

When the Allies returned in 1944, Saipan – about a quarter of the way up the 500+ expanse of islands – was the first target and proved to be a difficult one. Unlike the small atolls of the Gilberts and Marshalls, Saipan was a volcanic island with rugged

terrain, 1500 foot peaks and determined defenders. The collectively suicidal mindset of Japanese soldiers, and even civilians, first exhibited at Tarawa was on full display on Saipan – and later on Guam, where the last Japanese holdouts did not surrender until 1972. Tinian – just to the south of Saipan – proved to have the best terrain for long runways and ultimately there were five separate strips supporting B29 bombers, including the Enola Gay, which dropped the bomb on Hiroshima.

## Japan



In some respects “The Air War” which evolved from adolescence to maturity during WWII came of age in 1945, when air attacks – culminating with the two atomic bombs – brought a surrender without the need for an invasion. (Indeed, the only ground action by Allied troops in Japan prior to the surrender was an attack by commandos from the US submarine *Barb*. They managed to blow up a train on Sakhalin Island – north of Hokkaido.)

The four islands of Japan, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu (from north to south) were never attacked

– except from the air – during the war. The vast expanses of the Pacific – and the fact that Japan had a large footprint established through both diplomacy and conquest – made the simple problem of GETTING AT the Japanese homeland a main Allied preoccupation until the last year of the war.

But while Japan’s relative isolation gave protection, it also ultimately created problems. The resources – particularly oil – which had driven Japan to go to war in the first place were over 3000 miles away in the Dutch East Indies. When Japan’s hope that their early victories would bring the Allies to seek some form of settlement proved a chimera, the weight of Allied metal – particularly submarines – continually tightened the economic noose. While it was firebombing and the two atomic bombs that were the proximate cause of Japanese surrender, economic strangulation certainly played a role – and would have played a larger one had an actual invasion of the Japanese islands (scheduled to begin in November of 1945) been necessary.