The Guadalcanal Campaign: the Major Turning Point in the Pacific Theater
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ABSTRACT

World War II began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Before the official start of the war there were tensions throughout the Pacific dealing with Japanese expansion throughout the Pacific Ocean dating back to 1931. By 1940, the Empire of Japan aligned itself with Germany and Italy to create the Axis Powers. On December 7, 1941 the Pacific Theater officially began with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Ultimately, the Pacific Theater became a battle between the United States and Japan throughout the Pacific Ocean. While Japan was attempting to broaden their influence, the United States was doing all it could in preventing it. There were several battles in the theater, but the campaign taking place in Guadalcanal was the more important. The Guadalcanal Campaign was the major turning Point in the Pacific Theater of WWII.

UP TO GUADALCANAL

From Pearl Harbor on, the Japanese experienced grand victories in the Pacific. They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams thanks to a very fast and maniac offensive. Within their six months of victory, the Japanese took the following territories: the Gilbert Islands, Guam, Wake Islands, Hong Kong, British Malaysia and Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, Burma, Bay of Bengal, Colombo, Ceylon, and the Philippines. Their main concern was to defend the “Southern Resources Area.” All of this conquest led to the complete isolation of China, the elimination of Allied Power in the Western Pacific, and Japanese economic exploitation. There were two major battles that were fought between the U.S. and the Japanese: one at Coral Sea, and the other at Midway.

GUADALCANAL CAMPAIGN

Guadalcanal is located in the Solomon Islands, northeast of Australia. Prior to the campaign both sides realized the strategic importance of the area. For the Japanese, they would easily cut off a sea route between Australia and the Allies. For the Allies, they would be able to better protect Australia from possible Japanese invasions and protect an Allied build-up in Australia that would springboard a major assault on the Japanese.

In June, 1942 a reconnaissance plane discovered increased Japanese activity on the island. At Lunga Point there was construction taking place on an airfield. A Japanese airfield in the area did not bode well with the Allies. They decided to act right away.

Operation “Watchtower” took place on August 7, 1942 where there were simultaneous landings on Guadalcanal and five other islands in the Solomon Islands. The Marines that landed on the islands were met with no opposition. They found the airstrip at Lunga Point completely abandoned, allowing them to capture it and rename it Henderson Field. By August 20- Allied planes landed on Henderson Field.

A battle of attrition ensued for six months following the landing. The Japanese fleet constantly bombed the islands every night and soon controlled the sea around Guadalcanal. The planes from Henderson Field were able to prevent any Japanese ground forces from building up an invasion. The Japanese realized they could not capture Henderson Field and decided to evacuate their forces from the area.

IMPORTANCE OF GUADALCANAL

The Japanese were clearly on the defense after the battle for the rest of war. The Allies experienced a string of victories in the Pacific following this battle. Henderson Field became important to build up forces in South East Asia. It brought the fight to Japanese airbases throughout the Pacific, no longer acting on the defensive. It also checked further Japanese expansion in the Pacific.

Guadalcanal started off the island hopping campaign known as Operation Cartwheel. This was the campaign that allowed the Allies to hop up the islands to capture the Solomon Islands and capture New Guinea as well as Rabaul: the heart of Japanese air operations. Isolation Rabaul led to the Allies cutting off Japanese sea line communications.

This loss was costly for Japan strategically. It ended all Pacific expansion attempts for them. It also showed the Allied supremacy in the area. The Japanese could not bounce back from the devastating loss, facing a string of losses. This ended up being a blow to their strategic plans for the defense of their Empire.

There was a psychological impact on both sides. Allied forces faced Japan’s best land, air, and naval forces and beat them. This brought up optimism and a sense of pride. The Japanese were feeling completely defeated from the long, six month campaign. Major Kiyotake Kawaguchi was quoted, saying “Guadalcanal is no longer merely a name of an island in Japanese military history. It is the name of the graveyard of the Japanese military history.”

WHY NOT MIDWAY?

The Battle at Midway is considered a major turning point in the Pacific Theater. Guadalcanal, however, is the biggest turning point because of several reasons. Location has a big part to do with it. Guadalcanal had strategic value because of its location in the Solomon Islands. Midway was just an island in the middle of the Pacific. The proximity to Hawaii would also be an issue for the Japanese stationed at Midway later down the road in the war. Following Midway the Japanese had a decent amount of supplies and other military expenditures. Guadalcanal really deprived the Japanese of men, weapons, planes, ships, supplies, and so on. Guadalcanal helped with preventing Japan from annexing Australia. The Allies stopped Japan’s plans to use Guadalcanal to conquer the Pacific. Finally, the battling that took place on Guadalcanal was more significant because all terrains and branches of the military were used.

JAPANESE EXPANSION AND U.S. INVOLVEMENT

Japanese expansion throughout the Pacific began with invading Manchuria, which was the northeast area of China. In 1931 they invaded Manchuria for resources, colonized the area, and continued their war with China by capturing major Chinese cities and pushing the Chinese all the way to the Himalayas. Next, the Japanese had their eyes set on the “Southern Resources Area.” This was an area of colonized Pacific Islands that were not well well defended by their motherlands. The area included French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. By 1941 they had conquered the area.

The United States became involved when the government refused to renew a 1911 trade agreement between the two nations. They would no longer trade oil, steel, arms, war material, and gas. The U.S. even went as far to freeze all of its assets. The U.S. gave Japan an ultimatum: leave China and French Indochina and they would get all of their assets back and trade would reopen. If not, war would ensue. In November of 1941 all trade negotiations collapsed.

Japan acted on December 7, 1941 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor to demolish the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet stationed there at the time. At the same time they attacked the Philippines, ultimately enjoying a massive win for the day. With these attacks, Japan began a six-month campaign of victory in the Pacific Theater.