
The Round Tablette

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Written by Drs. Connie Harris & Chris Simer

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Welcome to the September session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is James Hallas, the author of *Saipan: The Battle that Doomed Japan in World War II*. Veterans will join him to discuss how the capture of the Mariana Islands of Guam, Tinian, and Saipan provided basing for the B-29's to bomb Japan and ensure Allied Victory.

The Pacific theater's strategy was a two pronged approach, one going through New Guinea towards the Philippines under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, and the other at sea in the central Pacific under the command of Admiral Chester A. Nimitz. By the middle of 1944, the Central Pacific campaign came to its defining objective, the Marianas Islands. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest King believed that taking the Marianas would be key to disrupting Japanese lines of communications, providing bases to aid the attacks on Palau and the Philippines, forcing the Imperial Japanese Navy to combine their fleet to enhance the possibility of its destruction, and providing air bases for the newest long-range bombers: the B-29.

Originally colonized by the Spanish, the Marianas archipelago is named after the Spanish Queen Mariana of Austria. The Spanish maintained control of the island chain until their loss in the 1898 Spanish-American War to the United States. The United States took over the southern island of Guam, and the Spanish sold the northern islands which included Saipan and Tinian to the Germans. After the German defeat in World War I, the Japanese took over the northern islands as part of the Treaty of Versailles mandate system. A large Japanese population settled on the islands during the inter-war period and produced sugar cane.

The Japanese captured the American colony of Guam in December 1941, part of the same attacks that took place at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines. Because of the logistical nightmare of fighting over a battlefield that was thousands of miles long (the distance from New Guinea to Guam is over 1,200 miles, the distance from Hawaii to Guam is over 3,000 miles), the US took several years before it was ready to invade the

Marianas. That did not mean that American forces were idle, with victories at Midway, Guadalcanal, and New Guinea.

During the 1930s, the Marine Corps developed the basic amphibious landing tactics and equipment that made possible the "island-hopping" or "leap-frog" operations conducted in the Pacific Ocean (Nimitz) and South West Pacific Ocean (MacArthur) Areas. In Marine Corps theory, amphibious landings were supported by naval gun fire and close air support in an environment of air superiority. In practice, doctrine was flawed, and the navy's landing boats were cumbersome if not lethal. Marines who had seen Japanese *Daihatsu* landing in use convinced New Orleans boat builder Andrew Jackson Higgins to modify his bootlegger bayou barge with a front drop ramp – the ubiquitous Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP).

The first test of amphibious operations at Guadalcanal brought together all aspects: land, sea, and air power. Oftentimes hanging on by a thread, American forces defeated the Japanese, while both sides fought the true enemy — malaria. Both the 1st Marine Division and the Army follow-on forces suffered from a lack of training before landing on Guadalcanal. Tactical and logistical lessons learned in the crucible of combat were rapidly disseminated to the forces prepared for the next invasion. All successive Pacific Ocean amphibious operations were or became *joint* operations as the army provided either the primary landing or the follow-on forces with naval transport and gun fire and aerial support.

In June 1944, the two great amphibious landings of the Second World War would take place on opposite sides of the world. On June 6, 1944, OPERATION OVERLORD would take place on the Normandy coast in France, while on June 15, 1944, OPERATION FORAGER, the land invasion of Saipan began when the 2nd and 4th Marine divisions under the command of Lt. Gen. Holland "Howling Mad" Smith (considered to be the father of amphibious warfare) secured a beachhead and were joined the next day by the Army's 27th Infantry Division. The Japanese, with little hope for resupply and determined to fight to the last man, engaged in "banzai attacks" and convinced many civilians to jump from cliffs committing suicide in fear of the American invaders. Though declared secured by July 9, pockets of Japanese fought on in the rocky wooded

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

terrain, and some units did not surrender until December 1945.

The American forces in the Pacific quickly learned to work together to achieve their common goal of defeating the Japanese. Perhaps the singular beauty of the Pacific operations, certainly the key to the successful American military leadership, was their ability to learn from each battle and build on it. Unfortunately, command personalities sometimes interfered with the overall mission. The best example of this was “the Smith-Smith controversy” Between Marine General Holland Smith, one of the most polarizing commanders in the Pacific, and Army Maj. Gen. Ralph Smith, whom he removed from command of the 27th Division, claiming that he was a “weak officer, incapable of handling men under his command.” Ralph Smith was an experienced combat commander who won two Silver Stars in World War I and his men respected him. While accusing the 27th Division of a lack of fighting spirit, Holland Smith excused same behavior by Marine units as battle fatigue. Great leadership is marked by a willingness to learn and to adapt to the circumstances present on the battlefield, audacity is a multiplying factor, but bigotry like H. Smith’s is too often destructive of that leadership.

Surprised by the Saipan invasion, the Imperial Japanese Navy, combined its forces to attack US Naval forces supporting the invasion. This resulted in the Battle of the Philippine Sea, otherwise known as the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot” for the high ratio of American to Japanese aviation kills. US Naval Fifth Fleet under the command of Admiral Raymond Spruance, crippled the Japanese carrier fleet in the battle, the largest carrier versus carrier battle in history.

After securing Saipan, US forces moved quickly to secure the other islands in the Marianas chain. By the end of August, Guam and Tinian were secured and US forces were only 1300 miles from the Japan and 1600 miles from the Philippines. The Marianas campaign, with its three-dimensional fighting, proved to be high water mark for US military power in the Pacific. The US Army Air Forces’ new long range B-29 bombers were able to fly from Saipan and Tinian supporting the invasion of the Philippines and bomb the Japanese home islands. In May 1945 Tinian became home to the 509th Composite Group under the command of Colonel Paul Tibbets, who on 6 August flew the mission that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

FURTHER READINGS:

James H. Hallas, *Saipan: The Battle that Doomed Japan in World War II* (Guilford CT: Stackpole Books, 2019).
 Harold J. Goldberg, *D-Day in the Pacific: The Battle of Saipan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Gordon Rottman & Howard Gerrard, *Saipan and Tinian 1944: Piercing the Japanese Empire* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2004).
 James Hornfischer, *The Fleet at Flood Tide: America at Total War in the Pacific, 1944-1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 2016).

Announcements:

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 13 Sept. 2023, *Mosby’s Rangers* – www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
- Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>.
- 8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1100 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.
- Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
- Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show – TBA - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.
- Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie –TBA July 2024 - Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org
- Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org
- Friends of the **National WW II Memorial** – <https://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org/blog/12-oclock-high>.
- Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club - <http://www.vbcphg.org>.
- Western Naval Historical Association info@wnha.net
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org
- Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2023-2024

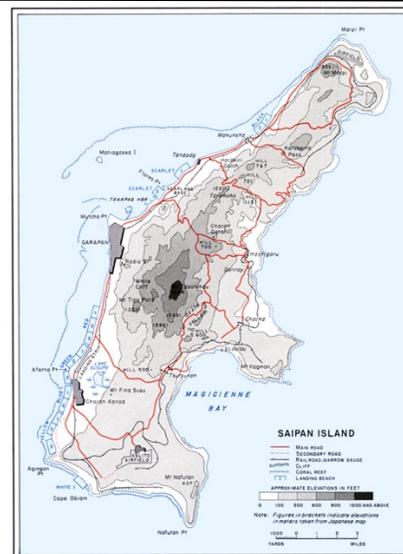
2023

- 10 Oct. LeMay – Bombing Japan
- 24 Oct. 3rd Inf. Division Campaigns
- 15 Nov. Weds.** Nazi Propaganda
- 12 Dec. Pearl Harbor – Air Battles

2024

- 9 Jan. Casablanca Conference
- 13 Feb. 99th “Viking” Battalion
- 12 Mar. Selling the War – Bill Maudlin
- 26 Mar. Coast Watchers: Hawaii, England
- 9 Apr. War of Supply–Mediterranean
- 14 May Dieppe’s Lessons for Normandy

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U.S. Army Campaign in the Marianas