

CHAPTER 3

The Forces Assemble

The attack on Pearl Harbor devastated the US Navy. The loss of life was appalling: 2,403 personnel were killed, almost all of them from the navy, and another 1,178 were wounded. Four battleships were sunk by the two attacking waves of 177 and 168 aircraft from four Japanese carriers. There were many other ships damaged to the extent they were only saved from sinking in that they were in the shallow waters around Ford Island and later raised, as were three of the battleships. 188 aircraft were destroyed. The results could have been worse, for the three carriers based at Pearl Harbor were out at sea on exercise.

The attack was accompanied around the Pacific by other strikes: in the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong. Due to a combination of factors: aggression, speed, preparation and above all a startling lack of Allied preparation and resolve, the Japanese were very successful.

They had hoped for a successful invasion of Singapore in 100 days – it took them 70. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who invaded Singapore down the Malayan peninsula and achieved what some have called the greatest victory in history, later wrote that it was a close call:

My attack on Singapore was a bluff, a bluff that worked. I had 30,000 men and was outnumbered by more than three to one. I knew that if I had to fight long for Singapore I would be beaten. That is why the surrender had to be at once. I was very frightened all the time that the British would discover our numerical weakness and lack of supplies and force me into disastrous street fighting.

Although Yamashita's honest appraisal is accurate, what he doesn't hint at is the Allied chaos, lack of resolve, failures of high command and unwillingness to see what was in front of them – a tenacious enemy. These were not isolated Japanese victories; they went on to be massive in geographical sweep and in numbers:

Significant / major actions of the Pacific War against Japan			
Commenced	Action	Detail	Result
1941			
7 Dec	Pearl Harbor	Air attack in two waves	Japanese victory
8 Dec	Invasion of Philippines	Heavy US losses; eventual total control	Japanese victory
8-23 Dec	Battle of Wake Island	Air raids and amphibious assaults – first attack defeated by Allies	Japanese victory
8 Dec	Invasion of Thailand	Capitulation within hours	Japanese victory
8 Dec	Invasion of Hong Kong	Capitulation on 25 Dec	Japanese victory
10 Dec	Attack on battleship <i>Prince of Wales</i> and battlecruiser <i>Repulse</i>	Both sunk by air attack	Japanese victory
16 Dec	Battle of Borneo	Invasion of British assets	Japanese victory
Dec-Jan	Defeat of Sparrow Force, Lancer Force etc	Efforts made to stem the Japanese tide in Timor	Japanese victory