War in the Pacific

"Arizona Monument - Pearl Harbor, Hawaii"

Pearl Harbor is but one of the stories of war in the Pacific. Pacific Islanders have a long history of war and could best be described as warrior-explorers. And they certainly were affected by wars fought between Western Nations. At the end of the World War I, German-controlled Samoa was given to Great Britain and was administered to by New Zealand. However World War II saw the greatest involvement of Pacific Islanders and it had a great effect on Pacific Islanders and Pacific Islander Americans.

Great Britain's declaration of war on Germany in 1939 began a ripple affect through the Pacific that magnified when Japan entered the war in 1941. Hitler's invasion of France in 1940 affected the French colonies and interests in the Pacific including New Caledonia, the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu), and French Polynesia. In some cases, the French governors were slow to act and coups d'états were staged in Noumea, New Caledonia and Tahiti. French settlers declared themselves Free French. Volunteers, including Pacific Islanders, went to the Middle East as France's Pacific Battalion. Fiji and Tonga rallied behind Britain and contributed by raising funds for the war effort. In Australia and New Zealand, food was rationed to save resources that were, in turn, directed to the military effort.

War came into the Pacific like a fast moving storm. In the north, Micronesians were being forced by the Japanese to build airstrips on many coral atolls. Immediately after the attack
Walter Henry Napia (Henare Arena Napia), the author's father who fought with the 28th Maori Battalion

on Pearl Harbor, Japan attacked and invaded South East Asia and the western Pacific to eventually control the Philippines, the Marianas, the Carolines, the Marshalls, the Gilberts (now called Kiribati), the Solomons and parts of Papua-New Guinea. This was accomplished with little resistance. British and Australian colonists, who were no match for the huge military power of the Japanese, fled or were captured. Allied forces, mostly British and American, mustered and began their relentless reoccupation of Pacific territories. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians on both sides died in some of the bloodiest battles in history. Many Pacific Islanders served with distinction in the Pacific Campaigns. Over 7,000 Papuans and New Guineans, thought to be cowardly by their British and Australian colonizers, proved to be excellent jungle fighters. More than 2,000 Fijians and 680 Solomon Islanders saw action in the Solomons, often outfighting their European and European-American allies. Twenty-seven hundred Tongans prepared to defend Tonga and one thousand Samoans prepared to defend American Samoa.

Islanders throughout the Pacific were conscripted as non-combatant laborers by both sides. Prior to the war, Japan controlled much of Micronesia. Some Micronesians volunteered for non-combatant duty. Others became forced laborers. Generally, in the early years of the war, Japanese occupiers saw islanders as important suppliers of food and labor. However as the war intensified, relationships between the Japanese and islanders deteriorated, especially as the Americans cut off Japanese supply lines. Islanders, now forced to feed the Japanese, suffered tremendously. The Chamorros of Guam were perceived to be American sympathizers and many were executed by the Japanese. It is said that they suffered more than most at the hands of the
Japanese. Marshallese were also executed in the hundreds.

Those parts of the Pacific behind allied lines were affected in other ways. Islands such as Fiji, Tonga, Western and American Samoa, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Tahiti, and New Caledonia became staging points for American forces that came in with technology, wealth and goods that islanders had never seen before. Americans were kind and shared their food freely with islanders. Colonization in the Pacific changed forever.

As with any war, people came out of this war with physical and emotional scars. The islands and their seas on which battles were fought were left with the physical scars, littered with skeletons of tanks and ships, craters and bombed buildings. In time, most of the land recovered, but the "Cold War" which followed brought new dangers to places like the Bikini Atoll in Micronesia and the Mururoa Atoll in French Polynesia. At Bikini, the Americans tested nuclear bombs as the French did at Mururoa. Kaho'olawe, one of the islands in the Hawaiian chain became the site of war games conducted by the Americans, Australians and New Zealanders and until recently, was still used for bombing practice by the U.S. military. Unfortunately, land tends to recover faster than man. Pacific Islanders and Pacific Islander Americans have participated in World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the Wars in the Balkans and many returned with physical and emotional wounds from which some never recovered. It is only recently that we have come to understand that the trauma of battle continues to affect people long after they return home.

At the end of World War II France, Britain, Australians and the United States had holdings in the Pacific. These, however, were no longer seen as colonies but as territories. In due time some became independent. Part of Micronesia became a trustee of the United States and American Samoa, a territory. After World War II, U.S. was perceived by many in the Pacific to be a desirable place to live and they began moving to the United States in significant numbers.

Hawaii was a natural port of entry in the United States. Its increasing military importance and the blossoming tourist trade attracted many Samoans and Tongans, and, very recently, Micronesians. Many Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, Chamorros, and Palauans moved to California and the other Western States where job opportunities were better. Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area have substantial Pacific Islander populations. Washington State has had a long history with Pacific Islanders, especially Hawaiians. More Pacific Islander communities are growing in the larger metropolis areas of San Jose, San Diego, Long Beach, Sacramento, and Hayward, California, and Salt Lake City, and West Valley City, Utah. The larger metropolitan areas in New York, New Jersey, Texas, Illinois, Colorado, and Arizona have
likewise become home to many Pacific Islander Americans.

**Suggested Activities**

1. Why were Pacific Islander nations important to Western nations?
2. What is meant by a "staging point"? What might American Military have used staging points for?

**Map Activities**

1. Create a map showing which Western Nations were exploring the Pacific and Islands where they attempted to set up trading points or colonies.
2. Create a map showing Japanese expansion in the Pacific during the World War II.
3. Create a map showing where Pacific Islanders participating in World War II came from. Where possible, show numbers.
4. Create a map showing American staging points in the Pacific.
5. Create a map showing U.S. territories in the Pacific after World War II.

**Poster Activities**

1. Create a poster showing a historic time line for Hawaii.
2. Create a poster showing nations interested in Hawaii.

**Reflective Activities:**

1. Write the story or stories of how your family came to the state where you live? Where did they come from? Why did they come here? Where did they live when they first came here? What were some of their occupations?