

## This Day in History... July 9, 1944

### US Troops Clear Saipan

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Throughout 1944 American troops continued to advance on two fronts in the Pacific Theatre. While MacArthur fought his way across New Guinea toward the Philippines, Admiral Nimitz's amphibious forces leapfrogged from island to island toward Japan.



*Nimitz was a fleet admiral in charge of US forces at Saipan.*

This leap-frogging tactic, also known as island hopping, was a military strategy that began in 1943 where they bypassed the more heavily fortified Japanese-held islands and instead targeted strategic islands with a smaller enemy presence.

By the summer of 1944, they had their sights set on Saipan. The Japanese expected the US to attack further south, so they were surprised by the two-day pre-invasion bombardment that began on June 13. US Marines came ashore early on June 15, supported by naval gunfire. By 9 a.m. 8,000 Marines had landed on Saipan. They quickly secured a beachhead and spent the night repelling Japanese attacks.

The Japanese put up a fierce resistance and bitter fighting ensued. As the battle continued, American troops nicknamed areas of the battle – Hell's Pocket, Purple Heart Ridge, and Death Valley – showing how bad the fighting there was. The Japanese would also hide in the caves during the day and drop sorties at night, but the American troops eventually used flamethrowers to clear the caves.



*The Marianas and Palau Islands Campaign took place between June and November 1944 and helped bring about the end of World War II.*



*The Marianas were the site of the last major "carrier-versus-carrier" naval battle of the war in the Pacific, which the US won.*



*Stamp pictures a US soldier with a flamethrower clearing an enemy bunker on Saipan.*



*Frontline Soldier with Canteen, Saipan by W. Eugene Smith, from the Masters of American Photography sheet*

The US victory nearby at the Battle of the Philippine Sea removed all hopes for relief or supplies for the Japanese. Troubled by the thought of his people surrendering to the Americans, Japanese emperor Hirohito issued a statement that they would enjoy elevated spiritual status in the afterlife if they took their own lives.

By July 7, the Japanese had nowhere to hide. Their commander said that "there is no longer any distinction between civilians and troops. It would be better for them to join in the attack with bamboo spears than be captured." So the Japanese military supplied the locals with weapons and launched an early-morning banzai charge on the Americans. The 15-hour battle was brutal, but the Americans won.

In the end, American forces fighting on Saipan and in the Philippine Sea dealt Japan a serious blow. The Japanese suffered at least 28,000 troop deaths, plus the destruction of five ships, including two fleet carriers, and more than 500 aircraft. On July 9, 1944, after more than three weeks of savage fighting, Saipan was declared under American control, though a small Japanese force evaded capture. Many locals believed the Japanese propaganda that if they surrendered they would be tortured or raped, and instead took their own lives, accounting for about 10% of civilian deaths. So ominous was the defeat that on July 18th, Japan's Prime Minister Tojo resigned. One Japanese admiral later admitted that their war "was lost with the loss of Saipan."

Within a week of the battle's end, American troops also occupied Guam and Tinian. Nimitz was now within striking distance of Tokyo and on November 24th, the first force of B29s took off from Saipan to bomb Japan. Using submarine and air bases on Saipan, Nimitz was eventually able to launch the assaults on Iwo Jima and Okinawa that led to the inevitable defeat of Japan.



*Seven men were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions on Saipan.*

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