

Major Battle of World War II

1. Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941

The fighting lasted only 90 minutes and was very one-sided, but this was undoubtedly a major battle – six aircraft carriers with more than 400 planes attacked the main American naval base. Crippling the enemy battleship fleet allowed Japan to overrun south-east Asia without interference. But the ‘Day of Infamy’ threw a hitherto cautious American public whole-heartedly behind war with Japan and Germany – although early preoccupation with Pacific defense delayed the sending of American forces to Europe. Fierce anti-Japanese sentiment also led to a readiness to use firebombing and nuclear weapons three years later.

2. The Siege of Leningrad: September 1941—January 1944

The Siege of Leningrad, also known as “the 900 day siege” since it nearly lasted that long (in actuality, it lasted 872 days) occurred when German and Finnish forces surrounded Leningrad and took over the city. The Soviet government had its citizenry work on building fortifications throughout the city although the area was almost entirely encircled by invading forces by November. The siege claimed more than 650,000 Soviet lives in a single year alone due to starvation, disease, and shelling.

3. Battle of Iwo Jima: February—March 1945

The Battle of Iwo Jima is an iconic event, thanks largely due to Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the American flag being raised. But military analysts still argue whether the island's limited strategic value justified the costly action. Twenty thousand Japanese defenders were dug in to an elaborate system of bunkers, caves, and tunnels. The attack was preceded by a massive naval and air bombardment lasting several days covering the entire island. Although outnumbered five to one and with no prospect of victory, the Japanese put up strong resistance and virtually none surrendered. Many positions could be cleared only out by hand grenades and flamethrowers, including the fearsome M4A3R3 Sherman "Zippo" flamethrower tanks.

4. Battle of the Bulge: December 1944—January 1945

Following the D-Day invasion of June 1944, the Allies broke out of Normandy and advanced rapidly across France and Belgium. Hitler aimed to halt them by a surprise Blitzkrieg. Several armored divisions massed in the Ardennes with the goal of breaking through Allied lines. American forces held on stubbornly in spite of heavy casualties—more than 19,000 died. The Germans had limited supplies and could only fight for few days before fuel and ammunition ran out, so the offensive soon ran out of steam. Allied lines bulged but did not break, and hundreds of thousands of reinforcements poured into the area. Afterwards Germany lacked resources for another offensive and the end was inevitable.

5. Battle of Britain: July—October 1940

By late 1940 Britain faced the threat of a German invasion, but the incursion would succeed only with air superiority. What followed was the first major campaign fought by opposing air forces. For four months the German Luftwaffe carried out attacks on British airfields, radar stations, and aircraft factories, and bombed British cities, too. But the Stukas proved too vulnerable to being intercepted and the Germans couldn't mass enough planes to defeat the fighter pilots of the Royal Air Force in their Hurricanes and Spitfires. Heavy casualties forced the Luftwaffe to scale down operations. Hitler's invasion plans were put on hold indefinitely.

6. Battle of Leyte Gulf: October 1944

The largest naval battle in history, the Battle of Leyte Gulf off the Philippines was another step in the U.S. advance toward the Japanese home islands. All available Japanese forces were thrown into the area but the separate units failed to unite, resulting in several actions scattered over a wide area. All four Japanese light carriers were sunk, as were three battleships. Leyte Gulf also marked the first use of a desperate new tactic: The escort carrier USS St. Lo was sunk after a Japanese kamikaze carrying a bomb deliberately crashed on its deck.

7. Battle of the Atlantic: September 1939—May 1943

Submarine warfare had some impact in the First World War but became vastly more significant in WWII as the German U-boat packs aimed to blockade Europe. Merchant ships took to sailing in large convoys, protected by screens of destroyers and corvettes armed with depth charges and sonar. Daring U-Boat commanders carried out torpedo attacks within the defensive screen, and when several submarines attacked at once, the defenders had little chance of striking back. In the end, the Battle of the Atlantic was eventually won by technology. Radar to detect U-Boats from the surface, radio interception, and code-breaking all played a part. By the end of the war more than 3,000 merchant ships had been sunk, as well as almost 800 U-Boats.

8. Battle of the Coral Sea: May 1942

After Pearl Harbor, the Japanese aimed to invade New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. U.S. forces, aided by some Australian ships, moved to intercept them. This produced the first naval battle fought at long range between aircraft carriers. Dive bombers and torpedo bombers attacked ships protected by screens of fighters. It was a novel and confusing form of warfare, with both sides struggling to find the enemy and unclear about what ships they had seen and engaged. The most serious loss was the American carrier USS Lexington, scuttled after catching fire. The fight forced Japan to call off its invasion plans.

9. Battle of the Philippine Sea: June 1944

The last great carrier battle of WWII, the Battle of the Philippine Sea happened as U.S. forces advanced across the Pacific. A Japanese force including five large fleet carriers and four light carriers, plus some land-based aircraft, fought seven U.S. fleet carriers and eight light carriers. The U.S. enjoyed not only numerical superiority but also vastly better aircraft. The new Grumman F6F Hellcats outclassed the old Japanese Zeroes. This disparity led to the action being nicknamed "the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot," with about four times as many Japanese planes downed as American.

10. Battle of Berlin: April—May 1945

The Battle of Berlin was a massive and extreme bloody action as three quarters of a million German troops, under the personal command of Hitler, fought a desperate final defense against the encroaching Red Army. The Russians had the advantage in tanks, but armored vehicles were vulnerable to new portable anti-tank rockets that destroyed 2,000 of them. The Battle of Berlin was an infantry action fought at close quarters; artillery demolished defensive strongpoints in a city already devastated by heavy bombing. Casualties were heavy, including thousands of civilians. On the 30th of April Hitler killed himself rather than surrender, effectively ending the war in Europe.

11. Battle of Kursk: July—August 1943

Operation Citadel was the final German offensive on the Eastern front, and Kursk is considered the greatest tank battle of the war. At Kursk, the Nazis aimed to repeat their earlier successes by surrounding and destroying Russian forces. Thanks to Allied codebreakers, though, the Russians got advance warning and built up defensive lines of ditches and minefields to absorb the German attack. In the air, Stukas armed with 37mm gun pods faced Russian armored Sturmoviks dropping dozens of anti-tank bombs. As the German offensive stalled, Marshal Zhukov launched his counterattack and drove the Germans back with heavy losses.

12. D-Day: June 1944

The largest amphibious operation in history involved more than 5,000 ships landing Allied troops on a heavily-defended 50-mile stretch of Normandy coastline, while thousands more took part in an airborne assault. A major deception operation fooled the Germans into thinking that the landings were a feint, and resistance was light at four out of five landing sites. On the fifth, Omaha Beach, U.S. forces came under heavy fire and 2,000 died as they fought to break out of the beachhead. The Germans failed to organize rapidly to meet the threat. Within a week the Allies had landed more than 300,000 troops in Normandy.

13. Battle of Midway: June 1942

Midway was a catastrophic defeat from which the Imperial Japanese Navy never fully recovered. Much of the credit goes to the codebreakers who revealed the Japanese plan to ambush U.S. forces in time for the Allies to plan a counter-ambush. The Japanese plan to split American forces also failed. The U.S. then launched a major air assault on the Japanese carriers. The TBF Avenger torpedo bombers were intercepted by Japanese Zeroes and decimated, but the SBD Dauntless dive bombers attacking afterwards got through. They arrived just as the Japanese planes were refueling and rearming on deck. Three of four Japanese carriers were destroyed, tilting the course of the war against Japan.

14. Operation Barbarossa, June–July 1941

Hitler's surprise attack on the USSR was the most devastating victory of the whole war; as a battle it covered the largest area. The Wehrmacht's first objective was achieved: the rapid destruction of the Red Army in western Russia. The battle did not achieve the larger goal of overthrowing the Soviet system and occupying all European Russia. Nevertheless, the catastrophe eventually forced the defenders to fall back 600 miles, to the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow. The Red Army had to be rebuilt; it would not drive the occupiers out of the USSR until the autumn of 1944.

15. Battle of Okinawa (April to June of 1945)

The Battle of Okinawa (April 1, 1945-June 22, 1945) was the last major battle of World War II, and one of the bloodiest. On April 1, 1945—Easter Sunday—the Navy's Fifth Fleet and more than 180,000 U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps troops descended on the Pacific island of Okinawa for a final push towards Japan. The invasion was part of Operation Iceberg, a complex plan to invade and occupy the Ryukyu Islands, including Okinawa. Though it resulted in an Allied victory, kamikaze fighters, rainy weather and fierce fighting on land, sea and air led to a large death toll on both sides.