

baul. American troops captured the island with hardly any resistance, forcing the Japanese garrison on Kolombangara to retreat back toward Rabaul. MacArthur's next assaults came against the coastal positions of Lae and Salamaua beginning on September 5. By September 12, Salamaua had been taken, and four days later Lae fell to MacArthur's troops. MacArthur then moved quickly to capture the enemy position at Finschhafen, which would take almost two weeks of bitter fighting to capture from the Japanese.

Starting on November 1, Halsey's forces opened their main assault against Bougainville, which would be the final link in the encirclement around Rabaul. American forces moved quickly to secure the landing sites, and reinforcements poured in as rapidly as possible—evidence that the Americans had learned the hard lessons of Guadalcanal. About a month later, on December 26, MacArthur opened his attack against his main target, Cape Gloucester. The landing was virtually unopposed although there were pockets of stiff resistance, most notably on Hill 660, which overlooked the main airfield at Cape Gloucester. By the end of January 1944, Operation Cartwheel drew to a close, but the expected follow up, an attack on Rabaul, never materialized. Instead, Allied attention had turned to other positions in the Pacific, and the great Japanese base was bypassed, left to simply wither on the vine as so many other Japanese positions would be before the end of the war.

The Japanese "Rice Offensive" in China

While the tide of the war in the Pacific had seemingly turned against the Japanese, in China Japanese army units continued to find themselves faced with the seemingly impossible task of conquering China. Through much of 1942 and 1943, Japanese offensives in China had forced the retreat of Chinese forces but had not led to their outright destruction. Beginning in the winter of 1943, the Japanese Army began a series of offensives around the city of **Changde**, which did not aim to conquer the city, but rather aimed to draw out the Chinese Army and destroy it. It was hoped that the rich resources of the area around Changde would force the Chinese Army into a fight rather than let these resources fall into the hands of the Japanese. Japanese forces entered into Hunan province on November 2 and found themselves engaged in heavy fighting with Chinese forces protecting the approaches to Changde. By December 6, however, the city had fallen into Japanese hands.

At this point, fresh Chinese reinforcements arrived, allowing the Chinese army to encircle the city and begin a vicious fight to retake it. By December 11, Chinese forces had reentered the city, beginning nearly two days of intense house-to-house fighting against the Japanese. By December 13, the Japanese were forced to withdraw from the city and were pursued over the next twenty days by Chinese forces. By January 5, 1944, the Japanese had been forced back to their starting position from

prior to the opening of the "rice offensive." This marked a clear victory for the Chinese and revealed that even in China—where the Japanese military continued to enjoy advantages that it had long since lost in the Pacific—the tide of the war was surely turning against the Japanese.

This offensive action would be followed up by the Japanese **Ichi-Go** offensive in southern China. These two actions were undertaken in order to occupy more territory in the south and allow a direct link between Peking and Nanking and to eliminate airfields being utilized by American planes that harassed Japanese forces throughout China. Ichi-Go began on April 19, 1944, and focused on three major operations in the southern provinces of Henan, Hunan, and Guangxi. By December 1944, Japanese forces had reached the border with Indochina, effectively bringing the campaign to an end, but it actually failed to achieve any real results as American air forces simply moved further inland and away from the threatened areas.

Island Hopping: Tarawa

The decision to bypass Rabaul in the southwest Pacific represented the ultimate victory of American Naval planners over their Army counterparts. In December 1943, American planners made it clear that American forces driving through the Central Pacific would win



A marine fires on a Japanese position during the Battle of Tarawa.