

Part 4: Your Way – Our Way: The Impact of WWII on the Pacific Islands

Unit 31: Marshall Islands: Economic hardship and changing authority

Mabel Andrew

The Marshall Islands' people have experienced one period of stress after another. They adjusted to the end of the German Administration when the islands were taken over by Japan in 1914. Under a League of Nations Mandate, Japan became the ruling power in Micronesia. Japan administered the islands as if they were an integral part of its nation, developing fishery and agricultural production. By 1938, almost 58% of the Marshall's' population were Japanese settlers, and these Japanese settlers, not Marshallese, were the beneficiaries of the many Japanese development programs.

In 1940, just before Japan attacked the USA at Pearl Harbour, many new problems emerged. Travel between the atolls was curtailed, and Marshallese families became separated, isolated, or even dispossessed of their land. During this period, islanders had difficulty selling their copra and handicrafts, and trade goods – upon which they had become dependent – became hard to obtain. Houses and canoes fell into a state of disrepair.

After 1942, the Marshalls played a key role in the Pacific War. In 1943, USA forces began an offensive in the neighbouring Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati), and then invaded Kwajalein, which had become the Japanese headquarters in the Marshalls. After massive, combined naval, air and army (the Marines) campaigns, Majuro and Enewetak were also invaded. Japan surrendered on 4 February 1944, after great losses.

The war almost completely destroyed the Marshallese economy. When the Americans arrived, living conditions were chaotic and deteriorating. Some people look back now at the war as a very productive time, one that showed what could be done in the Marshalls. But for most Marshallese this was a harsh time that left brutal memories of both the Japanese and American occupations.

After defeating the Japanese in 1944, the USA military assumed temporary control of the Marshall Islands, until the USA Department of Interior could take over. An Agreement between the USA and the United Nations Security Council in 1947 recognised the USA as the administering Trusteeship authority. The Marshalls was a 'strategic' trusteeship, the only one of its kind, and it gave the USA extensive military and security privileges in the Marshalls.

Shortly after the war, and tragically for the Marshalls, atomic, hydrogen and finally nuclear bomb testing was carried out on Bikini and Enwetak (44 tests in 1966-1974), with devastating effects on these local communities. The impact of World War 11 seemed to continue for decades for many Marshallese.

Postscript: a sovereign government was established on 1 May 1979, and in 1986, a *Compact of Free Association* took effect, giving independence to the Republic of the Marshall Islands, along with a continuing close relationship with the USA.