As of 2024, the United States and China continue great-power competition in the Pacific, struggling to achieve the greatest preeminence and influence. Recent general election results in Taiwan heighten tensions with China and underline the fragility of attempted détente. US Army Pacific is at the forefront of US Army efforts in the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility. This theater Army postures during competition as it prepares for potential crisis and conflict and continues the tradition of Army presence in the region. This monograph analyzes the Army’s experience in the Pacific in World War II and today, filling a major gap in understanding the US Army’s little-heralded accomplishments in the Pacific War and the central Pacific and showcasing Landpower’s role in the Pacific from a theater-strategic perspective.

Lieutenant General Robert C. Richardson Jr. functioned as de facto theater Army commander to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz from August 1943 to June 1945. Richardson’s command of US Army Forces in Central Pacific Area and US Army Forces, Pacific Ocean Areas in World War II is a case study of a senior Army command serving under a US Navy theater commander. Moreover, Richardson conducted the full range of what are now the Army warfighting and Joint functions, and his commands illustrate US Army Pacific’s current roles.

This monograph uses untapped primary sources to explain Richardson’s accomplishments, including five reports Richardson submitted on US Army forces’ participation in offensives under Admiral Nimitz. All reports consist of formal parts or sections and detailed annexes, but with limited commonality. The reports do not share identical structure, though there is heavy thematic crossover given the major topics. Some subjects are unique to a single operation. All five have a tailored summary and conclusions, as well as “Assistance Rendered to the Navy and Marines.” A sixth report from Richardson’s later US Army Forces, Middle Pacific provides addenda on the island bases. The six reports number close to 2,000 pages.

Research also examined the only known copies of draft text which was the basis of an unpublished autobiography. This work is an elusive source. Two complete copies are at the US Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. An incomplete set resides at the US Army Pacific History Office. These notes comment substantively on “the rest of the story” of Richardson’s Pacific War. Otherwise, Richardson has a voluminous collection of personal papers at the Hoover Institution. Published official histories and other specialized accounts complement these primary source collections. They lay out prewar plans, along with complex but comprehensive orders of battle, task organizations, and command relationships.

The study first contextualizes Richardson’s operating environment, analyzing prewar US plans for the Pacific with focus on the 1938 Orange Plan, the transition to the Rainbow plans, and the unforeseen disasters of the early war years from December 1941 through the surrender of the Philippines in May 1942. The next section examines the 1935 edition of the Joint Action of the Army and the Navy, which was the embryonic albeit unofficial, policy and doctrinal basis for conducting joint operations in World War II, followed by the wartime reality of deep-seated and widespread interservice rivalries.

Richardson’s operations occurred when American might had built up and was ready for virtually continuous offensive operations. The detailed evaluation of Richardson’s accomplishments as de facto theater Army commander distills and packages his reports for the reader. The context is the current Army warfighting and Joint functions: command and control, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, protection, and information. The final section on base operations explains Richardson’s key role as a major landowner in the Pacific.
Prewar plans and early-war defeats showcase the precarious nature of planning assumptions in a dynamic environment. Significantly, the transition from competition to crisis to conflict was brief. The crisis period lasted barely four-and-a-half months from July 26, 1941, until the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7. The implications are stark. The situation today is more uncertain and riskier than 1941–42. One can anticipate greater challenges in the unpredictable change and likely rapid transition from competition to crisis to conflict.

The preeminent, initial challenge for US Army Pacific is the buildup of Landpower during competition and before crisis and conflict. Limitations in forward-deployed units, pre-positioned stocks, and problematic timelines to cross the physical tyranny of distance imperil the Army’s effectiveness to setting the theater for large-scale combat operations. Richardson’s predecessors learned the risks of the Army’s limitations with the fall of Guam on December 10, 1941, and the Philippines in May 1942.

The shift to a largely continental United States–based Army following the end of the Cold War and through the Global War on Terror is ill-suited for the current environment of a contested commons in multiple domains and threats from factory to foxhole. This latest geopolitical reality requires strategic reframing to more forward-deployed units and pre-positioned stocks, also strategically dispersed. Failure to adapt risks preventing the Army from posturing effectively during competition with ramifications during crisis and conflict, especially for protracted war. Richardson’s commands in 1943–45 themselves highlight additional, multiple insights for today. They are especially illustrative for US Army Pacific’s four current roles of theater Joint Force Land Component Command, Combined Joint Task Force, Combined Joint Force Land Component Command, and Army Service Component Command.

Setting the theater in the Pacific, during World War II and today underlines the importance of the theater Army’s role across all Army war-fighting and Joint functions. The theater Army is the preeminent Joint provider for large-scale combat operations in protracted war. Notions of the Pacific as a “Navy theater” fail to consider a holistic approach. Nor is the Marine Corps another land army, as it lacks such capability and capacity by design and intent. Likewise, the Army’s corps and divisions cannot fulfill these continuous, theater-strategic responsibilities.

US Army Pacific today is well ahead of the Army’s Pacific posture from 1938–42, and it could posture yet more effectively during competition. United States Indo-Pacific Command and US Army Pacific should consider issuing additional establishing directives across the Joint functions. Refined task organization and forward positioning of enabling units and commodities under US Army Pacific during competition would help prepare for crisis or conflict, address allied partners’ concerns, and demonstrate commitment across the combatant commander’s area of responsibility.

Today’s strategic realities may also require US Army Pacific to function as a war-fighting headquarters for longer than planned. The current doctrinal guidance in the 2021 editions of Armies, Corps, and Division Operations, Field Manual 3-94, and also noted in Theater Army Operations, Army Techniques Publication 3-93, may prove illusory.

This study will help Army and Joint Staff planners, other warfighters, and senior leaders consider the context, scale, and implications of large-scale combat operations at the theater level in the Pacific’s extended lines of communication. It discusses actions through competition and crisis, not just conflict. The analysis fills a major gap in understanding the US Army’s little heralded accomplishments in the Pacific War in general and the central Pacific in particular. It showcases the critical role of Landpower in the Pacific. It is a theater-strategic analysis, not tactical, enriched by its research in previously untapped primary sources.