

During World War II, Truk Lagoon served as the forward anchorage for the Japanese Imperial Fleet. The place was considered the most formidable of all Japanese strongholds in the Pacific. On the various islands, the Japanese Civil Engineering Department and Naval Construction Department had built roads, trenches, bunkers and caves. Five airstrips, seaplane bases, a torpedo boat station, submarine repair shops, a communications center and a radar station were constructed during the war. Protecting these various facilities were coastal defense guns and mortar emplacements. At anchor in the lagoon were the Imperial Japanese Navy's giant battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, tankers, cargo ships, tugboats, gunboats, minesweepers, landing craft, and submarines. Some have described it as Japan's equivalent of the Americans' Pearl Harbor.

Once the American forces captured the Marshall Islands, they used it as a base from which they launched an early morning attack on February 17, 1944 against Truk Lagoon. The Japanese withdrew most of their heavy units. Operation Hailstone lasted for three days, with an American bombardment of the Japanese wiping out almost anything of value - 60 ships and 275 airplanes were sent to the bottom of the lagoon.

The attacks for the most part ended Truk as a major threat to Allied operations in the central Pacific; the Japanese garrison on Eniwetok was denied any realistic hope of reinforcement and support during the invasion that began on February 18, 1944, greatly assisting U.S. forces in their conquest of that island. Truk was isolated by Allied (primarily U.S.) forces as they continued their advance towards Japan by invading other Pacific islands such as Guam, Saipan, Palau, and Iwo Jima. Cut off, the Japanese forces on Truk and other central Pacific islands ran low on food and faced starvation before Japan surrendered in August 1945. (Stewart, 1986)