

Artillery at Tarawa

The landing of 75-mm pack howitzers

on Betio beach was a tremendous undertaking, but it paid handsome dividends in supporting the infantry, and in enemy dead. *By Lt. Col. P. M. Rixey and Maj. Wendell H. Best*

THE First Battalion, Tenth Marines, equipped with 75-mm pack howitzers and attached to the Second Marines, Second Marine Division, as direct support artillery for that combat team, landed on Betio beach, close behind their brothers-in-arms on that memorable morning, November 20, 1943. Under extremely adverse conditions they effectively accomplished the mission assigned.

Though landed on call under battalion control, firing batteries were embarked on separate transports with normal infantry landing teams of the Second Marines. Headquarters and Service Battery was divided between two ships with one complete Fire Direction Center team on each. The Battalion Commander, Bn-3, Communication Officer, and Bn-2 embarked on the Combat Team command ship.

The artillery annex to the Combat Team operation order contemplated landing the entire battalion on Red One, the westernmost beach, when a sufficient beachhead had been seized by assault infantry elements. Although this area was the most heavily wooded, we were prepared to cut lanes of fire with demolitions and axes in case air and naval bombardment failed to level this space. This plan was advisable in order to occupy the only likely and feasible position area from which we would render the maximum support for an advance toward the eastern third of Betio.

The infantry scheme of maneuver called for a sweep across the island from north to south with the object of seizing the airfield and then a turning movement to overcome resistance on the eastern portion of the island.

From hastily dug positions, a battery of Marine artillery goes into action against Jap-held airfield installations. The enemy was soon crushed, the field secured.



The observation plan called for two forward observer parties to land, one with 2-8 and the other with 1-2. On the eastern flank was 2-8, while 1-2 was the unit which was to make the final attack down the eastern tip. Inasmuch as 2-2 and 3-2 were operating in an area where he could under no circumstances place fire, no forward observers were assigned to them. The "B" battery forward observer was under orders to report to the battalion FDC on landing and it was planned to use him either as replacement or, should the opportunity arise, as an observer in a boat off the eastern tip of the island.

Small Area Makes Action Unique

Of the six forward observers in the battalion, only three were available for artillery spotting as three had been assigned to the assault landing teams to handle naval gunfire spotting. As a result, all but one of our forward observers were committed in the assault waves. Lieutenants N. E. Milner, T. N. Greene, and L. K. Wilson performed valiant duty as NGF spotters. Lieutenants H. E. Dickinson and M. A. Traylor were the artillery forward observers.

Due to the very small area (one square mile) in which the operation was going to take place,

the action was unique from our standpoint. We decided after long deliberation that no Liaison with assault landing teams would be needed. However, Liaison with the Combat Team Headquarters was, as normal, "a must."

One of our primary worries had always been a communication setup that would function during the landing and the subsequent action without breaking down.

Our main thought was to have at our disposal alternate methods of communication in case our primaries broke down. Also it may be of value to point out that we planned to use TBX to FO crews in order to insure contact with them.

In the early morning hours of D-Day, most of us watched assault units load into landing craft, remaining on "top-side" to witness the naval bombardment phase and air strike. The bombardment by our Fire Support Group was a beautiful sight and we wondered how any troops could survive such pounding. On landing, we were clarified on this score after observing the numerous, strongly constructed shelters, which would withstand all but a direct hit, that had been erected by our engineer-minded enemy.

Our Combat Team command group, including artillery battalion commander and battalion forward reconnaissance group with radio operator, embarked in small landing craft at about the same time that assault elements had left the line of departure. No reports of the nature of the resistance had reached us, although H-Hour had been delayed forty-five minutes. Two firing batteries, "B" and "C" had embarked in landing craft and were proceeding to their assigned rendezvous area. "A" battery and the remainder of H&S battery would load as soon as boats become available.

Hot Spot for a Landing

Our command boat group proceeded on the long run to our assigned landing beach, but on reaching the fringing reef, it was forced to separate and transfer to smaller landing craft. Colonel Shoup (CT commander), Lt. Colonel Carlson (observer), Major Culhane, Commander Nelson (MC), Captain Bradshaw, and Artillery Battalion Commander, with necessary minimum enlisted communication personnel, attempted to land on left half, Beach Red Two. Upon arriving opposite the end of the pier, about 300 yards from shore, we came under heavy enemy machinegun cross-fire and intermittent antiboat gun fire, which forced us to withdraw temporarily. Rounding the long pier, we attempted to join up with a wave of five larger craft containing medium tanks proceeding toward Beach Red Three. When our craft was about fifty yards in the rear of this wave and about 100 yards from shore, the Jap defenders opened up with two 77-mm field guns scoring two direct hits on boats of the tank wave. One sank immediately and the other was forced to



withdraw in such bad condition that it later sank.

We again decided that here was too hot a spot to attempt a landing of our CP group. Our boat then proceeded to Beach Red Two, a second time, where we could at least land under partial cover of the coral rock pier, and, to a degree, avoid this accurate heavy shell fire. Keeping close to the pier, we managed to get about one-third of the way into the beach when our engine went dead, cause unknown. All personnel slid over the side of our craft and waded in waist deep water to the shelter of the pier. No casualties were suffered enroute, though sniper and machinegun fire was directed at our group and mortar shells were striking above us on the pier.

When radio silence had been lifted previously, our artillery command net was set up and control with all units of our battalion was established; and by H plus 2 hours all elements were at the line of departure awaiting further orders. Each battery was able to maintain control of all its boats. But even with radio it was practically impossible to designate our positions within the lagoon with regard to each other, because of the large number of boats which were forced to lie off due to heavy fire being received from the beach.

We Move to Red Beach Two

While the CT command group was seeking shelter alongside and under the pier, all elements were informed via TBY that we were meeting heavy resistance—information that was totally unnecessary as it was obvious even to those on the line of departure—and to proceed to the vicinity of the control boat and await further orders.

During the afternoon of D-Day it became apparent that we would not be able to land the battalion, as planned, on Beach Red One due to heavy beach losses sustained there by the Third Battalion, Second Marines, and the unknown situation existing there. The battalion was finally ordered to land on Beach Red Two at about 1700 though approaches were still being swept by intermittent machinegun and mortar fire. A tentative limited position area close to the combat team CP had previously been selected from prone visual reconnaissance. A few frame buildings would have to be leveled and our battalion would be under small-arms fire (as was the whole island). Still, the infantry would need our help on the eastern end of the island and we wanted to be in position ready to render that help when most needed. Anyway, our cannoners were growing impatient out there in the water, many suffering the discomfort of sea-sickness.

Five Howitzer Sections Get Ashore

At this time, the tide was such that the Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVPs) could go only as far as the end of the pier and it was neces-

sary to transfer to Landing Vehicle Tank (LVTs). These LVTs had been operating for twelve hours and were needed by everyone in order to land.

Two gun sections were completely transferred; one from "A" and one from "B" battery, and were ordered in just as darkness fell. Through a misunderstanding that three sections of "C" battery were in LVTs, they also were ordered to land. Although they were in LCVPs when the order was issued, they lined up on the pier and came in. All other units of 1-10 were subsequently ordered to lay off in the rendezvous area during the night. Thus, on the evening of D-Day, we had five pack howitzer sections on the beach. The three sections which had managed to reach the end of the pier had hauled their pieces along the pier under fire or carried them broken down through waist deep water. Two members of the battalion were wounded while this was being accomplished.

An interesting sidelight on the day's landing was a story of a boat containing the Battalion Surgeon, Lieutenant Krauel, and the Bn-4, Captain Kafka. The last order they received prior to leaving the ship, was to land on Beach Red One. They became detached from the control boat and were faced with a decision as to what to do, since they had no idea as to the whereabouts of the battalion. Quite naturally, they decided to follow orders and started in for the designated beach. Actually, Red One had one of the largest pockets of Japanese on Betio and practically none of our troops; in plain speaking, there was no beachhead there! All in all, this boat made four attempts to land and was driven off by intense fire each time. After suffering a few casualties, Capt. Kafka and Lt. Krauel decided that the presence of friendly troops on that beach was quite doubtful and proceeded back to the boat rendezvous and found one of our artillery control boats.

Eliminating Trouble Spots

On D-Day, one of our battery commanders, Captain Kenneth L. Brown, who had arrived on the beach ahead of his battery, heroically led a group of infantrymen in an attempt to knock out a particularly troublesome machinegun emplacement which had killed many Marines in the support waves wading into the beach. While directing this group from an exposed position, Capt. Brown was mortally wounded by a supporting enemy rifleman's bullet. He was buried at sea.

A word on direct fire. At about 0700 on D plus 1, two howitzers were used for direct fire missions at two blockhouses extending out into the lagoon at the junction of beaches Red One and Two. These blockhouses contained Jap light machineguns which were delivering devastating fire into support waves of the Eighth Marines, who were forced to wade into the beach in water, chest deep. These guns were silenced by well di-

rected fire using fuse delay in order to penetrate the coral and log structures.

Limitations of the Pack Howitzer

The pack proved itself to be very valuable in this respect. However it is decidedly unhealthy and unless the situation is forced on one, they should never be used in this fashion. A tank or half-track is much more efficient. When the fire was delivered from fifty yards or less the shells passed right through the blockhouses as AP would, because the rotors in the fuses had not had time enough to rotate far enough to expose the flash opening. One of our section chiefs thought that he must be missing the target when this happened.

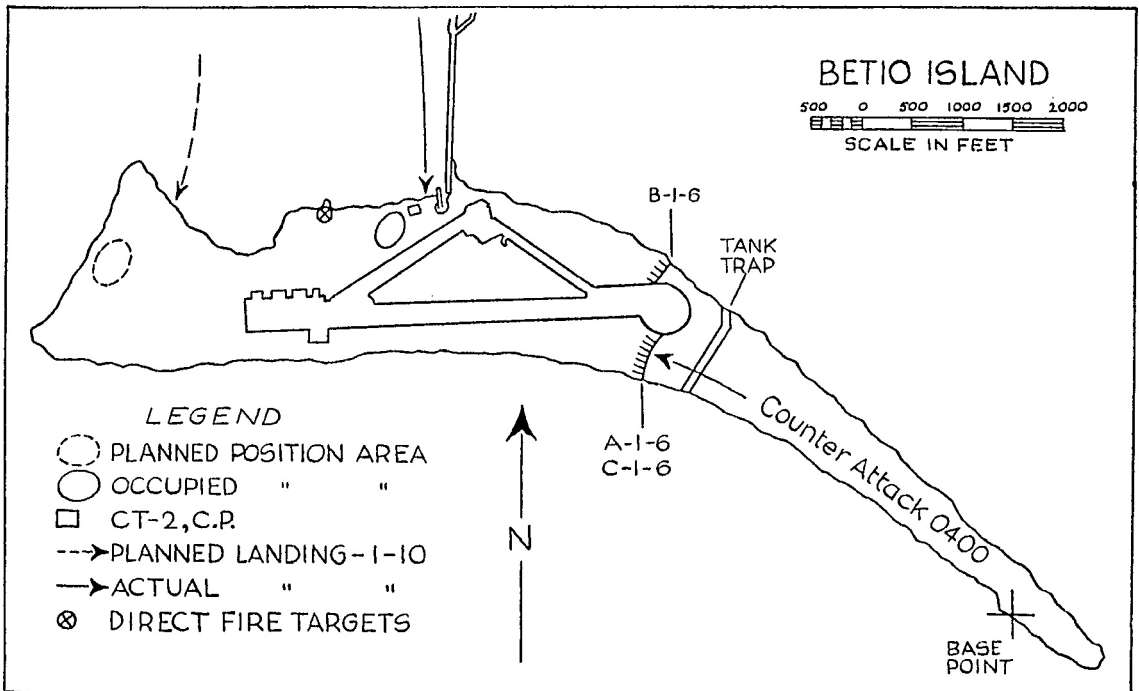
The composite battery of five howitzers which had arrived during the night were placed in position facing east at 0800 on D plus 1 day; hurriedly laid by First Lieutenant Kelleher and registered by forward observer methods. Lt. Kelleher, Lieutenant Brister, "A" battery executive, and crews were under constant sniper fire while this was being done. The laying of this composite battery was accomplished by simply pointing the guns toward the eastern end of the island and laying them parallel. The total frontage of this battery was about fifty yards. Even with that the right guns extended out into enemy territory and the entire battery was on level ground beyond the protective sea-wall.

Howitzer Sections Emplaced

At the time this battery was emplaced the situation ashore was still quite vague. There were

groups of Marines, ranging from less than squads to companies, who had penetrated inland. Several small groups had gone all the way across the airstrip and were on the south coast. Because of the mask to our left front, we could not render close-in support to the unit holding Red Three at this time; the closest we could get to this unit was about 500 yards. Of our five observers ashore, two, Lieutenants Traylor and Wilson, had been wounded, leaving Lieutenant Dickinson for artillery and Lieutenants Milner and Greene for naval gunfire. Contact with Dickinson was through intermittent wire and radio. The exact positions of Greene and Milner were unknown.

By 1600, D plus 1, the entire battalion had been landed in various and sundry craft, including rubber boats and life rafts, many sections being man-handled along the pier which was still receiving intermittent fire. One howitzer section under Lieutenant O. B. Wells was sent to the beach junction of Red Two-Red One to handle any direct fire targets which might present themselves. Two were emplaced on the beach to handle direct fire on the grounded Jap vessel off Red Two and any of the disabled American landing craft, should Jap snipers occupy them during the night to fire at our troops in the morning as had been done the night before. All others were set in the firing position, facing inland with ammo on hand to handle any situation which might arise. The unused personnel were distributed to provide the perimeter defense of three-fourths of Red Two including the combat team CP. Fire discipline was excellent and not a single small arm shot was fired from



the sector during the entire night. The composite battery fired only intermittent missions on the eastern end of the island due to the vague situation.

Reconnoitering for Positions

A bombing raid of early morning D plus 2 produced only material casualties of one flat tire and a damaged rear trail, both caused by bomb fragments. The tire was quickly replaced by a tire from Japanese light truck in the area.

It was imperative from our standpoint that our three known beachheads and other numerous guns be emplaced so as to be ready to render effective support to the infantry if they needed it. The area directly SSW from our position offered the only possible position area for the other two batteries. By 1000 D plus 2, the area we decided to occupy had not been thoroughly mopped-up and we decided to do it ourselves. Two large patrols were formed, one headed by Lt. Kelleher, the other by Captain Bo, the Bn-2, who was instructed to reconnoiter the area for battery positions and mark these positions on the map by inspection. Lt. Kelleher was under orders to destroy any enemy resistance found in the area we planned to occupy.

The reconnaissance group returned with information of two good battery position areas and word that they had cleaned out a Jap bombproof shelter which could be used as an FDC. The communication section started to run all the necessary wires so that a transfer of activities could be made without loss of communication and in the least possible time. A bulldozer was secured to knock down a series of sheds which were masking the right of "C" battery. These sheds were thus leveled with the added attainment of crushing a persistent sniper hidden under the flooring. At 1100, "A" and "B" batteries were moved into position facing east and echeloned to the west; "A" battery furthest inland and alongside the airstrip.

Lt. Milner, recently returned from his NGF work, was ordered to join 1-6, who were working up the south shore of the island. Lt. Dickinson's view was limited and he could not register us on the tip of the island. It was known that Lt. Milner would have a good view from the south coast and was given instructions to register the battalion. Prior to his crossing the island in an amphib, TBY communication was established and was not broken until twenty-four hours later when the island had been secured and our job done.

Setting up Communications

The Second Battalion of our regiment had sent us a Liaison officer who notified us that his battalion had landed on the next island east and was in position ready to support any of our fires. Communication between our battalions was by TBX. During the remainder of the operation, 2-10 fired harrassing missions on the eastern end

of Betio and on call missions through our FDC.

By 1400, although he had been forced to stop at intervals by virtue of ships' shellfire obscuring his view of the base point, Lt. Milner had registered the three batteries of this battalion and one battery of 2-10.

It is felt that at this point a brief discussion as to exactly how our communication was set up would be of value, if only to prove that a battalion can operate on equipment that would seem absurdly inadequate under normal circumstances. At 1400 of D plus 2 in the battle of Tarawa, this battalion was operating with the following communication gear: three TBYS, one TBX, fourteen telephones, and one switchboard.

It may be interesting to note that practically every piece of equipment in the battalion had been completely submerged and soaked during the landing. This applied to everything from radios to thumbtacks. With all of our planning not a thing we had was completely waterproof. It was a hard lesson. Every piece of equipment with rubber gaskets and clamp screws must have the screws turned as tight as possible with pliers, telephones placed in rubber bags and sealed, aiming circle cases sealed with rubber tape, and all radios kept in waterproof bags.

Telephone lines to all elements of the battalion were particularly hard to keep in. The heavy amount of traffic by track laying vehicles plus shell fire kept the lines continually cut-up. You may wonder why the lines were not raised to the trees. In some instances they were, but anything that stood up six feet or higher was fair game and the wire crews were satisfied to splice wires on the ground continually. One wire crew made eight trips between FDC and the forward observer, Lt. Dickinson, on the night of D plus 2. Corporal Downing was in charge and only one man was wounded although they were under constant fire during the entire trip.

About 2300 on D plus 2 days, the First Battalion, Sixth Marines held a line across the island as indicated on the sketch, with three rifle companies committed abreast. At this time, our forward observer, Lt. Milner, reported that approximately fifty Japs had infiltrated into the infantry lines between the center and right companies and were causing considerable casualties. This was probably a group of the enemy feeling out our front lines preparatory to a general counter-attack. A large force of the enemy, estimated at 250, could be heard assembling under cover about 200 yards in front of this break-through, preparing to follow up the advantage gained by the "feeler" group. Our battalion promptly laid down a heavy concentration on this area and the threatened attack was broken up amid shrieks and yells from the Japs. This assembly area had been in an open tank trap of their own construction and time fire



Marines examine the battered ruins of a Jap field gun emplacement, knocked out by Marine artillery. The Jap gun had been harassing American landing troops.

was very effective against these troops with no over-head protection.

After the "feeler" group had been eliminated by prompt mopping-up by Weapons Company of this infantry battalion, later that night at about 0400, the enemy commenced shooting and yelling on the infantry left flank. Subsequently, they initiated a counter-attack against the right flank anchored on the south shore. We again fired heavy concentrations at this point, stopping the attack before it could penetrate our front lines and bringing our fires as close as seventy-five yards to friendly troops. By judicious use of ammunition and repeated concentrations, we kept the enemy survivors below ground the remainder of the night. Lt. Milner, who conducted the fires of our battalion that night from a position with advanced elements of the infantry, received a much-deserved Silver Star Medal.

Approximately 1200 rounds were fired by our battalion during the night in repulsing these counter-attacks and the enemy dead credited to our fires is estimated at 125, counted the following morning. The pattern of our concentrations on the ground was easily discerned by observers, and within the pattern limits were bodies battered and

broken by HE shell fragments, the majority on the south beach. This news brought great joy to our unit as this was our largest "bag" since our days on Guadalcanal.

Our final blasts in anger were delivered as a preparation for the continuation of the attack in mopping-up of remaining resistance of the eastern end of Betio by the Sixth Marines (Colonel Holmes) at 0800 on D plus 3.

Our casualties for the entire four days of one of the fiercest fights in Marine Corp. history are considered exceedingly light in view of our early time of landing and exposed position area. Total casualties amounted to:

Killed.....	1 Officer; 4 enlisted.
Died of wounds....	2 enlisted.
Wounded.....	2 Officers; 16 enlisted.

A final summation of the fires furnished during Tarawa's seventy-six hectic hours may be of interest:

Total rounds fired	2,366
Fired on counter-attacks	1,200
Total other missions	30 FO problems & K transfer.
Average range fired	1,500 yds.