

# Reconnaissance at Tarawa Atoll

by J. Frederick Haley

*Somewhere in the island chain was a native of Tarawa with military experience who could pinpoint key enemy defenses. The mission: find him and bring him out.*



**D**arkness had, a few minutes before, settled over Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands on the night of 21 November 1943. Lt Marion Drake from Paonia, Colo., a grammar school teacher until about 18 months beforehand, and his platoon sergeant, Ed Brooks, a veteran of 15 years service in the Marine Corps, were checking the gear of the 2d Platoon, Scout Company, 2d Tank Battalion, 2d Marine Division on the deck of a transport, the USS *Doyen* (APA-1).

The platoon, which Drake commanded, was traveling light that night because the order from Division Intelligence, aboard the battleship USS *Maryland* cruising evasively near-

by, was that the 2d Platoon (along with the 1st and 3d Platoons) was to land in rubber boats on certain Japanese held islands in the Tarawa Atoll under cover of darkness and attempt an important rescue operation.

The *Doyen* had been ordered to provide a Higgins boat (LCVP) for each platoon to carry the Marines and their rubber boats to within approximately 1,000 yards of the 3 designated landing beaches.

It was the chore of the Higgins boat coxswain, a Navy chief petty officer, to get his Higgins boat in front of the correct beach after departing the *Doyen*. This was no easy task in the darkness. The *Doyen* circled a considerable

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distance offshore during daylight out of reach of the Japanese shore batteries. In the darkness, the *Doyen* accompanied by a destroyer came in as close to the atoll as she could to disembark the "scouts."

The operations order from Division Intelligence called for each platoon to land on a specific island, but because of the difficulties involved in navigating a Higgins boat in the darkness in strange waters, there is no assurance that the three platoons landed on the actual designated islands. It can be said with certainty that these three platoons did land on or near the actual designated islands with the 2d Platoon in the center, the 1st Platoon to the south and the 3d Platoon to the north and that they did not encounter each other during the reconnaissance.

The Marines in the Scout Company were generally familiar with the layout of Tarawa atoll, having studied maps and charts of its characteristics and having been instructed by a British colonial officer who had escaped from Tarawa in 1942 and was now present on the *Doyen*. However, they did not know how the Japanese were dispersed on the interlying islands of the atoll.

The most important consideration was that somewhere on that island chain there was a



**Two battalions of Marines landed earlier on Betio where the battle was in doubt.**

native of Tarawa who had served in the New Zealand Army during World War I and reached the rank of sergeant. The purpose of this mission was to find him and bring him out to the battleship *Maryland* where Adm Harry Hill, in charge of naval operations, and Gen Julian C. Smith, the commanding general of the 2d Marine Division, were plotting the strategy of the assault on Tarawa.

The information sought from the native (Sgt Joseph) was, of course, everything he knew about the Japanese defenses throughout the atoll, with particular reference to the island furthestmost from Betio (the most northerly island) which was known to be fortified and defended from aerial photos. The information this native sergeant could supply might lead to great savings in lives and perhaps play a significant role in the outcome of the battle, which on the night of 21 November 1943 was much in doubt, indeed.

As the Marines of the 1st, 2d, and 3d Platoons scrambled down the debarkation nets into the three Higgins boats pulled up alongside the *Doyen*, they could see the battle raging in the distance on Betio. The explosions of shells and the paths of tracer ammunition, indicated that all hell was breaking loose on that tiny island containing the ultimate prize, the airfield. It was about this time too that the "movers and shakers" in Pearl Harbor were considering the feasibility of changing the name of the operation from an "invasion" to a "raid," because the outcome was so much in doubt.

On the trip in from the *Doyen* to the disembarkation point not much was said in the Higgins boat carrying the 2d Platoon except for an occasional jocular, derisive comments about the coxswain's navigational abilities. All eyes were straining into the darkness as the boat moved quietly shoreward at a slow speed to keep the sound of its diesel engine muffled.

Finally, the coxswain said, "Surf ahead, this is as far as we go." In the darkness ahead the Marines of the 2d Platoon could make out the surf breaking on the edge of the fringing reef and they knew that approximately one-half to one mile more beyond the surf (east) was the beach and the unknown enemy.

The inflated rubber boats were pushed over the side, each boat containing 4 men on each

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side paddling with a 9th man in the stern steering with a paddle and a 10th man in the bow. Each Marine was armed with a M1 semi-automatic rifle, a hunting knife, an appropriate amount of ammunition, and two hand grenades. These Marines were supposed to avoid contact with the Japanese; they were on a rescue and a reconnaissance mission. If they were involved in a shooting scrape, they could “blow” the whole assignment.

The four rubber boats of the 2d Platoon were soon in line proceeding to the beach with Lt Drake (who could not swim but managed to keep that a secret from everybody but the members of his platoon) steering the lead boat and with a loosely held rope aiding togetherness. Drake’s boat was paddled by eight Marines and a Navy corpsman all assigned to platoon headquarters.

The surf breaking on the edge of the reef was fairly heavy but regular. Thanks to much practice in the heavy surf off New Zealand beaches, the four boats painstakingly made their way through this lighter surf line and then regrouped. They were about one-half mile from the beach, which they could now see even though there was no moon. They could also make out coconut palm trees silhouetted directly behind the beach. The water was much shallower and calmer on top of the reef, but the first order of business was to make it silently ashore. They would be “sitting ducks” if discovered by the Japanese on their way in.

After what seemed like ages the four boats ground to a halt on the sands of the beach. Ashore at last, after several weeks at sea, coming up from New Zealand, but what kind of a welcome they were walking into—nobody knew.

The Marines of the 2d Platoon hid their boats in low lying shrubbery while Drake, Brooks, and the three squad leaders held a hurried conference and divided up responsibilities. Each squad had a walkie-talkie radio, as did platoon headquarters. Drake also had an SCR300 radio which kept him in contact with the *Doyen* and with the Higgins boat that remained in position several hundred yards west of the reef in deep water.

The decision was made by Drake to have the 3 squads composed of 10 men each remain

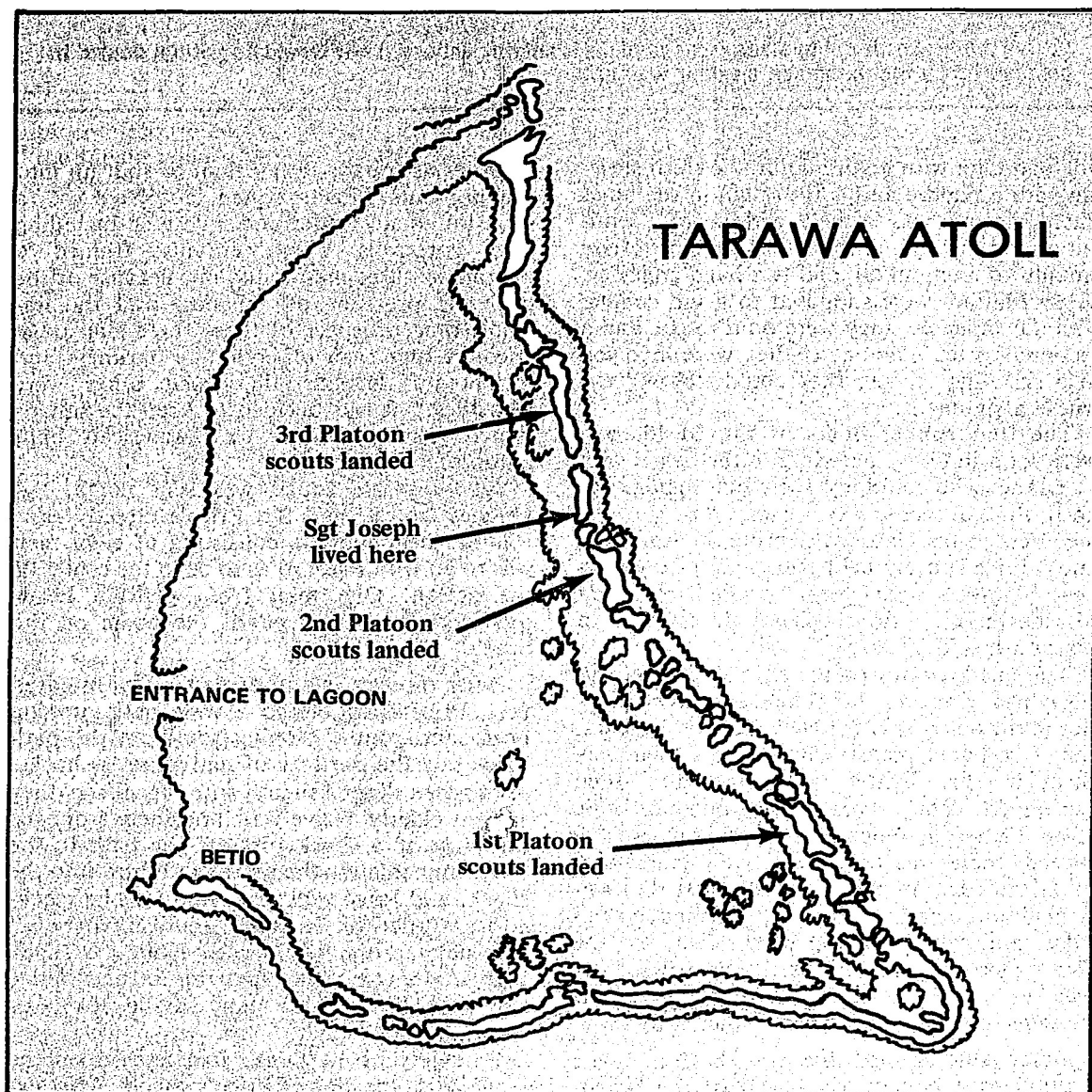
together as squads rather than to split up into 3-man units. Each squad consisted of a sergeant squad leader and nine men including three corporals. They were also trained to operate as three-man units, but because of the probable presence of Japanese and the unwholesome prospect of these three-man units encountering each other in the darkness and mistakenly deciding that each other were “hostiles,” it was decided to keep the squads intact. The password was American built automobiles.

Sgt Weaver’s squad was sent north, Sgt Hughes’ south, and Sgt Price’s directly east. Platoon headquarters consisting of eight men was to go with Price so as to be in the center of the action. One man from platoon headquarters was left to guard the boats on the beach.

After moving inland or east a few hundred feet, Price encountered a wide path running north and south. Moving south on the path Price saw the outlines of native grass shacks. As his men slipped silently into the village, they saw an elderly native watching them from the doorway of a shack just off the path to the west. Immediately the native withdrew into the shack, and Price whispered into it as he reached it, “American friends, American friends.” The native soon re-emerged from the shack with a younger male, and this second native spoke English, as did many of the people of Tarawa.

By this time Lt Drake had arrived on the scene from the rear of Price’s squad. After exchanging greetings in which the natives ushered the Marines some little distance from the path, Drake asked the all important questions, “Where is Sgt Joseph?” He was informed that the old native lived two islands north with his son. The natives agreed to go get Sgt Joseph for Drake and, after being reminded of the urgency of the situation, immediately departed. Meanwhile many other villagers clad only in loin cloths joined the group and Drake began to get apprehensive because many of these natives looked decidedly Japanese and he feared there might be a “Judas” among them.

In the meantime, Drake was rounding up the two other squads on the walkie-talkie radios telling them to keep off the path because he



had been warned that the Japanese used it regularly. Drake also asked that the natives disperse, which most of them did. Another native Drake had met, who seemed to be a person of authority, assured him that there would be no traitors among the villagers. They remained loyal to the British.

About 2:00 a.m. after nearly a two and one-half hour wait, Sgt Joseph arrived and seemed to realize what was expected of him. He immediately agreed to accompany Drake out to the battleship *Maryland*.

Moving very quickly now, Drake's platoon returned to the beach, reclaimed their hidden boats, and took off with their prize for the

*Maryland*. Upon reaching the fringing reef Drake flashed a hooded flashlight seaward to attract the attention of the Higgins boat and let the Higgins boat know approximately where he was. The Higgins boat could not respond because its light would be seen on the beach.

While Drake was thus signaling seaward he jarringly was told by Brooks that the Marine stationed on the beach to guard the boats while the platoon went inland was not in the boats. Drake froze. He could not believe this stroke of bad fortune. How could this happen? How could Brooks take off from the beach with one less man than we landed with? Brooks grimly explained that in departing the beach there was

some confusion, the boats left separately, and he had been told that the missing man was in Weaver's boat.

After a hurried consultation with the squad leaders Drake reluctantly told Sgt Weaver, his most resourceful squad leader, to return to the beach and see if he could find the Marine. Sgt Weaver, not given much to speech, asked only one question, "Is that an order, Lieutenant?" Drake responded reluctantly, "It's an order." With that Sgt Weaver and his squad turned their boat around and headed back to the beach. Sgt Jim Weaver, now a railroadman in Reno, Nev., was ordered to return because if anyone could find the man Weaver would.

Time was now of the essence because dawn was not far off. Upon reaching the beach Sgt Weaver and two three-man units from the squad dashed to where the boats had been previously hidden and within seconds found their man lying in the foliage nearby apparently asleep. After he was roughly awakened, all hands returned to the boat and promptly took off for the rendezvous point.

Meantime the Higgins boat had seen Drake's hooded light and came in close to the surf line. The surf had quieted down somewhat, and the coxswain could not understand why Drake did not come through the surf line and get aboard the Higgins boat. Radio communication had broken down, and Drake could not explain that he was waiting for Weaver. Finally, Drake sent the other two boats through the surf line with Sgt Joseph to rejoin the Higgins boat and tell the coxswain what was causing the delay. It seemed like forever, but finally Weaver returned. The two remaining boats set out through the surf for the waiting Higgins boat. After a near miss in which Weaver's boat almost turned over in the surf, the entire platoon was once more reunited on the Higgins boat with Sgt Joseph. They immediately took off "full speed ahead" for the *Maryland*.

In about two and one-half hours, the 2d Platoon reached the *Maryland* and delivered Sgt Joseph. After Drake and his NCOs had been queried for several hours by naval intelligence officers, the platoon returned to the *Doyen*.

A word about the 1st Platoon and the 3d Platoon which landed on other islands in the atoll under similar circumstances on the same night of 21 November 1943. The 1st Platoon was led by Lt Clifford Robichaud, a fiery Frenchman from New Hampshire. "Roby" was a small man in stature but had the heart of a lion. In its unsuccessful search for Sgt Joseph (because it was assigned to land on an island in

† For more on the November 1943 action on Tarawa see book review and commentary (page 101) by Maj-Gen Michael P. Ryan, USMC (Ret), one of the heroic participants in the struggle for Betio.

the atoll to the south of Drake) the platoon, consisting of approximately 40 men, lay silently and undetected on either side of the path while 250 to 300 heavily armed Japanese marched through it headed north from the "elbow" island to reinforce the garrison on Buariki.

The 3d Platoon was led by Lt Curtis Pike from the "Red Stone Hills" of Alabama. They landed on an island to the north of Drake (very close to Buariki) the same night under the same circumstances and were not discovered by the Japanese. Their reconnaissance provided Division Intelligence with valuable information about the Japanese forces and their disposition on the northernmost islands in the atoll.

It would seem that the 2d Platoon was entitled to a lengthy, well-deserved rest after the rescue, but not so. After only a few hours sleep back aboard the *Doyen*, the platoon was again assigned that same night, 22 November, to land on another island in the atoll. This time equipped with heavier weapons and accompanied by the other three platoons of the scout company, its mission was to establish a line across this island at both extremities to prevent Japanese troops from traveling north or south.

These two lines were established before dawn on the 23rd with two platoons on the north end and two platoons on the south end of this island approximately in the middle of the north-south axis of the chain, and once this island was secured, elements of the 10th Marines—the artillery regiment—were landed. The artillery elements were joined about noon on 23 November by the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines coming up from the south. This force was then led northward up the chain by the Scout Company until the last major island, Buariki, was reached. At this point, the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, commanded by LtCol Ray Murray, took over the assault on Buariki and by 28 November had destroyed all the enemy resistance on Tarawa Atoll. The 2d Battalion of the 6th Marines had landed on 22 November on Bairiki, the island immediately to the east of Betio, without much resistance. The battle for Betio was successfully concluded by nightfall on 24 November 1943, and the airfield was in use the following day.

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