Tarawa—lest we forget

by LtCol Richard G. Brown

The grim battle for a tiny atoll shocked America but the costly lessons learned at Tarawa were not learned in vain.

On 20 November 1943 the American drive through the Central Pacific began with an assault on the Japanese-held island of Betio, Tarawa Atoll, in the Gilbert Islands. Seventy-two hours later, at a price of 3,300 casualties, the atoll was in American hands. The battle, perhaps the most controversial of World War II, was both a testing ground for American amphibious doctrine and dramatic testimony to the will and tenacity of the 2d Marine Division. The American public, outraged by reports of the carnage, demanded to know if the atoll was indeed central to American strategy and, more pointedly, if it was worth the price paid in American blood. Even today the questions persist. Now, as in the aftermath of the battle, the answers are inconclusive. We can note with certainty, however, that at Tarawa, as on other far-flung battlefields, the indomitable will of the American fighting man once more prevailed against overwhelming odds.

The Japanese garrison, alerted by a reconnaissance pilot who spotted the American fleet as it approached the atoll, initiated the action with long range fires in the early morning darkness. The crack Japanese troops on Betio, keenly aware of their mission and imbued with the elan of the bushido, were prepared to defend to the death. Their morale, unshaken in the wake of increasing American air strikes and naval bombardment, was bolstered by an in-

credible network of fortifications, expertly fashioned by Japanese engineers. They had been told that Betio was the key to Tarawa Atoll and the entire Gilbert group. Adm Keiji Shibasaki, Japanese commander of the Gilberts, boasted that "Americans could not take Tarawa with a million men in a hundred years."

But the men of the 2d Marine Division, debarking from the transports into LCVPs (landing craft, vehicle personnel) and the new LVT (landing vehicle, tracked) amphibian tractors, were about to etch, with their blood, a new chapter in American military history. For the first time in the Pacific War and, indeed, in the history of warfare, an amphibious assault was being mounted on a small, very defensible, and highly defended coral atoll. The defensive order of the 3d Special Base Force, the so-called Japanese marines who defended Betio, was ominously foreboding:

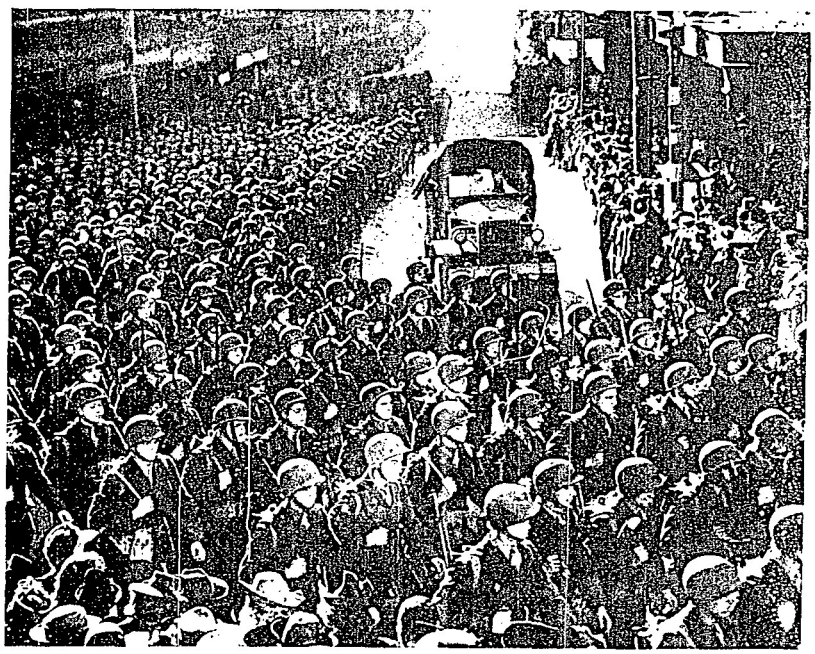
> If the enemy starts a landing, knock out the landing boats with mountain gunfire, tank guns and infantry guns, then concentrate all fires on the enemy's landing point and destroy him at the water's edge.

This was to be no Guadalcanal. The Japanese would defend at the beaches.

Painful lessons had been learned in the Solomons: at Guadalcanal where the tenacity of Japanese troops in a jungle environment had been revealed; at Munda where U.S. forces were dramatically introduced to the toughness of concentrated Japanese defense; and, even as Tarawa was being assaulted, at Bougainville in the Northern Solomons, where the lessons were being repeated. Yet none of these matched the Tarawa scenario.

The environment overwhelmingly favored the entrenched and well-fortified defenders. Elongated and irregular, Betio is 2 miles in length, ranging in width from 800 yards near the western end to a tapering point on the east, comprising an area of not more than one-half square mile, barely enough to contain the airfield that was its prize. It was, conspicuously, one of the most constricted battlefields in history. Even those Japanese units in the center of the island would have only to move 300-400 yards to get to the beaches. Fringed on all sides by a protective coral reef and washed by unpredictable "dodging" tides, the island was a formidable coral bastion garrisoned by 4,800 Japanese and Korean defenders with weapons ranging from 8-inch coastal defense guns to 7.7mm machineguns, all interwoven into a network of strong points buttressed by concrete emplacements and pillboxes, the most intricate pattern of defenses hitherto encountered in the Pacific.

So why Tarawa? Why attempt a frontal amphibious assault on such a fortress as Betio? The answers are almost obscured in the broad contours of the Pacific strategy that evolved after Japan's momentum had been checked at Coral Sea and Midway the previous year. On 20 July 1943 the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an-



2d Marine Division parades in Wellington, N.Z. prior to leaving for the invasion of Tarawa.

Tree protects Marine firing on pill box.

ticipating strategical decisions reached at the Quebec Conference in August, directed Adm Nimitz to prepare for operations in the Gilbert Islands as a prelude to the seizure of the more strategic Marshalls. At Quebec, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff concurred. The route to Japan, it was decided, would carry American forces island hopping through the Gilberts, Marshalls, Carolines, Marianas, Bonins, and Ryukus. Key Japanese strongholds were identified as vital to American interests: Kwajalein and Eniwetok in the Marshalls; Truk and Peleliu in the Carolines; Saipan, Tinian, and Guam in the Marianas; the Bonin island of Iwo Jima; and Okinawa in the Ryukus.

The Gilberts, 700 miles southeast of Kwajalein, would be the jumpoff point for this grand strategy; this chain of islands, it was concluded, would have to be secured as a base for entering the Marshalls. The Gilbert group lay relatively close to friendly bases in the South Pacific and its capture would shorten the supply route to Australia and ensure the security of Southwest Pacific environs in friendly hands. And if the Gilberts were to be secured, Tarawa, in the center of the group and with an airfield on Betio, would have to be taken.

They assembled at Efate in the New Hebrides for rehearsal, and a strange assemblage it was. From Wellington, New Zealand, came the 2d Marine Division under Gen Julian C. Smith, the division having only recently recuperated from the fighting on Guadalcanal and almost up to strength. From Pearl Harbor, New Caledonia, and the United States came an odd assortment of units, vessels, and machines: transports, minesweepers, carriers, destroyers, the 2d Tank Battalion, and the 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, which would undergo its true baptism under fire and whose commanding officer would not survive the first day. The new amphibian tractor, still relatively novel and only recently tested in Florida, was to be truly indispensable to the success of the operation.

With utmost secrecy the fleet approached Betio. The men of the 2d Marine Division, unaware of their destination and indeed their destiny, were told on 19 November, D-day minus 1:

> A great offensive to destroy the enemy in the Central Pacific has begun . . . You will quickly overrun the Japanese forces; you will decisively defeat and destroy the treacherous enemies of our country; your success will add new laurels to the glorious tradition of our Corps. Good luck and God bless you all.

The assault, the first of its kind in the Pacific War, was fraught with miscalculations and plagued by the unexpected from the beginning. Staff planning by the V Amphibious Corps, Task Force 53, and the 2d Marine Division appeared to be adequate if not thorough. But here, untested amphibious doctrine, requiring precise timing and coordination between air, naval, and assault forces, was being put to the test on a highly fortified coral atoll with defenses set at the beaches. It was trial by fire.

At 0320 the assault waves began debarking

Marines attack fortified enemy position on D+1.

from the transports into the LCVPs from which they would transfer to the amphibious tractors. As the offloading got underway, it was discovered that the transports were south of the designated area and well within range of enemy shore batteries. Steaming north to a safer debarkation area, the transports were followed in short order by the LCVPs, some half-laden. The tractors, already in the water, found it difficult to organize into the first three waves as the transports and LCVPs shifted positions. Confusion reigned.

The fire support plan called for naval gunfire to commence as soon as the heavy warships were in position and to continue until 0542, after which air strikes were to begin, neutralizing enemy shore batteries. The air bombardment, set for 0545, did not materialize until 0615, resulting in a precious loss of preparatory fire on the enemy positions. Meanwhile the guns on Betio lost no time in pounding the transport and assembly areas, causing further havoc as the amphibian tractors maneuvered to get into position.

By 0715 the first three waves were en route from the assembly area to the line of departure. The amtracs, capable of reaching five knots in calm water, faced a strong headwind and choppy water, reducing the speed to four knots. H-hour, the designated time to hit the beaches, had been set at 0830. It was quickly obvious, and confirmed by spotter aircraft, that by that time the amtracs would hardly be at the line of departure, over 6,000 yards from the beaches. And so it went.

British guns captured at Singapore defended Betio.

A year after the battle, a seabee prepares flowers for planting on graves of Marines.

Twice H-hour was delayed as the first three waves of amtracs churned toward the beaches. The first unit to reach the beach, the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, crawled up on the sand at 0910, followed at 0917 by the 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and at 0922 by the 2d Battalion, 2d Marines. As the Marines hit the beaches, overlapping deadly fire seemed to cover every inch of the sand. A hail of bullets, grenades, high explosives, shattered palm fronds—and death—greeted the invaders.

Amid the thunder and chaos of battle battalion and company commanders were hard pressed to maintain any semblance of control. Units became separated. Communication was lost. The struggle for the beaches became an ordeal of small group actions. It placed groups of three or four huddled together awaiting the chance to rush the next pillbox, while others remained behind the retaining wall at the beach, hoping to survive. But nonetheless, as the official Marine monograph states, there was a unity of purpose. The men fought on, moving dangerously and anxiously forward. Progress was measured in inches. After two hours the issue of who controlled the water's edge was still in doubt.

The amtracs which brought the first three waves ashore were suddenly in short supply. About half of the 125 vehicles had been knocked out in delivering the first waves. Virtually all of the exposed machine gunners atop the vehicles had been killed. This at a time when the 4th and 5th waves, attempting to make the beaches in LCVPs, were stalled at the reef, about 500 yards out; the required 4 to 5 feet of water covering the reef had fallen to scarcely 2 feet, not sufficient to carry the heavy boats

over. It was at this point that the real trouble began. Hundreds of Marines, unwilling to wait for the remaining amtracs to return to the reef to pick them up, attempted to wade the 500 yards to shore and were met by murderous small arms fire. At 1036 MajGen Julian Smith, almost prematurely, radioed V Amphibious Corps: "Successful landing on Beaches 2 and 3. Toe hold on Red 1." The observation was overly optimistic.

For three days the battle raged. The Marines walked a tightrope between victory and defeat. Unprecedented actions were taken: regimental and division reserves were committed the first day; the regimental commander, Col David Shoup, future Commandant of the Marine Corps, set up a command post the first day—on the frontlines in a Japanese bunker with live Japanese sealed off at the far end; and an entire battalion (1st Battalion, 6th Marines) landed in assault formation in rubber boats. It was the first amphibious operation where entry to the island was no easier for the reserves than it had been for the initial assault waves.

By the end of the second day the muddled situation began to clear as the scales tipped in favor of American forces. At 1600 on 21 November, Col Shoup sent a terse situation report to Headquarters, 2d Marine Division: "Many casualties; percentage dead not known; we are winning." But the Japanese defenders, shrieking and dying on their coral bastion, gave way only grudgingly. Not until the 24th was the island securely in American hands.

The carnage was appalling. Adm Nimitz wrote upon his arrival, "I have never seen such a desolate spot as Tarawa . . . The stench was terrific from bodies unburied. It's the first time I've smelled death." Heading the list of U.S. dead were three posthumous Medal of Honor recipients: 1stLt Alexander Bonneyman, Jr., 1stLt William D. Hawkins, and SSgt William J. Bordelon. Two battalion commanders, LtCol Herbert Amey and LtCol Henry Drewes, fell on D-day. Joining these were some 3,000 casualties, over 1,000 of whom died during the three days of fighting. A shocked American nation recoiled at the grimness of it all and received little solace from the fact that, of the 4,800 Japanese and Korean defenders, only 146 allowed themselves to be captured. None escaped.

Recriminations were forthcoming, it seemed, from every sector. A mother whose son fell at Betio, wrote a letter to Adm Nimitz accusing him of "killing my son." A prominent newspaper, reflecting perhaps a cross-section of editorial opinion, questioned if so little "real estate" was worth the cost; and after the war an unexpected source, LtGen Holland M. Smith, commander of V Amphibious Corps during the operation, said flatly: "Tarawa was a mistake."

Lessons learned at Tarawa were costly, but they were not learned in vain. Ninety-five separate "lessons" were gleaned from the action by the commander-in-chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, with the following immediate results: (1) Production of amphibian tractors, the only vehicle in the American arsenal capable of delivering troops over shallow coral reefs, was increased to include a new armored version and a modified version with multiple machinegun mounts; (2) A high priority was put on the production of waterproofed radio sets which were shortly forthcoming; (3) Destruction of strong points, rather than neutralization, came to be emphasized by naval fire planners, who acquired the capability of engaging concrete and steel fortifications with high-angle armor-piercing rounds; (4) Ship-to-shore logistics were revamped so that the first waves ashore could get ammunition, water, and fuel within minutes of the beachhead; (5) Special units were formed and trained, such as the scout-sniper platoon which so distinguished itself on Betio and underwater demolition teams needed for clearing submerged beach obstacles; (6) Medium tanks, in short supply at Tarawa, were recognized as vital in the elimination of coral fortifications, a lesson which would bear fruit at Iwo Jima; (7) The flamethrower was improved and flamethrower personnel were, correspondingly, subjected to more intense training in preparation for future operations; (8) The need for continuing close-in fire support, not available during the initial assault on Betio, was recognized, resulting in a positive reevaluation of fire support doctrine.

Four decades have produced volumes of memoirs, monographs, and official histories, bringing the battle into clearer perspective. Tarawa presaged the amphibious assaults on Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Peleliu, Saipan, Guam, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Improvements in materiel, weapons, fire support, logistics, assault tactics, and communication made victory easier, but even then not without tremendous loss of life. By the end of 1944 U.S. forces were well on the way to Japan by way of the Central Pacific. The classic battle for Tarawa was the audacious but bloody beginning.

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