The Bloodiest Beachhead Ever
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By R. R. Keene

Legend says Tarawa was the earth when the land, ocean and sky had not yet been cleaved by Lord Nareau the spider. It was he who made the sun, moon, stars, rocks and who ordered the sand and water to mate. Thus, after calling the sky "karawa" and the ocean "marawa," the spider god called the piece of rock "Tarawa."

Tarawa became the cornerstone of an archipelago of atolls called the Gilbert Islands.

Today, part of the Republic of Kiribati, the Gilberts, a 16-island chain in the desolate Central Pacific, nearly straddles the equator. Tarawa's place in history, as with so many previously unheard of Pacific geographical locales, came to the fore during World War II.

Since 1892, the islands had been a British protectorate. The natives were similar to the Chamorro and Carolinians on other Central and South Pacific islands.

But, everything changed on 7 Dec. 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere simultaneously occupied, administrated and governed the Gilbert Islands. Within days, on Betio, the last island on the extreme southwest of Tarawa Atoll, the Union Jack was lowered and the flag of the Rising Sun replaced it. Eventually, the Japanese also introduced a force of 2,200 Japanese workers and Korean laborers.

Why were nearly 4,900 Imperial Marines, sons of the Emperor sent 3,182 miles from Tokyo on such a small remote outcropping that resembles a dead bird? About 2 miles long and not even close to a half-mile wide, Betio rises only 10 feet above the waterline and is ringed by a coral reef. Its time in history was at hand.

Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King, and the Joint Chiefs back in Washington, saw the Gilberts, with the small airstrip on Betio, as a strategic springboard key to the success of the Central Pacific Front and the goal of opening a credible second front against the Japanese in the Pacific.

The Japanese high command had it figured the same way. They took the U.S. Marines' 17 Aug. 1942 raid on Makin, the northern-most atoll of the Gilberts chain, as a harbinger. A force of about 200 Marines with Lieutenant Colonel Evans F. Carlson's 2d Raider Battalion surprised and assaulted the small guard force garrisoned on Butaritari Island. The Marines withdrew on 18 Aug., leaving the Japanese to consider the state of their defenses against a larger, better-organized and better-equipped assault from the sea.

In August 1943, the Imperial Japanese Navy sent Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki to command Tarawa. A former gunboat commander and staff officer, RADM Shibasaki was a veteran of amphibious

Marine Corps artist Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret) captured the carnage on the beachhead at Betio, Tarawa Atoll, the morning of Saturday, 20 Nov. 1943.

ART COLLECTION, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS, TRIANGLE, VA.

USMC

Inset: Marines go over the side of one of the transports and down the cargo nets to a landing craft. The landing was delayed. While most loaded in the predawn darkness, these Marines negotiated the nets with early daylight.

landings in China during the late 1930s. He understood the difficulties facing an amphibious landing force and dedicated himself to making sure that those attempting to land on Betio would find it too difficult and far too heavy a price to pay. He encouraged his men and in a moment of bravado boasted to them: "A million Americans couldn't take Tarawa in 100 years."

The Brits had fled the Gilberts as had many of the native islanders. That's partly the reason why the Japanese workers and Korean labor force could work day and night. Wielding picks, shovels, and with few construction vehicles, they transformed Betio into a Gibraltar in the middle of nowhere.

Defenses were impressively shored up and seemed likely to scuttle the island to below sea level: 14 coastal 8-inch defense guns were secured in concrete bunkers, and there were 40 strategically located artillery pieces covering every approach to the island. Concrete and steel tetrahedrons, minefields and long strands of double-apron barbed wire protected beach approaches. A coconut-log, tough-as-concrete seawall 4 feet high lined the lagoon, and more than 100 machine-gun emplacements bristled behind the wall with interlocking fields of fire. Some 500 pillboxes, reinforced with cement and trenches, connected all points of the island, allowing troops to move undercover where needed.

Additionally, a large number of heavy-caliber coastal defense, antiaircraft, antiboat, field artillery guns, howitzers and

dual-purpose 13 mm heavy machine guns were prevalent. "Light tanks (mounting 37 mm guns), 50 mm 'knee mortars,' and an abundance of 7.7 mm light machine guns complemented the defensive weaponry," according to Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret) in "Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa."

It all protected the strategically important coral airstrip, which the labor force smoothed into an impressive landing port for birds of war and transports. That the airstrip was important is without doubt, but perhaps RADM Shibasaki also wanted to test his boast. He was about to get his chance.

Underway was the haze-gray American armada: 17 carriers, 12 battleships, eight heavy and four light cruisers, 66 destroyers and 36 transports. One admiral emphatically said: "We do not intend to neutralize Betio. We do not intend to destroy it. Gentlemen, we will obliterate it." Neither the Japanese nor the American admiral knew what they were up against.

The Marine commander, whose leathernecks would do the work, was not so quick to boast or promise. Major General Julian C. Smith, a 58-year-old veteran of the "Banana Wars," where he earned the Navy Cross, had spent 37 years as a Marine. He had commanded the Second Marine Division since May and with part of the U.S. Army's 37th Infantry Division, a force of some 35,000 soldiers and Marines, stuffed into transports, plowed inexorably toward Betio in early November.

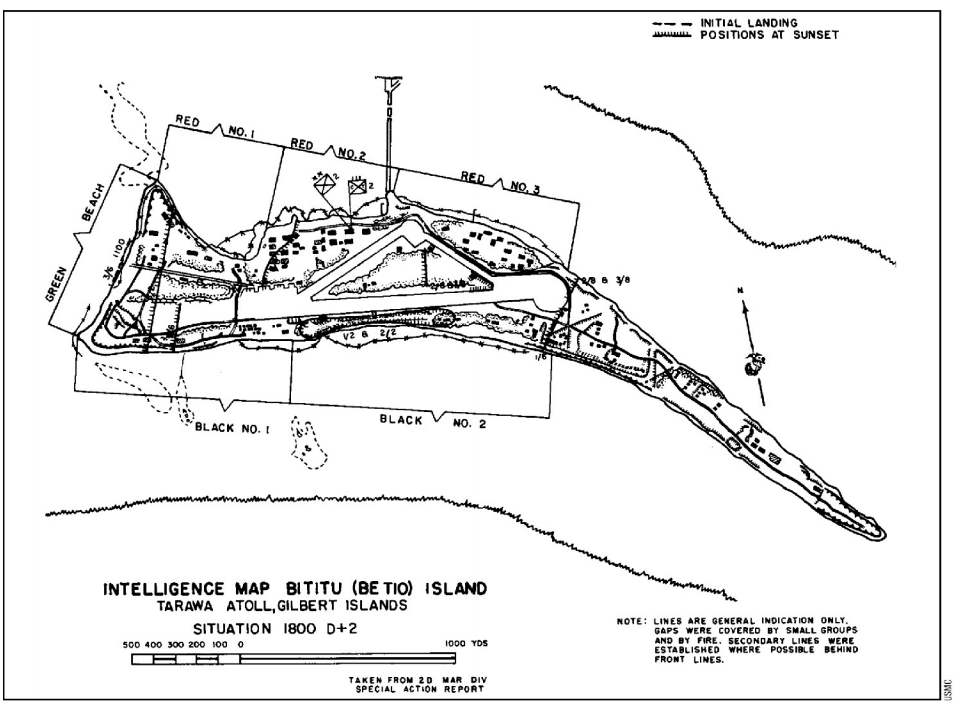
MajGen Smith's intelligence reports were "sobering," according to Marine historian Col Alexander, who also stated that MajGen Smith's "utmost concern … was the physical condition of the troops. The division had redeployed to New Zealand from Guadalcanal with nearly 13,000 confirmed cases of malaria. Half the division would have to be replaced before the next campaign. The infantry regiments of the 2d Marine Division were the 2d, 6th, and 8th Marines; the artillery regiment was the 10th Marines; and the engineers, pioneers, and Naval Construction Battalion ('Seabees') were consolidated into the 18th Marines" to be employed during what had been dubbed Operation Galvanic.

The favorable factors for MajGen Smith were that of the 18,088 Marines and sailors in the 2dMarDiv; approximately 55 percent were combat veterans. Infantrymen would go over the side of the transports and down the cargo nets better equipped than when the Corps landed on Guadalcanal back in 1942. They carried the M1 semiautomatic rifle and were trained to use it accurately.

It was 0320, Saturday, 20 Nov. 1943, when transports of Task Force 53 regurgitated their leatherneck cargo. The Marines started carefully down the cargo nets, tightly squeezing the vertical lines and gingerly feeling for the footing on horizontal lines as the whole net itself swayed when the transports rose and fell in the waves. Far below, the landing crafts bobbed precariously in the swells. On USS *Zeilin* (APA-3), the captain played "The Marines' Hymn" over the public address system, and the sailors cheered.

The highly touted "obliterating" naval gunfire was limited to only a few hours, and although the incredibly small island erupted in black explosions and shook from coral reef to coconut-log bunkers, Betio was largely unscathed. The Japanese were by then loaded and locked.

"We went over the side in the predawn darkness, and labored down the rope cargo nets. We weren't yet afraid," wrote Don Jones, who was then an intelligence scout attached to Company F, 2d Battalion,



Second Marine Regiment, in his November 1993 *Leatherneck* magazine story.

Although a staff sergeant, photographer Norm Hatch was about to see his first action. "We were underway. Even though the threat of death was ever-present, the sight of three long lines of tractors churning their way to the beach, followed by more lines of landing craft, was exhilarating."

Twenty-year-old Private First Class Manley F. Winkley, whose remains were recently identified, was also new to war and probably watched with other Marines as Grumman F6F Hellcat fighters and Curtiss SB2C Helldiver dive bombers strafed and launched their ordnance in the predawn light. A kick of adrenalin and a shudder of fear passed through the Marines when ordered to "Fix bayonets"—although they still were a long way from shore.

Marine planners had been forewarned by a New Zealand reserve officer who sailed the waters around Tarawa for more than 15 years that "there won't be three feet of water on the reef." The Marines' tracked landing vehicles in most instances could make it ashore, but the Higgins boats needed at least 4 feet of water to keep from running aground. The men fervently prayed for just a little higher tide.

It was SOP for Japanese Special Naval Landing Forces since 1942 to wait until the enemy was in effective range and then knock out the landing craft and destroy the landing force at the beach. It was critical now. At 0441, the Japanese fired a red star cluster, followed by the sound of shore batteries opening up. Battleships USS *Colorado* (BB-45) and *Maryland* (BB-46) counter-fired. The guns created impressive explosions, but still the defenses held. Radio communications, vital during the assault, also came down whenever the Navy's big guns erupted.

The tracked landing vehicles, behind schedule, hit the reef at approximately 0910, and the Higgins boats, as feared, were stuck. The tracs churned forward through an avalanche of pinging machine-gun bullets and geysers of water from Japanese naval guns and artillery.

Jones recalled: "We could see small spurts of water rising around tractors of the first wave. The man on our starboard machine gun fell back into the crowded tractor, a bullet hole in his forehead; another stepped up to take his place. Bursts of ack-ack [antiaircraft fire] immediately above us rained shrapnel into the craft.

"Crouched in the far rear port side of the tractor, I watched a growing circle of blood spread over the back of the man jammed in front of me. He didn't move. Two more machine-gunners died of head wounds.

USMC

Above: The Japanese-constructed coconut-log wall was practically impervious to incoming naval gunfire. Marines who reached the shore sought cover behind the logs, knowing they must get off the beach. (USMC photo)

Left: The long Burns-Philip pier jutting out from Betio provided some cover from the hail of bullets and shells hitting the water.

"Now, we were afraid."

Norm Hatch and his fellow combat cameraman Bill Kelliher were in 2/8 battalion commander Major Henry P. "Jim" Crowe's boat: "As we neared the island," Hatch said, "it became apparent that, because of heavy enemy fire on the lead amtracs, we were losing some of our beach frontage. Maj Crow ordered the coxswain to put the boat on the reef so he could get in there and take charge. When the boat hit the reef, the ramp would not drop. Everyone had to climb up and over the side, dropping into about 5 feet of water."

It was a 400-yard walk through the sea, laced with bullets hitting water like hailstones, to the beach. Hatch and Kelliher stood upright and shot film all the way in and continued recording the battle throughout.

"All the Marines from our boat … were dog-paddling ashore," said Hatch. "Only their helmets showed above the water. … The temptation to lower myself into the water was overwhelming, but the discipline of doing one's job, in this case preserving my camera and film, was stronger."

From their myriad gun positions, the Japanese poured a nightmare wall of fire, streaking inches above the water, into the Marines moving slowly in the surf toward what were Japanese strongpoints.

Heavier weapons, boxes of ammunition, and radios were to prove deadly to the Marines, pulling them under the water. Others, only slightly wounded yet unable to shed their equipment, went into shock and drowned.

There was a long pier, called the Burns-Philip pier, jutting out from Betio that gave the island its dead-bird look with the pier being a bird's leg in full rigor. Tactical communications were nearly nonexistent, but below the pier amid its pilings, newly promoted Colonel David M. Shoup, commanding Combat Team 2 (2d

Marines), had a radio that worked. Shoup was bleeding from shrapnel in his leg. According to Joe Alexander: "Standing waist-deep in water, surrounded by thousands of dead fish and dozens of floating bodies, Shoup manned his radio, trying desperately to get organized combat units ashore to sway the balance."

Shoup made radio contact with Maj John F. Schoettel commanding 3/2, who told Shoup at 0959: "Receiving heavy fire all along beach. Unable to land all. Issue in doubt." At 1007, Schoettel radioed: "Boats held up on reef of right flank [Beach] Red One. Troops receiving heavy fire in water."

Shoup radioed Schoettel at 1012: "Land Beach Red Two and work west." Schoettel later responded: "We have nothing left to land." Shoup radioed MajGen Smith to commit the 6th Marines who were in division reserve. Shoup led the Marines through relentless enemy fire, pushing them where fear and instinct told them not to go: the beach.

The slaughter was horrific. The first wave, Companies L and K of 3/8, lost 70 percent getting to the beach.

Securing the pier became paramount. Japanese gun positions on the jutting wharf were able to put Marines coming ashore in cross fires. Onto the pier came First Lieutenant William D. Hawkins, commanding 2d Marines' Scout-Sniper platoon, and his men. They moved forward, clearing the pier of Japanese who returned desperate and heavy fire. Similarly came 1stLt Alexander Bonnyman Jr. with 2d Shore Party Bn. He organized and led men previously pinned down on Betio Pier. They, too, fought their way along the long pier to the beach, and then with flame throwers and demolitions, they attacked stubbornly defended Japanese positions.

Getting beyond the beachhead took acts of individual courage. SSgt William J. Bordelon, an assault engineer with 1/18, was in the midst of chaos in his tractor where all but four were killed. He hit the beach and hurriedly made demolition charges, taking out two pillboxes.

Bordelon was assaulting a third when he was stitched with machine-gun fire just as the explosive charge exploded in his hand. But he continued the attack, picking up a rifle and providing covering fire for Marines clambering over the coconut-log seawall. He was bleeding heavily but rescued a drowning fellow demolitions man and another wounded Marine.

SSgt Bordelon fashioned more demolition charges and single-handedly assaulted a fourth machine gun when Japanese gunners fired a fatal burst. He was the only enlisted man to be awarded the Medal of Honor for action at Tarawa.

Don Jones finally was ashore, just barely. Lt Wayne Sanford, F/2/2's executive officer, saw a wounded Marine "groaning and breathing in gasps" in the water 10 feet away. "Is that Jones?"

"No, sir, I'm here!" Jones yelled.

Jones later explained: "One of my duties was to keep the company commander informed of our position. ... 'We're right here on Red Beach Two like we're supposed to be, sir.' ... He peered at me rather strangely, then glanced away. 'Thanks,' he answered."

Continuing, Jones said, "When I told Lieutenant Stanford I was not the dying man ... a Navy corpsman ... jumped from our hole and ran to the Marine. ... Machine-gun bullets tore into both of them."

Jones watched as a few hundred men walked through the surf from 500 yards. "Gradually, one by one, they disappeared. One of them was our battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Herbert R. Amey Jr. ... We were alone. And we were afraid."

The fortunes of war started to turn. The Japanese phone system had been knocked out and with it much of the ability for command and control. Directing fire at the incoming Marines became much less effective. According to Col Alexander in his book "Storm Landings," it was sometime in the afternoon of the first day that RADM Shibasaki was killed.

Moving up from the beach, Norm Hatch, using his 35-mm Eyemo movie camera, had gained some perspective of the island and the fight: "It was almost impossible not to achieve good photographic coverage on that operation. Everything was happening all around me. I could stand almost in one position and tell the whole story."

MajGen Smith had sent in just about every infantryman he had and then mustered a provisional reserve of clerks, cooks and bakers and was, according

This photo shows a ground-level view of battle at the beach with Marines seeking cover as they move in from the beach. In the background is a wrecked landing vehicle, the pier and U.S. aircraft strafing and bombing Japanese positions. (USMC photo)

In a common tactic on Betio—blast and assault—a Marine combat cameraman captured these Marines poised to immediately storm a Japanese position.

USMC

to Alexander, "prepared to lead them ashore himself, as necessary." He reported "Situation in doubt."

First Sergeant Dominick Vanditti was killed while taking cover in a sand pit with Jones. It was a sniper's bullet that killed him. "With binoculars, I located him [the sniper] in a palm tree about 25 yards away." Jones put six rounds into the tree. "He fell, not far, only about 3 feet. He was tied to the tree, and his rifle to him. It dangled just below him."

Jones continued: "I got the son of a bitch! I got him. I wanted to jump up and shout with joy. But I didn't. I rubbed sand into Vanditti's bloodstains on my dungarees."

At some time on D-day, PFC Manley F. Winkley gave his life for country and Corps. As night engulfed the tiny atoll, some 1,500 of the 5,000 Marines who went ashore only a few hours earlier were dead, wounded or missing.

At dawn, the killing continued. First Lt Hawkins continued clearing the beach of Japanese resistance. He took on a Japanese strongpoint defended with five machine guns. Hawkins inched forward by crawling, then shot into the pillbox loopholes and, for good measure, threw in grenades. He was hit in the chest but continued destroying three more pillboxes before a quick burst of fire hit him, eventually killing him.

Bonnyman and his Shore Party Marines had fought late into the previous night, assaulting with flamethrowers and demolitions. Dawn found Bonnyman near Japanese lines. He low-crawled more than 40 meters and set his charges against a heavily garrisoned, nearly bombproof installation. He then led his men in an assault through merciless hostile fire to storm the bastion.

Directing the placement of demolition charges at both entrances, the Marines seized the top of the enemy bunker. They flushed more than 100 Japanese, cutting them down as quickly as they emerged and annihilated more than 150 still inside when the charges went off. Still the Japanese were not all dead and not without fight. Bonnyman made his stand on the edge of the structure, firing his weapon, killing three until he fell mortally wounded.

The families of both Marine officers, Hawkins and Bonnyman, were presented with their Medals of Honor.

Col Shoup was one of four awarded the Medal of Honor at Tarawa and the only man alive to accept it. His citation "for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his own life above and beyond the call of duty" notes his leadership under great fire, being wounded and yet rallying his troops by leading them across the reefs to charge the heavily fortified island. He assumed command and worked without rest while under constant fire for two days and still conducted smashing attacks against fanatically defended Japanese positions.

Don Jones and Lt Sanford both were wounded but survived. Norm Hatch and Bill Kelliher got off the island unscathed. Their footage was made into a 20-minute documentary, "With the Marines at Tarawa," and won an Academy Award for the Corps in 1944.

General Alexander A. Vandegrift, newly appointed 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps, summed it up, saying: "Tarawa was an assault from beginning to end." The Japanese had fought with tenacity. When it ended 76 hours after the first wave went ashore, 97 percent of the 4,836 Japanese defenders were dead in their bunkers or at their gun positions. Of the 146 prisoners, all but 17 were Korean laborers. Kiyoshi Ota, 30, from Nagasaki, was the only Japanese officer captured.

Casualties for 2dMarDiv: 1,027 Marines and sailors killed; 88 Marines missing and presumed dead; 2,233 Marines and 59 sailors wounded; 3,407 casualties total. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, spoke out when controversy arose over the number of casualties and when accusations were made that "Tarawa was a mistake!"

Nimitz answered: "The capture of Tarawa knocked down the front door to the Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific." Only 10 weeks after the battle, Nimitz launched an attack on the Marshall Islands. Lessons from Tarawa influenced all future landings in the Central Pacific.

Today the lagoon at Betio is beautifully blue and teeming with fish. There are remnants of tanks and landing craft, gun emplacements and pillboxes. RADM Shibasaki's concrete headquarters still stands, and the big 8-inch guns are frozen in place still in line with their last firing. There are houses, businesses and a small tourist trade on Betio.

A few years ago, the skeletal remains of Marines were found and more were detected under the sand. A Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command team found human remains of at least three more individuals on Betio on April 2, 2013. It was at the site of the 2dMarDiv battlefield cemetery, which after the war saw the bodies disinterred and returned to the United States. One was positively identified as PFC Manley F. Winkley, USMCR. Winkley was buried in August in Indianapolis, 70 years after Tarawa. He was possibly the last Marine of the battle to leave the island.

Editor's note: Read Col Joseph H. Alexander's "Utmost Savagery: Three Days of Tarawa."

Leatherneck—On the Web

See the Academy Award-winning video and additional photos at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/tarawa