

# Colonel David M. Shoup, USMC

An excerpt from the field notebook David Shoup carried during the battle of Tarawa reveals a few aspects of the personality of its enigmatic author: "If you are qualified, fate has a way of getting you to the right place at the right time — tho' sometimes it appears to be a long, long wait." For Shoup, the former farm boy from Battle Ground, Indiana, the combination of time and place worked to his benefit on two momentous occasions, at Tarawa in 1943, and as President Dwight D. Eisenhower's deep selection to become 22d Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1959.

Colonel Shoup was 38 at the time of Tarawa, and he had been a Marine officer since 1926. Unlike such colorful contemporaries as Merritt Edson and Evans Carlson, Shoup had limited prior experience as a commander and only brief exposure to combat. Then came Tarawa, where Shoup, the junior colonel in the 2d Marine Division, commanded eight battalion landing teams in some of the most savage fighting of the war.

*Time* correspondent Robert Sherrod recorded his first impression of Shoup enroute to Betio: "He was an interesting character, this Colonel Shoup. A squat, red-faced man with a bull neck, a hard-

boiled, profane shouter of orders, he would carry the biggest burden on Tarawa." Another contemporary described Shoup as "a Marine's Marine," a leader the troops "could go to the well with." First Sergeant Edward G. Doughman, who served with Shoup in China and in the Division Operations section, described him as "the brainiest, nerviest, best soldiering Marine I ever met." It is no coincidence that Shoup also was considered the most formidable poker player in the division, a man with eyes "like two burn holes in a blanket."

Part of Colonel Shoup's Medal of Honor citation reflects his strength of character:

Upon arrival at the shore, he assumed command of all landed troops and, working without rest under constant withering enemy fire during the next two days, conducted smashing attacks against unbelievably strong and fanatically defended Japanese positions despite innumerable obstacles and heavy casualties.

Shoup was modest about his achievements. Another entry in his 1943 notebook contains this introspection, "I



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 310552  
Col David M. Shoup, here as he appeared after the battle, was the fourth and only living Marine awarded a Medal of Honor from the Tarawa fighting.

realize that I am but a bit of chaff from the threshings of life blown into the pages of history by the unknown winds of chance."

David Shoup died on 13 January 1983 at age 78 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. "In his private life," noted the *Washington Post* obituary, "General Shoup was a poet."

until 1300 today it was touch and go," said Rixey, "then I knew we would win."

By contrast, a sense of despair seemed to spread among the defenders. They had shot down the Marines at every turn, but with every fallen Marine, another would appear, rifle blazing, well supported by artillery and naval guns. The great *Yogaki* plan seemed a bust. Only a few aircraft attacked the island each night; the transports were never seriously threatened. The Japanese fleet never materialized. Increasingly, Japanese troops began committing suicide rather than risk capture.

Shoup sensed this shift in momentum. Despite his frustration over the day's delays and miscommunications,

he was buoyed enough to send a 1600 situation report to Julian Smith, which closed with these terse words that became a classic: "Casualties: many. Percentage dead: unknown. Combat efficiency: *We are winning.*"

At 1655, Murray's 2/6 landed against light opposition on Bairiki. During the night and early morning hours, Lieutenant Colonel George Shell's 2d Battalion, 10th Marines, landed on the same island and began registering its howitzers. Rixey's fire direction center on Betio helped this process, while the artillery forward observer attached to Crowe's LT 2/8 on Red Beach One had the unusual experience of adjusting the fire of the Bairiki guns "while looking into their muzzles." The Marines had practiced

this earlier on New Zealand. Smith finally had artillery in place on Bairiki.

Meanwhile, Major Jones and LT 1/6 were finally on the move. It had been a day of many false starts. At one point, Jones and his men had been debarking over the sides in preparation for an assault on the eastern end of the Betio when "The Word" changed their mission to Green Beach. When *Feland* finally returned to within reasonable range from the island, the Marines of LT 1/6 disembarked for real. Using tactics developed with the Navy during the Efate rehearsal, the Marines loaded on board LCVPs which towed their rubber rafts to the reef. There the Marines embarked on board their



LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

*Light tanks debark at the reef from LCMs launched by Harris (APA 2) and Virgo (AKA 20) to begin the 1,000-yard trek towards Green Beach the evening of D+1.*

rafts, six to 10 troops per craft, and began the 1,000-yard paddle towards Green Beach.

Major Jones remarked that he did not feel like "The Admiral of the Condom Fleet" as he helped paddle his raft shoreward. "Control was nebulous at best . . . the battalion was spread out over the ocean from horizon to horizon. We must have had 150 boats." Jones was alarmed at the frequent appearance of antiboat mines moored to coralheads beneath the surface. The rubber rafts passed over the mines without incident, but Jones also had two LVTs accompanying his ship-to-shore movement, each preloaded with ammo, rations, water, medical supplies, and spare radio equipment. Guided by the rafts, one of the LVTs made it ashore, but the second drifted into a mine which blew the heavy vehicle 10 feet into the air, killing most of the crew and destroying the supplies. It was a serious loss, but not critical. Well covered by Ryan's men, the landing force suffered no other casualties coming ashore. Jones' battalion became the first to land on Betio essentially intact.

It was after dark by the time Jones' troops assumed defensive positions behind Ryan's lines. The light tanks of Company B continued their attempt to come ashore on Green Beach, but the high surf and great

distance between the reef and the beach greatly hindered landing efforts. Eventually, a platoon of six tanks managed to reach the beach; the remainder of the company moved its boats toward the pier and worked all night to get ashore on Red Beach Two. McLeod's LT 3/6 remained afloat in LCVPs beyond the reef, facing an uncomfortable night.

That evening Shoup turned to Robert Sherrod and stated, "Well, I think we're winning, but the bastards have got a lot of bullets left. I think we'll clean up tomorrow."

After dark, General Smith sent his chief of staff, "Red Mike" Edson, ashore to take command of all forces on Betio and Bairiki. Shoup had done a magnificent job, but it was time for the senior colonel to take charge. There were now eight reinforced infantry battalions and two artillery battalions deployed on the two islands. With LT 3/6 scheduled to land early on D+2, virtually all the combat and combat support elements of the 2d Marine Division would be deployed.

Edson reached Shoup's CP by 2030 and found the barrel-chested warrior still on his feet, grimy and haggard, but full of fight. Edson assumed command, allowing Shoup to concentrate on his own reinforced combat team, and began making plans for the morning.

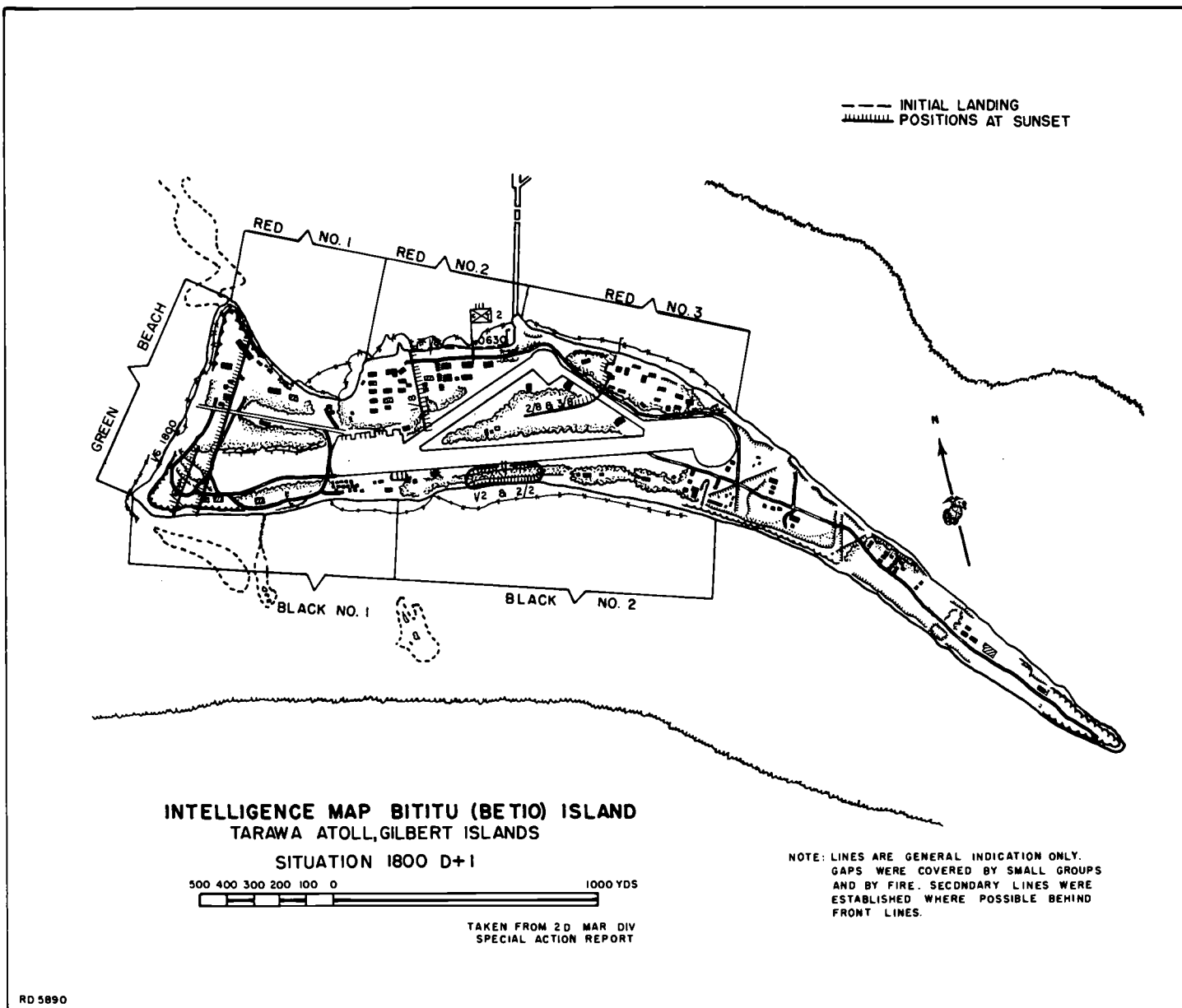
Years later, General Julian Smith looked back on the pivotal day of 21 November 1943 at Betio and admitted, "we were losing until we won!" Many things had gone wrong, and the Japanese had inflicted severe casualties on the attackers, but, from this point on, the issue was no longer in doubt at Tarawa.

### *The Third Day: D+2 at Betio, 22 November 1943*

On D+2, *Chicago Daily News* war correspondent Keith Wheeler released this dispatch from Tarawa: "It looks as though the Marines are winning on this blood-soaked, bomb-hammered, stinking little abattoir of an island."

Colonel Edson issued his attack orders at 0400. As recorded in the division's D-3 journal, Edson's plan for D+2 was this: "1/6 attacks at 0800 to the east along south beach to establish contact with 1/2 and 2/2. 1/8 attached to 2dMar attacks at daylight to the west along north beach to eliminate Jap pockets of resistance between Beaches Red 1 and 2. 8thMar (-LT 1/8) continues attack to east." Edson also arranged for naval gunfire and air support to strike the eastern end of the island at 20-minute interludes throughout the morning, beginning at 0700. McLeod's LT 3/6, still embarked at the line of departure, would land at Shoup's call on Green Beach.

The key to the entire plan was the eastward attack by the fresh troops of Major Jones' landing team, but Edson was unable for hours to raise the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, on any radio net. The enterprising Major Tompkins, assistant division operations officer, volunteered to deliver the attack order personally to Major Jones. Tompkins' hair-raising odyssey from Edson's CP to Green Beach took nearly three hours, during which time he was nearly shot on several occasions by nervous Japanese and American sentries. By



quirk, the radio nets started working again just before Tompkins reached LT 1/6. Jones had the good grace not to admit to Tompkins that he already had the attack order when the exhausted messenger arrived.

On Red Beach Two, Major Hays launched his attack promptly at 0700, attacking westward on a three-company front. Engineers with satchel charges and Bangalore torpedoes helped neutralize several inland Japanese positions, but the strongpoints along the re-entrant were still as dangerous as hornets' nests. Marine light tanks made brave frontal attacks against the fortifications, even firing their 37mm guns point-blank into the embrasures, but they were inadequate for the task. One

was lost to enemy fire, and the other two were withdrawn. Hays called for a section of 75mm halftracks. One was lost almost immediately, but the other used its heavier gun to considerable advantage. The center and left flank companies managed to curve around behind the main complexes, effectively cutting the Japanese off from the rest of the island. Along the beach, however, progress was measured in yards. The bright spot of the day for 1/8 came late in the afternoon when a small party of Japanese tried a sortie from the strongpoints against the Marine lines. Hays' men, finally given real targets in the open, cut down the attackers in short order.

On Green Beach, Major Jones

made final preparations for the assault of 1/6 to the east. Although there were several light tanks available from the platoon which came ashore the previous evening, Jones preferred the insurance of medium tanks. Majors "Willie K." Jones and "Mike" Ryan were good friends; Jones prevailed on their friendship to "borrow" Ryan's two battle-scarred Shermans for the assault. Jones ordered the tanks to range no further than 50 yards ahead of his lead company, and he personally maintained radio contact with the tank commander. Jones also assigned a platoon of water-cooled .30-caliber machine guns to each rifle company and attached his combat engineers with their flame throwers and demolition squads to



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63505

*CP scene, Betio, D+2: Col Shoup, center, with map case, confers with Maj Thomas Culhane, 2d Marines R-3, while Col Merritt A. Edson, Division chief of staff, stands in left background (hands on hips). Col Evans Carlson, an observer from the 4th Marine Division used as high-priced courier by Shoup, rests in the foreground.*

the lead company. The nature of the terrain and the necessity for giving Hays' battalion wide berth made Jones constrain his attack to a platoon front in a zone of action only 100 yards wide. "It was the most unusual tactics that I ever heard of," recalled Jones. "As I moved to the east on one side of the airfield, Larry Hays moved to the west, exactly opposite . . . I was attacking towards Wood Kyle who had 1st Battalion, 2d Marines."

Jones' plan was sound and well executed. The advantage of having in place a fresh tactical unit with integrated supporting arms was immediately obvious. Landing Team 1/6 made rapid progress along the south coast, killing about 250 Japanese defenders and reaching the thin lines held by 2/2 and 1/2 within three hours. American casualties to this point were light.

At 1100, Shoup called Jones to his CP to receive the afternoon plan of action. Jones' executive officer, Major Francis X. Beamer, took the occasion to replace the lead rifle company.

Resistance was stiffening, the company commander had just been shot by a sniper, and the oppressive heat was beginning to take a toll. Beamer made superhuman efforts to get more

*"March Macabre," a sketch by combat artist Kerr Eby, reflects the familiar scene of wounded or lifeless Marines being pulled to shelter under fire by their buddies.*

U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection



water and salt tablets for his men, but several troops had already become victims of heat prostration. According to First Sergeant Lewis J. Michelony, Tarawa's sands were "as white as snow and as hot as red-white ashes from a heated furnace."

Back on Green Beach, now 800 yards behind LT 1/6, McLeod's LT 3/6 began streaming ashore. The landing was uncontested but nevertheless took several hours to execute. It was not until 1100, the same time that Jones' leading elements linked up with the 2d Marines, before 3/6 was fully established ashore.

The attack order for the 8th Marines was the same as the previous day: assault the strongpoints to the east. The obstacles were just as daunting on D+2. Three fortifications were especially formidable: a steel pillbox near the contested Burns-Philp pier; a coconut log emplacement with multiple machine guns; and a large bombproof shelter further inland. All three had been designed by Admiral Saichero, the master engineer, to be mutually supported by fire and observation. And notwithstanding Major Crowe's fighting spirit, these strong-



Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*Col William K. Jones, USMC, a major during the battle of Tarawa, commanded Landing Team 1/6, the first major unit to land intact on Betio. The advance of 1/6 eastward on D+2 helped break the back of Japanese resistance, as did the unit's repulse of the Japanese counterattack that night. Jones' sustained combat leadership on Betio resulted in a battlefield promotion to lieutenant colonel.*

*Against the still potent and heavily defended, entrenched Japanese positions the 6th Marines advanced eastward on D+2.*

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

points had effectively contained the combined forces of 2/8 and 3/8 since the morning of D-Day.

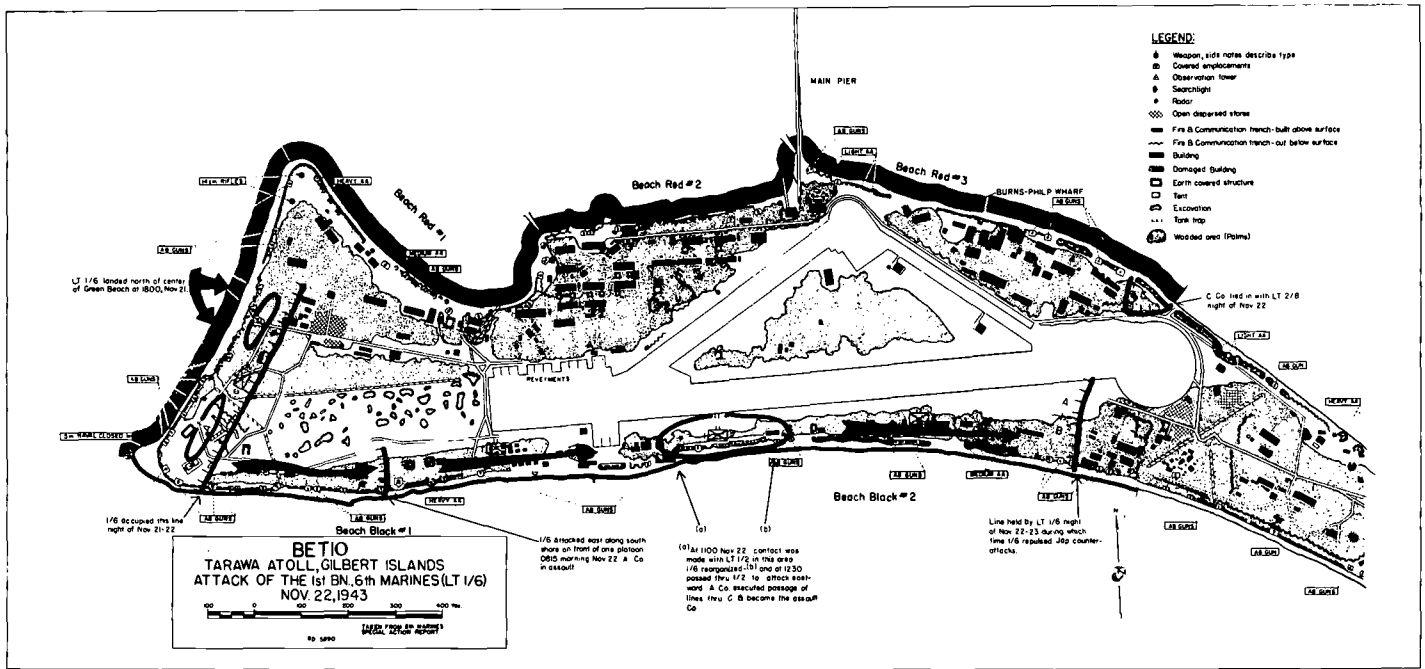
On the third day, Crowe reorganized his tired forces for yet another assault. First, the former marksmanship instructor obtained cans of lubricating oil and made his troops field strip and clean their Garands before the attack. Crowe placed his battalion executive officer, Major William C. Chamberlin, in the center of the three attacking companies. Chamberlin, a former college economics professor, was no less dynamic than his red-mustached commander. Though nursing a painful wound in his shoulder from D-Day, Chamberlin was a driving force in the repetitive assaults against the three strongpoints. Staff Sergeant Hatch recalled that the executive officer was "a wild man, a guy anybody would be willing to follow."

At 0930, a mortar crew under Chamberlin's direction got a direct hit on the top of the coconut log emplace-

ment which penetrated the bunker and detonated the ammunition stocks. It was a stroke of immense good fortune for the Marines. At the same time, the medium tank "Colorado" maneuvered close enough to the steel pillbox to penetrate it with direct 75mm fire. Suddenly, two of the three emplacements were overrun.

The massive bombproof shelter, however, was still lethal. Improvised flanking attacks were shot to pieces before they could gather momentum. The only solution was to somehow gain the top of the sand-covered mound and drop explosives or thermite grenades down the air vents to force the defenders outside. This tough assignment went to Major Chamberlin and a squad of combat engineers under First Lieutenant Alexander Bonnyman. While riflemen and machine gunners opened a rain of fire against the strongpoint's firing ports, this small band raced across the sands and up the steep slope. The Japanese knew





they were in grave danger. Scores of them poured out of a rear entrance to attack the Marines on top. Bonnyman stepped forward, emptied his flamethrower into the onrushing Japanese, then charged them with a carbine. He was shot dead, his body rolling down the slope, but his men were inspired to overcome the Japanese counterattack. The surviving engineers rushed to place explosives against the rear entrances. Suddenly, several hundred demoralized Japanese broke out of the shelter in panic, trying to flee eastward. The Marines shot them down by the dozens, and the tank crew fired a single “dream shot” canister round which dispatched at least 20 more.

Lieutenant Bonnyman’s gallantry resulted in a posthumous Medal of Honor, the third to be awarded to Marines on Betio. His sacrifice almost single-handedly ended the stalemate on Red Beach Three. Nor is it coincidence that two of these highest awards were received by combat engineers. The performances of Staff Sergeant Bordelon on D-Day and Lieutenant Bonnyman on D+2 were representative of hundreds of other engineers on only a slightly less spectacular basis. As an example, nearly a third of the engineers who landed in support of LT 2/8 became casualties. Accord-

ing to Second Lieutenant Beryl W. Rentel, the survivors used “eight cases of TNT, eight cases of gelatin dynamite, and two 54-pound blocks of TNT” to demolish Japanese fortifications. Rentel reported that his engineers used both large blocks of TNT and an entire case of dynamite on the large bombproof shelter alone.

At some point during the confused, violent fighting in the 8th Ma-

rines’ zone—and unknown to the Marines—Admiral Shibasaki died in his blockhouse. The tenacious Japanese commander’s failure to provide backup communications to the above-ground wires destroyed during D-Day’s preliminary bombardment had effectively kept him from influencing the battle. Japanese archives indicate Shibasaki was able to transmit one final message to General Headquarters in Tokyo early on

*The 8th Marines makes its final assault on the large Japanese bombproof shelter near the Burns-Philp pier. These scenes were vividly recorded on 35mm motion picture film by Marine SSgt Norman Hatch, whose subsequent eyewitness documentary of the Tarawa fighting won a Motion Picture Academy Award in 1944.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63930





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 310213  
1stLt Alexander Bonnyman, Jr., USMC,  
was awarded the Medal of Honor  
posthumously for extreme bravery dur-  
ing the assault on the Japanese bomb-  
proof shelter on D+2. Two of the four  
Marines awarded the Medal of Honor  
for Tarawa were combat engineers:  
Lt Bonnyman and SSgt Bordelon.

D+2: "Our weapons have been destroyed and from now on everyone is attempting a final charge . . . May Japan exist for 10,000 years!"

Admiral Shibasaki's counterpart, General Julian Smith, landed on Green Beach shortly before noon. Smith observed the deployment of McLeod's LT 3/6 inland and conferred with Major Ryan. But Smith soon realized he was far removed from the main action towards the center of the island. He led his group back across the reef to its landing craft and ordered the coxswain to make for the pier. At this point the commanding general received a rude introduction to the facts of life on Betio. Although the Japanese strong-points at the re-entrant were being hotly besieged by Hays' 1/8, the defenders still held mastery over the approaches to Red Beaches One and Two. Well-aimed machine-gun fire disabled the boat and killed the coxswain; the other occupants had to leap over the far gunwale into the water. Major Tompkins, ever the right man in the right place, then

waded through intermittent fire for half a mile to find an LVT for the general. Even this was not an altogether safe exchange. The LVT drew further fire, which wounded the driver and further alarmed the occupants. General Smith did not reach Edson and Shoup's combined CP until nearly 1400.

"Red Mike" Edson in the meantime had assembled his major subordinate commanders and issued orders for continuing the attack to the east that afternoon. Major Jones' 1/6 would continue along the narrowing south coast, supported by the pack howitzers of 1/10 and all available tanks. Colonel Hall's two battalions of the 8th Marines would continue their advance along the north coast. Jump-off time was 1330. Naval gunfire and air support would blast the areas for an hour in advance.

Colonel Hall spoke up on behalf of his exhausted, decimated landing teams, ashore and in direct contact since D-Day morning. The two landing teams had enough strength for one more assault, he told Edson, but then they must get relief. Edson promised to exchange the remnants of 2/8 and 3/8 with Murray's fresh 2/6 on Bairiki at the first opportunity after the assault.

Jones returned to his troops in his borrowed tank and issued the necessary orders. Landing Team 1/6 continued the attack at 1330, passing through Kyle's lines in the process. Immediately it ran into heavy opposition. The deadliest fire came from heavy weapons mounted in a turret-type emplacement near the south beach. This took 90 minutes to overcome. The light tanks were brave but ineffective. Neutralization took sustained 75mm fire from one of the Sherman medium tanks. Resistance was fierce throughout Jones' zone, and his casualties began to mount. The team had conquered 800 yards of enemy territory fairly easily in the morning, but could attain barely half that distance in the long afternoon.

The 8th Marines, having finally destroyed the three-bunker nemesis, made good progress at first, but then ran out of steam past the eastern end of the airfield. Shoup had been right the night before. The Japanese defenders may have been leaderless, but they still had an abundance of bullets and esprit left. Major Crowe pulled his leading elements back into defensive positions for the night. Jones halted, too, and placed one company north of the airfield for a direct link with Crowe. The end of the airstrip was unmanned but covered by fire.

On nearby Bairiki, all of 2/10 was now in position and firing artillery missions in support of Crowe and Jones. Company B of the 2d Medical Battalion established a field hospital to handle the overflow of casualties from *Doyen*. Murray's 2/6, eager to enter the fray, waited in vain for boats to arrive to move them to Green Beach. Very few landing craft were available; many were crammed with miscellaneous supplies as the transports and cargo ships continued general unloading, regardless of the needs of the troops ashore. On Betio, Navy Seabees were already at work repairing the airstrip with bulldozers and graders despite enemy fire. From time to time, the Marines would call for help in sealing a bothersome bunker, and a bulldozer would arrive to do the job nicely. Navy beachmasters and shore party Marines on the pier continued to keep the supplies coming in, the wounded going out. At 1550, Edson requested a working party "to clear bodies around pier . . . hindering shore party operations." Late in the day the first jeep got ashore, a wild ride along the pier with every remaining Japanese sniper trying to take out the driver. Sherrod commented, "If a sign of certain victory were needed, this is it. The jeeps have arrived."

The strain of the prolonged battle began to take effect. Colonel Hall



LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

*South side of RAdm Shibasaki's headquarters on Betio is guarded by a now-destroyed Japanese light tank. The imposing blockhouse withstood direct hits by Navy 16-inch shells and 500-pound bombs. Fifty years later, the building stands.*

reported that one of his Navajo Indian code-talkers had been mistaken for a Japanese and shot. A derelict, blackened LVT drifted ashore, filled with dead Marines. At the bottom of the pile was one who was still breathing, somehow, after two and a half days of unrelenting hell. "Water," he gasped, "Pour some water on my face, will you?"

Smith, Edson, and Shoup were near exhaustion themselves. Relatively speaking, the third day on Betio had been one of spectacular gains, but progress overall was maddeningly slow, nor was the end yet in sight. At 1600, General Smith sent this pessimistic report to General Hermle, who had taken his place on the flagship:

Situation not favorable for rapid clean-up of Betio. Heavy casualties among officers make leadership problems difficult. Still strong resistance . . . . Many emplacements intact on eastern end of the island . . . . In addition, many Japanese strong points to westward of our front lines within our position that have not been reduced. Progress slow and extremely costly. Complete occupation will take at least 5 days more. Naval and air bombardment a great help but does not take out emplacements.

General Smith assumed command of operations ashore at 1930. By that

time he had about 7,000 Marines ashore, struggling against perhaps 1,000 Japanese defenders. Updated aerial photographs revealed many defensive positions still intact throughout much of Betio's eastern tail. Smith and Edson believed they would need the entire 6th Marines to complete the job. When Colonel Holmes landed with the 6th Marines headquarters group, Smith told him to take command of his three landing teams by 2100. Smith then called a meeting of his commanders to assign orders for D+3.

Smith directed Holmes to have McLeod's 3/6 pass through the lines of Jones' 1/6 in order to have a fresh battalion lead the assault eastward. Murray's 2/6 would land on Green



Beach and proceed east in support of McLeod. All available tanks would be assigned to McLeod (when Major Jones protested that he had promised to return the two Shermans loaned by Major Ryan, Shoup told him "with crisp expletives" what he could do with his promise). Shoup's 2d Marines, with 1/8 still attached, would continue to reduce the re-entrant strongpoints. The balance of the 8th Marines would be shuttled to Bairiki. And the 4th Battalion, 10th Marines would land its "heavy" 105mm guns on Green Beach to augment the fires of the two pack howitzer battalions already in action. Many of these

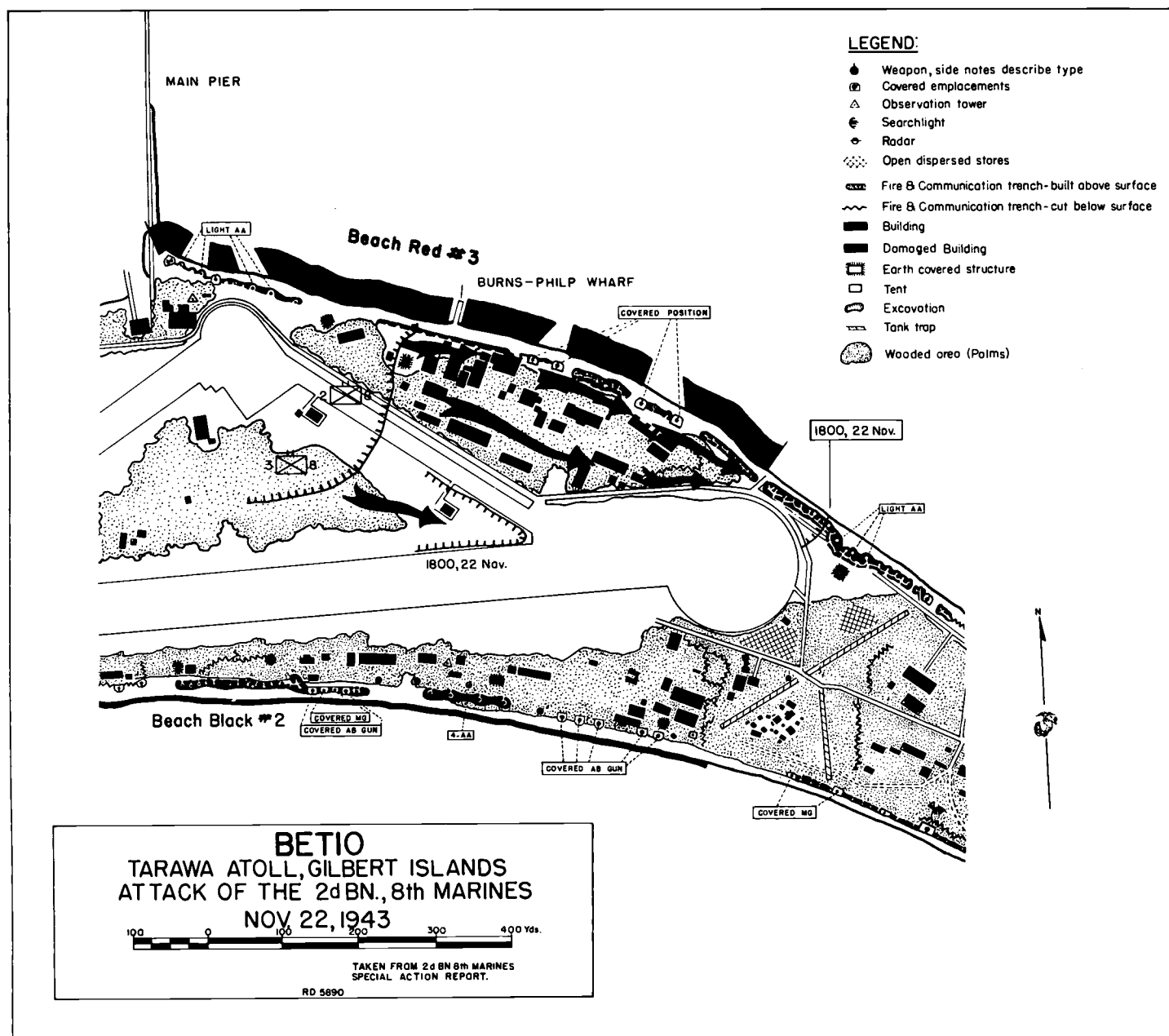
plans were overcome by events of the evening.

The major catalyst that altered Smith's plans was a series of vicious Japanese counterattacks during the night of D+2/D+3. As Edson put it, the Japanese obligingly "gave us very able assistance by trying to counter-attack." The end result was a dramatic change in the combat ratio between attackers and survivors the next day.

Major Jones sensed his exposed forces would be the likely target for any *Banzai* attack and took precautions. Gathering his artillery forward observers and naval fire control spot-

ters, Jones arranged for field artillery support starting 75 yards from his front lines to a point 500 yards out, where naval gunfire would take over. He placed Company A on the left, next to the airstrip, and Company B on the right, next to the south shore. He worried about the 150-yard gap across the runway to Company C, but that could not be helped. Jones used a tank to bring a stockpile of grenades, small arms ammunition, and water to be positioned 50 yards behind the lines.

The first counterattack came at 1930. A force of 50 Japanese infiltrated past Jones' outposts in the thick





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63640

*Destruction along the eastern end of Red Beach Three leads toward the long pier in the distant background. Japanese gunners maintained a deadly antiboat fire in this direction, as witnessed by these two wrecked LTVs and the various sunken craft.*

vegetation and penetrated the border between the two companies south of the airstrip. Jones' reserve force, comprised of "my mortar platoon and my headquarters cooks and bakers and admin people," contained the penetration and killed the enemy in two hours of close-in fighting under the leadership of First Lieutenant Lyle "Spook" Specht. An intense fire from the pack howitzers of 1/10 and 2/10 prevented the Japanese from reinforcing the penetration. By 2130 the lines were stabilized. Jones asked Major Kyle for a company to be positioned 100 yards to the rear of his lines. The best Kyle could provide was a composite force of 40 troops from the 2d Marines.

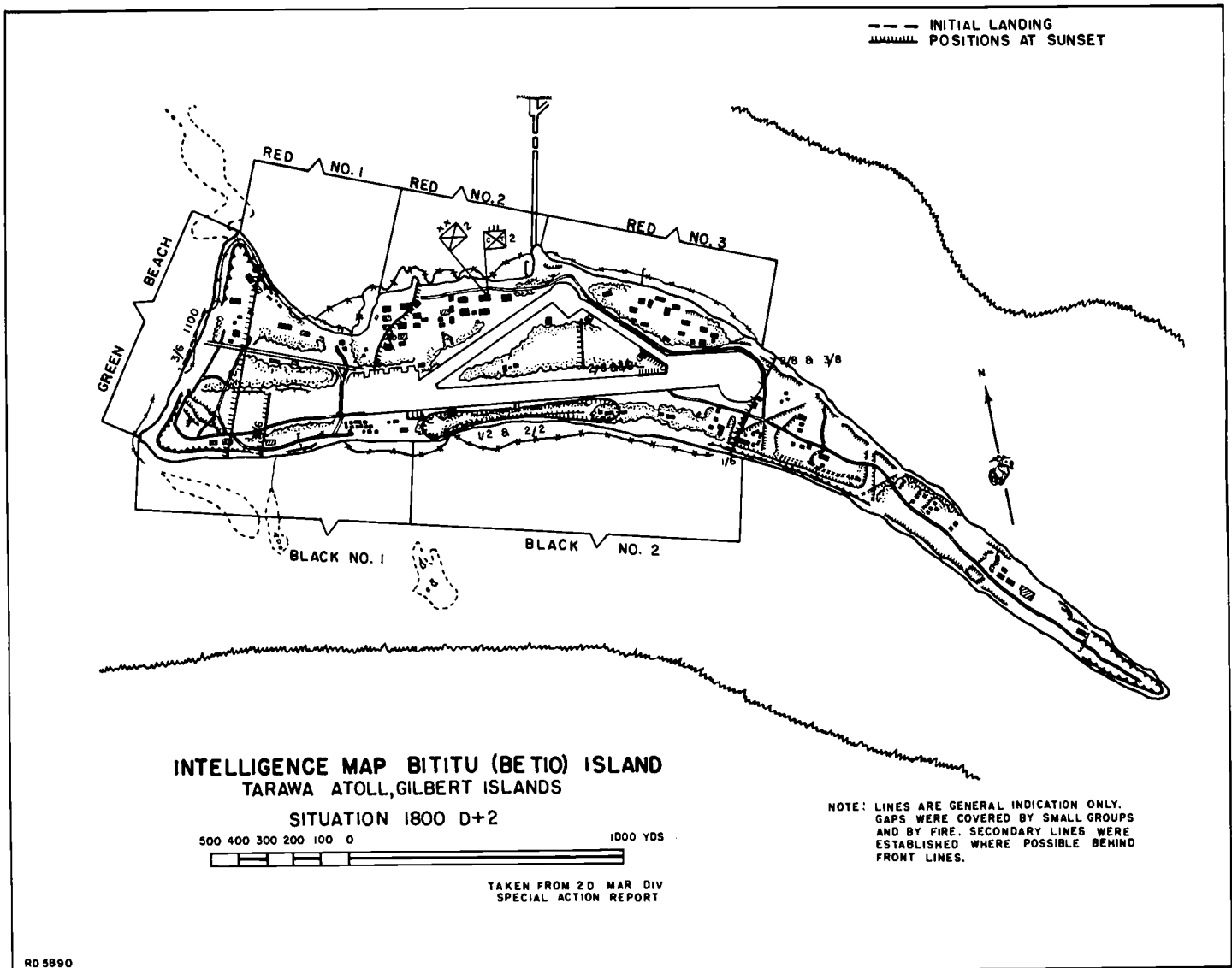
The Japanese struck Jones' lines again at 2300. One force made a noisy demonstration across from Company A's lines — taunting, clinking canteens against their helmets, yelling *Banzai!* — while a second force attacked Company B with a silent rush. The Marines repulsed this attack, too, but were forced to use their machine guns, thereby revealing their positions. Jones asked McLeod for a full company from 3/6 to reinforce the 2d Marines to the rear of the fighting.

A third attack came at 0300 in the morning when the Japanese moved several 7.7mm machine guns into nearby wrecked trucks and opened fire on the Marine automatic weapons positions. Marine NCOs volunteered to crawl forward against this oncoming fire and lob grenades into the improvised machine gun nests. This did the job, and the battlefield grew silent again. Jones called for star shell illumination from the destroyers in the lagoon.

*Marines use newly arrived jeeps to carry machine gun ammunition, demolitions, and other ordnance forward from the beach to troops fighting in the front lines.*

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection





ers emptied their magazines of 5-inch shells. The 1st Battalion, 10th Marines fired 1,300 rounds that long night, many shells being unloaded over the pier while the fire missions were underway. At first light, the Marines counted 200 dead Japanese within 50 yards of their lines, plus an additional 125 bodies beyond that range, badly mangled by artillery or naval gunfire. Other bodies lay scattered throughout the Marine lines. Major Jones had to blink back tears of pride and grief as he walked his lines that dawn. Several of his Marines grabbed his arm and muttered, "They told us we had to hold, and by God, we held."

### Completing the Task: 23-28 November 1943

"This was not only worse than Guadalcanal," admitted Lieutenant

Colonel Carlson, "It was the damndest fight I've seen in 30 years of this business."

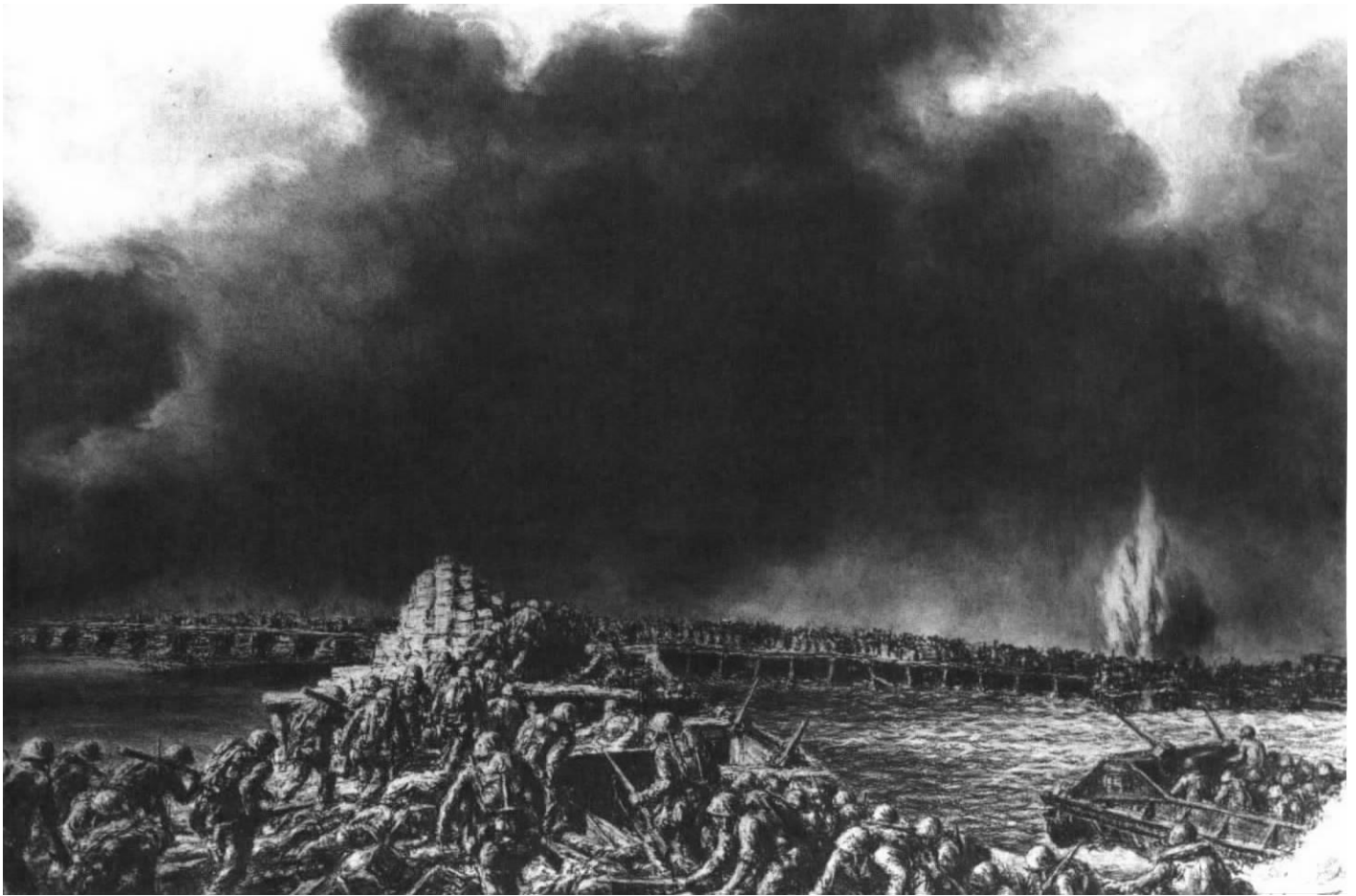
The costly counterattacks during the night of 22-23 November effectively broke the back of the Japanese defense. Had they remained in their bunkers until the bitter end, the defenders probably would have exacted a higher toll in American lives. Facing inevitable defeat in detail, however, nearly 600 Japanese chose to die by taking the offensive during the night action.

The 2d Marine Division still had five more hours of hard fighting on Betio the morning of D+3 before the island could be conquered. Late in the morning, General Smith sent this report to Admiral Hill on *Maryland*:

Decisive defeat of enemy counterattack last night des-

troyed bulk of hostile resistance. Expect complete annihilation of enemy on Betio this date. Strongly recommend that you and your chief of staff come ashore this date to get information about the type of hostile resistance which will be encountered in future operations.

Meanwhile, following a systematic preliminary bombardment, the fresh troops of McLeod's LT 3/6 passed through Jones' lines and commenced their attack to the east. By now, Marine assault tactics were well refined. Led by tanks and combat engineers with flamethrowers and high explosives, the troops of 3/6 made rapid progress. Only one bunker, a well-armed complex along the north shore, provided effective opposition.



U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection

*"Tarawa No. II," a sketch by combat artist Kerr Eby, reflects the difficulty in landing reinforcements over the long pier throughout the battle. As Gen Julian Smith personally learned, landing across Green Beach took longer but was much safer.*

McLeod took advantage of the heavy brush along the south shore to bypass the obstacle, leaving one rifle company to encircle and eventually overrun it. Momentum was maintained; the remaining Japanese seemed dispirited. By 1300, McLeod reached the eastern tip of Betio, having inflicted more than 450 Japanese casualties at the loss of 34 of his Marines. McLeod's report summarized the general collapse of the Japanese defensive system in the eastern zone following the counterattacks: "At no time was there any determined defensive . . . . We used flamethrowers and could have used more. Medium tanks were excellent. My light tanks didn't fire a shot."

The toughest fight of the fourth day occurred on the Red Beach One/Two border where Colonel Shoup directed the combined forces of Hays' 1/8 and Schoettel's 3/2 against the "re-entrant" strongpoints.

The Japanese defenders in these positions were clearly the most disciplined—and the deadliest—on the island. From these bunkers, Japanese antboat gunners had

thoroughly disrupted the landings of four different battalions, and they had very nearly killed General Smith the day before. The seaward approaches to these strongpoints were

*Marines fire a M-1919A4 machine gun from an improvised "shelter" in the battlefield.*

Department of Defense Photo 63495





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63455

*A Marine throws a hand grenade during the battle for the interior of the island.*

littered with wrecked LVTs and bloated bodies.

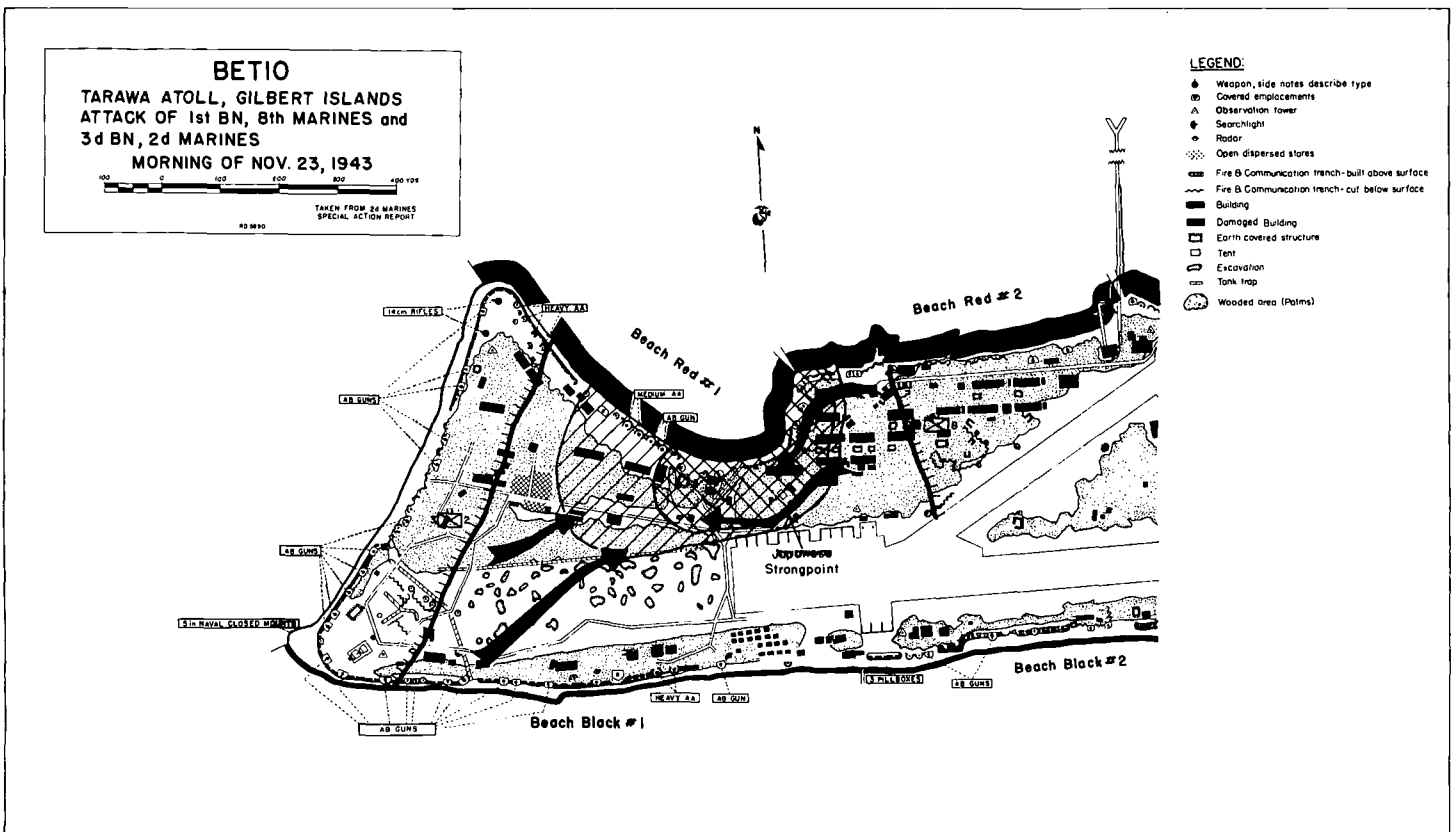
Major Hays finally got some flamethrowers (from Crowe's engineers when LT 2/8 was ordered to stand down), and the attack of 1/8 from the east made steady, if painstaking, progress. Major Schoettel, anxious to atone for what some per-

ceived to be a lackluster effort on D-Day, pressed the assault of 3/2 from the west and south. To complete the circle, Shoup ordered a platoon of infantry and a pair of 75mm halftracks out to the reef to keep the defenders pinned down from the lagoon. Some of the Japanese committed *hara-kari*; the remainder, exhausted, fought to

the end. Hays' Marines had been attacking this complex ever since their bloody landing on the morning of D+1. In those 48 hours, 1/8 fired 54,450 rounds of .30-caliber rifle ammunition. But the real damage was done by the special weapons of the engineers and the direct fire of the halftracks. Capture of the largest position, a concrete pillbox near the beach, enabled easier approaches to the remaining bunkers. By 1300, it was all over.

At high noon, while the fighting in both sectors was still underway, a Navy fighter plane landed on Betio's airstrip, weaving around the Seabee trucks and graders. Nearby Marines swarmed over the plane to shake the pilot's hand. A PB2Y also landed to take out press reports and the haggard observers, including Evans Carlson and Walter Jordan.

Admiral Hill and his staff came ashore at 1245. The naval officers marveled at the great strength of the Japanese bunker system, realizing immediately the need to reconsider their preliminary bombardment policies.



## Incident on D+3

A small incident on the last day of the fighting on Betio cost First Sergeant Lewis J. Michelony, Jr. his sense of smell. Michelony, a member of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, was a former boxing champion of the Atlantic Fleet and a combat veteran of Guadalcanal. Later in the Pacific War he would receive two Silver Star Medals for conspicuous bravery. On D+3 at Tarawa, however, he very nearly lost his life.

First Sergeant Michelony accompanied two other Marines on a routine reconnaissance of an area east of Green Beach, looking for likely positions to assign the battalion mortar platoon. The area had been "cleared" by the infantry companies of the battalion the previous morning. Other Marines had passed through the complex of seemingly empty Japanese bunkers without incident. The clearing was littered with Japanese bodies and abandoned enemy equipment. The three Marines threw grenades into the first bunker they encountered without response. All was quiet.

"Suddenly, out of nowhere, all hell broke loose," recalled

Michelony, "The front bunker opened fire with a machine gun, grenades hailed in from nowhere." One Marine died instantly; the second escaped, leaving Michelony face down in the sand. In desperation, the first sergeant dove into the nearest bunker, tumbling through a rear entrance to land in what he thought was a pool of water. In the bunker's dim light, he discovered it was a combination of water, urine, blood, and other material, "some of it from the bodies of the dead Japanese and some from the live ones." As he spat out the foul liquid from his mouth, Michelony realized there were live Japanese in among the dead, decaying ones. The smell, taste, and fear he experienced inside the bunker were almost overpowering. "Somehow I managed to get out. To this day, I don't know how. I crawled out of this cesspool dripping wet." The scorching sun dried his utilities as though they had been heavily starched; they still stank. "For months after, I could taste and smell, as well as visualize, this scene." Fifty years after the incident, retired Sergeant Major Michelony still has no sense of smell.

Admiral Hill called Betio "a little Gibraltar," and observed that "only the Marines could have made such a landing."

When Smith received the nearly simultaneous reports from Colonels Shoup and Holmes that both final objectives had been seized, he was able to share the good news with Hill. The two had worked together harmoniously to achieve this victory. Between them, they drafted a message to Admiral Turner and General Holland Smith announcing the end of organized resistance on Betio. It was 1305, about 76 hours after PFC Moore first rammed LVT 4-9 ("My Deloris") onto the seawall on Red Beach One to begin the direct assault.

The stench of death and decay was overwhelming. "Betio would be more habitable," reported Robert Sherrod, "if the Marines could leave for a few days and send a million buzzards in." Working parties sought doggedly to identify the dead; often the bodies were so badly shattered or burned as to eliminate distinction between friend and foe. Chaplains worked alongside burial teams equipped with bulldozers. General Smith's administrative staff worked hard to prepare

accurate casualty lists. More casualties were expected in the mop-up operations in the surrounding islands and Apamama. Particularly distressing was the report that nearly 100 enlisted Marines were missing and presumed dead. The changing tides had swept many bodies of the assault troops out to sea. The first pilot ashore reported seeing scores of floating corpses, miles away, over the horizon.

The Japanese garrison was nearly annihilated in the fighting. The Marines, supported by naval gunfire, carrier aviation, and Army Air Force units, killed 97 percent of the 4,836 troops estimated to be on Betio during the assault. Only 146 prisoners were taken, all but 17 of them Korean laborers. The Marines captured only one Japanese officer, 30-year-old Kiyoshi Ota from Nagasaki, a Special Duty Ensign in the *7th Sasebo Special Landing Force*. Ensign Ota told his captors the garrison expected the landings along the south and southwest sectors instead of the northern beaches. He also thought the reef would protect the defenders throughout periods of low tide.

Shortly before General Julian Smith's announcement of victory at Betio, his Army counterpart, General Ralph Smith, signalled "Makin taken!" In three days of sharp fighting on Butaritari Island, the Army wiped out the Japanese garrison at the cost of 200 American casualties. Bad blood developed between "Howling Mad" Smith and Ralph Smith over the conduct of this operation which would have unfortunate consequences in a later amphibious campaign.

The grimy Marines on Betio took a deep breath and sank to the ground. Many had been awake since the night before the landing. As Captain Carl Hoffman recalled, "There was just no way to rest; there was virtually no way to eat. Mostly it was close, hand-to-hand fighting and survival for three and a half days. It seemed like the longest period of my life." Lieutenant Lillibridge had no nourishment at all until the afternoon of D+3. "One of my men mixed up a canteen cup full of hot water, chocolate, coffee, and sugar, and gave it to me, saying he thought I needed something. It was the best meal I ever had."

The Marines stared numbly at the desolation that surrounded them. Lieutenant Colonel Russell Lloyd, executive officer of the 6th Marines, took a minute to scratch out a hasty note to his wife, saying "I'm on Tarawa in the midst of the worst destruction I've ever seen." Chaplain Willard walked along Red Beach One, finally clear of enemy pillboxes. "Along the shore," he wrote, "I counted the bodies of 76 Marines staring up at me, half in, half out of the water." Robert Sherrod also took the opportunity to walk about the island. "What I saw on Betio was, I am certain, one of the greatest works of devastation wrought by man." Sherrod whistled at the proliferation of heavy machine guns and 77mm anti-boat guns along the northwest shore. As he described one scene:

Amtrack Number 4-8 is jammed against the seawall barricade. Three waterlogged Marines lie beneath it. Four others are scattered nearby, and there is one hanging on a two-foot-high strand of barbed wire who

does not touch the coral flat at all. Back of the 77mm gun are many hundreds of rounds of 77mm ammunition.

Other Japanese forces in the Gilberts exacted a high toll among the invasion force. Six Japanese submarines reached the area during D+2. One of these, the *I-175*, torpedoed the escort carrier *Liscome Bay* just before sunrise on 24 November off Makin. The explosion was terrific—Admiral Hill saw the flash at Tarawa, 93 miles away—and the ship sank quickly, taking 644 souls to the bottom.

The Marines on Betio conducted a joint flag-raising ceremony later that same morning. Two of the few surviving palm trees were selected as poles, but the Marines were hard put to find a British flag. Finally, Major Holland, the New Zealand officer who had proved so prophetic about the tides at Tarawa, produced a Union Jack. A field musician played the appropriate bugle calls; Marines all over the small island stood and saluted. Each could reckon the cost.

At this time came the good news from Captain James Jones (brother to Major "Willie K." Jones) at Apamama. Jones' V Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company had landed by rubber rafts from the transport submarine *Nautilus* during the night of 20-21 November. The small Japanese garrison at first kept the scouts at bay. The *Nautilus* then surfaced and bombarded the Japanese positions with deck guns. This killed some of the defenders; the remainder committed *hara-kiri*. The island was deemed secure by the 24th. General Julian Smith sent General Hermle and McLeod's LT 3/6 to take command of Apamama until base defense forces could arrive.

General Smith kept his promise to his assault troops at Tarawa. Amphibious transports entered the lagoon on 24 November and backloaded Combat Teams 2 and 8. To Lieutenant Lillibridge, going back on board ship after Betio was like going to heaven. "The Navy personnel were unbelievably generous and kind . . . we were treated to a full-scale tur-

*One of the few Japanese prisoners taken on Betio this man was captured late in the battle.*

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection





Marine Corps Personal Papers, LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

*Navy Seabees managed to get their first bulldozer ashore on D-Day. With it, and the ones that followed, the Seabees built artillery revetments, smothered enemy positions, dug mass graves, and rebuilt the damaged runway – all while under fire.*

key dinner . . . . The Navy officers helped serve the food." But Lillibridge, like many other surviving troop leaders, suffered from post-combat trauma. The lieutenant had lost over half the members of his platoon, and he was consumed with guilt.

With the 2d Marines and 8th Marines off to Hawaii, McLeod's 3/6 en-route to Apamama, and Murray's 2/6 beginning its long trek through the other islands of the Tarawa Atoll, Major Jones' 1/6 became the last infantry unit on Betio. Its work was tedious: burying the dead, flushing out die-hard snipers, hosting visiting dignitaries.

The first of these was Major General Holland Smith. The V Amphibious Corps Commander flew to Betio on 24 November and spent an emotional afternoon viewing the carnage with Julian Smith. "Howling Mad" Smith was shaken by the experience. In his words: The sight of our dead floating in the waters of the lagoon and lying along the blood-soaked beaches is one I will never forget. Over the pitted, blasted island hung a miasma of coral dust and death, nauseating and horrifying."

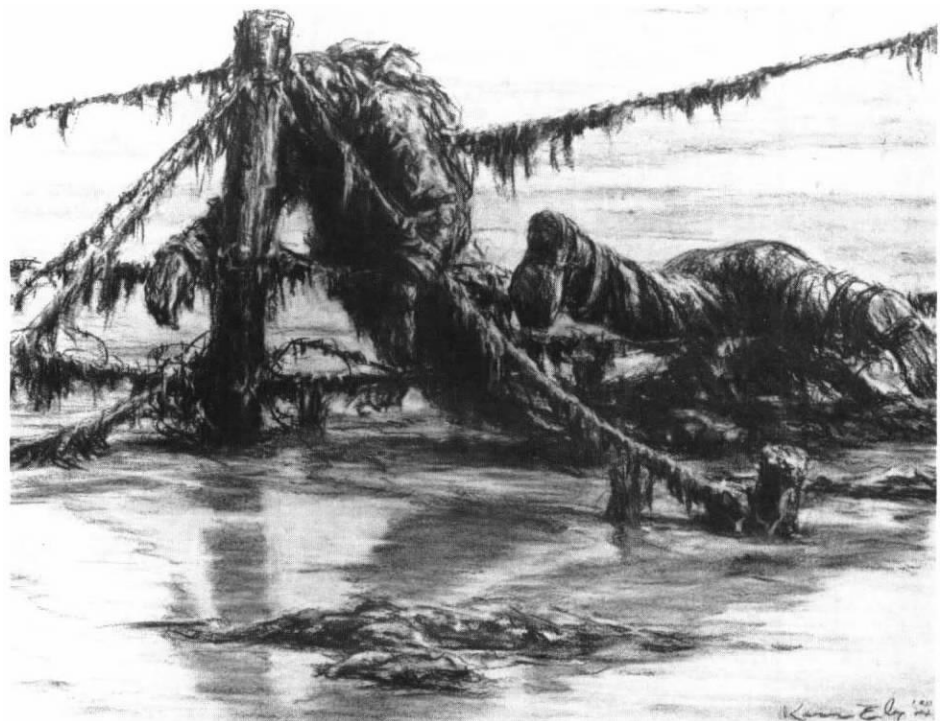
Major Jones recalled that Holland Smith had tears in his eyes as he walked through the ruins. Robert Sherrod also accompanied the generals. They came upon one sight that

moved all of them to tears. It was a dead Marine, leaning forward against the seawall, "one arm still supported upright by the weight of his body. On top of the seawall, just beyond his upraised hand, lies a blue and white flag, a beach marker to tell succeeding waves where to land." Holland Smith cleared his throat and said, "How can men like that ever be defeated?"

Company D, 2d Tank Battalion, was designated as the scout compa-

*"Ebb Tide – Tarawa," a sketch by Kerr Eby, evokes the tragic view of the beachhead.*

U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection



ny for the 2d Marine Division for the Tarawa operation. Small elements of these scouts landed on Eita and Buota Islands while the fighting on Betio still raged, discovering and shadowing a sizeable Japanese force. On 23 November, Lieutenant Colonel Manley Curry's 3d Battalion, 10th Marines, landed on Eita. The battalion's pack howitzers were initially intended to augment fires on Betio; when that island finally fell, the artillerymen turned their guns to support the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, in clearing the rest of the islands in the atoll.

Lieutenant Colonel Murray's LT 2/6 boarded boats from Betio at 0500 on 24 November and landed on Buota. Murray set a fierce pace, the Marines frequently wading across the sandspits that joined the succeeding islands. Soon he was out of range of Curry's guns on Eita. Curry detached Battery G to follow Murray in trace. The Marines learned from friendly natives that a Japanese force of about 175 naval infantry was ahead on the larger island of Buariki, near the northwest point of the atoll. Murray's lead elements caught up with the ene-



my at dusk on 26 November. There was a sharp exchange of fire in very thick vegetation before both sides broke contact. Murray positioned his forces for an all-out assault in the morning.

The battle of Buariki on 27 November was the last engagement in the Gilberts, and it was just as deadly as each preceding encounter with the *Special Naval Landing Forces*. Murray attacked the Japanese defensive positions at first light, getting one salvo of supporting fire from Battery G before the lines become too intermingled in the extended melee. Here the fighting was similar to Guadalcanal: much hand-to-hand brawling in tangled underbrush. The Japanese had no elaborate defenses as on Betio, but the Imperial sea soldiers took advantage of cover and concealment, made every shot count, and fought to the last man. All 175 were slain. Murray's victory was

*MajGen Julian C. Smith, wearing helmet liner at center, describes the nature of the recently completed conquest of Betio to Adm Chester Nimitz, facing camera, and Army LtGen*

dearly bought: 32 officers and men killed, 59 others wounded. The following day, the Marines crossed to the last remaining islet. There were no more Japanese to be found. On 28 November, Julian Smith announced "remaining enemy forces on Tarawa wiped out."

Admirals Nimitz and Spruance came to Betio just before Julian Smith's announcement. Nimitz quickly saw that the basic Japanese defenses were still intact. He directed his staff to diagnose the exact construction methods used; within a month an identical set of bunkers and pillboxes was being built on the naval bombardment island of Kahoolawe in the Hawaiian Islands.

Admiral Nimitz paused to present the first of many combat awards to Marines of the 2d Marine Division. In time, other recognition followed. The entire division was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. Colonel

David Monroe Shoup received the Medal of Honor. Major "Jim" Crowe and his executive officer, Major Bill Chamberlin, received the Navy Cross. So did Lieutenant Colonel Herb Amey (posthumously), Major Mike Ryan, and Corporal John Spillane, the LVT crewchief and prospective baseball star who caught the Japanese hand grenades in mid-air on D-Day before his luck ran out.

Some of the senior officers in the division were jealous of Shoup's Medal of Honor, but Julian Smith knew full well whose strong shoulders had borne the critical first 36 hours of the assault. Shoup was philosophical. As he recorded in his combat notebook, "With God and the U.S. Navy in direct support of the 2d MarDiv there was never any doubt that we would get Betio. For several hours, however, there was considerable haggling over the exact price we were to pay for it."

*Robert Richardson during their visit to the island on 27 November 1943. An exhausted Col Edson looks on at right. While they talked, the smell of death pervaded over the island.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 65437



## *The Significance of Tarawa*

The costs of the forcible seizure of Tarawa were two-fold: the loss of Marines in the assault itself, followed by the shock and despair of the nation upon hearing the reports of the battle. The gains at first seemed small in return, the "stinking little island" of Betio, 8,000 miles from Tokyo. In time, the practical lessons learned in the complex art of amphibious assault began to outweigh the initial adverse publicity.

The final casualty figures for the 2d Marine Division in Operation Galvanic were 997 Marines and 30 sailors (organic medical personnel) dead; 88 Marines missing and presumed dead; and 2,233 Marines and 59 sailors wounded. Total casualties: 3,407. The Guadalcanal campaign had cost a comparable amount of Marine casualties over six months; Tarawa's losses occurred in a period of 76 hours. Moreover, the ratio of killed to wounded at Tarawa was significantly high, reflecting the savagery of the fighting. The overall proportion of casualties among those Marines engaged in the assault was about 19 percent, a steep but "acceptable" price. But some battalions suffered much higher losses. The 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion lost over half the command. The battalion also lost all but 35 of the 125 LVT's employed at Betio.

Lurid headlines—"The Bloody Beaches of Tarawa"—alarmed American newspaper readers. Part of this was the Marines' own doing. Many of the combat correspondents invited along for Operation Galvanic had shared the very worst of the hell of Betio the first 36 hours, and they simply reported what they observed. Such was the case of Marine Corps Master Technical Sergeant James C. Lucas, whose accounts of the fighting received front-page coverage in both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* on 4 December 1943. Colonel Shoup was furious with Lucas for years thereafter, but

it was the headline writers for both papers who did the most damage (*The Times*: "Grim Tarawa Defense a Surprise, Eyewitness of Battle Reveals; Marines Went in Chuckling, To Find Swift Death Instead of Easy Conquest.").

Nor did extemporaneous remarks to the media by some of the senior Marines involved in Operation Galvanic help soothe public concerns. Holland Smith likened the D-Day assault to Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. "Red Mike" Edson said the assault force "paid the stiffest price in human life per square yard" at Tarawa than any other engagement in Marine Corps history. Evans Carlson talked graphically of seeing 100 of Hays men gunned down in the water in five minutes on D+1, a considerable exaggeration. It did not help matters when Headquarters Ma-

rine Corps waited until 10 days after the battle to release casualty lists.

The atmosphere in both Washington and Pearl Harbor was particularly tense during this period. General MacArthur, still bitter that the 2d Marine Division had been taken from his Southwest Pacific Command, wrote the Secretary of War complaining that "these frontal attacks by the Navy, as at Tarawa, are a tragic and unnecessary massacre of American lives." A woman wrote Admiral Nimitz accusing him of "murdering my son." Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox called a press conference in which he blamed "a sudden shift in the wind" for exposing the reef and preventing reinforcements from landing. Congress proposed a special investigation. The Marines were fortunate to have General Alexander A. Vandegrift in

*A Marine combat correspondent assigned to the Tarawa operation interviews a Marine from the 18th Engineers, 2d Marine Division, during the course of the fighting.*

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection



# Tarawa Today

Tarawa is one of the few Pacific battlefields that remained essentially unchanged for the half century that followed World War II. Visitors to Betio Island can readily see wrecked American tanks and LVTs along the beaches, as well as the ruins of Japanese gun emplacements and pill boxes. Admiral Shibasaki's imposing concrete bunker still stands, seemingly as impervious to time as it was to the battleship guns of Task Force 53. The "Singapore Guns" still rest in their turrets overlooking the approaches to the island. A few years ago, natives unearthed a buried LVT containing the skeletons of its Marine Corps crew, one still wearing dog tags.

General David M. Shoup was recalled from retirement to active duty for nine days in 1968 to represent the United States at the dedication of a large monument on Betio, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the battle. As Shoup later told *The National Observer*, "My first reaction was that Betio had shrunk a great deal. It seems smaller in peace than in war." As he toured the ruined fortifications, Shoup recalled the savage, desperate fighting and wondered "why two nations would spend so much for so little." Nearly

6,000 Japanese and Americans died on the tiny island in 76 hours of fighting.

Twenty years after Shoup's dedication ceremony, the American memorial had fallen into disrepair; indeed, it was in danger of being torn down to make room for a cold-storage plant for Japanese fishermen. A lengthy campaign by the 2d Marine Division Association and Long Beach-journalist Tom Hennessy raised enough funds to obtain a new, more durable monument, a nine-ton block of Georgia granite inscribed "To our fellow Marines who gave their all." The memorial was dedicated on 20 November 1988.

Betio is now part of the new Republic of Kiribati. Tourist facilities are being developed to accommodate the large number of veterans who wish to return. For now, the small island probably resembles the way it appeared on D-Day, 50 years ago. American author James Ramsey Ullman visited Tarawa earlier and wrote a fitting eulogy: "It is a familiar irony that old battlefields are often the quietest and gentlest of places. It is true of Gettysburg. It is true of Cannae, Chalons, Austerlitz, Verdun. And it is true of Tarawa."

Washington as the newly appointed 18th Commandant. Vandegrift, the widely respected and highly decorated veteran of Guadalcanal, quietly reassured Congress, pointing out that "Tarawa was an assault from beginning to end." The casualty reports proved to be less dramatic than expected. A thoughtful editorial in the 27 December 1943 issue of *The New York Times* complimented the Marines for overcoming Tarawa's sophisticated defenses and fanatical garrison, warning that future assaults in the Marshalls might result in heavier losses. "We must steel ourselves now to pay that price."

The controversy was stirred again after the war when General Holland Smith claimed publicly that "Tarawa was a mistake!" Significantly, Nimitz, Spruance, Turner, Hill, Julian Smith, and Shoup disagreed with that assessment.

Admiral Nimitz did not waver. "The capture of Tarawa," he stated, "knocked down the front door to the Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific." Nimitz launched the Marshalls campaign only 10 weeks after the sei-

zure of Tarawa. Photo-reconnaissance and attack aircraft from the captured airfields at Betio and Apamama provided invaluable support. Of greater significance to success in the Marshalls were the lessons learned and the confidence gleaned from the Tarawa experience.

Henry I. Shaw, Jr., for many years the Chief Historian of the Marine Corps, observed that Tarawa was the primer, the textbook on amphibious assault that guided and influenced all subsequent landings in the Central Pacific. Shaw believed that the prompt and selfless analyses which immediately followed Tarawa were of great value: "From analytical reports of the commanders and from their critical evaluations of what went wrong, of what needed improvement, and of what techniques and equipment proved out in combat, came a tremendous outpouring of lessons learned."

All participants agreed that the conversion of logistical LVTs to assault craft made the difference between victory and defeat at Betio. There was further consensus that the

LVT-1s and LVT-2s employed in the operation were marginal against heavy defensive fires. The Alligators needed more armor, heavier armament, more powerful engines, auxiliary bilge pumps, self-sealing gas tanks – and wooden plugs the size of 13mm bullets to keep from being sunk by the Japanese M93 heavy machine guns. Most of all, there needed to be many more LVTs, at least 300 per division. Shoup wanted to keep the use of LVTs as reef-crossing assault vehicles a secret, but there had been too many reporters on the scene. Hanson W. Baldwin broke the story in *The New York Times* as early as 3 December.

Naval gunfire support got mixed reviews. While the Marines were enthusiastic about the response from destroyers in the lagoon, they were critical of the extent and accuracy of the preliminary bombardment, especially when it was terminated so prematurely on D-Day. In Major Ryan's evaluation, the significant shortcoming in Operation Galvanic "lay in overestimating the damage that could be inflicted on a heavily

defended position by an intense but limited naval bombardment, and by not sending in the assault forces soon enough after the shelling." Major Schoettel, recalling the pounding his battalion had received from emplacements within the seawall, recommended direct fire against the face of the beach by 40mm guns from close-in destroyers. The hasty, saturation fires, deemed sufficient by planners in view of the requirement for strategic surprise, proved essentially useless. Amphibious assaults against fortified atolls would most of all need sustained, deliberate, aimed fire.

While no one questioned the bravery of the aviators who supported the Betio assault, many questioned whether they were armed and trained adequately for such a difficult target. The need for closer integration of all supporting arms was evident.

Communications throughout the Betio assault were awful. Only the ingenuity of a few radio operators and the bravery of individual runners kept the assault reasonably coherent. The Marines needed waterproof radios. The Navy needed a dedicated amphibious command ship, not a major combatant whose big guns would knock out the radio nets with each salvo. Such command ships, the AGCs, began to appear during the Marshalls campaign.

Other revisions to amphibious doctrine were immediately indicated. The nature and priority of unloading supplies should henceforth become the call of the tactical commander ashore, not the amphibious task force commander.

Betio showed the critical need for underwater swimmers who could stealthily assess and report reef, beach, and surf conditions to the task force before the landing. This concept, first envisioned by amphibious warfare prophet Major Earl "Pete" Ellis in the 1920s, came quickly to fruition. Admiral Turner had a fledgling Underwater Demolition Team on hand for the Marshalls.

The Marines believed that, with

proper combined arms training, the new medium tanks would be valuable assets. Future tank training would emphasize integrated tank, infantry, engineer, and artillery operations. Tank-infantry communications needed immediate improvement. Most casualties among tank commanders at Betio resulted from the individuals having to dismount from their vehicles to talk with the infantry in the open.

The backpack flamethrower won universal acclaim from the Marines on Betio. Each battalion commander recommended increases in quantity, range, and mobility for these assault weapons. Some suggested that larger versions be mounted on tanks and LVTs, presaging the appearance of "Zippo Tanks" in later campaigns in the Pacific.

Julian Smith rather humbly summed up the lessons learned at Tarawa by commenting, "We made fewer mistakes than the Japs did."

Military historians Jeter A. Isely and Philip A. Crowl used different words of assessment: "The capture of Tarawa, in spite of defects in execution, conclusively demonstrated that

American amphibious doctrine was valid, that even the strongest island fortress could be seized."

The subsequent landings in the Marshalls employed this doctrine, as modified by the Tarawa experience, to achieve objectives against similar targets with fewer casualties and in less time. The benefits of Operation Galvanic quickly began to outweigh the steep initial costs.

In time, Tarawa became a symbol of raw courage and sacrifice on the part of attackers and defenders alike. Ten years after the battle, General Julian Smith paid homage to both sides in an essay in *Naval Institute Proceedings*. He saluted the heroism of the Japanese who chose to die almost to the last man. Then he turned to his beloved 2d Marine Division and their shipmates in Task Force 53 at Betio:

For the officers and men, Marines and sailors, who crossed that reef, either as assault troops, or carrying supplies, or evacuating wounded I can only say that I shall forever think of them with a feeling of reverence and the greatest respect.

*Themes underlying the enduring legacy of Tarawa are: the tide that failed; tactical assault vehicles that succeeded; a high cost in men and material; which in the end spelled out victory in the Central Pacific and a road that led to Tokyo.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63843



## Sources

Much of this history is based on first-hand accounts as recorded by the surviving participants. One rich source is contained in the USMC archives maintained by the Washington National Records Group in Suitland, Maryland. Of special value are the 2d Marine Division's Operations Order 14 (25Oct43) and Special Action Report (6Jan44). Other useful documents in the archives include the combat reports of 2d Tank Battalion and 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion; the Division D-3 Journal for 20-24Nov43; the D-2 POW Interrogation Reports; "comments on equipment and procedures" by the battalion commanders; and the exhaustive intelligence report, "Study of Japanese Defenses on Betio Island" (20Dec43). The Marine Corps Historical Center's Personal Papers Collection contains Colonel Shoup's combat notebook, as well as his after-action report, comments during the Pearl Harbor conference on LVTs, comments on draft histories in 1947 and 1963, and his remarks for the record at various anniversaries of the battle. A lengthy account of the Betio assault is found in the transcript of Colonel Merritt Edson's briefing to the staff officers of the Marine Corps Schools after the battle (6Jan44). The Personal Papers Collection also includes worthwhile Tarawa accounts by General Julian C. Smith, 2dLt George D. Lillibridge, 1stLt Frank Plant, and LtCol Russell Lloyd, used herein.

Other useful Tarawa information can be gleaned from the MCHC's Oral History Collection, which contains recollections by such participants as General Smith; Eugene Boardman; Major Henry P. Crowe; Staff Sergeant Norman Hatch; Brigadier General Leo Hermle; Admiral Harry Hill, USN; Captain Carl Hoffman; Major Wood Kyle; Major William K. Jones; and Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray. Other contemporary accounts include newspaper essays written by war correspondents on the scene, such as Robert Sherrod, Richard Johnston, Keith Wheeler, and Earl Wilson.

The author also benefitted from direct correspondence with four retired Marines who served with valor at Tarawa: Lieutenant General William K. Jones; Major General Michael P. Ryan; Sergeant Major Lewis J. Michelony, Jr.; and Master Sergeant Edward J. Moore. Further, the author gratefully acknowledges the donation of two rare photographs of the Japanese garrison on Betio by the 2d Marine Division Association.

## Errata

Please make the following changes in the World War II 50th anniversary commemorative monograph noted:

*Opening Moves: Marines Gear Up For War*

Page 16, the correct armament for the Grumman F4F Wildcat is two .50-caliber machine guns mounted in each wing instead of four.

*First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal*

Page 43, the correct hull number for the cruiser *Atlanta* should be CL(AA) 51 instead of CL 104.

*Outpost in the Atlantic: Marines in the Defense of Iceland*

Photographs accredited to the Col Chester M. Craig Collection should be accredited instead to the Col Clifton M. Craig Collection.

Page 5, sidebar on "Uniforms and Equipment"—the enlisted Marine wore an almost black cow-skin belt called a "fair leather belt" instead of "... a wide cordovan leather 'Peter Bain' belt."

Page 8 and *passim*, the British division based on Iceland was the 49th Division, not the 79th Division.

## About the Author



Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret), served 29 years on active duty as an assault amphibian officer, including two tours in Vietnam. He earned an undergraduate degree in history from the University of North Carolina and masters' degrees in history and government from Georgetown and Jacksonville. He is a distinguished graduate of the Naval War College, a member of the Society for Military History, and a life member of the Marine Corps Historical Foundation.

Colonel Alexander, an independent historian, is the author of military essays published in *Marine Corps Gazette*, *Naval Institute Proceedings*, *Naval History*, *Leatherneck*, *Amphibious Warfare Review*, and *Florida Historical Quarterly*. He is co-author (with Lieutenant Colonel Merrill L. Bartlett) of "Sea Soldiers in the Cold War" (Naval Institute Press, accepted).



**WORLD WAR II**



**THIS PAMPHLET HISTORY**, one in a series devoted to U.S. Marines in the World War II era, is published for the education and training of Marines by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., as a part of the U.S. Department of Defense observance of the 50th anniversary of victory in that war.

Printing costs for this pamphlet have been defrayed in part by the Defense Department World War II Commemoration Committee. Editorial costs of preparing this pamphlet have been defrayed in part by a bequest from the estate of Emilie H. Watts, in memory of her late husband, Thomas M. Watts, who served as a Marine and was the recipient of a Purple Heart.

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Robert E. Struder, Senior Editor; W. Stephen Hill, Visual Information Specialist; Catherine A. Kerns, Composition Services Technician

Marine Corps Historical Center  
Building 58, Washington Navy Yard  
Washington, D.C. 20374-0580

1993

PCN 190 003120 00

