

ACROSS THE REEF:
THE MARINE ASSAULT
OF TARAWA

MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY COLONEL JOSEPH H. ALEXANDER
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by Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret)

In August 1943, to meet in secret with Major General Julian C. Smith and his principal staff officers of the 2d Marine Division, Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, commanding the Central Pacific Force, flew to New Zealand from Pearl Harbor. Spruance told the Marines to prepare for an amphibious assault against Japanese positions in the Gilbert Islands in November.

The Marines knew about the Gilberts. The 2d Raider Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Evans F. Carlson had attacked Makin Atoll a year earlier. Subsequent intelligence reports warned that the Japanese had fortified Betio Island in Tarawa Atoll, where elite forces guarded a new bomber strip. Spruance said Betio would be the prime target for the 2d Marine Division.

General Smith's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel David M. Shoup, studied the primitive chart of Betio and saw that the tiny island was surrounded by a barrier reef. Shoup asked Spruance if any of the Navy's experimental, shallow-draft, plastic boats could be provided. "Not available," replied the admiral, "expect only the usual wooden landing craft." Shoup frowned. General Smith could sense that Shoup's gifted mind was already formulating a plan.

The results of that plan were

momentous. The Tarawa operation became a tactical watershed: the first, large-scale test of American amphibious doctrine against a strongly fortified beachhead. The Marine assault on Betio was particularly bloody. Ten days after the assault, *Time* magazine published the first of many post-battle analyses:

Last week some 2,000 or 3,000 United States Marines, most of them now dead or wounded, gave the nation a name to stand beside those of Concord Bridge, the *Bon Homme Richard*, the Alamo, Little Big Horn and Belleau Wood. The name was "Tarawa."

Setting the Stage

The Gilbert Islands consist of 16 scattered atolls lying along the equator in the Central Pacific. Tarawa Atoll is 2,085 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor and 540 miles southeast of Kwajalein in the Marshalls. Betio is the principal island in the atoll.

The Japanese seized Tarawa and Makin from the British within the first three days after Pearl Harbor. Carlson's brief raid in August 1942 caused the Japanese to realize their vulnerability in the Gilberts. Shortly after the raid, the *6th Yokosuka Special Naval Landing Force* arrived in the islands. With them came Rear Admiral Tomanari Saichiro, a superb engineer, who directed the construction of sophisticated defensive positions on Betio. Saichiro's primary goal was to make Betio so formidable that an American assault would be stalled at the water's edge, allowing time for the other elements of the *Yogaki* ("Waylaying Attack") Plan to destroy the landing force.

The *Yogaki* Plan was the Japanese strategy to defend eastern Micronesia from an Allied invasion. Japanese commanders agreed to counterattack with bombers, submarines, and the main battle fleet. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet/Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas (CinCPac/CinCPOA), took these capabilities seriously. Nimitz directed Spruance to "get the hell in and get the hell out!" Spruance in turn warned his subordinates to seize the target islands in the Gilberts "with lightning speed." This sense of urgency had a major influence on the Tarawa campaign.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff assigned the code name Galvanic to the campaign to capture Tarawa, Makin, and Apamama in the Gilberts. The 2d Marine Division was assigned Tarawa and Apamama (a company-sized operation); the Army's 165th Regimental Combat Team of the 27th Infantry Division would tackle Makin.

By coincidence, each of the three landing force commanders in Operation Galvanic was a major general named Smith. The senior of these was a Marine, Holland M. "Howling Mad" Smith, commanding V Amphibious Corps. Julian C. Smith commanded the 2d Marine Division. Army Major General Ralph C. Smith commanded the 27th Infantry Division.

Spruance assigned Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly "Terrible" Turner, veteran of the Guadalcanal campaign, to command all amphibious forces for the operation. Turner, accompanied by Holland Smith, decided to command the northern group, Task Force 52, for the assault on Makin. Turner assigned Rear Ad-

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

On the cover: "Quiet Lagoon" is a classic end-of-battle photograph of the considerable wreckage along Red Beach Two.

U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection

At left: Artist Kerr Eby, who landed at Tarawa as a participant, entitled this sketch "Bullets and Barbed Wire."



Marine Corps Personal Papers, Boardman Collection

Japanese Special Naval Landing Force troops mount a British-made, Vickers eight-inch naval cannon into its turret on Betio before the battle. This film was developed from a Japanese camera found in the ruins while the battle was still on.

miral Harry W. "Handsome Harry" Hill to command the southern group, Task Force 53, for the assault on Tarawa. Julian Smith would accompany Hill on board the old battleship USS *Maryland* (BB 46). The two officers were opposites—Hill, outspoken and impetuous; Julian Smith, reserved and reflective—but they worked together well. Spruance set D-Day for 20 November 1943.

Colonel Shoup came up with an idea of how to tackle Betio's barrier reefs. He had observed the Marines' new Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT or "Alligator"), an amphibian tractor, in operation during Guadalcanal. The Alligators were unarmored logistic vehicles, not assault craft, but they were true amphibians, capable of being launched at sea and swimming ashore through moderate surf.

Shoup discussed the potential use of LVTs as assault craft with Major Henry C. Drewes, commanding the 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion.

Drewes liked the idea, but warned Shoup that many of his vehicles were in poor condition after the Guadalcanal campaign. At best, Drewes could provide a maximum of 75 vehicles, not nearly enough to carry the entire assault and following waves. Further, the thin hulls of the vehicles were vulnerable to every enemy weapon and would require some form of jury-rigged armor plating for minimal protection. Shoup encouraged Drewes to modify the vehicles with whatever armor plate he could scrounge.

General Julian Smith was aware that a number of LVT-2s were stockpiled in San Diego, and he submitted an urgent request for 100 of the newer models to the corps commander. Holland Smith endorsed the request favorably, but Admiral Turner disagreed. The two strong-willed officers were doctrinally equal during the planning phase, and the argument was intense. While Turner

did not dispute the Marines' need for a reef-crossing capability, he objected to the fact that the new vehicles would have to be carried to Tarawa in tank landing ships (LSTs). The slow speed of the LSTs (8.5 knots max) would require a separate convoy, additional escorts, and an increased risk of losing the element of strategic surprise. Holland Smith reduced the debate to bare essentials: "No LVTs, no operation." Turner acquiesced, but it was not a complete victory for the Marines. Half of the 100 new LVT-2s would go to the Army forces landing at Makin against much lighter opposition. The 50 Marine vehicles would not arrive in time for either work-up training or the rehearsal landings. The first time the infantry would lay eyes on the LVT-2s would be in the pre-dawn hours of D-Day at Tarawa—if then.

Assault Preparations

As replacement troops began to pour into New Zealand, General

Smith requested the assignment of Colonel Merritt A. "Red Mike" Edson as division chief of staff. The fiery Edson, already a legend in the Corps for his heroic exploits in Central America and Guadalcanal, worked tirelessly to forge the amalgam of veterans and newcomers into an effective amphibious team.

Intelligence reports from Betio were sobering. The island, devoid of natural defilade positions and narrow enough to limit maneuver room, favored the defenders. Betio was less than three miles long, no broader than 800 yards at its widest point and

contained no natural elevation higher than 10 feet above sea level. "Every place on the island can be covered by direct rifle and machine gun fire," observed Edson.

The elaborate defenses prepared by Admiral Saichiro were impressive. Concrete and steel tetrahedrons, minefields, and long strings of double-apron barbed wire protected beach approaches. The Japanese also built a barrier wall of logs and coral around much of the island. Tank traps protected heavily fortified command bunkers and firing positions inland from the beach. And every-

where there were pillboxes, nearly 500 of them, most fully covered by logs, steel plates and sand.

The Japanese on Betio were equipped with eight-inch, turret-mounted naval rifles (the so-called "Singapore Guns"), as well as a large number of heavy-caliber coast defense, antiaircraft, antiboat, and field artillery guns and howitzers. Dual-purpose 13mm heavy machine guns were prevalent. Light tanks (mounting 37mm guns), 50mm "knee mortars," and an abundance of 7.7mm light machine guns complemented the defensive weaponry.

The 2d Marine Division at Tarawa

Major General Julian C. Smith's utmost concern when he assumed command of the 2d Marine Division on 1 May 1943 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. These were the principal commanders as the division began its intensified training program leading to Operation Galvanic:

CO, 2d Marines: Col William M. Marshall

CO, 1/2: Maj Wood B. Kyle

CO, 2/2: LtCol Herbert R. Amey, Jr.

CO, 3/2: Maj John F. Schoettel

CO, 6th Marines: Col Maurice G. Holmes

CO, 1/6: Maj William K. Jones

CO, 2/6: LtCol Raymond L. Murray

CO, 3/6: LtCol Kenneth F. McLeod

CO, 8th Marines: Col Elmer E. Hall

CO, 1/8: Maj Lawrence C. Hays, Jr.

CO, 2/8: Maj Henry P. "Jim" Crowe

CO, 3/8: Maj Robert H. Ruud

CO, 10th Marines: BGen Thomas E. Bourke

CO, 18th Marines: Col Cyril W. Martyr

Other officers who would emerge in key roles at Tarawa included Brigadier General Leo D. Hermle, Assistant Division Commander; Lieutenant Colonel Presley M. Rixey, commanding 1/10, a pack-howitzer battalion supporting the 2d Marines; Lieutenant Colonel Alexander B. Swencski, commanding the composite 2d Tank Battalion; Major Henry C. Drewes, commanding 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion; Major Michael P. Ryan, commanding Company L,

3/2; and First Lieutenant William D. Hawkins, commanding the Scout Sniper Platoon in the 2d Marines. Altogether, 18,088 Marines and sailors of the division participated in the assault on Tarawa Atoll. About 55 percent were combat veterans. Unlike Guadalcanal, the Marines at Tarawa carried modern infantry weapons, including Garand M-1 semi-automatic rifles, Browning automatic rifles, and portable flame throwers. Assault Marines landed with a combat load consisting of knapsack, poncho, entrenching tool, bayonet, field rations, and gas masks (quickly discarded). Many of those carrying heavy weapons, ammunition, or radios drowned during the hectic debarkation from landing craft under fire at the reef's edge.

Troops of the 2d Marine Division debark down cargo nets from a troop transport during amphibious training.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63751





LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

An LVT-1 is lowered from a troop transport during landing rehearsals. Some of the Marines shown here are wearing camouflage utilities while the others are in the usual herring-bone twill. Note that the sea appears unusually calm.

The Japanese during August replaced Saichero with Rear Admiral Meichi Shibasaki, an officer reputed to be more of a fighter than an engineer. American intelligence sources estimated the total strength of the Betio garrison to be 4,800 men, of whom some 2,600 were considered first-rate naval troops. "Imperial Japanese Marines," Edson told the war correspondents, "the best Tojo's got." Edson's 1st Raider Battalion had sustained 88 casualties in wresting Tulagi from the 3d Kure Special Naval Landing Force the previous August.

Admiral Shibasaki boasted to his troops, "a million Americans couldn't take Tarawa in 100 years." His optimism was forgivable. The island was the most heavily defended atoll that ever would be invaded by Allied forces in the Pacific.

Task Force 53 sorely needed detailed tidal information for Tarawa. Colonel Shoup was confident

that the LVTs could negotiate the reef at any tide, but he worried about the remainder of the assault troops, tanks, artillery, and reserve forces that would have to come ashore in Higgins boats (LCVPs). The critical water depth over the reef was four feet, enough to float a laden LCVP. Anything less and the troops would have to wade ashore several hundred yards against that panoply of Japanese weapons.

Major Frank Holland, a New Zealand reserve officer with 15 years' experience sailing the waters of Tarawa, flatly predicted, "there won't be three feet of water on the reef!" Shoup took Holland's warnings seriously and made sure the troops knew in advance that "there was a 50-50 chance of having to wade ashore."

In the face of the daunting Japanese defenses and the physical constraints of the island, Shoup proposed a landing plan which included a sustained preliminary

bombardment, advance seizure of neighboring Bairiki Island as an artillery fire base, and a decoy landing. General Smith took this proposal to the planning conference in Pearl Harbor with the principal officers involved in Operation Galvanic: Admirals Nimitz, Spruance, Turner, and Hill, and Major General Holland Smith.

The Marines were stunned to hear the restrictions imposed on their assault by CinCPac. Nimitz declared that the requirement for strategic surprise limited preliminary bombardment of Betio to about three hours on the morning of D-Day. The imperative to concentrate naval forces to defend against a Japanese fleet sortie also ruled out advance seizure of Bairiki and any decoy landings. Then Holland Smith announced his own bombshell: the 6th Marines would be withheld as corps reserve.

All of Julian Smith's tactical options had been stripped away. The 2d

Major General Julian C. Smith, USMC

The epic battle of Tarawa was the pinnacle of Julian Smith's life and career. Smith was 58 and had been a Marine Corps officer for 34 years at the time of Operation Galvanic. He was born in Elkton, Maryland, and graduated from the University of Delaware. Overseas service included expeditionary tours in Panama, Mexico, Haiti, Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Nicaragua. He graduated from the Naval War College in 1917 and, as did many other frustrated Marine officers, spent the duration of World War I in Quantico. As were shipmates Colonel Merritt A. Edson and Major Henry P. Crowe, Smith was a distinguished marksman and former rifle team coach. Command experience in the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) was limited. He commanded the 5th Marines in 1938, and he was commanding officer of the FMF Training School at New River until being ordered to the 2d Marine Division in May 1943.

Smith's contemporaries had a high respect for him. Although unassuming and self-effacing, "there was nothing wrong with his fighting heart." Lieutenant Colonel Ray Murray, one of his battalion commanders, described him as "a fine old gentleman of high moral fiber; you'd fight for him." Smith's troops perceived that their commanding general had a genuine love for them.

Julian Smith knew what to expect from the neap tides at Betio. "I'm an old railbird shooter up on the marshes of the Chesapeake Bay," he said, "You push over the marshes at high tide, and when you have a neap tide, you can't get over the marshes." His landing boats were similarly restricted as they went in toward Tarawa.

Smith was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for Tarawa to go with the Navy Cross he received for heroic



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70729
MajGen Julian C. Smith, USMC, right, commanding general, 2d Marine Division, escorts MajGen Holland M. Smith, USMC, commander, V Amphibious Corps, on Betio.

acts in Nicaragua a decade earlier. The balance of his career was unremarkable. He retired as a lieutenant general in 1946, and he died in 1975, age 90. To the end of his life he valued his experience at Betio. As he communicated to the officers and men of the division after the battle: "It will always be a source of supreme satisfaction and pride to be able to say, 'I was with the 2d Marine Division at Tarawa.'"

Marine Division was compelled to make a frontal assault into the teeth of Betio's defenses with an abbreviated preparatory bombardment. Worse, loss of the 6th Marines meant he would be attacking the island fortress with only a 2-to-1 superiority in troops, well below the doctrinal minimum. Shaken, he insisted that Holland Smith absolve him of any responsibility for the consequences. This was done.

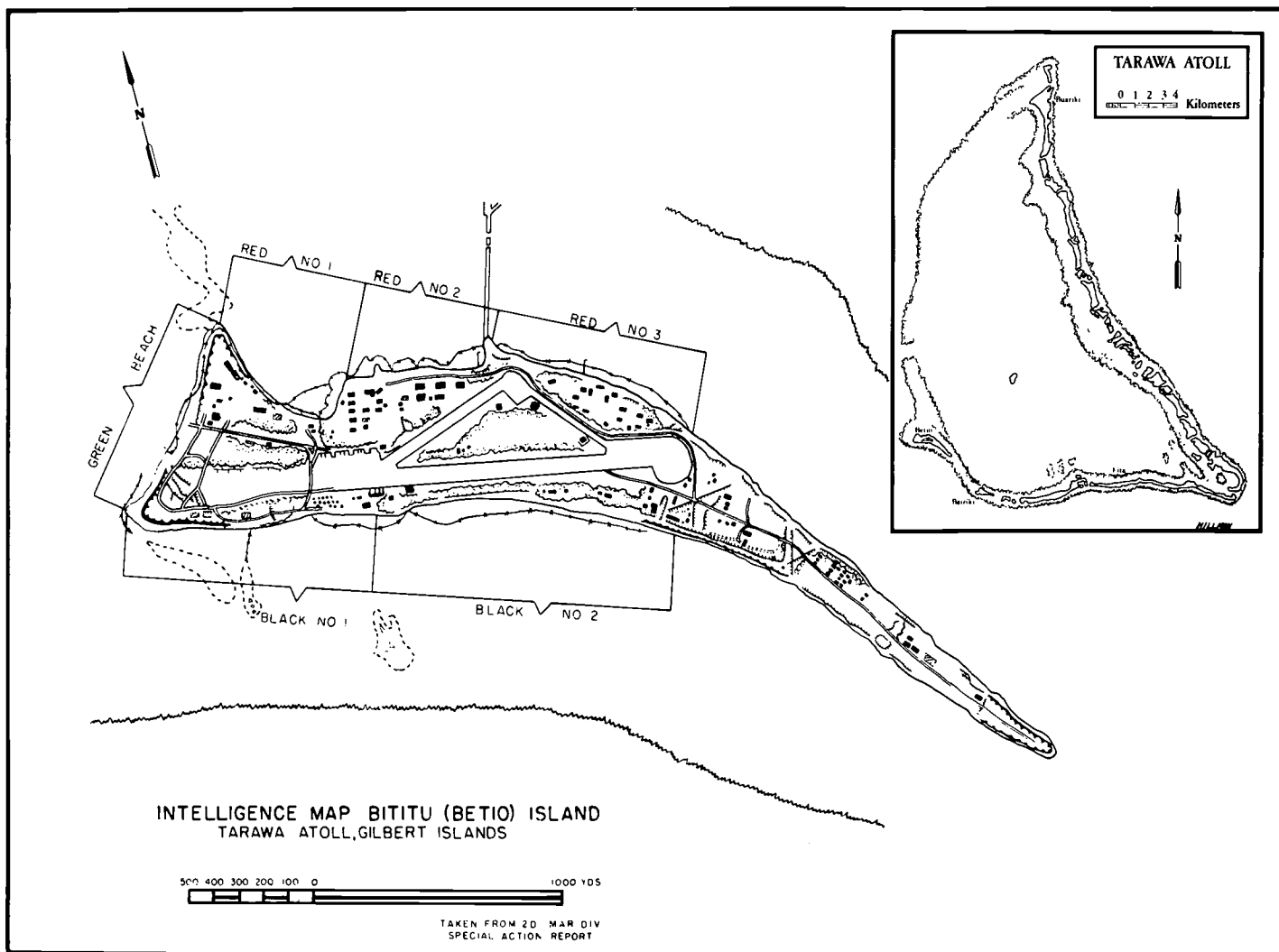
David Shoup returned to New Zealand to prepare a modified operations order and select the landing beaches. Betio, located on the southwestern tip of Tarawa near the entrance to the lagoon, took the shape of a small bird, lying on its back, with its breast facing north, into the lagoon. The Japanese had concentrat-

ed their defenses on the southern and western coasts, roughly the bird's head and back (where they themselves had landed). By contrast, the northern beaches (the bird's breast) had calmer waters in the lagoon and, with one deadly exception (the "re-entrant"), were convex. Defenses in this sector were being improved daily but were not yet complete. A 1,000-yard pier which jutted due north over the fringing reef into deeper lagoon waters (in effect, the bird's legs) was an attractive logistics target. It was an easy decision to select the northern coast for landing beaches, but there was no real safe avenue of approach.

Looking at the north shore of Betio from the line of departure within the lagoon, Shoup designated three

landing beaches, each 600 yards in length. From right to left these were: Red Beach One, from Betio's northwestern tip (the bird's beak) to a point just east of the re-entrant; Red Beach Two, from that juncture to the pier; Red Beach Three, from the pier eastward. Other beaches were designated as contingencies, notably Green Beach along the western shore (the bird's head).

Julian Smith had intended to land with two regiments abreast and one in reserve. Loss of the 6th Marines forced a major change. Shoup's modified plan assigned the 2d Marines, reinforced by Landing Team (LT) 2/8 (2d Battalion, 8th Marines), as the assault force. The rest of the 8th Marines would constitute the division reserve. The attack would be



preceded by advance seizure of the pier by the regimental scout sniper platoon (Lieutenant William D. Hawkins). Landing abreast at H-Hour would be LT 3/2 (3d Battalion, 2d Marines) (Major John F. Schoettel) on Red One; LT 2/2 (2d Battalion, 2d Marines) (Lieutenant Colonel Herbert R. Amey, Jr.) on Red Two; and LT 2/8 (Major Henry P. Jim Crowe) on Red Three. Major Wood B. Kyle's LT 1/2 (1st Battalion, 2d Marines) would be on call as the regimental reserve.

General Smith scheduled a large-scale amphibious exercise in Hawkes Bay for the first of November and made arrangements for New Zealand trucks to haul the men back to Wellington at the conclusion in time for a large dance. Complacently, the entire 2d Marine Division embarked aboard 16 amphibious ships for the routine exercise. It was all an artful ruse. The ships weighed anchor and

headed north for Operation Galvanic. For once, "Tokyo Rose" had no clue of the impending campaign.

Most of Task Force 53 assembled in Efate, New Hebrides, on 7 November. Admiral Hill arrived on board *Maryland*. The Marines, now keenly aware that an operation was underway, were more interested in the arrival from Noumea of 14 new Sherman M4-A2 tanks on board the dock landing ship *Ashland* (LSD 1). The division had never operated with medium tanks before.

The landing rehearsals at Efate did little to prepare the Marines for Betio. The fleet carriers and their embarked air wings were off assaulting targets in the Solomons. The Sherman tanks had no place to offload. The new LVT-2s were presumably somewhere to the north, underway directly for Tarawa. Naval gun ships bombarded Erradaka Island, well

away from the troops landing at Mele Bay.

One overlooked aspect of the rehearsal paid subsequent dividends for the Marines in the coming assault. Major William K. "Willie K." Jones, commanding LT 1/6, took the opportunity to practice embarking his troops in rubber rafts. In the pre-war Fleet Marine Force, the first battalion in each regiment had been designated "the rubber boat battalion." The uncommon sight of this mini-flotilla inspired numerous cat-calls from the other Marines. Jones himself was dubbed "The Admiral of the Condom Fleet."

The contentious issue during the post-rehearsal critique was the suitability of the naval gunfire plan. The target island was scheduled to receive the greatest concentration of naval gunfire of the war to date. Many senior naval officers were optimistic of the outcome. "We do not intend

to neutralize [the island], we do not intend to destroy it," boasted one admiral, "Gentlemen, we will obliterate it." But General Smith had heard enough of these boasts. In a voice taut with anger he stood to address the meeting: "Even though you naval officers do come in to about 1,000 yards, I remind you that you have a

little armor. I want you to know the Marines are crossing the beach with bayonets, and the only armor they'll have is a khaki shirt!"

While at Efate, Colonel William Marshall, commanding Combat Team Two and scheduled for the major assault role at Betio, became too ill to continue. In a memorable

decision, General Smith promoted David Shoup to colonel and ordered him to relieve Colonel Marshall. Shoup knew the 2d Marines, and he certainly knew the plan. The architect was about to become the executor.

Once underway from Efate, Admiral Hill ordered the various com-

The Japanese Special Naval Landing Forces

Tarawa was the first large-scale encounter between U.S. Marines and the Japanese *Special Naval Landing Forces*. The division intelligence staff had forewarned that "naval units of this type are usually more highly trained and have a greater tenacity and fighting spirit than the average Japanese Army unit," but the Marines were surprised at the ferocity of the defenders on Betio.

The Japanese "Imperial Marines" earned the grudging respect of their American counterparts for their esprit, discipline, marksmanship, proficiency with heavy weapons, small-unit leadership, manifest bravery, and a stoic willingness to die to the last man. Major William K. Jones, whose 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, engaged more of the enemy in hand-to-hand combat on Betio than any other unit, said "these [defenders] were pretty tough, and they were big, six-foot, the biggest Japs that I ever saw." Major Lawrence C. Hays reported that "their equipment was excellent and there was plenty of surplus found, including large amounts of ammo."

The Japanese used *Special Naval Landing Forces* frequently in the early years of the war. In December 1941, a force of 5,000 landed on Guam, and another unit of 450 assaulted Wake Island. A small detachment of 113 men was the first Japanese reinforcing unit to land on Guadalcanal, 10 days after the American landing. A 350-man SNLF

Japanese on Betio conduct field firing exercises before the battle. The film from which this picture was developed came from a Japanese camera captured during the assault.

Photo courtesy of 2d Marine Division Association



Photo courtesy of 2d Marine Division Association

The Japanese garrison on Betio conducts pre-battle training.

detachment provided fierce resistance to the 1st Marine Division landings on Tulagi and Gavutu-Tanambogo early in the Guadalcanal campaign. A typical SNLF unit in a defensive role was commanded by a navy captain and consisted of three rifle companies augmented by anti-aircraft, coast defense, anti-boat, and field artillery units of several batteries each, plus service and labor troops.

The Japanese garrison on Betio on D-Day consisted of the *3d Special Base Force* (formerly the *6th Yokosuka Special Naval Landing Force*), the *7th Sasebo Special Naval Landing Force* (which included 200 NCOs and officers of the *Tateyama Naval Gunnery School*), the *111th Pioneers*, and the *4th Construction Unit*, an estimated grand total of 4,856 men.

All crew-served weapons on Betio, from 7.7mm light machine guns to eight-inch naval rifles, were integrated into the fortified defensive system that included 500 pillboxes, blockhouses, and other emplacements. The basic beach defense weapon faced by the Marines during their landings on the northern coast was the M93 13mm, dual purpose (anti-air, anti-boat) heavy machine gun. In many seawall emplacements, these lethal weapons were sited to provide flanking fire along wire entanglements and other boat obstacles. Flanking fire discipline was insured by sealing off the front embrasures.

Admiral Shibasaki organized his troops on Betio for "an overall decisive defense at the beach." His men fought with great valor. After 76 hours of bitter fighting, 4,690 lay dead. Most of the 146 prisoners taken were conscripted Korean laborers.

Only 17 wounded Japanese surrendered.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 87675

Col David M. Shoup pictured in the field. The clenched cigar became a trademark.

manders of Task Force 53 to brief the troops on their destination and mission. Tarawa came as a surprise to most of the men. Many had wagered they were heading for Wake Island. On the day before D-Day, General Julian Smith sent a message "to the officers and men of the 2d Division." In it, the commanding general sought to reassure his men that, unlike the Guadalcanal campaign, the Navy would stay and provide support throughout. The troops listened attentively to these words coming over the loudspeakers:

A great offensive to destroy the enemy in the Central Pacific has begun. Our Navy screens our operation and will support our attack tomorrow with the greatest concentration of aerial bombardment and naval gunfire in the history of warfare. It will remain with us until our objective is secured . . . Garrison troops are already enroute to relieve us as soon as we have completed our job . . . Good luck and God bless you all.

As the sun began to set on Task Force 53 on the evening of D-minus-

one, it appeared that strategic surprise had indeed been attained. More good news came with the report that the small convoy of LSTs bearing LVT-2s had arrived safely from Samoa and was joining the formation. All the pieces seemed to be coming together.

D-Day at Betio, 20 November 1943

The crowded transports of Task Force 53 arrived off Tarawa Atoll shortly after midnight on D-Day. Debarcation began at 0320. The captain of the *Zeilin* (APA 3) played the Marines Hymn over the public address system, and the sailors cheered as the 2d Battalion, 2d Marines, crawled over the side and down the cargo nets.

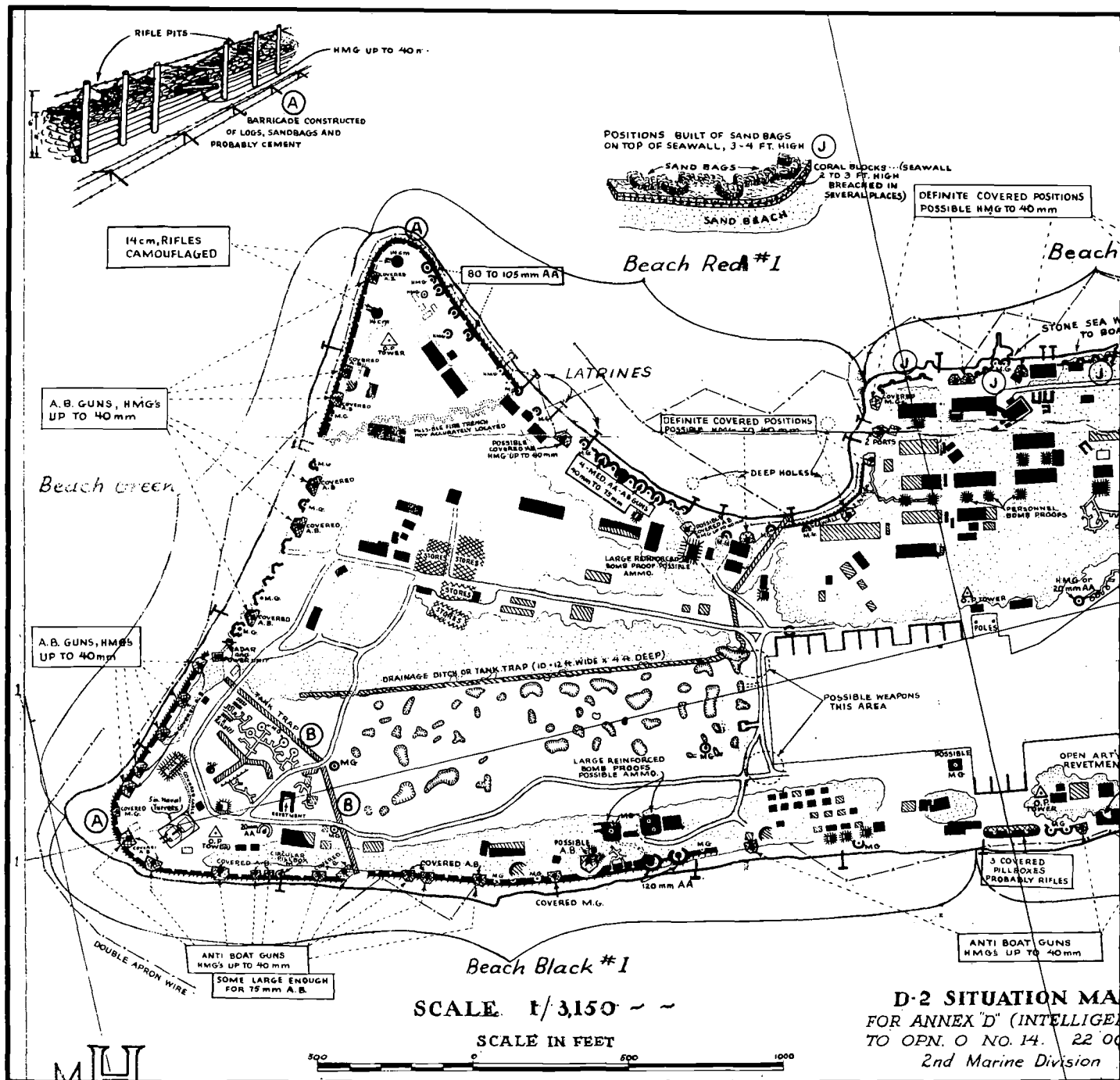
At this point, things started to go wrong. Admiral Hill discovered that the transports were in the wrong anchorage, masking some of the fire support ships, and directed them to shift immediately to the correct site. The landing craft bobbed along in the wake of the ships; some Marines had been halfway down the cargo nets when the ships abruptly

weighed anchor. Matching the exact LVTs with their assigned assault teams in the darkness became haphazard. Choppy seas made cross-deck transfers between the small craft dangerous.

Few tactical plans survive the opening rounds of execution, particularly in amphibious operations. "The Plan" for D-Day at Betio established H-Hour for the assault waves at 0830. Strike aircraft from the fast carriers would initiate the action with a half-hour bombing raid at 0545. Then the fire support ships would bombard the island from close range for the ensuing 130 minutes. The planes would return for a final strafing run at H-minus-five, then shift to inland targets as the Marines stormed ashore. None of this went according to plan.

The Japanese initiated the battle. Alerted by the pre-dawn activities offshore, the garrison opened fire on the task force with their big naval guns at 0507. The main batteries of the battleships *Colorado* (BB 45) and *Maryland* commenced counterbattery fire almost immediately. Several 16-inch shells found their mark; a huge fireball signalled destruction of an ammunition bunker for one of the Japanese gun positions. Other fire support ships joined in. At 0542 Hill ordered "cease fire," expecting the air attack to commence momentarily. There was a long silence.

The carrier air group had changed its plans, postponing the strike by 30 minutes. Inexplicably, that unilateral modification was never transmitted to Admiral Hill, the amphibious task force commander. Hill's problems were further compounded by the sudden loss of communications on his flagship *Maryland* with the first crashing salvo of the ship's main battery. The Japanese coastal defense guns were damaged but still dangerous. The American mix-up provided the defenders a grace period of 25 minutes to recover and adjust. Frustrated at every turn, Hill



Marine Corps Personal Papers

A detailed view of Division D-2 situation map of western Betio was prepared one month before the landing. Note the predicted position of Japanese defenses along Green Beach

and Red Beach One, especially those within the "re-entrant" cove along the north shore. Intelligence projections proved almost 90 percent accurate and heavy casualties resulted.

ordered his ships to resume firing at 0605. Suddenly, at 0610, the aircraft appeared, bombing and strafing the island for the next few minutes. Amid all this, the sun rose, red and ominous through the thick smoke.

The battleships, cruisers, and destroyers of Task Force 53 began a saturation bombardment of Betio for the next several hours. The awesome shock and sounds of the shelling were experienced avidly by the Ma-

rines. Staff Sergeant Norman Hatch, a combat photographer, thought to himself, "we just really didn't see how we could do [anything] but go in there and bury the people . . . this wasn't going to be a fight." Time correspondent Robert Sherrod thought, "surely, no mortal men could live through such destroying power . . . any Japs on the island would all be dead by now." Sherrod's thoughts were rudely interrupted by a geyser

of water 50 yards astern of the ship. The Japanese had resumed fire and their targets were the vulnerable transports. The troop ships hastily got underway for the second time that morning.

For Admiral Hill and General Julian Smith on board *Maryland*, the best source of information throughout the long day would prove to be the Vought-Sikorsky Type OS2U Kingfisher observation aircraft

LVT-2 and LVT(A)2 Amphibian Tractors

The LVT-2, popularly known as the Water Buffalo, was built to improve upon shortcomings in the design of the Marine Corps' initial amphibian vehicle, the LVT-1. The new vehicle featured a redesigned suspension system with rubber-tired road wheels and torsion springs for improved stability and a smoother ride. The power train was standardized with that of the M3A1 Stuart light tank. This gave the LVT-2 greater power and reliability than its predecessor and, combined with new "W"-shaped treads, gave it greater propulsion on land and in the water. The new vehicle also could carry 1,500 pounds more cargo than the original LVT-1.

The LVT-2 entered production in June 1942, but did not see combat until Tarawa in November 1943. The Marines used a combination of LVT-1s and LVT-2s in the assault on Betio. The 50 LVT-2s used at Tarawa were modified in Samoa just before the battle with 3/8-inch boiler plates installed around the cab for greater protection from small arms fire and shell fragments. Despite the loss of 30 of these vehicles to enemy fire at Tarawa, the improvised armor was considered promising and led to a call for truly armored LVTs.

The LVT(A)2 ["A" for armored] requested by the U.S. Army was a version which saw limited use with the Marine Corps. The LVT(A)2 had factory-installed armor plating on the hull and cab to resist heavy machine gun fire. The new version appeared identical to the LVT-2 with the exception of armored drivers' hatches. With legitimate armor protection, the LVT(A)2 could function as an assault



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63646

LVT-2 comes ashore on Green Beach on approximately D+2 vehicle in the lead waves of a landing. The armored amphibian vehicle provided excellent service when it was introduced to Marine operations on New Britain.

More than 3,000 LVT-2s and LVT(A)2s were manufactured during World War II. These combat vehicles proved to be valuable assets to Marine Corps assault teams throughout the Pacific campaign, transporting thousands of troops and tons of equipment. The overall design, however, left some operational deficiencies. For one thing, the vehicles lacked a ramp. All troops and equipment had to be loaded and unloaded over the gunwales. This caused problems in normal field use and was particularly hazardous during an opposed landing. This factor would lead to the further development of amphibian tractors in the LVT family during the war.

Compiled by Second Lieutenant Wesley L. Feight, USMC

launched by the battleships. At 0648, Hill inquired of the pilot of one float plane, "Is reef covered with water?" The answer was a cryptic "negative." At that same time, the LVTs of Wave One, with 700 infantrymen embarked, left the assembly area and headed for the line of departure.

The crews and embarked troops in the LVTs had already had a long morning, complete with hair-raising cross-deck transfers in the choppy sea and the unwelcome thrill of eight-inch shells landing in their proximity. Now they were commencing an extremely long run to the beach, a distance of nearly 10 miles. The craft started on time but quickly fell behind schedule. The LVT-1s of the first wave failed to maintain the planned 4.5-knot speed of advance due to a strong westerly current, decreased buoyancy from the weight of the im-

proved armor plating, and their overaged power plants. There was a psychological factor at work as well. "Red Mike" Edson had criticized the LVT crews for landing five minutes early during the rehearsal at Efate, saying, "early arrival inexcusable, late arrival preferable." Admiral Hill and General Smith soon realized that the three struggling columns of LVTs would never make the beach by 0830. H-Hour was postponed twice, to 0845, then to 0900. Here again, not all hands received this word.

The destroyers *Ringgold* (DD 500) and *Dashiell* (DD 659) entered the lagoon in the wake of two minesweepers to provide close-in fire support. Once in the lagoon, the minesweeper *Pursuit* (AM 108) became the Primary Control Ship, taking position directly on the line of departure. *Pursuit* turned her searchlight sea-

ward to provide the LVTs with a beacon through the thick dust and smoke. Finally, at 0824, the first wave of LVTs crossed the line, still 6,000 yards away from the target beaches.

A minute later the second group of carrier aircraft roared over Betio, right on time for the original H-Hour, but totally unaware of the new times. This was another blunder. Admiral Kelly Turner had specifically provided all players in Operation Galvanic with this admonition: "Times of strafing beaches with reference to H-Hour are approximate; the distance of the boats from the beach is the governing factor." Admiral Hill had to call them off. The planes remained on station, but with depleted fuel and ammunition levels available.

The LVTs struggled shoreward in three long waves, each separated by



LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

Troops of the 2d Battalion, 2d Marines, 2d Marine Division, load magazines and clean their weapons enroute to Betio on board the attack transport Zeilin (APA 3).

a 300-yard interval: the 42 LVT-1s of Wave One, followed by 24 LVT-2s of Wave Two, and 21 LVT-2s of Wave Three. Behind the tracked vehicles came Waves Four and Five of LCVPs. Each of the assault battalion commanders were in Wave Four. Further astern, the *Ashland* ballasted down and launched 14 LCMs, each carrying a Sherman medium tank. Four other LCMs appeared carrying light tanks (37mm guns).

Shortly before 0800, Colonel Shoup and elements of his tactical command post debarked into LCVPs from *Biddle* (APA 8) and headed for the line of departure. Close by Shoup stood an enterprising sergeant, energetically shielding his bulky radio from the salt spray. Of the myriad of communications blackouts and failures on D-Day, Shoup's radio would remain functional longer and serve him better than the radios of any other commander, American or Japanese, on the island.

Admiral Hill ordered a ceasefire at 0854, even though the waves were still 4,000 yards off shore. General Smith and "Red Mike" Edson object-

ed strenuously, but Hill considered the huge pillars of smoke unsafe for overhead fire support of the assault waves. The great noise abruptly ceased. The LVTs making their final approach soon began to receive long-range machine gun fire and artillery air-bursts. The latter could have been fatal to the troops crowded into open-topped LVTs, but the Japanese had overloaded the projectiles with high explosives. Instead of steel shell fragments, the Marines were "doused with hot sand." It was the last tactical mistake the Japanese would make that day.

The previously aborted air strike returned at 0855 for five minutes of noisy but ineffective strafing along the beaches, the pilots again heeding their wristwatches instead of the progress of the lead LVTs.

Two other events occurred at this time. A pair of naval landing boats darted towards the end of the long pier at the reef's edge. Out charged First Lieutenant Hawkins with his scout-sniper platoon and a squad of combat engineers. These shock troops made quick work of Japanese

machine gun emplacements along the pier with explosives and flame throwers. Meanwhile, the LVTs of Wave One struck the reef and crawled effortlessly over it, commencing their final run to the beach. These parts of Shoup's landing plan worked to perfection.

But the preliminary bombardment, as awesome and unprecedented as it had been, had failed significantly to soften the defenses. Very little ships' fire had been directed against the landing beaches themselves, where Admiral Shibasaki vowed to defeat the assault units at the water's edge. The well-protected defenders simply shook off the sand and manned their guns. Worse, the near-total curtailment of naval gunfire for the final 25 minutes of the assault run was a fateful lapse. In effect, the Americans gave their opponents time to shift forces from the southern and western beaches to reinforce northern positions. The defenders were groggy from the pounding and stunned at the sight of LVTs crossing the barrier reef, but Shibasaki's killing zone was still largely intact. The assault waves were greeted by a steadily increasing volume of combined arms fire.

For Wave One, the final 200 yards to the beach were the roughest, especially for those LVTs approaching Red Beaches One and Two. The vehicles were hammered by well-aimed fire from heavy and light machine guns and 40mm antiaircraft guns. The Marines fired back, expending 10,000 rounds from the .50-caliber machine guns mounted forward on each LVT-1. But the exposed gunners were easy targets, and dozens were cut down. Major Drewes, the LVT battalion commander who had worked so hard with Shoup to make this assault possible, took over one machine gun from a fallen crewman and was immediately killed by a bullet through the brain. Captain Fenlon A. Durand, one of Drewes' company commanders, saw a Japanese officer standing defiantly on the sea wall

waving a pistol, "just daring us to come ashore."

On they came. Initial touchdown times were staggered: 0910 on Red Beach One; 0917 on Red Beach Three; 0922 on Red Beach Two. The first LVT ashore was vehicle number 4-9, nicknamed "My Deloris," driven by PFC Edward J. Moore. "My Deloris" was the right guide vehicle in Wave One on Red Beach One, hitting the beach squarely on "the bird's beak." Moore tried his best to drive his LVT over the five-foot seawall, but the vehicle stalled in a near-vertical position while nearby machine guns riddled the cab. Moore reached for his rifle only to find it shot in half. One of the embarked troops was 19-year-old Private First

Class Gilbert Ferguson, who recalled what happened next on board the LVT: "The sergeant stood up and yelled 'everybody out.' At that very instant, machine gun bullets appeared to rip his head off . . ." Ferguson, Moore, and others escaped from the vehicle and dispatched two machine gun positions only yards away. All became casualties in short order.

Very few of the LVTs could negotiate the seawall. Stalled on the beach, the vehicles were vulnerable to preregistered mortar and howitzer fire, as well as hand grenades tossed into the open troop compartments by Japanese troops on the other side of the barrier. The crew chief of one vehicle, Corporal John Spillane, had

been a baseball prospect with the St. Louis Cardinals organization before the war. Spillane caught two Japanese grenades barehanded in mid-air, tossing them back over the wall. A third grenade exploded in his hand, grievously wounding him.

The second and third waves of LVT-2s, protected only by 3/8-inch boiler plate hurriedly installed in Samoa, suffered even more intense fire. Several were destroyed spectacularly by large-caliber antiaircraft guns. Private First Class Newman M. Baird, a machine gunner aboard one embattled vehicle, recounted his ordeal: "We were 100 yards in now and the enemy fire was awful damn intense and getting worse. They were knocking [LVTs] out left and right.

Marines and sailors traveling on board a troop transport receive their initial briefing on the landing plan for Betio.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 101807





U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection

"Down the Net," a sketch by Kerr Eby.

A tractor'd get hit, stop, and burst into flames, with men jumping out like torches." Baird's own vehicle was then hit by a shell, killing the crew and many of the troops. "I grabbed my carbine and an ammunition box and stepped over a couple of fellas lying there and put my hand on the side so's to roll over into the water. I didn't want to put my head up. The bullets were pouring at us like a sheet of rain."

On balance, the LVTs performed their assault mission fully within Julian Smith's expectations. Only eight of the 87 vehicles in the first three waves were lost in the assault (although 15 more were so riddled with holes that they sank upon

reaching deep water while seeking to shuttle more troops ashore). Within a span of 10 minutes, the LVTs landed more than 1,500 Marines on Betio's north shore, a great start to the operation. The critical problem lay in sustaining the momentum of the assault. Major Holland's dire predictions about the neap tide had proven accurate. No landing craft would cross the reef throughout D-Day.

Shoup hoped enough LVTs would survive to permit wholesale transfer-line operations with the boats along the edge of the reef. It rarely worked. The LVTs suffered increasing casualties. Many vehicles, afloat for five hours already, simply ran of gas. Others had to be used immediately

for emergency evacuation of wounded Marines. Communications, never good, deteriorated as more and more radio sets suffered water damage or enemy fire. The surviving LVTs continued to serve, but after about 1000 on D-Day, most troops had no other option but to wade ashore from the reef, covering distances from 500 to 1,000 yards under well-aimed fire.

Marines of Major Schoettel's LT 3/2 were particularly hard hit on Red Beach One. Company K suffered heavy casualties from the re-entrant strongpoint on the left. Company I made progress over the seawall along the "bird's beak," but paid a high price, including the loss of the company commander, Captain William E. Tatom, killed before he could even debark from his LVT. Both units lost half their men in the first two hours. Major Michael P. "Mike" Ryan's Company L, forced to wade ashore when their boats grounded on the reef, sustained 35 percent casualties. Ryan recalled the murderous enfilading fire and the confusion. Suddenly, "one lone trooper was spotted through the fire and smoke scrambling over a parapet on the beach to the right," marking a new landing point. As Ryan finally reached the beach, he looked back over his shoulder. "All [I] could see was heads with rifles held over them," as his wading men tried to make as small a target as possible. Ryan began assembling the stragglers of various waves in a relatively sheltered area along Green Beach.

Major Schoettel remained in his boat with the remnants of his fourth wave, convinced that his landing team had been shattered beyond relief. No one had contact with Ryan. The fragmented reports Schoettel received from the survivors of the two other assault companies were disheartening. Seventeen of his 37 officers were casualties.

In the center, Landing Team 2/2 was also hard hit coming ashore over Red Beach Two. The Japanese strong-

'The Singapore Guns'

The firing on Betio had barely subsided before apocryphal claims began to appear in print that the four eight-inch naval rifles used as coastal defense guns by the Japanese were the same ones captured from the British at the fall of Singapore. Many prominent historians unwittingly perpetuated this story, among them the highly respected Samuel Eliot Morison.

In 1977, however, British writer William H. Bartsch published the results of a recent visit to Tarawa in the quarterly magazine *After the Battle*. Bartsch personally examined each of the four guns and discovered markings indicating manufacture by Vickers, the British ordnance company. The Vickers company subsequently provided Bartsch records indicating the four guns were part of a consignment of 12 eight-inch, quick-firing guns which were sold in 1905 to the Japanese during their war with Russia. Further investigation by Bartsch at the Imperial War Museum produced the fact that there were no eight-inch guns captured by the Japanese at Singapore. In short, the guns at Tarawa came from a far more legitimate, and older, transaction with the British.

The eight-inch guns fired the opening rounds in the battle of Tarawa, but were not by themselves a factor in the contest. Earlier bombing raids may have damaged their fire control systems. Rapid counterbattery fire from American battleships took out the big guns in short order, although one of them maintained an intermittent, if inaccurate, fire

throughout D+1. Colonel Shoup stated emphatically that the 2d Marine Division was fully aware of the presence of eight-inch guns on Betio as early as mid-August 1943. By contrast, the division intelligence annex to Shoup's operation order, updated nine days before the landing, discounts external reports that the main guns were likely to be as large as eight-inch, insisting instead that "they are probably not more than 6-inch." Prior knowledge notwithstanding, the fact remains that many American officers were unpleasantly surprised to experience major caliber near-misses bracketing the amphibious task force early on D-Day.

Destruction of one of the four Japanese eight-inch Vickers guns on Betio was caused by naval gunfire and air strikes.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63618



point in the re-entrant between the two beaches played havoc among troops trying to scramble over the sides of their beached or stalled LVTs. Five of Company E's six officers were killed. Company F suffered 50 percent casualties getting ashore and swarming over the seawall to seize a precarious foothold. Company G could barely cling to a crowded stretch of beach along the seawall in the middle. Two infantry platoons and two machine gun platoons were driven away from the objective beach and forced to land on Red Beach One, most joining "Ryan's Orphans."

When Lieutenant Colonel Amey's boat rammed to a sudden halt against the reef, he hailed two passing LVTs for a transfer. Amey's LVT then became hung up on a barbed wire obstacle several hundred yards off Red Beach Two. The battalion commander drew his pistol and ex-

horted his men to follow him into the water. Closer to the beach, Amey turned to encourage his staff, "Come on! Those bastards can't beat us!" A burst of machine gun fire hit him in the throat, killing him instantly. His executive officer, Major Howard Rice, was in another LVT which was forced to land far to the west, behind Major Ryan. The senior officer present with 2/2 was Lieutenant Colonel Walter Jordan, one of several observers from the 4th Marine Division and one of only a handful of survivors from Amey's LVT. Jordan did what any Marine would do under the circumstances: he assumed command and tried to rebuild the disjointed pieces of the landing team into a cohesive fighting force. The task was enormous.

The only assault unit to get ashore without significant casualties was Major "Jim" Crowe's LT 2/8 on Red

Beach Three to the left of the pier. Many historians have attributed this good fortune to the continued direct fire support 2/8 received throughout its run to the beach from the destroyers *Ringgold* and *Dashiell* in the lagoon. The two ships indeed provided outstanding fire support to the landing force, but their logbooks indicate both ships honored Admiral Hill's 0855 ceasefire; thereafter, neither ship fired in support of LT 2/8 until at least 0925. Doubtlessly, the preliminary fire from such short range served to keep the Japanese defenders on the eastern end of the island buttoned up long after the ceasefire. As a result, Crowe's team suffered only 25 casualties in the first three LVT waves. Company E made a significant penetration, crossing the barricade and the near taxiway, but five of its six officers were shot down in the first 10 minutes ashore. Crowe's



Heywood (APA 6) lowers an LVT-1 by swinging boom in process of debarking assault troops of the 2d Battalion, 8th

Marines, on D-Day at Betio. The LVT-1 then joined up with other amphibian tractors to form up an assault wave.

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

LT 2/8 was up against some of the most sophisticated defensive positions on the island; three fortifications to their left (eastern) flank would effectively keep these Marines boxed in for the next 48 hours.

Major "Jim" Crowe—former enlisted man, Marine Gunner, distinguished rifleman, star football player—was a tower of strength throughout the battle. His trademark red mustache bristling, a combat shotgun cradled in his arm, he exuded confidence and professionalism,

qualities sorely needed on Betio that long day. Crowe ordered the coxswain of his LCVP "put this god-damned boat in!" The boat hit the reef at high speed, sending the Marines sprawling. Quickly recovering, Crowe ordered his men over the sides, then led them through several hundred yards of shallow water, reaching the shore intact only four minutes behind his last wave of LVTs. Accompanying Crowe during this hazardous effort was Staff Sergeant Hatch, the combat photographer.

Hatch remembers being inspired by Crowe, clenching a cigar in his teeth and standing upright, growling at his men, "Look, the sons of bitches can't hit me. Why do you think they can hit you? Get moving. Go!" Red Beach Three was in capable hands.

The situation on Betio by 0945 on D-Day was thus: Crowe, well-established on the left with modest penetration to the airfield; a distinct gap between LT 2/8 and the survivors of LT 2/2 in small clusters along Red Beach Two under the tentative command of Jordan; a dangerous gap due to the Japanese fortifications at the re-entrant between beaches Two and One, with a few members of 3/2 on the left flank and the growing collection of odds and ends under Ryan past the "bird's beak" on Green Beach; Major Schoettel still afloat, hovering beyond the reef; Colonel Shoup likewise in an LCVP, but beginning his move towards the beach; residual

LVT-1s follow wave guides from transport area towards Betio at first light on D-Day.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63909





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 65978

LVT-1s in the first assault wave enter the lagoon and approach the line of departure. LVT-2s of the second and third waves proceed on parallel courses in background.

members of the boated waves of the assault teams still wading ashore under increasing enemy fire; the tanks being forced to unload from their LCMs at the reef's edge, trying to organize recon teams to lead them ashore.

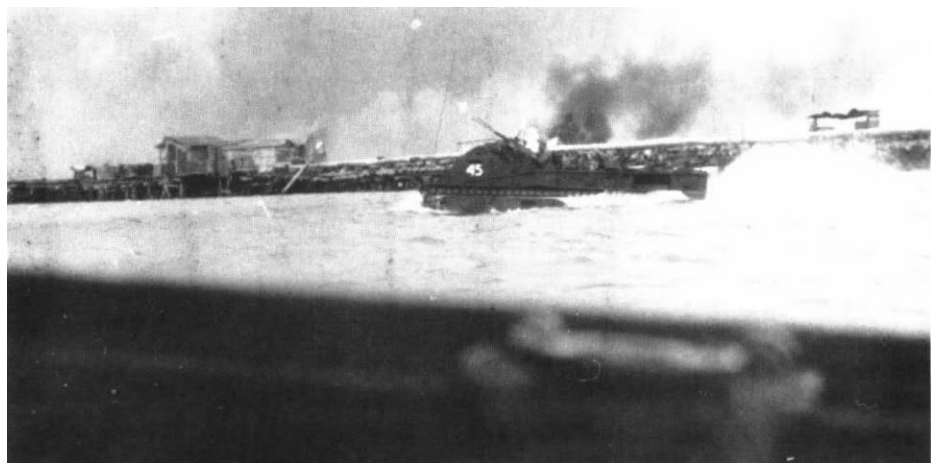
Communications were ragged. The balky TBX radios of Shoup, Crowe, and Schoettel were still operational. Otherwise, there was either dead silence or complete havoc on the command nets. No one on the flagship knew of Ryan's relative success on the western end, or of Amey's death and Jordan's assumption of command. Several echelons heard this ominous early report from an unknown source: "Have landed. Unusually heavy opposition. Casualties 70 percent. Can't hold." Shoup ordered Kyle's LT 1/2, the regimental reserve, to land on Red Beach Two and work west.

This would take time. Kyle's men were awaiting orders at the line of departure, but all were embarked in boats. Shoup and others managed to assemble enough LVTs to transport Kyle's companies A and B, but the third infantry company and the weapons company would have to wade ashore. The ensuing assault was chaotic. Many of the LVTs were destroyed enroute by antboat guns

which increasingly had the range down pat. At least five vehicles were driven away by the intense fire and landed west at Ryan's position, adding another 113 troops to Green Beach. What was left of Companies A and B stormed ashore and penetrated several hundred feet, expanding the "perimeter." Other troops sought refuge along the pier or tried to commandeer a passing LVT. Kyle got ashore in this fashion, but many of his troops did not complete the landing until the following morning. The experience of Lieutenant George D. Lillibridge of Company A, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was typical. His LVT driver and gunners were shot down by machine gun fire. The sur-

Three hundred yards to go! LVT-1 45 churns toward Red Beach Three just east of the long pier on D-Day. Heavy fighting is taking place on the other side of the beach.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 64050





LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

LVT-1 49 ("My Deloris"), the first vehicle to reach Betio's shore, lies in her final resting place amid death and destruction, including a disabled LVT-2 from a follow-on assault wave. This photo was taken after D-Day. Maintenance crews attempted to salvage "My Deloris" during the battle, moving her some-

what eastward from the original landing point on "the bird's beak," but she was too riddled with shell holes to operate. After the battle, "My Deloris" was sent to the United States as an exhibit for War Bond drives. The historic vehicle is now at the Tracked Vehicle Museum at Camp DelMar, California.

Lawrence C. Hays, Jr.), the division reserve. At 1036, Smith reported to V Amphibious Corps: "Successful landing on Beaches Red Two and Three. Toe hold on Red One. Am committing one LT from Division reserve. Still encountering strong resistance throughout."

Colonel Shoup at this time was in the middle of a long odyssey trying to get ashore. He paused briefly for this memorable exchange of radio messages with Major Schoettel.

0959: (Schoettel to Shoup)
"Receiving heavy fire all along beach. Unable to land all. Issue in doubt."

1007: (Schoettel to Shoup)
"Boats held up on reef of right flank Red 1. Troops receiving heavy fire in water."

1012: (Shoup to Schoettel)
"Land Beach Red 2 and work west."

1018: (Schoettel to Shoup) "We have nothing left to land."

When Shoup's LCVP was stopped by the reef, he transferred to a passing LVT. His party included Lieutenant Colonel Evans F. Carlson, already a media legend for his earlier exploits at Makin and Guadalcanal, now serving as an observer, and Lieutenant Colonel Presley M. Rixey, commanding 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, Shoup's artillery detachment. The LVT made three attempts to land; each time the enemy fire was too intense. On the third try, the vehicle was hit and disabled by plunging fire. Shoup sustained a painful shell fragment wound in his leg, but led his small party out of the stricken vehicle and into the dubious shelter of the pier. From this position, 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.

For awhile, Shoup had hopes that the new Sherman tanks would serve to break the gridlock. The combat

debut of the Marine medium tanks, however, was inauspicious on D-Day. The tankers were valorous, but the 2d Marine Division had no concept of how to employ tanks against fortified positions. When four Shermans reached Red Beach Three late in the morning of D-Day, Major Crowe simply waved them forward with orders to "knock out all enemy positions encountered." The tank crews, buttoned up under fire, were virtually blind. Without accompanying infantry they were lost piecemeal, some knocked out by Japanese 75mm guns, others damaged by American dive bombers.

Six Shermans tried to land on Red Beach One, each preceded by a dismounted guide to warn of underwater shell craters. The guides were shot down every few minutes by Japanese marksmen; each time another volunteer would step forward to continue the movement. Combat engineers had blown a hole in the seawall for the tanks to pass inland, but the way was now blocked



Marine Corps Personal Papers

Aerial photograph of the northwestern tip of Betio (the "bird's beak") taken from 1,400 feet at 1407 on D-Day from a Kingfisher observation floatplane. Note the disabled LVTs in the water at left, seaward of the re-entrant strongpoints. A number of Marines from 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, were killed while crossing the sand spit in the extreme lower left corner.

with dead and wounded Marines. Rather than run over his fellow Marines, the commander reversed his column and proceeded around the "bird's beak" towards a second opening blasted in the seawall. Operating in the turbid waters now without guides, four tanks foundered in shell holes in the detour. Inland from the beach, one of the surviving Shermans engaged a plucky Japanese light tank. The Marine tank demolished its smaller opponent, but not before the doomed Japanese crew released one final 37mm round, a phenomenal shot, right down the barrel of the Sherman.

By day's end, only two of the 14 Shermans were still operational, "Colorado" on Red Three and "China Gal" on Red One/Green Beach. Maintenance crews worked through the night to retrieve a third tank, "Cecilia," on Green Beach for Major Ryan. Attempts to get light tanks into

the battle fared no better. Japanese gunners sank all four LCMs laden with light tanks before the boats even reached the reef. Shoup also had reports that the tank battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander B. Swenceski, had been killed while wading ashore (Swenceski, badly wounded, survived by crawling atop a pile of dead bodies to keep from drowning until he was finally discovered on D+1).

Shoup's message to the flagship at 1045 reflected his frustration: "Stiff resistance. Need halftracks. Our tanks no good." But the Regimental Weapons Company's halftracks, mounting 75mm guns, fared no better getting ashore than did any other combat unit that bloody morning. One was sunk in its LCM by long-range artillery fire before it reached the reef. A second ran the entire gauntlet but became stuck in the loose sand at the water's edge. The

situation was becoming critical.

Amid the chaos along the exposed beachhead, individual examples of courage and initiative inspired the scattered remnants. Staff Sergeant William Bordelon, a combat engineer attached to LT 2/2, provided the first and most dramatic example on D-Day morning. When a Japanese shell disabled his LVT and killed most of the occupants enroute to the beach, Bordelon rallied the survivors and led them ashore on Red Beach Two. Pausing only to prepare explosive charges, Bordelon personally knocked out two Japanese positions which had been firing on the assault waves. Attacking a third emplacement, he was hit by machine gun fire, but declined medical assistance and continued the attack. Bordelon then dashed back into the water to rescue a wounded Marine calling for help. As intense fire opened up from yet another nearby enemy stronghold,

the staff sergeant prepared one last demolition package and charged the position frontally. Bordelon's luck ran out. He was shot and killed, later to become the first of four men of the 2d Marine Division to be awarded the Medal of Honor.

In another incident, Sergeant Roy W. Johnson attacked a Japanese tank single-handedly, scrambling to the turret, dropping a grenade inside, then sitting on the hatch until the detonation. Johnson survived this incident, but he was killed in subsequent fighting on Betio, one of 217 Marine Corps sergeants to be killed or wounded in the 76-hour battle.

On Red Beach Three, a captain, shot through both arms and legs, sent a message to Major Crowe, apologizing for "letting you down." Major Ryan recalled "a wounded ser-

geant I had never seen before limping up to ask me where he was needed most." PFC Moore, wounded and disarmed from his experiences trying to drive "My Deloris" over the seawall, carried fresh ammunition up to machine gun crews the rest of the day until having to be evacuated to one of the transports. Other brave individuals retrieved a pair of 37mm antitank guns from a sunken landing craft, manhandled them several hundred yards ashore under nightmarish enemy fire, and hustled them across the beach to the seawall. The timing was critical. Two Japanese tanks were approaching the beachhead. The Marine guns were too low to fire over the wall. "Lift them over," came the cry from a hundred throats, "LIFT THEM OVER!" Willing hands hoisted the 900-pound guns atop the

wall. The gunners coolly loaded, aimed, and fired, knocking out one tank at close range, chasing off the other. There were hoarse cheers.

Time correspondent Robert Sherrod was no stranger to combat, but the landing on D-Day at Betio was one of the most unnerving experiences in his life. Sherrod accompanied Marines from the fourth wave of LT 2/2 attempting to wade ashore on Red Beach Two. In his words:

No sooner had we hit the water than the Japanese machine guns really opened up on us It was painfully slow, wading in such deep water. And we had seven hundred yards to walk slowly into that machine-gun fire, looming into larger targets as we rose onto higher ground. I

"D-Day at Tarawa," a sketch by Kerr Eby. This drawing captures the desperation of troops wading ashore from the reef through barbed wire obstacles and under constant machine gun fire. The artist himself was with the invading troops.

U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63956

Maj Henry P. "Jim" Crowe (standing, using radio handset) rallies Landing Team 2/8 behind a disabled LVT on Red Beach Three on D-Day. Carrying a shotgun, he went from foxhole to foxhole urging his troops forward against heavy enemy fire.

was scared, as I had never been scared before . . . Those who were not hit would always remember how the machine gun bullets hissed into the water, inches to the right, inches to the left.

Colonel Shoup, moving slowly towards the beach along the pier, ordered Major Ruud's LT 3/8 to land on Red Beach Three, east of the pier. By this time in the morning there were no organized LVT units left to help transport the reserve battalion ashore. Shoup ordered Ruud to approach as closely as he could by landing boats, then wade the remaining distance. Ruud received his assault orders from Shoup at 1103. For the next six hours the two officers were never more than a mile apart, yet neither could communicate with the other.

Ruud divided his landing team into seven waves, but once the boats approached the reef the distinctions blurred. Japanese antiboat guns

zeroed in on the landing craft with frightful accuracy, often hitting just as the bow ramp dropped. Survivors reported the distinctive "clang" as a shell impacted, a split second before the explosion. "It happened a dozen times," recalled Staff Sergeant Hatch, watching from the beach, "the boat blown completely out of the water and smashed and bodies all over the place." Robert Sherrod reported from a different vantage point, "I watched a Jap shell hit directly on a [landing craft] that was bringing many Marines ashore. The explosion was terrific and parts of the boat flew in all directions." Some Navy coxswains, seeing the slaughter just ahead, stopped their boats seaward of the reef and ordered the troops off. The Marines, many loaded with radios or wire or extra ammunition, sank immediately in deep water; most drowned. The reward for those troops whose boats made it intact to the reef was hardly less sanguinary: a 600-yard wade through withering crossfire, heavier by far than that en-

dured by the first assault waves at H-Hour. The slaughter among the first wave of Companies K and L was terrible. Seventy percent fell attempting to reach the beach.

Seeing this, Shoup and his party waved frantically to groups of Marines in the following waves to seek protection of the pier. A great number did this, but so many officers and noncommissioned officers had been hit that the stragglers were shattered and disorganized. The pier itself was a dubious shelter, receiving intermittent machine-gun and sniper fire from both sides. Shoup himself was struck in nine places, including a spent bullet which came close to penetrating his bull neck. His runner crouching beside him was drilled between the eyes by a Japanese sniper.

Captain Carl W. Hoffman, commanding 3/8's Weapons Company, had no better luck getting ashore than the infantry companies ahead. "My landing craft had a direct hit from a Japanese mortar. We lost six or eight people right there." Hoff-

man's Marines veered toward the pier, then worked their way ashore.

Major Ruud, frustrated at being unable to contact Shoup, radioed his regimental commander, Colonel Hall: "Third wave landed on Beach Red 3 were practically wiped out. Fourth wave landed . . . but only a few men got ashore." Hall, himself in a small boat near the line of departure, was unable to respond. Brigadier General Leo D. ("Dutch") Hermle, assistant division commander, interceded with the message, "Stay where you are or retreat out of gun range." This added to the confusion. As a result, Ruud himself did not reach the pier until mid-afternoon. It was 1730 before he could lead the remnants of his men ashore; some did not straggle in until the following day. Shoup dispatched what was left of LT 3/8 in support of Crowe's embattled 2/8;

others were used to help plug the gap between 2/8 and the combined troops of 2/2 and 1/2.

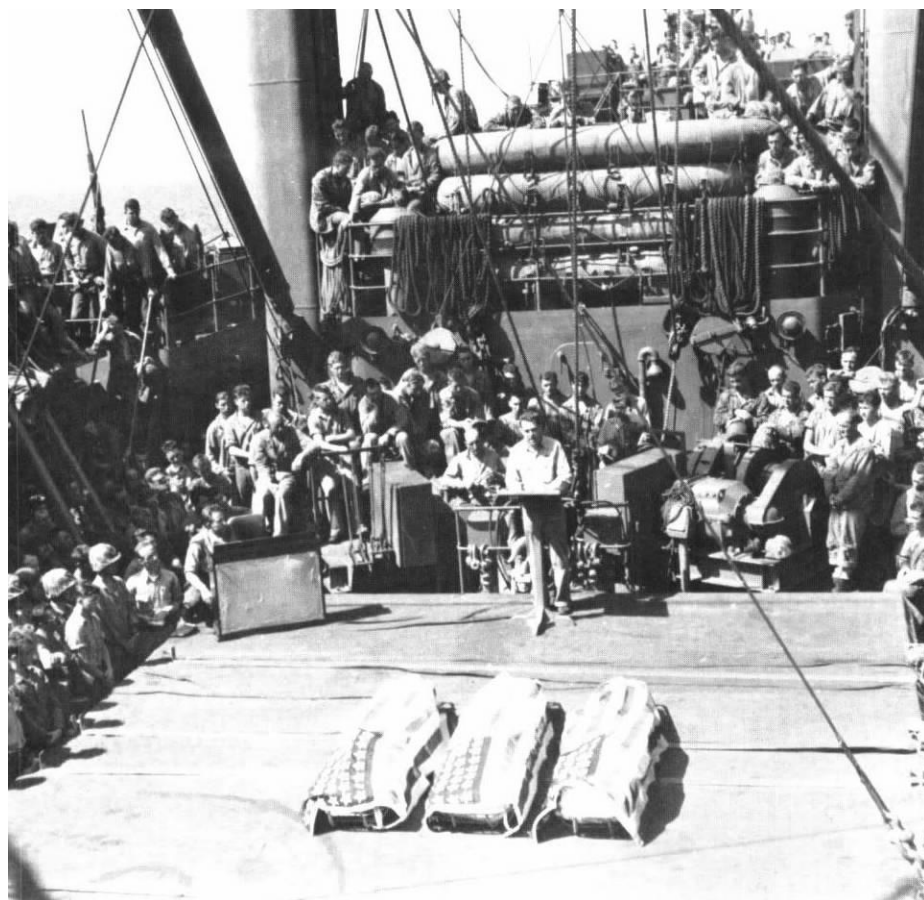
Shoup finally reached Betio at noon and established a command post 50 yards in from the pier along the blind side of a large Japanese bunker, still occupied. The colonel posted guards to keep the enemy from launching any unwelcome sorties, but the approaches to the site itself were as exposed as any other place on the flat island. At least two dozen messengers were shot while bearing dispatches to and from Shoup. Sherrod crawled up to the grim-faced colonel, who admitted, "We're in a tight spot. We've got to have more men." Sherrod looked out at the exposed waters on both sides of the pier. Already he could count 50 disabled LVTs, tanks, and boats. The prospects did not look good.

The first order of business upon

Shoup's reaching dry ground was to seek updated reports from the landing team commanders. If anything, tactical communications were worse at noon than they had been during the morning. Shoup still had no contact with any troops ashore on Red Beach One, and now he could no longer raise General Smith on *Maryland*. A dire message came from LT 2/2: "We need help. Situation bad." Later a messenger arrived from that unit with this report: "All communications out except runners. CO killed. No word from E Company." Shoup found Lieutenant Colonel Jordan, ordered him to keep command of 2/2, and sought to reinforce him with elements from 1/2 and 3/8. Shoup gave Jordan an hour to organize and rearm his assorted detachments, then ordered him to attack inland to the airstrip and expand the beachhead.

Captain and crew of Zeilin (APA 3) pause on D-Day to commit casualties to the deep. The three dead men (two Marines and a Navy surgeon), were found in a derelict LVT drifting through the transport area, 10 miles away from the beaches.

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection



Shoup then directed Evans Carlson to hitch a ride out to the *Maryland* and give General Smith and Admiral Hill a personal report of the situation ashore. Shoup's strength of character was beginning to show. "You tell the general and the admiral," he ordered Carlson, "that we are going to stick and fight it out." Carlson departed immediately, but such were the hazards and confusion between the beach and the line of departure that he did not reach the flagship until 1800.

Matters of critical resupply then captured Shoup's attention. Beyond the pier he could see nearly a hundred small craft, circling aimlessly. These, he knew, carried assorted supplies from the transports and cargo ships, unloading as rapidly as they could in compliance with Admiral Nimitz's stricture to "get the hell in, then get the hell out." The indiscriminate unloading was hindering prosecution of the fight ashore. Shoup had no idea which boat held which supplies. He sent word to the Primary Control Officer to send only the most critical supplies to the pier-

Sherman Medium Tanks at Tarawa

One company of M4-A2 Sherman medium tanks was assigned to the 2d Marine Division for Operation Galvanic from the I Marine Amphibious Corps. The 14 tanks deployed from Noumea in early November 1943, on board the new dock landing ship *Ashland* (LSD 1), joining Task Force 53 enroute to the Gilberts. Each 34-ton, diesel-powered Sherman was operated by a crew of five and featured a gyro-stabilized 75mm gun and three machine guns. Regrettably, the Marines had no opportunity to operate with their new offensive assets until the chaos of D-Day at Betio.

The Shermans joined Wave 5 of the ship-to-shore assault. The tanks negotiated the gauntlet of Japanese fire without incident, but five were lost when they plunged into unseen shell craters in the turbid water. Ashore, the Marines' lack of operating experience with medium tanks proved costly to the survivors. Local commanders simply ordered the vehicles inland to attack targets of opportunity unsupported. All but two were soon knocked out of action. Enterprising salvage crews worked throughout each night to cannibalize severely damaged vehicles in order to keep other tanks operational. Meanwhile, the Marines learned to employ the tanks within an integrated team of covering infantry and engineers. The Shermans then proved invaluable in Major Ryan's seizure of Green Beach on D+1, the attacks of Major Jones and Major Crowe on D+2, and the final assault by Lieutenant Colonel McLeod on D+3. Early in the battle, Japanese 75mm antitank guns were deadly against the Shermans, but once these weapons were destroyed, the defenders could do little more than shoot out the periscopes with sniper fire.

Colonel Shoup's opinion of the medium tanks was ambivalent. His disappointment in the squandered deployment and heavy losses among the Shermans on D-Day was tempered by subsequent admiration for their tactical role



LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

M-4A2 Sherman tank ("Charlie") of 3d Platoon, Company C, Medium Tanks, was disabled inland from Red Beach Three by mutually supporting Japanese antitank guns firing from well-dug in positions not too far from the beaches.

ashore. Time and again, Japanese emplacements of reinforced concrete, steel, and sand were reduced by direct fire from the tanks' main guns, despite a "prohibitive ammunition expenditure." Shoup also reported that "the so-called crushing effect of medium tanks, as a tactical measure, was practically negligible in this operation, and I believe no one should place any faith in eliminating fortifications by running over them with a tank."

The Marines agreed that the advent of the Shermans rendered their light tanks obsolete. "Medium tanks are just as easy to get ashore, and they pack greater armor and firepower," concluded one battalion commander. By the war's end, the American ordnance industry had manufactured 48,064 Sherman tanks for employment by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in all theaters of combat.

head: ammunition, water, blood plasma, stretchers, LVT fuel, more radios.

Shoup then conferred with Lieutenant Colonel Rixey. While naval gunfire support since the landing had been magnificent, it was time for the Marines to bring their own artillery ashore. The original plan to land the 1st Battalion/10th Marines, on Red One was no longer practical. Shoup and Rixey agreed to try a landing on the left flank of Red Two, close to the pier. Rixey's guns were 75mm pack howitzers, boated in LCVPs. The expeditionary guns could be broken down for manhandling. Rixey, hav-

ing seen from close at hand what happened when LT 3/8 had tried to wade ashore from the reef, went after the last remaining LVTs. There were enough operational vehicles for just two sections of Batteries A and B. In the confusion of transfer-line operations, three sections of Battery C followed the LVTs shoreward in their open boats. Luck was with the artillerymen. The LVTs landed their guns intact by late afternoon. When the trailing boats hung up on the reef, the intrepid Marines humped the heavy components through the bullet-swept waters to the pier and eventually ashore at twilight. There

would be close-in fire support available at daybreak.

Julian Smith knew little of these events, and he continued striving to piece together the tactical situation ashore. From observation reports from staff officers aloft in the float planes, he concluded that the situation in the early afternoon was desperate. Although elements of five infantry battalions were ashore, their toehold was at best precarious. As Smith later recalled, "the gap between Red 1 and Red 2 had not been closed and the left flank on Red 3 was by no means secure."

Smith assumed that Shoup was



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 64142

U.S. Navy LCM-3 sinks seaward of the reef after receiving a direct hit by Japanese gunners on D-Day. This craft may have been one of four carrying M-3 Stuart light tanks, all of which were sunk by highly accurate coastal defense guns that morning.

still alive and functioning, but he could ill afford to gamble. For the next several hours the commanding general did his best to influence the action ashore from the flagship. Smith's first step was the most critical. At 1331 he sent a radio message to General Holland Smith, reporting "situation in doubt" and requesting release of the 6th Marines to division control. In the meantime, having ordered his last remaining landing team (Hays' 1/8) to the line of departure, Smith began reconstituting an emergency division reserve comprised of bits and pieces of the artillery, engineer, and service troop units.

General Smith at 1343 ordered General Hermle to proceed to the end of the pier, assess the situation and report back. Hermle and his small

SSgt William J. Bordelon, USMC, was awarded the Medal of Honor (posthumously) for his actions on D-Day.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 12980



staff promptly debarked from *Monrovia* (APA 31) and headed towards the smoking island, but the trip took four hours.

In the meantime, General Smith intercepted a 1458 message from Major Schoettel, still afloat seaward of the reef: "CP located on back of Red Beach 1. Situation as before. Have lost contact with assault elements." Smith answered in no uncertain terms: "Direct you land at any cost, regain control your battalion and continue the attack." Schoettel complied, reaching the beach around sunset. It would be well into the next day before he could work his way west and consolidate his scattered remnants.

At 1525, Julian Smith received Holland Smith's authorization to take control of the 6th Marines. This was

Getting ashore on D-Day took great courage and determination. Attacking inland beyond the relative safety of the seawall on D-Day required an even greater measure.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63457



good news. Smith now had four battalion landing teams (including 1/8) available. The question then became where to feed them into the fight without getting them chewed to pieces like Ruud's experience in trying to land 3/8.

At this point, Julian Smith's communications failed him again. At 1740, he received a faint message that Hermle had finally reached the pier and was under fire. Ten minutes later, Smith ordered Hermle to take command of all forces ashore. To his subsequent chagrin, Hermle never received this word. Nor did Smith know his message failed to get through. Hermle stayed at the pier, sending runners to Shoup (who unceremoniously told him to "get the hell out from under that pier!") and trying with partial success to unscrew the two-way movement of casualties out to sea and supplies to shore.

Throughout the long day Colonel Hall and his regimental staff had languished in their LCVs adjacent to Hays' LT 1/8 at the line of departure, "cramped, wet, hungry, tired and a large number . . . seasick." In late afternoon, Smith abruptly ordered Hall to land his remaining units on a new beach on the northeast tip of the island at 1745 and work west towards Shoup's ragged lines. This



Marine Corps Historical Center Combat Art Collection

"Tawara, H-Hour, D-Day, Beach Red." Detail from a painting in acrylic colors by Col Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR.

This aerial photograph, taken at 1406 on D-Day, shows the long pier on the north side of the island which divided Red Beach Three, left, from Red Beach Two, where "a man could lift his hand and get it shot off" in the intense fire. Barbed wire

entanglements are visible off both beaches. A grounded Japanese landing craft is tied to the west side of the pier. Faintly visible in the right foreground, a few Marines wade from a disabled LVT towards the pier's limited safety and shelter.

Marine Corps Personal Papers





LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

Marines try to drag a wounded comrade to safety and medical treatment on D-Day.

was a tremendous risk. Smith's overriding concern that evening was a Japanese counterattack from the eastern tail of the island against his left flank (Crowe and Ruud). Once he had been given the 6th Marines, Smith admitted he was "willing to sacrifice a battalion landing team" if it meant saving the landing force from being overrun during darkness.

Fortunately, as it turned out, Hall never received this message from Smith. Later in the afternoon, a float plane reported to Smith that a unit was crossing the line of departure and heading for the left flank of Red Beach Two. Smith and Edson assumed it was Hall and Hays going in on the wrong beach. The fog of war: the movement reported was the beginning of Rixey's artillerymen moving ashore. The 8th Marines spent the night in its boats, waiting for orders. Smith did not discover this fact until early the next morning.

On Betio, Shoup was pleased to receive at 1415 an unexpected report from Major Ryan that several hundred Marines and a pair of tanks had penetrated 500 yards beyond Red Beach One on the western end of the island. This was by far the most successful progress of the day, and the

news was doubly welcome because Shoup, fearing the worst, had assumed Schoettel's companies and the other strays who had veered in that direction had been wiped out. Shoup, however, was unable to convey the news to Smith.

Ryan's composite troops had indeed been successful on the western end. Learning quickly how best to operate with the medium tanks, the Marines carved out a substantial beachhead, overrunning many Japanese turrets and pillboxes. But aside from the tanks, Ryan's men had nothing but infantry weapons. Critically, they had no flamethrowers or demolitions. Ryan had learned from earlier experience in the Solomons that "positions reduced only with grenades could come alive again." By late afternoon, he decided to pull back his thin lines and consolidate. "I was convinced that without flamethrowers or explosives to clean them out we had to pull back . . . to a perimeter that could be defended against counterattack by Japanese troops still hidden in the bunkers."

The fundamental choice faced by most other Marines on Betio that day was whether to stay put along the beach or crawl over the seawall and

carry the fight inland. For much of the day the fire coming across the top of those coconut logs was so intense it seemed "a man could lift his hand and get it shot off." Late on D-Day, there were many too demoralized to advance. When Major Rathvon McC. Tompkins, bearing messages from General Hermle to Colonel Shoup, first arrived on Red Beach Two at the foot of the pier at dusk on D-Day, he was appalled at the sight of so many stragglers. Tompkins wondered why the Japanese "didn't use mortars on the first night. People were lying on the beach so thick you couldn't walk."

Conditions were congested on Red Beach One, as well, but there was a difference. Major Crowe was everywhere, "as cool as ice box lettuce." There were no stragglers. Crowe constantly fed small groups of Marines into the lines to reinforce his precarious hold on the left flank. Captain Hoffman of 3/8 was not displeased to find his unit suddenly integrated within Crowe's 2/8. And Crowe certainly needed help as darkness began to fall. "There we were," Hoffman recalled, "toes in the water, casualties everywhere, dead and

Col Michael P. Ryan, USMC, wears the Navy Cross awarded to him at Tarawa. Ryan, the junior major in the Division, was instrumental in securing the western end of Betio, thereby enabling the first substantial reinforcements to land intact.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection

"The Hard Road to Triumph," a sketch by Kerr Eby. The action shows Maj Crowe's LT 2/8 trying to expand its beachhead near the contested Burns-Philp pier.

wounded all around us. But finally a few Marines started inching forward, a yard here, a yard there." It was enough. Hoffman was soon able to see well enough to call in naval gunfire support 50 yards ahead. His Marines dug in for the night.

West of Crowe's lines, and just inland from Shoup's command post, Captain William T. Bray's Company B, 1/2, settled in for the expected counterattacks. The company had been scattered in Kyle's bloody landing at mid-day. Bray reported to Kyle that he had men from 12 to 14 different units in his company, including several sailors who swam ashore from sinking boats. The men were well armed and no longer strangers to each other, and Kyle was reassured.

Altogether, some 5,000 Marines had stormed the beaches of Betio on D-Day. Fifteen hundred of these were dead, wounded, or missing by nightfall. The survivors held less than a quarter of a square mile of sand and coral. Shoup later described the location of his beachhead lines the night of D-Day as "a stock market graph." His Marines went to ground

in the best fighting positions they could secure, whether in shellholes inland or along the splintered seawall. Despite the crazy-quilt defensive positions and scrambled units, the Marines' fire discipline was superb. The troops seemed to share a certain grim confidence; they had faced the worst in getting ashore. They were quietly ready for any sudden *banzai* charges in the dark.

Marines of Landing Teams 2/8 and 3/8 advance forward beyond the beach.

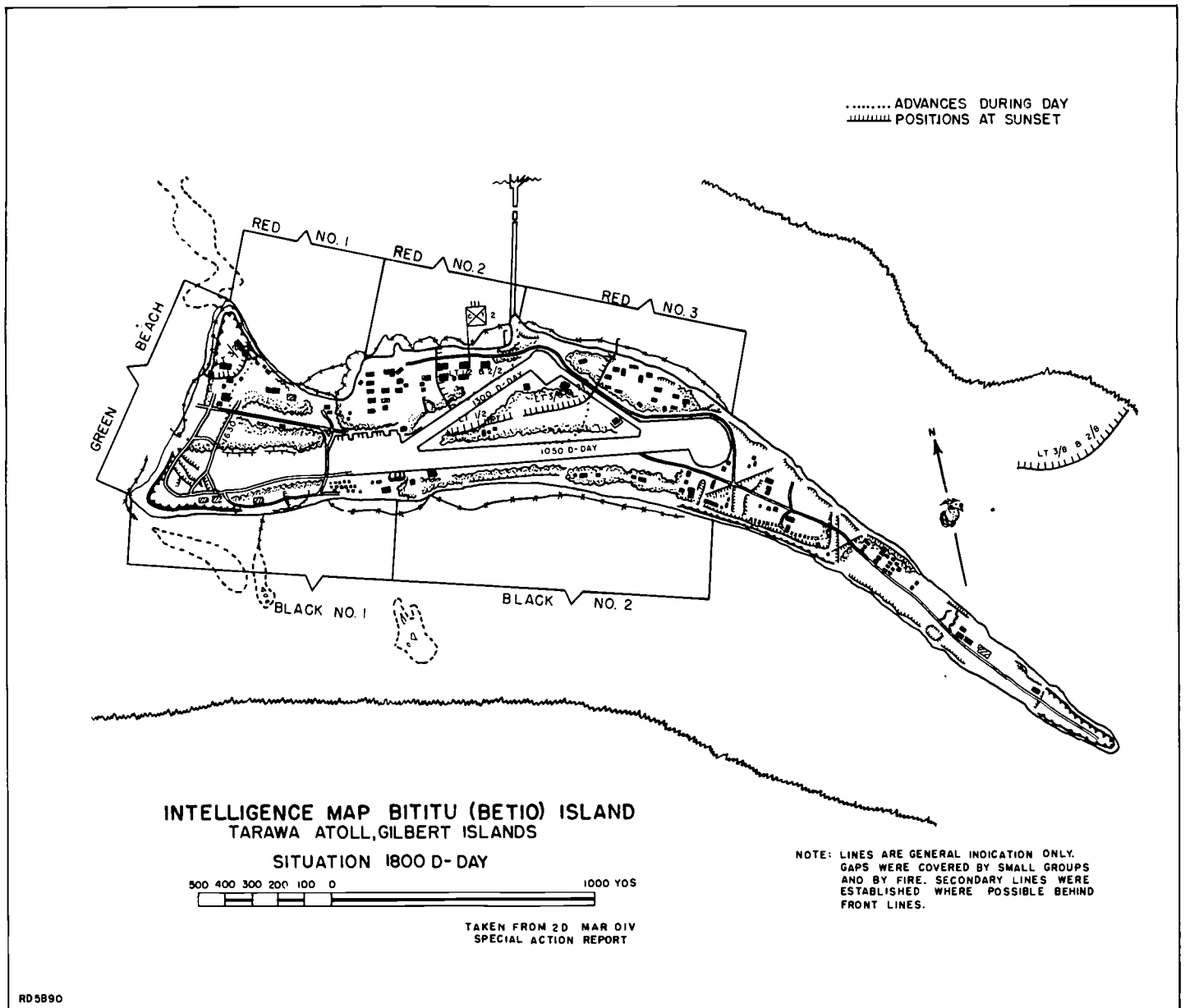
LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

Offshore, the level of confidence diminished. General Julian Smith on *Maryland* was gravely concerned. "This was the crisis of the battle," he recalled. "Three-fourths of the Island was in the enemy's hands, and even allowing for his losses he should have had as many troops left as we had ashore." A concerted Japanese counterattack, Smith believed, would have driven most of his forces into the sea. Smith and Hill reported up the chain of command to Turner, Spruance, and Nimitz: "Issue remains in doubt." Spruance's staff began drafting plans for emergency evacuation of the landing force.

The expected Japanese counterattack did not materialize. The principal dividend of all the bombardment turned out to be the destruction of Admiral Shibasaki's wire communications. The Japanese commander could not muster his men to take the offensive. A few individuals infiltrated through the Marine lines to swim out to disabled tanks and LVTs in the lagoon, where they waited for the morning. Otherwise, all was quiet.

The main struggle throughout the night of D-Day was the attempt by Shoup and Hermle to advise Julian Smith of the best place to land the





reserves on D+1. Smith was amazed to learn at 0200 that Hall and Hays were in fact not ashore but still afloat at the line of departure, awaiting orders. Again, he ordered Combat Team Eight (-) to land on the eastern tip of the island, this time at 0900 on D+1. Hermle finally caught a boat to one of the destroyers in the lagoon to relay Shoup's request to the commanding general to land reinforcements on Red Beach Two. Smith altered Hall's orders accordingly, but he ordered Hermle back to the flagship, miffed at his assistant for not getting ashore and taking command. But Hermle had done Smith a good service in relaying the advice from Shoup. As much as the 8th Marines were going to bleed in the morning's assault, a

landing on the eastern end of the island would have been an unmitigated catastrophe. Reconnaissance after the battle discovered those beaches to be the most intensely mined on the island.

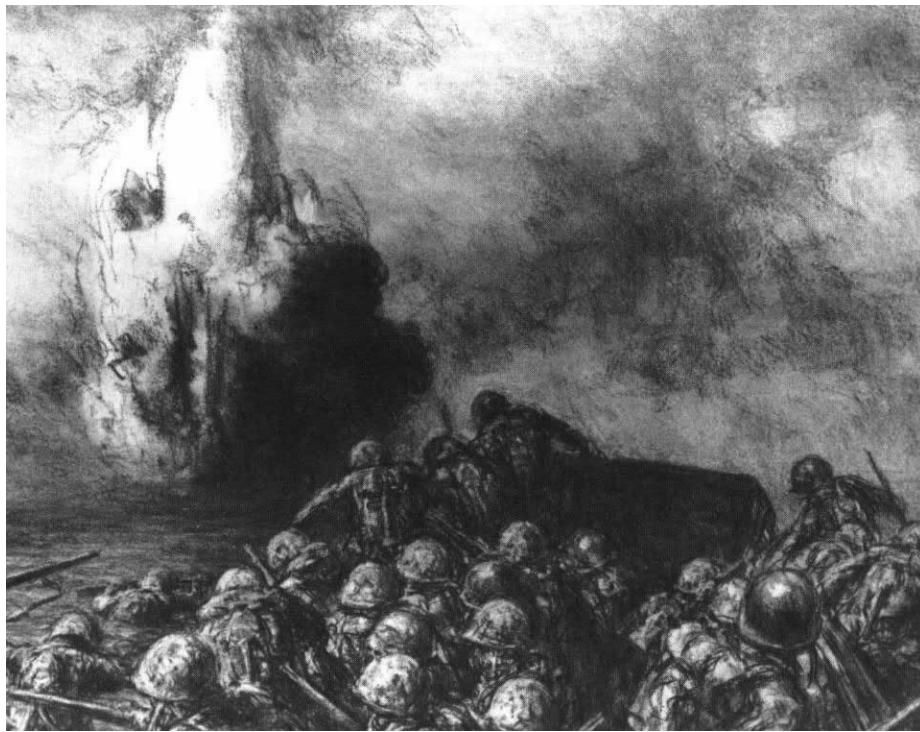
D+1 at Betio, 21 November 1943

The tactical situation on Betio remained precarious for much of the 2d day. Throughout the morning, the Marines paid dearly for every attempt to land reserves or advance their ragged beachheads.

The reef and beaches of Tarawa already looked like a charnel house. Lieutenant Lillibridge surveyed what he could see of the beach at first light and was appalled: ". . . a dreadful

sight, bodies drifting slowly in the water just off the beach, junked amtracks." The stench of dead bodies covered the embattled island like a cloud. The smell drifted out to the line of departure, a bad omen for the troops of 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, getting ready to start their run to the beach.

Colonel Shoup, making the most of faulty communications and imperfect knowledge of his scattered forces, ordered each landing team commander to attack: Kyle and Jordan to seize the south coast, Crowe and Ruud to reduce Japanese strongholds to their left and front, Ryan to seize all of Green Beach. Shoup's predawn request to General Smith, relayed through Major Tompkins and Gener-



U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection

"The Wave Breaks on the Beach," a sketch by Kerr Eby. The scene represents the unwelcome greeting received by LT 1/8 off Red Beach Two on the morning of D+1.

al Hermle, specified the landing of Hays' LT 1/8 on Red Beach Two "close to the pier." That key component of Shoup's request did not survive the tenuous communications route to Smith. The commanding general simply ordered Colonel Hall and Major Hays to land on Red Two at 0615. Hall and Hays, oblivious of the situation ashore, assumed 1/8 would be making a covered landing.

The Marines of LT 1/8 had spent the past 18 hours embarked in LCVPs. During one of the endless circles that night, Chaplain W. Wyeth Willard passed Colonel Hall's boat and yelled, "What are they saving us for, the Junior Prom?" The troops cheered when the boats finally turned for the beach.

Things quickly went awry. The dodging tides again failed to provide sufficient water for the boats to cross the reef. Hays' men, surprised at the obstacle, began the 500-yard trek to shore, many of them dangerously far to the right flank, fully within the beaten zone of the multiple guns firing from the re-entrant strongpoint. "It was the worst possible place they

could have picked," said "Red Mike" Edson. Japanese gunners opened an unrelenting fire. Enfilade fire came from snipers who had infiltrated to the disabled LVTs offshore during the night. At least one machine gun opened up on the wading troops

Readily disassembled and reassembled, the 75mm pack howitzers of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, were ideal for Tarawa's restrictive hydrography. The battalion manhandled its guns ashore under heavy fire late on D-Day. Thereafter, these Marines provided outstanding fire support at exceptionally short ranges to the infantry.

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection



from the beached inter-island schooner *Niminoa* at the reef's edge. Hays' men began to fall at every hand.

The Marines on the beach did everything they could to stop the slaughter. Shoup called for naval gunfire support. Two of Lieutenant Colonel Rixey's 75mm pack howitzers (protected by a sand berm erected during the night by a Seabee bulldozer) began firing at the blockhouses at the Red 1/Red 2 border, 125 yards away, with delayed fuses and high explosive shells. A flight of F4F Wildcats attacked the hulk of the *Niminoa* with bombs and machine guns. These measures helped, but for the large part the Japanese caught Hays' lead waves in a withering crossfire.

Correspondent Robert Sherrod watched the bloodbath in horror. "One boat blows up, then another. The survivors start swimming for shore, but machine-gun bullets dot the water all around them . . . This is worse, far worse than it was yesterday." Within an hour, Sherrod could count "at least two hundred bodies



LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

Navy medical personnel evacuate the wounded from the beachhead on D-Day. This was difficult because there were few places anywhere that Marines could walk upright. The shortage of stretchers compounded the problems of the landing force.

which do not move at all on the dry flats."

First Lieutenant Dean Ladd was shot in the stomach shortly after jumping into the water from his boat. Recalling the strict orders to the troops not to stop for the wounded, Ladd expected to die on the spot. One of his riflemen, Private First Class T. F. Sullivan, ignored the orders and saved his lieutenant's life. Ladd's rifle platoon suffered 12 killed and 12 wounded during the ship-to-shore assault.

First Lieutenant Frank Plant, the battalion air liaison officer, accompanied Major Hays in the command LCVP. As the craft slammed into the reef, Plant recalled Hays shouting "Men, debark!" as he jumped into the water. The troops that followed were greeted by a murderous fire. Plant helped pull the wounded back into the boat, noting that "the water all around was colored purple with blood." As Plant hurried to catch up with Major Hays, he was terrified at the sudden appearance of what he took to be Japanese fighters roaring right towards him. These were the

Navy Wildcats aiming for the nearby *Nimino*. The pilots were exuberant but inconsistent: one bomb hit the hulk squarely; others missed by 200 yards. An angry David Shoup came up on the radio: "Stop strafing! Bombing ship hitting own troops!"

At the end, it was the sheer courage of the survivors that got

Marines under fire along Red Beach Three near the Burns-Philp pier hug the ground as Navy planes continually pound the enemy strongpoints in front of them.

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection



them ashore under such a hellish crossfire. Hays reported to Shoup at 0800 with about half his landing team. He had suffered more than 300 casualties; others were scattered all along the beach and the pier. Worse, the unit had lost all its flamethrowers, demolitions, and heavy weapons. Shoup directed Hays to attack westward, but both men knew that small arms and courage alone would not prevail against fortified positions.

Shoup tried not to let his discouragement show, but admitted in a message to General Smith "the situation does not look good ashore."

The combined forces of Majors Crowe and Ruud on Red Beach Three were full of fight and had plenty of weapons. But their left flank was flush against three large Japanese bunkers, each mutually supporting, and seemingly unassailable. The stubby Burns-Philp commercial pier, slightly to the east of the main pier, became a bloody "no-man's land" as the forces fought for its possession. Learning from the mistakes of D-Day, Crowe insured that his one surviving Sherman tank was always accompanied by infantry.

Crowe and Ruud benefitted from intensive air support and naval gun-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 12448
 1stLt William Deane Hawkins, USMC, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for sustained bravery throughout the first 24 hours ashore at Betio. Hawkins commanded the 2d Marines' Scout-Sniper Platoon, which seized the long pier to begin the assault.

fire along their left flank. Crowe was unimpressed with the accuracy and effectiveness of the aviators ("our aircraft never did us much good"), but he was enthusiastic about the naval guns. "I had the *Ringgold*, the *Dashiell*, and the *Anderson* in support of me Anything I asked for I got from them. They were great!" On one occasion on D+1, Crowe authorized direct fire from a destroyer in the lagoon at a large command bunker only 50 yards ahead of the Marines. "They slammed them in there and you could see arms and legs and everything just go up like that!"

Inland from Red Beach Two, Kyle and Jordan managed to get some of their troops across the fire-swept airstrip and all the way to the south coast, a significant penetration. The toehold was precarious, however, and the Marines sustained heavy casualties. "You could not see the Japanese," recalled Lieutenant Lilibridge, "but fire seemed to come from every direction." When Jordan lost contact with his lead elements, Shoup ordered him across the island

to reestablish command. Jordan did so at great hazard. By the time Kyle arrived, Jordan realized his own presence was superfluous. Only 50 men could be accounted for of LT 2/2's rifle companies. Jordan organized and supplied these survivors to the best of his abilities, then—at Shoup's direction—merged them with Kyle's force and stepped back into his original role as an observer.

The 2d Marines' Scout Sniper Platoon had been spectacularly heroic from the very start when they led the assault on the pier just before H-Hour. Lieutenant Hawkins continuously set an example of cool disdain for danger in every tactical situation. His bravery was superhuman, but it could not last in the maelstrom. He was wounded by a Japanese mortar shell on D-Day, but shook off attempts to treat his injuries. At dawn on D+1 he led his men in attacking a series of strongpoints firing on LT 1/8 in the water. Hawkins crawled directly up to a major pillbox, fired his weapon point blank through the gun ports, then threw grenades inside to complete the job. He was shot in the chest, but continued the attack, personally taking out three more pillboxes. Then a Japanese shell nearly tore him apart. It was a mortal

Working parties ignore sniper and artillery fire to unload 75mm ammunition delivered by LCVPs from Biddle (APA 8) at the head of the long Burns-Philp pier.

LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63492

Navy hospital corpsmen attend a critically wounded Marine on Betio. The 2d Marine Division's organic medical personnel paid a high price while administering aid to fallen Marines: 30 Navy doctors and corpsmen were killed; another 59 wounded.

"Hold up—we are calling an air strike." It took two more runners to get the air strike cancelled. Ryan then ordered Lieutenant Greene to call in naval gunfire on the southwest targets. Two destroyers in the lagoon responded quickly and accurately. At 1120, Ryan launched a coordinated tank-infantry assault. Within the hour his patchwork force had seized all of Green Beach and was ready to attack eastward toward the airfield.

Communications were still terrible. For example, Ryan twice reported the southern end of Green Beach to be heavily mined, a message that never reached any higher headquarters. But General Smith on board *Maryland* did receive direct word of Ryan's success and was overjoyed. For the first time Smith had the opportunity to land reinforcements on a covered beach with their unit integrity intact.

General Smith and "Red Mike" Edson had been conferring that morning with Colonel Maurice G. Holmes, commanding the 6th Marines, as to the best means of getting

the fresh combat team ashore. In view of the heavy casualties sustained by Hays' battalion on Red Beach Two, Smith was reconsidering a landing on the unknown eastern end of the island. The good news from Ryan quickly solved the problem. Smith ordered Holmes to land one battalion by rubber rafts on Green Beach, with a second landing team boated in LCVPs prepared to wade ashore in support.

At this time Smith received reports that Japanese troops were escaping from the eastern end of Betio by wading across to Bairiki, the next island. The Marines did not want to fight the same tenacious enemy twice. Smith then ordered Holmes to land one battalion on Bairiki to "seal the back door." Holmes assigned Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray to land 2/6 on Bairiki, Major "Willie K." Jones to land 1/6 by rubber boat on Green Beach, and Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth F. McLeod to be prepared to land 3/6 at any assigned spot, probably Green Beach. Smith also ordered the light tanks of Company B, 2d Tank Battalion, to

land on Green Beach in support of the 6th Marines.

These tactical plans took much longer to execute than envisioned. Jones was ready to debark from *Feland* (APA 11) when the ship was suddenly ordered underway to avoid a perceived submarine threat. Hours passed before the ship could return close enough to Betio to launch the rubber boats and their LCVP tow craft. The light tanks were among the few critical items not truly combat loaded in their transports, being carried in the very bottom of the cargo holds. Indiscriminate unloading during the first 30 hours of the landing had further scrambled supplies and equipment in intervening decks. It took hours to get the tanks clear and loaded on board lighters.

Shoup was bewildered by the long delays. At 1345 he sent Jones a message: "Bring in flamethrowers if possible Doing our best." At 1525 he queried division about the estimated landing time of LT 1/6. He wanted Jones ashore and on the attack before dark.

Meanwhile, Shoup and his small staff were beset by logistic support problems. Already there were teams organized to strip the dead of their ammunition, canteens, and first aid pouches. Lieutenant Colonel Carlson helped organize a "false beachhead" at the end of the pier. Most progress came from the combined efforts of Lieutenant Colonel Chester J. Salazar, commanding the shore party; Captain John B. McGovern, USN, acting as primary control officer on board the minesweeper *Pursuit* (AM 108); Major Ben K. Weatherwax, assistant division D-4; and Major George L. H. Cooper, operations officer of 2d Battalion, 18th Marines. Among them, these officers gradually brought some order out of chaos. They assumed strict control of supplies unloaded and used the surviving LVTs judiciously to keep the shuttle of casualties moving seaward and critical items from the pierhead to the beach. All of this was per-



LtGen Julian C. Smith Collection

This desperate scene hardly needs a caption. The Marine is badly hurt, but he's in good hands as his buddies lead him to safety and shelter just ahead for treatment.

formed by sleepless men under constant fire.

Casualty handling was the most pressing logistic problem on D+1. The 2d Marine Division was heroically served at Tarawa by its organic Navy doctors and hospital corpsmen. Nearly 90 of these medical specialists were themselves casualties in the fighting ashore. Lieutenant Herman R. Brukhardt, Medical Corps, USN, established an emergency room in a freshly captured Japanese bunker (some of whose former occupants "came to life" with blazing rifles more than once). In 36 hours, under brutal conditions, Brukhardt treated 126 casualties; only four died.

At first, casualties were evacuated to troopships far out in the transport area. The long journey was dangerous to the wounded troops and wasteful of the few available LVTs or LCVPs. The Marines then began delivering casualties to the destroyer *Ringgold* in the lagoon, even though her sickbay had been wrecked by a Japanese five-inch shell on D-Day. The ship, still actively firing support missions, accepted

dozens of casualties and did her best. Admiral Hill then took the risk of dispatching the troopship *Doyen* (APA 1) into the lagoon early on D+1 for service as primary receiving ship for critical cases. Lieutenant Commander James Oliver, MC, USN, led a five-man surgical team

Some seriously wounded Marines were evacuated from the beachhead by raft.
Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 63926



with recent combat experience in the Aleutians. In the next three days Oliver's team treated more than 550 severely wounded Marines. "We ran out of sodium pentathol and had to use ether," said Oliver, "although a bomb hit would have blown *Doyen* off the face of the planet."

Navy chaplains were also hard at work wherever Marines were fighting ashore. Theirs was particularly heartbreaking work, consoling the wounded, administering last rites to the dying, praying for the souls of the dead before the bulldozer came to cover the bodies from the unforgiving tropical sun.

The tide of battle began to shift perceptibly towards the Americans by mid-afternoon on D+1. The fighting was still intense, the Japanese fire still murderous, but the surviving Marines were on the move, no longer gridlocked in precarious toeholds on the beach. Rixey's pack howitzers were adding a new definition for close fire support. The supply of ammunition and fresh water was greatly improved. Morale was up, too. The troops knew the 6th Marines was coming in soon. "I thought up

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.

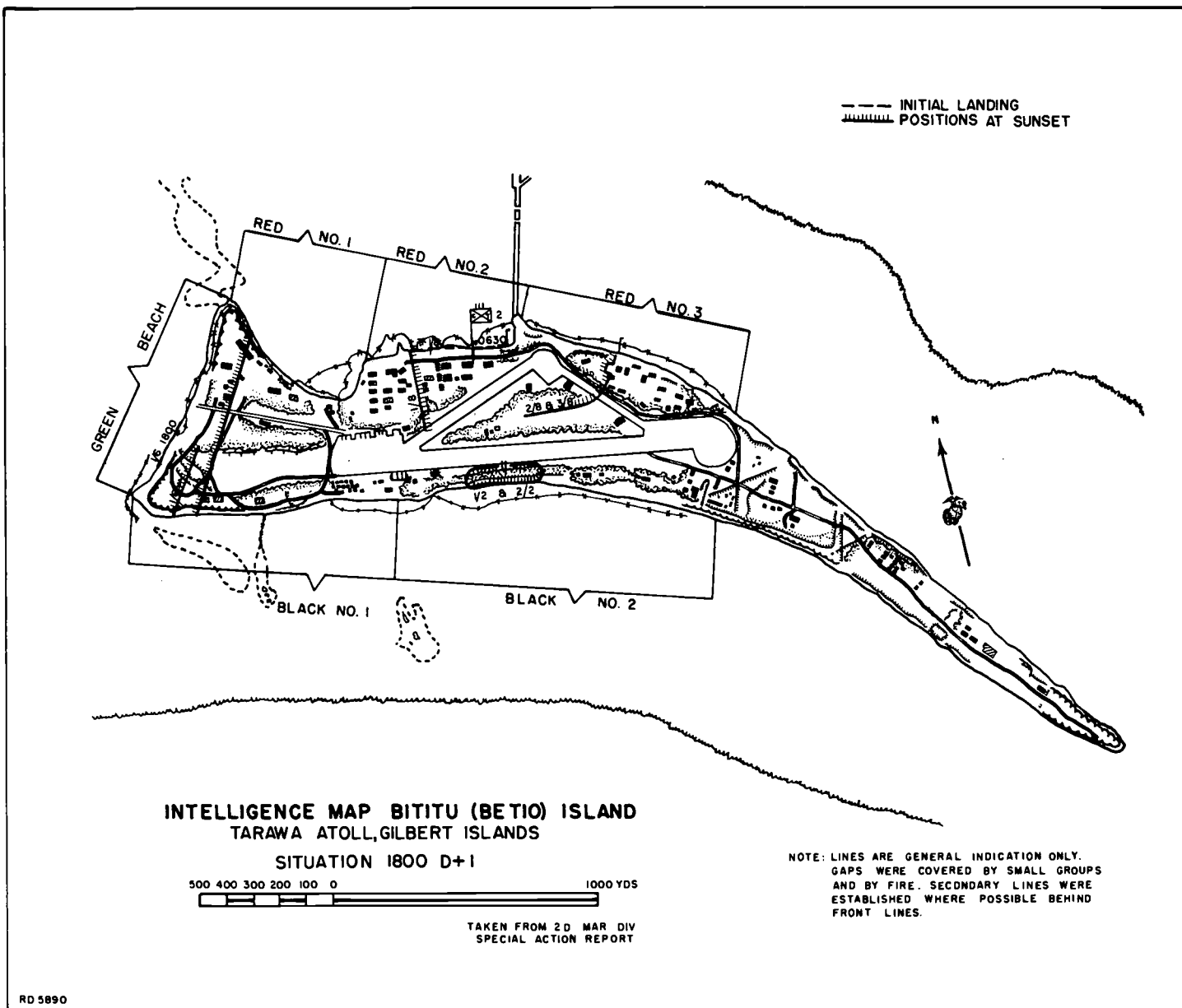
Years later, General Julian Smith looked back on the pivotal day of 21 November 1943 at Betio and admitted, "we were losing until we won!" Many things had gone wrong, and the Japanese had inflicted severe casualties on the attackers, but, from this point on, the issue was no longer in doubt at Tarawa.

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





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.

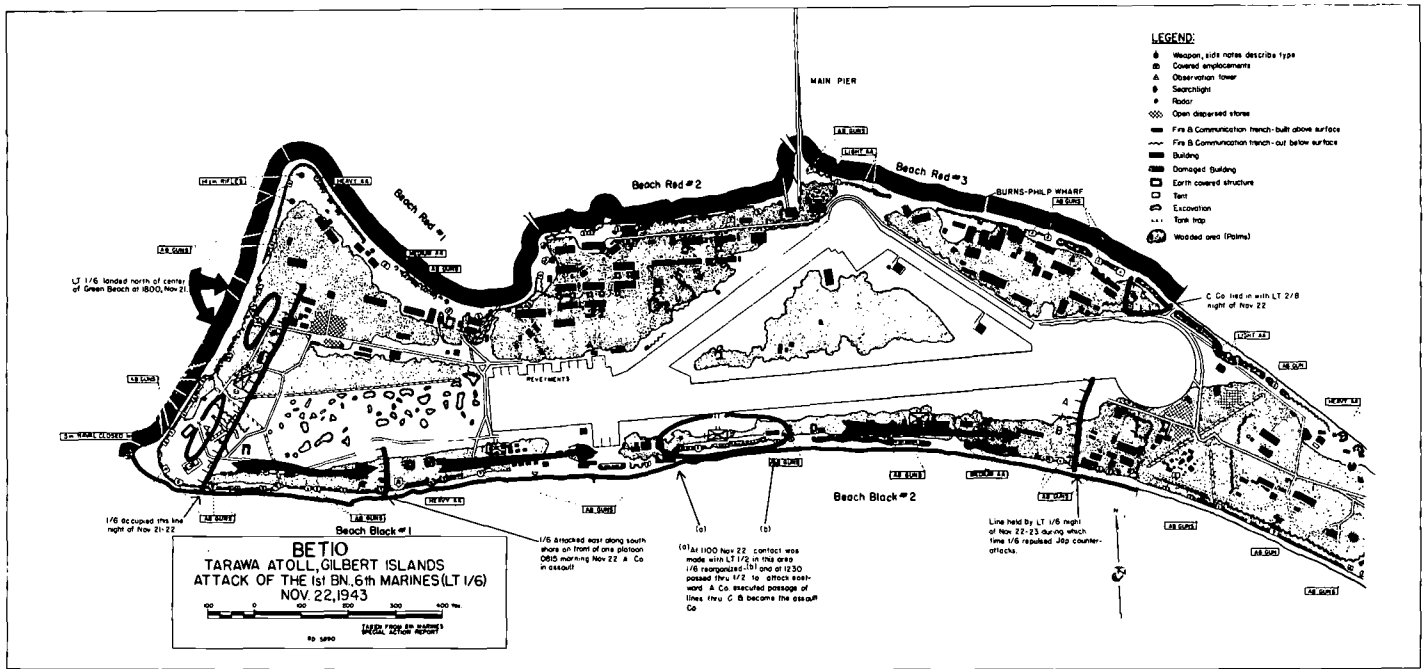
On the third day, Crowe reorganized his tired forces for yet another assault. First, the former marksmanship instructor obtained cans of lubricating oil and made his troops field strip and clean their Garands before the attack. Crowe placed his battalion executive officer, Major William C. Chamberlin, 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

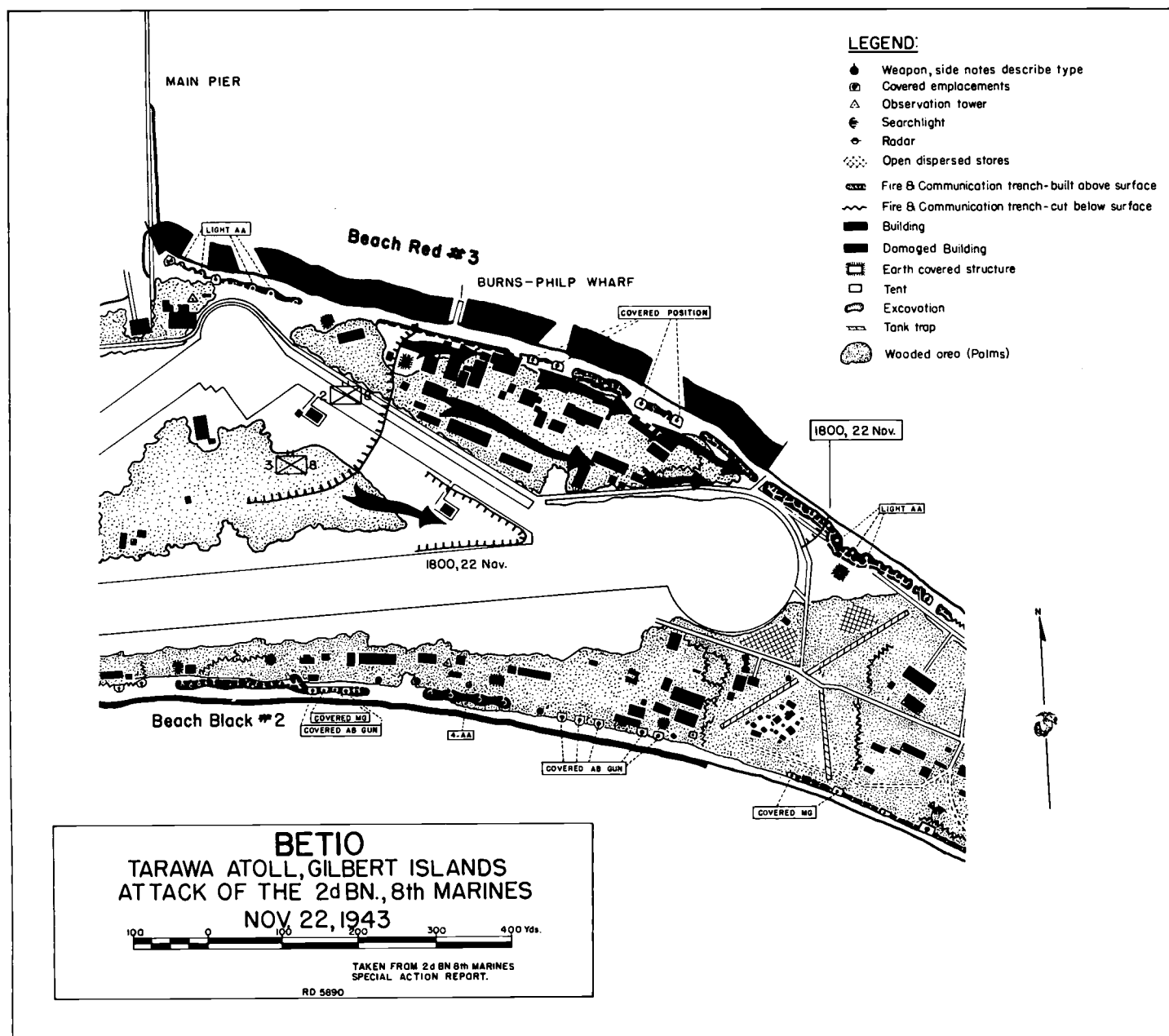
plans were overcome by events of the evening.

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.

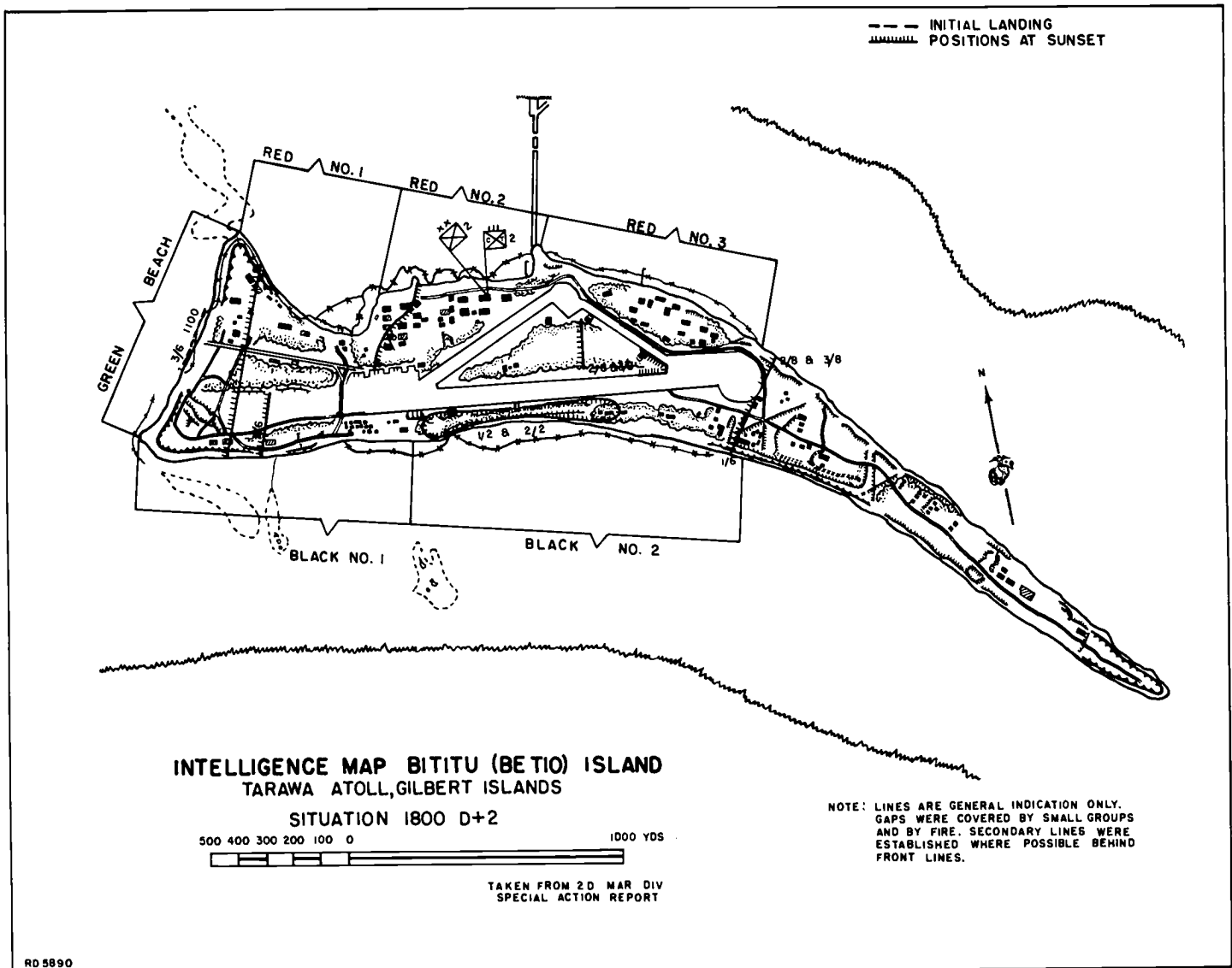
The Japanese struck Jones' lines again at 2300. One force made a noisy demonstration across from Company A's lines — taunting, clinking canteens against their helmets, yelling *Banzai!* — while a second force attacked Company B with a silent rush. The Marines repulsed this attack, too, but were forced 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-

troysed 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.

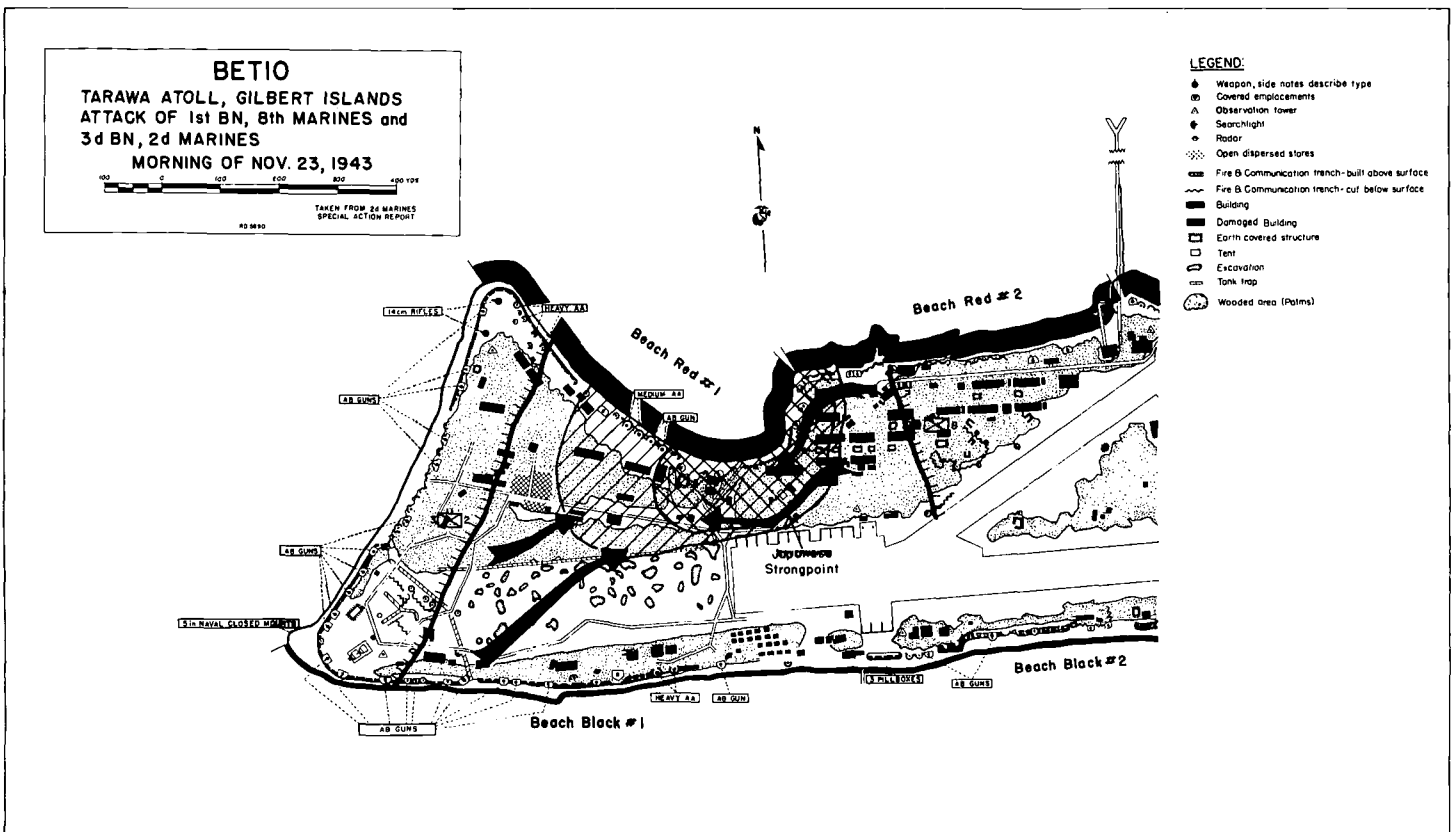
Major Hays finally got some flamethrowers (from Crowe's engineers when LT 2/8 was ordered to stand down), and the attack of 1/8 from the east made steady, if painstaking, progress. Major Schoettel, anxious to atone for what some per-

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."

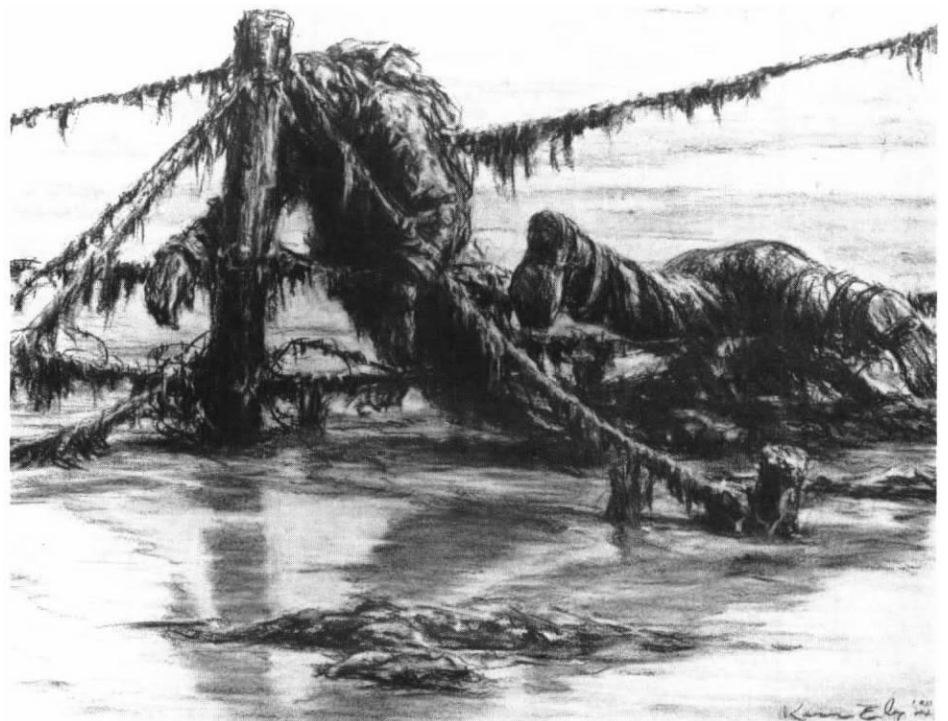
Major Jones recalled that Holland Smith had tears in his eyes as he walked through the ruins. Robert Sherrod also accompanied the generals. They came upon one sight that

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



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