

## Amphibious Victory<sup>1</sup>

### 1/8 LANDS

Colonel Hall, his regimental headquarters group, and the men of 1/8 had spent the night at the line of departure, waiting in vain for orders to land on Betio. Although division had issued such an order, on the afternoon of D-Day, the message had not reached the regimental commander. Finally, at 0200 on the morning of 21 November, Hall was contacted and told to report the position of 1/8 and the condition of its men. He replied that his Marines, in boats near the control vessel, were "resting easy," a surprisingly cheerful description of men that had spent over 12 hours in bobbing landing craft.<sup>2</sup> In 2 1/2 hours, Hall's radio again came to life, as division headquarters directed him to arrange with the *Pursuit* for a new line of departure and to land his troops at 0900 on D plus 1.

While Hall was preparing to make

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: *2d MarDiv Op Rpt*; *2d MarDiv D-3 Jnl*; *2d Mar OpRpt*; *2d Mar Unit Jnl*, 12-24Nov43; *6th Mar SAR* (including 1/6 and 3/6 SARs), dtd 20Dec43, hereafter *6th Mar SAR*; *8th Mar SAR*; *18th Mar CbtRpt*; *10 Mar OpRpt*; *2d PhibTracBn SAR*; *2d TkBn SAR*; 2/6 Narrative Account of Ops, 21-29Nov43, n.d.; *Edson Lecture*; Stockman, *Tarawa*.

<sup>2</sup> *8th Mar SAR*, p. 1.

this move, General Hermle radioed division headquarters that Colonel Shoup wanted 1/8 to land on Beach Red 2. The general's message was sent at 0513, and a few minutes later, Hall was told to start at once toward Red 2. Once ashore, 1/8 was to attack westward toward Red 1.

The LCVPs carrying the first waves of 1/8 grounded on the reef at 0615, and the men began wading the 500 yards to shore. En route, the troops were hit from both flanks by machine gun fire. Casualties were severe, and the survivors were badly disorganized. But by 0800, Major Hays, commander of 1/8, had over half his men ashore and under cover. He then reported to Shoup, who told him to reorganize the battalion for an attack westward toward Ryan's beachhead. This action would have to be fought with machine guns, rifles, and grenades, for Hays' battalion had lost its demolitions and flamethrowers during the passage from reef to beach.

Of great assistance to the landing of 1/8 were Rixey's pack howitzers, which had been organized into a five-gun composite battery. During the night, a bulldozer had thrown up an earthen embankment on the exposed sides of the artillery position to protect the cannoners from small arms fire. Early on the morning of D plus 1, two guns were moved from this makeshift

cover to fire directly into a pair of blockhouses located on the boundary between Red 1 and Red 2. Using high explosive ammunition with delay fuses from a range of about 125 yards, the Marine howitzers succeeded in penetrating these log and coral structures and in temporarily silencing machine guns that were sited to cut down Hays' incoming troops.<sup>3</sup> By 0800, after this mission had been fired, all five howitzer sections were in position to support Shoup's renewed offensive.

Colonel Hall, commanding officer of the 8th Marines, reached Shoup's command post about 1400. Although he was now the senior officer ashore on Betio, Hall did not assume command. In his opinion, nothing would have been gained from such an action, for Shoup, "who was doing very well and was the division's selected commander, was in a position to know more about what was going on ashore. . . ." <sup>4</sup> The senior colonel aided his junior by placing his own communications equipment at Shoup's disposal.

#### *EXPANDING THE BEACHHEAD*

Colonel Shoup's plan for the second day called for 1/8 to fight its way westward toward the Red 1 beachhead, while 1/2 and 2/2 drove across the island. Crowe's 2/8 was to reduce

<sup>3</sup>The commander of 1/10 recalls that he "personally sited the two pieces in view of their being masked by disabled LVTs. We, of course, desired to use those LVTs as partial cover for personnel manning the sections as small-arms fire was sweeping across the area at the time." BGen Presley M. Rixey ltr to ACofS, G-3, dtd 10Aug62.

<sup>4</sup>Capt James R. Stockman, Notes on an In-

terview with Col Elmer E. Hall, dtd 10Jun47. <sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

the enemy pocket at the base of Burns-Philp pier, and 3/2 was given the task of securing Green Beach. By 1200, Hays had his battalion ready to launch its thrust. His unit relieved the composite force that was holding the western segment of the beachhead and, with the aid of a medium tank, attempted to forge ahead. This lone tank could not shatter all the fortifications in the path of 1/8, and the attackers were unable to gain momentum. The battalion made little progress, killed few Japanese, and suffered light casualties, for the troops lacked the tools with which to destroy Japanese positions. "Hays had no flamethrowers, the most important weapon we had on Tarawa," commented his regimental commander, "and without them a unit had little chance to advance." <sup>5</sup> At dark the Marines paused, ready to continue the attack on the following morning.

The task assigned Major Kyle's 1/2 on the morning of the second day was to strike across the airstrip to the ocean shore. Two of Kyle's companies were located in the triangular area formed by the runway and taxiways, and the third was on their right facing to the west. Early in the day, the battalion commander had reinforced Company C, the unit on the right, with a platoon of water-cooled .30 caliber machine guns. In the meantime, members of Weapons Company headquarters had found a pair of .50 caliber machine guns on the beach. These weapons, manned by volunteer crews, joined the .30 caliber guns to give Company C

terview with Col Elmer E. Hall, dtd 10Jun47.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

still greater firepower. Neither reinforcements nor supplies could be sent to Companies A and B in the triangle, for enemy machine guns had been moved into position to graze the taxiway behind those units, thus isolating them from Kyle and the remainder of his command.

When 1/2 began its advance, Company C and Kyle's headquarters were prevented by the fire of the Japanese machine guns from crossing the airstrip, so the other two companies had to attack on their own. Assisted by elements of neighboring 2/2, the battalion on Kyle's left, Companies A and B reached the south coast. The Marines occupied an abandoned position about 200 yards long, a series of entrenchments that lay between two Japanese strongpoints. No sooner had the attackers gained the cover of the trenches than the Japanese attacked from the east, a blow that was beaten back at the cost of heavy Marine casualties.

Lieutenant Colonel Jordan, the observer who had taken command of 2/2 when Lieutenant Colonel Amey was killed, was not in contact with that portion of his command farthest from the lagoon shore. After runners had failed to return with news of these isolated units, Jordan reported this breakdown of communications to Shoup and was instructed to move his command post to the south coast of the island. Upon reaching the recently established perimeter, Jordan took command over remnants of three of his own companies, 50 to 75 men in all, plus Companies A and B of Kyle's battalion, an additional 135 Marines. Now that he had regained control, the com-

manding officer of 2/2 hoped to carry out Shoup's latest instructions—to join up with Crowe's 2/8 and form a continuous line facing eastward and stretching from the vicinity of Burns-Philp pier to the perimeter now held by Jordan's men.

Jordan soon realized that he lacked both ammunition and men to fight his way to the lines held by 2/8. With Shoup's permission, he postponed the effort until the following morning. Amphibian tractors carrying food, ammunition, and supplies reached the coastal perimeter during the afternoon, unloaded, and evacuated 30 wounded Marines.

In the meantime, Company C of Kyle's command had been trying to push across the island. The pair of .50 caliber machine guns managed to kill or discourage the Japanese gunners firing along the taxiway, the rifle platoons fell back from their positions on the right of Kyle's line, and, aided by the fires of the battalion machine gun platoon, Company C crossed the airstrip. By dusk, a stronger perimeter had been established along the south coast, with Company B and most of the recently arrived machine guns on the west, Company A and portions of 2/2 in the center, and Company C on the east. On both east and west, formidable Japanese positions lay within 25 yards of the Marine line. Since Major Kyle had arrived with Company C, Jordan, at Shoup's direction, attached the men from 2/2—who represented less than one sixth of the forces holding the position—to the 1st Battalion. Relinquishing his command to Kyle, Jordan reverted to his original role as observer, "having done," in Shoup's

words, "a fine job in the task he was assigned"<sup>6</sup> without warning or preparation in the hail of fire on Red Beach 2.<sup>7</sup>

At the eastern end of the main beachhead, Major Crowe's 2/8 fought hard but was unable to gain much ground. To the left of the battalion position was the Burns-Philp pier, inland of which lay several ruined buildings, a steel reinforced pillbox, a log and coral emplacement, and a large bombproof shelter. The eastward drive made no headway against these defenses, nor did the Marines attacking to the south in the vicinity of the airfield have much success. Company E did reach the main runway, but the unit had to fall back to avoid being isolated from the rest of the battalion. At dusk, a patrol reoccupied the Burns-Philp pier, a structure which served as a sort of no man's land, and by the following dawn these Marines had killed 15 Japanese infiltrators at the cost of 2 casualties. In brief, the best that 2/8 could do was to strengthen its position and maintain pressure on the weary enemy.

The main beachhead, by dusk of the second day, extended from 400 to 500 yards along the lagoon coast on either side of the control pier. To the right of that structure, 1/8 manned a line running from the beach directly inland to the west taxiway. Neither this taxi strip nor the main runway were occupied by American troops, so a gap almost 250 yards wide separated 1/8 from the perimeter on the south coast.

<sup>6</sup> Shoup interview/comments.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Rpt; Rpt of Capt Maxie R. Williams, n.d., in *Rpts of 2d MarDiv BnComdrs.*

This stretch, sandwiched between two Japanese strongpoints, encompassed a 300-yard portion of the coastline directly across the island from the base of the pier. The right flank of Crowe's 2/8 was near the middle of the airfield triangle, some 200 yards behind the left flank of the south coast position. From the triangle, Crowe's line curved in a quarter circle toward positions held by elements of 3/8 near the Burns-Philp pier. The Red 2 - Red 3 beachhead had been enlarged, but its defensive positions were marked by gaps which might be the target of enemy counterattacks and infiltration. (See Map 3.)

#### *SUCCESS IN THE WEST*

While the fight was raging for the central portion of Betio, Ryan's men, members of 3/2 aided by Marines from 1/2 and 2/2, were securing Green Beach, code designation for the entire western side of the island. Since the Japanese had a dozen anti-boat guns and a pair of 5-inch naval guns emplaced at the southwestern corner of this beach, positions that were protected by a maze of rifle pits, Ryan felt that he needed the help of naval gunfire in overrunning his portion of the island. A naval gunfire spotter contacted a destroyer lying off the coast and coached her guns onto Japanese strongpoints. Another destroyer joined the action, and at 1100 Ryan decided that the enemy was sufficiently battered to enable him to begin his attack. The Marines of 3/2, supported by two medium tanks, encountered only slight resistance. According to Ryan, his troops "got another medium tank,

and naval gunfire came from somewhere. . . . There was little opposition."<sup>8</sup> Late in the afternoon, the Marines organized a defensive line that stretched across the island about 200 yards inland from Green Beach.

Ryan's success, called by Julian Smith "the most cheering news of D plus 1,"<sup>9</sup> enabled the division commander to land elements of the 6th Marines without exposing them to enemy machine gunners. Although the 6th Marines had been released to his control, Julian Smith refused to commit this force until he had a clear picture of the situation ashore. On the morning of D plus 1, the general conferred with Colonel Maurice G. Holmes, the regimental commander, and outlined for him several possible missions which the 6th Marines might be called upon to perform. Holmes left the conference with the understanding that he was to prepare for any of these eventualities and await further orders from division. At 1230, while Holmes was passing on to his battalion commanders the instructions he had received from Julian Smith, he was told by division to land one of his battalions immediately. After reaching the southern part of Green Beach in rubber boats, this unit was to pass through the lines of 3/2 and attack to the east. In addition, Holmes was to have a second battalion ready to land in close support of the first. He selected 1/6, under Major William K. Jones, to make the landing and placed Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray's 2/6 in close sup-

port. Circumstances, however, upset Holmes' plans. The landing could not be executed immediately, nor did 2/6 remain available for close support.

At 1303, a message that was to alter Holmes' plans reached division headquarters. An unidentified observer, using the TBS circuit, claimed to have seen Japanese troops attempting to wade eastward from Betio toward the island of Bairiki. Half an hour later, Colonel Shoup sent a similar report to division and requested naval gunfire to prevent an enemy withdrawal. Before receiving this second message, Julian Smith ordered Holmes to land a battalion on Bairiki. The commander of the 6th Marines elected to use Murray's 2/6. Now the colonel had one battalion preparing to land on Betio and another getting ready to capture Bairiki. The third landing team, Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth F. McLeod's 3/6, was ordered to embark in boats in the event it might be needed at either objective.

At 1655, while 1/6 and its supporting tanks were preparing to land on Green Beach, Murray's 2/6 gained the coral sands of Bairiki. During the approach to the island, the 15 Japanese ashore opened fire with a pair of machine guns. Neither naval gunfire nor preliminary air strikes had silenced these guns, but division, upon learning that 2/6 was under fire, ordered the planes to try once again. This last minute strafing run proved a spectacular success, for a bullet struck a can of gasoline in the pillbox that housed the entire enemy contingent and turned the structure into an oven. The Marines landed against no resistance,

<sup>8</sup> Rpt of Maj Michael P. Ryan, n.d., in *Rpts of 2d MarDiv BnComdrs.*

<sup>9</sup> Smith, "Tarawa," p. 1174.

carefully searched the island, and found no live Japanese.

Getting ashore at Green Beach, however, proved a complex undertaking. Company B, 2d Tank Battalion, had the mission of supporting with its light tanks the operations of 1/6. The vehicles belonging to each of the tank platoons had been loaded in a different transport. The tanks had been stowed in bottom holds, and while the transports were unloading off Betio, the cargo within the vessels was rearranged in such a way that the armored vehicles were buried under a mass of supplies. Several hours were lost in digging out the tanks and lowering them into the waiting LCMs.

Nor was the experience of Jones' unit, the only battalion landed in rubber boats, much less frustrating. Just as the transport carrying 1/6, the USS *Feland*, was ready to lower the boats, it was ordered away from the reef into deeper water. Later this ship came in closer again, but it was still 12,000 yards from the beach when it launched the rubber boats. LCVPs towed the boats toward the beach, six of them strung behind each landing craft; outboard motors, which would have permitted the rubber craft to proceed independently, had proved unreliable. After the first wave was safely ashore on the southern part of Green Beach, Major Jones learned that the area was heavily mined and rerouted the rest of 1/6 to the northern portion of the beach. One of the two LVTs carrying food, water, and medical supplies for the battalion struck a mine en route to the island and was destroyed;

only one man survived. By 1835, 1/6 was ashore on Betio.<sup>10</sup>

Jones then conferred with Ryan, made a reconnaissance of his zone of action, and decided to attack at 2000 that night. In the midst of his preparations for this thrust, he received a message originated by Shoup and approved by division that directed 1/6 to hold fast until daylight and then strike inland. Upon receiving these orders, Jones organized his companies for the night and coordinated with Ryan concerning the next day's operations.

Unloading the light tanks from the transports had been difficult; getting them beyond the reef proved almost impossible. In fact, only one platoon managed to reach the island in time to support the attack originally scheduled for 2000. Potholes, treacherous currents, and a steep drop-off on the inland side of the reef caused the tank company commander to request permission to land the rest of his unit on Red 2. Division agreed, instructing the remaining two platoons to follow the west side of the long pier. The company commander complied, but it was the morning of the third day before all the tanks were ashore.

### THE SUPPLY SITUATION

Lieutenant Colonel Carlson, who had acted as Colonel Shoup's liaison officer on D-Day, was to serve in the same capacity on D plus 1. On the morning of 21 November, Carlson left the divi-

<sup>10</sup> Rpt of Maj William K. Jones, in *Rpts of 2d MarDiv BnComdrs*; Col William K. Jones interview with HistBr, G-3, HQMC and cmts on draft MS, dtd 20Aug62, hereafter *Jones interview/comments*.

sion command post in the *Maryland*, obtained an LVT, and made his way to the central part of the island. He found Shoup at the latter's command post, located in the shadow of an enemy bunker some 30 yards inland on Red 2. Since Japanese troops still lurked in the interior of the structure, guards had been posted at each exit. Shoup informed Carlson that ammunition and water remained in short supply and asked Carlson to return to division headquarters with news of the fighting ashore. At this point, Carlson volunteered to help organize the handling of supplies, an offer which Shoup promptly accepted.

About noon, Carlson met Lieutenant Colonel Salazar, the shore party commander, who had first reached the pier late the previous day. Salazar and Major George L. H. Cooper, operations officer of 2/18, had been supervising beachhead logistics and trying to keep a steady flow of supplies to the front lines. Carlson now urged that LVTs instead of carrying parties be given the job of shuttling supplies inland. Standard landing craft would continue to unload at the pier, which was being repaired by division engineers, and the amphibian tractors would be used for runs from the pier to the units on the island. Each vehicle could bring out wounded on its return trip. Now Carlson faced the problem of finding the necessary LVTs.

From the pier, Carlson journeyed to the minesweeper *Pursuit*, where he explained to Captain John B. McGovern, USN, who was coordinating the movement of landing craft, the need for

additional amphibian tractors. The captain responded by making 18 LVTs available to the shore party. Thanks to the presence of these vehicles, the pier could be used as an artificial beach for the unloading and sorting of supplies. The items in greatest demand were loaded in LVTs and rushed to the embattled Marines, while the remaining articles were stacked on the pier.

Another important development was the return to the island of Captain Moore, the assistant division surgeon, who helped speed the evacuation of casualties. With Moore was Major Homer W. Sharpenberg, an engineer assigned the task of locating the water reservoir known to be on the island. Sharpenberg found this source of water on Red 2, not far from Shoup's command post. Later, water purification equipment was installed and by D plus 3, the reservoir had become the principal source of drinking water for the Marines ashore.

After his conversation with McGovern, Carlson reported to Colonel Edson, division chief of staff, to add details to the picture which the officers in the *Maryland* had of operations ashore. Edson felt that progress had been good, and he sketched Julian Smith's plans for crushing the Japanese garrison. Two battalion landing teams from the 6th Marines were scheduled to land over Green Beach, while the third was to seize neighboring Bairiki Island. In addition, the division command post was to move ashore during the night.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Rpts of LtCol Chester J. Salazar and Maj George L. H. Cooper, n.d., in *Rpts of 2d Mar Div BnComdrs; Carlson Rpt; Weatherwax ltr.*

*WE ARE WINNING:  
THE SECOND DAY*

At dawn on 21 November, sharp bursts of small-arms fire had served notice that the bitter action of the previous day was to continue with unabated vigor. Because the island had no terrain features big enough to mask preparations for a large-scale attack, ground was gained at Betio by small groups of Marines fighting from the cover of shell craters, ruined buildings, fallen coconut trees, or piles of debris. Often a unit was enabled to advance by the determination of two or three men who worked their way forward by fire and movement to a position from which they could hurl grenades into a bunker or deliver a sudden burst of fire into an enemy position. Engineers attached to the rifle companies tied together blocks of TNT and threw these makeshift charges into pillboxes. The men handling the flamethrowers slipped close to an enemy blockhouse and, while covered by riflemen, suddenly jumped up, ran to the entrance, and sprayed the interior with liquid fire. The riflemen then surged forward to mop up the position, and the flamethrower operator sought the nearest cover to get ready for his next mission. At Betio ground was gained a few yards at a time.

Such had been the fighting on the second day, but even as the Marines were battling across the island, officers of the 2d Marine Division began to sense victory. "At about 1230," recalled Colonel Edson, "things broke

rapidly for us."<sup>12</sup> The messages sent and received by Colonel Shoup on 21 November accurately trace the shifting tide of battle. At 1022, division asked Shoup if he had troops enough to complete the conquest of Betio, to which the colonel replied that the situation did not look good. Julian Smith's headquarters radioed for a clarification of this statement, and again Shoup was less than optimistic. "Situation ashore uncertain," was his evaluation of the battle. During the afternoon, however, the picture began coming into sharper focus. At 1345, the best that Shoup could offer was a hopeful "Doing our best," but at 1706 he radioed: "Casualties many. Percentage dead not known. Combat efficiency—we are winning."<sup>13</sup>

Colonel Edson reached Shoup's command post at 2030, obtained an estimate of the situation from the leader of Combat Team 2, and assumed the burden of overall command ashore. Edson's arrival meant some measure of relief for Shoup, who had been responsible thus far for all the troops on Betio. Almost isolated from division headquarters, handicapped by unreliable communications with his battalions, he had succeeded in coordinating the efforts of his combat team. Neither enemy opposition, failures in communications, nor the slow delivery of supplies could stop the Marines who struggled ashore on Betio, for Shoup

<sup>12</sup> *Edson Lecture*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> CG 2d MarDiv msg to CO CT 2, ser no. 118, CO CT 2 msg to CT 2 (Rear), ser no. 134, CG 2d MarDiv msg to CT 2, ser no. 139, CO CT 2 msg to ADC, ser no. 148, CO CT 2 msg to LT 1/6, ser no. 169, CO CT 2 msg to 2d MarDiv, ser. no 198 in *2d MarDiv D-3 Jnl.*



had infused them with the spirit of victory.

### *PLANS FOR THE THIRD DAY*

Immediately after his arrival, Colonel Edson enlisted Shoup's aid in laying plans for the next day's attack. Their first task was coordinating air support and naval gunfire. They requested naval gunfire to work over the eastern end of Betio, starting on a line across the island east of the turning circle and the end of the main airstrip. The supporting ships were to slam their shells into the eastern third of the island, keeping 500 yards forward of friendly troops. Aircraft were to bomb and strafe the same general areas assigned to supporting warships. At 0700, ships and planes were to bombard their assigned target areas for 20 minutes, a pounding which was to be repeated at 0830, 0930, and 1030.

Edson next turned his attention to Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth McLeod's 3/6 which had been waiting in landing boats at the line of departure since 1600 of the second afternoon. Shoup's command post was in contact with division, but neither Combat Team 2 nor division was in direct contact with McLeod's battalion or with Jones' 1/6. To reach either landing team it was necessary to contact the headquarters of the 6th Marines and have the message relayed. Edson set to work establishing communications with 1/6 so that it could fight under Shoup's control, at least until more elements of the 6th Marines were ashore on Betio. Edson also recommended that McLeod's men land over Green Beach at 0800. Division accepted Edson's advice, 3/6

was ordered to a rendezvous area, but Julian Smith's headquarters finally decided that the battalion would land on Shoup's order.

After consulting with Colonel Shoup, Edson issued verbal orders for the attack of 22 November. Since Edson could not communicate directly with Jones at this time, he was forced to rely on a messenger. His choice to deliver the message to 1/6 was Major Tompkins, assistant division operations officer.

Plans for the third day of the Betio operation had to take into account the disposition of the troops ashore on the island. On Green Beach, at the western end of the battlefield, were Jones' 1/6 and the composite unit which had secured this area the day before. These troops were in position to advance eastward toward the central beachhead, where three battalions of the 8th Marines and two battalions of the 2d Marines manned the American line. Nearest the troops on Green Beach was Hays' 1/8, which faced westward from positions that extended from the lagoon coast to the western taxiway. No Marines were posted on the runway to the left of 1/8, but 1/2 and a fragment of 2/2 occupied a perimeter on the south coast inland of the pier. Another gap lay between the left flank of this perimeter and the line held by 2/8 and 3/8. The final portion of the beachhead curved from the center of the airfield triangle to the Burns-Philp pier. Strong Japanese fortifications lay at the juncture of Red 1 and Red 2 between Ryan's troops and those led by Hays, on either end of the south coast perimeter, and inland from the Burns-Philp pier.

The attack order for the morning of 22 November called for 1/6 to pass through 3/2 and strike eastward from Green Beach along the south shore in order to establish contact with Kyle's command. What time this assault got underway would depend upon the speed with which Tompkins could reach the battalion command post. At daylight, Hays' 1/8 was to attack to the west along the lagoon shore to eliminate the pocket of resistance astride the boundary between Red 1 and Red 2. Meanwhile, Colonel Hall, with the other two battalions of the 8th Marines, was to continue the drive toward the east, shattering in the process the defenses that had contained Major Crowe's battalion.

In addition to ordering air and naval gunfire support for the morning of 22 November, the 2d Marine Division prepared to augment the fires of its artillery already on Betio by emplacing batteries on neighboring Bairiki. As soon as Murray reported that 2/6 had landed successfully, division headquarters instructed Colonel Holmes to send the artillery element of his combat team, 2/10 (less Battery D), ashore on Bairiki early the next morning. Holmes then directed the artillery battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel George R. E. Shell, to start transferring his men and equipment to boats by 0330, 22 November, and to land on Bairiki.

At 0300, 2/10 began loading into LCVPs, but this work was suddenly interrupted by an air alert which sent the transports steaming out to sea. At the time of the alert, Battery E was fully loaded, and a portion of Headquarters and Service Battery was

boated. Leaving the troops in the transports to come ashore when those vessels returned, the boats already loaded moved directly to Bairiki, arriving off the designated beach at about 0630. Immediately after landing, Battery E dropped trails and, with the aid of the fire direction center on Betio, began registering on the larger island.<sup>14</sup> The transports returned to their unloading area at 0700, but it was noon before Battery F and the rest of the Headquarters and Service Battery reached Bairiki. Battery D, which had been ordered to land on Green Beach at Betio rather than at Bairiki, found that hydrographic conditions off its assigned beach were unfavorable to the landing of artillery. In order to get the howitzers of the battery into action as quickly as possible, division ordered it to land instead on Bairiki.

#### *THE ATTACK OF HAYS' BATTALION*

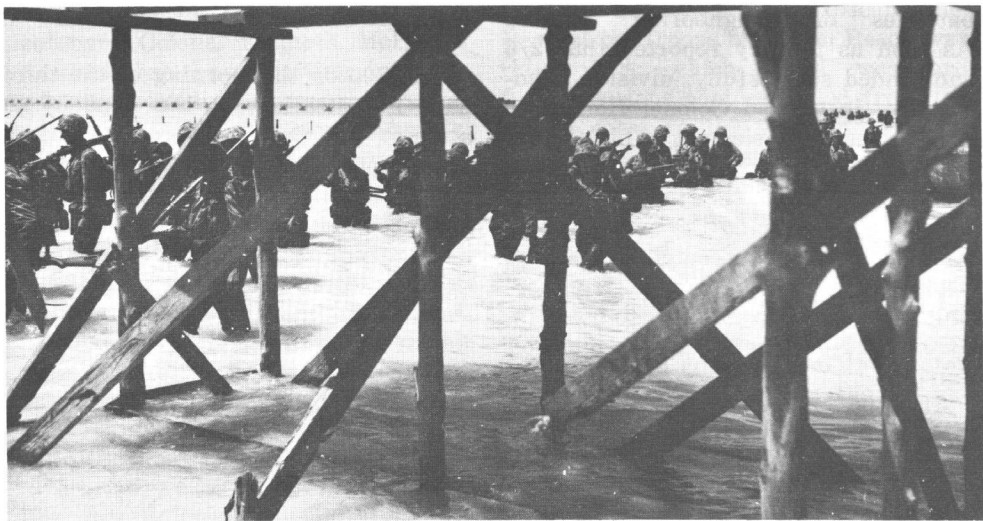
At 0700 on the morning of the third day, 1/8 attacked to the west in an attempt to drive the enemy from strong positions on the boundary between Red 1 and Red 2. Company B advanced along the shore on the battalion right, Company A in the center, and Company C on the left or inland flank. During the morning the attack was supported by three light tanks which maneuvered into positions from which they could deliver almost point-blank

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<sup>14</sup>The 1/10 commander noted that this procedure required his forward observer to adjust fires of 2/10 "while looking into their muzzles," an unusual situation that "had been foreseen, planned, and rehearsed in New Zealand during regimental exercises." Rixey ltr, *op. cit.*



*SQUAD LEADER points out the enemy ahead as Marines crawl inland under fire at Betio. (USMC 63575)*



*REINFORCEMENTS, seen through the framework of a Japanese pier, wade ashore at Betio. (USMC 63515)*

fire into the opening of the Japanese pillboxes that were holding up the Marine advance. The enemy positions, however, were far too rugged to be badly damaged by the 37mm guns mounted on these tanks, and the steel and concrete structures had to be reduced by hand-placed bangalore torpedoes and shaped charges.

The light tanks proved unable to perform their assigned task, and at 1130, after one of them had been put out of action by what was thought to be a magnetic mine, they were withdrawn.<sup>15</sup> Two self-propelled 75mm guns from Weapons Company, 2d Marines, were ordered forward to support the attack. One of these half-tracks had its radiator holed by a bullet and was forced to retire before it could contribute anything to the success of Hays' battalion.<sup>16</sup>

Although little ground was gained, the men of 1/8 succeeded in destroying several cores of Japanese resistance. The best progress was made by Companies A and C, which outflanked the enemy position, while along the beach Company B kept unremitting pressure on the Japanese. Late in the afternoon the defenders of the Red 1 - Red 2 strongpoint attempted a minor and futile counterattack which was easily beaten back. As a result of the day's action, the enemy in this area were effectively isolated from their comrades. When Hays' men dug in for

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<sup>15</sup> According to Japanese sources, no magnetic mines were used but some 3,000 small contact mines were planted, mainly on west and south coast beaches. *Japanese Gilberts comments.*

<sup>16</sup> Maj Robert J. Oddy ltr to CMC, dtd 11 Jun47.

the night, they held a semi-circular line reaching from the beach to the airfield dispersal area. (See Map 3.)

### *THE ATTACK OF 1/6*

As late as 0505 on 22 November, Colonel Edson had no contact with Major Jones of 1/6. An hour had passed since Edson had issued his attack orders, and the colonel was anxious that Jones learn of his mission in ample time to make the necessary preparations. Edson asked division to notify the battalion of his plan, but contact between the two headquarters had been lost temporarily. Shortly after 0600, however, Major Jones was able to contact Colonel Shoup by radio and was told the details of the operation plan. Consequently, the battalion commander reported, his men were ready to go at first light.<sup>17</sup>

Colonel Shoup, under whose control 1/6 was operating, ordered Jones to attack at 0800 in order to clear the south side of the island and make contact with 1/2 and 2/2. Once this was done, Jones was to pass through these battalions and prepare to continue the attack on order. With three light tanks in the lead, Jones launched his attack on time, driving forward on a one-platoon front in a zone of action only 100 yards wide. Company C, the assault company, had its lead platoon about 50 yards behind the trio of tanks. Thus the infantrymen were able to protect the tanks from suicidal Japanese who might attempt to destroy them, while the tanks carried out their mission of blasting

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<sup>17</sup> *Jones interview/comments.*

enemy strongpoints. Jones kept his flamethrowers up front with Company C, where they proved useful in knocking out covered emplacements.<sup>18</sup> Resistance, however, proved minor as 1/6 swept along the coast, and the battalion made contact with 1/2 at 1100. During this thrust, Jones' men killed about 250 Japanese, but suffered only light casualties themselves. Losses in the assault company were kept to a minimum by the effective employment of tanks and flamethrowers and rapid movement of the infantry. Given adequate infantry protection, the light tanks proved unusually effective in closing with and destroying enemy installations that might have delayed the battalion for several hours.

Just before 1/6 made contact with the Marines manning the coastal perimeter, Jones was ordered to report as quickly as possible to Shoup's command post. There he received orders to continue the attack to the east at 1300. With the exception of the Red 1 - Red 2 pocket, Japanese resistance on the western half of the island had been crushed. Since this surviving strongpoint was under pressure from 3/2 on the west and 1/8 on the east, it no longer posed a serious threat to the 2d Marine Division. For his afternoon attack, Jones was to have one medium and seven light tanks, the support of naval gunfire, and aid from field artillery on both Betio and Bairiki. In addition, the 8th Marines, except for Hays' 1/8, would attack in conjunction with Jones' battalion. Colonel Hall, commander of the 8th Marines, pointed out that 2/8 and elements of

3/8 had been fighting for two days to reduce the stubborn positions between the east taxiway and the Burns-Philp pier. He felt that these men were capable of just one more effort, and Shoup agreed. As soon as these two battalions had shattered the defenses that had so far contained them, they would rest while 1/6 and 3/6 assumed the entire burden of conquering the eastern half of Betio.

#### *THE ATTACK OF 2/8*

Early in the morning of 22 November, Major Crowe reorganized his troops for the day's attack. The strongpoints had to be reduced before substantial progress could be made. One was a steel pillbox to the left front, near the Burns-Philp pier and in the zone of action of Company F. To the front of Company K, a 3d Battalion unit temporarily under the command of Major William C. Chamberlain, Crowe's executive officer, was a coconut log emplacement from which Japanese machine gunners kept the company pinned down. The third position that impeded the advance was a large bomb-proof shelter, inland and to the south of the steel pillbox.

The aid of mortars and tanks was needed because the three positions were mutually supporting. None of them could be attacked unless the assault troops exposed themselves to fire from the other two. Crowe's entire battalion was to be involved in the attack. Company F was to strike first at the steel pillbox, then the next company would move forward, and the advance would be taken up all along the battalion front.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

At 0930 the mortars supporting Company K made a direct hit on the roof of the log emplacement, and fortune took a hand in the operation. The detonation of the mortar round touched off a supply of ammunition and the bunker exploded. In the meantime, a medium tank slammed several 75mm shells against the steel pillbox and Company F also was able to advance. The bombproof shelter, though, was a job for an infantry-engineer team. While riflemen kept the defenders busy, flamethrower operators and demolitions men darted forward. After an hour of bitter fighting, the Marines were clinging to the top of the structure.

As soon as the Marines had overrun the bombproof shelter, the Japanese counterattacked. The enemy's effort was smashed largely through the work of one man, First Lieutenant Alexander Bonnyman, who turned his flamethrower on the charging Japanese and drove back those not burned to death. The lieutenant lost his life as a result of this action, but he helped make possible the advance of 2/8.<sup>19</sup>

After this counterattack had failed, the defenders began fleeing the interior of the shelter, running out the east and south entrances. Those trying to escape from the eastern side were mowed down by machine gun and rifle bullets and grenade fragments. The Japanese who broke to the south ran into a hail of fire from machine guns and 37mm cannon.

<sup>19</sup> Maj William C. Chamberlain ltr to OinC, HistSec, DivPubInfo, HQMC, dtd 18June46; Capt James R. Stockman memo to telcon with Maj William C. Chamberlain, dtd 17Jun47.

As the attack progressed, Companies E and G moved around the north end of the bombproof shelter, while Company K moved up on the south, pausing in the process to touch off demolitions at the southern entrance. Company K made contact with Company E east of the shelter, and the enemy defenses were broken. For the time being, riflemen were left to guard the entrances to the bombproof, but in a short time a bulldozer arrived to push sand and dirt into the openings, thus sealing the doom of any Japanese still lurking within the structure.

The thrust of 2/8 carried it to a point at the east end of the airfield, where the battalion paused for fear of being fired upon by 1/6 operating along the south coast. In order to be completely safe from misdirected friendly fire, Crowe ordered his men to fall back about 150 yards. Even though forward progress had stopped, the men of 2/8 still faced the dangerous task of killing the Japanese that infested the area just overrun. At the east end of the airfield triangle, Companies I and L remained in place for the night, even though 1/6 already had advanced beyond that point. At dusk Company C of Jones' command took over the segment of the line along the north shore at the east end of the airfield, and Crowe's Company K was pulled back to form a secondary defensive line.

### *3/6 LANDS*

Lieutenant Colonel McLeod's 3/6 spent the night of 21-22 November in its boats near the line of departure. Twice during the early morning of 22

November the battalion received a change of orders. Originally McLeod was to have landed over Green Beach at 0800, but he was later told to rendezvous off the beach at 0800 and wait there for further instructions. By 0730 on the third morning, 3/6 was in position off Green Beach standing by for word from division. At 0850 orders were issued for McLeod to land his team on the north part of Green Beach, reorganize, and prepare to attack eastward. Although the reef made the landing difficult, by 1100 the entire battalion was ashore. McLeod immediately formed a line with Companies L and I, while holding Company K in reserve. At 1700, 3/6 began moving along the south coast, following the same route taken by Jones' battalion earlier in the day. McLeod halted about 600 yards to the rear of the lines held by 1/6 and remained there in close support of Jones' command. Early that evening, Company I was ordered forward to strengthen the forward position.<sup>20</sup> Much later that night, about 0340, four enemy planes arrived over Tarawa to bomb the island. One whole stick of bombs fell along the southern part of Green Beach, destroying the remaining LVT belonging to 1/6, but fortunately "the flamethrower supplies it contained were saved."<sup>21</sup>

In the morning of 22 November, General Julian Smith decided to establish his command post ashore. With the general and his 10-man command post group were Brigadier General Thomas

E. Bourke, commanding the 10th Marines, and Brigadier General James L. Underhill, an observer from VAC. After landing on Green Beach at 1155 and inspecting the troops in the area, the commanding general became convinced that he could best control operations from Red 2, where Colonel Shoup had set up his own command post.

The best route from Green Beach to Red 2 was by water via amphibian tractor, but even at its best the journey was far from easy. The Japanese holding out on the boundary between Red 1 and Red 2 fired on the general's LVT, wounding the driver, disabling the vehicle, and forcing the command post group to transfer to another tractor. Not until 1335 did Julian Smith arrive at Shoup's command post to be briefed on the situation.<sup>22</sup>

### THE THIRD AFTERNOON

Orders for the afternoon's effort, issued by Colonel Edson at 1117, called for 1/6, "with all available attached," to pass through the lines of 1/2 and at 1330 attack toward the tank trap at the eastern end of the airfield. In the meantime, 2/8 and 3/8 were to continue their efforts to destroy the enemy to their front, while the 2d Marines, with 1/8 attached, was maintaining pressure on the strongpoint between Red 1 and Red 2.<sup>23</sup> During the afternoon of D plus 2, 2/8 and 3/8 bulled their way to the east end of the air-

<sup>20</sup> Rpt of LtCol Kenneth F. McLeod, n.d., in *Rpts of 2d MarDiv BnComdrs.*

<sup>21</sup> *Jones interview/comments.*

<sup>22</sup> Rpt of BGen James L. Underhill, n.d., in *Rpts by SplObservers on GALVANIC, Encl G to VAC AR; MajGen Thomas E. Bourke ltr to CMC, dtd 8Jun47.*

<sup>23</sup> 2d MarDiv D-3 Jnl, no ser no.

field, and 1/8 helped isolate the Red 1 - Red 2 strongpoint, but the most spectacular gains were punched out by Jones' 1/6.

In order to reach Kyle's coastal perimeter, Jones' Marines had battled for 800 yards against a disorganized enemy. The men of the battalion were hot, weary, and thirsty, but fresh water was so scarce that only a small fraction of the command could fill canteens before the afternoon attack got underway. Although 1/6 had one medium and seven light tanks attached, only six of the light tanks saw action, for the seventh had to be held at the battalion command post so that Jones would have radio contact with the other armored vehicles. The enemy fought with his characteristic determination, finally stalling the Marines after gains of from 300 to 400 yards. At 1500, Company C was ordered to the northern coast to relieve a portion of 2/8, while Companies A and B dug in to the right of the runway.<sup>24</sup>

By dusk on 22 November, the Japanese, except for those manning the stronghold on the boundary between Red 1 and Red 2, had been driven back to the tail of the island. The troublesome redoubt along the beach boundary was effectively isolated. Marines from 1/6, backed up elements of 2/8 and 3/8, manned a line that stretched across the island at the eastern end of the airfield. As before, no troops had dug in on the airstrip itself, but the gap, in this case between Companies A and C of 1/6, was covered by fire. In spite of the day's progress, division

headquarters was far from optimistic concerning the possibility of a rapid conquest of the island. "Progress slow and extremely costly," reported the commanding general, "complete occupation will take at least five days more."<sup>25</sup> (See Map 3.)

### COUNTERATTACK

The staff of the 2d Marine Division believed at this time that the entire 6th Marines would be needed to dig out and destroy the Japanese holed up on Betio. Colonel Holmes, commanding officer of the regiment, had established his command post ashore. According to the division plan, 2/6 would be brought to Betio from Bairiki and used to support a morning attack by 3/6. Both 2/8 and 3/8 were scheduled to be evacuated to Bairiki. The plan could not be carried out, for most of the available landing craft were being used to carry supplies, and the first elements of 2/6 did not reach Betio until the following morning.

While plans were being made for the attack of the 6th Marines, the Japanese, as Colonel Edson phrased it, "gave us very able assistance by trying to counterattack."<sup>26</sup> The first blow fell at about 1930, when some 50 Japanese, taking advantage of the thick vegetation east of the airfield, infiltrated the outpost line and opened a gap between Companies A and B of 1/6. Within an hour, the battalion reserve, a force made up of Marines from Headquarters and Weapons Companies had mopped up the infiltrators and sealed the gap.

<sup>24</sup> Rpt of Maj William K. Jones in *Rpts of 2d MarDiv BnComdrs.*

<sup>25</sup> *2d MarDiv D-3 Jnl*, ser no. 206.

<sup>26</sup> *Edson Lecture.*





**MACHINE GUN AMMUNITION BEARERS** race forward to the front lines at the height of the battle for Tarawa. (USMC 64013)



**FLAMETHROWER SMOKE** rises above the top of an enemy bombproof shelter on Betio as Marines cautiously advance up its slopes. (USMC 63458)

To contain and destroy any future penetration, Major Jones asked Kyle, commander of 1/2, to set up a one-company secondary line 100 yards to the rear of the main line of resistance. Company I of McLeod's 3/6 later relieved Kyle's men, and additional ammunition, grenades, and water were rushed to 1/6. To disorganize the enemy and disrupt his communications, Jones arranged for a destroyer to shell the tail of the island to within 500 yards of Marine lines. The 10th Marines delivered harassing fire in the area from 75-500 yards in front of the battalion position.<sup>27</sup>

At 2300 the enemy struck again. About 50 Japanese created a disturbance in front of Company A in order to screen an attack by 50 enemy soldiers on the position held by Company B. The defenders used machine guns, grenades, and mortars to blunt this thrust, but the attackers did succeed in learning the location of Marine automatic weapons.

About 0300, Japanese machine gunners opened fire from some wrecked trucks that lay about 50 yards in front of the Marine positions. Although 1/6 silenced some of the enemy weapons with its own heavy machine guns, three of the Japanese guns had to be destroyed by Marines who crawled through the darkness to throw grenades into the ruined vehicles. An hour after the firing had begun, an estimated 300 Japanese hit Company B from the front and Company A from the right front. Artillery fire from 1/10 was pulled back to within 75 yards of the front lines, destroyers

opened fire from the lagoon, and the infantrymen caught the enemy silhouetted against the sky. By 0500 of 23 November the attack had been shattered. Within 50 yards of the Marine foxholes lay the bodies of almost 200 Japanese, and sprawled throughout the naval gunfire and artillery impact area were still other corpses.<sup>28</sup>

### *BETIO SECURED*

On the morning of the fourth day, 23 November, the 2d Marine Division faced two difficult tasks, the elimination of the Red 1 - Red 2 strongpoint and the capture of the tail of Betio Island. The coastal redoubt was to be attacked from two sides, with Schoettel's 3/2, of which Ryan's group was a part, advancing toward the northeast, while Hays' 1/8 pushed westward into the heart of the enemy defenses. The final stage of the drive along the length of Betio was made the responsibility of Holmes' 6th Marines. Supported by medium and light tanks, including those which had fought with 1/6, as well as the flamethrowers from Jones' battalion,<sup>29</sup> 3/6 was ordered to destroy the 500 Japanese believed to be on the easternmost portion of the island. In the event McLeod's Marines were fought to a standstill, Holmes would have to call upon 1/6, because 2/6, originally slated to support the assault

<sup>27</sup> Regarding this supporting fire, the 2d Marines commander noted: "The destroyers really cut these people to pieces. . . . They really laid it in there . . . cutting across their flanks and putting the rounds where they count." *Shoup interview/comments.*

<sup>28</sup> *Jones interview/comments.*

<sup>29</sup> *Jones interview/comments.*

battalion, had not yet arrived from Bairiki.

McLeod's battalion began its attack at 0800, and for the first 200 yards of the advance, it met relatively light resistance. Company I, however, was stalled in front of a group of bombproofs and pillboxes located along the lagoon shore. The battalion commander, noticing a great deal of cover in the zone of action of Company L, ordered that unit to bypass the troublesome position and then spread out across the width of the island before continuing its advance. Company I was to remain behind to reduce the enemy pocket, while Company K followed in the path of Company L. (See Map IV, Map Section)

All in all, the attacking Marines had a comparatively easy time. Commented Major McLeod:

At no time was there any determined defensive. I did not use artillery at all and called for naval gunfire for only about five minutes, which was all the support used by me. We used flamethrowers and could have used more. Medium tanks were excellent. My light tanks didn't fire a shot.<sup>30</sup>

At 1310, 23 November, 3/6 reached the eastern tip of the island, and Betio was secured. During this final drive, the battalion killed 475 Japanese and captured 14 at the cost of 9 Marines killed and 25 wounded. The enemy, though willing to fight to the death, was too tired, thirsty, and disorganized to put up a coordinated defense. Courage and determination proved no substitute for cohesive action; the Japanese were overwhelmed by Marines who displayed

<sup>30</sup> Rpt of Maj Kenneth F. McLeod, n.d., in *Rpts of 2d MarDiv BnComdrs.*

teamwork as well as personal bravery.

While McLeod's command was overrunning the tip of the island, Hays' 1/8 and Schoettel's 3/2 were wiping out the pocket of resistance on the northern shore. Since 2/8 was no longer in action, Colonel Hall, in command of the 8th Marines, directed that the flamethrowers formerly attached to the idle unit be released to 1/8. Once these weapons arrived, Hays' battalion made good progress.<sup>31</sup> Also supporting 1/8 were demolitions teams from the 18th Marines and half-tracks mounting 75mm guns. At 1000, 1/8 made physical contact with 3/2, the two units increased their pressure on the trapped Japanese, and by 1305 the western part of Betio was secured. Of the estimated 4,836 Japanese troops and Korean laborers who defended Betio, only 146 were taken prisoner, and a mere 17 of these were Japanese.

The men of the *3d Special Base Force* had died fighting to hold Betio. So great was the destruction wrought by the battle that few enemy documents of any significance survived. Most intelligence of the conduct of the defense by the *Sasebo 7th SNLF* was derived from combat observations and post-combat examination of the shattered and flame-charred remnants of the enemy installations. Somewhere in the ruins lay the bodies of Admiral Shibasaki and his principal commanders, silent forever on their part in the brief, furious struggle. The last word that Tokyo received from the island, a radio message sent early on 22 November read: "Our weapons have been destroyed and from now on everyone is

<sup>31</sup> Hall interview, *op. cit.*

attempting a final charge.”<sup>32</sup> The enemy *SNLF* troops, so often called Japanese Marines, met their American counterparts head on in a bitter, close-quarter clash that was never surpassed for its ferocity on any Pacific battleground.

Die-hard survivors of the garrison continued to crop up even though the island was secured. Mopping up continued on the 23d and 24th. The dead were buried, and the weary Marine battalions organized a systematic beach defense in the event that the Japanese should attempt a counterlanding. The

island was in shambles. “The stench,” wrote a Marine artilleryman, “the dead bodies, the twisted, torn, and destroyed guns of Betio are things which I shall long remember.”<sup>33</sup> Later the Marine dead were buried in a military cemetery on the island where they had fallen. On this plot of sacred ground was placed a plaque which read:

So let them rest on their sun-scoured atoll,  
The wind for their watcher, the wave for  
their shroud,  
Where palm and pandanaus shall whisper  
forever  
A requiem fitting for Heroes so proud.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted from a Japanese report, Military Action in the Gilbert Islands, dtd 3May44, cited in Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts, and Marshalls*, p. 173.

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<sup>33</sup> *Watson Ltr.*

<sup>34</sup> Smith, “Tarawa,” p. 1175. General Smith recalled that the author of these lines was Captain Donald L. Jackson. *Julian Smith ltr.*

## Completing the Capture

### JAPANESE RAIDS ON TARAWA

The beach defenses manned by the victorious Marines at Betio were never tested. Although the Japanese had hoped to respond to an American invasion of the Gilberts with an interception operation—a combined attack by aircraft, submarines, and surface ships—the swift capture of the key atolls made the enemy plans obsolete before they could be activated. The most important element of the counter-attack force, carrier air, was rendered impotent by losses of Rabaul early in November. Little choice was left the Japanese but to turn their attention from the Gilberts to the Marshalls.<sup>1</sup> All that the enemy could send to aid the defenders of Betio and Makin was a few planes and submarines to stage harassing attacks against the task forces of Admirals Turner and Hill.

On the afternoon of D-Day at Betio, after the invasion ships had been alerted to expect an aerial attack, a single plane winged toward the fleet at an altitude of about 300 feet. Anti-aircraft gunners opened fire, and the target settled toward the surface of the sea. The plane was not hit, fortunately in this instance, for it was an observation craft from the *Maryland*,

carrying Lieutenant Colonel Jesse S. Cook, Jr., D-4 of the 2d Marine Division. After drifting throughout the night, Cook's pilot managed to taxi his plane back to the battleship.<sup>2</sup>

Just before dawn on 21 November, approximately eight enemy aircraft soared over Betio, dropped a few bombs, and returned to their base. Four planes bombed the island on the following morning, but again the Japanese aviators ignored Admiral Hill's shipping. The task force, however, remained on the alert for a major aerial attack from either Mille or Maloelap in the southern Marshalls. (See Map 7.)

The gravest threat to the transports came not from planes but from submarines. At noon on 22 November, the destroyer USS *Gansevoort* reported a contact with a submarine to the west of the transports. Other contacts with this marauder were made during the afternoon, but not until 1627 was its position fixed. The destroyers *Meade* and *Frazier* took over from the *Gansevoort*, dropping depth charges until the enemy was forced to surface. Shells from the *Meade* and *Frazier* burst around the damaged raider. Finally, the impatient *Frazier* rammed the submarine, sending her plummeting to the bottom. The few Japanese who

<sup>1</sup> Hattori, *Complete History*, vol. 3, pp. 59, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Col Jesse S. Cook, Jr., ltr to CMC, dtd 11 Jun47.

survived to be taken prisoner identified the doomed vessel as the *I-35*.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from these few incidents of support, the enemy left the defense of Tarawa to the hopelessly cut-off garrison. What success the aerial and undersea counterattacks had was gained at Makin.

#### MAKIN TAKEN <sup>4</sup>

At Makin, the fire support ships began launching spotter planes at 0540 on 20 November, while Admiral Turner's attack force was about three miles from the island. The transports carrying the 6,472 assault troops of the 165th RCT slipped into their designated area at 0601 and began lowering their LCVPs and debarking soldiers within a few minutes. While the landing craft were rapidly filling with men and weapons in the gathering light, carrier aircraft struck targets on Butaritari Island. At 0640, the naval support ships began firing a preparation that lasted until 0824, by which time the island was hidden in a haze of dust and smoke.

As the waves of assault troops of the 165th Infantry were forming off the western end of Butaritari, the only Marine unit to fight at Makin was making a preliminary landing. The 4th Platoon, VAC Reconnaissance Company, along with a rifle platoon and a machine gun squad from the 165th,

<sup>3</sup> CinCPac WarD, Nov43, Anx E, pp. 13-14 (CinCPac File, HistBr, HQMC); USS *Gansevoort* AR, 17-26Nov43, dtd 3Dec43.

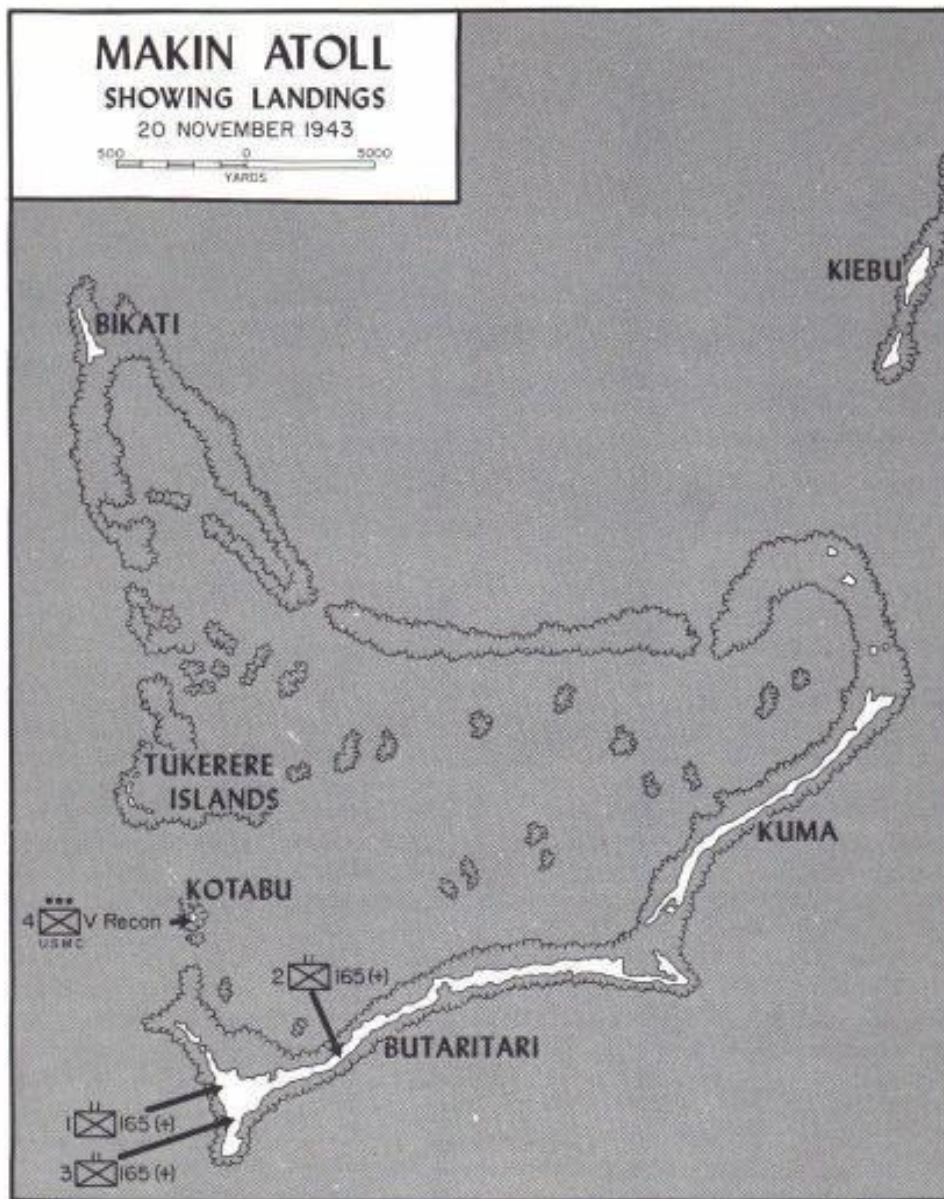
<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the material for this section was derived from: Crawl and Love, *Gilberts and Marshalls*; Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts, and Marshalls*.

occupied Kotabu, a reef-fringed islet that guarded the entrance to the atoll lagoon. Although this effort was unopposed, the Marines later saw action on 21 and 22 November when they assisted in the mop up on Butaritari.<sup>5</sup> (See Map 4.)

General Ralph Smith had been able to obtain the LVTs he wanted to spearhead the assault landing at Makin, although they arrived in the Hawaiian Islands only 13 days before their LST transports were due to sail for the target. Forty-eight tractors, manned by a provisional company from the 193d Tank Battalion, and loaded with men of the 3d Battalion, 105th Infantry, made up the first wave. Off the western beaches, 32 LVTs, formed in two inverted Vs, led the landing craft carrying the 1st and 3d Battalions of the 165th Infantry into the silent shore. The preliminary bombardment by air and naval guns had ripped apart the vegetation in the landing area and discouraged any attempt to meet the Americans on the beaches. Instead, the Japanese commander chose to remain in the area around King's Wharf, guarded on each flank by a cross-island tank trap and barricade.

It was fortunate that the Japanese did not contest the landing. Although the LVTs carrying the assault detachments of 3/105 landed without undue difficulty, the following LCVPs and LCMs were often unable to reach the shore across the reef, which was studded with coral rocks and potholes. Many men had to wade to the beach, and

<sup>5</sup> Rpt of 1stLt Harvey C. Weeks, n.d., Encl D to VAC G-2 Rpt, dtd 8Dec43, Encl C to VAC AR.



MAP 4

R.F. STIBIL

the waterproofed tanks which accompanied the infantry were taxed to their limit to reach land through the surging swells.

An innovation, rocket fire by some of the assault LVTs, was tried at Makin. Designed to neutralize beach defenses, the launchers mounted on the tractors were far from successful. Most of the rockets fell short, exploding harmlessly in the surf, and many never fired at all because of defects in their firing mechanisms caused by sea water. Machine guns on the tractors provided close-in suppressive fire as the first waves came ashore at 0832.<sup>6</sup>

Only scattered sniper fire met the first assault troops, and the confusion arising from the late arrival of infantrymen and tanks negotiating the rock-strewn reef and beaches had little effect on the course of operations. By 1000, the western end of Butaritari was secured, and the 1st battalion of the 165th advanced toward the western tank trap encountered increasing resistance as it approached the main Japanese position.

While 1/165 was moving toward the enemy, the second landing planned by Ralph Smith was taking place. Moving through the lagoon entrance in columns of LVTs and landing craft, 2/165, reinforced by a 3/105 assault detachment, turned and headed in for beaches which gave entrance to the heart of the Japanese prepared positions. Naval gunfire and carrier air hit

the island where the 2d Battalion was headed, and the 16 tractors made for shore with machine guns firing and landed at 1040. Behind them, the tanks and infantry in following waves found the water too shallow to proceed in boats and had to wade across the reef shelf about 300 yards to the beaches.

For the rest of the day, the troops which had landed on the lagoon side tangled at close quarters with small, determined enemy groups that held up any appreciable advance. Across the western tank trap, the men of the 1st Battalion of the 165th, whose regimental commander was killed in the fighting, were stalled by the fire of enemy machine gunners and riflemen. At nightfall, the troops dug in in close contact with the Japanese. What followed in the darkness was a harrowing experience for the American soldiers, as infiltrators and trigger-happy green troops filled the night with grenade explosions and rifle and machine gun fire.

Ruefully wiser in the ways of the Japanese in night combat, the men of the 165th spent most of 21 November consolidating their beachheads, all the while so closely enmeshed with the Japanese defenders that naval gunfire, air, and supporting 105s, which had landed on D-Day, could furnish little effective support. Much of the day's fighting, during which the two elements of the RCT joined forces, was concentrated in efforts to reduce Japanese pillboxes and machine gun nests, much like those on Tarawa. Tank-infantry teams, working with flame-throwers and demolitions, cleaned out the stubbornly resisting Japanese naval

<sup>6</sup> LtCol S. L. A. Marshall, USA, "Supplementary Notes on Makin Operation," dtd 2Jun 44 (File supporting *The Capture of Makin*, OCMH), pp. 3-4; VAC G-3 Rpt, dtd 11Jan44, p. 12, Encl B to VAC AR.





*LIGHT TANKS and artillery wait their turn to leave Betio two weeks after the battle, while Marine transports and fighters use the rebuilt airstrip. (USAF 68045AC)*



*SOLDIERS of 2/165 wade toward the lagoon beach at Butaritari, as smoke rises from oil dumps hit by naval gunfire. (USA SC183574)*

troops, but progress was slow. General Holland Smith, who landed to inspect the progress of the battle during the day, reported to Admiral Turner: "Enemy losses very heavy, own light. Consider situation in hand."<sup>7</sup> The Japanese, however, were still full of fight and those few that survived the first two days now withdrew across the eastern tank trap to take up positions in the heavy vegetation on the long, narrow tail of the island.

With the situation ashore rapidly clarifying and the destruction of the enemy garrison in sight, Turner gave Ralph Smith permission to land troops on Kuma Island north of Butaritari to cut off any Japanese attempt to retreat. On 19 November, the 27th Division commander had requested permission to make a landing on Kuma on D-Day, but on Holland Smith's advice, the admiral denied the request for the last-minute change in the tactical plan. Neither of the senior officers wanted to make the subsidiary effort until the destruction of the Butaritari garrison was certain. On the morning of the 22d, a detachment of the 105th Infantry rode LVTs ashore on the neighboring island and found no Japanese, only a welcoming party of natives.

On Butaritari, on 23 November, the main effort was made by 3/165, in reserve since D-Day. Crossing the eastern tank trap without opposition, the battalion moved quickly into the brush, flushing a few Japanese and maintaining a steady, continuous rate of advance that brought them up to a prepared line of enemy defenses by

<sup>7</sup> TF 52 NarrativeRpt, dtd 4Dec43, p. 21, Encl A to V *PhibFor AR*.

dusk. All night long, the Japanese tried to infiltrate the American positions and attacked in small groups to no avail. When morning came, there were 51 enemy dead in front of the lines of 3/165; the battalion had lost 3 men killed and 25 wounded. Sweeping on to the tip of the island on the 23d, the soldiers encountered no further organized resistance. At 1130, General Ralph Smith signalled Admiral Turner: "Makin taken. Recommend command pass to commander garrison force."<sup>8</sup>

Makin Atoll was captured at the cost of 218 Army casualties, 66 of whom were killed in action or died of wounds. Only one member of the *3d Special Base Force Makin Detachment* was made prisoner, but 104 Korean laborers surrendered to the assault force. The total number of enemy killed was estimated to be about 445, 300 of them Japanese combat troops.

The United States Navy suffered a far greater number of casualties in supporting the operation than did the Army units fighting ashore. On D-Day, an accidental explosion in a turret of the battleship *Mississippi* killed 43 sailors and wounded 19 others. Some 20 miles southeast of Butaritari on the morning of 24 November, the Japanese submarine *I-175* torpedoed the escort carrier *Liscome Bay*. Bombs stowed in the vessel exploded, and in 23 minutes the carrier had perished, claiming the lives of 53 officers and 591 enlisted men.

<sup>8</sup> CG, 27th InfDiv msg to CTF 52, dtd 23Nov 43, in 27th InfDiv G-3 Rpt, Encl 5 to 27th InfDiv Rpt of Participation in GALVANIC Op, dtd 11Dec43, hereafter *27th InfDiv Op-Rpt*.

The battle for Butaritari made veterans of the men of the 165th RCT. They had met the test of combat. Thanks to the experience gained at Makin, these troops could be expected to make a greater contribution to future victories in the Central Pacific.<sup>9</sup>

#### OTHER TARAWA ISLANDS

The occupation of the less important islands in Tarawa Atoll began while the battle for Betio still was raging. On 21 November, elements of Company D, 2d Tank Battalion, the division scout company, landed on Eita, west of Bairiki, and Buota, near the southeast corner of the atoll, where an estimated 100 Japanese were discovered. Another part of the scout company went ashore on an unnamed island that lay about one-fourth the distance from Buota to the northern apex of Tarawa. Two days later, while 3/10 was setting up its weapons on Eita to support the Marines on Betio, the Japanese on Buota escaped unopposed to the north. By 25 November, elements of Company D had scouted the southern half of Tarawa's eastern side, but at this point the entire unit was recalled to Eita to prepare for a reconnaissance of three nearby atolls—Abaiang, Marakei, and Maiana.<sup>10</sup> (See Map 5.)

In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Murray's 2/6, which had overrun Bairiki, had undertaken the mission of

clearing the enemy from the outlying islands. Murray's men encountered no resistance until the late afternoon of 26 November, when the battalion reached Buariki, the northernmost of the larger islands of the atoll. At sunset on that day, a Marine patrol engaged in a fire fight with a small Japanese force. In spite of enemy harassment, the Marines held their fire throughout the night.

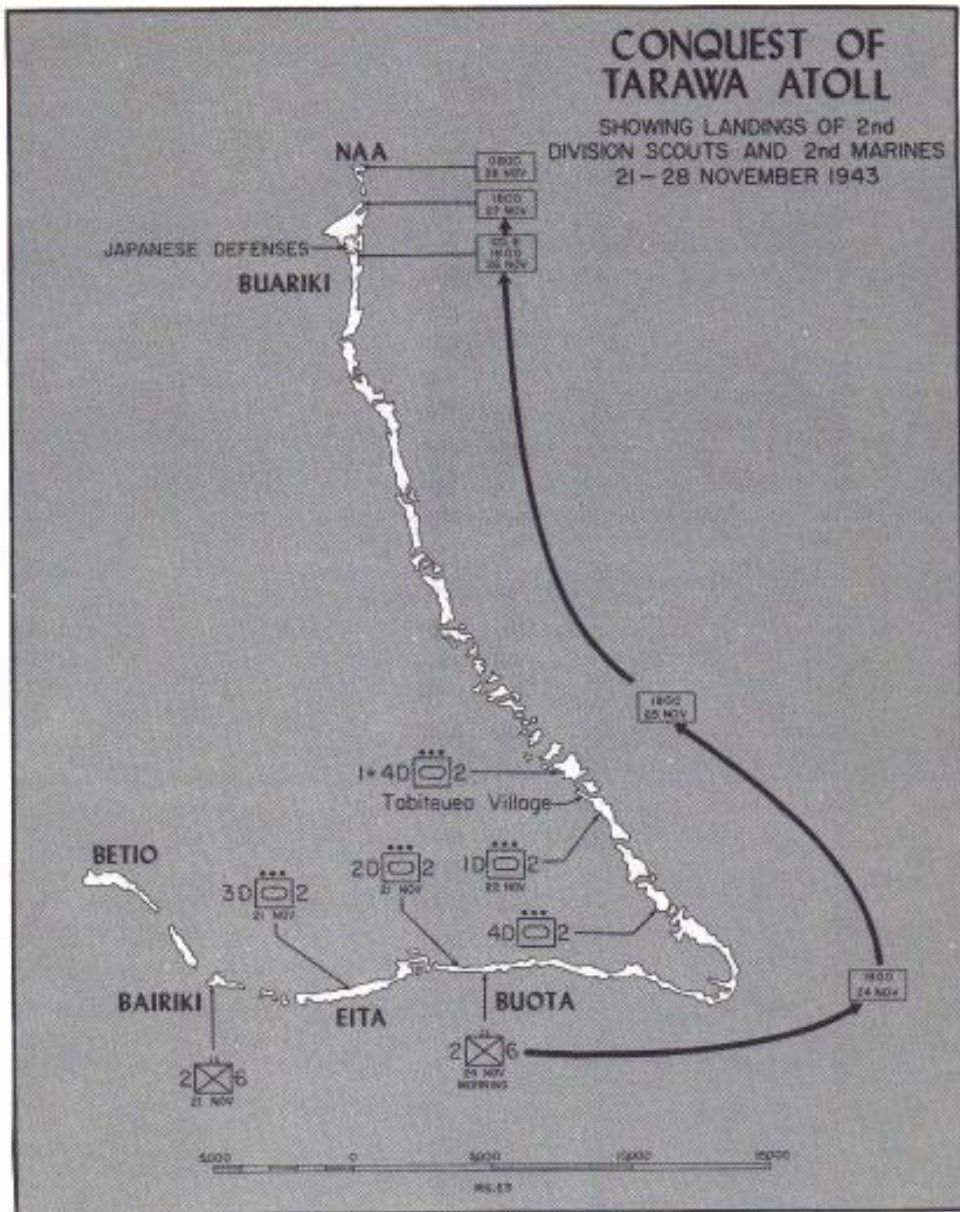
Murray resumed his advance on the following morning and soon located the enemy defenses, a haphazard arrangement of rifle pits and log barricades concealed in dense undergrowth. Because Company E had taken several casualties, the battalion commander ordered Company F to continue the attack while Company G maneuvered to strike the enemy on his eastern flank. Although Murray had a battery of pack howitzers at his disposal, poor visibility and the short range at which the infantrymen were fighting prevented the cannoneers from firing more than a single concentration. In spite of this absence of artillery support, Murray's troops crushed the position, killing 175 and taking 2 prisoners. The Marines lost 32 killed and 59 wounded as a result of this fight.

Naa, a tiny island north of Buariki and the final objective of the battalion, was found on 28 November to be free of Japanese. The men of 2/6 then returned to Eita to rest from their mission. By boat and on foot, these Marines had covered a distance of about 35 miles in moving from Betio to Naa.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of the operation to capture Makin, see Crowl and Love, *Gilberts and Marshalls*, pp. 75-126.

<sup>10</sup> Co D, 2d TkBn SAR, dtd 20Dec43, Encl to 2d TkBn SAR.

<sup>11</sup> 2/6 Narrative Account of Ops, 21-29Nov 43, n.d.



MAP 5

R.F. STIBIL

APAMAMA <sup>12</sup>

In operations to seize the third major objective of GALVANIC, plans called for VAC Reconnaissance Company, commanded by Captain James L. Jones, to sail to Apamama in the submarine USS *Nautilus*, land on the night of 19–20 November, and determine whether the atoll was as lightly held as aerial photographs had indicated. Should Jones' Marines encounter any large number of the enemy, they were to break off the action and make their way back to the *Nautilus*. The objective which the company was to explore was a large atoll shaped like a partially inflated football and measuring 12 miles long by 5 miles wide. Abatiku Island to the southwest, which might serve as the laces of the football, was bordered on either side by a passage into the lagoon. Beyond South Passage lay Entrance Island, then an expanse of reef, and finally Apamama Island, which curved to the northwest then swung southward toward Western Passage and Abatiku. Apamama Island was broken by shallow water into six segments, each of which had been given a name by the planners of the operation. Those of concern to Jones' men were, in order of their separation from Entrance Island, JOE, JOHN, ORSON, and OTTO. (See Map 6.)

The *Nautilus* was to pick up the reconnaissance unit at Pearl Harbor,

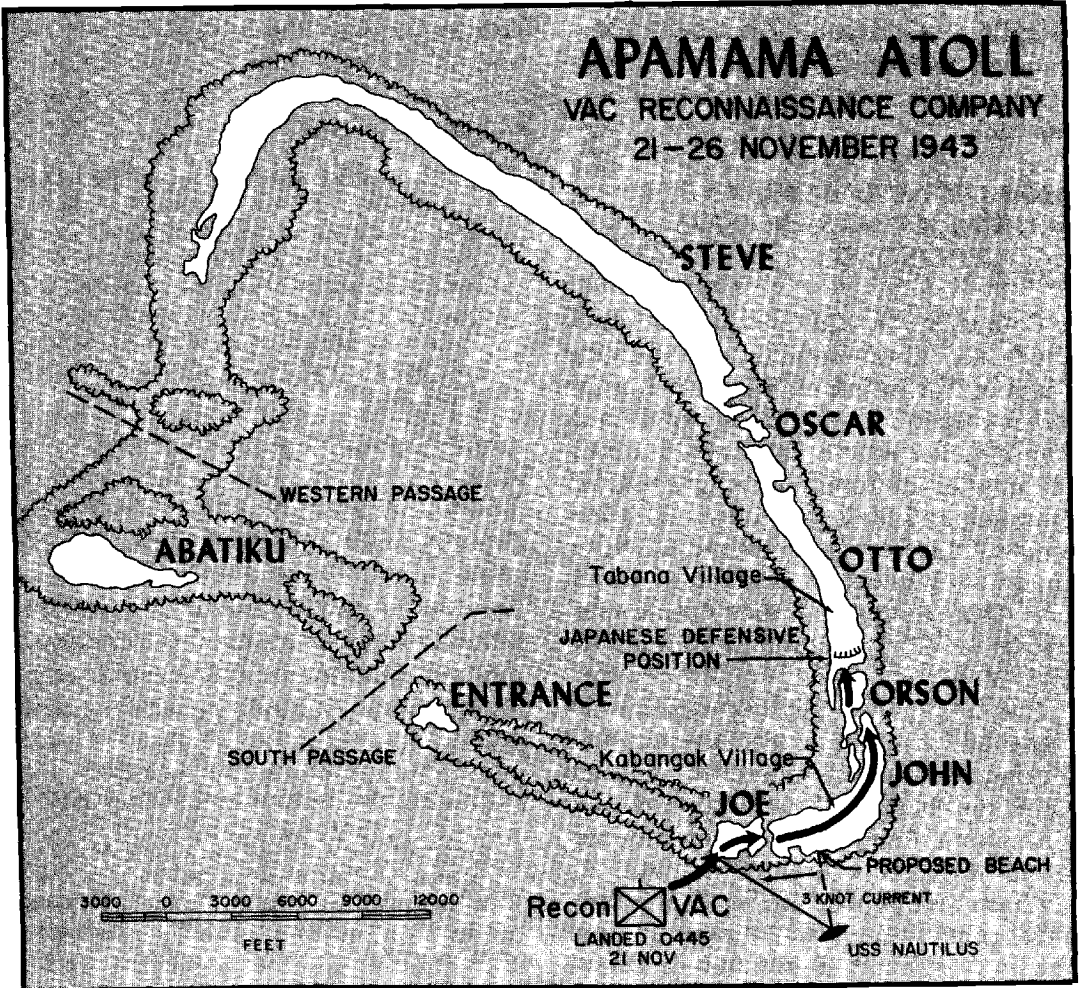
<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: TF 53 Rpt on Apamama Op, dtd 15Dec43; VAC ReconCo WarD, 8–27Nov43, dtd 12Dec43; Sgt Frank X. Tolbert, "Apamama: A Model Operation in Miniature," *Leatherneck*, v. 28, no. 2 (Feb45), pp. 26–27.

cruise for a time off Tarawa to observe Japanese ship movements, and then sail the 76 miles that separated Tarawa from Apamama. On 19 November, after departing from Tarawa, the submarine surfaced in order to increase her speed. The destroyer *Ringgold*, assigned to protect Task Force 53—which had received no word that the *Nautilus* was in the area—<sup>13</sup> spotted the submarine, scored a direct hit with a 5-inch shell, and forced her to crash dive. Luckily, the shell failed to explode and the minor damage it caused could be repaired once it was safe to come to the surface. The submarine arrived off Apamama on the afternoon of 20 November.

Before dawn of the following day, Jones and his men embarked in rubber boats for JOHN Island. An unexpectedly strong current forced them to land on JOE, just to the west, but they later crossed to their original objective. On JOHN, the Marines collided with a 3-man enemy patrol, killed one of the Japanese, and prepared to move to the next portion of Apamama Island, the part called ORSON. After this crossing had been made, the troops encountered a group of natives who informed Jones that about 25 Japanese were entrenched at the southern tip of neighboring OTTO.

The company attempted on 23 November to move across the sandspit connecting ORSON and OTTO Islands. The fire of enemy rifles and light machine guns proved so intense that Jones decided to break off the action and attempt to outflank the defenders. On the following morning, while the *Nauti-*

<sup>13</sup> Hill interview/comments.



MAP 6

R.F. STIBIL

lus shelled the Japanese position, the company commander tried to disengage so that his troops could enter the rubber boats, bypass the strongpoint, and attack it from the rear. The plan, however, could not be executed, for the Japanese kept firing steadily in spite of the bursting shells. Late in the day, a friendly destroyer arrived off the island to slam a few additional rounds into the stubborn emplacements.

A native reached Jones on the next

morning with the startling news that all the Japanese were dead. Patrols soon discovered that this report was true, for 18 of the enemy had killed themselves after the other 4 had perished in the bombardment. Marine losses in the Apamama action were two killed, two wounded, and one injured.<sup>14</sup> That afternoon, Brigadier General

<sup>14</sup> LtCol Merwin H. Silverthorn, Jr. ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 9Sep62.

Hermle, Assistant Division Commander, reached Apamama with 3/6 to assume responsibility for the defense of the atoll.

*ABAIANG, MARAKEI, AND  
MAIANA ATOLLS: MISSION  
ACCOMPLISHED*

Company D, 2d Tank Battalion, which had begun securing the outlying parts of Tarawa Atoll, embarked in the minesweeper *Pursuit* on 29 November. The division scouts had been assigned the mission of reconnoitering Abaiang, Marakei, and Maiana Atolls. By 1 December, this unit had checked all three objectives without encountering opposition, thus completing the Marine contribution to Operation GALVANIC. (See Map 1.)

Even while these last operations were going on, the 2d Marine Division was moving to Hawaii, there to prepare again for combat. The 2d and 8th Marines went first on 24 November, followed in short order by the 6th, as garrison troops responsible to the area naval commander took over the defense and development of the islands seized by the Marines. On 4 December 1943, General Julian Smith turned over command of Tarawa to the Navy and headed for the new division base, Camp

Tarawa, high in the hills of the big island of Hawaii. As the division historian recalled the 2,000-mile voyage, he described it as:

. . . a postscript to horror. The transports reeked of the awful smell of the island, of disinfectant, and of blood. There were no fresh clothes for unwounded Marines, and almost everyone had lost his gear in the shuffle of battle. Every day there were funerals aboard the transports, and flag-covered bodies slipping into the silent seas.<sup>16</sup>

The 2d Marine Division casualty reports show the battle for Tarawa claimed the lives of 984 Marines and attached Navy personnel and that an additional 2,072 men were wounded.<sup>16</sup> These harsh statistics serve as a lasting tribute to the courage, determination, and self sacrifice of the Marines who fought there. As a national magazine phrased it:

Last week some two to three thousand U. S. Marines, most of them now dead or wounded, gave the nation a name to stand beside those of Concord Bridge, the *Bonhomme Richard*, the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and Belleau Wood. The name was Tarawa.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Johnston, *Follow Me!*, p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> *Julian Smith ltr.* See Appendix H for the final official compilation of Marine casualties.

<sup>17</sup> *Time*, v. 42, no. 23 (6Dec43), p. 15.