

F34

Fight for Tarawa testifies to Marines' tenacity

Tarawa. To those Americans who fought on this desolate Pacific atoll in the Gilbert Islands during World War II, it was known as "Bloody Tarawa."

The following account is mostly from "Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa" by Col. Joseph H. Alexander (1993) as well as some parts from "Island Eleven: World War II," Time/Life Series, Rafael Steinberg (1978):

Defended by close to 5,000 Japanese, the defenses were formidable. The 2nd Marine Division Landing Force while under heavy fire would have to cross a rugged barrier reef honeycombed with underwater barbed wire that stretched several hundred yards out from the invasion beaches.

Those lucky enough to make shore found a 4-foot-high coconut log seawall which they would have to crawl over in the face of withering machine gun fire. The Japanese had constructed over 500 pill boxes and bunkers and had pre-registered their mortar and artillery fire onto the exposed invasion beaches.

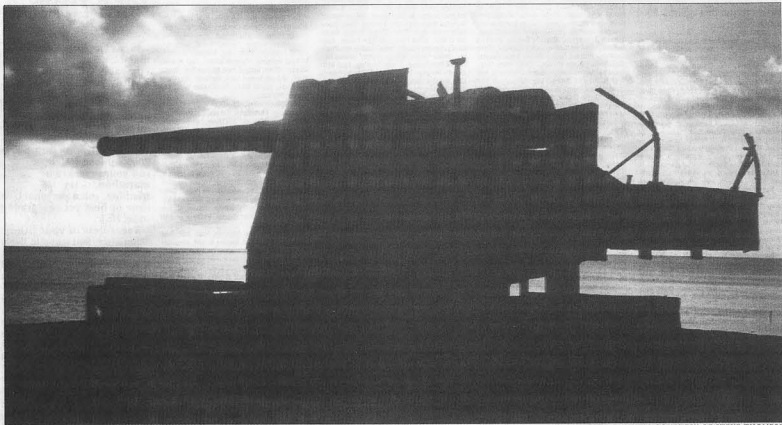
The Japanese commander of this intimidating stronghold, Admiral Melchi Shibasaki, boasted, "A million Americans couldn't take Tarawa in 100 years."

However, the Marines hit the landing beaches on Nov. 20, 1943, and just 76 hours later only 17 of the Japanese defenders were able to surrender — the rest being dead or wounded. The United States had captured the island and crushed the defenses, but not before 3,400 Americans out of the original landing force of 18,000 lay wounded or dead.

All of this butchery and carnage happened on an island less than half a square mile in area.

Tarawa was a necessary and vital first step in our westward march through the Central Pacific to Japan. The plan for Tarawa was to take the Marshall Islands, the Carolines and onto the Marianas.

Concurrent with this strategy, American forces in the Southern Pacific were on their



The sun sets behind a Japanese shore gun on Tarawa Island 60 years after Allied forces landed in 1943.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE THOMPSON

way northward from New Guinea through the Solomons and onto the Philippines. Eventually these forces would join up and seize two Ima and Okinawa as a prelude to the invasion of Japan.

In the pre-invasion bombardment of Tarawa the U.S. Navy pulverized the island with thousands of tons of bombs and shells, turning the jungle into an inferno of explosions and flames. This barrage was not intended to just neutralize Tarawa, it was intended to obliterate it. It did not work. The Japanese opposition was fierce and fanatical.

The initial hours of the battle were a bloodbath for the Marines. The tides had been misjudged, which prevented most of the landing crafts to be unable to cross the reef. Marines had to jump over the

sides into neck-deep water and wade 700 yards into Red Beach, exposing themselves to lethal enemy fire.

On the first day 5,000 Marines had managed to come ashore. By nightfall 1,500 of them were dead, wounded or missing.

Shattered American bodies floated in the sea. The Marines had penetrated only about 80 feet beyond the beachhead.

Second Division Cmdr. Maj. Gen. Julian Smith was convinced his men would be pushed into the sea if the Japanese counter-attacked on the first night. He reported back to Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Commander of the Pacific Force, "ISSUE REMAINS IN DOUBT."

Spruance immediately began emergency evacuation plans. The counter-attack never came.

Savage fighting continued for two more days. As the Marines grew deeper, demoralized Japanese troops began



Flowers were left in tribute to soldiers at the sea wall at Red Beach on the 60th anniversary of the bloody World War II battle on the island of Tarawa.

committing suicide. The previously boastful Shibasaki transmitted a final message back to Tokyo stating, "Our weapons have been destroyed and from now on everyone is attempting a final charge... may Japan exist for 10,000 years!" Japan, as Shibasaki knew it at the time, would come to a cataclysmic end less than two years later.

The Marines finally broke the back of the Japanese defenders in all-night fighting on Nov. 22. The remaining enemy mounted three Banzai attacks into the dawn. The screaming attackers fought the Marines in vicious hand-to-hand combat.

The Marine commander in the field reported back, "We're killing them as fast as they come at us." By dawn it was over, with 450 enemy dead and dying joining the stench of death and misery permeating the Tarawa jungle. The guns had finally gone silent.

On the 25th anniversary in 1968, Tarawa Medal of Honor winner Gen. David Shoup wandered out loud as he walked the invasion beaches,

"Why would two nations spend so much for so little?"

I visited Tarawa on the 60th anniversary in 2003. While I was there I met a true patriot who typified the courage of American fighting men in World War II.

Joe Sobol had joined the Marines one day after Pearl Harbor at the age of 18. Tarawa was one of five Pacific campaigns in which he would fight in the next four years. He was returning to Tarawa for the first time since the battle.

He brought 19 small American flags with him. Following the ceremony overlooking the deadly reef where he had fought his way onto the shore as a teenager 60 years earlier, he and his wife quietly placed the flags in the sand of Red Beach at the spot where 19 of his buddies had died in the fighting on the first day.

When the war ended Joe returned home to Chicago in 1945, where he spent the next 30 years on the police force. Between the war and his career, he had spent most of his life walking on the edge of danger.

When I asked him about that he simply said, "God will no look you over for medals, degrees, or diplomas... but for scars."

I then continued on with Joe and other veterans with the original Marine Corps Memorial, which had been constructed and commemorated many years before as a symbol of the courage of the Americans. We found that it had been dismantled to make room for a cold-storage plant built as part of a Japanese fish processing facility now on Tarawa.

Smith paid tribute to his men following the battle with these words: "I shall always think of them with a feeling of reverence and the greatest respect. It will always be source of supreme pride to me to say I was with the 2nd Marine Division at Tarawa."

• This was written by Steve Thompson of St. Charles, who visited Tarawa on the 60th anniversary of the battle in 2003. Thompson traveled extensively to the Pacific Islands where the Marine Corps fought in World War II.



Last year, Joe Sobol of Chicago returned to Tarawa, a Pacific island where he landed with 5,000 U.S. Marines in 1943. He served in five Pacific campaigns in World War II. He enlisted on Dec. 8, 1941. After the war, he worked as a police officer.