

‘Bloody, Bloody Tarawa’

Nov. 20 marks 75 years since the American assault against Japanese forces on Tarawa in World War II

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The November 1943 invasion of the Gilbert Islands was the beginning of the U.S. “island-hopping” campaign in the central Pacific during World War II. U.S. commanders determined that amphibious attacks on Japanese-occupied islands was the key to victory. The island of Tarawa was the first target in the Allied campaign.

About 80 nautical miles north of the equator, Tarawa is the largest atoll of the Gilberts, a 16-island chain roughly halfway between Hawaii and Papua New Guinea. The Japanese seized the then-British-occupied isle just days after Japan’s attack at Pearl Harbor. Tarawa’s main island, Betio, was the target of the Navy and Marine Corps.

The Battle of Tarawa was the first major American offensive in the central Pacific. Until then, Americans didn’t face much opposition during amphibious assaults. Previous landings met little or no hostility. But Tarawa was different.

HEAVY RESISTANCE CRUSHED IN 76 HOURS

The initial landings by the 2nd Marine Division met heavy Japanese resistance. Japanese troops on Betio were equipped with 8-inch, turret-mounted naval rifles; coast defense, anti-aircraft, anti-boat and field artillery guns and howitzers; and many other light tanks and weapons. America had never met this kind of force in an amphibious operation.

“Tarawa was a bloody, bloody battle,” said Annette Amerman, a historian with the Marine Corps History Department in Quantico, Va. “There are people that argue Tarawa should never have been taken.”

One of those people was Japanese Rear Admiral Meichi Shibasaki, who said “a million Americans” wouldn’t be able to take Tarawa in “100 years.” Americans took the atoll in 76 hours.

Retired Marine Corps Col. Joseph Alexander wrote in *Across the Reef: The Marine Assault*

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of Tarawa that Shibasaki's sentiment was "forgivable," saying it was "the most heavily defended atoll that ever would be invaded by Allied forces in the Pacific."

U.S. PUBLIC SHOCKED BY MOTION PICTURE

According to Amerman, the Battle of Tarawa gets its notorious reputation because it was the first Marine Corps battle to be captured on motion picture — something frequently seen in later wars and battles.

"Americans saw dead Marines on the beach of Tarawa, and it was very shocking to them," Amerman said. "Everyone had already heard the term 'war is hell,' but they got to see it first-hand."

Indeed, the Navy and Marine Corps suffered many casualties during the short battle. Some 1,085 men were killed and 2,292 were wounded in action. Only 5,600 Marines and sailors fought on and offshore Tarawa.

The reasons for the heavy casualties on Tarawa have much to do with the planning and execution of the invasion. For starters, the Allies counted on a tide of at least 4 feet to navigate the assault vehicles across the several-hundred-yard reef before being ashore on Betio, according to Across the Reef. Since Betio was at neap (or an especially weak) tide, landing crafts were unable to make it to shore on the first day of the battle. Marines had to wade through the ocean water — many were wounded or killed making it to the beach.

Another issue for the Navy and Marine Corps was the timing of the first attacks. Many of the radios during the opening of the battle were damaged by water and enemy fire. Because communication was limited, many units didn't know about last-minute changes to H-hour, or the designated time when the assault would begin. Rough seas and a long run from the Navy ships to the beach caused delays. The time of attack was postponed twice, but many troops did not receive the word because of communication failures.

ONLY 17 JAPANESE SURVIVED

Even with the heavy casualties and miscalculations, American forces inflicted a tremendous amount of casualties on the Japanese forces on Tarawa. A total of 4,836 Japanese troops died, with only 17 survivors.

The lessons learned on Tarawa were applied to the later invasions of the Marshall Islands at the beginning of 1944. According to the National Museum of the Marine Corps, the Navy and Marine Corps would be better prepared in these battles by having "improved naval gunfire and air support, ... waterproof radios and underwater demolition teams," as well as more amphibious landing vehicles and flamethrower tanks. These would prove vital for Allied success in later Pacific battles.

"Tarawa doesn't get the respect that Iwo Jima, Okinawa or other Pacific battles get, but, in

my opinion, it is right up there with them,” Amerman said. “It was a smaller and shorter battle, but it was just as crucial as the later fights in the war.”

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