



By Sgt. JOHN BUSHEMI
YANK Staff Correspondent

BETIO, TARAWA, GILBERT ISLANDS—Even the dead marines were determined to reach Tarawa's shore.

As one Higgins landing boat roared toward the dry sand, you could see a hand clutching its side. It was the hand of a marine, frozen in the grip of death.

The 2d Marine Division took this island because its men were willing to die. They kept on coming in the face of a heavy Jap defense, and though they paid the stiffest price in human life per square yard that was ever paid in the history of the Marine Corps, they won this main Jap base in the Gilbert Islands in 76 hours.

Out of two battalions—2,000 to 3,000 men—thrown onto the beach in the first assault at 0830 only a few hundred men escaped death or injury. Officer casualties were heavy. And still the marines kept coming. The Leathernecks died with one thought—to get there.

Before dawn of the first day of the invasion, the Navy opened up with a tremendous bombardment. Carrier planes dropped 800 tons of bombs while battleships, cruisers and destroyers hurled 2,000 tons of shells on an area 2¼ miles long and at no point more than 800 yards wide. This was Betio, the fortified airstrip that is the main island of 26 comprising the Tarawa atoll.

The marines were to hit the sandy beach immediately after these softening-up operations ceased, and everybody on the boats was happy because it seemed like very effective fire, the kind of intense blasting that would make the Japs "bomb happy." But that wasn't the way it worked out.

The Japs were too well dug in. Their blockhouses were of concrete five feet thick, with palm-tree trunks 18 inches in diameter superimposed on the concrete. And superimposed on the trees were angle irons, made of railroad steel. On top of these were 10 to 12 feet of sand and coral rock. Only a direct hit by a 2,000-pound bomb would cave in or destroy such blockhouses.

The Jap pillboxes were built out of sand-filled oil drums, buttressed by heavy coconut logs and then sandbags. Air-raid shelters were constructed from coconut tree trunks, piled high in two walls, with coral sand filling the space in between. Our heavy machine guns and 75s couldn't penetrate these emplacements or knock out the enemy eight-inch shore batteries and machine guns that were awaiting our assault waves.

Daylight had been chosen for the assault because it permitted naval gunfire and aviation as support, and because a night attack might have caused the boats to miss the beaches. But there was another important reason:

It was flood tide. At low tide the coral shelf that forms Betio and the rest of Tarawa atoll is practically dry; at high tide there is 4½ feet of water at the shore line, and it gets deeper farther out. The assault was timed to take advantage of the flood tide.

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Then the unexpected happened. A sudden shift of wind swept the water back from the beaches. Many of the Higgins boats piled up on a treacherous table reef of coral, barely submerged in the water. The marines were forced to debark and wade in the rest of the way—some 500 to 800 yards—in the face of murderous Japanese fire with no protection.

Those few hundred yards seemed like a million miles. Even before the boats went aground on the reef, the Japs opened up with rifles, machine guns, heavy mortars; 75-mm and 90-mm guns. But the marines kept coming on, across the corpses of other marines whose lifeless heads were bobbing in the water.

The assault was made against three designated beaches by three battalion landing teams. One of the teams was so powerfully opposed that only two companies could land. Many casualties were the result of a Jap trick. Snipers, hidden in the hulk of a wrecked Jap sailing vessel on the reef, let the marines move in beyond the hulk and then shot them down from behind.

Just after noon a reinforcing wave of Higgins boats was sent in. Five-inch automatic Jap weapons on the flank blew two of the boats out of the water. Several companies were shifted against the Jap flanking position to protect the passage of new reinforcements.

Then the Hellcat fighters, TBFs and dive-bombers worked over the area for about an hour, from 1430 to 1530, flying sometimes only 60 feet off the water. No point on Betio was much more than 10 feet above sea level except where the Japs had built up their emplacements.

After the planes, two U. S. minesweepers went in and tried to trade punches with the shore batteries. Then two destroyers pushed into the lagoon and fired at close range, 700 to 900 yards. Then more planes. We had absolute aerial supremacy; the greatest number of Jap planes seen at Betio at any one time was six.

MEANWHILE the blood-and-guts landing operation was continuing. Ten or 15 feet from the high-tide mark on Betio's narrow beaches, the Japs had constructed walls of coconut logs as a barrier to tanks. Marines rushed the beaches and scaled the chin-high walls in the face of Jap machine guns.

Behind the barricade the island was ringed with about 500 pillboxes, so arranged that when you fought your way past one of the pillboxes you were moving into the cross-fire of two inner pillboxes.

In the shallows, on the beaches and before the Jap emplacements, marines died by squads. In less than 100 yards on the beach and within 20 yards of machine-gun emplacements, 105 marines were killed. But others kept advancing until at last they took the emplacements and wiped out the Jap gunners.

By the end of the first day, the three battalion landing teams and reinforcements had secured little more than a toehold—three small beachheads from 70 to 150 yards in depth. The men dug in and held on there through the night. They established all-around security with orders to shoot anything that moved. There were local efforts at counterattacking. During the night, some artillery was brought ashore.

The second day the marines began widening their beachheads and improving their positions. The center battalion pushed ahead until it was stymied by pillboxes and blockhouses. This same day reinforcements, including some light and medium tanks, were landed on the comparatively lightly defended west end of the island, and they pushed east down the airstrip, which forms a diagonal line across the island, to the point where the advanced marines were being held up by the pillboxes. The Hellcats were called in again to strafe the area while the battleships and cruisers pounded from offshore. Then Marine infantry and tanks advanced.

After the second day the battalion was able to penetrate to the opposite shore of Betio, by-passing or destroying the stubborn pillboxes and blockhouses, and by this time the critical period was past. But the fighting was not "officially" over until 76 hours had passed from the time of the assault, and even then there was still a handful of Jap snipers in trees and dugouts that had to be picked off.

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In all, an enemy force of about 4,500 defenders was wiped out, including about 3,500 Imperial marines and 1,000 laborers. Fewer than 200 of the defenders surrendered, most of them laborers. Tarawa was taken by less than a division of U. S. Marines. We suffered the loss of 1,026 men killed and 2,557 wounded.

Within four days the Tarawa airfield had been put into working condition by Seabees, who followed the first waves of marines while fighting still was in progress. American planes are now operating from Tarawa as an advanced base.

This was the toughest battle in the history of the Marine Corps. They suffered losses of 1,026 dead and 2,557 wounded in the 76-hour fight.

(added images below)

