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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BREAKING THE OUTER RING: MARINE LANDINGS IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS ***

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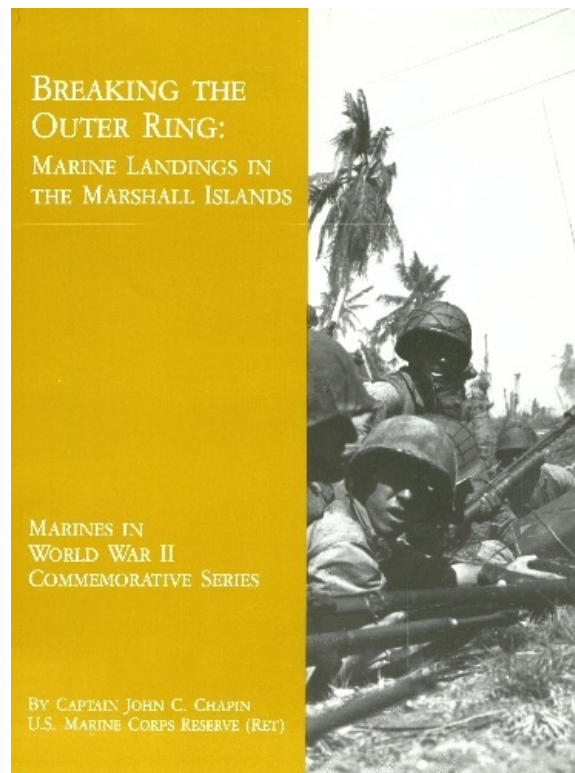
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BREAKING THE OUTER RING: MARINE LANDINGS IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY CAPTAIN JOHN C. CHAPIN
U.S. MARINE CORPS RESERVE (RET)



A flamethrower, center, is among weapons carried by men of the 22d Marines on Eniwetok.



Marine riflemen, under fire, leap from a just-beached amphibian tractor in the January 1944 landing.
(Department of Defense Photo [USMC 72411])

Breaking the Outer Ring: Marine Landings in the Marshall Islands

by Captain John C. Chapin, USMCR (Ret)

By the beginning of 1944, United States Marine forces had already made a dramatic start on the conquest of areas overrun by the Japanese early in World War II. Successful American assaults in the Southwest Pacific, beginning with Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August 1942, and in the Central Pacific at Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands in November 1943, were crucial campaigns to mark the turn of the Japanese floodtide of conquest. The time had now come to take one more decisive step: assault of the islands held by Japan before 1941.

These strategic islands, mandated to the Japanese by the League of Nations after World War I, were a source of mystery and speculation. Outsiders were barred; illegal fortifications were presumed; yet any Central Pacific drive towards Japan's inner defense ring had to confront these unknowns. The obvious target to begin with was the Marshall Islands. As early as 1921 a Marine planning officer had pinpointed their geographic significance.

Planning the Attack

In May 1943, the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided to seize them. This difficult assignment fell to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz who bore the impressive titles of Commander in Chief, Pacific, and Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas (CinC-Pac/CinCPOA), based at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. He turned to four very capable men who would carry out the actual operation: three admirals who were experts in amphibious landings, fast carrier strikes, and shore bombardment, and Major General Holland M. Smith, who was the commanding general of the Marines' V Amphibious Corps and now also would be Commanding General, Expeditionary Troops. It was he who would command the troops once they got ashore. Original cautious plans for steppingstone attacks starting in the eastern Marshalls were modified, and the daring decision was made to knife through the edges and strike directly at Kwajalein Atoll in the heart of Marshalls' cluster of 32 atolls, more than 1,000 islands, and 867 reefs.

Kwajalein is the largest atoll in the world, 60 miles long and 20 miles wide, a semi-enclosed series of 80 reefs and islets around a huge lagoon of some 800 square miles. Located 620 miles northwest of Tarawa and 2,415 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor, its capture would have far-reaching strategic significance in that it would break the outer ring of Japanese Pacific defense lines. Within the atoll itself there were two objectives: Roi and Namur, a pair of connected islands shaped like weights on a four-mile barbell in the north end, and crescent-shaped Kwajalein Island at the south end. The 4th Marine Division under Major General Harry Schmidt was to assault Roi-Namur, and the Army 7th Infantry Division under Major General Charles H. Corlett would attack Kwajalein. After these islands were taken, there was one more objective in the Marshalls: Eniwetok Atoll. This was targeted for attack some three months later by a task force comprised of the 22d Marine Regiment (called in the Corps the "22d Marines") and most of the Army's 106th Infantry Regiment. Brigadier General Thomas E. Watson, USMC, would be in command.

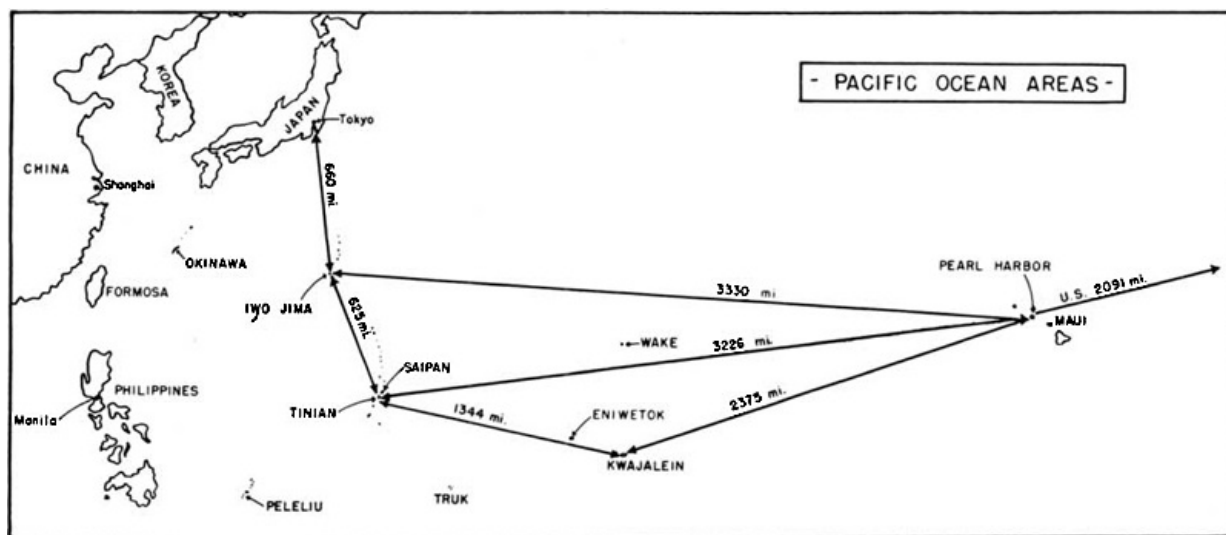
As a preliminary to these priority operations, the occupation of another atoll in the eastern Marshalls was planned. This objective was Majuro, which would serve as an advanced air and naval base and safeguard supply lines to Kwajalein 220 miles to the northwest. Because it was believed to be very lightly defended, only the Marine V Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company and the 2d Battalion, 106th Infantry, 7th Infantry Division were assigned to capture Majuro. To support all of these thrusts there would be a massive assemblage of U.S. Navy ships: carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and an astonishingly varied array of transports and landing craft. These warships provided a maximum potential for intensive preinvasion aerial bombing and ship-to-shore bombardment; the increased tonnage in high explosives, the lengthened duration of the softening-up process, and the pinpointing of priority enemy targets were all lessons sorely learned from the inadequate preparatory shelling which had contributed to the steep casualties of Tarawa. For the Marshalls, there were altogether 380 ships, carrying 85,000 men.

With the plans in place and a very tight schedule to meet the D-day deadline, the complex task of assembling and transporting the assault troops to the target area was put in motion. Readyng the Army 7th Division was the easiest part of the logistical plan; it was already in Hawaii after earlier operations at Attu and Kiska in the Aleutian Islands off Alaska. The 22d Marines, however, had to come from Samoa (where it had been on garrison duty for some 18 months), and the 4th Marine Division was still at Camp Pendleton in California, where it had recently been formed. On 13 January 1944, the division sailed from San Diego to commence the longest shore-to-shore amphibious operation in the history of warfare: 4,300 miles!

Life at sea soon settled down into a regular routine. All hands soon became acquainted with the rituals of alerts for "General Quarters" in the blackness of predawn, mess lines stretching along the passageways, inspections and calisthenics on the cluttered decks, the loudspeaker with its shrill whistle of a "bosun's pipe" and its "Now hear this!" fresh water hours, and classes and weapons-cleaning every day. Off duty, the men took advantage of the opportunity to sleep, play cards, stand in line for ice cream, write letters, and, of course, engage in endless speculation about the division's objective (which was originally known only by the intriguing title of "Burlesque and Camouflage").

On 21 January the transports carrying the Marines anchored in Lahaina Roads off Maui, Hawaii, and visions of shore leave raced through the minds of all the men: hula girls, surf swimming, cooling draughts in a local bar—just what was needed after the long nights in the crowded, humid troop compartments during the voyage. Over the ships' loudspeakers, sad to say, came a not unexpected announcement, "There will be no liberty...."

After one day filled with conferences and briefings for the senior officers, the task force sailed again. Next stop: the Marshall Islands! En route, crossing the 180th Meridian, there were the traditional, colorful ceremonies in which the old salts initiated the men who had never before crossed the International Date Line into the "Domain of the Golden Dragon." On 30 January the ships threaded their way through the eastern atolls of the Marshalls, and the following morning (dawn, 31 January) they halted before their objectives, with the northern component off Roi-Namur and the southern component facing Kwajalein Island. On every transport the men crowded the ships' rails to stare at the low-lying islets which they must soon attack. The 23d, 24th, and 25th Marines were assigned to the Roi-Namur operation, and the 32d, 17th, and 184th Infantry Regiments of the Army's 7th Division were to take the Kwajalein Island objectives.



PACIFIC OCEAN AREAS

Meanwhile, the small group assigned to Majuro (2d Battalion, 106th Infantry, plus the V Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company) had split off from the main task force and would make its own landing on 31 January. Advance intelligence estimates of minimal enemy forces proved accurate; there were no American casualties and just one Japanese officer was captured on the main islet. Three days later more than 30 U.S. ships lay at anchor in the Majuro lagoon.

Forward at the main theater, an awesome pre-landing saturation bombardment, begun on 29 January, was in full swing. U.S. Navy ships moved in on Roi-Namur, with some at the unprecedented short range of 1,900 yards, and poured in their point-bank massed fire. Continuing the repeated aerial strikes which had begun weeks earlier from the carriers, waves of planes swept in low for bombing and strafing runs. Key enemy artillery and blockhouse strong points had earlier been mapped from submarine and aerial reconnaissance, and individual attention was given to the destruction of each one. The combined total of shells and bombs reached a staggering 6,000 tons.

As a result of the underwater obstacles and beach mines uncovered at Tarawa, for the first time Navy underwater demolition teams had been formed for future operations. Fortunately, they found no mines at Roi-Namur and were not needed at Kwajalein.

Another factor which would assist the assault troops was the configuration of the atoll. The two main objectives, at the north end and at the south, were each adjoined by islets, and these neighboring locations were to be seized on D-day, 31 January, as bases to provide close-in artillery support for the infantry landing. On either side of Roi-Namur the 14th Marines would bring in its 75mm and 105mm howitzers and dig them in to support the main landing from islets which carried the exotic names of Ennuebing, Mellu, Ennubirr, Ennumennet, and Ennugarret. As is always the case in war, there were problems. The task was assigned to the 25th Marines, and, because of communications difficulties, the different units going ashore on different islets could not coordinate their landings. Their radios went dead from drenching sea swells that swept over the gunwales of the amtracs (LVTs, landing vehicles, tracked, or amphibian tractors). Nevertheless, by nightfall, the beachheads had been secured, and, for the first time, U.S. Marines had landed on a Japanese mandate.

On board the transports outside the lagoon, the men of the 23d and 24th Marines spent the afternoon of D-day transferring to LSTs (Landing Ships, Tank). That night saw a muddled picture of amphibian tractors stranded or out of gas inside the lagoon, with many others wandering in the blackout as they sought to find their own LST mother ship.

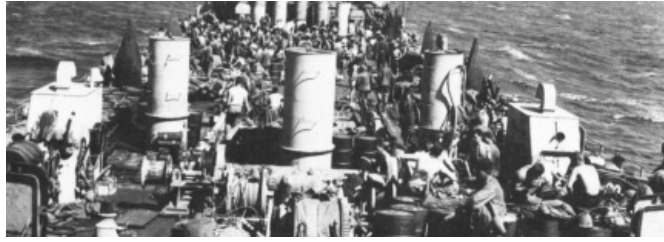
While this scramble was going on, the assault troops on board the LSTs were facing, each in his own way, the prospect of intensive combat on the following morning. One rifleman, Private First Class Robert F. Graf, remembered:

As I thought of the landing that I would be making on the morrow, I was both excited and anxious. Yes, I thought of death, but I wasn't afraid. Somehow I couldn't see myself as dead. "Why wasn't there fear?" I wondered. Even though I was nervous, it was with excitement, not fear. Instead there was a thrill. I was headed for great adventure, where I had wanted to be. This was just an adventure. It was "grown up" Cowboys and Indians, it was "grown up" Cops and Robbers.... Thoughts of glory were in my mind that night. Now it was my turn to "carry the flag" into battle. It was my turn to be a part of history. To top it all off, I was going into battle with the "Elite of the Elite," the United States Marines. Just prior to falling asleep, I prayed. My prayers were for courage, for my family, and I prayed to stay alive.

By the next morning, D plus 1, 1 February, the LSTs had moved inside the lagoon. Up before dawn, the infantrymen filed into the cavernous holds of the LSTs and clambered onboard their amphibious tractors. Graf described his equipment:

Landings were made with each person loaded with weight. We wore our dungarees, leggings, and boonockers (shoes). Our skivvies (underwear) had been dyed green while we were still in the States. White ones were too good a target. In addition, our packs were loaded with whatever gear we thought we would need, such as extra socks, toilet gear, poncho, and our "D" and "K" rations. Extra cigarettes were stuffed in also. Believe it or not, some of us carried books that we were reading.

I wore two knives. The K Bar [knife] that was issued was tucked into my right legging. The throwing stiletto that I had purchased was on my belt; a leather thong at the bottom of the sheath was tied around my leg so that the knife would not flop around. My bayonet was in its sheath and attached to my pack. On went the loaded pack. Around my waist went the cartridge belt, fully loaded, with ten clips of M1 rifle ammo, each clip holding eight rounds. Over my shoulder were two bandoleers of M1 ammo, holding an additional eighty rounds. Hanging from my pockets were four hand grenades, only requiring a pulled pin to be activated. We donned our helmets with the brown camouflaged covering. Finally we slung our gas masks over our shoulders. Now we were ready for bear!



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 146975

Jammed all together in the fetid multi-tiered bunks below decks, Marine troops welcomed being in the fresh air on deck even if they were also crowded there.

Out of the deafening din of the ships' holds, eerily lit by red battle lamps, down the ramps of the unfolding bows, lurching into the rough seas whipped up by the wind, the columns of amtracs went to war.

Major General Holland M. Smith

One of the most famous Marines of his time, General Smith was born in 1882. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1905. There followed a series of overseas assignments in the Philippines, Nicaragua, Santo Domingo, and with the Marine Brigade in France in World War I. Beginning in the early 1930s, he became increasingly focused on the development of amphibious warfare concepts. Soon after the outbreak of war with Japan in 1941, he was assigned to a crucial position, command of all Marines in the Central Pacific.

As another Marine officer later described him, "He was of medium height, perhaps five feet nine or ten inches, and somewhat paunchy. His once-black hair had turned gray. His once close-trimmed mustache was somewhat scraggly. He wore steel-rimmed glasses and he smoked cigars incessantly." There was one other feature that characterized him: a ferocious temper that earned him the nickname, "Howlin' Mad" Smith, although his close friends knew him as "Hoke."

This characteristic would usually emerge as irritation at what he felt were sub-standard performances. One famous example of this was his relief of an Army general from his command. It came when an Army division was on the line alongside two Marine divisions on Saipan in the Marianas Islands campaign following the Marshalls operation. A huge interservice uproar erupted!

Less than two years later, after 41 years of active service, during which he was awarded four Distinguished Service Medals for his leadership in four successive successful amphibious operations, he retired in April 1946, as a four-star general. He died in January 1967.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 72162B

On board Rocky Mount (AGC 3), newly designed and equipped to serve as a amphibious command ship, MajGen Holland M. Smith, V Amphibious Corps commander and commander of Expeditionary Troops at Roi-Namur in the Marshalls, points out a feature of the battle to his chief of staff BGen Graves B. Erskine.

Major General Harry Schmidt



Department of Defense Photo (USMC)
1118D

MajGen Harry Schmidt

The leader of the 4th Marine Division at Roi-Namur was born in 1886 and entered the Corps as a second lieutenant in 1909. By extraordinary coincidence, his first foreign duty was at Guam in the Marianas Islands, an area he would return to 33 years later under vastly different circumstances!

The Philippines, Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua (where he was awarded a Navy Cross—second only to the Medal of Honor), interspersed with repeated stays in China, were the marks of a diverse overseas career. At home, there were staff schools, paymaster duties, and a tour as Assistant Commandant.

By the end of the war, he had been decorated with three Distinguished Service Medals. Retiring in 1948 after 39 years of service, he was advanced to the four-star rank of general. He died in 1968.

A contemporary described him as “a Buddha, a typical old-time Marine: he had been in China; he was regulation Old Establishment; a regular Marine.”

The 4th Marine Division



Department of Defense
Photo (USMC) A707113

Shoulder patch of the 4th Marine Division: a gold "4" on scarlet background, official colors of the U.S. Marine Corps. This emblem was designed by John Fabion, in the division's Public Affairs Office before the Marshall campaign, and his commanding officer was astonished to find that the layout of the runways on the Japanese airstrip on Roi were "an exact replica."

This division was formed as the result of the organization and redesignation of several other units. The 23d Marines began as infantry detached from the 3d Division in February 1943, the same month that an artillery battalion of the 12th Marines became the genesis of the 14th Marines and engineer elements of the 19th Marines formed the nucleus of the 20th Marines. In March the 24th Marines was organized, and then in May it was split in two to supply the men for the 25th Marines.

This war-time shuffling provided the major building blocks for a new division. The units were originally separated, however, with the 24th Marines and a variety of reinforcing units (engineer, artillery, medical, motor transport, special weapons, tanks, etc.) at Camp Pendleton in California. The rest of the units were at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This East Coast echelon moved to Pendleton by train and transit of the Panama Canal in July and August. When all the units were finally together, the 4th Marine Division was formally activated on 14 August 1943.

After intensive training, it shipped out on 13 January 1944, and in 13 short months made four major assault landings: Roi-Namur, Saipan, Tinian, and Iwo Jima, suffering more than 17,000 casualties. It was awarded two Presidential Unit Citations and a Navy Unit Commendation, and then deactivated 28 November 1945. In February 1966, however, it was reactivated as the lead division in the Marine Corps Reserve, and major units later served with distinction in the Persian Gulf.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70490

Col Franklin A. Hart, commander of the 24th Marines, briefs his staff on the operation plan for the invasion of Roi-Namur. To his left is his regimental executive officer, LtCol Homer L. Litzenberg, Jr. Both would retire as general officers.

Down in the lagoon the signal finally came to the assault waves, "Go on in!" The two lead battalions of the 23d Marines headed for Roi, with the two lead battalions of the 24th Marines churning towards Namur. The memories of this run-in were burned forever into the mind of young Second Lieutenant John C. Chapin, leading his platoon in the first wave:

By now everything was all mixed up, with our assault wave all entangled with the armored tractors ahead of us. I ordered my driver to maneuver around them. Slowly we inched past, as their 37mm guns and .50-cal. machine guns flamed. The beach lay right before us. However, it was shrouded in such a pall of dust and smoke from our bombardment that we could see very little of it. As a result, we were unable to tell which section we were approaching (after all our hours of careful planning, based on hitting the beach at one exact spot!) I turned to talk to my platoon sergeant, who was manning the machine gun right beside me. He was slumped over—the whole right side of his head disintegrated into a mass of gore. Up to now, the entire operation had seemed almost like a movie, or like one of the innumerable practice landings we'd made.

Now one of my men lay in a welter of blood beside me, and the reality of it smashed into my consciousness.

The landing then became a chaotic jumble of rapid events for that officer and his men. There was a grinding crash to their right, and looking over they saw an LVT collide at the water's edge with an armored tractor, climb on its side and hang there, crazily atilt. Simultaneously, there was a grating sound under their tractor as they hit the beach. Keeping low, the men slid over the side of the tractor and dove for cover, for their LVT was a perfect target sitting there on the sand. The lieutenant was the last one to drop to the deck, and as he sprawled on the sand, the amtrac ground its way backwards into the ocean.

Now the lieutenant faced his first combat in a situation that characterized all the landing beaches. His intensive training stood him in good stead as he took stock of the situation. Being in the first scattered group of tractors ashore, his men had no contact yet with any other unit, so the Japanese were on both sides of them—as well as in front. One glance told him that they had landed on the west side of Namur, 300 yards to the right of the spit of land that their company had for its objective. The long hours of studying maps and aerial photographs had proved their worth. The lieutenant's account continued:

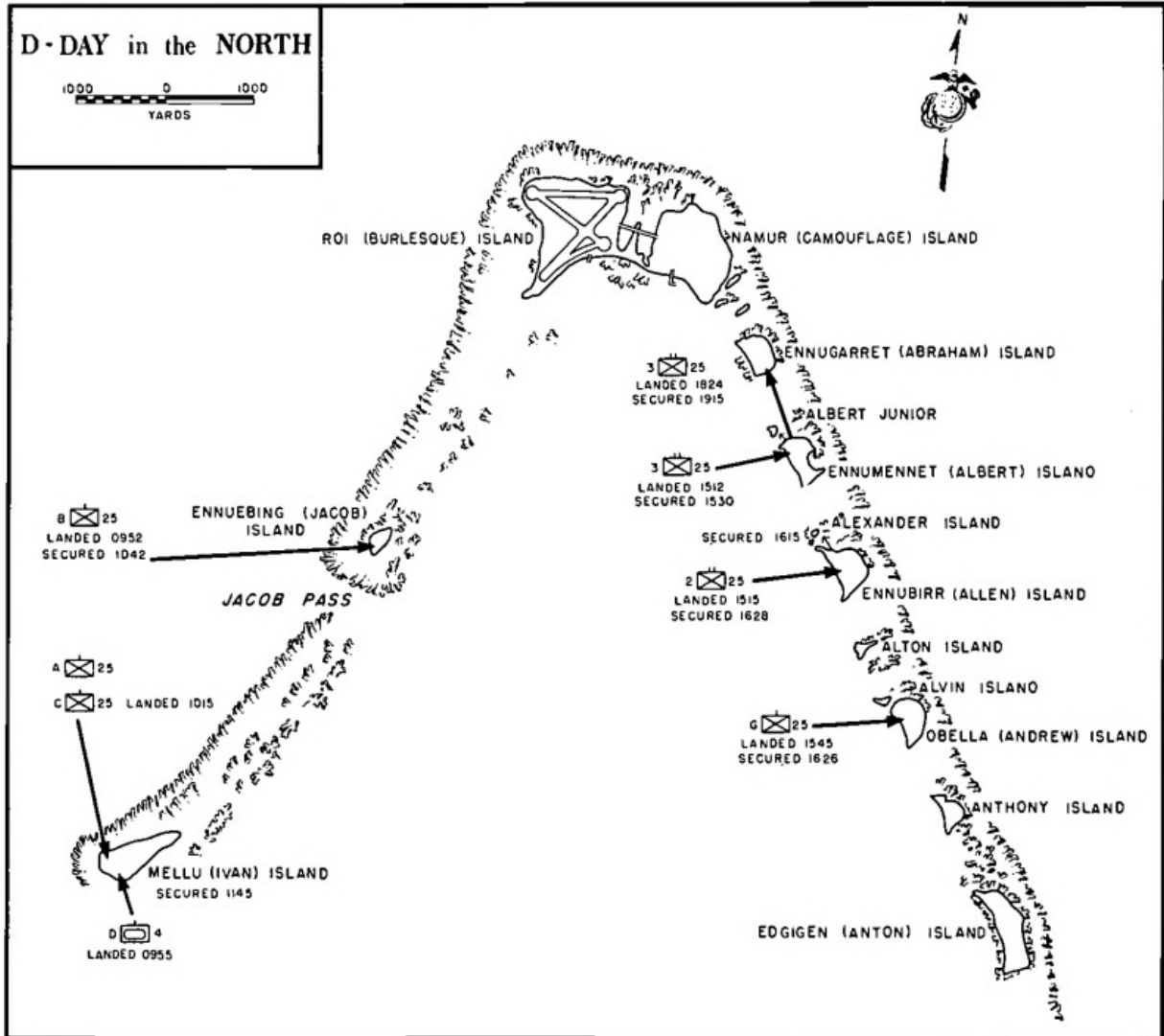
My immediate task was to reorganize my platoon, for it was scattered along the beach. The noise, smoke, and choking pall of burnt powder further complicated things. I turned to my sergeant guide, as we lay there in the sand, and asked him where his men were. He started to point and right before my eyes his hand dissolved into a bloody stump. He rolled over, screaming "Sailor! Sailor!" (This was our code name for a corpsman. Bitter past experiences of the Marines had shown that the Japs delighted in calling "corpsman" themselves, and then shooting anyone who showed himself.) Soon our corpsman crawled over, and started to give the sergeant first aid, so I turned my attention to more pressing matters.

As yet the officer hadn't seen a single Japanese, even though he was in the midst of them. But now one of the men next to him gasped, "They're in there!," pointing to a slit trench four feet away; the Marine raised himself up to a crouching position and hurled his bayoneted rifle like a javelin into the slit trench. There was heavy enemy fire coming at the platoon, but it was almost impossible to determine its source. Ten feet in front of the Marines, however, the Japanese had dug a series of trenches running the length of the beach. Tied in with these trenches were scores of machine gun positions and foxholes, mutually supporting each other, all camouflaged so that they were invisible until a Marine was right on top of them. Accordingly, as soon as the men of the platoon would locate an emplacement, they would deluge it with hand grenades, and then work on

the next one. The lieutenant's next experience was almost his last:

At one point in this swirling maelstrom of action I was kneeling behind a palm tree stump with my carbine on the deck, as I fished for a fresh clip of bullets in my belt. Something made me look up and there, not ten feet away, was a Jap charging me with his bayonet. My hands were empty. I was helpless. The thought that "this is it" flashed through my brain! Then shots chattered from all sides of me. My men hit the running Jap in a dozen places. He fell dead three feet from me.

Shortly after this, the squad with the Marine officer was working on another Japanese emplacement. He pulled the pin from one of his grenades, let the handle fly off, and started counting to three. (The grenade's fuse was timed to give a man about five seconds before it exploded.) In the middle of his count, a Japanese started shooting at him from the flank. Instinctively he turned to look for the enemy. Then something in his mind clicked, "And what about that live grenade in your hand?" Without looking, he threw it and dove for the deck. It went off in mid-air and the fragments spattered all around him....



D-DAY in the NORTH

Artillerymen unload ordnance on D-Day for the preparatory bombardment from the neighboring islets to pound targets before the infantry attacks on Roi-Namur.

Department of Defense Photo (Army) 324729



Groups of Marines were forming now under their own initiative, and beginning to work their way slowly inland. It was nearly impossible to keep tight control of the platoon under these conditions, but the lieutenant was moving with them, trying to get them coordinated as best he could, when suddenly he dropped to the ground, stunned. He recalled:

My first reaction was that someone had hit my right cheek with a baseball bat. With the shock, instinct made me cover my right eye with my hand. Then I realized I'd been hit. Searing my mind came the question, "When I take my hand away, will I be able to see?" Slowly I lowered my arm and opened my eye. I could see! Relief flooded through me. The wound was on my cheekbone, just below the eye, and it was bleeding profusely, so I lay there and broke out my first aid packet. After shaking sulfa powder into the wound rather awkwardly, I bandaged my right eye and cheekbone as best I could. The bullet had gone completely through my helmet just above my right ear, and left a jagged, gaping hole in the steel. My left eye was still functioning all right, however, so after a drink from my canteen, I started forward again.

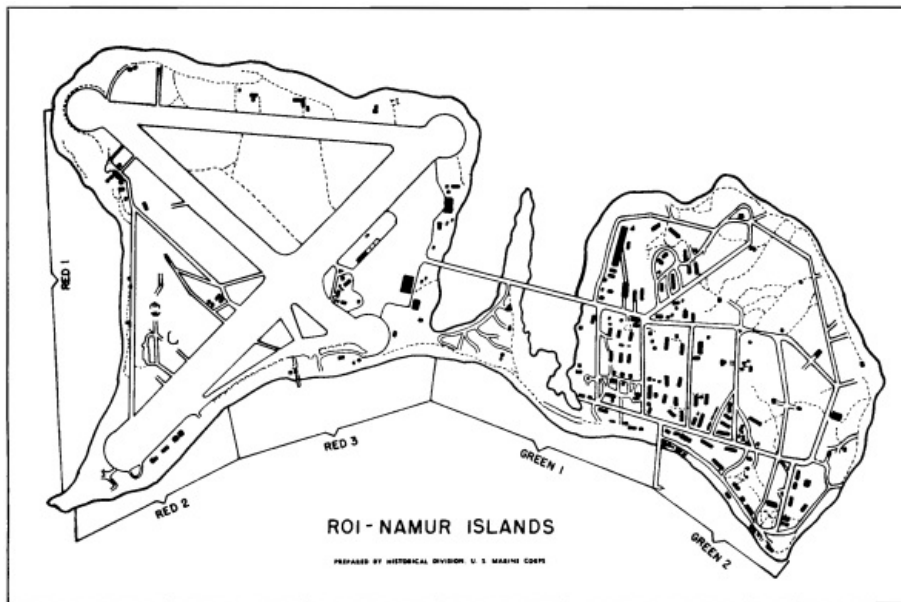
A little later I encountered another lieutenant from our company, Jack Powers. He had been hit in the stomach, but was still fighting. Crouching behind a concrete wall, he showed me a pillbox about 25 feet away that was full of Japs who were still very much alive and full of fight. This strong point commanded the whole area around us and was holding up our advance very effectively. It was about 50 feet long and 15 feet wide, constructed of double rows of sand-filled oil drums. Grabbing the nearest men, we explained our plan of attack and went to work. With a couple of automatic riflemen, Jack covered the rear entrance with fire. Taking another man and a high-explosive bangalore torpedo, I crawled around to the front and observed for a few minutes. Then we inched our way up to the slit that served as a front entrance, and I threw a grenade in to keep down any Jap who might be inclined to poke a rifle out in our faces.

Next we lighted the fuse on the bangalore, jammed it inside the pillbox, and scrambled for shelter. The fuse was very short, we knew, and we barely had tumbled into a nearby shell hole when we were overwhelmed by the blast of the bangalore. Dirt sprayed all over us, billowing acrid smoke blinded us, and the numbing concussion deafened us. In a few moments we felt all right once more, and a glance told us that we had closed that entrance permanently. We worked our way back to where we'd left Jack Powers, and found that he'd managed to locate a shaped charge of high explosive in the meantime. Taking this, we repeated our job—this time blowing the rear entrance shut.

That took care of that pillbox! Jack looked like he was in pretty bad shape, and I urged him to go get some medical attention, but he refused and moved on alone to the next Jap pillbox (where, I later learned, he was killed in a single-handed heroic attack for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor).

All over Namur there were similar examples of individual initiative. They were needed, for the island was covered with dense jungle, concrete fortifications, administrative buildings, and barracks. It was difficult to mount an armored attack under these conditions. Meanwhile, the Japanese used them to their fullest extent for cover and concealment. Enemy resistance and problems of maintaining unit contact slowed the Marines' advance.

Amidst all of this, a Marine demolition team threw a satchel charge of high explosive into a Japanese bunker which turned out to be crammed with torpedo warheads. An enormous blast occurred. From off shore, an officer watched as "the whole of Namur Island disappeared from sight in a tremendous brown cloud of dust and sand raised by the explosion." Overhead, a Marine artillery spotter felt his plane catapult up 1,000 feet and exclaimed, "Great God Almighty! The whole damn island has blown up!" On the beach another officer recalled that "trunks of palm trees and chunks of concrete as large as packing crates were flying through the air like match sticks.... The hole left where the blockhouse stood was as large as a fair-sized swimming pool." The column of smoke rose to over 1,000 feet in the air, and the explosion caused the deaths of 20 Marines and wounded 100 others in the area.



ROI-NAMUR ISLANDS

PREPARED BY HISTORICAL DIVISION U. S. MARINE CORPS

Finally, at 1930, Colonel Franklin A. Hart, commander of the 24th Marines ordered his men to dig in for the night. The troops had come across a good portion of the island. Now they would hold the ground gained and get ready for the morrow. One rifleman, Robert F. Graf, later wrote about that time: 10

Throughout the night the fleet sent flares skyward, lighting the islands as the flares drifted with the prevailing wind. Ghostly flickering light was cast from the flares as they drifted along on their parachutes. Laying in our foxhole, my buddy and I were watching, waiting, and straining our ears trying to filter out the known sounds.

Our foxhole in that sand was about six feet long by two feet in depth and just about wide enough to hold the two of us. Since I had eaten only my "D" ration since leaving the ship, I was hungry. "D" rations were bitter-sweet chocolate bars about an inch and a half square and were supposed to be full of energy. I removed a "K" ration from my pack and opened it. "K" rations came in a box about the size of a Cracker Jack box and had a waterproof coating. These rations contained a small tin of powdered coffee or lemonade, some round hard candies, a package of three cigarettes, and a tin about the size of a tuna-fish can containing either cheese, hash, or eggs with a little bacon. We dined on our rations, drank water from our canteens, and prepared to settle in for the night....

After finishing chow we elected to take two-hour watches, one on guard while the other slept. Also we made sure we knew where our buddies' foxholes were, both on the left and right of us. Thus we were set up so that anyone to our front would be an enemy. Our first night in combat had started.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70694

Landing Vehicles, Tracked (LVTs) equipped with rocket launchers new to the 4th Marine Division, churn towards the assault beaches of Roi-Namur on D-Plus One.

Before dawn the Japanese mounted a determined counterattack which was finally repulsed. Nevertheless, it was a tragic night for one particular family. A 19-year-old Marine private first class and his 44-year-old father, a corporal, had been together in the same company back in California, but the son was hospitalized with a minor illness and then transferred to another outfit. The father boarded his ship prepared to sail for combat alone, but then his son was found stowed away on it in order to be with his father. The young man was taken off and was placed under arrest. His mother, however, telephoned the Commandant's office in Washington and told the story of her son's effort to be together with her husband. The charges were dropped and the two were reunited for the trip to the Marshalls. The son was killed that first night on Namur. The father went on fighting—alone.

Troops of the 24th Marines near the beach on Namur, thankful for having made it safely ashore, are now awaiting the inevitable word to resume the attack.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70209



Early on the afternoon of the next day, 2 February, D plus 2, the 24th Marines finished its conquest of Namur, and the island was declared "secured." In the final moments of combat, however, Lieutenant Colonel Aquilla J. Dyess, commander of the 1st Battalion, was standing to direct the last attack of his men. A burst of machine gun fire riddled his body, and he became the most senior officer to die in the battle. For his superb leadership under fire he was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor. 11



Marine Corps Art Collection

A watercolor by combat artist LtCol Donald L. Dickson depicts members of a Marine fire team in a close-in attack on a Japanese defensive position on Namur.

Across the sand spit, on Roi, it had been a different story. This island was nearly bare, for it was mostly covered by the airfield runways. When the 23d Marines hit the beaches on D plus 1, the fierceness of the pre-landing bombardment prevented the Japanese defenders from mounting a coordinated defense. Small groups of Marine riflemen joined their regiment's attached tanks in a race across to the far side of the island. This charging style caused considerable confusion as to who was where. Reorganized into more coherent units, the men made a final orderly drive to finish the job.

Members of the 23d Marines on Roi turn to look in astonishment at the black plume of the giant explosion which took many lives in the 24th Marines on Namur.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 71921



In spite of the rapid progress on Roi, there were still some major enemy strongpoints which had to be dealt with. An after-action report of the 2d Battalion described one example of this perilous work in matter of fact terms:

[There] was a blockhouse constructed of reinforced concrete approximately three feet thick. It had three gunports, one each facing north, east, and west, another indication of the enemy's mistaken assumption that the Americans would attack from the sea rather than the lagoon shore. Two heavy hits had been made on the blockhouse, one apparently by 14-inch or 16-inch shells and the other by an aerial bomb. Nevertheless, the position had not been demolished....

[The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Dillon] then ordered Company G to take the blockhouse. The company commander first sent forward a 75mm halftrack, which fired five rounds against the steel door. At this point a demolition squad came up, and its commander volunteered to knock out the position with explosives. While the halftrack continued to fire, infantry platoons moved up on each flank of the installation. The demolition squad placed charges at the ports and pushed bangalore torpedoes through a shell hole in the roof....

"Cease fire" was then ordered, and after hand-grenades were thrown inside the door, half a squad of infantry went into investigate. Unfortunately, the engineers of the demolition squad had not got the word to cease fire, and had placed a shaped charge at one of the ports while the infantry was still inside. Luckily, no one was hurt, but as the company commander reported, "a very undignified and hurried exit was made by all concerned." Inside were three heavy machine guns, a quantity of ammunition, and the bodies of three Japanese.

12



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70241

One of the very few Japanese finally persuaded to surrender in the Roi-Namur operation, this stripped-down soldier is well covered by suspicious Marine riflemen as he leaves his hiding place in a massive but shell-shattered blockhouse.

Many Japanese had to be flushed out of or blown up in the airfield's drainage ditches and culverts, but by 1800 that day, D plus 1, Roi had been secured. ("Secured" seemed a somewhat flexible term when the first service of Mass, held the next day, was interrupted by Japanese shots.) By 6 February, however, the ground elements of a Marine aircraft wing were ensconced at the airfield, preparing for the arrival of their planes in five more days. For the entire remainder of the war these planes pounded the by-passed atolls with such power that the Japanese on them were eliminated from any further role in the war. (There was one surprise Japanese air raid on Roi, staged from the Mariana Islands, on 12 February. This caused a number of casualties and major damage to material.)

Marine tanks and infantry worked effectively together when the terrain permitted.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70203



The repair of the airfield and its quick return to action was a tribute to the skills of both the 20th Marines, an engineer regiment, and the 109th Naval Construction Battalion (Seabees). This achievement was one more illustration of the vital role played by a dizzying list of units that supported the assault rifle battalions. Besides the vast armada of naval planes, ships, and landing craft, there were Navy chaplains and corpsmen (two specialties which are always Navy). In addition to the Marine air, artillery, and engineer units, there were the tanks, heavy weapons, motor transport, quartermaster, signals, and headquarters supporting units. An amphibious operation, to be successful, must be a finely tuned, highly trained juggernaut that depends on all its parts working smoothly together and this was clearly demonstrated in the Marshalls. 13



This watercolor by LtCol Donald L. Dickson, USMCR, portrays Marines reviving themselves and taking it easy after the fighting near blockhouse skeleton.

The conquest of Roi-Namur had been a relatively easy operation when compared to some of the other Marine campaigns in the Pacific. (At Tarawa, for example, more than 3,300 men had been killed or wounded in 76 hours.) The 4th Division's victory came at a cost of 313 Marines and corpsmen killed and 502 wounded. By contrast, the defeated Japanese garrison numbered an estimated 3,563—with all but a handful of them now dead.

The once heavily overgrown terrain of Namur was almost completely denuded at the end of the battle by the combination of naval gunfire and bombing.

National Archives Photo 127-N-72407



Two more tasks remained for the 4th Division; the first was mopping up the rest of the islets in the northern

two-thirds of the atoll. The 25th Marines, which had supported the attacks of the 23d and 24th, took off on a series of island-hopping trips on board their LVTs. The regiment checked out more of the exotically named islets such as Boggerlapp, Marsugalt, Gegibu, Oniotto, and Eru. The 25th found no resistance and by D plus 7 it had covered all 50 of the islets that were its objectives. This assignment was a total change from what the regiment had experienced around Roi-Namur. One writer, Carl W. Proehl, described the expedition this way:

It was on this junket that the men of the 25th got to know the Marshall Island natives, for it was these Marines who freed them from Japanese domination. On many islets, bivouacking overnight, the natives and Marines got together and sang hymns; the Marshall Islanders had been Christianized many years before, and missionaries had taught them such songs as "Onward Christian Soldiers." K rations and cigarettes also made a big hit with them. And more than one Marine sentry, walking post in front of a native camp, took up the islander's dress and wore only a loin cloth—usually a towel from a Los Angeles hotel.

The final task that remained for the division was a miserable one. Roi and Namur were littered with dead Japanese; the stench was overpowering as their bodies putrefied in the blazing tropical sun. All hands, officers and enlisted, were put to work day and night on burial details. "Hey, I just finished two days of brutal combat! We don't have any gloves or equipment for this!"—"Too bad, just start doing it anyway!" Health conditions were so bad that 1,500 men in the division were suffering from dysentery when the troops finally reboarded transports for the journey back to their rear base at Maui in the Hawaiian Islands.

Naval Support

The infantry assault units in the Marshalls operations were carried by an incredible array of ships designed to perform very specialized functions. Also included were converted destroyers. The amphibian tractors carried the invading Marines in to the beaches, supplemented by the older ramped landing craft. Added to these were a jumble of acronyms: LCI, LST, LSM, etc., for infantry, rockets, tanks, and trucks.

No landings would have been successful, however, without the crucial support of naval gunfire and aerial bombardment. The fast task force that roamed the Pacific and the support groups which stood off the island objectives were visual proof of the deadly striking power that had been reborn in the U.S. Navy in the two years since the debacle at Pearl Harbor. Nearly all the old, slow battleships which had lain shattered in the mud were back in action, and now were joined by brand new, fast counterparts, and the familiar old peacetime carriers were now supplemented by a steady flow of new fleet carriers and the innovation of smaller escort carriers.

This is the roll call of the ships which poured in their fire before and during the landings:

Battleships: *Tennessee* (BB 13), *Colorado* (BB 45), *Maryland* (BB 46), *Pennsylvania* (BB 38), *Idaho* (BB 42), *New Mexico* (BB 40), and *Mississippi* (BB 41).

Heavy Cruisers: *Louisville* (CA 28), *Indianapolis* (CA 35), *Portland* (CA 33), *Minneapolis* (CA 36), *San Francisco* (CA 38), and *New Orleans* (CA 32).

Light Cruisers: *Santa Fe* (CL 60), *Mobile* (CL 63), and *Biloxi* (CL 80).

Carriers: *Saratoga* (CV 3), *Princeton* (CVL 23), *Langley* (CVL 28), *Enterprise* (CV 6), *Yorktown* (CV 10), *Belleau Wood* (CVL 24), *Intrepid* (CV 11), *Essex* (CV 9), *Cabot* (CVL 27), *Cowpens* (CVL 25), *Monterey* (CVL 26), and *Bunker Hill* (CV 17), plus six escort carriers.

Destroyers: The Kwajalein Atoll landings had 40 in direct support.

The Army Attack: Kwajalein

In accordance with the overall campaign plan for the seizure of the Marshall Islands, the Army's attack on Kwajalein Island at the south end of the atoll began in exact synchronization with the Marine assault in the north. The same softening-up process was used on D-day, 31 January, with a large force of warships and planes pouring on a blanket of high explosive. The Navy, for instance, fired 7,000 shells. Because of the location of the islets immediately surrounding its main objective, the 7th Infantry Division was able to follow a plan identical to the Marines, with the 17th Infantry Regiment clearing the way for placement of close-by supporting artillery. The 145th Field Artillery Battalion then proceeded to inundate the target with 28,000 rounds. 14



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 71920

Using palm fronds for concealment, two Marines carefully scout out the terrain ahead of them on Roi in a firefight with the Japanese forward of their position.

Then, on D plus 1, the riflemen of the 32d and 184th Infantry Regiments landed on Kwajalein Island itself. Because of previous joint rehearsals held in Hawaii the amtracs carried in the assault troops with smoothness and efficiency. In addition, Major General Charles H. Corlett, the division commander, had an assemblage of DUKWs (amphibious trucks always called "ducks") available, and it proved valuable in ferrying priority supplies ashore to the fighting men.

A rifleman of the 23d Marines moves slowly past a Japanese airplane and a hangar destroyed on Roi by naval gunfire. The rifle slung over his shoulder and the adjacent Marine carrying supplies indicate that combat is no longer imminent.

National Archives Photo 127-GW-1253-70345



Once ashore, the assault units found widespread devastation from the preinvasion bombing and shelling. Smashed seawalls, uprooted trees, demolished buildings, scarred pillboxes were everywhere. Dug in amidst all this debris, the Japanese fought resolutely. This kind of close combat usually forced the issue down to the individual level. An Army officer, Lieutenant Colonel S. L. A. Marshall, who later interviewed the troops, gave this account of how they dealt with the deadly Japanese "spider holes" they encountered:

The holes were everywhere. Each one had to be searched from close up. Every spot where a man might be hiding had to be stabbed out. So greatly was the beach littered with broken foliage that it was like looking through a haystack for a few poisoned needles....

The fire which cut the men down came from the spider holes farther up the line. It was the kind of bitter going that made it necessary for the junior leaders to prod their men constantly. The leader of the 3d Squad

had been trying to get his men forward against the fire. Private First Class John Treager got up, rushed forward about ten yards, hit the dirt, fired a few shots with his BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] and crumpled with a bullet in his head.

Somewhat farther along, a bayonet was seen sticking up through a patch of fronds. The Jap crouched within it hadn't room to draw in the whole length of the weapon. Private First Class Edward Fiske fired his BAR at the hole; the dried fronds caught fire from the tracers. At that point Fiske ran out of ammunition.

Private First Class Julian Guterrez then took up the fire with his M1 [rifle]. He stood directly above the hole and fired down into it. Then the hole exploded; the Jap inside had turned a grenade on himself. A man's shattered arm came flying out of the hole and hit Guterrez on the shoulder, splattering blood all over his face and clothing. The arm bounced off and fell to the side. As Guterrez looked at it, fascinated and horror-stricken, he saw another bayonet rising out of a patch of fronds just beyond the outstretched and still-quivering fingers. He yelled to a man behind him. The man relayed a grenade and Guterrez pitched it with all of his might into the patch of fronds. It erupted in a shower of palm leaves and blood and flesh.

Guterrez reeled over toward the lagoon to cleanse himself of the blood. Before he could reach the water, in sight of all the other men, he vomited all over the beach. Minutes passed before he could gather himself together again.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70650

The American flag is raised on Roi on 2 February 1944 to signify the end of the fighting. In the background is the shattered hulk of a three-story concrete blockhouse.

As the two Army regiments began their third day of combat, it was dirty and dangerous work. One Marine historical summary of the Marshalls operation told their story:

Resistance during the day was continually stiffer as the enemy took advantage of every possible uncertainty of the terrain, and concentrated the fire of such mortars and artillery as were left to them. Despite the havoc wrought by the bombardments, there was still much cover available and positions were concealed with great adroitness. Many of the concrete installations still stood in partial ruin even though they had received direct hits from heavy naval guns, and the fire from 75mm [cannon] had little effect on them.

It was necessary to employ heavy demolition charges to breach emplacements sufficiently for the employment of flamethrowers and grenades. In the utter turmoil, it was nearly impossible to maintain contact. Nothing was any longer recognizable. The situation was made doubly uncertain from the fact that fire might come from almost any direction at the flanks, frontally, or from the rear. The going was tough.

Weird things can and do happen in such fighting. A Japanese officer charged a U.S. tank with just his bare saber. In the dusk one evening Japanese riflemen tried to walk into the American lines carrying palm branches in front of their bodies so they would not be seen. A U.S. infantryman carrying a flamethrower approached a pillbox, and out through its door bolted a Japanese officer in counterattack. He was squirting a fire extinguisher towards the flame gun. The liquid doused the American soldier as he let the flame go. The Japanese officer dropped dead at his feet, burned to a crisp.



National Archives Photo 127-N-88477

Named "Dyess Field" in honor of the deceased battalion commander who earned the Medal of Honor, the Roi airstrip was quickly converted from Japanese use to become a new base for Marine aircraft as the Central Pacific drive moved westward.

And so it went for four long days until the far tip of Kwajalein had been reached and the island was declared secured.

Navy corpsmen (in their Marine uniforms) are there on the front lines of combat, plasma in hand, saving riflemen's lives in the critical minutes after a wound.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 72399





Department of Defense Photo
(USMC) 36034

LtCol Aquilla J. Dyess was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic personal leadership on Namur. Known affectionately as "Big Red," he was the only person to have been awarded both the Medal of Honor and the Carnegie Medal for Heroism (in 1928). He was honored in 1945 by having a Navy destroyer named after him.



Department of Defense Photo
(USMC) 302952

PFC Richard B. Anderson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for sacrificing his life when he threw himself upon a live Japanese hand grenade, in order to protect his fellow Marines.

1stLt John V. Power, after being seriously wounded attacking one pillbox, held his hand over his wound and went on to attack a second one. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Department of Defense Photo
(USMC) 307689



Pvt Richard K. Sorenson saved the lives of five Marines by throwing himself on a Japanese grenade which was thrown into the shell crater they occupied. He was awarded the Medal of Honor and later recovered from his terrible wounds.

Marine Corps Historical
Collection



The successful battle for both ends of Kwajalein Atoll had been concluded, and a series of conclusions were drawn from it. Japanese deaths reached a total of 8,122, some 27 times the number of Americans killed. The relatively small scale of U.S. casualties gave Admiral Chester W. Nimitz the ready forces he needed to push forward rapidly with plans for further action: first, one more atoll in the Marshalls, and then quickly on to the vital Mariana Islands, the linchpin of Japan's inner line of defense. Kwajalein would provide the air base from which the B-29 bombers would conduct their raids on the Marianas, and the Army 7th Infantry Division and the 4th Marine Division would play key roles in those future operations. 17

Tactically, there were a variety of innovations in the twin battles at Kwajalein, and these would continue to prove valuable in the future. There was the first use of Navy underwater demolition teams; the first use of DUKWs in combat; the first use of command ships with special communications equipment to control the battle; the first use of airplanes to control naval gunfire; and the first use of armored amphibian tractors (LVTAs). In addition, the two battles saw the debut of new units designed to facilitate crucial communications during combat. These were the Joint Assault Signal Companies. The official Marine history of the Marshalls campaign described their complex responsibilities:

The primary mission of this unit was to coordinate all supporting fires available to a Marine division during an amphibious operation. In order to carry out this function, the company was divided into Shore and Beach Party Communications Teams, Air Liaison Parties, and Shore Fire Control Parties.... During training, the various teams were attached to the regiments and battalions of the division. Thus each assault battalion could become familiar with its shore and beach party, air liaison, and fire control teams.

Another new element was the way rockets were used. This was a centuries-old technique of bombardment, but in the Marshalls the 4th Marine Division was the first American division to use rockets mounted on jeeps, pick-up trucks, and Navy gunboats in combat.

One other Marine resource was unique: the use of Navajo Indian "code talkers" in battle. They proved a perfect foil for the Japanese ability in previous battles to understand Marine voice-to-voice communications and Morse Code. To prevent this a group of Navajo Indians had been recruited and trained in special code words they could use in combat. When they were talking in the Navajo's exotic language, no Japanese would ever decipher the message! At Roi-Namur their walkie-talkie portable radios carried the urgent instructions back and forth between ship and shore, as well as between higher echelons and subordinate units, and did it so quickly that previous delays of up to 12 hours (intercepting, transmitting, and deciphering messages) were eliminated.

Finally, the two battles for Kwajalein Atoll proved incontestably the effectiveness of prolonged and massive preinvasion naval gunfire and aerial bombing. The U.S. planes and warships had so thoroughly scoured not only the target islands, but also the other Japanese air bases in the Marshalls, that not a single Japanese plane was able to attack the American surface forces in the campaign.

18



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70200

Resolute and fanatic Japanese defenders who were not previously killed by the Marines very often committed hara-kiri, as did the two soldiers in the foreground.

The Final Attack: Eniwetok

With Kwajalein Atoll now in American hands, a review of the next operation immediately took place. Admiral Nimitz flew there from Pearl Harbor and met with his top commanders. The 2d Marine Division, tempered in the fires of Tarawa, had earlier been alerted to prepare for a May attack on Eniwetok Atoll, 330 miles northwest of Kwajalein. The planners decided to use instead the 22d Marines (under the command of Colonel John T. Walker) and two battalions of the Army's 106th Infantry Regiment, since they had not been needed in the quick conquest of Roi-Namur and Kwajalein. In addition, the date for the attack was jumped forward to mid-February.

The softening-up process had begun at the end of January, and the carrier air strikes increased the following month. Japanese soldiers caught in this deluge were dismayed. One wrote in his diary, "The American attacks are becoming more furious. Planes come over day after day. Can we stand up under the strain?" Another noted that "some soldiers have gone out of their minds."

On D-Day, 17 February, the Navy's heavy guns joined in with a thunderous shelling. Then, using secret Japanese navigation charts captured at Kwajalein, the task force moved into the huge lagoon, 17 by 21 miles in size. Brigadier General Thomas E. Watson, the Marine in overall command of some 10,000 assault troops, had the responsibility for conducting a complex series of successive maneuvers. As at Kwajalein Atoll, the artillery was sent ashore on D-Day on two tiny islets adjacent to the first key target, Engebi Island. The Marines' 2d Separate [75mm] Pack Howitzer Battalion went to one islet, and the Army's 104th Field Artillery Battalion went to the other. There they set up to provide supporting fire for the forthcoming infantry assault.

Men of the 17th Infantry Regiment go in by amtrac to occupy one of the islets adjacent to Kwajalein itself in preparation for the main landing the next day.

Department of Defense Photo (Army) 187435



The landing on Engebi came the next morning, D plus 1, 18 February, as the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 22d Marines headed for the beach in their amtracs. At this time there occurred "one of those pathetic episodes incident to the horrible waste of war." As one Marine report described it:

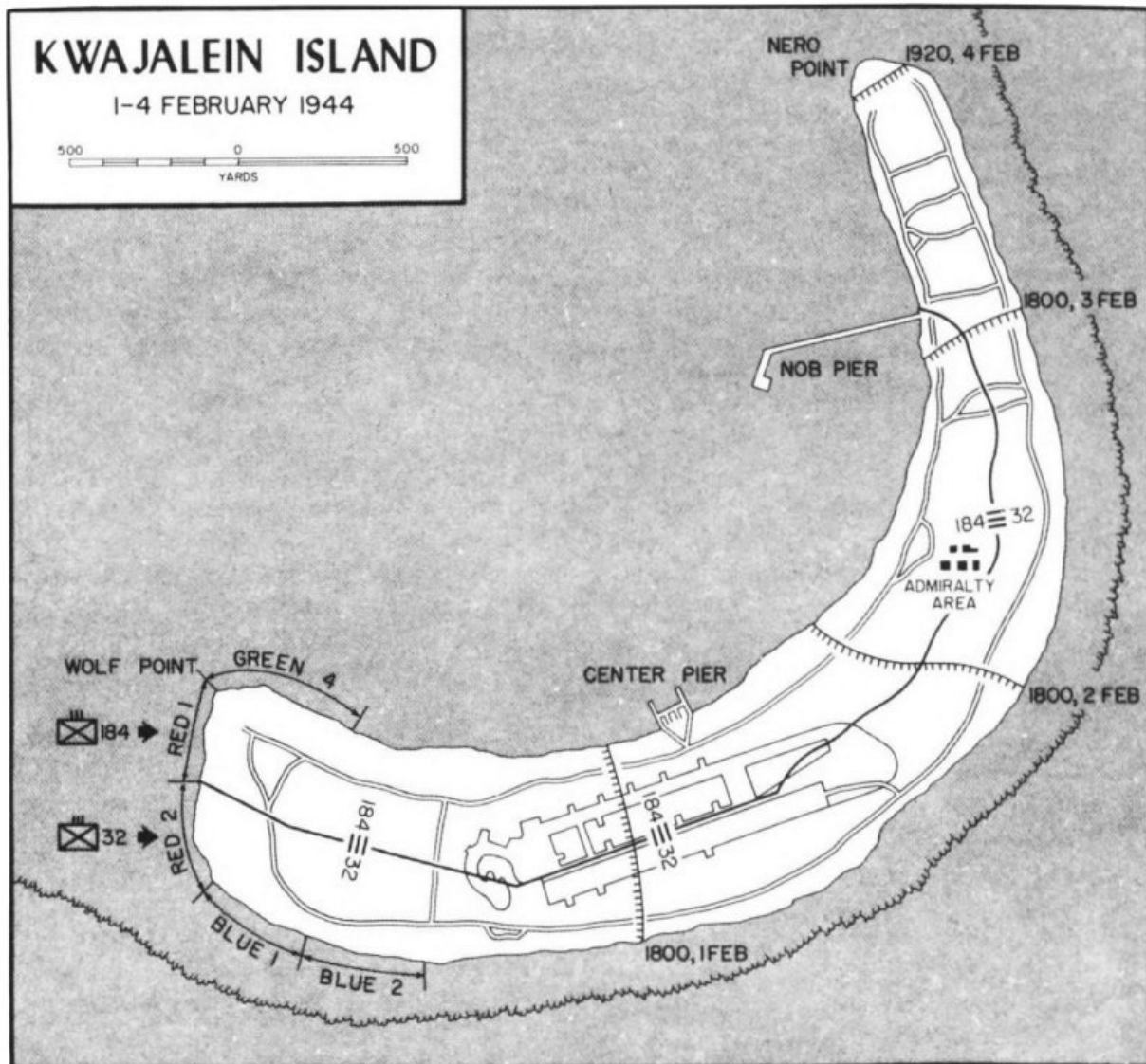
One tank was lost in the landings. It was boated in an LCM [Landing Craft, Medium] on which, unfortunately, only one engine was functioning. By some mischance the lever depressing the ramp was operated with the result that the craft began to flood rapidly while still 500 yards offshore. The tank crew had "buttoned up" and could gain but [a] small idea of the accident. Despite the frantic efforts of the LCM's crew to warn the occupants, the desperate urgency of the situation was not appreciated. The LCM gradually filled, listed, and finally spilled her load into the lagoon, turning completely over. At the last possible moment, one of the crew of the tank managed to escape as the tank actually hit bottom forty feet down.



Department of Defense Photo (Army) 324729

Troops of the Army's 7th Infantry Division make the tricky transfer from their landing craft to the amphibian tractors which will now carry them in across the reef fringing Kwajalein, for the final leg of their assault of the island.

Map of the attack on Kwajalein Island, with the landings at the west end, 184th Regiment on the left and 32d on the right. Demarkation lines show daily progress.



KWAJALEIN ISLAND

1-4 FEBRUARY 1944

Once the two battalions hit the beach, they found the core of the enemy defenses to be a palm grove in the middle of the island. This area was riddled with "spider holes," and the American shelling had added fallen trees

to the cover provided to the Japanese by the dense underbrush. Thus their positions were extremely difficult to locate. It was dangerous work for the individuals and small groups who had to take the initiative, but they did and the assault ground ahead against enemy defenses.



Department of Defense Photo (Army) 212590

The 37mm gun provided invaluable direct fire support throughout the campaigns of the Pacific War. Here, one of the guns takes on a stubborn Japanese position on Kwajalein, reinforcing the ability of riflemen to deal with the enemy.

Army soldiers lie warily on the ground as their flamethrower pours a sheet of fire on a Japanese pillbox. Since there were often multiple exits from the strongpoints, these soldiers are on the alert for any of the enemy who may try to escape.

Department of Defense Photo (Army) 212770



With these advances and some direct fire from self-propelled 105mm guns against concrete pillboxes, the whole of Engebi had been overrun by the Marines by the afternoon of D plus 1. On the following morning the American flag was raised to the sound of a Marine playing "To the Colors" on a captured Japanese bugle. An engineer company, however, spent a busy day using flamethrowers and demolitions to mop up by-passed enemy soldiers. More than 1,200 Japanese, Koreans, and Okinawans were on Engebi, and only 19 surrendered.

The main action now shifted quickly on D plus 2 to the attack on Eniwetok Island. This mission was assigned to the 1st and 3d Battalions of the Army's 106th Infantry Regiment. When they landed, their advance was slow. Only 204 tons of naval gunfire rounds (compared to the 1,179 tons which had plastered Engebi) hit Eniwetok. "Spider hole" defenses held up their advance. A steep bluff blocked the planned inland advance of their LVTAs, resulting in a traffic jam on the beaches. Less than an hour after the initial landing, General Watson felt obliged to radio Colonel Russell G. Ayers, commanding the 106th, "Push your attack."

Things were clearly not going as planned, for General Watson had hoped to secure Eniwetok quickly, and then have the battalions of the 106th immediately ready for an attack on the final objective, Parry Island. To speed the progress on Eniwetok, the reserve troops, the 3d Battalion of the 22d Marines, were ordered to land early in the afternoon. Moving forward, they were soon in heavy combat. Japanese soldiers who had been by-passed kept up their harassing fire; permission to bring the battalions half-track 75mm cannon ashore was flatly denied Colonel Ayers. The Marines had to take responsibility for clearing two-thirds of the southern zone on the

island. Tanks were ashore but “not available,” and coconut log emplacements provided the Japanese with strong defensive positions.

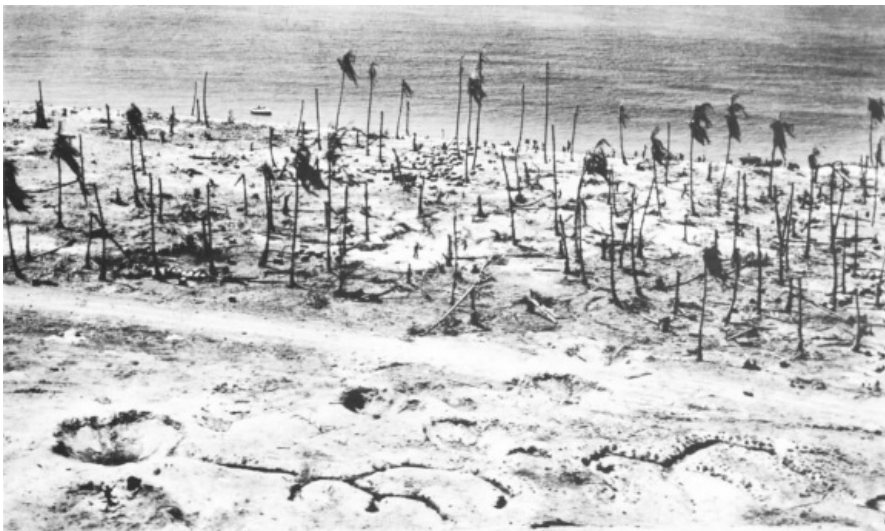


Department of Defense Photo (Army) 233727

Victorious Army soldiers relax by the ruins of a Japanese plane, smashed by the preinvasion bombardment of one of the islets adjacent to Kwajalein. One enterprising man still has the energy and the curiosity to climb on board for a look.

Nevertheless, the attack inched forward with the repeated use of flamethrowers and satchel charges. Halting for the night several hundred yards from the tip of the island, the Marines were greeted the following morning (D plus 3) by an astonishing sight. The Army battalion supposed to be on their right flank had, without notifying the Marines, pulled back 300 yards to the rear during the night and left a large gap in the American lines. The Marines then had to stem a small but furious Japanese night counterattack. When the soldiers returned in the morning, the American attack began again, and by mid-afternoon the Marines and the Army battalion had secured the southern part of the island.

22



Department of Defense Photo (Navy) 218615

A crater from U.S. Navy gunfire marks the left end of a series of Japanese trenches designed to provide mutually supporting enfilade fire against attackers. The shattered trunks of the palm trees show the effects of the Navy's bombardment.

Progress was still very slow in the northern sector, so Marine tanks and engineers moved in to assist the other Army battalion there. Finally, in the afternoon of D plus 4, 21 February, the northern area was also declared secure.

With the elapse of all this time (96 hours instead of the 24 hours expected), General Watson was forced to alter his plans for the final phase of the operation: the assault on Parry. He brought down from Engebi the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 22d Marines, pulled that regiment's other (3d) battalion off Eniwetok, and designated them for the landing on Parry.

Amidst all of this purposeful activity, the ludicrous side of war emerged in one episode. A U.S. float plane moored in the lagoon, and a boat was sent to take off the crew. Coming alongside, the boat cleverly managed to capsize the plane.

23



Department of Defense Photo (Navy) 217679

Waves of amtracs, each one crammed with Marines uncertain of what they will find when they hit the beach, churn in for the assault of Engebi on 18 February 1944. They are hoping to find an enemy dazed by the preparatory artillery fire.

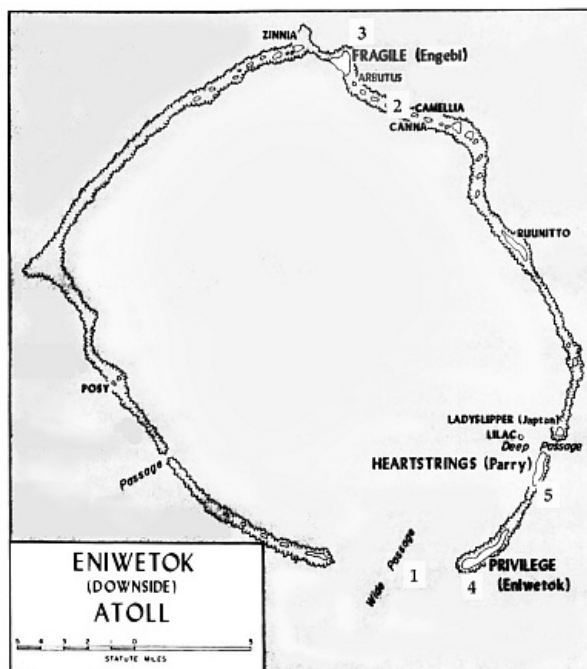
The exact timing of an amphibious assault is a crucial decision based on a delicate balancing of a host of factors, such as the condition of the troops and their equipment, provision of fire support, etc. General Watson decided to hold off the landing on Parry until D plus 5 (22 February). An official report explained the reasons for the delay:

- (a) To rehabilitate and reorganize [the battalion of the 22d Marines] which had been in action for three successive days.
- (b) To reembark, repair, and service medium tanks and rest their crews.
- (c) To make light tanks, which were still engaged on Eniwetok, available for the assault on Parry Island if required.
- (d) To provide one [battalion] of the 106th Infantry as support reserve in the event it was required.
- (e) To allow additional time for the air and surface bombardment of Parry.

Awaiting the amtracs of the 22d Marines, the Japanese commander on the island issued a very succinct order to his troops:

At the edge of the water scatter and divide the enemy infantry in their boats—attack and annihilate each one. Launch cleverly prepared powerful quick thrusts and vivid sudden attacks, and after having attacked and having destroyed the enemy landing forces, first of all, then scatter and break up their groups of boats and ships. In the event that the enemy succeeds in making a landing annihilate him by means of night attacks.

The enemy plans to “annihilate” failed. For two days before the Marine assault, the Navy had moved its big guns in as close as 850 yards offshore and pounded the defenders with 944 tons of shells. This was supplemented by artillery fire from the neighboring islands and rocket fire from the gunboats as the Marines went in. This rain of shells crept ahead of the tanks and infantrymen as they tenaciously slogged their way across the island.



ENIWETOK
(DOWNSIDE)
ATOLL

The capture of this atoll followed a carefully planned sequence, using a variety of geographic points: (1) entrance of U.S. ships into the lagoon through Wide Passage in the south and Deep Entrance in the southeast; (2) artillery set up on "Camellia" and "Canna" in the northeast; (3) landing on Engebi in the north; (4) landing on Eniwetok in the south; and, finally (5) landing on Parry in the southeast.

As always, there was the unexpected. When a shell from a U.S. warship hit directly on top of an underground bunker, all the Japanese inside poured out and ran—of all places—into the sea. Another shell hurled a coconut tree aloft and catapulted the body of an enemy sniper from its branches through the air to his death.

*Cpl Anthony P. Damato,
V Amphibious Corps,
was posthumously
awarded the Medal of
Honor for having saved
the lives of his fellow
Marines by throwing
himself on a Japanese
hand grenade.*

Department of Defense Photo
(USMC) 303037



For the assault troops, it was a continuing story of "spider holes," tunnels, underground strong points, and enemy resistance to the death. Another young Marine, Second Lieutenant Cord Meyer, Jr., in his first combat fought on both Eniwetok and Parry. The grueling experiences he had were typical of everyone who took part in these battles. He was landed with his machine gun platoon in the second wave of assault troops, three minutes after the first men to hit the beach on Eniwetok. Moving quickly inland, the platoon came to the edge of a blasted coconut grove. Then, as the lieutenant later wrote home:

We were hard hit there, and with terrible clarity the reality of the event came home to me. I had

crawled forward to ask a Marine where the Japs were—pretty excited really and enjoying it almost like a game. I crawled up beside him but he wouldn't answer. Then I saw the ever widening pool of dark blood by his head and knew that he was dying or dead. So it came over me what this war was, and after that it wasn't fun or exciting, but something that had to be done.

Fortune smiled on me that day, or the hand of a Divine Providence was over me, or I was just plain lucky. We killed many of them in fighting that lasted to nightfall. We cornered fifty or so Imperial [Japanese] Marines on the end of the island, where they attempted a banzai charge, but we cut them down like overripe wheat, and they lay like tired children with their faces in the sand.

That night was unbelievably terrible. There were many of them left and they all had one fanatical notion, and that was to take one of us with them. We dug in with orders to kill anything that moved. I kept watch in a foxhole with my sergeant, and we both stayed awake all night with a knife in one hand and a grenade in the other. They crept in among us, and every bush or rock took on sinister proportions. They got some of us, but in the morning they all lay about, some with their riddled bodies actually inside our foxholes. With daylight it was easy for us and we finished them off. Never have I been so glad to see the blessed sun.

With that battle over, the lieutenant and his men were hustled back on ship. For a day and a night they were “desperately trying” to get their gear into proper shape to go right back into combat. The following morning, they went in on the attack on Parry.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 72434

Poised in a shallow trench, riflemen of the 22d Marines await the order to attack an enemy coconut-log strongpoint on Eniwetok. While the most of the men are carrying M1 rifles, the flamethrower in their midst may well prove crucial.

They found the beach was swept with machine-gun and mortar fire, but they surged inland over ruined, shell-blasted soil rocked by the continual mortar bursts. Then their captain suddenly pointed, and above the brush line they saw 150 or so men bending forward, moving on a parallel course about 50 yards away. The Marines, however, waved, thinking that they must be fellow Marines. The men paid little attention to the Marines and seemed to be setting up machine guns. The realization struck home: they were Japanese.

F6F "Hellcat" fighters from carrier decks played an important part in the U.S. Navy's elimination of Japanese airpower on a number of islands in the Marshalls, as well as in the devastating air strikes supporting the assault landings.

Department of Defense Photo (Navy) 80-K-100



The lieutenant by now had just half a platoon of men and two machine guns. They set the guns up and started firing at the enemy. One gun jammed, so they buried the parts in the sand, because they thought that the Japanese would charge and they couldn't possibly stop it or prevent the capture of the gun. When they didn't attack, the Marines moved in against them. The two sides threw grenades back and forth for what seemed like hours. Many were killed on both sides. Finally the lieutenant and his men threw a whole volley of grenades and charged in and got to the beach. Down it they could see a whole group of Japanese, so all 12 of the Marines, standing, kneeling, or lying prone, fired their rifles and carbines. The enemy fell like ducks in a shooting gallery, but still they closed in on the little group of Marines who then had to back away.

27



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 149144

In one of the classic photographs of the Pacific War, dog-tired and battle-grime-coated Marines, thankful to be off the island and still alive, relax with a hot cup of coffee on board ship after victoriously ending the bruising fight for Eniwetok.

Now the lieutenant continued his story:

But we got some tanks and reinforcements some half hour later and moved through them in skirmish

line, which brings this tale to the most extraordinary incident of all. I was following some ten yards behind the tanks, when a Jap officer came out of a hole pointing his pistol at me; so instinctively I shot my carbine from the hip and hit him full in the face. I walked forward and looked into the trench and saw another with his arm cocked to throw a grenade. He didn't see me. I was only six feet away. I pulled the trigger but the weapon was jammed with sand. I had to do something, so I took my carbine by the barrel and hit him with all my might at the base of the neck. It broke his neck and my carbine.

Finally we killed them all. They never surrender. Again the night was a bad one, but with the dawn came complete victory, and those of us who still walked without a wound looked in amazement at our whole bodies. There was not much jubilation. We just sat and stared at the sand, and most of us thought of those who were gone—those whom I shall remember as always young, smiling, and graceful, and I shall try to forget how they looked at the end, beyond all recognition....

The lieutenant's letter went on to praise his men:

They obeyed with an unquestioning courage. One of my section leaders was hit by a bullet in his arm. It spun him clear around and set him down on his behind. A little dazed, he sat there for a second and then jumped up with the remark, "The little bastards will have to hit me with more than that." I had to order him back to the dressing station an hour later. He was weak with loss of blood but actually pleaded to stay.

My runner was knocked down right beside me with three bullet holes in him and blood all over his face. Stupidly I said, "Are you hit, boy?" He was crying a little, being just a kid of eighteen, and said, "I'm sorry, sir. I guess I'm just a sissy." I damn near cried myself at that.

And so it went all through the day, but by evening it was nearly all over. Early the next morning (D plus 6, 23 February) Parry was completely in American hands, and the conquest of Eniwetok Atoll's vital objectives was complete. Some 3,400 Japanese had been eliminated there at a cost of 348 American dead and 866 wounded.

Mopping up operations on many of the tiny islets in the Marshalls continued until 24 April. The troops encountered a few scattered Japanese soldiers—quickly dispatched—and an oddity. On one atoll they found a German who had married a native woman and had lived there since he had originally been shipwrecked in 1891. One of the obscure atolls was later to become famous as a U.S. nuclear testing ground, and as a name given to a sensational new woman's bathing suit: Bikini.

The 22d Marines had performed superbly. Recognition of their achievements came in the form of a Navy Unit Commendation, which praised its "sustained endurance, fortitude, and fighting spirit throughout this operation."

Thus the Marshall Islands operations were successfully concluded. With relatively light American casualties, a big step had been taken in the Central Pacific campaign. U.S. forces were now within 1,100 miles of their next objective, the Mariana Islands. The timetable for that leap was moved up by at least 20 weeks. The 2d Marine Division and the remainder of the Army's 27th Division were now free for that operation, since they were not needed in the Marshalls. The basic techniques for victorious amphibious assaults were now clearly proven. Another large contingent of American troops had received its baptism of fire, and the Americans had broken the outer ring of Japan's Central Pacific defenses with impressive skill and courage.

Brigadier General Thomas E. Watson

BGen Thomas E. Watson, USMC, commanded Tactical Group-1, built around the 22d Marines, as he led his Marines in the capture of Eniwetok. He later commanded the 2d Marine Division in the ensuing Saipan-Tinian operation.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC)



Commander of Tactical Group-1 built on the 22d Marines, he led the conquest of Eniwetok. For this he was awarded a Distinguished Service Medal. Promoted to major general, he received a second DSM for his service while commanding the 2d Marine Division at Saipan and Tinian. He retired in 1950.

With a birth date of 1892, and an enlistment date of 1912, he fully qualified as a member of “the Old Corps.” After being commissioned in 1916, he served in a variety of Marine assignments in the Caribbean, China, and the United States.

Given the nickname “Terrible Tommy,” Watson’s proverbial impatience was later characterized by General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., as follows: “He would not tolerate for one minute stupidity, laziness, professional incompetence, or failure in leadership.... His temper in correcting these failings could be fiery and monumental.” And so, both Marine and Army officers found out at Eniwetok and later Saipan!

The Deadly Spider Holes

Later accounts explained what the Marines ran into at Engebi—and what they did to keep their advance moving forward.

Those defenses were of the “spider web” type to which there were many entrances. They were constructed by knocking out the heads of empty gasoline drums and making an impromptu pipeline of them, sunk into the ground and covered with earth and palm fronds. The tunnels thus constructed branched off in several directions from a central pit and the whole emplacement was usually concealed with great skill and ingenuity. If the main position was spotted and attacked the riflemen within could crawl off fifty feet or so down one of the corridors and emerge at an entirely different and unexpected spot from which they could get off a shot and dive down to concealment before it was possible to determine whence the fire proceeded. Every foot of ground had to be gone over with the greatest precaution and alertness before these honeycombs of death could be silenced by the literal process of elimination.

The attacking Marines soon hit upon a method of destroying completely these underground defenses. When the bunker at the center of the web had been located, a member of the assault team would hurl a smoke grenade inside. Although this type of missile did no harm to the Japanese within, it released a cloud of vapor which rolled through the tunnels and escaped around the loosefitting covers of the foxholes.

Once the outline of the web was known, the bunker and all its satellite positions could be shattered with demolitions.

The Secretary of the Navy
Washington

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending the
**Twenty-Second Marines, Reinforced, Tactical Group One,
Fifth Amphibious Corps**

consisting of

Twenty-second Marines; Second Separate Pack Howitzer Company; Second Separate Tank Company; Second Separate Engineer Company; Second Separate Medical Company; Second Separate Motor Transport Company; Fifth Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company; Company D, Fourth Tank Battalion, Fourth Marine Division; 104th Field Artillery Battalion, U.S. Army; Company C, 766th Tank Battalion, U.S. Army; Company A, 708th Amphibian Tank Battalion, U.S. Army; Company D, 708th Provisional Amphibian Tractor Battalion, U.S. Army; and the Provisional DUKW Battery, Seventh Infantry Division, U.S. Army.

for service as follows:

“For outstanding heroism in action against enemy Japanese forces during the assault and capture of Eniwetok Atoll, Marshall Islands, from February 17 to 22, 1944. As a unit of a Task Force, assembled only two days prior to departure for Eniwetok Atoll, the Twenty-second Marines, Reinforced, landed in whole or in part on Engebi, Eniwetok and Parry Islands in rapid succession and launched aggressive attacks in the face of heavy machine-gun and mortar fire from well camouflaged enemy dugouts and foxholes. With simultaneous landings and reconnaissance missions on numerous other small islands, they overcame all resistance within six days, destroying a known 2,665 of the Japanese and capturing 66 prisoners. By their courage and determination, despite the difficulties and hardships involved in repeated reembarkations and landing from day to day, these gallant officers and men made available to our forces in the Pacific Area an advanced base with large anchorage facilities and an established airfield, thereby contributing materially to the successful conduct of the war. Their sustained endurance, fortitude and fighting spirit throughout this operation reflect the highest credit on the Twenty-second Marines, Reinforced, and on the United States Naval Service.”

All personnel attached to and serving with any of the above units during the period February 17 to 22, 1944, are authorized to wear the Navy Unit Commendation Ribbon.

Sources

All of the basic Marine histories for World War II contain detailed accounts of the Marshalls operation. This monograph represents a summary, supplemented by individual experiences drawn from the Personal Papers and Oral Histories Collections in the Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

Among the most useful were: 1stLt John C. Chapin, USMCR, *The 4th Marine Division in World War II* (Washington: Historical Division, HQMC, 1945); LtCol Robert D. Heinl, Jr., USMC, and LtCol John A. Crown, USMC, *The Marshalls: Increasing the Tempo* (Washington: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, HQMC, 1954); Historical Division, HQMC. "The Marshall Islands Operations." Unpublished draft, n.d. World War II—Marshall Islands Records File. Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, D.C.; LtCol S. L. A. Marshall, AUS, *Island Victory* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1944); Carl W. Proehl, ed., *The Fourth Marine Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1946); Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Bernard C. Nalty, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Central Pacific Drive—History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, vol 3 (Washington: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, HQMC, 1966).

In the Personal Papers Collection Unit, Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, D.C., the following files have been useful: First Lieutenant John C. Chapin (PC 671); Master Sergeant Roger M. Emmons (PC 304); Private First Class Robert F. Graf (PC 1946); Princeton University Collection (PC 2216).

Transcripts of interviews in Oral History Collection, Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, D.C.: BGen William W. Buchanan; BGen Melvin L. Krulewitch; Col William P. McCahill; MajGen William W. Rogers; LtGen James L. Underhill.

Other Titles

The following pamphlets in the Marines in World War II Commemorative Series are now in print: *Opening Moves: Marines Gear Up For War*; *Infamous Day: Marines at Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941*; *First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal*; *Outpost in the North Atlantic: Marines in the Defense of Iceland*; *A Magnificent Fight: Marines in the Battle for Wake Island*; *Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa*; *Up the Slot: Marines in the Central Solomons*; *Time of the Aces: Marine Pilots in the Solomons, 1942-1944*.

About the Author



Captain John C. Chapin earned a bachelor of arts degree with honors in history from Yale University in 1942 and was commissioned later that year. He served as a rifle-platoon leader in the 24th Marines, 4th Marine Division, and was wounded in action during assault landings on Roi-Namur and Saipan.

Transferred to duty at the Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, he wrote the first official histories of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions. Moving to Reserve status at the end of World War II, he earned a master's degree in history at George Washington University with a thesis on "The Marine Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1922."

Now a captain in retired status, he has been a volunteer at the Marine Corps Historical Center for 10 years. During that time, he wrote *History of Marine Fighter-Attack (VMFA) Squadron 115*. With support from the Historical Center and the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, he then spent some years researching and interviewing for the writing of a new book. *Uncommon Men—The Sergeants Major of the Marine Corps*. This was published in 1992 by the White Mane Publishing Company.



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Page [13](#) (Sidebar “[Naval Support](#)”, originally on page [7](#)): “BB 13” is a misprint for “BB 43”.

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