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# Through Crimson Tides: Tarawa's Effect on Military Tactics and Public Perception of War

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THROUGH CRIMSON TIDES: TARAUA'S EFFECT ON MILITARY TACTICS AND PUBLIC  
PERCEPTION OF WAR

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Joshua J. Hudak  
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## Abstract

This study is on the battle of Tarawa, and how the battle altered military doctrine in amphibious warfare tactics and public perception of war. Tarawa was the first battle of its kind being the first amphibious assault against a fortified objective utilizing joint land, sea, and aerial attacks. It was also the first battle that was filmed from its beginning to its end and shown uncensored to the American public. This study will examine the historiography of the Battle for Tarawa, an overview of the fighting, and the aftermath of the battle. It will also examine the public's reaction to the uncensored stories and images of American dead and try to attempt to understand why they were shocked at what they saw. It will explore the debate of producing and showing the film to the public and examine the lessons learned that altered military doctrine on amphibious war for future operations. The importance of this study is in understanding how military operations evolve through testing them in combat with the understanding that servicemen must often be sacrificed to rewrite military doctrine. The other area of importance is in understanding how the media coverage of wars can affect the public perception of them, and gain insight to the social implications of war.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The Battle of Tarawa was of great significance but gets overshadowed by those with bigger names. Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and Normandy are all storied fights from the epic saga of World War II. Tarawa was one as well, but it was overshadowed by the larger operations in better-known places. This particular battle was full of firsts in warfare and major contributions to World War II as a whole. It was the testing ground for Marine Corps doctrine on amphibious warfare and its new photographic service branch<sup>1</sup>. The results of Tarawa changed public perception of warfare and altered military tactics for the rest of the war. Without a Tarawa, American military planners and the American public would not have learned the valuable lessons they needed to achieve victory in such a massive conflict. This battle revealed to the United States not only flaws in tactics but also the disconnect between its people and the realities of war.

The Battle of Tarawa became the first battle filmed and shown uncensored to an American public that had become relatively unfamiliar with the harsh realities of war. In the interwar period, politicians and much of the public wanted to adhere to George Washington's policy of staying out of Europe's affairs. This goal would prove to be impossible with technology and growing economic forces bringing people together and making conflict inevitable. The atmosphere of isolation fostered many

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Jones, *War Shots* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2011), 54.

problems in terms of warfare and global conflict. It created unfamiliarity with war's destructive nature and false impressions as to what had to be sacrificed to achieve victory. America had not witnessed a major war on its soil since the Civil War of 1861-1865. After the Civil War the United States entered a period of growth expanding across the western territories and into new lands outside the mainland. During this time America intervened in several affairs including a war against Spain, and fighting in the Philippines, Haiti, Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico, and China. World War I soon followed with President Woodrow Wilson opting to remain neutral until numerous factors persuaded him to advocate entry into the war. As destructive as World War I was, America was only involved for about a year and suffered a far lower casualty rate than the nations that were more deeply involved. It also occurred overseas preventing the American people from witnessing the destruction that occurred across Europe. There were a few factors from these campaigns that gave Americans a false perception of war. One was they occurred in areas outside the United States so people were not personally exposed the brutality involved in war. Another was that these were short campaigns that ended in success. This may have provided people with the notion that wars fought in the modern age would no longer be lengthy conflicts. The practice of "yellow journalism" was another factor in these engagements. It told exaggerated stories to people for years beginning during the Spanish American War.

Prior to Pearl Harbor waking the United States from its slumber, many Americans enjoyed the prosperity of the economic boom during the 1920s and

fought to rebound during the Great Depression. They fought over wages and racial superiority instead of paying attention to the increasing tensions in Europe and the Pacific. The “day of infamy” sent America hurtling into a war that the people were not mentally prepared for. World War II also became one of the most documented wars in world history. However, most of the news was heavily censored prior to the Tarawa invasion. In the opening acts of American involvement the United States had lost 6,200 killed in Operation Torch and the Tunisian Campaign.<sup>2</sup> The initial invasion of Italy was equally as costly with the invasion of Sicily resulting 7,500 casualties.<sup>3</sup> Yet there were no headlines in the papers criticizing American losses, and there was no mass hysteria where people threw their hands up in disgust. The American public was not adequately being informed about the fighting overseas leaving the country with little knowledge of the sacrifice happening abroad. Historian Derrick Wright discusses the public perspective saying, “The folks back home had come to look upon the war as something that happened to other people; sons, husbands, and brothers went away to war, and some of them did not return, but for many people life remained to all intents and purposes much as it had been before Pearl Harbor.”<sup>4</sup> While Wright may have exaggerated, he does present an interesting view of the United States public. The American people had not seen the modern war that destroyed Europe in the First World War, nor had they experienced the hardships the British had during the bombing of Britain. Lack of these experiences left them

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<sup>2</sup> Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 536.

<sup>3</sup> SICILY DRIVE COST 7,500 CASUALTIES. (1943, Sep 03). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/106474766?accountid=6167>

<sup>4</sup> Derrick Wright, *A Hell of a Way to Die* (London: Windrow & Greene, 1996), 131.

psychologically unprepared for the true destructive nature of modern warfare. The lack of experience combined with censorship of news from the frontlines made Tarawa a significant benchmark for American perception of war as the truth unfolded.

When the news broke in that in 76 hours 1,000 Marines had been killed, with ghastly images revealing the dead, the reaction was shock and horror. Newspaper correspondent Robert Sherrod, who witnessed the fighting, forewarned of this reaction, questioning not whether America had the military or economic ability to wage war but, “whether we had the heart to fight a war.”<sup>5</sup> In such a simple statement, Sherrod expressed his concern that some military planners shared: the fear that the American people would be apprehensive of a long and costly war. This was a concern because under a democratic government the military is vulnerable to the will of the people. Under this system of government the military cannot function to its’ full effect without the public’s consent. This fact has been well documented throughout history and was one of the great fears of the United States political and military leaders including an anonymous Army general. When this general was asked in 1942 about his opinion regarding Americans and soldiers, his response was, “I’m afraid the Americans of this generation are not the same kind of Americans who fought the last war.”<sup>6</sup> It also became well known to the Japanese, who adopted a war of attrition and hoped to force the American government to the negotiation

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle* (New York: Stratford Press Inc., 1954), 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 32.



table by defeating the minds of the American public. Sherrod commented on this attitude, having experienced it personally, in the following statement:

They don't have a chance and they know it, unless we get fainthearted and agree to some kind of peace with them. But, in an effort to make us grow sick of our losses, they will hang on under their fortifications, like so many bedbugs. They don't care how many men they lose—human life being a minor consideration to them. The Japs' only chance is our getting soft, as they predicated their whole war on us being too luxury loving to fight.<sup>7</sup>

After Tarawa those fears of American faintheartedness nearly came true. When the story broke of the deaths of nearly 1,000 Marines and the pictures were released revealing the gory details, people were outraged. As will later be shown American citizens questioned the intelligence, the worth of the operation, the leaders, and cost in human life. Tarawa introduced the public to the devastation of modern warfare. Despite the emotions aroused by the pictures and stories, Tarawa had a tremendous impact on the American perception of war. It revealed the truth to people and made them aware of the long, costly road that lay ahead.

The exposure of the United States citizens to the gore on the beaches of Betio (the island of the Tarawa Atoll where most of the fighting occurred) was a valuable lesson learned. It was valuable in a sense that there were many larger and bloodier fights on the horizon. Aside from the psychological aspect of Tarawa, there were

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<sup>7</sup> Sherrod, 99.

significant tactical lessons learned as well. If these lessons had not been learned at Tarawa, there would have been disastrous consequences elsewhere in the Pacific. Before World War II many military planners had concluded that amphibious warfare was almost impossible and wrote it off after the failure of Great Britain at Gallipoli in World War I. The Gallipoli Operation, proposed by Winston Churchill, was a failed attempt to open a second front against the Central Powers and a sea route to Russia. Lacking intelligence or knowledge of the logistical complications of an amphibious attack, the operation was a disaster from the start. British and French forces had no air support, and their navy was defeated in the initial bombardment, leaving the amphibious invasion with no support against a heavily-defended beachhead. The result was an embarrassing defeat with 250,000 casualties. Of those 46,000 were killed.<sup>8</sup> This disaster made some Naval and Army officers skeptical that such operations were worth the cost in lives. In a series of writings on “Joint Army and Navy Operations” in the Naval Institute *Proceedings* in 1926, Navy Captain W.S. Pye stated:

The chances for success of an invasion by forces transported overseas are becoming smaller and smaller. The greater facility of movement of forces on shore by railroad and motors; the rapidity of communication; the increase in power of mobile artillery; the increased efficiency of the submarine and aircraft, and the increase in size and effectiveness of

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<sup>8</sup> “Battle of Gallipoli,” *History*, accessed 27 November 2013, <http://www.history.com/topics/battle-of-gallipoli>.

regular armies and navies, have made invasion by sea almost an impossibility...<sup>9</sup>

While these new innovations in weapons could provide the needed technology to make amphibious operations possible, they also made some leaders fearful of the cost in human life these types of operations would require. This attitude made Tarawa all the more significant because while many viewed such operations as risky, military planners knew that if the United States entered a war with Japan, amphibious operations were unavoidable. This reality was acknowledged in the Navy's writing of War Plan ORANGE in 1919, which recognized that forward operating bases would have to be captured from the Japanese to protect and supply the Navy's long-range fleet.<sup>10</sup> The United States at the time was also downsizing its military following World War I. Though proportionally the Marine Corps shrank least, it was a tiny service with only 1,400 officers and 18,000 enlisted men recorded in 1939.<sup>11</sup> War Plan ORANGE gave the Marine Corps the opportunity to adopt the mission of base defense and seizure as its primary objective. Marine leaders studied and evaluated the mistakes made at Gallipoli to establish their own doctrine of amphibious invasions and convinced themselves that they could carry out these operations successfully. The *Tentative Manual for Landing*

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<sup>9</sup> Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 256. In this same section others who were against amphibious operations included B.H. Liddell Hart and Captain W.D. Puleston. Most military planners who disregarded these operations were British, probably due to their experience in Gallipoli.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Millett, *Semper Fidelis* (New York, The Free Press, 1980), 320.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron O'Connell, *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 29.

*Operations* was drafted in 1931, and produced a body of operating principles to be taught to Marine officers. The Tarawa Atoll became the testing site for the Marine Corps doctrine on amphibious warfare. The lessons learned there would prove to be the key to unlocking the Pacific and victory over Japan.

This study will look at the historiography of Tarawa to explore how others have studied this battle. It will also provide an overview of the battle from its planning stages to its end result, giving the reader a synopsis of the encounter and highlighting the mistakes made that would be fixed for the success of future operations. This section will be followed by an examination of how the lessons learned at Tarawa were applied in future landings in the Pacific and will explain why this battle was necessary in the success in the war against Japan. Finally, this analysis will examine the importance the filming had on altering public perception of war and why this perception was so important in American society.

### **Historiography**

There have only been a few studies conducted on Tarawa. The Betio landings and fighting there were overshadowed by later battles and even today have been given little attention. The studies conducted on this topic are narrative in their approach and most of the focus is on the fighting and the tactical lessons learned. The most encompassing narratives are by Joseph Alexander. Alexander is a former Marine, having served 29 years as an officer in the Marine Corps, including service in Vietnam. He also worked for the Marine Corps as an official historian who helped design the Marine Corps Museum. These experiences made him familiar with

Marine Corps doctrine of amphibious warfare. He has written two extensive accounts about the Battle of Tarawa. *Utmost Savagery: The Three Days at Tarawa* explores the idea of mounting an amphibious assault against a fortified objective. He focuses on the critical tactical and strategic lessons that were learned, using his personal knowledge, interviews, and after-action reports. Alexander argued Tarawa's importance was in giving the American military confidence that a seaborne assault against a strongly fortified position was possible. He furthers his argument claiming, "American confidence in our capability to launch any future assault from the sea against other fortified coastlines—Normandy, Iwo Jima, as examples—would have been crippled."<sup>12</sup> Alexander also wrote a short, but detailed, account of Tarawa called *Across the Reef: With the Marines at Tarawa*. In *Across the Reef*, Alexander gave an overview of the planning and command structure as well as a summary of the fighting. Overall, both of Alexander's writings contribute to Tarawa's legacy by exploring the tactical side of it.

Very useful and revealing accounts of the Betio fighting came from Robert Sherrod, who was a combat correspondent, and Norman Hatch, who was the Combat Cameraman who filmed the fighting. Sherrod's book, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle*, was his story of what he witnessed and his attitude towards the American public at that time. This book contains a wealth of information, as he was one of the few who had access to the battlefield commanders, sailors, and infantrymen.

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Alexander, *Utmost Savagery: The Three Days at Tarawa* (Anapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), XVII.

Sherrod fills his story with personal experiences and interviews with the Marines and Navy personnel alike. He is also unique in that he was a civilian and interacted with the American public. Throughout the book, he mentioned his disdain for Americans' perception of the war and the faulty information they were receiving.

Another primary account comes from Norman Hatch. Hatch was credited for filming the battle from start to finish. His work was the first filming of a battle between the Marines and an enemy combatant. Hatch worked with author Charles Jones to explore the evolution of the Combat Cameramen in the Marine Corps. Hatch and Jones work together to add the story of the filming to Tarawa's legacy. Hatch revealed his experience of wading ashore into machine gun fire, providing the reader with the emotions of the fearful walk into the storm. He discussed the hardships of having to film his fellow Marines getting shot or blown up but also reveals the importance of it. Hatch's most important contribution was his discussion of the political debate over the film and the public opinion of the war; consequently it will be one of the central points of discussion in this study.

Other historical studies come from John Wukovits and Derrick Wright. In *One Square Mile of Hell*, John Wukovits told the story of Tarawa from an interesting perspective. He also used interviews in the battle. He focused on two childhood friends and wrote the book following these two from their childhood to their deaths at Tarawa. It was an interesting look that described the emotional impact of warfare on the common fighting man. Derrick Wright's *Hell of a Way to Die* focuses on the tactical adjustments that were made following Tarawa. He centers his argument on

the premise that Tarawa was the first true offensive of the Pacific War that relied on an amphibious assault against a defended shore, and the victory that ensued there was a key to victory over the Japanese in the Pacific.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this study will add to all of these studies by focusing on America's martial naiveté and false perceptions of war. It will then explore the extent to which American society was psychologically unfit to wage a war of this scale. This significant problem will be illustrated by the United States' reaction to the stories, pictures and film that were released following the battle. An examination of the film will show the importance it had in changing public perception of war and preparing civilians for the losses to come. Finally, this study will explore the importance of Tarawa on a tactical level. It will investigate the lessons learned to explain how important this battle was for future operations and success in the Pacific.

### **Martial Naiveté**

America had not experienced the centuries of war that Europe and Asia had experienced throughout history. It had fought the British Empire twice with one ending in victory and the other ending in a draw. America had also fought a war against Mexico that ended in victory granting the United States more territory. America at the time of these conflicts was a sparsely populated country, which meant that it had not experienced the devastation of other great wars. The Civil War

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<sup>13</sup> Wright does mention that Guadalcanal was intended to be the first offensive and did start off as such. He goes on to discuss that the landings were relatively unopposed and because the Marines became cut off and surrounded it turned into a defensive struggle (Wright, p 32. )

showed Americans how destructive war really was. It was the first one fought in the modern era and in a society whose population had grown along with cities. It was the largest loss of life and most destructive war that America had ever seen and still ranks as the bloodiest in its history. Following the Civil War the United States entered its age of imperialism. Being influenced by Social Darwinism and Manifest Destiny, American policy was to move west and conquer the indigenous people that were deemed inferior. American expansion continued west leading to the Indian Wars where the Native Americans were nearly eliminated. Soon attention shifted to territorial acquisitions beyond the boundaries of the United States leading to wars with Spain and fighting in the Philippines. All of these wars ended in decisive American victories giving people the false impressions that wars could be won quickly and easily. World War I would amplify these feelings as it took place on a global scale among the world's powers and America's entrance helped the allies defeat the Central Powers.

When World War I erupted across Europe and parts of Asia, the United States opted to stay out of it as long as possible. It took repeated torpedo attacks against merchant ships, the sinking of a cruise liner, and a discovery of a secret German telegram proposing that Mexico attack the United States before Americans decided to enter the war. As destructive as this war was, it took place on the other side of the world and the American military was there a little more than a year. When it was over, the United States emerged as the lone economic power. World War I devastated European nations, leaving them with generations decimated, heavy



debts, and toppled governments. People around the world realized that the modern age had made wars much more devastating than wars of old. This led to many believing that World War I would be the last major conflict the world would see. America did not experience the personal destruction that Europe had endured. It had lost life but not on the scale the European nations had leaving some to question whether they should get involved in European alliances.

By the 1920s the American focus turned towards profits and improving the standard of living. During the economic growth of the 1920s many Americans enjoyed a higher standard of living than ever before. People enjoyed the newest products and comforts of living. Even with the stock market collapse and the coming of the Great Depression, people still desired to regain their high standards of living. When Hitler began mobilizing his army and storming across Western Europe, America maintained its stance that it would stay out of alliances and European affairs. Despite having participated in numerous military victories and economic prosperity many Americans began to favor isolationism. The people experienced periods of growth and depression within the span of a few years. The Great Depression left the majority of the people suffering and not interested in Europe's or Asia's problems. Many wanted to fix the problems at home and feared getting involved overseas would result in a careless sacrifice. Robert Sherrod explained that it was a generational attitude that had evolved over the course of American history. He clarified this by saying, "But I didn't know if we had the heart to win a war. Our men who had to do the fighting didn't want to fight." He went on to explain, "Their

generation had been told in its first ten years, teens, and voting age that it was not necessary to fight.”<sup>14</sup> This attitude applied to not only military personnel but also the common United States citizen and became one of the fears for American leadership.

The American public’s reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor was outrage. Americans demanded action and called for war. What is important to remember is the American perception of war at this time was based on a quick and successful campaign in World War I, a quick and dramatic victory in a war with Spain, and a series of incursions in Central America and the Caribbean called the Banana Wars. These successes created an attitude of martial naiveté, which was the American public’s false perception of war being something other than what it truly was. In reality, World War II was a different kind of war that would cost countless lives before the lines of victory were crossed. It was a war that the American people were not psychologically ready for. This became clear following events on the home front. Although many companies had agreed to a no strike pledge, they continued to occur. In 1943 the U.S. Department of Commerce reported a loss of 13,500,000 man-days of production lost to strikes.<sup>15</sup> There were also race riots that erupted throughout the cities as competition for jobs increased. Riots had erupted in Los Angeles, Mobile, Alabama, and Beaumont, Texas. The most famous occurred in Detroit in

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<sup>14</sup> Sherrod, 32.

<sup>15</sup> United States. Bureau of the Census, (1975). *Historical statistics of the United States, colonial times to 1970*. Bicentennial ed. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

1943. This riot left 34 dead and required 6,000 federal troops to bring order.<sup>16</sup> This riot caused the entire city to shut down for weeks until peace could be restored.

This was complicated further by the news coverage of the war. Most of the articles were heavily censored and did not reveal much information about the fighting abroad. The truth was the United States suffered defeats at Wake Island, the Philippines, and Guam, as well as embarrassing setbacks in North Africa. The people needed to see the war for what it was to understand the truth that the servicemen faced. Tarawa would alter that perception because it came at a time when President Roosevelt loosened his restriction on the news coming home from the frontlines. The relaxing of the censorship gave correspondents the opportunity to ride with the Marines into combat and report their stories with little interference from the government.

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<sup>16</sup> "Detroit Race Riots," *PBS*. Accessed 7 March 2014.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eleanor-riots/>

## **Chapter 2: The Battle**

Prior to America's entrance into the war the main point of reference for amphibious landings was the Gallipoli Operation in 1915. In reviewing the failed Gallipoli operation and the likely possibility of a war with Japan, some planners viewed amphibious warfare as a tactical nightmare.<sup>17</sup> The reasoning behind their thinking was a combination of the development of advanced weaponry during the Industrial Age coupled with the experiences of mass charges against these weapons during World War I. United States Navy Captain Asa Walker discussed this reasoning in the following passage:

All the chances are against success and attempt is but courting disaster. Modern armaments serve to accentuate this fact, since the range of vast bodies of men and horses, with the artillery and stores, even organization presents great difficulties. If, then, we complicate these difficulties by subjecting the troops to the fire of a determined enemy, begun at long range and continued during the confusion attendant on disembarking, what but pre-eminent disaster can be the result.<sup>18</sup>

Though this passage was written prior to experiences in World War I it revealed, even before amphibious assaults had been attempted, some military planners were skeptical of them. They feared the new long-range weaponry and the complications of moving men and supplies from the open water to an open

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<sup>17</sup> Millett, 320.

<sup>18</sup> Weigley, 256.

beachhead in the face of strongly fortified enemy positions. Despite these concerns it was evident that these types of operations were a necessity. The military planners who believed these operations were possible were those within the Marine Corps. Marine leaders studied the failures of Gallipoli and determined the flaws were “correctable by proper planning and appropriate doctrine on the use of naval gunfire and the deployment of landing forces.<sup>19</sup> The Marines were also encouraged after studying a successful German landing made in the Gulf of Riga in 1917.<sup>20</sup> This came at an important time for the Marine Corps, as there were four attempts between 1829 and 1932 to either merge the Marines with the Army or abolish them.<sup>21</sup> With the adoption of amphibious operations as their primary mission, the Marines gave the military a reason to keep them as a separate branch.

The task of planning such operations was handed to the Navy and Marine Corps under War Plan ORANGE. This plan viewed Japan’s growing presence in the Pacific as a threat to United States’ interest abroad. War Plan ORANGE studied a possible war with Japan and the strategy needed to defend American bases in the Pacific region. ORANGE studied the dangers the United States faced in a war with Japan. It acknowledged that American bases in Guam and the Philippines were at risk due to their location. Planners predicted that in a war with Japan American bases in the Pacific would have to defend against a numerically superior Japan. An intelligence report in 1928 projected that the Japanese could transport about

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<sup>19</sup> Millett, 321.

<sup>20</sup> “Riga Expedition Reaches Mainland,” *New York Times*. 23 October 1917. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/99854392?accountid=6167>.

<sup>21</sup> O’Connell, 13.

300,000 men to the Philippines within 30 days; the United States only had an estimated 11,000 troops stationed there.<sup>22</sup> It was evident that should a war with Japan begin, the United States could expect an initial loss of Pacific bases. It was also acknowledged that the distance from Guam and the Philippines would make it extremely difficult for the Navy to sail directly to relieve those garrisons. The Navy would have to take individual islands establishing bases along the way. Under this scheme it was evident to officers that it was impossible to avoid amphibious operations against the Japanese because of the great distance between the U.S. and the Japanese mainland. Without advanced bases to supply and protect the U.S. Naval fleet, the war would be a logistical nightmare. With this problem in mind, the Chief of Naval Operations Robert Coontz wanted to expand the Marines' duties beyond their traditional Naval duties. This new approach led to the creation of the Marine Expeditionary Force that would focus on base seizure and defense.<sup>23</sup> Of course, base seizure meant that the Marines would have to study the possibility of amphibious assaults in the face of many skeptics. The idea that the Marines were the best suited for this mission originated in 1906 under Major Dion Williams, who planted the seed for other Marines to explore the possibility of success in these operations.<sup>24</sup>

The more the planners studied the complications of a war with Japan, the more they came to realize their biggest challenges were distance, resupply, and logistics. While Commandant John Lejeune was reorganizing the Marine Corps, he

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<sup>22</sup> Weigley, 246.

<sup>23</sup> Millett, 320.

<sup>24</sup> Weigley, 255.

assigned his adjutant Earl H. Ellis to study amphibious operations. Ellis listed his results in 1921 in Operational Plan 712. In his plan he argued that such operations were possible but stressed that success “depended on rapid ship-to-shore movement of waves of assault craft covered by overwhelming naval gunfire and aerial attacks.”<sup>25</sup> OP Plan 712 set the pattern that American amphibious doctrine would be based on. All of the principles were outlined in the *Tentative Manual of Landing Operation* drafted from 1931 to 1934. This document listed six main principles for a successful beach landing against fortified defenses. They are as follows:

1. Command Relations	“There must be a unified command of landing operations and a precise allocation of subordinate responsibilities and an adequate communications network binding sea, land, and air forces together.”
2. Naval gunfire support	“The assault force would be so vulnerable as it reached the beach, and so likely to be badly outnumbered that heavy support of naval guns would be required to suppress the defenders as much as possible. “
3. Aerial Support	“Aerial gunfire and bombing support as especially necessary at the critical moment when the troops would touch ashore, when naval gunfire would have to cease and the ground troops’ artillery would not yet be in action.”
4. Ship-to-shore movement	“This movement must be a tactical formation to lead directly into the assault; it is not a mere ferrying operation.”
5. Securing the beachhead	Must have trained beach parties to

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<sup>25</sup> Millett, 325-326.

	secure an area large enough to support and organize a constant flow of troops and supplies as well as coordinate air and naval support.
6. Logistics	Everything must be accessible at the time of the landing and in the order it would be needed. It became known as "combat loading" <sup>26</sup>

As the Marines evolved, so too did strategy in the Pacific. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had to decide on the best course of action for the Pacific Campaign. A debate emerged between General MacArthur and Admirals Chester Nimitz and Ernest King during a Pacific Military Conference in Washington during 1943.<sup>27</sup> MacArthur favored a south-to-north approach toward Japan that would require all forces to liberate the Philippines and mount a push to Japan. This would be an Army-centered campaign using a northern approach from Australia to the Philippines. King and Nimitz favored the island-hopping strategy that had been written in War Plan ORANGE.<sup>28</sup> This approach had the Navy and Marines making a westward thrust through the Central Pacific establishing bases in the Marshalls, Carolines, Marianas, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa islands.<sup>29</sup> It was accepted that both strategies needed to be implemented. By 1943, the war had expanded through the Pacific, and the United States was beginning its offensive push to Japan. American forces had ousted the

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<sup>26</sup> Weigley, 260-262. This chart was created using the information from Weigley. Some of the information is direct quotes while the ones not in quotation marks are paraphrased. "Tactical Formation" refers to movement in which ships, equipment and personnel are loaded, organized, and unloaded in a way that best suits immediate combat operations.

<sup>27</sup> Derrick Wright, *A Hell of a Way to Die* (London: Windrow & Greene, 1996), 16.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 16.



Japanese from the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division had landed on Bougainville, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was finishing its conquest of the Solomon Islands. The focus of Navy and Marine planners quickly turned towards the importance of the Central Pacific. Success there would prove disastrous for the Japanese Navy, as one of their largest bases was located at Truk in the Caroline Islands. Establishing forward bases in the Central Pacific would also provide needed air support and resupply bases for a push toward Japan. The first objective became the Tarawa Atoll located in the Gilbert Islands.

Tarawa became a battle of many firsts. It was the first modern test of Marine Corps doctrine on amphibious assaults against a fortified objective. It was also the first time combat correspondents and photographers were sent in with combat teams. Captain James Stockman summed it up calling it an “operation that was assault in nature from start to finish,” adding that it relied on a close coordination of land, sea, and air power to be successful.<sup>30</sup> Up to 1943 few offensives had been conducted against the Japanese. America had been successful in defeating the Japanese Navy at Midway, and was encouraged by the efforts of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division’s six-month campaign on Guadalcanal. With attention shifting towards the Central Pacific, Admirals Nimitz and King had their chance to open their island-hopping strategy. The Gilbert Island chain in the Central Pacific became a point of emphasis for the planners. Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King outlined this significance in

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<sup>30</sup> Capt. James Stockman, *The Battle for Tarawa* (Washington D.C: Historical Division of Public Information USMC, 1947), 66.

an official report. He explained that they were south and east of important Japanese bases in the Marshalls and Carolines, and that the Gilberts would serve as a staging point for operational thrusts into the Empire of Japan.<sup>31</sup> Principally the importance of the Gilberts was to establish air dominance using those islands to attack Japanese strong points at Truk and the Marianas. The Gilberts consisted of 16 atolls scattered roughly 2,000 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor with the main objective coming at Betio in the Tarawa atoll.<sup>32</sup> Admiral Nimitz proposed Operational Plan 13-43 on 5 October 1943; this was Nimitz's plan to seize and establish bases on Makin, Apamama, and Tarawa. Once the plan was approved, its name was changed to Operation GALVANIC. The specific objectives of GALVANIC were as follows:

- a. Gain control of the Gilberts.
- b. Prepare to gain control of the Marshalls.
- c. Improve security and lines of communication.
- d. Support the operations in the South-Southwest Pacific and Burma areas by extending pressure on the Japanese.<sup>33</sup>

Betio was the primary objective of Operation GALVANIC and the island where most of fighting occurred. It had the best airstrip that could be used as a forward operating and resupply base. Although it was not as strategically significant as the Marshall Islands, these objectives reveal why the Gilberts were made a priority

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<sup>31</sup> Admiral Ernest J. King Official Reports cited in Stockman, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Alexander, *Across the Reef: With the Marines at Tarawa* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1993), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Stockman 2.

before the Marshalls. The United States had no islands close enough to the Marshall Islands to launch surveillance aircraft or bombers from. The Gilbert Islands were also more familiar to the American forces, while the Marshall Islands were larger, unfamiliar, and protected by eight air bases.<sup>34</sup> This made the Gilberts less risky, but still necessary for success in the Marshalls. The other issue was the threat to Allied security and communication. The Gilberts were in the way of American merchant shipping, serving as a Japanese outpost that could interdict shipping traffic and protect the Japanese bases on the Marshall Islands.<sup>35</sup> The assignment was passed to the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet (CinCPac), Admiral Chester Nimitz. Nimitz quickly created the Central Pacific Force headed by Admiral Raymond Spruance who helped organize Task Force 53, which was assigned to Tarawa. Admiral Spruance selected the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division headed by General Julian C. Smith to lead the attack on Betio Island.<sup>36</sup> The assault was to be scheduled for 20 November 1943, with the primary objective being Betio. This particular island was three miles long, 800 yards wide, and about 300 acres; it was surrounded by a fringing coral reef hundreds of yards out from the beach.<sup>37</sup> Betio was also the most heavily fortified territory, yard per yard, which the Marines would encounter in the Pacific War.

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 16-17. The Gilberts were more familiar to the United States because an expedition took place there by a Navy Lt. Charles Wilkes in 1842. It had also been administered by Great Britain prior to World War II, Alexander 11-12. Sherrod described four people in his book who were British subjects and shipmasters that were used to provide intelligence on the waters and tides around Betio. See Sherrod 12-22.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Stockman, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Jones, *War Shots: Norman Hatch & the U.S. Marine Corps Combat Cameramen of World War II* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2011), 2.

The Japanese strength at Betio was 4, 836 men, all members of the Special Naval Landing Force referred to as the *rikusentai*. The commanders selected members for this unit who demonstrated “superior physical fitness and good judgment.”<sup>38</sup> Japanese soldiers who qualified for the *rikusentai* attended multiple schools of training including a school that psychologically indoctrinated loyalty and courage. When the Japanese realized how vital the Gilberts were to them, they sent the 111<sup>th</sup> Construction Battalion to construct defenses across Betio. They focused on reinforced concrete bunkers and bombproofs, beach obstacles, tank traps, trenches, and covered gun positions. They also specialized in using the natural environment to conceal their positions. Coconut logs, sand, and any other natural elements of the island were used to conceal nearly every defensive structure assembled on Betio. Once construction was nearly completed, the 7<sup>th</sup> Sasebo Special Naval Landing Force arrived to arm it with a plethora of different weapons; the Japanese force had transformed a barren island into a bristling island fortress. According to historian Joseph Alexander, it was the most sophisticated defensive system that the Marines would face until Iwo Jima in 1945, and yard for yard the toughest of the war.<sup>39</sup>

On 20 July 1943, Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki was appointed commander of the Japanese garrison on Betio. His mission plan was to destroy the enemy invasion at the water’s edge. The Japanese “Battle Dispositions” were released in October

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 31.

1942 with the directive, “wait until the enemy is within effective range (when assembling for landing) and direct your fire on the enemy transport group and destroy it.” It continued “If the enemy starts a landing, knock out the landing boats with mountain gunfire, tank guns, and infantry guns, then concentrate all fires on the enemy’s landing point and destroy him at the water’s edge.”<sup>40</sup> With the defenses set and elements in place, the stage was set for an epic engagement between two well-disciplined and determined foes. Rear Admiral Shibasaki confidently stated “the Americans could not take Tarawa with a million men in a hundred years.”<sup>41</sup> Nearly 10,000 Marines of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division would test this claim in 76 hours in what would be one of the most vicious fights of the war.

While boastful in his estimate, Shibasaki had a right to be confident as the island was one of the most heavily defended and well constructed citadels in World War II. U.S. Intelligence confirmed this strength prior to the invasion on 20 November 1943, as indicated in a letter from General Julian Smith saying, “we had excellent aerial photos and far better intelligence than we can normally expect to have concerning enemy territory.”<sup>42</sup> The one issue American planners were unsure of was the tides surrounding the reef. They faced unpredictable tides at Tarawa, as the tide tables available had not been completed and were inaccurate. The lack of hydrographic data created a tense atmosphere amongst planners. A team of sixteen men of different nationalities, all of whom had lived in the Gilberts and were familiar

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<sup>40</sup> Stockman, 7. The Mountain gunfire listed here refers to Japanese artillery.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Julian C. Smith letter to George Lockwood, 28 December 1943, Julian C. Smith Collection, Personal Papers Section, MCHC.

with the tides, were assembled to provide intelligence on the water levels. Mission planners needed them to help time the operation to have about five feet of water above the reef; that was what was necessary for the landing craft to float over the reef and deploy men and supplies on the beach. They also wanted to execute the mission during an incoming tide so that as the day went on it would be easier to ferry in supplies. The attack was scheduled during a neap tidal phase when tides were less extreme than during spring tides. The date selected was 20 November 1943 because it offered the most favorable situation with a midday high water level of 4.9 feet at 10:47am.<sup>43</sup> The only issue with the selected date was the possibility of a “dodging tide,” which typically occurs during a neap tide. When these types of tides occur, the water level drops lower than usual and does not change for an extended period of time.<sup>44</sup> This possibility meant that the Marines would run the risk of having their landing craft grounded on the reef, forcing them to wade ashore from as far out as 800 yards. Colonel David Shoup, who was placed in command of ground forces on Betio, voiced his concern to news correspondent Robert Sherrod about the reef situation in the following passage:

What worries me more than anything is that our boats may not be able to get over the coral shelf that sticks out about 500 yards. We may have to wade in. The first waves, of course will get in all right on the “alligators’ (amphibious landing craft), but the Higgins boats draw too

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<sup>43</sup> Roger Sinnott, “Astronomical Computing: The Tide at Tarawa,” *Sky & Telescope*, November 1987, 526.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 527.

much water to get in fairly close, we'll either have to wade in with machine guns shooting at us, or the amtracks will have to run a shuttle service between the beach and the end of the shelf. We have got to calculate high tide pretty closely for the Higgins boats to make it.<sup>45</sup>

The statement reveals many problems the Marines faced in getting ashore at Betio. The primary concern for Shoup and many others was the reef and getting across it. Marine Corps doctrine for amphibious war stressed rapid troop and resupply movements. The imposing reef was foreseen to be a problem not just at Tarawa but also at other venues in the Pacific. The problem had been addressed during War Plan ORANGE, leading to a search for a vehicle that could rapidly deploy men and equipment on beaches. The first model military planners settled on was developed by Andrew Higgins in the swamps of Louisiana. It had a "shallow draft, a broad, flat bow for landing and retracting and protected propeller."<sup>46</sup> When the Navy officially adopted this vehicle into the service, it was outfitted with a retractable bow ramp and named Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP); a separate model was created for moving heavy equipment named Landing Craft Mechanized (LCM).<sup>47</sup> Soon after it was commissioned, the other problem arose with how to deal with surrounding reefs that the United States would face in the island-hopping advance to Japan. The military began experimenting with an amphibious tank that could cruise through the water like a boat and crawl over reefs that the

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<sup>45</sup> Sherrod, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Millet, 340.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 340.

Higgins boat could not. They eventually developed their first Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT-1) or “alligator.”<sup>48</sup> Shortly before the time of the invasion of Tarawa, the LVTs had been designed as troop transports and logistical vehicles because they had little to no armor plating and no weapons for defense. Many of these models featured large, open windows in the front and sides with weak armor that could be penetrated by a small caliber rifle shot.<sup>49</sup> Despite their obvious flaws, their usefulness was undeniable in being able to cross reefs, so the Amphibious Tractor Battalion was born. When they were introduced into the Marine Corps there were 100 LVT-1s, but after the campaign at Guadalcanal there were only 75 available for the assault on Tarawa. This number became an obvious problem as the plan called for the first three waves to deliver 1,500 men and continue with ferrying in supplies.<sup>50</sup> The question then arose as to what would happen if the LVT-1s were destroyed and the Higgins boats could not cross the reef. General Holland “Howling Mad” Smith, commander of the V Amphibious Corps, estimated that the first wave would be the only one to make it ashore; the rest of the men and equipment would have grounded out on the reef hundreds of yards away.<sup>51</sup> Colonel David Shoup and General Julian Smith both made it a priority to find and acquire more LVTs. Fortunately there were some newer models, LVT-2s, based at the San Diego Naval Base. A fight ensued between the Navy and Marine Corps over the necessity of these vehicles. The Marines knew that these machines were the only means of getting men

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 341.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 28.



and equipment directly to the beaches. The Navy did not like the idea of storing these craft on their ships. Admiral Kelly Turner told Gen. Holland Smith that they were “not proper craft” and they were “weak and unseaworthy.”<sup>52</sup> After a series of debates, the Marines were able to procure an additional 50 of the LVT-2s from California when Holland Smith threatened to stop the operation unless additional LVTs were assigned to Operation GALVANIC. General Julian Smith discussed his fight with the Navy in a letter to his wife saying, “I and my staff fought like steers to get 50 Amphibian tractors clear from San Francisco, sent to Samoa and loaded on special ships to Tarawa.” He continued, “The Navy said they couldn’t do it but we made them.”<sup>53</sup> The older LVT-1s were outfitted with old boilerplates and machine guns for their defense since none were outfitted with armor. For the remainder of this study LVT-1 and LVT-2 will be referred to as AMTRACS, and the LCVP (flat bottom boats with retractable bows) will be referenced as Higgins boats. As the new landing craft were being rushed from the American West Coast to the Central Pacific, the plans were near complete for D-Day on Betio.

Not only was this operation the first amphibious assault against a defended position, it was also the first operation to utilize a joint naval and air bombardment. The Navy informed the Marines that they would be dropping ordnance over Betio for three hours prior to the landings on D-Day. The amount of ordnance to be dropped on Betio was to be the largest amount used by American forces up to that

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>53</sup> General Julian C. Smith letter to Harriotte Smith, 24 December 1943, Julian C. Smith Collection, Personal Papers Section, MCHC.

time. While the Marines were skeptical of the Navy's promises, naval officers were confident, stating at a post-rehearsal press conference, "We do not intend to neutralize it, we do not intend to destroy it. Gentlemen, we will obliterate it." General Smith voiced his concern in the same meeting, reminding the Navy, "Even though you navy officers do come in to about 1,000 yards, I remind you that you have armor. I want you to know that Marines are crossing the beach with bayonets, and that the only armor they'll have is a khaki shirt."<sup>54</sup> The Marines had good reason to be suspicious of such boasts by the Navy. The Navy had suffered a loss at Guadalcanal leaving the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division stranded for weeks and had not proven themselves in sea-to-shore fire support. The other cause for concern was the Navy's poor performance in the war exercises under War Plan ORANGE. One area of concern was the problems with naval gunfire. This weakness was due to their weapons systems being flat-trajectory, firing high velocity rounds designed to penetrate the armor of enemy ships, not to destroy bunkers.<sup>55</sup> Historian Allan Millett goes on to discuss other problems like the inability of naval vessels to fire registration rounds and the fact that long-firing barrages damaged the ships' guns' rifling. Millett explains that these problems led to Naval doctrine on preliminary bombardment being "short intense area barrages designed to neutralize exposed enemy infantry and machine guns."<sup>56</sup> This doctrine proved to be ineffective as the type of weapons systems on naval ships would require direct hits that would be

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<sup>54</sup> Alexander, *Across the Reef*, 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Millett, 332.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 332-333.

impossible without guidance from the shore; even then the rounds would not penetrate heavily fortified structures. The short firing barrages were also a problem because they allowed needed time for hidden enemies to regroup and gain their bearings. This would work out well for the Japanese, as they were excellent in preparing defenses and digging concealed trenches and bunkers that would protect them from the shelling. An anonymous sergeant illustrated this when he stated, "I can testify that they are the damnedest diggers in the world. It's like pulling a tick out of a rug to get one out of his hole."<sup>57</sup> This prediction was what Sherrod later described as a "prophecy" as the Naval shelling merely scratched the surface, leaving many Japanese fighters willing and able to fight from their holes. Colonel Mike Edson explained to Sherrod that the Navy's mistake was in viewing land targets as ships. Edson rationalized that the mistake was "in assuming that land targets are like ships—when you hit a ship it sinks and all is lost, but on land you've got to get direct hits on many installations, and that's impossible, even with three thousand tons of shells and bombs."<sup>58</sup> Despite these concerns, planning continued and the procedures were in place. Proposals for an initial invasion to establish an artillery base on an adjacent island were abandoned on the fear of Japanese submarines and fleet forces engaging troop transports. Navy officers felt this plan too risky as one submarine could kill thousands of waiting Marines with one torpedo. It was concluded that time was of the essence and the mission was a go.

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<sup>57</sup> Sherrod, 43.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

On the morning of November 20, 1943, the battle began when the sixteen-inch batteries of the battleships *Colorado* and *Maryland* fired on Japanese positions. The USS *Maryland* was named the Command and Control ship for this operation. This decision proved to be an error in judgment because every time the 16-inch batteries fired, the communications circuitry was disabled by the shockwave from the ship's guns. The faulty communication crippled the ability for the ships, planes, and ground forces to stay in contact, creating a wealth of confusion throughout the battle. While the ships fired their guns on Betio the Marines arose from their bunks and ate their traditional steak and eggs before being sent into the battle. Some thought resistance would be light and the enemy would already be destroyed. Others prepared themselves for what might be their last moment on this earth by attending worship services before heading into the fire. On deck the Marines witnessed the first joint air and naval bombardment in United States military history, and cheered as hits were scored against some of the Japanese 8-inch coastal defense guns. The island seemed to be burning, with explosions ripping the land to pieces and smoke enveloping it. The smoke was so thick that it actually hindered the operation. Gunnery officers had to delay their bombing because they could not accurately sight their targets, and air strikes were also delayed to allow for the smoke and coral dust to settle. This delay was disastrous because it allowed the Japanese to recover from their shell shock and prepare for the Marines. This recovery was unknown to the Marines who cheered wildly for the Navy bombers and battleships for every bomb and shell dropped on the island. Several other things

went wrong with the naval bombardment. As mentioned earlier, the Navy had little experience in shore bombardments. When ships began their attack, they made repeated errors in range, trajectory, ammunition type, and fuse settings.<sup>59</sup> Some rounds were so far off that reconnaissance planes reported multiple shells missing the island entirely and exploding in the ocean.

From the ocean it must have appeared as though the naval bombardment was as destructive as naval officers predicted it would be. Witnessing the pummeling from the ocean, Sherrod reflected the feeling of those going ashore saying, "Surely, we all thought, no mortal man could live through such destructive power. Surely, I thought, if there were actually any Japs left on the island (which I doubted strongly), they would all be dead by now."<sup>60</sup> The response to him and the Marines would rudely be given when a geyser erupted from a Japanese mortar shell that hit 50 yards from Sherrod's boat.

Faulty communication led to a terribly confusing start to an already complex operation. The first wave of AMTRACs was delayed by 40 minutes from its original time. Naval gunfire was halted because of the risk it posed Navy bombers, and the smoke was obstructing the aviators from being able to determine friend from foe. To make matters worse, the aerial component was more than 30 minutes late after the Navy had stopped firing. This gave the Japanese time to regroup and concentrate on where the Marines would be landing. The Navy pilots' lack of experience in ground

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 103.

<sup>60</sup> Sherrod, 62.

operations quickly showed. Admiral Kelly Turner's staff aviation officer, Lieutenant Commander Fredrick Ashworth, commented "I'm reluctant to say that I was involved in the so-called air support for the landing at Tarawa for it was pretty sorry. We didn't really know what we were doing." Another fighter wing commander stated in an after-action report, "The great majority of our bombs dug out a nice well and raised a great cloud of coral dust which hampered the bombing of other planes."<sup>61</sup>

As the Marines approached, the other obstacle feared was not the Japanese defenses but the reef protecting the island. Up to this point, the planners had received little more than conflicting reports about the status of the tides. General Julian Smith and Admiral Harry Hill could simply "hope for the best and plan for the worst."<sup>62</sup> The fears came to be realized when the first wave crossed over the reef. It was discovered to be worse than predicted with the water levels reaching no more than three feet over the reef.<sup>63</sup> This depth was fine with the first waves of AMTRACs as they crawled over the top and continued to the beaches. The concern was that eventually the Higgins boats would not be able to cross, forcing the Marines to wade ashore from up to 800 yards away. As General Julian Smith described, "The first waves reached the beach without excessive losses, but later waves got hung up by unforeseen tide conditions which prevented the boats from crossing the reef and the men had to disembark and wade nearly a half mile to the beach." He continued,

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<sup>61</sup> Alexander *Utmost Savagery*, 106-107.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, 76.

<sup>63</sup> Roger W. Sinnott, "The Tide of Tarawa," *Sky and Telescope*, 528 (November, 1987): 527,

“Their losses were terrible, but on they came.”<sup>64</sup> They also discovered mines, tank traps, and a multitude of other beach obstacles that posed a threat to the heavy equipment that would be coming in.

At 0910 the first waves of Marines crawled over the reef successfully and began landing on their designated beaches. Immediately the Japanese garrison fired their machine guns with interlocking fields of fire and Triple A dual purpose guns on the landing parties.<sup>65</sup> The AMTRACs quickly began attempting to shuttle Marines in, knowing that the Higgins boats could not cross the reef. As the ferocity of the fighting picked up, the number of AMTRACs decreased, having been rapidly destroyed by Japanese fire. Within an hour the little island of Betio turned into the gates of hell. The only protection many of the men could find was underneath an coconut log seawall. However, the seawall did not protect from Japanese snipers scattered all over the island because the Japanese snipers tied themselves to the palm trees and could shoot down into the hiding Marines. Sherrod recalled an incident in which a Marine running along the beach was shot in the head causing his eyes to nearly bulge out of his head as he hit the ground. Sherrod went on to discuss the opening scenes of the landing describing the dead and wounded coming every minute, and the screams of those whose limbs were torn off.<sup>66</sup> As D-Day progressed, Colonel Shoup became concerned over the precariousness of their situation. Not all

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<sup>64</sup> General Julian C. Smith letter to Harriotte Smith, 28 November 1943, Julian C. Smith Collection, Personal Papers Section, MCHC.

<sup>65</sup> The Triple A Dual Purpose Guns were a weapon system that was designed for anti-aircraft use, but could be adjusted to act as a type of heavy caliber weapon for ground forces.

<sup>66</sup> Sherrod, 73-75.

waves had made it ashore, AMTRACs were being knocked out, and communications were failing. Units that had to ditch into the ocean or wade ashore discovered their radios were not waterproof, causing nearly all them to malfunction. The Marines had to rely on runners to relay messages, which was risky because of the time it took to go anywhere with the amount of fire and the danger of the runner being killed or wounded. Those units that had to wade ashore and were suffering severe casualty rates, leaving many without officers or leading to the mixing of different units, further complicated the communication issue.

As the battle progressed the inexperience of Navy pilots in providing close air support continued to show. The Navy, much to the chagrin of the Marines, led the aerial bombardment. While the Navy pilots possessed a good deal of courage and motivation to prove themselves, they lacked experience and training in air-to-ground operations. Marine pilots had a wealth of experience in close air support. They had practiced it in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua during the Banana Wars. Furthermore, Marine Corps training instills the unique belief that every Marine is a rifleman and even pilots were trained as such before being sent to their specialty schools. This training gave Marine pilots a better understanding of what was involved in ground operations. This training, combined with the expanding mission of the Marine Corps to base defense and seizure, made commanders realize the need for aerial components to provide close air support for ground forces; they then made it a staple for all Marine pilots to train in air-to-ground support. Through their training, they had learned that to provide effective,



close air support, they must fly low and slow so that they could maintain visuals and communications with infantry units on the ground.<sup>67</sup> This type of training and experience would have proved vital to the success on Tarawa because the aerial support would have been more effective providing help to the ground forces during the operation. Marine pilots had also demonstrated their skills at Guadalcanal using beat-up planes to hold off the Japanese counter offensive until the infantry could be relieved. This heroic group of fliers, known as the Cactus Air Force, was a composite squadron of Marine pilots that assembled together to defend America's hold on Guadalcanal. Many officers and historians have since argued that without the support provided by the Cactus Air Force on Guadalcanal, the Marines would have been overrun. Despite all of this experience in air-to-ground operations, the Navy opted to stick with Navy and Army bombers. Their lack of experience would soon show during the bombing and strafing runs conducted at Tarawa.

Major Norman Hatch of the newly-formed combat photography division got his baptism by fire when his boat was hit by machine gun fire and they were forced to wade ashore. He recorded Marines getting shot in the water and witnessed a Higgins boat suffer a direct hit by a 75mm anti-aircraft gun resulting in faces being blown off and limbs littering the lagoon.<sup>68</sup> The following radio transcript between Major John Schoettel and Colonel Shoup indicated just how precarious the situation was.

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<sup>67</sup> Millett, 333-334.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, 95.

[Schoettel] 0959: Receiving heavy fire all along beach. Unable to land all.

Issue in doubt.

[Schoettel] 1007: Boats held up on reef of right flank Red 1. Troops receiving heavy fire in water.

[Shoup] 1012: Land Red Beach 2 and work west.

[Schoettel] 1018: We Have nothing left to land.<sup>69</sup>

This brief radio transcript illustrates the severity of the fighting and the dire situation the Marines were facing. Upon reaching the beach, the first waves sustained heavy casualties or confusion from units getting mixed up among the chaos in the water. One reprieve for the embattled Marines was a pier that jutted roughly 1,000 yards over the reef and into deeper waters.<sup>70</sup> By late afternoon American forces had only a marginal toehold on the beaches with the farthest progress being 150 yards inland.<sup>71</sup> The Marines who had successfully made it off the beach had their progress slowed by the extensive bunker complexes and machine gun emplacements. Most had to be taken out one at a time and were difficult to see because they were covered in earthwork and had narrow firing ports. The morning took a heavy toll not just on men but also machines, as the AMTRACs became the prime targets for Japanese gunners. The numbers of AMTRACs started with 42 in the first wave, and went to 24 in the second, and 21 in the third; by the end of the

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<sup>69</sup> Alexander, *Across the Reef*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 5. The pier provided cover for those who had to wade ashore. It also served an important logistics role because supplies could be delivered to it and the wounded evacuated.

<sup>71</sup> Stockman 21. There were three beaches selected for landings. Red Beach 1, 2, and 3. Red Beach 3 reported the most progress at 1530 hours.

day the numbers of AMTRACs were so limited that they were restricted to moving supplies to, and wounded from, the pier.<sup>72</sup> By nightfall commanders began to lose confidence that they could defend against a mass Japanese charge such as the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division had experienced on Guadalcanal. They had units disorganized and scattered all over with the number of casualties among officers higher than among enlisted men. The fear became that the Japanese would stage a massive offensive that night. In the position they were in, Marine commanders knew if this attack came, they would be driven right back into the ocean. As luck would have it, a shell from the Naval bombardment killed the Japanese commander Shibasaki during the initial bombardment, and all communication lines had been destroyed. This occurrence made it impossible for Japanese forces to organize and stage an offensive big enough to kick the Americans off the beach.

The situation at the beginning of Day Two was that three assault battalions held small toeholds on the beach; the third had gained the most ground pushing only 70 yards inland.<sup>73</sup> Colonel Shoup, realizing his losses were heavy to his officers and platoon sergeants, needed more men to help coordinate a push inland. Another problem was that the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine infantry regiment was held in reserve by Holland Smith, giving the initial waves a mere 2:1 numerical superiority; Alexander explains, “this was well below the doctrinal minimum.”<sup>74</sup> American forces would gain momentum with the help of reinforcements landing and the arrival of the 105mm

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<sup>72</sup> Alexander, *Across the Reef* 18-19.

<sup>73</sup> Sherrod, 86.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

pack howitzers the night before. Units from each beach started the slow push across the sea wall and into the island. What they found was that the Japanese defenses further in were more difficult to overcome and caused more casualties than did the ones that had confronted the D-Day landings. The arrival of heavy equipment helped turn the momentum. However, Marines learned that the light tanks sent into Tarawa were useless against reinforced bunkers, and that while the heavy tanks were effective, they were extremely vulnerable without the aid of infantry. Several times in the battle, tanks that were closed up fell into tank traps, ran over mines, or were hit by concealed anti-tank guns or Japanese suicide bombers. It became clear that joint tank-infantry tactics needed to be introduced in Marine Corps training.

There were also numerous cases of engineers being able to attack bunkers with TNT, and flamethrowers proved how important they would be in forcing the Japanese out of their bunkers.<sup>75</sup> Despite the small increase in momentum, the situation was still bleak. On the water, hundreds of Marines continued to get shot up as they waded ashore. Bodies became bloated and lifeless in the surf, and those that washed ashore began decomposing in the oppressive Pacific heat. Sherrod summed up the action early in the second day saying, "There are at least two hundred bodies which do not move at all on the dry flats." He continued. "This is worse, far worse than it was yesterday."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The extreme heat from the flamethrowers and concussive blasts from the TNT caused many Japanese soldiers to exit their fortifications. One example of this was Major Bill Chamberlin's siege of a Japanese command post. This can be found in *War Shots*, 105-110 and the story of Lieutenant Alexander Bonnyman's charge in *Utmost Savagery*, 187-188.

<sup>76</sup> Sherrod, 89.

To many the condition ashore seemed similar to what they experienced the previous day, and indeed it looked that way due to the number of casualties and lack of progress. However, a few officers such as Colonel Evans Carlson believed it had stabilized somewhat. Shoup radioed from ashore asking for permission to release the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine regiment being held in reserve; this request was immediately granted. With reinforcements and the artillery batteries operating, the momentum shifted in favor of the Americans. Shoup revealed this change in one transmission saying, "Casualties: many. Percentage of dead: unknown. Combat efficiency: we are winning."<sup>77</sup>

By Day Three the situation had completely changed. Supplies were now flowing onto the pier, and Betio had been cut in half, pushing the Japanese into pockets on the south side of the Island. Despite the failing Japanese defenses American commanders feared that the Japanese would force the Marines to eliminate them one at a time, inflicting as many casualties as possible. General Julian Smith, now ashore assessing the operation, reported that progress was slow due to strong Japanese resistance on the eastern end of the island and to the westward side of their frontlines. He predicted, "Complete occupation will take at least five days more. Naval and air bombardment a great help but does not take out emplacements."<sup>78</sup> This prediction would be proved wrong by the Japanese that night

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<sup>77</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 174.

<sup>78</sup> Stockman. 51

as they staged three major counter attacks.<sup>79</sup> The third was the largest and most violent, resulting in the breaking of Marine lines. At 0400 nearly 400 Japanese charged into the Marines resulting in fighting hand to hand. Lieutenant Norman Thomas radioed for artillery support, "We are killing them as fast as they come at us, but we can't hold out much longer; we need reinforcements!"<sup>80</sup> Major William Jones responded that there were not enough men and he had to hold. After the fighting there were 200 Japanese bodies and body parts strewn across the battlefield and an additional 125 lying farther away. American forces had 40 dead and 100 wounded. Some haggard survivors looked at Major Jones telling him, "They told us we had to hold, and by God we held."<sup>81</sup> By late morning General Julian Smith sent the following message to Admiral Harry Hill, "Decisive defeat heavy enemy counterattack last night destroyed bulk of hostile resistance. Expect complete annihilation of enemy on Betio this date. Strongly recommend that you and your chief of staff come ashore this date to get information about the type of hostile defenses which will be encountered in future operations."<sup>82</sup>

After 76 violent hours, General Julian Smith announced Betio secured. Out of nearly 5,000 enemy troops stationed there, only 146 were taken prisoner.<sup>83</sup> Most of these prisoners were Korean laborers; only seven were Japanese. The view of Betio is one the survivors wished they could forget. An island of less than a square mile

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<sup>79</sup> The mass charges conducted by the Japanese resulted in the Marines crushing most of the remaining resistance on the island ending the battle faster than predicted.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid, 200.

<sup>81</sup>Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 201.

<sup>82</sup> Stockman, 59.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid, 60.

was nothing but destruction and death. Palm trees were leveled, and shell holes cratered the sandy rock making it look like the moon. Bodies and body parts rotted and festered through stages of decomposition all over, some so badly mangled it was hard to tell if they were American or Japanese. Robert Sherrod provides the most descriptive image of the aftermath describing his tour of the island.

The ruptured and twisted bodies which expose their rotting inner organs are inexpressibly repelling. Betio would be more habitable if the Marines could leave for a few days and send a million buzzards in. The fire from a burning pile of rubble has reached six nearby Jap bodies, which start to sizzle and pop as the flame consumes flesh and gasses. Fifteen more are scattered around a food dump, and two others are blown to a hundred pieces—a hand here, a head there, a hobnailed foot farther away.<sup>84</sup>

This description provides readers with a strong picture of the severity of the battle and further reveals the gruesome realities of war, realities that the public was not ready to accept. The battle concluded with Generals Julian Smith and Holland Smith surveying the destruction. They were in awe of the defenses they saw, and impressed that the Marines had kept pushing forward. They began to shed tears seeing Marine dead scattered in the water and face down on the beach. They saw a dead Marine with a landing marker placed by his outstretched hand telling other landing parties where to go. Holland Smith, realizing the man died doing his job,

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<sup>84</sup> Sherrod, 142.

asked, “How can such men be defeated?”<sup>85</sup> While this was a proud moment of victory for the Marine Corps, the news that was returning home caused the public to question the sacrifice. Those tragic words of “heavy casualties” sent a chill down the spines of Americans. The reaction people had upon seeing the news of American losses in such a distant world reveals much about their psychological state. Their shock that men die in war reflects a nation mentally unprepared and reluctant to give what it took to achieve victory. It would take the filming and documentation of Robert Sherrod and Norman Hatch to provide the understanding of what the country should expect and what it was facing. To gain an understanding of the American psyche prior to and going into the war, this study will now look at the filming and documentation of Tarawa. It will reveal the martial naiveté that the American public had and explore why the filming was so important in educating a society psychologically not ready to accept the tragic nature of war.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 139.



### **Chapter 3: Heavy Casualties**

Following the failure of the massive Japanese charge, organized resistance collapsed. On 23 November 1943, Betio was declared secured around 1300. With Betio under U.S. control, the drive began to secure the rest of the islands in the Gilberts, which was successfully done with few losses. Also underway was the drive for the correspondents to get their stories of the Marines' sacrifice out to the American public. While many of the correspondents began their stories with good intentions, their tales grew bigger and more embroidered the further away from the battlefield they traveled. Historian Derrick Wright points out that Tarawa became one of the most documented battles in U.S. history.<sup>86</sup> This documentation was the result of a couple of factors. One was the new Photographic Section of the Marine Corps, and the other was President Roosevelt's loosening control of the media. These two facts together allowed for raw images to be sent right to the public. The hope was to educate people on the war to increase war bond sales. The sale of war bonds had steadily dropped off as the fervor of Pearl Harbor faded. President Roosevelt needed a boost in supporting the war effort and believed the only way to do it was to bring the war home. The effort to raise awareness initially backfired with the public becoming appalled at news featuring the feared phrase of "heavy casualties." The earliest case of this backfire had occurred in the New Guinea campaign at the battle of Buna-Gona. *Life Magazine* photojournalist George Strock

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<sup>86</sup> Wright, 130.

produced the first known picture of American dead during World War II.<sup>87</sup> The photograph featured three dead Americans lying face down in the surf of Buna Beach and made national news as many people witnessed American dead for the first time since the Civil War. Up until then, military censors strictly forbade the publication of photos of war dead. This censorship was done with the thinking that the more positive the news, the more support people would give. This philosophy worked to a point, but over time people became less interested in the war because they were worrying about wages, race relations, and their personal lives. The fear within the government and news media was that American society had grown complacent in a war that was far from over. Senior *Life* correspondent Cal Whipple is the man who fought the bureaucrats over loosening restrictions on the press. Whipple believed that revealing this picture and others to people would give a complacent America the reality it needed to bolster support behind the war effort. To get these pictures Whipple wanted journalists to be able to get cleared to go places where the fighting was and get more of their pictures cleared when they returned home,<sup>88</sup> Whipple's efforts to bypass censorship of wartime media paid off as the photo was produced in September 1943 and paved the way for other battles to be documented more fully. The next battle following the release of Strock's

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<sup>87</sup> Ben Cosgrove, "Behind the picture: "Three Dead Americans, Buna Beach 1943." Fox News, 18 October 2013. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/10/18/photo-that-won-world-war-ii/&ts=noscript&rnd=1382380716533>.

<sup>88</sup> David Dunlap, "Cal Whipple, 94, Dies; Won the 1943 Fight to Print Photo of War Dead." *New York Times*, 24 March 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/nyregion/cal-whipple-dies-at-94-won-1943-fight-to-print-photo-of-war-dead.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/nyregion/cal-whipple-dies-at-94-won-1943-fight-to-print-photo-of-war-dead.html?_r=0).

photograph was Tarawa and it captured the full fury of combat as it was the first battle where correspondents were to experience a battle first hand.

Immediately after the battle of Tarawa the news broke, spreading across the United States with headlines referencing heavy losses. Katherine Phillips, sister of Sid Phillips of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, was distraught and worried about her brother. Upon hearing about Tarawa, she stated:

When we saw those first pictures of Tarawa, we were overcome, just overcome. Those American boys' bodies just floating in the surf. It was just devastating to us. We just sat around and cried, and I know that's why they had kept it from the American public for so long. Our dislike for the Japanese was very violent. That they would do this to us. And would kill our boys like that. And of course the idea was kill the Japs. I'm ashamed to say it, but that's the way it was. We just had to get that war over with.<sup>89</sup> .

Katherine Phillips was not alone in her fears that her brother was among those killed on Betio. The pictures depicting the bloated bodies of dead Marines floating helplessly in the surf and tangled in barbed wire with their heads blown off nauseated much of the public. These images, combined with others featuring an island completely ravaged by man's destructive capabilities, were too shocking for most to take in. People were now cognizant that machines alone could not win battles; victory could be achieved only through flesh and blood.

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<sup>89</sup> Ken Burns, *The War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 141.

What concerned Americans the most were the losses sustained over a small space thousands of miles away from the Japanese mainland and in just 76 hours. On a territory of less than one square mile in diameter, the Marines sustained approximately 3,133 casualties, 1,000 of whom were killed.<sup>90</sup> This casualty figure was similar to those sustained at Guadalcanal with the main difference being Guadalcanal lasted six months. Hearing the numbers, the public, at least the part represented by the media reacted with shock at the losses on such a small distant place. Losses on Tarawa were listed at 20% of the landing force, which was said to be an acceptable number in a frontal attack against a fortified objective.<sup>91</sup> General Holland Smith also commented on this statistic in an interview with *The New York Times*. He said, “people should realize that the Marines on Tarawa killed four Japs for every Marine that died.” Smith continued, “Americans should know that in an offensive operation like this one you should expect to lose more than the enemy does.”<sup>92</sup>

Despite General Smith’s defense of the losses, newspapers continued to print lurid headlines and the public outcry grew louder. One article read, “The battle for Betio, the fiercest, bloodiest and most ruthless I have seen in the two years of the

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<sup>90</sup> Stockman, 72. These numbers were eventually released to the public. The first newspaper to discuss heavy casualties was by the *Washington Post* dated November 27, 1943 and was titled “U.S. Casualties Very heavy at Tarawa.” It did not release specific figures but later articles did. Later articles began releasing approximate numbers. Articles produced in December released the figure of 1,026 dead and 2,557 wounded. See “General Defends Tarawa Planning,” from the *Washington Post* and Robert Turnbull’s “Tarawa Proved Marines’ Mastery,” from the *New York Times*.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Trumbull, By Telephone to *THE NEW YORK TIMES*. 1943. “TARAWA ‘PROVED’ MARINES’ MASTERY.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 19, 28.

Pacific war, showed how long and costly that road will be.”<sup>93</sup> Another article described the fight as the “toughest fight in Marine Corps history” and that losses were “very heavy”.<sup>94</sup> In another *New York Times* article General Alexander Vandegrift had to defend the operation when he was questioned by an inquiry asking why the losses were so high.<sup>95</sup> One other article that was released read, “Scenes of Horror remain on Betio,” and “Battleground of Tarawa Atoll a Ghastly Picture of Dead Bodies and Destruction.”<sup>96</sup> General Julian Smith’s wife testified to the media storm that ensued after Tarawa’s public appearance. She stated “our unwavering love was the only thing that got us through the darks days of the battle and its aftermath, when the brutal attacks by the press begin to appear in print.”<sup>97</sup> It grew so loud that pressure was put on Congress to investigate the battle to determine what had happened at Tarawa.<sup>98</sup> General Douglas MacArthur joined the debate when he went to the Secretary of War declaring, “These frontal assaults by the Navy, as at Tarawa, are a tragic and unnecessary massacre of human lives.” MacArthur then voiced his displeasure to President Roosevelt and Admiral Nimitz

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<sup>93</sup> Henry Keys, “Betio Proves Tokyo Road Long, Rough,” *Washington Post*, November 28, 1943.  
<http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.clemson.edu/hnpwashingtonpost/docview/151600680/756DB252517642ECPQ/1?accountid=6167>

<sup>94</sup> Richard Johnston, “Island Battle Called Toughest in History of Marine Corps,” *Washington Post*, November 27, 1943.

<http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.clemson.edu/hnpwashingtonpost/docview/151587172/96867BD3815D4463PQ/1?accountid=6167>

<sup>95</sup> “VANDEGRIFT BACKS METHOD AT TARAWA.” (1943, Dec 18). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/106553896?accountid=6167>

<sup>96</sup> “Scenes of Horror Remain on Betio,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1943.

<http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.clemson.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/106740892/1860266C63BC4BCBPQ/26?accountid=6167>

<sup>97</sup> Harriotte Byrd Smith, *But That’s Another Story* (New York: Vantage Press, 1992), 243.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 229.

saying “Frontal assaults is only for mediocre commanders. Good commanders do not turn in heavy losses.”<sup>99</sup>

It also did not help that General Holland Smith criticized the operation and stated “costly mistakes had been made and that our reconnaissance had not revealed all of the Jap installations.”<sup>100</sup> Holland Smith’s controversial statement created tension throughout America and stirred the public’s emotion even more. It also riled up senior officers who participated in the Tarawa invasion. Julian Smith stated, “I am so mad I can hardly write, at an interview that Holland gave the press, in which he made a lot of unwarranted statements . . . Neither of which were true.”<sup>101</sup> Mentally, many Americans had taken a victory in a landmark operation and viewed it as a tragic sacrifice. The battle for Betio was intense in its own right, but after traveling from the front lines to rear echelon units the stories became bigger and bolder. The papers were interested in selling papers more than the true stories of courageous Marines protecting each other or of all the efforts that took place in planning the operation. They instituted the use of what Robert Sherrod called vivid verbs in their headlines. These verbs were used to grab the readers and stir their emotions. Some examples of these headlines were “U.S. Casualties Very Heavy At Tarawa,” “Nimitz Visits Death-Laden Tarawa Atoll,” and “Bloody Betio.” While these

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid 229.

<sup>100</sup> Julian C. Smith Letter to Harriotte Smith, 24 December 1943, Julian C. Smith Collection, Personal Papers Section, MCHC. This reference to Holland Smith was mentioned again in a letter from Julian Smith to George Lockwood on December 28, 1943. In the letter Holland was described as being upset because he was misquoted. However, in 1948 Holland published his memoirs in *Coral and Brass* where he criticized the entire operation referring to it as a mistake. See *Coral and Brass* 111-113, 134.

<sup>101</sup> Julian Smith letter to Harriotte Smith.

headlines were not an exaggeration of the battle, they painted a more somber picture than the public had seen before Tarawa.<sup>102</sup> The stories to accompany these headlines were equally compelling. One article described a wounded man's face as "little more than a mass of butchered meat." It continued, "The body twitched. Improvised crimson-stained bandages hid gaping holes in the bodies of others."<sup>103</sup> Other times the papers simply quoted what commanders and eyewitnesses said. Two of the most scrutinized pieces came from Sergeant James G. Lucas and General Holland Smith. Sergeant Lucas opened an editorial saying "Grim Tarawa Defense a Surprise" and that "Marines Went in Chuckling, to find swift Death Instead of Easy Conquest."<sup>104</sup> General Holland Smith gave the media several quotations that disturbed readers and angered senior commanders involved in the operation. One of his earliest missteps came in an interview with a *New York Times* correspondent. He was asked what was the main factor for the victory, and he responded saying, "it was willingness to die." Later in the article Smith went on to say, "The Tarawa battle could be likened to Pickett's Charge in the Civil War."<sup>105</sup> This was an odd exaggeration, especially to be made by a senior commander involved in the operation, but it caught the attention of many readers around the country. These

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<sup>102</sup> After searching numerous newspaper articles from 1941-1942, the majority did not discuss individual battles. Most were about how the war was affecting the home front. Some examples of these headlines were: "War Expenses Greater Than All U.S. Spent Since Washington," "College Students Change Their Opinion of War," and "War Cost Hits 60 Billions, Doubles 17-18."

<sup>103</sup> John Henry. "Writer Tells of Bodies Draping Broken Landing Craft at Betio." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), Nov 29, 1943.

<sup>104</sup> SGT, James G. Lucas "Grim Tarawa Defense a Surprise, Eyewitness of Battle Reveals." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 04, 1943.

<sup>105</sup> George F Horneby Telephone to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "TARAWA'S CAPTOR REVIEWS VICTORY." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Nov 30, 1943.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/106699075?accountid=6167>.

captions of Tarawa being a “surprise” and the Marines’ “willingness to die” along with the comparison to Pickett’s charge made the public furious with the losses sustained. One woman wrote Admiral Nimitz after reading all the stories and accused him of “murdering my son.”<sup>106</sup> This woman’s charge of murder paralleled the media’s charge of misdeeds. These headlines and the public’s response to them illustrated a society being influenced by the media and their lack of experience in war.

Sherrod became one of the most outspoken critics against the public and the media. He placed much the blame for America’s faintheartedness on the fact that reporters had created trumped up stories to comfort people. What Sherrod knew the common soldier wanted was for people to know that “we don’t knock the hell out of em every day of every battle.” He continued, “wars are fought and war is horrible.”<sup>107</sup> General Julian Smith also spoke out against the misinformation that corrupted people’s minds. In one letter to his wife, Smith opened saying “There had to be a Tarawa. It was a battle of firsts . . . It set the pattern for future amphibious operations in the Central Pacific.” He continued, “It brought the grim reality that there is no cheap shortcut to win wars.”<sup>108</sup>

Part of the media’s ability to shock and awe the public was the Marines’ own fault. This was the first time an operation like this had ever been conducted. The news prior to this point had been heavily censored to the point where even letters

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<sup>106</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 229.

<sup>107</sup> Sherrod, 114-115.

<sup>108</sup> Smith, 247-248.



from soldiers home were expurgated. One military censor discovered four different letters saying “I wish we could give you the story of the battle without all the sugarcoating you see in the papers.” Or another from a sergeant read, “The war being written about in the papers must be a different war from the one we see.”<sup>109</sup> This editing indicates that what the people were seeing was much different from what those actually fighting were seeing. What the people had been witnessing were claims that their boys were speeding to victory, and the belief their military could win the war with minimal losses. When War Bond sales dropped in May 1943, the President slackened restrictions on information coming home. His goal was to educate people on the war’s difficulties to pick up support for the war effort. President Roosevelt’s loosening of censorship of the war led to many news correspondents lining up to see a battle up close, and what better story for them to report than the first amphibious landing utilizing joint air, sea, and land forces. These correspondents were given unique access to landing with the Marines in the later waves of the assault force. Unfortunately the latter waves were the ones that had to wade ashore after the AMTRACs had been shot out. This problem forced reporters to witness the worst hell of the battle, and they simply reported what they saw. This approach made it appear as though every Marine involved in the Betio landings had to walk ashore in withering enemy fire. This description was further complicated by the fact that the story of the reef-crossing AMTRACs was withheld from the public to protect future operations. After Betio senior officials realized the

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<sup>109</sup> Sherrod 150.

key to unlocking the Pacific were the AMTRACs. These planners feared that reporting on these vehicles would enable the Japanese to adapt to American strategy and be prepared. Hiding this story from the public, along with the reporters all having to wade ashore, did two key things. One was that it strengthened the belief that every Marine had to walk hundreds of yards ashore. The other was it gave merit to General Holland Smith's argument that many mistakes were made because it appeared that there was faulty intelligence on the reef.<sup>110</sup> The combination of these dynamics provided the impression that most men were helplessly killed in the water because of flawed intelligence. What failed to be reported was that 75% of the casualties occurred inland, and that the first wave landed without excessive losses.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the factual information presented by the senior commanders Americans were still shocked by the number of dead in three days of fighting. This reaction of shock brings up Sherrod's question of, "Why did so many Americans throw up their hands at the heavy losses on Tarawa?"<sup>112</sup> What led to so many thinking that this war was going to be a clean war and that no one would suffer? These questions led to many survivors of Betio and those commanding the operation to question how America would react to future operations closer to Japan with a much higher casualty rate. It was of grave concern to military planners in the

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<sup>110</sup> The planners all knew the reef existed what they were unsure of was the tidal situation heading into the battle. That is why there was a fight between the Marine Corps and the Navy to acquire more AMTRACs, because they were aware of the threat posed by the reef.

<sup>111</sup> Julian C. Smith Letter to George Lockwood, 28 December 1943. Julian C. Smith Collection, Personal Papers Section, MCHC.

<sup>112</sup> Sherrod, 149.

Pacific, Europe, and to the President. President Roosevelt realized that it is not the general, but the will of the people that dictates the outcome of war. Without their support of the war effort, those losses suffered would be for nothing, and society's ardor was already dampened by Tarawa's losses. If they sustained another costly landing, which all officers knew they would, the fear became that America would succumb to the Japanese strategy of a war of attrition. Japanese leaders realized they did not have the economic means or manpower to defeat the United States. They just had to drag on the war and inflict so many losses that the American public would demand an end. President Roosevelt needed something to help educate people on what it was going to take to win this battle against a fanatical foe and the significance of such a small place so far away from Japan. What he needed would come from an unlikely source, a sergeant who caught the whole battle on film.

#### **Chapter 4: The Film that Changed America**

Sergeant Norman Hatch, a native of Gloucester, Massachusetts, became a Marine after having no direction in his life after high school and growing up in a family struggling from the Depression. He was originally planning to enlist in the Navy; delays in his enlistment date frustrated him and drove him to the Marine recruiting station. When Hatch asked how long it would take to enlist, the recruiter responded, "When do you want to go? Friday or two weeks from Friday?"<sup>113</sup> Soon after in 1939 he was on a train headed to Parris Island, South Carolina, for Marine Corps boot camp. Hatch spent several months working for *Leatherneck Magazine* before transferring to a new special unit started by the Marine Corps, the Combat Cinematography Division. Its purpose was to chronicle the exploits of the Marines as other services had already done. They would produce both still photos and moving picture films in an effort not only to capture Marine Corps history but also to educate people on the Marines. Marine Corps officers realized the importance of documenting their exploits for historical purposes. They also understood that they lagged far behind the Army and Navy in providing frontline coverage to the public. This gap came to be realized with the gallant defense of Wake Island by Major James Devereux. Major Devereux put up a stiff fight against overwhelming odds, yet there was no one there to film or photograph the actual battle.<sup>114</sup> A movie about Wake Island was produced in 1942 but it was scripted and filmed in the United States by

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<sup>113</sup> Jones, 26.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 53.

Paramount Pictures using actors. It was critically acclaimed but was full of inaccuracies proving to be more propaganda than facts. It was also realized that many of the communiqués about the war were inaccurate, dry propaganda that sought to bring comfort to those not on the front lines. When the division was first established at Quantico, Virginia, Norman Hatch was one of the first sent to begin learning filming techniques from people with Hollywood experience.

Training commenced in the summer of 1942 at Quantico. Hatch learned from Hollywood directors and cinematographers how to quickly set up and get the best shots. He also had to learn how to do it while moving around quickly in the woods, enduring Virginia's infamous summer heat and humidity around the swamps and marshes of the Potomac River. As their training went on the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was making a name for itself on Guadalcanal. The success of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division made them heroes of the war, but their victory was not as well documented as John Ford's *The Battle of Midway*. Ford's documentary became the first combat footage in history, which excited Hatch and members of his unit. The Combat Cinematography division was then attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division upon its being shipped to New Zealand while plans for the Central Pacific drive were underway. Sergeant Hatch had no idea that his participation in the invasion of Betio would have such a profound impact on the Marine Corps as well as on American society.

Sergeant Hatch was positioned in a Higgins boat under the command of Major Jim Crowe. As Hatch and his boat approached the shore they came under heavy machine gun fire. Major Crowe ordered the coxswain of their craft to put in at

the reef.<sup>115</sup> This decision meant that Hatch would get to experience the terror of wading 500 yards ashore carrying a variety of gear that could not get wet. On top of that, he had to do it without getting shot to pieces. Once Hatch made it ashore he hesitated to start filming due to being tired and in a state of shock from the intense fire. As soon as he witnessed a man near him have his buttocks blown off he realized he needed to do his job.<sup>116</sup> Once he gained his bearings, he and his partner Kelly Kelliner began setting up their equipment to capture the fighting. At the time Hatch thought he was just doing his job filming the events to document the battle. What he did not realize was that he was capturing the real and brutal nature of war that would be shown to an American public that had not been exposed to the ferocity of a battle. He captured the slaughter of Marines getting blown to pieces by the Japanese 75-mm antiaircraft guns, bodies and body parts floating in the surf, and corpsmen either treating the wounded or covering the dead with ponchos. All of these images were somber even for the most battle-hardened veterans to stomach let alone America's naive civilians. Hatch's signature scene came at Major Chamberlain's assault on a Japanese bunker. The Japanese came pouring out and were cut down by the Marine riflemen. It was the first and one of the few times the Japanese and Americans would be captured on film fighting in close combat.<sup>117</sup>

Tarawa became one of the most documented battles in warfare. Between all the correspondents and film crews, 900 still photos were taken; 2,500 feet of black

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<sup>115</sup> This is nautical terminology referring to the boats docking or beaching to unload their cargo, in this case the men aboard the landing craft.

<sup>116</sup> Jones, 93.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 109.

and white film, and 5,000 feet of color film were shot.<sup>118</sup> Sergeant Hatch sealed up all of his equipment and put it on a flying boat plane bound for Washington, D.C. He had no idea just how powerful his film would be. All Hatch was concerned about was the fact he had survived and that he was headed home. After a long trip back to Hawaii, Hatch started the process of setting up his camp and preparing his mind for training when he received orders to immediately head to Washington for a debriefing about his film. Hatch thought initially that he was in trouble and had messed up by overexposing the film or getting dirt in the lens. Regardless of his paranoia, all he could do is get on a plane and face whatever was going to happen. He voiced his fears to historian Charles Jones saying, "I thought I was going to have my sword broken and my epaulets torn off because I hadn't done any good." He continued, "The first time you're doing something in combat, you can forget to change your lens . . . there are a number of things that could happen."<sup>119</sup> What he was unaware of was that he was actually being flown in to help edit the film to be shown in movie theaters across the country.

On the long flight back to D.C., Hatch reminisced about all he had experienced on Betio. Through his reflections he realized why his work was so important and that was to provide truth to the public about the realism of combat operations. The films produced by the Combat Cinematography Division would provide the public with the unclean images of warfare. They would finally see something dirty and

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<sup>118</sup> Wright, 131.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, 127.

grim as opposed to the Hollywood versions featuring handsome actors like Humphrey Bogart, or depicting brawny Americans beating the enemy without breaking a sweat. In the words of one Marine, those movies were the “kind of crap gives the folks back home the wrong kind of idea about what we are up against.”<sup>120</sup> Hatch arrived in San Francisco on 15 December 1943 and he was introduced to World War I veteran Lieutenant Colonel Dan Bender. As they proceeded to their next stop Bender took him down Main Street and asked him what he noticed. Hatch was astonished to find the marquees above movie theaters promoting newsreel footage called “Marines Fighting at Tarawa.”<sup>121</sup> Even more jaw dropping for Hatch was the fact that the theatres gave credit to him as the one who captured the footage. Lieutenant Colonel Bender had realized the public was faint of heart, and being a veteran of World War I, he knew what war was all about. Bender was aware that the news being reported was sensationalized and inaccurate. He explained to Hatch that he picked up the raw footage from the plane and viewed it before sending it to Washington for processing. Bender immediately saw the film as being the cure for the public’s martial naiveté. The main issue became the violence exhibited in Hatch’s film. Movies in that era did not reveal the violence and gore that people often see in movies today. They were more classy and romantic than they were action packed. Even the newsreels played before movies pushing for war bond sales or giving news about the war was propaganda providing false information of

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<sup>120</sup> John Wukovits, *One Square Mile of Hell: The Battle for Tawara* (New York, New American Library, 2006), 253.

<sup>121</sup>Jones, 128.



success without the sacrifice. This inaccuracy was another criticism discussed by Robert Sherrod saying “Our information services had failed to impress the people with the hard facts of the war . . . our communiqués gave the impression we were bowling over the enemy every time our bombers dropped a few pitiful tons of bombs.”<sup>122</sup> Many officials who viewed the film thought that its graphic nature would be too much for a public, which was already up in arms over the pictures, and news stories they were reading. The fear was there would be an even bigger uproar, perhaps starting open protests against the war and a bigger drop in the war effort. However, it did present a unique opportunity to reveal to Americans what they were facing and how hard a fight it was going to be. It could be what was needed to renew their interest in the war effort and convince the industrial leaders to avoid strikes to ensure maximum production for U.S. service members.<sup>123</sup> This film would erase the idea that Americans could win this fight with machines. Most importantly, it would back the warning to America by Marine Commandant, Lieutenant General Alexander Vandegrift. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, he warned that losses in future operations would be heavier than Tarawa. He also informed people they needed to realize that “the war is now past the period when victories can be won at a low cost.”<sup>124</sup> His warning was chilling to society and more frightening in that it was true. General Vandegrift did not confine this statement to only the Pacific campaign

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<sup>122</sup>Sherrod, 150.

<sup>123</sup> The problem with labor strikes was mentioned earlier. The Department of Commerce reported 13,500,000 man-days of production lost to strikes.

<sup>124</sup> "General Defends Tarawa Planning." *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*, Dec 18, 1943. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/151617855?accountid=6167>.

but included Europe as well. His defense was that the Germans and Japanese were backed into a corner and they would fight bitterly for the territory they had left. While this prediction was widely accepted among leading officers, civilians had a tough time coming to terms with it. Sergeant Hatch's film would unveil all of these problems to the people. All that was needed to release the film was President Roosevelt's approval.

As controversy continued to swirl and the film was being edited, the Marines relied on Colonel Mike Edson to try to quell the misinformation that had been released about Betio. Well spoken, direct, and articulate, Edson was also considered a hero in the Battle for Guadalcanal, having won the Congressional Medal of Honor. This status made him an ideal choice to combat the bad press. Colonel Edson was also one who realized the difficulties in fighting the Japanese. He was one of the most decorated Marines of the time and had engaged in close combat against them in Guadalcanal. He discussed his experiences with Sherrod before the battle began: that the Japanese were tough fighters and that the United States "could not count on heavy naval or air bombardment to kill all the Japs on Tarawa or even a large portion of them."<sup>125</sup> Edson also reiterated the point made by General Julian Smith that the casualties, given the nature of the operation, were tragic but acceptable, and that the numbers of casualties were only going to get worse before they got better. Edson continued meeting with news correspondents dispelling the idea that there was bad intelligence on the reef. He acknowledged that they knew about the reef,

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<sup>125</sup> Sherrod, 24-25.

but were unsure of what the tides would be like. This was different than early reports that made it seem like the United States had little knowledge of the protective reef surrounding it. In one example a Washington Post article reported: "A shelving reef hung up most of the Higgins boats and wave after wave of infantry had to struggle 500 yards through water neck deep under a murderous Japanese barrage. At low tide many of their bodies dot the reef."<sup>126</sup> The other point of contention was that most Marines died in the water: he reaffirmed that most of the losses happened inland among the pillboxes and trenches.<sup>127</sup> He finally warned the people about the kind of fighters the Japanese were, mentioning their fanaticism and their desire "to make the campaigns as costly as possible because they don't believe we can take it."<sup>128</sup>

While Edson defended the operation, Hatch continued to work with Washington and Hollywood to finish the film. Famous actor-turned- director Lewis Hayward was appointed to the photographic section of the Marine Corps and sent to Washington to work on the documentary combining all the images and film from the battle. Hatch was sent to work with Hollywood director Frank Capra. The Italian-born Capra had produced a number of hit films in Hollywood and was recruited by the War Activities Commission (WAC) to create short films to show in the movie

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<sup>126</sup> Richard W Johnston Representing the Combined American Press (Distributed by the Associated Press. 1943. "Island Battle Called Toughest in History of Marine Corps." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), Nov 27, 1. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/151587172?accountid=6167>.

<sup>127</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 230-231. This perception of that most of the casualties sustained were on the reef and water was created by the way the press covered the story. Nearly all of the photographs of dead Marines were taken with them on the beach, tangled in barbed wire on the beaches, floating in the water, or draped over disabled landing crafts on the reef. There was little reporting of the losses that happened further inland.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid, 230-231.

theatres across the country. Capra was desperate for something new, having grown tired of seeing far away shots of shore bombardments, dog fights, and footage of Naval task forces underway. Hatch's rare footage of Japanese battling Marines up close gave Capra a new and fresh take on the war. Capra recognized the dramatic images and footage would captivate the minds of people across America. He was a good person to have a connection with because of the famous director's connection to the WAC. This connection promised to secure 16,500 movie theatres that would allocate ten percent of their screen time to government-sponsored films that would be free of charge to the public.<sup>129</sup> What was significant about this was the popularity of movie theatres across the country. With the rise of cities and urbanization across the country, more and more people were attracted to the new forms of entertainment. Movies were relatively inexpensive, and they were extraordinary pieces of technology of the time. They attracted audiences young and old, and now they were going to be able to advertise the first documentary showing actual Marines fighting a real battle up close with the Japanese. With Capra assisting in the production of the film and Lewis Hayward directing it, production companies quickly acquired it so that they could show it. The film still provoked questions, the main one being whether the public was psychologically ready to see it.

President Roosevelt went back and forth on the issue. He had been put to the test time and time again during his presidency, and now he had to make a decision on a film that could either help or hinder the war effort. Fortunately for the film,

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<sup>129</sup> Jones,132.

President Roosevelt was a good friend of Robert Sherrod. At a White House correspondents dinner, Roosevelt saw Sherrod. Knowing Sherrod had witnessed the battle, he decided to base his decision on the journalist's advice. President Roosevelt asked Sherrod for a private conversation, to discuss the film. Roosevelt asked Sherrod if he had seen the gruesome images of the film, and Sherrod acknowledged that he had. When asked if he thought the film needed to be shown to the public, Sherrod responded saying, "Gruesome, yes, Mr. President; but that's the way war is out there, and I think the people are going to have to get used to that idea."<sup>130</sup> Sherrod made it clear to the President that the American people did not understand the war. This error in understanding could have resulted in far worse consequences with the losses America would sustain at places like Saipan, Guam, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. President Roosevelt recognized the need for the film, so it was released without restriction on 2 March 1944. The newsreel companies such as Fox Movietone, Paramount, and Universal jumped at the chance to show the first up-close fight of a battle in the theaters. Learning of the twenty-minute newsreel people flocked to the theaters to experience the Battle for Betio. The film received overwhelming praise for its realism and truthful treatment of the war. One of the greatest impacts it had on people was the accurate knowledge of the Japanese soldier. No longer did people have the images of the Japanese as being animal-like in their appearance as created by American propagandists. Those primate features given to the Japanese created the impression that the Japanese were inferior and

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<sup>130</sup> Wright, 132.

lacked the mental and physical fortitude to stand and fight the American military. This misrepresentation furthered the idea that Americans were fighting an easy war that they would win quickly with machines. Hatch's film told a far different story, however, with people seeing a strong, intelligent, and courageous foe that would fight to the death.

*With the Marines at Tarawa* hit the theaters across America. Just as Tarawa was the first amphibious assault conducted against a fortified position, this film was the first of its kind. In comparison, other wartime documentaries failed to capture actual combat scenes and often used actors to portray participants in a battle. The only thing Director Lewis Hayward had to add were the sounds because the cameras could capture only images but not sound. The film opened to the image of an anchor and globe with "U.S. Marines" imprinted on it to the tune of the Marines' Hymn. It then showed footage of the Naval Fleet steaming towards the Tarawa atoll with warships of different shapes and sizes. It placed emphasis on the training that happened around the clock such as the loading and test firing of weapons and the commanders seated around an operational map planning the invasion. The map reveals an outline of the reef, Japanese defensive positions, and the pier that jutted out into the lagoon. Early in the film the message is clear to the audience that these were not actors but real American Marines. As the camera pans across the faces of young Marines gathered at a worship service before D-Day, viewers see different facial structures and sizes of anonymous men with a look of uncertainty on their faces. As the images of these men sink in, the narrator utters the unsettling phrase,

“Many of these men were killed the following morning.”<sup>131</sup> The audience is then exposed to the first joint sea and air bombardment in the history of war. The massive 16-inch batteries on battleships are shown hurling their shells to the distant beaches. Throughout the bombardment scene, the loading of the AMTRACs showed an important message that reoccurs throughout the film. That message was of the importance of all the equipment and munitions that were required for an operation like this and others that would follow. The purpose was to inform the audience that they all needed to pitch in to help produce the equipment the military needed to win this war.

The film continues to unfold the horrors that befell many at Tarawa. It presented the AMTRACs crossing the reef and some being struck by mortars. The audience gets exposed to the sights of Marines wading ashore in chest-deep water. As it fades into the next act, the first images of the wounded begin to surface with a young man’s leg torn up and bloody. Before the spectators can catch their breath, the most famous scene of the movie occurs with Lieutenant Alexander Bonnyman’s charge up a bombproof. Lieutenant Bonnyman charged up the bombproof and held off a Japanese counterattack, giving his life to protect his men: he posthumously received the Medal of Honor for his actions. Viewers see Marines charging up the hill and Japanese running out in the open to meet them. The dramatic images even reveal a Japanese soldier getting shot within a few feet of the camera. Now the American people were watching his final valiant moments on tape. Following the

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<sup>131</sup> *With the Marines at Tarawa.*

charge against the bombproof, Hatch takes the audience further inland to reveal the difficulties that would take place in fighting the Japanese. Americans were exposed to the bombproofs, bunkers, and trenches dug around the island. As the camera roved over these structures, the narrator explained, "These bunkers were so well constructed that demolition charges and heavy shelling failed to crumble them."<sup>132</sup> The purpose was to tell people that their thoughts that wars could be won with machines were false; the only way to win was through the flesh and blood of American sons.

The most stunning part of Hatch's film came towards the end. Once the fire died down, he was able to film the destruction wrought upon the island. While the images Hatch captured of a mass of dead Japanese bodies clustered around a bunker were impactful, they became an afterthought when he showed the bodies of dead U.S. Marines. It was not just a few images of two or three, but it was dozens of dead American bodies. The heartbreaking images must have caused the theaters to fall silent. The bodies were twisted wrecks of humans with some missing heads and limbs. The camera slowly turned across the beach showing bloated disfigured bodies floating aimlessly in the surf and some partly submerged in the sand. What made these images more disheartening was the knowledge that these were not actors. These were people's sons, husbands, and fathers who had given everything they had in a feat of overwhelming courage to achieve victory. The film ends with the flag-raising ceremony above Betio and Marines standing victorious. People now

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<sup>132</sup> *With the Marines.*



saw Tarawa as a gallant victory instead of a tragic loss of life. Tarawa became a battle to fit into the annals along with other great battles. *Time Magazine* put it best saying, "It gave the Nation a name to stand beside those of Concord Bridge, the BonHomme Richard, the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and Belleau Wood."<sup>133</sup> Though two of the battles listed by *Time* were regarded by Americans as heroic defeats rather than victories, the magazine was now describing Tarawa as glorious for the American military.

War bond sales rose substantially after the film was released. To help get the word out about the film, the government sent Norman Hatch on a war bond tour. Hatch was very effective in his effort selling \$23, 350 in bonds by telling his story to the People's Bank of Cumberland Maryland.<sup>134</sup> A letter from the American Red Cross to Hatch reveals the seriousness that people now had towards the war. Its closing line read, "You gave us a very clear picture of what our Armed Forces are facing."<sup>135</sup> While in shock over what they faced, people finally began to understand the warning by General Vandegrift and General Julian Smith that there would be far more costly battles than Tarawa. The gamble to release the film had done what government officials hoped it would do: renew interest and fervor in the war effort. Perhaps one of the few downsides the film produced was that enlistment into the

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<sup>133</sup> Alexander, *Across the Reef*, 1.

<sup>134</sup> "\$23,350 In Bonds Sold at Peoples Bank Dedication," *The Cumberland News* (Cumberland, Maryland), February 15, 1944. Norman Hatch's Personal Papers, MCHC.

<sup>135</sup> Louis Sigler Letter to Sgt. Norman T. Hatch, 16 February 1944, Norman Hatch Personal Papers Section, MCHC.

Marine Corps dropped 35% as young men saw what they would be facing and wanted no part of it.<sup>136</sup>

President Roosevelt's decision to release the film helped to improve the war effort. It educated people on what it would take to defeat America's enemies. It prepared the public for higher casualties to come at bigger battles. When the sacrifices mounted at places like Saipan, Peleliu, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima, the people were not outraged but saddened. They understood whom they were fighting and the costs of war. Hatch and other combat cameramen on Tarawa helped to expose the myth that machines alone could win the fight. The effects of the battle's documentation greatly impacted America's perception of modern warfare.

Tarawa was a battle of firsts. It tested amphibious warfare doctrine; it showed mistakes and successes. It taught the lessons that would need to be applied to other islands in future landings. While the Marines were successful on Betio Island, it could be argued that the same mistakes made in a place like Peleliu would have been disastrous and possibly result in a defeat for American forces. One can imagine how the public would have reacted to a failure such as this. It is possible to imagine that other amphibious landings would never have happened. As tragic as Tarawa was, the information gained paved the way for future operations to be successful. The lessons learned were the key to breaking Japanese defenses across the Pacific. Colonel Edson expressed these thoughts ten years after the battle to Robert Sherrod. He stated, "Without Tarawa, Peleliu, Saipan, and Iwo Jima would

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<sup>136</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 229.

have been defeats, not victories.” He continued, “The losses sustained at Tarawa were small when compared to the good that came out of it.”<sup>137</sup> Edson was not alone in his assessment, with every commander who participated in the invasion force agreeing that it had to happen. It had to happen so that the lessons learned could inform the military how to better conduct amphibious warfare. It taught them how to improve their tactics and strategy. More importantly it taught a nation what war was all about. It brought the fight and an understanding to a society that had rarely known such death and destruction since the Civil War some 78 years prior. Those lessons will be the focal point in the next section of this study.

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<sup>137</sup> Sherrod, 154-155.

## **Chapter 5: Tough Lessons Learned**

With World War I dawned the modern age of warfare introducing the deadliest weapons the world had ever seen. The massive loss of troops led to the war entering a stalemate. In an effort to turn the fortunes of war in favor of the Allies, the British decided to mount an amphibious invasion at the Gallipoli Peninsula. This attack would hopefully allow them to invade Istanbul, aid the Russians, and defeat the Ottomans. This attack would in turn expose Germany's flank, which would bring an end to the mass stalemate taking place on the Western Front. The result of the campaign that lasted from February 1915 to January 1916, was a humiliating defeat for the Allies at a cost of 250,000 casualties with 46,000 dead.<sup>138</sup> This attempt at an amphibious operation made many military planners believe that such a maneuver was nearly impossible and too costly in lives to actually work. The Marines at the time were viewed by the bigger branches as merely a security force and were paid little attention by Congress. Many argued that the Industrial Age had produced weapons that made setting up a defensive perimeter much easier. Despite the rhetoric surrounding amphibious operations, the Marines firmly believed that they were equipped to handle such missions.

Tarawa became the first successful amphibious assault against a heavily fortified target in the history of warfare. Its success proved that it could be done. The Marines had achieved success through studying the failure at Gallipoli and rewriting the doctrine. The overall objective of amphibious warfare is not a

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<sup>138</sup> "Battle of Gallipoli," *History*. 17 August 2013. <http://www.history.com/topics/battle-of-gallipoli>.

complicated one. As General Eisenhower stated, “You put men in boats, and as long as you get well-trained crews to take the boats in, it’s the simplest deployment in the world—men can go nowhere else except the beach.”<sup>139</sup> The complications of these operations lie in the delicacy of them. It must be well organized, coordinated, and fast. If something goes wrong it will disintegrate quickly. The Marines concluded that the key to success in amphibious warfare was timing and speed. Betio reiterated that point with its major flaws being those of coordination. While the assault on Betio was a success, it revealed many shortcomings of Marine Corps doctrine. As Admiral Raymond Spruance put it, “The lessons we learned capturing Tarawa were turned to good account, however, and saved many lives during future operations.”<sup>140</sup>

Although some ship-to-shore landings had been made at places like Guadalcanal, New Britain, and New Guinea, none of these were against formidable resistance. The drive through the Gilberts in the Central Pacific was different. Intelligence revealed the heavy fortifications built up on Betio, so it was no mystery what the Marines were walking into. General Julian Smith made this challenge abundantly clear stating, “I am telling you the truth when I say that we did not meet a single surprise.”<sup>141</sup> It became the testing ground for the Marines’ doctrine of amphibious assaults. The errors in this test case were found to be many. The main

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<sup>139</sup> Isley, 6.

<sup>140</sup> Sherrod, 153.

<sup>141</sup> Julian Smith letter to Harriotte Smith, 24 December 1943. General Smith’s confidence in not being surprised is likely referring to the Japanese defenses and the possibility of men having to wade ashore. There was always skepticism among himself and other planners about the Navy’s bombardment plans.

issues that were learned were coordination of air and naval gunfire support, communications, supplying the ground forces, types of weapons, and a heavily armored AMTRAC.

The Navy quickly assessed its effectiveness following the assault and determined Naval fire had been ineffective for the types of defensive structures encountered. Despite being the heaviest saturation bombardment in naval history, the three-hour bombardment destroyed only unprotected buildings and the coastal defense guns. It did not eliminate machine gun nests or bunkers. The Navy also realized ships had allowed lengthy gaps between firing, giving the Japanese a chance to recover from the blasting and man their weapons. Admiral Turner admitted that, "Air and naval gunfire preparations for two or three hours is not adequate. The preparation should begin several days prior to D-Day and should be designated both for destruction and for unrelenting harassing effect."<sup>142</sup> This new policy was to be combined with air strikes and would last throughout the war. They also began experimenting with different types of shells designed to penetrate thick structures. A replica of the Betio defenses was constructed near Hawaii to provide practice targets for the Navy to train with. Another addition to be made was providing specialists who could coordinate Naval gunfire, as well as landing parties that could coordinate landings.

Another grievance came against the Navy pilots. Many Marines appreciated their efforts but were angered that no Marine pilots were involved in the operation.

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<sup>142</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 233.

This omission was significant because naval aviators did not get the close air-to-ground support training that Marine pilots received. Marine aviators also had close air support experience in Central America and the Caribbean during the Banana Wars. The naval aviators involved at Tarawa were reported to have missed their target on many occasions. In one example, an airstrike was called on a rusted half-sunk Japanese ship that harbored a machine gun crew. It took over seven tries with some bombs missing by 200 yards or more before they were successful in hitting their target.<sup>143</sup> Colonel Edson was the most critical of this flaw, citing the “aviators’ lack of training in close air support, weapons and performance.”<sup>144</sup> He would push the Navy to better train its pilots for close air support, and he stressed how important it was to have it in combination with the Naval shelling. It was also realized that specialists were needed in directing air strikes in support of ground forces.<sup>145</sup> These people would prove a valuable asset in being able to communicate more effectively with Navy gunners and pilots.

After surveying the battlefield and making notes of the Japanese defenses, experts concluded that preliminary bombardment should be aimed toward total destruction as opposed to neutralization.<sup>146</sup> Tarawa also revealed to Navy planners the importance of timing the naval bombardment with the aerial assaults. As Captain Stockman pointed out, the timing of the naval and air raids must conform to

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<sup>143</sup> Alexander, *Across the Reef*, 29.

<sup>144</sup> Alexander, *Utmost Savagery*, 233-234.

<sup>145</sup> Millett, 409.

<sup>146</sup> It should be acknowledged that total destruction is impossible. What they meant by this was that providing a few hours of fire support to suppress an enemy force was not good enough. They instead had to provide days of advanced fire support in an effort to inflict as much damage as possible.

the movement of the assault waves.<sup>147</sup> The reason was simple: the landing force could not establish its own fire support until it had enough men and resources on the beach. If the supporting ships and planes failed to provide fire support, the landing parties would be exposed to mutually supporting fires from the enemy. This problem became significant during the battle when the fire from the sea and air subsided during the landing process. The men got pinned down before they were able to establish a base of covering fire to support the movement of other landing troops. Furthermore, the supplies and reinforcements were turned back before they could get close to the beach. The Navy understood that its role was to protect the landing party until it could establish itself ashore.

Another weakness that Tarawa revealed was beachhead logistics. It was unanimously agreed that a greater number of combat equipped AMTRACs should be used in subsequent operations. The cheaply armored older models would not do in future attacks. Along with more and better-equipped AMTRACs, Colonel Edson emphasized that the beginning waves of Marines were weighted down with too much equipment, making them slow and vulnerable, especially if they had to ditch into the water (some Marine casualties involved drowning from the equipment). This led to a detailed plan of combat loading that the Marines still use today. It designates primary assault forces and those held in reserve. This plan provides for the lead elements to load themselves with only essential gear making them more mobile and flexible. The reserve elements would be supply and logistics crafts each

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<sup>147</sup> Stockman, 67.



with a designated area. This would help in understanding where vital supplies were during the climax of battle. The combat loading procedure also designated certain ships as nerve centers for the operation. They were to be equipped with the best communications equipment in the field. At Tarawa it was realized there was no ability to coordinate landing parties once they launched from their mother ships. This issue made several assault waves late or worse caused some to be sent right into the teeth of the Japanese guns.

Some other flaws that were addressed were communications and small unit tactics. As historian Jeter Isley argued, the issue of faulty communications “stood out like a sore thumb.”<sup>148</sup> When the assault on Betio was being planned, the decision was made to name the battleship *Maryland* the command ship. This move turned out to be a poor choice of ships as it was a main combatant. The constant salvos of *Maryland*’s eight sixteen-inch guns knocked the communications circuitry out repeatedly, leaving the commanding generals blind to what was happening ashore, and it left field commanders unable to coordinate landings and reinforcement groups. To complicate things further, the radios provided to the Marines were ungainly and not waterproof. This problem left the Marines with virtually no communications with each other or the commanders back on the *Maryland*. This lack of communications made the Betio success all the more amazing. However amazing it was, that mistake could not be made in subsequent landings where the margin for error grew smaller with each step taken towards Japan. Almost

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<sup>148</sup> Isley, 252.

immediately after the after-action reports were released, lightweight and waterproof radios went into production. Command and Control centers were also changed to be either on frigates or more commonly on aircraft carriers.

The other major problem to be solved was small unit tactics. The Marine infantry were very well trained and disciplined in their field of expertise. What they lacked was knowledge on how to work with other elements of the assault force such as Marine engineers and tanks. One example was the combination of tanks and infantry. The tanks were an important asset but were blind and vulnerable to suicide bombers. They discovered quickly that they needed to address joint tank and infantry tactics because of the number of tanks disabled by tank traps, hidden Japanese bunkers, mines, and snipers that picked off any tanker who poked his head out to see where he was going. It was evident that to be combat effective, tanks and infantry had to be trained to work together. This training would pay dividends in later battles, particularly Peleliu where the Japanese had constructed a complicated bunker and tunnel system. Tanks also began to be outfitted with phones on the back so that infantrymen could talk with the drivers.

Along the same lines as joint tank and infantry tactics was better coordination of infantry with the heavy weapons and engineers. The flamethrowers and demolitions experts were highly valuable during and following Tarawa. The fanatical attitude of the Japanese required the Americans to dig them out of every bunker and underground tunnel that the Marines came across. The flamethrower could pour a jet of molten hot jelly that would not only instantly catch its victims on

fire but also suffocate those out of reach. It would serve to better protect Marines by not forcing them to search bunkers or tunnels, because the flamethrowers could kill without their having directly to see what they were shooting at. The overwhelming heat also cleared the dense vegetation the Japanese used so cleverly to conceal their positions, making them easier targets for tanks and other heavy weapons. Therefore more flamethrowers were issued to each division, and training commenced to teach riflemen how to work with the flamethrowers. Flamethrowers became so valued in the Pacific that tanks were even outfitted with larger versions and planes began carrying the napalm bomb.

The final tactical lesson learned was the importance of demolitions experts. The type of defenses encountered on Betio gave Americans great respect for the Japanese as masters of defense. The engineers' importance grew significantly with the discovery of hidden structures that navy ships and aircraft could not destroy. It would be up to them to destroy beach obstacles, tank traps, hidden bunkers, and other fortifications that could be encountered. Therefore, there was a rise in joint communications and tactical movement training between riflemen and engineers. The Navy also saw the need for a special type of warrior. While they did have sound intelligence on Betio, they realized they could not account for obstacles in the water and on the beach. Naval leaders also knew their hydrographic data on positions were guesses at best. They wanted to develop a team of underwater swimmers that could stealthily approach a beach doing reconnaissance on the reefs, beach

defenses, and surf conditions.<sup>149</sup> This group would also be able to destroy enemy mines or other obstacles that blocked heavy equipment from reaching the beaches. This extraordinary vision was the origin for the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs). Admiral Kelly Turner, who served in Operation GALVANIC, began organizing the UDTs shortly after the battle. Once they were established, they served in nearly every battle in the Pacific. They proved a useful commodity that evolved into what are today the Navy SEALs.

Tarawa revealed many of the faults in Marine Corps amphibious doctrine; sadly 1,000 men gave their lives during this test. Despite the sacrifices that were made, the commanders saw meaning in those they had to bury. The Commanding General of the Pacific wrote a telegram to those who served on Tarawa that read, "Congratulations on your hard fought victory. The Second Marine Division has added another brilliant page to the history of the Corps. The lessons learned from our battle on Betio will be of greatest value to our future operations."<sup>150</sup>

Nearly every commander involved at Tarawa agreed it had to happen as it did. There were many tactical and operational lessons learned from this battle. Reflecting back on the Pacific Campaign, Major General Merritt Edson said, "Without Tarawa, Peleliu, Saipan, and Iwo Jima probably would have been defeats, not

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<sup>149</sup> Alexander, *Across the Reef*, 236.

<sup>150</sup> Messages from 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division Headquarters to the officers and men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division, 24 December 1943, Julian C. Smith Personal Papers Collection, MCHC.

victories.”<sup>151</sup> There were other lessons to be learned from this battle as well. Those were the psychological lessons taught to the American people.

Before people saw the battle through the lens of the combat cameramen, they were under illusions about what mortal combat involved. They failed to grasp the severity and brutality of warfare and focused on their own concerns instead of supporting the war effort. This attitude is exemplified by Americans’ concern for maintaining segregation; and the labor strikes that plagued the cities costing the production of needed equipment on the frontlines. General Julian Smith had been partially correct when he charged that the public had, “developed the psychology that battles can be won with practically no losses.”<sup>152</sup> Those near 4,000 casualties in 76 hours opened the eyes of those all around the country. When the shock wore off that an “inferior” race of Japanese soldiers could do that to so many Americans, they began looking for answers. The answer they discovered was not one they were expecting. They found that all the technology in the world could not be the deciding factor in such a fierce fight. Yes, it can disrupt communications, destroy pillboxes, and large gun emplacements; but it cannot destroy every machine gun crew, sniper, or bunker complex. The realization set in that the great conflict could only be won through the blood, sweat, and grit of their own flesh and bone. The newfound consciousness that lives would have to be lost and more costly battles were on the horizon was the biggest lesson learned from Tarawa. Hatch’s film foreshadowed this

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<sup>151</sup> Sherrod, 155.

<sup>152</sup> Letter to Julian Smith, 22 March 1944, Julian C. Smith Personal Papers Collection, MCHC.

reality through bringing the truths of modern warfare to the homefront. The profound effect of this film was that the American people were now prepared for more headlines reading “Heavy Casualties Expected.” It gave Americans a taste of war’s painful cost and taught them that victory would not come easy. Without this knowledge how would they have reacted to the numbers lost in the future battles?

Tarawa *Marine Only	Saipan *Marine & Army	Guam *All branches	Peleliu *Marine & Army	Iwo Jima *Marine Only	Okinawa *All branches
3,302	14,111	7,800	7,919	23,203	49,151
991 KIA	3,426 KIA	1,747 KIA	1,460 KIA	5,885 KIA	12,520 <sup>153</sup>

Looking at the numbers of dead and wounded in other battles in relation to Tarawa illustrates Tarawa’s losses paling in comparison. Given what we know about the public’s reaction to Tarawa, one can only imagine how they would have received the news of Iwo Jima’s losses. The casualty rate for the Marines at Iwo Jima was so high that the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division was split up and never reorganized. Had this or another large battle site been the first test of amphibious landings, Americans might have succumbed to the Japanese strategy by demanding an end to the hostilities and a meeting at the peace table. Without a supporting public in a democratic country, it is impossible to attain victory, especially fighting somewhere so far away. It is for that reason that the most important lesson of all was mentally preparing the military and the public for the war to come. Mentally the military knew it was going

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<sup>153</sup> Robert Leckie, *Strong Men Armed* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1997), 228, 355-356, 383, 421, 463-464, 519.

to be a tough fight. What they did not know was whether their methods would work and just how sophisticated the Japanese defenses were. Tarawa revealed the flaws in their strategy and primed them for their future conquests across the Pacific. General Julian Smith added another important element to the significance of Tarawa. The following passage was from an interview conducted with him ten years following the battle.

The significance of Tarawa is that it proved that even the most strongly fortified islands, defended by men determined to fight to the bitter end would fall to men imbued with still greater determination to win regardless of the cost. It set the pattern for all the later battles in the Central Pacific. It showed America that the advance across the Pacific was not only possible but practical. To the Japanese it proved that their strongest outposts would surely fall and expose their homeland to invasion based on the very strongholds they had considered impregnable. For Japan, Tarawa was the beginning of the end of their dream of empire, and for America it was a step towards victory, which it was hoped, would bring peace to the world and freedom to its oppressed peoples.<sup>154</sup>

Julian Smith could not prove that the Marine “determination to win” was greater than that of the Japanese, but he was justified in emphasizing the importance of their valor and determination in the face of heavy casualties. It also may not have proven that the Japanese’s “strongest outpost would surely fall,” but

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<sup>154</sup> Sherrod, 153.

the overall lessons Smith drew were those of optimism in the skill and valor of the American fighting man.

Approaching the war with a renewed determination, Americans began to brace themselves for the fight to come. American society, for a brief moment, banded together. They knew they could win; they knew it would come with a price and that they had to come together to support the war effort. Although labor strikes continued to happen sporadically, the numbers decreased in the industries that were needed to make war supplies. Women and African-Americans were employed in positions previously closed to them.

While Tarawa did not affect a complete overhaul of American society, it did have a profound impact upon it. It brought people together, if only for one instant, as Americans. The savagery Norman Hatch and Robert Sherrod revealed consumed Americans with an overwhelming sense of urgency. Seeing the dead, disfigured, and helpless pulled the blinders off of a culture disillusioned by years of isolation. Betio taught the U.S. military many lessons to be used in future amphibious operations. It taught them about the importance of reef-crossing vehicles, and ship-to-shore communication. It revealed the flaws in preliminary bombardment and how timing was everything. America learned the necessity of packing light, moving quickly, and waterproofing valuable equipment such as radios. Commanders saw the need for training joint maneuvers among the riflemen, engineers, and tanks.

Outside of the tactical lessons learned, the more important schooling America received was in the truth in war itself. Through the works of Robert



Sherrod, Norman Hatch, and other correspondents Americans saw the true colors of war. A divided nation saw firsthand that with combat there is no easy road. They also gained confidence that they could win, but only with full support of a united people. There could be no more bickering over labor because for every strike, there would be another American killed. The issue of race had to be swept aside as those men and women of color were Americans. While it did not heal all wounds, it brought realization to people of the United States. It was realized that there is nothing glamorous about the mortal clash of human flesh and steel. Americans knew with certainty that its sons would be wounded, would suffer, and would die. Historian Joseph Alexander described Tarawa's effect best in title of his book calling it *Utmost Savagery*. The war, people realized, was one of utmost savagery and they must steady themselves for the martyrs they must give up for victory.

Tarawa was only a small price Americans paid in a bigger and bloodier war. It was a battle of many firsts both tactically and publically with it being released, uncensored, to civilians. The shock and attitude of the American people revealed a society psychologically unready to fight. Betio was called bloody, savage, brutal, and many other vivid verbs. However, it was no bloodier than many other battles fought in history. It was simply an engagement of mortal combat between both sides. Tarawa became a symbol to the American people of war's tragic nature. Wars are fought and they are full of chaos and hurt. In war people die and they do not die a clean death; they are mangled and in many cases suffer. Combat exhibits unspeakable horrors that people who have never fought can never fully understand.

It is an important lesson that citizens need to never forget and one the generations of today seem to overlook. While the United States continues to fight wars today, many people continue on in their lives unaware of the hardships service members face. Arguably the media today is as much at fault as it was 70 years ago because it does not inform people the about war. White House Correspondent Jack Tapper voiced his concern on this by saying, “The media in the United States—taking their cue from the American public—often shy away from such coverage, and that has not served the nation well, to say nothing of the troops or the people in those countries that the U.S. government says it’s trying to help.”<sup>155</sup> Those words are reminiscent of what Julian Smith must have thought a few weeks after taking the field. Today American society could use a film to document the good the American military has done. The public needs to see the heroic stories that never get attention due to be being overshadowed by all the negative press. It is important that the positives be revealed to not only bring America together in supporting the wars being fought today, but also for the memories of the men and women who did not return while performing their duties.

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<sup>155</sup> Jake Tapper, *The Outpost* (New York: Little, Brown, & Company, 2012), xi.

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