

## Amphibious Operations

### Tarawa: The Testing of an Amphibious Doctrine

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The most difficult of all military operations is an opposed amphibious landing. The very nature of such a landing assures high risk. Moving men and equipment across open water and unprotected beaches in the face of carefully calculated fire is an extremely dangerous proposition. Furthermore, the defender has the advantage of time and space. He is more knowledgeable of the terrain on which he is fighting, and he often has the time to prepare his defenses in considerable depth, erecting a wide variety of obstacles designed to canalize landing craft into undesirable landing sites or lethal fire zones. He can also use elaborate systems of tunnels and trenches to move reserves, redeploy forces, or respond to other crises in engaging the landing force.

The invasion force, on the other hand, is totally self-contained. It must carry every conceivable item it will need. It will serve as fire support base, commissary, evacuation hospital, communications center, recovery and maintenance depot, and command post until an adequate beachhead is secured to move those activities ashore. Moreover, the invasion commander will always have an imperfect knowledge of events and conditions ashore until the objective is taken. However skillfully he employs deception or surprise, he will eventually have to tip his hand to the defender as to when and where the attack will occur. Historically, therefore, amphibious operations have been attempted only rarely, and seldom have they been successful. Perhaps the only operation more difficult than landing on a hostile beach is withdrawing from one.

After the abysmal failure by the British to maintain and exploit their beachhead at Gallipoli in 1915, many military experts concluded that modern firepower had made the already difficult task of amphibious operations impossible. Therefore, European armies, as well as the U.S. Army, devoted little attention to the problem of amphibious operations after World War I. The U.S. Marine Corps, however, found itself in a serious predicament in the years following the war. During the war, the Marines had served in France with considerable distinction as regular infantry. Many Army leaders believed that this should be the continuing role for the Marines. Faced with a parsimonious Congress and the reduction of capital ships necessitated by the Washington Naval Treaty, the Navy questioned whether it could continue to maintain the Marines. What limited manpower and resources the Marines could muster were used to sustain colonial infantry in Latin American interventions. Within this milieu, the Marine Corps began to cast about for a more significant mission.

In 1921, Major Earl H. Ellis wrote a paper that offered a solution to the Marine Corps' dilemma. Ellis' paper dealt with the problem of wresting control of bases in the central Pacific in the event of war with Japan. He suggested that it might be possible, after all, to land successfully on and seize defended islands. Based on Ellis' proposals, the Marine Corps began the difficult process of developing a doctrine to accomplish this objective. Thirteen years later, after numerous exercises, both in the schoolhouse and with the fleet, the Marine Corps published the "Tentative Manual of Landing Operations," its protodocctrine for amphibious operations.

Doctrine, however, is merely theory. No matter how soundly it is based on past experience and solid staff work, there are no guarantees that it will achieve success. Only under the rigors of combat, with all its infinite possibilities for mischance and confusion, can doctrine be thoroughly and definitively tested. Thus, nine years after the appearance of the "Tentative Manual of Landing Operations," the Marine Corps was yet to demonstrate the efficacy of its nascent amphibious doctrine.

Although Allied forces in World War II conducted several seaborne invasions in 1942, none were staged against heavily defended, open beaches. The first real opportunity to test the Marine doctrine came in November 1943 at Tarawa atoll in the Gilbert Islands. Composed of more than a dozen coral atolls 2,000 nautical miles southwest of Honolulu, the Gilberts stretch 500 nautical miles in an area of the Pacific 3 degrees north and south of the equator, between 172 and 176 degrees west longitude. The British declared the Gilberts a protectorate in 1892 and established an administrative headquarters at Tarawa. Tarawa is a typical Pacific atoll ninety miles north of the equator, a hook-shaped chain of small islands surrounding a lagoon approximately eighteen by thirteen miles in size. The westward opening to the lagoon is protected by a coral reef that lies just beneath the surface of the Pacific. The highest elevation on Tarawa is fifteen feet above sea level.

The barb in the Tarawa hook is formed by Betio Islet, less than 300 acres of hard-packed coral sand liberally sprinkled with coconut palms. The island has no distinguishing natural features and would be of little importance except that an opening through the reef into Tarawa lagoon lies at its north end. It was probably because of this access into the relative protection of the lagoon that a British trading company established a copra station on Betio at the beginning of this century. To facilitate loading copra onto ocean-going vessels, the British built a long pier on the lagoon side of the island that reached to the deep water outside the reef. The long pier was the only significant structure on Betio when a Japanese task force landed in December 1941, evicted the British manager and his staff, and constructed an airfield.

By November 1943, the Japanese had turned Betio into a substantial fortress. About 5,000 naval infantry manned an extensive system of reinforced concrete blockhouses, coconut-log bunkers (covered by 3 or 4 feet of coral sand), steel pillboxes, and carefully placed gun pits— all connected by an elaborate network of tunnels and slit trenches. A score of heavy guns in hardened revetments, including four 8-inch guns removed from the British naval base at Singapore, commanded virtually every approach to the island. Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki, sent to Tarawa because of his reputation as a superb tactical commander, was so confident in his defenses that he remarked that Betio could not be taken by a million men in a hundred years. He could not have been more mistaken.

The Tarawa landing was part of Operation Galvanic, conducted by the V Amphibious Corps under the command of Holland M. ("Howling Mad") Smith. Galvanic called for the 2d Marine Division, under the command of Major General Julian C. Smith, to land at Tarawa, while the Army's 27th Infantry Division landed at Makin atoll to the north and a smaller Marine unit landed at Abemama atoll to the south. Clearly, however, Tarawa was the most important landing of the three.

Of the many details to be worked out by the V Corps staff over the next two months, the most important were on which beach to land and when to land. Betio is like a lazy triangle lying on its side, three miles long from west to east and about three-quarters of a mile wide at the base. The south side of the triangle presented the best landing beaches. These beaches were closest to the airfield, one of the primary objectives, and were on the seaward side of the island, closer to where the invasion fleet would anchor (see map 3). The staff designated these landing areas Black Beach 1 and Black Beach 2. The narrow base of the triangle, designated Green Beach, lay close to the opening through the reef into the lagoon, and landing craft would not have to climb over a reef to reach this shore. Along the Black and Green Beaches, the Japanese had constructed extensive obstacles, both above and below the water line.

That portion of Betio that faced the lagoon was designated Red Beaches 1, 2, and 3. Not only did the Red Beaches offer some protection from the open sea, Smith's staff concluded that they were the least heavily defended. Furthermore, a long pier was on this side of the island, and it could play a significant role in getting men ashore. Also, a seawall of coconut logs just above the high-tide line would provide some protection from small-arms fire to the men who reached it. The great disadvantage in using the Red Beaches was the precise navigation required by the small craft in carrying men and equipment ashore. Each wave of the invasion force would have to pass through the opening into the lagoon, turn to the starboard (at a predetermined point) in open water, maintain its position in formation as it approached the beach, and then mount the reef before proceeding ashore to discharge troops and cargoes at designated points. Despite these obstacles, the staff selected the Red Beaches for the landing.

The question of timing was even more problematical than that of choosing a landing beach. Doctrine called for landings at high tide. This was necessary so that the landing craft could clear as many defensive obstacles and land as far up the beach as possible. On a coral atoll, the landing craft would also have to get over the reef. The tides at Tarawa atoll are among the most capricious on earth. Without reliable charts and with little agreement among the intelligence experts, the staff struggled with the problem. Other factors, however, ultimately determined the time schedule. Washington was pressing for a quick offensive victory, and the Tarawa landing would have to coincide with the other Galvanic landings. Finally, Smith confirmed D-day as 20 November 1943. The tides would not be favorable.

The invasion force, composed of the 2d Marine Division (which had been training in New Zealand) and most of the support forces coming from Hawaii, rendezvoused on D-2. In accordance with doctrine, Navy and Marine aircraft had already flown a hundred sorties against Betio, saturating the island with bombs and strafing anything that moved. As the fleet approached Betio, its big guns worked over the island's defenses one last time, especially the area immediately behind the landing beaches. All reports indicated that nothing was left alive on Betio. Later analysis showed that about one-third of the defenders were indeed killed in the preinvasion bombardment, but that still left all too many Japanese to greet the Marines when they came ashore.

A little after 0800 on Saturday morning, 20 November, three reinforced amphibious battalions of the 2d Marine Regiment (commanded by Colonel David Shoup on board the first wave of landing craft and amphibious tractors [amtracs]) began moving toward Red Beaches 1, 2, and 3, abandoning the holding pattern they had maintained for more than four hours. Almost immediately, things went wrong. Many of the heavy guns on Betio had not been put out of action. They began to unleash a deadly hail of shrapnel and antiboat rounds into the tightly packed landing craft as they neared the reef, inflicting the first casualties on the attackers. The amtracs paused briefly as they reached the reef, then climbed over it and proceeded toward the beach. The Higgins boats, however, with a draft of about 4 feet, could not get over the reef, and they began discharging their cargoes into the water about 600 yards out. Blistering machine-gun and small-arms fire reached out to meet the Marines, who were unable to return fire as they waded toward shore laden with arms, ammo, and equipment. The majority of Marines who died on Tarawa did so as they struggled to reach shore.

Once ashore, confusion persisted. Many of the companies did not land at their designated points or found themselves

inextricably mingled with other units. One of the three battalion commanders was killed within a few minutes of hitting the beach, and another panicked under the severe fire and told his amtrac driver to withdraw toward open water. The seawall, behind which many Marines initially found some cover from enemy small-arms fire and where the Navy corpsmen had set up aid stations, turned out to be a mixed blessing. The amtracs and tanks that had come ashore were now penned between the beach and the water, and Japanese fire destroyed or disabled a large number of them. Thus, the second wave that was to come ashore was delayed, leaving the men who first reached the beach to struggle on their own. By late afternoon, the battle had deteriorated into a series of small unit fights all along the beach. Penetration by the invasion force was limited to no more than a few hundred yards in most places, and numerous Japanese strong points continued to inflict heavy losses on the Marines. Colonel Shoup, wounded himself, directed the fight from a makeshift command post and aid station.

The first night was the hardest time for the men on the beach. Constantly threatened with counterattacks, snipers, and infiltrators, they got little or no sleep. Furthermore, many Marines had long since drained their canteens and emptied their cartridge belts. No more supplies would come ashore until morning. The wounded suffered greatly. Those that lay in the aid stations on the beach could only wait for morning and evacuation; the uncollected wounded could only hope that their buddies got to them before the enemy did.

Sunday morning, D+1, saw little improvement in the Marines' situation. The 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, landing on Red Beach 2 a little after 0630, drew withering fire from almost as many enemy guns as the troops experienced the previous morning, and once again, the landing troops suffered heavy casualties in the water. Stiff resistance continued throughout the day, and the Marines had to destroy each Japanese strongpoint at a heavy price. Basic infantry weapons, grenades, flamethrowers, and explosive charges were the tools necessary for this task. Meanwhile, Navy destroyers cruised back and forth outside the reef providing fire support with their 5-inch guns. But with less than fifty yards in some cases between their positions and the Japanese, the Marines were reluctant to call for fire except when they had no alternative. Sunday ended with more of Betio in Marine hands, but the island was not yet secure, and the Marines prepared for another tense, sleepless night.

As the third morning dawned, the Marines found their position considerably improved. In the first place, the incoming tide now lifted the Higgins boats over the reef for the first time and allowed them to reach the beach before dropping their bow ramps. At midmorning, the Marines began their final assault on the big reinforced concrete structure housing Admiral Shibasaki's command post. Finally reaching the top of the building, they poured gasoline down one of the air vents and threw a match in after it. Thus ended Shibasaki's command and, seemingly, the will of many Tarawa defenders to continue resisting. Large numbers of Japanese began to take their own lives, and the Marines cleared much of the western portion of the island, pushing the remaining enemy into the narrow tail of land to the east by late evening. The battle for Betio was won, but it was not over.

The final act on Tarawa atoll was a series of nerve-racking banzai attacks that began just after dark on the third night. In each case, a mob of enemy charged the Marines' position with swords and bayonets. They came in a frenzy, seeking the final approval of their emperor by their glorious death. They were met by artillery, machine-gun fire, and tired Marines with bayonets who, in many cases, were also out of ammunition. The last attack came about 0400 on Tuesday morning— just seventy-two hours after the first Marines had begun loading into their landing craft.

Military experts and historians have long debated the strategic importance of Tarawa. Some have argued that wresting Tarawa from the Japanese was both unnecessary and too costly—1,027 Marine and Navy dead, 88 missing, and 2,292 wounded. Although the Japanese had a land-based air capability in the Gilberts, so the argument goes, they could not reach any major U.S. bases nor could they appreciably interdict shipping in the central or South Pacific. Furthermore, the critics maintain, the loss of life on Betio was not at all justified since the airfield was never used to support subsequent operations in the advance across the Pacific.

These arguments overlook two essential points. Although the airfield on Betio did not play a further role in America's war effort, one should not underestimate the importance land-based aviation held in the early years of World War II. As late as 1943, most military strategists believed that only land-based air forces could adequately support offensive operations. The fighting in the Solomons and New Guinea a year earlier had seemed to confirm that view. The fast carrier task force, with the ability to provide offensive support as well as fleet security, was then only in an early stage of development. Its future was still uncertain, although its proponents were already proselytizing among the skeptical. All this considered, the airfield on Betio was a legitimate military objective in November 1943.

Finally, one must consider the role of Marine Corps amphibious doctrine in Operation Galvanic. Until the Marines landed on Betio, amphibious doctrine was just theory. The Marines believed that they could land on a hostile beach and take their objective, but they had not yet proved that it could be done. The only way the Marines could prove the validity of their doctrine was to conduct an actual amphibious landing under fire and succeed. They did that at Tarawa.