

No Heroes, Just Marines

By GySgt Christopher Herron, USMC

Executive Editor's note: The following article received 2nd place in the 2025 Leatherneck Magazine Writing Contest. The award is provided through an endowment by the Colonel Charles E. Michaels Foundation and is being given in memory of Colonel William E. Barber, USMC, who fought on Iwo Jima during World War II, and was the recipient of the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War.

The Marine Corps has been shaped by the victories and sacrifices of past conflicts. This legacy, forged through fire and bloodshed, defines the Corps as it stands today. When we examine the defining moments that exemplify the ethos of the Marines, battles such as Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima and the Chosin Reservoir come to mind. These three battles are pivotal moments in the history of our Corps. As we prepare for the next fight, there is one battle that deserves closer examination—one that exemplifies courage, honor, sacrifice, adaptation and the relentless fighting spirit of the Marine Corps: Tarawa.

Often overshadowed by other battles and events of its time, the brutal 76-hour struggle for the Tarawa Atoll demands our respect. This battle showcased the tenacity and grit that continues to define the Marine Corps' reputation. The island marked a turning point in the Pacific War; no longer would amphibious landings go unopposed. Tarawa demonstrated the critical need, not for heroes, but for ordinary Marines to step up, take charge and do what must be done. This was evident in the battle's opening minutes. Due to insufficient and inaccurate intelligence, Marines found themselves hundreds of yards offshore, stranded on the reef in their landing craft. They were forced to wade through shallow water under intense machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire from a well-entrenched enemy. Over 150 Japanese bunkers remained untouched by the pre-landing bombardment from sea and air.

Amid this chaos, leaders like Major Henry Pierson Crowe, the commanding



A Marine aims at a Japanese pillbox during the Battle of Tarawa, 1943. Hitting the enemy through a narrow firing slit demanded finely tuned shooting skills and fearless resolve.

officer of Landing Team 2/8, rose to the occasion. After beaching on the reef outside Red Beach Three, he famously turned to his Marines and declared, "Look, the sons of b---es can't hit me. Why do you think they can hit you? Get moving. Go!" This kind of leadership inspired ordinary Americans to accomplish extraordinary feats.

Another example of heroism was Staff Sergeant William J. Bordelon, a combat engineer with Landing Team 2/2. After his landing vehicle was struck and most of its occupants were killed, he took control of the situation, leading the

survivors to shore. As they advanced, he placed explosives to remove obstacles and clear a path for other Marines. When Japanese positions opened fire, SSgt Bordelon personally destroyed two enemy strongholds. While attacking a third, he was wounded but refused medical assistance, instead pressing forward. At one point, he paused to run back into the water and drag a wounded Marine to safety. Resuming his assault on the third position, he was killed in action. For his bravery, he became the first Marine of the battle to be awarded the Medal of Honor. These



SSgt William J. Bordelon

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U.S. Navy and Marine Corps ships close in on Red Beach No. 1 and 2 during the opening hours of the Battle of Tarawa. Many landing craft became stuck on coral reefs hundreds of yards from shore, forcing Marines to wade through chest-deep water while under direct enemy fire. (USMC photo)



acts of courage are the foundation upon which the Marine Corps' legacy is built.

Before the battle, Japanese Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki boasted that "a million men could not take Tarawa in 100 years." Yet, in just 76 hours, 5,600 Marines conquered the heavily fortified island defended by 4,836 Japanese troops, only 17 of whom survived to witness the American flag raised over what had been deemed an impregnable Pacific fortress. This victory came at a steep cost. A total of 1,009 Marines and Sailors lost their lives, with another 2,100 wounded. To this day, 350 remain unaccounted for. Tarawa is a testament to the bravery and self-sacrifice that continue to define the Marine Corps. However, as time has passed, the lessons of Tarawa, like many chapters of history, have been eclipsed by larger and more well-known battles such as Okinawa and Iwo Jima.

We must never forget the bloody 76 hours that shaped not only the 2nd Marine Division but also the broader strategy of the war. The lessons learned from Tarawa remain as relevant today as they were in 1943. With the growing threat of conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, a renewed focus on Tarawa is necessary. As we transition from the global war on terror to preparations for future challenges, we must look to the past for guidance. Tarawa marked a shift in doctrine and mindset. It was the first battle filmed and



With minimal cover, Marines advance toward a heavily fortified island the Japanese claimed would be impregnable for a hundred years. However, the Marines proved otherwise in 76 hours.

shown to the public, revealing the harsh reality of war—victory is not achieved through experimental weapons or tactics alone, but through sacrifice, bravery and unyielding determination.

These traits remain fundamental to the United States Marine Corps. As adversaries fortify islands and expand their reach, we must learn from Tarawa's lessons. Future success will depend on the adaptability and fighting spirit of individual Marines, as well as their unwavering dedication—not only to Corps and country but to the Marines on their left and right. In battle, they must know that they are never alone.

Author's bio: GySgt Christopher Herron has served in the Marine Corps for 13 years and is currently the chief faculty advisor at the SNCOA Camp Lejeune. He has deployed twice aboard Marine Expeditionary Units to EUCOM, AFRICOM and CENTCOM and is currently pursuing his degree in military history.

Executive Editor's note: For more about the unrecovered Marines of the Battle of Tarawa, see "Until they All Come Home: History Flight is Dedicated to Locating, Excavating Remains of Missing Marines," in the November 2020 issue of Leatherneck.