



# TARAWA

# Bombardment

☛ THIS STORY OF THE BOMBARDMENT OF TARAWA BEGINS on 14 November 1943 aboard the battleship USS *Tennessee*, proceeding as a part of Task Force 53, en route for Gilbert Islands in the Central Pacific. That morning the ship received a dispatch from the Task Force Commander RearAdm Harry W. Hill to "Give all hands the general picture of projected operations and further details to all who should have them in execution of their duties."

In compliance with this directive, Capt Robert S. Haggart, USN, commanding the *Tennessee*, assembled all hands and had the following memorandum read to them, viz:

"The *Tennessee* is now proceeding to Tarawa, an atoll in the Gilbert Islands, in company with the ships of our present formation and a few others which will shortly join. This group is the Southern Group of

The USS *Tennessee*, seen here from the USS *Monrovia*, silenced a Jap 6-inch coastal defense battery with her third salvo from 14-inch guns. The ship scored a direct hit from 17,870 yards out

a force which will simultaneously attack the Atolls of Makin and Tarawa, now held by the Japanese. This will be the first assault on a strongly defended atoll and the combined operation is the largest offensive Pacific operation to date. Practically our whole Pacific Fleet will take part in one of the attack forces or covering forces.

"At Tarawa the battleships, cruisers and destroyers will bombard the island and support the Marines in their landing. The *Tennessee* leads the bombardment and the success of our bombardment is vital to the success of the whole operation. Enemy opposition must be expected."

**By MSgt Roger M. Emmons**

Afterwards, in the wardroom, the ship's officers were told the whole invasion plan in great detail. And that afternoon, Capt Ernest E. Schott, commanding the *Tennessee's* Marine Detachment, gave the Marines a preliminary briefing of the coming operation. To sum it up:

Tarawa Atoll lies on the equator, 2400 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor, and was a British possession until captured by the Japanese in December 1941. The atoll itself consists of a chain of 26 small, low-lying coral islands, surrounded by reefs. The group is shaped like a lopsided V, with one leg extending north 18 miles and the other running west for 12 miles with a lagoon inside the angle. The key island is Betio at the western tip of the atoll. It has an airfield in the center, and the whole island is strongly fortified. The purpose of our attack is to recapture Betio Island and develop it as an advanced air base for future Central Pacific operations. The assault force will be comprised of the 2d Marine Division under the command of MajGen Julian C. Smith. On Saturday, 20 November 1943 the troops will land on the north, or lagoon, side of the island. According to the battle plan, the initial landing is set for 0830, after a three hour bombardment of the Japanese defenses by air and naval gunfire.

To resume the narrative. In addition to some seventeen big transports and supply ships, the invading fleet included the old battleships *Maryland* (flying the flag of RearAdm Hill), *Tennessee* and *Colorado*, accompanied by several cruisers. They were provided with air cover by fighter planes from three or four escort carriers and screened by a group of destroyers. As the invading force neared the Gilbert Islands, Japanese submarines were contacted and our destroyers dropped depth charges

in those areas. And enemy scout planes shadowing the task force were reported shot down by our protective fighters on several occasions. Unquestionably by this time the Japanese on Tarawa must have been warned by their intelligence organization of the presence of the American fleet in the vicinity.

Aboard the *Tennessee* sailors and marines of the ship's gunnery division spent many hot hours studying maps and aerial photographs of Betio Island. The map showed

Betio to be a low-lying coral island about two and a half miles long from east to west and 800 yards wide at

its widest point, tapering down at its eastern end to a long narrow sand spit. The island resembled a lean pork chop. Information on the Japanese defenses and gun installations was obtained through study of air photographs.

☛ THE JAPANESE coast defense armament included four 6-inch guns and four 8-inch guns. Sited to sweep the lagoon with fire, two of the 6-inch guns were located on the northwest corner of the island and two on the north coast of the eastern tip. On the south, or seaward, side of the island, two 8-inch guns were emplaced at the southeast corner and two on the south coast of the eastern tip. There was an undisclosed number of 80mm guns, other batteries, machine guns and mortars stationed at various points throughout the island. Information was meager about the size and composition of the Japanese garrison on Betio. Their number had been estimated at 2,000.

Before dawn on the morning of November 20th the American task force reached Tarawa, and the transports gathered about eleven miles off to the northwest of Betio Island, while the battleships, cruisers and destroyers moved up into position offshore to deliver the pre-landing bombardment. On the *Tennessee* the alarm for general quarters sounded at 0515. When I arrived at my battle station on the Marine automatic weapons battery it was still pitch dark. Shooting had already started. Fires were visible on Betio. The cruiser *Santa Fe* was fighting a gunnery duel with a shore battery. This was truly a spectacle. There would be a whirling sheet of orange flame from the cruiser's guns and then a couple of red balls would streak through the blackness toward

**Whirling sheets of orange flame and red balls of steel streaked through the early dawn as battleships, cruisers, and destroyers began their softening-up barrage. Concrete, steel, and log pillboxes withstood everything but direct hits**

the island. Then the enemy's shore battery would answer by another yellow flash hurling a meteor across the sea at the cruiser. Farther out at sea enemy shells from the coastal defense guns were exploding in the water near the transports.

At dawn the island of Betio stood out sharply in silhouette against the eastern sky. From the approaching warships it looked striking and beautiful, a low-lying islet plumed with tall coconut palms which fringed beaches of white sand. The weather was clear and warm with a gentle breeze blowing.

About 0611 the bombardment began. The naval gun-fire plan called for an intense bombardment to be laid down all over the island but particularly on the western end. This schedule of fire was drawn up with prearranged mathematical calculation long before the beginning of the engagement. Each ship was to fire at predetermined targets for a given length of time, with a definite number of rounds. The *Tennessee's* first target was the 6-inch coastal defense battery located on the northwest point. Main battery fire schedule called for a three-gun salvo every 30 seconds. It is worth recording that the third salvo from her 14-inch guns put the shore battery out of action. The range was 17,870 yards. The ship's report on effect of the firing, in part, says:

"The ship opened fire on a definite target and at the third salvo a large explosion was seen but shortly afterwards the target became entirely obscured by smoke and so no further sight observations could be obtained. It has been reported that this third salvo put a large caliber battery out of action which was then firing at the transports."

✿ At 0613 the task force ceased firing when several squadrons of our carrier-based planes appeared overhead and dropped tons of high explosives on Betio. For nearly ten minutes the island flicked with great orange bursts of flame and huge clouds of black smoke reached high into the air. There was enemy antiaircraft fire. As the last plane disappeared the warships resumed their shelling. Then the *Tennessee* moved in to the 7,000 yard range off the western end of Betio and began concentrating its main and secondary batteries on a 300 or 400 yard strip of lagoon shoreline at the northwest end of the island. The secondary battery (5-inch) schedule called for four-gun salvos to be fired at twelve second intervals.

About 0642 the *Tennessee* came under fire of Japanese shore batteries, but the ship was not hit, although splashes of enemy shells could be seen striking the water around her. The next incident occurred at 0726 when an enemy submarine that poked her nose into the bombardment operation was engaged by the destroyer *Meade*.

For more than two hours the bombardment continued.

The warships stood from 2,000 to 8,000 yards offshore and poured a steady stream of steel at gun emplacements, the beach area, and other specific targets. Huge fires were started as oil storage tanks and ammunition dumps came under fire. Explosion after explosion could be seen on the island, and clouds of black smoke billowed skyward. At times, the shoreline and tall coconut palms behind it were completely obscured by heavy smoke and dust. The aerial observer in the *Tennessee's* spotting plane reported, "Target area completely black." Sometimes, too, the warships were shrouded in the smoke created by their own gunfire, such was the intensity of the shelling. The noise was deafening. At 0823 there was a momentary lull in the naval bombardment when about thirty American dive bombers appeared on the scene and carried out a strafing mission on the island. The air strike was over at 0830, and the Navy's guns resumed firing.

✿ H-HOUR (time the leading landing boat wave was supposed to reach the beach) had been ordered delayed 30 minutes to give the landing boats more time to reach the line of departure because it was a longer trip than scheduled due to the fact that the continued Jap shell fire had forced the transports to shift out of range of the shore batteries. Instead, therefore, of the leading assault wave reaching the beach at 0830, it was postponed till 0900. This change in landing time necessitated the warships slowing down the rate of fire proportionately to insure that sufficient ammunition would be available to maintain the schedule and volume required at the end of the pre-landing bombardment.

While the final phase of the bombardment was going on the landing craft formation, preceded by the minesweeper *Pursuit* escorted by the destroyer *Ringgold*, shoved off from the line of departure to make the trip across the lagoon to the beach. Amphtracs were used to carry the first three waves of assault troops. The succeeding waves followed in blunt-nosed Higgins landing boats. The initial attack was to be made by three reinforced battalions landing abreast on the one-mile stretch of lagoon shoreline between the northwest end of the island and a point roughly halfway up the lagoon coast. Midway on the landing beach a long pier extended out from the shore for a distance of about 50 yards. This pier with a beached Japanese freighter nearby was a key terrain feature of the beach area.

Because of the heavy bombardment the assault troops crossed the lagoon in their landing crafts with little opposition. At 0855 the bombardment was completed and all firing almost entirely ceased. Warships and planes already had dropped more than 2,500 tons of shells and bombs on the island, and it looked as though nothing could live under that devastating hail of steel. Numerous direct hits were observed scored on gun emplace-



**Direct hits from destroyers failed to demolish this blockhouse used as a command post on Tarawa. Constructed of concrete and reinforced with sand and coconut logs, its walls were eight feet thick.**

ments, pill boxes, and other fortifications by both the warships and bombers. A pall of smoke and dust hung over the island. Several large fires were burning. The coconut trees were broken and splintered, their fronds torn off. The Japanese guns were still, and an ominous silence lay over the lagoon.

☛ THEN ILL-LUCK took a hand; some 500 yards offshore the formation of landing craft hit a shallow reef. The first three waves of amphtracs clawed their way over the coral barrier without difficulty and moved on toward the beach, but the fourth and succeeding waves of Higgins boats could not pass over the reef. Suddenly, the Japanese on Betio came to life. As the first three waves of amphtracs neared the beach they were met by a hail of Jap mortar shells and automatic weapons fire, while shore batteries blasted away at the Higgins boats hung up on the reef. The fact was that a great many Japanese had survived the bombardment, and that neither the warships nor the bombers had eliminated the enemy's defenses.

The first wave of amphtracs touched on the beach at approximately 0917, and as the assault troops leaped

ashore they were greeted by heavy fire by the Japanese with every weapon available, including rifles. The Marines ran toward palm trees, logs, sand humps, anything beyond the water's edge which offered cover. They made their way to a retaining wall of coconut logs immediately inshore from the beach, and this was the first shelter they found against Jap fire.

Then the defenders stepped up their fire, both on the beach and reef. Apparently their plan was to annihilate our force on the beach and destroy all our attempts to land reinforcements. From a line of pill boxes and entrenchments the hidden Japs poured mortar shells and machine gun fire into the small force of Marines crouched behind the retaining wall. Out on the reef shell bursts from enemy shore batteries and mortars spouted up among the stranded Higgins boats, and troops in the open landing crafts suffered casualties. Some of the boats were blown right out of existence. Upon this situation the men jumped overboard into neck-deep water and started wading 500 yards shoreward through a withering fire of Jap mortar shells and automatic weapons. It was a long slow trip into the beach. Bodies slumped and disappeared beneath the water. One of the sorriest sights

of the war was to watch these tiny figures struggle toward the beach, while the water about them boiled and spouted under the hail of lead. Casualties were extremely heavy, but those who got ashore joined the assault troops behind the retaining wall.

☛ THAT WAS THE BEGINNING of the bitter fight for Betio beachhead. For a thin slice of time the situation ashore was so critical it seemed that the Japanese might exterminate the Marines before reinforcements could reach them. But a beachhead was obtained because the assault waves had a toehold on the island and hung on through sheer grit, and more Marines kept doggedly wading in neck-deep water 500 yards into the beach to support them. By 1000 some units had advanced inland to the edge of the airstrip but others were knocked back every time they crawled up over the retaining wall.

Meanwhile the warships remained in their respective positions after the landing to provide "call fire" in support of the troops ashore. At 1054 the *Tennessee* commenced delivering her first "call fire" in target area 207, using both main and secondary batteries, and continuing shelling for about forty-five minutes. The second order for "call fire" came at 0024 and the ship again fired until 0100. Range to the island on this occasion was 3,000 yards which in the world of battleships is practically sitting on the beach. During remainder of day the *Tennessee* stood by offshore awaiting further orders for firing but none was requested. The ship was kept in motion as the fire from Japanese shore batteries and the vulnerability to submarine attacks rendered it impossible to anchor without great risk.

In course of the afternoon we scanned the island with binoculars to locate enemy gun installations and defenses. Our battleship aviators flew low over Betio observing the battle. Lying very close inshore, destroyers were firing from ranges of 700 to 900 yards. Across the water rolled the sound of shelling and of rifle and machine gun fire. At D-day's end little was known of the situation ashore beyond that violent fighting was in progress and there were a good many casualties. The Marines had established a small beachhead about 200 yards wide and 20 yards deep around the head of the pier. For some reason which we probably will never know the Japanese did not counterattack that night.

Soon after dawn on the morning of the second day a battalion, which had spent the night in landing craft offshore, climbed out of their Higgins boats and started wading ashore. These troops were met by a withering fire of enemy mortar shells and automatic weapons reminiscent of the previous morning—men began to drop while the water about them churned under the hail of lead. A portion of them reached the beach, but the Japanese fire took a heavy toll. A good many of the casualties came from machine guns in the wrecked

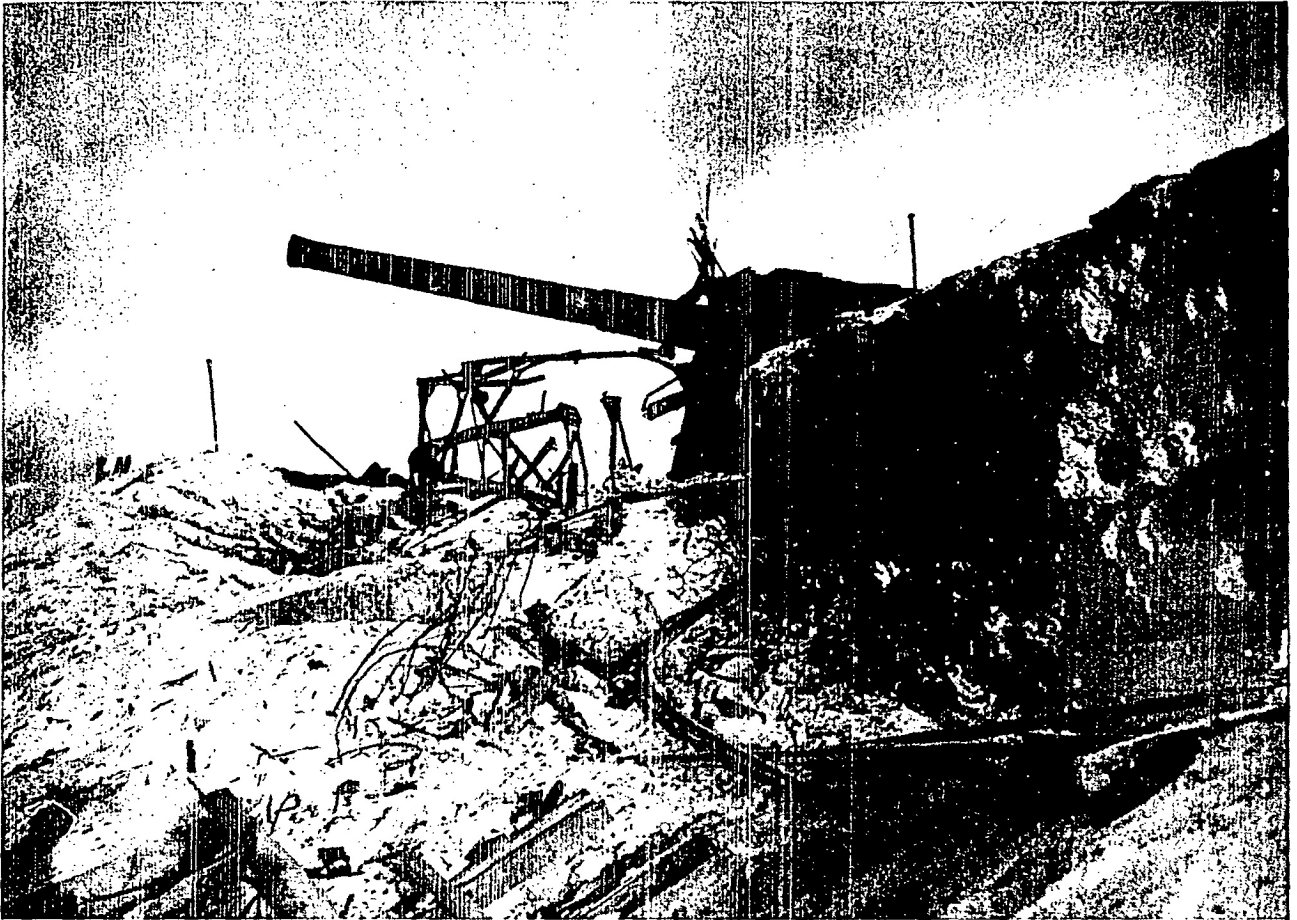
freighter which was beached near the pier. During the night the Japs had swum out to the ship and converted it into a veritable machine gun nest. In progress of the morning air strike, our dive bombers scored several hits on the ship, and smoke and flames poured from the hull.

All that day the *Tennessee* moved to and fro off the island, prepared to furnish gunfire, when requested. The scene was unchanged. Shell bursts from enemy shore batteries still splashed among the landing craft in the lagoon. Our destroyers stood close inshore, firing intermittently. Several cruisers joined in the attack. All day our forces alternated between naval shell fire and aerial bombardment. When the ships were not engaged our planes would carry out bombing missions and strafing. There was also some enemy antiaircraft fire. Over on the beach we could make out the dark forms of tanks milling about and see the flashes of guns. Now and then flame throwers would be seen spouting liquid fire at pillboxes.

I think it entirely proper at this point to run ahead of the main narrative and report an interesting talk on the subject of Japanese defense of Betio Island given by LtCol Emery E. "Swede" Larson, USMC, attached to the flag of RearAdm Howard F. Kingman, Commander of Battleship Division Two on the *Tennessee*, who made trips ashore as liaison officer between the Flag and the 2d Marine Division. Concerning the defense setup on Betio, LtCol Larson said the Japanese had built a coconut log retaining wall all around the edge of the island. Inside this barricade a total of some 500 pillboxes decorated the area like porcupine quills. In between the pillboxes they had constructed numerous blockhouses, machine gun emplacements, and bomb-proof shelters. These installations were made of concrete, steel and coconut logs. Covered with three or four feet of coral sand, they stood anything but a direct hit. The job came down to an old fashioned man-to-man struggle—the stout fortifications had to be neutralized one by one. Flame throwers, 75mm pack howitzers and demolition charges proved particularly effective against these strongholds.

☛ MIDAFTERNOON NEWS was received from ashore that the fighting was going slowly against fanatical resistance, but at some point not precisely discernible the tide of battle turned in favor of the Marines, and some units had crossed the airstrip and reached the far side of the island.

Late in the afternoon a battalion of Marines occupied Bairiki Island which is east of Betio and so close that it is possible to cross the narrow channel on foot at low tide. Japanese from Betio had been observed crossing the narrow water gap to find refuge on the adjacent island. The *Tennessee* covered this landing of troops but



A direct hit from a 16-inch shell put this Jap 8-inch coastal defense gun out of action. Most emplacements on Tarawa were equally tough; nothing less than a direct hit did damage.

there was no opposition. While all this was going on another Marine battalion effected a landing from rubber boats on the northwest tip of Betio. During the night more men, more guns, and supplies were slipped in over the pier.

On the morning of the third day the Marines began an advance up the length of the island to the eastern tip. At 0906 the *Tennessee* bombarded the east end of Betio for twenty minutes with both the main and secondary batteries. During this time, ending at 0925, her guns silenced a large caliber shore battery that the Japs had put back into action and were firing again.

✿ AN INCIDENT of interest occurred at 1743 that afternoon when a large Japanese submarine broke surface about 11,000 yards to starboard of the *Tennessee*. Standing in sky aft, GySgt Frank L. Pearman and I trained our binoculars on the scene. The submarine lay low on the water, with a huge conning tower in the middle. She carried a large gun on each side of the conning tower, and Japs manning the aft deck gun could be seen firing at an approaching American destroyer. An alert 5-inch gun crew on the *Tennessee* spotted the enemy vessel when it

surfaced and fired 21 rounds into its hull with effect. It was a matter of two or three minutes only before the destroyer *Frazier* rammed the submarine, and the enemy craft began slowly to settle by the stern, then suddenly pointed her bow skyward, and thus slid down, stern first, to the bottom of the Pacific.

That dayfall found the main body of the surviving Japs crowded into the island's eastern end. Next morning, November 23d, the Marines pushed through to the end of Betio and annihilated the remaining Japs trapped in the island's tail. Soon after noon all resistance ended, and Betio was declared secured. It can be said that this action was the toughest fight in the Marine Corps history to date, costing the Marines in round figures some 1,000 dead and about 2,000 wounded. The troops opposing the U. S. Marines were crack Imperial Marines, and there were approximately 4,000 of them.

The rest of the story of the Battle of Tarawa is too well known to need repeating. Betio was the first test of naval gunfire in support of an assault against a strongly defended atoll, and some mistakes had been made, but the lessons learned here were the most important of the entire war.

US & MC