

THIS WAS TARAWA



By Colonel Clyde H. Metcalf, USMC

AS the tide of battle sweeps westward across the Pacific, and colossal naval forces pound Japanese positions on coral islands into dust, neutralizing the efforts of our enemies to resist, the landing and seizing of these islands is made relatively easy so long as the fleet, with its superior air power, can exercise control of the air and sea, and deliver thousand of tons of explosives at a dozen or more critical points.

Let us not forget, however, that this has not been the order of the day for very long and it may not continue to be the pattern of war. The more normal pattern seems to be that of the Guadalcanal, the Bougainville, and the Cape Gloucester campaigns with an occasional Tarawa thrown in as the supreme test.

During this more normal type of fighting, close support of artillery and bombing planes can hardly be counted upon; tanks and mortars may more often be available; coordination by platoon and company commanders will usually be the order of the day. There will be times when the fighting will be so close and resistance will be with such determination that only the small groups led by determined leaders who rise to the occasion on the spot will be able to function as tactical units. Such fighting usually takes the form of one or two men delivering accurate fire at a critical point, such as the slit of a pillbox, while other members of the determined group close in with grenades or bayonets, and, by their heroic acts, eliminate an enemy group which may be holding up the advance of large numbers of our

forces. The number of such determined points of resistance may be legion and held by foes determined to make a stand to the last. Under such a situation, if our forces are to carry the fight on to an ultimate victory, they must be endowed with a determination and fighting spirit that has been attained only by men of a strong individualistic race, by men belonging to an élite corps having a long record of determined fighters, thoroughly trained in the best technique for such fighting, and endowed by their leaders with a will to live up to the best traditions of that corps.

Such conditions have arisen repeatedly during the 169 years of the history of the Marine Corps. We could cite many such examples but let us, for this purpose, skip all but brief mention of one, and a fuller development of this manifestation in a recent battle.

At Belleau Wood, during the most critical stage of World War I, determined groups of Marines fought their way, foot by foot, through a rugged thickly wooded terrain which had been highly developed for defense and filled with obstacles and held by the best units of the German Army. By methods devised only by small groups, the Marines drove back superior numbers of Germans and, after days of fighting, completely cleared the enemy from the wooded area. Many of them were immediately recognized as outstanding heroes of the Marine Corps; they became known as the élite fighters of their organization for other Marines to pattern after.

World War II has produced another such battle but in

an entirely different setting—on a small coral island in the Central Pacific, the island of Betio of Tarawa Atoll. Our readers are generally familiar with the over-all picture of the attack on Tarawa, how after many bombings and bombardments, battalions of the Second Marine Division began making landings on the lagoon shore of Betio Island. They have read of the heavy losses that the units suffered in making their way in to the beach and getting a foothold along the north shore of the island. This, of course, also took the highest order of courage, facing the losses which they sustained and still keeping on and affecting the landing in the face of murderous fire.

BUT we are concerned here more particularly with the kind of fighting that took place on the landing beach and in driving the enemy from his strongholds as exemplified by a few gallant Marines, most of whom, in addition to many others, will in due time be given recognition in official citations. The individuals mentioned are only typical but were picked out by their commanders; many others who performed similar deeds, known only by their intimate comrades or themselves, played equally important parts in the winning of this decisive victory which helped to open the way for a deeper thrust into the Japanese controlled areas of the Western Pacific.

While the heroic individuals mentioned below were performing outstanding deeds of heroism and helping to gradually overcome the resistance of the enemy, they were given every possible support by naval gunfire, occasional bombing missions, and above all, as constant a flow of reinforcements, as much ammunitions and supplies as could be gotten to them under the difficult situation of bringing it across the reef and reaching a beach swept by enemy fire. The ultimate success of their fighting was made possible by this support given them by their higher command and supporting forces.

Let us first notice the action led by First Sergeant Wilbur McC. Burgess, who when his company landed on the beach, located two pillboxes firing on our troops as they attempted to land. On his initiative, he set forth to knock out these positions. Taking along a rifle grenadier, he personally directed grenade fire against the emplacement and temporarily knocked it out of action. He then crawled to the position and destroyed it with TNT. Crawling to within five yards of a second emplacement, he threw TNT and offensive grenades into the opening, forcing out two of the enemy, who were immediately killed. After all the officers of his company had been killed or wounded, Burgess took command and continued the attack. He was one of the first to cross the landing field to the south coast and although he had only a few men left, he continued the attack and rendered valuable assistance in stopping a counterattack.

For courage and effective leadership, the actions of Sergeant James R. Atkins have scarcely ever been excelled. While a member of the Second Tank Battalion reconnaissance party which laid a lane of channel markers over a shell- and bomb-pocked coral reef for a distance of 1200 yards, Atkins, when the channel markers were swept away, made himself a human channel marker, during which time he was under heavy enemy fire. After the tanks were

safely guided to the beach, he volunteered to lead tanks inland through our own infantry lines. He led the tanks well within the enemy lines daringly and courageously working his way forward under extremely heavy enemy fire and pointed out targets to the tanks.

The extraordinary effective action of Sergeant Roy W. Johnson ranks equally high in our rôle of heroes. When the advance of his squad and the entire right flank of his company was held up by an enemy tank, which was in a shell hole and firing continuously from its movable turret, Johnson, without regard for his own safety, fearlessly crawled through fire to the tank, climbed to the turret and then with great coolness opened the escape hatch and dropped a grenade into the tank. With keen presence of mind he slammed the hatch and sat on it until the grenade exploded, completely knocking the tank out of action. By this daring act, at the risk of his life, he not only enabled the advance to continue, but became an inspiration to all who were in the area. Sergeant Johnson was killed later in the action while fearlessly leading his men.

For leadership, initiative, coolness under fire, and utter disregard for his own safety, the actions of Corporal Phillip R. Burke warrant serious consideration for inscription in the Corps' Hall of Fame. Although wounded while landing on the beach, Burke organized a group of men and, under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire, attacked enemy positions with TNT charges until his supplies ran out. Wounded again the next morning, he disregarded his own safety by throwing himself on a hand grenade thrown by the enemy, saving the lives of members of his section; from this action he received serious wounds in his right arm.

For the inspiring leadership of a command above his rank and conduct for sustaining the morale of his men, the actions of Sergeant Edward R. Godwin will find an outstanding place in the annals of the Marine Corps. His platoon landed within the boundaries of an enemy strongpoint which dominated the entire bay area. When the platoon leader was seriously wounded, Godwin assumed command. In spite of severe enemy fire and a complete absence of communication with friendly troops, he led the platoon and established an isolated position in a crater among enemy emplacements. Through his cool-headed organization, the platoon was enabled to repel repeated bayonet attacks made by the enemy from three directions. For two days Godwin refused to withdraw within friendly lines. Although suffering an injury to his shoulder, he administered first aid to the wounded in the absence of a corpsman.

For notable initiative, skill, and devotion to duty, the conduct of Private First Class Joseph D. Doherty is particularly worthy of admiration. Unable to locate his own unit which had landed under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire, Doherty on his own initiative made his way to the front lines and took up a position. The following morning he found himself and two other Marines in advance of the front lines and under attack by enemy forces which were trying to wipe them out. After repulsing the attack by accurate rifle fire and grenades, he decided that the position was too advanced and covered the withdrawal of his companions. Later that day he saw a group of the enemy at

Presidential Unit Citation for Second Marine Division

THE Presidential Unit Citation has been presented to the Second Marine Division (Reinforced) for the attack and victory over the Japanese defenders of Tarawa.

The citation reads:

"For outstanding performance in combat during the seizure and occupation of the Japanese-held Atoll of Tarawa, Gilbert Islands, November 20 to 24, 1943. Forced by treacherous coral reefs to disembark from their landing craft hundreds of yards off the beach, the Second Marine Division (Reinforced) became a highly vulnerable target for a devastating Japanese fire. Dauntlessly advancing in spite of rapidly mounting losses, the Marines fought a gallant battle against crushing odds, clearing the limited beach-heads of snipers and machine guns, reducing powerfully fortified enemy positions and completely annihilating the fanatically determined and strongly entrenched Japanese forces. By the successful occupation of Tarawa, the Second Marine Division (Reinforced) has provided our forces with highly strategic and important air and land bases from which to continue future operations against the enemy; by the valiant fighting spirit of these men, their heroic fortitude under punishing fire and their relentless perseverance in waging this epic battle in the Central Pacific, they have upheld the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

tempting to set up a machine gun under a wharf behind our lines and by extremely accurate rifle fire prevented any considerable casualties from being inflicted on our troops. The following day, with utter disregard for his own safety, he exposed himself to draw sniper fire and with remarkable skill killed four enemy snipers.

For executing a hazardous task, Sergeant Eugene L. Hill made a substantial contribution to the success of the operation in a most unusual manner. When his unit was attacking a strong enemy position in the emplacement of a disabled five-inch gun, the tripod of his machine gun was damaged beyond further use. Knowing that the fire power of his weapon was vitally needed at this stage of the attack, he cradled the weapon in his arms and with complete disregard for his own safety, exposed himself to heavy enemy machine-gun fire in order to fire his gun effectively from a kneeling position. Tracers from his weapon ignited a powder magazine in the enemy position which was thus destroyed.

But as a two-man army, Sergeant Clarence E. Petrie

and his platoon leader are in a class to themselves. The Japanese were in possession of many strong pillboxes and dugouts on the beach: these were causing heavy casualties among Marines attempting to gain the beach by wading through the shallow waters. Petrie, accompanied only by the officer, voluntarily assisted in attacking and destroying four of the strong enemy positions. He helped put a 75mm. pack-howitzer in position to fire on the first pillbox and helped to load the howitzer in the face of heavy machine-gun fire. He then with the lieutenant rushed the position and entered it to ascertain if all the Japanese were dead. Without hesitation they attacked four large pillboxes connected together by trenches. They attacked the first position in the face of heavy machine-gun fire, and under the cover of the accurate and steady fire of Petrie, the pillbox was gained and a number of hand grenades and TNT tossed in, after which both men entered to finish off the enemy. By way of the connecting trenches, they made an assault on the second position and killed its occupants. They then attacked the third position, and after throwing

grenades and TNT inside, they entered to mop up. Two Japanese were discovered and killed by grenades before the lieutenant was seriously wounded by a Japanese grenade. Without hesitation, and at great risk of his own life, Petrie dragged the officer outside to safety and carried him back to the aid station.

ONE of the most decisive actions of a small group of men in the battle was carried out by Corporal Robert E. Voorhees and four other marines. Enemy fire coming from a large bomb-proofed shelter on the flank of the battalion had caused numerous casualties and had been holding up the advance for two days. Demolition crews beginning the assault under the cover of friendly fire were soon pinned down by heavy machine-gun fire from the structure. The success of the demolition group depended on quick action because mortar shells were bursting close by and the shallow trenches in which Voorhees' assault crew had taken cover offered little or no protection. Realizing that enemy fire must be lifted from the demolition team so that they could advance and place their charges, Voorhees exposed himself and the four other marines to heavy machine-gun fire in order to move to a position from which they could bring fire to bear on the shelter. Their initial fire was answered immediately. During the violent action which followed, the demolition group advanced and planted their charges. The explosion partially demolished the shelter and killed about one hundred of the enemy within. The remainder, approximately two hundred, emerging from the main entrance firing rifles and light machine guns in an effort to withdraw and to establish a new defense, were met by the fire of Voorhees and his comrades, who were closing in. The engagement that followed was violent and at close quarters and resulted in the death of many more of the enemy. The reduction of the bomb-proofed shelter, the key point of the enemy defense in this area, made possible the advance of the battalion and the securing of the northeast section of the island.

For gallantry beyond the call of duty, the actions of Corporal Orville E. W. Broeker are worthy of recounting

in this brief narrative of outstanding heroic acts. His squad was in the assault. After advancing several hundred yards, the assault was held up by heavy enemy flanking fire coming from a concrete machine-gun emplacement. Showing bold initiative and quickness of thought, Broeker withdrew his men to a covered position. In the face of heavy enemy machine-gun fire, he began to work his way to the emplacement. Midway to his objective, he was hit in the face by fragments of an enemy grenade. Wounded and partially blinded, he continued to advance and finally, gaining the top of the emplacement, he dropped a thermite grenade through an air vent and completely destroyed the enemy resistance, allowing the front lines to continue the advance.

But not all of the heroes were engaged in trying to kill the enemy. During the cleaning up of the smaller islands of the Tarawa Atoll, after the advance guard (to which Private John "A" Bolthouse, Jr., was attached as a member of an artillery observation party) was heavily attacked by a superior enemy force at close range, Bolthouse joined a group of other marines engaged in an effort to evacuate casualties from the front lines under heavy enemy fire. He succeeded in getting several of the wounded to the rear area and continued his action until he was killed while attempting to reach a wounded Marine who was in the rear of the enemy. By his great personal valor he saved the lives of men who would otherwise have perished.

These hasty accounts of the deed of valor of the Marines of the Second Division are necessarily fragmentary and incompletely told, but they show the battle courage of America's fighting men at a new height. Perhaps it will not be necessary for Marines to gain a victorious decision under such difficult conditions as that of Tarawa during the continuance of this war, but if we all get on with the war with the determination to maintain the highest traditions of the Corps, our fighting units will stand ready to engage the enemy under the most difficult circumstances with confidence in ultimate victory. Come what will, Marines will not fail to live to the highest order of gallantry that was reached at Tarawa.

Camp Elliott Transferred to Navy

CAMP ELLIOTT, Calif., chief training center of FMF units on the West Coast until the establishment of Camp Pendleton, will be turned over to the Navy as a personnel distribution center, the Navy Department has announced. Marine activities at Camp Elliott, now used principally as a replacement and casual center and as a specialized school area for mortars and machine guns, field artillery and officer candidate instruction, will be moved to Camp Pendleton. Transfer of the camp will be completed by June 30, 1944.

The transfer will not at present include the Marine Base depot, and the tank training area known as Jacques Farm and Green Farm. Those areas of Camp Elliott will be

turned over to the Navy later, it was announced recently.

Situated just north of the San Diego city limits on Kearny Mesa, Camp Elliott comprises about 29,000 acres. It came into being on 21 December 1934 when the Marine Corps rented 19,000 acres. It was not until the stress of national emergency, however, that the camp mushroomed to its present proportions. It became the home of the Second Marine Division in June 1941, when that unit was in the process of being formed.

The camp was known as Camp Holcomb until 20 June 1940, when it was redesignated at Camp Elliott, in honor of Major General George F. Elliott, who was Major General Commandant 1903-1910.