

TARAWA: THE THIRD DAY ON RED-3

November 22, 1943

By Eric Hammel

The situation on Beach Red-3, the 2nd Marine Division's left flank on Betio Island's northern shore, had remained unaltered for a day and a half. Major Henry "Jim" Crowe's 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment (2/8), had been pulverized in the initial landing and subsequent stalemate. Company F, which was holding a 10-yard perimeter along the coconut log seawall, on the battalion's (and division's) left flank, could barely muster enough able bodies to man a platoon. Every one of its officers had been wounded. Co G, 2/8, had been largely broken up to fill gaps and plug holes in the thin battle line. Co E, on the battalion right flank, had fared best. It had advanced on D-day, Nov. 20, to a limit of 75 yards inland. Casualties had been heavy, but Co E was still an organization.

Major Robert Ruud's 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment (3/8), had also landed on D-day to reinforce Crowe's mauled battalion, but it had been blasted apart even before reaching

the beach. Scores of Ruud's Marines had been killed or wounded wading to Red-3 through the fire-swept lagoon, and the remainder of the battalion was still sorting itself out, still forming and reforming into pick-up squads and platoons wherever a lieutenant or sergeant or private with command presence could persuade enough Marines to sit still long enough to get together.

No gains had been made on Red-3 throughout Nov. 21, the second day on Betio. Crowe's Marines had plugged away at the incredible defenses in depth on Red-3 and had probably killed scores or even hundreds of Japanese. But the major uncommitted Japanese combat units were to Crowe's left, safely out of the battle and therefore intact—they provided a reservoir from which fresh troops could be fed into the battle at will against the Marines struggling to expand the tenuous perimeter on Red-3. No matter how many Japanese they killed, the Marines on Red-3 had to constantly face relatively fresh reinforcements. It was all the Marines could do to hold their meager gains.

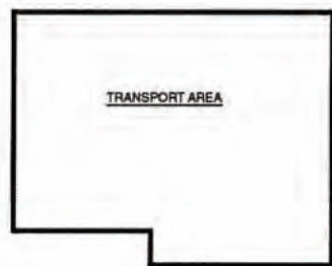


A pair of U.S. Navy Hellcat fighters comes in low to strafe targets south of the Burns-Philp Wharf.

TARAWA ATOLL

SHOWING TRANSPORT AREA, LINE OF DEPARTURE
AND LANDING BEACHES
20 NOV 43

1 0 1 2 3 4 5 6



FIRE SUPPORT
AREA 1

FIRE SUPPORT
AREA 2

FIRE SUPPORT
AREA 3

FIRE SUPPORT
AREA 4

USMC

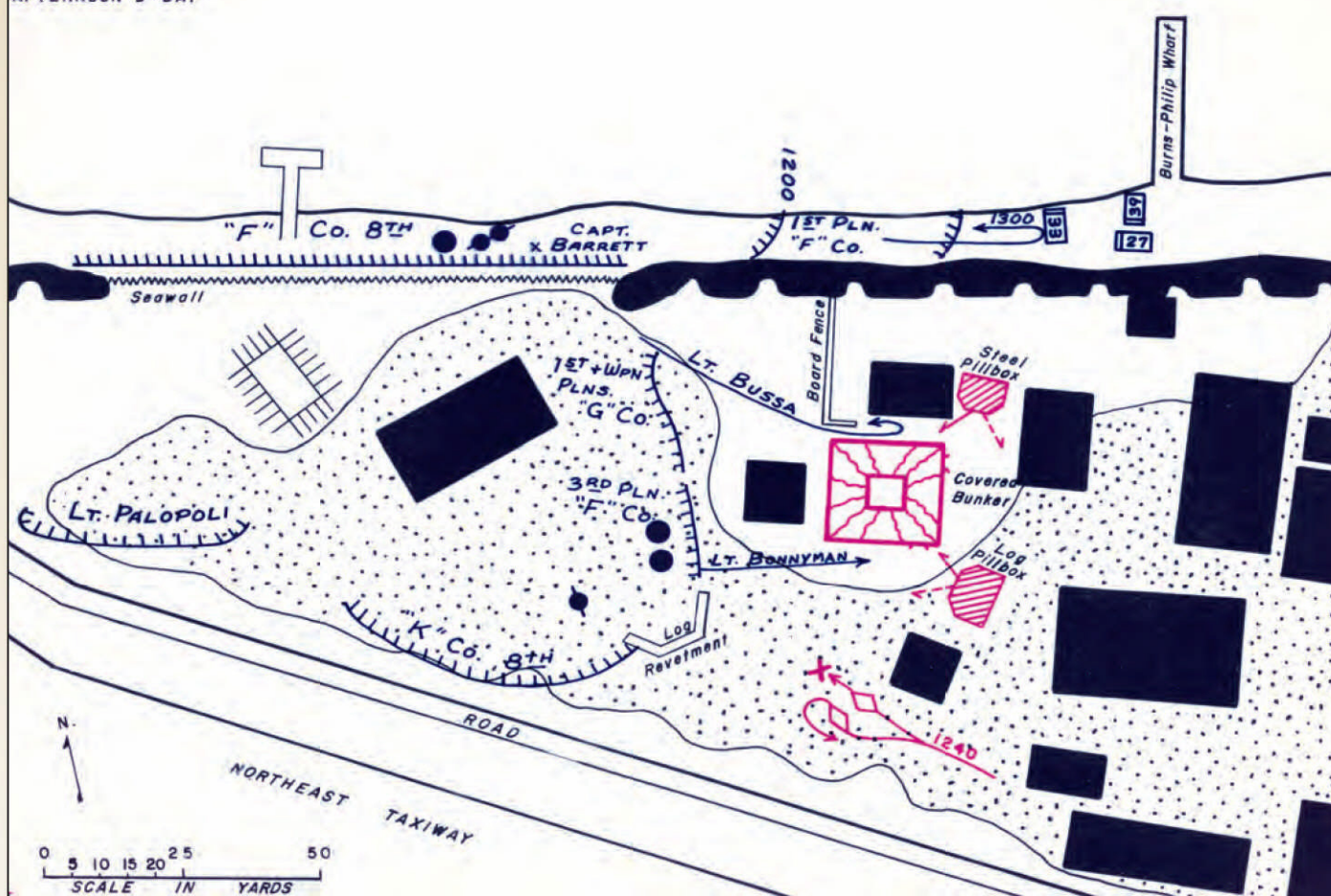
Between 7 a.m. and 7:20 a.m. on D+3, U.S. Navy battleships standing well off Betio fired their 14- and 16-inch guns at targets ranging from the eastern end of the island to within 500 yards of Crowe's lines on Red-3. Next, U.S. Navy carrier aircraft pummeled the area for 30 minutes. Between 8:30 a.m. and 8:50 a.m., the battleships fired again. Then there was another air strike. The battleships fired again from 9:30 a.m. to 9:50 a.m., and then there was yet another air strike. Then the battleships fired one last time between 10:30 a.m. and 10:50 a.m. The goal was to destroy, or at least disorganize, the Japanese reserve manpower pool and resources in the eastern half of Betio.

Earlier on D+2, Major Jim Crowe had issued general orders calling for an all out assault against a particularly well-built and stubbornly held defensive complex on his force's left flank, just below an old copra-loading wharf that had been built before the war by the Burns-Philp company. The defensive complex, which consisted primarily of a very large covered bombproof bunker and two supporting

pillboxes, had stymied Co F, 2/8, and Co K, 3/8, for nearly 48 hours and had barred the way to the Burns-Philp wharf and the entire eastern end of Betio. Having spent nearly all of D+1 preparing the way, the two badly understrength infantry companies and assorted mixed units under Crowe's executive officer, Major William Chamberlin, were ready to go.

The remnants of Co F drew a steel pillbox covering the wharf and the northeast corner of the bombproof bunker. Co G, 2/8, was in support. A short distance to the south, Co K, supported by two 37 mm antitank guns and its own 60 mm mortars, was to attack the coconut log pillbox guarding the south and southeast portions of the bunker. The most successful of these assault elements would take on the bunker itself after first reducing the initial objectives. There were no plans for further advances by any of the units on Red-3; orders would be issued when the bunker fell—if it fell.

Preparations for the assault began at about 9:30 a.m., when most of the machine guns along the front, particularly those



supporting Co F, were shifted to what was hoped would be a better advantage. At the same time, Marines stood down in relays to clean their rifles and automatic weapons, for the accumulated crud of the two days of battle had fouled many weapons to the point of unreliability.

Also at 9:30 a.m., the 60 mm mortars supporting Co K were unleashed against the coconut log emplacement and the area around it. No fire was directed against the covered bunker, as that would have been a waste of precious ammunition. One round from a Co K mortar struck an uncharted ammunition dump, which blew up with a resounding bang. The dump, to the amazement of all, had been in the very emplacement that had held up the advance for two full days. Machine-gun fire from this quarter ceased to be a problem.

While the infantry's preparations continued, *Colorado*, the lone surviving Sherman M4 medium tank of First Lieutenant Louis Largey's platoon—and the only medium tank left on Red-3—slowly advanced through the riflemen huddled along the beach to a position behind the easternmost extremity of Co F's seawall line. As 1stLt Largey directed *Colorado's* 75 mm main gun against the steel pillbox, a quick succession

of direct hits flattened the position, giving Co F free reign over the area.

At 10 a.m., moments after *Colorado* destroyed the steel pillbox, the assault on the bunker was canceled. Instead, Co F was ordered to assault eastward along the beach in order to outflank the defensive keypoint. Then, the main event would commence.

The haggard remnants of Co F had only 30 yards of ground to take—the same 30 yards the company had conceded the day before in order to consolidate its position on the beach. A lot had happened to weaken and demoralize Co F in two days of battle, so it took the company commander, Captain Martin Barrett, several hours just to maneuver his Marines into position.

Co F struck at 1 p.m. and immediately met with ferocious defensive fire from Japanese infantry positions along the beach and just across the seawall. Although small gains were achieved, it was decided that the assault on the bombproof bunker would have to be made without the added benefit of flank control.

As the covered bunker—the Japanese communications center—was the main objective in his sector of Red-3, Maj Bill Chamberlin, Crowe's executive officer, was more or less given the task to organize the

proceedings. With Co F bogged down at the seawall and Co K engaged on the bombproof bunker's western flank, it was impossible to draw upon any formally organized infantry units to mount the assault. So, Maj Chamberlin began scrounging.

One of the first men nabbed in the major's roundup was Technical Sergeant Norman Hatch, the only combat movie cameraman on Red-3, the only one on Betio through D-day and D+1. Using his rank to bolster his innate talent for organization, Hatch helped Maj Chamberlin gather a mixed group of stray riflemen and specialists. Once organized, the group huddled below the seawall for a quick briefing. Chamberlin pointed to the crest of the bombproof and told the men, "When I yell, 'Follow me!' you follow me up that bombproof."

Hunched up against the wall with TSgt Hatch, Chamberlin watched and waited for a few moments. The fire did not slacken and the scene did not change. The major shrugged and, without looking back, rose to his feet and yelled, "Follow me!" Norm Hatch raced him to the top.

At the crest of the mound, the major and the cameraman—who was carrying his movie camera—stared in amazement as a squad of Japanese naval infantrymen



The final assault on the Red-3 covered bunker begins as 1stLt Sandy Bonnyman's assault team moves into position. (Photo by Cpl Obie Newcomb, USMC)

(rikusentai), broke into the open and turned toward the two Marines, who were silhouetted at the highest point—10 feet—of Betio's smoky skyline. Chamberlin instantly reacted as if to fire, but it was then that he remembered he had given his weapons away.

Hatch wordlessly looked on. The major looked at him, snapping him into action. Hatch placed his precious movie camera under his arm and furiously sifted through his film-filled bandoleers in search of his .45-caliber pistol, which had long since been twisted out of reach behind his back. He looked at Chamberlin in helpless dismay, and Chamberlin muttered one curt suggestion, "Let's get the hell out of here!"

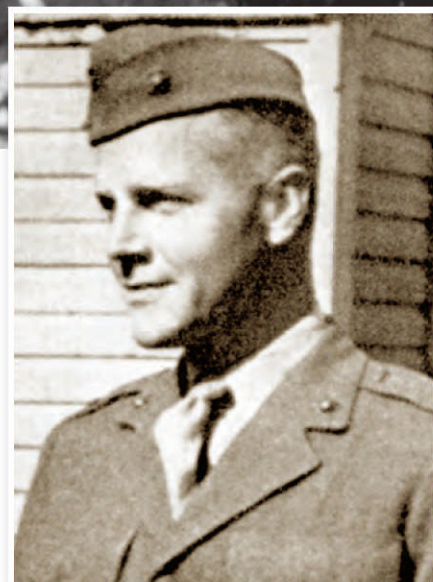
The two turned and barreled off the mound, unhurt but furious.

Over the course of two days, on his own initiative, First Lieutenant Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman of Co F, 2nd Battalion, 18th Marines—a pioneer (shore-party) unit assigned to Red-3 to unload sup-

plies—had scrounged together a mixed group of engineers, pioneers and stray riflemen to mount an assault on the bombproof. Bonnyman's group worked through the Co F seawall line and sought the protection of a 6-foot wooden fence running at right angles to the seawall, just off the bombproof bunker's northwest corner.

The bunker was the closest thing to a hill on Betio. Since it had proved impossible to breach either of the entryways, the only tactic left to 1stLt Bonnyman was a direct uphill assault. The Japanese engineers who had designed the bombproof bunker had left a number of large black ventilators protruding from the well-camouflaged roof. Those ventilators would be Sandy Bonnyman's key objectives. A bit of flamethrower fuel fired into them would almost certainly force the defenders into the open. The alternative was air too hot to breathe and rapid asphyxiation.

So, supported by the 37 mm antitank guns, 60 mm mortars, and an assortment of



1stLt Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman

automatic infantry weapons, Bonnyman's group lined up single-file below the seawall and stepped off.

Each of Bonnyman's men individually vaulted over the seawall to the higher ground behind an L-shaped fence that screened the approach to the bombproof bunker's northwest corner. From there, guided by hand signals from observers who could clearly see the objective, the

As the final assault on the bunker grinds forward, a fearless TSgt Norm Hatch stands tall to record the moment with his movie camera.

Marines in the assault group worked along the fence to the foot of the slope, where they were stopped by heavy gunfire.

Corporal Harry Niehoff's demolitions team was intercepted by Maj Chamberlin as it returned from a minor foray farther along the beach. Chamberlin asked Niehoff if there were any explosives available. After Niehoff replied that he still had several charges, he added, "Where do you want them used, sir?" Chamberlin motioned to the covered bombproof and explained that the Japanese were reinforcing the position from the southeast but that their avenue of approach was well camouflaged and had not yet been found.

Harry Niehoff hurled several charges over the bunker and ducked behind the seawall as a flurry of fire sought him out. When the firing subsided, he led his engineers around to the L-shaped fence and prepared to move on the summit.

Private First Class John Borich, who was operating one of two flamethrowers on Red-3, was Cpl Niehoff's pointman. He lightly doused the top of the bunker with flaming fuel while Niehoff tossed a big explosive charge he hoped would kill or stun the defenders. Next, Borich moved forward to spray a burst of flame. As Niehoff prepared to throw another charge, Borich screamed, "Grenade!" and everyone hit the dirt.

The instant the dust settled, Cpl Niehoff threw another big charge. When it blew up, every man behind the L-shaped fence piled into the open and legged uphill to the bunker's summit.

All over Red-3, Marines curious about the commotion stopped what they were doing to look on as Bonnyman and a half dozen Marines made it to the top. TSgt Hatch captured the breakthrough with his movie camera, standing tall and exposed to sheets of gunfire.

The first key had been turned by the engineers, PFC Borich and Cpl Harry Niehoff. The combination of flame and TNT had killed the crew manning a machine gun at the top of the bunker and had set the palm frond camouflage afire to cover the breakthrough.

The next key was turned by another engineer, Private First Class Earl Coleman. As Bonnyman sparked his pick-up assault team and issued a steady stream of orders, Coleman yelled for TNT. He tossed fused charges as fast as he could light them. In moments, Coleman had blown the cover off a camouflaged entry-



way at the southeast corner of the huge structure. As soon as he did, as hundreds of Marines looked on, a large knot of Japanese burst from the exposed entryway and formed to counterattack Bonnyman's pick-up assault team.

There were only a half dozen men atop the bunker at that moment. PFC Borich was firing burning fuel into the ventilators, forcing the Japanese to evacuate, while PFC Coleman, Cpl Niehoff, and Sergeant Elmo Ferretti were furiously heaving blocks of TNT. So Bonnyman faced the Japanese alone with his .30-caliber M1 carbine.

Bonnyman leaped to the forward edge of the toehold beside Niehoff, rammed home a full 15-round clip and rapidly fired

into the oncoming rikusentai. Several of the Japanese fell, but most of them kept coming. With the Japanese only yards away, Bonnyman rammed home another fresh clip and killed three—just as Marine reinforcements attacking up the back side of the bunker blunted and turned the Japanese drive. But the help arrived too late for Sandy Bonnyman. He had been shot dead in the final moments of his one-man defense of the bunker summit.

As soon as Niehoff heard the killing shot thud into Bonnyman's body, he flattened himself against the ground. It was just in time, for one of Coleman's potent TNT charges arched back over the knot of the defending attackers, bowling men from their feet. Elmo Ferretti was



Cpl Harry Niehoff



PFC John Borich operated one of two flamethrowers on Red-3. (Photo courtesy of John Borich)

Niehoff decided to call it a day. He sat down to rest and following a few nearsighted reveries, discovered a pile of glass at his feet. The glass was of a sort known to all Marines—the kind they make beer bottles with. Niehoff idly poked through the shattered debris and found the best reward he could ever have hoped for. He pulled one tantalizing, if warm, full and unopened bottle of Kirin beer from the wreckage of what had once been a goodly supply. As his tongue madly quivered, Harry Niehoff prepared to open his prize. But a voice from behind shattered his solitude. Commenting on the corporal's ideal luck, Maj Bill Chamberlin stared at the lone bottle of beer through eyes that had become a gateway to his soul. The major looked as bad as the corporal felt. Succumbing to one of the hardest decisions of his life, Niehoff silently handed the major the prize of a lifetime.

Following the annihilation of the bombproof bunker defenders, the Marine infantry companies on Red-3 got set to move. Maj Crowe ordered his mixed command to attack eastward along Betio's northern shore until stopped by the onset of darkness or an order from on high.

While Co F occupied a holding position, Co E and Co G moved around the north side of the bombproof. To the south, Co K stood down to cover a demolitions team as it moved to seal the southeastern entryway of the bombproof. No one was about to enter the building, and no one wanted any more Japanese vacating it after dark, by which time it would be well behind Marine lines. Next, Co K and *Colorado* attacked

badly dazed and had to be led back down to the seawall.

Moments later, as Cpl Niehoff was firing his carbine into the midst of another Japanese sally, he heard something drop next to his head. He saw a grenade from the corner of his eye. Without thinking, he leaped across the dead lieutenant's body and wedged himself between it and a dead Japanese machine gunner. But nothing happened. Long moments later, Niehoff ventured a peek and saw an unarmed American grenade, thoughtfully provided by one of the men at the foot of the bunker.

Tension, smoke and the stench of burning flesh finally got to Niehoff. Since he was out of TNT and ammunition for his carbine, the engineer corporal lurched to the rear for a break. He had not suffered a scratch, even though 13 of the first 21 Marines to reach the top of the bombproof had been killed or wounded.

On losing their bid for the summit, the Japanese sought to abandon the position; they cascaded from the two entryways and legged off to the east. Most of them were cut down by Marines from Co F. Many defenders who turned south to escape the fire from Co F were felled by the pair of Marine 37 mm antitank guns, which fired canister rounds as fast as the gunners could reload.

After leaving the bunker, Cpl Niehoff wandered down the beach to his engineer platoon's impromptu command post. There he found a large cache of TNT. Rising above his exhaustion, Niehoff loaded an ammunition cart with explosives and solicited help from nearby Marines to haul it to the beach by the bombproof. By the time Niehoff got there, however, dozens upon dozens of Marines were swarming over the area, rooting out Japanese survivors and snipers.

CPL OBIE NEWCOMB, USMC



The 3rd Special Konkyochitai command bunker was struck by many naval rounds from 5-inchers up to 14-inchers but none penetrated the structure.

parallel to Co E along the southern side of the bunker.

A team of riflemen that had been left to guard the southern side of the bunker whiled away the afternoon by chucking grenades into any openings that could be found. In time, a bulldozer with an improvised armor-plate cab arrived to seal the entire structure with sand. Doubtless, any Japanese still cowering within were asphyxiated.

Companies E, G, and K had a field day. Everything fell before them. Trenches, buildings, and pillboxes were blown up wherever they were encountered. Although a number of Marines were wounded, no one was killed. First Lieutenant Robert Rogers, the Co E commander, had a close call when he noticed a Japanese officer bearing down on him, sword held high for a killing blow. Fortunately, the attacker was shot dead by a nearby rifleman.

The last major objective of the advance from Red-3 was the massive concrete bunker that housed the headquarters of Rear Admiral Keichi Shibasaki's 3rd Special Base Force (konkyochitai). For nearly three days, Japanese machine gunners on the flat roof of the headquarters bunker had had an unobstructed view of the Marine positions

on Red-3. Their machine guns had taken the lives of many Marines.

While a line of Marine machine guns was positioned to keep the Japanese from manning the bunker's numerous firing embrasures, a large group of engineers tactfully approached the bunker in short hops. Their objective was the massive steel door, which had been banged shut by seven fleeing rikusentai only minutes earlier.

The engineers set and ignited a powerful charge beside the door, then ducked around the corner. The door was buckled and thrown open, and then PFC Borich stepped through the billowing dust and smoke to douse the bunker's innards with a stiff dose of flaming flamethrower fuel. When Borich turned to let waiting riflemen pass into the bunker's interior, he was greeted by a tremendous cheer from scores of Marines who had watched his calm actions.

Marines streamed by. The advance was so swift and steady that *Colorado*, which was backing Co K, was never called on to help.

Later estimates concluded that nearly 100 Japanese throughout the area committed suicide in the face of the successful Marine attacks. This, more than anything, accounted for the low casualties among

the assault units. Only three Marines were wounded after the leading files passed the Burns-Philp wharf.

In the end, Maj Crowe's two mixed battalion landing teams covered nearly 400 yards of ground straight out. Late in the afternoon, however, orders from the 2nd Marine Division headquarters pulled Crowe's forward elements back nearly 150 yards, to the airport turning circle. It was feared that Crowe's fields of fire might endanger a Marine unit that was rapidly taking ground in its attack through the area south of the turning circle.

For playing his vital role in turning the key that unlocked the gate that had been blocking the Marine advance on Red-3—for defeating the large covered bombproof bunker—1stLt Alexander Bonnyman, Jr., was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor. Maj Bill Chamberlin was awarded a Navy Cross for his part in the attack, and Harry Niehoff, John Borich, and Earl Coleman each were awarded a Silver Star.

Author's bio: Eric Hammel, who has been contributing to Leatherneck since the 1970s, is co-author with the late John E. Lane of "76 Hours: The Invasion of Tarawa" and its pictorial edition, "Bloody Tarawa."

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