

It has been said that Admiral Shibasaki of the Japanese Navy, commander of Japanese forces on Tarawa, was killed by a shell from the U.S. Destroyer *Ringgold*, in the fighting of the first day, as he transferred his headquarters from a concrete bunkhouse in between Beaches 1 and 2 to an alternate location on the southern beach of Betio island. Of the 5,000 Marines that stormed the beaches on D-Day, 1500 were casualties. At the end of the day the ground forces occupied less than a quarter of a square mile of land. They rested in shell holes and along the battered seawall. Peter and his unit were nestled in a defensive perimeter located between Beach Green and Red 1. Sergeant Vannover used the sunset to relay command orders to be on the look out for a possible counter attack. His experience at Guadalcanal served him well and, at present, he was preparing his 'boys' for the worst. There were 600 Japanese soldiers on the eastern end of the island and they were in good position to attack their left flank.

It was an attack that never came. Whether it was because of the destruction of Japanese landline communication during the bombardment, or the death of Admiral Shibasaki, Peter and his cohorts had dodged a very big bullet.

The long night presented a host of jitters to the men on the ground. Scattering wildlife, cries from the wounded, strange sounds, and phantoms of paranoia kept many men awake for sometime. The things they'd heard from the veterans served like ghost stories to them and just like children at a campfire they found it hard to get shut eye.

An immediate counterattack by Japanese forces against an enemy beachhead was fundamental to Japanese defensive strategy in the Pacific from around 1942-44. In Admiral Kobayashi's, of the Japanese Navy's, "Gist of Battle" instructions a garrison was directed to maintain its reserve forces, supported by tanks, if available, to launch definitive counterattacks, throwing the enemy back into the sea.

Earlier that afternoon two of the tanks that assisted Major Ryan in his push on Beach 1 were put out of action. The first tank still had its machine gun and was used as a gun emplacement to protect his flank as night fell. 14 medium tanks were brought in on the LSD (Landing Ship, Dock) that morning. Of those only one was completely functional at the present time.

That night the Japanese forces had enough capability to assemble a thousand plus men behind the headquarters blockhouse and the big, sand-covered redoubt, later called "Bonnyman's Hill", that faced the American forces on Beach 3. They, also, still had an impressive arsenal in their possession, which included knee mortars, Type 92 70-mm howitzers, tanks, and flamethrowers. If desired, the Japanese could mount an offensive that would succeed in penetrating the American lines from the east and driving them to the west, recapturing a long pier that marked the division of Beaches 2 and 3, and route the exhausted Marines that held the grounds. However, the Japanese forces seemed smitten, and with every hour of delay the Americans gained confidence. By morning the night's test of patience would give them more.

Daybreak found Peter and his Platoon thankful for the night's inaction. Half of the men slept through the night with the other half standing guard against the expected Japanese counterattack. Peter was among those were granted rest. The others were witness to the night activity on the island which included foraging for Japanese gas masks to get the rubber tubing that could be cut up and placed around the edges of their dog tags so that they didn't make noises when banging together. There were 'fireworks' as well as occasionally Japanese tracer fire arched through the air over the beach towards the pier. The reddish orange color of machine gun fire from American ships could be seen coming in the direction of the beach as the gunners tried to target Japanese soldiers, who'd swum out to the wrecked boats and tanks in the lagoon to fire their machine guns on the American positions. Some of

the Marines dug foxholes once initial signs of a counterattack did not materialize. Along the beach there were long lines of wounded stretched out for yards and no smoking was allowed due to the danger of presenting oneself as a target for Japanese snipers. There was no morphine, plasma, nor food available, little water and ammunition as well. The lack of supplies depleted the effectiveness of the Marines onshore. The wounded died slowly, and in great pain as not much could be done to save them.

Peter slowly wiped the sleep from his eyes as he woke and opened a can of K rations for breakfast. As he ate Chadwick made a seat out of the sand beside him and joined in for a silent meal. There wasn't much to talk about as the shock from the previous day's events left a void of words in their mouths. Both of them were sure that today's events would be as worse if not more.

At daybreak Major Ryan's mixed assortment of troops and sailors held a closely triangular area that reached about 300 yards inland. The sides of that triangle touched Beach 1 to the east and Green Beach to the west. To the left three quarters of Beach 1 and about half of Beach 2 remained in Japanese hands. From that area the enemy could subject the Marines on the two beaches to debilitating machine gun and antiboat fire. The Marines held half of Beaches 2 and 3 but the two positions shared poor communication. They extended to about 300 yards inland of the pier. As well they held close to half of the triangle in the center of a airstrip and two taxiways located in the middle of the island.

The Japanese defenders had been very busy during the night. They'd moved machine guns close in to bear on the front Marine positions near the airstrip along with the men sneaked out to the abandoned wrecks in the lagoon during the night. They had also stopped the hole that allowed some Marines to cross over the taxiway. By the morning machine guns were positioned to fire down the long taxiway, and no one was expected to cross alive.

Morning brought in a normal tide, unlike that of the previous day's low one, bringing the threat of drowning to the wounded men on the beach. Colonel Hall's men of the Eighth Marine Regiment had spent close to 20 hours in landing crafts near the line of departure awaiting landing orders. At 0200 that morning he was finally asked where he and his men were and about their conditions. His reply was that they were okay and in their boats near the minesweeper *Pursuit* at the line of departure. Two hours passed and he was ordered to land on the eastern tip of Betio for a diversionary move. The same orders that were sent to him a day before but never reached him. Next he proceeded to plan the landing to be executed at 0900, and set up a new line of departure a good ways to the east of the original.

Avoiding the certain destruction of his men that would have occurred had he landed on Beach 3 he, luckily, was later ordered to land at once on Beach 2 and attack west against the Japanese strong point in an attempt to link up with Ryan's forces on the western end of the island. At 6:15 the first wave of his battalion climbed from their boats onto the reef and began to wade ashore. Like the men who went in a day before, they were caught in the enemy meat grinder. Their losses were heavy. His men lost all of their flamethrowers, demolition devices, and most of their heavy equipment. They reached Betio shaken up and disorganized.

The previous day a safer way to the northwest coast of the lagoon was discovered that consisted of a 100 yard corridor west of the pier that separated Beach 1 and 2. Unaware of it Hall's men had been subjected to the fire of snipers and machine gunners who'd occupied a sunken interisland steamer the *Nimonea*. Planes strafed the ship getting four direct hits, and in doing so fired on the wounded men of the Battalion in water nearby. Men who tried to avoid the fire on Beach 2 waded into the cove of Beach 1 where they were shot down. The Battalion suffered 331 casualties killed and wounded out of 800. More than any other Battalion that landed on day one. By 8:00 about half of them were ashore. The rest of the morning they organized and positioned for the attack to the west.

The intense small arms fire that came with dawning of day two convinced the commander of 2/2 that the level of action would be the same as the first day's. He wanted to divide the enemy forces in half and direct the Regiment that held the grounds nearest the airstrip to push toward the south of the island, to attempt a crossing of the airstrip, and take the impressive defenses on the southern beach from the rear. He had been commanding the battle ashore for twenty four plus hours, and was

exhausted as well as wounded. Needless to say his temperament was not well either. He radioed the Maryland at 8:25: "Imperative you land ammunition, water, rations, and medical supplies in amtrac on Beach Red 2 and evacuate casualties."

Easier said than done, no matter how important it was, his orders to battalions 1 and 2 were not easily accomplished. Crossing the island meant, as the day before, that a group of Marines, 2 or 3, had to work their way forward to a close enough range and throw hand grenades into the enemy pillboxes that blocked the Marine advance. Alternatively, they could fire into the bunkers' interior with automatic weapons or blow it up with TNT thrown into its entrance or gunslits. Another technique was to use flamethrowers to evacuate the defenders. A flamethrower loaded with four gallons of napalm weighed about 72 pounds and was made up of a wand and 3 tanks, one holding compressed air and the two others fuel. The flamethrower valve was usually turned by one's right hand and the trigger that ignited the weapon's charge with the left. Air drove the napalm out of the wand ablaze and at tremendous pressure. If the soldier firing the weapon did not lean forward when firing, to counteract its "kick" when opening the valve, he would be thrown on his back covered in napalm and a heartbeat away from being torched by his own weapon. This had happened before. Since both hands were needed to operate the weapon, those who carried it were relatively unarmed. They had to advance under the cover of support fire, spray the entrance, and quickly find cover while the infantry mopped up. If this method worked the soldiers could inch their way forward. The Japanese defenders knew this and did everything possible to prevent their success.

Later that morning, carrier based planes strafed the area to the south of the airstrip, softening it up for the Marine assault. At about noon Lt. Col. Walter Jordan, who had taken field command of the 2/2 after its previous commander was killed, reported to the commanding officer of the ground forces that he had repeatedly sent out runners to contact his southernmost troops, but none had responded. His reply was to order Jordan to move his command post to the south beach and reestablish contact with them himself.

By now Peter and the rest of the men had finished their meals and prepared to move again. Major Ryan was taking the men south along Green Beach, the western end of the island. Located on the southwest corner of the island, the Japanese had twelve antiboat guns and two five-inch naval turret guns. This position was protected with several machine nests and rifle pits. Naval bombardment had taken out most of the antiboat guns and both of the five-inch guns but Ryan felt more naval fire was needed before they assaulted the area. The "fire mission" was called in and two destroyers went into action. Soon after 11:00 Ryan and his "orphans" as they were now called, being that they consisted of men from two landing teams, "dismounted" amtrack drivers, tankers, and sailors as well, attacked.

Also in support of them were two medium Sherman tanks. Peter heard the blast of the guns as they discharged at the targets ahead of them. To their immediate right were two 140-mm coastal defense guns. Peter and his Platoon followed the swarm of men as they rushed the defensive perimeter of the weapons, firing on the group of defenders as they advanced. Softened by the fire of the Sherman tanks to the rear, the gun crews had little chance of holding on to their weapons. First Lt. McPherson, Vannover's immediate superior, ordered his group forward to support those firing on the position of the closest gun. From there Vannover sent his men to the left of the position to assault its flank. The Japanese defenders in trenches noticed their action and pinpointed on their movement. Taking cover in the sand they returned fire on the enemy soldiers while a small band of them moved forward to throw grenades into the trenches. One soldier was hit as he prepared to throw his grenade and it was dislodged amongst the men with the pin pulled. It exploded, sending shrapnel and debris flying in all directions, hitting some of the men as they tried to flee. Seeing this Peter jumped up to regain the initiative. Covered by Chadwick, McNeil and others, he dashed to the area of the fallen soldiers. O'Rielly quickly followed, firing as he went. With the heads of the Japanese defenders down, Peter dislodged a grenade from his waist belt, pulled the pin, counted two Mississippi's, and tossed it into the enemy dugout. Diving into the sand to avoid return fire he saw the quick flash of the explosion and

heard its piercing ring. As the sand settled he looked up for confirmation of his success to see the remaining defenders depart the area of impact. He and O'Rielly were quickly joined by more of his Platoon and they occupied the far right end of the trench which curved around the emplacement like a semicircle. With elements of the rest of his Platoon, and others, rushing the front of the trench, the remaining defenders abandoned it, kept their ground and fired forward, or rushed the men in the right end. Peter responded by ramming an oncoming soldier with the butt of his rifle. Knocked back by the blow, the defender scrambled to regain control of his weapon and fire at his assailant. As his bayonet was not affixed to his weapon, Peter reached for it from off of his belt and placed it in the soldier's midsection. He followed that with more thrusts and a twist, relieving his enemy of his service in this world.

Behind him, O'Rielly advanced forward past the site of the altercation and fired his rifle down the exposed area of the trench, hitting a defender who'd stayed behind to thwart the attack. Return fire came down the trench forcing him to move back for cover. A Japanese hand grenade came flying down on them from an unexposed area and a soldier retrieved it and tossed it away. It exploded midway in its flight, but far away enough to cause no harm. As the crouching soldiers prepared to find better ground, the charging soldiers attacking the front reached the trench firing on and killing the defenders lodged in its opposite end. They had succeeded in ridding the emplacement of the enemy, and Peter and his followers focused their attention on the 140mm gun and its crew.

Using the trench as cover, they fired on the cannon, wounding those defenders who had not yet hidden behind the gun for protection. It was a shield that would not protect them for long as the position became entirely enclosed by U.S. Soldiers and they were driven to the sea, where death or surrender were their only options. 75 yards ahead the same activity was repeating itself on the second gun emplacement. With other units engaged in dealing with the disposed gunners, Peter and the rest of his Platoon moved on to support the men ahead.

Vannover had been impressed by what he saw from his men, especially Peter, whose initiative he rewarded with a compliment and by the time they reached the second gun, it had been overrun.