

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 418

### “Bloody Tarawa”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Last week, some 2,000 or 3,000 United States Marines, most of them now dead or wounded, gave the nation a name to stand beside those of Concord Bridge, the *Bonhomme Richard*, the Alamo, Little Bighorn, and Belleau Wood. The name was Tarawa.”

War correspondent Robert Sherrod, writing for *Time* magazine, December 6, 1943.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 418. Bloody Tarawa.

The last time we discussed the Pacific War, back in episode 412, I described to you Operation Cartwheel, Douglas MacArthur’s master plan for advancing north and west from Guadalcanal and New Guinea with the ultimate goal of capturing Rabaul, Japan’s most important base in the region.

By August 1943, the Allies had captured Lae on New Guinea and were advancing on the Huon Peninsula, which is the part of New Guinea that comes closest to the island of New Britain, where Rabaul is located. At their closest, they come within 60 nautical miles. That’s 70 mile miles, or 110 kilometers. On the other hand, Rabaul is located at the opposite end of New Britain, a long and slender island that is 500 kilometers, or 300 miles, long.

Also by August 1943, Allied forces, mostly American, had secured control of New Georgia Island in the central Solomons. The advance along the Solomon Islands chain northwest from Guadalcanal was the second prong of MacArthur’s planned advance on Rabaul.

The loss of New Georgia was a serious blow to Japan. The Japanese had invested time and resources in building an airbase on New Georgia, which they intended to use to counter the US airbase on Guadalcanal, but the Allies had taken the airbase from them in a matter of weeks. Opposing the Allied advance on New Georgia had cost Japan 3,000 soldiers and sailors, a light

cruiser, eight destroyers, and some 350 airplanes, and they'd lost the island and its airfield anyway.

The ships, the planes, the pilots—these were losses Japan simply could not afford. The Army had already drawn this conclusion, even before the Allied assault on New Georgia. Losses in the islands were too great. The Army's top commanders pointed to the map at the location of Bougainville. Bougainville was a large island at the northwestern end of the Solomon Islands chain. It was the obvious penultimate island hop before the Allies began an assault on Rabaul itself. Its being that much closer to Rabaul meant it would be that much easier to defend. Warships and planes could get there faster and using less fuel; transport and supply would be easier, too.

Now, in the aftermath of New Georgia, the Navy was forced to agree. The remaining garrisons in the Solomon Islands would receive no more reinforcements. They were ordered to hold off the enemy as long as possible, then evacuate via the Tokyo Express.

They were also worrying about the costs of this operation on the Allied side. The Japanese continued to resist with almost superhuman ferocity; it had taken 40,000 American soldiers to dislodge a Japanese garrison one-quarter that size. American soldiers on New Guinea suffered in the tropical climate, struggled to navigate the jungle without getting lost, and were in constant fear of Japanese ambushes, snipers, and booby traps. The advance along the northern coast of New Guinea was likewise proceeding more slowly than hoped.

The costs of continuing the advance would likely prove even greater. Would it still be possible to reach the final step of Operation Cartwheel by the end of 1943, as MacArthur had planned? That seemed doubtful. And when the Allies were ready to land on New Britain, how many soldiers would it take to oppose a Japanese force that numbered around 100,000?

A huge force would be required to take Rabaul, including not only soldiers, but the planes and ships and supplies and transports to support them. Now consider the likelihood the date of the operation would slip into 1944. This raised concerns that the assault on Rabaul might draw from ships and aircraft that would be needed for Operation Overlord.

Churchill and Roosevelt discussed these issues at their meeting in Québec in August and came to a decision. There would be no assault on Rabaul. Experience in the region had shown that the Allies could control the seas and the air and in that way interfere with the supply and transport of Japanese units. This suggested a different strategy: seize control of islands around Rabaul and deploy sufficient numbers of planes and ships, and the Japanese would not be able to supply the base. Japanese personnel on New Britain would be trapped and unable to fight. Rabaul would become nothing more than a huge POW camp.

Meanwhile, Admiral Chester Nimitz, stationed at Pearl Harbor, was advocating an alternate strategy for conducting the war against Japan. Instead of advancing from the Solomon Islands to

New Britain and on to the Philippines as MacArthur had proposed, Nimitz wanted to begin at Hawaii and advance west through the Marshall Islands and the Caroline Islands, two archipelagos made up mostly of small atolls, then on to the Mariana Islands.

Nimitz saw several advantages to this approach. It would be shorter and quicker than Operation Cartwheel, for one. For another, America's new generation of strategic bomber, meant to replace the venerable B-17, was just beginning to come off the assembly lines. It was designated the B-29, and it could carry a bigger payload across a longer distance than its predecessor. Since the B-17 had been dubbed the "Flying Fortress," they began calling the new plane the "Superfortress."

And when the US secured the Mariana Islands, which include the occupied US territory of Guam, along with other islands to the east and north, B-29s based in these islands would have sufficient range to bomb targets in the Japanese Home Islands. The Americans were very keen on this. German cities were paying the price for their government's aggression. Japanese cities must pay as well. The Americans wanted it so badly that they declined to deploy B-29s in Europe; they were saving them for Tokyo.

Additionally, air and naval units stationed in the Marianas would be in a position to choke off vital shipments of supplies and resources from Southeast Asia headed for Japan.

There was one other important consideration. In the Southwest Pacific, the islands are big enough to build and operate large airbases. The islands of the central Pacific, by contrast, are tiny and spread widely over hundreds of miles of ocean. It's not easy to build an airfield on an atoll, and even if you manage that, how much room will you have to store planes and supplies and repair equipment?

This gives the US Navy a big advantage. The Navy lost four aircraft carriers in the Pacific in 1942; five, if you count USS *Langley*. By the time New Georgia was secured in August 1943, the Navy had acquired five new carriers of the *Essex* class, bigger and better than the carriers they replaced, and two more *Essex*-class carriers would enter service in November. Japan, by contrast, had lost four fleet carriers at Midway, and no new fleet carrier would enter service until 1944.

In other words, the US now had a substantial lead in carriers and carrier aircraft compared to Japan, and I'm not even counting light carriers and escort carriers, where the lead was even greater. This meant the US could guarantee air superiority by sending large numbers of carrier-based fighters and bombers to one of these small Central Pacific islands, while Japan would have available only the handful of aircraft that its Navy could station on that island. The small size of the islands would also limit the size of any Japanese garrison, meaning these islands would not see the kind of slow, costly combat involving tens of thousands of soldiers, as had become the norm in the Southwest Pacific campaign.

Nimitz's arguments persuaded his superiors, especially in light of how tough a slog Operation Cartwheel was proving to be, so the decision was made at Cairo in November. Operation

Cartwheel would be further downgraded, while Nimitz's plan would get top priority. MacArthur protested the decision vigorously, but the Joint Chiefs were unpersuaded.

The first steps in Nimitz's island-hopping campaign would take place in the Gilbert Islands. The Gilbert and Ellice Islands were a colony within the British Empire and had been under British control since 1892. They were a small and obscure colonial possession, sometimes jokingly referred to in Britain as the "Gilbert and Sullivan Islands."

The islands lie roughly at the midpoint of a line drawn from Hawaii to Australia. The Gilbert Islands are a chain of 16 islands, which in our time are part of the independent Republic of Kiribati. Kiribati is the local language's way of saying "Gilberts." The Ellice Islands include nine islands, and I'm being generous in calling some of them "islands." In our time, the Ellice Islands form the independent nation of Tuvalu. On the eve of the Second World War, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands collectively were home to about 32,000 people.

North and west from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands lie the Marshall Islands, which had been a Japanese mandatory territory since the end of the last war. Beginning in the days following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, when Japanese forces were seizing control of islands around the Pacific, the Imperial Japanese Navy had landed troops in the Gilbert Islands and by September 1942 they were fully in control. They built an airfield on the island of Tarawa as part of the Japanese plan to construct a defensive line at the outer limits of the Japanese-controlled Pacific to hold off American naval forces.

On August 17, 1942, just ten days after US Marines landed on Guadalcanal and even before the Japanese had consolidated their control over the Gilbert Islands, a force of 200 US Marines landed on Makin Island in the Gilberts. One of the 200 was James Roosevelt, eldest son of the American President. The Japanese had set up a seaplane base on Makin Island, which was garrisoned by about 70 Japanese soldiers.

The purposes of this raid were to gather some intelligence on the Japanese, test American tactics for landing on a small Pacific island, disrupt the Japanese seaplane base, and most important, to confuse Japanese military leaders about American priorities, specifically to make them wonder whether the Guadalcanal landings were an all-out effort to take the island (they were), or merely one in a series of raids the Americans planned to carry out along the fringes of the Japanese defensive line.

The American raiders killed 46 Japanese and destroyed two seaplanes. Twenty-one Americans were killed, 17 wounded, and nine captured by the Japanese, who executed them by beheading.

The raid was a mixed bag for the Americans, but it did succeed in distracting the Japanese from Guadalcanal for a little while, and by that I mean, the Japanese reacted to the raid by beefing up their garrisons in the Gilbert Islands, which may have drawn a few reserves away from the Solomon Islands, but...well, I'll get back to that.

Two months later, the Americans occupied the Ellice Islands and built their own airbase there, effectively defining the front line between Japanese-controlled waters and Allied-controlled waters as running between the two island groups.

By this time, after Midway and with the Americans on Guadalcanal, the Japanese lost whatever interest they had once had in seizing the Ellice Islands and were content to fortify the Gilbert Islands and dare the Americans to come and take them.

A year later, in November 1943, Admiral Nimitz was determined to do exactly that.

[music: Mozart, *String Quartet No. 19 in C major*.]

Chester Nimitz's plan to advance into Japanese-controlled waters by island-hopping began with an effort to secure the Gilbert Islands and drive out the Japanese. The Gilberts would then be the base from which Allied forces would advance westward to the Marshall Islands, and the Marshall Islands would then be the base from which they would take the Marianas. Airfields already under US control in the Ellice Islands would serve as bases for B-24 bombers that could attack targets in the Gilberts. The two islands in the Gilberts Nimitz chose to assault were Makin Island and Tarawa.

I spoke earlier about the significant advantages Nimitz's island-hopping strategy had over MacArthur's Solomon Islands campaign. One of them was the small size of the islands, which meant the defenders were limited in how many soldiers and aircraft they could station on any one of them. But on the flip side, there is a serious disadvantage. In the Solomon Islands campaigns, when Allied forces landed on islands like Guadalcanal or New Georgia, those islands were large enough that the invaders had the luxury of choosing their landing site. The Japanese could not defend every beach on the whole island. But Japanese forces defending an atoll could, and they did. The invasion force would have no choice but to land right in the face of Japanese defenders.

I said a few minutes ago that the 1942 raid on Makin Island helped draw Japanese attention away from Guadalcanal, but... The "but" is that last year's raid spurred the Japanese to beef up their defenses in the Gilberts. Makin Island was now defended by 400 Japanese soldiers, along with another 400 civilian workers, and the island now had its completed seaplane base plus a few tanks and anti-tank guns, with one submarine patrolling nearby. Remember that submarine.

The Americans landed more than 6,000 troops on Makin Island on November 20. The combat was fierce, but the Americans outnumbered the Japanese 15:1 and they had the firepower of the US Navy backing them up in the form of battleships, cruisers, escort carriers and fleet carriers. One of the ships in the latter category was the old workhorse USS *Enterprise*, which was becoming the most storied US Navy ship of the Second World War.

In three days, Makin Island was secure. The Japanese lost virtually all of their 400 combat soldiers; the Americans lost 66 killed and 152 wounded.

That sounds pretty good, but the Japanese exacted some measure of revenge the following day, when a torpedo from that submarine sank USS *Liscome Bay*, one of the three escort carriers assigned to this mission, and which was also serving as the flagship of the American task force. Of the 916 aboard *Liscome Bay*, 702 died, including the captain, the admiral, and Doris Miller, the African-American Navy mess attendant who became a hero of the Pearl Harbor attack. Doris Miller was 24 years old.

An additional 43 American sailors died aboard the First World War-vintage USS *Mississippi* when a turret exploded while the battleship was firing on the island in support of the invasion. Add in the lost sailors, and the total number of Americans killed during this operation increases to 821, about double the Japanese losses.

But Makin Island was a walk in the park compared to the other landing, on the island of Tarawa.

Tarawa is an atoll, and for the sake of simplicity, I've been using the word atoll as if every atoll consisted of one single island. But they often don't. As you know, an atoll is a ring of coral around what used to be an island, until it eroded away, leaving behind a shallow lagoon. An atoll might be just one narrow ring- or V-shaped island, but more commonly it is a series of smaller islands, as in the case of Tarawa.

The Japanese based their forces on the island of Betio, which was about two miles long and a half-mile wide; just barely big enough for the Japanese to build an airfield on. The airfield represented a threat to any American force advancing into the Marshalls. It had to be taken.

The Japanese garrison on the island numbered about 2,600, plus 2,200 civilian laborers. The Americans would send 18,000 Marines plus some Army units. The Japanese force standing against them was not composed of ordinary soldiers, but of Japan's elite Special Naval Landing Forces, basically Japan's marine corps. An American military intelligence report of the time describes the Special Naval Landing Forces as "more highly trained and [with] a greater tenacity and fighting spirit than the average Japanese Army unit." Suffice it to say that this is a huge understatement.

And not only was the island garrisoned by some of the toughest in the Japanese military, its defenses were well prepared. The Japanese had built a meter-high wall of logs at the water's edge. Behind this were trenches, artillery pieces, and a hundred machine gun emplacements, inside pillboxes reinforced against enemy artillery fire, as well as a dozen naval guns, captured from the British at Singapore. The garrison commander was an admiral, Keiji Shibasaki, who boasted to his soldiers that the Americans could not take the island with a million soldiers.

The American landing force came with battleships, escort carriers, and heavy cruisers. Early on D-day, before the Marines landed, the support ships spent two and a half hours pounding the tiny island with a total of 3,000 tons of shells, until the entire island was covered in black smoke and flames. You might have thought that no human or weapon could have survived.

*Time* magazine correspondent Robert Sherrod, whom I quoted at the top of the episode, drew that conclusion. Then a shell landed in the sea near the ship he was on, sending a spout of water into the air. Sherrod remarked, “My God, what wide shooting! Those boys need some practice.” A Marine Corps officer accompanying him asked, “You don’t think that’s our own guns doing that shooting, do you?”

It was one of those formerly-British Japanese naval guns firing on the American ships. Most of the Japanese garrison on the island was alive and well and ready for a fight.

As the Marines approached the shore in landing craft, Japanese troops climbed out of their bunkers and took up positions on the sea wall. The Marines approached on amphibious landing craft that had a four-foot draft. The Americans were attacking at high tide and expected the water over the coral reefs to be at least five feet deep, which would have been sufficient. But this was a neap tide. Neap tides are lower than average, in this case, just three feet. The Marines had no choice but to climb out of their stranded landing craft and wade to shore as Japanese rifle and machine gun fire rained down on them. Casualties were heavy.

Some of the Marines were approaching in a new kind of vehicle, a landing craft equipped with treads, like a tank. These were known in military-speak as LVTs, for “Landing Vehicle, Tracked.” They became better known as amtracks, or amtracks. They worked on the same principle as those amphibious cargo trucks I described when we looked at the Allied invasion of Sicily, and initially these amtracks were conceived for the same purpose: to carry supplies from ships out at sea to the shore, and then once on shore, they were able to keep going, their engines now driving the tracks instead of propellers.

Tarawa was the first instance of these new amtracks being used to land soldiers, and they worked great. While the older-style landing craft ran aground in unexpectedly shallow water and got stuck on the coral reef, the amtracks just kept coming. Each amtrack could carry about two dozen soldiers, or a jeep or a load of supplies, and they were armed with as many as four machine guns, so they were even capable of firing back.

The Marines fortunate enough to be riding in one of these amtracks were much more likely to make it to the beach, but once there, they could only huddle against the outside of the seawall until enough of them had gathered to assault the first line of Japanese defenders.

The Japanese had built a heavy concrete bunker to serve as a command post for Admiral Keiji and his staff, but the telephone lines they had laid to allow him to communicate with his soldiers had been destroyed by the American naval bombardment. Frustrated by his inability to give orders there, and after several hours of heavy fighting, Keiji ordered the bunker to be used as shelter for Japanese wounded. As he and his staff prepared to move to a new command post, an American naval artillery shell exploded among them, killing the admiral and most of his staff.

This left the Japanese defenders isolated in small groups with no ability to coordinate their defense. The Marines managed to hold onto their slender beachhead at the landing site until dark, the scattered defenders unable to organize a serious counterattack. Overnight, some Japanese soldiers waded out to some of the wrecked American landing craft just offshore, which they used as sniper nests after dawn, although again, this effort was sporadic and unorganized.

Two more days of heavy combat followed, with the Americans gradually gaining the upper hand. Seabees came ashore and set to work repairing the island's airstrip even as the Marines were still fighting for it. Soon American airplanes were basing there.

After barely 72 hours of fighting, the Americans lost about 1,700 sailors and Marines killed and another 2,000 wounded. Virtually the entire Japanese garrison gave their lives to resist the invasion, including the civilians. After the fighting ended, the Marines took prisoner only 17 Japanese soldiers and 129 Korean laborers.

That's a total of more than 6,000 killed on both sides in a mere three days, for control over an island smaller than New York City's Central Park.

After Betio was secured, the Marines advanced through and secured the other islands that made up Tarawa Atoll.

Back in the United States, news of the heavy casualties in a battle over a tiny, seemingly worthless island, sparked a public backlash. People began referring to "Bloody Tarawa." Even the overall commander of the Marines, General Holland Smith, compared the battle to Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. Marine Corps General Alexander Vandegrift, who'd commanded the First Marine Division during the Battle of Guadalcanal, and who was later made Marine Corps Commandant, defended the operation as costly, but necessary. Admiral Nimitz agreed, stating, "The capture of Tarawa knocked down the front door to the Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific."

It also taught the Americans costly but valuable lessons they would apply as they advanced west, improving their amphibious assault tactics along the way.

Marines with cameras recorded film footage of the invasion and subsequent fighting; these were made into a short documentary film titled *With the Marines at Tarawa*. The film included footage of dead and wounded Americans so disturbing, the decision on whether to show it to the public was left to President Roosevelt. He approved distribution of the film, which won the 1944 Academy Award for Best Short Documentary. Today, it can be seen on YouTube; I've posted it on the podcast website, if you'd like to watch it for yourself.

The narration that accompanies the footage of dead Marines sums it up best, I think: "This is the price we have to pay for a war we didn't want."

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Amy for her kind donation, and thank you to Tommy for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Amy and Tommy help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

I've gotten a lot of responses to my call for questions, and it looks like there will be a question-and-answer episode, sometime before the end of the year. I'll keep you posted. I have plenty of questions to work with, but there's still some time, so if you have a question for me that you'd like to hear me answer on the podcast, send it to the email address, [historyofthetwentiethcentury@gmail.com](mailto:historyofthetwentiethcentury@gmail.com). Also please let me know if and how you'd like to be named if I use your question.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at the new chapters in the story of the Holocaust unfolding in 1944 and consider the guilt of not only large numbers of Germans, but large numbers of people across Europe. Millions of Spectators, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned that the carrier USS *Enterprise* provided support for the landing at Makin Island. If you think back to episode 382 and the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands during the battle for Guadalcanal, you may remember that America's only two operational carriers in the Pacific were involved in that battle, *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, and that *Hornet* was sunk and *Enterprise* damaged.

For a period of almost three months afterward, from late 1942 into early 1943, *Enterprise* was the only operational American carrier in the Pacific Theater, and it was damaged. One crew member hung a poster on the hangar deck that declared, "*Enterprise* vs. Japan."

The ship and its crew rose to the occasion. Bombers from *Enterprise* helped sink the Japanese battleship *Hiei* in November 1942, the first American sinking of a Japanese battleship.

In May 1943, *Enterprise* returned to Pearl Harbor, where Admiral Nimitz awarded the ship's crew the Presidential Unit Citation, making it the first carrier to receive that honor. It became known across the US Navy by the nickname, "The Big E," or sometimes "The Lucky E."

With newly-built American fleet carriers and light carriers entering service in the Pacific, *Enterprise* was at last relieved of duty and sent to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard for a refit that included improved anti-aircraft guns and torpedo defenses.

And in November 1943, *Enterprise* returned to duty, providing air support over Makin Island. For the next six months, *Enterprise* would cover Admiral Nimitz's island-hopping campaign as it proceeded westward into the Marshall Islands and beyond.

*Enterprise* would remain in service for the rest of the war, and until it was decommissioned in 1947. If you ever wondered why this particular name was selected for the starship in *Star Trek*, now you know.

[music: Closing War Theme]