

On the second anniversary of Pearl Harbor, 7 Dec 1943, Admiral Chester Nimitz, normally a seeker of consensus, made an uncharacteristic move by assembling his staff and without consultation, ordering the invasion of Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. At the dawn of 1944, the Fast Carrier Groups of the Pacific Fleet extended their raids deep into Japanese territory but the fleet, now immense in size and power, had no major bases west of Pearl Harbor. Even with at-sea replenishment, after every sortie they were compelled to return Pearl for fuel, provisions and repairs, requiring many days of unproductive steaming time. Kwajalein's location afforded a superb anchorage, airfields and sufficient room for a major naval repair and supply base some 2100 miles closer to Japan than Pearl Harbor, thus vastly increasing the operational range of the fleet.

The staff raised many objections to the rushed timetable but Nimitz was adamant. Nimitz knew the time was right for the Marshall Islands operation. The Japanese expected an attack in the area and further delay would afford them an opportunity to reinforce their Marshall Islands bases. American industry was providing vast numbers of ships, planes and supplies and voluntary enlistments and the draft ensured that sufficient numbers of trained and experienced marines and soldiers were at the ready. Nimitz also knew (confirmed by post-war interrogations of Japanese officers) that Kwajalein and Eniwetok, our next target, were lightly defended. Japan concentrated their strength on their larger Marshall Islands airbases at Wotje, Maloelap, Jaluit and Mili, expecting the U.S. to strike at these strong points. Nimitz would employ our ground forces only for islands we needed to occupy for forward bases and utilize our overwhelming air power to neutralize other Japanese strongholds.

Admiral Ray Spruance, made a special request that we simultaneously take the island of Majuro, 270 miles south of Kwajalein, as a base for Service Squadron Ten, which was composed of the fleet oilers and supply vessels that provided at-sea replenishment of the carrier groups. Nimitz consented - immediately prompting a question by General Holland (Howlin' Mad) Smith, commander of the landing forces: "How many defenders on Majuro?" Intelligence indicated that most of the Majuro garrison had been withdrawn and Intelligence Officer Ed Layton replied, "Six sir." Smith responded, "Six thousand?" "No sir, six." American intercepts of supply messages from Majuro indicated that six rations were consumed daily. Majuro was thus added to the operation and taken by the U.S. Army on 31 January, 1944. A Marine Corps recon team was welcomed by a friendly planter who supplied them with coconut liquor. They encountered only one Japanese warrant officer remaining on the island and he was quickly captured. Majuro was reported secure after two hours. Japan won the Marshall Islands from Germany after World War I and the seizure of Majuro represented America's first capture of actual Japanese territory in the Pacific War.

Pre-invasion fast-carrier raids on the large Japanese bases in the Marshalls heavily reduced Japan's air assets and essentially eliminated their threat to the Kwajalein operation. Numerous sorties were also flown from our new air base in Tarawa Atoll. A fleet of nearly 300 ships, comprising 4 fast carrier groups was assembled to transport the Marines and Army to Kwajalein, arriving on 31 January 1944. In a new naval formation, older battleships sailed ahead and astern of the carriers, adding their massive anti-aircraft firepower to protect the carriers. The venerable battleship - which Alfred Thayer Mahan famously theorized would win all future naval wars in decisive pitched battles - was now supplanted by naval aviation and reduced to screening aircraft carriers and shore bombardment duties.

The 4th Marine Division was assigned the northern islands of Roi and Namur and the Army's 7th Infantry Division would take Kwajalein island 35 miles across the lagoon to the south. Pre-invasion aerial bombing had reduced the enemy's large guns, allowing the battleships and other vessels to take positions close to the beaches. Alternate naval and air bombardment put the enemy in a state of shock, laying waste to the islands. Underwater demolition teams swam in and destroyed obstacles to landing

craft and mines – a lesson learned from Tarawa. The next day, 1 February 1944, the landing forces motored in – this time with sufficient amtracks to get them all safely to the beach.

Roi and Namur were connected with a causeway and are today landfilled into one island. The marines hit Roi on its west coast and Namur from the south on 1 February 1944. Roi, with its large airfield, was overrun with great rapidity, one Marine unit had actually crossed the island without stopping but was called back so as not to endanger the methodical advance. The defense of Namur was more spirited, Japanese soldiers fought from every possible location. Lt. Saul Stein led a patrol up to a blockhouse that had somehow survived the bombardment and commenced an assault on the building. His marines first blew a hole in its side with a shape-charge. Suddenly, Japanese soldiers began to run from the building in a frenzy. The incredulous marines thought the Japanese had gone crazy and were too surprised to shoot at them. Stein ordered satchel charges thrown in prior to entry. From an observation plane above the island, it appeared that the entire island of Namur disappeared – the observer noted that the aircraft had gained 1,000 feet of altitude as a result an immense explosion from which rose a towering cloud and a rain of debris. The blockhouse as it turned out, was a warehouse for hundreds of torpedo warheads and all that remained of it was a water-filled crater. The explosion killed Lt. Stein and his men. All told, 40 marines lost their lives and 60 were injured by the blast. The only survivor was blown 150 feet into the lagoon. Namur was secured the next day, 2 February 1944 with 1,000 casualties including about 200 KIA. Japanese losses were about 3500 killed.

The 7th Infantry's advance across Kwajalein Island to the south was in accordance with army doctrine, slower but less costly. Kwajalein was reported secure on 4 February, with about 140 soldiers killed and about 850 wounded. The Japanese lost about 4300 killed on Kwajalein Island. Once again, the Navy complained about the speed of the Army advance, but a dispassionate analysis of the numbers of enemy troops and defense positions on each island reveals no basis for this complaint.

The smoke had not cleared over Kwajalein Atoll when construction commenced to transform it into a major mid-Pacific naval base with vast supply dumps and shops capable of repairing all but the most heavily damaged ships. The war was moving forward at a speed that, even 6 months prior, could not be imagined. The quick capture of Kwajalein vindicated all doctrinal changes effected from lessons learned in previous battles. General Smith did not have to commit his floating reserve, the 22nd Marine Regiment and the 106th Infantry. These regiments remained offshore with the large naval invasion task force. With these assets already on hand, on the advice of Gen. Smith and the fleet commanders, the invasion of Eniwetok, with its small garrison of 3500, was put forward by 2 months, now scheduled for 17 February. Nimitz's staff was given 10 days to plan it. So vast was America's carrier fleet, that Operation Hailstone, the mission to reduce the "impregnable" Japanese air and sea base at Truk lagoon in the Caroline Islands, would commence simultaneously on 17 February 1944.

Today, Kwajalein Atoll is part of the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Roi-Namur is a restricted U.S. missile-tracking installation. Off Enubuj island, just west of Kwajalein Island, lies the partially submerged, capsized wreck of the German Battle Cruiser Prinz Eugen. The Prinz Eugen accompanied the battleship Bismark into the North Atlantic in 1940 and was detached just before the famed sea battle with the Royal Navy in which the Bismark was sunk. Taken as a prize of war, the Prinz Eugen was anchored in the Bikini Atoll lagoon about 1200 yards from the epicenter of the Able and Baker A-Bomb tests (Operation Crossroads) in July, 1946. Highly irradiated, the Prinz Eugen was later towed to Kwajalein to determine if it could be decontaminated but a small leak that could not be repaired because of the radiation danger caused it to list heavily and eventually capsize in December, 1946. The wreck is a major attraction for sport divers and a monument to a future war that humankind must dedicate itself never to even contemplate.