

In December of 1942, the surviving marines of the 2nd Marine Division departed Guadalcanal to rest and recuperate in New Zealand. Still nursing wounds and sick from malaria and other tropical fevers, the marines were amazed by their reception. With most of their army fighting in North Africa, New Zealand braced for the inevitable Japanese invasion until the Marines stopped the Japanese southeastern expansion at Guadalcanal. New Zealanders welcomed the marines as their saviors, opened their hospitals to the sick and wounded, paid for their drinks, invited young Americans into their homes and treated them as honored guests. Steak and eggs became a favorite food and with most New Zealand men off to war, the marines were rarely at a loss for female company. Some 600 marriages or engagements united American marines and New Zealand women.

As the 2nd Marine Division recuperated and trained, the American advance south of the equator inched its way northward throughout the spring and summer of 1943. Marine and army units advanced through the central Solomons and then attacked Bougainville at the southern doorstep of the key Japanese naval and air base at Rabaul. Army and Naval aviation methodically reduced Japanese naval and air capability and our ships and subs interdicted Japanese supply convoys.

Due to serious systemic weaknesses, the once-invincible Japanese air forces were beginning to weaken as their losses grew. Selecting and training pilots was a two-year training program with brutal competition that produced excellent, combat-ready pilots but “washed out” equally skilled candidates for minor reasons. The system however was not designed to produce a continuous pipeline of new pilots which made each Japanese pilot lost in action irreplaceable. Japan was also weak in engineering talent. The Japanese aircraft industry that produced the once state-of-the-art Zero fighter, was unable to rapidly produce new designs capable of matching improved American aircraft.

Thus 75 years ago in October, 1943, the Pacific War had become a war of numbers – and the numbers were not looking good for Japan. Nobody had a better grasp of the mathematics of the Pacific War than the Navy’s chief of staff, Admiral Ernest J. King. King easily recognized that Japan’s irreplaceable losses of pilots, aircraft and ships seriously reduced its capacity to import raw materials and petroleum thus hampering its capacity to conduct the war. King also saw his advantage increasing as the war-production boom in America peaked. New aircraft like the F6F Hellcat, now appearing in large numbers, could best the Zero in every performance factor. American pilots had the machine to defeat the Zero and Japanese air losses accelerated. The Air Force had the B-29 bomber which could pummel Japan once we could establish an air base within its range. In June, 1943, the first of the fast Essex class carriers deployed. At speeds of 30 knots, carrier task groups could project air and naval power rapidly and to greater distances. King “did the math” and calculated the Japanese could not sustain their most powerful bases between the equator and the Marianas. America need only capture one or two critical islands of the Gilbert and Marshall chains to provide airports, supply bases and anchorages for each successive operation. The remaining Japanese-held islands would be neutralized by air superiority and lack of supply. (Japanese standard orders to their outer defensive posts were: Expect no assistance. Fight to the death.) The strategic objective of the island-hopping offensive would be the Marianas which would put the B-29s in range of the Japanese home islands. Now all Ernest J. King needed to do was convince a few critics that his strategy was viable.

The British, who held the line in Europe since the fall of 1940, felt it crucial that America honor the “Europe First” policy by ceasing offensive operations and holding the Japanese in place until the European War was successfully concluded. King’s offensive counted on the current weakened state of Japanese outer defenses, any delay would give them time to fortify and give us a much harder nut to crack later on. It didn’t take a lot of convincing to win over the British, they too understood the calculus of the war and realized that America was perfectly capable of mounting a two-theater war.

King's greatest problem was inter-service rivalry, in the person of General Douglas MacArthur who was insisting on leading the entire Pacific war.

MacArthur felt the Army were the experts at continental ground warfare and best suited to fight their way north on New Guinea to reduce Rabaul. After New Guinea would come MacArthur's passionate goal – the liberation of the Philippines. MacArthur only needed the navy to transport his troops and cover his landings. To MacArthur's credit, the eventual - and necessary - conquest of New Guinea and the Philippines were each accomplished with the loss of fewer soldiers than in the Battle of the Bulge. However, the Army's slow and deliberate advances, while minimizing casualties, required much time to accomplish. Time was something King did not have. His plan required speed to keep the Japanese reeling from each blow and unable to recover. His carrier forces had to cover the amphibious landings and the longer the carriers remained off the landing beaches, the more vulnerable they were to air and submarine attack. King required an aggressive amphibious infantry, willing to trade large numbers of casualties for speed of advance – the basic doctrine of the United States Marine Corps.

Admiral King used all the political influence he could muster and forced MacArthur to accept two parallel American offensives, above and below the equator. The first step in King's strategy would focus on establishing an airfield in the Gilbert Islands (today called Kiribati – Pidgin for Gilbert.) Operation Galvanic would use carrier task forces to neutralize enemy air power and cover simultaneous amphibious landings by the army on Makin island and the marines on the island of Betio. In an incredible coincidence, both the Japanese and Americans came to a simultaneous conclusion that long, flat Betio Island, whose highest elevation was 10 feet above sea-level, was a perfect location for a forward air base that would control the skies for much of the area. The Japanese had taken the Gilberts from the British Commonwealth in December of 1941 and by summer of 1943, they knew we wanted it. Japan garrisoned Betio with a Special Naval Landing Force, (sometimes called Japanese Marines) highly-trained, fanatically motivated and chosen for their physical characteristics – some taller than 6 feet, rare for a Japanese soldier. The SNLF, along with with Korean forced laborers fortified the island with “bomb-proofs,” concrete bunkers with roofs made of alternating layers of logs, sand and steel girders that were impervious to aerial and sea bombardment. Water obstacles channeled landing craft to lanes pre-sighted by artillery and machine guns. Trenches and tunnels connected the bomb-proofs with dozens of machine gun pits and mortar emplacements. The Japanese island commander reported that “one million men could not capture Betio in one hundred years.” The 2nd Marine Division was chosen to disprove his theory with the war's first assault on a heavily defended beachhead. (The army's 167th Infantry, 27th Infantry Division was assigned to Makin. The slower army infantry doctrine would result in tragic naval losses that would further the bitter inter-service rivalries during the war.)

James A. Michener, was a lieutenant on Espiritu Santo and other supply bases far removed from the front. His “Tales of The South Pacific” and the musical it was made into, depicted how most Americans pictured the Pacific war – palm trees, sports, beautiful sunsets and beautiful women. Marines and soldiers who were in combat hated it for ignoring the real Pacific War. For the 2nd Marine Division, their pleasant stay in New Zealand ended with no prior notice to settle their affairs. On 7 November 1943, they received orders to gear up and board transports. Unknown to them, operation Galvanic had begun. There would be no tearful goodbyes, no goodbyes of any sort – and for many, no return. At sea, they learned their mission was to capture the atoll of which Betio was a part. It's name will forever remain synonymous with horror, sacrifice, valor and the United States Marine Corps – Tarawa.