

This Day in History... November 20, 1943

Battle of Tarawa Begins

On November 20, 1943, US troops launched the Battle of Tarawa, the first American offensive in the central Pacific region of World War II. A turning point in the Pacific War, it saw effective use of the America's newly developed island-hopping strategy and provided important lessons for future invasions.

As the Allied forces slowly gained control in Europe and Northern Africa, they turned their attention to winning the Battle of the Pacific. Admiral Chester Nimitz developed a new strategy in which the Allies would hop from island to island across the Central Pacific.

Rather than capture every island held by the Japanese, the Allies would bypass Japanese strongholds and invade those islands that were weakly defended. Each captured island would then become a base from which to strike the next target. This strategy, which was known as island hopping or leapfrogging, would ultimately save both time and lives.



From the Great Americans Series

In order to win the war in the Pacific, the Allies needed to capture the Philippines and ultimately Japan. To take the Philippines, they needed to take the Mariana Islands, which were heavily defended. And in turn, to take the Marianas, they needed to capture the Marshall Islands, which would provide a suitable base for land-based aircraft to provide essential cover and support for American landings. However, a Japanese base on Betio in the Tarawa Atoll had cut off the Marshall Islands' communications with Hawaii. With all this in mind, the Allies decided that they needed to invade Tarawa to achieve their goal.

In the coming months, the Allies assembled their largest invasion force yet in the Pacific – 17 aircraft carriers, 12 battleships, 12 cruisers, 66 destroyers, and 36 transports, totaling around 35,000 troops. In the early hours of November 20, this massive force approached Tarawa under fire from the island's enemy batteries. US battleships returned fire, one hitting and exploding an ammunition bunker. They ended up destroying three of the four enemy guns, creating an opening in the lagoon for landing.

Next the Allies launched air and additional naval attacks. However, a series of problems followed. Rough waters slowed the transfer of Marines to landing crafts, the air raid was delayed, and battleships waiting for their cue were the targets of Japanese fire. Low tide levels made coming ashore difficult. The Marines were forced to abandon their landing crafts and wade through the water under enemy fire, also soaking and destroying important equipment, such as radios. There were also issues landing tanks on the island, and many of those that reached the island were knocked out or otherwise disabled within a matter of hours.

Despite all these issues, the US troops took most of the beach up to the Japanese first line of defense by noon. By nightfall, they had cut the Japanese communication lines and made their way across about half of the island. That night was difficult for everyone. US troops that made it ashore waited anxiously for a counterattack that never came while bringing howitzers ashore for the next day's battle. The second wave hadn't been able to land on the first day, so they spent the night on their boats without food or water. Meanwhile, the Japanese on the island had lost their commander and communication lines, though some swam out to ships that would attack the Americans from behind the next day.

Day two of the battle started with dismal weather, but the rising tide allowed destroyers to move closer to the shore to provide supporting fire. Troops were able to effectively land and attack the Japanese positions. By noon the US troops destroyed most of the Japanese heavy machine gun posts. Within a matter of hours they crossed the airstrip and controlled the western end of the island by nightfall.

On November 22, the Allies spent much of the day linking up their forces from separate landings and pushing across the island. By evening, they had pushed across the island and had the Japanese nearly cornered in a few locations. The Japanese attempted a counterattack that inflicted US casualties, but ultimately failed.



Issued to honor the role of the Navy in WWII.

Though the airfields were important to the war, the lessons learned at Tarawa led to vast improvements in later atoll battles and work on waterproof radios. The difficulties in landing men at Tarawa also led to the creation of the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT), tasked with "hydrographic reconnaissance and underwater demolition of obstacles prior to any amphibious landing." The UDT is the precursor of the Navy SEALs.



From the WWII 1943: Turning the Tide Sheetlet



Miller received the Navy Cross for his heroics at Pearl Harbor and was called one of the first heroes of WWII.

In the early hours of November 23, a Japanese submarine torpedoed the aircraft carrier USS Liscome Bay, a ship that had provided significant air support during the Battle for Tarawa. The torpedo took the lives of 687 men, including Pearl Harbor hero Doris Miller.

Back on the island, the Japanese launched a banzai charge on US troops, which was fought back with the help of artillery. Navy fighters, dive-bombers, and howitzers then attacked the Japanese positions. By early afternoon, American troops reached the eastern shore and declared the island secure. They spent the next few days removing Japanese troops from the rest of the islands in the atoll, finishing this work on November 28.

Casualties were high on both sides. The US suffered 1,696 dead and 2,101 wounded. Meanwhile, all but 17 of the 3,636 Japanese troops on the island were killed, along with 1,071 of the 1,200 Korean forced laborers. Back in America, the public was outraged at the high casualties for what seemed to be such an insignificant island. In response to such criticism, Admiral Nimitz claimed, "The capture of Tarawa knocked down the front door to the Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific." The Marshall Islands Campaign began about 10 weeks after the battle, and Tarawa's airfields launched much-needed supporting aircraft.

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