

- [FAQ](#)
 - [FAQ](#)
 - [Use of Photographs and Video](#)
 - [How to start Military Research in the United Kingdom](#)
 - [Using comments to discover information about a relative](#)
 - [Contact me](#)
- [Guestbook](#)
- [Apps](#)
 - [Overlord](#)

[WWII Today](#)

Nov

20

1943

The U.S. Marines begin their assault on 'Bloody Tarawa'



Crash landing of F6F-3, Number 30 of Fighting Squadron Two (VF-2), USS Enterprise, into the carrier's port side 20mm gun gallery, 10 November 1943. Lieutenant Walter L. Chewning, Jr., USNR, the Catapult Officer, is climbing up the plane's side to assist the pilot from the burning aircraft. The pilot, Ensign Byron M. Johnson, escaped without significant injury. Enterprise was then en route to support the Gilberts Operation. Note the plane's ruptured belly fuel tank.



Aerial view of Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll before invasion of the island by U.S. Marines, 18 September 1943. The image was shot by an aircraft from Composite

Squadron (VC) 24.



F6F Hellcat fighter of US Navy VF-5 preparing to launch off Yorktown (Essex-class) to attack a target in the Marshall Islands, 20 Nov 1943

The Pacific war now moved into a new stage, as the United States began its 'island hopping' campaign across the central Pacific. Some islands could be sidestepped but there were a sequence of islands that needed to be occupied so that the United States could get within striking distance of Japan itself.

First on the list were the Gilbert and Marshall islands. Prime amongst these was Betio island, part of Tarawa atoll at the end of the Gilbert islands. The airstrip here was of crucial importance – and the Japanese had spent the past year fortifying the two mile long island with gun emplacements and over 500 pillboxes and strongpoints. They were to claim that 'a million men could not take it in a hundred years'. The Marines were to prove them wrong, but at considerable cost.

Carl Jonas was one of the Marines who went in on the first day. Many of the Higgins boats – the assault Landing Craft – were grounded 700 yards or more offshore. A neap tide meant that the depth of water was far below normal at high tide. The Marines were forced to wade the remaining distance, all the way under fire:

The shore line curved like a longshoremen's hook, and the flat part to my right was the handle of it. From the other side, near the point of the hook, a Jap machine gun kept up a

steady fire across our line of advance. Another machine gun was able to spit out almost directly at us, so that the two of them made a cross fire.

Also, from some point I couldn't see, a mortar was dropping bursts ahead of us and slightly to our right. I saw no Marines on the beach, only blasted boats where they had stopped. Two of them were on fire. Beyond, a stout coconut-log barricade ran like a fence parallel to the whole shore. Then I got down as low as I could, with only my helmet showing, and began to crawl and duck-walk through the water, which was hardly three feet deep, even though we were almost a half mile out. I was heading for the right-hand flank, but just why, I couldn't say myself... .

I passed two or three dead Marines. My legs were very tired, and I couldn't keep my rifle out of the water. Finally, I used it to push myself along with, and forgot about keeping it dry. I saw a boat coming in toward me, and I worked away from it; for, although this brought me nearer the guns, I knew the boat would draw heavy fire, and wouldn't pick me up anyway.

I kept down and pushed ahead, not very fast but steadily. Finally I came to what I thought was the beach, but as I inched up onto it I saw it was a sand bar with another fifty yards of water on the other side. At the top were fifteen or twenty dead or wounded Marines. A man who had been in our boat crawled up beside me.

"Where are the other guys?" I asked him. "I don't know," he said. "As soon as I find out, I'm going on in." I didn't want to go over the sand bar very much, so I worked to the left, which again brought me closer to the fire, but gave me the cover provided by the water.

I wondered if I was doing the right or the wrong thing. I decided it was more dangerous to stay still and think it out than to keep moving, so I just went on in. Then, just as I saw some Marines lying between the bar and the shore, a current caught me and carried me along with no bottom under my feet. I swam a few strokes and felt bottom again. My pack was heavy with water, so I slipped it off and, dragging it behind, scrambled up into the lee of the shore. It seemed like the sweetest earth this side of paradise, and I wanted to lie there forever without moving a muscle.

This account first appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, 1943.



Staff Sergeant William J. Bordelon, U.S.M.C. – Medal of Honor recipient.

Once ashore the truly desperate battle began. Just some understanding of this can be gained from the citation for the Medal of Honor awarded to William J. Bordelon.

For valorous and gallant conduct above and beyond the call of duty as a member of an Assault Engineer Platoon of the First Battalion, Eighteenth Marines, tactically attached to the Second Marines, Second Marine Division, in action against the Japanese-held Atoll of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands on November 20, 1943.

Landing in the assault waves under withering enemy fire which killed all but four of the men in his tractor, Staff Sergeant Bordelon hurriedly made demolition charges and personally put two pill boxes out of action. Hit by enemy machine-gun fire just as a charge exploded in his hand while assaulting a third position, he courageously remained in action and, although out of demolition, provided himself with a rifle and furnished fire coverage for a group of men scaling the seawall.

Disregarding his own serious condition, he unhesitatingly went to the aid of one of his demolition men, wounded and calling for help in the water, rescuing this man and another who had been hit by enemy fire while attempting to make the rescue. Still refusing first aid for himself, he again made up demolition charges and single-handedly assaulted a fourth Japanese machine-gun position but was instantly killed when caught in a final burst of fire from the enemy.

Staff Sergeant Bordelon's great personal valor during a critical phase of securing the limited beachhead was a contributing factor in the ultimate occupation of the island and his heroic determination reflects the highest credit upon the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.



Marines take cover behind a sea wall on Red Beach #3, Tarawa. November 1943.
(Marine Corps)



Troops of 2nd Battalion, US 165th Infantry at Yellow Beach Two, Butaritari, Makin Atoll, Gilbert Islands, 20 Nov 1943



{ 1 comment... read it below or [add one](#) }

William Cooper [September 23, 2017 at 6:00 am](#)

My uncle, Cpl. Berlin Robinson of Madill, Oklahoma listed as a Chief Cook in 2/8. He was on first wave to Red Beach 3 at 0917 on Nov. 20. He was wounded on that day. He has long passed. I know that he was also at Guadalcanal and later Saipan. Anyone have any info? I served USMC 1966-1969.

Leave a Comment

Name *

E-mail *

Website



{ 2 trackbacks }

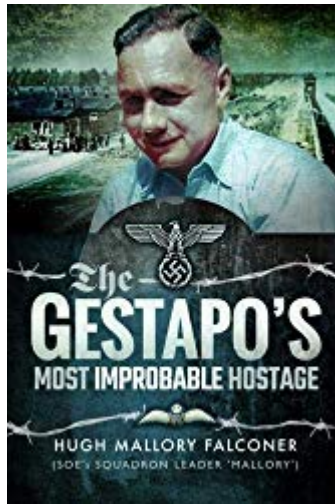
- [21st November 1943: The second day on 'Bloody Tarawa'](#)
- [3 February 1944: Mopping up the last Japanese on Kwajalein](#)

Earlier in the war: [Captain Cromwell goes down with USS Sculpin](#)

- **Follow the war as it happened ...**
-
- **Updated 75 years after the event...**
- **Recommended**



•



-

-

-

Overlord for iPad

Illustrated history of D-Day and the battle for Normandy,

"Fascinating set of photographs, many of which I haven't seen anywhere else before. Well worth the money – better than any book."

-

-

- **Recent Comments**

- Thomas HOGG on [Disaster in Piraeus Harbour](#)
- Lesle Dodge on [580 men die as SS Paul Hamilton explodes](#)
- J Fox on [HMS Dorsetshire and HMS Cornwall sunk](#)
- John C Shidlet on [American 168th Infantry's last stand at Kasserine Pass](#)
- howard appel on [With 'The 'Plywood Navy' – duel with plane in the Med](#)
- Janet Humphrey on ['Epsom' – Scottish troops v 12th SS Panzer 'Hitlerjugend'](#)
- John Bradley on [With 'The 'Plywood Navy' – duel with plane in the Med](#)
- Gillian Donnelly on [Rescue ship Walmer Castle bombed in Atlantic](#)
- Jan Sawyer on [SS Yoma torpedoed – 451 troops lost](#)
- Thomas Lucas on [Cliff climb assault surprises Germans on Riva Ridge](#)

-

Translate to:

English ▼

Translate

Powered by [Google Translate](#).

-
- **Explore World War II Today for more**

[accidents and friendly-fire](#) [amphibious](#) [assault](#) [artillery](#) [base area](#) [battleships](#) [blitz](#)
[bombers](#) [bombing](#) [carriers](#) [casualties](#) [children](#) [Churchill](#) [civilians](#) [commando](#)
[D-DAY](#) [destroyers](#) [fighters](#) [first](#) [Generals](#) [Hitler](#) [holocaust](#) [infantry](#) [kamikaze](#) [King](#)
[George VI](#) [Maginot line](#) [Medal of Honor](#) [mines](#) [Mussolini](#) [occupation](#) [paratroopers and](#)
[gliders](#) [prisoners](#) [reconnaissance](#) [refugees](#) [rescue](#) [retreat](#) [Roosevelt](#) [secret war](#) [secret war](#)
[September 1939](#) [Stalin](#) [submarines](#) [tanks](#) [torpedo](#) [training](#) [Victoria Cross](#)

- Apple, the Apple logo and iPad are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. App Store is a service mark of Apple Inc.

Copyright © 2008-2017 [WWII Today](#). All rights reserved.