

Never Forget Our Veterans Foundation

A Tarawa Brief From Our Managing Director

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The Battle of Tarawa: November 20–23, 1943

In the fall of 1943, few Americans had heard of Tarawa, a remote atoll in today's Republic of Kiribati. Yet it was to become the site of one of the most costly amphibious assaults of the war in the Pacific. Japanese forces had built a strategic airfield on the islet of Betio and fortified its defenses with a web of pillboxes, blockhouses, heavy shore batteries, machine gun nests, minefields, and beach obstacles. More than 4,700 Japanese Imperial Marines were dug in and prepared to defend every inch of the two-mile square island. Rear Admiral Keije Shibazaki, the commander of the Japanese garrison, boasted that "it would take one million men one hundred years" to conquer the island. He was wrong. U.S. Marines took it in 76 hours in what is known as the Battle of Tarawa, a three-day kill-or-be-killed fight that resulted in the deaths of more than 1,100 Americans, with 2,290 more wounded. The battle was one of the bloodiest and most ferocious in Marine Corps history. The 17 Japanese who survived reported that what broke their morale was the sight of the Marines continuing to advance despite the enormous casualties they suffered.

The Lost Graves of Marines, Sailors, and Airmen

By the end of the battle, decomposing bodies were scattered across the island. Burials were conducted hastily. Efforts at marking them varied, with some graves receiving a white wooden cross or a roughly engraved mess kit or nothing at all. When the Navy "Seabees" expanded the airfield, many graves were paved over or otherwise lost. As many as 500 of these heroes were forgotten and subsequently listed as Missing in Action (MIA) for the last seven decades. In recent years, about 100 individuals have been found by History Flight, a non-profit MIA search and recovery organization supported by NFOVF. As long as we keep searching, the rest of these brave men will not be forgotten. They can all be brought home.

Tarawa Today

Tarawa is one of the most densely populated and polluted places in the Pacific. Betio is now the largest township and cultural center in Kiribati. Approximately 20,000 people live on the small island. Their homes, businesses, roads, latrines, and pig sties fill the landscape—and they cover the hallowed ground where hundreds of Americans still lie. "Red Beach," where so many men were killed or wounded, is a garbage dump (just imagine if that were the case at Normandy in France). The present-day situation in Tarawa is an economic, environmental, and humanitarian nightmare.

Why We Must Care

1. Current members of our military must be assured that they will not be left behind if anything happens to them. "Leave No Man Behind" means just that—it's a promise that no one will be left on the battlefield. Hundreds of men were abandoned at Tarawa. They are still there today and they are recoverable.
2. Hundreds of families of Tarawa MIAs need closure. Our team has attended many burial services for those who have been recovered, identified, and brought home. We have seen how the sorrows of Tarawa continue in communities across America. These unrecovered men are not just a part of our history—they are a part of our present.
3. Environmental conditions in Tarawa can be improved alongside efforts to recover the fallen. There is no finer tribute than to pursue humanitarian initiatives in their name. We propose a Tarawa Living Memorial that cleans up the battlefield, limits the waste entering the ocean, and establishes a memorial cemetery to honor the missing.

Our Need

We need your support to bring home those left behind, clean up the battlefield, build a memorial cemetery for the missing, and improve the environmental and public health situation in Tarawa. Please visit us online to learn more about our initiatives. For a personal report of the situation, please contact me directly.

Anchors Aweigh!

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