

Field Burials, Memorial Graves, and the Postwar Search for Tarawa's Fallen

by Geoffrey W. Roecker

Abstract: The battle for the Tarawa atoll—and, specifically, the V Amphibious Corps assault on the island of Betio during World War II—resulted in an enormous and highly publicized loss of American lives. Grieving families were assured that every possible care was given to their fallen Marines and sailors, and photographs of beautiful cemeteries appeared in magazines and print. This belied the reality of the situation: most of the “graves” were only memorials, and a postwar effort to recover the dead was markedly unsuccessful. Representatives from the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps pointed fingers until Navy inspector general Charles A. Lockwood issued a report blaming “a series of errors . . . and a series of unavoidable circumstances” for the fiasco. This article examines the factors contributing to the nonrecoverability of hundreds of the fallen and describes the challenges facing researchers and archaeologists who continue the search for the lost graves of Betio.

Keywords: memorial graves, field burials, Tarawa atoll, World War II, Betio, V Amphibious Corps

The failure of the Army Graves Registration Company to locate and identify bodies of Marine Corps personnel on Betio is due not to an error by any one individual, but to a series of errors by several individuals or groups of individuals, and to a series of unavoidable circumstances.¹

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¹ Charles Andrew Lockwood, “Investigation of Burial of Deceased Marine Corps Personnel on Tarawa Atoll,” 11 March 1947, box 783, Office of the Commandant, General Correspondence January 1939–June 1950, Record Group (RG) 127, Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD, 1, hereafter Lockwood report.

Operation Galvanic—the amphibious assault and capture of Tarawa atoll undertaken by U.S. Navy and Marine Corps units in November 1943—captured public attention wholly and immediately. “Beach-heads Punched out by Yankees,” blared newspaper headlines, and “Wreck Jap Bases at Tarawa.” Photographs of the battlefield, fresh from the front lines, accompanied the articles; an unusually high percentage depicted dead Americans, an unfamiliar sight to most readers. Editors worried that their audience might become distressed. The *Kansas City Star* quickly noted “US Toll Not Too High. Looks Worse than It Is.” The subhead explained: “Losses Appear Shocking Because Bodies Littered Beach in Short Period of Time”—hardly a reassuring message for readers with friends or relations in the 2d Marine Division, and one undercut by the release of casualty lists.² Yellow Western Union

² B. J. McQuaid, “Jap Boast Fails,” *Kansas City (MO) Star*, 30 November 1943.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo by PFC Clifford G. Jolly

Navy Lt Francis W. Kelly (CHC) and Cpl Daniel A. Getz perform Catholic and Jewish rites for the dead. Note the casualty tags affixed to the rifle and plank of wood serving as markers. Kelly assisted with the postwar search for the dead. Written on the back of the photo: "This is a typical funeral on Tarawa that was common throughout the brief but fierce battle."

telegrams arrived at thousands of homes just in time for the holiday season. *With the Marines at Tarawa*, a full-color documentary, arrived in theaters, and families saw (or thought they saw) their loved ones smiling or waving or running or falling, larger than life, one final time.³ If Wake Island was a symbol of sacrifice and Guadalcanal was the epitome of endurance, Tarawa was synonymous with brutality and seemingly senseless slaughter.

³ U.S. Marine Corps, *With the Marines at Tarawa*, directed by Louis Hayward (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1944).

As the home front digested the highly publicized horrors of the battle, Betio was completing a transition that started before the shooting stopped. Naval Construction Battalion personnel (Seabees) began repairing roads and building new infrastructure; American aircraft were landing on the former Japanese airstrip within days. By March 1944, Naval Air Base Hawkins Field (Tarawa) was a familiar home to bomber crews who flew strikes to targets in the Marshall Islands. The base boasted machine shops, mess halls, a new pier, and even a movie theater. Curious airmen climbed ruined Japanese gun positions, peeked into bunkers,

and sunbathed on the invasion beaches. Between the crew's tents and Quonset huts sat pristine cemeteries with immaculate rows of crosses. Individual graves lay beside duckboards and under trees, a stark reminder of the island's cost.

Looking at aerial photographs of the island, one sees orderly cemeteries neatly organized into a jigsaw of base roads and buildings, as if by design. This is precisely the case: original burials were "beautified and reconstructed" by the garrison troops, who took pride in their efforts to create fitting monuments to fellow Americans. Headquarters Marine Corps commended the work and acknowledged the existence of *memorial cemeteries*—but either failed to grasp the term's whole meaning or deliberately downplayed its impact when communicating with the families of the fallen and those charged with returning the remains.

Thus, when the Army's 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company (QMGRC) arrived in 1946, its members expected to exhume remains from numerous, well-ordered, and accessible graves, a physically strenuous but relatively routine operation. After weeks of frustrating effort, the 604th QMGRC turned up only "about fifty percent of the bodies previously reported buried on that Atoll. . . . of that number, only about 58% were identified."⁴ This stunning admission triggered a ripple of criticism in military channels and a tidal wave of righteous anger from the families of the fallen, who had been assured of their loved ones' proper burial and now struggled to grasp how bodies could seemingly disappear. Anthropologists working at the Central Identification Laboratory in Honolulu, Hawaii, spent two years searching for clues in bones, teeth, and personnel records; their efforts identified 186 individuals. Added to the 215 identified by the 604th QMGRC and the 116 known buried at sea, the total stood at 517 cases resolved and 500 more declared permanently nonrecoverable.

The Marine Corps demanded an inquest into the perceived failure of the 604th QMGRC, but it never occurred. Navy inspector general Charles Lockwood conducted his own review and concluded that, while errors were committed in the field, the Army was not solely to blame. Rather, he identified a series of poor post-battle decisions and inefficient practices that predated the Marine landings. These "unavoidable circumstances"—a need for rapid burial, inconsistent identification, and insufficiently trained personnel—combined to exacerbate the 604th QMGRC's shortcomings and continue to plague identification efforts to this day.

The Aftermath: Collection and Identification

To understand the first blow against the successful identification of Betio's dead, it is necessary to come to grips with the conditions that fighting Marines faced in the hours and days after the battle. The island of Betio, barely 300 acres of sand a few feet above sea level, was strewn with an estimated 6,000 American, Japanese, and Korean corpses.⁵ "What I saw on Betio was, I am certain, one of the greatest works of devastation wrought by man," wrote Robert L. Sherrod. "Words are inadequate to describe what I saw on this island of less than a square mile. So are pictures—you can't smell pictures."⁶

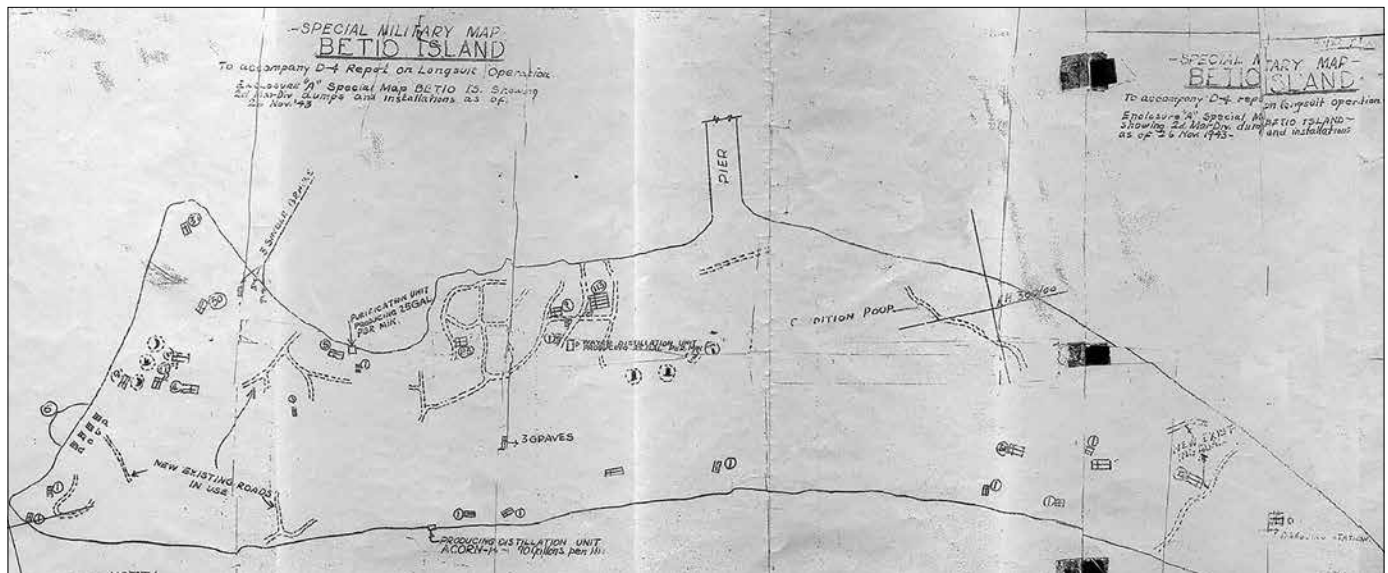
Betio sits a few degrees off the equator. During the battle, temperatures reached into the triple digits and the heat and humidity created ideal conditions for putrefaction. Sherrod observed the bodies of several Japanese soldiers "already turning a sickly green, though they have been corpses only two days."⁷ Bodies turned black, swelled, and ruptured. A stench permeated the air; a "miasma of coral dust and death, nauseating and horrifying," in the words of Major General

⁴ 1stLt Isadore Eisensmith, "Memorandum to Chief, Memorial Branch, Quartermaster Section, Army Forces, Middle Pacific," 3 July 1946, General Correspondence, Miscellaneous File, RG 92, Records of the Quartermaster General, NARA, College Park, MD, 3, hereafter Eisensmith report.

⁵ Rebecca J. Taylor et al., "The Tarawa Project Part I: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Resolve Commingled Human Remains from the Battle of Tarawa," *Forensic Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (July 2019): 87, <https://doi.org/10.5744/fa.2019.1004>.

⁶ Robert Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of A Battle* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pierce, 1944), 123.

⁷ Sherrod, *Tarawa*, 124.



Special military map, Betio Island, dated 26 November 1943. This rather crude sketch shows graves known to be marked before the 2d Marine Division departed.

Holland M. Smith.⁸ Pilots flying over Betio were sickened by the smell; those on the ground, like Platoon Sergeant Roger Scovill, faced almost unimaginable horrors: “The odor was overwhelming. It was like a burning garbage dump. Within a very short period—let’s say, two, three hours—the only way we could tell a Marine from a Japanese was by the web gear that we were wearing and by the armament that the man had.”⁹

Exposure to rotting flesh was bad for sanitation; the sight of decomposing friends was terrible for morale. The combined effect reduced the fighting efficacy of the surviving Marines. Getting the dead underground as rapidly as possible was of utmost importance. This was generally impossible during the first two days of the battle while the situation was, in the words of General Julian C. Smith, "in doubt."¹⁰ When the fighting moved on, however, burials happened rapidly. A single cemetery along Red Beach 2 received 112 bodies on 22 November; the same crew buried 66

more a short distance away the next day. Western Bettio was dotted with dozens of individual graves for Marines who were buried as a matter of expedience. Their graves, at least, were marked: Japanese and Korean bodies, which outnumbered Americans by about five to one, were simply tossed into craters or fortifications and covered with sand.¹¹ Lockwood summed up the issue in 1947.

The small area of the island, the closely contested action fought over it, and the precarious position of our forces under constant Japanese attack made it imperative to beat the enemy, to fight to stay alive, and to get underground by any effective, improvised method available, the large number of fast disintegrating bodies lying about. There was no time to properly bury the dead. Such is war.¹²

⁸ Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret), *Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa* (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 1993), 48.

⁹ Roger P. Scovill, interview with Mark Van Ellis, 16 September 1997, transcribed by Nathan King and Abigail Miller, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center, Madison, WI, 10, hereafter Scovill interview. Scovill served with Battery M, 10th Marines, 2d Marine Division.

¹⁰ As quoted in Col Joseph H. Alexander, "A Bloody Proving Ground," *Naval History* 22, no. 6 (December 2008).

¹¹ Lt W. Wyeth Willard, "The Gilbert Islands Campaign, Report of Chaplain, and Recommendations," 30 November 1943, scanned copy of document originally from the Willard estate, courtesy of Katie Rasdorf, 4-6, hereafter Willard report.

¹² Lockwood report, 4.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Original three-row layout of Navy and Marine Corps Cemetery no. 1 established by W. Wyeth Willard on 23 November 1943. Individual markers are simple sticks. Building in background served as a field hospital.

Unfortunately, the necessary speed of burials meant that proper identification was not always taken from the dead. According to regulations, every man in naval service was supposed to carry a pair of metal identification tags. "These tags are prescribed as a part of the uniform," instructed the 1940 *Marine Corps Manual*, "and when not worn as directed . . . will be habitually kept in the possession of the owner."¹³ The tags included name, service number, religious preference, blood type, date of last tetanus shot, and branch; they

were such a vital part of a Marine's kit that they were subject to scrutiny at inspection. The reasoning was plain in the manual's language.

In order to secure proper interment for those who fall in battle, and to establish beyond a doubt their identity, should it become desirable subsequently to disinter the remains for removal to a national or post cemetery or for shipment home, the identification tag suspended from the neck of the officer or enlisted man will in all cases be interred with the body. The

¹³ *Marine Corps Manual*, 1940 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1940), 21.



duplicate tag attached thereto will be removed at the time of the burial and turned over to the surgeon or person in charge of the burial, from which a record of same, together with the cause and date of death, shall be made and reported to the commanding officer.¹⁴

The tags, however, were small and easily lost on rigorous field exercises or spirited liberty calls. Some men preferred carrying tags unsecured in their pockets.

Since the cost of replacement tags was docked from a Marine's monthly pay, some losses doubtless went unreported until discovered at inspection, and some men preferred to make their own tags from coins or other souvenirs.¹⁵ Thus, it may be assumed that a certain percentage of any Marine unit was without regulation tags at any given time. Many Marines wore sterling silver bracelets inscribed with their names, but these too could be lost or discarded.

Some men lost tags accidentally, others deliberately. The 2d Marine Division went into Operation

¹⁴ *Marine Corps Manual*, 22.

¹⁵ *Marine Corps Manual*, 22.

PLOT #1

ROW #1

1. ALBERT L. PARKER
2. OLIVER L. BANGE
3. UNKNOWN
4. JOHN A. ABADIE
5. WILLIAM H. BLANCHER
6. W. C. FELTMEIER
7. CLARENCE K. ARY
8. NORMAN ALFRED BUAN
9. RUSSELL M. BURILL
10. UNKNOWN
11. ROY E. KEELE
12. UNKNOWN

ROW #2

1. JOSEPH M. SIMONETTI
2. DONALD A. KARLSON
3. WILLIAM D. HAWKINS
4. UNKNOWN
5. HERBERT R. AMEY, JR.
6. BENJAMIN F. DAVIS
7. LOWELL BARKER
8. CLAN ARD
9. UNKNOWN
10. ARNOLD J. HARRISON
11. UNKNOWN
12. JOHN SNYDER

PLOT #2

ROW #1

1. UNKNOWN
2. ZILMAN T. MINICK
3. CHRISTOPHER O. SURBER
4. RICHARD BRAUN
5. JAMES E. WATKINS
6. UNKNOWN
7. CECIL R. JONES
8. "J" "A" HALE, JR.
9. NORMAN O. HUNTER
10. UNKNOWN
11. HERBERT STROUD

ROW #2

1. LEONARD ARTHUR BOOKER
2. WILLIAM E. BRANDENBERG
3. UNKNOWN
4. JOHN M. TILMAN
5. CLIFFORD LEE KNOWLES
6. STANLEY S. GLOWACZ
7. M. P. CASHION
8. UNKNOWN
9. MICHAEL KOOOPY
10. VINCENT E. TRAVERSIE
11. MARVIN E. YOUNG

PLOT #3

ROW #1

1. WALTER H. YOUNG
2. JAMES H. SHERROD
3. EVERETT E. LYNN
4. JOHN J. MARTINEZ
5. LEWIS A. CAMPBELL
6. UNKNOWN
7. WILLIAM L. WILLIAMSON
8. ROBERT S. PHILLIPS
9. ROBERT L. SANDERS
10. UNKNOWN
11. EVERETT S. G. LINDQUIST
12. JAMES ALAN WHITWORTH

PLOT #4

ROW #1

1. JOHN S. SPENCE
2. UNKNOWN
3. OSEA A. AUDETTE
4. AUGUSTINE V. JAUREGUI
5. RALPH CARSON MC NEIL
6. UNKNOWN
7. JUSTIN G. MILLS
8. JAMES J. DEPRETA
9. DUANE O. COLE
10. UNKNOWN
11. JOSEPH W. VARNADO, JR.

PLOT #5

ROW #1

1. JARREL M. ARMSTRONG
2. KENNETH I. LEWIS
3. UNKNOWN
4. ARTHUR G. MENDER, JR.
5. HARLOWE D. SALISBURY
6. ARVIL R. SHARP
7. OTTIE B. SENTELLE
8. ARMSTEAD E. ROSS
9. UNKNOWN
10. GEORGE E. TROTTER
11. UNKNOWN
12. MARK TOMLINSON

ROW #2

1. EUGENE V. RUGGIERO
2. ROGER W. GODIN
3. EZRA O. GUYTON
4. UNKNOWN
5. WILLIAM R. SHAFER
6. KENNETH N. PEEBLES
7. ALLEN K. GETZ
8. DONNELL E. GAMBRELL
9. RICHARD M. GLASS
10. UNKNOWN
11. CAROL E. LUNDRIGAN
12. OSBALDO R. PERADES

PLOT #6

ROW #1

1. UNKNOWN
2. WALTER J. MILLER
3. UNKNOWN
4. OSCAR B. LARSON
5. UNKNOWN
6. WALTER J. LAWICK
7. RALPH V. GOFF
8. UNKNOWN
9. LAFEY L. WALES
10. UNKNOWN
11. DOMINICK VANDITTI

ROW #2

1. JOHN F. SCISLEY
2. MARION W. BREITHAUP
3. JAMES O. FOX
4. JOHN C. DE LELLIS
5. UNKNOWN
6. ALBERT LEE RASMUSSEN
7. UNKNOWN
8. HAROLD E. MILLER
9. ROY B. TAYLOR
10. JOHN H. TERRELL
11. HAROLD J. ANDERSON, JR.

GRAVE #26

Official U.S. Navy photo

Formerly named Cemetery no. 1, now called Cemetery 26, after beautification by the Navy garrison in March 1944.

Galvanic with an unusual superstition: identification tags brought bad luck. The origins and prevalence of this belief are difficult to determine, but it was notable enough to be remarked on by persons interviewed for Lockwood's investigation. Some Marines just chucked their tags, while others "would exchange tags as a good luck measure." The effect of this practice had tragic implications when they went into battle. In recalling his experience burying bodies on Betio, Chaplain William Lumpkin remarked that "in almost one-third of the cases, no identification was found on the bodies."¹⁶

Before landing on 21 November 1943, First Sergeant Lewis J. Michelony (Company D, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines) "made sure the men had dog tags . . . because that was the only way that you could identify anybody." He went on to explain how this worked in practice:

When we identified and buried a man, we didn't know what to do with the other dog tag. So finally, we found out that we had to give them to the chaplain. . . . We marked the man, if he had a toe, by putting the dog tag on his right toe. In some cases, we just

¹⁶ Lockwood report, 2.

*Official U.S. Navy photo*

The impeccably manicured Memorial Cemetery 11, June 1944.

put them around their neck. . . . See, these were things that they hadn't told us before the battle.¹⁷

Then, of course, there was the impact of violent death. Platoon Sergeant Scovill commented that "Marines who were fortunate enough not to have their dog tags blown away" were more easily identified; the obvious implication is that many were not so fortunate.¹⁸ A Marine Corps casualty card for Private First Class Raymond Warren includes a unique notation: "The

head was practically severed from his body and caused the loss of his dog-tags, and later [caused] identification complications to burial authorities."¹⁹

Tags lost all inherent value once removed from a body, and troops with an incomplete understanding of graves registration protocols unwittingly compounded identification problems by trying to help. Chaplain Warren Wyeth Willard of the 8th Marines recalled a conversation with one Private Yontz who "took the identification tags from [several] bodies and

¹⁷ 1stSgt Lewis J. Michelony Jr., interview with John Daniels, 2 May 1993, transcript, World War II Veterans Oral History Collection, National Museum of the Pacific War Digital Archive, 47.

¹⁸ Scovill interview, 10.

¹⁹ U.S. Marine Corps Casualty Card for Warren, Raymond, PFC, 426717, Historical Resources Branch, Archives, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. The quoted text is attributed to George J. Fox; Warren was hit by ricocheting tank shell. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) accounted for Warren in 2019.



Official U.S. Navy photo
Monument Cemetery 10, September 1944. These small-footprint plots were ideal for high-traffic areas. Original markers were discarded, and the cross built atop the bodies.

placed the tags into the hands of a Marine Colonel.” Yontz gave Willard 12 names, 11 of which eventually appeared on the list of unrecovered.²⁰ Lieutenant (Dental Corps) Solomon M. Kozol handed Willard a stack of 19 tags said to be removed from bodies; only 14 of these individuals were actually dead, and of these, only 7 were identifiable at time of burial.²¹ Technically, Yontz and Kozol were following guidelines as

²⁰ Willard report, 7. Yontz provided the names of Eaves, Scisley, Kroenung, Gaviglia, Caley (probably Daley), Woolsey, Cole, Reynolds, Winkler, Parks, Voorheis, and Mannix. Aside from Eaves (wounded but survived), all were reported as unrecoverable. Scisley, Gaviglia, Woolsey, and Winkler were identified after the war; Kroenung and Cole were buried as unknowns in Honolulu and accounted for in recent years. Daley, Reynolds, Parks, Voorheis, and Mannix are still unaccounted for.

²¹ Willard report, 7. Kozol’s collection included two men who were wounded but survived, two who escaped without recorded injury, and one incorrectly transcribed name. Archival and archaeological evidence reveals that the deceased men were buried, identified or not, in several different cemeteries, and it is not known how Kozol came to have these specific tags. Five of them (Michael Green, Frank Krchmar, Lloyd Livingston, Stephen Mayer, and Robert Newell Smith) are still unaccounted for.

prescribed in the *Marine Corps Manual*—that is, handing over tags to an officer in charge. However, verbal communication was insufficient, and those who buried the bodies had no idea who was who. This dismal ratio was compounded across the island.

Provisions were made for handling casualties without official identification. Some men were trained to fingerprint the dead for later comparison against service records of those reported killed or missing, but battle wounds and rapid decomposition limited this method’s effectiveness. Corpsmen and clerks at clearing stations were overwhelmed by the sheer number of casualties and naturally had to focus their attention on those with a chance of survival; we can only guess at the number of errors made under the stress of pitched battle. In the Solomon Islands, Chaplain Willard learned to retrieve “pocketbooks or other identification material” from corpses and recommended others do the same. “In many cases on divers [sic] parts of the Island of Betio, bodies were in such a state of decomposition that the unpleasant task of searching their outer garments was not carried out,” he wrote in his battle report.²² Paper or fabric items were frequently damaged by water or biological fluids, and there was no way to guarantee perfect accuracy in assigning a name from a wallet or notebook to a dead person.

Willard also noted a decidedly ghoulish behavior among Marines who “pilfered . . . money and valuables before our working parties could reach [the dead].” This was a particular sore point for Willard, who buried a close friend whose pack was turned inside out by a scavenger. The chaplain recommended shore patrols to prevent the “mad rush for souvenirs” until burials were complete and that “all companies be lectured by their commanders regarding the wickedness and depravity of such malicious practices.”²³

The complications arising from initial misidentification are illustrated by the burial ground designated Navy and Marine Corps Cemetery no. 1. Willard buried 112 men on 22 November 1943 and kept a de-

²² Willard report, 9.

²³ Willard report, 10.



Official U.S. Army Signal Corps photo

The 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company exhumes Cemetery 26 in 1946. Note discarded and battle-damaged helmets, shoes, and other items left in the trenches.

tailed roster of individual names. Ten of these names are known to be wrong: either the individual survived the battle or never existed at all. (Willard was not prone to guessing or fabrication: these names came from some unknown, inaccurate source, possibly misplaced personal effects.) Another 21 men were not identifiable by any means; of these, only 6 could be fingerprinted. Thus, 31 of 112 (28 percent) of the men buried in a single cemetery had their identities compromised or obliterated within hours of death.²⁴

Individuals like Willard—a prewar part-time undertaker with experience establishing military

cemeteries in the Solomon Islands—could expect little support at Tarawa. In 1947, when Commander Lockwood correctly noted that “the highly organized Graves Registration setup which existed in later battles was not in existence at the Battle for Tarawa,” he was referring specifically to Marine Corps organization.²⁵ In the years after World War I, the Corps spent very little of its limited budget on developing independent support services; it anticipated operating in conjunction with the much larger and better supplied Navy or Army. Chaplains were instructed in the appropriate ceremony of military burial with the expect-

²⁴ Willard report, 4–6.

²⁵ Lockwood report, 2.



Official U.S. Army Signal Corps photo

Burial service at Lone Palm Cemetery, 1946. Memorial Cemetery 11 is visible in the background.

tation that the Army Quartermaster Corps would handle the establishment and upkeep of cemeteries.²⁶ However, the Army's Graves Registration Service was only mobilized during wartime, meaning there were no standing units available when Pearl Harbor was attacked.²⁷ Training these specialized troops took time and none would arrive in the Pacific theater until early 1943. Using limited copies of *Graves Registration*, Tech-

nical Manual 10-630, and a healthy dose of common sense, the 1st Marine Division established an ad hoc service in the field on Guadalcanal, but Army quartermaster troops later took over this operation, and the nascent Marine units disbanded to other duties.²⁸

The need for Marine-organized graves registration was acknowledged but evidently was not a high priority in Operation Galvanic's planning. While the 2d Marine Division had a dedicated Graves Registra-

²⁶ See *The Chaplain*, Technical Manual (TM) 16-205 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), 22–24.

²⁷ Edward Steere, *The Graves Registration Service in World War II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1951), v. "Continuity of graves registration organization was broken during the peace, resulting in an arrest of the function and such a condition of atrophy that it could not be reinvigorated at will."

²⁸ *Graves Registration*, TM 10-630 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941). Troops deployed overseas had very limited access to this manual. For a detailed discussion about inter-Service responsibilities in peacetime and how they fell apart early in the war, see Steere, *The Graves Registration Service in World War II*.

Figure 1. Marine Corps and Navy designations for known Betio cemeteries.

Marine Corps designations (1943)	Navy designation (1944)
No recorded designation	Isolated Graves 1–8
“Single grave on east end of Betio Island.”	Isolated Grave 9
Cemetery B Green Cemetery B 2d Marines Cemetery no. 2	Monument Cemetery 10
West Division Cemetery	Memorial Cemetery 11
[unnamed individual burials]	Isolated Grave 12
Cemetery A Green Cemetery A 2d Marines Cemetery no. 3 Red Beach 1 Cemetery	Monument Cemetery 13
[unnamed individual or small group burials]	Isolated Graves 14–19 (including 16A and 16B)
D-2-18 Cemetery Wireless Station Cemetery	Monument Cemetery 20
[unnamed individual or small group burials]	Isolated Graves 21–24
Red Beach 2 Cemetery Navy and Marine Corps Cemetery no. 2 1/8th Marines Cemetery Central Division Cemetery, 8th Marines no. 1	Memorial Cemetery 25
8th Marines Cemetery no. 2 Division Cemetery no. 3 Cemetery 3	Monument Cemetery 27
[unnamed individual or small group burials]	Isolated Grave 28
Grid Location 213085 “Isolated grave near airport” “Next to Japanese cement mixer near Hawkins Field”	Isolated Grave 29
[unnamed individual or small group burials]	Isolated Graves 30–31
6th Marines Cemetery no. 1	Isolated Grave 32
East Division Cemetery Cemetery 1	Memorial Cemetery 33
[unnamed individual or small group burials]	Isolated Graves 34–36
“Grid Location 213085”	Isolated Grave 37
[unnamed individual burials]	Isolated Grave 38
“KH 238072 D-2 Map 14 Oct 43”	Isolated Grave 39
[unnamed individual or small group burials]	Isolated Graves 40–41
2d Marines Cemetery no. 1 Green Beach Cemetery C	None; not beautified
Gilbert Island Cemetery Row D, East Division Cemetery	None; not beautified

Source: Author's working files



Official U.S. Army Signal Corps photo

Makeshift morgue on Betio, 1946. Remains were brought to this facility for preliminary identification by the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company.

tion Section as part of its Service and Supply Company, it did not operate as a cohesive unit on Betio. “The Graves Registration Section, as such, never landed at Betio,” commented Commander Lockwood, “nor was any of its equipment available to forces ashore during the first days of the invasion.”²⁹ (The reason for this decision is unknown but may stem from the overconfidence of planners who believed Betio would fall without much of a fight.) Chaplain Willard noted that each regiment of the division was assigned a squad of eight service troops to assist with graves registra-

tion activities. These squads had at least rudimentary training, but Willard writes, “Many of these men were drafted for working parties and were not allowed to do what they had been trained to do.”³⁰ Instead, Willard had to rely on his two personal assistants and whatever extra labor he could collar.

The dearth of trained graves registration personnel did not impact collecting bodies or digging graves; labor could be done by any able-bodied individual. Specific knowledge regarding identification, mapping of burials, marking of graves, and accurate

²⁹ Lockwood report, 2.

³⁰ Willard report, 9.

<p>UNKNOWN X-17</p> <p>19. BLACK OUT PARTS OF BODY NOT RECORDED</p> <p>Left side of mandible missing</p> <p>BRD 44TH THORACIC MISSILE</p>			
<p>20. MASS BURIAL CERTIFICATE (IF APPLICABLE) (Wherein segregation in whole or parts is impossible)</p> <p>I CERTIFY THAT THE GROUP REMAINS CONSIST OF PARTS OF <u>3</u> DECEDENTS BASED ON THE PRESENCE OF ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING ANATOMICAL PARTS:</p> <p>One (1) unmatched left ulna } From one man. One (1) unmatched radius }</p> <p>One (1) extra left femur) From one man.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Chas. E. Snow</i> Charles E. Snow, SIGNATURE OF MEDICAL OFFICER Anthropologist</p>			
<p>21. REMARKS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION</p> <p>Picture a tall, young man of 22 with a slender muscular body build and with ash brown hair, fine to medium in texture.</p> <p>The skull vault is average in size and a rather broad oval in outline with an average amount of backhead protrusion.</p> <p>The facial proportions were long and narrow with a palate which shows anterior pinching. The lower jaw is quite narrow but deep and appears to have had a rather narrow median point.</p> <p>Fluoroscopic examination negative. Tooth chart completed.</p> <p>I CERTIFY THAT I HAVE PERSONALLY VIEWED THE REMAINS OF DECEASED AND THAT ALL RESULTING INFORMATION HAS BEEN RECORDED TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>TYPED NAME, GRADE, ARM OR SERVICE, AND ORGANIZATION</p> <p>O. W. GREENWOOD, CAPT., QMC</p> <p>CENTRAL IDENTIFICATION LABORATORY</p> <p>AND MAUSOLEUM, APO 957</p> <p>QMC FORM 1044b 18 MAR 47</p> </td> <td> <p>SIGNATURE</p> <p><i>O. W. Greenwood</i></p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p>TYPED NAME, GRADE, ARM OR SERVICE, AND ORGANIZATION</p> <p>O. W. GREENWOOD, CAPT., QMC</p> <p>CENTRAL IDENTIFICATION LABORATORY</p> <p>AND MAUSOLEUM, APO 957</p> <p>QMC FORM 1044b 18 MAR 47</p>	<p>SIGNATURE</p> <p><i>O. W. Greenwood</i></p>
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Case file for Unknown X-17, Schofield Barracks Mausoleum no. 1, RG 92,
Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NARA, College Park, MD

Portion of Quartermaster Form 1044. This individual (X-17) was recovered from Cemetery 26. The left radius and ulna were associated with another individual; as of 2022, X-17 is still unidentified.

record-keeping was not part of a regular Marine's training, and many did not even know such specialties existed, as Michelony admitted: "At the time, I didn't even know there was a Graves Registration service."³¹ While chaplains and their assistants worked on large cemeteries, smaller graves were dug all over Betio by those more concerned with taking care of fallen friends than noting regulation map coordinates. Markers were sticks, scrap lumber, or helmet-topped rifles stuck in the ground. Locations were sometimes inaccurately reported or not reported at all. An examination of primary sources reveals a dizzying array of burial locations: West Division Cemetery, Wireless Station Cemetery, Division Cemetery no. 3, Map Coordinates KH10035, "next to the Japanese cement mixer." Some locations had multiple names; some Marines' records show burial in two, three, or four places. The 2d Marine Division's supply (D-4) section produced a crude map of "dumps and installations" that included notable burial sites in place as of 26 November 1943 with an estimated number of graves.³² The Graves Registration Section had to piece together a casualty report from these different sources and its final effort was inevitably incomplete. For example, in the February 1944 "Recapitulation of Known Graves," the section reports two "isolated" burial locations totaling seven bodies.³³ In reality, at least 33 isolated graves amounting to more than 50 bodies are known to have existed. The lack of on-the-spot regulated oversight by trained personnel resulted in spotty, confusing, and often contradictory records. When looking at Marine Corps casualty records for Tarawa, the most common refrain is some form of "burial details unknown."

Burial Details

Although the work was rapid by necessity and complicated by Lockwood's "unavoidable circumstances," combat Marines on Betio did their best to care for dead buddies with reverence and dignity. Field burials on Betio fall into three broad categories: inadvertent, isolated, and cemetery.

As the term *inadvertent* implies, the first type refers to bodies covered up either during the battle—for example, by exploding artillery—or accidentally during cleanup and construction. There is no accurate way to count the number of Marines lost in this manner. However, we do know that it happened because their remains are occasionally found by construction workers or citizens of Kiribati, such as the 1974 discovery of a buried amphibious vehicle, tracked (LVT), with American bodies still inside, or the more recent case of Private First Class Randolph Allen, whose skeletal remains were found in 2013, entangled with four Japanese soldiers. Evidently, the five men died together in a makeshift fighting position and were covered over by heavy machinery, presumably during the construction of Hawkins Field. The fighters were found in the exact positions in which they had fallen in 1943; no attempt had been made to separate or rebury the remains.³⁴

While the term *isolated interment* conjures up an image of a lonely single grave—and this was often the case—the phrase has a specific definition. *Graves Registration* stipulated that all groupings of fewer than 12 graves "will be considered as isolated burials." By contrast, 12 or more graves "were to be established, marked, registered, and reported as a cemetery."³⁵ The nature of the fighting on Betio and the need for swift burial resulted in many isolated graves containing anywhere from one to eight bodies. It is not known how many of these graves originally existed on Betio. Thirty-three were well-marked and conspicuous

³¹ Michelony interview, 46.

³² "Special Military Map, Betio Island," *D-4 Report on Longsuit Operation*, enclosure A, 26 November 1943, RG 127, Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, NARA, Washington, DC. While this map is the earliest known (and only Marine-produced) diagram of cemeteries on Betio, plotting graves was not its primary purpose and its accuracy leaves much to be desired.

³³ "Recapitulation of Known Graves," 3 February 1944, box 168, Graves Registration Section, Service and Supply Company, 2d Service Battalion, Service Troops, 2d Marine Division, RG 127, 2d Marine Division Correspondence, 1942–1949, NARA, Washington, DC.

³⁴ *History Flight Excavation Report on the Recovery of PFC Randolph Allen, Taiwanese Housing Project, Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Republic of Kiribati, JPAC Site #KR-28* (Fredericksburg, VA: History Flight, 19 January 2014), 21.

³⁵ *Graves Registration*, 6. Further, a cemetery was "to remain until the disposition of all bodies, during an armistice or after cessation of hostilities, is definitely agreed upon." Isolated graves could potentially be moved or consolidated at any point, circumstances permitting.

enough to survive until the Navy's beautification process began in 1944; others may have been damaged or destroyed without any record of their original location. Most known isolated graves stood on western Betio, where the 2d Marines faced heavy fighting.

Graves registration protocols dictated that isolated burials were to be avoided whenever practicable in favor of larger cemeteries. This made sense even to those without any specific training: gathering remains together made record-keeping and eventual recovery easier. The 2d Marine Division followed this guidance whenever possible in the Solomon Islands and repeated the practice on Betio, establishing the first cemeteries before the fighting ended.

For cemetery burials, we turn again to the exemplary account of Chaplain Willard. In August 1942, Willard created the first Marine Corps cemetery in the South Pacific at Gavutu; one of his first tasks after coming ashore at Betio on 21 November was to lay out a burial plan with senior officers. The following morning, the chaplain staked out a location near the division command post and secured a bulldozer to scoop out three long trenches "in which the dead could be placed side by side. Under the circumstances, the command decided that individual graves were out of the question. The main thing was to identify and bury our departed comrades with as much reverence as possible."³⁶ He was impressed by the courageous bulldozer drivers, who ducked Japanese sniper fire as they worked.

With the assistance of Chaplain Francis W. Kelly, Willard rapidly filled his three rows. "Kelly had charge of the bodies after they were brought to the cemetery," he noted. "The rest of us went out with working parties to search out the dead."³⁷ He recognized the remains of close friends like Lieutenant Colonel Herbert R. Amey and First Lieutenant William D. Hawkins and gave equal care to mutilated strangers—"one was just the buttocks and legs."³⁸ Willard's two helpers, Assis-

tant Cook Marion Gonzales and Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Edward Rosenberg, helped collect identifying media and fingerprints. Many of the bodies were in such a poor state that Willard had no choice but to note "unidentified" or take a best guess at the last name. At the close of a very long day, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Cemetery 1 held the remains of 112 men.

After a restless night, Willard collaborated with First Lieutenant Paul B. Goverdare to clear a site for U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Cemetery 2 and bulldoze two trenches. With the help of a truck, Willard's working parties could range farther afield searching for bodies. The chaplain ventured into harm's way on this mission, even after a spent piece of shrapnel smacked his collarbone. He helped collect and bury 66 bodies over the day, only 2 of whom were unidentifiable.³⁹ In his memoir *The Leathernecks Come Through*, Willard writes that "[as of 23 November] it was up to each chaplain, carrying on his work in different sectors of the island, to select his own site for a cemetery."⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the other chaplains did not leave quite as detailed accounts of their activities. The burial grounds Willard helped create were two of the best organized on Betio.

The chaplains rendered excellent service but could not be everywhere at once. In their absence, burials were accomplished "by organization"—platoons, companies, or battalions taking care of their own fallen. There are two standout accounts of cemeteries established by rank-and-file Marines seeking to provide their friends with something close to a proper burial. First Sergeant Lewis Michelony told of a trench burial that would later become known as Row D, East Division Cemetery.

Where we were, there was no graveyard. There was a big tank trap, so we laid Japanese down on one side of the tank trap, and on the other side, we laid Marines down. There were four men with a poncho [to] pick up a dead

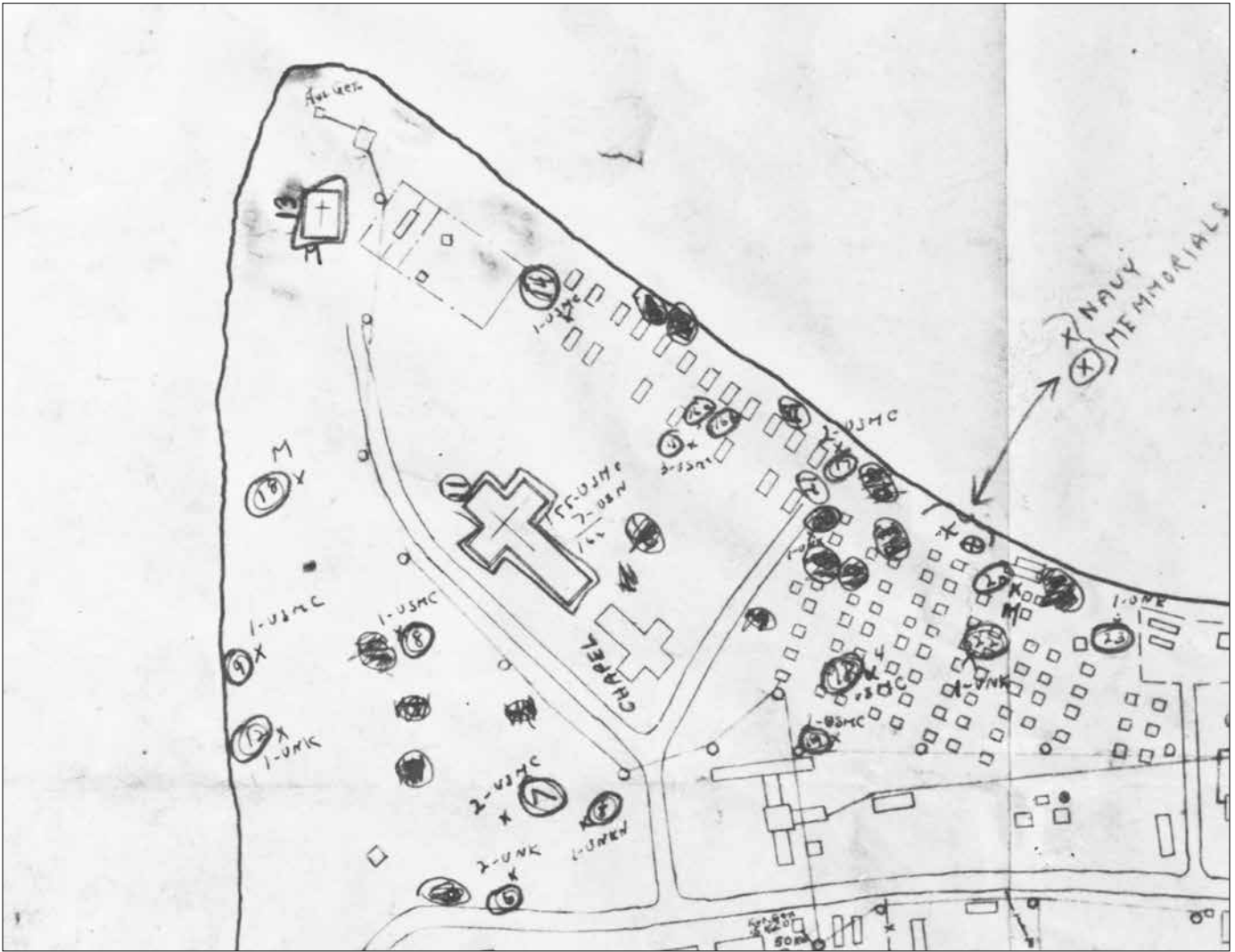
³⁶ W. Wyeth Willard, *The Leathernecks Come Through* (New York: Revell, 1944), 218.

³⁷ Willard, *The Leathernecks Come Through*, 218.

³⁸ W. Wyeth Willard personal diary, undated entry (ca. 20–24 November 1943), copy of original document courtesy of Katie Rasdorf, hereafter Willard diary.

³⁹ Willard report, 6. Remains in Row A, Grave 35, were noted as "pair of legs," while remains in Row B, Grave 64, were "burned to death." A handful of men were buried under wrong names.

⁴⁰ Willard, *The Leathernecks Come Through*, 219.



Box 445, General Correspondence, 1946–1946: Graves Registration, RG 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NARA, College Park, MD
Detail from a map used by the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company in 1946. Cemetery numbers are noted along with the number of markers, nearby roads, and buildings.

man (or a part of a man). When we got to [Lt. Hugh D.] Fricks I took my mess gear out, and I carved his name and officer number and rank on it, and I put KIA 23 November 1943 on it. We didn't have crosses [markers] then.

I would go to my men, if I didn't recognize a body, "Okay, you were [in] his platoon. What happened to Jim Jones? What was wrong with him?" "He got hit." "Where did he get hit?" "He got hit in the head, a gunshot wound to the head, evacuation unknown aboard ship." Or they might

answer, "Killed in action and buried."

In some cases, I got the burial place where they were buried.⁴¹

On the other end of Betio, correspondent Robert Sherrod was trying to comprehend the numbing carnage of Red Beach One and "the bodies of Marines who have not yet been reached by burial parties." They lay as they fell in front of pillboxes, hung up on barbed wire, in the hulks of burned vehicles. At one point, Sherrod counted 80 dead Marines in a 20-foot square. Activity at the water's edge drew his attention.

⁴¹ Michelony interview, 46.

A half-dozen Marines, members of the engineer regiment, are walking around the beach, examining the bodies. "Here's Larson," says one. "Here's Montague," says another. The bodies, as they are identified, are tenderly gathered up and taken fifteen or twenty yards inland where other Marines are digging graves for them.

This is unusual, because most of the Marines are being gathered by burial parties, which have not progressed this far. But these men are looking for dead from their own particular company. Since they are leaving by transport in a few hours, I suppose they think "Here is the last thing we can do for these boys we have known so long. We'll do it with our own hands."⁴²

Sherrod hits on another vital fact: the Marines were leaving Betio. The Red Beach burial took place on 24 November as combat units were in the process of boarding transports. The notice came swiftly, as Chaplain Willard wrote, "At 0600 I took a walk. On one little sector I discovered 72 of our dead Marines, that had not been buried. At 0700 received notice that we would have to go aboard ship at 0900. Made 66 crosses, put on names and dog tags. Packed gear."⁴³

The departure of the 2d Marine Division meant that additional burial records and casualty reports had to be compiled after the fact. Record keepers like Sergeant Michelony had to make the rounds of squads and platoons inquiring after Marines who failed to answer at muster. Approximately 200 were initially reported as "missing in action," and most of these were later declared dead. It took months—and sometimes years—to finalize the whereabouts of every man who fell on Betio.

Meanwhile, the remainder of battlefield cleanup was left in the hands of Navy garrison troops, who lacked an immediate personal connection to the Marines who died to take the island. The last burials on Betio, for bodies far past individual identification, were less "the last thing we can do" and more an unpleasant chore to be completed as quickly as possible.

From Battlefield to Base: 1944–45

V Amphibious Corps did not expend a thousand lives at Betio for the sole purpose of wiping out a Japanese garrison. Securing the airfield for rapid use was so mission-critical that U.S. fire support took pains to avoid hitting the runway—a remarkable feat, since the runway covered most of the island's surface. The first U.S. aircraft touched down on Betio on 24 November 1943; in less than a month, U.S. troops repaired or constructed "two coral runways, one 150 feet by 6,150 feet, the other 300 feet by 5,600 feet [with] adequate taxiways, night lighting, control tower, communications, and gasoline facilities."⁴⁴ Navy Captain Erl C. B. Gould, a veteran aviator, skipper of ACORN-14, and first air base commander of Hawkins Field, was in charge.⁴⁵ On 9 February 1944, Gould was named island commander of Betio, a tenure that would last through June. His efforts to bring Hawkins Field into fighting condition "under nearly continuous enemy bombing activity" earned him a Legion of Merit, with specific praise for "personal foresight and resourcefulness" in overcoming "adverse working conditions of the worst sort."⁴⁶

Gould fully appreciated the sacrifice of life required to secure Betio. He saw lonely Marine graves dotting the island everywhere he looked, and his ACORN-14 unit buried "several more known mem-

⁴² Sherrod, *Tarawa*, 126–28.

⁴³ Willard diary, 24 November 1943.

⁴⁴ CINCPAC, *Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas—December 1943*, Part IVD: "Development of Bases in GILBERT Islands," 31 March 1944, reel A913, RG 38, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, NARA, Washington, DC.

⁴⁵ ACORN (Aviation, Construction, Ordnance, Repair, Navy) was the code name for Navy advanced base construction, accomplished by construction battalions (Seabees). ACORNs were small-size air bases that could be swiftly transitioned to American use after capture.

⁴⁶ CINCPAC, *United States Naval Administration in World War II*, part I: "Generalized History of the Marshalls-Gilberts Area, with Emphasis on the Development of the Higher Echelons of Command," roll 2092, RG 38, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, NARA, Washington, DC, 7.

bers of the Second [Marine] Division. . . . [and] a substantial number of unknown bodies . . . mutilated beyond recognition.”⁴⁷ Gould witnessed burial ceremonies for men who died in bombing raids, operational accidents, and a horrific double crash of two Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers shortly after takeoff on 21 January 1944. He felt not only the immediate loss of young men and comrades but could easily imagine the pain of families at home: his two sons were elsewhere in the Pacific, serving in the Marine Corps.

Gould also wanted to win the war. His base needed troop housing, machine shops, power plants, and access roads in particular locations. When facilities encroached on gravesites, Gould applied his resourcefulness to the issue. In early 1944, he proposed a plan that would allow for needed construction while providing a fitting memorial for those who gave their lives on Betio. However, his decision would constitute the single most significant impediment to the recovery of those same fallen fighters. As Commander Lockwood later wrote, “Gould’s good intentions in desiring a suitable memorial for each man who gave his life were commendable, but his choice of method to achieve this end is questionable as to judgment.”⁴⁸

The island commander’s plan called for replacing the original Marine burial grounds with landscaped memorials laid out by the book and maintained by the garrison. Regulation white crosses would replace scrap lumber, paths and boundaries would be neatly defined, and painted plaques would invite reverence and reflection from the men stationed on Betio. This approach, Gould felt, would appropriately commemorate sacrifice while conveniently opening space for additional construction, as the memorials could be rotated or relocated according to the needs of Hawkins Field. Crucially, there were no premeditated plans to move any of the dead—although archaeological evi-

dence reveals that some remains were apparently reinterred during construction and beautification.⁴⁹

Gould had the skilled workers to accomplish this ambitious goal. Many under his command were Seabees of the 98th Naval Construction Battalion or 549th Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit (CBMU): professional carpenters, builders, and machine operators in civilian life. Lieutenant Elmer J. Miller drafted the designs for the new memorials, while Lieutenant A. E. Dishman of the 549th CBMU organized the workforce. Lieutenant Francis T. Cooke was charged with “the identification and recording of graves,” ensuring the correct number of memorial markers. Cooke’s job was immense: Gould wanted markers for every man who fell in the battle—even those buried at sea.⁵⁰

Hundreds of identical white crosses were hammered together and painted with names procured from the 2d Marine Division’s casualty report. Sailors sawed logs for borders and posts and hung chains to create decorative pathways. Engineers poured concrete pedestals. Sign painters practiced their calligraphy and delivered beautiful tablet-shaped burial registers in red, black, and gold leaf.⁵¹ Sailors volunteered in the cemetery in addition to their regular duties: Fireman First Class Anthony Cyll, an ambitious botanist, cultivated beautiful tropical flowers, trees, and shrubs, especially for the beautification project. “Needless to say, every officer and man who has been connected with this project has considered himself privileged to have the assignment,” Gould declared, “and taken keen interest in developing final resting places which would give evidence of the esteem in

⁴⁷ Capt Erl C. B. Gould, Island Commander, Betio, memorandum to the Commanding General, Second Division, USMC, Fleet Marine Force, “Subject: Cemeteries, Memorial Monuments, and Graves,” CINCPAC Files 1944 P6-Deaths, RG 313, Records of Naval Operating Forces, NARA, College Park, MD, hereafter Gould memo.

⁴⁸ Lockwood report, 3.

⁴⁹ *A History Flight Excavation Report Detailing the Recovery of Captain Richard Vincent from East Division Cemetery (Cemetery 33), Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Republic of Kiribati* (Fredericksburg, VA: History Flight, December 2013), 19. Capt Richard W. Vincent was originally buried in the D-2-18 Cemetery; his remains were not recovered after the war. In 2013, the remnants of a wooden coffin were uncovered from the Cemetery 33 area, and Vincent was identified as the occupant. Coffin burials were not possible in battle conditions, and the prevailing theory is that Vincent’s body was accidentally unearthed by wartime construction and reburied in a more convenient location.

⁵⁰ Gould memo, 5.

⁵¹ Gould memo, 5. This work was led by PTR2 J. E. Anderson, 98th Construction Battalion. Gould also commended the efforts of PTR1s E. W. Soderberg and K. H. Dewitt (549th Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit) and PTR1 J. E. Quick (Carrier Air Service Unit 16).

which the gallant forces who fought and died here are held.”⁵² Photographers from *Life* magazine shot color pictures of the sailors at work and sent a film crew to Bairiki to witness the exacting care with which the United States honored its fallen. Their work appeared in the 17 April 1944 issue; much of the beautification was complete by that time. “A conscientious effort has been made to reconstruct and beautify the cemeteries and graves on this atoll,” summarized Gould, “and also to record, as accurately as available data has permitted, the names and burial locations of all the officers and men who fell here.”⁵³

The Navy also did some administrative cleanup on the cemeteries. While Marine records gave burial grounds many descriptive (and conflicting) names, Gould’s island command decided on a simple numbering system. Almost all mentions of Betio burials post-1944 refer to Cemeteries 1 through 41, occasionally appended with the terms *memorial*, *monument*, or *isolated* (figure 1). The layout of each plot was generally based on the number of men initially buried nearby, with due consideration for the needs of the expanding base.

Memorial cemeteries looked like formal plots one might see on a military post back home. Four of these cemeteries appeared on Betio. Gould described their locations using landmarks that veterans of the battle could identify from memory:

- “The main one where memorial services were held on 1 December 1943 just south of the air-strip near the turning circle” (East Division Cemetery, renamed Cemetery 33)
- “Another immediately south of Colonel [David M.] Shoup’s original headquarters” (Central Division Cemetery, renamed Cemetery 26)
- “A third about one hundred yards southwest of the tree upon which our Colors were first raised” (8th Marines Cemetery no. 1, renamed Cemetery 25)

- “The fourth a short distance inland from the northwest end of Betio” (West Division Cemetery, renamed Cemetery 11)⁵⁴

Each memorial cemetery was laid out to exact dimensions, from the size of the individual markers (36 inches high, painted white) to the spacing of plots (three feet side to side, in rows nine feet apart). Coconut log borders and fencing marked the edges. Every cemetery featured a decorative plaque “shellacked to withstand the weather and inscribed with gold leaf.”⁵⁵ A stirring epitaph, jointly composed by Navy captain Jackson R. Tate and Colonel Vivian Fox-Strangways (British resident commissioner) appeared over a Marine emblem at the entrance to each cemetery.

So there let them rest
On their sun-scoured atoll
The wind for their watcher
The waves for their shroud
Where palm and pandanus
Shall whisper forever
A requiem fitting for
Heroes so proud.⁵⁶

Although constructed atop existing Marine Corps graves, the four memorial cemeteries on Betio were oriented according to base construction needs rather than replicating the original burial order.⁵⁷ Cemeteries 25 and 26 nodded to accuracy: the Navy installed one marker for each man, known or unknown, on the Marine burial records. Massive Cemetery 33 and cross-shaped Cemetery 11, centerpieces of the project, contained many more memorial markers than remains. Gould openly stated that “all cemeteries on Betio Island bear a memorial aspect in that accurate detail to locate every cross has never been available. Furthermore, crosses have been erected in them for a

⁵⁴ Gould memo, 2.

⁵⁵ Gould memo, 3.

⁵⁶ Gould memo, 3.

⁵⁷ A fifth memorial cemetery was established on the neighboring island of Buariki, where the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, chased down and eliminated the last Japanese forces in the atoll. In this case, regulation crosses simply replaced old markers, with fencing and plaques added. There was no attempt or need to do much else; Buariki was not intended for military development.

⁵² Gould memo, 5–6.

⁵³ Gould memo, 1.

large number of men reported missing and others buried under memorial monuments so that there stands a cross in memory of every officer and man who fell here.”⁵⁸

While the memorial cemeteries contained individual markers for all casualties, Gould decided that “at four sites . . . where substantial numbers of officers and men are known to have been buried, it has appeared appropriate to erect memorial monuments.”⁵⁹ The monument cemeteries were designed around 10-foot-high crosses made from palm logs and a carved plaque fashioned to look like an open book. The painters applied their talents to include the names of every individual (or the number of unknowns) buried nearby, along with an excerpt from John Masefield’s poem “Truth.”⁶⁰

The monument cemeteries—which the Navy named Cemetery 10, Cemetery 13, Cemetery 20, and Cemetery 27—replaced four Marine Corps burial sites. Original markers were taken down and discarded; in most cases, the monuments were planted directly atop the bodies. A fifth monument of similar size and layout commemorated the New Zealand coastwatchers executed by the Japanese on the atoll in 1942. Notably, monument cemeteries stood in heavier traffic areas where a smaller footprint was more convenient for military operations.

Most of the original burials on Betio were isolated graves—lone Marines or small groups interred on the spot where they died. Gould’s men marked off 33 such graves with the same professional precision as the memorial and monument cemeteries: regulation markers, palm log borders, and mounded sand. Gould noted that “a few bodies were moved to avoid necessary construction work over them,” though he later clarified this as “two” bodies. He added a crucial point of explanation: “Some [isolated] graves . . . are known to be improperly located. In these instances, bodies well identified by name tags, clothing, etc., were buried at varying distances from the sites shown on

the map in question.” This statement makes clear that some isolated graves were only memorials and implies that some bodies were, in fact, built over. Gould could neither specify which graves were “improperly located,” nor did he mention which two were moved to make way for construction.⁶¹

Above ground, the effect of beautification was undeniably impressive. Gould sent a photographer to document each cemetery and wrote up a detailed report of his efforts, lauding the contributions of several officers and enlisted by name. He later received an official letter of gratitude from the 2d Marine Division.⁶² Servicemembers staging through Betio were drawn to the cemeteries, and occasional wreath-laying ceremonies captured the eye of newsreel cameramen. Mrs. Virginia Matthews of the Red Cross managed to visit Betio during the war—“the first American woman serving in the Pacific to see the battlefield grave of her husband”—and hoped that the late Second Lieutenant Ernest A. Matthews might rest there for eternity.

I wish that all the other families who have loved ones there could share the experience. . . . These men earned the right to lie there. In some places, native plants have started to come back, and this results in a gorgeous flood of purple morning glories—it reminds me of a little old cemetery in the U.S., which is mellow and not closely

⁶¹ Gould memo, 2. The author suspects that PFC Leonard E. Kristal and PFC Harold R. Burch may be the two moved men. Their burial information references proximity to a Japanese cement mixer at Hawkins Field. The Navy put markers for them in Cemetery 29 on the eastern end of Betio, while they as members of the 2d Marines landed and fought on the other side of the island near Green Beach. Neither Marine has been accounted for, and both are probably still on Betio.

⁶² William L. Niven, *Tarawa’s Gravediggers: One of the Greatest Mysteries of World War II Finally Solved!* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, 2015), 37. Niven provides a scanned copy of this letter, dated 9 September 1944, and notes that the Betio island commander at the time was Jackson R. Tate. However, the letter is in reference to communication from 1 June 1944, during Gould’s tenure, and as Gould was the only island commander referenced in the postwar inquiry, it is believed that this letter of appreciation was directed to him and not to Tate.

⁵⁸ Gould memo, 4.

⁵⁹ Gould memo, 4.

⁶⁰ John Edward Masefield, “Truth,” *Selected Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1922).

pruned. I can't think of a righter place for my husband to lie.⁶³

Virginia Matthews's sentiments were echoed by many in the United States who received official notice of a loved one's death along with a report of a specific grave location in one of the beautified cemeteries.

However, the graves were nearly all shams. "While this arrangement of markers undoubtedly improved appearances, it destroyed whatever accuracy the first crude grave markings possessed, making it practically impossible to identify most of the graves in later disinterments," wrote Commander Lockwood.⁶⁴ An unknown number of individual markers and two larger cemeteries were never commemorated.⁶⁵

Certainly, Gould was not thinking ahead to later disinterments; ending the war for the living outweighed the needs of the dead. Navy wartime policy dictated that all remains buried overseas remain there at the very least until the end of hostilities.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Gould was a Great War veteran and knew that most American dead from that conflict were permanently buried in other countries. He could not have anticipated the chaos his project would cause, or the pain and strife it would inflict on the families of the Marines he sought to honor.

There was no secrecy about the memorial nature of the cemeteries; the Marine Corps was aware of this before the end of the war. Representatives of the Marine Corps Graves Registration Service inspected the setup in 1945 and came away impressed. Their memo to Commandant Alexander A. Vandegrift read, in part,

Investigation made by this Headquarters indicates that graves in the four cemeteries on Betio Island are largely commemorative (unoccupied). In some instances, bodies will be found interred, but it is uncertain whether the bodies interred are actually the bodies indicated by the markings above them. It is understood that in some cases graves marked "unknown" contain parts of bodies only. . . . It is therefore recommended that all interments in the four cemeteries listed [11, 25, 26, 33] be considered memorial.⁶⁷

This intelligence was not communicated to the families of those supposedly buried in the memorial cemeteries. The Corps either wished to avoid unduly worrying the next of kin or to keep the news as quiet as possible, hoping that most of the remains would be retrieved after the war. Nor was it made plain to the men who would carry out that grim task.

Recovery and Reburial: The Graves Registration Mission

Few Graves Registration Service (GRS) units in the Pacific had as much accumulated experience as the Army's 4th Platoon, 604th QMGRC. Activated in 1943, it trained in Hawaii and deployed to the Pacific in time for the New Guinea campaign; the war took them as far north as Iwo Jima. After the surrender, it was detailed to cross the Pacific yet again, revisiting old island battlefields to collect remains from temporary graves and consolidate small cemeteries in regional hubs.⁶⁸ The 4th Platoon was led by First

⁶³ "Casualties: Last Landing," *Time* 47, no. 13 (1 April 1946), 97. History Flight recovered the remains of Lt Matthews from Cemetery 27 in 2015; DPAA completed the identification in January 2017.

⁶⁴ Lockwood report, 3.

⁶⁵ Although Gilbert Islands Cemetery and Green Beach Cemetery C contained a significant number of graves, neither was commemorated as a memorial or monument, presumably due to the needs of base construction. History Flight located the first site in 2019; the second has not yet been located.

⁶⁶ Steere, *The Graves Registration Service in World War II*, 34. This policy, first proposed by U.S. Armed Forces in Australia (USAFA) and adopted by all branches, cited inadequate facilities for preserving remains, wide dispersion of troops, and lack of transportation, particularly shipping.

⁶⁷ Excerpt from Letter Serial #28531, "Commemorative Graves," 24 April 1945, personnel file for Hillard, Robert, Pvt. USMC, 360956, Official Military Personnel Files, RG 127, NARA, St. Louis, MO, hereafter Hillard personnel file. Copies of this excerpt were included in Official Military Personnel Files of unrecovered men reported buried in these cemeteries.

⁶⁸ In December 1946, the 604th QMGRC received the Meritorious Service Unit award for "completion of a number of difficult separate missions in connection with the American Graves Registration Service concentration program." Tarawa was cited as "the most difficult mission the company ever faced." *Honolulu (HI) Advertiser*, 9 December 1946.

Lieutenant Isadore Eisensmith, with Lieutenant (DC) Henry Robinson as the senior medical officer. The enlisted ranks included embalmers, clerks, dental specialists, bulldozer drivers, and diggers. At Robinson's insistence, all hands arrived with a rudimentary knowledge of tooth charting, courtesy of a compulsory crash course taught en route to Betio.⁶⁹

As the soldiers unloaded the USAT *Lawrence Philips* (U.S. Army transport) and cleaned out the *fales* in which they would live, Lieutenant Eisensmith made a tour of inspection. He counted "approximately 43 graves containing from one body up to 400."⁷⁰ In keeping with practice established on other islands, Eisensmith planned to collect remains, confirm identities, and rebury everyone in a new location to await transport home. He found a spot near the old base chapel, negotiated with British officials for its use, and set his bulldozer driver to work pulling stumps.⁷¹ Chaplains Francis W. Kelly and William R. O'Neill, who helped with the 1943 battlefield burials on Betio, arrived via airplane from Kwajalein. By 15 March, the new cemetery—called Lone Palm for the single tree within its boundaries—was cleared, graded, and ready for use; two days later, the first bodies were exhumed from their temporary graves.

Corporal Hubert Clayton Luther, who was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross with Company I, 2d Marines, and was buried where he died in 1943, was among the first to be brought to the 604th QMGRC's morgue and laboratory. The corpsmen examined bones, charted teeth, and cataloged personal effects. Luther's remains were carefully wrapped in a blanket and placed into a wooden coffin with duplicate identity tags; he was buried in grave 1, row 1. The second was a skeleton uncovered while grading the southwest corner of Lone Palm. He had no personal effects and no identification; after receiving the same thorough exam-

ination as Luther, he was also placed into a coffin with tags reading "Unknown X-1." Betio had surrendered its first unknown soldier. As it happened, later laboratory examination suggested that X-1 was Japanese.⁷²

On 18 March 1946, Lieutenant Eisensmith divided his platoon into four teams. One handled operations at Lone Palm, while another tackled the numerous isolated graves. The other two groups started with Cemeteries 26 and 33 with 119 and 400 individual markers, respectively.⁷³ Eisensmith anticipated a rapid expansion of Lone Palm as the teams worked row by row through the massive burial grounds. He must have been aware, at least on some level, that some of the burials on Betio were memorials. At the very least, a conversation with the garrison force commander intimated that Cemetery 11 was "primarily a 'memorial'."⁷⁴ However, from the sudden tone of dismay in his operation report, the true scope of the problem evidently caught him by surprise. "At this point," he wrote, "our difficulties began."

After two days of excavating, no bodies had been recovered. This created much concern. Father O'Neill, who buried Marine dead on this spot shortly after the invasion, finally made the suggestion that we see if traces of the original rows could be found.

Originally, the remains were buried side by side in three rows. These rows were supposed to be diagonal to certain tree stumps. By a series of prospect excavations and narrow trenches, the middle row was found first. Later the other two rows were found. These rows were also diagonal to the way the cemetery was laid out.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Eisensmith report, 2.

⁷⁰ What the Navy called *cemeteries*, the 604th QMGRC called *graves*—another point of potential confusion for modern researchers. For the sake of simplicity, we will refer them to by the more common Navy designation. *Fales* were simple huts found throughout the South Pacific.

⁷¹ The bulldozer broke down after about a day, and the rest of the Army garrison force heavy equipment on the island was in poor condition. Much of the digging and physical labor was done by hand.

⁷² Case file for Unknown X-1, Schofield Barracks Mausoleum #1, RG 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NARA, College Park, MD.

⁷³ 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company, "Company Diary, 21 Feb 1946 to 9 June 1946," box 17969, RG 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917–, WWII Operations Reports 1941–1948, NARA, Washington, DC, hereafter 604th QMGRC Diary.

⁷⁴ Eisensmith report, 7.

⁷⁵ Eisensmith report, 3.

The team at Cemetery 26 faced similar problems: no bodies under the five rows of markers. Kelly, who helped Willard bury Marines on this spot in 1943, recalled the original three-row layout and suggested digging a trench across the cemetery. His idea bore fruit, and the three rows were located. The other two teams were reassigned to help, and an average of 30 remains arrived at Lone Palm Cemetery for reburial each day.⁷⁶

Finding the bodies was only part of the challenge. Battle debris was everywhere; many Marines were buried with live ammunition and grenades on their persons. One grenade exploded—fortunately causing no injuries—and a large Japanese mine was found in Cemetery 26. O'Neill and Technical Sergeant A. S. Galluzzi took on the dangerous task of dumping the rusting munitions into the sea.⁷⁷ Work was further delayed by heavy rain, intense heat, and a fire that burned down part of the mess hall.⁷⁸ These two cemeteries also gave Eisensmith and Robinson a worrisome preview of the identification process.

Very few of the remains had any means of identification such as regulation tags, shoes, or names stenciled on their web equipment and ponchos. The identification tags found were almost useless to us for the chemical reaction of the coral had corroded them until they were illegible. Most of the tags were almost disintegrated when found by us.

Tooth charts were not of much value . . . it appeared that additional dental work had been done since the original charts were made and no record kept of it. The tooth charts taken from the remains did not check with those furnished by [the] Marine Corps for the person whose identification tags were found. It seems that the Ma-

rines had traded identification tags for reasons unknown.⁷⁹

Cemetery 26 was declared closed on 26 March; 123 bodies had been found instead of the expected 119, and the workers started on Cemetery 25. Now wise to the nature of memorial cemeteries, they dug a test trench and quickly found the original burials running perpendicular to the rows of crosses. The same troubles plagued Cemetery 25, and it took nearly a week to finish the job. Cemetery 25 was closed on 2 April; so was Cemetery 33, where only 129 bodies lay under 400 markers. Unfortunately, the nature of the excavations—and, possibly, carelessness or fatigue by the workers laboring with shovels in the hot sun—meant that many bones were left in the ground. It was difficult to differentiate if a missing limb was due to combat-inflicted trauma or simple inattention.⁸⁰

Work on the isolated graves was soon complete, and “it was found that many of the graves did not contain all the remains reported buried there.”⁸¹ Unfortunately, the 604th QMGRC did not specify which isolated burials were problematic, but a tally of individual reports of interment suggests that as many as 18 of the 33 isolated graves either had unidentifiable remains or no remains at all. Some burials on Betio's western shore (Green Beach) were supposedly washed away by coastal erosion.⁸²

The 604th QMGRC took a well-earned weekend break, enjoying payday, a wreath-laying service at Lone Palm, and “a very good USO show.” They were back at work on Monday, 8 April. One group went to Cemetery 11, “the cross cemetery near the Chaple [sic]” while others tackled Monument Cemeteries 10 and

⁷⁹ Eisensmith report, 4–5.

⁸⁰ Archaeological work on these cemeteries occasionally unearths nearly complete skeletons. In these cases, the blame must rest on the soldiers of the 604th QMGRC.

⁸¹ Eisensmith report, 6.

⁸² Most notably Cemetery 9, isolated grave of Capt Thomas B. Royster. Eisensmith spoke with aviators familiar with the shifting coastline and concluded that Royster's grave was underwater. Eisensmith report, 8. William Niven states this phenomenon also affected Cemetery 12 (an isolated unknown) but photographs of Betio in 1946 appear to show that marker still standing. Niven, *Tarawa's Gravediggers*, 89.

⁷⁶ Eisensmith report, 5.

⁷⁷ Eisensmith report, 4.

⁷⁸ 604th QMGRC Diary, 9–11.

13.⁸³ The Cemetery 11 crew anticipated trouble from the beginning, having been told by the garrison force commander that 11 was “primarily a memorial.”⁸⁴ It took two days of digging to find the first two bodies; they found nothing but sand for a solid week. Diggers were dismayed to find seawater seeping into the excavation. Work paused pending the arrival of a pump from Kwajalein.

Cemeteries 10 and 13 presented different problems. There were no clues on where to dig; remains were supposedly in the vicinity (42 at Cemetery 13, 21 at Cemetery 10) but no plots to exhume. Soldiers dug test holes and trenches with no success. Finally, somebody near Grave 14 suggested looking under the monument. A clapped-out garrison truck dragged the wooden cross out to the beach; beneath the concrete pedestal lay the dead Marines. After this discovery, work progressed well: Cemetery 13 surrendered 41 remains, and 19 were retrieved from Cemetery 10.⁸⁵

Simultaneously, a small group boated over to the island of Buota to exhume a small cemetery next to Mullinix Field. They expected 10 remains but located 24, including the elaborate grave of Navy Commander George Tilghman. No less impressive was the commander’s casket, a steel-and-wood construction unlike any other encountered in the Gilbert Islands.⁸⁶ “Contrary to all the other cemeteries on Tarawa, there was no doubt about the identification of these remains,” noted Eisensmith. “Index cards with all pertinent information were found buried in each of the caskets.”⁸⁷

Back on Betio, the crews started work on Cemeteries 20 and 27. Cemetery 20, located near the British wireless station, was the old D-2-18 Cemetery described by Robert Sherrod. From start to finish, operations at Cemetery 20 took only two days and returned all but one of the anticipated remains. Cemetery 27, by contrast, was a complete failure. The 604th QMGRC expected 40 bodies under the cross monu-

ment, but none were found. The pit reached seven feet, twice that of a typical Betio burial, and still no trace of any remains. Frustrated, the 604th QMGRC branched out. “Explorative excavations were started throughout the area,” wrote Eisensmith. “At the same time, trenches were started in front of the four large Quonsets in the area around the boat basin, but all this work was in vain. . . . The area around the barber-shop and the area along both sides of the road was dug up, but no remains, no remnants of equipment, or any other debris that would have indicated a burial place were found.” The soldiers spent half a month working on Cemetery 27 before abandoning the project on 1 May. Eisensmith felt that the entire monument was only a memorial.⁸⁸

With the ongoing debacle of Cemetery 27 weighing on his mind, Eisensmith badly needed some good news. He got it on 24 April when the long-awaited water pump for Cemetery 11 arrived by airplane. However, the day turned tragic shortly after the aircraft departed: a large plume of black smoke rose above the lagoon, and “immediately everyone seemed to know that the [Douglas] C-47 [Skytrain] had crashed.”⁸⁹ A rescue boat raced to the scene and was met by a small fleet of Gilbertese canoes. The bodies of Lieutenant Colonel Fred O. Tyler, Captain Robert B. Poteet, and Captain Wesley J. Siedenburgh were fished from the water that afternoon; a few days later, the lower half of one man’s body emerged from the wreckage. There was no hope of individual identification, so the legs were declared a group burial representing Captain William A. Lanman and Corporals John R. Whitehead Jr., William M. Young, and Robert Tingle. The seven men were given a military funeral and joined the dead of Tarawa in Lone Palm Cemetery.

In early May, the 604th QMGRC’s journal commented that “the end of operations seems to be near.”⁹⁰ Teams were still working in the waterlogged Cemetery 11, and a contingent sailed 145 kilometers to Apamama to collect 11 more remains. Idle soldiers

⁸³ 604th QMGRC Diary, 17. For unknown reasons, the 604th QMGRC renumbered these as Grave 18 and Grave 14.

⁸⁴ Eisensmith report, 7.

⁸⁵ 604th QMGRC Diary, 17–20.

⁸⁶ Tilghman, the commander of Mullinix Field, was killed on 4 January 1944 when a bomber ground-looped and crashed into his parked Jeep.

⁸⁷ Eisensmith report, 8.

⁸⁸ Eisensmith report, 8–9. Cemetery 27 was discovered by archaeologists in 2015.

⁸⁹ Eisensmith report, 10.

⁹⁰ 604th QMGRC diary, 26.

were assigned to fill in and level the excavated graves. Chaplains Kelly and O'Neill flew out of Betio, on their way to discharge and home. Lone Palm was beautified with coral pathways, chain fencing, a flagpole, and newly planted trees. On 20 May 1946, Eisensmith authorized a beer party for his men in recognition of two months of hard work. As he looked over the four plots of white crosses, he must have admitted that the cemetery was much smaller than he had hoped. Lone Palm contained only 527 remains, and 274 were under markers labeled unknown.

Chief among the omissions at Lone Palm were nearly 90 battle casualties from three major cemeteries never located by the 604th QMGRC. The failure to find approximately 40 remains at Cemetery 27 was acknowledged, but two others were not mentioned in the unit's report.⁹¹ The first was the tank trap burial conducted by First Sergeant Michelony and his comrades. Originally called Gilbert Islands Cemetery by the 6th Marines, the site became known as Row D, East Division Cemetery, presumably for its proximity to the larger burial ground. However, it was never within the fenced boundaries of East Division Cemetery; photographs show Rows A, B, and C, but no fourth row. Evidently, Row D was a bit of a misnomer, and the tank trap lay some distance away.

Unfortunately, and for reasons unknown, no memorial was raised over Row D during the beautification process, and its precise location was not known to the 604th QMGRC. They certainly searched for it; among their files was a burial roster for 33 men in Row D, and O'Neill was a veteran of the 6th Marines with a personal interest in finding his old comrades. O'Neill also conducted memorial services at East Division Cemetery after the battle; when he returned to Betio in 1946, he would undoubtedly have recalled three, not four, rows of markers. Although one man reportedly interred in Row D was identified, the trench eluded the 604th QMGRC.⁹²

The other lost cemetery is more of a mystery. Known as Green Beach Cemetery C or Cemetery C, 2d Marines no. 1, it once stood along the western shore of Betio and held the remains of 13 men. Its origins are almost entirely obscure; only a few photographs are known to exist, and it does not appear on any Navy-produced maps of the island. Author William Niven postulates that Cemetery C was included on the D-4 "Dumps and Installations" map of 26 November 1943 and presents logical evidence for this conclusion—namely, the proximity to other cemeteries designated A and B.⁹³ Cemetery C was never marked or mapped in the beautification effort, and the 604th QMGRC omitted any mention of the location in their report.

Identification and Accounting

The 604th QMGRC understood that even the best-marked cemeteries could present identification problems: men buried without identification, multiple remains in a single grave, or simple misspellings could mean a delay of months or years. To combat this, they brought reams of paperwork to Betio, including rosters of the fallen as prepared by the 2d Marine Division in 1944. They also had dental charts (Navy Form H-4) for every man known to be dead or missing from the battle. Using the available documentation, Lieutenant Robinson and his team of technicians hoped to confirm the name of each body that came through their morgue.⁹⁴

The process began at the gravesite. A pair of corpsmen attended each exhumation and "would immediately obtain the skull, thoroughly clean the teeth of all dirt, and proceed to make the dental examination and record of condition found on one of the blank H-4 forms." Simultaneously, a clerk filled out Form 1042: "Report of Burial." Lieutenant Robinson pulled the relevant dental record and checked all the information personally. He was a strict arbiter, attuned to the slightest discrepancies. Robinson later reported,

⁹¹ 604th QMGRC diary, 20; and Eisensmith report, 8–9.

⁹² PFC Manuel Nunes (Company M, 8th Marines), recorded as the 33d and last body in Row D, was reburied in Lone Palm Cemetery on 21 March 1946. It is not known whether the 604th QMGRC really found part of the row, or if Row D was a clerical error on the original report. The 604th QMGRC was exhuming Row B at the time Nunes was found.

⁹³ Niven, *Tarawa's Gravediggers*, 251–52.

⁹⁴ Lt H. H. Robinson, "Dental Officer's Report on Identification Operation at Tarawa," 31 May 1946, General Correspondence, Miscellaneous File, RG 92, Records of the Quartermaster General, NARA, College Park, MD, hereafter Robinson report.

“In the event that there was no clue as to identification, and there was present even the slightest unusual dental condition, a search was made through each record of the bodies buried in the particular cemetery or location.”⁹⁵ Robinson’s task was made more difficult by the similarity of records—many remains showing the results of typical dental work, like extracted wisdom teeth—and the condition of the remains:

There were remains found with one or more teeth missing from the jaws. In many instances, the teeth were found adjacent to the skull. In other instances, the teeth were not recovered. Another common condition found was that parts of one or both jaws were missing. Several skulls were found with one jaw missing, and a few remains were exhumed for which no skull was found.⁹⁶

Damage of this sort could affect identifying features, and, as Robinson correctly argued, “unless there was some dental peculiarity, no matter how slight, it followed that positive identification was impossible.”⁹⁷ He erred on the side of caution, rejecting several possible matches over slight discrepancies that he could not resolve with the resources or information available. At the end of field operations, Robinson collected his conflicting files and collared his eight most proficient corpsmen for a final review. This homestretch effort resulted in 19 additional identifications.

Confirmation of identity by dental records was vital to the process—for, as noted, few of the bodies had legible identification and those who did sometimes had items that did not match the tooth chart. Robinson noted that “117 bodies were positively identified by dental charts alone, and 137 bodies were identified by correlation of other information with dental

charts. The identity of 40 remains was definitely disproven after other information had led to a tentative identification.”⁹⁸ It does not appear that the 604th QMGRC considered other physical traits—they were not, after all, trained anthropologists—but they did take an additional step for remains deemed unidentifiable. Skulls were propped up on a small stand and photographed from the front and both sides, with a placard bearing their X-number. The photographs were forwarded along with the individual’s burial information. As far as this writer knows, this practice was not repeated elsewhere in the Pacific theater and was possibly due to the high percentage of unidentified remains.

The penultimate stop for Betio’s battle casualties was the Central Identification Laboratory, Honolulu (CIL). At this facility, a trio of expert anthropologists—Doctors Mildred Trotter, Charles Snow, and Paul Graves—worked with a team of technicians to check and confirm the identities of dead men from across the Pacific theater. The workload was immense, and the pressure correspondingly high: they were the final checkpoint before remains could be released to families for final burial.

The Tarawa dead arrived in their caskets from Lone Palm accompanied by the records created by the 604th QMGRC: new tags, reports of burial, dental charts, and any other pertinent information. In the quiet confines of the laboratory, new clues came to light. Remains were spread carefully on examining tables and checked for duplicate bones. Often parts of two, three, or four individuals were found commingled in caskets; an extra articulating right arm, for example, might be removed and associated with another set of remains, or assigned a separate case number. They recorded estimates of age, height, weight, and stature, charted teeth, and ordered fluoroscopy tests. The trained eye of a professional anthropologist could spot the defining physical traits suggestive of Caucasian or Asian ancestry; any remains thought to be Japanese or Korean were removed for separate disposition. The doctors even described how each in-

⁹⁵ Robinson report, 2.

⁹⁶ Robinson report, 3.

⁹⁷ Robinson report, 3. Robinson remarks that Chaplain O’Neill spent a week at Headquarters Marine Corps searching for “original lists and diagrams showing the location of bodies in the various cemeteries and . . . a chart showing the location of cemeteries on the island.” He came up empty; it is not clear if these diagrams ever existed.

⁹⁸ Robinson report, 3.

dividual might have appeared in life. To avoid confirmation bias, they worked without access to personnel files and submitted the findings of each case for review by an external board.

Unfortunately, CIL was somewhat hampered by the remains they received. Recent archaeological work on Betio's cemetery sites tends to return personal effects, smaller bones, entire limbs, and sometimes entire skeletons overlooked by the 604th QMGRC. This suggests the diggers—generally the least experienced or skilled members of the platoon—were not as careful in their work as expected. Furthermore, the 604th QMGRC sometimes submitted dental data that obviously contradicted the CIL findings, indicative of another record-keeping breakdown along the way.⁹⁹

Nor was CIL completely error-free in its work. In 2019, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) accounted for Private First Class Alfred Edwards by combining two separate sets of unidentified remains, which had obviously failed an association check by CIL anthropologists. That same year, Captain Edward Glenn Walker was identified from remains buried in Hawaii. This news came as a surprise to the Walker family, who received and buried a body as their kin back in 1949. The mistake was finally corrected in 2021.¹⁰⁰

Ultimately, the 604th QMGRC sent 282 remains to CIL as unknown. The laboratory assigned identities to 186 of them in just more than a year's time. In 1949, the unidentified remains were buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific with full military honors. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps was grappling with the fallout from the 604th QMGRC's mission. The families of Marines whose bodies were still missing received a form letter.

⁹⁹ For example, Betio Unknown X-20 includes a Navy H-4 form dated 19 March 1946 with the notation "Head shot OFF! (no skull)." A detailed dental chart was created on 17 December 1946; the remains examined at CIL had no skull but included pieces of at least three individuals. X-20 was combined with remains recovered in 2014 and identified as PFC Joseph F. Boschetti in 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Betio Unknown X-198 was determined as a potential match for Walker based on his unusual height and a distinctive pattern of tooth fillings. The error appears to have dual roots: Walker's ID tags were found on one body, and the identification was accepted primarily on this information without the usual confirmation checks by CIL. The remains exhumed from Walker's grave in Lebanon, TN, are still awaiting final identification.

It is with sincere regret that I inform you that his remains have not been recovered. This information was not furnished you at an earlier date pending receipt of the reports of the final searches made of the islands of Tarawa Atoll for isolated graves. These searches are now considered complete. . . . A number of unidentified bodies were found on Tarawa and the American Graves Registration Service is attempting by any known means to identify them. . . . Although it is improbable that the remains of your son will be recovered, you may be certain that should his remains be positively identified you will be promptly informed.¹⁰¹

Naturally, this news was not well received. Families possessing photographs of memorial graves, details of specific burial sites, or boxes of personal effects could not understand the seemingly arbitrary decision that remains were unrecoverable. Mrs. Susie Ratliff, whose son Robert Hillard was among those so designated, was rightly outraged.

If his remains are truly lost or were never recovered, as I have been informed, why have I been deceived? Why didn't they tell me the cold hard facts in the beginning so I could accustom myself to them all at the same time? A woman can stand much after she has become accustomed to it, but to be told one thing, as I was, and then after accepting it as reported, to be informed of something quite contrary, is more than I can sanely take. It is almost the same as freshly receiving that fateful telegram over four years ago.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Hillard personnel file.

¹⁰² Hillard personnel file.

The Navy convened an investigation into the “deplorable graves situation,” and Commandant Vandegrift pressed for a formal court of inquiry. However, the inspector general declined to pursue one, stating it would be “of no further avail” and that “at this late date, due to disintegration of the bodies and their identification tags, no effective action can be taken to remedy the conditions.” Commodore Gould, the man behind beautification, was officially notified of his “error in judgment with regard to rearranging the grave markers,” and the Navy recommended better record keeping and more durable identification tags for future use.¹⁰³

None of this, of course, brought any comfort to the families of the missing. Charles Lockwood’s argument of “unavoidable circumstances,” while rational, made no allowances for accountability, and bereaved families received little more than another form letter expressing official sympathy. Those who requested markers in national cemeteries were rebuffed: official policy was clear that permanent cenotaphs would not be provided at government expense.

In reflecting on the cemeteries at Betio, Robert Sherrod wrote “the inevitable erosion, of heroes as well as landmarks, has set in.”¹⁰⁴ There is perhaps no more fitting epitaph to the sorry situation arising from the “unavoidable circumstances” of burial at Betio and the administrative decision that closed cases but left countless open wounds.

Epilogue

Betio’s cemeteries have not lain undisturbed in the decades since the 604th QMGRC departed. The island is densely populated today; civil construction projects, house building, and even gardening projects have turned up bones and rusted military gear. Repre-

sentatives of the American government were called to the island every few years to conduct investigations, examine the evidence, and take charge of the remains. Occasionally, an identification resulted—Private First Class Maurice J. Drucker in 1965, Private Thomas L. Scurlock and Private Ernest E. Tucker in 1982, Private First Class Darwin H. Brown and Pharmacist’s Mate Second Class Raymond P. Gilmore in 2002—but others followed their comrades into graves in Hawaii marked “unknown.”¹⁰⁵ These finds were all by chance; no formal searches for the missing Marines were made.

Interest in locating the cemeteries accelerated in the mid-2000s as a nonprofit organization called History Flight began researching burial sites and conducting independent digs based on information provided by Kiribati citizens. Working in partnership with the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and its successor DPAA, History Flight led the fieldwork that uncovered Cemetery 27 and the remains of more than 40 men, including Medal of Honor recipient First Lieutenant Alexander Bonnyman Jr. in 2015.¹⁰⁶ Four years later, this same partnership located and exhumed Row D, with more than 30 additional remains, most of which have since been identified.¹⁰⁷

The Cemetery 27 discovery turned public attention toward Betio, and in 2016 DPAA recommended exhuming the Tarawa unknowns in Honolulu.¹⁰⁸ The remains were brought back to a laboratory setting for reexamination with modern forensic methods. Matching chest X-rays and DNA samples have resulted in the identification of another 40 casualties; every year, the list of missing grows shorter. To this day, however, there are approximately 350 Betio casualties still unaccounted for—more than one-tenth of all Marine Corps personnel not recovered from World War II.

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¹⁰⁵ Excerpt from Letter Serial #49579, “Drucker, Maurice Jay,” 11 August 1965, personnel file for DRUCKER, Maurice, PFC USMC, 369370, Official Military Personnel Files, RG 127, NARA, St. Louis, MO; and “Profiles of America’s Unaccounted For Personnel,” Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, accessed 25 October 2022.

¹⁰⁶ “Battle of Tarawa,” Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, accessed 25 October 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Jason Daly, “Remains of 30 Service Members Killed in WWII Unearthed at Tarawa,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (27 June 2019).

¹⁰⁸ “Battle of Tarawa,” Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

¹⁰³ Lockwood report, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Sherrod, “Tarawa Today,” *Life* magazine 48, no. 6 (5 August 1946), 19.