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THE UNITED STATES MARINES  
in the  
MARSHALLS CAMPAIGN

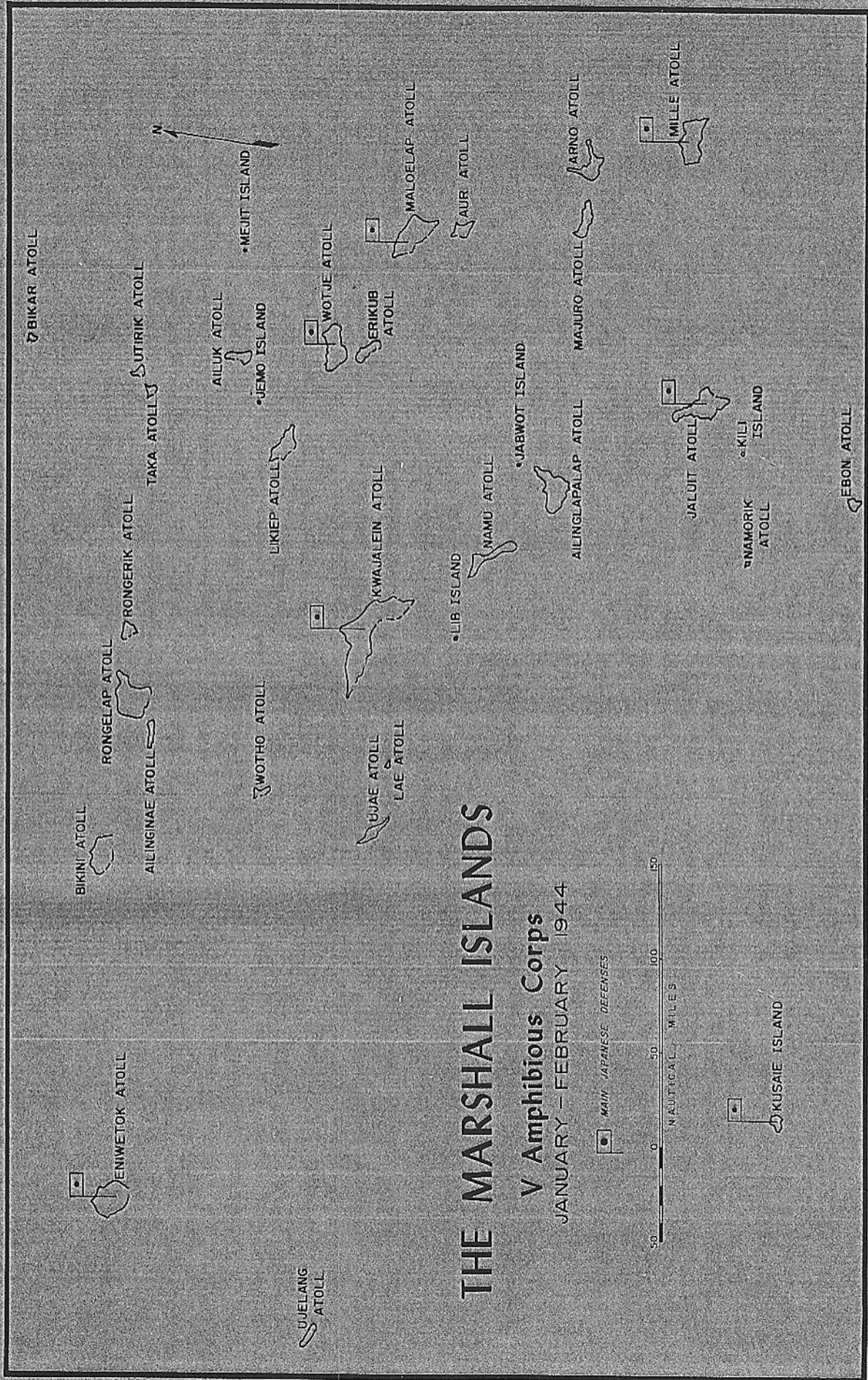


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THE UNITED STATES MARINES IN THE MARSHALLS CAMPAIGN

by

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The Marshall Islands, which had been entrusted to Japan by the League of Nations after World War I, would have been the first objective in the Central Pacific offensive if Admiral Chester W. Nimitz had possessed the necessary ships, men, and intelligence information. During the autumn of 1943, the admiral lacked all three, so his forces struck first at Tarawa and Makin in the Gilberts. These two victories encouraged Nimitz to bypass the western Marshalls and seize Kwajalein Atoll.

The admiral's decision surprised his own subordinates as well as the Japanese high command. The enemy did not realize that carrier planes could completely neutralize the island airfields scattered throughout the Marshalls group, and until aerial photographs were processed, American planners believed that the potential objective was heavily fortified. Actually, the construction of emplacements had lagged, so that Kwajalein was not as well prepared as Tarawa had been.

Planning for FLINTLOCK, code name for the Kwajalein operation, proceeded at a rapid pace. An earlier scheme to seize certain atolls in the western Marshalls was abandoned in favor of an attack against supposedly powerful Kwajalein and lightly defended Majuro. Originally, Nimitz hoped to strike on 17 January 1944, but in order to permit the further training and thorough equipping of the assault divisions, he postponed the attack until 31 January.

Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance was in over-all command of the operation, while Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner directed the Joint Expeditionary Force. Marine Major General Holland M. Smith commanded the Expeditionary Troops, an organization built around V Amphibious Corps and its two component divisions. Major General Harry Schmidt's 4th Marine Division was to seize the northern half of Kwajalein Atoll, the principal objective, while an Army unit, the 7th Infantry Division, was overwhelming the Japanese who defended the islands in the south. The key objective assigned to Schmidt's division was Roi-Namur, a pair of small islands joined by a causeway and a sandspit. The most difficult objective facing the Army division was Kwajalein Island.

A separate group was formed to conquer Majuro, an atoll 220 nautical miles southeast of Kwajalein. Because this objective was poorly defended, the V Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company and a battalion from the Army's 106th Infantry were scheduled for employment there. This force proved more than adequate, for the Marine reconnaissance troops landed on the night of 30 January and quickly secured the atoll without losing a man.

On 31 January, after a series of carrier raids had destroyed enemy air power in the Marshalls, naval guns joined the carrier planes in pulverizing targets in northern Kwajalein. During the day, elements of Brigadier General James L. Underhill's IVAN Landing Group, a force built around the 25th Marines, seized or occupied six small islands on either side of Roi-Namur. Artillerymen then landed on the larger of these to support the

following day's operation. Next on the FLINTLOCK timetable was the storming of Roi-Namur by the other reinforced regiments of Schmidt's division. The 23d Marines was to seize Roi, while the 24th Marines captured Namur.

Throughout the first day's landings, the amphibian tractor units had encountered a series of delays. Unreliable communications equipment was a recurring problem, for the radios mounted in the LVTs were not adequately waterproofed. In addition, the tractor companies had been hastily organized and had trained in so hectic a fashion that they conducted their final rehearsals without benefit of the completed operation plan. Finally, the LSTs designated to recover the tractors and service them for the Namur landing had failed to collect and prepare a sufficient number of LVTs for the assault units.

The 23d Marines, assigned a fresh tractor battalion, was ready to attack Roi at 1100 on 1 February. Off Namur, however, the 24th Marines could not obtain enough LVTs to launch its assault at the specified time. This regiment was supported by the same tractor units that had helped execute the previous day's landings. Because of the difficulty in rounding up tractors, the 24th Marines had not completed forming for the ship-to-shore movement by 1112, when the assault waves were ordered toward the beaches.

The preparatory bombardment by ships, artillery, and aircraft was devastating. After the battle, General Schmidt estimated that naval shells and aerial bombs had killed over half of the Roi-Namur garrison. The defenders of Roi, in particular, were dazed by the downpour of high explosives, and the 23d

Marines encountered little organized resistance at the water's edge. Instead of pausing a short distance inland to reorganize, small groups of Marines joined the regiment's attached tanks in a race across the island.

Hundreds of Japanese were killed in this disorganized attack, but by midafternoon, the units had been recalled, reorganized, and ordered to launch a coordinated drive. This thrust carried across the island, destroying the last pockets of organized resistance. Roi was declared secured at 1802, although isolated defenders, who had survived the lightning-like advance, remained to be ferreted out and killed.

At Namur, the enemy took advantage of dense undergrowth just inland of the beaches to put up a gallant, if poorly coordinated, defense. The 24th Marines, however, suffered greater losses as a result of an accident than it did in reducing any of the enemy strongpoints. A demolitions team hurled a charge into a bunker crammed with torpedo warheads, touching off a blast that killed 20 Marines and wounded 100 others. This severe blow stalled the regiment, but reserve units were promptly committed so that the advance might continue.

Darkness descended upon Namur before the entire island could be overrun. The enemy, though active during the night, could not launch a counterstroke until the morning of 2 February. This effort was repulsed, the Marines made an attack of their own, and at 1418 of the second day, Namur was declared secured.

While the 4th Marine Division was seizing Roi-Namur, the 7th Infantry Division, after capturing certain outlying islands,

on 1 February landed at Kwajalein Island. This objective was overrun after four days of fighting. The remaining islands in both the northern and southern parts of the atoll were captured or occupied by Marines or Army troops on 8 February. In seizing its assigned objectives, the 4th Marine Division accounted for 3,563 Japanese at a cost of 313 killed and 502 wounded. Army losses in overcoming 4,823 of the enemy were 173 killed and 793 wounded.

The rapid execution of FLINTLOCK enabled Admiral Nimitz to strike, months ahead of schedule, at Eniwetok Atoll at the northwestern extremity of the Marshalls group. Instead of waiting until 1 May to begin the Eniwetok operation, Nimitz now planned to attack the atoll on 12 February, employing Brigadier General Thomas E. Watson's Tactical Group 1, the FLINTLOCK reserve. Because of a planned carrier strike against the Japanese base at Truk in the Carolines, the target date for CATCHPOLE, the Eniwetok undertaking, was postponed until 17 February.

General Watson planned a series of landings throughout the atoll. His command, which included Army as well as Marine units, would first seize a trio of small islands, two of which would serve as artillery positions. On 18 February, the second day, the 22d Marines was scheduled to take Engeb1 Island. Once this objective had been secured, Watson's other infantry element, the 106th Infantry (less the 2d Battalion), would capture Eniwetok Island, then prepare to attack Parry Island upon order. This plan was based on the intelligence available at the time.



Although Admiral Nimitz's intelligence officers were convinced that the atoll garrison numbered between 2,000 and 4,000 men, they did not realize the extent of the enemy defenses. A shortage of heavy equipment had forced the Japanese to construct underground positions, not easily detected by aerial photographs, instead of the usual concrete bunkers. Once the strength of these emplacements became apparent, General Watson altered his tactical plans, and Rear Admiral Harry W. Hill, the task group commander, increased the volume of preparatory naval gunfire.

On 17 February, the preliminary landings took place without opposition. On the following morning, the 22d Marines stormed Engeb1, where the bulk of the enemy manpower was concentrated, and in a single day overran the objective. During the swift advance, many Japanese were bypassed. After dark, these survivors emerged from hiding to harass the Marines, but on 19 February an organized mop-up put an end to enemy resistance.

The third day's landing on Eniwetok Island, an objective riddled with underground positions, did not proceed as planned. Two battalions from the 106th Infantry were not equal to the task of overcoming the cleverly entrenched enemy. The 3d Battalion, 22d Marines, serving as reserve for the 106th Infantry, went ashore during the afternoon to join in the drive toward the southern end of the island. This sector was secured the following afternoon, and the Marines were then withdrawn. Not until 21 February, however, was the entire island in American hands.

While Eniwetok Island was being captured, scout and reconnaissance detachments continued operations against the smaller islands that formed the atoll. By the afternoon of 21 February, every island except Parry was in American hands. General Watson selected the 22d Marines to capture this last objective.

At 0900 on the morning of 22 February, the first of the assault troops landed on Parry's beaches. Because some of the boat control officers had not learned of a last-minute change of plan, the Marines did not land exactly where the general intended. In spite of this, the attackers overran the area directly to their front, changed direction to establish a line that stretched from shore to shore, and began advancing down the long axis of the island. By darkness on 22 February, the surviving enemy had been pushed into a small pocket at the tip of the island, a strongpoint that was wiped out on the following morning.

Approximately 3,400 Japanese were killed at Eniwetok Atoll, at a cost of 254 Marines killed and 555 wounded. Army units lost 94 killed and 311 wounded. With the atoll under American control, the enemy was incapable of supplying or reinforcing those Marshalls bases over which the Japanese flag still flew.

By seizing Kwajalein, Majuro, and Eniwetok Atolls, Admiral Nimitz had shattered the defenses of the Marshalls. During March and April, several other atolls were occupied, but few of these were defended by the enemy. The powerful Japanese bases at Mille, Jaluit, Wotje, and Maleolap were neutralized for the remainder of the war by aviators of all the services. Marine flyers, however, carried out most of the strikes against these targets.

The rapid conquest of the Marshalls deprived the enemy of the time he needed to improve the defenses guarding the approaches to his homeland. American submarines could now operate from bases closer to the sea lanes over which war materials were shipped from the conquered territories to Japan's industrial centers. Finally, the carrier strike against Truk, undertaken in connection with CATCHPOLE, had important effects. It hastened evacuation of the larger units of the Imperial Navy from the Carolines; then the raid itself destroyed most of what was left at Truk, including merchant shipping. As a result, American forces could bypass an enemy base which was once believed formidable, and they could strike directly at the Marianas --islands which the Japanese considered particularly vital to empire security.

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