

CHAPTER 9

BLOODY
TARAWA

Tarawa, or “Bloody Tarawa” as a war correspondent famously labeled it in his report to *Life* magazine, was one of my six invasions as a landing craft officer. It was the worst. This atoll in the Gilbert Islands now called Kiribati — it *does* sound something like “Gilbert” in the native argot — was considered important in the stepping stones to Japan for one reason; there was an airstrip on it.

Everything about this particular battle was screwed up from the outset. There was virtually no “softening up” prior to the landings — unlike later invasions when days of heavy naval and air bombardment prepared the way for the assault troops. It seems the “experts,” who forecasted the tide conditions, picked the exact time for the initial landings when the tide was ebbing, increasing the likelihood of landing craft getting hung up on the coral reefs fronting the beach and making them even easier targets for the enfilading fire the Japs

set up. The LVTs (Landing Vehicle Tank) were a new and untried craft that had virtually no freeboard; They foundered easily in even moderate seas, and to top it off the thin armor offered scant protection from Jap automatic weapons fire. Statistics of the number of Marines who drowned or were killed before their LVTs reached shore are uncertain, but 3,500 Marines died taking that atoll and fewer than 100 Japanese survived. Altogether there were 8,000 casualties. (I hope the Marine Second Division veterans of the Tarawa madness will forgive me for laying bare what actually happened, leading to the deaths of so many brave young men in this needless battle.)

My boat group was assigned as the first wave to land at “Beach Red” on Betio, the island with the airstrip and hence where the Jap defenses were concentrated. With my three-man crew and thirty Marines in our LCVP we headed to the demarcation line — marked by flanking destroyers banging away at the island with their five-inch guns — as we started toward the atoll, I noticed a six-foot blue shark swimming alongside, perhaps sensing we were an imported delicacy.

Leaving the demarcation line, I stood up on the boat’s engine box and used flags to signal the other nine boats in my group to form up. The ten LCVPs moved steadily toward the beach. My coxswain,

an 18-year-old named Cockrell, tapped my leg and shouted that he saw white water breaking ahead. It could be a reef. I studied the surface ahead, but splashes from mortar shells were marching toward the craft. Maybe that was what Cockrell had seen. I could see nothing that suggested a reef. Again, Cockrell shouted that he was sure he'd seen white water. We were going to get hung up. There was a note of hysteria in his voice.

Myriad thoughts tumbled through my mind... I had already signaled the other boats to form up and move forward, presenting a united front that would keep the defenders from concentrating their fire on isolated craft. Any contrary move, at this juncture, by the lead boat could cause confusion. A coordinated assault was vital to minimizing casualties and getting Marines ashore.

"I saw white water, sir, I know I did," shouted Cockrell. "We're going to be sitting ducks!"

Standing on the engine box, I squinted at the water ahead. I saw only Jap mortar fire coming closer and closer to the invading craft. This undoubtedly was what Cockrell had seen.

Some of the Marines, jammed in the bottom of the craft, looked back at Cockrell and me, hoping we knew what the hell we were doing and that they were in good hands. They were scared enough without this uncertainty.

A few days earlier Boda had dressed me down, accusing me of passive resistance, or even insubordination, to orders or arguing the wisdom of an order he'd given. Boda's words and image were still vivid in my mind.

"Damn it, Cooper, when you're given an order from a superior officer, you obey it, period. I'm not interested in the opinions of every half-assed 90 Day Wonder that comes down the pike. I'm in command of this ship and when I give you an order, you hop to. If I want your two cents' worth I'll ask for it. Now get to your duty station!"

My orders were to lead these 10 LVCPs to the beach. The command had been given to me and it was my responsibility to get as many craft to shore as possible and get as many Marines as possible on the beach in one piece. I didn't see any white water and I couldn't have some scared shitless 18-year-old telling me how to run this operation.

"I think we should slow down, sir."

"Just shut up, Cockrell, and hold the course."

My survival instincts were to heed Cockrell's urgent advice, or even veer hard to port or starboard, which would have put us on a collision course with the boat on either side. Suddenly, a mortar shell burst close by showering us all. My eyes met with those of a young Marine looking back at me anxiously. Those 30 lives were also in my charge.

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I had to make the right decision for them. Or was my own life prominent in the equation?

When I received my commission as an officer in the U.S. Navy, I swore I would do whatever was necessary to defend my country, including die, if need be. All these thoughts flooded through my mind swifter than I can say them here.

My LCVP came to a crunching halt. Marines were thrown forward in a heap, carbines, ammo boxes and other supplies came loose and were projected forward. A firm grip on the wheel kept Cockrell on his feet, and the engine box was all that kept me from landing in that swearing pile of Marines. I ordered full astern. The craft shuddered but did not budge. Mortar fire was drenching us with geysers of seawater.

“Lower the fucking ramp!” someone shouted.

“Get us out of here!”

I wrestled with that decision as the craft continued to shudder. To unload them this far from the beach would be disastrous. They would drown. Then a deafening explosion and a blinding white flash as a mortar made a direct hit on our boat among the Marines. I came to floating, my kapok life jacket having kept my head above water. Cockrell was nearby, dazed but conscious. Those few Marines who had survived the blast were not equipped with life jackets, and were burdened

down with heavy packs. For a brief period, as in a nightmare, I saw a few flailing in the water. Then it was just Cockrell and me. Together we swam in the bloody water through body parts toward an LCM, another landing craft whose stern was projecting up in the air. It had also been hit by Jap fire, but remained precariously afloat.

Cockrell and I climbed aboard and hunkered down behind the boat's armored coxswain's station, where her controls and wheel were located. Whenever we peered around the armor the Japs would open with machine gun fire. We were probably seventy-five yards or so from the beach.

The two of us remained crouched behind this minimal shelter for what seemed an eternity. The machine gun fire was becoming more sporadic, and succeeding waves of landing craft carried more Marines to the beach. The Japs had either been killed or driven inland and the Jap fire finally stopped altogether, allowing an LCVP to pick us up. Cockrell never mentioned the reef, nor did I. The officer aboard said he was taking us to the USS *Charity*, the Navy hospital ship standing offshore.

No matter how carefully planned, and the invasion of Tarawa was poorly planned, a battle becomes a chaotic mix of confusion, bravery, survival, desperation and resourcefulness. The side that makes the fewest mistakes wins. I've sometimes mulled the concept.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of years and generations earlier, an ancestor of mine evaded an arrow, ducked a mace, survived the thrust of a spear, or the swipe of a sword, and jammed his weapon forward seconds earlier than an opposing sword and that happenstance had put me and my children on this planet at this time. A fraction of an inch in the flight of a bullet, one way or another, either abruptly ended a lineage or kept it on earth. For whatever reason, luck or God's will, I survived that direct mortar hit to marry, have a home, sire children, who I hope will reach adulthood between wars that seem inevitable. Wars that man brings upon himself. To think that Hitler could be responsible for the deaths of millions and millions of humans, that they could all be herded to, or sent to slaughter because of the ambitions of one man, one man, is beyond comprehension.

The lineage of the young Marines in my boat ended in one terrible blast. There were children waiting to be born, to have their colds, throw cottage cheese on the floor, have schoolyard scraps, fall in love, bear children, maybe even make life better for their fellow man. But those children would not come into this world because a mortar shell landed in the middle of an LCVP under my command.

Coming aboard the *Charity* a corpsman led Cockrell and me to sick bay where we both

showered, scrubbing the dried blood off our skin. A Navy doctor came by and examined us. Cockrell's eyes did not track with the doctor's pencil flashlight, and he was diagnosed with concussion and kept aboard. After looking me over, the doctor said, "There's nothing the matter with you — you can go back to the battle."

"Why the fuck don't *you* go back to the battle, asshole."

I don't know how many stripes he wore, but I'm sure he outranked an Ensign. But it was no time to get involved in Navy protocol. There were other patients that needed his attention and he walked away. I heard him muttering, "Coward." Nevertheless, his order stood. In his diagnosis I was mentally and physically ready to return to battle. I wasn't. A great depression had overcome me. I was drained of any physical energy and my thoughts were blurred and confused.

I put on my dirty, bloody clothing, nodded a goodbye to Cockrell and went up on deck. There was an LCVP at the foot of the accommodation ladder. The coxswain asked, "Where to, sir?"

I sat there in a stupor on the engine box, not answering.

"Sir?"

"Sailor, you see that island out there?"

He looked where I was pointing to a tiny speck

of land on the outer fringes of Tarawa atoll.

"Yes, sir."

"Take me there."

"Sir, I don't know if I'm supposed to..."

"Take me there, damn it. That's an order."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The coxswain cast off and we headed toward the green speck on the horizon.

There was no further conversation between us during our trip.

I can't say that I thought about what had happened. I tuned out everything. The ships, the trip to Betio were soon far behind me.

The LCVP's ramp dropped at the beach. As I went ashore the coxswain asked, "When should I come back to pick you up, sir?"

I didn't answer but simply headed off into a coconut palm grove a hundred yards away. I heard the sound of the ramp being pulled up and the accelerated engine as the LCVP backed off. Soon that sound was no longer audible. There was probably intense gunfire on Betio, but I couldn't hear it, just the soft breeze working through the palm fronds overhead. I slumped to the ground and used one of the palm trunks as a back rest for a while, then lay on my side.

I could only imagine the activity that was taking place as Betio was being secured, but I could neither

see any of this activity nor hear it. That was fine with me. I slept, then made a cursory inspection of my surroundings. I was getting thirsty. The fact that I hadn't brought my canteen testified to the state of my mind when I asked to be dropped here. I looked up at the coconuts overhead. Even if I had the energy, I knew I did not have the skills to safely climb one of those slanting trunks.

One little area became home. The temperature, even at night, was in the high 70's and there was no need for covers. The second night, I thought I heard footsteps. There was no animal life that I knew of on these islands that could make such a heavy sound. If it was a native, why didn't he make his presence known? If it was a Jap, do your damndest. At the moment life did not seem that precious. A bullet or a bayonet might be the answer.

The old gag about seasickness seemed appropriate. "At first you're so sick you're afraid you're going to die, then you become so sick you hope you do." I was somewhere in there.

The third day, maybe it was less, maybe more, I knew I needed liquid. I searched the ground for a fallen coconut without being at all selective about ripeness. Unable to find a sizeable rock I threw the coconut against a tree trunk. It hit the trunk and dropped unharmed. Three attempts confirmed that this was not the answer.

I returned to "camp," recovered my trench knife and took the two objects to the shore where I buried the handle of the knife in the packed sand, then holding the coconut in both hands I repeatedly pounded it against the upright blade. It sapped my strength and twice I had to stop and rest. Maybe I did want to live, or I wouldn't be going through this. Thirst is a great motivator. I cut my left hand in the process but I finally had the fibrous husk off and a hole in the shell. The precious milk was running out onto the sand and the knife pulled free of the sand before it came loose from the nut.

I lay back and held it overhead, letting the milk track down the knife into my mouth, taking with it a certain amount of sand. It didn't taste quite like I remembered, but it was wet. I lay on the shore exhausted but refreshed. An hour or so later I had uncontrollable diarrhea, which I could only attribute to green coconut milk which of course defeated the purpose by further dehydrating me. What a wretched spectacle I must have made, skinny, bearded, washing my shitty shorts and pants in the surf. Every activity was exhausting and I stumbled back to my camp at the base of the palm tree. My head was starting to clear some and the isolation that earlier had seemed so appealing and essential was now causing serious concern. I would like to have been on that hospital ship

between clean sheets. Even the menace of Boda seemed preferable to this. I'm sure he was privately pleased I had not returned from the invasion. That's the way it crumbles. C'est la guerre, and good riddance.

I considered my prospects for survival. It was unlikely the Navy would find me here — alive. I was far too remote from the scene of activities. I obviously had not thought it through when I asked to be put ashore here. Not at all. I thought of my parents and what they would make of "M.I.A.," which always left a ray of hope — usually unwarranted. I thought of Alberta. She would never even be notified and left to come to her own conclusions as to why I didn't call.

I lost track of time, but it must have been the fourth or fifth day when a few Navy Corsairs swung over this remote extension of the atoll. They were single planes, not a formation, which suggested that a scouting operation took them pretty far afield. They might have been operating off a carrier or even off the newly-acquired landing strip on Betio. The Corsairs would be gone a long time before returning. They flew high and I knew my wave was pointless, but I did it anyway.

I was lying on my side at my base camp when I realized someone was shaking me. I rolled on my back and looked up at the coxswain who had

brought me here.

"Sir, there's talk about a Jap task force from Truk coming this way. Most of the ships are pulling out. You better come while you can."

I was unable to get to my feet but he pulled me up and I stood there unsteadily.

"You want to put your pants on, sir?"

I didn't answer but he helped me put them on and supported me as we went to the beach. I stumbled up the boat's ramp and then laid down on the deckboards.

"Water," I said, and he provided a canteen. I knew better than to gulp it down and lose it, but I sipped it until the canteen was empty.

I directed the coxswain toward the *Lee*, anchored among a group of ships in the far distance. Soon the *Lee*'s hulk loomed before us, the disembarkation net still draped on its side.

My rescuer maneuvered the LCVP alongside and guided me as I grabbed a crosspiece of the net. He continued to hold my arm. "You going to be okay, sir?"

In answer I started climbing and I heard the boat pull away from the *Lee*.

About halfway up the net, with another twenty or thirty feet to the main deck, I found I could not ascend farther. It took all my strength just to hang on. I could not advance to the next rung.

I remained there, suspended on the net like a fly in amber. I locked my arm through the rung and hung there.

"You okay?"

I looked up to see two sailors at the rail taking in my situation. As bad off as I was, it was not easy to say that I needed help.

Captain Boda relieved me of the decision. I heard his voice from the bridge: "You men report to your stations." Boda had undoubtedly seen the LCVP come alongside with me in it.

I heard one of the sailors call back to Boda, "Sir, it's Mr. Cooper. I think he needs help."

"Mr. Cooper is quite capable of coming aboard by himself. Report to your stations, we're getting underway!"

I heard no more from the rail above me and I clung to the net. The hull began to vibrate and I looked down to see the water easing past the ship. The vibrations didn't help and I tried to lock my grip on the net as the water moved past below faster and faster.

I learned later that Boda, after telling the sailors I was quite capable of ascending the net, had gone into the wheel house where he could no longer be privy to my predicament. If he saw me drop into the sea, he would have to come about and rescue me. If I became M.I.A., that was part of the cost of

taking Tarawa. Besides, there was a Jap task force approaching and he had the responsibility of this ship and hundreds of men. All that could not be jeopardized for the sake of one recalcitrant officer. Boda would have all the answers if it ever came to a Court of Inquiry, and it never would. So I hung there.

Often, when I'd read news reports of ships capsizing at sea, with passengers clinging to the upturned hull, and noted in the story that when dawn came several of the victims had slipped into the water during the night and disappeared, others hung on and were rescued. What separated them? Was it physical strength or a determination to cling to the boat and life itself? I often wondered if I would be there in the morning or joined those who found it easier to just let themselves slip into the dark waters. I looked down at the sea which now had a white wake, as the ship's vibrations tried to shake me loose. The sea beckoned.

"Put your arms around my neck, sir." It was Washington, one of the ship's Stewards Mates, a mountainous black man. I followed his instructions and he started climbing easily, mounting the net with me. Reaching the main deck, I slid off his back.

"Thanks, Washington."

He moved off. I called after him, repeating my thanks. But he ignored me. Washington and I

were not particularly close, but always mutually respectful in the wardroom. Crew members, though they might discuss it among themselves, steered clear of letting officers know of their views of particular officers, pro or con.

I'm certain, however, that Washington was aware Boda had singled me out as his whipping boy. He also knew that if the Captain was aware Washington had gone down the net to pull me to safety, he would get every shit detail on the ship. Washington had stuck his neck out — way out — to save my life, but he didn't want it to be known that he had done a good deed for the Captain's pet fall guy. Survival takes on many forms. Cross a Captain aboard ship, especially a sociopath, and your life can become hell. I hope if Washington is still alive and reads this, he'll accept my heartfelt thanks.

There was never any discussion in the wardroom, or among the *Lee's* officers, about my ignominious return to the *Lee*. I don't think Boda ever did know how I got on deck. But the other officers seemed to show a certain new respect for Washington.

One of the ship's doctors had been told of my return to the *Lee* and came by with a corpsman to help me to sick bay where I stayed about a week. The SMO came by a few times to see me.

In addition to dysentery, I was told I was suffering from traumatic something-or-other. In World War One it was "shell shock." "That's what you have," said the doctor. "That's why your hands are trembling and your legs are twitching involuntarily, plus the low-grade fever. You're a classic case." The SMO said I would be temporarily relieved of my landing craft duties and assigned to less hazardous ones for the time being, as had been arranged for the coxswain, Cockrell. He said he was going to request a duties assignment of the Captain.

"No, I'll be okay," I assured the doctor. "That won't be necessary."

I felt that a reassignment would be unfair to my boat crews. They would continue landing operations during the next invasion while I was kept out of harm's way on the ship. I did not view myself as a hero in any fashion, but a rapport had developed between me and the boat crews and I did not feel comfortable deserting them.

Several days later, with the help of rest and medication, the tremors ceased, my fever abated and I was released from sick bay. On unsteady legs I returned to my room. Gatch, the Exec, was standing in the passageway. He shook his head as I passed, then bellowed, "Cooper, you're just as I thought — a stupid cunt."

"Good man, that," I heard him say as he

walked away. He had heard that I had refused the temporary reassignment.

Tarawa: The New Atlantis

The final mockery: Tarawa and other atolls among the Gilbert Islands — AKA Kiribati as the Polynesians now call their island nation — has begun to sink under the sea. The curse of the industrial world, global warming, is causing the oceans around Tarawa to lap at the roads leading from Beach Red. Soon, the airstrip will be washed over by the rising tides. The natives will ultimately depart Tarawa, leaving behind WWII detritus and the ghosts of those who died in a senseless battle.