

THE PIER AT BETIO

USMC VS JSNLF
"OPERATION GALVANIC"
TARAWA ATOLL, 20 NOVEMBER, 1943

BY STEVEN CURRY

"A pair of naval landing boats darted towards the end of the long pier at the reef's edge. Out charged First Lieutenant Hawkins with his scout-sniper platoon and a squad of combat engineers. These shock troops made quick work of Japanese machine gun emplacements along the pier with explosives and flame throwers."

ACROSS THE REEF: The Marine Assault of Tarawa
by Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret)

This scenario focuses on a series of remarkable events in, around and under the pier on Betio Island during the invasion of the Gilbert Islands in 1943. The invasion was supposed to open the way for the invasion of the Marshall Islands, in turn a staging post for the drive on Japan. The 2d Marine Division was tasked with seizing Betio, site of a strategically important airfield. It was a famously bloody and difficult battle, exemplifying the tenacity of the Marine soldiers and providing a remarkable, if surprisingly rare, example of the kind of contested landing many think of as typical of the war in the Pacific.

Three battalion-strength landing teams (LTs) drove on to three 600-yard stretches of beach, known as Red One, Two and Three, using LVTs in an attack role for the first time. Unfortunately the naval and aerial bombardment ended prematurely and the LCVPs of the later waves could not cross the reef, leaving the infantry essentially unsupported in the teeth of fierce resistance and well-prepared defences.

The pier was the only point outside the reef where men and supplies could be landed. If it was not secured it would allow Japanese machingunners to enfilade the landing beaches. To secure the position a platoon of sniper-scouts and a squad of pioneers led by 1st Lt. William Hawkins raced ahead of the first wave in two Higgins Boats and cleared the pier. According to Shaw, Nalty and Turnblad, Hawkins lost one of the boats, which was held up by a control officer. He went up the ramp with the section in his own boat but sent most of them back as MG bullets began to strike petrol drums at the end of the pier. He proceeded with just five men,

including four scouts and an engineer with a flamethrower. Once they had blown up and burned every hiding place on the pier they withdrew to the boat. Hawkins then commandeered three LVTs and transferred his men from both LCVPs to these for the trip to shore where they joined their regiment for the rest of the battle. Hawkins won a Medal of Honour, but died later in the battle.

Later on D-Day and D+1 1st Lt. Alexander Bonnyman, leading a shore party from the 8d Marines organised his pioneers into assault groups and cleared the bunkers with grenades and explosives. He also won a Medal of Honour, but like Hawkins was killed defending the bunkers from a counter-attack on D+1. It was that sort of battle: lots of conspicuous valour, lots of medals - many of them posthumous.

The challenge with this scenario is to truncate the complexity and time scale of these events, not to mention the extraordinary length of the pier!

THE SCENARIO

The scenario is a simplified version of these events. The attacking USMC must clear the pier and destroy two bunkers within a definite time period to win a complete victory. The mission is to secure the approaches to the landing beaches before the main landing teams, somewhere off table, get shot up too badly. A defending platoon of SNLF troops must try to retain or re-take these positions to secure a draw or victory. This is not a complete battle but a small and daring commando-type raid in support of a larger action.

TIME

The battle begins with the USMC boats at the starting line and ends after both sides have had sixteen (16) complete turns.

VICTORY CONDITIONS

There are three objectives, the pier and two log blockhouses.

If either side controls all three objectives at the end of the game this is a major victory.

If either side controls two objectives this is a minor victory.

If neither side controls at least two objectives the game is a draw.

"Controlling" means having at least one unpinned team, unit or crew of at least two men in or on the objective. If both

sides have men in the objective it is contested, not controlled.

THE FORCES

Japanese Forces

Under-strength Rifle Platoon of 7th Sasebo SNLF Regiment.

- Command Squad (Lieutenant, Sergeant, 2-man LMG team)
- 2 x rifle squads (corporal, 8 riflemen, 4-man LMG team)
- 2 x Grenadier teams (4 men each, with a Type 89 mortar)
- 4 x HMG sections (three men each with Type 92 HMG)

Other support options such as ATR, mortars or artillery are not available. Player can take any available weapons upgrades.

The beach is also defended by two log bunkers (see map). These are each equipped with a 47mm AT gun and a LMG, with a crew of 10. See the item in the RSRD supplement or treat as hard cover with two crewed support weapons in each. Use any suitable gun, one in the 40-50mm range that can use direct fire.

Setting up: The Japanese player sets up first. The crews of the weapons are in the bunkers. Up to 26 men may deploy anywhere on dry land, the remainder must be placed in the rear slit trench, to reflect the partial success of the initial bombardment. The Japanese player must also deploy six (6) three-inch linear obstacles on the pier. These are made of crates, sacks, sandbags and petrol drums (usually filled with sand). They can be anywhere on the pier, facing across the pier or turned towards the sides, and may be turned into defences. They provide the same cover as sandbags and are linear obstacles to firing. One of the six may be petrol-filled drums (see special rules).

American Forces

2d Scout-Sniper Platoon

A commando unit without heavy weapons. The formation is a guess. The only known fact is that the platoon was 34 strong.

LCVP 1: Command Squad under 1st Lt. W. D. Hawkins, with a Gunnery Sgt, 2 privates.

1st Sniper-Scout Squad

Command team: sergeant and corporal

2 x fire teams (2 x 2-man scout-sniper teams)

Pioneer (engineer) Squad

LCVP 2: 2nd and 3rd Sniper-Scout Squads

8d Marines shore party

LVT-2: Engineer platoon command (1st Lt. A. Bonnyman); pioneer squad, up to 6 crew for support weapons (bazooka, HMG, mortar).

LT2/8: elements of the 2d Bttn, 8th Marines landing at Red Three in an LVT-1 and an LVT-2.

The exact composition of the teams on the LVTs is up to the US player. There is room for six extra men on the LVT with Bonnyman's engineers, enough for a two man bazooka team and a four man HMG team, or two three-man HMG and/or mortar teams. The two LVTs belonging to the 2/8 can carry 48 men total, enough for say three 12-man rifle squads plus three four-man weapons teams. The restrictions are that teams or squads must all be on the same boat, and the units selected must be rifle squads (no command squads), HMG, mortar or bazooka teams (no snipers, FO, recon or AT guns).

The sniper-scout teams are rifle armed, but the leadership groups may have upgrades to carbines and Thompson SMGs. The engineer in each pioneer team can carry a BAR, bazooka or flamethrower and both pioneers and riflemen can carry explosives. Rifle, support and pioneer squads may take all available weapon upgrades. To reflect the special circumstances of the raid Hawkins may attach an engineer (or up to a whole team) from the pioneer squad to his own command squad before the start of the game.

Setting up: The marines are embarked on the boats as above. The US player sets up second, placing all boats on the start line (see map). Each boat is placed wherever on the line the player likes. When activated it is placed directly ahead at either the reef or ramp before starting its first move.

THE MAP

The map is designed for a fairly standard 4'x6' table. The important thing is that the distance from the reef to the nearest shore (by the pier) is 12" and the distance from the reef to the farthest stretch of beach is 16". The pier should be 4" wide and 22" long. The beach is 6" wide.

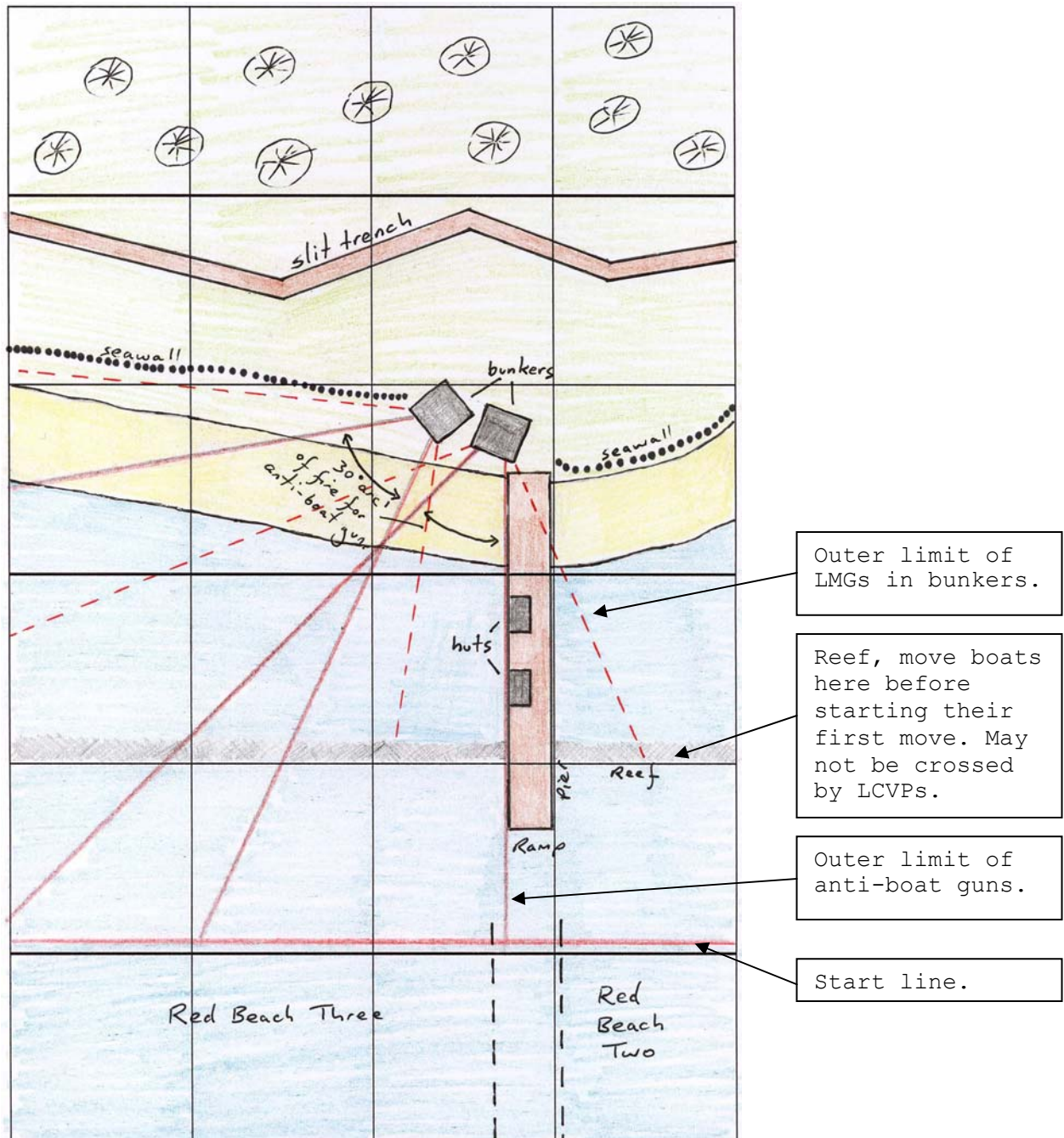
Troops (but not boats) can shelter under the pier. It blocks LOS and provides hard cover. The 4" section of the pier past the reef is a ramp that runs down to the water and will allow troops to disembark from one boat at a time.

There are two small wooden huts on the pier, each about 2x3" and able to provide medium cover to one MG team, which can shoot in all directions, subject to the usual rules concerning facing. These were targets for Hawkins' flamethrower.

The seawall was 5' high and men could shelter on either side. It is a linear obstacle, provides hard cover, blocks LOS and may be an obstacle to vehicles. The small draws around the

blockhouses allow for infantry to pass in single file, they should not be big enough for an LVT to drive through.

The map uses full and dashed red lines to show the fields of fire of the AT guns and LMGs in the blockhouses. As you will see the boat guns have a 30° arc from the centre of the front aperture, while the LMGs have 45° fields of fire to cover the seawall and pier. They are vulnerable from behind. In fact the Japanese bunkers had many blind spots, covered by other positions.



SPECIAL RULES

Chaos on the Beach: The individual US units lack effective command and control. Leaders can only apply their Guts to their own team or squad.

Johnny on the Spot: The chaos was relieved by men of great presence of mind. Both Hawkins and Bonnyman are an exception to the rule above and can apply their guts to all units within their command radius. Bonnyman may also reorganise any pioneer units within his range by activating them together and moving men between them.

Petrol Drums: If the Japanese player chooses to place a line of petrol drums on the pier these will act as a linear obstacle and provide medium cover, but they may also explode! Each time a unit uses them for cover when shot at, or they provide a linear obstacle modifier for shooting, or a unit within 2" is targeted, or the barrels are hit by explosives or flames the firing player rolls a d10. 1-2 means the barrels explode. One unit with figures within 4" of the barrels takes an AP3 hit and the barrels burn as per the rule below.

Burning Obstacles: If explosives or flamethrowers are used against obstacles or huts on the pier roll a d10 in addition to normal wounds. On a 1-2 the hut or obstacle catches fire. Any troops in or immediately next to the object suffer an AP2 hit. The target then burns for 1-3 turns (roll a d6 and divide in half). A burning obstacle creates smoke that covers the pier in a strip 3" deep. This plume blocks all LOS. Any man passing through it suffers an AP1 hit. Once the obstacle finishes burning it is removed and leaves no ruins. undefended obstacles may be targeted for this reason.

The Seawall: The wall was a serious problem for the LVTs. An LVT may drive over the wall, but must roll a Gut check. If the check is failed the boat is stuck on the wall, its nose pointing into the air. All hits are against the lower hull. The driver, if he remains in place, may roll a Gut check every turn after this to try and get off again.

Wading: The lagoon inside the reef was about chest deep. If forced to bail out always use the 9" or less column of the bailing into water table, but instead of using the standard turns to the beach actually place models on the water. Troops in LCVPs on the reef can also get out and walk. All movement is 3". Men in the water may shoot. If they don't move they shoot as if they made a normal sneak move, if they move at all treat this as a manoeuvre. No machineguns, bazookas, mortars or flamethrowers can fire from the water.

NOTES

The scenario is designed to give both players considerable tactical latitude. The defender may seek a strong forward defence or retreat to his lines and hope to counter-attack. The attacker must decide how quickly to head to the beach, and how many troops to commit to the dangers of the narrow pier. He must move quickly to protect the boats from enfilade, but must also take care not to expose men on the pier. It should not be a static game and even the defender is likely to be on the move a lot.

The size of the table is very deliberate. The LVTs move at a leisurely 4" per turn. They start at the reef and will take 3-4 turns to go one way. If they return to the reef, pick up more men and return these men will get on the beach somewhere between turn ten and turn thirteen, leaving a limited window for them to influence the result. For this reason if the table is smaller or larger than 4x6 the proportions cited above should be retained. The game could easily be played on a small 3'x4' table.

The terrain for the battle could be a problem. If you don't have and don't want to make bunkers, slit trenches and, above all, a long timber pier, it will be okay to adapt the scenario. Give the Japanese low stone and log walls in place of trenches, create bunkers by laying a low roof over a sandbagged position, and turn the pier into a breakwater by laying a strip of terrain material across the water. If using a breakwater ignore the rule for sheltering under the pier.

This should be a fast-paced and quite brutal game, just like the real thing. I hope you like playing it as much I enjoyed writing it.

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