

To: Brett Bull
From: Leon Cooper
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Subject: Article for Japan Times

Here are answers to your questions in the order given...

1. As a US Naval officer, I was “wave commander” of a group of Higgins Boats, carrying altogether about 300 Marines of the 2nd Division on the first morning of the invasion. As a newly minted Ensign—a “90 Day Wonder”—it was my responsibility to land my wave of fifteen boats on Red Beach #1 on “D Day,” November 20, 1943. (Yes, there were “D Days” in the Pacific War also; this was to be the first of my “six.”). En route to the beach, I stood on the engine box of the boat, waving flags to keep my wave in a straight line, as I was supposed to do. Presently, I heard buzzing, snapping sounds. The Japanese defenders were firing at the guy waving flags; he must be important, they figured. I heard my coxswain shout, “Drop the Flags!” Then again, more urgently, “Drop the Fucking Flags!” I did so, as my knees buckled under me, forcing me to sit on the engine box. I tried to stand several times but my knees wouldn’t let me. While seated, I looked down at the Marines in my boat as they looked up at me, fear plainly showing on the faces of some. Heading in to the smoke and flames of the inferno, we passed a number of boats of earlier waves, stern high in the turbulent water that marked the reef fifteen to twenty feet below. A colossal miscall of the tides gave the Japanese gunners the proverbial “sitting duck” targets as dozens of boats perched helplessly on the reefs that ringed the island. I still I don’t know which of the Red Beaches we landed on-- there was so much smoke and fire enveloping the island, hiding it. I simply headed my boat group toward any beach, relieved that I was able to get to the “sand” at all, as also seemed to be true with the Marines as they rapidly emptied the boat. I watched transfixed as scores of the Marines that had been in my boat moments before fell under murderous Japanese gunfire. In classical enfilading defense strategy, firing came from every direction as the Marines ran, crawled, lurched toward the shelter of the seawall fifty or so yards away. At the same time I suddenly became aware that my coxswain, standing nearby at the boat’s wheel, and I were also targets—the buzzing, angry sounds of bullets seemingly surrounding the two of us, bullets banging into the boat’s wooden sides, some hitting the boat’s metal ramp, giving off loud

bell sounds. Later that day, I made more trips into the beach with boatloads of Marines, each time watching more of the slaughter of my countrymen as we landed – the same buzzing, snapping sounds of bullets coming from the island, still hidden behind smoke and fire. During each trip our boat was sprayed by machine gun fire from another quarter, this time from some Japanese who had boarded a small inter-island freighter anchored near the pier. It was on my third or fourth trip, or later, that the Beachmaster—the Naval Commander directing the traffic in and out of the beach—motioned for me to come ashore. Some supplies—ammo, medical, other—were needed. His walkie talkie wasn't working. He told me to go to the Command Post at the pier, about 100 yards away. There was a walkie talkie there so I could phone the command ship with the list he had given me of those urgently needed items. I ran toward the pier. I was lucky; no bullets were aimed in my direction. I returned to the seawall and the Beachmaster. He told me to stand by. The Japanese gunfire had pretty much died down later that day, so I left the seawall to walk around the island. A Japanese task force was en route from Truk, the rumor had it, so all of the transports, including my ship, had left the area to return to Pearl Harbor. I stayed on the island several days, maybe a week. I can't remember what I did during that time except for helping with burials and loading the wounded on boats for medical treatment on the transport ships anchored several miles away. I had a carbine that I had taken from a wounded Marine. Did I use it? I don't remember. The smell of the by now thousands of dead, rapidly decomposing in the equatorial sun, hung like a pall over the island. I joined a chow line a few times, trying to force myself to swallow some food, but I couldn't—it was like eating the dead. The dead lay everywhere. Once I started to look closely at a pile of mangled bodies, but turned away after I felt vomit coming up my throat. After a few days it was difficult to tell whether they were Americans or Japanese. One day a big seaplane landed in the lagoon. I watched from the beach as several men in civilian clothes stepped from the plane's pontoons into a boat to come ashore. A day or so afterwards I saw these civilians walking around the island with a Marine General. I learned afterwards one of them was Secretary of the Navy Forrestal—later to be Truman's first Secretary of Defense. He would commit suicide after less than a year in office (because of the Tarawa debacle?). The Marine General was Holland Smith, who said "Tarawa was a tragic mistake." I finally got aboard another ship that was to sail to Pearl Harbor. After I got back to Pearl

Harbor and boarded my ship the Captain summoned me to his cabin to yell, “Cooper, you jumped ship!” I was ordered to write a letter to him explaining why I had done so.

2. I decided to return to Tarawa in February, 2008--sixty-five years after the battle-- because I decided the only way I could get the garbage removed from Red Beach, the hallowed ground where so many of my countrymen died, was by filming the outrage, and hopefully shaming our dumb government into doing something about it. I had written over a hundred emails, faxes, letters to all of the “usual suspects” in Washington with no acknowledgements of consequence. Of course, I didn’t know until my visit that there were far more disturbing matters than garbage on Tarawa. Hundreds of Americans still lie in Tarawa, as I was to learn in discussions with many in Tarawa, including the president of Kiribati and his key ministers—Kiribati is an independent republic, formerly the Gilbert Islands, that had been a British mandate. The reason the public doesn’t know about the dead in Tarawa and about the more than 50,000 who lie in Papua New Guinea, in the Philippines, in the Solomons, in the Marianas, in Papua and elsewhere is because the Department of Defense doesn’t want the matter made public. For lack of a better term, it’s a “cover up.” All wars prior to Viet Nam are classified as “Ancient Wars.” Recovery of the dead is based on “Most Recent Wars First” (i.e., Iraq and Afghanistan) and WWII MIAs later, as staff and funds permit. At the Department’s current 0.2% rate of repatriating the “recoverable” MIAs of WWII, one study has estimated it will take 300 years to recover those in the Pacific Theatre alone. It is essential that the Defense Department make its policies known to the American public, and then undertake an accelerated recovery rate of the WWII MIAs. Absent the Department’s disclosure, Congress should begin a formal inquiry into this matter. Only in that way can the relatives of the WWII MIAs ever obtain closure.
3. I didn’t ever want to see Tarawa again--to be reminded upon my return, of the horrors of those three days of savagery, when more than 6,000 were killed, including more than a thousand Marines. I didn’t want to be reminded how narrowly I had escaped death myself. Even now, after all these years, I still have nightmares from time to time . A random smell reminds me of the stink of those years

ago. A sudden loud noise makes me jump. But I decided to go back, having conquered my demons, at least temporarily.

4. During my time in Tarawa I developed an “Action Program for Tarawa,” which I discussed with the key officials in Tarawa, including the Ambassador to Fiji—whose portfolio includes Tarawa—calling for, among other things, a state-of-the-art incineration plant that will burn up all of the garbage on the islands, incidentally, supplementing the island’s electric power (Energy Through Waste) and most important, preventing the garbage on the islands from being swept out to sea, killing marine life and polluting the Pacific, the shame of our planet. It would do this with only minimal greenhouse gas emissions. I’ve also prepared a detailed schedule of expenditures that would do much to restore a healthful environment to the island archipelago--to be funded by my government. Red Beach would once again become a pristine area, a permanent memorial to those who fought and died there. While in Tarawa I made arrangements with a local businessman—in charge of the island’s can compaction business- to carry out my Program. The Program can well serve as a model for all of Pacific Oceana, restoring the beauty of the ocean and reversing the destruction of marine life. My “Action Program” is attached. With no help from the US Government, New Zealand will soon begin to implement my Program. Their consultant, an American, and I have exchanged frequent e-mails. His latest e-mail advises that a feasibility study may soon get underway, looking toward the installation of (my proposed) incinerator system to be funded by New Zealand. And the town council of Betio—the island in which the major military action took place—has recruited some volunteers to clean up Red Beach. And yet another country is doing our dirty work: While in Tarawa I met the Australian Navy Commander who heads up a bomb demolition team, removing the live ammunition—ours, still there after all these years—that has injured or killed possibly thousands of the inhabitants. This live ammunition lies everywhere among the relics of that long ago battle.

For an up front and personal statement of what the battle of Tarawa and its aftermath has meant to me...go to “Return to Tarawa-the Leon Cooper Story” at www.snagfilms.com. DVD copies of the film are on

sale. Go to www.returntotarawa.net. Narration is by movie great. Ed Harris.

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