Voices of Connecticut Veterans: John Pease and “Bloody Tarawa,” November 20-23, 1943

By: Eileen Hurst

John E. Pease, a life-long Broad Brook, Connecticut resident, known to most friends and family as “Jack,” is a proud U.S. Marine of the “Greatest Generation.” Now 84 years old, Jack is a World War II veteran. He is also a witness to and survivor of one of the bloodiest engagements in the Pacific: the Battle of Tarawa, which raged for 76 hours in November of 1943, and in that window of time some 5,600 men perished. It was the largest Pacific battle up to that point in the war.

How did Jack endure slogging through dead bodies, weighed down with a heavy sixty pound pack, 200 rounds of ammunition, two canteens, three days of rations, his bayonet, and his M-1 Garand rifle, to reach a body-strewn shore in a fight against elite Japanese combat forces? Jack shared the answer to such a question with Eileen Hurst on April 29, 2005, in an interview for the Veterans History Project.1

Jack’s entry into WWII is not an uncommon story for the men of his generation. Like many young men his age, he was motivated to join the service after the 1941 Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Jack followed the war news closely, and after learning of the battles of Midway and Guadalcanal he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps on December 26, 1942 at the age of nineteen. He was inducted on January 19th in Springfield, MA. When asked why he chose the Marine Corps over the other military branches, Jack said, “because they were tough and ready and hard, and that’s what I wanted to be.” He recalls with nostalgia the day that he and his buddy, George Neelans, also from Broad Brook, enlisted because, although they joined with the intention of staying together, George was one of the men who did not survive the war. His body was returned to the states for burial.

Jack and George left the small rural community of Broad Brook for thirteen weeks of basic training at Parris Island, SC. Even after 63 years, Jack still remembers Sergeant Roche, his drill instructor, describing the training as, “hard and good and fair. They trained us very well.” He especially enjoyed the three weeks of train-

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ing on the rifle range where he became a crack shot with the M-1 rifle and was awarded the sharpshooter medal.

A 1943 picture of Jack Pease. Original in possession of Mr. Pease.

Jack then moved on to Camp Lejeune, NC to await orders. Eager to get into the war, Jack volunteered to go overseas and was transferred to San Diego Naval Base, where, on April 17, 1943, he shipped out on the S.S. Lurline. In peacetime, the Lurline, was a luxury vessel in the Matson Line. When Jack and his fellow marines
boarded her and departed on their nine-day voyage to American Samoa, they hardly considered it "luxury;" with six marines crammed into a cabin designed for two. Upon their arrival on Samoa, Jack’s special weapons unit proceeded to one end of the island, what Jack described as a jungle, where he became acquainted with the 40 mm anti-aircraft gun and an expert with the 30 caliber Browning heavy machine gun and the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). Operating the 40 mm gun required a squad of eight men. Jack’s position was the “trigger man,” a function he performed with his foot. On the machine gun crew of three men, Jack was again assigned as “trigger man.”

In addition to learning every part of the machine gun and how to disassemble and reassemble it with speed and 100% accuracy, the special weapons group also had classroom work in the use of weapons. Jack, who admits that he was not much of a student, took a keen interest in becoming proficient in the use of the weapons that would in the future save his life and the lives of his fellow Marines. One of Jack’s proudest moments, then and now, was when he received a score of 97 out of 100 on the Browning 30 caliber machine gun test. To this day, he still has the actual test.

Jack and his squad remained on Samoa for five months practicing with special weapons before boarding a Liberty ship, the U.S.S. W. P. Biddle, for Wellington, New Zealand to join the rest of the 2nd Marine Division. Jack did not know at that time that it was only fifty-seven days before he would be hitting the beach of “bloody Tarawa.”

It was in the Windsor Hotel in Wellington that Colonel David M. Shoup planned the attack on Betio, the largest of the forty-seven coral islands comprising the Tarawa Atoll. Betio, surrounded by coral reefs, covers less than one square mile in area, two-and-a-half miles long and a mere 800 yards in width at its widest point. Only a few days after Pearl Harbor the Japanese attacked and occupied Betio, where they built a main base and a critical airfield, which was the island’s military importance to both the Japanese and the Americans. Tarawa marked the southernmost tip of Japan’s defense perimeter. The Allies maintained bases to the south and the east and wanted to halt the Japanese expansion to preserve their lifeline from Hawaii to New Zealand and Australia. Re-capturing the island and use of the airfield would put the Allies in striking distance to begin their controversial “island hopping campaign” towards the Japanese mainland. Tarawa, Makin and Apamama, in the Gilbert Islands, was the first operation in what was dubbed Operation Galvanic and was used as a test case to decide the future of the island hopping strategy.

In planning the Betio landing, code named “Longsuit,” the Americans lacked intelligence on several key issues, all of which had a tremendous impact on the battle’s outcome. One of the critical questions was estimating the size of the Japanese defense force. It was Colonel Shoup who estimated, with astounding accuracy, the number of defenders on the island at 4,840. The actual number was 4,836, which included the Japanese combat forces, as well as the Korean, Okinawan, and Japanese laborers on the island. Shoup’s simple method for calculating the defenders was to
count the number of latrines that were positioned on stilts over the lagoon and multiply by the number of men estimated to use a single latrine.

American planners were also unaware of the type of Japanese soldier defending Betio. Commanded by Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki, the occupying Japanese forces were not ordinary troops. Rather they were the elite “Rikusentai” Imperial Marines, also known as the Special Navy Landing Force (SNLF), who were ruthless, highly trained, and specialized in amphibious infantry. They were led by skilled officers.
and lived by the “bushido” philosophy of death before dishonor. For these troops, it was unthinkable to succumb to capture. Indeed, only seventeen were taken prisoner. All other Japanese survivors committed suicide rather than suffer the humiliation of capture or surrender.

Another unknown for the Allies was the massive fortifications the Japanese had constructed on and around Betio. Slave labor was used to cut down hundreds of palm trees on the surrounding islands and the logs were used to construct a huge seawall barricade around the perimeter of the island with machine gun and rifle pill boxes positioned behind it. Additional defenses included a ten foot high barricade in the shape of a V in the water just off shore to channel any incoming attack into “killing zones.” There were also pyramid shaped concrete barriers on the reef surrounding half of the island, a double row of barbed wire, mines, and anti-tank ditches. All of the structures were covered with mammoth amounts of concrete, steel and wire to make them impregnable. Yard for yard, Betio was the most heavily fortified position in the world at the time. It was Rear Admiral Shibasaki who boasted, “The Americans could not take Tarawa with a million men in a hundred years.”

This is the reality that faced Jack Pease and his fellow marines. Yet these were only the man-made obstacles. Equally daunting was the natural hindrance of tidal changes. The depth of the water covering the coral reefs that surrounded Betio was the single most critical factor in the November landing. The proposed plan was to land the first three waves of 1,500 men in Landing Vehicles Tracked (LVTs), also known as amtracs. This wave would be followed by three additional waves transported in landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP), known as Higgins boats. A British officer, Major Frank Holland, who had resided in the Gilbert Islands for fifteen years, and understood the tidal flows, strongly opposed the landing plan because of what he called a rare “dodging tide” which would allow only three feet of water over the reef. His warnings went unheeded, and the result was that many Higgins boats became grounded and unable to reach the beach. Jack and his comrades were forced to wade in while under a thunderous and deadly fire.

Prior to arriving at Tarawa Atoll, Jack had never heard of the tiny island called Betio. Nor did he know its strategic significance. He and the other members of his special weapons group, 2nd Defense Battalion (Reinforced), second Marine Division, left New Zealand on the U.S.S. Biddle, were attached to the V Amphibious Corps, and stopped for six days at Efate in the New Hebrides for practice in landing exercises. Once enroute to Betio, Jack recalls that he was not particularly worried about the landing. “They told us it wasn’t going to be much; that they were going to bomb the place from the air. They were going to soften it up, and we shouldn’t have much trouble. So we didn’t worry too much about it.” He remembers that the anticipation of the battle was the most stressful part. Although the Marines did not expect heavy resistance, Jack knew the potential for injury or death. He did not sleep well the night before, and when he finally did dose off he did not wake in time to attend the early morning Roman Catholic Mass. Jack felt uneasy about having missed Mass,
not knowing what lay ahead. He slid his rosary beads around his neck next to his
dog tags, where they remained throughout his sojourn on Betio. Jack keeps those
same rosary beads with the rusted crucifix along with his dog tags close to him today
as a reminder of the savagery he witnessed at Tarawa, and as reminder of how grate-
ful he is that he was one of the Marines who came home.

On landing day, November 20, 1943, Jack and the special weapons group were
prepared and eager when it was time for them to board the Higgins boat that would
transport them to the shore of what had been designated Red Beach Two. He recalls
that it was no easy task to get off the Biddle and into the Higgins boat. “Well, we
came down the rope nets, down with all our gear where we had three days of food
and two canteens of water and two hundred bullets. Coming down that net wasn’t
easy because we had about a sixty-pound pack plus our rifles.” Once onboard the
Higgins boat, Jack remembers a lot of mumbling among his fellow Marines, adding
“Of course, what it was, everybody praying. You know, me along with the rest of
them.”

Although Jack left the Biddle on November 20th, his unit did not actually set
boots on Red Beach until the second day of the battle. Jack explained the landing in
the following way: “The set up was we were a defense battalion. But this is the first
time they were going to try to send the defense battalion if the other Marines had
gotten into trouble, and I’m sure they did. There were high casualties. I think pretty
near 99% of the first two waves that went in were casualties.” Jack actually spent the
first night of the battle huddled with his unit in a Higgins boat, waiting for the oppor-
tunity to get ashore and praying they would not be hit by Japanese planes that strafed
the boats awaiting an opportunity to land.

“The next morning,” Jack continued, “we made our landings on to Red Beach
Two, which was along the pier that jutted out into the water and where Jap machine
gunners were lined up under the pier. On the way in on the Higgins boat, they
transferred us to amphibious tractors, so we got aboard those, and then the tractor
couldn’t get in to the beach either. So we jumped off the side of the amphibious
tractor with our packs and our gear and ran for shore as quick as we could, amongst
the dead bodies that were floating around in the way, both Marines and Japanese.
We got to the concrete log embankment and we stayed there for a while.” Jack
vividly remembers using his rifle to push away dead bodies as he waded in to the
beach. He and his fellow Marines remained at the barrier for a short time before
moving up a couple hundred yards toward the airfield runway. It was at the barrier
that Jack realized his leg was bleeding, ripped open from the barbed wire he encoun-
tered while wading in. He decided against bandaging the wound since he carried
only one large bandage and was afraid he might need it later in the battle in case of a
more serious wound. Jack could not have known it at the time, but by surviving the
landing he had already increased his chances of survival by 50%. Casualty figures
later revealed that half of the 990 Marines who were killed on Betio died in the water
before ever reaching the beach.
Once on Betio, the immediate objective of Jack’s unit was to capture the airfield and set up their anti-aircraft guns before nightfall to be prepared for any enemy strafing runs. Though they frantically attempted to set up the gun, daylight ran out and the Marines dug foxholes for the night and took turns standing watch. After Jack’s watch, he hunkered down in his foxhole, exhausted, and fell asleep. Suddenly a man fell into Jack’s hole right on top of him. As Jack struggled to get his knife out of his belt, the man started yelling in English that he was an American. Jack’s mind flashed to what he had heard about Japanese soldiers jumping in foxholes and stabbing the occupant, and that some Japanese even spoke English to deceive the enemy. Fortunately for both men, before unsheathing his knife Jack realized that the man really was a Marine. Jack recalls the ensuing exchange between the two men: “I asked him how in the heck could you fall in a foxhole on me like this? He said, ‘Well, I had to go out and relieve myself and so when I was rolling back to my foxhole –because he didn’t want to stand up and walk around – I fell right into your foxhole. Rolled right into it.’ I says, Well, you’re lucky you’re alive.” Jack laughs about the incident today, but remembers his shock and fear at the time. To this day, Jack still has the knife as a reminder of Tarawa. He also brought home a Japanese rifle that he found on the battlefield.

There was another frightening night-time incident, that Jack remembers well. On his second night on Betio, Jack’s unit was in a small shack near the runway when Japanese strafing fire hit barrels of gasoline stored nearby. The barrels exploded and ignited everything around them, including the little shack. They all escaped the fire and slept outside that night. Jack recalled, “I understand that one of the members of our unit on a 50 caliber machine gun shot down one of their planes. So there was some satisfaction there.”

The main Japanese defenses on Betio fell to the Americans on November 23rd, although fighting continued until November 27th on the island of Na’a in the Tarawa Atoll. Jack recalled an incident that occurred on the 24th, his fourth day on Betio, that had to do with the raising of the American flag. He remembered that they were all directed to look in a certain direction at a specific time for the flag raising. They did as ordered but could not actually see the ceremony because they were too far away. To the dismay and anger of the American Marines, the British Union Jack was given the honor of being raised first because Betio was a British island prior to the Japanese invasion in 1941. The Marines felt cheated because it was American lives that were sacrificed to gain control of the island.

In the battle’s aftermath, American forces were confronted with the gruesome task of dealing with the carnage and destruction left behind. The 5,600 corpses laying exposed in the hot tropical sun, or water logged for days in the lagoon, attracted hordes of flies and produced what Jack remembered as the unforgettable and unbearable stench of death. Jack also remembered that when he opened one of his ration cans with a knife, he had to fight off the flies that immediately swarmed the can. Jack could not shoo them away long enough to get a mouth full so he just went ahead and ate: “I had to hold my can with one hand and eat with the other hand and
by the time I'd push the flies out and get [my hand] back there, those flies were back in. And they were there, and there was I'd say probably an inch, inch and a half of flies. So what I did, I was so hungry, I just put that knife into it and I ate the flies and all. There was approximately 5,000 dead people on that island, so there was a lot of flies.”

One of Jack’s most unforgettable memories involved an incident that occurred after the battle. Jack and his friend, Flemming, sat relaxing with their 40 mm gun as they watched two Naval officers approach another gun squad a short distance away. After a short conversation, the Marines pointed to Jack, and the officers then proceeded to Jack’s gun and presented their dilemma. They were delivering the seventeen captured Japanese prisoners to one of the ships and wanted to dump them overboard in the lagoon on the way out to the ship and then machine gun them in the water. Having learned that Jack could operate a machine gun, they hoped that Jack would handle that responsibility. Though he was outranked by the two officers, he absolutely did not want to be a participant in killing POWs. His quick response to the officers was, “Oh, that’s a different kind of gun the Navy has than the Marines. I wouldn’t know how to run the gun.” Jack was relieved that the officers believed his story and departed.

Jack also remembers Thanksgiving Day, November 25th, on Tarawa because it was the day he had his first warm meal since departing the Biddle. It was not exactly a turkey dinner, but the heated rations tasted great to the Marines who had been eating cold rations out of cans for days. Ultimately, Jack spent two more holidays on Tarawa, Christmas and New Year, because his unit remained to defend the atoll. It was shortly after recapturing the island that Jack had the opportunity to meet and chat with Lieutenant Commander Butch O’Hare, the famous pilot later memorialized with a Chicago airport carrying his name. A few days after the battle several Navy planes attempted to land on the runway, which was pocked with craters and ruts from the intense bombing. The first plane landed and Jack welcomed the pilot to Tarawa, not knowing at the time it was O’Hare. As the next several planes tried to land they were damaged by varying degrees of crashes and the remaining pilots turned away to take their chances on a better runway. The Marines were impressed that O’Hare was the only pilot who landed without sustaining damage. Work immediately got under way to repair the strategic airfield for American use.

Jack finally left Betio on January 21, 1944, when he was medevaced to the Iea Heights Naval Hospital in Hawaii because he had contracted elephantitis, a tropical disease transmitted by infected mosquitoes, in which the wuchereria bancrofti, or threadworm, takes up residence in a host’s lymph nodes. Due to the extremely long lifespan of the threadworm, symptoms can last for years. During WWII there was no cure for the disease and Jack bounced around to several hospitals before the end of the war. After a couple of weeks in Hawaii, he was sent to Oak Knoll Hospital in California and then on to a Naval hospital in Seattle.

Jack remembers that while in Hawaii he ran into a nurse from Broad Brook, CT, Eleanor Dorman, which gave him a wonderful sense of home. He also recalled that
he snuck out of the hospital and jumped the fence so that he could see Hawaii for a few hours. After staying at the hospital in Seattle, Jack went to a convalescent Naval Hospital in Sun Valley, Idaho, where he stayed until June 1944. He was then reported as fit for duty and given thirty days leave, during which he made a surprise visit home to Broad Brook. He then reported to Bremerton, Washington, where he served as a guard for the ammunition depot until discharged on February 4, 1946.

After serving in the Marines, Jack returned to Connecticut and went to work at Hamilton Standard during the day, and attended night school on the GI Bill at Hillyer College in Hartford, CT for business administration. He ultimately went on to become an accountant and worked for the next 38 years in the insurance industry, working his way up to Vice President of the Celtic Life Insurance Company. In 1947, Jack married Thelma Barry and together they raised two children. He remains a member of the American Legion and the VFW.

Jack notes that his military service and experience on Betio had a huge impact on his life. He has never forgotten the sacrifices that so many men made in taking and defending a tiny strip of land that was of strategic importance to the larger war effort. In many ways, the Battle of Tarawa was a first for American forces. Never before had they attempted a beach-front landing at a heavily fortified position, and as such it was the first time that the military attempted using amtracs to transport soldiers to the beach. A great deal was also learned about such an approach to taking over enemy inhabited islands. Better radios were developed for close air support from aircraft carriers, amtracs were heavily armed and led future invasions, pre-battle bombardments were extended and precise targets were selected, and assault demolitions were improved. The Battle also marked the beginning of U.S. “island hopping” across the Central Pacific to Japan, the key to which was capturing Japanese airfields because American forces did not have the time to build entirely new ones. The Battle was also important because if was the first time that President Franklin Roosevelt approved war film coverage to be shown to the American people which included graphic footage and photos that both shocked the nation and awakened them to the reality of war. It was a reality with which Jack Pease was all too familiar.

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NOTES

1 John E. Pease interviews by Eileen M. Hurst, April 29, 2005 & October 14, 2007, video recording and transcript in possession of the Elihu Burritt Library at Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT, and of the Library of Congress, Veterans History Project, Washington D.C. The following history and all of John Pease’s quotes are from the interviews.


3 Hammel and Lane, Bloody Tarawa, 21.


5 Derrick Wright, Tarawa 1943 the Turning of the Tide (United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing, 2000), 17.

6 Wright, Tarawa 1943 the Turning of the Tide, 93.