ONE SQUARE MILE OF HELL: THE BATTLE FOR TARAWA BY JOHN WUKOVITS



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"Naval historian John Wukovits writes about the bloody Tarawa fight as though he had gone ashore with the Marines...a worthy memorial to the Marines who fought there."—Herman Wouk

JOHN WUKOVITS

AUTHOR OF PACIFIC ALAMO: THE BATTLE FOR WAKE ISLAND

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It may be impossible to write a really dull book about the 1943 battle of Tarawa. In the assault on the island, the Second Marine Division lost a thousand dead, the Japanese garrison was annihilated, and the marines learned valuable lessons about amphibious weaponry and tactics that aided them in future campaigns. Wukovits avoids a straight narrative in favor of seeing the development of the battle through the eyes of selected survivors, whom he has interviewed intelligently and thoroughly. They were impressed, as readers may be, by the strength of the Japanese fortifications and the tenacity of their garrisons, who kept the whole island under fire for two of the battle's three days. Wukovits adds emotional punch with accounts of marines who did not survive but whose memories families have kept alive for 60 years. A worthwhile battle monograph for any Pacific theater or marine collection. Roland Green

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Review

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About the Author

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In the Tarawa atoll lies the tiny islet of Betio. In November of 1943, the men of the 2nd Marine Division watched as bombardments destroyed the island's Japanese defenses. But when the Marines landed, the Japanese poured out of their protective bunkers and began one of the most brutal encounters of the war.

Drawn from sources such as participants' letters and diaries and interviews with survivors, One Square Mile of Hell is the riveting true account of a battle between two determined foes, neither of whom would ever look at each other in the same way again.

• Sales Rank: #473552 in Books

Brand: Wukovits, John
Published on: 2007-08-07
Released on: 2007-08-07
Original language: English

• Number of items: 1

• Dimensions: 9.10" h x .80" w x 6.00" l, .85 pounds

• Binding: Paperback

• 352 pages

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Most helpful customer reviews

143 of 147 people found the following review helpful.

76 Hours In November, 1943

By Kay's Husband

Most of us live 76 hours with little thoughts of danger, but as readers of this book will quickly find out, the 3 days the U.S. Marine 2nd Division spent on Tarawa atol, and especially Betio, was just about the most dangerous place a person could ever be.

Several people have said, including the two commanding generals of this operation, that next to Iwo Jima, Betio was the most fortified war zone they had ever seen. In fact General Smith said he had never experienced anything in WWI to compare to how the Japanese had fortified the island. The commanding Japanese Admiral Shibasaki, later killed in the battle, expressed his opinion just prior to the battle that "A million men cannot take Tarawa in a hundred years." Several thousand Marines from the 2nd Division at great cost would soon prove the Japanese admiral wrong.

The U.S. Navy bombarded the island prior to the landings, but not as much as the Marine generals would have liked. However, after the battle, it would be seen that no amount of shelling would have been able to destroy the defending Japanese troops, they were just too well fortified. In the end, it took the combined efforts of the U.S. Marines, U.S. Navy, and the air force to take and hold, as Robert Sherrod said, an island no larger than 1 square mile.

I served with the Navy & USMC so this book immediately caught my attention, though I have two others on the subject, also. My opinion after reading this heart rending book is that it very well may be the best of recent times, and may be the best of any future books on the subject. The author has written a very readable book, whereas some books of military subjects are not; and he has built his book not only on individuals that were there, but also on their statements today, 60 plus years after the battle. And as anyone who has read this book can testify, two of the main characters in the drama: the activities of Gene Seng and Charles Montague may never be forgotten. Along with Stanley Bowen, Norman Hatch, William Hawkins, and William Chamberlin, among many others, their heroics will be forever burned into one's mind.

Out of the thousands of Japanese who defended Tarawa, only 17 lived past the battle; while the American losses were 1,027 killed, 2,292 wounded, and 88 recorded as missing. On Tarawa's D-Day the losses of the Marines were close to the 30% range, out of 5000 landed, the losses were 1500.

This Central Pacific island saw much hand-to-hand fighting with bayonet, KaBar knife, and close in shooting. The only way to dislodge the Japanese from their spider webs and pill boxes was with explosives and flame throwers. Snipers existed all thoughout the battle, and even after the island was considered 'secure' fatalities from snipers still occurred by the burial details. The Marines were at times very surprised to see Japanese standing well over 6 feet in height, for these Japanese were special naval landing forces much on a par with our Marines. There was no where to run, no where to hide, and for a large part of the battle we were at times close to being thrown back into the sea. It got so bad that towards the end no prisoners were taken.

Much went right by training and luck, and more went wrong; with both the Navy and Marines learning from this battle. Since it differed from the earlier Guadalcanal fighting both USN/USMC were surprised at it

ferocity and casualties. One of the main issues during the critical hours of the battle was logistics: supplies, especially ammo could not reach the Marines due to tides and reef. Later when such a necessary item as water made it ashore in 55 gallon drums, it was discovered that the drums, used prior for gasoline storage, were not properly cleansed so the water both tasted and smelled of gasoline.

This is such a fact filled book that a reviewer could almost seemingly go on forever, but this review is long enough. I give this book a high rating where military and line of departure books are concerned. One doesn't have to have served to read this book and come away with a feeling what it was like to be on Tarawa for three days in November, 1943. And sadly the American public of that time was kept in the dark about the battle and did not find out what WWII island fighting would be like until weeks after the battle.

Semper Fi.

45 of 47 people found the following review helpful.

Tarawa Vividly Revealed

By Steve Iaco

Tarawa was one of the bloodiest engagements of the Pacific War. The Marines' successful invasion set a precedent for amphibious assaults to come -- including Normandy, seven months later -- and provided the Allies with a crucial staging area for the drive on Japan.

It's a wonder why Tarawa is not better remembered today. The ferocious three-day battle resulted in nearly as many casualties as SIX MONTHS of fighting on Guadalcanal.

John Wukovits brings the horrors and heroics of Tarawa to a new generation of readers. Like Stephen Ambrose, Wukovits relies on vivid, first-person accounts to describe the harrowing amphibious landing and the vicious, close quarter combat that followed. Wukowits offers up some of the most engaging writing on warfare I've ever encountered, surpassing even Ambrose.

In late 1943, Tarawa was not without its controversies. The high death toll had some people questioning the strategic necessity of taking the atoll as well as the tactics employed in capturing it. TIME correspondent Robert Sherrod wrote a highly acclaimed book about Tarawa in part to rebut criticisms of the campaign and bolster home-front morale. Can you imagine a journalist with such motivations today?

The battle's aftermath also saw Frank Capra direct an Academy Award-winning documentary, using footage shot by Norman Hatch, a cameraman who, like Sherrod, accompanied the Marines in the Tarawa campaign. Both Hatch and Sherrod are central players in Wukowits' excellent book.

60 of 66 people found the following review helpful.

Make THIS one into a movie!

By Michael J. Maxwell

I don't think there'll ever be the perfect Tarawa book, that combines all the technical/human interest/personal experiences! It's like waiting for the 'next Dr.J' or 'next Hendrix!' But this one is the best so far for combat & 'before the war' stories. I was thinking, everyone has worked on cars & chased girls, why not put in more vet's stories. Maybe there's not that many Tarawa vets around anymore willing to open up - all of them need to, for the generations to come.

So, you'll want to add this to your Tarawa collection, along w/ Alexander's 'Utmost Savagery' for the technical, Hammel's '76 Hours & 'Bloody Tarawa' for the whole story & photos, Wright's 'Hell of a Way to Die' for the cover photo (!) and Sherrod's 'Story of..." for the reporter's view, along with the official Marine/Battery Press 'Battle of Tarawa.' Read about REAL American heroes and the toughest foe America ever fought, & defeated with little outside help!!

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