

Naval Aviation in WW II

Island Hopping



Escort carriers, like this one shown carrying a composite squadron of F4F Wildcats and SBD Dauntlesses, gave the amphibious force organic air support.

in WW II

From the Gilberts to the Marshalls

By John C. Reilly

The offensive in the southwest Pacific, beginning with the landings on Guadalcanal and Tulagi in August 1942, continued through 1943 as Allied strength built up. Ships, planes, troops and bases multiplied as the front was pushed toward Rabaul.

The early campaigns taught valuable lessons. Aviators gave particular attention to tactics, including ground-air liaison procedures and communications.

Prewar strategic planning had called for a naval offensive across the island groups of the central Pacific, aimed at the Philippines and Japan. General Douglas MacArthur, Allied commander in the southwest Pacific, felt that the main effort should, instead, continue past Rabaul and along New Guinea to the Philippines.

Early in 1943, the Army and Navy laid their ideas before the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who approved a two-prong concept. The southwest Pacific offensive would continue, but the new central Pacific thrust would become the main avenue of attack while northern Pacific forces operated against the Japanese in the Aleutians. Admiral Ernest J. King and General George C. Marshall discussed this with the British at Casablanca in January 1943, assured them that this would not drain resources needed in Europe and won their assent. The overall strategic plan was blessed by British and American commanders in Washington in May of that year.

This unprecedented campaign across thousands of miles of nearly empty ocean would have to be spearheaded and supported by a powerful force of aircraft carriers. By the end of

1942, the first of the new *Essex*-class fleet carriers (CV) and *Independence*-class small carriers (CVL) were being commissioned to join *Saratoga* and *Enterprise*, the only surviving prewar carriers in the Pacific Fleet. A number of small escort carriers (CVE), converted from merchant hulls, were in service, and a large number of "keel-up" CVEs were on their way.

Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander of what was now called the Pacific Ocean Area, formed the Central Pacific Force in August 1943, with Admiral Raymond Spruance in command. Spruance's spearhead was the Fast Carrier Force. This was organized into task groups, each group containing three to five fast carriers, screened by fast battleships, cruisers and destroyers to provide antisubmarine and anti-aircraft protection. The Fast Carrier Force was the fleet's long-range striking arm, designed to run interference for the fleet's Amphibious Force. Each landing operation would be opened by strikes at Japanese bases within flying range of the objective and on the target islands themselves. Carrier planes would support the initial landings, and the carriers would then fight off any possible Japanese counterattacks. The Carrier Force and Amphibious Force were backed up by the Service Force, a mobile logistic force of tenders, floating dry docks and underway replenishment ships whose mission was to keep the fleet at sea. By 1945, the Service Force was even delivering replacement planes and aircrews to the carriers at sea.

In mid-1943, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Adm. Nimitz to take the ball in the central Pacific. Prewar

plans had looked at the Marshall Islands as the first target, but little was known in 1943 about the strength of their defenses. Planners decided that the fleet was not yet up to the strength and experience needed to take on this largely unknown objective, and the first amphibious operation was aimed at the Gilbert Islands to provide bases for land-based air and vital experience for the largely untested amphibious forces. Fighter and bomber fields were built in the Ellice Islands to attack the Gilberts, and the new carriers were sent to "get their feet wet" by hitting Japanese island bases. Grumman's F6F *Hellcat* saw its first action in a strike on Marcus Island in September 1943; shortly afterward, a raid on the Gilberts led the Japanese to pull nearly all their planes back from the Tarawa and Makin atolls. "Lifeguard submarining" was tested in an air-and-gunfire raid on Wake Island, when *Skate* gave course information to incoming carrier planes and rescued six flyers from the water under fire. The CO of the cruiser *Minneapolis* reported that "both air power and ship-based gun power in great quantity" would be needed to overcome Japanese island defenses, and even then any landing would be strongly resisted and would exact a heavy price from the attackers. He was right on both counts.

The Gilberts operation opened in mid-November 1943 as Army B-24 *Liberator* bombers from the Ellices attacked Tarawa. Land-based Army, Navy and Marine Corps planes continued to hit targets in the Gilberts and Marshalls as the naval task forces converged on Tarawa and Makin. The attack was led by Rear Admiral Charles

Naval Aviation in WW II

Pownall's Task Force (TF) 50, four task groups numbering six CVs and five CVLs armed with *Hellcats*, SBD *Dauntlesses* and TBF *Avengers*; the carrier *Bunker Hill* was introducing Curtiss SB2C *Helldivers* to the war. Eight "jeep carriers" were assigned to support the amphibious force.

One of TF 50's task groups launched repeated attacks on the Marshalls during the last days before the landings and helped the escort carriers cover the Gilberts, smashing two Japanese air attacks from Marshall Island bases. Another task group pounded Makin before and during the landing, while a third group did the same to Tarawa. The fourth task group struck the Japanese air base on Nauru, taking it out of the Gilberts operation, and then flew air cover for troop convoys following the invasion force. Land-based planes out of the Ellice reconnoitered the Gilberts area throughout the approach and kept up the pressure on targets in the Gilberts and Marshalls.

The assault forces were aimed at the Abemama, Tarawa and Makin atolls. Abemama, nearly undefended,

was captured by a raiding party. Makin was fairly easily captured by Army troops, but a submarine torpedo detonated a bomb magazine in the escort carrier *Liscome Bay*, sending her to the bottom with two-thirds of her crew.

A postwar account called Tarawa "the tough nut," and indeed it was. The Japanese had constructed formidable fortifications on the island of Betio, and these were held by some 2,600 naval infantry with 1,000 construction troops. Landing beaches were shielded by coral reefs, mines and obstacles. Planners concluded that most of Betio's defenses would have to be knocked out before the assault waves went in, and pinned their hopes on pre-landing air strikes and short-range battleship and cruiser gunfire.

The Navy-Marine concept of close air support got its first real test in the Gilberts. The landing force included liaison parties charged with helping the infantry commanders select suitable targets for air attack and for communicating with the supporting aircraft. Air spotting was provided by experienced pilots who had been thoroughly briefed on the ground plan.

At sunrise on D day, 20 November 1943, carrier planes gave Betio a brief going-over, followed by two and a half hours of naval gunfire. At H hour minus 5 minutes, the gunfire was supposed to lift to allow a final strafing of beach defenses by carrier fighters. Innumerable complications in getting the assault waves formed and going postponed H hour, and a communications glitch kept that word from the carriers; the strafers raked the beaches at the time appointed, but this was now 35 minutes before the new H hour. Dense smoke over the landing area put the assault waves out of sight of bombardment ships while still 15 minutes from the beach, and most gunnery ships had to cease firing. This gave the defenders time to man their guns and reinforce the landing beaches. By the afternoon of 23 November, Tarawa was secured, but at a cost of more than 1,000 lives and 2,000 wounded.

Americans were startled at the toll of this fight for what seemed to be an insignificant speck of ground, but the capture of the Gilberts proved to be the essential first step on the ocean

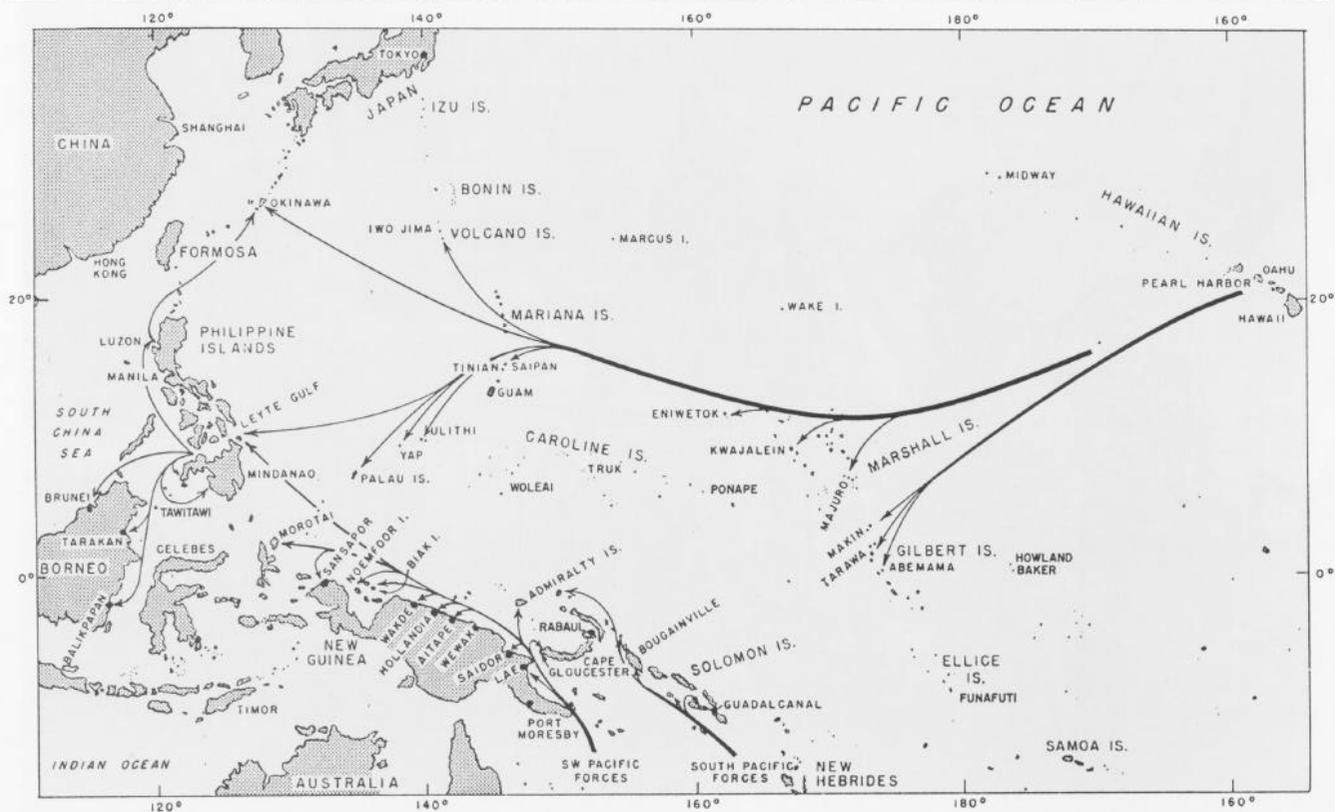
road to Tokyo Bay. The Navy and Marines immediately began to assess Tarawa's bitter lessons as critical reports came in from every level. Brief air and naval bombardments were not enough to defeat strongly fortified objectives; this required prolonged, carefully controlled bombing and shelling with continuing assessment of target damage. Air strikes, gunfire and troop landings had been poorly coordinated, with fatal results. Field radios failed, and Marines ashore could hardly communicate with supporting planes and ships. High-trajectory gunfire, using heavy armor-piercing shells, was seen to be needed to penetrate major fortifications, and close-range saturation fire was judged necessary right up to the time the first waves went ashore.

Though close-support air sorties had produced "good to excellent results," assault landing strikes were criticized. One senior aviator reported that "the carrier squadrons had little concept of their mission in detail and only a rudimentary idea of how to accomplish" it. The amphibious force needed a full-time air commander to help plan all aspects of air support and to control all aircraft in the landing area. Another senior air staff officer later remarked that fast carrier flyers, like Army pilots, thought in terms of air strikes and air-to-air combat; close-support missions were an "irksome" diversion. The CVE pilots, he noted, "soon got in the groove and provided A-1 results," and the "jeeps" would play an increasing role in the history of Pacific island hopping. Reports and analyses of Tarawa were carefully studied by Allied commanders planning the invasion of Europe. They concluded that air and naval fire support would have to be provided on an unheard-of scale if Hitler's "Atlantic Wall" was to be broken. This was carried into the plan for Operation Overlord, and it seems quite likely that the costly experience of Tarawa may have saved the lives of many Allied soldiers and sailors on the other side of the world.

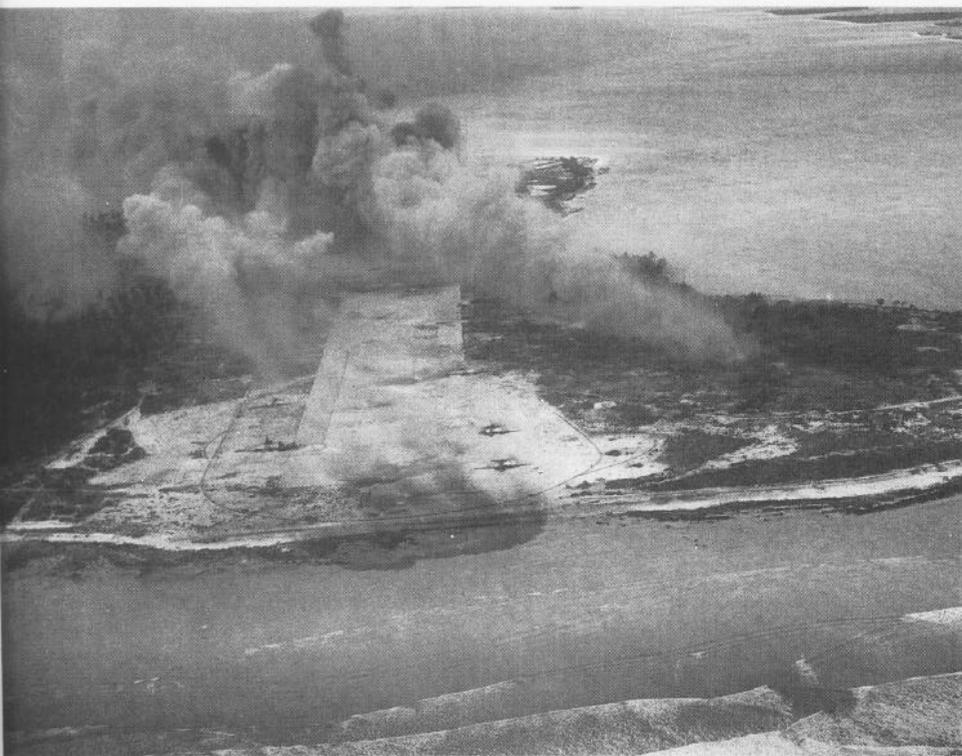
The assault on the Marshalls was being planned well before the Gilberts landings. The first plan prescribed landings on the Kwajalein, Wotje and Maloelap atolls. After Tarawa, Navy and Marine Corps commanders con-



By the opening of the central Pacific offensive, the Grumman F6F Hellcat had replaced the F4F Wildcat in the Fast Carrier Force.



The Fast Carrier Force led the way into the Gilberts and Marshalls, then headed south to support General MacArthur in New Guinea before turning toward the Marianas.



Planes from Langley (CVL 27) rake an Eniwetok airfield during the invasion of the Marshalls, February 1944.

cluded that their resources still did not permit three simultaneous invasions and recommended that Maloelap and Wotje first be taken and turned into bases to support an attack on Kwajalein. Adm. Nimitz caused a stir among his commanders when he opted to bypass the other atolls and take Kwajalein alone, reasoning – correctly, as it proved – that the outer atolls would be more strongly defended. Adm. Spruance got authorization to occupy Majuro Atoll in the eastern Marshalls for an advanced air and fleet base.

Land-based planes from the Ellices and the newly won Gilberts began the attack on the Marshalls early in January 1944. The six CVs and six CVLs of the Fast Carrier Force, now called TF 58 under Rear Admiral Marc Mitscher, arrived on 29 January and hit Japanese airfields on Maloelap, Wotje and Kwajalein while land-based bombers struck Mili and Jaluit. On the 30th, one carrier task group destroyed Japanese aircraft on Eniwetok while the other three kept Kwajalein, Wotje and Maloe-

Naval Aviation in WW II



Lexington (CV 16) Hellcat pilots return from a strike during the Gilberts operation, November 1943.

lap busy as the escort carriers and gunnery ships of the amphibious force joined in.

Tarawa's experience had been well digested. Gunships used high and low-trajectory fire with armor-piercing as well as bombardment ammunition against appropriate targets, and carrier air strikes were carefully laid on, delivering a much greater weight of ordnance on target than had been used at Tarawa.

Throughout the night of 31 January, destroyers maintained harassing fire on Kwajalein Atoll's major islands, Roi-Namur and Kwajalein. Early that morning, gunfire ships closed the islands to hammer them at short ranges, while artillery landed on nearby small islands joined in. Army B-24s from the Gilberts dropped heavy bombs on Kwajalein Island, and gunfire was lifted as planes from the fast carriers and "jeeps" bombed and strafed the beach defenses. Communications were better this time; when the Marine landing

waves were delayed heading for one of the islets near Roi-Namur on 31 January, carrier planes stayed overhead and continued their attacks until the "amphtracs" were 10 minutes from the beach. Though the relative inexperience of Marines and sailors complicated the capture of Roi-Namur, the air and surface preparation worked well; over half of the Japanese defenders were killed by air attack and gunfire, and most of the islands' defenses were put out of action.

The Army troops that went ashore on Kwajalein Island benefited, not only from careful fire support but from months of thorough amphibious training. The landing went ashore with near-textbook precision. With the help of heavy support from carrier planes and naval guns, the soldiers cleared the island in three days of fighting.

The capture of Kwajalein went so well that Adm. Spruance did not have to commit his reserve troops and was ready to proceed without delay to cap-



Rifleman of the 4th Marine Division advance on Roi-Namur with the help of carrier planes.

ture Eniwetok at the western end of the Marshalls group. Japanese bases in the Marianas and on Ponape and Truk could threaten this move, but Adm. Nimitz saw how the carrier force protected the move into the Marshalls

and immediately approved the Eniwetok landing.

The amphibious force and a task group of TF 58 headed for Eniwetok as Army bombers attacked Ponape and Adm. Mitscher took his three other task groups south to hit Truk.

Eniwetok Atoll, at the western end of the Marshalls, was hit by TF 58 on 31 January 1944. Carrier planes worked over the airfield on Engebi Island, destroying planes on the ground and striking island defenses. Air strikes continued into D day, 17 February, when CVEs and bombardment ships joined in. Small outlying islands were taken, and Engebi itself fell the following day. Good-sized forces of crack Japanese troops were concealed on Parry and Eniwetok islands, but these had received only a light air and naval bombardment since they were thought to be unoccupied. Documents found on Engebi revealed the truth; an impromptu bombardment assisted the landing forces, but this turned out to be insufficient. Hard fighting, helped by planes from the escort carriers, was needed before the islands were secured.

Nerves were taut as the carriers approached Truk, long touted as the impregnable "Gibraltar of the Pacific."

Jan 11: The first U.S. attack with forward-firing rockets was made against a German U-boat by two TBF-1Cs of Composite Squadron 58 from the escort carrier *Block Island*.

Jan 29-Feb 22: Occupation of the Marshall Islands – Six heavy and six light carriers, in four groups of Task Force 58 (RAdm. M. A. Mitscher), opened the campaign to capture the Marshalls (Jan 29) with heavy air attacks on Maloelap, Kwajalein and Wotje. Their early achievement permitted the second phase of the campaign – seizure of Eniwetok – earlier than the planned date of May 10. Covering operations were provided by the first strike on Truk (Feb 17-18), carried out by the Truk Striking Force (VAdm. R. A. Spruance), built around three fast carrier groups. In this action, the first night bombing attack in the history of U.S. carrier aviation was carried out by VT-10 from *Enterprise* with 12 ra-

dar-equipped TBF-1Cs.

Jan 30: To effect the neutralization of Wake Island during the Marshalls operation, two squadrons of *Coronados* from Midway Island made the first of four night bombing attacks. Repetitions of the 2,000-mile, round-trip mission were completed on February 4, 8 and 9.

Feb 4: In a test of refueling operations with the CVE *Altamaha* off San Diego, Calif., the K-29 of Blimp Squadron 31 made the first carrier landing by a nonrigid airship.

Feb 24: The first detection of a submerged enemy submarine by the use of magnetic anomaly detection (MAD) gear was made by *Catalinas* of VP-63, on a MAD barrier patrol of the approaches to the Strait of Gibraltar. They attacked the *U-761* with retro-rockets and, with the assistance of two ships and aircraft from two other squadrons, sank it.

They reached the launch point undetected by Japanese search planes and, as the first landings went ashore on Eniwetok on 17 February, TF 58's planes rained bombs and bullets on Truk's three airfields, destroying over 200 planes on the ground. They went

on to strike warships and merchantmen in Truk Lagoon, and surface warships swept around the atoll to intercept escaping ships. During the night that followed, the carrier force made its first radar-guided night bombing attack, scoring hits and near-misses on ships in the lagoon. The carrier *Intrepid* took a hit from a night-flying Japanese torpedo plane and had to retire for repairs.

When more carrier planes came in the next morning, not a single Japanese plane took to the air. Airfield installations got a thorough going-over before Mitscher ordered his force to retire at midday. The aviators had shown Truk to be a cardboard Gibraltar; naval ships and some 200,000 tons of cargo shipping were on the bottom, some 270 planes were wrecked or damaged and base facilities were hard hit. Tokyo radio reported, "A powerful American Task force suddenly ... and repeatedly attacked our important strategic base, Truk, with a great number of ship-based planes.... The war situation has increased with unprecedented seriousness...." ■



Carriers and "gunships" of Task Force 58 teamed up with the amphibious force to give the Pacific Fleet a powerful one-two punch.

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