



(Artwork by Jim Orr)

The Battle of Tarawa, fought on a small atoll in the South Pacific 20–23 November 1943 during World War II, pitted approximately eighteen thousand invading U.S. Marines against a Japanese defending force of about five thousand. The action featured the first Marine amphibious assault in the Pacific, an attack that unfortunately was plagued with planning shortfalls and faulty reconnaissance that resulted in the force getting hung up on a coral reef five hundred meters from the island's shore. This compelled the attackers to disembark and wade into shore under the guns of the defenders. The Marines ultimately took the island at a cost of about 1,200 dead and many wounded. Of the Japanese defending force, most fought to the death; only seventeen survived.

And now...Tarawa

A place some said would easy fall
This tropic atoll we recall
Our first Pacific test we're told
By elder brass; the wise, the bold
So confident and sure were we
Then thrust in craft upon the sea
With smoke and tumult everywhere
As rockets blistered through the air
We hurdled forward wave by wave
Toward ravaged shore, my brothers brave
And prayed that day was not our last
While to the Lord we held steadfast
For strength into the battle fray
Against a foe not far away
Yet as we dashed into the fight

Our craft now wedged on coral tight
The tide not high as thought to be
Before the battle told were we
So in the sea we all did go
Five hundred yards from shores halo
As comrades fell to left and right
I did my best within the fight
To reach the battered deadly shore
With devastation, palms no more
Then finally sand below my feet
Determined foe I soon would meet
And prayed that day I would not die
While on the shore the wounded cry
Then three days battle finally done
The victory ours, the struggle won
Yet still alive and standing tall
So many brothers gave their all

—J. Michael Orr