

Americans Don't Die!

Casualties, From Republic to Empire

by Roger D. McGrath

Americans do not believe in death. At least, they live as if they will never die. This has been the case from colonial times. It is a consequence of seemingly limitless opportunity and a drive for upward mobility, denied to generations of Europeans. Indentured servants, laborers, persecuted minorities, and peasants tilling the soil of the manor became landowners in America. This ignited an insatiable desire for all the material gain and status possible. An American was not condemned by custom and law to serve out his life in a particular role: He was master of his own fate. "We have been told," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, "that the same man has often tried ten estates. He has appeared successively as merchant, lawyer, doctor, minister of the gospel. He has lived in twenty different places and nowhere found ties to detain him." Like other oppressive relics of European society, death would be left behind. Tocqueville noted that "Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die."

Americans also rejected the notion that suffering and dying for a ruling aristocracy is part of one's fate. In fact, most Americans rejected the notion of a ruling class altogether. Describing Americans, Francis Baily, a British visitor during the late 1790's, said that "the means of subsistence being so easy in the country, and their dependence on each other consequently so trifling, that spirit of servility to those about them so prevalent in European manners, is wholly unknown to them." This was especially pronounced on the frontier. "There is nothing in America," said British traveler Charles Murray during the 1830's, "that strikes a foreigner so much as the real republican equality existing in the Western States, which border on the wilderness." At the same time, Michael Chevalier, sent to America on a fact-finding mission by the French minister of the interior, noted that "There is in the West a real equality, not merely an equality to talk about, an equality on paper; everybody that has on a decent coat is a gentleman." Even the way Westerners walked was notable. "The clumsy gait and bent body of our peasant is hardly ever seen here," said an Englishman, "every one walks erect and easy." John Wayne was already in evidence.

From the California gold fields, Dame Shirley wrote that a sourdough could

Enter a palace with his old felt hat on—
To address the King with the title of Mister,
And ask the price of the throne he sat on.

The contrast with Europe repeatedly surprised and even shocked visitors. An Englishman who demanded that he be

addressed as Esquire found that, within a few days, everyone was calling him Charlie. A supercilious scion of English nobility was told by a cowboy in Kansas, "You may be a son of a lord back in England, but that ain't what you are out here." Another cowboy added, "It's what's above ground, not what's under, that we think on." An Englishman traveling in Wyoming asked a cowboy if his "master" was at home. "The son of Babel ain't been born yet," came the reply. A titled Englishman on a hunting expedition out West had brought a bathtub along in his baggage train. When he ordered one of his outfitters to fill it, he was told to take a swim instead. When he again demanded that his bathtub be filled, the outfitter shot the tub full of holes, saying, "You ain't quite the top-shelfer you think you is, you ain't even got a shower-bath for cooling your swelled head, but I'll make you a present of one, boss!"

All this meant that Americans were not ready to offer unquestioning obedience to anybody, including superior officers in the militia. Abraham Lincoln learned this in the Black Hawk War. When Black Hawk and his band of Sauk and Fox crossed the Mississippi into Illinois, Lincoln and dozens of others from New Salem and nearby communities formed a militia company. One of the volunteers nominated Lincoln for captain; another proposed William Kirkpatrick, a mill owner. Some of the volunteers later said they chose Lincoln because they would be able to do as they liked under "Abc." The first order Captain Lincoln issued was answered with, "Go to the devil, Sir!" Lincoln found that he had to cajole, bully, and fight his own men to get any kind of obedience out of them. The militia was on active duty for one month. Lincoln then enlisted in another militia company as a private and served for three weeks, followed by a third enlistment in another militia company—again, as a private—for three weeks. Apparently, one attempt at leading a company of frontier militiamen had been enough.

The Texas Rangers were nothing more than a frontier militia until the early 1840's, when they were formally organized and stationed at San Antonio. Even then, they retained their informal and volunteer characteristics. Uniforms with gold braid, to distinguish officers, were tossed aside. Evidence of rank was difficult to find. When the Mexican War erupted in 1846, the Rangers were attached to the U.S. Army under Gen. Zachary Taylor at Fort Brown in the southern tip of Texas. When Taylor's army crossed into Mexico at Matamoros, the Rangers led the way as scouts and guides. Initially thrilled to have the veterans of many a Comanche battle with him, Taylor learned that the Rangers had little respect for rank and were all but uncontrollable.

In an impromptu Ranger Fourth of July celebration in Reynosa, General Taylor found the Texians washing down barbecued Mexican pigs and chickens with two buckets of

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whiskey. When he asked them how they came into possession of the animals, they said they had killed them accidentally while firing salutes in honor of the day. Calling them “licentious vandals,” he threatened to jail the entire regiment. He knew he would not, though, because they were the best fighters in his command. Moreover, he could not turn to their officers—Jack Hays, Ben McCulloch, Sam Walker, and the others were just like the men they led. If the Rangers were a problem for Taylor and, later, for Gen. Winfield Scott, they were more of a problem for the Mexicans, who called them *Los Diablos Tejanos*. Any death of a Ranger was avenged tenfold or more.

From the War for Independence on, Americans have come to the battlefield more as militia—citizen soldiers of a republic—than as regular army. This has meant that Americans have never failed to question their leadership, let alone die by the thousands without a compelling reason. Today, in defense of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, there are those who dismiss our losses by reminding Americans that fewer than 4,000 killed and 25,000 wounded are nothing compared with the more than 400,000 dead and more than a million wounded in World War II. This misses the point, however. The Japanese launched a sneak attack that killed some 2,400 Americans and wounded another 1,200 at Pearl Harbor (numbers that should be tripled to adjust for the differences in population from then to now). That is why Congress declared war on Japan the following day: We had to avenge Pearl Harbor; we had to go to war. There was but one dissenting vote in Congress—that of Montana’s Jeannette Rankin—and the American people were nearly unanimous in supporting the declaration.

Even during World War II, though, costly battles were questioned by the public, the press, Congress, and the troops themselves. Tarawa is but one example. The principal action at the Tarawa atoll was on the island of Betio. The Japanese commander there, Keijo Shibasaki, bragged that a million Marines in a hundred years could not capture the island. Shibasaki had good reason for his confidence. Betio, only two-and-a-half miles long and at no point more than a half-mile wide, was defended by some 5,000 Japanese troops, all in fortified positions. The Japanese had artillery pieces, including eight-inch guns they had taken from the British at Singapore, antiaircraft guns, cannons and mortars, coastal guns and machine guns, antitank guns, mines and tank traps, concrete blockhouses with walls five-feet thick, 500 pillboxes, and an airstrip. For its size, Betio was the most heavily fortified position in the world.

Moreover, the tides at Betio would rise and fall at uneven and unpredictable rates in a shallow lagoon. The reef lay 800 yards offshore. On the morning of November 20, 1943 (D-Day), high tide was supposed to provide a depth of five feet, barely enough for a fully loaded Higgins boat to clear the reef. There was no margin for error. Amphibious tractors, rather than Higgins boats, were needed, but the Marines had only 75 ready to go, and the Navy would not supply any more. In a planning session with the Navy, Marine Maj. Gen. Holland M. Smith—known as “Howlin’ Mad” Smith—exploded: “No amphtracs, no operation!” The Navy said it would supply more amphtracs, but only enough to ferry Marines from the Higgins boats should any of them run aground.

Early on the morning of D-Day, naval and aerial bombardment of Betio began. It looked impressive but did little damage to the Japanese, who were firmly entrenched in reinforced

concrete bunkers. Howlin’ Mad thought there should have been round-the-clock bombardment for a week. The bombardment was lifted well before H-Hour, 0900—giving the Japanese ample time to recover—and the first three waves of Marines, in amphtracs, headed for the beach. At 4,000 yards from shore, they were greeted by Japanese artillery shells, then by coastal guns and mortars at 2,000 yards. At 1,000 yards, the Japanese began raking the Marines with machine-gun fire. At 800 yards, the surviving amphtracs hit the reef, but their treads carried them up and over the coral and into the lagoon. Some amphtracs seemingly vaporized when hit by artillery shells. “It had been there,” described a Marine who watched an amphtrac take a direct hit, “and then suddenly it was not. In its place, for a split second, there was a blur in the air, and then there was nothing.”

Americans, as citizens of a free republic, have never believed that it is their duty to genuflect before superiors, to follow incompetent leaders blindly, to perish for secret designs, or to die in vain. That is for the subjects of an emperor, a czar, or a king.

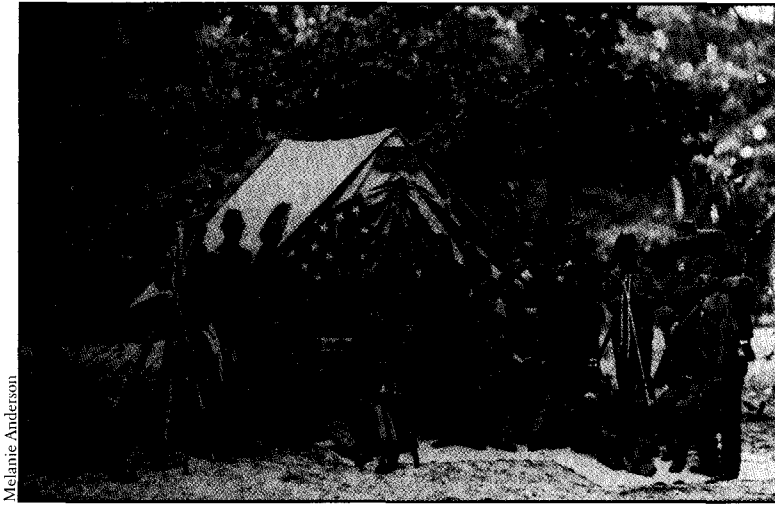
By 0910, the first amphtracs reached the beach. In the face of murderous fire, Marines threw themselves out of the amphtracs and scrambled across the sand to a low coconut-log seawall. The beachhead was but ten yards wide. Marine casualties mounted.

Meanwhile, the Higgins boats began hitting the reef and, unlike the amphtracs, ground to a halt. Marines could do nothing but leap from the foundering boats and push through the water toward shore. A Navy pilot overhead looked down and later recorded, “The water seemed never clear of tiny men, their rifles held over their heads, slowly wading beachward. . . . They kept falling, falling, falling . . . singly, in groups, and in rows. I wanted to cry.”

On shore, the Marines tenaciously clung to a narrow strip of beach. One group of Marines, led by Maj. Michael P. Ryan, got off the beach, overran several Japanese positions, and penetrated several hundred yards inland. Lacking flamethrowers and TNT satchel charges, and having no communication with other units, Ryan was eventually forced back inside Marine lines at the beach.

By midday, hundreds of Marines had been killed; hundreds more, wounded. Some units had lost most of their officers and senior NCOs. A few units had lost nearly everyone. At 1330, Howlin’ Mad, aboard *Pennsylvania*, received the ominous message, “Issue in doubt.” He immediately released the reserve. On Betio, 1st Lt. William Deane Hawkins, Sgt. William Bordelon, and Lt. Alexander Bonnyman were earning the Medal of Honor. None would live to receive it.

Fighting raged for three days before the 290 acres of hell that was Betio Island was declared secured by the Marines. The cost for such a small piece of real estate was stunning: The Marines had almost 1,100 killed and 2,300 wounded. The Japanese lost nearly every one of their 5,000 men.



At 1800 on D+3, Col. David Shoup, the Marine commander on Betio, was greeted by his relief, Col. Merritt "Red Mike" Edson. "Dave, you look like you've been hit by a tank," exclaimed Edson. Shoup was bleary-eyed, bloody, and bearded. He had gone 60 hours with almost no sleep, had refused evacuation despite being wounded, and was in the thick of battle from beginning to end. His leadership had helped keep the Marines from faltering. He was awarded the Medal of Honor. Shoup would end his career as a lieutenant general and commandant of the Marine Corps (1960-64). He became a sharp critic of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He knew something about losing good men.

Before, during, and after the battle, the necessity of capturing Tarawa was questioned. The slaughter was graphically described in newspapers across the nation. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* gave the battle front-page coverage. Holland Smith was quoted as saying that the assault at Tarawa was like Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. He later announced, "Tarawa was a mistake!" Edson remarked that the Marines "paid the stiffest price in human life per square yard." Col. Evans Carlson, leader of Carlson's Raiders, said he saw a hundred Marines killed in five minutes as they tried to get ashore on the second day. Gen. Douglas MacArthur wrote to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, "These frontal attacks by the Navy, as at Tarawa, are a tragic and unnecessary massacre of American lives." MacArthur later told President Franklin Roosevelt, "Frontal assault is only for mediocre commanders. Good commanders do not turn in heavy losses." Letters poured in to the President and to Adm. Chester Nimitz, commander of U.S. Naval forces in the Pacific. One woman accused Nimitz of "murdering my son." Several congressmen called for a special investigation. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was forced to call a press conference to defend the assault. He blamed "a sudden shift in the wind" for causing less water to cover the reef.

Col. Red Mike Edson was brought home by the Corps to defend the operation at Tarawa publicly. He was both a logical and ironic choice to do so. Edson had been awarded the Med-

al of Honor for his heroic defense of Bloody Ridge on Guadalcanal; his name was widely recognized; he was articulate; and he looked every inch a Marine. However, he had opposed the tactical plan to assault Tarawa during planning sessions and felt the Navy was not fully supporting the Marines. Nonetheless, Edson accepted the mission, and the Corps selected him for promotion to brigadier general.

Standing in front of a map of Betio Island in the office of the commandant in Washington, Edson addressed a large group of reporters. He said that the Marines had known about the unpredictable tides and, accordingly, had used amphtracs. Moreover, he claimed, most of the Marine casualties had occurred ashore in savage fighting that was a consequence of the fanatical Japanese. "I think the American people should realize the psychology of the people we are fighting—to make the campaigns as costly as possible because they don't believe we can take it," he concluded.

Edson's last line struck a chord. Newspapers and magazines began to describe Tarawa as a great victory that demonstrated the kind of courage and fortitude it would take to fight our way to Japan. *Time* declared that the name Tarawa would "stand beside those of . . . the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and Belleau Wood." Author William Manchester was a young Marine in the Pacific at the time. "The comparison of Tarawa with the great battles of the past," said Manchester, "didn't impress most of us; we saw it for what it was; wartime propaganda designed to boost the morale of subscribers, a sophisticated version of rhapsodies about the Glorious Dead, who had Given Their All, making the Supreme Sacrifice. Our sympathies were with those who protested the high casualties."

Some of the most poignant, powerful, and graphic wartime footage was shot by combat cameramen on Betio. The footage was edited and titled *With the Marines at Tarawa*. Because the carnage was so graphically captured, President Roosevelt hesitated in having it released for viewing in movie theaters. He asked Robert Sherrod, the famous war correspondent who had been with the Marines at Tarawa, what he thought. Sherrod told the President that Americans at home had little idea about the nature of the Japanese enemy and the horrors of the war in the Pacific, and that the documentary must be released. The President was convinced. *With the Marines at Tarawa* played to packed theaters and won the Academy Award for Best Documentary. Sales of war bonds soared. Enlistment in the Marine Corps dropped 35 percent.

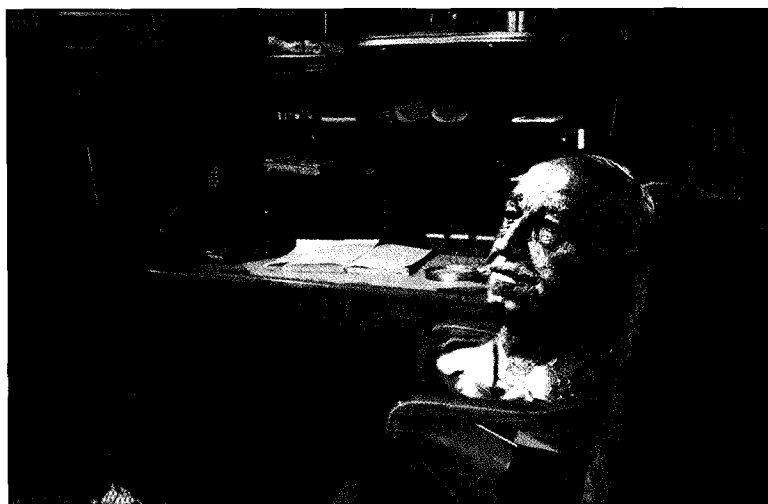
In 1948, Gen. Holland Smith's memoirs were published. He called Tarawa a mistake from beginning to end, a futile sacrifice, and "a terrible waste of life and effort." Others argued that there had to be a Tarawa—that the lessons learned there were invaluable. Smith said the lessons learned came at a price too dear and that Betio Island could have been leapfrogged as was done so many times before and after the campaign for Tarawa atoll.

When pundits today cavalierly remark that Americans stoically accepted enormous casualties during World War II, it might be good to remind them of the public reaction to Tarawa—and to many other battles during the war. Americans, as citizens of a free republic, have never believed that it is their duty to suffer misuse at the hands of the government, to genuflect before superiors, to follow incompetent leaders blindly, to perish for secret designs, or to die in vain. That is for the subjects of an emperor, a czar, or a king.

Portraits

Some Notes on the Poetry of Growing Old

by George Garrett



Years and years ago—it would have to have been in 1958-59, a year that my wife and I and our two young children were living in Rome—I wrote a little satirical poem about famous old poets and what’s to become of them. It was occasioned by a couple of things. First, there was the arrival at the library of the American Academy in Rome, where I was working, of an anthology of contemporary poetry, one in which, to my foolish and youthful dismay, I was not mentioned or included. That same day and place, I saw two bronze portraits done by one of the sculptors at the Academy, one of John Ciardi, the other of Archibald MacLeish. Both of these men were featured in the new anthology. I have no copy of my poem, only a loose memory of the last few lines (such as they were):

What finally becomes
of all these people,
people I mean
like John Ciardi
and Archibald MacLeish?
They get old.
They have their portraits
cast in bronze.

As best as I can recollect, it was never published anywhere. Which is just as well. It was disowned and discarded by myself, or perhaps some insistent editor or other, as being too “mean spirited” to see the light of day. Since then, for better and for worse, I have written a good many things that could justly be so classified. I never met MacLeish (1892-1982). Ciardi (1916-

86) and I were to become good friends later on. And, anyway, in today’s context of the new and unimproved illiteracy, a time described by a fellow poet (in part reacting to the dismal facts of illegal immigration and outsourcing) as “the age of broken English,” all of our old literary joys and woes seem to be more than slightly irrelevant.

Even so, we are not quite done with this story. Lest I should misread and misinterpret the lessons out of my own past, something happened during this writing (springtime 2007) that took me by surprise. One day, I heard from the widow of the sculptor Allen Harris that she was passing through Charlottesville and wanted, if possible, to stop by and drop off something for me. (I am, appropriately, housebound these days with a rich variety of geriatric ailments.) I had no idea what she might be bringing. A gifted and accomplished sculptor, Allen had been my friend in Rome, and I have written about him elsewhere. Jean, his widow, arrived and handed me a heavy box. She explained that it contained a work by Allen, one which she had found while clearing out his old barn/studio. Unpacked, it turned out to be a bronze cast, a portrait of myself as I was in 1958. Other than a wincing laugh at the irony of it all—live long enough, and you’ll discover that irony is the last infirmity of fading minds—I have no smart comment to make. Take it for what it’s worth, no more and no less.

Meanwhile, friends and enemies in the shrinking literary world, poets and critics alike, seem to be dedicated to trying to create a “legacy,” trying to determine whose names and works will be remembered and who shall be sent off with a one-way ticket to oblivion. We read the obituary pages, usually in vain, looking eagerly for the names of our rivals and always wondering how it is that the death of A earned respectful attention in the *New York Times* while B gets a brief nod and a misspelling of his name in the local newspaper.

A fictional character of mine, John Towne by name, seri-

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