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JOURNEY INTO THE PAST:



searching for war remains in the Gilbert & Ellice Islands

By WILLIAM H. BARTSCH, UNDP, Suva

Frozen into history at the moment it discharged its human and material cargo on the reef at Nanumea more than 30 years ago, this 300-foot LST is now reduced to a rusting hulk.

Tarawa! Makin! Abemama! Funafuti! Nukufetau! Nanumea!

Magic names out of the past for anyone personally involved in or—as in my case—fascinated by the Pacific War. Now, after months of frustrated attempts to visit these legendary spits of sand and coral in the vast Central Pacific, involving perfect coordination of air and sea transportation, all seemed in good order as I relaxed at my desk in Suva, Fiji.

I was to fly to Funafuti where, a few days later, the MV *Nivanga* would arrive and take me to Nukufetau, Nanumea, and Tarawa. From Tarawa I would be able to visit Abemama and Butaritari (known during the War as Makin to the Americans), to complete my adventure to the six atolls in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands that played a role in the War.

The ringing of the phone rudely woke me from my day-dreaming. It was Mike Drew, Marine Manager of GEIDA, Tarawa, whose ships were the only ones plying the Gilbert and Ellice route.

'Bill, the *Nivanga* has developed a leak and is coming directly to Suva to be slipped.'

My heart sank as I realized that my trip plans once again were down the drain. Would I **ever** be able to arrange this journey into the past?

It was Mike again.

'But you can go on my MV *Nareau*, which is leaving Suva shortly and should be in Funafuti a few days after you arrive . . .'

My spirits rose. The *Nareau* was a much smaller ship than the *Nivanga*, but it would make the trip possible again. It had been in slip in Suva and would now substitute for *Nivanga* on voyage 18/74.

Although the Gilbert and Ellice Islands lie only 600 to 1600 miles north of Fiji, my experience illustrates the difficulty in reaching any particular ones within a short time span, such as the three weeks at my disposal, on leave from my United Nations' post in Fiji. Tarawa was no problem, served as it is weekly by Air Pacific from Fiji; and Abemama and Butaritari, directly to the south and north of Tarawa, respectively, were also easily accessible, by twice-weekly Heron flights from Tarawa. But except for Funafuti—served only every other week from Fiji—there are no air connections with the Ellice Islands, obliging the would-be traveller to go by ships of GEIDA, which visit the individual islands in an irregular fashion.

The trip through the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was to be more than a nostalgic journey through history. Photos and notes taken during the trip were to constitute the raw material for

the initial chapter of a book I was preparing on the subject of the Pacific War as seen through the remains found today on the myriad atolls, islands, islets, and reefs that dot the Pacific and on which the Japanese and the Allies were locked in struggle 30 years ago.

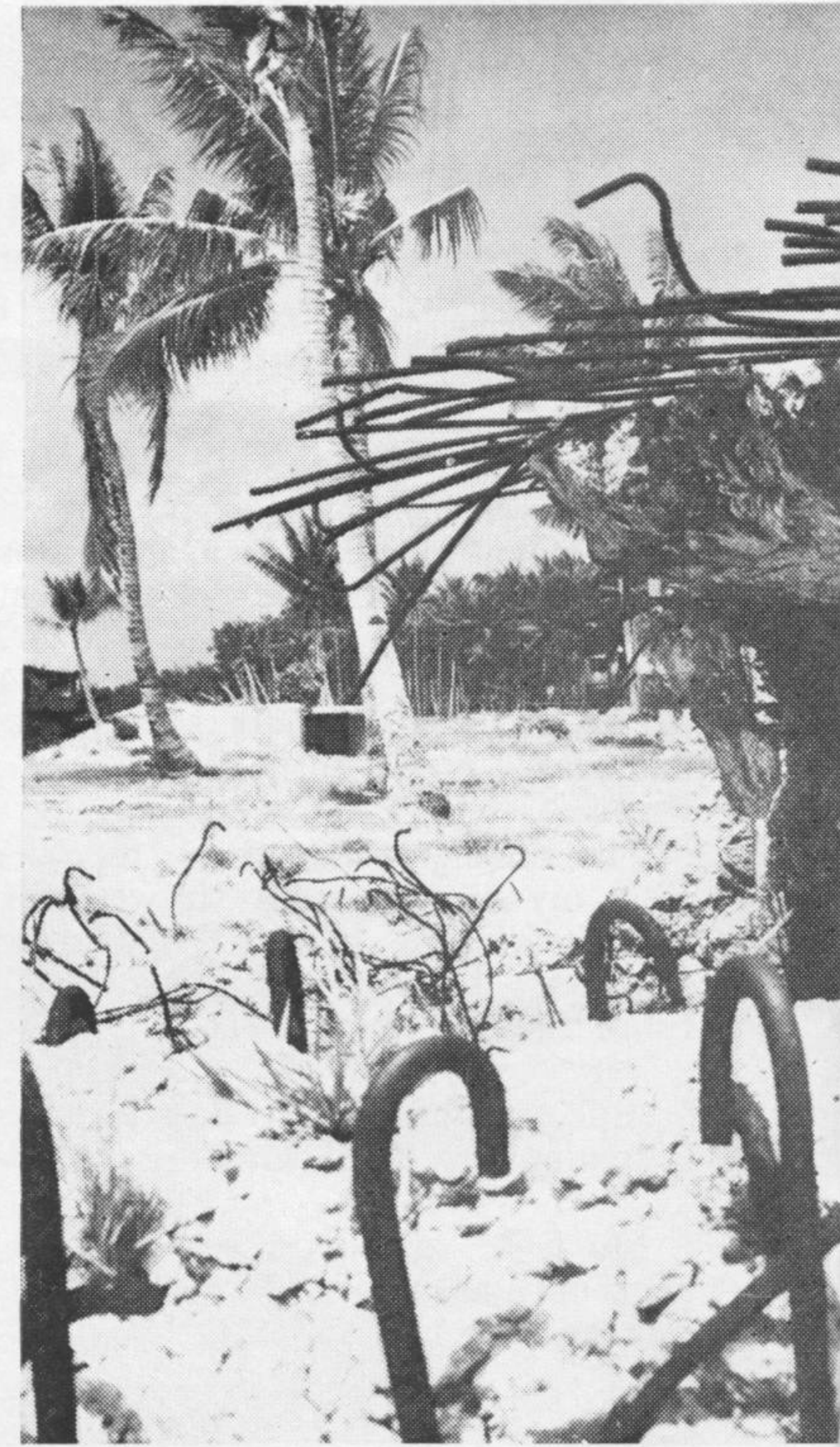
Funafuti, the administrative centre of the



Among the discoveries in the junk-littered 'borrow pits' of Funafuti Island was this still-intact propeller.

Ellice group, was easily reached after a three-hour, 700-mile flight from Suva on the Hawker-Siddeley 748 turbo-prop of Air Pacific. In a way, it was appropriate that the search should begin here, for it was from this atoll that the great Central Pacific drive of the Americans against the Japanese positions to the north began. In early October 1942, Funafuti was occupied by a US naval task force, in order to prepare it as a naval and air base for the northward push.

Its lagoon was both large and deep enough to accommodate more than 100 large ships; while at the main island of Funafuti a crushed



Left: Remarkably intact 30 years after it fought its last battle, this Japanese Type 95 light tank lies embedded in the sand on the lagoon beach of Betio. Centre: Iron reinforcement bars protrude at all angles from a blasted concrete bunker at Takarongo Point, Betio. Right: This British-made 8-inch coastal gun at Temakin Point, Betio, still maintains its threatening mien 30 years after it was knocked out by US naval bombardment.

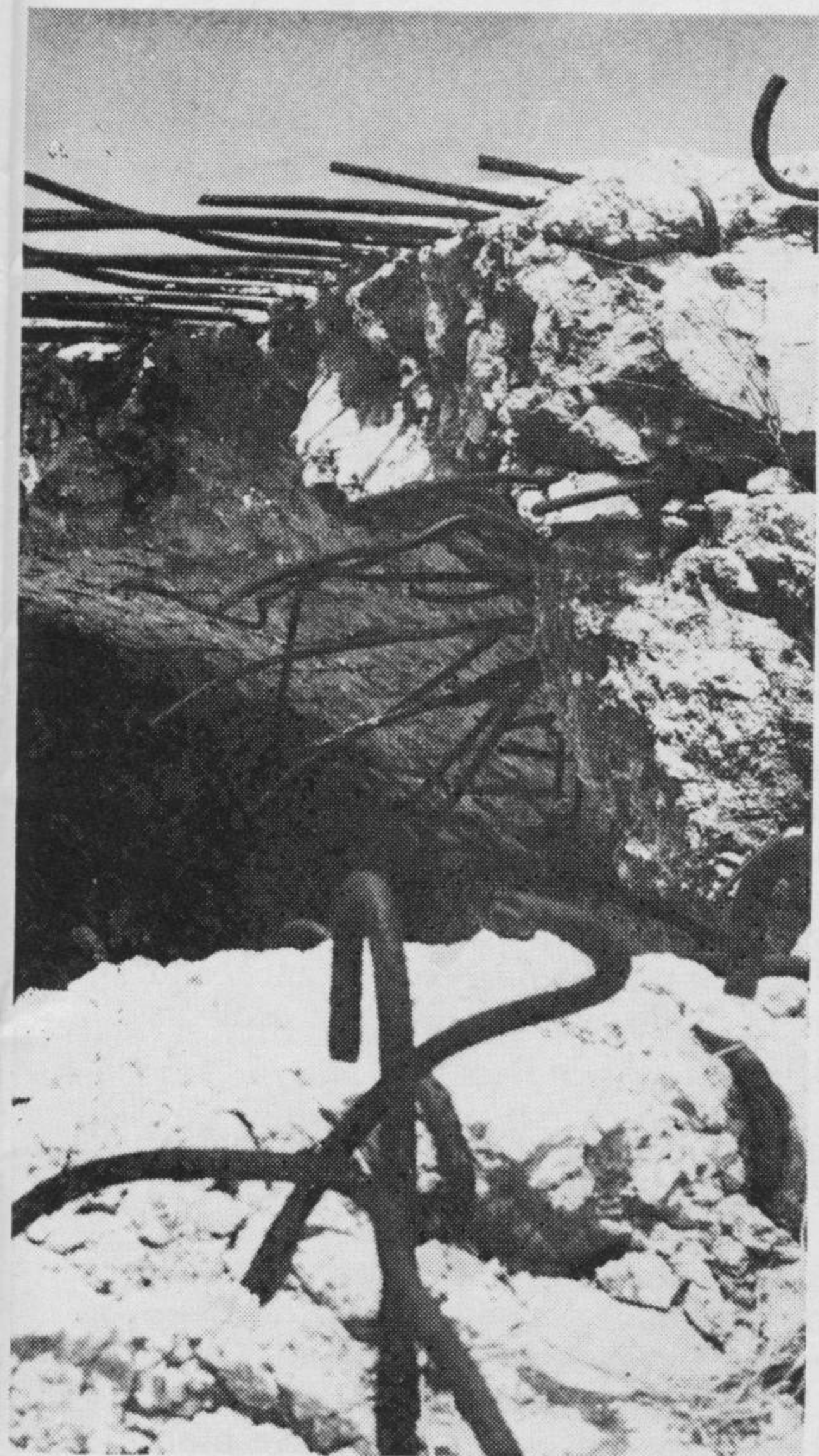
coral airstrip was rapidly constructed that could eventually support four-engine bombers on reconnaissance and bombing missions against Japanese-held Nauru, Tarawa, and the Marshalls. It was apparently not until six months later that the Japanese discovered the Americans had set up a base here, since the first of their three bombing attacks against Funafuti Island did not take place until the early morning of 21 April 1943, when two B-24 Liberator bombers were destroyed and five US servicemen killed.

Today, the most important remains of the war on Funafuti is the airfield itself, extending 5200 feet across Funafuti Island. After the War it was replanted with coconut palms, but in 1962 they were chopped down and the airstrip put into service again to accommodate flights to and from Fiji. It constitutes the main link with the outside world for the atoll's 900 inhabitants.

There is little in the way of military wreckage on Funafuti today. The noteworthy exception

is the twisted remains of a twin-engined Army C-47 transport in a mangrove swamp a few metres to the east of the airfield, a victim of the Japanese air attack of 17 November 1943. If it were possible to dive deep enough, the enterprising diver could also probably find the two B-24 bombers that fell into the ocean just beyond the reef when they reportedly took off overloaded with bombs on an absolutely still night in June 1943.

The unusual feature of Funafuti, in terms of its historical links with the War, is the existence of lengthy 'borrow pits' on the main island. In order to provide fill for the construction of the airfield, huge quantities of coral were excavated at the north and south ends of the island, creating deep and wide pits. These constituted convenient dumping areas for the morass of boiler tanks, vehicle chassis, tyres, spare parts, etc. no longer wanted by the US forces when they withdrew from the atoll after the War. Today, this junk still lies rusting in its final resting place, disfiguring an otherwise attractive atoll.



In connection with 'Operation Galvanic'—the seizure of the Gilberts—the Americans needed to expand their Ellice air base, and in August 1943 occupied Nukufetau and Nanumea to the north. US Navy Seabees quickly constructed a bomber and fighter airstrip on each, from which attacks were mounted against the enemy in the Gilberts, the Marshalls, and on Nauru.

We reached Nukufetau, only 43 miles to the northwest of Funafuti, in the early morning, following departure from Funafuti at midnight. To go ashore on Motulalo Island, the site of the US wartime airstrips, we took an open launch across the lagoon, as the *Nareau* had anchored just inside the lagoon and Motulalo lies on the other side of the atoll.

On reaching the island, we discovered we were the only people there; Motulalo is uninhabited and serves only as a coconut plantation for the 600 inhabitants on the other islands of the atoll. After a ten-minute walk in searing heat down the island, we found the old air-

strips, still in good condition despite 30 years of non-use, though largely overgrown with salt bush and coconut palms. We found no trace of wreckage, however, despite the volume of business that these airstrips handled during 1943/44: up to 34 four-engined bombers and 45 fighter planes were based here.

Our efforts were rewarded about 200 metres above the beacon on the northern end of the island, known as Kongoloto Motulalo. There, about 150 metres inland from the lagoon, lies the spectacular wreckage of a B-24 Liberator bomber strewn over a wide area. We found individual pieces of the wreckage, partially covered with bush, at short distances from each other: two engines with propellers, two engines without propellers, the nose turret, part of the fuselage, both wings, and a rusted machine gun alongside spent and unspent ammunition.

The scene attests to the violence of the crash when the four-engined bomber, most likely returning from a raid, fell a few miles short of the bomber strip.

Two mornings later, the *Nareau* reached Nanumea, the northernmost Ellice atoll, after brief stops at Vaitupu and Niutao. Even from some distance out it was possible to see Nanumea's best-known war remains: the intact LST (Landing Ship, Tank) stuck on the ocean reef near the entrance to the lagoon where it was beached 31 years ago with a load of equipment for the newly occupied base.

To enter the lagoon, one must go by small boat through a narrow reef passage blasted by US forces after they occupied the atoll in late August 1943, since there is no natural reef entrance. The passage must be navigated at optimum tidal condition, as boats are easily capsized if the tide is running out. Fortunately, *Nareau's* arrival had been well-timed, and we navigated the 300-metre passage, coral debris heaped high on both sides, without mishap.

A resident American anthropologist husband-and-wife team, earlier informed of our impending arrival, had arranged for a guide to take us to the LST and other war remains on Nanumea. A few minutes later we were wading knee-deep several hundred metres into the ocean out to the LST. Earlier, we had heard that this landing ship was deliberately run onto the reef, as there was no other way to get its cargo of vitally required anti-aircraft guns and other military equipment onto the atoll in the absence of a reef passage. Frank Pasefika, who was the senior Ellice Islander in the Colonial Service at the time, disembarked from the LST and urged the local population to help land all the material and equipment for the defence of Nanumea, which lay only 550 miles south of Japanese-held Tarawa and within easy range of Japanese bombers.

Venturing inside the rusting hulk of the LST was a hazardous experience. The 300-foot ship afforded only treacherous footing, with gaping holes and beams eaten away with rust during its 30 years on the reef. Its interior yielded nothing but bare partitions.

Other than the LST, the most interesting war relic on Nanumea lies just past the airstrip on the other side of Nanumea Island. This is a Douglas SBD-5 Dauntless dive bomber of the US Marine Corps, minus its wings, engine, and cockpit instruments. Its history is unknown, but numerous bullet holes in the fuselage suggest it may have been shot up in a bombing raid against Japanese-held islands to the north. An identification plate, found in the cockpit, indicates the plane's model, serial number, and delivery date. (Subsequent research based on this information has traced the aircraft to Marine Scout Bombing Squadron 331, based on Nukufetau in 1943, lost on 27 November 1943.)

As is the case for Nukufetau, the two war-time airstrips on Nanumea are still in good

condition, though overgrown in places. Except for the Dauntless, no other aircraft wreckage was found near the airstrips, although the middle section of the fuselage of a B-24 Liberator was found lying on its side about 30 feet off the road leading to the airstrips.

From Nanumea, the little *Nareau* covered the 550 miles to Tarawa in two and a half days flat, under the urging of Captain Loto Pasefika, the only Ellice Islander captain of a GEIDA vessel. It was Loto's father, Frank, who had participated in the Allied cause so actively during the War and who had given me a first-hand account of the war years in the Ellice during my stay on Funafuti.

It is Tarawa, of course, that stirs the imagination more than any Central Pacific atoll. Would I be able to link this place that existed in name only with the physical reality that now slowly revealed itself to us as the *Nareau* edged closer and closer to the lagoon entrance and to the islet of Betio, which gave the atoll its place in history?

One's first impression of Betio is not that of a battleground of history, but of teeming humanity, at least compared with the Ellice Islands. Indeed, statistics reveal that there are 14 times more persons per square mile on Betio than on the most crowded Ellice island! Overcrowding is the most serious problem of the islet, on whose one-half square mile live more than 6000 people.

I was not staying on Betio, but on the adjoining island of Bairiki, the centre of Government administration for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, reached in half an hour by a ferry leaving Betio every other hour. With Tarawa's war remains almost exclusively located on Betio, this ferry received considerable business from me during the five days spent on Tarawa.

Although Betio can be circumnavigated along its beaches by foot in an hour by anyone able to stand the heat, blinding sun and glare of the sandy islet, it was still no mean feat to absorb this treasure chest of war remains during the short time allotted to the task. At every corner the eye is struck by some rusting or crumbling instrument of war left by the adversaries and today ignored by the locals. Virtually each item fits into the mosaic of the epic battle fought here over three days in November 1943, when more than 1000 US Marines and virtually all of the Japanese defending force of 5000 men lost their lives.

The capture of Tarawa had been vital for US strategy in turning the tide of war. It was necessary to eliminate it as a threat to the US lifeline to Australia and New Zealand in those uncertain days of 1943, and it was wanted as a stepping-stone base for the seizure of the

Marshall Islands. Tarawa held the only Japanese airfield in the Gilberts, from which bombing raids had been harassing US forces to the south in the Ellice.

Since a good part of the total remains of the Battle of Tarawa lie off the lagoon and ocean beaches, I had to time my daily searches with low tide conditions, for at high tide most items were not visible. Tidal conditions had been critical for the success of the US landings in 1943 too, but on the day of the initial landing in November 1943 the tide was lower than expected, and all the landing ships became stuck on the reef; only the tracked landing vehicles (LVTs, or amtracs) could make it over the reef to the beaches, if not stopped by the murderous fire of the Japanese shore defences.

Today there are about 20 rusting remnants of amtracs from 100 to 500 metres off the lagoon beaches on the western ('Green Beach') and northern ('Red Beach') coasts of Betio. It is hard to recognize them today for what they were, except for their caterpillar tracks. The two I found off Temakin Point on Green Beach were among the 90 that were lost of the 125 brought to Tarawa.

Unfortunately, I was six months too late to experience the unique find of another amtrac on Betio. For 31 years the gun mount of an unknown type of vehicle had been sticking up in the back yard of a Gilbertese about 200 metres inland from Red Beach. During work on the construction of Betio's new water pipeline in May 1974, it constituted an obstacle in the path of the pipeline, and was unearthed. To the amazement of all, the excavation revealed an amtrac in remarkably good condition, along with the skeletons of two US Marines with—in mint condition, preserved in the diesel oil that flooded the amtrac from its punctured fuel tank—four cases of 50 and 30 calibre ammunition, a box of spare parts, even the victims' toothbrushes, shaving cream, razors, and aspirin!

Curiously enough, the amtrac today is back in its original position; it was decided to rebury it and build the pipeline around it: the gun mount once again marks its location.

Red Beach also revealed a Sherman tank half submerged at low tide in the sand, the only example of a US tank in evidence today on Betio. (Another met an ignominious fate: it was used as filler in the construction of the new mole at Betio.)

The remains of Japanese tanks are in greater profusion. I found traces of six of the seven Type 95 light tanks the Japanese had used to defend the islet in varying stages of deterioration. The best-preserved example lies on its side at the eastern end of Red Beach. Although it is missing its track on one side, it is virtually

intact, complete with 7.7 and 37 mm turrets. Today local children use it as a diving platform at high tide.

A few metres down and inland from this tank one can see the still-blackened, two-storey concrete bunker of Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki, the commandant of all Japanese forces on Betio. Huge holes on the lagoon side of the bunker attest to the damage inflicted by point-blank shelling of a US destroyer, but it was necessary to drive a tank into the entrance and fire directly into the bunker to dislodge its 300 defenders, including Admiral Shibasaki, who had boasted that Tarawa could not be taken by a million men in a hundred years. To penetrate the bunker today is almost as difficult as it proved for US Marines, though for a different reason: human excrement everywhere makes exploring in the darkness a perilous business; the smell alone is sufficient to deter the most determined.

The best-known relics of the Battle of Tarawa are the four 8-inch coastal defence guns that command Temakin and Takarongo Points at the western and eastern extremities of Betio, respectively. Except for the lower gun at Temakin, which has fallen into the sea from its foundation, these guns, purchased from England some time between 1905 and 1930 (and *not*, as often held, captured by the Japanese at Singapore in 1942), and their mounts are in good condition and dominate their localities. They were emplaced by the Japanese to defend the ocean beach, from which direction it was expected the Americans would attack, and in the event proved relatively easy targets for US bombardment. One of the pair at Takarongo Point has lost the end of its barrel, the result of a direct hit by US naval forces which softened up Betio before the Marines landed.

All along the ocean side of Betio, many of the strong fortifications built by the Japanese are still in evidence today. In addition to the 8-inch guns, the defenders had placed concrete tetrahedron blocks in the shallows to divert landing craft into the Japanese lines of fire, and some of these are still in place about half-way down the beach. At least two other coastal defence guns emplaced by the Japanese—these are 130 mm—are still in their original position just below the cemetery, though they have fallen from their twin mount.

Many half-blasted, bomb-proof shelters stretch down the shore, and at least two of the movable metal pillboxes are found just inland today. Gone, however, are the smaller calibre field gun and machine gun nests that dotted the coastline, as well as the log barricade at the shoreline that contributed to making Betio the most fortified small island in the Pacific War.

Human remains are only exceptionally found

on Betio today. The bodies of the 946 Marines who lost their lives were either buried at sea or sent back to the US after the War, though—as in the case of the discovery of the two in the amtrac in May 1974—the remains of the 88 missing are from time to time discovered. More common is it to find the bones of some of the thousands of Japanese defenders reportedly still lying under the sands.

One could have spent more time profitably on Tarawa, but air schedules dictated three-day sojourns on Butaritari, 100 miles to the north, and Abemama, 90 miles to the south-east. Each was occupied by the Japanese in 1941-42 and wrested from them at the time of the capture of Tarawa, though with considerably less loss of life.



Only the mid-fuselage and inner wing sections remain intact today of the US Corsair fighter wreck lying in a coconut grove near Tanimainiku village, Abemama.

Kava Konrote, the pilot of the four-engine De Havilland Heron of Air Pacific, when informed of the purpose of my trip to Butaritari, invited me to occupy the co-pilot's seat for a better view of the atoll's lagoon and, hopefully,

of the three Kawanishi 'Emily' flying boats reportedly lying submerged there in shallow water from the time, in 1943, when they met their fate in a US carrier attack. Although we dropped low and searched the lagoon intently for signs of these three Japanese planes on our approach to the airfield after the 50-minute flight, we could see nothing that suggested their presence.

Once aground, there was no problem locating the fourth 'Emily' known to exist on Butaritari. On the motor-bike trip to the Government rest house, we found it lying on the beach near King's Wharf, just to the right of the road. Today all that remains of this plane is half of the fuselage and its wings (minus engines); the local people through the years have removed chunks of it for their own purposes, including the fabrication of aluminium combs.

As suggested by the presence of these huge, four-engined aircraft, Butaritari was a Japanese flying boat base, the only one in the Gilbert Islands. The garrison maintained on the atoll was very small—only 43 men—after occupation in December 1941, but following the spectacular hit-and-run Marine Corps raid in August 1942 it was increased to 400 men. It took three and a half days for two units of the US Army's 27th Division to occupy the atoll in November 1943, although the American troops outnumbered the defenders by 17 to one.

What war remains exist today on Butaritari are found in the 3000-metre stretch of Butaritari Island between the wartime eastern and western tank traps, where the Japanese defences were concentrated. The most interesting finds—other than the 'Emily'—include a Japanese pillbox covered with sand and grass (today occupied by a big black pig hostile to any closer examination of its quarters), a concrete bunker that must have served as a bomb shelter for the Japanese defenders, several chassis of an unknown type of vehicle (clearly stamped 'Kato Works, Shinagawa, Tokyo' in English). In a nearby junk pile is the live warhead of a 14-inch US naval shell fired by one of the three battleships that bombarded the island in November 1943 (detonated one month after my departure), and the skeleton of a US PBV Catalina flying boat on the grounds of the Catholic Mission.

After the Americans occupied Butaritari—or Makin, as they erroneously called it (perhaps because the smaller island immediately to the northeast is called Little Makin)—they used it as yet another air base for bombing attacks on the Marshalls to the north. Star-mann Field, constructed on Butaritari Island some distance to the northeast from the Japanese defence positions, is still in service today, though only about one-half of its 7000-foot runway is operational, all that is required to get the Heron airborne.

After the trip to Butaritari, Abemama remained the only unexplored atoll of the three-week journey. The 'Island of Moonlight'—reputed the most beautiful of the Gilberts—proved the least rewarding of the six visited.

Although O'Hare Field, built by the Americans shortly after occupation of the atoll in November 1943 against only slight resistance by its 25 defenders, was the best big bomber airstrip in the Gilberts, no trace of its great activity was found during a detailed search of the airfield area. However, cycling through the village of Tabiang, some distance to the south of the airfield, I did discover a wing and an engine of a B-24 that must have been a crash victim of the War.

About one and a half miles down the dusty road from the eastern end of O'Hare (now Abemama) Field, near the village of Tanimainiku, I found the wreckage of a US Marine Corps (or Navy?) Corsair fighter plane, broken in half at the cockpit and missing the outer sections of its distinctive inverted gull wings. How this aircraft ended up on Abemama is a mystery; no Marine Corps fighter unit is known to have been based on the atoll. Unlike the SBD-5 on Nanumea, no identifying numbers were found on the Corsair that could have allowed us to trace its history.

Before going to Abemama, I had heard of the existence of the remains of a US under-

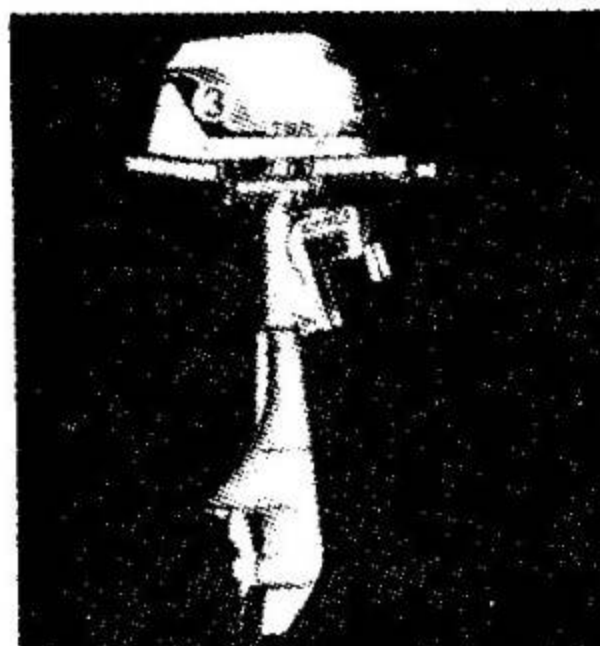
ground radio receiving station, but initial inquiries among the local population produced negative results. Eventually, two workmen at the Seventh Day Adventist Mission on the island were able to lead me to its location; they had played near it as children 30 years ago. The station turned out to be a snake-like corrugated iron structure covered with sand and growth about 120 feet long. It had caved in in several places, but still could be explored inside. No trace of its wartime activity was found.

The radio station was the last of the many relics of the War in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands I found on my trip. Many—particularly those on Tarawa—are already known to travellers to these islands, but I believe mine must have been the first systematic attempt to locate and identify individual items on all six atolls.

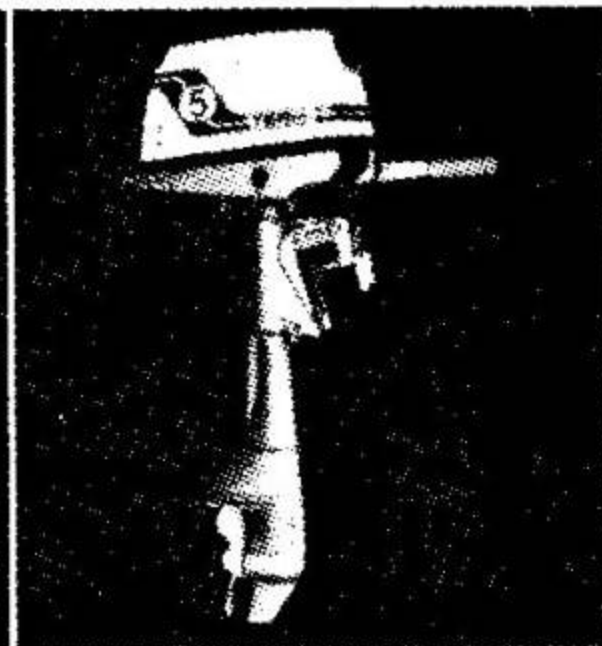
A day after returning to Tarawa from Abemama, the Air Pacific BAC-111 jet was winging me home to Fiji over the 1500 miles of the route it had taken me three weeks to cover in my searches. As I peered down on that endless expanse of ocean from five miles up, it was hard to believe that 30 years ago men were locked in mortal combat on those pinpoints of coral reef and white sand known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Yet so it was, and the signs of it still lie there for all to see. □

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