

OP REVIEW BY THE SECRETARY OF WAR
AT PRESS CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 25, 1943

Box 22
Folder 3
Item 29
P 1

To Americans, the most interesting war news of the week was the landing of our troops in the Gilbert Islands. We are now firmly established on three small groups of islets. Under the command of Admiral Nimitz, Army and Marine units have crashed into a portion of the island barriers which constitute the outer perimeter of the Japanese defenses.

Landings at Tarawa and Makin were made last Sunday and at Abemana a day later. The heaviest resistance was encountered at Tarawa, where the Second Marine Division had some tough fighting and considerable casualties before securing and consolidating their beachheads. Fighting at this point is about over, with practically all enemy resistance overcome. The landing at Abemana was also made by Marines without much difficulty. Farther north at Makin the 27th Infantry Division, a New York National Guard organization, completed the conquest of the island group in about 48 hours. Included among combat teams which overran the Japanese positions was that of the 165th Infantry, formerly better known as the "Fighting 69th," of New York, a regiment with long traditions of victories on many fronts. Unfortunately, the gallant leader of this great regiment, Colonel James Gardiner Conroy, was killed at Makin as he led a charge on the enemy positions. I might say that that news came to me with personal sense of loss, because some two or three years ago when I last inspected that division, I met Colonel Conroy and was very much impressed with his effectiveness and with resulting good conduct of the troops under his command.

Our success in the Gilberts is largely due to the fine support provided by naval and air units. The enemy attempted unsuccessfully to launch air counter-attacks, but they were beaten off. The Japanese navy failed to appear. Japanese ground troops have been fighting stubbornly, in spite of heavy casualties, particularly on Tarawa, where the Japanese garrison was much larger than on the other islands. The enemy mortar and machine gun fire was heavy and persistent.

Operations in the Gilberts, in conjunction with our offensives in the Solomons and New Guinea areas, constitute converging attacks on the outer arc of the defenses of Japan's recent conquests. Our successes thus far have opened relatively small cracks in these defenses. We hope these cracks will develop into breaches through which our forces may move to assault the inner and more important bastions. It is well to note that we are still a long way from Tokyo or Manila. As a matter of fact, New Guinea and Bougainville are much closer to Japan and the Philippines than are the Gilberts. But the Gilberts and other atolls in the Pacific are of indispensable value as stepping stones on the way to Asia and as fields for land-based planes used as air cover for shipping and fleet operations.

The accelerated pace of our Pacific operations indicates our growing strength in the vast area extending from the Aleutians to Australia, and embracing countless islands of the sea. Because of the vast distances involved, the supply of our widely dispersed forces in the Pacific has been exceedingly difficult. However, with the steady increase in available shipping and naval escorts, the lessening of the submarine menace, and the marked strengthening of our own fleet, it should soon be possible to step up the rate of our shipments to trans-Pacific areas.

In the Solomons Sea, in the Southwest Pacific, our light naval vessels have just scored another signal success. They intercepted six Japanese destroyers between New Britain and Bougainville and sank four of them, while damaging another. None of our vessels was lost.

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On Bougainville, the most important island of the Solomons still occupied by the Japanese, our Marine and Army units are steadily enlarging their bridgehead at Empress Augusta Bay. Our army, Navy and allied flyers rule the sky over the islands and have rendered five enemy airfields practically useless. They are also patrolling the shipping lanes so as to cut to the minimum the supplies reaching the substantial Japanese garrison on the island.

Box 22
Folder 3
Item 24
P 2

In northern New Guinea, Australian troops have advanced through thick jungle country to attack a Japanese pocket of resistance at Sattelberg, near Finschhafen. Close support of ground forces is being furnished by Allied air units.

Throughout the South and Southwest Pacific, Allied flyers have ranged far out over the ocean to attack enemy shipping and to raid Japanese airfields on the various islands. Since November 1, it has been reported that Japan has lost approximately 74 ocean-going naval and merchant vessels, as well as some 553 planes. During this period we lost one destroyer-transport and 91 planes in this theater of war.

In Burma, there has been desultory ground fighting with relatively small forces engaged; while in central China, Japan has started another offensive in the Tungting Lake area. Some headway has been made by the enemy in the general direction of Chungking, but this advance has not yet assumed serious proportions. American airmen have rendered close and effective support to the Chinese troops. They have also attacked Japanese installations in China and Burma and enemy shipping along the China coast.

On the eastern front, German troops made a strong counterattack on the apex of the Soviet salient west of Kiev. The Germans have recaptured Zhitomir and have made moderate gains east of that important city. Thus far, the German successes appear to be of a local character, and a major counteroffensive appears unlikely. Elsewhere, the Soviet troops are continuing their aggressive operations.

Winter has set in throughout the long eastern front, with fresh snow in most sectors. While Russian winters are a severe handicap to military operations, the Red Army has demonstrated that it can withstand the cold weather better than the Germans. It would not be at all surprising if the Soviet offensive continued throughout much of the winter.

On the Italian front little progress was made during the week. Foul weather, with heavy rains, seas of mud, rivers in flood, and bad roads have greatly restricted all military operations. In the Eighth Army sector, reinforced British troops made some slight advances and succeeded in getting additional patrols across the Sangro River. American troops of the Fifth Army ran into heavy resistance in the mountains. Enemy reinforcements have reached the battle line, and a stiffening of the opposition has resulted.

Casualties of American troops of General Clark's Fifth Army from the landing at Salerno on September 9 to date are 1,613 killed, 6,361 wounded and 2,685 missing in action—a total of 10,659. Casualties among British elements of the Fifth Army were slightly less.

General Clark reports that the 100th Infantry Battalion, composed of Americans of Japanese ancestry, continues to make a highly creditable combat record. These soldiers are well-trained and well-disciplined and fight with confidence and resolution. They are particularly skillful in scouting and patrolling. They are cheerful and uncomplaining, and their rate of illness is practically nil. Their casualties to date in the Italian campaign are 34 killed, 130 wounded, and 5 missing.

Adverse weather has prevented full-scale air support for our ground troops in Italy. However, our bombers and long-range fighters have made several attacks on strategic objectives in the Mediterranean area.

After fierce fighting, the Aegean islands of Leros and Samos have been captured by the enemy. Several thousand Germans landed on these islands and attacked British and Italian troops. German forces, heavily supported by aircraft, finally overcame the resistance of the defenders. Indications are that most of the Allied troops on Samos were evacuated.

During the week the Royal Air Force made three heavy attacks on Berlin. In these raids several thousand tons of high explosives were dropped on the German capital by large numbers of British bombers. Reports of these raids are still incomplete, but there are indications that the damage inflicted was particularly heavy. Several hundred American bombers, escorted by large numbers of fighters, attacked industrial plants in the Ruhr Valley. They did this in daylight without losing a single plane. Other raids were made by American and British planes on enemy airfields in France, without encountering serious air opposition.

END

-3-

Press Branch
Bureau of Public Relations
November 25, 1943

Box 22
Folder 3
Item 29
P 3