



### A KORERO Report

IN DECEMBER, 1941, a young officer of the Colonial Administration left Tarawa one day ahead of the invading Japanese. He had been in command of a Government vessel which maintained contact between the scattered islands of the Gilbert Group and knew those waters like the back of his hand, especially around Betio. He came back to Betio twice. The first time he brought his vessel to within some 50 miles of the island and picked up a number of other officials who had escaped from the Japanese and headed south in a small boat. The second time was two years later when he led the U.S. Marines in through the surrounding reef to recapture Betio for the United Nations.

After his escape from the Gilberts he joined the R.N.Z. Navy and was commissioned in the rank of lieutenant. Some successful anti-submarine work in the Pacific was followed by a call to confer with Marine Corps officers to whom the recapture of the Gilberts had

been assigned. Because of his special knowledge of these waters he was asked to take the first destroyer in to Betio.

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Tarawa is a group of small islands. Betio is one of them. As an American report has put it: "As real estate the Gilberts aren't much to look at." Betio itself is about 2 miles long by 800 yards wide, and is nowhere more than 10 ft. above sea-level. Before the war there was a hospital there and administrative buildings and a staff of about twenty people. When the Marines arrived they found blockhouses with walls 15 ft. thick and a suicide garrison of 6,000 Jap. defenders. The capture of that tiny atoll cost the Marines over 1,000 dead and over 2,500 wounded. In the words of the New Zealand officer, "they fought and died like heroes."

The landing was made on 20th November. For a week previous the American Air Force had rained 1,000 tons of bombs on Betio. The landing itself was covered