Chapter 17

The Day Before

My name is Walter Baker. I have gray hair and brown eyes. I was 65 in 1943.

The air was filled with the smell of smoke from cigars and the tang of whiskey permeated the air from the various glasses. Every high ranking official was gathered in the HQ to plan our next invasion on this island hopping campaign. Being a Lieutenant General, most of the other men around the room expect me to smoke and drink with the rest of them. However, I promised my wife not to drink or smoke unless occasion called for it such as a great victory. Instead, we were planning the murder of so many young lives for both sides of this campaign.

Every invasion, every campaign, and every battle, I think of the choices and decisions I have made to defeat our enemy. I think of every live I had changed or ruined from this war dragging on and on. For almost every man that has fallen under my command, I write a condolence letter to that brave man’s family.

It’s because of my family that I do all this for others. My wife, Nancy, is my rock and my soul that helps carry me forward in this war. I do not want more families to suffer which is why I carry on instead of retiring like most would at my age. Our five children are another reason why I fight on for my country and home in Salt Lake City, Utah. And every time I look at one of my seven grandchildren, I think of the future I am trying to build for them. This war will not last forever as long as I have some control over the fighting and planning.

Which bring me back to the others in the room, planning for the upcoming invasion in November of Makin and Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands. From intelligence gathered, there are only about 800 men defending the rather weak Makin Island. However on Tarawa, it’s a totally different story with about 5,000 men guarding the island from possible invasions. During these short strategy meetings, all the generals, myself included, agreed to stick to the original plans and strategies that have been working with most of our other campaigns.

On the morning of November 20, the invasion commenced as scheduled with hundreds of our troops proceeding to land on the beaches of Makin and Tarawa. Some days, I wish to be young again and storm up the beaches to defeat the enemy. Some days, however, I like to sit in HQ and listen to the reports coming in over the radio. But some days, I feel I wish I could do both as if only to help at the fullest. Today was one of those days where I wish I could do both.

On the island of Makin, the battle did not take fourth right away as was predicted by most of the intelligence officers. Instead, there were neither defenders nor resistance along the coasts which made establishing a beachhead quite easy. With the Japs having no boats or planes on this island, their resistance would have been laughable at best anyway. For most of the day, I felt sure about our place on the island and the men I put there. Later on, reports coming in said of the strong defenses as they moved to the interior of the island. As discouraging as this sounded to me, they reported that all was well and under control here. I wish it was that easy for the men on the other island.

On the island of Tarawa, the defenders and resistance told a very different story than of their neighboring island. Right away as my men made their way up the beaches and coast, the enemy put up fierce resistance and heavy fighting. The reports came in of much higher casualty rates than what was being reported to us by the other island. I wished nothing more than to be able to be young again and fight with my fellow soldier down at that island.

By the end of all fighting on the 23rd, the Battle of Makin showed that 395 of the Japanese defenders had died with only 66 American casualties. The Battle of Tarawa should increases in its number casualties. For the Japanese, there were a total of 4,690 dead defenders and 1,000 Americans had died. Though I never wished for any soldier to die, these numbers were not as discouraging like most other battles of the Pacific Theater. Our next objective, the Marshall Islands for the start of the new year.

Having planned since the end of the Gilbert Islands campaign, we were ready to invade Kwajalein and Majura Atolls in the Marshall Islands. On January 31, divisions of men captured the beaches and coasts of the islands. According to intelligence reports 8,000 Japanese men were defending the island but this seemed not to matter because the resistance had been very light. Even so, almost all of the defenders had died rather than surrender and become prisoners. From February 1-7, we had captured all of Kwajalein and Majura Atolls and ended all fighting with in those areas. The next objective: Burma.

Burma is an important area for us to take and the jurisdiction of this island in the Marshall Islands fall under General Wingate and all of his men. Even so, I received reports of plans from various other officials. On February 24, a group of his called Merrill’s Marauders began their ground campaign in Northern Burma. It did not take them long to gain enough control to set up bases of operation and planning other activities. By March 5, General Wingate’s groups began their operations behind some Japanese lines in Burma. Their efforts seemed to be paying off.

The war was starting to look really good for our side, but it seemed to discourage the Japanese armies greatly. On June 5, 1944, the first mission of a group of B-29 Superfortresses took off on its mission as 77 of them bombed Japanese railway facilities at Bangkok, Thailand. We were making more ground and starting to cut off the Japanese supplies to win the war. I was 65 years old. Even though we were doing well, I received reports that something big was going to happen the next day.