

Utah National Guard HISTORY HIGHLIGHT



August 2023

Operation Flintlock, 145th FA, 1944

“Every member in the 145th Field Artillery Battalion should feel proud of their record. You are a superior battalion, proven in battle and I wish to take this opportunity to express my extreme satisfaction over your work in the Kwajalein Operation.” Brigadier General Arnold, 1944.

Following the battles of Coral Sea and Midway in World War II, the Japanese advance in the Pacific was thwarted. As the tide turned, the U.S. began to implement the “island hopping” strategy, which was to bypass more heavily defended islands in the Pacific in favor of invading lightly defended islands on its way to Japan. This strategy gave the U.S. staging points, ever closer to the enemy’s mainland, and left the Japanese defenders on the islands more heavily fortified cutoff from resupply and aid.

This new campaign began with the invasions of Guadalcanal and New Guinea in August in 1942, and before long, General Douglas MacArthur set his sights on the Marshall Islands.

The initial invasion of the Marshall Islands was codenamed “Operation Flintlock”, which took place from January 31, 1944, to February 4, 1944. Key to the success of the operation was gaining control of the Kwajalein Atoll, a large crescent shape group of islands in the heart of the Marshall Islands.

The plan of operation called for the 145th Field Artillery Battalion to support the invasion and the 7th Division from a small island approximately 6,000 yards from the island of Kwajalein. The island held a small occupying force of 200 to 300 Japanese, which was eliminated prior to the 145th setting up their gun emplacements.

The day prior to the invasion and up to commencement, artillery, navy, and aircraft bombarded Kwajalein with thousands of tons of shells and bombs. The effect of the bombardment was lauded by Lt. Col. George Preston, the commander of the 145th, as “having to be seen to be believed” and with a “precision that has never been equaled.” The constant and accurate fire from the guns of the 145th ensured a successful and effective landing and contributed greatly to the capture of the Marshall Islands.



Wallace B. Gatrell

Wallace B. Gatrell was born in Salt Lake City on January 25, 1921. After graduating high school, Wallace joined Battery D, 2nd Battalion, 145th Field Artillery Regiment, Utah National Guard. Wallace served in the Service Battery of the 145th during World War II, primarily in the rank of Chief Warrant Officer, and was responsible for the supplies necessary for that organization to function. Wallace fought with the 145th in the battles of Kwajalein, Saipan-Tinian, Leyte, and Okinawa.

After World War II, Wallace left the Army for a brief time before rejoining for the Korean War. Wallace received a commission and during the conflict, was awarded the Silver Star, two Bronze Star Medals with “V” (valor), and the Purple Heart. He continued serving until 1972, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Aerial view of Kwajalein Atoll taken by a U.S. aircraft prior to the invasion. Photograph was taken in January 1944.



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While the landings were successful, the operation was not without incident. The after-action report highlighted, "someplace back in the state of Connecticut, the making of the fuses, super-quick, something had slipped, something was wrong." A defect in some of the fuses caused explosions in three of the breaches of the 145th guns. The first two explosions resulted in burns to the artillerymen, but the third was much worse.

Near midnight on January 31, 1944, a powder charge was not ignited by the primer and the shell exploded in one of the guns. Seven men lost their lives and twenty-one were wounded, many losing arms and legs from the explosion. The guns of the 145th had been engaged in more than 50 hours of continuous use preceding the incidents. As a testament to the courage, commitment to service, and unwavering dedication to duty, the artillerymen of the 145th continued to fire their guns in support of the infantry fighting on Kwajalein.

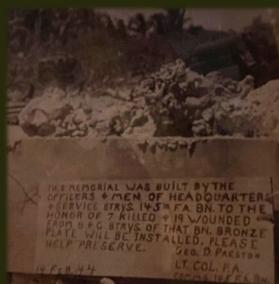
They did this knowing that at any time, another defective fuse could take their lives. Kwajalein was taken on February 4, 1944, ending Operation Flintlock. The 145th returned to Oahu, Hawaii where they were detached from the 7th Division and became an element of the 24th Corps Artillery to prepare for further combat on February 24, 1944.

Preston's final remarks on Kwajalein, "the thoroughness of the planning, immense preparations, and strategic employment of the various elements of the invading forces set the pattern for the offensive which ultimately brought the surrender of Japan and the end of the War."

Sources:

145th Field Artillery Battalion History, 1946
PennLive Family History, 2014

Scene depicting the devastation at Kwajalein Island, Marshall Islands after the 145th FAs bombardment of the island in 1944.



Handwritten memorial commemorating those lost from the 145th Field Artillery Battalion after the invasion of the Kwajalein Atoll in February 1944. The message was written by Lieutenant Colonel George Preston, Commander of the 145th at the time.