

# Medic was awash in carnage on Tarawa

By RACHEL GLASS  
and JESSE MURPHY

Special to *The Arab Tribune*

There was a time when the things we all cherish so dearly but take for granted daily were close to being lost. At the cost of thousands of lives, freedom was preserved. One man's story embodies the fear, sacrifice and courage experienced by countless American war veterans.

"Mother never would sign my papers," says Joseph Armour. Eventually, he persuaded his father to sign them and headed off to the U.S. Navy. After seven weeks of boot camp in San Diego, Calif., he was drafted into the Marine Medical Corps.

After five months in New Caledonia, Armour's unit shipped off to Tarawa, a small island in the Pacific, for what would be a five-day mission. It was Armour's first encounter with combat.

Japanese forces were 4,700 strong. Strategically planted machine gun nests, minefields and a natural barrier of razor sharp coral were among the island's defenses. Japanese forces used a system of underground tunnels to navigate around the entire island.

The Marines attacked on Nov. 20, 1943.

"It was so scary, my best friend kept having to slap me so I could recognize who he was," Armour says.

On one occasion, Armour recalls, he and a few others volunteered to retrieve a group of Marines who had been stranded in a tank. After wading through water for four or five hours, sometimes receiving heavy enemy fire, he arrived to find the stranded Marines were already dead.

"I didn't like the medical corps any, but it was an experience," Armour reflects.

At night, the tide would wash bodies inland. The swelling soldiers were unrecognizable. It became hard to distinguish between the bodies of the Japanese and Americans.

"You get used to death like that," says



Photo special to the Tribune, courtesy of [www.EyeWitnessstoHistory.com](http://www.EyeWitnessstoHistory.com)

**A photo taken after the invasion of Tarawa gives some idea of the 'hell on earth' Armour, others encountered**

Armour. "You'd sit down to eat with bodies everywhere – head, arms, legs, everything."

After four days in this "hell on earth," as he describes it, Armour sailed back to Hawaii along with the rest of the soldiers. He left the bloody battle for Tarawa with not even a scratch.

But not all injuries are physical. What he saw in those four days would remain with him forever.

It wasn't long before the young Marine faced combat again, this time on the island of Saipan. Having fought and

endured Tarawa, he pretty much knew exactly what to expect.

Thoughts of fear, blood and loss preyed on his mind and heart, along with the minds and hearts of many men as they sailed to the large island just south of Tinian.

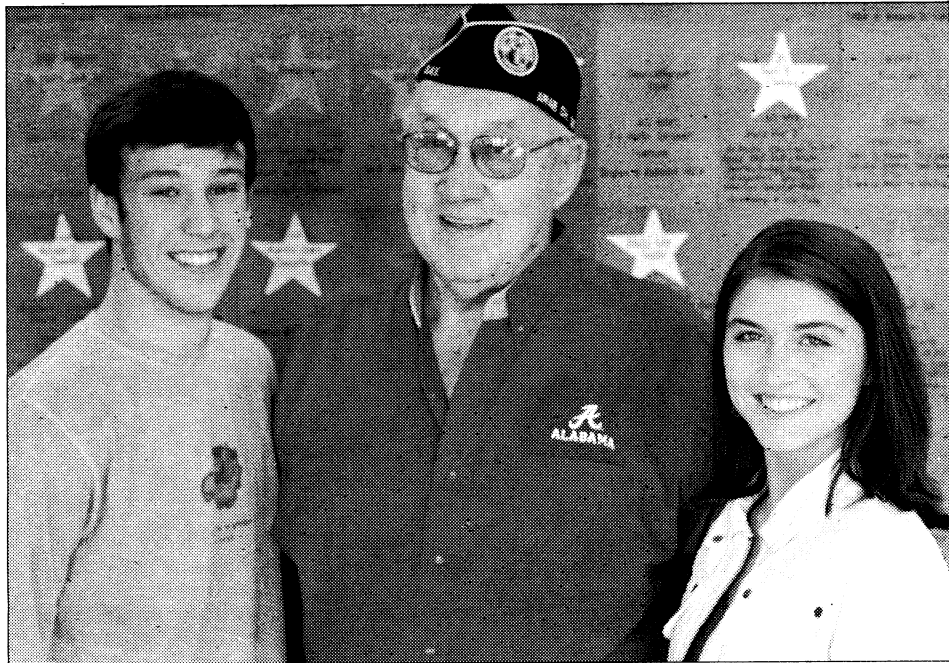
"You could smell it several days before we got there – the dead and smoke and all that," he says.

As the young soldier approached the island with a wave of the 2nd Marines, it looked as if every tree on the island had already been knocked down or blown up.

Ships were separated from the island by a coral reef, and the men were dumped into the water. Their heavy equipment weighed them down and drowned many young fighting men as they fought for breath. Armour made it to shore.

After three hours of attempting to push further into the island, a Marine was hit by mortar shrapnel that badly mangled his leg; and young Armour rushed to his assistance. In attempt to aid the wounded soldier, Armour himself

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Tribune photo by David Moore

**Joseph Armour with AHS senior writers Jesse Murphy, Rachel Glass**

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was wounded, a common occurrence for medical corpsmen.

"I thought I was dead," he says.

Armour's pants were ripped from his body, his rifle split in half with a powerful surge of mortar fire. The shrapnel entered the upper portion of his right leg. He and his wounded

comrade took refuge in a hole until finally they could be evacuated with other wounded men to a ship.

"It was an experience I'd take nothing for, but I'd never go through it again," Armour says, finishing his story as he sits in his house on Baldwin Drive in Arab. "It was just awful."

It is soldiers such as Joseph Armour who continue to ensure freedom for every American citizen. Their sacrifices will forever be remembered.



Photo special to the Tribune

**Armour stands partially hidden with group of young, war-bound sailors**