

DESTINATION: THE MARSHALLS

An Eye-witness Account of the Invasion

By Commander ANTHONY KIMMINS, in *The Listener*, England, February 24, 1944

WHEN I FIRST discovered that our destination was to be the Marshalls, I experienced exactly the same thrill as when, last year in the Mediterranean, I had learned that we were off to Pantellaria, and later to Sicily and Salerno. There was the same added zest in the knowledge that we were invading genuine pre-war enemy territory, and I thanked my lucky stars for guiding me in to such historic moments on both, and almost exactly opposite, sides of the world. I had another reason to be grateful also, for I found myself detailed to an amphibious force commanded by Admiral Connolly, whom I had last seen action with during the Salerno landings, where his personality and the determined manner in which he had handled his landing craft had gained him the respect and admiration of every Britisher out there. "If you really want a seat in the front row," he said, "I'd suggest that you go in the destroyer 'Phelps,' as she is doing a special job."

The voyage, week after week of monotonous steaming through the long Pacific swell, was completely uneventful; and when at last we approached our destination, every ship was in position according to the pre-arranged plan. There had been no loss or damage from enemy action, and very few signs of air reconnaissance. One can only presume that the bold plan of going for the centre and main atoll of the Marshalls had taken the Japs completely by surprise. Our main objectives in the northern attack force were the islands of Roi and Namu; but, unfortunately, both these islands are on the windward side of the Kwajalein atoll, where the heavy breakers and reefs make a direct assault impossible. In other words, we must first capture the islands on the leeward or calm-weather side, force an entrance into the lagoon, and then attack our main objectives from inside.

As dawn broke on "D" day, "Phelps"

added to the rest of the task force, was nosing in towards the first objectives. In the darkness we had seen lights burning on Roi and Namu, where the Japs were obviously trying to repair the damage from the previous day's bombing. Now, as the small, flat islands became visible in the morning light, with their clusters of palms sticking out of the vast expanse of water, they looked rather like the sort of mirage one would expect after a long march across the Sahara. Flying-fish kept skimming out of the water, wondering what all the commotion was about. At exactly the appointed second, the Captain ordered "Open fire," and with a blinding flash of her broadside, "Phelps" had the honour of starting the bombardment. Almost immediately there were more flashes from farther out to sea, as the battleships, cruisers, and other destroyers let fly. It was far and away the most staggering bombardment I have ever seen, and I have witnessed a good many in my time. Each ship took on not only her own particular island, but an actual spot on that island. The whole northern tip of the atoll ring was surrounded by ships pounding it from every side, and, if you watched carefully, you could see the bursts relentlessly and systematically creeping across each strip of land covering every possible point where there might be Jap emplacements or defences. And then, as if one master hand was controlling the trigger of every gun, the bombardment ceased, and as the great clouds of yellow cordite smoke drifted away in the breeze, guns' crews tumbled out of their turrets and enjoyed a quick smoke while empty shell-cases were heaved out of the way, leaving everything clear for the next phase.

But that temporary lull in the ships allowed no respite for the defenders of the islands. Even as the smoke and dust from the last shells were subsiding, dive-bombers were roaring in and carrying