

The Amgrunts

A story about the Amgrunts published in Leatherneck Magazine (circa 1968)

Story and Photos by Sgt. P.L. Thompson

FOR THE first time in Marine Corps history, a Marine Amtrac Battalion has parked half of its amtracs and turned the men who operate them into an infantry company - proving the old Marine Corps adage that every Marine is, no matter what his job, an infantryman

Camp Kistler, named for the first amtrac Marine killed in the Cua Viet area, just six miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, South Vietnam, sits on the southern bank of the Cua Viet River. The camp is spread over a large area and is situated in a stand of pine trees, the kind found all along the Vietnamese coast.

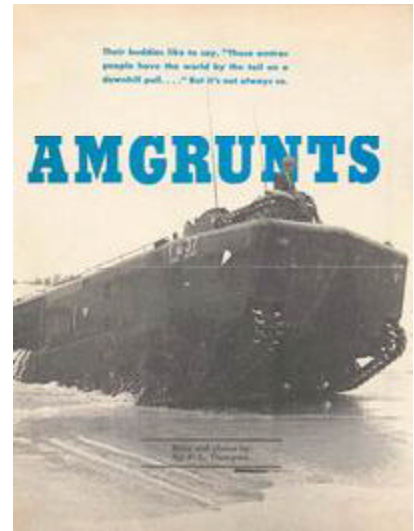
At first glance, a Marine who has been in the field for some time, would say, "Those amtrac people have the world by the tail on a downhill pull - they sure have it made!"

A closer inspection would reveal a lot of bunkers; one would also notice a lot of patched buildings. North Vietnam, only a stone's throw away, has hit Cua Viet with a vengeance.

It's not unusual to see huts with large holes in the roof, or, in some cases, no roof at all. The 1st Amtrac Marines have had so many rocket and artillery attacks that the official count is no longer kept - but it is well up in the hundreds.

Robert W. 'E. Begersdort, the battalion's sergeant major, says of his unit, "We are charged with the defense of the whole area, from Cua Viet to the DMZ." He added that Cua Viet is important because it is a port facility. Tons of supplies pass through Cua Viet for Dong Ha and the rest of the area the Marines hold near the DMZ. The sergeant major continued, "Cua Viet is a very important link in maintaining the Marines in this area, and we of the 1st LVT Battalion, provide security and supplies."

The battalion's commander, LtCol E. R. Toner, explained how his battalion became the first amtrac battalion to have its own infantry company. "We were given an area of operation, much like any other Marine battalion. When we first came to Cua Viet there was no infantry support here and we revised our battalion to meet the needs of our mission." LtCol Toner went on to explain that the battalion's "A" Company was organized into an infantry company while "B" Company provided mobility with amtracs.



This Vietnamese woman had no identification when the Amgrunts interrogated her.



Land mines are a major problem to the Amtrac Marines and checks must be made constantly.

This hard-hitting infantry amtrac unit, or “amgrunts” as they call themselves, covers both sides of the Cua Viet-to the south for a few miles, and to the north, until very recently, all the way to the DMZ.

No one in Vietnam has ever said the VC or NVA are stupid - least of all the 1st Amtrac Bn, Indeed, they have a great deal of respect for their enemy. They know the enemy is well trained and well led, but the 1st Amtrac Marines know they are better and they’ve proved it time and again.

In one operation, Hickory II, the 1st Amtrac Marines accounted for 54 of the 57 confirmed kills against the enemy.

The battalion’s operation officer, Maj Walter J. Donovan, remarking on Operation Hickory, said, “The situation this battalion was in, placed particular emphasis on the requirement that Marines of every MOS be able to act as patrol leaders and patrol members.”

To help these Marines become more skilled as infantrymen, the battalion runs a school on infantry tactics. The battalion recruits teachers, when necessary. Instructors from the Navy’s Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit teach the amgrunts how to deal with the mines that infest their area of operation. Besides their schooling in infantry subjects, the battalion’s experienced personnel school the inexperienced replacements in the art of being an am tracker. It requires a lot of hard work and double duty for many. SSgt Wilber D. Glaw is one Marine who pulls double duty. He was an 81-mm. mortar man a number of years ago, before switching his MOS to amtracs. When he was sent

to the 1st Amtrac Battalion in Vietnam, the last thing he thought he would be doing was running a mortar section. SSgt Glaw’s maintenance section is also the mortar section. They have two guns, both of which are used for training and “for real.”

“My men,” said Glaw, “spend about ten hours a day working on the ‘tracs and then put in another couple of hours working with the 81 ‘s.”

They strive for speed and accuracy and within seconds after a setting is called they’ll answer, “Gun up!” meaning they are ready.

An amtrac’s worst enemy is a heavy anti-tank mine which can split the hull of an LVT and cost Uncle Sam \$125,000. The 1st Amtrac Bn. Maintenance Department is well trained to keep this loss at a minimum. 1stLt Donald A. Whiteside, a former enlisted man who has spent most of his Marine Corps career in amtracs, heads the maintenance section.



1st LVT Amgrunts crossed the Cua Viet River, heading north toward the DMZ.



Besides running patrols, the Amgrunts must also keep their ‘tracs in top shape by constant maintenance.



Discovered less than three miles from the DMZ, In an area in which he did not belong, this suspect was searched and held.

“When we first started taking mines, our maintenance section was told we would be unable to repair most mine damage. My men have sent better than 50 percent of our LVTs damaged by mines back to duty,” the lieutenant told us.

There is a joke among the men of the maintenance section: When the section is not pulling maintenance, working on the 81-mm. mortars, sandbagging bunkers, pulling patrol duty, or standing guard-they can have some time off !

There are compensations, however, for hard work and long hours, as Cpl Bruce S. Goins, a maintenance man, pointed out. “We keep busy all right, but you’d be surprised how fast the time goes around here.”

Another interesting sidelight to the LVT Bn. is its Recon section, a group of men who serve as the battalion’s scouts. They go on patrol almost every day, both to the south and north of the Cua Viet River. The battalion’s operations officer, Maj Donovan, says of the Amtrac Recon Marines, “They’re our eyes and ears, much the same as Recon Battalion is the eyes and ears of the division. The VC in this area never know when they’re being watched by some of our men.”

As an amtrac battalion, it is 1st LVT’s job to transport troops in assault landings, then support and supply them after the landing. Landings are few and far between these days, especially for LVT’s. But the task of getting supplies from the beach inland is a never-ending job. The 1st and their sister unit, the 3rd LVT’s have supplied almost every Marine unit in Vietnam at one time or another.

On the Cua Viet River the 1st LVT’s have a number of jobs. The first is to support the Third Marine Division. The second is to support ARVN units in their area; the third is to provide security for their area and the Navy’s Cua Viet Port Facility.

The average infantry Marine will tell you LVT’s make too much dust in the summer and splash too much mud in the monsoon season. But ask any Marine who has been re-supplied by LVT and he will tell you they look damn good, charging across a rice paddy to deliver a load of fresh water and chow..

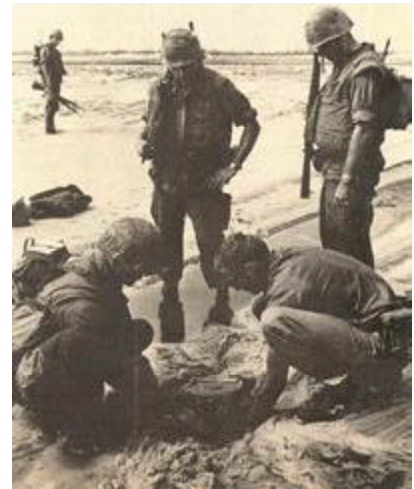
Or ask a Marine, who, after being wounded, was carried to safety inside the armored hull, what he thinks of the iron monsters. He’ll say they’re A-OK.

They also look good to a tired Marine when the word is passed that LVT’s are in the area and a free ride is available. ...

End.



An Amtrac maintenance unit doubled as an 81-mm. mortar crew.



An anti-tank mine was uncovered in a sweep toward the DMZ by Navy EOD Team. Mines planted by the NVA are a major threat to the Amgrunts.