

Third in a series of articles recalling the vehicles that were and are uniquely Marine.

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian III. Neutralizing Rabaul

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)



Marines on Bougainville in November 1943.

The basic Marine weapon on Guadalcanal was the 1903 rifle. A few Riesing submachineguns had also been issued. But, as one lieutenant demonstrated in an encounter with a Japanese soldier, the Riesing was a better club than firearm. The LVT(1) was also new and unreliable. Rushed into production in 1941 as a hasty redesign of the vehicle tested in the Caribbean, the model had been frozen when the war began



A standard LVT(2), the successor to Roebing's LVT(1). It was the basic design for all amtrac models during WWII except for LVT(3). The LVT(A)2 was an LVT(2) built of armor; the LVT(A)1 was an LVT(A)2 with a 37mm gun turret.

and America's industry shifted into high gear. Meanwhile, Food Machinery Corporation engineer James Hait, working with inventor Donald Roebing and military technicians, designed the improved LVT(2), a duplicate LVT(A)2 built of light armor, and an LVT(A)1 fitted with a 37mm gun in a tank turret. All three went into production early in 1943.

The Navy, which began the war without specialized lift beyond six destroyers converted to troop transports, quickly began building amphibious ships. The first LSTs and LCTs appeared in the South Pacific in March 1943; LCIs followed a month later. The Army, increasingly preoccupied with amphibious operations, formed amtrac battalions like those of the Marines and created engineer amphibious

brigades, each with 7,000 men and 550 landing craft for short-range landings. The first reached New Guinea in June 1943; two more followed in 1944.

The Marine Corps, with two divisions already deployed, activated the 3d Marine Division in September 1942, at the same time as its 3d Amphibian Tractor (Amtrac) Battalion. The division moved to Guadalcanal in June 1943 after a sojourn in New Zealand. The previous February, 2 weeks after Guadalcanal had been secured, the nearby Russell Islands had been occupied in preparation for the drive toward Japan's major base at Rabaul. Now in June, the Army's XIV Corps with several Marine raider and defense battalions was poised to invade the Central Solomons. After bitter fighting, mastery over the area was attained in October. In that world dominated by mud, the 12 LVT(1)s of the 3d Amtrac Battalion supporting the 9th Defense Battalion had proved invaluable.

The next task, that of establishing airfields on Bougainville to seal off the eastern approaches to the Japanese bastion, was assigned to the 3d Marine Division. It landed near Cape Torokina on 1 November 1943. A month later, after organizing a perimeter accommodating two airfields, the Marines were relieved by Army units and returned to

See Amphibians On Parade, p. 94.



An LVT(1) from the 3d Amtrac Battalion moves supplies through the mud on Bougainville.

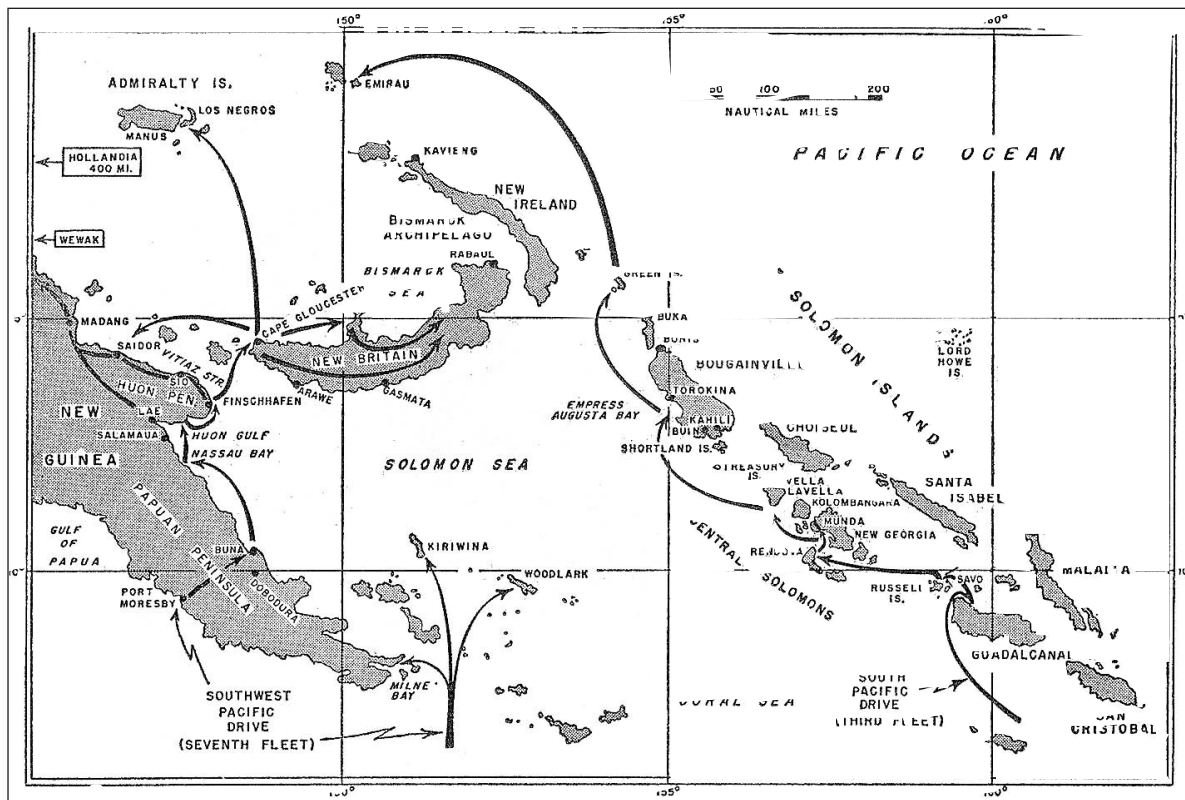
Guadalcanal. Marine casualties were relatively light. However, only 29 of the division's 124 LVT(1)s were operational 3 weeks after the landing. The division's after action report explains, "Due to the swampy terrain and complete absence of roads, the LVTs were the only vehicles that could be used." Particularly impressive was the transport of 23,000 tons of supplies, all of which had had to be manhandled over the side of 8-foot high amtracs.

Meanwhile, Allied forces advancing up New Guinea had reached the strait opposite the island of New Britain. The 1st Marine Division, having by then ended its Australian idyll

and moved into New Guinea staging bases, was ready to invade that "evil island." Operations began at Arawe on 15 December where an Army regiment landed over the reef in 29 LVT(1)s and 15 new LVT(A)2s of Company A, 1st Amtrac Battalion. This double first, a new amtrac in a new assault troop transport role, was followed 11 days later by the 1st Marine Division landing from boats on Cape Gloucester. The Japanese airfield there was presented "to the American people" by Gen MacArthur on 31 December. This was not a simple accomplishment, for the "damp flats" behind the beaches proved to be virtually impenetrable swamps and rain fell daily with unbelievable violence. Unprecedented among the casualties were 20 Marines killed by falling trees. In these conditions, the amtrac, as the only reliable transport, became indispensable. Unlike Bougainville, where the capabilities of the 3d Amtrac Battalion diminished as its LVT(1)s broke down, the effectiveness of the 1st Amtrac Battalion was maintained by 50 new LVT(2)s received as replacements.

The Marines remained on New Britain to help secure the facilities needed to isolate Rabaul at the other end of the island. They were relieved on 25 April and ordered to the Russells, which differed little from the wet misery of New Britain. The month before, the 4th Marines, reconstituted by fusing the four raider battalions, had landed on Emirau in 66 amtracs of the 3d Amtrac Battalion and closed the last access to Rabaul. Thus ended the campaign in which amtracs had thwarted an environment as hostile as the enemy.

US MC



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