

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

## Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian IV. Central Pacific Atolls

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)

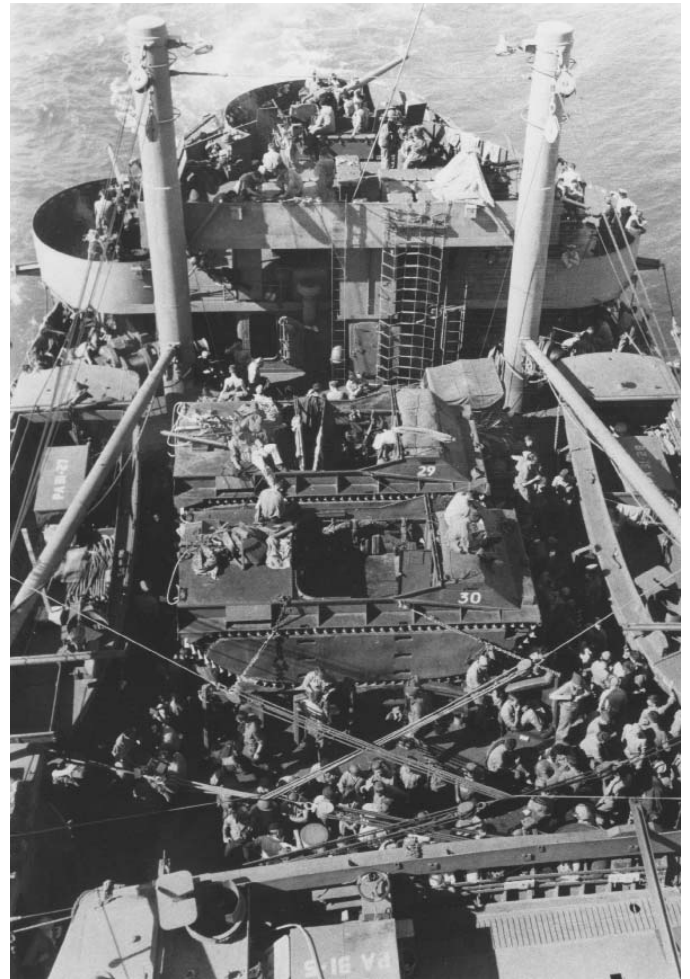
The second year of the Pacific War began with the Allies in control of Papua and the Japanese evacuating Guadalcanal. Parallel drives up New Guinea and the Solomons toward Rabaul would soon begin. (See map MCG, Jun99, p. 94.) Coincidentally, the Combined Chiefs of Staff had agreed to operations in the Central Pacific, and on 20 July 1943, the Joint Chiefs had directed seizure of the Gilberts to open the way to the Marshalls, stepping stones to the Marianas.

Commander, Central Pacific Force alerted the 2d Marine Division (2d MarDiv) in New Zealand that it was tasked with landing on Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, while the Army's 27th Division cleared Makin. Marine planners soon realized their mission was unprecedented. An estimated 3,000 Japanese had organized formidable defenses on Betio, which was little more than a square mile of sand and coral surrounded by reefs. The landing would be the ultimate test of their amphibious doctrine; crossing the reef would be a measure of their ingenuity.

Trials confirmed amtracs could cross reefs. When the 75 operational LVT(1)s remaining in the 2d Amtrac Battalion proved insufficient, 50 LVT(2)s were shipped to Samoa. They were met by a provisional company and readied for combat before sailing aboard 3 LSTs directly to the objective. The LVT(1)s were loaded on transports with 2d MarDiv and sailed from New Zealand. All came together at 0330 on 20 November off Betio, where the troops safely transferred to amtracs. These then formed columns for the long journey to the line of departure 6,000 yards off the landing beaches. At 0824, the first of three waves began churning shoreward. Fifty-six minutes later 1,500 Marines were fighting ashore. The amtracs then repeatedly braved intense enemy fire to maintain the flow of men and supplies across the reef to fuel the Marines' advance. Three days later 4,690 Japanese were dead and the battle over. *Time* carried the story:

Last week some 2,000 or 3,000 United States Marines, most of them now dead or wounded, gave the nation a name to stand beside those of Concord Bridge, the *Bon Homme Richard*, the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and Belleau Wood. The name was Tarawa.

Of the 3,301 Marine casualties, 180 were from amtrac units. Ninety amtracs had also been lost, 82 to enemy action. Maj Henry G. Lawrence, succeeding to command of the amtracs at Tarawa, summarized the experience as, "We went from s--t troops to shock troops in a helluva hurry!"



**USS Monrovia steams toward Tarawa with LVT(1)s of the 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion loaded on deck in place of LCVPs. Note LCVP in foreground.**

Seizure of the Marshalls had been authorized in January, but implementing details awaited the end of the Gilberts campaign. Thus, the 4th MarDiv activated at Camp Pendleton in August with its 4th Amtrac Battalion, learned only in December it was to seize islands in the northern part of Kwajalein Atoll. Then, on 5 December, the division was authorized to activate the reinforced 10th Amtrac Battalion using a nucleus of personnel from the 4th Amtrac Battalion, to provide 140 additional LVT(2)s. This enabled the division to plan positioning artillery on off-lying islands on D-day to support the main landings on Roi and Namur Islands the next

*See Amphibians On Parade, p. 88.*



**LVT(1) #49 and LVT(2) in foreground knocked out by gunfire on beach at Tarawa. Note penetration of boilerplate on cab of LVT(1) #49 by machine-gun fire.**



**Marines land from LVT(2). The high drop required of troops laden with individual weapons and equipment was always difficult, as was cargo-handling over the side.**



**LVT(1) towing 105mm howitzer offloaded from LCM on reef.**

day. The resulting activity, and a 6 January sailing date, shattered the meaning of time for the amtrac community at Camp Del Mar where the 1st Armored Amphibian Tractor Battalion was also based. That unit, formed in July, had 75 LVT(A)1s armed with 37mm guns. Intended to cover the movement ashore of the troop carrying amtracs, the armored amphibians would henceforth constitute the first wave in all landings.

The weather on D-day, 31 January, was unfriendly to schedules for troop transfers and multiple trips to the beaches. Little went as planned. Yet, by nightfall, 10th Amtrac Battalion had landed infantry on five islands and brought three battalions of artillery ashore. However, the recovery of the amtracs that night was hampered by LST crews as inexperienced as the amtrac units embarked. Thus only half the amtracs needed for the landing on Namur Island on D+1 were available, and it was near noon when the infantry went ashore. The 4th Amtrac Battalion with 100 fresh LVT(2)s had little difficulty landing on Roi Island.

While the Army's 7th Infantry Division cleared southern Kwajalein, an Army battalion secured Majuro Atoll. This allowed release of the 22d Marines and the 106th Infantry, held as force reserve, to undertake seizure of Eniwetok Atoll, beginning 17 February. A week later American forces dominated the Marshalls. Of note, the 4th Marine and 7th Infantry Divisions both encountered enemy garrisons at Kwajalein equal to that at Tarawa but had less than one-third the casualties the 2d MarDiv had suffered there.

The campaign in the Marshalls validated the experience of Tarawa and confirmed the combat role of the amtrac. Yet it took more than 30 years for ALMAR 172/76 of 14 December 1976 to rename the amtrac an assault amphibian.

US MCMC

>Editor's Note: For an interesting account of subsequent air operations against another island in Kwajalein Atoll see article by Col Elie G. Tremblay, USMCR(Ret), on the Gazette Web Site: <[www.mca-marines.org/gazette.html](http://www.mca-marines.org/gazette.html)>.