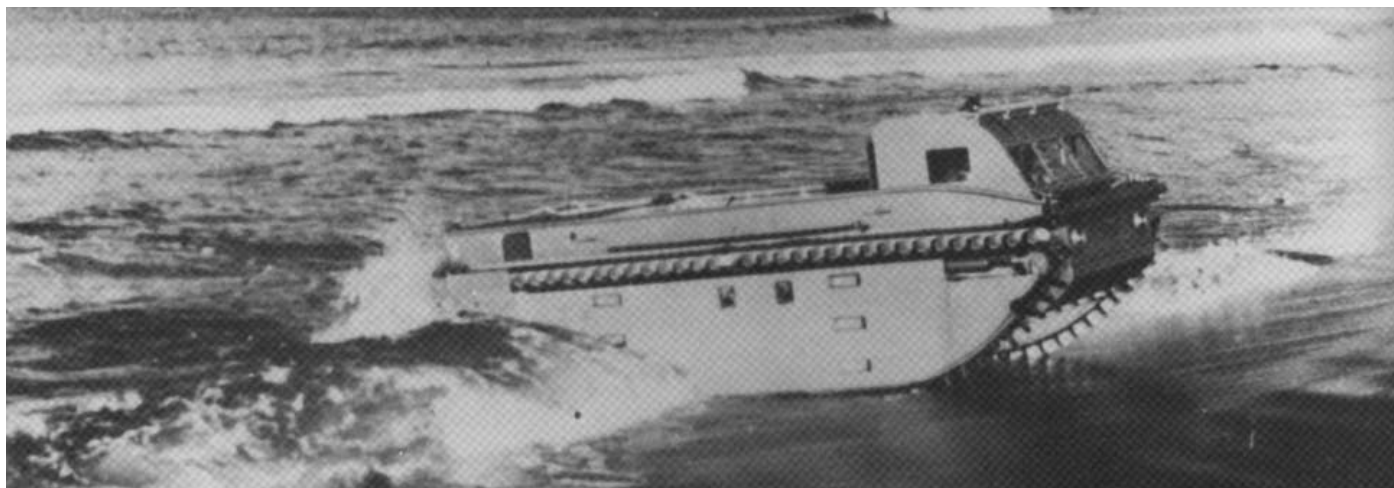


First in a series of articles recalling the vehicles that were and are uniquely Marine.

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian

I. The Beginning

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)



The first amphibian tractor procured by the Marines undergoing tests at Culebra Island in 1941 during Fleet Exercise Seven (FLEX-7).

Operation Plan 712H, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia, approved by John A. Lejeune, Major General Commandant, on 23 July 1921 is an exceptional document. Prepared by Maj Earl "Pete" Ellis, it contains the strategic blueprint for the Central Pacific campaign of World War II. Beyond identifying objectives such as the Marshalls and Marianas, now part of Marine Corps legend, the plan envisages many of the innovations needed to make the amphibious assault operation possible. This, at a time when there were only 20,000 Marines and landings were made



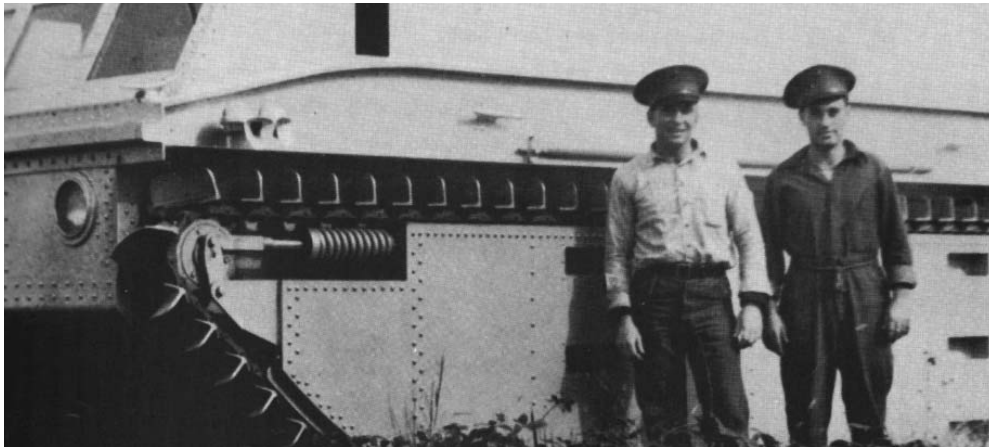
The LVT(1), first production amphibian tractor, was a modified Roebling design powered by a 150 hp Hercules engine and capable of carrying up to 18 men or 4,500 pounds of cargo. It began its combat service in a logistic role at Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942 and saw extensive use in the Southwest Pacific, ending its service as an assault vehicle at Tarawa on 20 November 1943. 1,225 LVT(1)s were built during WWII.

with ships' boats and tows. The establishment of offensive Expeditionary Forces that year was another event pointing the Marine Corps toward the amphibious mission. Notable too was the creation of the Marine Corps Schools where the visions of Ellis and other like-minded Marines would find expression in the 1934 *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations*, destined to guide the conduct of amphibious operations in World War II.

Efforts to parallel these developments with the acquisition of proper landing craft were limited by inadequate funds. Despite the establishment of the Marine Corps Equipment Board in 1933, little could be done with the scant \$40,000 in the R&D budget. Yet, when World War II ignited Europe in September 1939, the Navy had 35 of the 30-foot personnel landing boats and 11 lighters for tanks and artillery. Two years later the expanding conflict had helped the inventory grow to 1,285 boats, 303 lighters, and "300 amphibian tractors under construction." These unique vehicles, born of civilian rather than military needs, would come to play such a vital role in the Pacific War that Gen H. M. Smith would declare ". . . without (them) our amphibious offensive . . . would have been impossible."

In 1933, when rescue efforts following a devastating hurricane in Florida were hampered by the lack of capable transport, Donald Roebling, a wealthy engineer living in Clearwater, undertook to build an amphibious vehicle. The result, an aluminum box-like craft fitted with cleated tracks for propulsion, was featured in the 4 October 1937 issue of LIFE magazine. This came to the attention of the Com-

See Amphibians On Parade, p. 92.



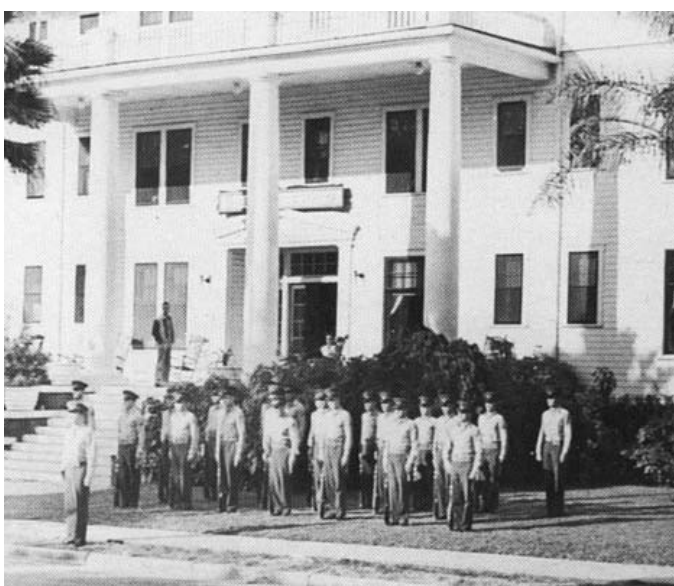
Sergeants Clarence H. Raper (right) and Walter L. Gibson pictured with the original amphibian tractor procured from Donald Roebling in 1940; the vehicle was aluminum and was powered by a Lincoln-Zephyr engine.



Donald Roebling pictured after receiving the Medal for Merit in Washington on 18 December 1946.



An LVT(1) emerges from a bay near Dunedin during a driver training session. 2dLt Harry Taylor wears the "tank" driver's helmet.



A Marine Amtrac Detachment poses in front of the Dunedin Hotel, Florida in June 1941. The Hotel served as headquarters, mess, and barracks for the initial 37-strong group of Marines to serve in the Detachment.

mandant, MGen Thomas Holcomb, who directed the Equipment Board to investigate.

Maj John Kaluf, Secretary of the Board, went to Clearwater in September 1938 to find Roebling uninterested in involvement with the military. Kaluf returned in January and convinced the reluctant Roebling to demonstrate his "alligator." Impressed, Kaluf recommended procurement of a test vehicle, but no funds could be found. Unwilling to drop the matter, Board President BGen E. P. Moses, visited Roebling in September and gained his agreement to build a test model with military specifications for \$20,000. Moses then talked the Navy out of the money. Roebling had the tractor finished by October 1940, \$4,000 below estimate. Refunding the money reportedly took longer than building the machine!

A week after arriving in Quantico, the amphibian tractor was demonstrated successfully to the Commandant and other dignitaries. A letter of intent for 100 tractors promptly followed. The vehicle was then sent to the 1st Marine Brigade in the Caribbean for field testing. This went well until the day Capt Victor H. Krulak took crusty Adm Ernest J. King, Atlantic Fleet commander, for a ride. The vehicle threw a track, and the admiral, ever impatient, waded ashore in starched whites, a stream of profanity in his wake. In Quantico, meanwhile, Maj W. W. Davies was preparing to move his detachment of 3 officers and 37 men to Dunedin, FL, where, in July, they would receive the first production LVT(1), a 21-foot sheet steel vehicle, near 10-feet wide and 8-feet high with 4,500 pound cargo capacity, quite different from its smaller and less powerful aluminum prototype.

The Marines, knowing virtually nothing of its performance, promptly went into the field to acquire operational and maintenance data. The process trained the officers and men who formed the first amtrac units and contributed to improving the LVT(1) and designing the LVT(2). An initial group of 45 Marines received orders to depart on 8 December for North Carolina to join the 1st Marine Division; another 69 Marines were to leave a week later for the West Coast and the 2nd Marine Division. Thus it was that the morning after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the people of Dunedin, still shocked by the event, gathered at the railroad station to bid goodbye to the first to go, the amtrac Marines . . .

USMC

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

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian II. Offensive Defense

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret)



LVT(1)s of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion bringing supplies ashore during the landing on Guadalcanal, 7 August 1942. Note World War I model water-cooled .30 caliber machinegun. Note also canvas cover used to cover cargo compartment in high surf. The LVT(1)s were completely unarmored and were armed with three .30 caliber and one .50 caliber machineguns.

Ten weeks after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had reached the “The Southern Resources Area” and were establishing strongpoints to safeguard their prize. At home, the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions, though below authorized strength, each had to detach an infantry regiment to garrison Samoa. While this hampered their buildup, they could rely on established practices to overcome difficulties. The

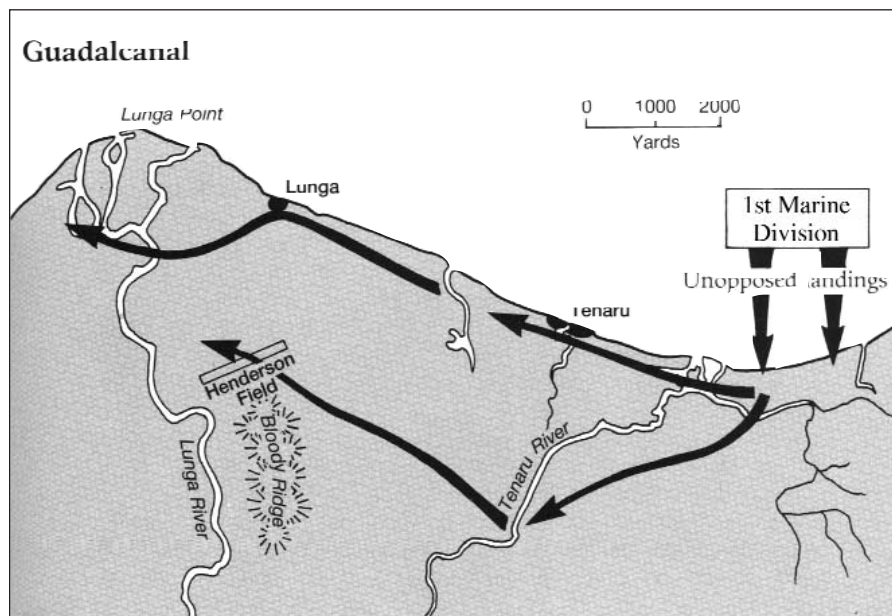
amphibian tractor (amtrac) units had no comparable guidance; only the decision to organize them as division motor transport battalions with 10 LVT(1)s in the headquarters and 30 in each of 3 lettered companies, these last to be attached for operations one per infantry regiment. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was activated accordingly on 16 February; the 2d followed on 18 March.



Amtracs used as pontoons over which wooden bridges have been built. Speed is of the essence during the initial landing hence the use of field expedients to span waterways.

In May 1942, Japanese naval forces from Rabaul entered the Coral Sea. One group seized Tulagi and started building an airfield on nearby Guadalcanal. The Port Moresby invasion group, however, turned back when it lost the carrier *Shoho*. The latter was a strategic victory for America, but the Guadalcanal airfield threatened the communications with Australia, whose security was one of the Commander in Chief Pacific’s two principal missions. The other, “holding the Hawaii-Midway line and maintaining its communications with the west coast,” was decided off Midway on 4 June when Japan lost four carriers and 250 aircraft. This cleared the

See Amphibians On Parade, p. 101.



way for U.S. forces to regain the lower Solomons and mount an offensive against Rabaul where Japan had five airfields, an excellent fleet anchorage and, reportedly, the best brothel east of the Dutch Indies.

On 14 June 1942, the lead echelon of the 1st Marine Division arrived in Wellington, New Zealand anticipating a lengthy training period. Twelve days later MajGen Alexander A. Vandergrift learned his division was to undertake the first Allied offensive of the war. Controlled chaos followed, during which arriving ships, administratively loaded, were emptied and combat loaded, often under bone-chilling rains. Despite all adversities, the force sortied as scheduled on 22 July. It met up with the 1st Raiders, the 2d Marines with Company A, 2d Amtrac Battalion and other reinforcements in the Fijis, where all joined in a rehearsal of little value. That ended, 19,000 Marines crowded in 23 transports set course for Tulagi and Guadalcanal.



Another view of the LVT(1) clearly showing two of the machineguns. The vehicle was capable of land and water speeds of 12 and 6 miles per hour, respectively, and ranges of 120 miles on land and 50 miles in the water.

The 1st Division's LVT(1)s, tasked to provide transportation services, had been embarked early. Thus, all preparations for combat, to include painting over their factory-bright silver, were accomplished in the ships' holds. There, too, four amtracs were fitted with wooden ramps to serve as bridges on Guadalcanal. Strange to add that, although a reef fronted the landing beach at Tulagi, boats were used and the Marines had to wade ashore. Fortunately, all landings on 7 August were unopposed. The next day, however, Rube Dailey and brothers Olin and Glen Darnel, manning an amtrac of the 2d Battalion, stormed ashore on Gavutu with guns blazing to cover the evacuation of several wounded Marines.

Units of the 2d Amtrac Battalion left with the transports on 9 August; the 1st Amtrac Battalion remained until the end of the year. Initially committed to help the Shore Party disperse the supplies and equipment dumped ashore by the departing Navy, amtracs were also used to position artillery and support advancing infantry. Thus engaged, Sgt Cantrell's amtrac reached the airfield and nearby encampment on 8 August, where Cantrell found a stock of Asahi beer. After careful testing to ensure the wily Japanese had not poisoned the brew, he generously shared what remained. Soon after, the 1st Amtrac Battalion was integrated into the defense perimeter established around the airfield, from where it engaged in endless hauling tasks that diminished only as its vehicles broke down. These were not a total loss. With three machineguns per amtrac, they were a welcome source of parts and replacement weapons for infantry units.

The Japanese repeatedly sought to destroy the Marine beachhead. Antipersonnel bombs and naval shells ranging to 14-inch size entertained at night, bomber formations routinely arrived as the Marines were eating one of the two meals per day their meager supplies allowed, and the perimeter defenses were periodically attacked by ground forces. Yet, the Marines held. In December, the 1st Division, decimated by combat casualties and tropical diseases, was relieved and resettled in Australia. The 2d Division, incrementally deployed to Guadalcanal, remained until the island was secured in February and then sailed for New Zealand. The lower Solomons were back in Allied hands, and two amtrac battalions had started a "can do" tradition.



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.

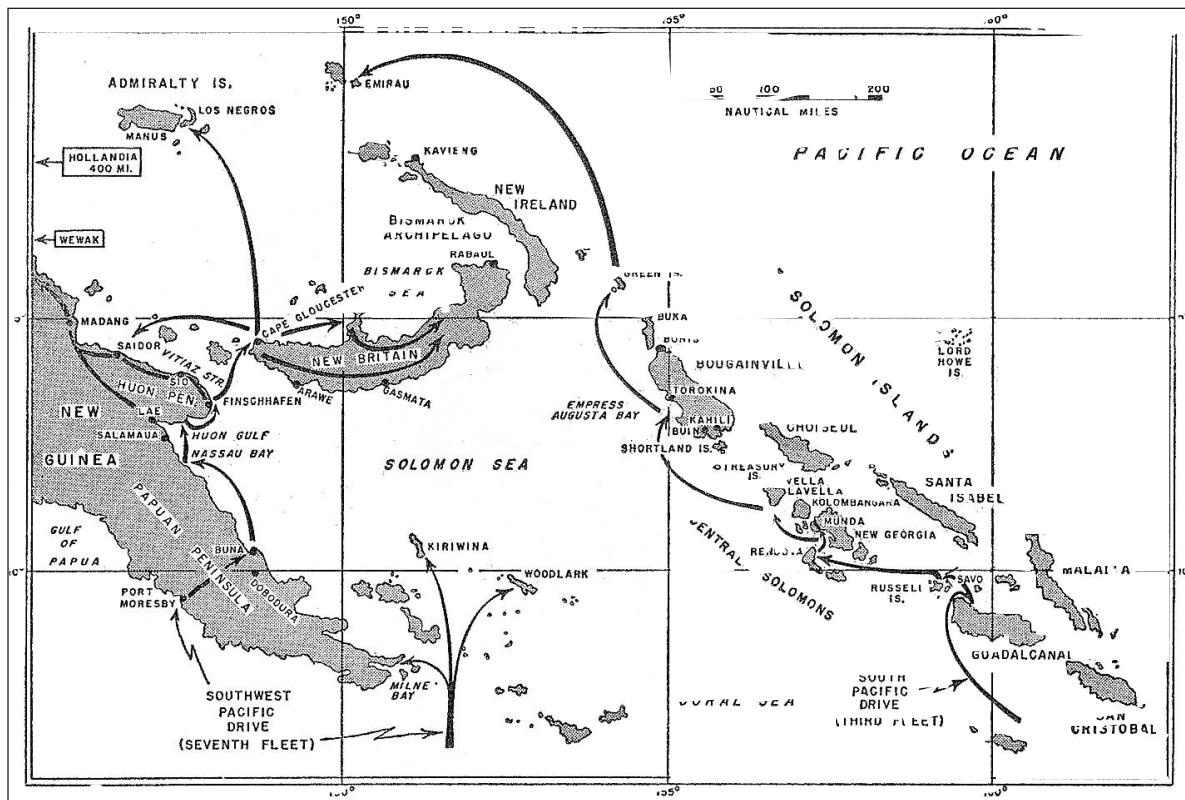
Guadalcanal. Marine casualties were relatively light. However, only 29 of the division's 124 LVT(1)s were operational 3 weeks after the landing. The division's after action report explains, "Due to the swampy terrain and complete absence of roads, the LVTs were the only vehicles that could be used." 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



Neutralizing Rabaul

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian IV. Central Pacific Atolls

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)

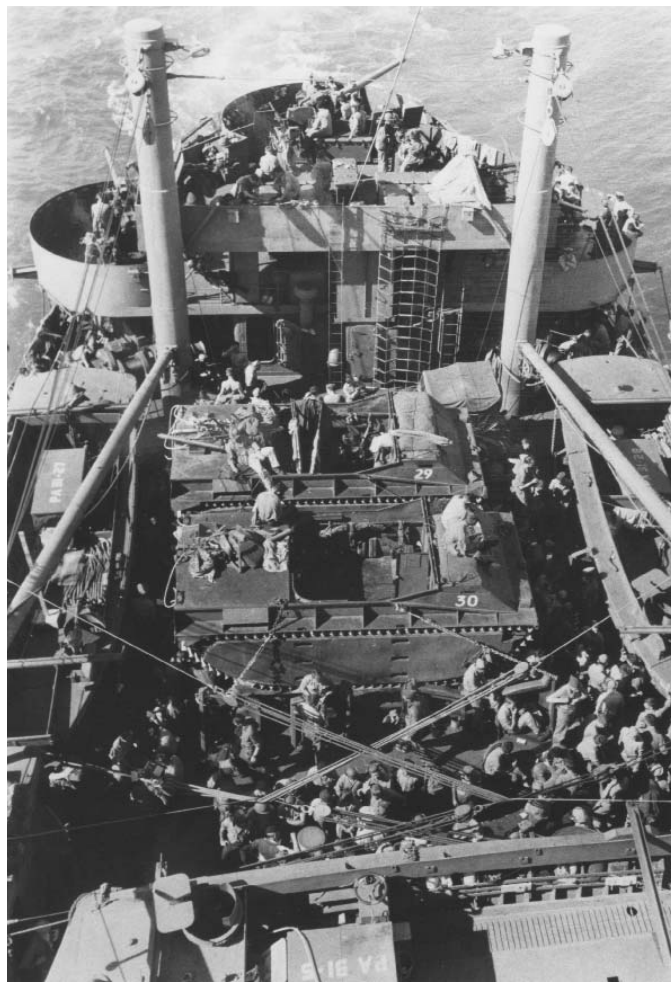
The second year of the Pacific War began with the Allies in control of Papua and the Japanese evacuating Guadalcanal. Parallel drives up New Guinea and the Solomons toward Rabaul would soon begin. (See map MCG, Jun99, p. 94.) Coincidentally, the Combined Chiefs of Staff had agreed to operations in the 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.

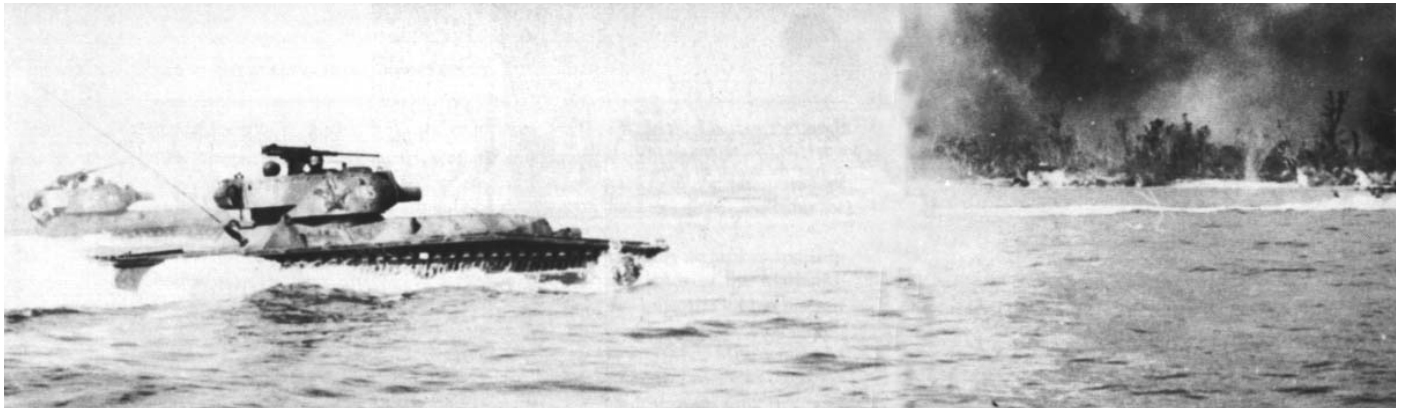
The campaign in the Marshalls validated the experience of Tarawa and confirmed the combat role of the amtrac. Yet it took more than 30 years for ALMAR 172/76 of 14 December 1976 to rename the amtrac an assault amphibian.

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>.

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian V. Marianas Campaign

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)



LVT(A)4s form the first wave during the landing on Saipan, 15 Jun 44. This armored amphibian mounted a 75mm and a .50 caliber machinegun in an open turret. There were 1,890 LVT(A)4s built during World War II.

Near first light on a drab 6th of June in 1944, lead elements of two American and three British Divisions stormed ashore over five beaches fronting the Normandy coast. A few hours later and half a world away, word that the invasion of Europe had begun invited grunts of sympathy from the soldiers, sailors, and Marines crowded on ships rolling heavily over the long Pacific swells on course for the Mariana Islands.

The Normandy invasion force, embarked in 2,727 ships and craft for a sea passage measured in tens of miles, was backed by one million men in Britain who would be shuttled to the continent by 4 July. The Marianas invasion force comprising 4 divisions and 1 brigade was embarked in a self-contained 800-ship armada whose objectives were 4,000 miles from its mount-out bases and 1,200 miles from the nearest American-held area.

The outpouring of resources that made these operations possible included the LVT(4), essentially an LVT(2) with a stern ramp which multiplied its utility, and the LVT(A)4, whose 75mm howitzer made it an assault gun, in contrast to the

LVT(A)1 whose 37mm gun had encouraged its use as a tank, with disastrous consequences. That same year, the Marine Corps had doubled its amtrac units by forming five new cargo and two new armored amphibian battalions.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff directive of 12 March to seize the Marianas beginning 15 June countered Gen MacArthur's efforts to gain priority for operations in the Southwest Pacific in favor of acquiring secure bases for the forthcoming B-29 offensive against Japan. The plans that followed called for Marine landings on Saipan then,



Marine reserves transfer from LCVP to LVT(4) 1,500 yards offshore at Saipan on D-day. The LVT(4), a variant of the LVT(2), had its engine moved forward to permit installation of a stern ramp. It could carry up to 30 troops and as much as 9,000 pounds of cargo, including a jeep or 105mm howitzer. A total of 8,348 LVT(4)s were built during the war.

See *Amphibians On Parade*, p. 87.

days later, on Guam. Tinian would be taken once Saipan was secure. The Army would provide the reserves.

The pageantry of the amphibious assault began with a bright morning and bombardment ships resuming their thunder. Soon after, 46 LSTs carrying the assault units of the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions began disgorging 2 battalions of armored and 6 battalions of troop-laden amtracs, half of them Army units. Meanwhile, scores of small craft wearing bright colored flags took positions identifying the lanes to the beaches over which control teams would direct troops and supplies ashore. At 0827, 24 rocket gunboats crossed the line of departure, followed by 719 amtracs in a succession of orderly waves. The gunboats veered away at the reef, the amtracs continued shoreward, defying a deluge of fire. Twenty amtracs were lost, 12 to enemy fire and 8 to surf and mechanical failure. Still, within 30 minutes, 8,000 Marines were meeting the first of 30,000 Japanese defenders, most

of whom would die in the 25 days to follow.

The loss of Saipan caused the fall of the Tojo government and Emperor Hirohito to wish "for a diplomatic settlement of the war." But that was not to be, and the weary soldiers and Marines, diminished by 16,600 casualties, prepared for Tinian. On 24 July, the 453 serviceable amtracs remaining began landing the 4th Division over 2 northern beaches on Tinian that totaled just 600 yards in width. A demonstration by the 2d Division off Tinian Town distracted the enemy so that by nightfall virtually all the 4th Division was ashore ready to receive the expected counterattack. This attack, conducted by 1,500 of the island's 8,900 defenders, was unsuccessful and cost the Japanese 1,241 dead. A week later, 3,800 more were dead, and Tinian was American.

The invasion of Guam was delayed by the Battle of the Philippine Sea wherein Japan lost its carrier aviation, and by the American's need to reconstitute reserves when the 27th Infantry Division was committed to the battle on Saipan. Hence it was 21 July when 73 LVT(A)1s followed by 360 troop-laden amtracs began landing the 3d Marine Division and 1st Provisional Marine Brigade. The pageantry was like that at Saipan except that at Guam 55 amtracs were destroyed or damaged on the initial landing. Despite these and later losses, the amtracs continued to demonstrate their unique versatility in supporting the advance of the Marines and soldiers that had joined them.

On 11 August after 11,000 Japanese had been killed and another 6,000 sealed in caves, Guam was secured, and the Marianas campaign ended. It marked the first massive use of amtracs in a meticulously organized landing, the introduction of the LVT(4) and LVT(A)4, and the first time a systematic effort had been made by amtracs to proceed inland before offloading troops.

Three months later, on 24 November 1944, the first flight of 100 B-29s left the Marianas for Japan.

US MC



Top and right: Marines landing on Guam, July 1944, from LVT(2)s. Pictures illustrate the difficulties of landing troops and cargo in this amphibian.

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian VI. Peleliu, Agony Island

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)



Marine assault troops head toward the beach at Peleliu, 15 September 1944.

The 1st Marine Division spent 1941 and 1942 in the field, including 4 memorable months on Guadalcanal. It received compensation in the paradise of southern Australia during most of 1943, then returned to reality in the hell of Cape Gloucester as the year ended. Four unpleasant months later, the division was ordered to Pavuvu to refit. There, midst swamp and jungle, it had built a camp and was just settling in when, in June, it was alerted for the invasion of Peleliu.

Gen MacArthur had initially planned to reenter the Philippines by way of Mindanao, following seizure of the Palaus, 530 miles to the east, to eliminate their threat to his flank. However, when an extensive sweep by the Third Fleet revealed the enemy was unexpectedly weak, it was decided to strike directly at Leyte on 20 October, while executing the Palaus operation as planned. This entailed the landing of the 1st Marine Division on Peleliu on 15 September, followed 2 days later by the seizure of neighboring Angaur Island by the Army's 81st Infantry Division.

Intelligence on the 10,000-man Japanese garrison defending Peleliu was confirmed in documents captured on Saipan. However, little was known of the island oth-

er than it was 6 miles long, less than 2 miles wide, and surrounded by a reef. Not until landing did the Marines discover Peleliu's fragmented terrain, the product of a submerged reef thrust upward by volcanic action and now hidden under scrub jungle. The Japanese had ably exploited this tormented landscape, with its caves in the low-lying Umurbrogol Mountain, to create defenses of unsurpassed difficulty.

Prior to Peleliu the 1st Marine Division had used its 100 amtracs mainly as logistics vehicles. Now, it needed twice that number, plus some 70 armored amphibians, for its assault landing over Peleliu's reef. The 1st Amtrac Battalion had less than half its amtracs still serviceable. Only the 8th Amtrac Battalion at Camp Pendleton, reporting 10 percent readiness, was uncommitted. This compelled use of 1st Amtrac Battalion personnel as nuclei for the new 6th Amtrac and 3d Armored Amphibian Battalions. Working an impossible schedule, these units were organized, equipped, and "trained" in the time normally required to prepare arriving amtracs for combat. Most aggravating, the 3d Battalion found that its armored amphibians, all re-

See Amphibians On Parade, p. 108.

Marines on the Peleliu beach return Japanese fire from behind the shelter of an LVT(A) nicknamed "The Bloody Trail."

ceived in August, included the 37mm gun and 75mm howitzer models, both unfamiliar to their crews. Notwithstanding such problems, the armored amphibians sailed on 4 September accompanied by 221 cargo amtracs of the 1st and 6th Amtrac Battalions and a detachment of the 8th Amtrac Battalion. Among these, four were fitted with Navy flamethrowers; six others



Marines clear mines from path of a flame thrower LVT(4), one of three such vehicles in the platoon commanded by Ens Melvin B. Thayer.

were designated to guide tanks across the reef.

The deceptive tranquillity with which D-day began ended at 0530 when naval guns opened fire to herald the drama of the amphibious assault. The orchestrated scenario unfolded in familiar fashion until the lead wave crossed the line of departure. Thereafter, Japanese fire of increasing intensity fell on the boat lanes and reef, hitting 26 amtracs. Despite this deluge of fire, the first wave reached shore at 0832, and five battalions of infantry quickly followed. Progress thereafter was agonizingly slow and costly. Twenty-seven armored amphibians were hit while helping establish a shallow beachhead. Fortunately, their agony was relatively brief. Within the hour most of the division's 30 tanks had been guided over the reef and, though virtually all were hit during this transit, none was put out of action.

The division commander, who had announced the operation would take 4 days, was reluctant to accept the pace of events ashore or the eventual need for Army help. However, 6 days after landing the 1st Marines had suffered 56 percent casualties and was no longer a fighting force. It was relieved by a regiment of the 81st Division. The 5th and 7th Marines fought on, but by 15 October

they too were exhausted and ready to have the Army finish the job. Finally, on 27 November, the "4-day operation" ended after 73 days of incessant combat and 10,000 casualties, 6,400 of them Marines. Included among them was Ensign Melvin B. "Flamethrower" Thayer, who had been adopted by the Marines and was killed on one of the support missions he unflinchingly accepted for his flamethrowing amtrac detachment. Vehicle losses in the amtrac units were also unusually heavy. The difficult terrain, prolonged operations, enemy action, and exceptional demands for transportation had left only a handful serviceable when the division was relieved. Return to Pavuvu was poor reward for the agony of Peleliu.

USMC