

# Battalion on Iwo

Their commanding officer's program for

"mental conditioning" made things rough for the troops while in training but it paid off when the battalion faced its most crucial test on Iwo. *By Capt Arthur N. Hill*

**T**HIS is the story—the unbelievable story—of a marine battalion on Iwo Jima. If it were a scientific thesis, it would be an awesome commentary on the incredible punishment men can take and still retain their senses, still move ahead, still realize that men must die if wars are to be won. And be willing to die.

But it's not that kind of a tale. It's just the story of a bunch of American marines and what they did on Iwo to help win the war against Japan. They did quite a bit.

It seems impossible that a military unit could take the losses that men of the 3d Battalion of the 25th Marines took during the initial phases of the battle for the tiny, dirty rock which provided the site for the most murderous campaign of the Pacific war and still be there for the finish. But it isn't impossible. These men did it.

LtCol Joe Chambers, Capt Jim Headley, a 19-year old kid named Bigler, a New Mexican called Martinez. These are the men who, along with several hundred others, wrote this story. It's the story of a commanding officer who was almost a legend and a captain who carried on in his place when he fell. It is a story that had to be told.

The men who make up the Fourth Marine Division are sure that they belong to one of the greatest fighting outfits of all time. The members of the other battalions of the Fourth would hardly admit that the 3d, 25th, is any better than theirs. Perhaps it isn't. It's quite possible that any battalion, in the same spot, could have done the same job. It's good to think so. But read what this one did.

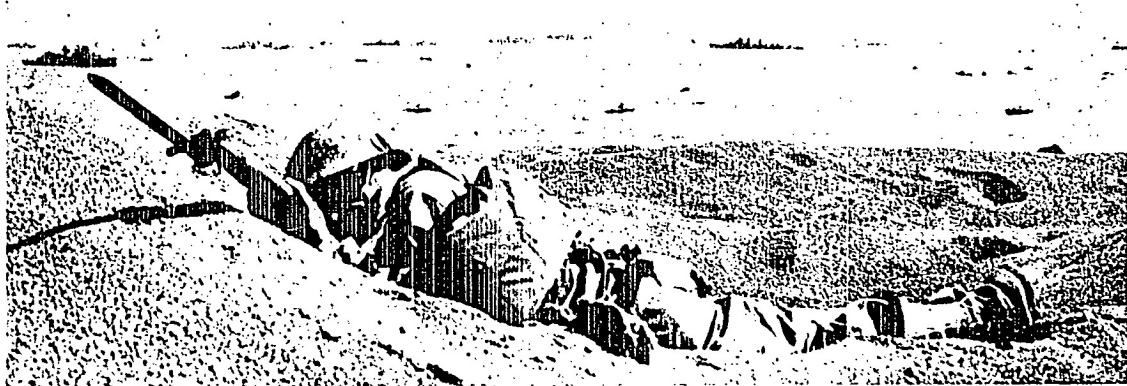
When the huge convoy carrying the Third, Fourth

and Fifth Marine Divisions moved up to the anchorage off the east coast of Iwo Jima on the morning of 19 February 1945, there were more than 900 men in the 25th; regulation, flesh and blood human beings. When the weary survivors of the fight climbed aboard the waiting transports a month later, 750 of the original battalion were dead, wounded or missing. But, three days earlier, when organized Japanese resistance was officially declared at an end, this battalion was still fighting.

That, however, is far from being the whole story. At the end of the first day of fighting on Iwo, the situation looked hopeless. Four officers of the battalion staff had been killed or wounded and another had left to take command of a rifle company which had lost its leader. The executive officer had been detached to take over another battalion whose CO had been wounded.

**I**N the rifle companies of the battalion, the story was equally grim. One of them had lost *all seven* of its officers before nightfall. Another had lost its commander and two other officers while the third was missing two of the officers who had landed with it that morning. Casualties among the enlisted men were almost as appalling.

In such a position, almost any unit might have been forgiven had it cried for help and withdrawn. But, because of the tactical mission of Joe Chambers' battalion, any such move on his part would have imperiled the success of the entire operation, and the battle for Iwo, instead of a great triumph for United States forces, might easily have become



A good many men of the 3d Battalion didn't make it all the way to the objective.

the most disastrous tragedy of the entire war. They had to stay.

They stayed.

The history of this magnificent fighting battalion did not begin in the Marshall Islands or the Marianas, where it had fought before going to Iwo. It started back in the summer of 1943 when the 25th Marine Regiment was organized and LtCol Justice M. Chambers of Huntington, W. Va., was named commanding officer of its 3d Battalion. The officers and men of the original battalion, unable to foresee what they were destined to undergo on a tiny dot of land in the Volcano Islands almost two years later, soon thought they had discovered the meaning of hell on earth right down in New River, North Carolina.

Colonel Chambers, called Jumping Joe by those who learn his training methods the hard way, is known throughout the Marine Corps as one of the finest guys and one of the toughest commanding officers in any man's army. He didn't waste any time letting the members of his new command know where he, and they, stood.

Jumping Joe had no sooner assumed command than he called together his officers and said, in effect, "Gentlemen, I believe in play on the weekends and work during the week. I enjoy hitting the spots and standing up to the bar for a tall cool one as much as any of you. But, gentlemen, we are going to war. And when we get there, we are going to be ready."

A reserve officer, Chambers is as much a marine as any man who ever lived. Handsome, good-natured and rather young for his rank (especially since he is a reserve), his credo can be summed up in two words, "mental conditioning." Close order drill? Fine for peacetime and for garrison troops. Weeks on the rifle range? Well, a man certainly had to be able to shoot, and to hit what he was shooting at. But "mental conditioning," that was the stuff.

Joe Chambers was determined that his battalion was going to go through as much morale-breaking, nerve-wracking drudgery and downright misery as he could possibly devise without actually calling out the artillery to fire at them in training. He succeeded.

ANYONE familiar with the marine reservation at New River can testify that Colonel Chambers couldn't have picked a better spot to put his ideas into practice. It's called Camp Lejeune now, after a famous marine general of World War I, but to the men who helped build it while training on it back in the early days of the war and before, it's still New River, the crummiest, lousiest hole on the face of the earth. And just about the best training spot for Pacific warfare in the U.S.A.

It contains more snakes, bugs, swamps, impenetrable thickets and genuine jungle than any other area of its size in the country. The 3d Battalion,

25th, spent all week every week in those swamps and jungles, rain or shine.

Every Monday morning, at eight o'clock, if you were watching, you might have seen those men strutting along the paved roads of the camp, headed for the field. If it happened to be raining so hard that you could barely see 15 yards ahead, you probably would have been watching from the shelter of one of the green beaverboard huts in which the combat troops at New River lived; but you would have seen them just the same. Perhaps they weren't strutting, but there they went. It didn't rain hard enough to keep Chambers' outfit indoors.

And any Friday afternoon, late, these same men could be seen tramping back to their living area. Maybe not quite so jaunty, not as cocky as they had looked five days before. In fact, usually looking just plain miserable. They had just come back from five days of living in mud, eating in mud and sleeping in mud (when they slept, which wasn't every night by any means).

And what did they have to look forward to? A weekend's liberty (and the night spots in Jacksonville, the only town within easy reach, are not the type that will ever come to the attention of Lucius Beebe), then right back to the swamps. Their schedule was as dependable as sunrise and sunset. And even in New River, where the weather does weird and mysterious things, sunrise and sunset were usually on time.

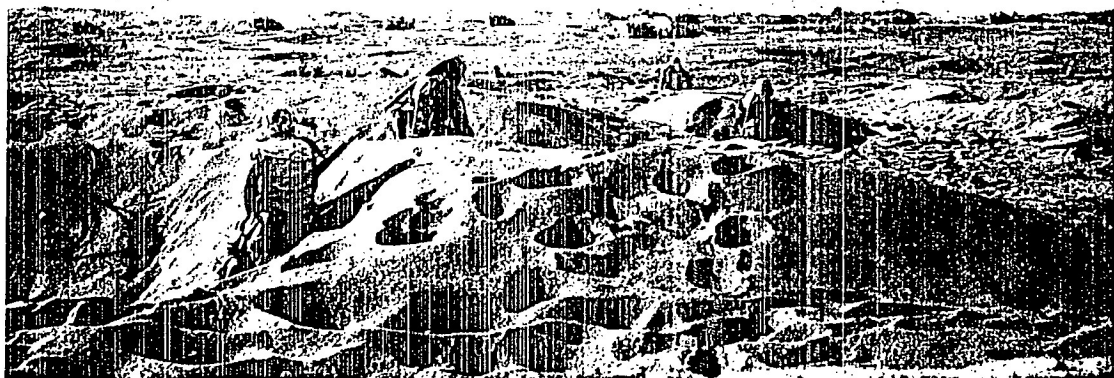
There were those who said that the colonel was driving his men to revolt. It's likely that they came within an inch or two of rebellion on more than one occasion during those first few weeks. But gradually, and seemingly miraculously, they began to get the idea. They still didn't care much for it but they began to realize that there was a reason for it besides just a diabolical desire to make them all very, very unhappy.

When, late in 1943, the regiment moved to Camp Pendleton, preparatory to shipment overseas, there was a great deal of excitement over the prospect of having a decent liberty town fairly close by. Los Angeles! The fabulous L.A. Whatever else they may have to say about Southern California and its inhabitants, most marines agree that you can't touch L.A. for liberty.

But the 3d Battalion was still going to war. And it was still going to be ready. The routine didn't change. Five days in the field every week. L.A. was there. But Joe Chambers' men didn't see much of it.

Most of the officers and a good many of the men had their wives with them on the coast. Those moments at home were becoming more precious as the trip overseas loomed closer. But while their comrades in arms in other units were getting home four or five nights a week with only an occasional lengthy period in the field, Chambers' troops saw their wives on weekends only.

Did they resent it? You bet they did. Is there



There was no cover, no concealment as they moved out to attack the high ground.

any one of them now who wouldn't put his arm in the fire up to the elbow for Joe Chambers? It's not likely.

As Capt Jim Headley put it after the Iwo campaign (in which his exploits had gained him fame throughout the division), "We were taught by the master. He spoke of 'mental conditioning' and at first we thought it was just a pat phrase to explain a lot of unnecessary hardships. But he showed us what it meant and I am completely convinced that this battalion never would have made it through those first days on Iwo if it hadn't been for Chambers' training."

THE men of the battalion took a good deal of ridicule from members of other units. They were always ragged, almost sloppy. They didn't have much time for doing laundry and their utility clothes needed replacement every three or four weeks. At marching and drill they weren't very proficient. They never practiced except on their way to and from field exercises. And there isn't much precision to be acquired while marching through ankle-deep mud. They were probably the least snappy outfit in the whole Marine Corps, an organization which prides itself on its ability on the drill field.

Gradually, however, their embarrassment at their shortcomings changed to a sort of fierce pride and a burning conviction that they were members of the roughest, toughest gang in the war business. It's possible that they weren't the best battalion in the Marine Corps, or in the Fourth Division. But you couldn't have convinced them of that. And, brother, that counts!

Colonel Chambers' ready-for-war battalion didn't get much action in the Marshalls, where the 25th was assigned what turned out to be a fairly easy task during the landings at Roi and Namur. The whole thing was finished in two days and it looked as if all the training had gone to waste, at least as far as that operation was concerned.

They sat on the tiny island of Enubirr for 30 days while the rest of the division returned to an advance base. When they finally returned to that "rest camp," they were quarantined as a result of an epidemic of dysentery which had attacked the entire regiment.

Finally, the epidemic ended; the unpleasant symptoms of that most unpleasant disease were no longer in evidence and the men were ready for liberty. Well, a little, of course. But, as soon as every member of the battalion which Joe Chambers had determined was going to be the best in the Pacific got a chance to blow off a little steam, back they went to the old routine. More "mental conditioning." And they kept it up until they shoved off for Saipan.

In the Marianas, the 3d, 25th, came into its own. With the youthful West Virginian in the lead, they established a reputation which won them publicity in *The Leatherneck*. The author of that article made the mistake of referring to them as Chambers' Raiders, a nickname they had acquired during their incessant sojourns in the bush back in the States.

This sobriquet did not fall too pleasantly on the ears of MajGen Clifton B. Cates, the division commander. General Cates wanted it made clear that this great fighting organization was an ordinary rifle battalion of the Fighting Fourth, and not one of the marine raider battalions which had won fame during the first year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

If you think that, after leaving the Marianas, the men finally got a well-earned rest, it simply indicates you haven't yet begun to realize that Joe Chambers didn't believe in letting up. Incessant training was his watchword and it didn't cease after a successful campaign against the Emperor's soldiers. It was New River and Camp Pendleton all

(Continued on page 57)

mission." This, however, is dependent upon the time of delay which must be achieved, and the space in which the delaying commander may operate.

In view of these considerations, determined defense was apparently unnecessary in this case.

The commander had at least 100 miles of mountainous country traversed only by one main road, through which he could readily delay in successive positions, and the higher commander had ordered him to evade decisive action with superior forces.

Why, then, did General Zasulich make the fateful decision to stand and fight? In his defense it must be said that the unsound command set-up previously mentioned was instrumental. The Vice-roy, Admiral Alexeieff, knew that while four months' delay of the Japanese First Army would permit concentration of the Russian Army, a retirement from the Yalu prior to that concentration would jeopardize Port Arthur and the remnants of the fleet. So, although no actual change was made in Kuropatkin's orders to the Eastern Detachment,

as quoted earlier, Kuropatkin and Zasulich were given to understand that Alexeieff expected them to exact the maximum possible delay at the Yalu.

This did not, however, excuse Zasulich from the exercise of sound military judgment in his operations. Like most other European soldiers of that time he had a low regard for the combat ability of the as yet "uncivilized" Japanese. Then, too, he was a typical old soldier, impressed with the citations to his many earlier decorations. Upon receiving his orders for the Eastern Detachment to execute this delaying mission, he remarked: "His Majesty has made me a Knight of the Order of Saint George, and I do not retreat." Even though the Detachment was for the most part disposed for a wide front, mobile delaying action—by personal direction of the Army commander, Kuropatkin—we now see Zasulich deciding to use this disposition for a determined defense of the Yalu River at Chiu-lien-cheng!

*(Second and last installment of "Withdrawal from the Yalu" will appear in the December GAZETTE.)*

## Battalion on Iwo

*(Continued from page 29)*

over again for the war-weary marines of the 3d Battalion.

If ever there was an outfit ready for battle, it was this battalion as its men filed aboard ship to take the Iwo Jima cruise. They wanted to kill Japs! They got their chance.

When the Fourth and Fifth Marine Divisions moved onto the black, volcanic beach on Iwo's southeast coast, Chambers' battalion was assigned the extreme right flank position, an unpleasant prospect in any operation but, in this case, one which looked like organizational suicide.

It is an unfortunate but painfully true fact that in any amphibious assault there must be a flank. The men on that flank are exposed to anything the enemy wants to throw at them. They have no protection from screening friendly forces. They have nothing but the weapons they carry with which to fight off enemy fire. They are in an unenviable spot.

TO the right of Iwo's Blue Beach (over which the 3d Battalion made its assault) lay high rocky hills offering concealment for any number of Jap troops with machine guns, rifles and mortars. What Colonel Chambers' men met when they crossed that beach was simply the most withering, vicious flanking fire imaginable. That any of them got through it at all is one of the many apparent miracles of the battle for Iwo.

The plan called for the battalion to hit the beach in column of companies, I Company going in first to anchor its flank on the beach and swing to the

right for the projected advance to the north. Companies K and L were to follow, advancing inland for a couple of hundred yards to take up positions at I Company's right.

I Company, commanded by Capt Elwyn W. Woods of Mountain Grove, Mo., made it ashore, but, in the confusion resulting from the murderous Japanese shelling and the powerful surf which battered the Iwo beaches, the other companies landed several hundred yards down the beach, in another unit's sector. But the well-trained marines of those two companies lost no time in moving to their assigned positions to the left of Woods' lines.

When the battalion was finally in position for the assault to the north, Chambers began to take stock of his outfit. His radio blared bad news with agonizing regularity. Almost before the battle had started, the colonel learned that K Company's leader, Capt Tom Witherspoon of Lexington, Ky., had taken a shell fragment in the shoulder which would put him out of action for good; that most of Witherspoon's company officers had similarly become casualties (before the day was out, all of them were gone); that Capt Woods had also been evacuated.

(Woods was removed to a hospital on Guam, but as soon as he was back on his feet, although under no compulsion to do so, he reported back to the battalion on Iwo. He served as a member of the battalion staff during the last five days of the campaign.)

In the battalion command post, the situation was

no better. The unceasing artillery and the soul-searing screech of mortar shells were of an intensity calculated to drive lesser men to gibbering insanity. There were no mental crackups but the Jap shells took their toll, nonetheless.

Capt Sam Pitetti of Rillton, Pa., killed in action. Lt John M. Fogarty of Worcester, Mass., and WO Braxton E. Henderson of Coral Gables, Fla., supply officers, wounded and evacuated. These were a few of the losses to the battalion staff in those first few hours of the inferno of death that was Iwo Jima on D day.

In addition, LtCol James Taul of Lexington, Ky., the executive officer, had been ordered to assume command of another battalion of the 25th which had lost both its CO and its exec. And Capt Hugh Breakenridge of Waterloo, Ia., the assistant operations officer, had gone forward to take command of Witherspoon's company. (Breakenridge was subsequently killed.)

With his battalion shot to pieces but not demoralized, Chambers gave orders to advance. Why, you may wonder, didn't he hold fast until a reorganization could be effected? That would have been preferable but it happened that it also would have been suicidal.

To the battalion's front lay high ground from which the Jap defenders had been driven by the pre-invasion naval bombardment. If that ground were not seized before nightfall, it was a foregone conclusion that it would be retaken by the Nipponese during the night. That done, the task of killing off or driving into the sea every member of Col Pat Lanigan's 25th Marines would have been painfully simple.

This would have isolated the remainder of the division and likely resulted in the annihilation of which Japanese battle orders so fondly speak. The Fifth Division, which had stormed across the southern end of the island clear to the opposite shore, would then have been cut off from all possibility of supply or reinforcement.

*The victory on Iwo Jima depended upon the ability of the pitifully exposed and riddled 3d Battalion to take that ground!*

**REFUSING** to face what appeared to be obvious facts, Chambers gave the order to "advance and take the high ground to your front." At least, that's the way in which he would have phrased it if he had had time to write out an operations order. But Jumping Joe just grabbed a radio-phone and said, "Get the hell up there before those Japs get wise and grab that ground themselves."

He received no murmurs of dissent in reply. No company commander called back that his outfit was too shot up to go forward. And, under one of the most vicious and terrifying artillery, mortar and rocket barrages in the history of modern warfare,

those men moved across the open sand and took the ground. There was no cover, no concealment. They were in the open, plainly visible to the Japanese defenders, like targets in a shooting gallery where you pay your money and pick them off at your leisure.

A good many of the men didn't get all the way to the objective. But when night fell on D day, the 3d Bat was dug in, prepared to resist any attempt by the enemy to retake the area.

And the turning point in the bloodiest engagement of the Pacific war, which came almost before the battle was well under way, had passed.

Heroes in that initial drive were a dime a dozen. Ask Jim Headley about it and he'll tell you that he saw "so many acts of courage and bravery that it's almost impossible to recall them all."

"They died so fast," Jim goes on, "that the whole business of heroes and death is a little mixed up in my mind. You'd see a man do something almost unbelievable and a minute later you'd see him die. It's pretty hard to pick out any outstanding man or men."

Although they had been on the line less than 24 hours, the men of the 3d Bat, in consideration of the tremendous pasting they had taken, were relieved at one o'clock of the morning following D day. At that stage, however, relief from the lines wasn't the blessed respite from death and danger that it sometimes can be. There was no place on Iwo Jima where men could be safe from enemy shell-fire.

So Joe Chambers reorganized what was left of his battalion under fire, and the men dug in and sat the day out. On the afternoon of D plus 2, they returned to find that the hell they had encountered two days before hadn't abated appreciably.

Shortly after the 3d had returned to action, a bullet smashed into Joe Chambers' chest and punctured his right lung. Only immediate medical attention and a magnificent constitution kept the battalion's leader alive. He was evacuated almost immediately to a ship in the anchorage.

For days, rumors covered the island. "Chambers died aboard ship." "Chambers lasted 'til he got to Guam, then cashed in." But they were only rumors. The Japs, who certainly had good reason to wish for the West Virginia colonel's death, couldn't quite swing it. Joe Chambers is alive today, convalescing in a California hospital.

And now misgivings gripped officers of other units on the island. What would the 3d Bat do without Chambers? With him they were great, but perhaps he was the only one who could keep them going.

But the doubtful ones hadn't reckoned with the slim, blond youngster who took charge when his commander fell. Thirty-two-year-old Capt Jim Headley, who looks about 25, was a reserve officer with only a little over three years' service in the

Corps. But he had what it took to lead, he had been molded in the Chambers crucible and believed in the Marine Corps' doctrine that the only reason for risking men's lives in combat was to kill the enemy and take ground.

The good-natured ex-lawyer from Cincinnati, who took charge of a unit four times the size of any he had ever led before, never faltered. And the officers and men who fought under his leadership drove ahead the same way they would have done with Chambers at the helm. And the manner in which Headley led them to final victory is known to every man in the Fourth Marine Division.

WITH every member of his depleted staff doing double or triple duty, Jim never rested, never stopped thinking about the next day, the next hour, the next minute. And the story of the 3d Battalion through the weeks that followed his rise to command is a tale of heroism and sacrifice which would be hard to match.

Typical of those who met the crisis with outstanding valor and determination is Capt James Antink, a skinny, happy-go-lucky, fast-talking Chicagoan with a pants-kicking sense of humor. Jim, who attended the University of New Mexico, married a New Mexico girl and calls Santa Fe God's country. was CO of battalion headquarters company and had never led a front-line outfit in combat.

On the morning of D plus 3, Antink found himself battalion executive officer with additional duty as operations officer, a job which ordinarily calls for a major with a captain as assistant. He rose to the occasion with the fortitude which had been ingrained in him by a man who was determined that no one of his command would ever falter in a tough spot.

Another officer who carried a double burden was Lt Bob Davis of Dallas, Texas, communications officer, who also served as the unit's intelligence officer and did an excellent job although he had never had an hour's training in intelligence work.

As the days went by and the painful, inch-by-inch progress of the divisions fighting on the bloody rock became more and more heart-breaking, the history of the 3d Battalion was enriched by hundreds of examples of unselfish bravery and devotion to duty. Cases of men exposing themselves to fire in order to tempt Jap snipers into giving away their positions became commonplace. Heroism was the normal

thing, no longer awe-inspiring or even surprising.

There was Sgt Manuel Martinez of Moses, N. M., who walked erect into a cave full of trapped Nipponese. Blasting them with his automatic rifle, Martinez killed 15 and by his very audacity escaped without a scratch.

Or Pvt Delbert Maupin, a kid from Hannibal, Mo., who threw himself in front of a potato-masher grenade, taking the lethal blast himself to save his squad leader who hadn't seen the grenade fall.

Then, too, there were a couple of replacements, green kids who hadn't had the terrific build-up for this battle like the battalion's veterans, but who knew what the word *marine* meant and who caught the fever for victory of the men beside whom they fought.

It happened at the spot known to the men who fought there as Grenade Ridge. They'll tell you how Lawrence Bigler, a 19-year-old private first class from Woodsfield, Ohio, jumped to his feet and continued to pound the enemy with his automatic rifle after being mortally wounded in the stomach. When he fell, his pal, Pvt Johnnie J. Turnage of La Grange, N. C., snatched his weapon up and carried on in his place until he, too, was killed.

THAT'S the story of the 3d Battalion of the 25th Marines. Cut off from hope and doomed to inevitable annihilation, it fought ahead, inspired by a smiling lieutenant colonel who had never allowed himself to think of defeat and a tall, yellow-haired captain whose hopes and ambitions weren't tied up with death and heroism but with a wife in Cincinnati and a law practice that's missed him for too long.

It could be told in figures. The men of the battalion have been recommended for 18 Navy Crosses, six Legions of Merit, 50 Silver Stars and 150 Bronze Stars, plus a great number of lesser awards.

In the operations report it's told in cold, precise military language, the details in hundreds of yards gained and number of rounds fired.

But, in one way or another, it had to be told. For it's written in blood on the ugly, black sands of Futatsune Beach; in bone and flesh and in names on white crosses in the crowded cemetery above the beach. And it's etched with a sharp-pointed knife into the hearts of those who lived to fight again.

They won't forget.

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The Navy Department reports that 703 vessels—from battleships to patrol craft—were lost during the war. Of this number 116 were lost by air attack and 53 to submarines. Fifty-three were sunk by surface vessels. Losses included: battleships, 2; aircraft carriers, 5; aircraft carriers, escort, 6; heavy cruisers, 7; light cruisers, 3; destroyers, 71; destroyer escorts, 11; submarines, 52; submarine chasers, 18; gunboats, 12; seaplane tenders, 3; motor torpedo boats, 69; tank landing ships, 41; medium landing ships, 9; smaller craft, 394.