Marine Tanks in the Battle of Okinawa

by [illegible], USMC (Ret)

The three-month battle of Okinawa represented the capstone of offensive tank-infantry tactics refined in years of hard fighting in Pacific islands. The Sherman medium tank employed by the seven Army and Marine Corps tank battalions on Okinawa would prove to be a decisive weapon—but only when closely coordinated with accompanying infantry. The Japanese intended to separate the two components by fire and audacity. "The enemy's strength lies in his tanks," declared Lieutenant General Mitsura Ushijima before the invasion. Antitank training received the highest priority within his 32d Army.

On April 19, in the third week of the battle, a sizable tank-infantry task force of the U.S. Army 27th Infantry Division breached the Japanese lines between Kakazu and Nishibaru, the outer fortifications of the Shuri defensive complex. Savage enemy fire from reverse slope positions separated the tanks from their supporting infantry. The column of 30 tanks tried to fight its way back to safety, but was hit by every conceivable weapon—antitank guns, antiaircraft artillery, mines and suicide-bent soldiers with demolitions strapped to their chests. Only eight tanks survived.

Given this grim report, LtGen Simon Bolivar Buckner, commanding the U.S. Tenth Army, directed Marine Major General Roy S. Geiger to detach the First Marine Division's tank battalion for assignment with the 27th Division in the fight for Kakazu Ridge. No Marine general was more oriented to joint operations and interservice cooperation than Roy Geiger, but the commander of III Amphibious Corps knew better than to sacrifice the unit integrity of his components. "Use the entire First Marine Division," he countered to Buckner, "they learned tank-infantry coordination the hard way at Peleliu."

Buckner eventually redeployed Geiger's entire corps—essentially the First and Sixth Marine Divisions—into the meat-grinder battle being waged against Shuri. Throughout the ensuing two months of desperate fighting, the

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Tanks played a key role in the battle for Okinawa. Tanks, such as the flame tank shown here, proved decisive only when closely coordinated with accompanying infantry.

Marines would provide a close, protective overwatch to their accompanying tanks, keeping the "human bullet" suicide squads at bay. Although enemy guns and mines took a heavy toll of the Shermans, only a single Marine tank sustained damage from a Japanese suicide foray.

Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J. Stuart, USMC, commanded the 1st Tank Battalion during the Okinawa campaign. The unit had fought with distinction at Peleliu a half-year earlier, despite shipping shortfalls which kept one-third of its tanks out of the fight and a questionable decision by the division commander to terminate armored operations prematurely. Stuart insisted on retaining the battalion's older M-4A2 Shermans because he believed the twin General Motors diesel engines were safer in combat. MajGen Pedro A. del Valle, commanding the 1stMarDiv, agreed. "The tanks were not so easily set on fire and blown up under enemy fire," he would later report. "We salvaged many using a 4.2 mortar smoke barrage and a tow tank under fire."

By contrast, LtCol Robert L. Denig's 6th Tank Bn preferred the newer M-4A3 model Shermans. Denig's tankers liked the greater horsepower provided by the water-cooled Ford V-8 engine and considered the reversion to gasoline from diesel an acceptable risk.

Both battalions benefited from extensive cross-training with the infantry prior to the invasion. Much of this concerned tactical communications. The Fleet Marine Forces had come a long way since Tarawa, where radios in the then-new Shermans could not find a common frequency with infantry field radios, causing a high incidence of casualties among tank commanders who had to dismount to coordinate with their infantry counterparts. By 1945, radio systems were compatible, and each tank carried at least a rudimentary "bustle phone" on its stern for direct conversations with the infantry. Most company commanders also took pains to train their riflemen to operate the tank's bow machine gun to designate targets. The First Division went so far as assigning individual rifle squads the responsibility for specific tanks. This paid great dividends in the battle.

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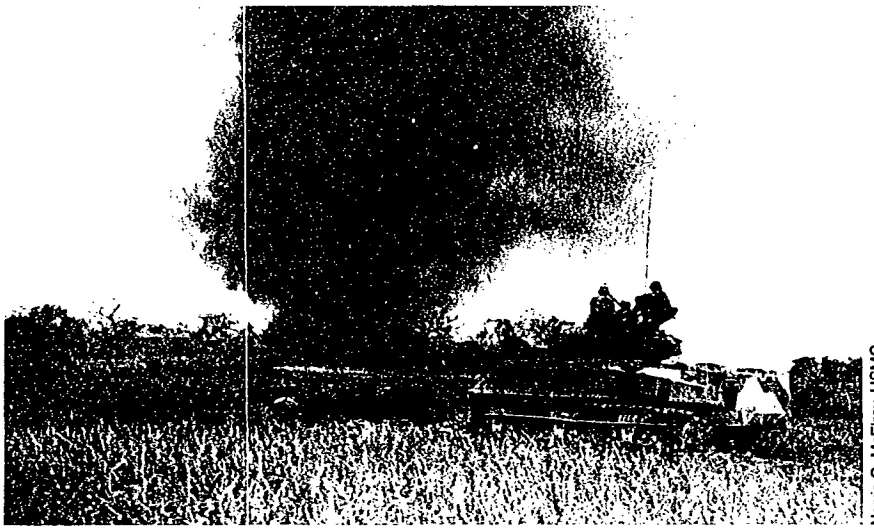
The Sherman tank, much maligned in the European theater for its shortcomings against the heavier German Tigers, seemed ideal for much of the island fighting in the Pacific. By Okinawa, however, the Sherman's limitations would often become liabilities. The 75-mm. gun proved frequently too light against some of Ushijima's fortifications; on these occasions the new M-7 half-track with its direct-fire 105-mm. weapon was more effective. And the Sherman was never known for its armor protection. At 33 tons, its strength lay more in its mobility and reliability. But as Japanese antitank weapons and mines reached the height of lethality at Okinawa, the Sherman's thin-skinned weak points (1.5-inch armor on the sides and rear, for example) became a cause for concern. Marine tank crews had resorted to sheathing the sides of their vehicles with lumber as a foil to hand-lobbed Japanese magnetic mines as early as the Marshalls campaign. By the time of Okinawa, Marine Shermans were festooned with spot-welded track blocks, wire mesh, sandbags and clusters of large nails.

Both tank battalions fielded Shermans configured with dozer blades, invaluable assets in the cave fighting to come, but—surprisingly—neither outfit deployed with flame tanks. Despite rave reports of the success of the USN Mark I turret-mounted flame system installed in eight Shermans in the battle of Iwo Jima, there would be no massive retrofit program for the Okinawa-bound tank units. Instead, all flame tanks on Okinawa were provided courtesy of the U.S. Army's 713th Armored Flamethrower Bn. Company B of that unit supported the III Phib Corps with brand new H-1 flame tanks. Each carried 290 gallons of napalm-thickened fuel, good for 2½ minutes of flame at ranges out to 80 yards. The Marines received consistently outstanding support from this Army company throughout the battle.

Marine Corps amphibious doctrine as developed in the Central Pacific drive called for early landing of tanks, usually right behind the assault infantry waves. The massive four-division landing scheduled for Okinawa put a premium on tank landing craft, so Gen Geiger encouraged use of the newly developed T-6 "Tank Flotation Devices." The T-6 featured a series of flotation tanks welded all around the hull, a provisional steering device making use of the tracks and electric bilge pumps. Once ashore, built-in explosive charges would jettison the ungainly rig—without blowing up the vehicle, one hoped.

The invasion landing on April 1 constituted an uneventful cakewalk for most of the Tenth Army, but for the 1st Tank Bn, it was truly April Fools' Day. The captain of an LST carrying six T-6-equipped Shermans claimed he never got the Fifth Fleet landing plan and launched the vehicles an hour late and 10 miles at sea. It took this irate contingent five hours to reach the beach, losing two vehicles on the reef at ebb tide.



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Enemy guns and mines took a heavy toll on Marine and Army tanks in the fighting for Okinawa. However, the Army provided flame tanks which, with 290 gallons of napalm-thickened fuel, took a heavy toll of Japanese.

Most of Col Stuart's other Shermans made it ashore before noon, but his reserves had a hell of a time; some did not make it across the reef for 48 hours. The 6th Tank Bn fared better. Their LST skippers had "The Word" and launched the T-6 tanks on time and in close. Two tanks were lost; one sank when its main engine failed, another broke a track and veered into an unseen hole, but the other Shermans surged ashore, detonated their float tanks successfully and were ready to roll by H+29.

Once ashore, the Marine tankers found a different kind of battle waiting. Here there would be no tank versus tank action like the brief, violent encounters at Saipan and Peleliu; nor would tanks ever mass forces to lead multiple divisions across an exposed airstrip as at Iwo Jima. Okinawa at first was more like Tinian, especially for the 6thMarDiv racing north toward the Motobu Peninsula. The nature of the terrain and elusiveness of the enemy permitted the use of mechanized task forces—columns of Shermans and M-7 half-tracks loaded with exuberant infantrymen roaring up the country roads. Too soon this came to end when the enemy went to ground in the high country around Mount Yae. Then it became time for all the Marines to file into the lines of the Tenth Army besieging Shuri Castle and its many spiny ramparts. Tanks would play a significant role in the bloody weeks ahead, but only with modest gains and heavy casualties all around.

Thanks to Gen Geiger's insistence, the Marines preserved the integrity of their tank-infantry teams throughout the battle. At the same time, the leathernecks quickly learned what their Army counterparts had first experienced in the attacks against Kakazu Ridge: The Japanese would use every trick to separate the Shermans from their supporting infantry. Being assigned to an overwatch fire team for a Sherman advancing against those ridge-and-cave complexes was not conducive to a long, healthy life. The Japanese threw everything in the book at the tanks, once using an 8-inch naval coast defense gun to blow up an unfortunate Sherman at close range. The Japanese 150-mm. mortars and 47-mm. direct-fire weapons were worse. The tanks always drew an abundance of fire, and the troops on foot could only hunch their shoulders and try to keep moving forward, from shell hole to rubble pile, always watching for the flurry of movement out of the underbrush which would signal another suicide squad. The only proven tactic was to smother enemy positions with heavier fire than they were dishing out—tanks, Marine Corsairs, artillery, naval gunfire—until the assault squads could snake forward to finish the job with flame and demolitions.

When the fighting reached a particularly vicious stalemate, as during the protracted battle for Sugar Loaf, Marine commanders would deploy tanks forward in hull-defilade positions, using their high-velocity, flat-trajectory fire to scourge the cave and bunker entrances a few hundred yards away. Meanwhile, troops of the 7th Infantry Division on the opposite flank came up with an ingenious expedient to deliver flame on targets when rough terrain kept the "Zippo Tanks" out of range. The Soldiers connected a series of hoses to the flame tank, extending its reach another 250 feet. Dragging the heavy hoses forward under fire took time and courage, but at length the "nozzle-man" presented a scorching surprise to the occupants of a previously unassailable enemy cave.

Tank units expended an enormous amount of ammunition in fighting their way through this seemingly endless maze of fortifications. To cite one example, the 1st Tank Bn supported the attacks on Wana Draw and Dakeshi Ridge on May 16 with 5,000 rounds of 75-mm., 173,000 rounds of machine-gun ammo and 600 gallons of napalm. By the end of the battle the two Marine tank battalions would shoot 200,000 75-mm. shells between them.

Sometimes in the brutal fighting a company of Marines would finally suc-

During the 29th Marine Regiment's all-out assault on Sugar Loaf Hill, it was almost impossible to evacuate the wounded by stretcher parties. Tanks helped to solve the problem. This tank helped evacuate wounded along the narrow gauge railroad.

ceed in taking the high ground in their sector, only to be cut off and pounded by the mutually supporting enemy positions to either flank. Soon the situation would grow critical, the embattled troops desperate for reinforcements, ammo and medical evacuation for their casualties. At these times, the Sherman tanks served as armored personnel carriers going up and armored ambulances coming back. By removing the assistant driver temporarily from the crew, the tank commander could squeeze six riflemen inside for the dash to the summit. There the reinforcements and fresh supplies would be exchanged for casualties through the bottom escape hatch. Those less badly hurt could be wedged inside, but stretcher cases had to be strapped to the rear sponson, heavily buffered by sandbags. The 1st Tank Bn retrieved 22 casualties from Kunishi Ridge by these means before dark on June 11.

Japanese gunners, sappers and mine warfare experts knocked out a total of 153 American tanks in the battle for Okinawa. According to the III Phib Corps action report, 51 of these were Marine Corps Shermans. Many more tanks sustained damage in the fighting. Maintenance crews worked wonders in field expedients and recovery operations to restore many of these for extended close combat. A freshly disabled tank on the battlefield always drew a lot of attention. The Americans would surround it with a smoke barrage to permit evacuation of the crew and shield recovery attempts. Retrieval crews had to work fast to winch the damaged tank out of no man's land by dark. If it couldn't be done, the crews would spike the main gun, disable the engine and evacuate the machine guns and radios—hurriedly. Night would bring a swarm of Japanese infiltrators, searching for stragglers to kill and weapons to seize, establishing a new "armored sniper fort" for the coming day.

Tankers and infantrymen alike expressed interest in the advent of the Army's new M-26 Pershing tank, standardized in March 1945. The Pershing provided much thicker armor, wider tracks and a 90-mm. gun. The Army rushed the first dozen Pershings to Okinawa, but they arrived just as the fighting died. The new tanks would have helped. The troops could only hope a sufficient number would be on hand for what was being called Operation Coronet, the invasion of Honshu in early 1946.

During Okinawa, however, the sturdy, thin-skinned Shermans had survived the ultimate combat test with distinction. Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, commanding general of the Sixth Marine Division and future 20th Commandant, said: "If any one supporting arm can be singled out as having contributed more than any others during the [Okinawan] campaign, the tank would certainly be selected." The concept of Marine combined-arms task forces was now well underway.

Editor's note: Col Joe Alexander is the author of the 50th anniversary historical monograph of the Iwo Jima campaign newly published by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington. He also co-authored, with LtCol M. L. Bartlett, USMC (Ret), "Sea Soldiers in the Cold War: Amphibious Warfare 1945-1991," published by the Naval Institute Press in December 1994. A book on Tarawa is due for release later this year.

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