

Baptism by Fire: Sherman Tanks at Tarawa

Story by Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret) • USMC Photos

Marine First Lieutenant Lou Largey's world had just turned upside down. Less than an hour earlier Largey had landed his reinforced platoon of brand new Sherman medium tanks on Red Beach 3. Riflemen of Battalion Landing Team 2/8, pinned down along the seawall, had cheered when the column of unfamiliar tanks clanked inland, directly into the teeth of the Japanese defenses.

But the Sherman tanks were too new. The Second Marine Division had no idea how best to employ them tactically. Unsupported by infantry, Largey's tanks were knocked off in short order: some by friendly fire, others by deadly accurate Japanese antitank guns. Largey's own tank had been disabled and abandoned. As the platoon commander

jumped aboard "Colorado," his last surviving Sherman, it sustained a major-caliber hit and burst into flames. The driver raced madly back to the beach, dousing the flames in the waters of the lagoon.

This was part of the chaos on D-Day morning, Nov. 20, 1943, on Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Gilbert Islands. It was a terrible beginning for what had promised to be the decisive combat weapon on Tarawa.

Watching this disaster from close range was Colonel David M. Shoup, commanding officer of the 2d Marines and future Commandant. Wild with frustration, Shoup radioed the flagship: "Need half-tracks. Our tanks no good!" The time was 1045.

In truth, no Marine units got ashore

intact and unbloodied during the first 30 hours at Tarawa. The Japanese Special Naval Landing Forces (the *rikusentai*) were simply too well-armed and fortified. The battle was eventually won by small clusters of Marines who improvised new tactical concepts to employ the few surviving tanks to clear a secure landing beach for reinforcements. In the process, the Marines developed a fond relationship with their sturdy Shermans that lasted through fierce fighting for the next 15 years.

The Marines were actually lucky to have medium tanks available in time for the Tarawa assault. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were determined to prevent another "Operation Shoestring," when Marines landed at Guadalcanal with World War I-vintage weapons and



This shell-pocked Sherman medium tank was put out of action on Betio, D-Day, Nov. 20, 1943.

equipment. By contrast, the 2dMarDiv landed at Tarawa with M1 Garand semi-automatic rifles, portable flamethrowers, and the first delivery of new LVT-2 assault amphibian vehicles.

Getting medium tanks to the objective area required breakthrough developments in industrial design and production. The M-4 Shermans themselves were a quantum improvement in firepower, armor protection, and mobility over the M-3 Stuart light tanks. But because of their increased bulk, the medium tanks needed special amphibious ships and landing craft. Hence, Tarawa also saw the first combat deployment in the Pacific War of the dock landing ship, a revolutionary new amphibious vessel that could flood her own well deck to launch pre-loaded LCM-3 tank lighters. The USS *Ashland* (LSD-1) was the great-grandfather of our LSD-41-class ships, still invaluable components of the amphibious task force 50 years after Tarawa.

There was a good news/bad news catch to the promise of a company of new Sherman tanks for the Tarawa landing. The good news was the availability of the tanks in time for D-Day. The bad news: Because of the deadline, the 2dMarDiv had no time for advance training with their new combat vehicles. In fact, the first time any Marines of the landing force ever laid eyes on a Sherman tank occurred when the "Mike" boats dropped their ramps on the barrier reef to disembark the 14 vehicles for their final run to the beach.

Col Shoup ordered the tanks to join the fifth assault wave on D-Day. Eight Shermans, under Lt Largey, were assigned to land over Red Beach 3; the other six, under 1stLt Edward Bale, were destined for Red Beach 1 on the northwestern end of Betio Island. Marine Corps Shermans were not equipped with fording kits at that point in the war, and the vehicles could not operate in water deeper than 3 feet. While the tankers knew the low tide within the barrier reef would not be a problem, they worried about unseen shell craters or potholes. Indeed, one of Largey's tanks sank offshore in such a hole en route to the beach. Most of the crew drowned.

Bale's tankers on the right flank had a longer run from the reef to the beach, about a thousand yards. The tanks moved forward in a slow column preceded by a dismounted scout with markers to identify dangerous holes in the turbid waters. Japanese sharpshooters shot down scout after scout; each time another tanker volunteered to take

the lead.

The bravest of these brave men was Sergeant James R. Atkins, who offered himself as a "human channel marker" during the final, most dangerous approach to the beach. Atkins led the column ashore, but paid for it with his life, one of 217 Marine Corps sergeants to be killed or wounded in the 76-hour battle.

An incident occurred at this point which the survivors vividly remember, even half a century later. Lt Bale's orders were to pass through a gap blasted in the seawall and proceed inland. As he approached the beach, Bale had to make an agonizing decision. The gap in the seawall was littered with dead and wounded Marines. Rather than grind over the bodies of his own breed, Bale ordered his six tanks back into the lagoon to proceed around "the bird's beak" to land at another gap farther west.

Bale's decision saved several lives, but it was costly. The column of tanks, now operating blindly without Sgt Atkins, lost four vehicles in deep shell holes, a significant setback. The bottom line on the ship-to-shore movement was no Shermans lost to enemy fire, five lost because of the absence of fording kits.

As tough as it was for the tankers to get ashore, the real problem facing them was how to fight effectively once they arrived.

Few Marines had any concept of practical, combined-arms tactics in the fall of 1943. "Conventional wisdom," based on fragmentary reports of Army experiences with tank warfare in Northern Africa, called for forward deployment of the vehicles for independent missions against enemy bunkers and tanks. In this regard, the Marines were guilty of ignoring the tactical lessons learned from their own recent history. During the sharp fighting to secure Gavutu Island (across Iron Bottom Sound from Guadalcanal in August 1942), a Marine M-3 light tank had deployed far ahead of the infantry. Japanese rikusentai appeared out of the jungle, swarmed over the vehicle, set it ablaze, killed two crewmembers, pulled the driver out of his hatch by his legs and nearly hacked him to death before rescue arrived. The obvious need for coordinated tank-infantry tactics did not make it into doctrine in time for Tarawa.

Largey's tanks were simply waved forward by the infantry battalion commander with vague orders to "knock out all enemy positions encountered." The

The M-4A2 Sherman Medium Tank

The first combat employment of Sherman tanks in the Pacific War took place at Tarawa in November 1943. The Marines at Tarawa found the Sherman's bigger gun, heavier armor, and overall mobility to be far superior to the M-3 Stuart light tank and the Japanese M-97 light tank, both equipped with 37-mm. guns.

It took five men to operate the 34-ton Sherman tank: commander, driver, assistant driver/machine-gunner, main gunner, and loader/machine-gunner. The tank's main armament was a gyro-stabilized 75-mm. gun, and there was room to store 97 rounds. The secondary armament comprised three machine guns. The M-4A2 was powered by a General Motors 375-horsepower diesel engine, and the vehicle could climb a 60-percent slope, cross a 7.5-foot trench, and move out at speeds up to 25 miles per hour.

The Marines found only three combat deficiencies among the Shermans at Tarawa. The tanks needed waterproof radios, a fording kit to enable amphibious delivery through waters up to 6 feet deep, and improved armor protection against Japanese 75-mm. and 40-mm. guns. The first two conditions were readily corrected, but armor problems continued to hinder the Sherman throughout the war.

The American ordnance industry produced 48,064 Sherman tanks for employment by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in World War II. The Marines also used Sherman tanks in the Korean War. Shermans were used in the Indo-Pakistani conflicts of 1965 and 1971, as well as several Arab-Israeli crises. Modified Shermans still exist today, 50 years after Tarawa, in the Reserve components of several countries. The sturdy vehicles did the job. The expression "built like a Sherman tank" has persisted for decades in America as a compliment for rugged durability.

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USMC Sherman tank "Colorado" was set ablaze by Japanese shellfire on D-Day. It was driven into the lagoon off Red Beach 3 to douse the flames. Later repaired, it provided excellent support for the 8th Marines.

tank crews, buttoned up under fire, were virtually blind. Without accompanying infantry, they were fair game for every weapon on the island. Small wonder that Largey's Colorado, sizzling and smoking in the lagoon after its headlong dash for safety, was the only survivor on Red Beach 3.

The last two Shermans on Red Beach 1 did not fare much better. One was soon lost to enemy shellfire. The second, Lt Bale's "China Girl," was the victim of a bizarre encounter with a Japanese light tank. The heavier Marine tank demolished its smaller opponent, but not before the doomed Japanese crew released one final 37-mm. round, a phenomenal shot, right down the barrel of China Girl. Bale's tank served only as an armored machine gun for the remainder of D-Day.

It was a long day for the entire 2d Tank Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander B. Swenceski, commanding the battalion, was blown out of his LVT and severely wounded in the assault. Swenceski survived by clinging to a pile of dead bodies for the next 24 hours to keep from drowning. When his successor tried to land a platoon of light tanks to reinforce Lt Largey on Red Beach 3, the maneuver served only to provide handsome targets for Japanese gunners. In a display of naval gunnery not seen since the Marines defended Wake Island two years earlier, the rikusentai sank four Mike boats with embarked M-3 light tanks before the craft could reach the reef.

If necessity is truly the mother of invention, modern Marine Corps tank tactics were invented by those desperate troops crouching in their toeholds along the fringes of Betio Island the night of D-Day. Enterprising tank maintenance crews, mindful of Japanese infiltrators, worked all night to repair or cannibalize disabled Shermans. The best news came from the border of Red Beach 1 and Green Beach where salvage crews rendered sunken "Cecilia" fully operational and equipped crippled China Girl with a replacement 75-mm. gun.

These two tanks were the only significant weapons available to Major Mike Ryan, commanding a provisional "orphan battalion" along the isolated west end of the island. The Marines quickly learned how to operate the tanks within the protective envelope of infantry. Ryan discovered he also had a naval-gunfire spotter with an operational radio

in his ranks, and from that point the tide began to turn in the west.

Ryan's combined-arms attack the morning of D+1 became the working model for subsequent tank employment throughout the island. The Shermans were proving their worth. By noon, Ryan had uncovered all of Green Beach, the turning point in the battle. Learning that news gave Shoup great hope. His 1600 situation report concluded with this flat statement: "We are winning!"

Other infantry commanders quickly developed sensible tank-infantry tactics. The successful assaults of Maj William K. Jones' 1/6 and Maj Henry P. "Jim" Crowe's 2/8 on D+2 made maximum use of integrated support by the surviving Sherman tanks. Both commanders task-organized teams of combat engineers and infantry to accompany the tanks.

This teamwork paid quick dividends. Riflemen spotted Japanese antitank guns for destruction by the Shermans. The tanks opened up on the embrasures of pillboxes and bunkers, allowing engineers to close with bangalore torpedoes, satchel charges, and flamethrowers. Japanese suicide squads with magnetic mines were shot down by rifle and machine-gun fire. The frustrated rikusentai were limited to ineffective sniper fire against the periscopes and turret rings of the approaching Shermans.

Even Lt Largey had his moment in the sun. When the assault of the 8th Marines and their combat engineers finally gained the summit of the large enemy command post, 100 rikusentai broke and ran for cover. Largey's crew fired one 75-mm. canister round along their path, a "dream shot" which dropped at least 25 in their tracks.

By the morning of the fourth day, Marine tank tactics for destroying enemy positions were well-established. LtCol Kenneth R. McLeod's 3/6 used every available tank to eliminate the final Japanese defenses on the eastern tail of the island. "Medium tanks were excellent," McLeod reported, "but my light tanks did not fire a shot."

This was the consensus of all the commanders at Tarawa, including Shoup. The light tanks were just too light. Nineteen of the 36 Stuart light tanks were lost at Tarawa, but only seven to enemy fire, including the four sunk offshore. The others were lost to collisions and mechanical breakdowns.



"Medium tanks are just as easy to get ashore," reported one infantry commander, "and they pack greater armor and firepower." The Shermans were here to stay.

After Tarawa, the 2dMarDiv went to unusual lengths to share its lessons learned in the first combat employment of medium tanks. The Tarawa veterans stressed the urgency of integrated tank/infantry/engineer training against strongly fortified positions. They were also outspoken in stating the need for fording kits and high-capacity, vehicle-mounted flamethrowers (leading shortly to the advent of the "Zippo tanks"). Communications at Tarawa had been



terrible. All Marines, including the tankers, sorely needed waterproof radios. The Shermans also needed some kind of tank-infantry phone. Most casualties among tank commanders at Tarawa occurred when they had to dismount in order to talk to the infantry.

Col Shoup overcame his frustration with the squandered losses among the Shermans on D-Day morning. He could foresee years of productive employment of these medium tanks—if only the Marines used their heads about tactical employment.

While the Shermans had proved the principal difference in overcoming Japanese defenses at Betio, they were not, in Shoup's opinion, the final an-

swer. In some cases, he reported, individual tanks fired more than 100 rounds from their main gun, trying to reduce some sand-covered, coconut-log and steel bunker. Even weighing 34 tons, the Shermans were ineffective in grinding down the tops of such bunkers. Integrated teamwork of *all* supporting arms—tanks, artillery, engineers, naval gunfire, and close air support—was the ultimate combat lesson of Tarawa.

The Sherman tanks had “made the team.” Improved tactics and vehicle modifications dictated by experiences at Tarawa were fruitful. Within eight months following Tarawa, Marine Corps Shermans were effectively employed in combat at Bougainville, Kwa-

jalein, New Britain, Saipan, Tinian, and Guam.

Tarawa veterans who return to Betio today (it's now the Republic of Kiribati) will quickly spot the rusty hulk of a Marine Corps M-4A2 Sherman tank, half submerged along the once-deadly border between Red Beaches 1 and 2. Fifty years after the epic battle, this sturdy hulk is a mute testimony to the combination of American technology and Marine valor which left us the legacy of the Sherman's “baptism by fire.”

