

# Victory and Occupation

HISTORY OF U. S. MARINE CORPS  
OPERATIONS IN WORLD WAR II

VOLUME V

*by*

BENIS M. FRANK

HENRY I. SHAW, JR.

*Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps*

1968

General Geiger was particularly impressed by the penetrating and destructive power of the 200-pound shell of the 8-inch howitzer when compared with the results achieved by the 95-pound projectile fired by 155mm guns and howitzers, the largest caliber pieces organic to Marine artillery units. The Marine commander asked that some of these 8-inch battalions be included when task organizations were formed for future scheduled Marine operations against Japan scheduled for the future.

Teamwork was a most important ingredient in the formula for reduction of heavily fortified Japanese positions. During the course of the Okinawa campaign, the work of supporting arms, infantry-engineer, air-ground, and tank-infantry teams played a vital role in the defeat of the enemy. Ground assault operations, however, were the especial province of the tanks and the infantry. Concerning the armored support of 6th Division Marines on Okinawa, General Shepherd wrote that "if any one supporting arm can be singled out as having contributed more than any others during the progress of the campaign, the tank would certainly be selected."<sup>72</sup> In a battle lesson issued to the *Thirty-second Army*, General Ushijima supported this opinion, stating that "the enemy's power lies in his tanks. It has become obvious that our general battle against the American forces is a battle against their M-1 and M-4 tanks."<sup>73</sup>

In comparison with the factors limiting armored support during some of the

<sup>72</sup> *6th MarDiv SAR, Ph III, pt III, p. 28.*

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in the preface to the Tank Support Anx, *1st MarDiv SAR.*

other Pacific island battles, tanks were more widely employed on Okinawa because its terrain, for the most part, favored armored operations. Tenth Army units lost a total of 153 tanks to accurate enemy AT fire, vast and thickly sown minefields, and demolitions-laden Japanese soldiers who attempted to destroy both the tanks and themselves, but who failed in their efforts for the most part, however, because of the accurate fire of the infantrymen protecting the tanks. Individual Japanese damaged seven tanks from the five Army battalions, disabled one from the 6th Marine Division, and none in the 1st Marine Division where "the alertness of the covering infantry and the tank crews prevented the successful completion of these attacks."<sup>74</sup>

Tanks from the Army 713th Armored Flamethrower Battalion, the first unit of its type to be formed and take part in sustained action, supported Army and Marine units alike. After the campaign, the battalion was highly praised for "a consistently outstanding record of performance."<sup>75</sup>

While covered by infantrymen and standard tanks, flame tanks were par-

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41. A few tanks in each of the standard tank battalions on Okinawa were equipped with small, limited-range flamethrowers, which were mounted either on the periscope mounts or where the bow machine gun had been. Both were inferior to the gun tube flamethrower of the 713th Armored Flamethrower Battalion, which had "a greater range in addition to being an all-around better weapon and the most practicable of the three." *Tenth Army AR*, chap 11, sec IX, p. 12. See also pt VI, chap 2, *infra*, for a discussion of armored flamethrowers.

cult to maintain troop control in the jungle, the "contact imminent" formation proved eminently sound. Another lesson of Bougainville was that, like in the "Banana Wars" of Central America, rapid-fire weapons were most suitable for jungle fighting; the light machine gun was particularly favored because of its rapid rate of fire, mobility, and low silhouette.

Less than two months after the Bougainville D-Day, Major General William H. Rupertus' 1st Marine Division landed on New Britain at Cape Gloucester, which was the last major Marine ground operation in the Southwest Pacific area. The terrain on New Britain for the most part was very similar to that found on Bougainville. Jungle, swamps, and unknown and unforeseen heights abounded. The tactics the Marines employed here, therefore, were the "book" tactics for jungle warfare, with basic techniques refined by these now combat-wise veterans. General Rupertus' men maintained excellent night fire discipline and patrolled aggressively throughout the campaign. In essence, they successfully employed tactics which had once been the exclusive province of the enemy in the Pacific; the tables had been turned. Marines captured enemy weapons and used them expertly against their former owners. Again, as before, small-unit leaders were capable of independent action in "brush-choked terrain, where the bitterest fighting was often done at close range with an unseen enemy."<sup>92</sup>

While fighting on Bougainville was underway and before it had started in

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438.

New Britain, Marines opened the Central Pacific campaign with the invasion of Tarawa, where Marines met a determined enemy well ensconced in heavily fortified defenses. An overall evaluation of the Tarawa operation called this "a battle where perseverance dominated over adversity, where individual courage and collective knowhow defeated a strong Japanese garrison on its own ground and in its own positions."<sup>93</sup>

A post-operation analysis determined what factors militated for success on Tarawa. In this context, both 2d Division engineers and tankmen praised the preinvasion training they had received in coordinating their employment of demolitions, flamethrowers, and firepower in knocking out the coconut palm log, coral, and concrete bunkers and pillboxes.

Tarawa served as a bloody testing ground where valuable lessons were learned for storming a heavily defended beach. It was found that in their training for future combat commitments, the Marine divisions had to emphasize more thorough coordination of tanks, artillery, flamethrowers, demolitions, and riflemen in isolating and overrunning strong Japanese defenses. A further conclusion based on the Tarawa experience was that all Marines, regardless of their specialties, had to be taught something about the use of demolitions. Up to that point, explosives had been employed almost exclusively by combat engineers.

<sup>93</sup> Capt James R. Stockman, *The Battle For Tarawa* (Washington: HistSec, DivPubInfo, HQMC, 1947), p. 65.

where the technique of tank-infantry coordination was improved. Although artillery served admirably as a supporting arm, the fighting in the Pacific demonstrated the "need for a weapon which could operate closer to the infantry, a weapon which the infantry could direct and control, and from this came the tank-infantry team."<sup>96</sup>

Standard infantry arm and hand signals and radio communication were employed whenever infantry and armor worked together. Neither was a satisfactory link, however, and at Arawe, 1st Tank Battalion personnel installed field telephones at the rear of their light tanks through which the riflemen could contact the tank commanders. "The improvement in tank-infantry cooperation was immediate, and the innovation proved to be sound enough to have a permanent part in armored support tactics."<sup>97</sup>

Tank-infantry cooperation was based on a mutuality of needs. The tanks had the crushing ability and firepower which, under optimum conditions, provided excellent support to the infantry. On the other hand, in the midst of battle, the tank, a large lumbering vehicle, was a target which the enemy could hardly expect to miss, and, in fact, often hit. Under most combat conditions, the tanks were tightly buttoned up and vulnerable because the vision of the tankers inside was restricted to a very great degree. The infantry, therefore, was responsible for protecting the

tank from suicide-inclined Japanese who threatened to blow up both tanks and themselves. As the eyes and ears of the tank, the infantry was also responsible for designating suitable targets for the guns of the armored vehicle and directing its fire.

The tank-infantry concept reached full maturity at Saipan. Not only because of earlier experiments but because the terrain here was more suited for armored operations. Infantry-tank coordination was excellent at Tinian. "Indeed, much of the operation took on the properties of a tank-infantry sweep."<sup>98</sup> There were few tank losses here primarily because enemy antitank fire was ineffective, and also because the most dangerous antitank weapon, the magnetic mine, was offset by a Marine technique used first at Roi-Namur, later employed in the Marianas, and nearly perfected at Iwo and Okinawa. This simple field expedient merely consisted of covering the flat areas of the most vulnerable surfaces of the tank with oak planking.<sup>99</sup>

Each infantry regiment on Tinian was assigned one reinforced company of 18 medium tanks plus a platoon of four flamethrower tanks and two light tanks. Throughout this operation, these tank companies supported the same infantry units to which they had originally been assigned. This led to constantly improving tank-infantry tactics.

As at Tarawa, the only infantry tactics feasible at Peleliu were those

<sup>96</sup> Capt Leonard G. Lawton, "Tank-Infantry Team," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 29, no. 11 (Nov45), p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> Shaw and Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul*, p. 394.

<sup>98</sup> Maj Carl W. Hoffman, *The Seizure of Tinian* (Washington: HistDiv, HQMC, 1951), p. 131.

<sup>99</sup> LtCol Richard K. Schmidt ltr to CMC, dtd 5Dec49, cited in *Ibid.*

even the most steadfastly held Japanese defensive position.

It was tactics such as these which moved Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, who was present and an observer at Iwo Jima, to express great admiration "for the guy who walks up beaches and take enemy positions with a rifle and grenades or his bare hands."<sup>105</sup> Mr. Forrestal gave an exaggerated description, of course, of how Marine infantry overcame General Kuribayashi's island fortress, but the Secretary of the Navy was not far off the mark.

Okinawa was the ultimate amphibious assault landing in the Pacific War, and the ultimate weapon here was the infantryman and his supporting arms. The most complete employment of tank-infantry tactics perhaps best characterizes the nature of the fighting on Okinawa. In the rapid drive north which led to the decisive and successful battle for Motobu Peninsula, 6th Division Marines rode the tanks which later provided fire support in the heavy fighting to rid northern Okinawa of the Japanese. But it was in the southern portion of the island, both on level ground and in cave-studded draws that the development of the tank-infantry team reached a climax.

In both the 1st and 6th Marine Divisions, tanks functioned as a major direct-fire, close-support weapon. At all times, IIIAC tanks operated within the limit of observation and control of the infantry. Generally depending upon the tactical situation, tank-infantry teams were employed in one of two ways on

Okinawa. In the first instance, following the neutralization of an objective by supporting fires, the ground troops—preceded by Shermans—advanced to secure the area. This type of attack proved successful only against ground lightly defended by the enemy. In cases where there were heavy and well dug-in Japanese positions, the pre-attack preparation had a temporary effect only, and when American forces were on or near the objective, the enemy would level furious fire on the attackers, pinning them down and prohibiting their movement forwards or backwards.

A second method was widely employed in southern Okinawa. Prior to a general tank-infantry advance, the Shermans—protected by fire teams—delivered close-range direct fire on caves, bunkers, and tomb emplacements in the path of the assault. Tanks and armored flamethrowers ranged out ahead of the front lines to distances up to 800 yards, systematically destroying enemy positions on forward and reverse slopes by putting point-blank 75mm fire and flame right into cave mouths and embrasures. In the fighting for Sugar Loaf, tanks were emplaced in hull defilade firing positions at the front to deliver flat trajectory fire into enemy lines opposite. Of proven worth in the tank-infantry attacks were the M-7s with their 105mm guns. These vehicles served admirably as siege guns and were the most powerful organic weapon in the infantry regiment. Like the tanks, the M-7s could and did roll right up to the face of Japanese emplacements to deliver their fire.

Peculiar to the terrain of Okinawa is a series of sharp, rocky coral ridges

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in *New York Times*, 26Feb45, p. 1, column 6.