

**LVT'S**  
**By Charles Tatum**

**LARGE VEHICLE TARGETS**

**No, the abbreviation LVT didn't stand for large vehicle targets. It stands for "Landing Vehicle Tracked". It would be hard to convince any member of the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion that it didn't.**

**B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines short trip from landing ship tank # 10 to the beach at Iwo Jima was through the courtesy of the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion. Our sea going taxis were LVT (Landing Vehicle Tracked). Marines often referred to them as Amtrak's, short for amphibious tractors. The steel hulled LVT resembled armored turtles in the water and were about as slow. They had all of the stability of a steel cork and seemed that they would sink at any moment.**

**I was always amazed that anything that weighed as much as an LVT would float at all. I was always jealous of the Marines that had a truck or a tank to ride around in. It must have been better than walking. In fact, I wanted to be in tanks, the dry-land type. But, I would have settled for duty in a LVT. That was till I saw what happened to the Amtrak's at Iwo Jima.**

**A slow moving LVT was a high priority target for the Japanese. I always thought they had a lot of armor plating to protect them from**

**harm's way. Wrong! Regular tanks had real armor plating. Compared to a Sherman, a LVT had the equivalent of tin foil!**

**LVT 4's had 10 lb. plate on the pontoons, the stern, in the hole, on the cab top, and the cab back. Plus it had 10 lb. plate inboard of their tracks. The Navy went all out on the front of the cab, sides and bow, with 20 lb. plate. Good for light infantry fire but of little use against any of the guns the Japanese had on Mt. Suribachi.**

**While researching this book I had the need to find out more about LVT's. What kind of engine did they use? How many Marines could they carry? What was their range? How much did they weigh? And how in hell could they float?! Questions that remained unanswered, that was until I met Corporal Raymond A. Heise, a former member of the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion, at the 89 Iwo Jima Veterans' Reunion in Mobile, Alabama.**

**Raymond was a fountain of information on the LVT and was of great help to me. He told me that he had been with the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractors from the earliest days when the battalion was formed at the Boat Basin at Oceanside, near Camp Pendleton, California. This was in early January 1944.**

**Raymond told me that the LVT 2 engines were seven to ten cylinder Continental radials, air-cooled, aircraft type engines. The Continental engines developed 200 horsepower at 1800 r.p.m. (revolutions per minute) and consumed 13 gallons of gasoline per hour.**

**The LVT 3 utilized two Cadillac gasoline engines developing 220 horsepower total. This type of LVT was issued after Iwo Jima. The LVT 4, the type used at Iwo Jima, had the same basic specifications as the LVT 2, with the addition of a stern ramp. The addition of a ramp improved the versatility of the LVT allowing men, smaller vehicles and guns to exit at ground level. This sure beat clambering over the sides and jumping to the ground as we had to do in the LVT 2.**

**Pfc. Steve Evanson and I still had to jump from the LVT 3 when we landed on Iwo Jima. Our job once we hit the beach was to cut the ropes holding the boxes of C-rations on the sides of the LVT. The jump would get your attention. It was like jumping from the roof of a house. A LVT 4 was just at 8 feet high. Their range was 150 miles on land and 75 miles on water. Speed 25 mph on land and 5.4 knots on water (about 5 miles per hour). The LVT 4 weighed 25,000 pounds unloaded, but could carry 6,500 lbs. of cargo or 24 fully equipped Marines.**

**Standard armament was one 30 caliber and one 50 caliber machine-gun each. The LVT that I arrived at Iwo on had two 50's. I know because as machine gunners, Steve and I had the job of manning the turret guns. A LVT 4 had a crew of three and had their hands busy handling their weapons. Ray told me how they could float, but I still don't understand it. Something about surface tension, you know, like the way a needle can float in a glass of water.**

**The fact that the pontoons were watertight helped a lot until they got a bullet or shell hole through a pontoon. I asked Ray what they did**

when this happened. “Simple,” he said, “we had a repair kit that consisted of a bag of round wooden pegs of various sizes. We just picked a peg of the right size and drove it into the hole and kept going!”

The 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibious Tractor Battalion beat the rest of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division overseas. Raymond was there during the invasions at Saipan and Tinian, with the 5<sup>th</sup> Amtrak’s. On June 15, 1944, on the island of Saipan, his heroic actions won him the Bronze Star Medal (see Medals and Decorations section).

It seems one day Ray found a tractor without a crew, and a lot of wounded Marines needing a trip to hospital ship. In spite of hostile shellfire, Ray loaded up the tractor with the wounded and took them to a hospital ship. This bold action on Ray’s part saved more than a few Marines’ lives.

Ray and the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion’s next operation was Iwo Jima. Cpl. Heise told me that he figured that Saipan and Tinian were real tough operations, but in comparison Iwo Jima was a continuous nightmare! The Marine crews of the LVT really caught hell on the beach at Iwo Jima. The beach was littered with wrecked LVT’s; mute testimony to the volume and accuracy of the Japanese gunners. In spite of their losses, they fought on.

Cpl. Ray and his crew made more than a few trips to the “hot black sand beaches of Iwo Jima” on D-Day, carrying supplies in and the wounded back out to hospital ships. LVTs were instrumental in

supplying the front lines with ammo and food. During the conquest for Iwo Jima the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion carved out a combat record second to none! Ray went all the way through Saipan, Tinian and Iwo Jima without being wounded.

He wasn't as lucky in civilian life, though. After the war Ray returned to his former job as a Security Agent for the old Railway Express. Later he joined the Detroit Police Department and after 12 years as a uniformed officer, he received the silver badge of a detective sergeant.

The concrete jungles of Detroit can be as dangerous as Iwo Jima's black sand beaches to a police officer. While apprehending an escaped felon a gun battle erupted. In the shootout Ray was wounded, but got his man. Ray has a departmental citation and other decorations from the City of Detroit to go with his Bronze Star Medal that he won on Saipan.

Ray was born on July 21, 1925 at Devil's Lake, North Dakota. He presently lives in Central Lake Michigan with his wife of forty years, Dorothy. Dorothy and Ray have four sons, Bruce, Douglas, Russell and Kevin, 5 grandchildren and 2 step-grandchildren. After 25 years of service Ray retired from the Detroit Police Department. An avid fisherman, Ray spends his time fishing in the lakes that abound in Michigan. Ray also paints, not on canvas or watercolors . . . houses, part-time.

**Ray sent me a clipping from the Honolulu Advertiser Era 1945. Ray Coll, Jr., the Advertiser Reporter, is interviewing a Sgt. Neal Hill, a Section Chief in the 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion about the battle for Iwo. Ray has a small complaint about this article. The Sergeant failed to mention the fact that the tractor had a crew: Cpl. Raymond A. Heise's crew. Maybe this will make up for the oversight:**

**Raymond A. Heise, Crew Chief**

**Benjamin L. Hammett, Driver \***

**Salvatera Coticelli, Crewman\*\***

**\*Benjamin L. Hammett was killed in a cave the last day by a Jap who was souvenir hunting!**

**\*\*Salvatera Coticelli cracked up going into Iwo Jima on the initial assault and had to be returned to the hospital ship. He was never heard from since.**