

US MARINE CORPS TANKS OF WORLD WAR II



STEVEN J. ZALOGA

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD CHASEMORE

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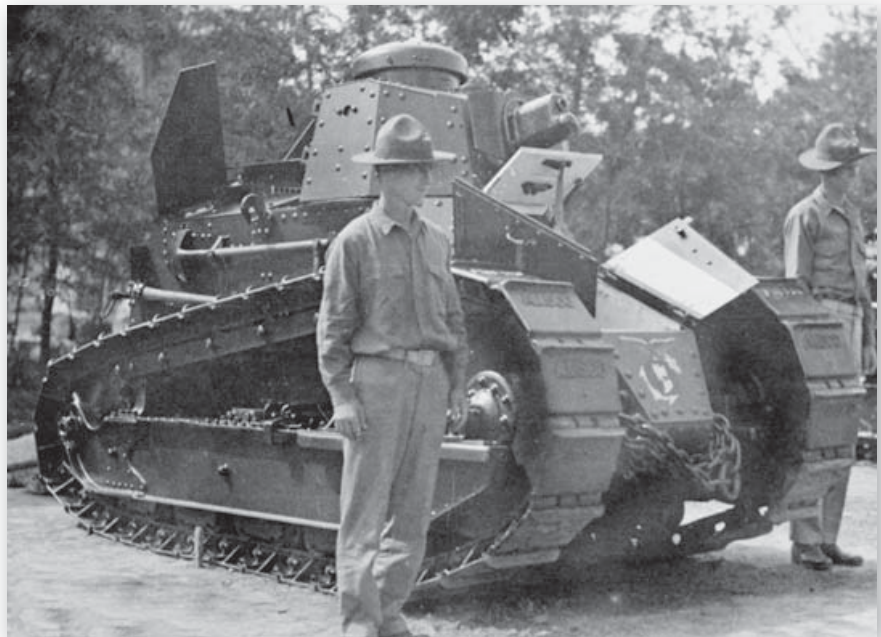
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INTRODUCTION

Marine tank operations in the Pacific during World War II had none of the drama of tank campaigns in Europe. There were no great tank-vs.-tank battles like Kursk, Normandy, or the Ardennes; there were no great sweeping blitzkrieg advances. Instead, Marine tanks were used in brutal close quarter battles supporting the Marine riflemen from the muddy jungles of the Southwest Pacific to the coral and volcanic islands and atolls of the Central Pacific. Through 1942–43 they were a relatively minor supporting arm, but by 1944 they emerged as an essential element of modern close combat tactics. The tank battalions were not the star actors of the campaigns, but played a critical supporting role for the Marine riflemen. The Pacific battles were still determined by aggressive infantry assault and tenacious infantry defense, but the fire-support and protection offered by tanks gave the US Marines a decisive offensive advantage against their hard-pressed Japanese adversaries. Had the war continued on to the Japanese Home Islands in the fall of 1945, tanks no doubt would have played an increasingly vital role in the assault.



The Marine Expeditionary Force's Tank Platoon at Quantico, Virginia was equipped with the Six Ton Tank Model 1917, a license-built copy of the French World War I Renault FT. The platoon was deployed to Tientsin, China in 1927 to serve with the garrison there. (NARA)

EARLY MARINE ARMOR

The US Marine Corps obtained its first armored vehicles in 1916 when the Advanced Base Force, Philadelphia, purchased armored cars from the Armor Motor Car Company (AMC). These were a commercial design based on the King 1917 touring automobile. Eight were purchased in total and they served in Armored Car Squadron, First Regiment. Although the unit was disbanded in 1921, five of the cars were deployed overseas in Haiti with the 2nd Marines for patrol duty. They returned in 1927 in run-down condition and were put in storage.

The Marine Corps had noted the Army use of Renault FT tanks in World War I and an experimental light tank platoon was formed in 1923 at Quantico, Virginia as part of the Marine Expeditionary Force. It was originally equipped with three Six Ton Tanks Model 1917, the license-built American copy of the French Renault FT. Initial experiments were conducted with these tanks during the annual maneuvers at Culebra Island in 1924. Curiously enough, the maneuvers also involved the trials of a 75mm gun Amphibian Tank on loan from J. Walter Christie's company. Although the Marines did not have the funds or the interest to acquire the Christie Amphibian Tank, the maneuvers had been successful enough that in 1925 the Marines requested additional Six Ton Tanks from the Army, eventually receiving eight. The Tank Platoon received its first assignment in 1927 when Gen. Smedley Butler, in command of the Marine Expeditionary Force at Tientsin outside Beijing, requested armored cars to assist in the patrol duties in China. Since the AMC armored cars were in such poor repair, the Tank Platoon with five Six Ton Tanks was sent to China in April 1927. After an uneventful deployment, the platoon returned to the US in late 1928 and was disbanded in November due to budget cuts.

By the early 1930s the Marine Corps began to focus on the mission of conducting forcible entry against defended beaches. There was considerable

The Marmon-Herrington CTL-3 was the first tank built to Marine specifications. This shows one of the tanks that was tested by the Army at Aberdeen Proving Ground; it lacks the usual three .30 cal machine guns mounted in the front ball sockets. It did not prove durable enough in service and most were rebuilt to the CTL-3M standards in 1941, which only marginally improved their utility. (Patton Museum)

