

WORLD WAR II MARITIME HERITAGE TRAIL

BATTLE OF SAIPAN



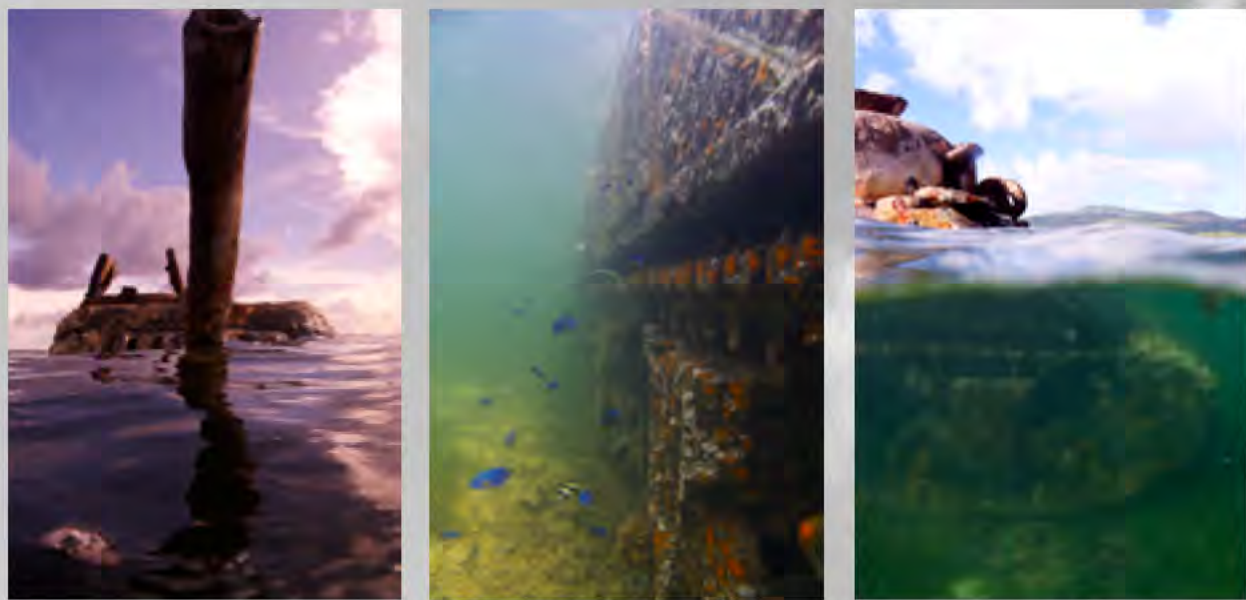
ASSAULT VEHICLES

*Top: M4A2 Sherman Tank off Susupe
Bottom: LVT(A)-4 landing craft in Tanapag Lagoon*



U.S. Sherman Tanks

The M4 Sherman was the primary tank used by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps during WWII. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a technically simple and reliable medium tank, labeled "M4" was put into production post-haste. It was by no means the finest, most powerful, or well-armored tank serving in the worldwide conflict; however, it was accepted as the standard combat tank of the U.S. military. It was mass-produced and for this reason it was often said "The M4 Sherman tank was a winner by quantity, not by quality." The M4 Sherman served in the U.S. military from 1942 until 1955.



Six tank battalions were prepared for action in the Marianas; however, only two battalions, the 2nd and 4th Marine Divisions, were used in Saipan. The tanks were not used during the initial invasion but intended to serve as support vehicles during the U.S. offensive push across Saipan's rugged interior. Following the morning's initial amphibious invasion, the tanks motored across the shallow fringing reef to shore under their own power. A few tanks fell victim to high tides, Japanese artillery, and short circuits; however, their presence brought much needed firepower to the beach, boosting U.S. morale in the process.

Visit the Tanks

The three tanks are located within swimming distance of Susupe and Chalan Kanoa beaches on the south-western side of the island. They are semi-submerged with their turrets and portions of their deck awash and can be easily seen from shore. Because of this, they make a great place for a photo, and for the more adventurous, a snorkel or dive trip from shore.

All are partially submerged on a shallow, flat, sandy bottom inside the barrier reef. These sandy areas are interspersed with patches of various seagrass species. The tanks support different fauna compared to the surrounding seagrass flats. Numerous sapphire damselfish (*Pomacentrus pavo*) can be seen around the outside of the tanks feeding on plankton, while distinctive yellow tangs (*ZebraSoma flavescens*) move in small groups through gaps in the structure. Tightly grouped schools of juvenile striped catfish can be seen in the large recesses underneath the tanks, along with multiple species of butterfly fish (*Chaetodon* spp.). Spotted toby (*Cathigaster solandri*) can occasionally be seen near the bases of the tanks, usually moving in pairs.

Tank 1 and **Tank 2** are both M4A2 Dry models equipped with 75-mm guns. Tank 1 is the northernmost example, located approximately 130yds (120m) offshore at 15 9' 44.31"N, 145 42' 14.14"E (55P 0360758N, 1676687E) (WGS 84). Tank 2 is located just south of Tank 1, about 490yds (450m) offshore at 15 9' 44.35"N, 145 41' 58.56"E (55P 0360293N, 1676694E) (WGS 84).

Tank 3 is located south of Tank 2, about 190yds (175m) offshore at 15 9' 18.58"N, 145 41' 53.26"E (55P 0360130N, 1675903E) (WGS 84). An M4A3 Wet model, it also was equipped with a 75-mm gun. The "Wet" designation refers to the ammunition being stowed wet. In the Dry model tanks live ammunition in the dry bins could be punctured by shrapnel, set aflame, and explode. Coupled with the tanks' gasoline fuel system, this flaw contributed to the nicknames "Tommy Cookers" and "Ronson Lighters." To counteract this, U.S. designers developed "Wet" ammunition lockers surrounded by a glycol liquid, which diminished the threat of secondary fires and exploding ordnance.

Corrosion and human pressures have taken a toll on all of the tanks. The 75-mm gun barrel on Tank 3 is severely degraded and appears to have been broken. This may be due to swimmers standing on or swinging off the barrel. If you visit the tanks, please be aware that they are fragile heritage sites and are protected by Commonwealth Law. Please do not use the guns as a standing platform or hang on them.

My great-grandma Nieves said that she saw the American soldiers arrive on the beach. There were American ships and the soldiers came to the beach in amphibious vehicles. When she saw them, great-grandma said she was scared because she thought the Americans were going to kill them. Her grandpa Juan told her not to be scared because the Americans were nice and they were not going to kill them. There were a lot of Japanese and American soldiers fighting in San Antonio. Chamorro elder Nieves Cruz Mgeskebei as told to great-granddaughter Daisy Anne Marie Basa Lizama



U.S. LVT (A)-4

The remains of a well preserved landing craft are located approximately 1,200yds (1,100m) from shore, just off the seaplane ramp in Tanapag Lagoon. The landing craft has been identified as an LVT (A)-4 and is resting in 3-9ft (1-3m) of water on a sandy bottom. Originally intended solely as cargo carriers for ship-to-shore operations, landing craft rapidly evolved into assault and fire-support vehicles. The type was widely known as an amphtrack, amtrak, and amtrac, which are acronyms of "amphibious tractor."

The U.S. Solomon Islands campaign in the Pacific saw the need for new vehicles capable of delivering troops and cargo where traditional wheeled vehicles and boats were unable to travel. These vehicles needed to be capable of not only traveling through the water but also across shallow and sometimes exposed fringing reefs. The solution to the problem was the Amphibious Tractor; also known as the Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT).

There were seven models of LVT produced and used in the Pacific during WWII. Four of these - LVT2, LVT (4), LVT (A)-1, and LVT (A)-4--were used in the Northern Mariana Islands. The Food Machinery Corporation produced the LVT (A)-4 armed with a 75-mm howitzer turret. The turret of early production models possessed a single ring-mounted .50 caliber machine gun that designers later changed to two pintle-mounted .30 caliber machine guns. The new vehicle was welcomed by the troops, but possessed a major flaw; the turret was not covered, making it vulnerable to enemy grenades, mortar and small arms fire. As a result, U.S. crews began "field expedient modifications" as soon as they received the LVTs in preparation for the invasion of Saipan. Modifications included: adding armor plating around the .50 caliber machine guns to help protect the gunner, adding a .30 caliber coaxial machine gun to the cab in front of the radio operator's seat, and adding armor shields to the forward portion of the turret. These modifications had the goal of prolonging the lives of the crew and vessel. This version of the LVT became known as the "Marianas Model" but no change in model designation occurred.

The din robbed us of all sense of hearing. It wasn't the same as a boom or a roar that splits the ears; it was more like being imprisoned inside a huge metal drum that was incessantly and insufferably being beaten with a thousand iron hammers. Japanese soldier Maashi in reference to the bombardment that took place prior to invasion

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LVTs were vital to the U.S. mission and its operations in the Marianas due to the presence of fringing reefs. On the morning of 15 June 1944, LVTs disembarked from LSTs at the fringing reef (1,000yds offshore) and formed up at their respective landing zones headed for shore. Four waves hit the beaches at timed intervals beginning at 0805. Rough seas capsized more than a few LVTs on the reef, but the majority made it to shore. The LVTs were to reach their designated landing beaches and move 200yds (182m) inland to what was called the 0-1 Line. This allowed the beaches to remain uncluttered for the arrival of subsequent waves of landing forces. However, the rugged terrain of Saipan proved to be challenging for the LVTs and most disembarked their troops on the beach under heavy fire.

After the initial assault, commanders employed LVTs in a wide range of missions including: supply delivery, evacuation of wounded to hospital ships, runs inland to supply dumps, assisting underwater demolition teams, fire fighting, and use as salvage vessels for pushing stranded landing craft off the reef.

Visit the LVT (A)-4

The LVT (A)-4 is situated in a large sandy area and surrounded by small and large patch reefs at 15 14' 24.58"N, 145 44' 10.78"E (55P 0364288N, 1685292E) (WGS 84). The vertical sides and recesses of the LVT wreck make it an attractive reef for numerous species of fish, despite its relatively small size. Dark overhangs at the western end of the wreck provide shelter for nocturnal lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) to hide during the day. This species hunts small fish and crustaceans at night, using its ornate fins to corner and stun its prey. The aptly named birdnose wrasse (*Gomphosus varius*) is also common on this wreck, and can be seen swimming quickly between the wreck and nearby reefs. Large blue-green birdnose wrasse are male, while females are smaller and brown in color.

The stern of the LVT has sunk into the sand and there are many missing components and disarticulated features on the site. One of the most obvious is the absence of armor plating across the deck, tracks and engine room. The turret has settled into the deck space below. The vehicle is basically an empty shell and has been stripped of its 75-mm howitzer, auxiliary guns, fire controls, turret controls, and radios. Still present are the driver's seat, steering controls, instrument panel containing the engine gauges, and the radial engine and two exhaust mufflers. Hoses from the transmission and a pile of debris lie where the radio operator's seat was located. Evidence of field expedient modifications can be seen in the 3/4-in (10.05 cm) armored plating added to the turret around the .50 caliber machine gun scarf ring and in the bow. Additionally a coaxial-mounted .30 caliber machine gun port was added in front of the radio operator's seat, which was not included in LVT (A)-4 design until after the Battle of Saipan.

Preserving Our Wrecks

Shipwrecks, aircraft wrecks and other underwater archaeological sites are protected like historical sites are on land. They are non-renewable resources and although ships and planes continue to sink every day, there will never be another WWII aircraft wreck or submarine chaser wreck. These sites are important because they provide us with the details of history and represent the men and women who served during the conflict. All underwater sites including shipwrecks, aircraft wrecks and other vehicles are protected under CNMI Public Law 3-39. This law protects all archaeological sites on Commonwealth-owned or controlled lands and submerged bottomlands from unauthorized disturbance, excavation, or removal of artifacts. Historic wrecks located in Commonwealth waters are protected just as natural resources are protected, so that future generations may visit, learn from, and enjoy these unique examples of our underwater heritage.

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