



GREATEST TANKS



Heroes of the Medal of Honor

ROBERT H. McCARD

This US Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant gave his life to save his tank crew during the fight for the Pacific island of Saipan in World War II

WORDS MICHAEL E. HASKEW

Gunnery Sergeant Robert H. McCard was 25 years old, a fine example of the dedicated, rock-solid non-commissioned officers that were the backbone of the United States Marine Corps. McCard did not wait for his country to enter World War II to become a Marine, enlisting three years earlier in December 1939.

By the spring of 1944, McCard was a combat veteran, a platoon sergeant in Company A, 4th Tank Battalion, 4th Marine Division, who had participated in the seizure of the island of Kwajalein in the Marshalls group that January. While the eyes of the world were on the events in French Normandy as Allied soldiers assaulted Hitler's Fortress Europe, McCard was on the other side of the globe in the Pacific, engaged in a life-and-death struggle against the Japanese occupiers of Saipan, the administrative centre of the Marianas archipelago.

On the island road to the Japanese homeland, the Marianas were 1,931 kilometres (1,200 miles) from the enemy capital of Tokyo. For American war planners possession of the Marianas, including Saipan and two other large islands in the group, Guam and Tinian, meant staging areas for further progress toward victory. More importantly, in the short term, it meant airfields that were large enough to accommodate the latest generation of US strategic bomber, the Boeing B-29 Superfortress, and within the operational range of the big, four-engine aircraft to strike Japan's

home islands. The Superfortresses would rain death and destruction, eroding Japanese will and capacity to wage war. The capture of the Marianas was codenamed Operation Forager. Its first significant assault at Saipan became Operation Tearaway.

So, in the stifling afternoon heat of 16 June 1944, D+1 of Operation Tearaway, McCard was buttoned up inside one of several M4A2 Sherman medium tanks along with the four members of his crew, advancing toward the eastern slope of an otherwise obscure ridge designated as the O-1 phase line, the initial objective of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 25th Marine Regiment, 4th Division. Their immediate mission was to silence a battery of four Japanese Type 88 75mm antiaircraft guns that were actually dual-purpose – also deadly against American tanks when depressed to fire horizontally. When the furious fight was over, McCard had heroically given his life while covering the escape of his crew from a deathtrap, a selfless act that earned him a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor.

When the order arrived for the tanks of the 4th Battalion to move forward, they had been ashore on Saipan only a day. A thundering preparatory barrage of naval gunfire had commenced at 5.42 on the morning of 15 June, and just over an hour later as the rain of steel intensified, Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, commanding the amphibious forces, barked, "Land the landing force!" Large transport craft known as LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) moved into

positions 1,143 metres (1,250 yards) behind the line of departure, and the Marines climbed down cargo nets into LVTs (Landing Vehicle, Tracked), amphibious vehicles that would churn toward the invasion beaches on the island's western shore. At 8:40am, the LVTs began their hazardous runs.

The enemy reception for the Marines of the 2nd and 4th Divisions was hot. Japanese artillery, mortar and small-arms boomed and crackled as they came ashore, and strong currents pushed some landing craft away from their assigned sectors. From concealed positions, the 23,000 Japanese defenders of Saipan unleashed a torrent of fire.

The 4th Tank Battalion attempted to come ashore at Saipan throughout the afternoon. Just getting ashore was an ordeal. Along with the challenges of a substantial coral reef and swift currents, the Japanese kept up a murderous fire, and the situation quickly became confused. Underwater demolition teams had blown up obstacles and scouted the beaches for favourable areas for the tanks to come ashore. They recommended two methods. The first was to transit the channel leading to Blue Beach 1 and land the tanks directly on the shore from their LCMs (Landing Craft, Mechanized). The second, more hazardous, was to deposit the tanks on the coral reef offshore, primarily near Yellow Beach, requiring them to reach the beaches under their own power.

Company A was offloaded on the coral reef and forced to negotiate nearly 640 meters

“SERIOUSLY WOUNDED... AND WITH HIS SUPPLY OF GRENADES EXHAUSTED, GUNNERY SERGEANT McCARD DISMANTLED ONE OF THE TANK’S MACHINE GUNS AND FACED THE JAPANESE FOR A SECOND TIME TO DELIVER VIGOROUS FIRE...”

Medal of Honor citation

Gunnery Sergeant Robert H. McCard received a posthumous Medal of Honor for action on Saipan during World War II



50 GREATEST TANKS



M4 SHERMAN

COMMISSIONED: 1941

WEIGHT: 31 TONS

RANGE: 120 miles CREW: 5

ENGINE: 317KW (425HP)

ARMOUR: 38-89MM

PRIMARY WEAPON: 75MM M3

L/40 MAIN GUN

SECONDARY WEAPONS:

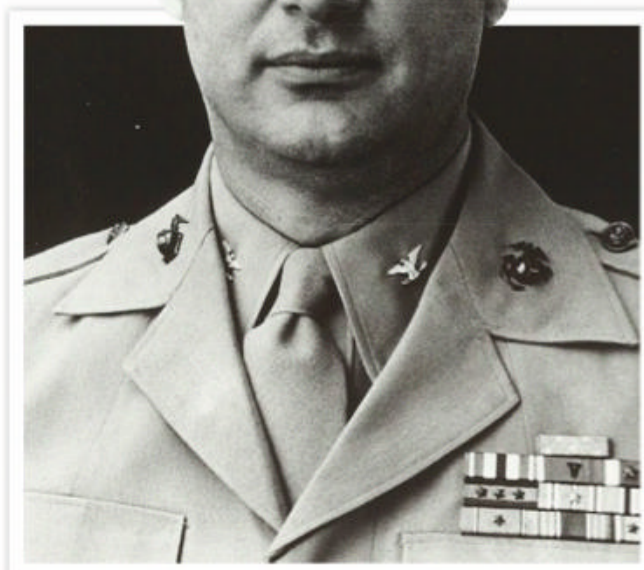
BROWNING M2HB, X2

BROWNING M1919A4 MG

“MARINE SGT. ROBERT H. McCARD, 33 [SIC], WAS KILLED IN ACTION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC AREA, HIS WIFE, MRS. LISETTE McCARD OF BELLEVILLE, HAS BEEN NOTIFIED”

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, August 10, 1944 edition

U.S. Marine flame-throwing tank attacks a Japanese pillbox on Saipan. In mid-ground a Marine watches from a foxhole



(700 yards) of churning water to reach Blue Beach 2, losing a pair of Shermans when they were swamped and saltwater rendered their electrical systems useless. A third was damaged as it tried to tow another tank ashore. Nearby, only four of Company B's 14 tanks reached the beach, some of them falling into offshore shell holes – unforeseen hazards of the pre-invasion bombardment.

As soon as it was practical on D-Day, the Company A tanks assembled and lumbered forward to support the 1st Battalion, 25th Marines locked in combat near Agingan Point.

Left: Lieutenant Colonel Justice Chambers, who ordered the 16 June 1944, Saipan attack, received the Medal of Honor for heroism at Iwo Jima

Arriving just in time to help fend off an attack from two companies of Japanese infantry, the Shermans erupted with a curtain of fire from their 75mm main guns and their secondary .50-calibre and .30-calibre Browning machine guns, driving into the exposed enemy flank. The attack was shattered, and Japanese bodies littered the ground. The Shermans roared across Agingan Point, engaging bunkers and machine-gun nests with devastating efficiency and allowing the 1st Battalion to continue its advance. No tanks were lost in the engagement, although one threw a track and became lodged in a crater. It was recovered hours later. Overnight, a Japanese counterattack attempted to wipe out the



Left: Marines on Saipan take cover behind the protective hulk of an M4 Sherman medium tank amid withering Japanese fire

infantrymen of Company L and six Shermans of Company A to eliminate harassing rifle fire from Japanese soldiers. The enemy was hidden in the jungle surrounding an assembly area near the troublesome ridgeline, along with the four 75mm Type 88 guns and a pair of mountain howitzers that were lobbing shells into the area and making any activity hazardous.

At approximately 12.15pm, McCard and the rest of the 4th Tank Battalion buttoned up their Shermans, turret roofs painted fluorescent yellow for recognition from the air to prevent friendly planes from firing on them, and moved out. They would bring welcome firepower to the effort to clear the ridge and capture the airfield. The tank-infantry teams went to work, swiftly silencing five machine-gun nests, taking out the two mountain howitzers, and killing about 60 Japanese soldiers. Company L then moved to assist the 2nd Battalion, 25th Marines in the battle with the Type 88s and, as it was soon discovered, three more machine-gun nests spewing deadly fire.

McCard's tank platoon headed up the eastern slope of the ridge as well. In the scramble for position, his Sherman became separated from the others and was pounded by the Japanese guns. The tank was immobilised, isolated, and silhouetted against the sky – a proverbial sitting duck. A tanker from Company C dodged 75mm rounds that hit the road in front of his Sherman and later remembered, "I'm shifting up gears, and I look off to the left and I could see a burning tank right on the skyline!"

That burning tank was McCard's, disabled but still full of fight. The crew returned fire with its own 75mm gun, and the tank's machine guns kept Japanese infantry at bay, but enemy shells continued to slam into the Sherman. Time was running out. "Take off! Out the escape hatch!" McCard bellowed, and his crewmen slid out of the tank, into the mud, and along to safety. From the turret, the tough gunnery sergeant peppered the enemy with hand grenades to cover their retreat. Grievously wounded, he ducked back inside the smoking Sherman and removed a coaxial .30-calibre machine gun, re-emerging to fire until he was overwhelmed. Before he died, McCard killed 16 Japanese soldiers and wounded several others. His heroism bought time for his fellow Marines, and the enemy guns were later put out of action.

Saipan was declared secure on 9 July, after more than three weeks of savage fighting. American dead, wounded and missing neared 14,000, and the Japanese garrison was virtually wiped out.

McCard's widow, Lisette, accepted his Medal of Honor from Rear Admiral Arthur S. Carpenter, commander of the Ninth Naval District, at Centralia, Illinois, on 10 April 1945. The hero's citation incorrectly identifies the Japanese guns as 77mm but captures the spirit of his gallant sacrifice, reading in part, "Cut off from the other units of his platoon when his tank was put out of action ... Gunnery Sergeant McCard carried on resolutely..."

Buried on Saipan, McCard's remains were exhumed in 1948 and reinterred in the Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, Honolulu, Hawaii.



The rusting shell of an American M4 Sherman tank lies just off the beach at Saipan decades after the battle

American beachhead but was repulsed with heavy losses.

On the morning of the 16 June, sluggish progress was made toward Aslito Airfield, a primary objective of the 24th and 25th Marines. As their artillery swung into action against Japanese strongpoints, accurate counter battery fire disabled numerous

Marine howitzers, but most of these were back in action later in the day. Slogging through swamps and jungle terrain, the Marines encountered heavy resistance, and the battalion commanders radioed for tank support. Before noon, Lieutenant Colonel Justice M. Chambers, commanding the 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines, called upon his

"...I COULDN'T SEE THE GUNS. THE GUNS WERE NO DOUBT IN PITS... I THINK HE WAS RIGHT IN AMONGST THREE OF THEM"

Company C Marine, eyewitness