

Middling Machine

Japan's Type 97 Chi-Ha medium tank

The name reflects the 15-ton vehicle's creation in imperial year 2597—or 1937. Its category, “Chi-sensha,” means “medium tank.” And “Ha,” or 3, indicates the line's third iteration. An upgrade arising from a bruising loss to Soviet tankers at Khalkin Gol in August 1939, the punchier 97 flourished in soggy settings, slithering through Malayan jungle to topple the British bastion at Singapore. In the Philippines, the 47mm high muzzle-velocity gun could make mincemeat of American M3 Stuart light tanks. Once Japan's Pacific

war went defensive, the empire tended to use tanks as self-propelled forts to steer into place, bury, and operate as static strong points. However, in the war's biggest Japanese tank attack, 97s maneuvered on Saipan until men of the 6th Marine Regiment beat back the enemy with mortars, machine guns, bazookas, and artillery, plus naval guns. The American medium tank weighed at least as much as *two* Type 97s; when 14 Chi-Has and 13 light tanks confronted 800 Shermans on Okinawa, the outcome was predictably morbid.



Troops of the 26th Tank Regiment buried this Chi-Ha, one of 11 on Iwo Jima when the Allies invaded, at the base of Hill 382.

Muscular Mantlet

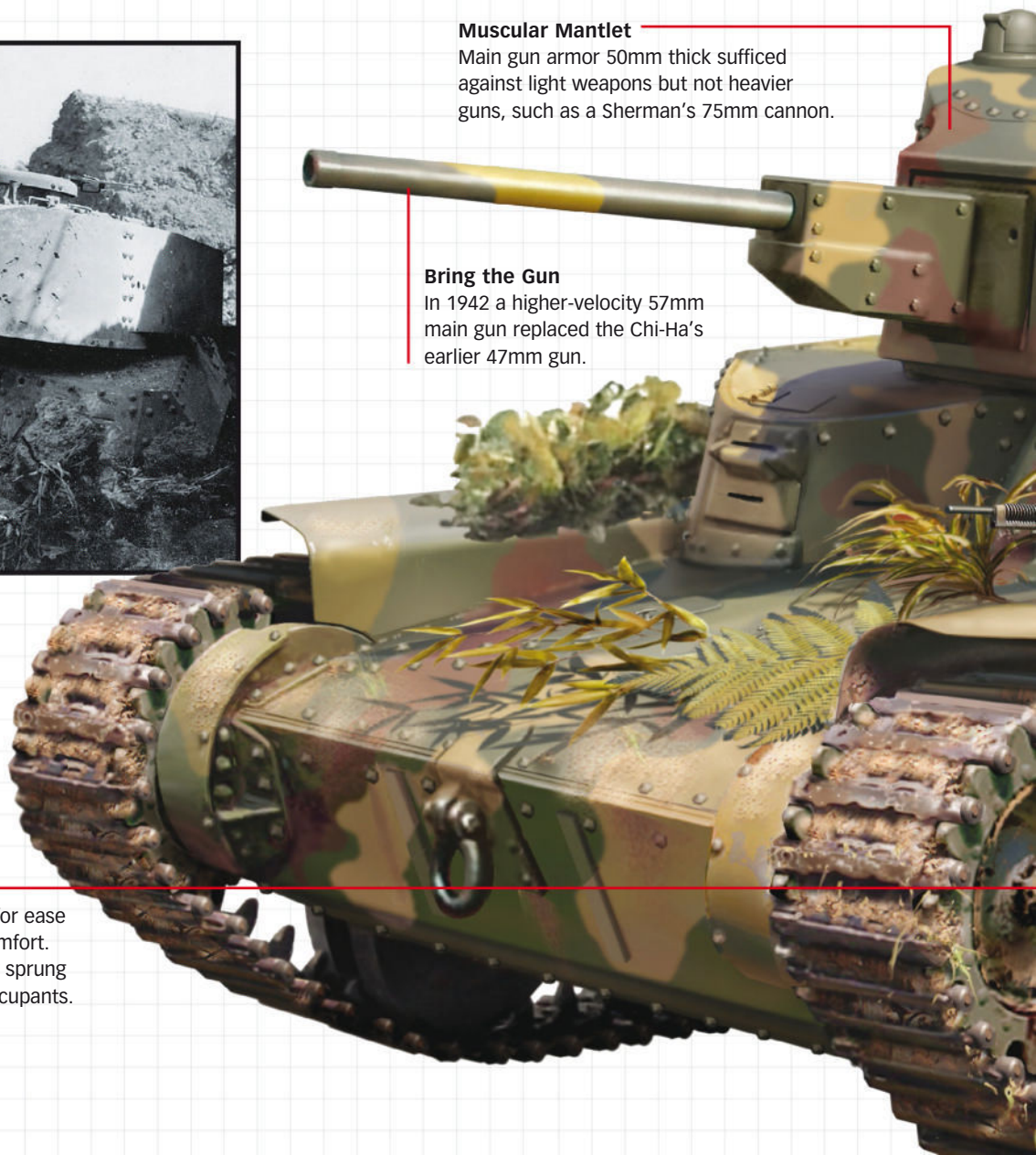
Main gun armor 50mm thick sufficed against light weapons but not heavier guns, such as a Sherman's 75mm cannon.

Bring the Gun

In 1942 a higher-velocity 57mm main gun replaced the Chi-Ha's earlier 47mm gun.

Not Built for Comfort

Engineers meant the Chi-Ha for ease of maintenance, not crew comfort. The cramped vehicle's poorly sprung ride was brutally harsh on occupants.



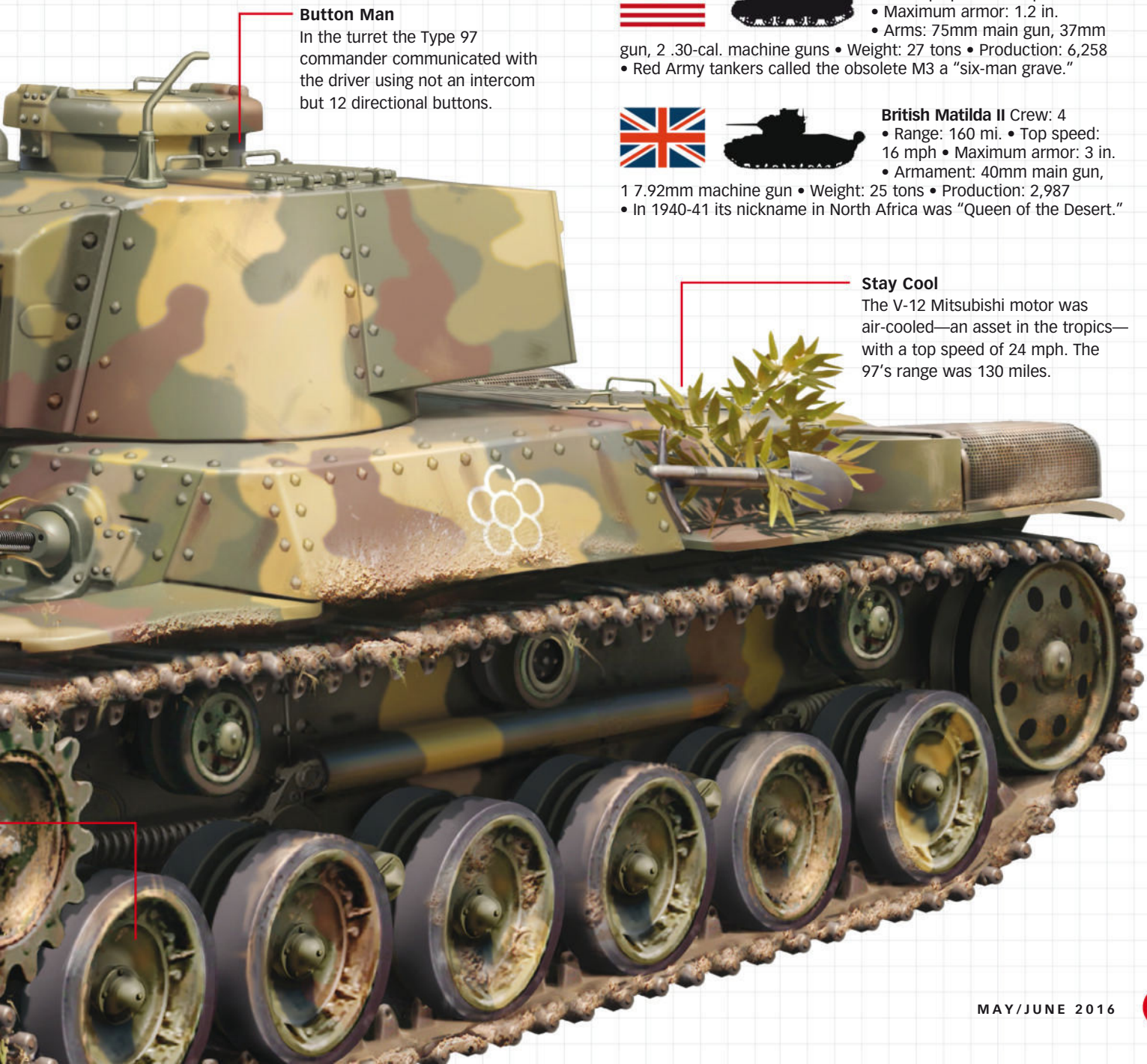


PHOTOS: NATIONAL ARCHIVES (BOTH)

In 1944 Japanese troops ride atop a Type 97 as imperial forces smash into the city of Hengyang, China.

Button Man

In the turret the Type 97 commander communicated with the driver using not an intercom but 12 directional buttons.



The Competition



German Panzer IV Crew: 5
• Range: 120 mi. • Top speed: 26 mph • Maximum armor: 3.1 in.
• Armament: 75mm main gun,
2 7.92mm machine guns • Weight: 25 tons • Production: 8,553
• Variants included anti-aircraft, assault gun, and tank destroyer.



French Char B-1 Crew: 4
• Range: 120 mi. • Top speed: 17 mph • Maximum armor: 2.3 in.
• Arms: 75mm howitzer, 47mm gun, 2 7.5mm machine guns • Weight: 28 tons • Production: 405
• German crews used B-1s they captured and re-repurposed.



US Lee M3 Crew: 7 • Range: 119 mi. • Top speed: 26 mph
• Maximum armor: 1.2 in.
• Arms: 75mm main gun, 37mm gun, 2 .30-cal. machine guns • Weight: 27 tons • Production: 6,258
• Red Army tankers called the obsolete M3 a "six-man grave."



British Matilda II Crew: 4
• Range: 160 mi. • Top speed: 16 mph • Maximum armor: 3 in.
• Armament: 40mm main gun, 1 7.92mm machine gun • Weight: 25 tons • Production: 2,987
• In 1940-41 its nickname in North Africa was "Queen of the Desert."

Stay Cool

The V-12 Mitsubishi motor was air-cooled—an asset in the tropics—with a top speed of 24 mph. The 97's range was 130 miles.