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Happy 248th Birthday, Marines!



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IWO JIMA: The Battle for Coordination

Part 1: Pre-Iwo Jima

by Mr. Steven D. McCloud

From its opening minutes, the battle on Iwo Jima was a *battle for coordination*. The entirety of that operation was characterized as the daily striving to win that battle for coordination.

The Japanese within the island were uncharacteristically coordinated in their efforts to tear asunder the Marine combat teams and prohibit their ability to work as one. For weeks, the Marines strove, fought, and died for the ability to work as one. To them, that meant getting the tank-infantry team together. It was the ultimate test of the right things, and the Marines passed the test.

The battle for coordination on Iwo Jima reached its apex in the northern part of the island, where its broken terrain and the enemy worked effectively as one to cast chaos on the Marines and to lure, trap, and pummel them. However, to properly embrace the nature of that struggle, it is necessary to be familiar with the efforts that led up to that event. Our case study will focus on the 4th MarDiv.

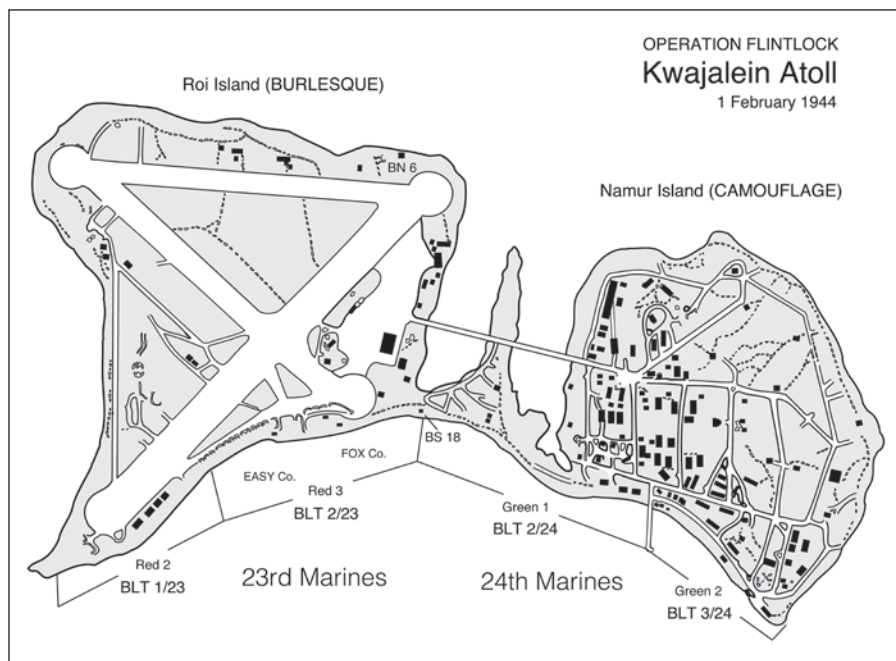
Experience in 1944: Fight for Coordination

When the new 4th MarDiv was training on the West Coast in late 1943, the word “team” was used often. Through three operations over the coming year, its meaning to those Marines evolved from what might be described as *functional cooperation* to one of *singularity*. But that evolution was not an easy one.

From Functional Cooperation ...

The division’s first operation, in the Marshall Islands, brought into sharp relief, from the highest echelon to the

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Map of Roi-Namur based on Marine Corps map. (Illustrated by Steven D. McCloud.)

lowest, the shortcomings of having high expectations from mere cooperation. It highlighted the friction between *control* and *coordination* as methodologies, mindsets, and cultures. Inter-Service differences and well-intentioned trip-ups between cooperating small teams created innumerable sources of friction above and beyond those created by the enemy or the battlespace.

The amphibious operation, launched from San Diego to Kwajalein, was complex and dependent upon everything and everyone working harmoniously. But on the morning of the main assault on the conjoined islands of Roi and Namur, one of the two assault regimental combat teams, RCT-24, was without half its assigned amtracs. They had been used for the pre-assault

landings the previous day. Now on D-Day, some were overturned in the lagoon due to heavy surf; many were scattered amongst Kwajalein's northern islets out of fuel; and others were on the ocean floor, having run out of fuel after being literally turned away by naval landing ships (LSTs) from which they had not been launched.

The other assault team, RCT-23, had all its assigned amtracs on the scene. It simply could not get them into the water. One-third of those needed for the assault and support waves had been loaded by crane to the weather decks of the LSTs—as many as 26 amtracs ferried by a single vessel. Only after they were loaded did someone question whether the ship's single elevator could handle a 33,000-pound amtrac and lower it to the tank deck for launch or whether the 24-foot craft could fit through the opening of those ships that had ramps. Neither question could be answered favorably.

The 4th MarDiv's main effort in the landing was to be made at Roi Island's Beach RED 3 by Capt John J. Padley's Fox Company, 2/23 Mar. The battalion had been transferred from its troop transport to four LSTs, but all three of its rifle companies were packed into two of them—each with amtracs loaded as described above. Jack Padley's company was split between two LSTs. The armored amtracs assigned to lead Battalion Leading Team (BLT) 2/23 ashore were divided between three widely scattered LSTs that entered Kwajalein's lagoon in the pre-dawn hours through two different passages, some five miles apart.

On D-Day, 1 February 1944, it took the 5th Amphibious Corps no less than 151 minutes merely to get RCT-23's assault troops into the water. It was unclear who was in charge of sending the waves ashore, and even after a three-hour postponement, one RCT was sent toward the beach without the other even being notified.

Inter-Service cooperation did not approach a state of coordination.

As for the troop assault, a plan for a controlled, orderly combined-arms push across the pair of tiny flat islands was surely understandable after the sear-



PFC Charles A. Gray, E/2/23 BAR man, looks across the flat and open landscape on Roi-Namur.
(Photo: Sgt Bob Cooke, Marine Corps Photograph, NARA 127-GW-70564.)

ing experience at Tarawa two months earlier. However, Roi Island was 230 acres of airfield devoid of trees or cover, while Namur was heavily vegetated and home to numerous blockhouses and buildings. A rigid top-heavy fire support plan for both islands negated tactical flexibility on the ground of either.

The plan, completed while the task force was en route to the Hawaii rendezvous, was for the assault to halt

him the plan dictated that he halt his advance—right there in the middle of the airfield. Neiman argued that it was against tank doctrine for high-profile medium tanks to sit idly out in the open and present easy targets for enemy blockhouses that were just as visible as he was across the airfield. They needed to keep moving.

Neiman pressed the attack across the island. Some riflemen tried to follow him but were ordered back. Aerial observer Maj Charles Duchain saw his advance beyond the O-1 and promptly made the call for all fire support units to check fire. A flurry of “check fire” orders buzzed throughout Task Force 53 by way of the Talk Between Ships net. From that point onward, any additional fires were to be made only on call from the shore fire control parties. Like it or not, the plan had just been altered.

A half-hour later, the troops on Roi were still in large part sitting out in the open. The division commander, Maj-Gen Harry M. Schmidt, directed that the attack's second phase be launched at 1430 “or when ready on both islands.” RCT-23's commander, Col Louis R. Jones, replied promptly and tried to get things moving: “This is a pip. No opposition near the beach. O-1 ours.

Inter-Service cooperation did not approach a state of coordination.

halfway across the pair of islands and await a second scheduled bombardment before resuming. The main effort from Beach RED 3 was to be supported by the brand new M4 medium tanks of Capt Robert M. Neiman's Company C, 4th Tank Battalion. (The other tank companies still operated light tanks.) Neiman landed at 1202. A half-hour later, he was at the O-1 line arguing with 2/23 Mar's commanding officer, LtCol Edward J. Dillon, who was telling

Give us the word and we will take the rest of the island.”¹ That approval was not forthcoming.

Meanwhile, Neiman’s tanks, at the north end of the island, had pinned down a cluster of enemy troops in an anti-tank ditch, but his machineguns could not depress low enough to wipe them out. He reported that no additional bombardment or delay was needed and that the island would be

Once the attack was unleashed, small teams of infantry and engineers threatened unknowingly to blow each other up while assaulting the same fortifications from opposite sides. They were aggressive, getting after the enemy, and wanted to win. None of that makes a team. They were separate teams cooperating. Working as one is difficult.

There were a great many people believing they knew what right looked like

They were separate teams cooperating. Working as one is difficult.

secured with immediate infantry help. Two hours after crossing the O-1 line, Neiman and his tanks were ordered by the threat of court-martial to return to the phase line so the second phase of the attack could be carried out according to plan. The event was written up as confusion resulting from radio interference. Neiman later described the reality to Marine historian Ken Estes.² After the battle, Col Jones reported that a phase line was probably not necessary on an island the size of Roi. (They did reprise the approach six months later at Saipan, a much larger island.)

and were doing it. But the best of intent is no substitute for coordination, and control was not going to provide it—a point underscored a few weeks later when the Commandant approved the sweeping reorganization of the Marine Corps.

... to Singularity

The Marine Corps made a move to speed the kill chain with decentralized precision a month after the 4th MarDiv reached its new base on Maui. On 27 March, Commandant Archibald Vandegrift approved the F Series tables of

organization. His own commanders at Guadalcanal, including Merritt Edson and Lew Walt, had reported wishing they had focused more on small-unit training and leadership. The message was echoed by LtGen Holland M. Smith in his 6 March after-action recommendations to the Commandant. The reorganization consolidated the BLT’s capability to better support localized lethality, not merely by altering organizational structure but by simultaneously forcing decision making down to the lowest possible level.

At the pointy end of the spear was the adoption of the four-man fire team, called a *group* in the 4th MarDiv. Overnight, this quadrupled the number of decision makers in the squad and, thus, the rifle platoon. The desired end state was, of course, greater flexibility on the Pacific-style battlefields. But for troops accustomed to twelve-man squads and a squad leader, such a move introduced an immediate opportunity for chaos.

Through the spring of 1944, the BLTs on Maui launched a focused indoctrination campaign above and beyond field training, for every Marine—especially the NCOs—to fully grasp the impact of the change. They had to figure out how to turn it not just into action but coordinated action—and then get good at it. They went to battle against chaos by developing first a shared mindset and then a shared muscle memory. It was not and could not be done by memo and manuals; it required human effort and work. This characterized the main effort of training on Maui in the spring of 1944.

The Marshalls’ experience also indicated a need for work on the tank-infantry team. Unfortunately, only Bob Neiman’s C Company had medium tanks. “Much of the training time,” explained the tankers, “was devoted to converting Companies ‘A’ and ‘B’ from light tank to medium tank companies. This was accomplished in spite of the fact that all organizational tanks were not acquired until after approximately one-half of the battalion had been loaded for Saipan.”³

The tankers rigged makeshift field phones to the rear of their tanks so the infantry could communicate with them and then hosted schools for infantry



KING KONG, Co. C, 4th Tank Bn advances through 2nd MarDiv zone down Karrabera Pass toward Tanapag Plain on 8 July 1944. (Photo: Cpl Angus Robertson, USMC Photograph, NARA, 127-GW-85832.)

officers to familiarize them with the capabilities and limitations of tanks as well as to work on such things as hand signals and directing fire. Unfortunately, the representatives sent by infantry units to attend the schools were not ones who would actually be working with the tanks in combat. The opportunity to gain the upper hand against chaos was lost. The Marines fell short in the battle for coordination and in defining what “team” really meant. The infantry and the tankers would head to Saipan as separate teams still intending unintentionally to cooperate.

Coordination Is Difficult

Combat experience on the large land masses of Saipan and Tinian, from June to August 1944, brought varied experience for the tank-infantry team. Perhaps the crowning achievement for the 4th Tank Battalion came on 8 July 1944, with the opportunity to affect a combined-arms sweep across the Saipan’s Tanapag Plain toward the ocean. It was coordinated in terms of orderly, photogenic placement reminiscent of a bombing formation and worthy of a diagram on a chalkboard, with tanks, infantry, and half-tracks moving together as one physical entity. It was one of the few such opportunities on Saipan to achieve mass and was valuable in the coming sweep across the open fields of Tinian a few weeks later. The long-term value of those maneuvers may have been the implicit reinforcement, in the hearts and souls of the Marines, that they naturally belonged together, working as one. And if they were not, something had to be done to change the situation.

In hindsight, however, the most maturing experience for the team may have come the previous six days on Saipan during the fight to reach the Tanapag Plain. For BLT 2/23, it began with the 2 July fight through an enemy strongpoint in what they dubbed as “the Gorge,” the solitary road that snaked through precipitous hills and into Saipan’s central high ground. The enemy placed a series of roadblocks and minefields at the turns in the trail and covered them with mortars, machineguns, and anti-tank positions. BLT 2/23 machinegunners



Marine tanks and infantry advancing across Tanapag Plain south of Makunshu. (Photo: Marine Corps Photograph, NARA 127-GW-87603.)

and bazooka men clawed their way to the hilltops to hammer those positions while a combat patrol was sent around the passage to flank the positions from the north; additionally, tanks added their fire support as engineers worked to clear the mines and roadblocks. It was the battalion’s first real experience

buried aerial bombs covered by sniper and machinegun fire. It was then, once on the low ground and only after that hard work was done, that the ideal formation was achieved.

The tankers returned to Maui asserting that “infantry unit commanders are still inadequately acquainted with

In hindsight, however, the most maturing experience for the team may have come the previous six days on Saipan during the fight to reach the Tanapag Plain.

in a combined concentration of force as opposed to massing, operating on coordination and maneuver more than central control. A couple of hours later, the battalion was proceeding up the road.

Four days later, the regiment tried for two days to descend from Saipan’s cliffs to the Tanapag Plain by way of Karaberra Pass, a narrow earthen cut through the island’s mountainous spine, flanked by cliffs covered with dense jungle foliage. It was the only road to the bottom—and the enemy knew it. Marine tankers, infantry, and engineers had to work together through

the capabilities, limitations, and proper tactical uses of tanks.” They also recommended that “Division Engineers conduct a school for tank personnel in recognition of and removal of mines and destruction of road blocks, and that training in the infantry-tank-engineer team be emphasized during the forthcoming training period.”²⁴

Striving for Coordination

A hundred and three days after departing Maui, the division returned from the Marianas in August 1944 with no shortage of experience but a crippling shortage of personnel. RCT-23

was at roughly 60 percent strength, BLT 2/23 at 50 percent, with the heaviest losses in the rifle units. Fox Company's Capt Padley had only one lieutenant. A broad wave of promotions filled out leadership roles but left a gaping void of privates and privates first class. Furthermore, the division had little information on the condition or disposition of its Marines who had been shipped off to hospitals across the Pacific. Regardless, once the troops who were present had time to rest and recuperate, training had to proceed. And again, much focus was on the tank-infantry team.

From September through December 1944, the 4th Tank Battalion devoted 30 percent of its training period to the tank-infantry team, and they tried hosting schools again. "Conferences were held by each tank company's officers with the infantry officers of their respective combat teams," they wrote. These focused on tank capabilities and limitations, infantry-tank coordination, and liaison and communication. "All infantry companies received schooling at the tank park in the use of the tank telephone, arm and hand signals, target designation, etc. Following this indoctrination school, small-unit problems were conducted, and later problems which included firing were held with each BLT."⁵

Significantly, the 4th Tank Battalion installed SCR-300 radios into each platoon leader's tank. Utilized at the battalion rifle-company level, these sets enabled direct and reliable radio communication with infantry on the ground, especially when unable to utilize the attached field phone. Unfortunately, the 5th Tank Battalion received the SCR-300 too late to spend time with it. Their training emphasized a devised system of hand and arm signals, and they worked closely with NCOs at the rifle-platoon level to refine coordination.⁶

The combined training focused on assault against fortified positions. Two weeks before the 4th MarDiv had sailed for the Saipan operation, the Commandant of the Marine Corps had issued another directive that transferred responsibility for assault demolitions from the engineers to the rifle companies. The

result had been a hasty transfer of such equipment, including flamethrowers, to infantry units. Few opportunities for such work presented themselves on Saipan and Tinian, but back on Maui, training is now focused on this mission. Organic teams learned to work as one to get the job done—at least those Marines who were there to participate.

The combat veterans present had received plenty of individual training from the recent operations. They had developed ad hoc teams in combat on Saipan and Tinian as well as discipline in jungle patrols, night patrols, and in clearing caves. While they did require some discipline in cover and concealment, they were trained to operate every weapon in the regimental arsenal. Teams rich with experienced noncommissioned officers could operate swiftly

When BLT 2/23 embarked for Iwo Jima, 50 percent ... had been with the company for roughly 30 days.

and precisely on implicit guidance and controls, but this level of training and maturity applied only to those combat veterans. As Thanksgiving 1944 approached, their rifle squads were still half-vacant.

Maj Doyle A. Stout of BLT 3/24 on the effect this had on the struggle to achieve coordination.

Tentative plans were drawn up for a two-month intensive training of replacements when and if they should arrive. These plans were reduced to six weeks by the first of November, four weeks by the middle of the month, and when the battalion was finally filled out two days before regimental amphibious maneuvers began, a three-week program was outlined. The first week of December was devoted to amphibious training, including special emphasis on battalions landing in reserve. The new men in BLT

3/24 did not profit too much from this because they did not understand what a squad was supposed to do when it landed, and it was found practically impossible to train them in the short time allotted. Upon returning to camp from these maneuvers, BLT 3/24 instituted an intensive training program in an effort to ready the battalion for combat. Instruction was held on basic weapons, including some firing, and as much work on squad and platoon problems as possible. The lack of tanks was the most serious handicap. Three weeks was all the time available for the training of approximately three hundred men and this was very definitely proved inadequate in combat.⁷

When BLT 2/23 embarked for Iwo Jima, 50 percent of its Marines—mostly in the rifle squads—had been with the company for roughly 30 days. Achieving coordination in the coming operation had been made tremendously difficult.

Notes

1. Headquarters Fourth Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, *Division Journal during Assault Phase FLINTLOCK, Period 0000 to 2400, D+1-day (1 Feb44)*.
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3. *Fourth Marine Division Operations Report Saipan, 15 June–9 July 1944*, Annex K, Report of the 4th Tank Battalion.
4. Ibid.
5. Fourth Marine Division Operations, *Report Saipan, 15 June–9 July 1944, Annex K, Report of the 4th Tank Battalion, Planning and Preparation*.
6. Action Report, Iwo Jima Operation, 5th Tank Battalion Report, 24 April 1945, Preparation and Training.
7. *Final Report on IWOJIMA Operation, Battalion Landing Team 3/24 report, 20 April 1945, Section 1, Planning and Preparations, Training*.

