

MORTAR SUPPORT FROM THE SEA— CWS MORTARS SUPPORT AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN WORLD WAR II

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In landings on hostile beaches during the early part of World War II, amphibious doctrine possessed a small disconnect. The first waves in any beach assault were largely infantry and engineers with a few support personnel. Supporting artillery normally landed later, so troops on the beach had to depend on fire support from the naval vessels offshore. Normally, these ships were destroyers.

The Navy rightly did not want its big ships close inshore because they were vulnerable to shellfire and air attacks. Something had to be done to provide an interim fire support to the infantry to cover the time that naval gunfire was no longer available and artillery landed and was able to fire. Enter the mortar boats manned by Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) soldiers. The CWS had been developing this capability since 1942.

In the summer of 1942, CWS mortars had been trained at the Amphibious Training Center, Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, and also at Camp Carabelle, Florida. In England, the U.S. Army set up an assault-training center where this concept was tested and later implemented for landings in the European theater of operation.

In fact, the 3d Chemical Mortar Battalion (now the 3d Chemical Brigade) sailed to Sicily prepared to support the ground forces with indirect fire from mortars mounted on six assault craft. However, their support was not necessary because of the tactical surprise of the Sicily landings.

Colonel George P. Unmacht, Chief Chemical Officer of the Pacific Area, recommended the use of 4.2 mortars to Navy officers and, in 1943, demonstrated this capability to observers in Hawaii. The Navy liked the idea and experimented with it for almost a year before its first use.

Mortar boats were nearly perfect for their intended mission—to provide indirect-fire support during the most vulnerable time of the amphibious operation. Working with Colonel Unmacht, the Navy developed both landing craft, tanks (LCTs) and landing craft, infantry (LCI)

retrofitted with 4.2 mortars. The CWS and the Navy cooperated to develop a suitable mount for the mortar. (During the War, cooperation between the Navy and the Army often was not easy.)

After a series of training accidents, the Navy finally settled on using LCI mounted with three 4.2 mortars (one mounted forward and two amidships, with one on the port and the other on the starboard side) as mortar boats to support landings.

Each mortar's mount was bolted to the deck and reinforced with steel plating under the deck. The forward troop compartments were turned into magazines that allowed the LCI the capability of firing up to 1,200 rounds for the three onboard mortars. Four mortar boats were earmarked for the campaign in the Palaus (the principle fighting took place on the island of Pelelu and involved the First Marine Division and one Army regiment).

The crews came from diverse sources—the commanding officer and some soldiers from the 88th Chemical Mortar Battalion and some from the 111th Infantry Regiment. The results were excellent, so more LCIs were converted to mortar boats and two groups consisting of up to six mortar boats supported the Leyte Gulf landings. More supported the landings at Iwo Jima and at Okinawa.

The fighting in the Pacific proved that the concept of the mortar boat was sound, and these boats proved very effective in supporting the infantry ashore. The concept was so good that instead of four boats operating during the Palaus operation, up to 60 operated during the fighting on Okinawa.

Since these mortar boats were small, they could move very close inshore to give direct-fire support. They were also small enough so that they rarely drew any attention from kamikazes or shore-based artillery.

In future amphibious operations, there may still be a place for the mortar boats—of course, brought up to the level of current technology. CWS or corps personnel won't man them, but the concept belongs to the Chemical Corps.