LCTs and LCT(A)s at Omaha Beach, Normandy, D-Day, 1944

The following is not intended to be a thorough report of the Omaha Beach operation at Normandy, but rather some background information to better understand the role of the LCTs.

The WWII invasion of Normandy was obviously the largest amphibious operation of all time. Not only did it have the largest number of LCTs included in the operation plan (277--147 on Omaha, 80 on Utah, plus 50 lend-leased Mark 5s manned by the British), it was the first time that LCTs were used to that extent in the initial assault wave.

It seems that at some juncture in the planning phase, the decision was made to support the initial infantry wave with Sherman tanks. It has been suggested that this came from the experience at the Dieppe raid or maybe the decision that this beach, because of the need to effect surprise, would not be pounded with two days of naval gunfire as were some Pacific beaches.

The plan then was to put 112 tanks on the beach at the same time the initial infantry hit the beach. Two different projects were pursued to accomplish this:

DD "Swimming Tanks"

The first project was to develop "swimming tanks", that would be dropped off 6000 yards from the beach and "swim" in hopefully undetected. A brainchild of British Gen. Percy Hobart, these DD tanks, as they were called because of their duplex drive which could activate either their treads or twin propellers. They had a water proof, air filled canvas shroud all around the hull which gave them enough buoyancy to "swim" into the beach, where the steel treads would be engaged, the canvas shrouds would be deflated and the Shermans would be ready at H-Hour to support the infantry in their first assault wave which would come in about the same time.

Lt. Dean Rockwell, of LCT Flotilla 12, was in charge of this secret mission and trained the 24 LCTs used for the Normandy assault. On the assault wave, Lt. Rockwell was in direct charge of the eight LCTs in the western sector of Omaha beach which would launch the 32 tanks of the 743rd Tank Battalion that would swim onto the Dog Green and Dog White beaches. Under perfect conditions, only nine inches of the canvas shroud would be showing over the water. Unfortunately, this nine inches of freeboard was not sufficient for the heavy seas on D-Day. After conferring with the Army captain in charge of his tank group, Lt. Rockwell decided to ignore his original orders and took his group toward the beach and unloaded the tanks onto the beach Twenty eight of the 32 tanks assigned to the eastern section that were dropped off at 6000 yards out were swamped and lost.

LCT(A)s

The second project invoked LCTs taking in tanks that had the capability to fire while making the run into the beach at H-Hour. These LCT(A)s were part of a special Gunfire Support Group organized late in 1943, and included LCT(G)s, LCT(R)s and LCT(A)s. The first two mentioned were British LCTs converted to gun boats and rocket boats, respectively. For the LCT(A)s, the invasion planners found 26 American LCT(5)s that had been lend-leased to the British early on. These were reverse lend-leased to us for this project. They were sent to British shipyards to be converted into LCT(A)s, the "A" standing for armored.

At the conversion, a solid sheet of almost two inch steel armor was placed against the living quarters at the end of the well deck shutting off the hatch between the well deck and the living quarters. Additionally, one inch armor was placed over the port and starboard bows to protect the ramp operators and more composite armor was placed against the "bridge" the British had constructed over the wheelhouse. A raised wooden platform was built so the two Shermans loaded in the front could fire over the ramp as the craft approached the beach. Since these LCT(A)s were to be the first to land at H-Hour, they were given jury rigged paravanes to sweep a wider channel, beyond the 32 feet of the craft's own bottom, as they went into the beach. Also they were carrying in a radar jamming device and carried a radar reflector to advise the bombardment ships the position of the first wave in relation to the beach.

In addition, the LCT(A)s carried a team of Army Engineers, the Co B 146th Battalion, and Navy Underwater Combat Demolition teams, from USN Combat Demolition Unit # 42, whose mission was to clear lanes of mines and obstacles onto the beach. Each LCT(A) towed a LCM from England loaded with equipment and explosives needed by these teams to accomplish their mission. At some distance from shore the teams were to transfer to the LCM and come in more or less alongside the LCT(A). Since H-Hour was shortly after low tide, the obstacles would be exposed and there would be time to work before the next high tide.

In addition to the two Sherman tanks that would fire going into the beach, a third tank fitted with a bulldozer blade was carried. The M-4 Shermans were to begin firing from a range of 3,000 years at about H-15, and each gun had an allowance of 150 rounds.

Mention must be made that these older Mark 5s had traveled many nautical miles and were not in the best of