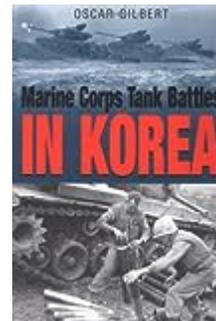




Oscar E. Gilbert. *Marine Corps Tank Battles in Korea.* Havertown: Casement, 2003. xxii + 308 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-932033-13-7.



Reviewed by Thomas W. Crecca (U.S. Marine Corps, Field Historian, Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, DC)

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Marine Tankers in the Forgotten War

In the Korean War, the combined arms team of the Marine Corps showed its devastating capability, from the battles at Pusan, Inchon, and Seoul to the arctic conditions of the Chosin Reservoir and the war of attrition marking the period from April 1951 to the Armistice in July 1953. One very important element of the combined arms team was Marine armor, which is the subject of Oscar E. Gilbert's *Marine Corps Tank Battles in Korea*.

Oscar "Ed" Gilbert served in the Marine Corps Reserve as an artilleryman and instructor of Non-Commissioned Officers and has devoted considerable time in researching and writing about the combat experience of Marine tank crews and units in World War II and Korea. In addition to this book on Marine tank battles in Korea, he is the author of *Marine Tank Battles in the Pacific* (2001) and is currently working on a history of tank battalions in Vietnam. In addition to his military experience, Gilbert earned a doctorate and is an experienced geologist and geophysicist, specializing in oil and gas exploration and production.

Gilbert's inspiration for writing this book was based

on the popular perception of the Korean War as "The Forgotten War." Not only was the war never won in the World War II sense of total victory, but it was overshadowed by the attention given to the frustrating experience of Vietnam. He explains that "no one has been so forgotten as the tank and armored vehicle crewmen who served in Korea" and describes the book as "a small effort to clarify some of the lesser-known aspects of the war, [depicting] what the war was like for some of the doubly forgotten warriors" (p. x). The outcome of Gilbert's endeavor is an interesting and informative book providing an excellent addition to the scholarship on the Marine Corps experience in the Korean War.

Gilbert's use of primary sources focuses on the interviews of Marines from the 1st Tank Battalion and the 1st Tank Battalion Historical Diary written during the war. The interviews were conducted from 2000 to 2002 and include many interesting individual stories illustrating the experience of Marine tank crews from the defense of the Pusan Perimeter to the end of the conflict in July 1953. One potential weakness is that the informa-

tion collected from the interviews is quite removed from the actual events. All of these interviews were taken fifty years after the fact, raising questions about the clarity of each Marine's recollections. In addition to his primary sources, Gilbert also relies heavily on secondary works to tie together the individual experience of the Marine tankers with the flow of events that occurred throughout the war. He uses the five-volume official history of *U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, 1950-1953* as the basis for the chronological framework of events and campaigns of the war. Gilbert incorporates the data he compiled from his interviews to highlight the experiences of the Marine tank crews in each of these campaigns.

Gilbert's focus is on the experiences of junior officers and enlisted men at the platoon and company level and how this illustrates the day-to-day life of a Marine in combat. Gilbert does discuss, however, the experience of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Milne, the Battalion Commander of the 1st Tank Battalion, during the Inchon-Seoul and Chosin campaigns as well as the Offensive/Counteroffensives of 1951-1952.

The author does a good job in covering the entire Korean War experience by illustrating the war in a balanced way. He not only covers the major campaigns of the first six months (Pusan, Inchon, Seoul, and Chosin in great detail), but also provides a solid explanation of the war of attrition from the spring of 1951 to the Armistice in July 1953. Gilbert opens with the major transformation of the U.S. Armed Forces from a powerful position in 1945 to a hollow peacetime force in 1950, explaining how the United States was caught "off guard" that summer when North Korea launched its attack on the South. Because the 1st Marine Division had a serious shortage in manpower, the reserves served a key role in providing a strong pool of combat veterans for the 1st Tank Battalion (pp. 5-7, 13-14, 197). Many of the reservists had combat experience from World War II either in tank or other frontline units. The author also emphasizes the importance of each Marine's basic combat skills, regardless of the formal specialty/training received. Every Marine's training as a rifleman is clearly demonstrated through the savage fighting during the withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir.

Gilbert does an outstanding job comparing the capabilities of Marine and North Korean tanks. He describes the importance of the American M26 Pershing tank and its capabilities on the battlefield in the early part of the war. Compared to the M4A3, which was the mainstay of the Marine armor forces in World War II, the M26 was

much better equipped to fight enemy armor. The Marines showed outstanding adaptability in using the Pershing as it came into the Marine Corps inventory on the eve of the Korean War. Most Marine tankers were not familiar with this new weapon until a month before they found themselves fighting in the Pusan Perimeter. The M26 Pershing was built to defeat the type of armor American units had faced in the European theater during World War II. Specifically, it was designed to counter the lethal German Tiger and Panther tanks (p. 5). The Pershing had thicker armor, improved mobility, and a 90mm cannon compared to the lightly armored M4A3 with its 75mm main gun. In comparison, the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) was equipped with the venerable T-34/85 Soviet tank, which distinguished itself in the armor battles against Germany on the European eastern front in World War II. The T-34/85 tank was a fast and agile tank with sloped armor that often deflected enemy rounds without suffering major damage. This tank also had a powerful 85mm cannon.

The author does an excellent job portraying the different types of combat experienced by the 1st Tank Battalion during the Korean War. From the fighting at the Pusan Perimeter to the landing at Inchon and the urban battle for Seoul, Gilbert illustrates the encounters between the Marine tank units and the NKPA's mechanized forces. The Marine infantry-tank teams gave the 1st Marine Provisional Brigade the combat power necessary to stop the North Korean spearhead toward Pusan. Even though the Marines had little time to become familiar with the M26 Pershing tank, the crews quickly adapted and inflicted heavy casualties on the NKPA infantry and armored units.

Gilbert illustrates the changing nature of combat for the tankers as the 1st Marine Division moved with X Corps to the eastern part of Korea and drove northward from the port of Wonson toward the Yalu River. The author vividly illuminates the immense challenges faced by Marine crews maneuvering single file along a narrow road in mountainous terrain. The difficulty of movement in channelized terrain was compounded by the arctic weather conditions facing X Corps. Gilbert describes the eerie feeling of driving a tank in horrible weather along a winding road through the mountains with steep drop-offs to one side (p. 145). The Marine tankers discuss how the narrow icy roads played havoc with their vehicles, because they only had steel tracks without rubber pads. This made the crews feel as though they were riding on ice skates as the steel tracks had problems gaining a firm hold on the ice (pp. 109, 112). One Marine noted

that the personnel who rode on the outside, “rode on the left fender so they could jump off if the tank went over the side.... It took a hell of a lot of courage for the driver to stay in the tank and drive it” (p.157).

Fighting in the November 1950 Chosin campaign differed from the battles with NKPA mechanized forces in previous encounters. In this campaign, Marine tank units faced an overwhelming number of Chinese infantry that attacked in mass, often at night. As X Corps was surrounded and outnumbered by Chinese troops, Marine tank crews fought off swarms of infantry attacks and ambushes. Gilbert explains how the Marines worked tirelessly to preserve and maintain their equipment while enduring heavy fighting on a constant basis. While X Corps Commanding General, Major General Ned Almond urged Major General Oliver P. Smith (the Commanding General of the 1st Marine Division) to destroy all of his equipment, Smith refused, arguing that his primary responsibility was to bring out his dead and wounded, and to preserve his division as a fighting force (p. 137). The author poignantly summarizes the daunting feat achieved by the 1st Marine Division by saying, “the difficulties of coordinating the movement of some 20,000 men and thousands of vehicles down a single lane road in the Siberian-cold winter can not be overestimated” (p. 150).

After the Chosin campaign, the 1st Marine Division along with the rest of the UN forces transitioned to a defensive posture reminiscent of the attrition style warfare of World War I. While the Marines still faced large numbers of Chinese infantry, Gilbert mentions only one occasion where the Chinese employed tanks in the battle

around the Bunker Hill outpost (p. 222). Although an enemy armor threat remained minimal, the author recounts the experiences of the Marine tankers in the slugfest with Chinese forces, describing how tanks become more frequently used as artillery and “infantry and artillery actions became increasingly more grisly as each opponent tried to bleed the other dry. The Korean War had evolved from one of mobility to one of simple static attrition” (p. 216). In addition to its role as artillery, Gilbert recounts how the 1st Tank Battalion was used extensively in infantry-tank teams with armor supporting company-sized patrols. The American tactics focused on the attack and capture of Chinese outposts, inflicting large casualties and taking prisoners. Marine tank crews were involved in the intense fights for the control of the Nevada outposts of Carson, Reno, and Vegas, providing direct support for infantry assaults.

Informative maps and photographs covering the major campaigns of the 1st Marine Division complement the narrative. Many of his photographs and captions focus on the details and distinguishing features of various armored vehicles. He also includes pictures of the Marines interviewed and referred to throughout the book. Gilbert has written an interesting, informative, and readable history, which provides a much better understanding of the role that the 1st Tank Battalion played in the major campaigns of the Korean War. He does an outstanding job of conveying the perspective of the enlisted Marines and junior officers, and certainly fulfills the mission of covering the war experienced by some erstwhile forgotten, but heroic warriors.

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