

1945 April 9-15

L is for Landing, Anything Everywhere

Prisoners Taken In Invasion Were Hostile, Veteran Reports

"About the only thing that keeps some of us going at the pace that we do is the fact that we might get home that much quicker."

Now one of the men La Crosse sent into service is home, having earned his discharge from the navy. Roland F. Mach, pharmacist's mate, first class, becomes "Doc" to his friends once more. He intends to pick up his chiropody business where he left off as a civilian.

Dr. Mach entered the navy Oct. 10, 1942. Thirteen months of training were had at Great Lakes, followed by his assignment to an LCI. He served on board this craft from Dec. 10, 1942, to Sept. 11, 1944.

[excerpt]

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 9, page 10)

Roland Mach of La Crosse was part of the Navy's "L Fleet" of landing craft that was crucial to the Allied victory in World War II. Whether it was in the European Theater at North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, the rivers of Germany, or in the Pacific Theater at Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Guam, Saipan, Tinian, the Philippines, Iwo Jima, or Okinawa, landing craft were the means of getting men and machines to the places where they needed to fight the enemy.

Roland Frank Mach was born in August 1900 in La Crosse.¹ He graduated from La Crosse High School in 1917.² His first job was working in the master mechanic's office of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Then he went to medical school, graduating from the Illinois College of Chiropody and Foot Surgery in June 1929.³ After living in Seattle, Washington for at least five years in the early 1930s, he had returned to La Crosse by 1940.⁴ Mach established his podiatry practice in the city.⁵

Being 41 years old when the United States entered World War II made Mach older than the usual Navy recruit. As a pharmacist's mate, he served as the ship's doctor on a Landing Craft, Infantry (LCI) from December 10, 1942 to September 11, 1944. The LCI was a 20-foot wide, 125-foot long vessel used to land infantry on a beach. Mach's LCI was sent to England as part of the build-up to the Normandy invasion.⁶ Even though not built for transoceanic voyages, the LCI crossed the Atlantic Ocean under its own power like a cork riding every wave the whole way. It was not exactly a rowboat, but it was not an ocean liner either.



Roland Mach crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a Landing Craft, Infantry (LCI) similar to this one. The version in the photo has been modified to carry rocket launchers.

(d-day-overlord.com)

Amphibious operations have been a part of warfare since Greek and Roman times. It was used by the Vikings, Napoleonic armies, and in World War I by both the Allies and the Germans.⁷

Vessels specifically intended for landing on a shoreline had first been built by the British in the mid-1700s. They were wooden flat-bottomed boats with ramps, and that was the basic design for hundreds of years. Landing crafts were often created from modified civilian boats such as ferries.⁸

The battlefields of World War II were all over the world, and many of them could only be accessed by sea. Landing an army on a defended hostile shore has never been an easy task, and it was even harder in World War II with the weaponry of the time. Amphibious warfare was necessary for Europe to free the territory conquered by the Germans, and it was essential in the Pacific where the Japanese conquests were far-reaching over the vast distances of the Pacific Ocean.

The United States Marine Corps was somewhat prepared for its role in World War II having studied amphibious operations after World War I. In 1935, it created a manual for amphibious assaults and had training exercises in Puerto Rico. The Marines held "fleet landing exercises" every year until 1940.⁹

To conduct amphibious landings, the Navy developed a wide variety of vessels for specific functions, including:

LCA-- Landing Craft, Assault

LCC--Landing Craft, Control
 LCF-- Landing Craft, Flak
 LC (FF)--Landing Craft, Flotilla Flagship
 LCI--Landing Craft, Infantry [Roland Mach's vessel]
 LCI (L)--Landing Craft, Infantry (Large)
 LCM--Landing Craft, Mechanized
 LCP--Landing Craft, Personnel
 LCR--Landing Craft, Rubber
 LCS--Landing Craft, Support
 LCS (S)--Landing Craft, Support (Small)
 LCT--Landing Craft, Tank
 LCT (R)--Landing Craft, Tank (Rocket)
 LCV--Landing Craft, Vehicle
 LCVP--Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel
 LSD--Landing Ship, Dock
 LSM--Landing Ship, Medium
 LSM (R)--Landing Ship, Medium (Rocket)
 LST--Landing Ship, Tank
 LST (H)--Landing Ship, Tank (Hospital)
 LSV--Landing Ship, Vehicle
 LVT--Landing Vehicle, Tracked¹⁰

The U.S. Navy categorized landing ships as seagoing vessels over 200 feet in length. Landing craft were under 200 feet long and intended for short trips from a mother ship to a beach.¹¹ The various other types provided fire support or command and control functions.

Landing craft were required to navigate in open water, carry quantities of men and supplies, be simple to operate, cheap to build, and easy to unload. Planners thought most landing craft would be destroyed in a single operation, so they were viewed almost as disposable. Most, however, were used over and over.¹²



Troops disembarking from the front of an LCI in the Pacific Theater
(Navsource.org)

The first landing craft to be built in quantity was the Landing Craft, Personnel (LCP). It was made of wood and could carry 20 men. The Landing Ship, Infantry (LSI) could carry 200 men, along with the smaller landing craft (LCI or LCP) that would take them into shore. The Landing Ship, Tank (LST) would anchor offshore and unload its tanks to a Landing Craft, Tank (LCT) that would take them onto the beach.¹³ An empty LCT would be carried on the upper deck of an LST; it would then be slid off sideways for loading of four to eight medium tanks on it for transport ashore.¹⁴ LSTs, with their flat bottom, could also unload their cargo directly on a beach with its two large bow doors and a ramp. Because of its large size and seagoing capability, some were modified into repair or hospital ships. The Landing Ship, Medium (LSM) was another seagoing landing ship that could unload directly on a beach with its bow ramp.¹⁵

During the war, American and British shipbuilders supplied large numbers of these vessels to the Allied armed forces. There were 1,040 LSTs (327 feet X 50 feet), 490 LSMs (204 feet X 34 feet), 1,465 LCTs (120 feet X 32 feet), 11,350 LCMs (56 feet X 14 feet), and 23,358 LCVPs (36 feet X 11 feet) built. All of these vessels had a maximum speed of about 11 miles per hour.¹⁶ Because of its size and speed, sailors quipped that LST stood for "Large Slow Target."



USS LST 393
(lst393.org)

The most numerous type, the Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel (LCVP), was also known as the "Higgins Boat." Andrew Jackson Higgins of New Orleans had experience building shallow-draft boats that oil and gas companies used in the Louisiana bayous. When World War II began, Higgins created the Landing Craft Personnel (Large) that was used by American troops to land on Guadalcanal and in North Africa in 1942. Troops disembarked by climbing over the sides. Higgins then combined his LCP (L) design with the LCV (Landing Craft, Vehicle) to create the Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel (LCVP) that had a front ramp exit for troops and vehicles. These plywood landing crafts were the workhorses of many beach landings.¹⁷



LCPV at the Normandy Beachhead
(National WW II Museum)

Only the United States built large numbers of wheeled and tracked amphibious vehicles that could navigate in water, drive up on a beach, and continue to operate inland.¹⁸ Two of the most-used and best-known were the "amtrac" and the "DUKW" (pronounced and sometimes written as "Duck").

"Amtrac" was derived from the "AMphibious TRACtor" that the Marines ordered in 1940. Originally created as a hurricane rescue vehicle in the Florida Everglades, the fully-tracked LVT-1 was unarmored and could carry 25 men who had to jump over the sides to get off. It was first used at Guadalcanal in August 1942. The Model LVT-4 added armor, moved the engine to the front, and featured a rear ramp so troops had a sheltered exit. Used extensively in the Pacific, this vehicle also saw action in Italy and Northwest Europe.¹⁹ The driver and his assistant, who also operated a machine gun, sat in a cab in the front. It could haul men or supplies for 100 miles over water or 150 miles over land. An "amtrac" could even carry a jeep or a 105mm howitzer in its cargo area.²⁰



Marine Corps Amtrac at Peleliu, 1944
(HistoryNet.com)

A wheeled amphibious vehicle was the Model GMC DUKW-353, or "Duck." It was a six-wheel-drive truck with a boat-like hull that could travel equally well on land or sea. The driver and his assistant sat in the front just as they would in a truck, and it could carry 25 men or 5,000 pounds of cargo.²¹ Anybody who has been to Wisconsin Dells has probably ridden on, or at least seen, one of these versatile vehicles.



British soldiers using a DUKW
(History.com)



A "Duck" in water at Wisconsin Dells
(Jeff Rand, 2013 June 13)



A "Duck" on land at Wisconsin Dells
(Jeff Rand, 2013 June 13)

Landing craft became such an important part of so many operations that General George Marshall remarked in 1943, "Prior to the present war I never heard of landing craft except as a rubber boat. Now I think of little else."²²

Amphibious operations required an immense amount of planning and preparation. Coordination of reconnaissance, intelligence, shipping, preparatory bombardment by naval and air forces, loading and unloading men and material, and command and control throughout the operation was a challenging task. In addition to enemy defenses and resistance, commanders also had to factor in weather, tides, and terrain.

The biggest amphibious operation in the history of warfare was the Normandy Invasion of France on June 6, 1944. Although it is popularly known as "D-Day," in armed forces parlance D-Day is the day that any military operation begins.²³ "H-Hour" is the time that the operation begins.²⁴ Normandy is remembered as the "D-Day" because of its size and significance. After a vanguard of 18,300 American and British paratroopers landed behind the Normandy beaches, an invasion fleet of 5,300 ships of all sizes and types landed 152,615 American, British, and Canadian troops on a 60-mile wide landing area in one day. The cost was about 10,274 casualties, including 2,132 dead on D-Day.²⁵

Roland Mach's small LCI was part of this massive effort. His vessel made "countless trips" between its base in England and the Normandy beachhead. Each trip took 12 hours because they did not travel in a straight line across the English Channel. On D-Day plus One, a ship near them was hit, and Mach's LCI helped rescue 439 survivors from it. Mach also saw many German prisoners, who he described as "hostile."²⁶

In a conflict where aircraft, tanks, and larger ships were given names and nicknames, as well as creative logos and symbols emblazoned on their exteriors, the various landing craft of the U.S. Navy toiled gallantly, with relative anonymity, labeled with plain white numbers as their sole identifier. Despite this lack of "personality," landing craft performed many vital duties on all the battlefields of World War II.

After being discharged from the Navy, Roland Mach resumed his podiatry practice in the Hoeschler Building in La Crosse until he retired. He was also a member of the La Crosse Eagles Club, the Knights of Pythias, the Kanana Temple, and Wesley United Methodist Church.²⁷

Dr. Roland F. Mach died on June 14, 1978, in a nursing home in Onalaska at the age of 77. He is buried in Mormon Coulee Memorial Park Cemetery.²⁸

Revised: 2020 December 18

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Sources & Notes:

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- ²⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1978 June 16.
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See also:

USS Landing Craft Infantry National Association <http://usslci.org/>
 United States LST Association <https://www.uslst.org/>
 Historic Naval Ships Association <https://www.hnsa.org/>
 LST Story <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTSqhCdgwrl>
 Landing Ship Tank "USS LST 393" Tour (amateur video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMQv7T58aqq>
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