

A Soldier of the Independent Tank Battalions – In the South Pacific with 706th Tank Battalion

by retired LTC Thomas R. Rozman

The role of the independent tank battalions in operation in the Pacific in 1944-45 with the island-assaulting infantry divisions is largely overlooked today. The following is a remembrance connected to one of these battalions.

The large family had gathered for Sunday dinner in Wilson, CT, at the family homestead. It was the mid-1950s. World War II had ended 11 years earlier. Ten brothers, brothers-in-law and one sister of the 22 adults who gathered were veterans, one on active duty just returned from Viet Nam. One brother was overseas. Two brothers-in-law not present were also veterans.

Except for the family patriarch who had walked out of Poland just before Russia mobilized for the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 to avoid Russian service in Manchuria, all 13 brothers and brothers-in-law had served. Eight had volunteered for service; the rest had been inducted.

The gathering of 15 of the then-21 grandchildren made the earlier Sunday afternoon before dinner lively in the house and on the yard outside. But despite the excitement of the cousins, most of the men had spent the before-dinnertime catching the football game on the television in the library. All were athletes in earlier days, one having played on Florida State's squad in his student days. The younger family members understood not to carry their chaos into that sacred place.

After dinner a group gathered as was the custom around the cleared dinner table – usually the veterans. Different topics like some of the family businesses and customer issues, work with employers, or world or local politics would get attention. But the veterans would sometimes recall a remembrance of their service.

The World War II veterans typically were not overly forthcoming on their service and often spoke of their experience in a downplayed mode – sometimes it was clear the memory went further than they wanted to share or remember. Four of the World War II men had been with infantry divisions in Europe and the South Pacific, two at Normandy and one on Okinawa, another on New Georgia and Luzon. One overseas at the time had fought in North Korea.

The veteran of the Okinawa campaign always seemed less forthcoming with his memories and often shared them as humorous self-effacing short comments. There was a different character to his perspectives from the two infantrymen and the artilleryman. The difference was noted by one of the listening nephews who would later enter service as well. The differences were enough to cause the nephew to want to learn more about the unit of his uncle's experiences.

A resident of Windsor, CT, PVT William F. Chorazy would be inducted into the Army in June 1942, two months after his 24th birthday. He would be on the Army's rolls until January 1946, when he would be separated at Fort Devens, MA.

After initial processing and training, he would be assigned to the unit that would become 706th Tank Battalion upon the reorganization of 37th Armored Regiment in September 1943. He would serve as a soldier in Company A and achieve expert-gunner status. With the battalion, he would participate in the Eastern Mandates, Southern Philippines, Luzon and Ryukyus campaigns. He would be awarded the Good Conduct, Asiatic Pacific Theater, American Theater Campaign, World War II Victory and Philippine Liberation medals on discharge in January 1946.

The ultimate profile of Chorazy's service was that of 706th Tank Battalion. The unit did not exist under that designation when he entered the service.

In September 1943, 37th Armored Regiment, then a part of 4th Armored Division, reorganized as part of a larger reorganization of the armored divisions across the Army. Elements of the regiment were formed

into a number of smaller separate units. The 3rd Battalion of the regiment reorganized and redesignated as a separate tank unit, 706th Tank Battalion. The battalion was then relieved from assignment to 4th Armored Division.

Prior to the reorganization, the battalion as part of 37th Regiment and 4th Armored Division since a move to Camp Forrest, TN, in October 1942, had participated in maneuvers on the Cumberland Plateau. It had moved in November to the West Coast Desert Training Center, first situating at Camp Ibis, CA. The training that ensued in the Mojave Desert addressed lessons-learned by 1st and 2nd Armored Divisions in North Africa.

By June 1943, the division and regiment were located at Camp Bowie, TX. This was an armored-division training center located near Brownwood, TX. The reorganization followed in September. The battalion continued to train as a battalion formation after the reorganization.

As a separate battalion, 706th Tank Battalion deployed from the San Francisco Port of Embarkation March 22, 1944, arriving in the Hawaiian Islands in April 1944. The battalion then embarked on-board landing ship tanks moving west across the Pacific. The unit was to be assigned to the force commanded by ADM Chester Nimitz.

Nimitz was commander of the Central Pacific component of the larger Pacific Theater allied force engaged in seizing islands from Imperial Japanese Forces in an ever-constricting cordon of the Japanese home islands. GEN Douglas MacArthur commanded the other wing of the allied force in the South Pacific. Each island seizure brought allied airbases closer to Japan and would ultimately allow around-the-clock strategic air attack in preparation for invasion of the home islands if the Imperial Japanese Government continued to fight.

The 706th Tank Battalion would experience operations on Guam in July 1944, the Philippines in late November, Ie Shima in mid-April 1945 and Okinawa in late April.

The battalion would frequently be in support of 77th Infantry Division, serving as its armored arm. The fight would be especially brutal on Okinawa. The film *Hacksaw Ridge* about a combat medic in the division who won the Congressional Medal of Honor captures an aspect of how difficult the combat was.

An excerpt from a recent book characterizes the operational and tactical relationship that developed between 77th Infantry Division and 706th Tank Battalion prior to and during the operations on Guam and also indicates the battalion's interservice operability: "706th Tank Battalion trained extensively with 77th Infantry Division for the assault on Guam," according to Oscar Gilbert and Romain Consiere in *Tanks: A Century of Tank Warfare*. "The 706th operated in large increments of 14 tanks with infantry support on armed-reconnaissance operations and cooperated fairly seamlessly with adjacent Marine Corps units."

The following excerpt from a 1948 article captures an aspect of the battalion's employment with 77th Infantry Division during operations on Southern Guam: "At Barrigada the division's 307th Regiment, fighting for a vital water supply, struck a determined enemy defense, and during a long, costly day tried unsuccessfully to dislodge the hidden force," LTC Max Myers writes in "Lookit Those Old Buzzards Go!" "But the next morning the Japanese were gone; they had had enough. At Yigo the 306th and 307th regiments and 706th Tank Battalion, with plenty of artillery support, tore apart the last Japanese positions and turned the campaign into a hunt."

The combat on Leyte and the battalion's operations with the division are characterized by the following excerpt published in the 2010 book, *The Infantry's Armor: the U. S. Army's Separate Tank Battalions in World War II* by Harry Yeide: "The Japanese moved reserves to the area and 77th Division experienced in the fight north of Palompon road what has been described as the bitterest American troops had yet encountered in the Pacific. Ten medium tanks from Company A, 706th Tank Battalion, and all of Company D were moved by landing craft to Ormoc Bay [Dec. 29] to support infantry. CPT Leonard Seger led nine light tanks against entrenched Japanese infantry [Dec. 21], but mortar fire was so intense that three tanks were hit one of which was destroyed."

The battalion would return to the Philippines after operations on Okinawa. It would inactivate in September 1945 in the Philippine Islands.

The 706th Tank Battalion would be returned to active status in 1949 as 71st Heavy Tank Battalion, assigned to 1st Cavalry Division in Japan. It would reorganize and redesignate as 71st Tank Battalion in August 1950. The battalion would be inactivated in Korea in October 1950, concurrently relieved from assignment to 1st Cavalry Division.

Administratively the Army redesignated the 71st as 706th Tank Battalion in August 1951 and assigned the battalion to 12th Armored Division in February 1953. This arrangement continued until relief from assignment to 12th Armored Division in April 1957 and consolidation of 706th and 37th Tank Battalions in April 1957 under the Combat-Arms Regimental System to form 37th Armor, a parent regiment in that system. In February 1983, the regiment was withdrawn from the system and assigned to the U.S. Army Regimental System. Since 1957, separate battalions of 37th Armor have served and distinguished themselves as formations of the Army in the continental United States and overseas as an element of the different force deployments that have occurred.

But it was the stories of long ago that my uncle, a soldier of 706th, told around the family dinner table on a Sunday afternoon that made 706th and its tankers come alive in a boy's mind. They were not stories of daring-do but the stories of citizen soldiers who met the call, mastered tank warfare in the tough, unique-for-armor environment of the Pacific Campaign, and they prevailed. In many an engagement as the armored arm of the infantry in those horrific fights, they made the difference.

The stories resonated enough that years later the nephew would spend many years serving in the heavy forces of the Army in mechanized and cavalry battalions, armored brigades and divisions.

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