

General Subjects Section
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1947 - 1948

OPERATIONS OF 773D AMPHIBIAN TRACTOR BATTALION
(Attached to 27th Division) IN THE OPERATION
ON TANAPAG PLAINS, SAIPAN, 7 - 8 JULY 1944
(WESTERN PACIFIC CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of Battalion Executive Officer)

Type of operation described: UTILIZATION OF ATTACHED
AMPHIBIAN BATTALION IN EVACUATION

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INTRODUCTION

On 15 June 1944, just nine days after the landings in Normandy, the NTLF (Northern Troops and Landing Force) composed of the United States V Amphibious Corps, which was made up of the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions, the 27th Infantry Division, and attached Army, Navy and Marine Corps troops, opened the Marianas Campaign by an assault on the Island of SAIPAN.

In the opinion of many commanders and officers the Saipan phase of the Marianas would be completed in ten to fourteen days. Later events proved this to be fallacious for two reasons: first, under-estimation of the enemy's ability to fight; second, fanaticism displayed by Japanese troops. Actually the campaign was not finished until 9 July 1944, 24 days after the assault. (1)

This assault was made over beaches in the vicinity of CHARAN KANOA by the 4th Marine Division on the right and the 2d Marine Division on the left. (Map A). Elements of the 27th Infantry Division were landed on D plus 1; and after the entire southern end of the island was secured, the lines were readjusted with the 2d Marine Division on the left, 27th Infantry Division in the center, and the 4th Marine Division on the right. The 2d Marine Division was pinched out on 4 July 1944, north of GARAPAN. (Map A). It was taken out to rest and prepare for the assault on the island of TINIAN. This assault had originally been scheduled for about 1 July, but the unexpected length of the SAIPAN campaign delayed the landing on TINIAN until 24 July. (2)

By 4 July, when this reduction in strength was made, all divisions had received heavy casualties; one division commander had been relieved;

(1, 2) Personal knowledge.

the men were tired and in poor physical condition. The poor physical condition was primarily caused by two specific factors. First, the men had received no hot food since 15 June. The units were unable to feed hot meals because of the great numbers of large green flies on the island. The Japanese believed that these flies destroyed certain fungus growths on their main crop, sugar cane; therefore, they had cultivated and protected the insects. The presence of the flies made necessary an order that no kitchens would operate until properly flyproofed. As combat units put a rather low priority on screen wire, they had been unable to get any hot food to their men since the beginning of the campaign. Second, dengue fever had infected a great number of the men; and although not as serious as malaria, it caused the infected personnel to be logey and tired. (3)

The terrain of SAIPAN was such that the two outside divisions had much easier going than the 27th Division in the center. MOUNT TAPOTCHAU (Height: 1555 feet) was the dominating terrain feature on the island. The ground dropped off rather abruptly to the east and west but sloped gradually to the north and south with many valleys and cliffs, that were ideally suited to the Japanese type of defense. The plains to the west of MOUNT TAPOTCHAU were covered by fairly dense undergrowth and trees interrupted by small fields of cane and sweet potatoes. The 27th Division in the center had the hardest terrain to fight over. (4)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

After the 2d Marine Division was pinched out on 4 July, the 27th Infantry Division and the 4th Marine Division continued to advance as planned until 060905 July, Corps notified the 27th Division Commanding General that the 27th would be pinched out north of MAKUNSHA and the 4th Marine Division zone would include the entire north end of the island. (Map A) (5)

(3, 4) Personal knowledge.

This action was taken because all intelligence indicated heaviest resistance on the western side of the island between the 27th's present position and MAKUNSHA, and light resistance from MAKUNSHA on the north to the end of the island. Further, the Marines were advancing faster than the Army, and it was not desirable to have the Marine flank hanging in the air.

Therefore, the 27th Division issued a new attack order placing the 105th Infantry on the left and the 165th Infantry on the right. (Map B) With only a few hundred yards to go, the end of the 27th Division's battle for SAIPAN was in sight; however, resistance was becoming increasingly strong. (6) Furthermore, G-2 reports indicated that many Japanese troops were assembling in the vicinity of MAKUNSHA. (Map B) When these reports were phoned into Corps G-2 section, they were not believed in their entirety because the general opinion at Corps headquarters was that the greater part of the Japanese forces had been destroyed and that the few remaining were between the 27th Division and MAKUNSHA. (7) The attitude of the G-2 section, V Amphibious Corps, seemed exemplified by a statement made about 061600 July by an assistant in the section to the effect, "The Army is excited. The 27th Division G-2 has called me several times this afternoon telling me that Japs are massing around MAKUNSHA." (8)

On 6 July the 105th and 165th Infantry Regiments continued their advance against stubborn resistance until 1800 when ordered to halt and dig in for the night. (Map B) (9) At this time the 105th had all three battalions on the line with a gap of 600 yards between the 2d Battalion on the left and the 3d Battalion on the right, and the Division had everything committed except one battalion of the 106th Infantry which was in Division reserve. This battalion was moved into the line to reinforce

(6) A-3, p. 81; (7) A-2, p. 15; (8) Statement made by an officer in G-2 section, V Amphibious Corps to 1st Lt William H. Fulton, Bn S-2; (9) A-2, p. 15.

the 165th Infantry during the night of 6 - 7 July. (10)

Since 1500 artillery observers with the forward battalions had been calling for fires on suspected Japanese concentration points and on the roads leading into and around MAKUNSHA. In spite of these constant artillery fires the Japanese were able to concentrate a large force to the north of and in MAKUNSHA. (11) At 070445 July the Japanese attack hit the gap between the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 105th, and the very impetus of their attack carried them through. (Map B) The Japanese soldiers were armed with rifles, bayonets, swords, long sticks sharpened into spears, bayonets tied on the end of sticks, and the inevitable bottle of sake. In fact, the soldiers knew this type of frenzied attack as a "Banzai" or a "Sake" attack. Actually this attack was Gyosukai - which only the Emperor could order, but the Japanese general commanding the forces spread the rumor that a plane from TOKYO had dropped the orders for the attack. (12)

All units fought gallantly and well, but they were overwhelmed by the very numbers of the enemy. The initial attack lasted twenty-five minutes and in that length of time practically decimated the 1st and 2d Battalions, 105th Infantry, as they took the brunt of the attack and caused it to be slowed down somewhat. (13) The 3d Battalion fared better as it was on commanding terrain and had its defenses well organized. The attack rolled on and hit the 3d Battalion of the 10th Marine Regiment (105mm Howitzer Battalion) who were surprised at their guns. A hand-to-hand fight ensued, and the Japanese captured the guns intact; but luckily they were not organized, and continued the attack and did not make use of the guns against our troops. (14)

The impetus of the attack was finally halted by the use of every available man in Regimental Headquarters of the 105th Infantry. After the organized effort of the Japanese was repulsed, they formed into bands and started wandering over the plains. Thus the survivors of the 1st and

(10) Personal knowledge; (11, 12, 13, 14) A-2, p. 15.

2d Battalions were completely cut off from all aid. (15) The strength of the two battalions was approximately twelve hundred men on the evening of 6 July. That night 406 were killed and 512 were wounded, some several times; ~~This is~~ about seventy-five per cent casualties. (16)

The Japanese advance had carried them about 2000 yards into the 105th Infantry sector. On the morning of 7 July, Division put two battalions of the 106th Infantry in the 105th area to try to regain the ground lost. However, they only made about 600 yards during the day because of the stubborn resistance put up by the groups of Japanese. (Map B) (17)

By the middle of the afternoon the danger of further penetration was over; however, the survivors of the 1st and 2d Battalions had been fighting all day in an effort to reach the American lines. They fought their way back to a point just north of the village of TANAPAG where they began encountering those Japanese who had been repulsed by the CP personnel of their own regiment. (Map B) (18) They found themselves surrounded at an unknown distance from friendly lines, without food, water, ammunition, or medical aid. Only five officers of the two battalions were left; three of them were seriously wounded. Their situation was seemingly hopeless. (19)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

The 773d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, after initially landing and supporting the 25th Marines of the 4th Marine Division, was attached to the 27th Infantry Division on 21 June. Continuous support had been rendered on the beaches unloading LST's and in the lines as armored vehicles. On 4 July, the battalion bivouac was moved to the southern end of SAIPAN in order to start readying equipment for the assault on TINIAN. (Map A) Every effort was being made to rehabilitate LVT's that had received excessive running over coral, deep sand, and rocks without time for proper maintenance. This was a rather new vehicle, and it was difficult to main-

(15) A-2, p. 16; (16, 17, 18, 19) A-2, p. 17.

tain in a running condition under perfect operating conditions with regular care. A certain percentage of the vehicles were being deadlined each day for repairs. (20)

At 061845 July, a message was received from G-4, 27th Division, that 15 LVT's would be required at 0800 the next morning at the Division ammunition dump to carry ammunition to elements of the division then in the vicinity of TANAPAG. Lt. Fredriksen was placed in command of the vehicles and given necessary instructions. He moved his group out at 070730 July. It was about a two hour trip for LVT's, and after loading he expected to arrive at his destination by 1500. In the meantime, the Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. D. L. Edwards, had received an urgent call to report to the Division CP. He returned to the battalion area about 1400 with instructions to dispatch 12 more LVT's of ammunition to the vicinity of TANAPAG because of a heavy Japanese attack on the 105th Infantry. He further ordered the Battalion Executive Officer to contact Lt. Frederiksen by radio and inform him that the area to which he had been sent was now in Japanese hands and to land his vehicles in an open area on MUTCHO POINT, in the event that he was not signaled ashore sooner. (Map B) The executive officer was then sent to the Division CP to ascertain any knowledge of the location of the 105th Infantry CP, and upon location thereof, to proceed there and render any assistance possible. (21)

The executive officer arrived at division CP about 1430 and found it in a turmoil. The operations map gave the location for 105th Infantry CP at a point on the southern edge of TANAPAG, which the executive officer knew to be incorrect. (Map B) The location given was as of 061800 July, and the CP had been moved further to the rear during the day of 7 July. However, since this was the latest information available, the executive officer proceeded to the general area where he thought it likely the CP would be located. He finally found the CP at a point about 1000 yards

(20) A-1, p.33; (21) Personal knowledge.

southwest of TANAPAG near the shore. (Map B) It consisted of the S-3 who was sitting beside a EE8 phone. The utility of the phone was rather uncertain, for division had no communications with the 105th at this time, and the regimental switchboard had been destroyed in the heavy fighting during the early morning. Nearby were three or four men lying around eating K rations. The executive officer explained that his mission here was to render all possible assistance to the 105th and asked the S-3 Major where he might give aid. The Major said the 105th had been relieved but that he thought the division G-1, Lt. Col. Bidwell, had a mission. He also thought that Col. Bidwell would be back in a few minutes. Then he unhooked his phone, and followed by his men, headed toward the rear.

In a few minutes Col. Bidwell did appear. He informed the executive officer that there were an unknown number of survivors of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 105th Infantry, up the coast behind the Japanese lines and that he wanted to try to evacuate them by water. He had a corporal from the 27th Division Reconnaissance Troop with him, who claimed to know the location of the survivors. It was about 1600 by this time, and the executive officer was beginning to be worried about the location of Lt. Fredericksen's group of LVT's which should have arrived by 1530 at the latest. However, about 1630 eight vehicles were sighted and signaled into shore. The delay had been due to mechanical trouble with some of the vehicles which had been left temporarily at MUTCHO POINT, and Lt. Fredericksen had come forward with the remaining eight LVT's.

The corporal from the Reconnaissance Troop had a limited amount of information to give to the executive officer. He thought the survivors were in the town of TANAPAG which lay about 1000 yards north of his present position. (Map B) His estimates of the number of survivors varied from 100 to 600; however, he had visited and was familiar with the town.

The executive officer now had eight LVT's with which to accomplish, before dark, the evacuation of an unknown number of men, an unknown distance from the present location. In preparation he had the stores of

ammunition and rations unloaded on the beach, leaving only the normal vehicular load. The process was retarded somewhat by machine gun fire from two American M5 light tanks which were out in the water of the reef. A platoon leader had unsuccessfully attempted a water envelopment of some Japanese near the shore, and all five tanks had been knocked out immediately. During the night some Japanese had appropriated two of them for use as pill boxes for Nambu machine guns. By the time this interference was cleared up and the unloading completed, it was about 1800. (Map B) (22)

THE EVACUATION

The executive officer planned to send the eight available vehicles forward as soon as possible to start the evacuation. The other seven vehicles were expected momentarily, but the exact time of their arrival was uncertain. Time was of the utmost essence since the sun was getting low, and it was unhealthy for everyone concerned to be moving in that area after dark. However, the absence of other organized enemy troops in the vicinity decreased the danger somewhat. On the other hand, the group was ahead of its own reestablished lines, and there was the possibility that some ambitious American artillery observer would put some fire on the group.

Lt. Fredericksen moved out by water to the north at 1805 to try to locate the survivors. In the meantime the remaining seven vehicles, under the command of Lt. Murray, had been located by the executive officer who moved them forward. It was necessary to unload them of ammunition and rations before they could be used in the evacuation. The executive officer oriented Lt. Murray concerning his mission by taking him forward to a point that jutted out into the ocean where Lt. Fredericksen's group could be seen going into shore about 1200 yards north. He then

(22) Personal knowledge.

ordered him to unload his vehicles and move out as soon as possible. The executive officer's jeep had been sent back to locate an aid station and bring forward some ambulances and aid men to care for the wounded. The regimental surgeon of the 105th Infantry arrived with several aid men and some emergency medical supplies.

By the time Lt. Murray's group was ready to move out, Lt. Fredericksen was returning with a load of survivors. When the first group came ashore there were an estimated 20 men on each vehicle. The LVT's could carry no more because the large number of casualties had to be laid out over the engine compartments, front decks, and the bottom. The few unwounded were sitting or standing where there was room. There was not a sound from any one of those men. They were so tired and so relieved at being pulled out of an impossible situation that the unwounded merely got to the ground and helped unload the wounded. Then, they gathered in small knots and just waited. Not a man had had a drink of water or a thing to eat all day and yet they were not interested in food or water. They had no ammunition whatsoever; their only resupply for 24 hours of constant firing had been what they could get off the bodies of dead comrades. Lt Fredericksen reported that a large number of men still remained to be evacuated, and his eight LVT's were immediately started on a second trip to the forward area. It was 2000 now and almost dark. Lt. Murray brought in seven tractor loads and reported that the eight vehicles already underway should be able to bring back all the remaining survivors. The executive officer ordered him to remain in place therefore, awaiting the return of those vehicles.

Lt. Fredericksen returned about 2030 with eight loads of men and reported that this completed the evacuation. The executive officer and Lt. Murray took two vehicles, however, and went back to "doublecheck". They thoroughly searched the area under the beams of the headlights of their LVT's, but no more men were found so the party returned to the

evacuation point.

The only opposition to the whole evacuation had been a Japanese machine gun which opened fire on Lt. Fredericksen's vehicles as they moved in the first time. It was quickly eliminated and the operation proceeded without further interruption despite the presence of Japanese in the vicinity. (23)

Lt. Col. Bidwell ordered the vehicles to stand by in readiness for a continuation of the evacuation that night if more survivors were located in the area. The executive officer made arrangements to move the vehicles by water back to MUTCHO POINT, where a temporary bivouac would be established. (Map B) The vehicles were moved there without incident, which statement allows for the expected minor breakdowns, getting stuck on coral heads, and running into sandbars.

Upon arrival at MUTCHO POINT the executive officer contacted the battalion commanding officer by radio and requested emergency crews to be sent up the first thing on the morning of 8 July if it became necessary to operate all night. In the meanwhile twelve more LVT's had arrived, making a total of twenty-seven in the forward bivouac. The executive officer dispersed the vehicles and set up the necessary security measures. This had just been accomplished when a Japanese Zero came in low from the sea with his motor turned off, dropping two bombs estimated at 50 pounds each and strafing with his machine guns. Fortunately, no harm was done.

About 2200 the executive officer was ordered to report to the division CP as soon as possible. He was met there by Lt. Col. Bidwell who stated that the operations for the night were over. Questioning some of the survivors had revealed that insofar as they knew all the men had been evacuated. Col. Bidwell estimated that between 300 and 400 men had been rescued that evening, many of whom died while on the LVT's or before they could be given adequate medical care.

(23) A-1, p.34.

The executive officer returned to the forward bivouac area and issued instructions for the group to stand fast on 8 July until definite instructions were received from the battalion. Captain Bouler, Headquarters Company Commander, had arrived; and after placing him in command, the executive officer proceeded to the battalion bivouac area at 080145 July to report the night's operations to the battalion commander and to check on orders for operations on the following day. Operations for 8 July were merely resupply operations. G-4 had requested 30 LVT's to carry more ammunition and rations to the forward dump. This detail was planned and placed under the command of Captain Suttle.

About 0600 G-4 requested that 10 LVT's be used for further evacuation of wounded from front lines. Lt. Fredericksen was placed in command, but it turned out to be merely a reconnaissance mission along the Japanese held beach.

The 773d Amphibian Tractor Battalion closed the MUTCHO POINT bivouac at 081800 July, and all LVT's were returned to the battalion bivouac. (Map A) to prepare for the assault on TINIAN. In this operation again the Unit's performance was outstanding, and the Presidential Unit Citation (Navy) was granted the battalion by Order of the Secretary of the Navy for the SAIPAN-TINIAN operation.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing this particular operation several points are obvious. First, the mission given the 773d Amphibian Tractor Battalion was explicit as to what was desired -- evacuation of survivors of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 105th Infantry. However, no one knew the location or the number of survivors; and furthermore, nothing was done until around 1400 when the Battalion Commander of the 773d was called to the Division OP and ordered to send more ammunition forward and to render any possible assistance to the 105th Infantry. This is an excellent example of an

"armchair" staff. If they had been doing their jobs properly they would have known (1) That there were men of the 105th Infantry out off behind the Japanese lines (2) Their approximate location (3) That ammunition was not essential at that time.

Second, there was a gap of 600 yards in the line of the 105th Infantry. The frontage of the regiment was only about 900 yards, and the 1st and 2d Battalions on the left with a strength of about 1200 men were covering only a front of about 200 yards. If the Regimental Commander was of the opinion that his troops could cover no more frontage, then he should have made strong representations to the Division Commander for reinforcements. Then, if not granted, he should have re-adjusted his lines so that the gap could have been covered to a better advantage.

Third, the Corps was so anxious to finish the campaign that it was pressing Division which was in turn pushing the Regiments. Consequently, the battalions were given objectives that they were unable to reach until about 1800. They did not have enough time before night fell to establish a proper defensive position to withstand a determined attack. In other words, the regimental commander did not allow himself enough time to correct the gaps in the line noted in the second point above.

Finally both Corps and Division failed in their estimates of the situation — Corps insofar as it disregarded important G-2 information and Division by not taking proper action on the G-2 information in its possession. Division G-2 passed information back to Corps about Japanese massing around MAKUNSHA, but neither Corps or Division took any positive action to guard against a threatening counterattack.

LESSONS

1. Commanders should always give consideration to the intelligence reports received from subordinate units.
2. Commanders must keep in mind all of their attached and supporting units and their capabilities.

3. Commanders must see that their staffs, especially the operations sections, G-2 and G-3, do not become "chairborne". They must be inculcated with the idea that their only excuse for existence is to aid the units. Frequent visits to front line units and difficult situations by staff officers will cause both the units and the staff officers to develop mutual confidence and trust.

4. Inter-service jealousy and strife must not be allowed to exist in peace or war. It is detrimental to the morale and efficiency of all concerned.

5. Against a determined enemy sufficient time must be allowed in the evening to properly tie in defenses before dark. In an exploitation constant and continuous pressure should be maintained to keep the enemy from reorganizing. However, in a small island campaign against opposition such as the Japanese offered there was no opportunity for an exploitation. (All the day of 6 July the 105th Infantry had been running into increasingly heavy resistance and had had to fight for every inch of ground. Consequently, when night fell they were not properly organized on the ground and their supplies were low. Further, all previous fighting against the Japanese had revealed that if there were gaps in the line the Japanese would find them and exploit the gaps to the fullest.)

6. Efficient communications are a vital necessity.