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OPERATIONS OF THE 77TH INFANTRY DIVISION (XXIV CORPS)
IN THE ORMOC CORRIDOR, LEYTE ISLAND
7 DECEMBER 1944 - 5 FEBRUARY 1945
(SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Division Assistant G-3)

Type of operation described: DIVISION IN THE ATTACK

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OPERATIONS OF THE 77TH INFANTRY DIVISION (XXIV CORPS)
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 77th Infantry Division, principally in the Ormoc Corridor on Leyte, Philippine Islands, from 7 December 1944 to 5 February 1945. A portion of it covers operations of the division on other parts of the island to provide the necessary background and complete the narrative. Throughout the campaign the division was commanded by Major General A. D. Bruce.

Although it will not be covered in detail in the narrative, the fact should be borne in mind that the operation of the division throughout the period discussed was seriously complicated by difficulties of supply which were common to all units participating in action on Leyte and which were inherent in the nature of the terrain, the lack of adequate road nets, and the heavy tropical rains which persisted throughout the campaign. Supply on Leyte has been characterized as a situation "in which the impossible became the every day reality". (1) The problem became even greater during operations of the 77th Division in the Ormoc Corridor, where resupply depended almost entirely on inadequate naval convoys. Frequently the division ammunition reserve was reduced to less than one-half unit of fire and at no time did the level of supplies ever really become adequate

(1) P, p. 61

to support the operation properly. (2) Lack of sufficient air cover must also be remembered as a constant deterrent to our forces.

Any discussion of the part played by the 77th Infantry Division must necessarily be preceded by an orientation covering the overall campaign, enemy reaction to the Leyte landing, and operations of other units engaged in action on the island, to show the reasons behind the employment of the 77th Division and to point out the contribution it made.

Leyte is located in the central portion of the Philippine archipelago in what is known as the Visayan Group which comprises Bohol, Cebu, Leyte, Masbate, Negros, Panay, Romblon, Samar and numerous dependent islands, numbering in all about 490 of varying sizes. (3) It lies generally between Luzon to the northwest and Mindanao to the south, and is separated only by the narrow San Juanico Strait from Samar on the northeast. (Map A) It is an extremely mountainous and densely wooded island with a very high annual rate of precipitation. The island is sharply divided throughout its length of 121 miles from northwest to southeast by a high rugged mountain range composed mostly of extinct volcanoes which forms a definite barrier to movement of any kind from one coast to the other. This range, known as the Central Cordillera, varies in height up to 4426 feet and is characterized by sharp spurs, ridges, and clefts which interlock to form an almost impassable terrain feature. (4) Roads on the island are inadequate and insufficient

(2) B, p. 43,44; (3)(4) B, p. 5

to support military operations; during the campaign the heavy rains and military traffic rendered most of them impassable. (5) Basically there is one road which runs from Tacloban south to Abuyog, across the mountains by a narrow, tortuous route to Baybay; thence north through Ormoc and Libungao to Pinamapoan and Carigara, and thence back to Tacloban. There are other roads and trails, but few are suitable for more than carabao travel. (Map B)

Despite the unfavorable terrain conditions, Leyte was chosen as the point of entry of our forces for the long-awaited return to the Philippines. Possession of it would split the Japanese forces in Luzon on the north from those on Mindanao on the south and would control the central passages through the Visayas to the Japanese-held islands to the west as well as to the China sea. Bases on Leyte would also constitute a serious threat to the sea lanes upon which the enemy depended for his very existence. Further, Leyte offered excellent possibilities as a base from which to launch subsequent drives to the north, south, or west in the ultimate accomplishment of complete liberation of the Philippines.

On 21 September 1944 General Headquarters Southwest Pacific Area (General MacArthur's command) confirmed previous warning instructions and directed the Sixth Army under Lieutenant General Walter Kreuger to seize Leyte, setting the target date at 20 October 1944. Cover and support were to be provided by the Third Fleet and allied air and naval forces. (6)

(5) E, p. 180; (6) B, p. 19

To accomplish its mission the Sixth Army was given the X and XXIV Corps. Major units of the X Corps, commanded by Major General Franklin C. Sibert, were the 1st Cavalry Division and the 24th Infantry Division. Those allocated to the XXIV Corps, commanded by Major General John R. Hodge, were the 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions. Sixth Army also had the 6th Ranger Infantry Battalion, while the 32d Infantry Division at Hollandia and the 77th Infantry Division at Guam were designated in general reserve. These divisions were to be prepared to load at any time after A / 3 days on twenty-four hours notice to move to Leyte to reinforce Sixth Army. (7)

The Sixth Army plan for the capture of Leyte envisaged an operation conducted in three phases. The first comprised an amphibious operation, prior to the landing of the main force, for the purpose of securing the entrance to Leyte Gulf. The second called for simultaneous major amphibious assaults to gain control of the east coast of Leyte from Tacloban to Dulag where vital airdromes and potential base sites were located, the securing of San Juanico and Panaon Straits, and capture of the Carigara Bay area. The third phase involved the subsequent destruction of remaining hostile forces on Leyte and southern Samar. (8) It was in this last phase that the 77th Infantry Division made its contribution to success on Leyte. (Map B)

The plan was carried out on schedule and initially went very smoothly. Phase I was completed by 18 October and by 2 November Phase II was declared at an end. (9) At this time

(7) B, p. 20; (8) B. 3; (9) B, p. 3

X Corps units on the north had captured the key towns of Tacloban and Palo, Tacloban airfield, secured control of San Juanico Strait and the Carigara-Barugo area, and had driven the Japanese from the northern portion of the Leyte Valley. XXIV Corps on the south had captured its portion of the beach-head area including the airfields of San Pablo, Buri, and Dulag; captured all key towns in its zone; forced the bulk of the Japanese defenders into the foothills of the Central Cordillera in the vicinity of Dagami; and initiated relief of the 7th Infantry Division to permit it to move across the Abuyog-Baybay Road in preparation for an attack north along the west coast to capture Ormoc. (10)

The Japanese garrison on Leyte, ^{which} consisted of the 16th Infantry Division with necessary service forces, a total of approximately 16,000 troops in all. Because of the relatively small size of the defending force in comparison with the assaulting troops of Sixth Army it was originally believed that the Leyte campaign would be of short duration. (11) The rapid successes of our forces during Phase II intensified this belief and caused General Headquarters on 29 October 1944 to release the 77th Infantry Division from its commitment as Sixth Army reserve. (12) On 3 November this division sailed from Guam to join its rear echelon in a rest area at New Caledonia. (13)

Although the Japanese 16th Division was quickly forced back into the hills, enemy reaction to the landing on Leyte was far from passive. In the "Second Battle of Leyte Gulf" between

(10) B, p. 3; (11) B, p. 83; (12) B, p. 64 (Note: "Guadalcanal" in error); (13) A, p. 1.

24 and 26 October the Japanese committed a major portion of their fleet in an attempt to destroy our naval cover and assault shipping, which would have meant disaster to our forces ashore. Luckily, the threat was stopped by our Third and Seventh Fleets, with heavy loss to enemy air and surface units. (14)

This action did, however, have a serious effect on our shore operations. The bulk of the support aviation on Leyte consisted of carrier-based naval aircraft, all of which was removed from shore missions for the period of the naval attack. From that time until near the end of the operation the level of air support did not become entirely adequate to support the ground operations. (15)

It is estimated that during Phase II, prior to 2 November 1944, the Japanese landed a total of approximately 22,400 reinforcements on Leyte, the bulk of which were combat troops. The entire 1st Japanese Division, a seasoned unit from North China, landed at Ormoc on 1 and 2 November and moved north to oppose the X Corps in the Carigara Bay area. On 9 November the Japanese succeeded in landing the 26th Division at Ormoc in addition to numerous troops at other places on the west coast. Three freighters loaded with troops were landed at Palompon on 28 November and the troops from about half a convoy of fifteen ships succeeded in getting ashore at Ormoc on the next day.

It was evident that the Japanese High Command intended to gamble their hold on the Philippines on the outcome of the Leyte campaign. Troops poured in from Luzon, Cebu, Panay, and

(14) B, p. 42; (15) B, p. 43, 44.

Mindanao in all types of craft ranging from small landing barges to troop transports, destroyers, and cruisers. Total reinforcements landed on Leyte during the campaign approximated 60,000, the bulk of which landed at Ormoc, Palompon, and other west coast ports. (16)

Although our air and surface units inflicted terrible casualties on the enemy reinforcement convoys, we were unable to stop the flow due to lack of sufficient air forces on the island. On the other hand, enemy air forces from bases on Mindoro and other nearby islands were extremely active, which further complicated our situation. (17)

Phase III of the campaign was initiated on 3 November; but for the next month advances were severely limited by increased enemy resistance, torrential rains which reduced all roads and routes of communication to ribbons of mud, almost insurmountable supply problems, and the extremely rugged nature of the terrain in which the bulk of the activity was centered.

Sixth Army received much-needed reinforcements before the end of November. On 14 November the 32d Infantry Division arrived and relieved the weary 24th Division in the X Corps zone. The 11th Airborne Division arrived on 18 November and was attached to XXIV Corps. The 77th Infantry Division, diverted at sea from its proposed rest at New Caledonia, arrived on 23 November and was attached to XXIV Corps. (18)

(16) C, p. 11; (17) B, p. 3, 41; (18) B, p. 64

At the time of landing on Leyte, the 77th Division (reinf) consisted of the following units: (19)

| | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Organic:</u> | Division Troops | 305th Infantry Regiment |
| | Hq Special Troops | |
| | Hq Co | 306th Infantry Regiment |
| | 77 Signal Co | |
| | 77 Ren Tr | 307th Infantry Regiment |
| | 777 Ord Co (LM) | |
| | 77 QM Co | |
| | 77 MP Plat | |
| | Hq and Hq Btry Div Arty | |
| | 304 FA Bn (105mm how) | |
| | 305 FA Bn (105mm how) | |
| | 902 FA Bn (105mm how) | |
| | 306 FA Bn (155mm how) | |
| | 302 Engr (C) Bn | |
| | 302 Med Bn | |
| <u>Attached:</u> | 1118th Engr Gp Hq | 95 Port Surgical Hosp |
| | 132 Engr (C) Bn | 92 Ord Bomb Disposal Squad |
| | 233 Engr (C) Bn | Co A, 88 Cml Wpns Bn |
| | 242 Engr (C) Bn | 292 Joint Assault Signal Co |
| | 7th AAA (AW) Bn | |
| | 706 Tank Bn | |

Within a few days after the division had landed on the east coast of Leyte, XXIV Corps had parcelled out elements on various parts of the island. The 305th Infantry sent one battalion to Baybay for attachment to the 7th Infantry Division. The 306th Infantry was placed under operational control of the 11th Airborne Division and took over a portion of the line near Burauen. The 307th Infantry on Corps order sent one battalion to Samar Island to protect naval installations. Two of the attached engineer battalions were removed for road work. The balance of the division was scattered along the beach and throughout the Corps service area from Tarragona to Rizal on patrol missions, beach defense, Corps Command Post defense,

(19) Personal knowledge

traffic control, and road maintenance. The 305th Infantry was even required to furnish a labor detail of 1300 officers and men to load ships scheduled for an assault on Mindoro. (20)

Perhaps the reason for this piecemeal employment of the division on relatively unimportant missions was that it was not considered ready for combat when it arrived. The division had left a large part of its combat equipment on Guam because of lack of shipping and the fact that it had been destined for a rest area. The division rear echelon with more of its equipment was on New Caledonia and did not rejoin until the Leyte Campaign was over. (21) This shortage of equipment further complicated the combat operations of the division.

On 1 December 1944 the division received warning orders to make an assault landing in the vicinity of Ormoc. When these orders were received the division had elements in practically all portions of American-held territory on Leyte and Samar, under control of XXIV Corps, 7th Infantry Division and 11th Airborne Division. (22)

A landing on the west coast near Ormoc had long been desired by the Commanding General Sixth Army, but conditions previously would not permit it. The Navy could not supply sufficient transportation to move a force large enough, and in addition took a very dim view of operating in waters controlled by enemy air and surface units--particularly so in view of the meager friendly air available. (23)

(20) (21) Personal knowledge; (22) Personal knowledge;
(23) B, p. 62.

However, on 1 December the Mindoro operation, scheduled for 5 December, was delayed because of lack of air cover to support it. This made the necessary shipping available. The Navy was still extremely dubious about it when General Kreuger repeated his request, because they knew that our air units had been unable to stop Japanese air attacks against our shipping in Leyte Gulf and they feared that any loss of bottoms west of the island (which they considered a certainty) would seriously affect not only the Leyte battle but operations scheduled later against Mindoro and Luzon. (24)

An agreement was reached, however, and 7 December 1944 was set as the target date.

Assembly of the division was a matter of great concern in the limited time available due to its wide dispersion, shortage of transportation, muddy and deteriorated condition of the roads, and the fact that some units were actively engaged with the enemy. Mainly through superhuman effort assembly of units scheduled for the initial convoy was completed in time to load out from the east coast on the morning of 6 December.

Shipping allocated for the move was 8 APD's (destroyers converted to carry personnel for assault landings), 25 LCI's (landing craft infantry), 10 LSM's (landing ship mechanized) and 4 LST's (landing ship tank). All these vessels are small which meant that space, both for personnel and equipment, would be severely limited. As a result of these limitations, only

(24) B, p. 69

8500 troops and 269 vehicles of all types (including combat vehicles) could be taken. (25)

The Navy commander of the task force had notified the division that because of enemy air and surface action to be expected in the target area he could not keep his convoy offshore for longer than two hours; accordingly only those supplies which could be mobile-loaded on vehicles could be taken. No bulk loading was possible. (26)

Loading of vehicles and supplies was started on the night of 5 December. All vehicles, supplies and personnel were loaded into assault shipping by noon on 6 December, and the division awaited in Leyte Gulf the arrival of 12 DD's (destroyers) which were to furnish surface protection for the convoy. (27)

Apprehension was great both on the part of the division and the Navy. Men started referring to the target as the "Anzio of the Pacific".

The division was scheduled to make an assault landing at about half the strength (including attachments) with which it had fought on Guam, against a hostile shore in rear of an estimated 40,000 enemy troops, supported only by twelve destroyers and without hope of reinforcements or friendly contact for an unknown number of days. Friendly air cover was promised, but past experience on Leyte in this regard was not too reassuring.

The mission was to land in the vicinity of Ormoc to disrupt enemy defenses and cut routes of supply, evacuation, and communication in the Ormoc area. The plan was to land initially

(25) (26) A, p. 10; (27) A, p. 11.

near Deposito, establish a limited beachhead between the Baod and Bagonbon Rivers, await the arrival of additional supplies and reinforcements on D+1 day, and subsequently to advance north and capture the town of Ormoc. (28) (Map C)

The convoy sailed from Leyte Gulf at 1300 on 6 December and moved, without hostile interference and under cover of darkness most of the way, to the Ormoc area via the southern tip of Leyte and the Camotes Sea. (29) (Map B)

THE CAPTURE OF ORMOC
6 - 10 DECEMBER 1944

The eve of the Ormoc landing found elements of the X Corps approximately 3000 yards south of Limon astride and to the east of Highway 2. XXIV Corps units engaged in the Central Cordillera had not yet succeeded in crossing over the range. The 7th Infantry Division had crossed to the west coast on the Abuyog-Baybay Road and had started its attack north against stubborn resistance of the Japanese 26th Division. By 5 December advance elements had crossed the Palanas River north of Damulaan, but they were still 8000 yards south of the point at which the 77th Infantry Division landed on 7 December. (30) (Map B)

The assault was made by only seven Infantry Battalions and one battalion of 105mm howitzer field artillery. The task force was organized as follows: (31)

(28) A, p. 12; (29) A, p. 11; (30) B, p. 64, 67, 71;
(31) A, p. 13

Division troops:

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Div Hq and Hq Co (det) | 1118th Engr Gp Hq |
| 77 MP Plat (det) | Atchd: 233 Engr (C) Bn |
| 77 Ren Tr | 1 SBC Tm, 292 JASCO |
| 77 Sig Co (det) | Btry D, 7th AAA (AW) Bn |
| 77 QM Co (det) | Co A, 88 Cml Wpns Bn |
| 777 Ord Co (LM) (det) | 92 Ord Bomb Disposal Squad |
| Hq and Hq Btry Div Arty (det) | 6th Spt Acft Pty |
| 902 FA Bn (105mm how) | Co A, 776th Amph Tk Bn |
| 302 Engr (C) Bn (less Cos A,B,C) | Co A, 718th Amph Tk Bn |
| 302 Med Bn (less Cos A,B,C) | Det, Co B, 536th Amph Trac Bn |
| Atchd: 95th Port Surg Hosp | |

305th Infantry

Atchd: Co A, 302 Engr (C) Bn
Co A, 302 Med Bn
3 SFC Ptys

307th Infantry (less 2d Bn)

Atchd: 1st Bn 306th Inf
Co C, 302 Engr (C) Bn
Co C, 302 Med Bn
3 SFC Ptys

2d Bn, 306th Infantry

Artillery support available within the division area after landing was only one battalion of 105mm howitzers and one company of amphibious tanks mounting 75mm howitzers. Additional support was hoped for from the 226th FA Battalion (155mm gun), a X Corps unit in position across the mountains to the northeast near Daro, and from the 155mm howitzers of the 306th FA Battalion of the 77th Division which had been pushed into the front lines of the 7th Division 8000 yards to the south for this purpose. Fires of these two battalions were to be available on call if and as long as radio communications could be maintained.

(32)

Preliminary Naval bombardment of the beaches began at 070640 December and some P-40 air cover arrived over the area

(32) A, p. 13

at 0700. Four destroyers furnished the preparation fires, the remaining eight having been reserved by the Navy to protect the convoy against anticipated enemy surface attack from the Camotes Sea. Two LCI rocket boats also fired on the beach.

The leading wave hit the beach at 0707 at a point between the Baod and Bagonbon Rivers just south of Deposito against practically no resistance. (Map C) Assault elements quickly gained the initial beachhead line while the balance of the force was unloading. This landing is probably the most rapid ever accomplished in the Pacific--the entire force of about 8500 men and 269 vehicles was ashore within two and one-half hours. Division CP personnel hit the beach at H/35 minutes.

The lack of opposition to the landing was extremely fortunate since the beach was narrow and difficult for vehicles to traverse--any opposition would have delayed the operation seriously and caused numerous casualties. Early unloading allowed the Navy to withdraw on schedule, but before they got out of the beach area Japanese airplanes sank one destroyer and damaged several other vessels of the convoy.

Immediately after landing, General Bruce assumed operational control of all XXIV Corps units on the west coast of Leyte. (33)

The light opposition encouraged the division commander to abandon his initial plan of holding a limited beachhead to await the arrival of reinforcements and to continue the attack to the

(33) A, p. 11

north. By 0930 all elements of the division had secured their portions of the line and the bridge across the Baod River had been taken intact. Orders were issued at 0955 which sent the 307th Infantry (attached 2d Battalion 306th Infantry) northward along Highway 2 with the town of Ipil as its objective. (34)

Ipil was secured by 1600 and orders were issued to consolidate positions for the night. The 307th Infantry held the north half of the area with its left at Ipil, while the 305th Infantry held the south half with its right near the beach along the Bagonbon River. (35)

On the day of our landing the Japanese landed from 2-3000 troops at San Isidro on the west coast according to Sixth Army intelligence reports.

Since the enemy troops in the Ormoc area were already engaged to the north, east, and south and since our landing had taken him entirely by surprise, it was estimated that it would probably be a day or more before he could assemble adequate forces to stop our advance. General Bruce therefore decided to continue the attack northward without waiting for help in order to expand our holdings and capture as much of the key terrain as possible before the enemy had a chance to assemble his troops for a counterattack. (36)

The 307th Infantry (less its own 2d Battalion but with the 1st and 2d Battalions 306th Infantry attached) resumed the attack northward astride Highway 2 at 0800 on 8 December, following preparation fires of the 902 FA Battalion, the amphibious

(34) A, p. 12; (35) A, p. 12; (36) Personal knowledge

tanks of Company A, 776 Amphibious Tank Battalion, and one platoon of 4.2" chemical mortars. Camp Downes, a former Philippine Constabulary post located on high ground commanding Highway 2 and other approaches, was the objective.

As the attack progressed north from Ipil, resistance became increasingly heavy. The ground was not heavily held in point of numbers, but the enemy executed a series of small unit delaying actions from the northern exit from Ipil all the way to his prepared position at Camp Downes and used artillery, mortars and machine guns to slow our attack. Although the 307th Infantry made good use of M-8 and M-10 self-propelled guns in the front lines during the day, the objective was not taken on 8 December; but the regiment had secured the high ground just south of Camp Downes from which the objective could be observed and which offered a good line of departure for a continuation of the attack.

As the attack progressed to the north, the 305th Infantry followed in rear and continued to protect the east and south flanks of the division. By the end of the day the rear of the division was about 400 yards south of the Baod River. The 1st Battalion 306th Infantry reverted to division reserve. (37)

The D/1 convoy for the division landed at Ipil at 0400 on the morning of 9 December, bringing with it the balance of the 306th Infantry and the entire 305th FA Battalion, which went into position immediately near Ipil.

(37) A, pp 13, 14

The action on 9 December followed closely the pattern of that of the day before. As the 307th Infantry pressed the attack to the north, the 305th Infantry withdraw the division rear correspondingly. Enemy resistance increased steadily throughout the day; it appeared that he had taken advantage of the previous night to reinforce his Camp Downes position. The attack was met with automatic weapons, mortars, artillery, and small arms fire of considerable intensity. All approaches to the enemy position were commanded by the high ground around Camp Downes.

By 1600, however, the 307th Infantry had captured the position. The 305th Infantry meanwhile had pulled up the division rear to positions on the north bank of the Baod River.

The division command post moved forward by echelon starting at 1000 on 9 December to a position which had been chosen on a hill just south of Camp Downes. As the advance echelon of the CP moved into the new location, it found itself entangled in a fight between the 307th Infantry and the Japanese defenders of the hill. The CP was established under mortar and small arms fire and even at 1700, when the balance of the CP group moved in, elements of the 307th Infantry were still mopping up to clean out the last remnants of the enemy defense. (38)

During the day the 3d Battalion 306th Infantry maintained contact on the east flank between the 307th Infantry on the north and the 305th Infantry on the south. The 1st Battalion 306th was attached to the 307th and the 2d Battalion reverted to division reserve. (39)

(38) Personal knowledge; (39) A, pp 14, 15.

At 1830 General Bruce issued oral orders for the capture of Ormoc, pointing out the scheme of maneuver from his CP from which the objective was visible. The 307th Infantry was ordered to make a frontal attack on a frontage of 700 yards with its left on Ormoc Bay. Simultaneously the 306th Infantry was to attack on the right (east), maintain contact between the 305th and 307th, and furnish one company in division reserve at Deposito to protect the division clearing station. The 305th Infantry was ordered to remain in position initially defending its portion of the line to the south and east. One FA Battalion was in direct support of each assault regiment.

On 10 December both artillery battalions fired heavy preparations from 0920 to 0930 which were supplemented by organic mortars of the regiments, heavy mortars of Company A 88th Chemical Weapons Battalion, the 75mm howitzers on the M-8's of the cannon companies and of Company A 776 Amtank Battalion, and the 3-inch guns of cannon company M-10's. The attack jumped off at 0930 with the riflemen immediately behind the last of the artillery rounds. (40)

The approaches to Ormoc were cut by a stream in deep draw on the southern edge of the town extending east and west perpendicular to our advance. This proved to be a formidable obstacle since the Japanese were dug in on both banks and on the far side. Passage was finally made by close and continuous mortar fire, by point blank fire of self-propelled weapons brought up into the infantry front lines, and by the grenades and bayonets

(40) A, p. 15

of the riflemen. In the town itself the frontal attack of the 307th met strong resistance from enemy troops dug in under houses and in pillboxes hastily constructed of whatever material was available. Once again heavy fire of close support weapons enabled the infantry to pass through. The leading elements of the regiment entered the town at 1330 and fought steadily through it from house to house, preceded at all times by strong supporting fires.

The 306th Infantry on the right (east) met relatively little resistance, but slowed its attack to protect the division right flank. (41)

By the end of the day the town of Ormoc was cleared and our front lines were established on the northern outskirts of it on the south bank of the Antilao River. At 1645 while the smoke and dust were still drifting through Ormoc and sporadic rifle fire could still be heard in the town, General Bruce sent his classic message to the Commanding Generals of the 7th Infantry Division and the 11th Airborne Division, with an information copy to XXIV Corps: "Have rolled two sevens in Ormoc. Come 7, come 11. Bruce". (42)

This ended the first phase of the division's operation on the west coast of Leyte. Although the landing at Deposito on 7 December had met only light opposition initially, resistance stiffened during the attack northward with from 1500 to 2000 enemy troops being committed. From the initial landing through the capture of Ormoc the division counted 1516 Japanese killed

(41) A, p. 16; (42) A, p. 17

and took 7 prisoners of war. (43)

THE CAPTURE OF LIBUNGAO ROAD JUNCTION
AND
CONTACT WITH THE 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION
11-12 DECEMBER 1944

On the morning of 11 December the 307th Infantry on the left (west) and the 306th Infantry on the right (east), each with two battalions abreast, launched an attack northward across the Antilao River with the limited objective of securing favorable terrain north of the river from which to protect a reorganization in Ormoc. (44)

The enemy defended the north bank of the river with intense small arms and automatic weapons fire from dug in positions along the top of the bank and was successful initially in stopping the assault elements of both regiments before they could climb the bank. Our troops huddled close against the river bank while artillery time fire was brought down on the defenders, at times within twenty-five yards of our own men. This fire was extremely effective and allowed our troops to gain the top of the bank, costing us only two casualties from our own artillery. (45)

The bulk of the resistance was in front of the 307th Infantry and the left battalion of the 306th. Further advances were possible on the right of the 306th, but the 2d and 3d Battalions of that regiment necessarily had to maintain themselves in echelon to the right rear to protect the east flank of the division from counterattack by the enemy by passed previously.

(43) Personal knowledge of G-2 estimates, 77th Div;

(44) A, p. 18; (45) A, p. 18

Defensive positions for the night were established just north of the Antilao River.

At 1600, two battalions of the 305th Infantry, which had been having a relatively easy time of it so far, were moved into the center of the line between the 306th and 307th Infantry to protect the center and to be in position for an attack north astride Highway 2 the following day. The remaining battalion of the 305th was withdrawn northward to a position just south of Camp Downes to protect the new southern boundary which had been established there.

At 0955 on 11 December, the 2d Battalion, 184th Infantry, 7th Infantry Division, had reached the southern boundary of the 77th Division and was attached to the 77th. This battalion was ordered into position in the vicinity of Ipil to protect the division clearing station and supply installations there while the balance of the division continued its progress up the valley.

Apparently the Japanese had failed to get the word that we had captured Ormoc, because they sent a small convoy into the harbor on the night of 11-12 December in an attempt to land further reinforcements. The convoy consisted of two ships about the size of our LST and one fifty-man landing barge, all loaded with troops, equipment, and supplies. The barge attempted a landing at the pier while one of the large ships landed about 1000 yards farther north on the beach. Beach defense units consisting of the 7th AAA (AW) Battalion, elements of the Amtrac and Amtank Battalions and M-8's and M-10's of the

307th Infantry Cannon Company destroyed the barge and set fire to the larger ship, sinking it within a few minutes. Of approximately 500 enemy troops on the larger ship, only about 150 managed to get ashore and disperse inland. The second large ship, which had landed farther to the northwest, was not discovered until almost dawn the next day as it attempted to retreat along the west shore of the bay. Although this ship had been successful in landing from 300 to 400 troops and all of its equipment it was severely damaged by M-10 and light and medium artillery fire before it got out of range. (46)

During this period, division supply dumps were moved forward and concentrated in the town of Ormoc in anticipation of further operations to the north. (47)

No attacks were made on 12 December, the day being spent in consolidation of positions, reorganization of units, extensive patrolling by all regiments, and preparation for a resumption of the attack. Company F (reinf), just returned from Samar, rejoined the 307th Infantry.

The attack on 13 December jumped off at 0830 following an intensive artillery preparation which was so severe it drove the enemy toward our lines in an effort to escape it. This was a welcome sight to the infantrymen waiting to launch their attack-- they inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy with small arms and automatic weapons fire. (48)

The 305th Infantry made the main effort in the center, with the regimental main effort on the left (west). The 306th

(46) A, pp. 18, 19; (47) A, p. 19; (48) A, p. 20.

Infantry attacked on the right (east) to protect the right flank of the 305th and of the division and to maintain contact with the 305th. The 307th attacked on the left (west) to protect the left of the 305th and to extend the division zone west along the shore of Ormoc Bay, capturing the towns of Punta and Linao.

The 305th Infantry immediately ran into the same stiff resistance which had held up the 306th and 307th the day before. The enemy position was centered around a three-story stone church building near Cogon which was literally packed with automatic weapons and riflemen. The high ground surrounding the church was beautifully organized with spider holes and foxholes six to eight feet deep with undercuts and overhead cover which protected the enemy even from artillery time fire. The church building was reduced to a rubble pile and the surrounding position was hammered with artillery, but still the enemy refused to be dislodged. His reserves in rear counter-attacked on both flanks, but these attacks were successfully broken up or repelled by the 306th and 307th. (Map D)

By local envelopment the 305th made slight progress but could not reduce the strong enemy position. The regiment re-organized in the vicinity of the ground it had held on the previous night. (49)

The enemy had apparently decided on a stubborn defense in the vicinity of Cogon and accordingly kept pouring reinforcements into the "Cocoanut Grove" position (as the church and surround-

(49) A, p. 21

ing area had been dubbed by the infantrymen). He had withstood attack in this position for two successive days and took advantage of darkness to strengthen his stand. (50)

Artillery positions throughout the day were extremely far forward--at times within 200 to 300 yards of our front lines. From these positions they frequently delivered direct fire on call of the infantry. (51)

The 184th Infantry, 7th Infantry Division, relieved the 1st Battalion 305th Infantry at Camp Downes and the 2d Battalion 306th Infantry on the east flank to permit them to rejoin their respective regiments for the attack northward. (52)

In anticipation of a series of stubborn defensive positions along Highway 2 similar to the one already encountered near Cogon, General Bruce tentatively decided on a wide envelopment to the west and north as the main effort in an attempt to secure Valencia, its airfield, and the vital junction of the Libungao-Palompon Road without further delay. Accordingly on 14 December the 306th and 307th instituted long range patrols along the proposed routes. These patrols made deep penetrations into enemy territory and reported back with information that it would be feasible, though difficult, to move foot troops as contemplated. (53)

The activity of both the 306th and 307th Regiments on 14 December was restricted to protecting the flanks of the 305th Infantry, conducting the above patrols, and reorganizing in pre-

(50) (51) A, p. 21; (52) A, p. 20; (53) Personal knowledge

paration for the envelopment. The 307th was joined by the remainder of its 2d Battalion. Sixth Army readjusted the boundary between X and XXIV Corps to include Valencia in the zone of XXIV Corps. (54)

The attack on 13 December had indicated that the left (east) of the enemy position around "Cocoanut Grove" was almost impossible to turn since it was anchored on sharp and heavily wooded finger ridges protected by deep ravines. Accordingly the attack of the 305th Infantry on 14 December took the form of an envelopment of the enemy's right (west) flank to bypass the bulk of the Cogon resistance, attack east to cut Highway 2 north of Cogon to stop the flow of enemy reinforcements from that direction, seize the road junction about 1000 yards north of Cogon, and then to destroy the enemy forces thus isolated.

The movement was initially successful and by the end of the day that portion of the position immediately surrounding the church had been reduced by bringing M-8's and M-10's forward to fire point blank into the holes and by the use of an armored bulldozer of the 302d Engineer Combat Battalion to knock off the overhead cover and bury the occupants alive. A company commander of the engineer battalion rode this bulldozer into the position and killed the occupants of about thirty holes with submachine gun fire. (55)

Elements of the 305th were successful in bypassing Cogon and reaching the road junction about 1000 yards to the north. This maneuver blocked the flow of enemy reinforcements from the

(54) B, p. 79; (55) G, p. 62

north and trapped approximately one battalion of the enemy in and around Cogon which was pounded heavily with artillery and by the remaining elements of the 305th Infantry. Resistance remained heavy, however, and the 305th was unable to secure Highway 2 south of the road junction. (56)

On 15 December the 306th and 307th Regiments continued active patrolling to the north and west and completed supply and other preparations for the proposed enveloping attack on the following day.

The 305th Infantry continued its attack east toward Highway 2 at 0730 with the 1st Battalion leading, followed by the 2d Battalion. The 3d Battalion held in positions farther south and east of the road. All along the highway, from Cogon to the road junction north of it, particularly on the high ground east of the road, the enemy resisted stubbornly from dug-in positions and had to be routed by close infantry contacts in a foxhole to foxhole fight. By the end of the day both these battalions were on line along Highway 2 facing east. Cogon had not yet been secured but was under heavy pressure.

While the 77th Infantry Division was improving its position around Ormoc and preparing for further operations to the north, the 7th Infantry Division continued to move up from the south, mopping up remnants of the Japanese 26th Division as it came. By 15 December elements of the 7th Division under command of Brig. General Randle, Assistant Division Commander of the 77th, had taken over the defense of Ormoc in conjunction with some

(56) A, p. 22

supporting troops of the 77th and had relieved all elements of the 306th and 307th Infantry regiments for the attack on the sixteenth.

All of the division artillery was consolidated in and around Ormoc, including the remainder of the 306th FA Battalion (155 how) which had arrived overland from the south after the way had been cleared by the 7th Infantry Division. Some of it was emplaced within 200 yards of the northern perimeter in order to allow the greatest possible range for fires in support of the coming attack.

With the exception of the enemy pocket remaining in Cogon, the stage was now set for the drive toward Valencia and the Libungao road junction. (57)

The scheme of maneuver to be undertaken on 16 December was for the 305th Infantry to continue its attack to the north along Highway 2. The 306th Infantry was to make an envelopment to the west of the 305th through territory known to be unoccupied in force by the enemy, pass the 305th, and then attack east to cut Highway 2 between Dayhagan and Catayom. After cutting the road, this regiment was to attack south to assist the 305th and north toward Valencia at the same time. The 307th Infantry was to make a wider sweep to the west, turn north, and capture Valencia from the southwest. The 77th Reconnaissance Troop was to furnish combat patrols on both flanks of the zone to protect the advance and destroy with artillery fire any groups of the enemy discovered.

(57) A, pp. 23, 24

Although patrols sent into the area previously had reported the absence of any but relatively small groups of the enemy; the terrain to be traversed, the distance to be covered, and the uncertainty of enemy strength near the objective made this operation extremely hazardous. The terrain consisted of low swampy ground, rice paddies and heavy brush, and was traversed by numerous small rivers and creeks. It was passable to foot troops only, which ruled out the use of any vehicles and meant that all supplies to sustain the regiments until capture of the objective had to be hand-carried. Resupply and evacuation were dependent upon an early opening of Highway 2, which was still stubbornly held by the enemy. In spite of all the risks involved, General Bruce decided to attempt it in the hope of early success. He felt that surprise, poor enemy communications, and relative lack of mobility of Japanese troops were in his favor. (58)

The plan was put into effect on schedule on 16 December. (Map D) The 305th Infantry attacked in its zone with the 1st Battalion on the west of Highway 2 while the 3d Battalion moved up on the east side.

Initially the 2d Battalion conducted a holding attack on positions near Highway 2. This coordinated attack completed the destruction of the Cogon position, and by the end of the day the regiment occupied a position around the road junction 1000 yards north of Cogon.

The value of prior reconnaissance was proved by the

(58) Statement of Major General Bruce to officers of G-3 Section, 77th Div.

uninterrupted movement of the 306th and 307th Infantry regiments. The 306th advanced without opposition in its zone to a point about 1200 yards southwest of Tipic where it established a defensive position for the night. The 307th Infantry encountered only slight resistance by scattered enemy patrols and by the end of the day had reached and taken the town of San Jose after a march of about ten miles through the difficult terrain. Everyone breathed easier, but there was rough going ahead. (59)

Coordination and control throughout this move was effected by radio primarily. Advance elements marked their positions hourly by panels; locations were reported to division by artillery liaison planes which were constantly over the area. (60)

The attack was again pressed vigorously by all three regiments on 17 December. The 305th Infantry drove rapidly northward along Highway 2, clearing a path about 300 yards wide on both sides of the road and sending combat patrols to the east to locate enemy forces in the hills. No attempt was made to mop up as the attack progressed--the mission was to get on up north as fast as possible. By the end of the day the regiment had captured the Tambuco road junction and organized a defensive position for the night extending north and east to block up both Highway 2 and the Tambuco-Dolores road.

The 306th Infantry attacked toward the highway initially against light resistance which stiffened considerably as the

(59) A, p. 24, 25, 26; (60) Personal knowledge

leading element approached Highway 2. There was heavy fighting near the road and the regiment sustained several casualties but succeeded in cutting the road between Cabulihan and Catayom. It appeared that the 306th had run into large numbers of the enemy who were withdrawing to the northwest in front of the attack of the 305th Infantry and the artillery fire which preceded it. Cabulihan was captured and the regiment defended in this vicinity for the night. When the road was first cut, artillery liaison planes landed at the request of the regiment and evacuated the more serious casualties, some of whom had been carried along for almost a full day.

Guerrilla reports and air observation had indicated large numbers of enemy troops in and around Valencia and the airfield; accordingly the Division Commander decided to soften up the area before continuing the attack with the 307th Infantry. 155mm guns of the 226 FA Battalion (X Corps) from the vicinity of Daro and medium artillery of the division began the process on the morning of 17 December and continued it until 1230. At 1240 an air strike was started on the town and airfield which lasted until 1330; then the artillery resumed its fire. Meanwhile the combat team artillery of the 307th (902 FA Battalion) displaced along Highway 2 immediately in rear of the 305th Infantry and was in position to support the attack on the objective when the 307th jumped off from San Jose at 1415.

The intense preparation was successful in forcing the enemy to withdraw. Air observers reported about 2000 Japanese troops fleeing to the east. The 307th reached a point about 1000 yards from Valencia where it occupied another night position. Patrols

had reached the airfield. (61)

Direct pressure was again maintained on 18 December. The 305th Infantry continued its attack north along Highway 2, captured the towns of Catayom and Dayhagan, and contacted elements of the 306th Infantry between Dayhagan and Huaton.

The 306th Infantry from its position astride the road near Cabulihan drove vigorously north with two battalions to join the 307th Infantry while the remaining battalion attacked south to join the 305th Infantry. Physical contact was made with the 307th in Valencia. After contacting the 305th, the battalion of the 306th returned north and rejoined its regiment.

By noon the 307th Infantry had secured the airfield and the town of Valencia and consolidated the area for defense.

Both the 306th and 307th Regiments had been without resupply since leaving Ormoc on 16 December, except for a mere trickle which had been provided by native carriers, and both were badly in need of ammunition and medical supplies. As soon as contact was established between the 305th and 306th an armored supply column consisting of a platoon of light tanks from the 7th Infantry Division, self-propelled weapons of the 306th and 307th, LVT's, a platoon of infantry, engineers and an artillery FO party was pushed along the road through sporadic enemy fire to resupply the two forward regiments. Weak bridges were a hazard, and the engineers were kept busy ahead of the column preparing the way for it. (62)

(61) A, p. 27; (62) A, p. 28; G, p. 62

The capture of Valencia placed the 7th Division almost on the XXIV Corps north boundary. Encouraged by the successes so far and desirous of maintaining the initiative, General Bruce requested authority to continue north to contact X Corps and to start a drive west along the Libungao-Palompon Road.

On 19 December the Corps boundary was moved north to include Libungao in the zone of XXIV Corps. The Commanding General Sixth Army directed X Corps to seize Cananga and establish contact with XXIV Corps while the latter seized the junction of Highway 2 and the Libungao-Palompon Road. (63)

Although the enemy was still defending fiercely wherever he was encountered and still held the objective in considerable force, General Bruce issued orders for a resumption of the attack on 19 December, and characterized it as a pursuit. (64) The only similarity to a pursuit was the rapidity of advance of our troops--the enemy did not regard it as such.

The 305th Infantry moved north into Valencia and took over the defense of that area, releasing the 307th Infantry for the continuation of the attack on the Libungao road junction. The latter regiment attacked astride Highway 2 against initially scattered resistance which became increasingly stiff as our troops approached the objective.

The 306th Infantry meanwhile attacked across country north of Valencia and west of Highway 2 with the mission of cutting the Libungao-Palompon Road west of its junction with Highway 2. The regiment ran into a strong Japanese position about 500 yards

(63) B, p. 80; (64) Personal knowledge

south of the Libungao-Palompon Road which was unable to crack before nightfall. The regiment held for the night about 400 yards south of the road and 800 yards southeast of the point where the road crosses the Tagbong River.

Artillery support was limited for both regiments throughout the day because of the difficulty encountered in moving heavy equipment north along Highway 2. Engineers worked night and day to build and strengthen bridges, but progress could not keep up with the rapid advance of the infantry. (65) Engineers and artillerymen furnished their own protection while moving north to catch up with the division.

The division command post was moved into Valencia on 19 December. (66)

The 306th and 307th regiments resumed their attacks on 20 December, the 306th with the added mission of securing the crossing of the Tagbong River and seizing the key road junction from the west.

During the day it was determined that both regiments were being opposed by the 5th Japanese Regiment (reinf), reportedly one of the best in the Japanese Army, which at this time was composed of fresh troops who had not previously been committed on Leyte.

The 306th Infantry cut the Libungao-Palompon road early in the morning in the vicinity of the Tagbong River, forced a crossing of the river with the 1st Battalion, and attacked east toward the road junction at Highway 2 with the 2d and 3d Bat-

(65) G, p. 62; (66) A, p. 29, 30.

talions. The 1st Battalion met heavy resistance from well-organized high ground west of the river and was forced to retire to the west bank for the night. The remainder of the regiment against stiff resistance reached a point about 300 yards west of the road junction. Elements had reached the junction, but were forced to withdraw under heavy fire.

The advance of the 307th Infantry was met with the same determined resistance which the 306th had encountered, which limited the progress of the regiment to a point about 1000 yards south of the objective, where it established a defensive position for the night. Several enemy counterattacks were beaten off on the flanks during the day. (67)

During the night 20-21 December a half-unit of fire was employed in harassing artillery fire around the objective, which was followed by a 30-minute preparation prior to resumption of the attack on 21 December.

The 306th and 307th Regiments continued the attack on 21 December against resistance which had been considerably lessened by enemy losses the previous day and by the intense artillery fire placed on him throughout the night. By 0830 the road junction was seized, remaining enemy troops on the objective were destroyed, and contact was established between the two regiments.

Meanwhile the 1st Battalion 306th Infantry had taken the high ground west of the Tagbong River and was ordered to proceed to the Pagsangahan River. It left a security force on the high

(67) A, p. 30, 31

ground just taken and withdrew from it to continue the attack west. Immediately the enemy drove off the security force and retook the position. The 1st Battalion attempted to retake it but was unable to do so before nightfall.

Contact between the 306th Infantry and elements of the 1st Cavalry Division was firmly established in the vicinity of Cananga by 1645, 21 December 1944, thus joining elements of X and XXIV Corps and opening Highway 2 from Pinamapoan to Ormoc. (68)

During the attack from Valencia to Libungao the 306th and 307th Regiments had virtually destroyed the 5th Infantry Regiment, one of the best in the Japanese army. The 307th Infantry counted approximately 3000 enemy dead in its zone, while the 306th counted 1500.

It is estimated that the enemy committed from 10,000 to 11,000 troops in the action between Ormoc and Libungao. The 77th Infantry Division during this period counted 9780 of the enemy killed and took 35 prisoners of war. (69)

THE CAPTURE OF PALOMPON 22 - 25 DECEMBER

The one remaining port available to the enemy for supply and evacuation was Palompon on the west coast, which General Bruce desired to capture as quickly as possible to put a definite end to hostilities on Leyte. The attack (or pursuit) was resumed on 22 December with this mission in mind.

Originally it had been planned to use a fast armored

(68) A, p. 31, 32; (69) Personal knowledge of G-2 Estimates, 77th Division.

column to strike west through the mountains to Palompon, but engineer reconnaissance indicated at least 20 bridges on the first half of the route, none of which would support even a 2½-ton truck. This meant that the use of an armored column was out until bridges could be repaired, which involved considerable delay. (70)

Accordingly on 22 December the 2d and 3d Battalions 305th Infantry attacked west along the Libungao-Palompon Road in a column of battalions, passing through the 1st Battalion 306th Infantry which by this time had retaken and was guarding the crossings of the Tagbong and Pagsangahan Rivers. Resistance was light, and both battalions reached a point about 2000 yards southwest of Humaybunay. The 1st Battalion 305th Infantry remained in Valencia and started preparations for an amphibious landing at Palompon. (Map E)

The 306th Infantry continued to guard the above river crossings and the Highway 2-Palompon Road junction with the 1st Battalion 307th Infantry attached. (Note: By now the Libungao-Palompon Road had become known simply as the Palompon Road and will be so referred to hereafter).

The 307th Infantry (less its 1st Battalion) took over the defense of the Valencia area from the 305th.

During the day Battery A, 531 FA (155mm gun) Battalion (Corps Arty) was moved into position near San Jose to provide fire support for the attack west along the Palompon Road and to fire on Palompon itself. Protection was afforded by Company F, (70) H, p. 121; Personal knowledge

307th Infantry. Organic artillery of the Division was prepared to move forward in rear of the 305th Infantry as soon as bridges could be repaired. (71)

The attack was continued in the same manner on 23 December. Native and guerrilla reports indicated that Matagob, which the 305th would probably reach before the end of the day, was occupied by about a battalion of the enemy. Accordingly, air strikes hit the town at 0955, starting large fires and exploding several ammunition dumps. Two air strikes, one at 1240 and the other at 1640, hit Palompon, which was also pounded with 155mm gun fire from San Jose.

The 305th Infantry (less the 1st Battalion) reached a point 500 yards west of Matagob, passing through the enemy position which had been largely abandoned after the air strike.

The 1st Battalion 305th Infantry moved from Valencia to Ormoc in preparation for an amphibious assault against Palompon.

The 306th and 307th Regiments continued to guard their assigned areas. (72)

On 24 December the 2d and 3d Battalions 305th Infantry resumed the attack west along the Palompon Road after repulsing a counterattack by about 200 of the enemy. Resistance along the route was relatively light, but going was slow because of the rugged, mountainous nature of the terrain and the necessity for digging the enemy out of each hole individually. The force advanced 4000 yards west during the day.

(71) A, p. 32, 33, 34; (72) A, p. 34, 35

Meanwhile, the 1st Battalion 305th Infantry in Ormoc got ready to embark for Palompon. The bulk of the force was to be transported in LVT's of the 718 and 536 Amphibious Tractor Battalions, with a few LCM's of the 2d Engineer Special Brigade. It was also planned to move the medium artillery battalion of the division to Matagob to support the landing, but bridge construction had not progressed sufficiently to do it.

The task force embarked and departed from Ormoc at 2000 on 24 December bound for Palompon, 44 miles away. The naval "screen" for the move consisted of elements of a PT boat squadron based at Ormoc, but this cover was to be removed at dawn to permit the PT boats to return to their base. The only artillery support available for the landing was to be the one battery of Long Toms at San Jose, which would be firing at almost maximum range. Communication with the amphibious force was by one SCR 193 which accompanied it.

Despite the extreme apprehension of members of the landing force, the crossing to Palompon was made during the night 24-25 December almost without incident. There was no enemy action during the crossing, but three LVT's sank through mechanical failure (without loss of life). (73)

The amphibious task force landed without opposition on the morning of 25 December and quickly secured the port of Palompon and the surrounding area, thus sealing off the last enemy port on Leyte. (74) "The rapid occupation of the area by the 77th Division provided a fitting climax to the Leyte operation". (75)

(73) A, p. 35, 36; (74) A, p. 37, 38; (75) B, p. 80

General Headquarters declared the island secure and organized resistance at an end on 26 December 1944. (76)

From 22 December to the capture of Palompon on 25 December, 1828 of the enemy were killed and eight prisoners of war were taken. The bulk of these were killed in the rugged mountains west of Matagob and in the mop-up operations of the 306th and 307th regiments in the Ormoc valley around Libungao and Valencia.

MOPPING UP OPERATIONS
26 DECEMBER 1944 - 5 FEBRUARY 1945

The initial task in the mopping up of remaining enemy forces on Leyte--to secure the entire length of the Palompon Road--was assigned to the 77th Division. (77) By a two-way attack (west from Matagob and east from Palompon) the 305th Infantry accomplished this mission on 31 December when its forces met in the rugged mountains near the summit of the pass. (78) Extremely bitter resistance from well intrenched Japanese had been encountered all along the road. (79) (Map E)

On 5 January the division assumed responsibility for the entire area of western Leyte from a line east of the Central Cordillera and north of the line Valencia-Palompon inclusive, relieving units of the X Corps which were slated for action on Luzon. (80)

The 305th Infantry assembled in Palompon and assumed responsibility for the west coast, sending troops to Abijao and Villaba and patrolling both along the coast by water and inland on foot.

(76) Personal knowledge; (77) (78) J, p. 7; (79) Personal knowledge; (80) D, p. 4

The 306th Infantry protected the Libuao-Cananga area and sent elements north and west of that vicinity as far as the extreme northwest tip of the island.

The 307th Infantry took responsibility for the valley area around Valencia.

All regiments made daily contacts with groups of the enemy and killed mounting numbers of them by patrol action and artillery fire. This was particularly true in the sector of the 307th Infantry since that regiment was astride two natural lines of drift being utilized by the Japanese in an attempt to move from the central mountains into assembly areas on the western peninsula. (81)

The first major engagement of the mopping up period took place at Villaba on 15 January. On that date the 1st Battalion 305th Infantry which had organized a hasty defensive position around the town was attacked by a numerically superior force of the enemy and subjected to a coordinated infantry-artillery attack which lasted one whole day. By loading its perimeter with all the automatic weapons obtainable, including .30 and .50 caliber machine guns dismounted from amphibious tractors and landing craft, the 1st Battalion was able to beat off the attack, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. Approximately 500 enemy dead were found in the vicinity. (82)

Increasing enemy activity in the Villaba-Abijao area indicated that the remaining Japanese on the extreme west coast were gradually organizing for further offensive action. Patrols

(81) Personal knowledge; D, p. 5; (82) Personal knowledge; D, p. 5

of the 305th operating in the area discovered a large pocket of them near Agubob.

In order to clean out this pocket and in the hope of putting a final end to enemy activity on the west coast, the division commander ordered a three-pronged attack on 27 January. Two battalions of the 307th Infantry attacked west from Casa while the 1st Battalion 305th attacked southeast from Villaba and the 3rd Battalion 305th attacked northeast from Abijao. The drive lasted until 3 February, and although it was unduly costly to our forces it succeeded in clearing out the pocket. The Japanese troops encountered here were in good condition, well trained, and well equipped. The mountainous, heavily wooded terrain was in their favor and allowed them to inflict numerous casualties on our troops before they were definitely located.

(83)

This action ended the participation of the 77th Infantry Division in active combat on Leyte. The division was relieved on 5 February by the Americal Division and moved to the east coast near Tarragona to reequip for the Okinawa campaign.

(84)

It is interesting to note that while the 77th Division was operating alone on the Palompon coast against what was then believed to be not more than 5,000 Japanese troops, subsequent developments indicated the figure to be considerably higher. Eighth Army, which conducted the mopping up operations, placed the figures at those shown on Map E. (85)

(83) Personal knowledge; D, p. 5; (84) Personal knowledge
(85) J, following p. 7 and 9.

From 7 December 1944 to 29 January 1945 the 77th Division killed 18,455 Japanese soldiers on Leyte. By 3 February approximately an additional 500 had been killed. Ratio of enemy killed to our own troops killed to 25 December 1944 was fifty to one--which spells a very successful operation. (86)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The landing of the 77th Infantry Division at Deposito accomplished five major effects: (a) it surprised, split and confused the Japanese command; (b) it isolated the Japanese 26th Division which was attempting to push our 7th Division out of southern Leyte; (c) it reduced the enemy capability of attacking east across the mountains to break into the Leyte valley; (d) it drew off and destroyed formerly uncommitted enemy reserves thus relieving the pressure on other elements of the Sixth Army; and (e) it denied the Japanese the use of Ormoc as a port of entry for receiving reinforcements and supplies, denied them the use of Highway 2 south of Ormoc and opened the way to drive the enemy north up the Ormoc valley into a trap between the 77th Division and elements of X and XXIV Corps.

The capture of the junction of Highway 2 and the Libungao-Palompon Road and the juncture of forces with X Corps resulted in the following: (a) the securing of the entire length of Highway 2; (b) the capture of key towns, enemy defenses and

(86) C, p. 23

supply dumps from Ormoc to Cananga; (c) the virtual collapse of the entire Japanese defense system in the Ormoc valley; (d) the complete frustration of enemy plans to launch an attack east into Leyte valley; and (e) complete separation of enemy forces east of the Highway from those west of it.

The capture of Palompon denied the Japanese their last good port of entry or exit on the west coast. The loss of the Palompon Road cost them their only usable route to the west coast and isolated the forces north and south of the road, thus opening the way to piecemeal destruction.

The tactics and techniques employed by the division in accomplishing the above results were largely those taught in our service schools and field manuals. The Ormoc Corridor on Leyte offered perhaps the first opportunity in the Pacific Theater to test the theory of combat in which our troops had been trained. The flat, open country encountered here supplied an opportunity for maneuver such as had not before been possible in combat against the Japanese.

The rapid advance up the Ormoc Corridor demonstrated clearly that maneuver and envelopment, aggressively conducted, will give the attacker an undisputed advantage over even the most stubborn enemy. The mobility of our forces, maintained to the utmost even in difficult terrain, was a decisive factor in our victory over the Japanese in this action. On the other hand, the enemy's relative lack of mobility was definitely in our favor.

The combined use of heavy mortars, artillery, and self-propelled weapons in close and continuous support of the infantry was also responsible in large measure for our success. This was particularly demonstrated in the actions at Ormoc, Valencia, and the Libungao Road junction. Artillery was also used to the maximum in mopping up and in patrol actions. All patrols were furnished artillery forward observers with radio communications to bring fire quickly on located groups of the enemy.

The initiative was maintained by our forces throughout the operation discussed herein. From the landing at Deposito until the final relief of the 77th Infantry Division, the initiative was not once relinquished. The series of bold, aggressive moves conducted against the enemy kept him constantly confused, bewildered and unable effectively to react against them.

The principle of mass was probably, in a sense, violated in this campaign. Regiments, and even battalions, executed a series of separate attacks against forces which were almost consistently superior in numbers. These attacks were separate in that our units were frequently out of supporting distance of each other, yet they succeeded because of the aggressiveness with which they were conducted. Although our forces were attacking in numerous directions simultaneously, the attacks were planned to catch the enemy in a trap between them, to cut him into small groups, and to destroy each group successively.

Economy of force was certainly demonstrated in the Ormoc Corridor. The employment of one division against approximately

40,000 of the enemy was an economy which I do not hope to see repeated.

Surprise, too, was a major factor in our favor. It was achieved initially with the landing at Deposito and maintained throughout the attack by aggressive action at widely separated points.

Reconnaissance was continuously undertaken and proved to be of great value. It is doubtful that the enveloping attacks on Valencia and the Libungao area could have been attempted without the information furnished by patrols which reconnoitered the proposed routes. Although the operations conducted appeared to be and were bold and daring, the actual risk was reduced greatly by accurate intelligence and aggressive reconnaissance.

Probably the division should not have been committed to the Ormoc operation until it was certain that it could be adequately supplied. Because of the lack of air cover, the Navy was extremely hesitant about coming around to Ormoc. Although all troops and initial supplies were supposed to be landed at Ipil by D/8 days, the capture of Palompon found the division still without its medium tanks, some service troops, and many greatly needed supplies. Ammunition levels became so low on occasion that a major Japanese counterattack might have spelled the end of the 77th Division. Supply is a vital factor in an operation of this type; a weak link in the chain may mean disaster.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Surprise is a vital factor in the success of any military operation, particularly one conducted against a numerically superior enemy force. Once achieved it should be maintained if possible by aggressive action.
2. The initiative if possible should be gained early and maintained by aggressive and unexpected action. The enemy should be kept off balance by a series of attacks and not be given time to reorganize to counterattack or prepare good defensive positions.
3. Adequate reconnaissance and accurate intelligence is essential.
4. There is no substitute for close and continuous support of the infantry by all supporting weapons. Effective supporting fires lessen infantry casualties and allow the infantry to achieve success against superior enemy forces.
5. Air cover is essential for amphibious and island operations, particularly where supply, evacuation, and reinforcement depends on water routes controlled by enemy air forces.
6. A high velocity flat-trajectory weapon near the infantry front lines is a must for the reduction of pillboxes and to fire at automatic weapons and other point targets at ranges up to 2000 yards or more.
7. Mopping up combat patrols, with artillery observers to adjust fire, are very successful, even when superior enemy forces are encountered.

8. All elements of an infantry division, including artillery and service troops, should be trained to provide their own security without dependence on the infantry. Frequently, as in the Ormoc Corridor, the infantry will be busy elsewhere.

9. Heavy mortars are particularly valuable for close support of an infantry regiment in the attack.

10. Bold and aggressive action, even though it appears extremely risky, will frequently succeed and will save casualties in the long run if the enemy can be knocked back on his heels initially and kept reeling.