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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "A", 302D ENGINEER
COMBAT BATTALION, (77TH INFANTRY DIVISION) ON
LEYTE, 21 DECEMBER 1944 - 5 JANUARY 1945
(SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: ENGINEER COMPANY
IN SUPPORT OF INFANTRY IN JUNGLE TERRAIN

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INTRODUCTION

After participation in the Guam Campaign, the 77th Infantry Division sailed from that island on 3 November 1944, en route for New Caledonia for rehabilitation and reequipping. (1) Since there was no indication of combat in the immediate future, the transports were commercially loaded.

The convoy had reached a point four days from New Caledonia when orders were received to proceed to Manus Island in the Admiralty Group and prepare to receive a change of destination. This new destination proved to be the Island of Leyte. (2) After a two-day stop to allow for resupplying the naval vessels, the convoy sailed for the Philippines on the 17th of November. (3)

The convoy reached Leyte on the morning of the 23d of November and the division began unloading on the beaches in the vicinity of Tarragona and Dulag. (See Map A) This section of the island had been taken by the ^{combat troops} troops in initial landing which took place on 20 October. The unloading took place throughout the 23d and 24th, and upon completion of the unloading, each unit began making plans and preparations for participation in the liberation of the island. (4) The campaign at this time had virtually reached a standstill, due to the rains, extremely rugged terrain and strong reinforcements the enemy had been receiving. (5) (See Map A)

The 77th Division was given the mission of landing in the vicinity of Ormoc which was the last major port in the possession of the enemy, ^{the} thereby preventing any further reinforcements and resupply. (6) (See Map A) The division loaded on the assault shipping on the morning of 6 December. The convoy was to stay in the landing area approximately

(1) A-1, p. 1; (2) A-2, P. 64; (3) A-1, p. 1; (4) A-1, p. 3;
(5) A-2, p. 71; (6) A-2, p. 80.

two hours, and all supplies and equipment that were to be taken were loaded in a manner to enable them to be unloaded in the allotted time. (7) The convoy sailed from the embarkation point at approximately 1300 en route to the Ormoc area by way of the southern end of Leyte and then north, paralleling the west coast. The landing area was reached at 0630, 7 December, and after a brief but intensive naval bombardment the assault waves crossed the line of departure with the first wave landing at 0700. (See Map A) By 0930 the initial objectives were taken and all elements of the division were ashore. (8) The plan initially had been to establish a defense on the initial beachhead, but the nature of the first day's operation indicated that the division had landed in a lightly defended area and the division commander decided to drive to the north with Ormoc as the objective. (9)

By the afternoon of 10 December, Ormoc had been taken, and after time had been taken for reorganization the division continued the drive north along Highway No 2.

*No. 11
Plan and notes*

THE SITUATION ON 21 DECEMBER

*Enemy sit.
cont'd*

The 306th Infantry had succeeded in cutting the Palompon-Libungao Road in the vicinity of the Tagbong River on 20 December. The 1st Battalion had forced a crossing of the Tagbong, but after hard fighting throughout the day had been unable to secure ground suitable for the defense during the coming night. In the late afternoon the battalion withdrew to the east bank of the river and dug in. The 2d and 3d Battalions, 306th Infantry, had turned east upon reaching the Palompon-Libungao Road with the road junction at Libungao as the objective. The battalions dug in for the night 300 yards west of the road junction and orders were issued to resume the attack the following morning. (10) (See Map B)

(7) A-1, p. 10; (8) A-1, p. 11; (9) Statement of Major General A. D. Bruce, 13 October 1948; (10) A-1, p. 30.

The 307th Infantry had been attacking north along Highway No 2 and by nightfall of 20 December had reached a point 1000 yards south of the Libungao Road junction. During the day's action the two regiments killed approximately 4500 of the enemy, and every yard of ground gained was against bitter resistance. (11) (See Map B)

Company "A", 302d Engineer Battalion, normally comprised a part of the 305th Combat Team, but on the morning of 21 December the company, minus the 2d Platoon, was ordered to assist the advance of the 306th Infantry. The 2d and 3d Battalions had succeeded in taking the Libungao Road junction by 0800 the 21st. The 307th joined the 2d and 3d Battalions, 306th, and both units continued the drive north to make contact with the 1st Cavalry Division. (12)

Enemy demolitions and our own artillery fire had largely demolished two bridges on Highway No 2, just south of the Libungao Road junction. The 306th had been unable to evacuate their casualties or be resupplied by normal means, due to the condition of those bridges. (13) Upon receipt of the order to assist the advance of the 306th Infantry, the Company Commander, Co "A", issued orders to the 1st and 3d Platoons to discontinue the work planned for the day and to move by truck to the vicinity of the Libungao Road junction to perform the immediate repair of the bridges there. On arrival at the site the 1st Platoon was assigned the bridge 50 yards south of the road junction, and the 3d Platoon was assigned the smaller of the two bridges which was approximately 600 yards south of the 1st Platoon bridge. Since the 3d Platoon would be able to accomplish their job with less men than the 1st Platoon, two squads were detailed to secure bridge material from several demolished buildings approximately one-half mile south of the road junction, and to deliver the material to the bridge sites. (14)

(11) A-1, p. 31; (12) A-1, p. 31; (13) Statement of Colonel A. Smith, CO, 306th Infantry, 10 September 1948; (14) Personal knowledge.

In the meanwhile the 1st Platoon and the remainder of the 3d Platoon went about clearing away the debris and inspecting the bridges to determine what repairs were needed. The plan was to repair the bridges to the extent that the casualties could be evacuated by jeep ambulance and as soon as the situation would permit, to reinforce them to take a 35-ton load. The bridge material detail encountered no difficulty in delivering their load to the 3d Platoon site but small-arms and mortar fire was being encountered at the 1st Platoon bridge and the truck driver and two men of the unloading detail became casualties. Work progressed rapidly and by 1130 the ambulances were able to cross and remove the waiting casualties. (15)

The 1st Battalion, 306th, had resumed the attack on 21 December, and by 1200 had succeeded in recrossing the Tagbong River and had captured the high ground on the west bank. (16) The bridge on the Palompon Road over the Tagbong had previously been bombed and completely destroyed. The enemy had constructed a flimsy log bridge 500 yards downstream from the original bridge site, but on their withdrawal had demolished it. The river was fordable for foot troops at most points but had an average depth of approximately four feet, and the steep bank and quick sand bottom made it an effective barrier for wheeled vehicles. It was of prime importance that the river be bridged in order that the drive west could be sustained. (17)

The 3d Platoon was assigned the task of further strengthening the bridges at the road junction and the 1st Platoon was ordered to construct a temporary crossing over the Tagbong. The swift current and sandy bottom precluded the use of the standard trestle, so it was decided to construct log cribs to support the stringers and flooring of the bridge. Enough logs were salvaged from the demolished enemy bridge to build these cribs. Due to the shortage of dressed lumber for the construction of the floor of the bridge, treadways of sufficient width to allow a

(15) A-3, p. 184; (16) A-1, p. 31; (17) Statement of Major General A. D. Bruce, 13 October 1948.

one-quarter ton and a two and a half ton truck to cross were constructed. The temporary structure was completed by 1730, but due to fire from the enemy positions across the river, it was the following morning before wheeled vehicles could cross. (18)

The 3d Platoon, upon completion of the work at the road junction, joined the 1st Platoon, and the company dug in for the night on the west bank of the river.

THE BATTLE OF THE BRIDGES

In the late afternoon of 21 December several M-10 tank destroyers had been moved up to the Tagbong and their weight had caused the collapse of two bridges between the Libungao Road junction and the Tagbong. The bridges had previously been inspected and had been rated as capable of carrying a thirty-five ton load. The deceiving factor was the manner in which the abutments had been constructed. The abutments appeared to be concrete, but they actually were stone with a covering of mortar. When the bridges were subjected to a heavy load, the abutments crumbled and allowed the bridges to settle below the road bed.

Each of the two platoons were assigned to one of the bridges, and work was started on their repair on the morning of 22 December. The plan was to jack the bridges up to the level of the road bed, repair the damaged trestles, construct an additional trestle as close to each abutment as possible and extend the stringers well out on the road bed to secure the needed bearing surface.

The work was interrupted throughout the day by small groups of enemy stragglers trying to use the streams as an avenue of escape. A number of the enemy were killed and the company suffered three casualties. The bridges were capable of carrying light traffic by 1000, but due to the interruptions to allow traffic to pass and the activity of the enemy, it was late afternoon before both bridges were completely repaired. (19)

(18) Personal knowledge; (19) Personal knowledge.

From the Tagbong River west for a distance of eleven kilometers the Palompon Road takes the form of a dike. The area on both sides of the road was marsh land and small sluggish streams crossed and recrossed the road. On 19 December a motorized column had been organized to drive west to Port Palompon after a crossing on the Tagbong had been secured. This task force was to be able to operate independently until it had been able to force its way through the mountains and into Palompon where they were to be resupplied by water. (20) From engineer patrols, information was gained that there were approximately twenty small bridges that would have to be repaired and reinforced before the task force would be able to get through. The enemy was not defending this area as the nature of the terrain was most unfavorable for defense, but the magnitude of the work needed to be accomplished on the bridges precluded the use of the column as originally intended. The force was reorganized on 22 December into an amphibious force. The plan was to make an assault landing near Palompon and after taking the port to attack east along the Palompon-Libungao Road to make a junction with the forces attacking west. The amphibious force consisted of the following units:

1st Battalion, 305th Infantry

One provisional company of amtracks

Company "A", 776th Amtrack Battalion

One platoon, Co "D", 706th Tank Battalion

Three M-8 self-propelled howitzers from Cannon Company,

305th Infantry

2d Platoon, Company "A", 302d Engineer Battalion

Detachment, Company "A", 302d Medical Battalion

Detachment, 292d JASCO

Detachment, 305th Field Artillery Battalion

Detachment, 306th Field Artillery Battalion

Detachment, Battery "A", 531st Field Artillery (Gun) Battalion

The force was to proceed on order to Ormoc by road and then by water to Palompon. (21)

(20) A-1, p. 30; (21) A-1, p. 33.

The 2d and 3d Battalions, 305th Infantry, were ordered to move by truck from positions at Valencia and to pass through the 1st Battalion, 306th Infantry, to continue the attack towards Palompon. The movement was completed at 1130 and the two battalions continued the drive west. (22)

After completion of the repair of the bridges that had collapsed on the afternoon of 24 December, the 1st and 3d Platoons, Company "A", returned to the company area at the Tagbong River. The men were given time to eat, and at approximately 1800 the company was ordered to repair a bridge fifteen hundred yards west of the Tagbong Crossing. The enemy had sawed the decking parallel to the long axis of the bridge, and had removed one side of the flooring when they withdrew. Demolitions had also been placed against each abutment, but the leaving of one-half of the floor had enabled jeeps to cross the bridge after a few minutes' work had been done on the approaches. The bridge was an effective barrier for vehicles larger than a one-quarter ton as their wheels extended into the void left by the partial removal of the flooring. All the bridges along the route had to be capable of carrying a 35-ton load, as it was contemplated moving M-10 tank destroyers, medium tanks, and some elements of the division's medium artillery forward with the 2d and 3d Battalions, 305th Infantry.

The work was completed at approximately 0700, 23 December, and the company moved on west one-half mile to a section of the road that had three small bridges in a 200-yard area that had been burned by the enemy. (23) The structures had not been completely consumed by the fire but they had been weakened to the extent that it was deemed necessary to rebuild them entirely. There were no sources of bridge material available in the area, and a detail was organized to demolish buildings several miles back to obtain the material needed.

(22) A-1, p. 33; (23) Personal knowledge.

At this time it became apparent that the efforts of Company "A" would be insufficient to keep abreast of the work load and Company "C", 302d Engineer Battalion, was ordered to assist Company "A" in the repair of the bridges along the route. (24) Upon completion of one job that company would leap-frog to the next bridge site and a detailed description of the work done would be repetition as the nature of the work was similar to that of preceding jobs. Company "A" worked continuously from the morning of 22 December until the afternoon of 24 December at which time it was relieved by a company of the 232d Engineer Battalion. (25) The company moved back to the bivouac area on the east bank of the Tagbong River and enjoyed a good night's rest.

not in map
The 2d and 3d Battalions, 305th Infantry, had advanced west on the Palompon Road to the foothills of the mountain range that paralleled the west coast and on the night of 24 December had dug in 4000 yards west of Matogob. (26)

At approximately 2000 on 24 December the amphibious force moved by water from Ormoc for the assault on Port Palompon. The movement was by LVT and LCM, and was accomplished without interference from the enemy. The only incident was the sinking of three of the LVT's due to mechanical failures. (27)

155-mm guns of the 531st Field Artillery Battalion in the vicinity of Valencia and mortar boats of the 2d Engineer Special Brigade fired the preparation fires for the landing. The troops landed at approximately 0800, 25 December, against little or no resistance, and by 1200 Buza, Look and Port Palompon were captured. (28) The capture of Port Palompon closed the last available port to the enemy and assured the defeat and destruction of all the remaining forces on the island. Quoted below is the message the Commanding General, 77th Division, sent to the Commanding General, XXIV Corps. "The 77th Infantry Division's Christmas contribution to the Leyte Campaign is the capture of Palompon, the last port available to the enemy." (29)

(24) Personal knowledge; (25) Personal knowledge; (26) A-1, p. 36; (27) A-1, p. 36; (28) A-1, p. 37; (29) A-1, p. 37.

Immediately upon the capture of Palompon the 2d Platoon, Company "A", began the construction of a landing strip to accommodate the L-4's of the division. It was planned to evacuate the more serious casualties of the force by this means. On completion of the strip the platoon leader had dubious honor of being one of the first casualties evacuated.

(30)

Since Company "A" was in the vicinity of the Tagbong Crossing and had had sufficient rest, the company was ordered to construct a permanent bridge across the river. A site was selected 25 yards upstream from the original permanent bridge site. This location was selected to be able to use as much as possible the approaches of the former bridge. To be able to secure firm foundations for the abutments the overall length of the bridge had to be slightly in excess of eighty feet. The current under the center span of the bridge was very swift at this point. Since there was no pile driving equipment available, it was decided to hinge the center span. This was to be done by building the trestle several inches higher at this point to allow for settling; overlapping the stringers and bolting the overlap together with one large bolt to allow the stringers to settle with the trestle in the event the current scoured out around the bottom of the trestle. The work continued on the bridge throughout 25 and 26 December and was completed on 27 December.

At approximately 1400, 27 December, the company moved by truck to the vicinity of Matogob to join the 305th Infantry in its advance towards Palompon. On this date approximately one-half of the 2d Battalion had been sent by truck to Ormoc and then by water to reinforce the 1st Battalion. The 3d Battalion, reinforced, continued the attack through the mountains against determined resistance. (32)

The 3d Battalion needed the M-8's and M-10's of the regiment to assist them in the attack against the enemy positions. Two bridges between Matogob and the mountains were incapable of carrying the weight

(30) Personal knowledge; (31) Personal knowledge; (32) A-3, p. 191.

of these vehicles. The needed repairs were completed in a short time and the last of the bridges from the Tagbong to the mountains had been repaired and reinforced. This stretch of road was referred to many times as the Battle of the Bridges. (33)

The 3d Battalion succeeded in taking the height of land of the mountain range on the afternoon of 28 December and from that point on the terrain sloped down to the sea. At 0800, 29 December, the elements of the 2d Battalion that had been sent to reinforce the 1st Battalion at Palompon passed through the 1st Battalion and advanced towards Matogob to make a junction with the 3d Battalion. (34) Spasmodic resistance was encountered by both elements of the converging forces, but it was quickly overcome, and contact was established by leading elements of the 2d and 3d Battalions at 1215 on 31 December. (35) This junction opened the road for its entire length from Ormoc to Palompon.

ACTIVITIES AT PALOMPON

The 305th Combat Team moved into a bivouac area at Lock and made preparations to stay in this location for some time. An adequate water supply was needed to meet the increased use by troops in a semi-permanent position. The 2d Platoon had obtained information from the former city engineer of Palompon that prior to the occupation of the town by the enemy three years before, the town had been furnished water by a pipe line whose source was a large spring nine kilometers from the town. The city engineer further stated that the system had not been operating for approximately a year due to the leaks that had developed in the line. After an inspection of the system it was decided to repair the line to obtain a water supply for both the troops and the town. (36) The 2d Platoon was given the task of repairing the line, and the 3d Platoon was to furnish security as the area the line passed through was infested with enemy stragglers. The 1st Platoon was given the job of collecting and destroying the stores of ammunition the enemy had abandoned in the town. (33) A-1, p. 34; (34) A-3, p. 193; (35) A-3, p. 195; (36) Personal knowledge.

In addition the platoon was directed to use the three bulldozers of the company to clear the debris from the streets and to fill the shell and bomb craters.

The wharf at Palompon extended five hundred feet from the shore and was constructed in the form of a T. The stem of the T had been constructed of criss-crossed concrete beams, and the voids filled with rock. The concrete beams performed the function of a retaining form, and for a distance of four hundred feet the stem of the T was a solid structure. At this point a fifty-five foot reinforced concrete span connected the solid portion of the stem with the head of the T. The head of the T was constructed of reinforced concrete piling supporting a concrete floor.

The wharf had suffered four direct bomb hits that had caused extensive damage. One hit had completely knocked out the fifty-five foot connecting span, and the other three had blown craters fifteen feet deep and the width of the roadway at regular intervals along the solid stem of the T. The Philippine Civil Affairs Unit needed the wharf to handle the supplies that were to be landed at Palompon, so Company "A" agreed to repair the damage.

The 1st Platoon, supplemented by the bridge carpenters of the 2d and 3d Platoons, started the repairs on the morning of 2 January. The craters presented no particular problem. There was plenty of stone from wrecked buildings nearby and plenty of native labor to load it. Retaining forms were built to hold the stone, and by afternoon the solid portion of the wharf had been repaired. The connecting span was a different situation. The water at this point was twenty-five feet at high tide and twenty-three feet at low tide, and the bottom was covered with the wreckage of the original span. The distance was too great for a clear span, and the condition of the bottom precluded the use of a trestle bent. After much deliberation a plan was devised to lower charges at selected points and blow a cleared area large enough to allow a fifty-five gallon

drum to be placed. Five areas, evenly spaced, were cleared and 10"x10" x25' timbers with fifty-five gallon drums firmly attached to the ends were lowered into place. The tops of the drums had been cut out and the drums were filled with crushed rock by using a chute after they were in position. A cap was placed across the uprights and another bent was added to bring the trestle up to the level of the roadway. The construction of the bridge from this point on followed conventional lines.

The work on the wharf and the pipe line was completed on the afternoon of 4 January, which closes the period covered by this monograph. (37)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Due to the nature of this operation and the terrain over which it was conducted the organic engineers were extremely hard pressed at times to keep the roads and bridges repaired to sustain the forward movement of the infantry and its supporting weapons. The lack of supporting engineer units caused the Division Engineers to have to maintain supply routes of much longer length than ordinarily expected. The lack of organic portable bridges made it necessary to build wooden structures that were costly in time.

As a result of the conditions mentioned above, the companies were often required to work far beyond the period of normal efficiency. The addition of a line company and three hundred feet of portable bridge to the present TO&E of the engineer battalion has to a large extent remedied this situation.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Organic portable bridges are needed in the Division Engineers if speedy passage over streams and obstacles is to be effected.
2. Aggressive engineer reconnaissance should be maintained at all times.

(37) Personal knowledge.

3. Division Engineers will often meet situations that will call for the use of field expedients.

4. Engineers will often be required to continue work while being subjected to small-arms fire.

5. Engineer companies ^{which} that form part of a combat team should be attached to the same regiment each time to secure the teamwork and co-operation required.