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OPERATIONS OF 503D PARACHUTE REGIMENTAL COMBAT
TEAM IN CAPTURE OF CORREGIDOR ISLAND
16 FEBRUARY - 2 MARCH 1945
(NORTHERN PHILIPPINES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of Regimental Assistant S-1)

Type of operation described: AIRBORNE ASSAULT
OF A FORTIFIED ISLAND.

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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INTRODUCTION

16 February 45 was the beginning of one of the most unusual airborne operations in the Southwest Pacific Area during World War II. This operation was unusual in that it departed from most all the established principles concerning airborne operations.

This is an account of the Airborne Assault on Corregidor Island, Philippine Islands during the period 16 February - 2 March 45. Some people have referred to this operation as "Operation Coordination" due to the fact that the coordination and cooperation between the services made it a practically perfect operation.

The author emphasizes the planning relative to this operation because it is felt that planning is more important in an airborne operation than in a normal ground assault.

It is the intent of this monograph to show how a well trained airborne unit vertically envelopes and defeats a strongly entrenched and numerically superior enemy on a small rugged island. This monograph will also show how some principles of war may be disregarded if other principles are properly emphasized.

GENERAL SITUATION

The opening of the Luzon Campaign in the Northern Philippines was the beginning of the end for the Japanese Forces in this string of islands. The expulsion of the Japanese from these islands began with the amphibious landing on Leyte Island, 21 October 44 (See Map A). This campaign was followed by the amphibious invasion of Mindoro by two regimental combat teams, the 19th Infantry and 503d Parachute Infantry. There was very little opposition to the latter operation and the island was quickly secured. Mindoro was still nearer the Japanese stronghold of Luzon and furnished an excellent base for air operations against the major portion of Japanese Forces in the Philippines. Luzon was the third step in the recapture of the islands and is considered the most important because it was on this island that the enemy had massed his forces. The United States Sixth Army under command of General Walter Krueger was assigned the mission of recapturing Luzon and surrounding smaller islands and to open Manila Harbor, the largest harbor in the Philippines. (1) (See Map B)

In brief, the mission assigned Sixth Army was as follows: "To land in the Lingayen-Damartis-San Fernando (La Union) areas of Luzon; (2) to establish a base of operations, including facilities for uninterrupted naval and air operations; (3) to advance southward and seize the central Plain-Manila area; and (4) by subsequent operations, as directed by Gener-

(1) F, p. 1; personal knowledge.

al Headquarters Southwest Pacific Area, to establish control over remainder of Luzon". (2)

The execution of this mission began with the landing in Lingayen Gulf area by XIV and I Corps on 9 January. These landings were followed by an advance inland and to the south towards Manila. (3)

Meanwhile activity was also taking place south of Manila. Landings were made by elements of the United States Eighth Army in the vicinity of Nagsugbu Bay in the Bastangas area and the push towards Manila was on. Among the Eighth Army troops, participating in this landing was the 11th Airborne Division. As demonstrated by this and the landing on Mindoro, the airborne forces were ready for operations other than airborne. (4) (Map B)

One objective of these two landings, in addition to gaining control of and clearing Luzon, was the capture of the city of Manila. The Philippine Islands, as a whole, would provide bases for future operations against the Japanese homeland. With the fall of the islands, the Japanese holdings in the Pacific would be threatened because it would be much easier for United States Forces to cut their supply lines. (5) As you can see from the map, a pincers movement was on to separate the Japanese Forces on Luzon and take the city of Manila and pave the way for establishment of the needed bases.

On 3 February 45, the advance elements of 1st Cavalry

(2) F, p. 1; (3) F, p. 1; (4) F, p. 2; personal knowledge; personal statements of Capt. Edwin B. Jeffress, Bn S-2, 511th Parachute Infantry, 11th Abn Div; (5) F, p. 5.

Division, which was spearheading the United States Sixth Army drive, reached the outskirts of Manila. Earlier in the planning phase, it was believed the Japanese would not defend the city but as U.S. forces approached the city, it was determined they would defend to the end. (6)

Manila, without the use of the harbor facilities, would be of little use to the United States Forces. To gain access to the bay, it was necessary to gain control of Corregidor. This island's location was excellent for defense of the bay and city, It was located in the entrance to the bay with a channel on the north side and one on the south (Map B). Any craft attempting to enter the harbor must pass under the mouth of its guns. The coastal defenses, prepared by the Americans, had been destroyed by the Japanese seige in May 1942, and others were destroyed during our bombardment in 1944 and early 1945. Some of these guns had been returned to operational status by the Japanese prior to our invasion of the islands in 1945, but the preliminary bombardment prior to the assault had rendered most of them useless. (7)

Manila Bay, and the channels thereto, were heavily mined and the Japanese were securely entrenched along the coast believing themselves capable of repulsing any amphibious attack against the island fortress. (See Map C). It was learned from prisoners of war and documents captured on the island that the mines were controlled by a switchboard and it was possible to detonate them one at a time or all at once. (This switchboard was captured intact by the assault

before or after 15

(6) F, p. 1, p. 36; (7) C, Appendix A to Annex No. 1.

forces in the invasion of the island). With the coastal defenses facing onto the bay, minesweeping was made difficult. Too, there were many "Q" boats operating from the island. These boats were more or less one and two man torpedos. They were small inboard motor boats carrying an average of 400 lbs of explosives in the nose. One method of employing these craft was to slip out quietly and crash into the side of a ship with much the same effect as a conventional torpedo. Since most of the fortifications to repel an amphibious assault were reinforced concrete constructed by U. S. Engineers, it was practically impossible to bomb the defenders out. During a bombing attack they would go below ground into the many caves and tunnels and wait it out. These factors made it impractical to min^esweep the channels. (8)

The inadvisability of an amphibious assault on the island was demonstrated by the heavy losses suffered by the Japanese at the hands of a small number of half starved United States and Filipino defenders in May 1942. (9)

PLANNING

The overall plan for the capture of Corregidor was as follows: The United States XI Corps was given the mission of opening Manila Bay by Sixth Army Order No. 48 issued 7 February 45 which read in part as follows: "XI Corps - On D plus 1 employing the 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment in

(8) F, p. 51; personal knowledge; (9) M, p. 146.

airborne operations as arranged with Eighth Army and by shore-to-shore operations from Mariveles Bay area will capture Corregidor. Control of 503d Parachute Infantry passes to XI Corps upon completion of the drop on Corregidor." (See Map B) (10)

Although XI Corps was assigned the operational phase of the assault on Corregidor, the airborne phase was mounted by the United States Eighth Army from the island of Mindoro P. I. (11)

The 503d Parachute Regimental Combat Team, composed of 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment, 462d Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and 161st Airborne Engineer Company was in training on the island of Mindoro, P. I. As stated previously, this organization participated in the initial assault on this island. The operation having been completed, the regiment was in the process of reequipping and undergoing some training. On 3 February 45, the Regimental Commander was alerted for a parachute drop to capture Nichols Field in the vicinity of Manila. Due to the rapid advance of the ground forces on Luzon, this mission was cancelled on 5 February and the Combat Team alerted for the drop on Corregidor to take place on 12 February 45. Although the 503d was not alerted until 5 February 45, the reader should realize that preliminary bombardment had already begun, as early as 23 January 45. The extent of the bombing of this small island is indicated by the fact that in less than a

(10) F, p. 50; (11) F, p. 49.

month 3,128 tons were dropped. (12)

When the Combat Team Commander, Colonel George M. Jones, received the change in missions on 5 February, he set about changing plans for the new objective. There was little, if any, change as far as the troops were concerned. The preliminaries are the same for any airborne operation regardless of the objective. They consist mainly of checking and replenishing equipment and general readiness for combat. (13)

ORDER OF BATTLE

There were troops other than the 503d Regimental Combat Team participating in this operation. So that the reader will understand the size and support received during the operation, the following troop list is quoted:

- "1. 503d Regimental Combat Team
 - a. 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment
 - b. 462d Parachute Field Artillery Battalion
 - c. 161st Airborne Engineer Company
2. 3d Bn 34th Infantry Regiment reinforced by
 - a. 3d Platoon, AT Co, 34th Infantry
 - b. 3d Platoon, Cannon Company, 34th Infantry
3. 18th Portable Surgical Hospital (Reinforced)
4. 174th Ord Ser Det (Bomb Disposal)
5. Det 592d EBSR
6. Det 98th Sig Bn
7. Det 1st Plat, 603d Tk Co
8. Det 592d JASCO*
9. Det 6th SAP**
10. Det Naval Task Force
11. Elements of Fifth Airforce including 317th TC Group" (14)

(12) A; personal knowledge; (13) Personal knowledge;
(14) A, p. 1; * Joint Assault Signal Company; ** Support Air Party.

THE TERRAIN

When the Combat Team Commander informed the staff that the new objective was Corregidor, they were somewhat amazed when they considered the size of the island and recalled the "requirements" for desirable drop zones. (15) Upon first glance it appeared there was no place to drop the troops. (Map C) Arrangements were made with the army air force for the regimental and battalion commanders and selected staff officers to fly over the island in planes making air strikes against Bataan. When this aerial reconnaissance was accomplished, the RCT Commander called the battalion commanders together and, with a study of aerial photographs, it was determined there were three possible areas where a drop might be made. These were: (1) the remains of a small golf course, (2) an open area that had been used for a parade ground in days of peace and (3) Kindley Field, a small air strip on the tail of the island. These could hardly be classified as desirable drop zones but there were none better. Kindley Field was ruled out almost immediately because of its location. As stated previously, it was on the "tail" of the island and even if a successful drop was made at that point, it would be necessary to overcome defenses prepared for an amphibious assault before the high ground could be taken and the island secured. The other two had few of the desirable characteristics for drop zones. The parade ground, though level, measured only 150 by 200 yards and was sur-

(15) personal knowledge.

rounded on three sides by concrete barracks and other buildings. The golf course was approximately 150 by 275 yards and sloped steeply down to an abrupt drop to sea level. Combined, they were much smaller than anything used for a parachute drop in the Pacific Theater. The RCT Commander had confidence in the capabilities of his troops and a thorough knowledge of airborne technique. He felt the mission could be accomplished successfully although he expected the drop casualties to run high, possible 20%. (16)

To insure that the reader realizes some of the problems facing the commander in the detailed planning of this operation, it is well that we include a description of the topography of this island. (See Map C) The island is approximately one square mile in area and is divided into three sectors, (1) "Topside" "Bottomside" and "Middleside". "Topside", on the western end of the island, is the highest part and it was on this part that Fields "A" and "B" were located. "Bottomside" is that part of the island lying east of Malinta Hill and is called the "tail" of the island. "Middleside" is the area between the other two. Malinta Hill rises to a height of only 350 feet but is the dominating terrain feature on Middleside. Monkey Hill, very small, is the dominating terrain on Bottomside. Corregidor is bounded in many places by sheer cliffs approximately 500 feet high dropping off to the waters edge. The only open and flat terrain on the island is on "Topside", and comprises the area of the old parade

(16) O, p. 2; personal knowledge.

ground and golf course which were designated Fields "A" and "B" respectively. The entire island is guttered with deep ravines with precipitous sides. The aerial bombardment had stripped the trees of any foliage and splintered and shattered the trunks until they created a parachute hazard. The bombing had also wrecked the buildings. The barracks buildings were of the three story reinforced concrete type and, after bombing, created still another parachute hazard. The fields selected for the drop abounded in bomb craters, huge boulders and large sunbaked clods of clay which were almost like rock themselves. The cliffs facing the beach, sides of the ravines and the old gun batteries had been made into well fortified positions. The latter was not determined however, until after landing on the island. This is exemplified in the intelligence estimate of the terrain. An excerpt from this estimate is as follows: "A close comparison of the installations of the island in recent extensive photography of CORREGIDOR with its pre-war appearance clearly shows that little attempt has been made during the Japanese occupation to develop it."

(17) The Japanese had indeed been clever in concealing the development of their defensive organization. Several all weather roads covered the island but these too had been damaged to some extent by our bombers. The terrain definitely favored the enemy for a good defensive stand. This was the terrain setup into which the RCT was going. In addition, intelligence estimates placed the strength of the Japanese garrison at 850. (18)

(17) C, App. A to Annex No. 1; (18) C, App. A to Annex No. 1.

COORDINATION

To borrow a phrase from Lt Colonel Posthlewate, Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry, " this operation could well have been called 'Operation coordination' ". This was evident in the planning as well as the execution phase. We have mentioned that personnel from the RCT flew over the island to make a visual reconnaissance of the drop zones. A scale model of the island was flown to the RCT from GHQ. Extensive aerial photo missions were flown. Personnel who had served on the island in prewar days were made available for questioning. These were only part of the examples of willing cooperation. Every member of the RCT was briefed on the operation, and each knew exactly where he was to land and what he was expected to do. This system of briefing afforded the RCT the best they had had for any operation to date. (19)

Additional cooperation and coordination was evidenced by the fact that the staff and pilots of the 317th Troop Carrier Group, which was designated by 5th Air Force to furnish the air transportation, practically "lived" at RCT headquarters. They attended every briefing and offered comments and suggestions, many of which later proved to be highly beneficial to the actual execution of the drop. The Group Commander, Lt Colonel John Lackey suggested the employment of a command ship to control the drop. This was accepted. (The role of the command ship will be discussed later in this monograph).

(19) E; personal knowledge.

THE ENEMY SITUATION

Little was known about the strength of the enemy on Corregido. Intelligence estimated that the minimum strength was 850. The defenses of the island were set up to repel an amphibious assault. (See Map C) Later events revealed that the Japanese commander had been informed that he should prepare a defensive plan to repulse an airborne assault on the island. After a reconnaissance, he decided such an attack was virtually impossible and did nothing anti-airborne defenses. This proved his undoing. (20)

Although we find the amphibious defense set up, the success of the airborne drop still depended entirely on surprise. When you visualize the size of the drop zones, and realize that it would be possible to drop only six or eight men at a time, the reader can readily see the truth in this statement. Normally airborne drops strive for the maximum men on the ground in the minimum time. This would certainly not be true in this case. (21)

THE COMMANDER'S PLAN

Tactical Plan

Based on the information available to him, the RCT Commander outlined his plan for the operation. (See Map D) On D plus 1 elements of the 503d RCT would drop on Corregidor, utilizing Fields "A" and "B", and seize and secure "Topside". The 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry (reinforced), would by shore-to-shore assault from Mariveles, seize and

(20) B, p. 8; (21) personal knowledge.

secure Malinta Hill. Upon link-up of these two forces, the high ground on the island would be in the hands of U. S. Forces. Upon landing, these units, and remainder of troops participating, would become the "Rock Force". As mentioned previously, Malinta Hill was the highest terrain on Middleside. The primary reason for occupation of this terrain feature was to contain the enemy on the eastern part of the island until the numerous caves and tunnels could be cleared on Topside. The 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry would not come under control of the RCT until landing. Plans were made for this reinforced battalion to stage in the Subic Bay area and follow the 151st Infantry Regiment on the landing in the Mariveles area on D Day. On D plus 1, it would make the shore-to-shore assault on Corregidor from Mariveles. (See Map D) (22)

This shore-to-shore operation would also open an overwater supply route for the Rock Force. This would simplify, to a large extent, the supply problem for it was realized that only a small number of planes would be available for aerial resupply. I have stated that an amphibious assault on the island was not considered feasible, however, this did not apply to the proposed landing of this infantry battalion inasmuch as plans called for this landing to be supported by fire from the airborne units already landed. To my knowledge, this is the first time an amphibious landing had been accomplished under cover of an airborne operation. If it had been necessary for the airborne forces to

(22) A; C.

seize Malinta Hill after the drop, it is believed it would have been many times the actual cost of the amphibious assault. (23)

The overall plan called for a systematic reduction of the island i.e., clear Topside, move to Middleside, repeat and then move to Bottomside, clear and mop up.

Landing Plan

Due to the fact that insufficient aircraft were available to lift the RCT at one time, the Rock Force Commander set up the RCT as battalion landing teams. This was necessary to maintain tactical unity and to insure that troops on the ground would have the necessary support to continue operations while the remainder of the airborne forces was being dropped. Three of the factors to be considered in planning an airborne operation are (1) number of planes available, (2) number of troops to be transported and (3) distance to drop or landing zone. There was a total of fifty one C-47 type aircraft available for this drop, approximately 3000 men to be transported and the drop zone was approximately 140 miles away. These factors also dictated that the RCT be transported in three lifts. The Rock Force Commander ordered that one battalion landing team would be dropped in the morning of D plus 1, one in the afternoon and the third landing team in the morning of D plus 2. (24)

(23) C; F, p. 51; (24) F, p. 52; personal knowledge.

The landing plan was set up as follows:

"a. First lift, 31 C-47s to be over the objective
at 160830 February 45: (3)²?

3d Bn 503d Precht Inf
Det Hq 502d Precht Inf
161st Engineer Co
Det Hq Btry 462d Precht FA Bn
Btry A 462d FA Bn (75-mm How)
.50 Cal MG Plat, Btry D, 462d FA Bn

b. Second lift, 51 C-47s to be over the objective
at 161215 February 45:

Det Hq 503d Precht Inf
2d Bn 503d Precht Inf
Ser Co 503d Precht Inf
.50 Cal MG Plat, Btry D, 462d FA Bn
Btry B, 462d FA Bn (75-mm How)

c. Third lift, 43 C-47s to be over the objective
at 170830 February 45:

Balance Hq 503d Precht Inf
1st Bn 503d Precht Inf
.50 Cal MG Plat Btry D 462d FA Bn
Btry C 462d FA Bn (75-mm How)". (25)

As can be seen from above, each battalion landing team was capable of supporting itself until the entire RCT was on the ground and operating as such. The remainder of the troops to comprise the Rock Force (mainly supporting troops) would land amphibiously after Malinta Hill had been secured and the road to Topside had been opened.

Fire and Air Support Plan

A detachment of the 592d JASCO (Joint Assault Signal Company) would drop with the airborne assault and furnish communications for naval support. A detachment of the 98th

(25) F, p. 52.

Signal Battalion would land with the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry and provide signal communications with higher headquarters. A detachment of 6th SAP (Support Air Party) would drop with the airborne assault units and furnish liaison for aerial support. Air support would be furnished by 5th and 13th Air Forces. Fire support, other than organic artillery, would be furnished by elements of 7th Fleet. These naval forces would support this operation in much the same way artillery supports infantry in normal ground operations. The JASCO detachment handled the communications and liaison for fire missions in much the same way as a Field Artillery Liaison Officer does in normal ground combat. (26)

In order to prevent any enemy movement to "Topside", during daylight and immediately following the drop, plans were made for an intense aerial and naval bombardment. A bomb line was established (See Map D) and was not^{to} be crossed prior to 161030 February. Continuous bombing and strafing would take place east of this line before, during and after the drop. It would be lifted at 1030 hours which was the scheduled landing time of the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry. The planned air support for this period was as follows: from H-45 to H-30 minutes one group of heavy bombers would pound the island, mainly the drop zone. They were scheduled to drop approximately 125 tons of bombs. Immediately following, one group of A-20s would bomb and strafe the island. During and after the drop, strafing outside the drop zone

(26) A.

would take place until 0930 hours or H plus 60. After that, 3 squadrons of A-20s would remain on air alert. The naval support, consisting of cruisers and destroyers, was at strategic locations off the coast and prepared to deliver "artillery support" on call. There was a naval gunfire liaison section scheduled to go in with the RCT which would work through JASCO and furnish fire support. Patrol Torpedo boats were spotted around the island to pick up any troops who drifted over the side. (27)

The Plan for the Drop

In most of previous airborne operations, especially in Europe, a mass of planes would fly over an enormous drop zone and thousands of parachutists would drop at one time. That was not the case for the capture of the "Rock". As stated before, the selected drop zones were the smallest this RCT had ever used. To utilize these drop zones, it would be necessary for the planes to fly in trail (one behind the other) instead of the normal prescribed formation of "V". The flight would be divided into two columns, one over each field. The planes in the left column would fly over Field "A", drop eight (8) jumpers, circle to the left, join the tail of the column and in a "round robin" fashion continue this until all men and equipment were dropped. The planes on the right or eastern side would fly over Field "B", circle to the right and do the same as the left column until all men were dropped. The reader can readily see that this

(27) B, p. 2; personal knowledge.

method would require quite some time and actually did require a little over an hour for the drop of one lift to be completed. It would be necessary for each plane to make three passes over the drop zone. A "GO" point was selected for each drop zone. This was a clearly defined point. Upon reaching this point, the pilot of the aircraft would turn on the "Go Light" which would indicate to the jumpmaster in the rear of the ship that he was over the point. Due to velocity and direction of the prevailing winds, instructions were issued for each jumpmaster to count to three (3) after passing the "GO" point and then jump his men. The men would actually be jumping after passing the DZ but the wind would drift them back on to it. Each plane carried twenty-four (24) jumpers and three (3) equipment bundles and would drop eight (8) men and one (1) bundle on each pass of the field. This was the largest number deemed advisable due to the size of the drop zone. A command ship would be employed in controlling the drop. The command ship would precede the planes carrying personnel to see if the drop zone was clear from the dust and smoke which would follow the bombing and to make any corrections in the drop. Plans were that this command ship would circle the island at a greater altitude than the jumpers in order to observe the jump and make any corrections necessary. Jumping altitude was set at 1150 feet above sea level. Since the DZ was 550 feet above sea level, (See Map D) this made the actual jumping altitude 600 feet. It was predicted that the wind would range from 15 to 20 knots. (28)

(28) B, p. 4; personal knowledge.

Little opposition was anticipated from enemy anti-aircraft fire since the bombing and strafing was expected to keep the Japanese down during the drop. Jump casualties were expected to be high due to the condition of the fields and the prevailing winds. (29)

Supply Plan

Supply plans called for aerial resupply until the road from the landing beach to Topside was opened. Twelve (12) C-47s were allotted for resupply missions. After the amphibious landing, an overwater supply route would be established. To assist the small number of supply personnel in a parachute regiment, a supply detachment was sent to Subic Bay four (4) days prior to the operation to land amphibiously on Corregidor and handling the unloading of supplies on the beach after the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry had secured Malinta Hill. This detachment consisted of three (3) officers and fifty-one (51) enlisted men. They carried with them squad bags containing blankets, extra clothing and equipment not landed with the assault airborne units. They also carried one unit of fire for 75-mm howitzers, extra radio equipment and flamethrowers. Once the road from the beach to Topside was opened, supply headquarters for the entire Rock Force would be opened on Topside. (30)

Evacuation Plan

Initially the Regimental and Battalion Medical Sections
(29) personal knowledge; (30) A, Supply Annex.

would be consolidated into one unit. This unit would set up a single aid station in a suitable location and with the exception of the company aid men, all medical personnel would be employed in this consolidated aid station. The 18th Portable Surgical Hospital (reinforced) would land amphibiously, move to Topside and set up in a suitable location. Evacuation from the hospital would be overwater to Mariveles. (31)

The Order

12 February 45 found the plans completed and with the exception of briefing, the RCT was ready to go. Following is quoted extracts from paragraph 3, Field Order No. 9, 503d Regimental Combat Team, 13 February 45:

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"3

a. 3d Bn, with Btry A and one (1) platoon Btry D, 462d FA Bn, and 3d Plat, Co. C 161st AB Engr Bn attached, will

(1) Drop on FIELDS "A" and "B" on D plus 1 at 0830 I and secure drop area.

(2) Upon being relieved by the 2d Bn, advance and seize the high ground approximately 600 yards northeast of hospital site (318.0-403.5), CORREGIDOR, and the commanding ground approximately 1000 yards

(31) personal knowledge.

east of the hospital site, CORREGIDOR.

- (3) Support the amphibious landing of the 3d Bn 34th Inf Regt, reinforced, by fire.
- (4) Effect contact with the 3d Bn 34th Inf Regt, reinforced.

b. 2d Bn, with Btry B and one (1) plat Btry D, 462d FA Bn attached, will:

- (1) Drop on FIELDS "A" and "B" on D plus 1 at 1215 I and immediately relieve the 3d Bn from the defense of the drop area.
- (2) Exploit the terrain to north and west of the drop area, destroying all enemy encountered. OPN MAP

c. 1st Bn, with Btry C and one (1) plat, Btry D, 462d FA Bn attached will:

- (1) Drop on FIELDS "A" and "B" on D plus 2 at 0830 I as RCT Reserve.
- (2) Be prepared on order to exploit terrain south of drop area, destroying all enemy encountered. See Opn Map.

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f. 3d Bn 34th Inf Regt, reinforced, after landing on SAN JOSE BEACH, CORREGIDOR, will:

- (1) Secure beachhead and rapidly seize and secure MALINTA HILL area as initial objective.
- (2) Effect contact with 3d Bn 503d RCT to the west."

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In addition to excerpt from FO No. 9 quoted above, the FO also contained orders for the attachment of Engineer Platoons to the Infantry Battalions. (32)

THE EXECUTION

16 February 45.

I have mentioned previously that during the planning phase of this operation, D Day was set for 12 February 45 and later changed to 15 February. The reader will recall that the airborne phase would take place on D plus 1 or 16 February. This date marked a memorable one for the members of the Combat Team. This was the day they would retake Corregidor, the historically famous fortress in the hands of the Japanese for the past two and one half years. The memory of General Wainwright surrendering a handful of half starved but gallant soldiers to the Japanese on 6 May 42 lingered in the minds of the members of the regiment. The night before the jump, captured Japanese movies of the surrender of the island were shown to the regiment. (33)

Dawn of 16 February promised an ideal day for jumping. The first lift of troopers took off from Elmore and Hill Strips at San Jose Mindoro at 0715 hours. The planes completed the rendezvous and headed for the Rock. The flight required approximately one hour and a half. About five (5) miles out from the target, the planes began to fall into two columns. The lead ship was piloted by Lt Colonel John Lackey, Commanding Officer of the Group, and carried Colonel

(32) C, p. 2, 3; (33) F, p. 51; personal knowledge.

Jones and certain members of his staff. This was the control ship. It was anticipated that the drop zones would be obscured by the dust and smoke of the bombing and strafing which preceded the drop. The initial mission of the command ship was to reach the island first and check this. If the dust and smoke was such as to obscure the DZ, a message would be flashed to the troop carriers and they would wait it out. If not, the jump would proceed. Once the jump started, the command ship would circle the island and make corrections by voice radio in the clear. (34)

On reaching the island, the pilot of the command ship announced the drop zones clear and the first plane carrying jumpers approached the island. The first man jumped at 0830 hours. Incidentally this was Lt Colonel John L. Erickson, Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 503d Parachute Infantry. The first drop was made at an altitude of 1150 feet above sea level as prescribed. On the initial drop, the Rock Force Commander in the command ship noticed several jumpers drifting over the cliff and some out into the ocean. By radio, he ordered the jump altitude down to 500 feet above the DZ and the jumpmasters to count six after passing the go point. This was immediately complied with by all planes and the men began to hit the drop zone. This is one example of the value of a command ship which heretofore had not been used for any parachute drops. (35)

(34) B, p. 6; personal knowledge; (35) B, p. 6; personal knowledge.

There was very little enemy resistance on the initial drop. The air and naval bombardment had forced the Japanese to take cover and apparently surprise was complete. The resistance was limited to scattered antiaircraft fire which did little damage. Some planes were hit but they continued to fly the mission. Approximately one hour and fifteen minutes was required to complete the drop of the first lift. The battalion assembled quickly and set about to accomplish its initial mission of securing the drop zones and protecting the landing of the second lift. They established a perimeter running generally along the 500 foot contour line. (See Map E) Automatic weapons were placed into position to support the landing of 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry, which was scheduled for 1030 hours. On approach of the landing craft carrying the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry, intense automatic weapons fire opened up from the enemy entrenched along the coast. The Navy was called on and immediately silenced these weapons. The troops hit the beach successfully, but suffered some losses in personnel and equipment due to the extensive mining of the beach by the defenders. One of the three (3) tanks in the assault operation was lost along with other equipment. With only light resistance, the battalion quickly attained their objective and went into position on Malinta Hill. The reader will recall that under Malinta Hill was famed Malinta Tunnel which housed the headquarters of the United States Forces during the seige of 1942. Intelligence agencies had reported that it housed a large amount of am-

munition and explosives. Later report indicated that the actual amount far exceeded any estimate that have been voiced. (36) These explosives come into the picture later on in this monograph.

The second lift took off from Hill and Elmore Strips on Mindoro at 1100 hours and began dropping at 1240 hours. The same pattern and procedure was used for the second lift as for the first. Due to the fact that the wind subsided to some extent and the correction made in "go time" from the first lift, the jump casualties were less in the second lift. We stated in the beginning that jump casualties were estimated to run as high as 20%. Actually they were only 10.7% with the first lift sustaining 75% of these. The 2d Battalion quickly assembled and relieved the 3d Battalion of their portion of the perimeter. (See Map E). Because of the apparent success of the landing of the initial assault troops and believing that the position was secure, the Rock Force Commander requested to Corps that the drop of the 3d lift be cancelled and the battalion landed amphibiously. This would eliminate the casualties which would occur from a jump. This was approved. (37)

The two parachute battalions began immediately extending their positions. This consisted mainly of clearing the barracks and other buildings on Topside. The buildings were cleared and the Rock Force Headquarters was established in one of the old barracks. (See Map E) This Headquarters

(36) personal knowledge; (37) A; B, p. 10; B, p. 7-8; personal knowledge.

consisted of Rock Force CP, Field Artillery CP, Engineer CP, Fire Direction Center, JASCO Headquarters and SAP Headquarters. The medical detachments were grouped together and functioned very effectively as a "hospital" under direction of the regimental surgeon. (38)

Just a word about the men who drifted over the cliffs. Some of these men made their way to the beach area and were picked up by PT boats and carried to safety. Others assembled and began to make their way back to Topside to rejoin their unit. One group of these men rounded a turn in the trail and ran into a group of Japanese which they immediately attacked and destroyed. Among this group was Naval Captain Itagaki Ijn, Commanding Officer of the forces on Corregidor, who had gone to an OP near Breakwater Point to investigate the amphibious landing. (39)

By the end of the 16 February, the parachute battalions were in possession of the high ground on Topside and the 3d Battalion 34th Infantry was in position on Malinta Hill. (See Map E) The Japanese forces on the western end could not organize for an attack because the two parachute battalions were sitting on top of them. The 3d Battalion 34th Infantry had cut the island and isolated those on the eastern end of the island. (40)

The night was rather uneventful. Harrassing fire was maintained by our artillery and small disorganized attacks were made against the perimeter. The navy illuminated the

(38) personal knowledge; (39) O, p. 7; (40) B, p. 8; F, p. 53.

entire island on call with illumination shells which enabled the enemy to be repelled under "daylight" conditions.

(41)

17 February 45

On the morning of 17 February, the 3d Battalion was ordered to launch an attack against Morrison Hill to the northeast. (See Map F) This was the commanding ground on the northeastern part of Topside and favored defense by the enemy but surprisingly enough was only lightly defended and was captured in short order.

The 2d Battalion was ordered to clear the area towards the southwest. This area contained many strongly fortified gun positions constructed by the American forces prior to the war.

At 0830 hours, the 3d lift composed of the 1st Battalion, with attachments, flew over the island, dropped their equipment bundles and in compliance with change in plans flew on to San Marcelino in the Subic Bay area. They deplaned, climbed aboard ADPs and landed late in the afternoon on the beach which had been used by the landing of 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry. They immediately established a perimeter for the night. (See Map F) (42)

This day's operations of the 2d and 3d Battalions saw the beginning of a systematic and stereotyped plan which was used in the reduction of enemy positions on Topside. In order to accomplish the Rock Force missions assigned the battalions, it was necessary that numerous

(41) O, p. 8; (42) Statement of Lt Col John N Davis, then CO, 1st Bn, 503d Prcht Inf.

cave and tunnel positions enroute to the objective be cleared. Then is when the plan went into effect. This plan consisted of demolition teams from Regimental Headquarters Company and the Engineers accompanying the leading elements of the infantry. The infantry would pin down the enemy in the position by delivery of heavy fire while the demolitionists moved in with explosives and flamethrowers to reduce the position. In the initial employment of this method, some of the flamethrower operators were injured by the backblast of their weapon when used against a shallow position. This was overcome by directing the unignited fuel into the position and igniting it with WP grenades. If the position was such as to require a great deal of time and demolition work to eliminate, the infantry, after initial assistance, would push on and the demolitionists would remain behind to complete the job. This plan was used against the smaller positions throughout the fighting on the island.

(43)

A similar method was also used against positions of greater strength such as the fortified gun positions encountered by the 2d Battalion. These positions were not as simple to reduce or as easily overcome as the ones described above. Many of these fortifications included underground barracks, store rooms for ammunition and powder magazines.

(44) A plan was also worked out for reduction of this type fortifications. This method was developed by the Platoon Leader, Demolition Platoon, RHQ Co. Five gallon cans of

(43) B, p. 10; Statements of Major Lawson B Caskey, then CO, 2d Bn 503d Proht Inf; (44) B, p. 10.

gasoline and oil and WP grenades were tied together with prima cord and time fuse. The infantry would cover the position while the demolition team crawled forward to a ventilator shaft or other similar opening, ignited the time fuse and dropped the explosive into the shaft. The resulting explosion and fire usually eliminated the position from further consideration. (45)

These were two of the methods employed and there were others. Artillery and naval fire was used to fire point blank into positions and air support was used where needed. To give the reader an idea of the air support for this operation the following is cited: "31 P-47 type aircraft expended 4,000 gallons of napalm, 38 500 pound bombs and 31,000 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition to assist one company in taking one objective." (46)

During the reduction of Topside, the size of the units varied in attacks. Patrols were usually dispatched to clear enemy positions in the battalion zone of action. The size of the patrol depended entirely on the amount of resistance expected and varied from a squad to a company. However, nearly all these attacking patrols were accompanied by demolition teams. (47)

18 - 23 February 45

mip G.

The 1st Battalion which had spent the night on the beach, began their move to Topside fighting most of the way. Upon reaching Topside, the road was opened, the over-

(45) I; (46) B, p. 13; (47) O, p. 7.

water supply route went into operation and the entire RCT was in position on Topside by noon. (48)

During the period 18-23 February, the fighting followed practically the same pattern as described above. Each battalion was given a zone of action, demolition and flame-thrower teams assigned them and emphasis placed on sealing all cave and tunnels in the zone of action. The perimeter was gradually enlarged with each days operation. With the arrival of 1st Battalion and attached field artillery, all the artillery of 462d FA Battalion was massed on the parade ground in front of the Rock Force CP under control of Rock Force Commander so that support could be readily given. To support attacks on positions in the sides of the cliffs, the navy maneuvered destroyers and cruisers to positions from which they could fire point blank into the caves and tunnels thus reducing many positions quickly. There were few large scale hostile attacks against the positions on Topside. This is believed to be accredited to the inability of the enemy to organize a force of sufficient strength to launch such an attack. There was one attack launched against the perimeter which might be called organized. This attack was made by the Endo Force (Marines) on the morning of 19 February and penetrated the perimeter to a depth of approximately 150 yards but was quickly repulsed. (49)

So far in this monograph little has been said regarding 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry (reinforced) and it is not the intent to cover their operations but it is considered well

(48) Statement of Lt Col John N Davis, then CO, 1st Bn, 503d Prcht Inf; (49) O, p. 8.

to bring them in at this point. This battalion had plenty to keep them busy. They had been successful in containing the Japanese on the eastern part of the island but were constantly fighting off attacks against their position. They had accounted for 815 dead. (50) It was common knowledge that a large amount of explosives was stored in Malinta Tunnel. Captured documents had confirmed this fact and questioning of POWs by Rock Force S-2 had confirmed the fact that the amount exceeded any previous estimates. The thought had been in the minds of all as to the results of an enemy initiated explosion of this arsenal. The troops, worried about this most, were those of the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry which was sitting astride Malinta Hill. At 212130 February, the underground arsenal exploded. The island rocked like a boat in a storm and the tremors were felt as far away as Bataan. When the smoke and dust cleared, Malinta Hill was still standing. A few casualties were suffered by 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry by landslides; and an untold number of Japanese troops were sealed inside the hill. A POW who escaped the blast stated that the explosion was destined to precede a coordinated attack by the remaining garrison east of Malinta Hill but the attacking force had been cut off by a resulting landslide which completely blocked the road. Upon attempting to go around the other side of the hill, they ran into heavy mortar barrages which halted the attack. (51)

In the afternoon of 23 February, the Rock Force Com-

(50) A; (51) B, p. 13-16; A.

mander decided that resistance had been reduced sufficiently on Topside to permit an attack down the island. He issued orders for the attack of two battalions to clear the remainder of Corregidor. The order called for 1st and 3d Battalions to attack in column, 1st Battalion leading. The battalions would pass through the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry and clear the eastern part of the island. Battalion Commanders and selected personnel moved to the top of Malinta Hill and made a visual reconnaissance of the area over which the attack would take place. Except for the fact that the island began to narrow down to a point, it was not much different from that over which they had been fighting for the past week. Troops were moved to assembly areas from which they would launch the attack at 240730 February 45. The artillery would support the attack from the parade ground and the navy would pound the tail of the island until fires were masked by the advancing personnel. (52)

The attack jumped off 24 February 45 as planned. The 1st Battalion was leading and passed one company over Malinta Hill and the other two companies around on the road. The 3d Battalion followed the road. (See Map H) The artillery support consisted of rolling barrages and the infantry were following it as close as safety would permit. The only organized resistance encountered the first day was a coordinated counterattack launched from Monkey Point. (See Map H) The artillery killed an estimated 300 of the 600 participating and the attack was repulsed. By night fall

(52) Statement Lt Col J N Davis, CO, 1st Bn, 503d Precht Inf; B, p. 16.

24 February, the 1st Battalion held a line Infantry-Camp Points and the 3d Battalion in rear. The 1st Battalion had been pushing through and 3d Battalion had been employed in mopping up bypassed pockets of enemy resistance. (53)

25 February 45

On 25 February the only dominating terrain in the hands of the enemy was Monkey Hill. The 1st Battalion jumped off in their attack. They were met with strong automatic weapons fire from this terrain feature. A fifteen minute artillery barrage was laid down. The navy added to the barrage with fire support from the cruisers and destroyers. After this barrage, the 1st Battalion moved in and established a perimeter on the hill. The Japanese forces had ducked into the tunnels when the artillery began to fall. Before they could come out, the perimeter was thrown around the hill with the tunnel entrances inside the perimeter. The entrances were blocked and the enemy was sealed inside.

On the approach of the 1st and 3d Battalions to the tip of the island, many of the enemy forces had attempted to escape to Bataan by swimming and use of hastily constructed rafts. At first, attempts were made to pick them up, but it was learned that most of them were armed with a weapon of one type or another and put up a fight. They were then considered targets of opportunity by PT boats and fighter aircraft. (54)

(53) A; B, p. 16; Statement Lt Col J N Davis, CO, 1st Bn, 503d Prcht Inf; (54) A.

The battalions had succeeded in taking and establishing a perimeter around Monkey Hill just before dark so the attack was halted for the night.

26 February 45

It was on 26 February that the enemy effected his last desperate act on the island. The 1st Battalion had moved one company up on top of the hill and was getting ready to jump off on an attack which would take it to the tip of the island. The attack was to follow a short artillery barrage. It was while the battalion was waiting for the barrage to lift that the Japanese blew up the explosives which were also stored under this hill. The battalion suffered approximately 195 casualties and a ravine was created where a hill had stood. The blast was so terrific, that a tank, accompanying the troops, was tumbled over like a matchbox and thrown forty yards away. (55)

The battalion commander realized that no offensive action could take place until casualties were evacuated and reorganization effected. A hasty defense was organized to meet the expected counterattack which did not materialize, and to cover evacuation of casualties. In approximately half an hour he made the following report to the Rock Force Commander, "The battalion is reorganized, 3d Battalion is assisting us to evacuate our casualties and we are ready to go." (56) The Rock Force Commander, however,

(55) B, p. 7; A; Statement Lt Col J N Davis, CO, 1st Bn, 503d Prcht Inf; (56) Statement Lt Col J N Davis, CO, 1st Bn, 503d Prcht Inf.

ordered the 3d Battalion to pass through the 1st Battalion and take up the attack. This was done and by 1600 hours reached the tip of the island. Corregidor was in our hands. From this days fighting alone, 500 Japs were killed and 2 POWs captured. This brought the total to 4,214 counted dead since 16 February 45. (57)

27 February - 2 March 45

During the period 27 February to 2 March mopping up operations were carried out and the campaign was officially closed. On the morning of 2 March 45, the Rock Force Commander met General Douglas MacArthur and party at South Dock and escorted him to the parade ground. Those troops left in the Combat Team were called to "attention". General MacArthur ordered the flag to be raised with these words, "Have your troops hoist the colors to its peak and let no enemy ever haul them down." Upon conclusion of this statement, the Rock Force Commander officially presented the island to the Commander-in-Chief Southwest Pacific Area and the campaign was over. (58)

It is believed the nature of the execution of the operation can be summed up in the following quotation from the citation of the Regimental Combat Team by XI Corps "Both officers and enlisted men were thoroughly competent, knew what there was to do and did not hesitate in any instance to close with the enemy and do it." (59)

(57) B, p. 17; (58) I; personal knowledge; (59) I.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

One point, which is clearly evident throughout the planning and execution of this operation is the thorough and willing cooperation and coordination of all the services involved. Except for this cooperation, the operation could have very easily lasted much longer. The change in plans which cancelled the drop of the third lift caused no confusion whatsoever. The facilities were put into operation immediately to land them amphibiously instead of by parachute.

It is believed that insufficient armor was employed. Of course this island was not good tank country and it would have been necessary for the tanks to confine themselves mainly to the road. They could, however, have reached and been used very effectively in eliminating many of the Japanese positions. In instances where the infantry was used to cover demolition and flamethrower teams, the tanks could have performed this mission without loss of life to the crews since most of the enemy fire was confined to small arms.

The JASCO and SAP units were commendable in their actions. All requests for air and naval support were immediately processed and supporting fires placed when and where they were needed.

The decision to take Malinta Hill amphibiously was a wise one. By containing the large number of Japanese on the eastern end and cutting the island at Middleside, the

airborne forces could clear Topside without fear of attack from the lower part of the island.

I believe it is evident that the principle of mass was violated and the principle of surprise was the major principle indicated by the airborne landing. The Japanese had underestimated the enemy, therefore the surprise was magnified when you consider it from his viewpoint.

The support by fire of the landing of 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry by airborne troops aided greatly the successful amphibious assault. The Japanese had prepared for an amphibious assault and without the supporting fires from above their positions, they could have made it doubly difficult. It has been pointed out that due to the nature of the fortifications it was next to impossible to bomb them out. After the bombing they would simply pop out and take up the fight. It was necessary to lift naval fire support during the landing but the parachutists on Topside could continue to fire.

It is clearly indicated that the plan of operations after landing was very simple. Aggressive patrolling to clear the enemy from the island was the order of the day. The plans were not complicated by a mass of details and descriptions of positions, strengths and etc that is usually found in an order.

Fire support was simple and plentiful. The patrolling units requested it and were immediately furnished what they wanted. There was nothing complicated about it.

The decision to use a command ship was an excellent

idea. The Regimental Combat Team had no pathfinder personnel which is presently organic to the Airborne Division. The command ship carrying personnel to control the drop did serve as a pathfinder unit in principle and was directly responsible for the successful landing of the troops and undoubtedly saved many lives which would have been lost had the men continued to drop over the cliff.

This operation was an unusual operation and departed from all principles heretofore considered necessary for a successful airborne operation. There were no desirable drop zones to be selected nor was there a superior force, in numbers, dropped.

The Japanese commander can be criticized for leaving his CP to make a reconnaissance in the midst of an airborne drop. This mistake was magnified when he was immediately killed. He can also be criticized for his apparent failure to have an organization such that someone would succeed him as commander in event of his death. This was evident since there was no organization of forces apparent on the island.

It is evident that the plans were flexible. At almost the last minute, plans to land a battalion amphibiously instead of by parachute were carried out without any confusion or prior planning.

LESSONS

1. Close coordination and cooperation between the services is necessary for the successful completion of an airborne assault.

2. Plans for an airborne operation must be flexible. There must be no inflexibility of minds of the planning staff.

NB
3. Armor can play a useful role in the reduction of fortified positions.

PH
4. Ready communications is necessary to insure support of air and naval forces in operations.

Sup - 5. It is feasible for parachutists, in some instances, to cover and support amphibious landings on small scale.

Sup - 6. It is possible to successfully complete an operation by violating some principles of war if other principles are emphasized.

General
7. Never underestimate your enemy.

" 8. Keep your plans simple and flexible.

Sup - 9. The use of a command ship to control parachute drops is feasible and will minimize casualties when using hazardous drop zones.

10. A commander should never leave his CP during an assault on his position unless necessary to control his command.

NB
- 11. A commander should always have others trained to assume his job in case he becomes a casualty.

12. It is often times desirable to depart from the conventional weapons and utilize field expedients in the reduction of certain positions.

Sup - 13. Parachutists can be advantageously utilized in seemingly impossible areas if the drop is small in size and controlled.

14. G-2 estimates should not be taken for granted with regards to enemy strength on an objective.

15. It is entirely feasible for the enemy to fortify positions without any outward change in appearance.