

TANK SUPPORT WITH THE 7th CAVALRY

41-14

By Marcello W. Bordley Jr.

Marcello W. Bordley Jr.

Captain, Cavalry

SCOPE

This manuscript is a presentation of the personal experiences and opinions of the writer who served as a platoon leader, troop commander and squadron S-3 with the 7th Cavalry Regiment throughout World War II. It includes a brief history of the tank support afforded the regiment, a description of several engagements in which tanks took part and a discussion of their limitations and problems.

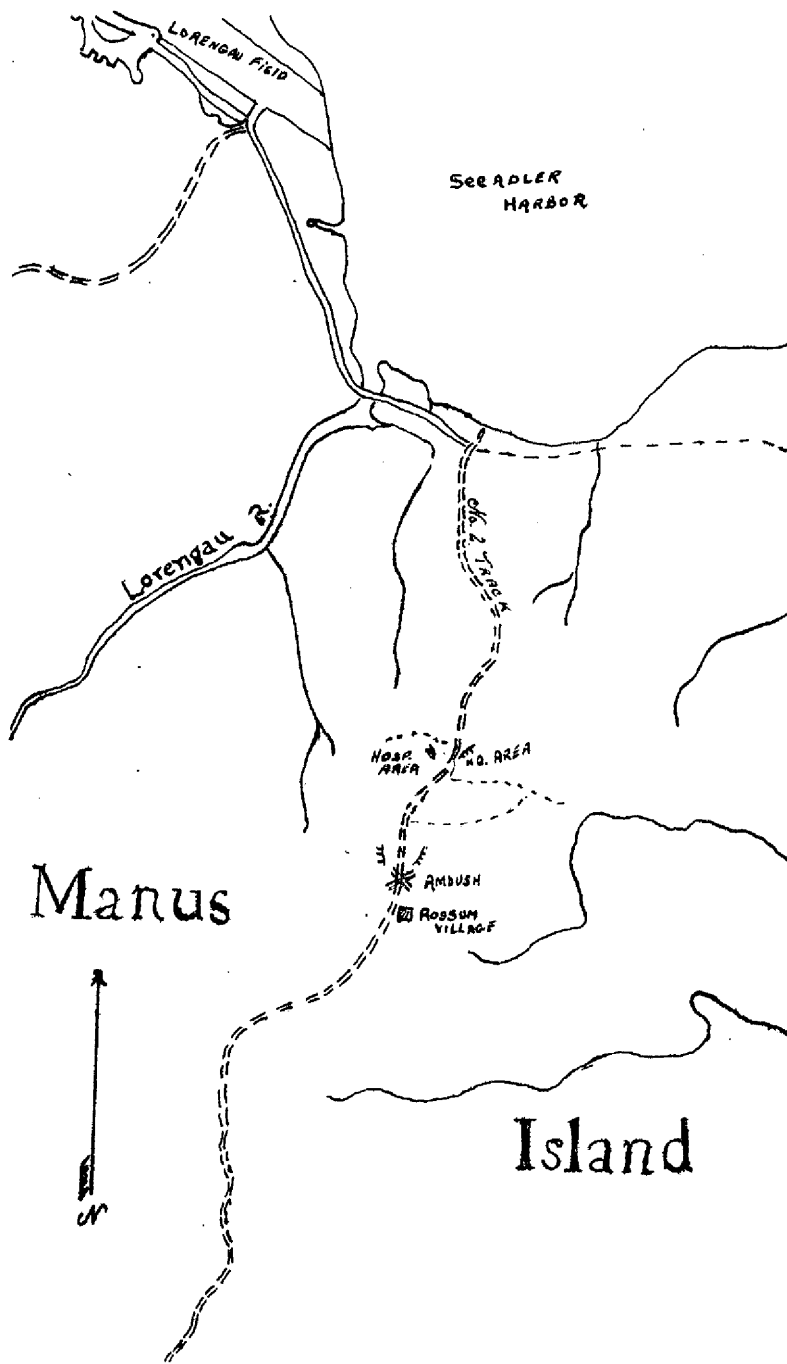
To the average armored officer accustomed to thinking in terms of mass, mobility and firepower, the role of the tank in the Pacific War must seem of little consequence. But to the foot soldier fighting his way through the jungles and swamps from New Guinea to the Philippines, the tank was a welcome addition which contributed materially to the success of many operations.

Their use was limited. They were not employed as consistently, on the large scale or as spectacularly as they were in other theatres. Their role was none the less vital. Their presence assured the infantryman of a most effective counter measure against the Jap bunker and well concealed automatic weapons.

The original attempt to employ tanks in the Pacific in any sizeable force occurred at Buna, New Guinea by the Australians. The soldiers from down under were successful in reaching their objective but it proved a costly victory.

Possibly because of this episode, infantry-tank tactics had been minimized. At any rate, the 7th Cavalry, upon its introduction into combat, had had little if any such training. It is not surprising, therefore, that initial attempts to employ these teams were not entirely satisfactory.

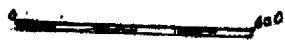
Throughout the Admiralty Campaign, the only tank support available was the 302d Tank Company attached to the division for this operation. It was not a sizeable force to spread out among four regiments. As a result the squadrons seldom had more than three tanks with which to work and more often only one. One tank did not prove to be a very



Manus



Island



satisfactory attachment even though it might be confined to a road wide front.

When subjected to intense automatic fire, it was virtually impossible to maintain adequate communications. Moreover, the crew was dependent entirely upon infantry for support. This restricted maneuver and had the tendency to make the crew overly cautious.

The first occasion in which I was directly concerned with this situation occurred on the 20th of March 1944. The campaign for the Admiralties was well along. Los Negros had been virtually cleared of all organized resistance. Lorengan airstrip on Manus had been secured, and the 2d Brigade, in continuing its mission, had set its sights on the high ground to the south and east.

Little was known of the enemy organization or disposition in this area. Accordingly, F Troop, 7th Cavalry was given the patrol mission of proceeding south through Rossum Village; and, unless prevented by superior enemy forces, was to continue along Track No. 2 to the vicinity of Kelau Harbor. Upon arrival in this area, they were to determine the possibility of resupply by LSM; and, if favorable, would set up a base from which future patrols could be sent out.

It was fully anticipated that the mission might prove to be a difficult one. An artillery F. O. party and a light tank were attached. Communications with regiment were to be maintained by 284 radio which was mounted on a $\frac{1}{2}$ ton truck. To facilitate the progress of the jeep and tank, a D7 dozer, towing a 1ton trailer with extra fuel and ammunition,

was also attached.

Throughout the greater part of the advance to the harbor, the employment of the tank was expected to be limited. The track was bordered on both sides by very heavy woods interspaced by such dense jungle undergrowth that even the natives were forced to stay on the trails. However, it was thought that the tank would be of material assistance in reducing trail blocks and supporting the attacks on the several villages along the route.

Of even greater benefit, and one which may or may not have been taken into account, was the psychological effect upon the patrol. Moral was boosted considerably. Everyone knew that if there was any sizeable force left that the logical place for them to be was along the track. The protected fire power of the M5 was a welcome addition.

That it was an accurate premonition was quickly verified. For two previous days, small patrols had moved down the trail as far as Rossum without making enemy contact or discovering any indications of the enemy's presence in force. However, the troop had moved only six hundred yards south of the I P when they ran head on into a hornets' nest. Upon investigating several trails converging on No. 2 Track at approximately the same point, the patrol uncovered a hospital area on the west and what had been a headquarters area on the east.

It seems inconceivable that a sizeable patrol, which included vehicles, could move within several hundred yards of an enemy held area without being discovered. Yet such must have been the case. The sudden

appearance of the small security elements in their midst sent Nips scurrying in every direction. They had no idea they were in dire peril until they were being fired upon. Casualties were suffered on both sides, but the element of surprise balanced the scale in the patrol's favor. The rate of seven to one which the troops had somehow adopted was more than maintained. In addition, some valuable documents were obtained. Foremost among these was a map of the entire defenses of Manus Island. They were sent back immediately to Regimental Headquarters.

The contact had cost the patrol much valuable time and it was well past noon before they could again resume the march. Even then it was questionable as to the advisability of attempting to push through such a large concentration, but a timely radio message from Regiment left no other alternative. The contents were brief and to the point, "Continue on Mission".

In accordance with those instructions the advance was resumed, but not until added security measures had been taken. There was no doubt now that the enemy was present in force. There was no doubt either that he knew of our presence for we had left our calling cards in no uncertain terms. The tank was moved from the head of the main body to front of the advance party. Instructions were issued for thorough investigation of all trails converging on the main track. Leading elements were to reconnoitre by fire anything that caused the slightest bit of suspicion.

The precautions were not without justification. Warned by the previous fire fight or perhaps lying in wait for similar patrols which

had taken place on the preceding days, the Nips were poised several hundred yards further south and just north of Rossum Village.

Their initial burst was very effective, and severe casualties were suffered throughout the advance guard. The leading elements were literally engulfed in a hail of lead that came at them from all sides. Machine gun and rifle fire poured in from every conceivable angle. The Nips were in trees, in bunkers, and in slit trenches on both flanks and to the front. The whole jungle for one awe inspiring minute which seemed like hours was literally alive with those little hissing, whining messengers of death.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. Men on both sides of the trail slowly, hesitantly lifted their heads. They stared into the jungle and saw absolutely nothing. There was no movement, no telltale smoke or dust to give the slightest indication of the enemy's position. Yet there was the feeling that if you reached out you could touch him.

The respite was of brief duration. The tank, first to recover, moved up just behind the point and began firing at the bunkers directly to its front. It sprayed the area with MG fire, raked it with cannister, HE, and AP. Return fire was vicious. Bullets splintered and bounced off the hull in all directions. No one dared move. Those who tried, and the numbers were few, were hit instantly. The Nip was playing it smart too. He fired only when the tank fired and so made it practically impossible to determine his location accurately.

Finally, the tank commander decided to withdraw for a consultation with the patrol leader. The move was a fortunate one. Communications consisting of two improvised EESA telephones had broken down. No pre-arranged signal had been made, and there was no way of controlling the tank's action. As long as it kept firing, the men flanking it had no choice but to remain also. Moreover, its presence made it impossible to get to the wounded. There was too much return fire to risk it.

As it backed out rescue parties and aid men went in to evacuate and administer to their fallen comrades. The tank was told to return far enough forward so as to be in position to meet any attempt by the Jap to close in. It was not to fire under any other circumstances. Provisions were made for signalling through the rear pistol port.

As the evacuation progressed, steps were taken to reorganize and secure the position. A quick consultation was held among the officers. It was decided that it would be foolish to try to push through or to attempt another envelopment. There wouldn't be sufficient day light remaining, and the men were exhausted by the days activities. In addition, approximately fourteen men would have to be returned to the regiment where they could be treated by a doctor. Among them was the patrol commander who had been shot through the wrist.

The terrain was not ideal for defense, and it was decided to radio for permission to withdraw. While awaiting the reply, preparations to establish a perimeter for the night were begun. Security detachments were pushed out further on the flanks. An area was designated for the

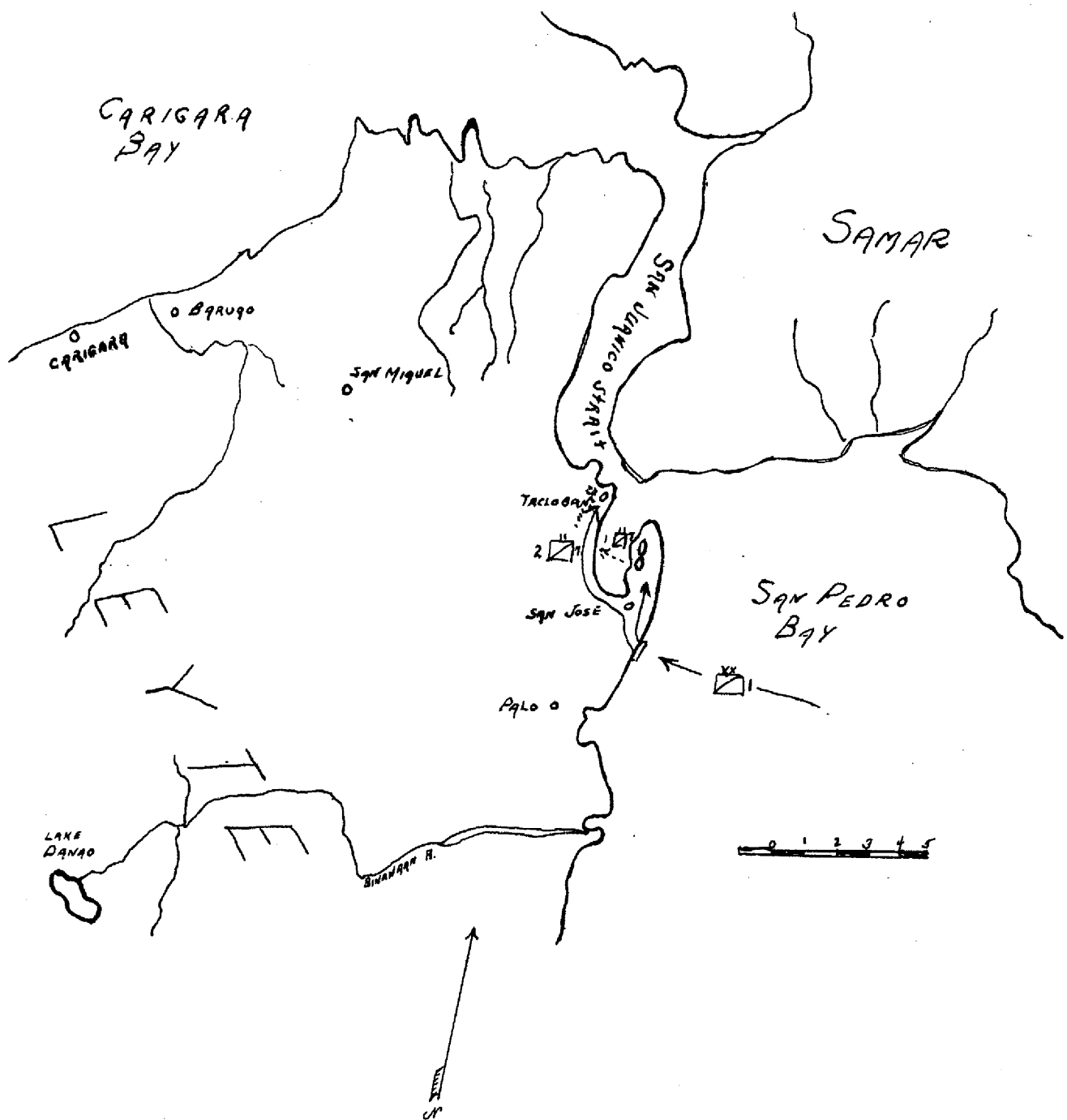
vehicles, and the dozer began clearing a passageway. Machine guns were just being set in position when word was received to withdraw. Also another troop was being sent out to assist if needed.

After necessary orders were issued, the patrol again assembled on the track and started back. This time the tank was placed toward the rear of the column as were all of the BARs in the troop. The precaution proved unnecessary, however.

At the half way point, a little more excitement occurred when the tank ran over a land mine. The explosion knocked the track off and flying pieces of metal caused three more casualties. It was never determined whether the vehicles had missed the mine earlier or whether it had been planted after the patrol had passed earlier in the day. Forward momentum was quickly restored when a tow chain was hooked on from the dozer. After proceeding another hundred yards or so, contact was made with E Troop; and, the rest of the march was made without any further incidents.

In contrast to this type of tank support, was that employed by the Regiment during the Leyte Campaign. During this operation, the 44th Tank Battalion, consisting of three medium companies and one light company, supported the division. For the initial phase Companies B and D were attached to the 7th Cavalry.

The battalion was sent to the Admiralties to stage with the division, and while final plans were being drawn up and last minute preparations made, officers and men of the 44th sought out the various units to which they were attached. They spent as much time as possible



in the area getting to know the men with whom they expected to work. They went over tentative plans; hashed up alternate plans. During meals, many discussions were devoted to previous experiences. As a result, when at last troops were ready to embark, new friends had been made, difficulties ironed out and tricks of the trade passed back and forth. Most important, knowledge of and confidence in the men they were fighting with had been instilled.

G-2 reports had indicated that the terrain in the 7th Cavalry zone was tankable. There was even some talk of concrete roads, park like coconut groves and good solid ground. Moreover, aerial photographs of the area from White Beach to Tacloban appeared to bear this out.

At 20 1000 October 1944, the first assault wave hit the beach immediately in the wake of the devastating naval gun and rocket barrage. They moved in rapidly against light machine gun and sniper fire. Succeeding waves followed close behind. At 1030, LSMs carrying elements of the 44th Tank Battalion came ashore. D Company plus one platoon of B Company joined the 1st Squadron, moving through them to lead the assault across the air-strip. They encountered very little resistance and quickly secured the peninsula. One tank was put out of action when it ran over what was believed to have been a 500 lb. aerial bomb.

B Company moved straight in to join the 2d Squadron which had extended its portion of the beach head in about six hundred yards. It had been anticipated that the depth would be greater than this and guides had been left to lead the tanks forward. Unfortunately, the park like

terrain had developed into a twisted mass of underbrush and debris as a result of the barrage. Matters had been further complicated by landing several hundred yards too far to the south. With none of the predesignated land marks clearly discernable, the squadron had experienced some difficulty in becoming oriented. Fortunately, the resistance had been light. For the most part, the few defenders who were in the area were still too stunned to offer more than token resistance. There were instances in which lead elements came upon groups of Japs literally running around in circles. Though some were armed, they appeared to be too bewildered to even raise their rifles. Few were given much of an opportunity.

Even before the tanks came up, it had become apparent that they were going to be largely restricted to a road wide front. The ground was soft and to the immediate front were rice paddies and swamps. As a consequence only one platoon stayed with the leading elements. The balance reverted to Regimental reserve. This one platoon was largely instrumental, however, in restoring the momentum of the attack. It moved to the right of the squadron sector and successfully took under fire, a Jap machine gun position which had momentarily halted F Troop. They assisted in the destruction of several other isolated strong points which appeared during the rapid advance. By 1630, the squadron had nearly reached the second days' phase line. Here they dug in for the night while the tanks pulled back for servicing and resupply.

The following day the squadrons joined forces for the attack on Tacloban. The 1st Squadron moved over water in LVTs to the 2d Squadron

perimeter. D Company, 44th Tank Battalion moved over the same route which the assault troops had taken the preceding day to continue in its support role. The combined strength of the two squadrons proved to be too much for the Nips, and regiment quickly moved into Tacloban to receive a rousing welcome from the inhabitants. Unfortunately, there was little time to devote to the joyous citizens for the enemy had dug in on the ridge line overlooking the town from the North. Intermittent rifle, machine gun and mortar fire emanating from this source, made it imperative that these hills be secured immediately. The 2d Squadron was given this task while the 1st Squadron cleared the town. Inasmuch as the terrain prohibited the use of tanks on the ridge line both B and D Companies supported the force attacking the town. This advance was a slow house to house process with the tanks and dismounted cavalrymen working closely together to eliminate the stubbornly resisting japs. In the northern sector of town, around the school area, the resistance was particularly determined. Once again, however, the infantry-tank team proved an effective combination. The town was cleared of all opposition by mid afternoon and the balance of the Tacloban area was in our hands by night fall on A/3.

Upon the capture of this objective, the 44th Tank Battalion reverted to division control where they remained through A/42. Heavy rains and several typhoons turned the fields and roads into a sea of mud and of course nullified any thought of employing tanks.

The 44th was once again attached to the division for the Luzon operation. For the first time since becoming attached the 1st Cavalry,

it was able to make full use of all its attributes. There were many instances when the battalion rendered invaluable assistance. Probably the most noteworthy was its support of the flying columns in the race for Manila.

The majority of the tank support was given to the units fighting in the capital. About February 20, however, the 2d Squadron, 7th Cavalry was given the mission of securing San Juan Reservoir. F Troop, assisted by one platoon of the 44th, launched the attack and after a bitter, all day battle, wrested one of Manila's main sources of water supply from the enemy. Two tanks were lost during the engagement when they were knocked out by direct hits from a large calibre coastal gun commanding the approaches from the city.

A few days later, when the regiment spearheaded the attack on Antipolo, a part of the Shimbu line and one of the best coordinated, carefully planned defense systems encountered by the division in the war, tanks were again attached. Once more terrain restricted their employment. Confined to the road by a series of rugged ridges and ravines, ever increasing in height and depth, the tanks could do little more than bring direct, large calibre fire on the mouth of caves which honey combed the hills and housed automatic weapons and 47mm guns. During the course of one of the Japanese counterattacks, two tanks were knocked out. One by a 47mm, the other by a satchel charge dropped from an overhanging bluff. On 12 March 1945, the regiment captured the final ridge overlooking Antipolo and was relieved for a short rest period prior to taking part in the eastern phase of the operation. During this final stage of the

campaign, no further tank support was made available; and, the regiment closed out its battle career on 30 June 1945 when troops were withdrawn to Infanta on the east coast, and from there, were sent to Lucena for a well deserved rest.

In retrospect, it is my opinion that tank support with the 7th Cavalry while not always entirely satisfactory was generally highly desirable. As has already been pointed out, many of the short comings encountered originally were due almost entirely to the lack of training in the principles of infantry-tank tactics, poor communications from ground to tank, and a tendency to underestimate the ability of the tank in jungle terrain. Occasionally, a reluctance on the part of the tank crew to depend solely on the infantry for support caused some dissension among the dismounted cavalry leaders. It was felt that tanks should expect to take the same chances and suffer losses along with the troops they were supporting. Such instances were rare and occurred only where tanks were operating singly. Confidence, through prior training with and a personal knowledge of prospective teammates, will most assuredly eliminate this irregularity entirely. Under present day tables of organization where the tank company is an integral part of the regiment and with communications vastly improved, most of these deficiencies have been eradicated. Tank support, be it for its mass, mobility, shock action or protected fire power, collectively or individually, is an asset that no commander can afford to overlook or fail to appreciate.