

ADVANCED OFFICERS CLASS #1

1 May 1948

MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: THE FIRST UNITED STATES TANK ACTION IN WORLD WAR II

SCOPE: A military monograph covering the operations of the Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East from September, 1941, to April, 1942.

44-47

Prepared by: THOMAS DOOLEY

Lt. Col., Cavalry

THE FIRST UNITED STATES TANK ACTION
IN WORLD WAR II

THOMAS DOOLEY

Lt. Colonel, Cavalry

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to express my appreciation to Brigadier General James R. N. Weaver, United States Army, for the information and records used in the compilation of this monograph.

Thomas Dooley

Lt. Colonel, Cavalry

In direct contrast to the lightning-like thrusts of United States armored divisions across France and Germany during the last year of the war, the first United States tank action was a slow, difficult, retrograde movement on the opposite side of the world in the Philippines.

Let us look back to July, 1940, when there existed only one reserve tank battalion, the 70th GHQ Reserve Tank Battalion (Medium) stationed at Fort George G. Meade in Maryland. It was in a sad state due to lack of personnel.

Such was the condition when news came to Major General Adna R. Chaffee, then on his sickbed, that the War Department planned to use many similar units as special task forces, though they made no provision for their organization. The "Father of the Armored Force" could foresee that without authorization for these reserve units his armored divisions would be chopped to pieces to supply them. So greatly did he fear this that he dispatched a letter of protest to Chief of Staff Marshall. "So already they are contemplating breaking up our divisions to fritter them away for small purposes," he wrote indignantly. "G-3 has set up no additional GHQ Reserve Tank Battalions so far. At least four more should be set up at once. We will have material."¹

In October of 1940, General Chaffee wrote to Major General William Bryden, the Deputy Chief of Staff, reiterating his plea

1. Mildred Hanson Gillie, Forging The Thunderbolt, Military Service Publishing Company, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1947, pp. 195.

for "prompt formation of efficient GHQ Reserve Tank Battalions."¹
It was his proposal to use eighteen scattered National Guard tank companies to provide personnel for the formation of four tank battalions immediately, with training of cadres for ten more battalions to begin soon thereafter.

General Chaffee's work resulted in the first of these additional battalions being formed about one month later, for on November 25, 1940, the 192d Tank Battalion was inducted at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Three more battalions were organized soon after: the 193d at Fort Benning, Georgia, on January 6, 1941, the 194th at Fort Lewis, Washington, on January 22, 1941, and the 191st at Fort Meade, Maryland, on February 3, 1941. Inasmuch as these battalions were only expected to be in Federal service for one year, no attempt was made to standardize them or to make them conform with any established tables of organization or equipment.²

The Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East was composed of the following: Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 192d General Headquarters Tank Battalion (Light), 194th General Headquarters Tank Battalion (Light), and 17th Ordnance Company (Armored).

After the formation of USAFFE in August, 1941, General Douglas MacArthur, then commanding, had asked for an armored

1. Ibid. p. 195
2. Ibid. p. 194-196

division. The above nucleus was never augmented although a medium GHQ tank battalion had been completely equipped and was on 48-hour standby for departure for the Philippines when its orders were cancelled on December 10, 1941.

The 192d had come from General Sylvester's 1st Tank Group at Fort Benning, Georgia, and had carried out a defensive role in the 1941 Louisiana maneuvers. The 194th had come from the West Coast where it had been taking part in minor maneuvers with, what was at that time, Fourth Army. Both battalions had worked during this maneuver period with early models of the M1 tank.

The first of the units to arrive in the Far East, the 194th and 17th Ordnance Company (Armored), reached Manila on September 26, 1941. One tank company of this battalion and a part of the battalion headquarters company had been detached to Alaska. Upon movement to Port of Embarkation, this battalion (as was the 192d later) was reequipped with new M3 tanks and half-tracks. The armament of these new tanks was strange to the personnel. The M3 had for its main battery the 37 millimeter gun with a .30 caliber machine gun co-axially mounted in the turret. The two fixed sponson guns (fired by remote control by the driver) and the AA gun were all new to the crews. This light tank was heavier and longer, had better flotation, and was equipped with radio facilities which were different from those of the M1. So little time and direction

had been possible before departure that the unit had thought it necessary, in installing the new radios, to remove the right sponson gun to make space, and to spot weld armor over the thus-vacated spot.

The 194th was assigned station at Fort Stotsenberg in Pampanga Province adjacent to Clark Field. Before the arrival of the group commander, this unit undertook limited reconnaissance in North Luzon. It did not accomplish any firing problems nor cross-country driving as no ranges, no fuel nor ammunition was released for this.

The Group Commander, Brigadier General James R. N. Weaver, (then Colonel), with Headquarters and Group Headquarters Detachment and the 192d GHQ Tank Battalion (Light) arrived in Manila on November 20, 1941. The headquarters detachment consisted of ten enlisted men, no tanks, two half-tracks, two 2-way radios, two 1/4-ton C&R cars, one sedan and no trucks.¹ These units were also stationed at Fort Stotsenberg and were housed in tents pending completion of semi-permanent housing (Sewale, a siding for houses and buildings made by natives by weaving two-inch reeds onto a bamboo frame.) The only training at this time was limited reconnaissance work as far north as Lingayen and Baguio, the summer capital.

The Provisional Tank Group, USAFFE, (as such) was organized on November 21, 1941. Eight days later, November 29, 1941, the 17th Ordnance Company (Armored) which had arrived at the same

1. Operations of the Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East. 1941-1942.

time as the 194th Tank Battalion, was assigned to the group, in place at Fort Stotsenberg.

On November 27, a general alert for all forces in the Philippines had been sounded, but for some reason or through the oversight of someone, the tanks were omitted in the warning. However, the commanding officer of Clark Field, had been ordered by FEAF (Far East Air Force) to execute two alerts, one day--one night, prior to December 2, and the tank group had been asked to participate. This they did on December 1, by going into battle positions for the defense of Clark Field.

The general change in commands which was published about November 22, may have contributed to the disrupted channels: FEAF, North Luzon Force, South Luzon Force, The Philippine Division, all had new commanders. On November 28, when General Wainwright arrived at Fort Stotsenberg to take command of North Luzon Force, his staff consisted of a chief of staff, two officers in G-3 section and one in G-2 section. Headquarters, South Luzon Force, had not completed their set-up on 13 December, when a tank reconnaissance was made to the south and west coasts of South Luzon.

As to command, the Provisional Tank Group was a separate tactical command under Commanding General, USAFFE, only being associated with the General Reserve for administrative reports. The major unit of this reserve was the Philippine Division.

On December 8, (December 7 in the United States) when the news of the Pearl Harbor attack was received, the crews were at their tanks and at 0830 the word was passed along that Jap planes were 40 minutes away. Final checks were made as the men stood by, but no attack came. However, at 1230, while the noon meal was being served, a surprise attack of Clark Field interrupted the routine of this organization. Bombers at about 20,000 feet accurately blasted Air Force installations throughout the Stotsenberg area. The tank weapons were of no use until the strafers came in low immediately after the bombing. In this action Technical Sergeant Temon Bardowski, B/192d is credited with the first enemy plane brought down by armored units in World War II. The first armored soldier to die in combat in World War II was Private Brooks of Company D, 194th.

After the attack, the tanks were redispersed with the 194th moving about three kilometers northeast and the 192d spreading so as to fully protect the relatively unbroken terrain to the south of the airstrip.

There were two more air attacks, on the 10th and 13th of December, but the group losses amounted to only one half-track and two men wounded. During this time tankers brought in the first prisoners of war, who were apparently naval aviators.

With landings imminent in Southern Luzon, the group headquarters were moved to Manila and the 194th was moved to an area

north of Manila after having sent reconnaissance and liason groups to the areas of Montinlupa, Nasugbu Bay, Balayan Bay, Batangas Bay and east and north around Lake Taal.

About this time a fugitive British ship put in to Manila and from its holds came potential augmentation for the tank group. Some forty Bren gun carriers were made available and the initial plan called for organization of two companies. The Bren guns were not available, but ordnance was to arm the carriers with either .50 caliber or .30 caliber guns. Had this organization been completed, the tanks would have been strengthened by a much needed economy force carrying out a reconnaissance and security role. Notice of impending landings, by the enemy, in strength, in Lingayen Gulf, and subsequent moves of the tanks, halted this augmentation. Eventually all were armed, those with tank units from salvage of the tank casualties. About twenty were kept with the tank group while the remainder went with Philippine Army divisions and to the 26th Cavalry. The latter group, commanded by a Veterinary Officer, did noble work throughout the Bataan campaign. Those retained by tanks, though their capacity was small, did a very good job in emergency supply and on cross country work over doubtful terrain before committing tanks. It was soon found that the heat-baked ground with appearance of good standings would not even support the Brenns.

At a staff conference at USAFFE Headquarters on the evening of December 21, orders were received to dispatch one company from the 192d to be on the way by midnight, and by resupplying with gas at Gerona and at Bauang to get to the Lingayen Gulf area by daylight, where, according to reports, it was anticipated the enemy would land a sizeable force at first light. The 192d was ordered to move up Highway 3 for such supporting moves as the battalion commander might direct after his contact with the Commanding General, North Luzon Force.

When the group commander arrived in the Lingayen Gulf area, he found the company which was dispatched prior to midnight, out of gas at Rosario. The tank company commander reported that contradictory orders had prevented his refilling at Gerona and that his mission had been changed to cover rear elements of the 11th Philippine Army Division. Such was to be the case in several instances in the next few weeks due to the confusion and lack of coordination between units of untrained troops.

It is only fair to explain that all Philippine Army divisions were comparatively untrained and understrength. Many of the troops had gone through the Philippine military training of five months but some had not even had this background. Too, some of the units which were now in the shadow of contact with well-trained Japanese divisions, had not been mobilized until after the declaration of war.

No steel helmets or individual entrenching tools were available to Philippine Army troops. The uniforms habitually worn by these units were light tropical hats, fatigue clothes, and canvas-topped shoes. All men were equipped with Enfield rifles, but very few spare parts were available. This point was of concern to unit commanders due to the many malfunctions caused by broken ejectors.¹

Let us return to the company from the 192d which was enroute to the beach area and had been found out of gas at Rosario. After the tank group commander arrived, the Commanding General, North Luzon Force, entered the town. Movement of any kind was hampered due to unopposed enemy air activity, for after the airstrikes on December 8, the FEAF, as pertains to Luzon, consisted of a few P-40's, used on sneak reconnaissance, and a few Philippine Army BT-1's which proved of service as courier carry. The general situation was not clear but reports indicated that two companies of the 11th Division were engaged north of Damortis. Elements of the 26th Cavalry were enroute from Rosario to the point of contact, but as witnessed by the writer, horse troops were at the mercy of fighter-bombers.

Then came a report that an enemy motorized unit was approaching Damortis and it was at this time that General Wainwright asked

1. Report of Operations of North Luzon Force and I Philippine Corps in the Defense of North Luzon and Bataan from 8 December 1941--9 April 1942.

of the tank commander, "What can you do?". Resupply gas had not yet arrived, but the resources of the company were pooled and a platoon was gassed and dispatched to meet the enemy elements moving on Damortis. This platoon was commanded by a Lieutenant Morin.

The platoon did not encounter opposition as they pushed out of Damortis (north) so they continued on to Agoon. There they met an enemy tank unit on the road. At this time occurred the first tank versus tank action in World War II. The enemy tanks were of low silhouette, no turret, with sides sloped so that an impact close enough to normally secure a penetration was difficult to achieve. On the other hand their 47 millimeter gun was quite effective against our tanks with their perpendicular sides and high profiles--points which had caused their rejection by our allies before the war. Lieutenant Morin's tank which left the road in an attempt to maneuver out of the road was hit and burned. This was the first tank lost through tank action in World War II. It was later determined that the crew survived and was captured, making them the first Armored Force P.O.W.'s in World War II. The other four tanks, all hit, were able to pull out, one being towed, although they were all lost later in the day through bombings and mishaps in salvage operations. The assistant driver of the platoon sergeant's tank, Private Henry Deckert, B/192d, had been decapitated when a direct hit

penetrated the forward deck at the ball and socket joint of the bow gun mounting. This man was the first armored soldier killed in tank versus tank action in World War II. Hits on enemy tanks with our 37 millimeter guns had been observed during the fight, but many of the shots were seen to ricochet off their sloping armor.

Later the situation around Damortis developed to such a degree that it was imperative that tanks be used to cover the withdrawal of the 26th Cavalry. The company at Rosario (gas had arrived in trucks) was sent in with instructions to cover the withdrawal by a "peeling-off" routine. The "peel-off" was from the point of contact to the rear after the withdrawal of the foot troops.

Later in the day the tanks were disposed to the north and west of Rosario but the quickly developing situation caused the 71st Division (Philippino Army) Commanding General to order all elements south of the Bued River bridge, which was burned in the face of advancing tanks and cyclists.

The 192d at this time was disposed to the east of Highway 3, and on the twenty-fourth day of December, because of the dire straits of the North Luzon Force, the 194th Battalion (less Company C) was sent from south of Manila to be disposed to the west of the arterial highway.

Since the Orange Plan had been put into effect, the mission assigned the Provisional Tank Group at this time was to cover the withdrawal of the Philippino-American Forces into Bataan. This plan had been made prior to the formation of USAFFE and called for a withdrawal in event of attack to the Peninsula of Bataan to make a stand and gain time for action of troops emanating from the States.

The withdrawal plan called for a retrograde action in successive phase lines, four in number, (see sketch, Lingayen Gulf to Clark Field) and the tanks carried out this mission amid much confusion. Because of the aforementioned nature of the terrain all units were instructed to plan positions to occupy all roads, both major and minor, from the north and at the same time to reconnoiter for avenues of egress that would tie in with Highways 3 and 5 (the two N.S. axial roads). Tanks occupying positions on the main routes were to pay particular attention to mechanized units, and were given detailed instructions to cover all turns in the highway and to coordinate with the SPM's (75's in half-tracks).

This period was marked by many tank actions, notable of which was the action at Baliuag in the Pampanga area in which two platoons of C/192d in a back and forth fight through the town bagged eight Jap medium tanks and forestalled a complete rout of our own foot troops in the vicinity.

Another incident, tragic in its loss of much needed equipment, occurred north of the Agno when, due to lack of coordination between units, ten tanks had to be abandoned due to blown bridges and a hard pressing enemy.

The first phase of the final action prior to the defense of Bataan came in covering the Calumpit bridge position at which junction the last troops of the South Luzon Force joined the route of the North Luzon Force. The Calumpit bridge was blown during the night of December 31-January 1. After the destruction of the bridge, the 192d was passed through the 194th which had had a short respite, although now reduced to about thirty tanks. Because of this reduction in personnel and equipment, Company A of the 192d was attached to the 194th and this force was to cover the retrograde from the Calumpit junction to the Layac Junction covering position.

The attached company, in one instance, attempted a makeshift counterattack in the vicinity of Guagua with elements of the 11th Division (P.A.). The infantry elements at one time mistook our tanks for enemy and laid down very accurate mortar fire, as they did also on the group commander's 1/4 ton reconnaissance vehicle as he attempted some sort of coordination. The tank company, by trial and cross-country, and with the eventual loss of three tanks, rejoined the 194th on Highway 7 at a point west of Guagua.

On the afternoon of January 5, C Company of the 194th, supported by four SPM's was fortunate in ambushing an enemy unit of about seven or eight hundred infantry, guided by three Filipinos, apparently under duress, carrying white flags. The unit was routed with approximately 50 per cent loss to themselves. The entire group worked continuously during the withdrawal at retrieving tank gas cached along the route.

One other fire fight marked the covering action just prior to entry into Bataan. This engagement, with few casualties, lasted from 1430 to about 1700 when the enemy withdrew. It is of particular interest only because it marked the first use of smoke by Jap units.

The period from January 6 to January 26 was marked by further covering actions in the East Coast road and one attempted foray in the West or I Corps sector. The covering action on the east was to aid the II Corps to pull back after a main effort was made by the Japs in the Abucay Hacienda area. (See sketch, Bataan 1.) The new and last MLR was along the Pilar-Bagac Road. (See sketch, Bataan 2).

The action in the I Corps sector was an attempt to open up a road to extricate the First Philippine Army Division which had been cut off north of Bagac by a sizeable infiltration of Nipponese units. In this attempt, the lack of close-in infantry protection and the cleverly concealed road mines of the Japs

caused the loss of two tanks and the eventual withdrawal of the foot troops (without heavy equipment) over a circuitous beach trail.

Too, during this period the bulk of the tank units gained their first respite since December 8, in a bivouac area south of Pilar. The tank units were reorganized, companies of the 194th being reduced from 17 to 10 tanks; platoons from five tanks to three; a reduction shortly to be imposed upon the 192d. Overhaul, to the limit of time available, was effected, the 17th Ordnance Company (Armored) carrying out third and fourth echelon maintenance with the long-needed spare parts, tracks, motors, batteries and radios from ordnance stocks on South Bataan (not released by order prior to December 8). For the first time since hostilities began, crews were fed from their own kitchens, but this luxury was dampened due to the forced reduction on January 6, which placed all troops on half rations.

Also during the period occurred further indications of the lack of knowledge among commanders of the characteristics and capabilities and limitations of tanks when requests were made for tanks to seek out and destroy snipers, flush Japs from sugar cane fields (this role of bird dog was carried out), and sorties in front of the MLR which had been mined extensively by our own troops.

The beach defense of the East coast was assumed on January 28, and with it came contingent missions: the 192d overwatched the north half of the East coast and was on call to support the western half of the II Corps front; the 194th was assigned the southern half of the beaches and secondarily supported the western half of II Corps. The difficulty in supporting any front line unit was accentuated by the narrowness of new trails and the old trails leading off the coast road were dead-end avenues originally cut for timber operations.

On February 1, composite platoons of tanks and half-tracks were assigned to each of three airfields that had been built on the peninsula in anticipation of the reconstitution of air forces for the beleaguered troops.

Upon request by I Corps Commander the 192d (less one company) was dispatched to the western sector to support foot troops in erasing three "pockets": the Tuol Pocket formed by infiltration of Jap units on I Corps front before the MLR had been cleared and definitely established; the Aglaloma and Anyasen Pockets formed through the uncoordinated Jap landings in their attempt to cut the main supply route (the West Coast road).

The difficulties typical of these actions can best be described by quoting from the citation awarded Lt. John Hay of the 192d:

"During this period and in the terrain involved, a rugged dense jungle wherein tank movement had to be limited to the space cumulatively cleared by repeated charges of a few yards each, Lt. Hay's gallantry, persistence, and complete disregard of personal danger, in an entirely new phase of tank warfare, pre-eminently contributed to the ultimate success of the tanks and troops which they supported."¹

In the Tuol pocket, a tank-infantry combination worked very effectively against Japs dug in around banyan trees, the outstanding case resulting in the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Lieutenant Bianchi of the infantry company. Also in this action, one United States tank was lost, due to being blinded by a Jap flame thrower (the first used in the campaign) and subsequent jamming between two trees, which necessitated abandonment.

After the clearance of the pockets in the I Corps, the tank group instituted a plan for a comprehensive instruction among Philippine Army troops of tank-infantry tactics but this was limited, due to gas rationing and lack of personnel. Although movement was at a minimum due to lack of gasoline, ammunition was adequate and ordnance contributed to the effectiveness of the tanks by converting considerable AP 37 millimeter to HE and Cannister, much more useful in the absence of enemy armor. After the entry into Bataan, enemy tanks were never observed in strength--never more than three at one time--usually less, and

1. Operations of the Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East. 1941-1942.

these only in April during the last days of Bataan when United States artillery and AT had been virtually reduced to inaction.

On April 3, the Japanese started their all-out offensive apparently with the blessing of their Emperor who this day was celebrating the anniversary of the dynasty. As the enemy activity increased on the II Corps front, the 194th took on its contingent mission as primary and moved its companies to support the front line units on the East Coast road and west thereof. The 194th was later supported by one company of the 192d. The activities of the tank units in the next five days, with the resultant confusion of untrained, half-fed, malaria-ridden troops attacked by a superior equipped, better trained, better organized enemy, can hardly be given in detail. Suffice it to say that the tank units supported at every opportunity and on every trail that was not completely blocked by supply vehicles of the retreating troops until the tanks' battalion commanders were given the following order about 1830 on April 8, 1942: "You will make plans, to be communicated to company commanders only, and be prepared to destroy within one hour after receipt by radio, or other means, of the word "CRASH", all tanks and combat vehicles, arms, ammunition, gas, and radios: reserving sufficient trucks to close to rear echelons as soon as accomplished."¹

1. Ibid.

At about 2230, April 8, Major General E. P. King, commanding Luzon Forces, announced that further resistance would result in the massacre of the 6,000 sick and wounded in the area and of the 40,000 civilian refugees now congested closely about; that he was not in touch with any troops that were still resisting behind the closely drawn lines; that there were less than 25 per cent effective of those in being; that at most he could not expect to hold more than one more day; that upon his, and his only, responsibility, he would send a staff officer with a flag of surrender across the lines the next morning. When asked by the tank group commander if any help was in prospect, General King could answer only, "No." The destruction of the main ordnance dump was to commence at 2340. Troops were to destroy all arms and ammunition and cease resistance at 0700, April 9, 1942.

After the surrender, the tank group commander and his staff were quizzed several times by the Japanese and from these investigations it was learned that:

1. The Japanese had feared most the artillery and the tanks.
2. The tanks by their cordon coastal guard had stood off invasion from Manila Bay.
3. The Japanese had overestimated our tank strength, from 33 per cent to 900 per cent (158 to 1080).

The Japanese had about 200 tanks, inferior to ours in armor, but better adapted to tropical terrain and better armed as to

main battery, having a very effective 47 millimeter gun. (Report and recommendations on armored equipment was radioed to the War Department, by direction, sometime after the withdrawal to Bataan.)

These were the actions and circumstances that brought the members of the Provisional Tank Group, USAFFE, to that state which is so ably described by Mr. Winston Churchill as:

"Prisoner of War! It is a melancholy state. You are in the power of your enemy. You owe your life to his humanity, your daily bread to his compassion. You must obey his orders, await his pleasure, possess your souls in patience. The days are very long. Hours crawl by like paralytic centipedes.

"Moreover, the whole atmosphere of prison, even the most easy and best regulated prison, is odious. Companions quarrel about trifles, and get the least possible pleasure from each other's society. You feel a constant humility in being fenced in by railings and wire, watched by armed men and webbed about with a tangle of regulations and restrictions."¹

1. Winston Churchill, "A Rowing Commission". The Readers' Digest, July, 1940.

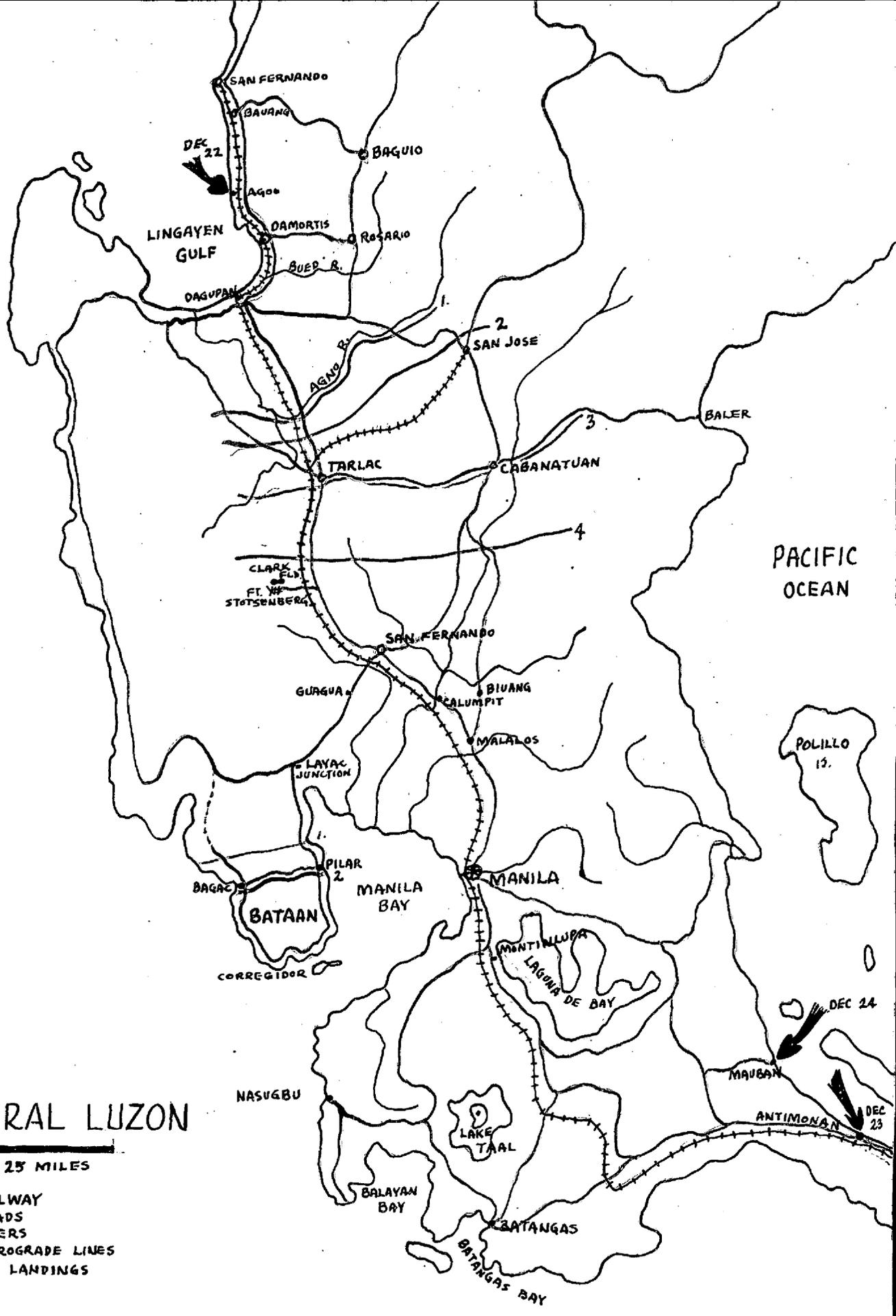
CHINA SEA

PACIFIC OCEAN

CENTRAL LUZON

25 MILES

- ++++ RAILWAY
- ROADS
- RIVERS
- - - RETROGRADE LINES
- ▶ JAP LANDINGS



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gillie, Mildred Hanson, Forging the Thunderbolt, Military Service Publishing Company, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1947.

Churchill, Winston, "A Roving Commission", The Readers Digest, July, 1940.

Operations of the Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East, 1941-1942.

"Supply" - Report of Operations of North Luzon Force and I Philippine Corps in the Defense of North Luzon and Bataan from 8 December 1941--9 April 1942.