

TITLE: Use of Armor in Luzon

SCOPE: Preparation for the invasion of Luzon, initial landings in Lingayen Gulf, the campaign from Lingayen Gulf to Clark Field and Fort Stotsenberg, the Battle of Manila, final operations in the mountains of Luzon.

41-75

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The return of the American Army to the Philippine Islands in the fall of 1944 appeared to offer for the first time in the Pacific Theater, an opportunity for armor to function in its traditional roles; especially the role of employment in mass. The island of Leyte was not expected to offer these opportunities, but as we prepared for the invasion of the island of Luzon, it was thought that the broad Luzon plain, which extended from Lingayen Gulf to Manila, would be ideal for tank operations.

The plans for the invasion of Luzon envisioned a greater use of armor than had heretofore been seen in the Pacific Area. The armor in the Pacific consisted of separate tank and tank destroyer battalions. Prior to the Luzon operation, these battalions had been attached to first one division and then another, with no centralized control. Therefore, in October, 1944, the 13th Armored Group was shipped from the zone of interior to Hollandia, New Guinea, with the apparent mission of coordinating, controlling and commanding the separate battalions that would participate in the Luzon invasion.¹

The group commander and staff, preparatory to the invasion, knowing that the initial landing would be in the Lingayen Gulf area, made a very extensive and complete map study of the area comprising the great central Luzon plain. This valley was twenty to sixty miles

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in width. It had two main north to south highways; highway number three on the western side and highway number five on the eastern side of the valley. These two highways merged at Calumpit, approximately twenty miles north of Manila, and all the way down the valley they were connected by an extensive lateral road network. The valley was cut from east to west by numerous streams and rivers. Most of these rivers, and especially the Agno River in the northern portion and the Pampanga River in the central portion of the plains, would present major obstacles to both infantry and tanks. The valley, with the exception of the Cabaruan Hills in the north and Mt. Arayat in the central part, was a vast flat floor, covered almost entirely with rice paddies and in the northern sector with fish ponds.²

The initial landings on Luzon took place on 9 January 1945, with Sixth Army commanding the operation. Two Corps, I Corps and XIV Corps, composed of two divisions each plus supporting Corps troops, landed abreast. Each Corps had one medium tank battalion attached to it.

The 716th Tank Battalion was attached to I Corps and the 754th Tank Battalion was attached to XIV Corps. The initial landings were practically unopposed; however, due to an abnormally high surf, both battalions had some difficulty in getting ashore.³

The 13th Armored Group, composed of the 44th Tank Battalion, the 775th Tank Battalion, the 632nd Tank Destroyer Battalion and the

2. After Action Report, 13th Armored Group

3. The War with Japan, Part 3, January to August 1945

156th Engineer Combat Battalion, arrived in Lingayen Gulf and commenced landing operations on the morning of 11 January 1945. Two days later this force, with the exception of the rear echelons, had completed debarkation and had closed in an assembly area about three thousand yards east of the town of San Jacinto and approximately six miles inland from the beach.⁴

The first mission assigned to the group, was that it prepared to lead or spearhead the attack in the zone of action of either Corps. This mission was never carried out, due to the fact that the 25th Infantry Division, which had originally been in Army reserve, had been committed to action a few days after the initial landings. When this unit was committed, the 13th Armored Group reverted to and constituted the bulk of Army reserve. It was believed to be necessary to hold the group in reserve, because of the existence of the Japanese 2nd Armored Division, which was known to be in the plains area somewhere in the vicinity of the town of Cabanatuan. The very existence of this Jap armor constituted a very serious threat to the Army rear areas. The group staff visualized that the group's initial taste of combat would be against the Jap tanks; however, this proved not to be the case. The Japanese high command chose to fritter their armor away in fairly small scale and localized attacks against the infantry and by 30 January 1945, the infantry cannon companies and the 716th Tank Battalion had almost completely decimated the Japanese 2nd Armored

4. After Action Report, 13th Armored Group

Division. With the destruction of the Jap armor, it was no longer necessary to hold a large armored reserve; therefore, all battalions were detached from the group and attached to different infantry divisions. The group staff was attached to Sixth Army as an armored advisory section. This occurrence pretty well obliterated all hopes the tankers had of seeing their weapon employed to its best advantage in the Philippine campaign.⁵

Prior to the conclusion of the Luzon Campaign, there were approximately twenty tank and tank destroyer battalions on the island. Obviously, in a paper of this nature, it would be impossible to follow the actions of each of these units. Therefore, I have chosen one unit, the 754th Tank Battalion, and will show its employment throughout the campaign. From the close contact I had with other armored battalions during the campaign, I believe that the actions and methods of employment of this battalion will be found to be typical of the employment of all the separate battalions on the island.

Now, to go back to the beginning of the campaign to liberate the island of Luzon, and pick up the story of the 754th Tank Battalion. On the morning of 9 January 1945, as the invasion armada steamed into Lingayen Gulf, the 754th Tank Battalion was broken down and attached as follows; Company A attached to the 37th Infantry Division, Company B attached to the 40th Infantry Division and the remainder of the battalion in XIV Corps reserve. By 17 January all combat elements of the

5. After Action Report, 13th Armored Group

battalion were ashore and were prepared for action. To date the tanks had not been employed, principally due to lack of opposition to the advancing infantry, but also because of fish ponds, rice paddies and other terrain features which caused the tanks to be road bound in the beach area.⁶

The infantry made rapid advances southward toward Clark Field and Fort Stotsenburg. For tanks, this phase of the operation was characterized by rapid movements, followed by long delays while they waited for blown bridges to be repaired or replaced over unfordable streams. As soon as the engineers had completed a bridge, the battalion made long marches in an effort to stay up with the infantry and be able to give close support should they be called upon.⁷

On 25 January 1945, the battalion (minus) still in XIV Corps reserve had reached Capas. Companies A and B were still attached to the 37th and 40th Infantry Division respectively. Thus, all the combat elements of the battalion were located in the central plains just to the north of Clark Field. To this point only one platoon of tanks had seen action and this engagement was very minor. This was due to the fact that the Japanese had elected not to defend the plains area in any great strength; therefore, the infantry had had no reason or opportunity to call on the tanks for support. The lack of action had been a keen disappointment to the tankers. This was especially true

6. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

7. Ibid

later, when they found that this terrain from Lingayen Gulf to Clark Field was the most suitable for tank operation that was encountered throughout the entire operation.⁸

The disappointment over lack of action was short lived. From 26 January to 7 February 1945, when all organized resistance at Clark Field had ceased, the battalion was to have at least one company of tanks in support of the infantry. This was a difficult series of operations for both men and equipment. The tanks were called upon to fight over terrain most unfavorable for their use, and in areas covered with mines and anti-tank fire. Long hours spent in buttoned up tanks produced a rather large number of cases of heat exhaustion among the crews. Tank commitment was characterized by small unit action; companies attached to regiments and platoons attached to battalions.⁹

Here, for the first time in our experience, several major defects in tank infantry combined operations became painfully apparent. The detrimental effect of lack of previous combined training was most outstanding. Neither arm understood the capabilities or limitations of the other. The tankers thought that the infantry misused them tactically and, in many instances, the infantry felt that the tanks were reluctant to be committed to action. Convincing the infantry commanders that they should use the tank unit commanders as special staff officers and advisors was, in some instances a problem.

8. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

9. Ibid

Another very serious defect noted at this time, was the inadequacy of communication between the infantryman on the ground and the tank in the tank. The tanks were equipped with exterior telephones; however, the man on the ground that tried to use them made a prime target for Japanese snipers.

On 1 February, the battalion (minus) moved south to Angeles. This was our first southward move in the infantry's final drive from Clark Field to Manila. One company was left with the 40th Infantry Division, which was conducting operations against the Japanese in the hills west of Fort Stotsenburg.¹⁰

The battalion saw little action on the southward lunge to Manila. On 7 February the battalion, still in XIV Corps reserve, opened its headquarters in the northern outskirts of Manila. This was to be the beginning of our operations, in support of the attacks, which finally led to the liberation of the city. For the tanks, as well as the infantry, city and street fighting was a new experience; a new type of warfare entirely. Heretofore our experience had been in the jungles of the South Pacific Islands and in the rice paddies of the plains of Luzon. Now we were forced to change our tactics and technique in order to meet the changed conditions. Improvisation, especially of small unit tactics, was the word of the day. The fact that we were able to change our methods and procedures, and change quickly and successfully, amply demonstrated one of the principal characteristics of armored

10. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

units; that is, the flexibility of armor.¹¹

During the fighting in the city the tanks were used primarily as mobile artillery; firing at enemy pillboxes, bunkers, buildings and other fortifications. Here for the first time, it was brought home to us that our 75mm tank gun was too small to have much if any effect against heavy fortifications. Again, as at Clark Field, both the tanks and the infantry were hampered by lack of an adequate means of communication between the two. Enemy snipers in buildings forced the tanks to remain buttoned up, and the resultant lack of vision greatly reduced the efficiency and the effectiveness of the tanks.¹²

As the operation to liberate the city continued, the battalion encountered increasing hazards from mines. Lanes of approach, to many enemy installations, were characterized by very narrow streets, over which the infantry was not able to advance with any great rapidity. Mine sappers found it extremely difficult to clear lanes, due to the many enemy fortified positions covering all approaches. For this reason the examination of many streets was very cursory, and as a result, the battalion lost several tanks on streets which had supposedly been cleared of mines.¹³

It had undoubtedly been noted that no attempt has been made to discuss all the actions of the individual platoons and companies. The battalion was divided into such small units, scattered over such

11. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

12. Ibid

13. Ibid

wide areas, attachments and reattachments so frequent, the missions so varied that individual discussion of the various units would have required more time and space than is available. However, in the further discussion of the fighting in Manila, the policy of not discussing small units has been deviated from somewhat. This was done for two reasons; first, because I think tank action in Manila was probably some of the most important in the Pacific Area, and secondly, to further impress upon the reader that all tank action in Manila was in small units. For that matter, small unit action was typical of tank action throughout the entire Luzon Campaign. By small unit, I mean platoon and on many occasions as low as section level. A tank company, fighting as a unit under its commander, was the exception and not the rule.

As stated previously, the battalion (minus) moved into Manila in Corps reserve. Company A was attached to the 37th Infantry Division and Company B was with the 40th Infantry Division west of Fort Stotsenburg. On 9 February the 37th Division assigned Company A, 754th Tank Battalion, to a special security force, which had the mission of securing the division sector in Manila, north of the Pasig River. Companies C and D, under battalion control, participated in this mission. For several days the tank mission was to sit on the north bank of the river and fire on Jap barge traffic in the river; also to lay down area fire in the Jap-held southern sector of the city. The tanks were credited with destroying a great many barges. During this period, tank platoons were rotated every four hours to reload the ammunition and rest the

crews.¹⁴

On 14 February, after the Pasig River had been crossed, Company A, 754th Tank Battalion, supported the infantry in its attacks on the buildings in the business and governmental areas of the city. This type of support was to be continued until the city was secured. In the meantime Company D had replaced Company B in the Fort Stotsenburg area and Company C had been sent to the Bataan Peninsula to be attached to the 38th Infantry Division.¹⁵

On 20 February, Company A was attached to the 1st Cavalry Division and Company B to the 37th Infantry Division. We now find the four tank companies attached to four different divisions and for the most part on widely separated fronts. Companies A and B in the Manila area, Company C on the Bataan Peninsula, and Company D in the Clark Field-Fort Stotsenburg area.¹⁶

An extract from the battalion after action report will give, I believe, a clear picture of how the units were divided and of the diversified missions assigned them. The extract from the report is dated 23 February 1945.

"Company A (minus) in support of 1st Squadron, 5th Cavalry Regiment, shelled the last enemy strong points in the University Buildings. The 3rd platoon, Company A, gave close in support to the Cavalry advance in the area from the Army-Navy Club to the Manila Hotel.

14. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

15. Ibid

16. Ibid

Company B (minus) participated in the artillery barrage on the Intramuros area from a position in the vicinity of the City Hall. The tanks were firing at the rate of two rounds per minute and the target was an area target in the southwest corner of the walled city. The 3rd platoon, Company B, supported the 129th Infantry Regiment in its attack on the northeast sector of the walled city. The 1st platoon, Company B, in support of the 3rd battalion, 145th Infantry Regiment, gave direct fire support in the assault on the Finance Building and the Legislative Building.

Company C closed Balanga, Bataan Province, and moved to Olongapo, Bataan Province. This company had not as yet participated in any action on the Bataan Peninsula, due to the lack of enemy resistance.

Company D (minus) reported no action for this period. The 1st Platoon, Company D, in support of the 3rd battalion, 108th Infantry Regiment, assisted in the attack on Hill 11, southwest of Bambam. In a combined infantry tank assault our forces succeeded in destroying the enemy position and securing the objective. The 3rd platoon, Company D, supported the 2nd Battalion, 185th Infantry Regiment in that unit's attack upon a series of unnamed hills in the regimental sector.

The rear echelon of Headquarters Company and of Service Company landed at Lingayen Gulf, and on this date, after a long road march, rejoined their parent companies at Grace Park, Manila. Damage to vehicles and equipment during unloading was fairly extensive."¹⁷

The above quote amply and vividly demonstrates, I believe, the tremendous hardships, both in command and logistics, under which the typical separate battalion operated in Luzon. The quote covers a period of only one day's operation, yet it is typical of most days spent in combat.

After the battle of Manila, the scene of action for the 754th Tank Battalion shifted to the hills east of Manila, where the Shimbu

17. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

line was located, and to the mountainous Balete Pass area in northern Luzon. Here the terrain was totally unsuitable for tank action, yet the tanks did manage to take a part, although a minor one, in the fighting. The role of the tanks was limited to firing at the enemy caves, pillboxes and other known or unsuspected installations, from fixed positions. In many instances the tanks did not have sufficient motive power to get into position under their own power but had to be towed in by one or more tractors. For the most part, this type of action characterized the armored role throughout the balance of the Luzon Campaign.¹⁸

Shortly before the close of the campaign, the battalion was concentrated in Manila, but this state of comparative bliss was doomed to be short lived. Extensive preparation for the invasion of Japan was beginning to take place. This preparation, again caused the division of the battalion and V-J Day found the units of the battalion in the following dispositions: Company A attached to the 158th Regimental Combat team at Legaspi, on the southern tip of Luzon. Companies B and C were on the Island of Panay, attached to the 40th Infantry Division. Company D was at Apparri, on the northern coast of Luzon, attached to the 37th Infantry Division. Each of the companies had small detachments of the Headquarters Company and the Service Company. The balance of Headquarters and Service Companies remained in Manila.¹⁹

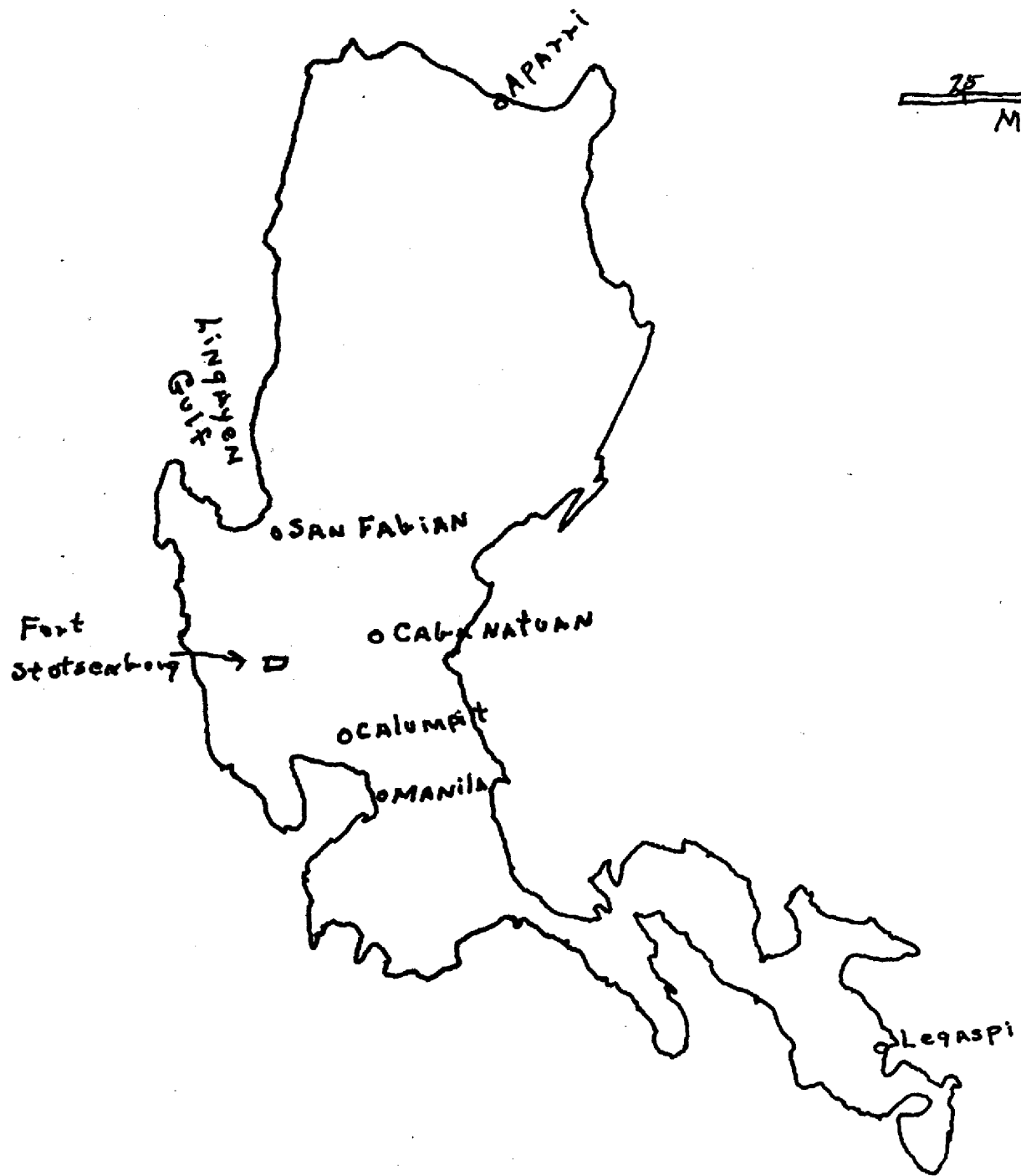
18. After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

19. Ibid

In conclusion I wish to point out again and re-emphasize the major difficulties encountered.

1. The great dispersion of battalion strength, with the resultant hardships in command, logistics and morale.
2. The lack of previous combined training of tanks and infantry causing a mutual lack of confidence and trust.
3. The deficiency of the tank itself, with its narrow track, undersized gun, restricted vision and insufficient motive power.
4. The inadequacy of communication between the tanks and the infantry.

These deficiencies have been recognized and thoroughly studied since the war and adequate corrective measures have been or will be taken. Our army schools are laying ever more stress on combined arms training. The present day officer cannot be satisfied with being merely a tanker, doughboy or artilleryman. To gain success in battle will demand that he be, regardless of whether he commands a platoon or division, thoroughly grounded and proficient in the tactics and technique of all of the arms he may command.



B I B L I O G R A P H Y

The War With Japan, Part 3

After Action Report, 13th Armored Group

After Action Report, 754th Tank Battalion

After Action Report, 716th Tank Battalion

After Action Report, 44th Tank Battalion