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TITLE: RIVER WARFARE

SCOPE: The scope of this paper primarily includes the tactical employment of amphibious forces in river operations.

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SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

During World War II, amphibious units were activated as a means to facilitate seaborne operations of hostile shores. There was a large number of amphibious units concentrated in the South Pacific which were used primarily in ship-to-shore movements, and probably as the result of this large concentration, amphibious forces were also used to support ground forces in shore-to-shore and river operations.

The current trend in tactical doctrine for amphibious units is to emphasize their application in ship-to-shore (assault landings) over that of supporting ground forces in shore-to-shore movements. This trend may be explained by the relatively unglamorous role of supporting ground forces in shore-to-shore movements as compared to their spectacular ship-to-shore roles at Normandy, Okinawa and Leyte.

SECTION II

COMPOSITION AND TACTICAL EMPLOYMENT OF RIVER FORCES

On April 23, 1945, a news report appearing in the New York Daily News carried the headlines: "Mindanao Army Uses Navy Play In End Run Around Japs." It further stated, "This gain of almost 30,000 yards in 12 hours is believed to be something of a record in jungle warfare. It marks the infantry's employment of naval tactics."

What appeared to be a rabbit pulled from the Navy's hat was actually the employment of river warfare as a technique to overcome unfavorable conditions imposed by tropical warfare. The use of rivers as avenues of attack and routes

of supply was introduced early in the Pacific war--the Mindanao end run was merely graduation day.

River warfare is just another way in which the infantry accomplishes its traditional mission of closing with and destroying the enemy. It is a method which enabled our forces to penetrate deep into enemy territory, seize critical terrain, exploit fully the advantage gained by surprise and strike the enemy before he had time to react and prepare his defenses. It was also learned that possession of the river by our forces placed great hardships on the enemy by splitting his forces and denying him the use of his main supply routes. Whenever rivers would lend themselves favorably to the operation, the use of such rivers was exploited to the fullest.

To accomplish these missions small task forces were formed, consisting of infantry, landing craft, amphibious tanks and gunboats. Rocket launchers and 40 MM guns were mounted on the decks of L.C.M.'s. Land tanks and self-propelled artillery were transported in L.C.M.'s and put ashore to support the infantry. Air support was provided by land and carrier based planes. Naval support was available to neutralize targets within range of the big guns. Forward control parties from both the Navy and Air Corps accompanied the command boat to adjust fire.

You can conclude, from the above, that river warfare is not the product of any one arm or service, but is an excellent example of the employment of the combat doctrine which demands unification of arms, services and forces at the point of battle under the control of the commander having the primary interest. The infantry commander, usually having the primary interest,

was most frequently charged with the vital function of coordination.

The composition of these small amphibious forces depended upon the mission to be accomplished, the tactical situation and the forces and equipment available. Missions were usually as follows: to secure a supply route, reduce load on highways, cut enemy communications and seize critical terrain features.

SECTION III

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

On 23 July, 1945, on the Island of Mindanao, Philippine Islands, a reinforced battalion proceeded up the Agusan River in landing craft (mech.) for a distance of 61 miles and established a base at La Paz, Mindanao. This operation enabled our forces to trap the enemy east of the Sayre Highway. The enemy forces were so split and divided that they soon disintegrated into starving, sickly bands that could no longer be considered an organized military force.

A PROBLEM IN SUPPLY

On Leyte, Philippine Islands, during the initial stages of the Philippine Campaign a fleet of amphibious tractors was used to supply an isolated battalion of the 34th Infantry. This battalion had been ordered to seize Kilay Ridge, 4,000 yards behind the Jap positions on Breakneck Ridge, to deny Kilay Ridge to the enemy and disorganize the enemy rear.

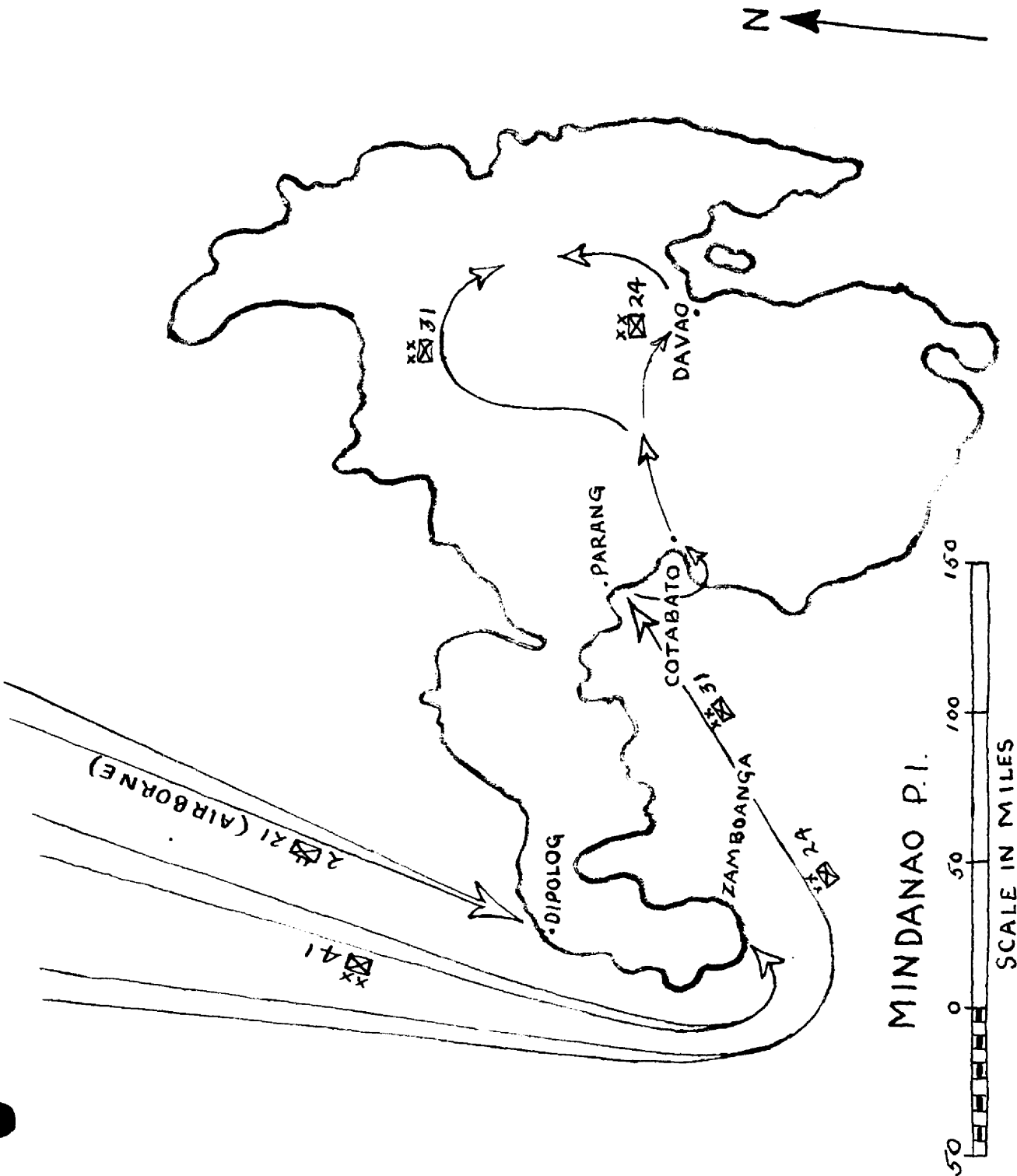
As the mission would indicate, supply and evacuation would present a serious problem. Air drops which were previously scheduled failed to materialize. Hills and jungles were blanketed by a dense mist and transports, unable to locate the battalion, were forced to return to their base. Roads were non-existent, and the use of carrying-parties was out of the question. Desperately

in need of supplies, the battalion commander sent a patrol to reconnoiter the Naga River as a possible route of supply and evacuation. The patrol reported that amphibious tractors could navigate the Naga River as far as Consuegra, which was a short carrying distance from the battalion perimeter. Soon a fleet of amphibious tractors was churning up the Naga River bringing in the much needed supplies and evacuating casualties. It is very doubtful that this courageous battalion could have completed its hazardous mission without the support of amphibious tractors.

END RUN IN MINDANAO

Mindanao, a tropical island, is the second largest of the Philippine Group. It measures 250 miles east to west and 300 miles north to south. The terrain is ideally suited for defensive tactics. Natural obstacles such as mountains, jungles, rainforests and swamps were found in great abundance. Great distances lay between the most suitable landing beaches and the enemy. Few routes of approach existed and most of these were commanded by critical terrain features from which small enemy units could make our advance costly. Opportunities for maneuver were few. Use of mechanized elements on most of the island was impossible. Mobility of troops was impeded by stretches of marsh and jungle, and problems of engineering, supply, evacuation and communication were difficult to overcome. Mindanao's sparse road-net penetrated only a short distance into the interior, and movement in Mindanao was restricted generally to men on foot.

Enemy order of battle estimated 30,000 Jap troops in the Davao area plus many Jap civilians who had been drafted into the Japanese Army. It was



SKETCH I

later learned that this estimate was in error and that actually 50,000 Jap troops defended the Davao Province. The enemy had had three years in which to prepare against the inevitable attack. He expected the invasion to come from the sea directly on Davao and most of his guns faced the Davao Gulf.

Initially it was planned to use two divisions, the 24th and 31st, in the early stages of the operation. The initial objective was to be the seizure of the Malabang-Cotabato area for the establishment of an advance base. Target date (R-day) was set for 17 April, 1945. General Headquarters Operation Instructions No. 97 directed The Commanding General, Eighth Army, to seize the Malabang-Parang-Cotabato area by over-water operation and from these bases continue the offensive and destroy hostile forces on the island east of the Zamboanga Peninsula. The assault was to be made in the vicinity of Malabang by the 24th Division; the 31st Division was to arrive five days later.

The Malabang landing was ordered with subsequent over-land and shore-to-shore drives to be made as the operation developed. On April 12, 1945, the Malabang town fell to guerilla forces and the formulation of a new attack order was begun. The new plans shifted the impact of the assault from Malabang, as initially ordered, to Parang—17 miles south—which meant that the operation would be speeded up. However, a reduced landing team, the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry, landed at Malabang and secured an airfield. The remainder of the 24th Division landed at Parang to seize a beachhead.

At Parang the 19th Infantry swept ashore in column of battalions, encountered a few stragglers, and turned southeast on the National Highway. All bridges had been destroyed and by nightfall the 19th Infantry had reached

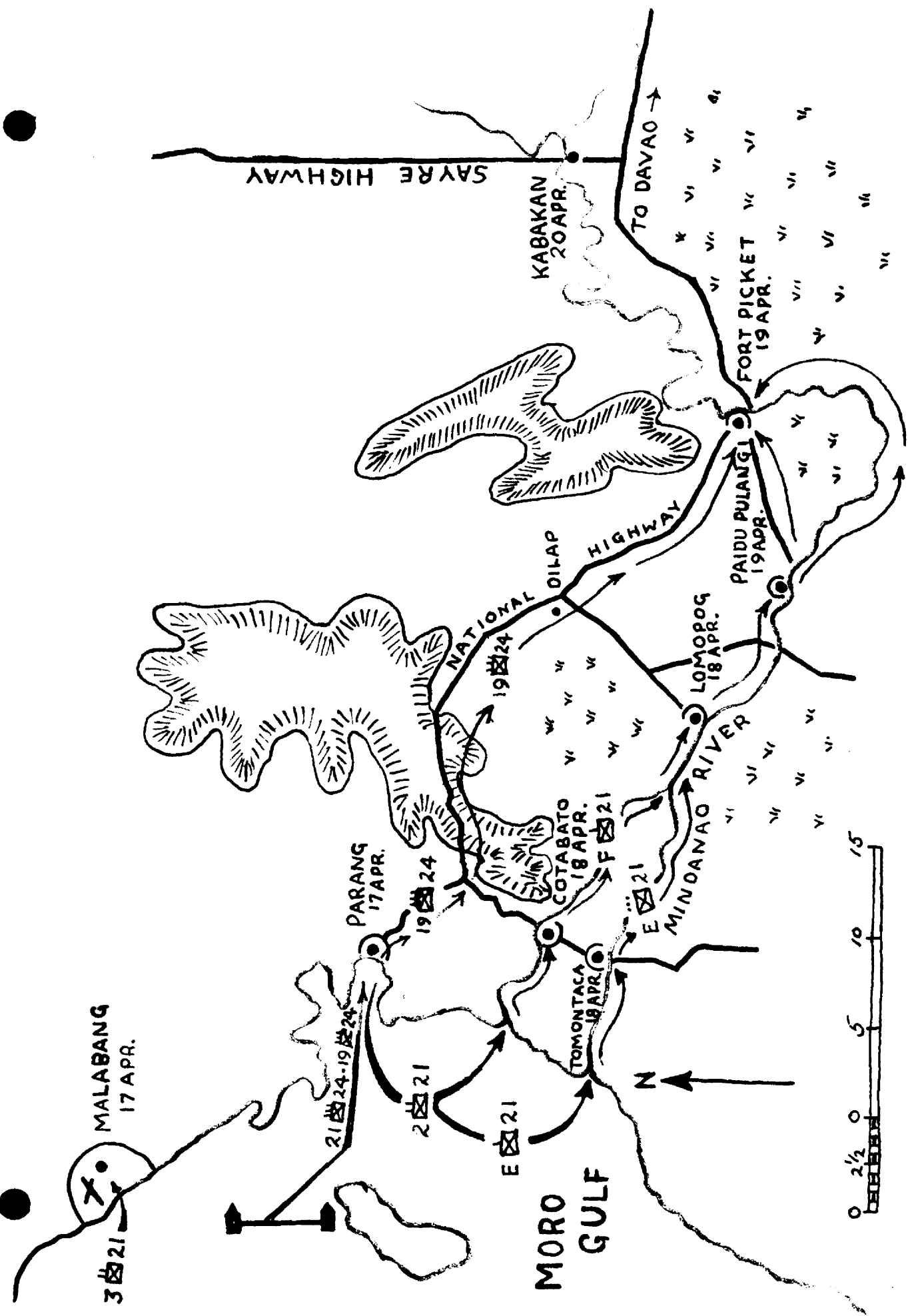
a point about 4,000 yards north of the Simuay River. The 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry, followed the 19th Infantry into Parang and organized the defense of the beachhead. The 2nd Battalion, 21st Infantry, became the division reserve ashore, while the 3⁴th Infantry remained a floating reserve.

The morning of R plus 1 the 19th Infantry continued southward along the National Highway, but progress was slow. Mined roads, destroyed bridges and continuous harassing by the enemy penalized their advance.

Use of the Mindanao River as a possible supply route had been discussed during the planning stages of the operation, but until navigability of the river could be ascertained and enemy dispositions established a final decision could not be made. Reconnaissance troops in amphibious tractors had reconnoitered as far south as the mouth of the Mindanao River and reported no enemy. It was then decided, by the 24th Division Commander, to embark on an audacious amphibious thrust at Fort Picket by the way of the Mindanao River. If successful, this movement around the right flank of the advancing 19th Infantry would cut off all enemy between Fort Picket and Parang. It would also open up an avenue of approach and route of supply for larger forces.

At 1700 R-day, a task force was formed under the command of the commanding officer, 2nd Battalion, 21st Infantry. This force consisted of the 2nd Battalion, 21st, the 533rd Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment reinforced with engineer landing craft (mech.), gunboats and other amphibious equipment drawn from the engineer regiment.

The attack called for the simultaneous forcing of both branches of the Mindanao River and the capture of the Cotabato-Tomontaca area. To accomplish



SKETCH II

this mission, the battalion commander ordered Company "E", reinforced, to proceed up the south branch of the Mindanao and seize the barrio of Tomontaca. The 2nd Battalion (—) reinforced by a platoon of self-propelled artillery was to move up the north branch and seize the City of Cotabato. The task force was given the additional support of a flight of B-25's, one cruiser and one destroyer. Forward control parties from both the Navy and Air Corps accompanied the command boat to adjust fire.

At first light, 18 April, the two columns moved independently up the north and south branches of the Mindanao River. As the assault forces approached their objectives the flight of B-25's appeared over the target and dropped their lethal cargo. When the last plane had cleared the area, the Navy saturated the target area with a 20-minute preparation of naval fire. When the naval fire was lifted the assault troops, supported by rockets, swept ashore and seized the Tomontaca-Cotabato areas. The surprised enemy, stunned by the violence of the attack, withdrew to the refuge of the near-by hills.

The smoke had hardly cleared away when the task force commander received his next order which read, "Congratulations, continue advance up both north and south branches to the fork."

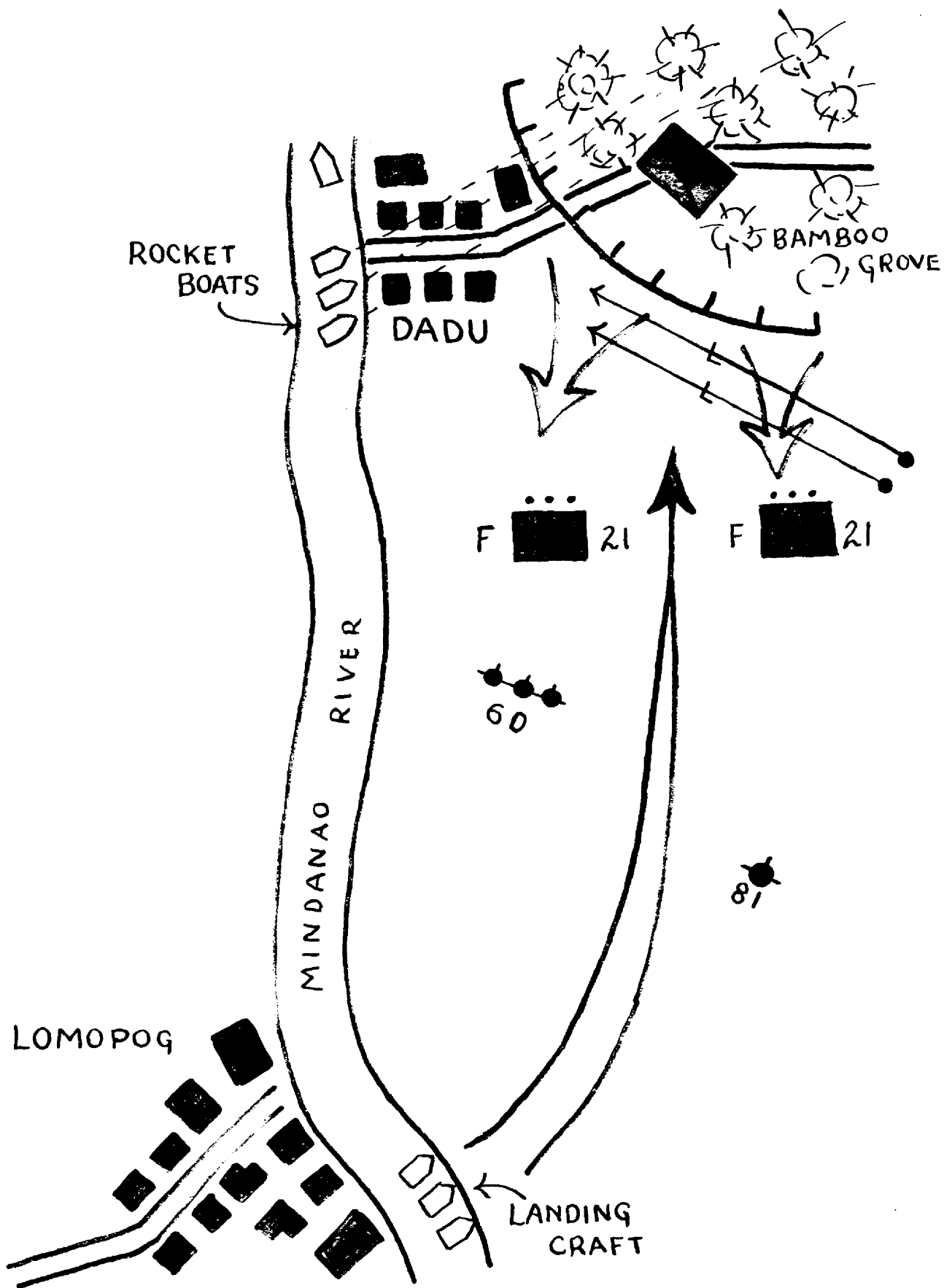
At 1100, 18 April, the task force commander ordered Company "F", reinforced, to continue the advance up the north branch. Company "E" was ordered to move one reinforced rifle platoon up the south branch. The remainder of the 2nd Battalion was given the mission of organizing the defense of the Tomontaca-Cotabato area. At 1500 the two columns met at the fork, formed into one column and continued the advance toward Lomopog.

1700, 18 April, found this advance flotilla landing, like men from Mars, against a surprised enemy garrison at Lomopog. As rockets hissed through the air and descended upon the unsuspecting Jap, the infantry went ashore to assault the town. Again the terrified enemy fled, leaving behind tables set for meals which were never eaten. The task force commander quickly organized the defense of the area and dispatched a patrol, platoon strength, to reconnoiter the road to Dilap, as a possible avenue of flank attack in support of the 19th Infantry.

The morning of 19 April the task force commander again split his force. One force consisting of two rifle platoons, a machine gun platoon and one 81 MM mortar, was placed in defense of Lomopog. The other force, Company "F" less one rifle platoon, plus one 81 MM mortar, was ordered to continue the advance to Fort Picket.

Fort Picket, an old United States Army Fort, is located about 45 miles up the Mindanao River and commands a very strategic position overlooking the junction of the Mindanao River and the National Highway. To the north of Fort Picket are rugged mountains and to the south are impassable swamps. All four terrain features meet at Fort Picket to form a critical terrain feature, which, if held by a determined enemy (which the Japs were), would greatly penalize our advance and allow the enemy time to regroup and prepare defenses to meet the threat.

At daylight, 19 April, the undersized flotilla pushed out on the Mindanao River for a final thrust at Fort Picket. As the small force was forming on the river an excited Moro appeared on the south bank and flagged down the leading boat. His message was to the effect that a company of Japs



SKETCH III

(190 men) were bivouaced in a bamboo grove near his barrio.

Guided by the Moro the infantry went ashore and moved parallel to the river for about three kilometers. The rocket boats were ordered to move slowly up the river and be ready to support the attack on call. When the infantry reached their attack positions, the supporting weapons selected positions which would facilitate close support of the assault groups. The rocket boats signaled, "Ready", and the stage was set for action.

All was quiet as a small patrol moved cautiously toward the enemy. Suddenly, when the patrol reached the edge of the grove, a howling mass of maniacs emerged from the grove and the fight was on. Evidently the enemy had been led to believe that the small patrol represented our strength in the immediate vicinity and had not anticipated the supporting weapons that were over watching the patrol. As the enemy came into view, the well-aimed fire of the machine guns had its deadly effect. Terrified by the sudden change of events, the enemy assault groups broke and withdrew to the shelter of the grove. By this time the mortars and rocket boats had found their target and were pounding the bamboo grove. Like a trapped animal the enemy lunged forward in another fanatical attack only to be cut down again by the accurate machine gunners. After a third futile attempt to gain the initiative, the harassed enemy broke into small groups and fled.

During the mopping up which followed, 57 enemy dead were counted. Of this number three officers were identified including the company commander plus an undetermined number of wounded which were evacuated by their comrades. Aggressive patrolling by the Lomopog garrison brought the total up to 72. This

figure compared with no casualties received by Company "F", and the fact that Company "F" fought and defeated a force twice its size is something of a record in warfare and one to be justly proud of.

Spurred on by the recent victory, the small force reformed on the river and continued the advance toward Fort Picket. Infantry went ashore at the Ulandang and Paidu Pulangi crossings where large stores of enemy supplies were found and destroyed.

The evening of 19 April found the tiny landing force occupying the division objective at Fort Picket and in desperate need of reinforcement. An urgent message was dispatched to The Commanding General of the 24th Division requesting the release of Company "G" at Cotabato to bolster the defense of the Fort Picket garrison. In reply, the task force commander was told to hold at all cost and that the 34th Infantry was enroute to Fort Picket to relieve the 2nd Battalion, 21st Infantry, at about 1200, 20 April.

At 1300, 20 April advanced elements of the 34th Infantry relieved the 2nd Battalion at Fort Picket and continued the drive to the Kabakan crossing. This marked the beginning of an endless procession of landing craft, including L.C.I.'s and L.C.T.'s which poured troops, equipment and supplies of two infantry divisions into the Davao Province and facilitated the rapid advance of the 24th Division to Davao.

SECTION IV

LESSONS LEARNED

The success of the Mindanao Campaign was greatly enhanced by the use of the Mindanao River both as a route of tactical advance, and as a main route

of supply. By attacking up this water-way, our forces were able to seize promptly the critical Picket-Kabakan crossings and prevent enemy re-grouping. The use of the river as a supply route made it possible to support the rapid inland drive since the road-net was incapable of carrying sufficient traffic to supply the troops.

SECTION V

CONCLUSION

To exploit fully the advantage gained by surprise, commanders must take rapid aggressive action and strike before the enemy has time to react and prepare his defenses. Following the main landing at Parang, the 24th Division pressed quickly across the island and the 31st Division swung north on the Sayre Highway, thus disorganizing the enemy and splitting his forces before he could redeploy his troops and effectuate defensive measures.

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