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AIR SUPPORT

FOR

GUERRILLAS

ON

•• NORTHERN LUZON ••

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AIR SUPPORT FOR GUERRILLAS ON
NORTHERN LUZON

A casual glance at the pages of history will reveal that guerrilla warfare had been conducted with varying degrees of effectiveness since man began to regard war as a business. Great military leaders like Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Napoleon had at their time felt the sting of this type of fighting which in small measure contributed to the final shattering of any dream they had for world empires. It was not until World War I, however, that guerrilla operations began to be looked upon with strategic importance. Laurence of Arabia whipped up a guerrilla army which was strategically employed to protect a flank of General Allenby's force in the Near East. The bloody and bitter fighting of the Spanish civil war during the respite between the two world wars, the grim and stubborn resistance of China against the Japs, and the short skirmishes in several other places in both hemispheres, were guerrilla warfare in the modern sense. Records of actions during the recent war are replete with exploits of guerrilla units and some military leaders of our times had given this form of fighting some considerations in their planning. It was evident that the full effectiveness of guerrilla actions will be realized when they are coordinated with the operations of the organized military forces.

A small nation may have the misfortune of lying directly in the path of an aggressor nation by virtue of its geographical position without any force strong enough to be able to stem the tide of invasion. All it could do under this situation is to attempt to slow down the enemy by a series of delaying and harrassing actions until such time that an allied power could start a counter-drive. Guerrilla warfare in some form will be resorted to but the effectiveness and persistency of the resistance will depend to a great extent on the amount of support in supplies and arms that a richer and stronger ally could provide.

During the recent war the French Maquis ~~had been~~^{had} supplied by air. The Filipinos received limited aid through submarines that were able to sneak into hidden ports and have rendezvous with the guerrilla units. It was not until the last few months of the war against Japan that air support ~~have become~~^{has become} available. This article will describe a few of the improvizations and expedients that were resorted to by the guerrillas in order to take full advantage of the air support provided by the American Forces of liberation.

In March 1943, General MacArthur's headquarters approved by radio the establishment of the United States Army Forces in the Philippines, Northern Luzon (USAFIP, NL). The main objective of this effort was the organization and training of a fighting force that could go into action when the American Forces landed, the collection of intelligence, and the dissemination of radio information and propaganda to the people.¹

An intensive mopping-up operation conducted by the Japs in Luzon the following months resulted in the capture and execution of a great number of American and Filipino resistance leaders. These were mostly officers who were able to elude the Japanese dragnet after the fall of Bataan and Corregidor and who preferred privations obtaining in the mountains to the promise of good treatment offered by the Japanese Forces of occupation. Only eight Americans were able to escape capture in the Northern Luzon area and they later became the commanders of the major units of the USAFIP, NL with the senior officer taking command of all the seven districts into which Northern Luzon was divided.²

1. Lt. Col. Donald D. Blackburn, "One Against the Japs",

Army Information Digest, April 1947, (Vol. 2, No 4), p.9.

2. Ibid. p. 10.

The organization of the districts started from the consolidation of the several resistance bands that had been operating in the area since the early days of the Japanese invasion. These bands had their humble beginnings from small parties led by the more daring of the American and Filipino leaders who refused to recognize the Japanese puppet government that was established to rule the area.

A large number of Filipino officers and men who had survived the rigors of Bataan and Corregidor and the subsequent incarcerations in concentration camps began to trickle into the guerrilla hideouts until it became necessary to draw a system of cooperation between all the units operating within the same area. Further consolidation was brought about by the elimination of friction and rivalry between the bands which have by this time earned the name bandits from the Japs and their quislings. There also followed an intensive campaign against spies and informers, an operation which was conducted with the utmost severity ~~sometimes bordering~~ ruthlessness.

By the middle of 1944 the USAFIP, NL had assumed the proportions of an infantry division, a large, dispersed body whose area of operation covered all the provinces of Northern Luzon. It was broken down into the 11th, 14th, 15th, 66th, and the 121st regiments under the overall control of a division headquarters.

Each of these regiments was assigned a definite area of responsibility and control. The 11th Infantry was assigned the whole province of Cagayan and four subprovinces of the Mountain Province.

Tactically, the 11th Infantry laid low until after the Leyte landings in October 1944. Most of the activities prior to this time had been confined to the gathering of vital intelligence data and the disruption of enemy communications and rear installations. This was accomplished by the extensive use of agents who were planted to deal directly with the Japs and by frequent raids into the enemy-held areas. A few weeks before the assault landing of the American Sixth Army at Lingayen, all the regiments of the USAFIP, NL had been tied together by a radio net supplemented by telephone and foot messenger service. The composite division was then ready to operate in close coordination and rapid drives into some of the enemy positions were initiated.

This article will be confined mainly to the operations of the 3rd Battalion, 11th Infantry, USAFIP, NL. This battalion conducted its operations along a pattern which was similar in many respects to those followed by the other battalions of the entire division.

Soon after the Lingayen landings, there was no longer the threat from the Jap air forces in the Philippine area. Jap air activities in Northern Luzon were confined to the operation of a number of transport aircraft engaged in shuttling commanders and staff officers from one region to another. By March 1945, only the airfields around Tuguegarao and Aparri were in operation within the 11th Infantry sector. All these activities were made during the hours of darkness. The few available aircrafts were dispersed and skillfully concealed during the day in elaborate shelters located several hundred yards from the landing fields. The Japs would clear lanes along the bomb-shattered runways wide enough to permit take-offs and landings but they made no attempts to clear the whole landing strip from ~~the~~ the debris and the wrecks as a result of previous strikes. Installations in these operational fields were kept to the minimum and the ground crews resorted to crude improvisations to keep them within any semblance of usefulness. Illuminations for the night were furnished by truck and tank headlights. During the day these airfields were struck by American air units and the brunt of these fighter sweeps were taken by the shells of wrecked planes that littered the fields and the skillfully located dummies that were set up as fast as they were demolished.

The nocturnal habits of the enemy were kept under observation and the information gained was forwarded to the division headquarters which took care that the information was relayed to units that could profit by them. Only a few of these enemy planes were still plying their night traffic after the American air units set loose night fighters to cover the area. The danger from the enemy air having been reduced, the American Air Forces were then in a position to spare aircraft for the close support of the guerrillas.³

The 11th Infantry, USAFIP, NL, started its full scale aggressive operations against the Japs within its zone immediately after the Lingayen landing. Some of the operations of the regiment during this early period were the siege and capture of the towns of Ballesteros on the north and Lubuagan in the south, and the clearing of the area west of the Cagayan River. These early actions enjoyed limited support furnished by fighter bombers. Arrangements for the airstrikes were made several days before the actual execution of the mission. These consisted mainly of general instructions to the ground units as to when the strike will be available, what panels to display, and what type of aircraft will fly the mission.

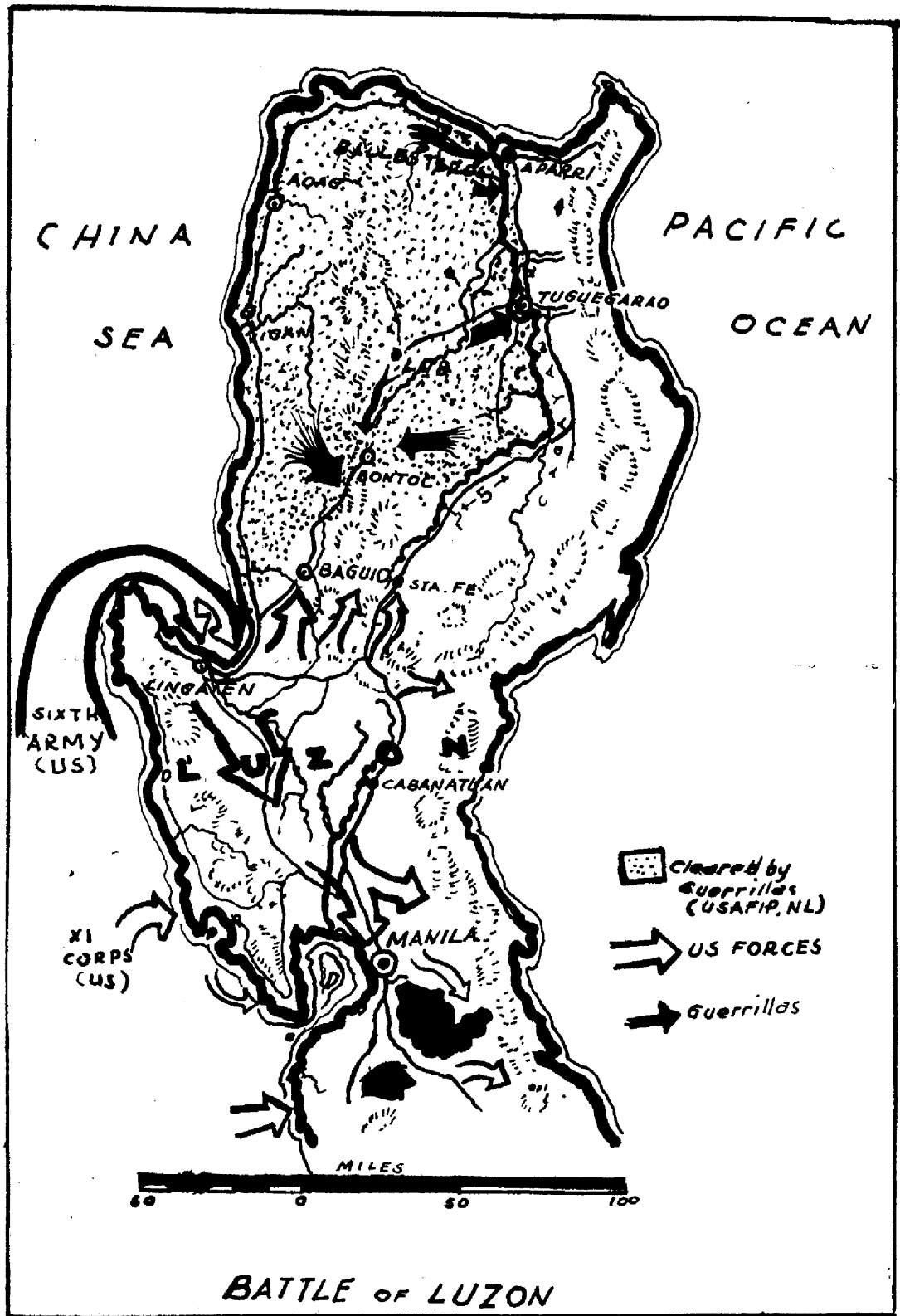
3. General H. H. Arnold, "The War Reports", p. 445.

The effectiveness of these early ground-support missions depended to a great extent on the instructions received by the pilots at their respective bases. There was no direct communication between the aircrafts and the ground troops they were supporting. Panel displays were used almost exclusively for friendly ground unit identification and for the designation of the general area and direction of the target which in most instances embraced a whole town. All the pilots had to do was fly to the area, pick out the targets indicated by the panels, peel off, make the strafing or bombing runs, circle over the area to verify effects, then make a beeline for the home base. Very often the Japs will have recovered from the stunning effects of the strike before the ground troops could close in and engage the enemy under fire. It will take several days before another airstrike could be arranged for the same target and it gave just that amount of time for the Japs to reorganize and consolidate their defenses. Operations like these were at times too costly in lives.

By February 1945, the whole area west of the Cagayan River was in the hands of the guerrillas after wresting from the Japs all the major towns with the exception of an isolated pocket at the western approaches of the Babayuan Ferry. To this piece of ground, the Japs clung desperately in an effort to keep open their northern line of communication.

The regimental CP was moved down to the town of Tuao and it undertook the task of setting up a provincial military government which exercised control over all the town governments established in all the liberated towns. Civilians living on the enemy side of the river started a mass evacuation into our side adding more difficulties to the already critical food supply problem.

A few weeks after D-Day in Luzon, the regiment utilizing the services of an engineer company and civilian labor constructed two 4000-foot airstrips, one of them hard-surfaced and graveled. It was not long before all supplies for the regiment were brought in by transport planes dispatched according to arrangements made by the division headquarters. Supplies were then hauled from the airstrip to the outlying battalions by carriers and oxen-drawn carts which were later supplemented by an assortment of captured vehicles. Each battalion was required to construct at least one cub strip in the vicinity of its CP. Critical supplies and urgent messages were flown into these airstrips by L-4's. Telephone lines were rigged up from commercial and captured Jap equipment and provided a most effective means of communication between the CP's and the subordinate units. Arms, Ammunitions, and clothing began pouring in in increasing quantities as the battalions were brought up to full fighting strengths.



BATTLE OF LUZON

The 1st Battalion was in the Bontoc area in grips with the Japs who had decided to make a stand in the mountains. The 2nd Battalion was engaged in defense of the northern seacoast and a portion of the river line. The 3rd Battalion was defending along the Cagayan River from Lallo south to Isabela and was also charged with the protection of the regimental zone against enemy infiltration from the south and west. Other regiments of the USAFIP, NL were engaged in pressing the enemy towards the mountains in the Kiangan and Bontoc areas.

It was apparent that the lines were altogether too extensive to be physically occupied by the defending troops. A series of defensive positions were prepared along the river line and a system of guarding reinforced by civilian guards gave rigidity to the thin lines.

The 37th US Division was driving north from Balete Pass, the 32d US Division was busy prying out stubborn enemy resistance along the Villaverde Trail, the 33d US Division was pushing the Japs northward from the city of Baguio, and elements of the USAFIP, NL were hemming in from the north and west. The Japs holed-in in the Cagayan Valley began to realize that there was no longer the threat of any American landing on the north, a possibility for which they have hectically prepared for several months.

The most dangerous threat to their existence was the determined drive from the south. There began a noticeable shifting of forces, supplies, and equipment from the well prepared defenses on the north towards the south in an attempt to plug the gateway to the valley. There was heavy traffic along Highway 5 from Aparri way down to Santa Fe in the Caraballo Mountains, a situation which gave the guerrillas the opportunity to prey on the extended columns and the unwary bivouacs of the shifting enemy forces.

The Japs became annoyed by the high-handed actions on the part of the bandits and decided to throw a punitive force across the river. Early in March 1945, the Japs tried a crossing from Tuguegarao. This force bumped against one of the few organized positions of the 3rd Battalion and was driven back. Another attempt to regain areas they lost was made in the junction of the Cagayan and Paret rivers. Timely warning from reconnaissance aircraft which detected the presence of new rafts along the river, and the immediate shifting of troops to the threatened area, aborted the enemy plan. No major attempt to cross the river was made by the Japs after this but they began to ferry more troops to strengthen the bridgehead they still held in the Babayan area. This spot became the scene of long and bitter fighting up to late in June 1945.

Meanwhile, the air units were engaged in continuous reconnaissance over the entire valley with special attention to Highway 5, the main highway that ran parallel to the river all the way from Aparri to Santa Fe. All towns in the Jap-held areas were subjected to severe bombing and scattered installations were hit repeatedly. The Japs, finding it hard to stick to the road during the day, made most of their troop and supply movements during the night.

The guerrillas were quick to grasp this change in the situation. Aggressive leaders began departing from the original mission of defending along the river and started sending out raiding patrols to the enemy side of the river during the daylight hours when the Japs were occupied in dodging air observation. These small parties crossed at points where the enemy is not organized. The actual locations of all the defensive positions were plotted and requests to have them bombed were sent to the regimental headquarters. The air units were then given the chance to concentrate on specific targets instead of subjecting the entire area to indiscriminate bombing.

Repeated operations of this nature began to meet with new difficulties. While it was true that the guerrillas crossed the river using planes as "indirect" air cover, there arose the problem of keeping the troops from the dangers of airstrikes once they were in the enemy area.

There were occasions when our troops laden with booty snatched from an enemy supply dump would jettison these supplies in midstream and swim to our side empty-handed in order to escape from friendly planes which struck anything that moved. This problem was later solved by notifying the regimental headquarters of any planned crossing at least 24 hours before it would be effected. The same information was relayed to the division headquarters which saw to it that the airplanes operating over the area were forewarned of the presence of friendly troops in specified localities.

There were instances when the raiding parties became involved in pitched battles with the Japs and failed to return to our side of the river at the appointed time and place. This situation was reported by the fastest means of communication available to higher headquarters so that the planes would refrain from making strikes at areas where the tardy raiders were likely to be. On the other hand, we frequently receive orders to hold our troops for certain specified periods in order to allow air units to conduct raids into the area without being cramped by the presence of friendly troops.

The guerrillas, encouraged by their early successes, resorted to more aggressive actions against the enemy. Almost all points along Highway 5 became the scenes of swift raids and ambushes. The Japs began using all sorts of vehicles, from half-tracks to bullock carts, to shuttle troops from the north to the hotly contested regions on the south. Ambushing parties were dispatched to strike at these motley columns and withdraw to our side before the Japanese could effectively organize to cut off the withdrawal. Telephone lines were severed as often as they were installed which made the relay of information between the Jap garrisons difficult. Another form of deception frequently resorted to was for our parties to strike simultaneously at widely separated points and for them to make detours deep into the enemy before they will recross the river at points distant from the scenes of the previous encounters.

The Japs would retaliate by firing several artillery pieces at our defensive positions along the river immediately after dark. These weapons were shifted from one position to another during the night and were pulled out just before daybreak. They began to be more cautious in their movements when they realized that the river did not offer them the protection they needed to beat off guerrilla attacks.

By May 1945, the 3rd Battalion had accounted for more than 2000 enemy killed and had wrought destruction on enemy installations that came within its reach. Vehicles abandoned by the Japs during the ambushes were ferried across the river in broad daylight by the use of improvised bamboo rafts. These vehicles were repaired and pressed into the service of augmenting the transportation facilities.

The 32nd US Division had broken through the Jap defenses along the Villaverde Trail and was pushing the enemy remnants into Kiangan; the 37th US Division was driving through Balete Pass and was sweeping northward astride Highway 5; the 2nd Battalion of the 11th Infantry, USAFIP, NL have cleared the Babayan pocket with the assistance of special units from the US Sixth Army.

By 16 June 1945, the 3rd Battalion of the 11th Infantry was alerted for an organized attack on Tuguegarao and its surrounding airfields. Simultaneous with this attack would be a similar attack on Aparri and its airfield to be conducted by the 2nd Battalion assisted by a company of Rangers of the US Army.⁴ Feints and demonstration would be carried out between these two towns all along the river line by other elements of the regiment.

4. General G. C. Marshall, "The War Reports", p. 241.

The attack of Tuguegarao was to be made without any artillery support. The only heavy fire support that was promised was the close air support we will get during the daylight hours. A forward air controller (FAC) and his party were assigned to the Battalion and was to operate in the battalion CP. Some forms of improvisations have to be resorted to in order to effect any semblance of air-ground operation system. There was very little time available for elaborate planning and we lacked the special equipment ordinarily needed for an operation of this nature. It was planned to make the Tuguegarao attack at least two days before the advanced elements of the 37th US Division would reach the town.

Five SCR 300 radios were given to the battalion and operators were promptly pulled out from the companies. These operators were given a short orientation by the FAC in matters relative to fire adjustment and target designation and they were to stick with the assaulting companies during the attack and serve as the forward observers for the air strikes. Aside from their duties as FO's they were to be at all times with the company commanders and serve as the communication links between the company commanders and the battalion commander. It was only through the FO'S radio sets that the situation on the farther side of the river could become known to the battalion commander.

The assault companies were to make their crossings on three widely separated points and the only available vantage point from which the battalion commander could coordinate the attack was on the high grounds on the near side of the river. The communication set up required that both the battalion commander and the FAC had to work side by side. Request from the frontline company will come from the company commander who will forward this request through the FO to the battalion commander and the FAC. It was the responsibility of the battalion commander to consolidate the numerous air strike requests before deciding on what company would be given priority of support. The FAC was beside him and would readily pick up the target designated and gave the necessary instructions to the aircraft.

On D-2, several patrols were sent to the other side of the river by the companies of the battalion. They patrolled their respective zones of attack and tried to definitely locate the enemy strongpoints so they could be subjected to strikes. The results of these reconnaissance were given to the FAC. A plan to work over these targets in the order that both the FAC and the Battalion commander agreed upon was made during the night.

On D-1, the whole Tuguegarao area was subjected to heavy pounding by American air units. All these sorties were under the direct control of the FAC. Since there were no noticeable active anti-aircraft measures set up by the Japs, the planes took their time and made their strikes more deliberate. The FAC usually required the flight leader to make several dummy runs over the target and made sure that the pilot had definitely identified the target before he gave the "fire-away" signal.

At H-30, there were available a number of planes for the close support of the ground troops. Medium bombers loaded with fragmentation bombs dumped their loads on spots designated by the FAC. Fighter bombers bombed and strafed a strip of land a thousand yards wide along the enemy bank of the river. The other planes which are not thus occupied were over the rear areas striking at installations and other targets of opportunity until such time that the FAC could assign to them certain targets to engage.

At H-hour, the three assaulting companies crossed the river in small dugout canoes manned by volunteer civilians. A smoke screen was laid out by the supporting aircraft to protect the troops from observed automatic fire.

The two companies which were attacking from the west were stopped by heavy resistance so they received the bulk of the air support for the rest of the day. They immediately consolidated their respective bridgeheads and continued to expand them until they were held in check by heavy automatic fire from prepared positions. These positions had to be neutralized by air action because the assaulting troops carried no heavy weapons that could effectively engage this type of target. A strike at targets of this nature required extreme accuracy both in the manner of designating the target and the execution of the strike. The frontline companies carried with them panels to mark their front elements but most of the targets pointed out were seldom more than 250 yards from the ground units. Pinpointing of the target was not enough to insure safety. The FAC required the planes to make approaches only from specified directions and to make their runs along well defined lines. These was to offset the dangers from hangfire and other mechanical defects. Before the passes, the troops were required to hug the ground. Requiring them to pull back to allow for the necessary safety clearances before the strike would mean losing just that much ground already gained.

The company attacking from the south of Tuguegarao swept into the town with light losses and proceeded to clear the area of the defending Japs. The reserve company crossed the river about noon and joined the other company in the heart of the town. By midafternoon both these companies were astride Highway 5 thus severing the only route of the Japs from Cagayan to Isabela and points farther south.

During the entire day of this operation air support was ever present. The FAC required every flight that had just completed its run to make manuevers over the targets in simulation of strafing or bombing runs until another flight had dumped its load and took over the job of furnishing air cover.

In this operation the guerrillas suffered about 60 killed and more than a hundred men wounded. Not a single soldier was hurt as a result of actions from the supporting planes except for a few who experienced minor shocks. Of the killed and the wounded, 85% were suffered during the night when the absence of supporting aircraft permitted the enemy's use of tanks and light armored vehicles in a vigorous counterattack.

5. General G. C. Marshall, "The War Reports", p. 241.

Meanwhile, the 2nd Battalion, assisted by a company of American Rangers from the Sixth Army, captured Aparri and its airfield.⁶ A company from this battalion was ordered to secure the Calamaniugan airfield in time for some troops of the 11th Airborne Division to stage one of the biggest airborne show in the Pacific War. These airborne units moved south along Highway 5 to effect a junction with the lead elements of the 37th Division which was driving northward from Tuguegarao and marked the end of organized enemy resistance in the Cagayan Valley. Broken units of the enemy began fighting scattered delaying actions as they backed up towards the Sierra Madre mountains.

V-J Day found the 11th Infantry, USAFIP, NL in the vicinity of Kiangan still engaged with the enemy forces under Yamashita's direction. The move from the Cgayan Valley to the Cordillera mountains was characterized by hard marches along rugged terrain and under inclement weather. Resupply was made through airdrops on designated points along the way, a procedure which met with very serious difficulties due to difficult terrain, lack of smooth coordination between the air and the ground units, foul weather, and sporadic enemy interference.

6. General G. C. Marshall, "The War Reports", p. 241.

Experiences of the Philippine Guerrillas during the recent war show that guerrilla warfare is a form of fighting with varying ranges of adaptability. A guerrilla unit which is adequately supported by air units, and is operating in coordination with the organized armed forces, is capable of performing special missions exploiting its inherent characteristics of mobility, stealth, and flexibility. The 11th Infantry, USAFIP, NL killed more than 15,000 Japs between the Lingayen landing and V-J Day and had denied large areas to the enemy for nearly a year.⁷ The availability of supporting aircraft contributed to a large measure to the regiments success in most of its missions, and it came out of the war with hard-earned lessons relative to air support for guerrillas.

Close support aircraft is capable of delivering large volumes of fire on designated targets and at specified time even in areas where the terrain restricts the use of supporting artillery, but it can not replace artillery fire during the night.

Guerrilla units travel light; they are stripped of most of their heavy weapons and can rely only on support aircraft for heavy fire and supplies.

7. Lt. Col. Donald D. Blackburn, "One Against the Japs", Army Information Digest, April 1947, (Vol. 2, No 4), p.13.

Close air support is practical and effective but it requires good communication and a high degree of coordination between the air and ground units. This could be attained by proper training and indoctrination of ground officers in the principles of air-ground operation systems.

An airborne operation of small size could be facilitated by the employment of guerrillas operating in the area of protracted operation. They could furnish accurate intelligence concerning the area and can even secure the drop zone a few hours before the pathfinder teams of the airborne forces are landed.

Carried to a larger scale, an entirely new front can be opened by well organized guerrillas deep in the enemy-occupied areas and this front can be entirely maintained by air.

In the planning for future operations a brief study should be made by the commanders as to the possibility of guerrillas being present in the theater of operations. To be able to count on their assistance with some degree of assurance is a much brighter outlook than having to prepare for defense against possible annoyance and embarrassment as a result of the hit and run tactics of guerrilla elements.

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