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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: Participation of a Squadron Heavy Weapons Troop on a Mission of Reconnaissance in Force

SCOPE: An account of the combat action of the 2d Squadron, 5th Cavalry in the Admiralty Islands during the period 29 February to 2 March 1944, with particular emphasis on the employment of the heavy weapons of the squadron weapons troop in the amphibious landing and subsequent defense of the initial beachhead.

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With the added emphasis placed on heavy supporting weapons of all types and their utilization during the recent conflict, it appears that too little consideration has been given to those supporting weapons integral to a unit of battalion size. These weapons, the 81 MM mortar, the caliber .30, heavy machine gun, and the caliber .50 machine gun represent a potent combat element which, if properly and timely employed by the battalion commander, may mean the fine-line difference between success and failure.

Few operations were conducted in which the commander had only these weapons to rely on for support. The amphibious landing and subsequent defense of a shallow beachhead by the 2d Squadron, 5th Cavalry on Los Negros Island, Admiralty Group during the period 29 February through 2 March 1944 will serve to illustrate the importance of the Squadron Heavy Weapons Troop.

The mission of the squadron as part of the Brewer Reconnaissance Force was initially that of reconnaissance in force to be transformed into invasion, provided the initial assault units could successfully secure and defend a beachhead.¹ General MacArthur believed that the islands were lightly held and that there was opportunity for a successful surprise landing. He himself would accompany the reconnaissance operation in order to judge how far the enterprise should be pushed.²

1. Historical Division, U. S. War Department, The Admiralties, p. 11

2. Ibid. p. 12

Because intelligence reports indicated a strategical withdrawal of enemy air power from the New Guinea-Bismarck area, the decision to move up the target date from 1 April 1944, as originally scheduled to 29 February was made late in the same month.¹ The Admiralty Islands furnished one of the principal links in the enemy chain of supply and communications to the important bases of Rabaul on New Britain and Kavieng on New Ireland. A naval task force had sunk a 3800 ton enemy vessel due east of Lorengau during 22 and 23 February.² Survivors indicated that some 400 airforce service personnel were being evacuated to bases farther north.

Aerial reconnaissance reported the islands deserted and both naval and air units operating in that area had received no opposition in some weeks. Therefore, General MacArthur, believing that the time was ripe to secure the islands with little opposition, ordered an immediate assault. He referred to the operation as "putting the cork in the bottle". The bottle in this case was the Bismarck-Solomons area containing isolated enemy garrisons totaling over 100,000 troops, the major segment of the outer defenses of Japan's Pacific Empire which barred allied advance from the southwest toward the Philippines.³ The Admiralty Islands, developed as

1. Historical Division, War Department, The Admiralties, p. 11

2. Ibid. pp. 10, 11

3. Ibid. p. 1

an offensive base for Allied air and naval power, would control western approaches to the Bismarck Sea, flank Japanese strongholds on the New Guinea coast, and protect allied advance into the open waters leading toward the Philippines. The 5000 foot air strip at Momote Plantation on Los Negros and Seeadler Harbor, with its sheltered anchorage with ample room for the largest fleet of capital ships and escorts, were prizes not to be neglected.¹

The 1st Cavalry Division, staged at this time at Camp Borio in the vicinity of Oro Bay, New Guinea, had already been designated as the nucleus of the task force assigned to the capture of the Admiralties. To effect the desired surprise the initial landing force was to be limited to 1000 men and was to be landed from destroyers and three light APD's which had been converted from the old type four stack destroyer.

Under the accelerated plans the Brewer Reconnaissance Force was created and included the 2d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, Battery B, 99th Field Artillery, and the 673rd Antiaircraft Machine Gun Battery. Command and service elements attached included the Reconnaissance and Communication Platoons, Headquarters Troop, 1st Cavalry Brigade, 1st Platoon, Troop B (clearing), 1st Medical Squadron, 30th Portable Surgical Hospital, Detachment, Australian New Guinea Administration Unit, Air Force Detachment (supervisors).

1. Historical Division, War Department, The Admiralties, pp. 7, 8

Also included were a Naval Gunfire Support Party and an Air Liaison Party.¹

After having been selected for the Brewer Reconnaissance Force, the 2d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, was alerted for its first combat of World War II on 25 February 1944, just four scant days before the tentative target date. Feverish preparations were begun to ready an understrength, partially equipped squadron for combat. The three rifle troops, E, F, and G were almost up to strength, but Troop H, the squadron weapons troop, newly activated in Australia the previous October, was understrength some 10 percent and was still short some of its organizational and individual equipment.

The weapons troop was organized identically to the Heavy Weapons Company, Infantry Battalion, there being two platoons of caliber .30 heavy machine guns of four guns each and one 81 MM mortar platoon with six mortars. In addition, there were troop headquarters and the administrative mess and supply section.

Due to the importance placed on the initial phase of the operation being entirely successful and because of the limited time remaining for final preparation, all division service facilities were placed at the disposal of the task force commander. In less than 36 hours the squadron was completely equipped for combat. As C.O. Troop H, I was given priority on organizational equipment and

1. Major B. C. Wright, The First Cavalry Division in World War II
p. 16

was permitted to requisition extra equipment that was not on the organization's Table of Organization and Equipment but which was considered necessary for this type operation.

The two gunners of each of the machine gun and mortar squads were armed with caliber .45 pistols. Carbines were issued to all men armed with pistols, most of them retaining the pistol and carrying the carbine also.

Taking advantage of the unusual opportunity to draw extra equipment, we drew six prismatic compasses for the mortar platoon. During the previous training in Australia, we had borrowed one of these compasses from the 82d Field Artillery. It was, in my opinion much superior to the lensatic compass issued for use with the 81 MM mortars.

For local protection of the mortar platoon there was available one caliber .50 machine gun with ground mount. The question of the inadequacy of this one gun had been discussed before and at this time I was allowed to draw three caliber .30 light machine guns for local protection of the three mortar sections. This one item proved very necessary and was retained by the mortar platoons throughout the ensuing campaign and also on subsequent operations.

It should also be mentioned at this point that each troop commander of the rifle troops drew one extra light machine gun to augment the two light guns in the weapons platoon of each troop. This allowed an attachment of one light gun to each rifle platoon.

That this need was universally recognized is demonstrated in the new infantry organization making the weapons squad an integral part of the rifle platoon.

In anticipation of sustained defense a complete set of spare parts and one spare barrel were drawn for each machine gun in addition to the same number provided by the Table of Organization and Equipment.

To augment the extra weapons secured by unit commanders, many individuals had secured pistols and knives of all types in anticipation of the hand to hand, foxhole fighting.

In order to bring Troop H up to strength and also, because it was felt that more mortars could be used, two additional mortar sections were attached, one section of 15 men and 1 officer from Troop D, 5th Cavalry and another section of 16 men and 1 officer from Weapons Troop, 5th Cavalry. This brought the total 81 MM mortar strength of the squadron to 10 instead of the usual 6.

The need for additional mortars was realized when it was learned that B Battery, 99th Field Artillery, which was to accompany the squadron, could carry only two 75 MM howitzers and approximately 40 men due to the limited cargo space of the ships to be used in transporting the squadron.¹

1. For a further account of the difficulties experienced by the 1st Cavalry Division artillery in jungle operations during this and subsequent operations, the reader is referred to the following article: Colonel Rex E. Chandler, "First Cavalry Division Artillery Combat Operations," The Armored Cavalry Journal. (May-June 1947), p. 20

All extra equipment was drawn, attachments joined, and the squadron was loaded by 1400 hours 27 February on nine destroyers, each carrying an average of 57 men, and on the three old destroyers which had been converted for transport service by removal of guns and two stacks, thereby enabling them to carry the remaining 510 men of the squadron.¹

Twelve LCPR's were the only assault craft available for the ship to shore movement, thereby necessitating hand loading and hand carrying of all weapons and ammunition. Because of the type landing craft available no vehicles could be landed on D-day and the entire task force operated without vehicles until D plus 2.

One and one half units of fire were carried for both the heavy machine guns and the 81 MM mortars. Due to the landing schedule's placing the mortars in the fifth wave of five scheduled waves, only 10 rounds of ammunition per mortar was available initially. However, there was no immediate need for mortar support upon landing and the remaining ammunition was safely landed in the ensuing shuttle waves.

The initial objective of the assault waves was the landing strip some two hundred yards inland from the landing beach and lying parallel thereto. The plan of maneuver designated one rifle troop, reinforced to be landed in the first wave and to establish

1. Historical Division, War Department, The Admiralties, p. 21

an initial perimeter.

The second and third troop waves would land within the protection of the perimeter established by the first troop, pass through this perimeter and move on inland to secure the objective. After the second and third troops passed through, the first troop reverted to squadron reserve, remaining in position. In the event a withdrawal became necessary, this initial perimeter was to be held by the reserve troop covering the withdrawal of the other elements of the squadron. The reserve troop would then be the last element to be evacuated from the beach.

The two machine gun platoons of the weapons troop were attached to the two rifle troops landed in the second and third waves. In order to facilitate the make up of the landing teams, these platoons were attached prior to loading at Cape Sudest. This placed the burden of coordination of the supporting machine guns with the rifle troop upon the platoon commanders. Because of situations of this very sort, I believe that only combat experienced or senior lieutenants should be assigned to a weapons troop or company. It was my experience during the time I commanded a weapons troop that when the squadron was understrength in officers, the weapons troop was called upon to fill officer vacancies in the rifle troops. While I appreciate the importance of rifle platoon commanders, I do not feel that the replacements should be entirely at the expense of the weapons troop.

After a lightly opposed landing, the unloading of the reconnaissance force was completed in 4 hours, 35 minutes. The rifle troops had advanced some 1000 to 1500 yards inland with only scattered resistance. Mortar fire had been employed in neutralizing probable avenues of approach, and the two 75 MM pack howitzers of the 99th Field Artillery had been placed in firing position and had fired observed fire missions on bivouac areas and more distant avenues of enemy approach.

Evidences of recent enemy occupation of the area in considerable number dictated that early preparations get under way for the inevitable Japanese counterattack. An account of the operation up to this point will not be given in complete detail, because of the almost negligible participation of the weapons troop. However, with plans for the occupation of a defensive perimeter for the night the necessary utilization to the fullest of the 81 MM mortars and heavy machine guns began to become increasingly evident.

The commanding officer of the squadron, upon realizing the over extension of the limited rifle strength of the squadron secured permission from the task force commander to pull the squadron back into a defensive perimeter small enough to be adequately covered by the riflemen and supporting weapons available. This perimeter, anchored on the right flank at the beach, extended from right to left some eight hundred yards along the beach side of

the air strip, made a 90 degree turn and ran for approximately 700 yards along a series of taxiways and beach roads back to the beach on the left flank. By digging in with the air strip and taxiways inland the squadron was provided with a table-top smooth, cleared field of fire of from 50 to 150 yards in depth and extending along practically the entire squadron front of approximately 1500 yards.

The extreme width of the perimeter as compared to a very shallow depth, being less than 500 yards at the deepest point, early indicated that the two 75 MM howitzers could offer very little support. Therefore, the 40 field artillery officers and men were assigned sectors of defense on the left flank of the squadron perimeter.¹

Most of the back portion of the perimeter was along the water's edge with the exception of a small peninsula approximately 200 yards wide. Since it was felt that the greatest enemy threat was from inland, the rear defense along the beach was entrusted to the Reconnaissance and Communication Platoons, Headquarters Troop, 1st Cavalry Brigade. As task force headquarters had occupied a large revetment just off the beach, these two platoons could occupy the shoreward portion of the perimeter and at the same time afford necessary local protection to this headquarters.

1. Historical Division, War Department, The Admiralties, p. 31

The three rifle troops were assigned sectors of the perimeter of about 450 yards each. All eight caliber .30 heavy machine guns were assigned sectors of fire covering the entire front portion of the perimeter held by the rifle troops. The air strip and taxiways allowed flat grazing fire up to extremes of 500 yards. The light machine guns of the rifle troops were tied in to the final protective line and all likely avenues of approach and dead spaces were covered by automatic rifle teams.

The absence of enemy air opposition up to this point made it feasible to utilize the caliber .50 machine guns of the 673rd Antiaircraft Machine Gun Battery within the defensive perimeter against possible ground and water targets. Eight of these guns were dug in along the portion of the perimeter bounded by the air strip and the remaining four were placed along the perimeter near the beach covering the water approaches and so situated that they could still fulfill the mission of antiaircraft defense. While there had been no reports or indications of Japanese tanks on the islands, the terrain around the air strip was, for the most part, trafficable for armor. It was felt that the caliber .50 guns, if placed in such positions to enable them to engage ground targets, would augment to a large extent the squadron's sole antitank defense consisting of the 2.36 inch rocket launchers.

The hard coral sand made it extremely difficult to dig suitable positions for front line weapons. Coconut logs were used

to build up protective sides for the positions. Sand bags enabled gun squads to build up their positions in addition to dirt and logs. On the first day most of the positions, both for individuals and for automatic weapons, were without overhead protection. This proved disastrous in some cases with the terrific grenade attacks by the Japanese during the following night.

Riflemen and members of the gun squads other than the gunners were dug in to cover the flanks and rear of the gun positions. Time did not permit installation of wire or of booby traps and anti-personnel mines on the first day.

The 81 MM mortars were placed in position within the perimeter to provide close defensive fires along the entire squadron front. It was found that the shallow perimeter made it necessary to divide the platoon, reinforced and assign three sections to cover the right portion of the perimeter along the air strip from one position while the remaining two sections from a second position covered the left portion along the roads and taxiways.

At this point it should be mentioned that a very successful resupply by air was being accomplished. Due to the immanence of attack by enemy air these resupply missions were being flown by two B-17 bombers. Ammunition, sand bags, barb wire, rations and additional medical supplies were being dropped within the perimeter. Upon completion of the dropping, the planes assumed a combat role by thoroughly strafing from low altitude the area across the air

strip from our defensive position.

During the afternoon of D-day while preparing the defensive perimeter, the squadron had received some naval support from the destroyers and cruisers supporting the landing.¹ The comparatively flat nature of the terrain and the shallow perimeter, however, forbid any reliance on the navy for any close-in overhead support.

The shore fire control party having come ashore with the first wave had fired on targets of opportunity during the furthest extension of the squadron and by very accurate fire had destroyed three bunkers and a battery of dual purpose 20 MM antiaircraft guns abandoned by the enemy. Interdictory fire had been placed on outlying points covering the harbor during the landing in addition to the initial softening up shore bombardment by the destroyers and cruisers, and therefore the ammunition supply was low. Two destroyers were to remain offshore during the night to furnish possible fire support and to provide communications in the advent of failure of the beachhead to be maintained necessitating withdrawal of the landing forces.²

The expected air support for the landing had been limited by the heavy overcast and low ceiling. Of the forty B-24's scheduled to arrive during the naval bombardment, only three had appeared and

1. Historical Division, War Department, The Admiralties, p. 27

2. Ibid. pp. 29, 31

only nine of four groups of B-25's had arrived and these later than scheduled.¹ The ceiling had lifted sufficiently for the resupply mission, but no combat aircraft was available during the first day.

No further attempt will be made to outline the general operation of the squadron during the first two days and nights ashore. As a background to bring out combat lessons learned and errors observed it may be said that the Japanese made overwhelming counter-attacks throughout the nights of February 29 - March 1 and March 1 - 2. Operations during the second day, 1 March were devoted to resupply, local patrols and to strengthening and improving positions.

While it cannot be said that any one unit accomplished more in the successful repulsion of the savage and fanatical Japanese counter-attack it was due to a large extent to the thoroughly coordinated defensive fires of the rifle troops and of the supporting machine guns and mortars. Breaches of the line and infiltrations were made by the Japs during the course of the first two nights. The mortar positions were attacked and the task force and squadron headquarters both had their share of attack from within.²

1. Historical Division, War Department, The Admiralties, p. 23.

2. Ibid. 34. For a vivid and more picturesque of the entire Admiralty Islands operation the reader is referred to the following article, not for military authenticity but merely for a reader interest approach: Charles A. Rawlings, "They Paved Their Way With Japs," The Saturday Evening Post, October 7, October 14, 1944.

The establishment and maintenance of communications during the initial two days as well as the rest of the campaign was most difficult. Wire lines were cut by shell fire and by infiltrating Japanese. Tapping of our lines was not uncommon, particularly on the lines to the forward observers of the mortar platoon. One occasion, one section was caused to move out of position by a Japanese, speaking in perfect English, who ordered the section leader to withdraw because the whole line was falling back. The SCR 300 radio for forward observation proved invaluable and very few failures were experienced. However, the SCR 536 did not stand up as well. The ones used were issued shortly before the squadron landed at Cape Sudest and there had been no opportunity for training in the use and maintenance of this radio set. Consequently, their failure was due principally to inadequate protection from jungle moisture. This serves to illustrate the absolute necessity of prior training with all equipment before combat. After the squadron was reinforced and the beachhead enlarged, maintenance of wire lines became extremely difficult because of airdrome and road construction activities. It was found that W 110 lines could be strung along the water's edge and across water with the lines submerged and service still be maintained. Some of these lines continued to operate after 20 days of submersion.¹

1. Report No. 107, USAFFE Board, SWPA, 8 July 1944, p. 13

One of the earliest and most tragically apparent deficiencies in our training was in the construction of fighting positions, both for individual riflemen and for crew served weapons. The maneuver slit trench and the two man foxhole were both inadequate. Where an all night vigil is to be maintained, at least three men should be together. Sand bags should always be available as soon as possible after construction of the defensive position begins.¹ After the first night on Los Negros overhead protection for foxholes became the first order of the day. This was especially true for automatic weapons, since the Japanese spared no effort to destroy them.

No matter how effective the defensive position, some method of warning of approaching enemy is absolutely necessary. C ration cans strung on wires proved effective in warning front line positions. One artillery battalion later in the campaign tried bolting together the metallic ends of cloverleaf ammunition bundles minus the containers with the long centerbolt. These were strewn haphazardly around the gun positions and it was impossible to walk even in daylight without tripping on them.²

Fire control of automatic weapons in the fina protective line during the early phases was virtually impossible. indiscriminate firing is a fault of even well trained, battle experienced troops

1. Report No. 114, USAFFE Board, SWPA (Brewer Operations) 18 July 44

2. Report No. 107, USAFFE Board, SWPA, 8 July 1944, p. 12

and presents a major problem to all commanders. In the confusion and uncertainty of a concentrated, fanatical night attack it is extremely difficult to tell whether or not firing is necessary. Only by constant and continual emphasis being placed on this matter to troops can it be controlled. In our own case, this became a lesser problem toward the closing days of the campaign as the troops learned the uselessness of it themselves, but with each re-entry into combat with green replacements the job will have to be done over again.

Ammunition control presents another problem, not in control of expenditure, but more so in the assurance of equitable distribution to all weapons. Given an opportunity, enterprising gun corporals would hoard ammunition against the ever present fear of running out in the heat of battle. The only solution I can offer to this is to stockpile gun positions to the limit of your supply facilities and then to constantly check to assure equal distribution.

Maintenance of the automatic weapons during period of prolonged night fighting is the problem of the gun crews alone. No assistance can be expected from other sources. The importance of training in stoppages and instinctive application of immediate action to reduce these stoppages cannot be over emphasized. This training should be conducted at night or with the trainee blindfolded. This has always been a favorite training idea of mine and in those night attacks it paid dividends. Where it is impossible

to depend on artificial light for night repairs the squad leader must be taught to organize his gun position in such a manner as to facilitate these emergency repairs in the dark. To some this may seem a minor point, but unfortunately it is often neglected until the need is realized under adverse conditions of combat.

Automatic weapons within a defensive position, no matter how much flank protection is provided, are most vulnerable. The Japanese concentrated their attacks on those portions of the position where the location of machine guns had been revealed and it seemed that no amount of effort or personnel were spared in these attacks.

Gun positions should be provided with overhead cover and as much material flank protection as possible.

Mortars are also quite vulnerable to attacks by infiltration parties as well as to counter-battery fire. Local protection for the mortar positions is essential regardless of the depth within the perimeter. The Japanese as evidenced by documents and diaries captured on the Admiralties feared our mortars even more than artillery. Tapping of forward observation wire lines to give cease fire orders and the numerous attacks on the mortar positions were even further indications of their importance to the enemy.

The defensive fires of the mortars close in to the front line positions played a major role in repulsing counter-attacks. Coordination between the mortars and the rifle troop commanders is

essential in order that these fires can be brought down at the opportune moment. Alternate means of communication should be worked out in event of radio or telephone failure. Flares of different colors used with a prearranged code was one method that was tried. Even in event of radio failure the mortar platoon leader could tell by the amount of firing along the defensive line where mortar fire was apparently needed. An emergency measure of signaling in event of short rounds was necessary. This signal arrangement had to be changed frequently to prevent the Japs from learning its reason and using it themselves to lift our fire.

Mortar fire against the Japanese emplacements and pillboxes had little effect and consequently was not used for this purpose.

Throughout this initial campaign it was realized that more adequate battery control of the 81 MM mortar was necessary. In massing the fires of the entire platoon fire data had to be computed at one source in order to prevent large errors and dispersion. A platoon fire direction center was the obvious answer and this was attempted by having the platoon leader or a non-commissioned officer give all changes of range and deflection to all guns being massed. This allowed for an economy of personnel and produced the desired accuracy of massed fire.

Fire control in some manner should be incorporated into the training of all mortar crews including the 60 MM mortar. A greater adaptation of artillery methods would be beneficial. With the

increased ranges and accuracy obtained with new ammunition and new weapons this need seems to become of much greater importance.

While no armored targets presented themselves for the caliber .50 machine guns, they were used against enemy barges. Little need be said about their effectiveness against these thin skinned targets, but the fact that they were used brings out a definite point. While the caliber .50 gun with ground mount is cumbersome and back breaking to man handle, these guns should not be cast aside too readily. In island and amphibious warfare they are well worth the trouble involved in transporting them.

In summarizing the defensive phase of the operation an enumeration of a few of the tactical principles borne out by the successful defense of the beachhead will include the following:

1. The importance of a field of fire above all else in selecting and preparing a defensive position.
2. The siting of machine guns to cover existing avenues of approach, the fire of these guns being augmented by automatic riflemen.
3. Fire control or withholding of fire until the most opportune targets are offered.
4. Use of supporting artillery and mortar fire in covering avenues of approach by defensive concentrations which can be fired without observation.

These were only a few of the many points observed and lessons learned in the war in the Pacific. Unfortunately, many of these lessons were learned at the expense of great personnel and material casualties.

Even at present there is a tendency to classify jungle operations as a special situation and to treat the tactics and lessons learned very lightly. These lessons were far too costly to be regarded in any such manner. The possibility that these tactics will be used again in securing and safeguarding our island bases in the Pacific and elsewhere is not so remote that we can afford to forget them.

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