

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1949-1950

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY L, 45th INFANTRY (P.S.)
(PHILIPPINE DIVISION) ON THE ABUCAY HACIENDA LINE,
BATAAN, P. I., 15-25 JANUARY 1942
(Philippine Islands Campaign)
(Personal Experience of the Company Commander)

Type of operation described: THE EMPLOYMENT OF AN INFANTRY
RIFLE COMPANY IN THE ATTACK

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

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- A-9 The Action of Company G, 31st Infantry (Philippine Division), Abuceay Hacienda, 15-25 January 1942 (Struggle for the Philippines), Major John I Pray (TIS Library)
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company L of the 45th Infantry Regiment (PS) between the dates 15-25 January 1942, in the action at the Abucay Hacienda, in the defense of the Philippine Islands. In order to orient the reader, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the background of the 45th Infantry Regiment and the development of the situation leading up to the action in the vicinity of the Abucay Hacienda.

HT. 3-17 The 45th Infantry was a part of the Philippine Division composed of three combat teams, the 31st, the 45th, and the 57th, organized and equipped under the existing tables of organization and allowances for Philippine Scout units. The organization of the infantry regiment followed generally the current organization for similar units in the U. S. Army. It must be remembered that this was a regular U. S. Army division composed of Philippine professional soldiers and American officers in the 45th and 57th Infantry Regiments, and all American officers and men in the 31st Infantry Regiment.

In February of 1941, after a very careful screening of volunteers, Company L of the 45th Infantry Regiment was increased from its peacetime strength of 92 officers and enlisted men to its full strength of 6 officers and 139 enlisted men. (1) A comprehensive training program was inaugurated immediately. As a result of the selection methods, these new recruits were soon developed into first rate soldiers. In the summer of 1941, Company L lost five of its key non-commissioned officers and all but two of the American officers to the Philippine Army as a training cadre, but in spite

(1) Personal knowledge

of this loss, the average length of service for the enlisted men was seven and one-half years. The organization consisted of three rifle platoons, one heavy weapons platoon and a company headquarters section. The rifle platoons were armed with M1 rifles and Browning automatic rifles. The weapons platoon was composed of a mortar section and a light machine gun section armed with two light machine guns and three 60 mm mortars. The three 60 mm mortars were exchanged for heavy machine guns soon after the war started when it became evident that there would be no ammunition for these weapons. The heavy weapons companies were armed with the 81 mm mortars but received only 45 rounds during the entire campaign.⁽²⁾ The thirty calibre ammunition supply was apparently unlimited.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

A description of the major events leading up to the action on the Abucay line will give the reader an insight into the situation as it existed on 16 January 1942. Our air force had been rendered inert on 8 December, the first day of the war. After its defeat, the invasion forces lost no time landing. The first landings on the island of Luzon by the Japanese troops took place at about 0530, 10 December 1941. One regiment was landed at Aparri and one battalion was landed at Vigan, both almost unopposed. Legaspi was struck on 12 December by one division, Bauang on 22 December by one division and one division hit Mauban and Antimonin on 24 December 1941.⁽³⁾ The Japanese had landed three well trained divisions at widely separated points (See Map A). To oppose these units, General MacArthur had eight untrained Philippine Army divisions and one U. S. Army division that was well trained but under strength.⁽⁴⁾ The 45th Infantry Regiment (PS) was a part of the latter.

(2) Interview with Lt Col Gross, S-4 of the 45th Inf Regt (old 3rd ammunition was available)

(3) A-8, p. 8

(4) A-1, pp. 52-53

It soon became obvious that the defensive forces would not be able to hold an enemy which was superior in training and equipment. So on 24 December, War Plan No. 3 was put into effect. This plan provided for the withdrawal of all forces into Bataan in order to protect the exposed flank of Corregidor. *Map B.*

It is the opinion of many observers that if War Plan No. 3 had been in effect from the beginning, as had been planned and practiced, the delaying actions would have been more effective and the supply problem would have been much simpler. Actually the supply problem rapidly became highly complicated when the movement to Bataan started and, as a result, only a limited quantity of Quartermaster supplies ever reached Bataan. A great portion of the Ordnance^x supplies were stored in Bataan prior to the war. On 11 January, all military personnel went on half rations and shortly thereafter, the half ration was cut to one-fourth ration, or eight ounces of rice - minus what was looted in the rear areas!^x

occupied by
Bataan Peninsula, thirty two miles long by twenty miles wide, was divided into the I Corps commanded by General Wainwright and the II Corps Commanded by General Parker. The corps boundaries ran generally down the center of the peninsula (see Map B).

The forces that were withdrawn into Bataan totaled approximately 80,000 men⁽⁵⁾, including 15,000 Americans. In addition, there were some 20,000 civilian refugees who had to be fed from Quartermaster supplies.⁽⁶⁾ The original plan called for two battle positions, the main position extending from Mauban^{NS} across the peninsula just north of Mt Natib to Abucay and the Manila Bay. The reserve battle position extended across Bataan from Bagac to Orion (See Map B).

(5) A-8, p. 67

(6) A-12, p. 65 - 70,000 total strength

The II Corps sector of the main battle position, known as the Abucay Line, was reconnoitred in February of 1941, and it was then decided that the Mt Natib section of the line was so rugged that an enemy could not possibly attack in force over this area. As a direct result of this concept of impossible terrain, there was never any satisfactory contact established between the II and I Corps.

The recently mobilized 51st Division was deployed on the left flank of the II Corps with its left flank anchored to one of the many deep ravines that fanned out from Mt Natib. The 41st Division and the 57th Infantry Regiment completed the MLR of the II Corps. The Philippine Division, minus the 57th Infantry Regiment, constituted the corps reserve. (7)

Between 9 January and 15 January, the Japanese made two attacks along the Abucay Line in an effort to find a soft spot. After an initial failure to break through the right flank and the middle of the line, the enemy attacked the sector held by the 51st Division. On 16 January, a battalion of the 51st Infantry, led by a battalion officer, withdrew to the rear. Before the officers in command could act, there was a "withdrawal" en masse, leaving the left flank of the 41st Division exposed. The Japanese exploited this situation by sending only a small force in pursuit to the Gitol area. (See Map B)

General Parker, in command of the II Corps, ordered the Philippine Division (Minus the 57th Combat Team) to reestablish the left flank of the Abucay Line and regain the original battle position. The division was to counter-attack at daylight 17 January. (8) At about 1700 on 16 January, Headquarters II Corps issued an order over the telephone to the S-3 of the 45th Infantry Regiment (PS) at Bani: "Proceed to the area southwest of the Labangan River and northwest of the Capitanan Valley to be in reserve behind the 31st Infantry Regiment (US)." (9)

(7) A-1, p. 32
(8) A-1, p. 32
(9) A-10, p. 10

*Spelling
different in Map B*

This order did not go through the Division Commander and, as you may guess, this failure to follow military command channels caused great confusion a few days later.

MOVEMENT TO THE ABUCAY LINE

On the night of 16 January, the 45th Infantry Regiment moved north toward the Capitangan River Valley. It was a black moonless night and the march was over country that was criss-crossed by a maze of trails. Capt. George Moore, Co. I, had reconnoitred the route the day before but became hopelessly lost on the night of the march.⁽¹⁰⁾ The weapons trucks were soon bogged down in a stream ford and it was necessary for the unit to go "by hand" most of the distance that remained to be covered. Soon after daylight on 17 January, the 3rd Battalion arrived at the position shown on Map B in the Capitangan River Valley and went into bivouac. The 1st Battalion had been lost somewhere northwest of Beni during the night.⁽¹¹⁾ At 1200 hours the same day, the 3rd Battalion moved out with the 2nd Battalion, marching on an azimuth of 352 degrees. The destination was the Abucay Hacienda. There were no guides for this movement and the route was generally perpendicular to the ridge lines. The Battalion Commander, in compliance with regimental orders, made every effort to move his battalion as rapidly as possible and, as a result, M Company and the medical section were separated from the rest of the unit. It was also at this time that the 2nd Battalion became separated from the 3rd Battalion and for the next seven days, the 3rd Battalion had no contact with any other combat unit of the regiment. At about 1300 hours, the 3rd Battalion, less M Company and the medical section, went into bivouac about 900 yards south of the Hacienda. (See Map B) By 1130 hours on the morning of 18 January, the Battalion Commander had made contact with the Regimental Commander of the 31st Infantry Regiment. It was decided that the 3rd Battalion would go into position on

(10) Personal conversation with Major George Moore, September 1949

(11) Ibid., Major Louis B Besbeck

the left of the 31st Infantry Regiment.

In order to clarify the picture, it will be necessary to explain the overall situation. It will be remembered that this was supposed to be a division counterattack consisting of two combat teams, the 31st and the 45th. At 0815 on 17 January, the 31st Infantry Regiment had attacked north along trail 12 (see Map C).⁽¹²⁾ The 1st Battalion was on the left of the trail, the 2nd on the right and the 3rd Battalion was in reserve. Their objective was the MLR evacuated by the 51st Division. Very heavy resistance was met in the area shown on Map C. On 19 January, the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 45th Infantry went into position on the right flank of the 31st. 20 January⁽¹³⁾, the 31st employed their 3rd Battalion in a very poorly coordinated envelopment which resulted in a fire fight between the 3rd Battalion 45th and the 3rd Battalion 31st. During this whole engagement there was no supporting artillery, aircraft or effective mortars. Theoretically, the 24th Field Artillery (75 mm Battalion), 88th Field Artillery (75 mm Battalion) and one battalion of 155 mm GPF's were assigned to the two combat teams. The enemy had a large amount of artillery with good observation from Mt Natib and from the air.

To return to the 3rd Battalion of the 45th Infantry, it is not clear now and was never clear exactly who was supposed to be issuing orders to the Battalion Commander. There was a conflict between Regimental Headquarters and the II Corps Headquarters which was finally settled when the 3rd Battalion was attached to the 31st Infantry Regiment. The Regimental Commander of the 45th Infantry was conspicuous by his absence.⁽¹⁴⁾

NARRATION

The 3rd Battalion was formed in an approach march formation approximately 1000 yards east of the Hacienda and moved west along the Abucay Road (see Map C). L Company formed the advance guard with one squad as

(12) A-9, p. 8

(13) This date cannot be accurately determined.

(14) Personal conversation with Battalion Commander of the 1st Battalion on 28 October 1949

the point, two squads as the advance party and the rest of the company in support. Before I Company in the main body moved off, the point was fired upon from the Abucay buildings and the leading man was shot right between the eyes. There was only one shot fired. The point deployed and advanced on through the buildings of the Abucay Hacienda. After proceeding about fifty yards further up the road, they came to what seemed to be an old command post that had been evacuated by the 51st Infantry Regiment (PA). Here they found a large quantity of ammunition. The point had advanced only a few yards further when it was pinned down by a very heavy automatic weapons fire. The Battalion Commander and the Company Commander made a personal reconnaissance but were not able to determine the exact direction from which the hostile fire was coming. The Japanese Army was using firecrackers, either dropped from airplanes or fired from the light mortar, to cover their fire. Company L was then deployed with the first platoon facing west and the second platoon facing northwest. The third platoon and the weapons platoon had taken position off the road in a ravine to the left.

THE ATTACK

The Battalion Commander assembled the company commanders and issued an order to attack on an azimuth of 360 degrees immediately (1300 hours 18 January).⁽¹⁵⁾ Since the mission of the battalion was to reestablish the MLR evacuated by the 51st Division and not to locate and destroy the enemy, this appeared to be the proper action. Companies L, I and K were ordered to attack in line of companies with L Company on the left flank. The objective was the old MLR of the 51st, a "prepared" position somewhere to the front along the ^{N1} Labangan River. One platoon of machine guns from Company M was attached to L and K Companies and the mortar platoon went into general support from a position to the rear of the ^{N7} assembly area. No reconnaissance was made by anyone before the attack was started and only

(15) Ibid., Major Louis Besbeck

one highly inaccurate map was available for the entire battalion. All communications were accomplished by runner. These were only a few of the elements that contributed to the complete failure of this operation, even though the objective was finally secured.

The IP was crossed and Company L advanced in a squad column formation with three platoons in line with scouts out. The platoon of heavy machine guns was instructed to follow close enough to maintain contact. The advance was made through a sugar cane field which limited visibility to only a few feet. The company advanced for about 250 yards before the left flank was fired upon. On this flank, part of the cane had been burned off so that visibility was not materially restricted. The company deployed in a line of skirmishers and built up on the scouts. Lt Ulrick, the only other officer in the company, was sent to the left flank in an effort to determine what was holding up the advance of the left platoon. He came back in a few minutes with the information that an enemy machine gun was firing from under a 1½ ton 45th Infantry supply truck located about 500 yards to the left front. Lt Ulrick was sent back to the battalion CP to request mortar fire. He had no means by which to adjust the fire so he tried to locate the truck on the Battalion Commander's map. There was so little similarity between the map and the ground that he found it impossible to locate the truck.

A few rounds were fired in the general direction but none came near the target. It was later found that the men of the 45th Infantry who had driven up there were almost hit by this mortar fire. They had managed to clear the truck and hide in a small ravine. Regimental Headquarters had told the Battalion S-4 that the 2nd Battalion was already in position in this area. (Regimental Headquarters had made no attempt to orient them-

How?

selves as to the existing situation⁽¹⁶⁾.) The Japanese machine gun was finally destroyed and, as the company advanced, covering a front of about 350 yards, enemy fire became progressively heavier. They came to a draw extending parallel to the front, which got progressively deeper and wider to the right. The ravine was grown up in heavy undergrowth which restricted movement to the trails that the Japanese had covered by mortar fire. On the north side of the ravine, the cane field again restricted visibility. About fifty feet from the lip of the ravine, the cane was broken by a road running perpendicular to the direction of attack. This trail or road gave perfect flanking visibility to the enemy on the left flank. The company advanced through the draw without much trouble and continued the advance on the north side until they reached the road. Here Company L received heavy casualties from flanking fire delivered from the left flank. The attached heavy machine guns went into position on the left flank and soon neutralized the enemy fire from this direction. No targets to the front had yet been seen. The road was crossed and the attack was continued for about twenty-five yards to a position where the objective, a line of fox-holes along a ridge about 100 yards to the front, could be seen. Company L had received 30 casualties, including those suffered by the attached machine gun platoon but there was no evidence that any Japanese soldiers had been killed.

It was at this time that the Battalion Adjutant informed the Company Commander that the attack had been called off and that the company would return to the line of departure. This was accomplished but not without additional losses. As soon as the Company Commander of L Company got back to the line of departure, he went to Battalion Headquarters and found the Battalion Commander in very bad humor. The 45th Infantry Regimental Head-

(16) Personal conversation with Lt Col Van Oosten, the 1st Battalion Commander, October 1949

*Not shown
on MTRP
Not clear*

quarters, upon hearing that the objective was about to be taken, had ordered the battalion to withdraw. The reason for this decision was never discovered. About this time, Headquarters II Corps called and asked if the objective had been reached. The situation was explained and the reply was that II Corps was the higher headquarters and that the objective would be taken. (17) Again the battalion fought back across the ravine, road and open field to the old MLR of the 51st Infantry. In this attack, K Company was on the left flank and had very high casualties.

Communication by wire was soon established between Company I on the right and the battalion command post which was located just north of the Hacienda buildings.

About 2300 hours, the battalion adjutant requested carrying parties to bring up a hot meal. The men started back at about 2330 but never reached the battalion CP - the enemy had infiltrated into the draw and ambushed the men along the trail. Enemy fire was very heavy for the rest of the night, all of it coming from the direct rear and from the left flank. The enemy made every effort to make the battalion believe that their strength was much greater than it actually was. They fired a large number of firecrackers packed with whistling shot to confuse our men. The left flank of K Company was attacked during the night and received heavy casualties in its refused flank which extended to the southwest. Company L sent one squad to K company to help hold the left flank. Artillery support was requested but refused on the grounds that they did not know exactly where the 3rd Battalion was. (18)

There was no possible way of evacuating the wounded soldiers that night because contact with the battalion CP had been completely broken. The screams of these wounded men, easily heard over the small arms fire,

(17) Personal knowledge verified by Major George Moore, who was in command of I Company (September 1949). Col Dennis Moore who was G-2 of II Corps said that he had no knowledge of any such order having been given. (Personal interview October 1949)

(18) Personal knowledge.

Not clear

how?

was hard on the morale of the troops. The position was under heavy fire all of the next day and it wasn't until that night that the enemy was finally forced out of the ravine to the rear of the position. The first food and water in two days reached the company at about 1700 hours. After eating, an attempt was made to evacuate the dead. The work had hardly started when effective automatic weapons fire was received from the high ground to the left flank. It was soon seen that any attempt to evacuate these men would only result in more casualties. The men were buried in their foxholes.

On 20 January, one company of the 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry, which had been held in reserve, was ordered to clear out the ravine by an enveloping movement around the left flank of the 1st Battalion of the 31st Infantry. (19) Due to the lack of coordination, the 3rd Battalion was not told that the 3rd Battalion, 45th Infantry, was on the left flank, nor was the 3rd Battalion, 45th Infantry, told that the attack was going to be made. This resulted in an element of this battalion engaging in a fire fight with Companies L and I of the 45th Infantry. This action failed to clear the ravine.

WITHDRAWAL

The 20th and 21st were relatively quiet. Patrol action located a large force of the enemy about 1000 yards to the east of the battalion position and it soon became evident that the enemy was building up its force in the ravine. On 22 January, the 1st Battalion, 31st Infantry (on the right flank of the 3rd Battalion, 45th Infantry) was struck hard from the rear. A fire was started in the sugar cane that covered their position and they became disorganized and withdrew to the rear. A number of men from D Company attached themselves to L Company, 45th Infantry. The

(19) Personal conversation with Major John Pray

withdrawal of this battalion left both flanks and the rear of the position exposed. At this time, the Japanese stopped firing completely and the area was dead quiet for the first time. The prospect of spending the night in this isolated position was hard on the morale of the men in the command. At about 1500 hours, the order came from the Battalion Commander to withdraw to a position south of the Hacienda Road. The 3rd Battalion was then attached to the 31st Infantry and placed in reserve. The next morning our position was pounded by artillery concentrations alternated with air strikes but there were few casualties from this fire.

The 3rd Battalion was organized in a defensive position in the center of a large cane field about 200 yards behind the forward elements of the 31st Infantry. Company L occupied a position near the road and I Company was dug in near the left flank of the left company of the 31st. The battalion remained in this position until the evening of 24 January. Enemy bombardment and artillery fire became increasingly heavier.

COVERING FORCE

It had become obvious that the Philippine Division could not hold the left flank of II Corps and a general withdrawal of II Corps was ordered for the night of 24 January. (20)

In preparing this paper, I have found that there is no agreement in the available references as to what happened or what was supposed to happen on 24 January when the 31st and 45th Infantry Regiments withdrew from the Abucay Line. Major Louis B Besbeck, Executive Officer of the 3rd Battalion, Major George Moore, Commanding Officer, Company I, 45th Infantry, Major John Pray, Commanding Officer, Company G, 31st Infantry and Major Eugene B Conrad, a company commander of the 31st Infantry, all have different ideas and opinions about what actually took place. Since there

(20) The withdrawal order originated in the USAFFE Headquarters.

NOT
CLEAR