

**ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1949-1950**

**THE OPERATIONS OF THE MORTAR PLATOON, COMPANY H,
382ND INFANTRY (96TH INFANTRY DIVISION), IN THE
ATTACK ON TABONTABON, LEYTE ISLAND, P. I., 26-29
OCTOBER 1944 (LEYTE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)**

**Type of operation described: 81MM MORTAR PLATOON IN SUPPORT
OF AN ATTACK OF A VILLAGE**

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 1**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
INDEX.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	2
ORIENTATION.....	3
Introduction.....	3
The General Situation.....	4
Situation and Plan of the 382nd Infantry.....	7
Situation of Mortar Platoon, Company H, 382nd Infantry.....	8
NARRATION.....	9
The Piecemeal Attack on Tabontabon.....	9
The Second Attack on Tabontabon.....	15
The Third Day of the Battle for Tabontabon.....	24
ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM.....	31
LESSONS.....	35
MAP A Southwest Pacific Theater	
MAP B XXIV Corps Beachhead	
MAP C Tabontabon Situation 26 October 1944	
OVERLAY C ₁ Tabontabon Situation 27 October 1944	
OVERLAY C ₂ Tabontabon Situation 28 October 1944	
OVERLAY C ₃ Tabontabon Situation, Night of 28-29 October 1944	

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

World War II has recorded many stirring accounts of the capture of great cities and the importance of their fall. But, except to the men who fought in them, there is little significance or publicity given to the countless small towns and villages turned to battlegrounds in the late conflict. Such a nameless village was TABONTABON in the far off PHILIPPINES. The possession of its 500 grass huts and one concrete schoolhouse was not worth a single American life until the day in October 1944 when elements of the Japanese Army decided to hold the very important road net that centered there. For the American Forces to be able to cut the main enemy supply and escape route two miles to the north, they needed TABONTABON and so, for the second time in thirty-eight years, American troops fought in its muddy streets.⁽¹⁾ In 1906, Col. Joseph B. Pate, USA, commanding a Philippine constabulary detachment, had been attacked there by insurrectos.⁽²⁾ By October 1944, however, Col. Pate was probably the only living American soldier who had ever heard of the village. He would soon share this memory with the men of the 382nd Infantry, 96th Division.

The events which finally connected the village of TABONTABON with the subject of this monograph, the mortar platoon of Company H, 382nd Infantry, began in August 1944. Toward the end of that month, while the 96th Infantry Division was completing its jungle and amphibious training in the HAWAIIAN ISLANDS, 5000 miles to the west Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet was beginning a probing operation in the western CAROLINES and the PHILIPPINES.

(1) A-1, p. 37

(2) Personal knowledge; statement of Col Joseph B Pate, USA, Retired, October 1947

On 12 September Admiral Halsey had struck at the central PHILIPPINES with his carrier planes and found the Japanese air defense weak. This discovery stepped up the Pacific schedule by months. He had recommended to Admiral Nimitz in Pearl Harbor that intermediate island targets be by-passed and that LEYTE in the Central PHILIPPINES be attacked as soon as possible. Admiral Nimitz had placed Vice Admiral Wilkinson's Third Amphibious Force, which included the XXIV Army Corps, at General MacArthur's disposal for the attack on Leyte. Within 48 hours General MacArthur's headquarters had completed the remarkable achievement of shifting the planned PHILIPPINE invasion date from 20 December to 20 October 1944. Halfway around the world in QUEBEC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had approved the new plan within ninety minutes after its receipt.⁽³⁾ And so, in the brief space of three days and ninety minutes, the 96th Division, part of the XXIV Corps, had been diverted from a minor role, the invasion of Yap in the western CAROLINES, to a part in the biggest mission short of JAPAN, the liberation of the PHILIPPINES. On 15 September 1944, the XXIV Corps had sailed from Honolulu on its long journey to the Southwest Pacific.⁽⁴⁾

THE GENERAL SITUATION

General MacArthur had assigned General Walter Kreuger's sixth Army the mission of taking LEYTE. In addition to the 96th and 7th Infantry Divisions of the XXIV Corps, General Kreuger had under his command the 1st Cavalry and the 24th Infantry Divisions of the X Corps from the Southwest Pacific.⁽⁵⁾ The 96th Division was the only recruit in the Sixth Army. A mighty armada of over 600 ships had transported the divisions and this Amphibious Force was covered by six battleships with their cruiser and destroyer screens.⁽⁶⁾

(3) A-2, p. 73
(4) Personal knowledge
(5) A-3, p. 76
(6) A-3, p. 77

The invasion fleet had departed from MANUS in the ADMIRALTIES on 11 October and struck out boldly deep into the enemy zone.⁽⁷⁾ At that time, the nearest American bases to the target were at PELELIU, 600 miles to the east of LEYTE, and at MOROTAI, 700 miles to the south of LEYTE.

On 20 October a successful landing had been effected on the east coast of LEYTE with the two Sixth Army Corps abreast, the XXIV Corps on the south.⁽⁸⁾ (See Map B) The surprised defenders, consisting of the 16th Japanese Division (reinforced to about 20,000 men), had been driven out of the beach defenses the first day of the landings. Because the Japanese Army Headquarters in Manila had expected the American landings on LUZON far to the north⁽⁹⁾, the only other Japanese force immediately available for the defense of LEYTE was the Navy.⁽¹⁰⁾ A powerful fleet, comprising 60% of the Japanese Navy, had steamed into the Central PHILIPPINES on 23 October to destroy the American seaborne penetration and thereby precipitated one of the decisive battles of history.⁽¹¹⁾ Fortunately for the U. S. Sixth Army, Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet and Admiral Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet had virtually eliminated Japan as a sea power by the 26th of October.

That same day on shore, General Hodge's XXIV Corps had continued its advance in a turning movement toward its first phase line, the HINAHAN RIVER, with the two divisions of the Corps abreast.⁽¹²⁾ (See Map B) The 96th Division (less one regiment in Corps reserve) moved on the right and was primarily concerned with the capture of the strongly entrenched CATMON HILL, a critical terrain feature in the right of the Division Zone. By 26 October, the 383rd Infantry was well along on the accomplishment of that mission. In LEYTE VALLEY, protecting the left of the 383rd Infantry, the 382nd Infantry had been wading hip deep through an endless swamp since

(7) Personal knowledge

(8) A-3, p. 77

(9) A-2, p. 73

(10) A-3, p. 78

(11) A-2, p. 73

(12) A-1, p. 16

it had crossed the beaches seven days before.⁽¹³⁾ (See Map B) When the Division Commander had shown General MacArthur the location of the two assault regiments, the Supreme Commander had exclaimed: "That's impossible. No man can get through those swamps."⁽¹⁴⁾ For once, the Japanese seemed to have agreed with General MacArthur for they had covered the area only by patrols and artillery fire from CAITMON HILL.⁽¹⁵⁾

Many times during the first week the two assault regiments had also been ready to agree with the Supreme Commander about the passibility of the swamps.

The supply situation in the advancing regiments was critical. There was not a single road leading inland in the Division Zone. Even amphibious tractors had mired down trying to supply the troops; only a few "weasels" had gotten through in places. Packs and gas masks had been abandoned the first day. There had been no resupply of rations during the first three days and the coconut crop had been put to good use by the troops.⁽¹⁶⁾ There was plenty of water as it rained several times a day and usually most of the night to chill the men in flooded foxholes. The rainfall for October was normally 8.4 inches but in 1944 it was almost double the normal.⁽¹⁷⁾ The evacuation of wounded took hours of extreme discomfort for the casualties and exhausting work for the litter bearers. On 23 October a main supply route, consisting of a rough trail, had been finally established through the 7th Division zone to the south. The one trail supported both front line regiments with a trickle of supplies.⁽¹⁹⁾ In spite of the hardships, the morale of the men was generally good. Their fighting efficiency, however, was substantially reduced by the shortage of ammunition and food.⁽²⁰⁾ Very little was known about the Japanese forces opposing the 96th Division.⁽²¹⁾

(13) A-1, p. 16
(14) A-1, p. 23
(15) Personal knowledge
(16) Personal knowledge
(17) Personal knowledge

(18) Personal knowledge
(19) A-1, Map 3 and Map 5
(20) Personal knowledge
(21) Personal knowledge

The 2nd Battalion had been in the process of forming a night perimeter about a mile south of the village when the attack order came. The tired troops had been marched and countermarched most of the day due to a faulty map. Also the shortage of supplies in that unit was particularly acute.⁽²⁸⁾ It had been hoped, therefore, that an attack would not be launched until the following morning when some of the deficiencies could have been remedied. With receipt of the orders, the battalion had hastily moved out to the north to make the most of the three hours of daylight remaining.

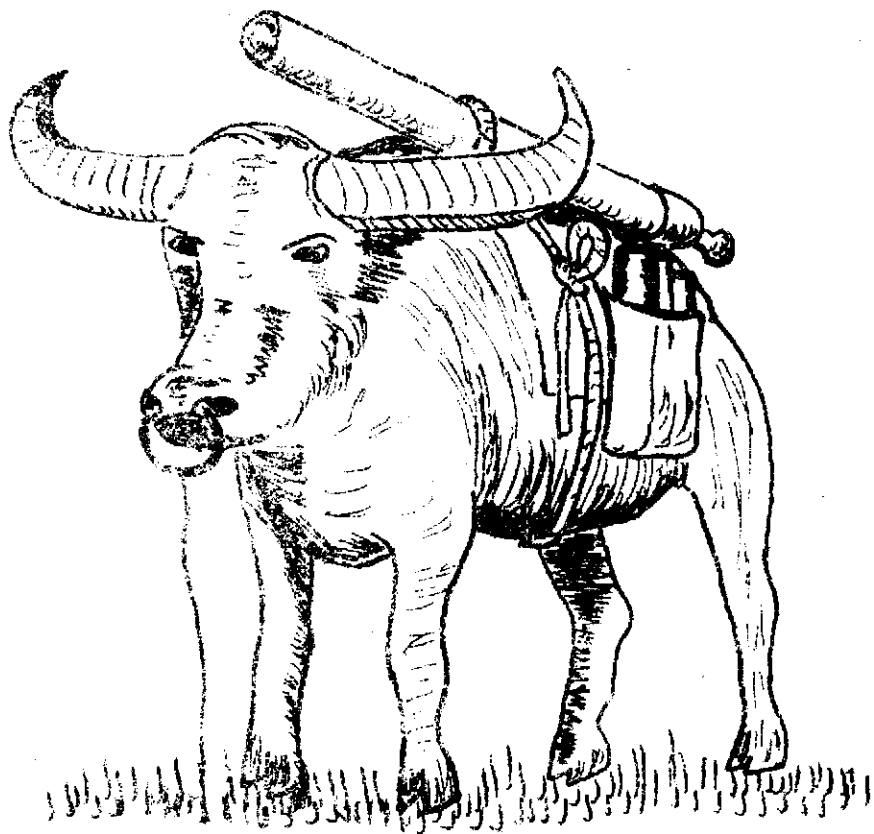
SITUATION OF THE MORTAR PLATOON, COMPANY H, 382ND INFANTRY

The heavy weapons of the 2nd Battalion, and especially the mortars, would have been unable to keep up with the seven day advance of the battalion through the swamps if it had not been for some extraordinary measures. After two days of exhausting hand carry of weapons by all members of the platoons including officers, the farmers in the company conceived the idea of rounding up the stray water carabaos in the area and using them for weapons carriers. (See illustration) This idea had saved the day and the mortar platoon alone had eighteen of these prime movers.

During most of the campaign, the machine guns of H Company were attached to rifle companies and the mortar platoon had a great deal of autonomy, coordinating directly with the supported elements of the battalion.⁽²⁹⁾ The platoon was organized into the normal three sections of two mortar squads each. The section sergeants acted as forward observers with each rifle company. The platoon leader alternated between an observation post and a fire direction center and habitually fired the mortars in battery. The assistant platoon leader stayed at the mortar position and was responsible for control and local security, the latter being a most important duty in jungle warfare. The communications problem was so difficult that the third officer in the platoon was the com-

(28) Personal knowledge

(29) Personal knowledge



WEAPONS CARRIER M 1944

munication officer and had assigned to his section all five of the communications personnel of the company. This wire section landed on D day with eight miles of assault wire and four SCR 536 radios but by 26 October, due to the incessant rain, there was not a single operating SCR 536 in the platoon and no replacement available in the company.

The mortar platoon leader had commanded his platoon for ten months and the men had been working together for over two years. There was one Purple Heart veteran in the group, Cpl. Carpenter, a gunner. Enemy action against the platoon had only resulted in two casualties. The state of training of the platoon was very high, as it had made the second highest platoon proficiency score among the mortar platoons of three divisions in the Jungle Training Center on OAHU in the HAWAIIAN ISLANDS. (30)

However, the highest state of training could not make up for the fact that there were only forty-seven rounds of mortar ammunition in the platoon as it moved at the rear of the 2nd Battalion toward the village of TABONTABON.

The platoon leader had received no orders and was not aware that a coordinated attack was about to be organized.

NARRATION

THE PIECEMEAL ATTACK ON TABONTABON

It was about 1600 hours when the word was passed down the column for the mortars to move forward on the double. The Mortar Platoon leader led his column around E Company, the battalion reserve, and pushed rapidly down the trail. Captain Harbison of E Company had not been able to give any additional information on the need for such haste. (31)

After advancing about a half mile without making contact with the remainder of the battalion, the Platoon Leader began having serious misgivings about his line of march. Freshly dug Japanese foxholes came into view along the trail, and the warnings of his young Filipino guide that

(30) Personal knowledge

(31) Personal knowledge

he could smell Japs was not reassuring in the least. Although the officer felt instinctively that something had gone wrong, he could not let the sense of smell of a frightened boy stop the forward progress of the platoon. He did, however, take the precaution of preceding the platoon with a six man point.

A short time later the point rounded a bend in the trail and there stood what was apparently their destination, the village of TABONTABON, or what little could be seen of it down the heavily wooded path. (See Map C) In front of the village was a foot bridge spanning the GUINARONA RIVER, which at that point was only a forty foot wide stream. The group halted there and considered the question of who held the village, the 2nd Battalion or the Japanese. The question was shortly answered by the movement of a Japanese soldier between two buildings just across the stream. The inexperienced platoon leader gave away his presence by opening fire. This thoroughly alerted the enemy garrison and a violent reaction of small arms fire soon followed.

The nose of the Filipino guide was fully vindicated and, judging by the first unguarded movements of the enemy in the village, their local security must have been by-passed by the point. The advancing platoon was therefore in immediate danger of being ambushed in the jungle defile.

Leaving Sgt. Jasnoch, the first section leader, in charge of the point with instructions to cover the bridge, the platoon leader took off for the platoon. He had started to go down the trail but intuitively chose a route through the jungle. His young guide, by that time smelling a Jap soldier under every bush, disappeared from the theater of war. As the officer beat his way through the thick brush, he was trying to think of a way to extricate his platoon from the unusual predicament it was in. He had never before considered the use of a mortar platoon as the advance guard of a battalion.

Somehow he found the trail and, dropping into the drainage trench that ran along it, he crawled on all fours as fast as he could. To make better time, he slipped out of his harness, intending to pick up his equipment later. The air was alive with zinging bullets, but no enemy was visible. Around a bend in the trail, he saw the deserted carabao of the platoon, the men having taken cover in the trenches on either side of the trail. The platoon was still safe, but was certainly in no position to function as a mortar platoon. Several of the carabao, including the one with the communications equipment on it, had been wounded and charged off madly into the jungle never to be seen again.

The platoon leader held a council of war with Captain Harbison who had closed in with E Company. The Captain's information was still hazy on the situation of the remainder of the battalion, but he agreed to launch an attack to assist in extricating the mortar platoon.⁽³²⁾ While E Company prepared to send a platoon down either side of the trail, the mortar platoon leader crawled back down the trench toward Sgt Jasnoch's group.

Before he could reach their position, the word was passed that Jasnoch had been hit trying to withdraw down the trail. The lieutenant crawled over a dead medic in the trench and continued down it to the GUINARONA RIVER. He could not rejoin the point, however, because of the automatic fire on the trail which separated them.

The E Company platoon on his side of the trail forced a crossing upstream, after taking some casualties at the stream bank, and disappeared into the hotly defended village. Sgt. Puccetti, the mortar platoon communications sergeant, ran a wire forward from the mortars. He reported that in spite of the heavy fire on the trail, the platoon, led by such stalwarts as Sgt Hillstrom and Cpl Douglas, had put two tubes in firing position. Big ex-coal miner Douglas had carried his bipod and tube for-

(32) Personal knowledge

ward in one load, shouting to his crew that they were afraid to follow him. They followed him.⁽³³⁾

While the platoon leader was preparing to fire the mortars, across the trail Sgt Jasnoch's friends were making every effort to save his life. When that isolated group was joined by the other assault platoon of E Company (3d platoon), Pvt Emelio borrowed a BAR and, moving into full view of the enemy, fired several magazines into the village. Under cover of Emelio's fire, Instrument Corporal Burns made a dash for Jasnoch on the trail. He was killed six feet from his buddy. Emelio then took a bazooka and fired it into the village while Sgt Staver and the platoon medic, Watson, tried in vain to reach Jasnoch. Watson received a long welt on his back from a passing bullet.⁽³⁴⁾

The 3d platoon of E Company could not force its way across the stream and the 1st platoon of E Company in the village had been pushed back across the stream. Jap artillery fire fell around the mortar OP and the trail.⁽³⁵⁾ When the OP stopped rocking, the mortar platoon leader started to give a fire order over the phone. He was interrupted by Lt Runick of E Company yelling for everyone to fall back because artillery fire would be dropped on the area in five minutes. The mortar platoon leader yelled to Lt Runick to stop the artillery fire, that there were E and H Company wounded in the immediate area who couldn't be evacuated. But there was nothing Lt Runick could do. The mortar men knew from sad experience that the Japanese fire which just ended was only a sample compared to what they could expect in five minutes.

The Japanese fire had apparently killed Jasnoch as there was no moaning from the trail. The lieutenant organized three E Company men and Sgt Pucetti into a rear guard and they started down the narrow trench, dragging with them the only wounded man they had been able to reach. After all the noise that the retreating Americans had made, the little

(33) Statement of Tech Sgt Wesley Hillstrom, then of Company H, 382nd Infantry, 26 October 1944

(34) Personal knowledge

(35) Personal knowledge

group, working its way down the trench, expected to be cut off at any moment, but they were not seen in the trench and made their withdrawal in good order. And just in time as the American artillery fire was starting in the area.

The next problem that faced the platoon leader was to locate his men. When he crawled down the trench to their old position, they were gone. A loud cry from the trench across the trail was from Douglas as he was hit in the hip with a bullet. The same bullet had passed through Pvt Ritacco's head, killing him. Lt. Sigler, the assistant platoon leader, together with Douglas and Ritacco had started forward to find out what had happened to Jasnoch and the group on the stream bank. The rest of the platoon under Lt Marshall, thinking that the platoon leader had been killed after the withdrawal order, moved to the rear with E Company.⁽³⁶⁾ Lt Sigler had no idea where they had gone.

The platoon leader finally overtook scattered parties of men converging on a large open space in the jungle about four hundred yards east of the trail. An atmosphere of confusion and defeat prevailed. The idea that an almost unseen enemy had driven the battalion of eight hundred men back from the village didn't seem possible. There was no time to study mass psychology, however, as the mortar platoon was still missing. Back the lieutenant went. He thought he had retraced his steps on a path which led to the trail but the clearing with the nipa hut in it was new to him. Silence had settled on the jungle and he was very much alone.

He was glad, therefore, to see three natives pass through the clearing and he asked them if they had seen any Americans. They had not. As an afterthought, he inquired if they had seen any Japs. They had and they pointed to the end of the clearing. There was certainly a five man patrol approaching him but he must have misunderstood the natives. The boldly advancing group would have to be Americans. He hailed them and asked

(36) Report of Lt Paul B Marshall, Company H, 382nd Infantry, 26 Oct 1944

if they were from the 2nd Battalion. No answer from the patrol. He yelled his question again - this time the men broke into a run and he knew something was wrong, as the men of the 2nd Battalion were too tired to run that evening. At a seventy-five foot range his near-sighted eyes picked up the long bayonets of the Japanese soldiers. A fleeting urge to open fire was quickly suppressed, followed by a mad dash for the edge of the clearing, a hundred feet away. The enemy tried to cut off the retreat but the US race entry, discovering speed he didn't know existed, won the concealment of the jungle. He had no idea which way to run and rather than be driven into the Japanese lines again, he decided to try an ambush. Rounding a curve, he jumped into a bush and waited but the Japanese never came.

It was almost dark and without the compass, which he had left in the trench that afternoon, he had a very slim chance of finding the battalion. In training, he had frequently raised hell with the men about making too much noise but he was thankful that night that not all the men were thoroughly indoctrinated with the necessity for silence. Noise proved to be the slim chance that guided him to the perimeter. (37)

He had hardly rejoined his platoon, when he was given the task of organizing the rear of the battalion defenses. The Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon was attached to the mortar platoon,

As an example of how jumpy the whole battalion was, the ordinarily efficient A&P Platoon Sergeant called the use of his light machine guns on the perimeter a suicide mission. He got little sympathy from his temporary boss, however, who had reached the point where he felt there were worse fates than suicide.

After the usual supper of cold C rations (there had been no fires for a week), the platoon leader received a report from his officers on

(37) Personal knowledge

the day's activities. To begin with, when the battalion first approached TABONTABON, while F and G Companies were preparing to attack the village from the southwest (see Map C), the H Company Commander, Captain Wagoner, stated he had dispatched a messenger to guide the mortars into position in the vicinity of the night perimeter.⁽³⁸⁾ The messenger, as we have seen, never reached the platoon. F and G Companies launched a weakly supported attack and were driven back from the village about the same time E Company withdrew. The 3rd Battalion on the left had also met heavy opposition and it was through that unit that the artillery fire, which caused so much confusion in the 2nd Battalion, had been called for.⁽³⁹⁾ During the withdrawal to the night perimeter, the platoon leader had passed the platoon on a parallel path and reached the area ahead of the platoon, which explained the lost platoon or the lost leader, depending on how one looks at it.

To sum up the activities of the first day's attack on TABONTABON, the mortar platoon of Company H had accidentally acted as an advance guard in a meeting engagement, a rear guard of sorts in a withdrawal, had lost two men dead, one wounded and one missing, and had not fired a round of HE in support of the battalion.

The men of the 2nd Battalion settled in their foxholes for a long night of fitful sleep and vigil, fully expecting the Jap to press his advantage of the afternoon.

THE SECOND ATTACK ON TABONTABON

By sunrise of 27 October, 1944, however, there had been no enemy attack and those who were fortunate enough to be asleep were abruptly awakened by the firing of BAR's, as the "termite" patrols from the perimeter began flushing out the surrounding underbrush and treetops. The so-called "termite" patrol was habitually used in the Pacific to clear from the areas immediately around troop positions infiltrating Japanese snipers. The technique of the patrols was to systematically fire into all possible

(38) Statement of Capt Ralph D Wagoner, then CO Company H, 382nd Infantry, 26 October 1944

(39) Idem

hiding places such as clumps of bushes and treetops.

As soon as possible, the Battalion Commander, Lt Col Sterner, led a reconnaissance party of the company commanders and the mortar platoon leader to the GUINARONA RIVER. The party reached a point near the familiar footbridge without running into the enemy. There Colonel Sterner issued his attack order. F and G Companies were to attack abreast from the GUINARONA to seize and hold the village. F Company on the left was to follow Avenue 3 and maintain contact with the 3rd Battalion on the left at Avenue 2. H Company left its two machine gun platoons attached to the assault companies. The mortars were to be in general support. E Company was to follow G Company and protect the exposed right flank of the Battalion. The time of attack was 0800.⁽⁴⁰⁾ (See Overlay C₁)

The Mortar Platoon leader was hard pressed to complete his preparations in the forty-five minutes that remained before H hour. Lt Marshall's wire team tied into the wire that Sgt Pucetti had laid along the trench that previous afternoon. The wiremen extended the line back to the selected mortar position. Their work was slowed down by the precautions taken against enemy patrols.⁽⁴¹⁾ Another complication to meeting the dead line arose over the difficulty of finding a position with mask clearance for the mortars. After sending a runner back to bring up the platoon to a rather poor position, the platoon leader found a better one; having dispatched all his other runners, he was forced to try to intercept the platoon himself. Without his compass, he again got on the wrong path. Even though the day was hot, the lieutenant was soon in a cold sweat as he checked his watch. Also, he had learned by that time that the Japanese used those paths too. Instead of running into the enemy, however, he ran into the flank of the 2nd Battalion moving forward in column.

The Battalion Commander had assigned Lt Runick's platoon of E Company

(40) Personal knowledge

(41) Report of Lt Paul B Marshall, Company H, 382nd Infantry, 27 October 1944

to see that the mortars reached their firing position safely. As the mortar platoon moved into the position, the desirability of the location was greatly diminished by the arrival of one Japanese artillery round. At any other time, a move would have been clearly indicated but, under the circumstances, the mortars were laid on the base azimuth immediately and the platoon leader started rapidly for the OP.

He had reached a point in the trench well forward when he was startled by a head poking out of a bush which hung into the trench. He almost shot the missing Sgt Jasnoch before he recognized his ashen colored face. The rescued man wept for joy. During the night he had dragged his body, shattered and mutilated with eleven bullets, thirty feet into the trench, thereby saving his life. The other wounded had been killed by the Jap patrols. (42)

At 0800 the assault crossed the GUINARONA RIVER after an artillery preparation and pushed rapidly into the smoking village. There was plenty of evidence of the Japanese occupation of the area, including several hundred foxholes and dugouts, a freshly laid mine field, electrically controlled, along the stream bank, and a lot of abandoned equipment, but not a single living defender. (43) The troops moved cautiously along the dirt streets and between the smoldering nipa huts. Everyone suspected a trap, and with good cause, for when the assault platoons emerged from the northern edge of the village, all hell broke loose in that quarter. It was almost a relief to know where the enemy was.

Avenue 3 was covered with a stream of automatic fire from the northern edge of town. The mortar FO party found itself in a mad scramble to win cover in a drainage ditch filled with F Company men. The fire down the street was shifted into the ditch and everyone was trying to use the man in front of him as a shield. The mortar platoon leader, finding that he

(42) Personal knowledge

(43) Personal knowledge

was more often a shield than not, lead his party in a dash for cover on the other side of the street. They found they could work forward on that side and reached a wooden church at the end of Avenue 3.

A number of men were in what shade the ripped up roof still afforded. The hot tropical sun was beginning to compete with the enemy on the number of casualties caused. As the FO party entered the church, one of the enemy machine guns that was raking the street shifted its fire to the church. All the shell craters in the dirt floor were filled with men, so all the mortar men could do was watch with a strange detached fascination as the beaten zone of bullets swung up the center of the church towards them. About ten feet in front of them the beaten zone disappeared - the clip had run through the gun. It was very clear that they were getting close to a target or to be more accurate, the target was getting close to them.

In back of the church, the 1st platoon of F Company had its OP in a big shell crater. The FO party selected a large bush to get under as an OP. They preferred taking their chances with the bullets rather than the heat exhaustion. Sgt Fromm left the OP and led his wire team back to the platoon for more wire and Sgt Schneider and the platoon leader started adjusting on the closest machine gun position. The F Company men provided guesses as to where the gun was located some fifty yards to their right front in the high kunai grass and trees.

The mortar platoon had displaced from its original position to the south bank of the GUINARONA just upstream from the footbridge. After several adjustments the riflemen felt the target was bracketed and the mortars fired for effect. Everyone was feeling happy about cutting down the enemy by one gun when he proved he was still very much in business. Again the mortars fired and again the Jap escaped destruction but he would only fire short bursts after that.

Finally to try to get the Jap gunner to fire a long burst, an F Com-

p any volunteer walked into the open space between the church and the kunai grass which concealed the enemy positions. The ruse didn't work, however, and by then there was so much fire coming from all directions that the man could have been hit without providing much information.

The mortar platoon, less a large ammunition carrying party, reported it was being attacked by a Jap patrol and would have to suspend fire until the enemy could be driven off. Sgt Hillstrom, the platoon sergeant and Sgt Staver, a squad leader, having been joined by several riflemen on an ammunition detail, counterattacked the Jap patrol against what they thought was the enemy rear. In the thick vegetation, Hillstrom and Staver got separated from the riflemen and the Japs chased the two of them all the way back to last night's perimeter.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The actions of the two sergeants at least took the pressure off the platoon which opened fire again on the elusive target in front of F Company. But forty seven rounds didn't last long and the platoon ammunition carrying party hadn't returned with a resupply.

On the right of F Company, G Company also was unable to advance and was suffering heavily from the enemy and the heat exhaustion. The character of the enemy defense had become clearer - he had a well prepared position, cleverly camouflaged and heavily armed with automatic weapons, mutually supporting. He was astride the road to KILLING, two and a half miles to the north, where one of his main supply bases was located. He was in the position to stay.⁽⁴⁵⁾ (See Overlay C₁) About noontime, Col Sterner committed his reserve company through the exhausted G Company in an effort to push up the KILLING road. Practically no progress was made in the face of fanatical resistance.⁽⁴⁶⁾

While E Company was attacking unsuccessfully on the right, Capt Baron of F Company was continuing to have his troubles. The battalion had been without artillery support because the artillery communications had broken

(44) Statement of T/Sgt Wesley Hillstrom and S/Sgt Kenneth Staver, then of Company H, 382nd Infantry, 28 October 1944

(45) A-I, p. 37

(46) A-1, p. 38

down. The artillery wiremen who ran the lines forward from the radio jeep to the FO's had all passed out with heat exhaustion. F Company had not moved for three hours. (47)

When the mortars had run out of ammunition, Sgt Fox of F Company had collected all the rifle anti-tank grenades in the company and tried to knock out the machine gun the mortars had been working on. He too was unsuccessful. (48) Then a 37 mm anti-tank gun was worked forward around the northwest corner of the church but it drew such a volume of small arms fire that it had to be pulled back without firing a round. (49)

The artillery finally got into action and started working over the ground in front of F Company. The air was filled with humming shell fragments and the OP under the bush lost its usefulness when Sgt Schneider caught a hot shell fragment in the thigh. The wound was not serious but the sergeant recommended a move into the church. The recommendation was quickly approved and executed.

The OP was set up under the altar and a life size wooden crucifix, which artillery fire had knocked off the altar, provided a physical as well as a spiritual shield against the flying shell fragments. As an added precaution, the sergeant got on the flank of his platoon leader, away from the artillery fire.

Back at the mortar position, there was a continual harassment from sniper fire. The carrying party had not returned from the long trek to the regimental ammunition supply point at ASLOM. The wire team was having a great deal of trouble keeping in the wire due to some tracked vehicles which had arrived in the village. (50)

The mortar platoon was out of ammunition but the heavy machine gun platoon (1st platoon, H Company) attached to F Company, had not fired a round of the five units of fire at the guns. If the platoon had been or-

(47) Personal knowledge
(48) Personal knowledge
(49) Personal knowledge
(50) Personal knowledge

dered to fire, undoubtedly a number of casualties, including their platoon leader, would have been saved in the vicinity of the church.⁽⁵¹⁾

About 1600, F Company was ordered to withdraw toward the center of town to start forming a perimeter.⁽⁵²⁾ The mortar platoon leader ordered his platoon to displace forward to the vicinity of the battalion CP in the center of town. Then he moved to the rear down Avenue 3.

A hundred yards down the avenue the Battalion Commander was meeting two M7 self-propelled 105mm howitzers from Cannon Company. The Regimental Commander, dissatisfied with the lack of progress of the 2nd Battalion, was giving Col Sterner a pep talk to the effect that a "few snipers" were holding up the whole battalion. The two officers stood right in the middle of the street with an M7 five feet behind them as an aiming point. Vacancies in the rank of colonel and lieutenant colonel appeared a certainty. The "few snipers" missed their chance, however, and Col Dill left the scene. Three minutes later Col Sterner and his mortar platoon leader were wishing the drainage ditch by the side of the road was much deeper because the enemy fire was so intense.⁽⁵³⁾

The M7s fired point blank into the enemy perimeter and it seemed impossible that any resistance could be left in the Jap; but as soon as the M7s ran out of ammunition and withdrew, the stirred up enemy just doubled his fire. Besides failing to crush the Japanese, the M7s chewed up the mortar platoon wire in several places, adding to an already complicated communication problem.

No one at the Battalion CP location had seen the mortar platoon so the lieutenant went back to the GUINARONA RIVER in search of his lost command. From the north bank of the stream, he could see members of the platoon ducking around on the south bank. The snipers were preventing the heavily loaded men from crossing the stream. The platoon leader yelled

(51) Statement of T/Sgt Charles L Andrew, then of 1st platoon, H Company, 382nd Infantry, 15 February 1945; Personal knowledge.

(52) Personal knowledge

(53) Personal knowledge

over that he would get help and went back through the village. He was amazed to hear bugle calls from the north edge of the town followed by the insane yelling of a Banzai charge. If the 2nd Battalion had failed to use all its weapons during the day, it did not repeat the mistake then, as a terrific fusilade burst from everything that would fire. The Banzai yell was choked in the mangled throats of the attackers.

The Battalion S-3 authorized the mortar platoon leader to ask F Company for some men to extricate his pinned down platoon. Naturally at that time, F Company was most reluctant to give a heavy weapons company officer a single man to go to the rear so the only help the lieutenant could muster was the supply sergeant of H Company. By the time the rescue party reached the stream, the platoon had disappeared. A search of the north bank 150 yards downstream finally brought results. Lt Marshall with half the platoon was halted in a small hollow near the stream trying to decide which way to go. Lt Sigler had led the other half of the platoon across the stream so rapidly that he had lost the tail of the column. (54)

Just as the group was about to move out again, the jungle around them seemed to erupt. From every side, even across the stream, small arms fire was directed over the hollow. A light machine gun was spraying the area from not more than twenty feet away. Luckily the bowl provided defilade to the seated men from the machine gun. If the Jap had held his fire a minute longer, there would have been no doubt about the results.

The platoon leader yelled a few quick orders for an all around defense, for bayonets to be fixed, and for fire to be withheld to save the limited ammunition. The Japs apparently knew that there were only twenty men in the hollow and, with the battalion fully engaged with the enemy counterattack, that there was not much chance of any American help coming. Furthermore, no one else in the battalion knew where the platoon, minus,

(54) Report of Lt Paul B Marshall, Company H, 382nd Infantry, 27 Oct 1944

was and there was no communication. The men were beginning to understand how Custer must have felt.

As suddenly as it started, the firing ceased, but no charge followed. Five minutes of tension ensued during which everyone pictured the machine gun being moved around where it could eliminate the defilade, or similar plans being executed. Finally the platoon leader and Pvt Hand crawled downstream and swinging back, made a reconnaissance of the Japanese machine gun position. They could find no enemy and, returning quickly to the hollow, started the delayed move into the village. Again the move was halted by the discovery of a sniper tied in a tall coconut palm growing in the hollow. He had been unable to depress his rifle far enough to shoot into the bowl, but was waiting to pick the men off as they moved away from him. He was quickly dispatched. The column moved through the village hoping that they would not be fired upon by their own troops in the fading light.

In the vicinity of the battalion CP, they found a scene of considerable confusion. The effort to organize a perimeter was meeting with little success as the Japanese were infiltrating back into the village around both flanks of the battalion. The 1st and 3rd Battalions had advanced during the afternoon to a point about a mile northwest of TABON-TABON, ⁽⁵⁵⁾ which left the enemy considerable freedom of movement in the village. He proceeded to reoccupy many of the honeycomb of foxholes and dugouts in the area. The foxholes were often connected by tunnels and when termite patrols dropped grenades on a sniper in one hole, he would pop up in another hole behind them. This proved to be most demoralizing to the Americans who began to see a Jap under every bush. ⁽⁵⁶⁾ Lt Marshall was almost shot by a man ten feet from him when the lieutenant pulled a bush into his foxhole. Unable to drive off the snipers, groups dug in where they were expecting to be attacked from any direction. (See Overlay C1)

Lt Sigler's group of the mortar platoon could not be found. It was

(55) A-1, p. 37

(56) Personal knowledge

guessed that they had also been ambushed. The remainder of the platoon, together with H Company Headquarters and the Anti-tank Platoon, organized a small perimeter. The mortars were not put in position because there was not enough ammunition to register, it was very difficult to lay wire (even if a decision could be made as to where the greatest threat lay), and the crews probably could not have manned the tubes. In the center of the platoon, two men in the prone position filled canteens from a five gallon can and tossed them, together with C rations, to each foxhole.

A message from G Company to the mortar platoon stated that Lt Sigler's group was in the G Company perimeter.

All night long a grenade duel went on with the enemy. The Japs got in the upstairs of the house across the street and made the perimeter almost untenable. The light machine gun with the AT Platoon opened fire on the house but immediately was caught in a hail of bullets from many directions which knocked off the rear sight of the gun and cut the ammunition belt in half.⁽⁵⁷⁾ After that, no one wanted to give his position away by firing at the house. One sniper who was trying to crawl into the perimeter was killed on the side of the street with a grenade. Characteristically, the Japanese spent a great deal of risk and effort to drag the body off in order to hide the number of their losses. Their deep foxholes usually served as an inconspicuous grave.⁽⁵⁸⁾

If the amount of damage done to the soldiers of the Emperor was unknown, the amount of sleep lost by the Americans was not. The enemy had given the impression all night that he was building up to a banzai charge and the defenders wanted to be awake when it came. It came, but fortunately not against the weakly held mortar position.

THE THIRD DAY OF THE BATTLE FOR TABONTABON

The sunrise was greeted with extreme relief by the very tired peri-

(57) Personal knowledge

(58) Personal knowledge

meter defenders. Termite patrols again went to work with a vengeance. The mortar platoon was a beehive of activity. Cold C rations were eaten at the same time that six by sixes were dug for the mortars. Lt Sigler's group arrived and went into position. The wire section was busy salvaging and splicing wire. The regimental trains, after having been ambushed the day before, caught up with the assault elements and mortar ammunition began arriving from ASLOM by jeep.⁽⁵⁹⁾ For the first time since the invasion began, supplies did not have to be carried on the backs of men or carabao. The morale of the mortarmen soared high as the piles of HE and SMOKE grew large behind each mortar. (See overlay C2) The high spirits were dampened, however, when Chaplain Todd called for volunteers to bury the company dead. Emilio and Royne went to do a last service for their friends.

Captain Harbison of E Company hurried to the mortar position and asked for all the fire he could get on a large concentration of Japanese in front of his company. The Japs were right on top of his platoons and too close to use artillery fire on them in the tall kumai grass. All the wire the wire section had available was being used to get a line to G Company which was to make an envelopment of the Japanese left flank.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Under the circumstances, Capt Harbison decided to stay at the mortar position with his SCR 536 and relay sensings from one of his platoon sergeants. The E Company sergeant was so close to the Japs he could hear them jabbering and then yelling as he brought the mortar fire in on them.⁽⁶¹⁾

The fire orders were hardly out before the rounds went down the tubes. The results were so devastating to the Japanese, who had grown used to the puny mortar fire of the previous day, that their defenses in the E Company zone were badly disorganized.

In keeping with the pattern set by the enemy, as soon as the mortars opened fire, so did the Japanese. The sniper fire into the position did

(59) Personal knowledge

(60) Personal knowledge; A-1, p. 39

(61) Personal knowledge

not lower the rate of fire of the platoon, but after a hot Jap bullet ignited the increments on a large pile of rounds at Cpl Carpenter's mortar, the platoon leader was forced to take action. The big flash from the exploding powder completely hid the mortar and its crew from sight. If the ammunition had exploded, there would have been little left of the platoon in its close battery position.

Lt Marshall was given the job of clearing out the snipers from the surrounding area. Every man who wasn't firing a mortar was on the flushing detail. Cpl Hollenbeck was the only man left on number one tube. He was laying and loading with precision and speed besides keeping a sharp lookout for any attacks on his flank of the platoon. (62)

Lt Marshall's marauders brought some relief to the situation before they returned to the position. Sgt Hillstrom, however, was missing for an hour. He had tried to repeat his maneuver of the day before and outflank a sniper, but again he had only succeeded in getting himself outflanked. The sniper chased him two blocks into the GUINARONA RIVER, where he had been pinned down behind a log and forced to lie in the water up to his neck. That episode cured him of chasing snipers individually. (63)

Only a few jeeps had succeeded in dashing through the village since early morning and the mortar ammunition again ran out, so Capt Harrison returned to E Company which was beginning to make headway up Avenues 4 and 5. Sniper fire into the mortar position resumed in full force. Lt Fisher of H Company shot one sniper tied in the top of a coconut tree. From that vantage point in the next block, he was firing into the mortar position with small chance of detection. (64)

The exasperated platoon leader went to the Battalion CP for help. He found that nerve center also confined to its foxholes. The S-3 again

(62) Personal knowledge

(63) Report of T/Sgt Wesley H Hillstrom, Company H, 382nd Infantry, to author

(64) Statement of 1st Lt Charles W Fisher, then of H Company, 382nd Infantry, 28 October 1944

authorized him to get help from F Company which was in reserve.

The mortar officer found Lt Seymour Terry's platoon about a block away from his position, and talked his friend into giving him aid. The rifle platoon with two BAR's per squad did an apparently thorough job in the sniper area and for the first time that day, men could move freely in the mortar position. The rifle platoon had departed and the mortar platoon leader was thanking Lt Terry for his help when a Jap 75mm battalion gun scored three direct hits on the mortar position. One round got a tree burst right over the two exposed officers. They made a dash and headlong dive into the platoon CP hole. As if by signal, the Japanese small arms fire began again. (65)

A quick command decision had to be made. Not to move the platoon meant more artillery fire as the Japs had the position bracketed. To move meant exposure to the lively small arms fire, the temporary abandonment of the mortars and the risk of losing control of the platoon at that critical stage. The platoon leader selected the latter capability and shouted to the platoon to move 100 yards to the left of the battery position. The men moved expeditiously and in good order but, because most of the wounded were hidden by the foxholes, the platoon leader did not realize the extent of the damage created by the three shells. Pvt Fred Weston ran up to him bleeding in a number of places and so, after he had organized a hasty perimeter across Avenue 2, the lieutenant returned to the battery position with litters. For the next thirty minutes the mortar platoon was acting as a medical section evacuating its nine wounded to the aid station across the street.

The small hut which housed the aid station was overflowing with casualties from the rifle companies. Evacuation of wounded to the rear was

(65) A-1, p. 39; Personal knowledge

practically at a standstill and so, in order to make room for the wounded mortarmen, the volunteer medics cleared the aid station and placed those moved in another hut.

The enemy was so active during this period that everyone expected a raid against the aid station and all members of the mortar platoon who were not acting as medics were prepared to defend it. The Battalion Surgeon, Capt Llewellyn E Christenson, was awarded a Bronze Star with two oak leaf clusters for his repeated acts of courage and calm efficiency under these most trying conditions. (66)

Pvt Emelio was one of the most seriously wounded mortarmen. Capt Christenson said he needed immediate evacuation. Assistant Division Commander Claudius M Easley's weasel was standing empty in the street about two hundred yards from the aid station while the General was up front with the rifle companies. Emelio rode to the rear in the General's borrowed weasel, but even speed did not save the brave man's life. Two of his comrades also died during the difficult evacuation. (67)

After the mortar platoon had completed the litter carrying job, it recovered the mortars from the old position and prepared to support the battalion again.

The Battalion Executive Officer, Major Borley, came over to the mortar position to talk over the critical situation of the battalion as he saw it. At that time (1600) he was afraid that Col Sterner had been killed. He had lost all contact with the Colonel and E and F Companies and only knew that G Company was still trying to envelop the Japanese left flank. Three light tanks had gone to the assistance of E Company but, at the last report, one had already been knocked out by a fanatical human mine throwing himself on the tank tread. For all Major Borley knew, they were all knocked out and he judged by the tremendous crescendo of firing in the jungle north of the village that E and F Company were making a desperate stand.

(66) A-1, p. 39

(67) Personal knowledge

He intended to recall G Company from their envelopment to form a perimeter and he wanted recommendations on a defense. (68)

The mortar platoon leader drew a sketch in his message book of a perimeter that would include two blocks and the area around the concrete schoolhouse. By defending whole blocks, the battalion had a better chance of limiting Japanese infiltration during the night. (See Overlay C-3)

Major Borley accepted the recommendation and coordination was begun immediately. G Company returned to the perimeter at a double time and with the arrival of G Company, Col Sterner returned from E and F Companies. The Colonel had ordered these two units to form a perimeter where they were and not to give an inch to the tenacious enemy. (69)

The mortar platoon and H Company headquarters had two sides of a city block to organize. The understrength mortar platoon put two sections on the perimeter and one section manning two mortars. By this time the platoon had equipped itself with several BAR's and sub-machine guns. The organization had had enough of getting "the hell beat out of it". Interlocking bands of automatic fire were sited along the streets. The men were eager to shoot an enemy at 15 yards instead of the usual 500.

At dusk, the platoon leader checked his positions and settled into his own hole for a miserable wet night. The rain poured down and the lightning created some alarming images in the bushes and trees. A tired mind visualized a regiment of snipers crawling into the thinly held position. To keep his imagination from running away with him, the lieutenant reviewed the condition of the platoon. Besides the dead and wounded, who were gone, he had several individuals who were potential casualties. The second in command of the platoon would neither eat nor talk. After the shelling, one man had run a block, jumped into a passing M7 and gone to the rear where the platoon sergeant found him. One man had developed hysteria and

(68) Statement of Major Edward Borley, then of Hq, 2nd Battalion, 382nd Infantry, 28 October 1944

(69) Personal knowledge; A-1, p. 39

had to be evacuated. One man disappeared for several hours and returned to the platoon in his stocking feet with Japanese equipment all over him and told tales of killing six Japanese. The leadership problem was becoming more difficult in the mortar platoon.

The night of 28-29 October passed with only enemy mortar and sniper fire harrassing the exhausted 2nd Battalion of the 382nd Infantry.

The next morning, E and F Companies crushed the last resistance in the Japanese perimeter and began a series of advance guard actions up the road to KILING and the Division Objective. (70)

The mortar platoon, plus fifteen native carriers attached, was the last unit to leave the smoldering village with the stench of death over it. The men felt that after ten days of exposure, hardship and homicide they had earned a rest but they were to go sixty-seven more days before they were finally relieved from the line.

Regardless of the number of combat days remaining or the number of villages yet to capture on the road to Tokyo, the men of the 2nd Battalion, 382nd Infantry, would never forget the name TABONTABON in the far off PHILIPPINES.

The 2nd Battalion, 382nd Infantry, had succeeded in capturing the key Japanese position in the central Leyte Valley after four days of fighting against the fanatical defense of elements of the 20th Japanese Infantry Regiment. The 2nd Battalion had killed between four and five hundred enemy with the loss of only 34 killed and 80 wounded. (71)

During this decisive engagement, the mortar platoon had performed its close support mission at all times when it had ammunition; and in addition to its regular duties, had held sectors of the Battalion perimeter, done combat patrolling and aided in medical evacuation. The platoon had five killed and ten wounded during the battle. (72)

(70) Personal knowledge

(71) A-1, p. 39

(72) Personal knowledge

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. AMMUNITION SUPPLY

The terrain over which the 382nd advanced from the landing beaches to TABONTABON was described in the Geographical Survey as an area of "cultivated agricultural flats, with abaca, corn and rice cultivation extending west across a 10 mile width of the broad Leyte Valley".⁽⁷³⁾ With that totally inadequate information as a planning guide, no extra measures were planned for supply and evacuation in the regimental zone. Consequently, the regimental supply system broke down almost completely.

The H Company Mortar Platoon was forced to supply itself with food and ammunition from a regimental supply point several thousand yards to the rear of the battalion. During the battle of TABONTABON the platoon ran out of ammunition twice at critical times. The necessity of sending large ammunition carrying parties from the platoon decreased the effectiveness of its mortar fire, made very difficult the displacement of the mortars, exposed the battery position to enemy raids, and exhausted the men.

A solution to the problem would have been the extensive use of mules for resupply or, in the absence of mules, the use of the reserve company. Many jungle wise units had each soldier in the reserve company carry two rounds of mortar ammunition which were dropped on the mortar position as the reserve company passed by to be committed.

2. LOCAL SECURITY

Because the mortar platoon was raided every time it fired, the platoon leader was influenced more in selecting a position by its local security requirements than by good mortar firing requirements. The efficiency of the platoon was reduced considerably by the constant harassment from the enemy. To maintain the efficiency of such an important percentage of the battalion fire power would have been well worth the attachment of a rifle squad to the platoon for its protection. As it was, the Battalion Com-

(73) A-6

mander's economy of rifle force almost cost him all his mortar force.

3. COMMUNICATION

During training the mortar platoon had learned to rely heavily on wire communication for fire control. The SCR 536 was not considered very satisfactory over the distances from the forward observers to the mortar position. The platoon landed on Leyte with 8 miles of assault wire which would have been an adequate supply if most of it had not been lost on the back of the wounded carabao on 26 October. There was no resupply of wire from regiment at that time. The wire section did an outstanding job of salvaging, repairing, and maintaining wire under dangerous conditions in the jungle. All the SCR 536's were out of order by the second day of the invasion due to the extreme weather conditions. In addition to the wire section, every man in the platoon was trained in the maintenance of wire communication.

Foot messengers were very important and the best men were usually selected for this duty to be sure that instructions got through correctly. The failure of the messenger from Capt Wagöner to reach the mortar platoon on the afternoon of 26 October resulted in the Battalion reserve being committed prematurely in an effort to extricate the mortar platoon which created considerable confusion and unnecessary loss of life.

4. MOBILITY

The mortar platoon was only able to keep up with the advance of the battalion from the beaches by the use of water carabao. The availability and use of that sturdy beast was pure luck. Without them, the advance would have been slowed, or riflemen would have had to help carry mortars, or the battalion would have had to push on without mortars. The last solution would have been particularly poor considering the dependence the battalion put on its mortars for any heavy fire support. That was especially true on the 27th and 28th of October when the artillery was unable to fire. The initiative of the man of the platoon provided the solution

LESSONS

1. Commanders, during field exercises, should rehearse their units occasionally in special resupply measures to meet a situation where transportation is not available.
2. In warfare in woods or jungles, additional protection by rifle units must be given 81mm mortar platoons.
3. All personnel in a mortar platoon should be trained in the use and maintenance of wire and radio communication.
4. Commanders, during field exercises, should rehearse their units occasionally in special measures to keep the heavy weapons up with the advance when weapons carriers are not available.
5. More time should be allocated to the training of a mortar platoon than to any other platoon in an infantry battalion.
6. Commanders should allow, while planning for a time of attack, enough time for 81mm mortar platoons to establish communications, prepare firing data, and, if possible, register on a base point.
7. Battalion commanders should, wherever possible in the attack, keep centralized control of the heavy weapons fire power as a means of influencing the action and maintaining flexibility.