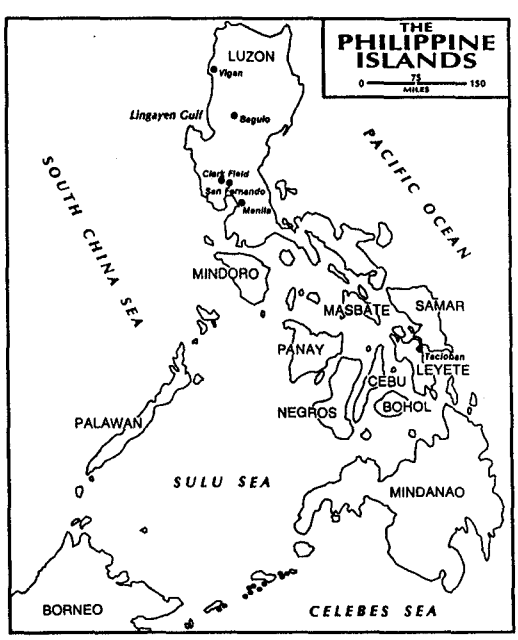
The Liberation of the Philippines

by Martin K. Gordon

By the summer of 1944, the war in the Pacific was going so well that the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked the theater commanders, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Pacific Ocean Area, and General Douglas MacArthur, Southwest Pacific Area, about the possibility of bypassing selected objectives in order to accelerate the timetable. At a July conference in Hawaii, MacArthur convinced President Roosevelt that for both moral and strategic reasons American forces had to return to the Philippines. The attack on Leyte was set for December 1944.

In a series of air attacks on the central Philippines in mid-September, Admiral William Halsey's Third Fleet carrier pilots reported weak opposition, and Halsey told Nimitz the area was "wide open." He recommended the immediate invasion of Leyte. When MacArthur agreed, the Joint Chiefs set the Leyte attack for 20 October with Luzon to follow in December. MacArthur was returning to the Philippines.



Philippine Islands

Leyte, the eighth largest island in the archipelago, was chosen for the initial attack as it is the natural gateway to the rest of the Philippines. The island is 115 miles long and from 15 to 45 miles wide. It has two seasons, wet and dry, caused by the October to April northwestern monsoon. Volcanic in origin, a range of mountains from north to southeast separates the island into the northeast Leyte and northwest Ormoc valleys. Most of the people, the largest cities including Tacloban the capital, and the principal airfields were in the Leyte Valley in the fall of 1944. Tacloban airport was a

prewar, 5,000-foot field 2 miles southeast of the capital. Four other smaller fields were located in the vicinity of Dulag in central Leyte Valley. While much of this information was available to the Americans from prewar studies, the latest Japanese situation was partially concealed behind cloud cover, which air photography had little success in penetrating.

However, some information came to MacArthur's headquarters from guerrilla sources, and by the summer of 1944, the Americans knew the Japanese were reinforcing their Philippine garrisons. The Japanese transferred their western Pacific headquarters from Singapore to Manila and developed their Philippine Island brigades to division strength that summer. By the fall, Leyte troop strength, consisting of the 16th Division with service troops, was at the 21,700 level, a force that could increase by adding regiments from neighboring islands. The Japanese had an undetermined number of tanks and armored cars, but their artillery consisted of only coastal defense guns and a few field pieces near Tacloban.

MacArthur's strength, on the other hand, was considerable in air, naval, and ground forces. The ground forces belonged to Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army of two corps: the X Corps with the 1st Cavalry and 24th Infantry Divisions and the XXIV Corps with the 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions. In reserve were the 32d and 77th Infantry Divisions. To provide an efficient construction and logistics organization in the early days of the operation, the theater Services of Supply (SOS) established the Sixth Army Service Command, and the theater engineer, Major General Hugh J. Casey, stepped down to command it. He established his staff around the headquarters personnel of the 5201st Engineer Construction Brigade and, as commander of a unit on a level with the tactical corps, he reported directly to Krueger. The 21,097 engineer troop strength included 15 aviation battalions, 3 construction battalions, 2 port construction and repair groups, and 7 dump truck companies.

Even with this strength, plus the engineers at army, corps, and division level, shortages existed mainly in bridging. The Leyte campaign would require more bridges than had New Guinea, but only the 556th Heavy Ponton Battalion and 530th Light Ponton Company with Sixth Army and the 506th Light Ponton Company with X Corps were available.

The beach assault forces were not short engineer expertise as the 2d Engineer Special Brigade, a Sixth Army asset, was an experienced unit having participated in the New Guinea campaign from May 1943 to September 1944.

The plan required the 2d Brigade to support two major landings across Leyte's east coast beaches: the X Corps' 1st Cavalry and 24th Infantry Divisions were to land near Tacloban while the XXIV Corps' 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions landed further south near Dulag. The assault areas were selected for ready access to airfields, one near Tacloban and four near Dulag. The exploitation portion of the plan had the X Corps advancing northwest to take the airfield and Tacloban and then attacking through the mountains toward the Ormoc Valley. At the same time, the XXIV Corps would drive across the narrow waist of the island, seizing the airfields and then advancing northwest to link with the X Corps in the Ormoc Valley.

The first mission of the Service Command engineers was rehabilitation of the Japanese airfields for American use. They were to prepare one 5,000-foot field for fighters within five days of the landing. The engineers were also to build a logistical support base for 200,000 troops to include port facilities, warehouses, and hospitals. The Service Command engineers were to accomplish all of this within the first 30 days, at which time the theater SOS was to become operational.

To accomplish this mission, General Casey organized his engineers into two subordinate commands: Construction Command would build the airfields and bases while Base K Command would administer the facilities. Not all engineers were in agreement with the plan. Colonel William J. Ely, Sixth Army Engineer executive officer, objected to the construction program objectives during the monsoon season. He argued that the impact of the heavy rains on what was an inadequate road system would make it impossible for the engineers to accomplish their mission in the time allotted unless they were reinforced. As Ely summarized his recommendations, "Perhaps we can mud and muddle through again on a shoestring but the shoestring must be frayed by this time and if it broke we may lose our shirt as well as our shoe." MacArthur's headquarters decided to go ahead with the original plan.

The Sixth Army assaulted Leyte on 20 October 1944 in ideal weather and a calm sea. The 2d Engineer Special Brigade supported the X Corps landings; the 1st Cavalry Division came across White Beach near Tacloban while the 24th Infantry Division used Red Beach just to the south. The amphibious engineers faced serious problems on Red Beach, where the 532d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment encountered water so swampy and shallow that only one landing craft could unload at a time. Equipment and supplies came ashore under intense Japanese 75-mm. gunfire and, after several craft were hit, the remainder moved to a new landing area in the White Beach sector. This caused problems for the future as supplies piled up on the airfield.

Another problem in the Red Beach sector occurred when the 339th Construction Battalion, on X Corps orders, began building a road through the swamps and rice paddies to Highway 1. They were still working futilely on 21 October when Brigadier General Sam Sturgis, Sixth Army Engineer, came ashore and rerouted the road further south to a drier and ultimately more successful location.

In the XXIV Corps area, the amphibian engineers supporting the 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions encountered a few underwater obstacles which were removed by demolition crews. With good water depth, firm beaches, and little Japanese opposition, the engineers landed bulldozers early in the operation to cut access roads. The engineers unloaded all ships of the initial assault force within the first 44 hours of the landing.

General Casey and some of his staff came ashore in the X Corps area on the first day. Tacloban airfield, the priority objective of the 1st Cavalry, was an existing but inadequate airstrip on the narrow, mile-long Cataisan Peninsula on the right flank of White Beach. The 46th Engineer Construction Battalion reached the site on the first day and wanted to begin realigning the strip 10 degrees to extend it to the 6,000 feet needed for bombers.

They found work impossible because of the great quantity of supplies and equipment piled on the runway from the landing craft diverted from Red Beach. Efforts to remove the supplies caused traffic congestion which further blocked the engineers and set work back two days. On 23 October,

the 1881st Engineer Aviation Battalion and the 240th Engineer Construction Battalion joined the 46th, and work began on realigning and extending the runway.

The situation turned critical on 25 October when Japanese aircraft attacked the Tacloban field 12 times during the morning as rumors of a great naval battle in Leyte Gulf reached the engineers. Navy planes, whose carriers had been sunk or disabled during the battle, began circling the incomplete strip, searching for a landing place. Many crashed attempting to land, and the engineers had to push some 25 wrecked aircraft into the ocean to keep the primitive runway clear. The engineers serviced and refueled some of the planes so they could reenter the battle as over 65 aircraft used the incomplete runway that day. Working through the night, the engineers had the strip ready for fighters the next day. Then, with the help of the dredge *Raymond*, which pumped sand onto the projected extension to make up for a shortage of coral, the engineers realigned the runway into the bay to achieve the needed 6,000-foot length for bombers.

Meanwhile, in the Dulag area, the engineers were having terrain and weather problems. The 1112th Construction Group reported to General Casey that the airfield locations were in the middle of swamps and rice paddies and that construction would be difficult in the dry season and almost impossible during the monsoon. Even so, the 808th Engineer Aviation Battalion began working on the Dulag strip on 23 October, smoothing the runway and building roads to a nearby gravel pit. On 25 October, about 50 Navy planes from the Leyte Gulf battle used the incomplete runway. Good weather the next two days helped, and on 27 October, the 821st Aviation Battalion joined the 808th. But heavy rains through the end of the month turned the whole area into a sea of mud.

By the end of October, only the Tacloban field was operational, with Dulag finally ready by 18 November. The engineers said no other airfield construction in central Leyte was possible during the monsoon and they recommended east coast locations south of Tacloban. Site selection was so critical that when one was chosen near Tananan, in the Sixth Army headquarters area, General Krueger agreed to move. On 28 November, three aviation battalions began work, and within three weeks a fighter runway was ready.

Diversion of LSTs (landing ships, tank) to the White Beach-Cataisan Point area on Leyte Island seriously impeded construction of the adjacent Tacloban Drome.

On 27 October, the theater air commander had assumed responsibility from the Navy for air support. The lack of airfields reduced air power and allowed the Japanese to reinforce with over two divisions in the Ormoc area. While the campaign developed as planned, the additional Japanese strength made it more difficult and longer than expected.

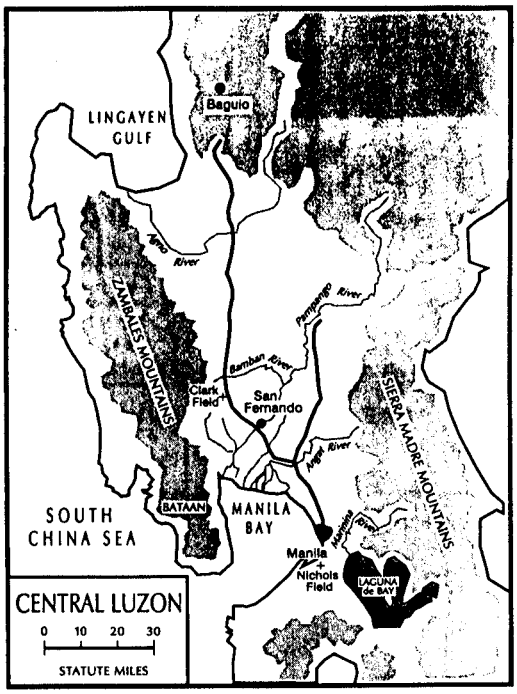
During the prolonged campaign, road construction and maintenance required the most work. In the X Corps area, the three combat battalions could not maintain the roads in the Leyte Valley. Some help came from the 2d Special Brigade engineers who moved supplies along the coast and evacuated the wounded. The advance into the mountains almost came to a halt due to poor roads, but air drops and local porters kept the drive going. In the XXIV Corps area, the 13th Engineers of the 7th Division and the 321st Engineers of the 96th Division built the main supply road through a swamp, using a great deal of corduroy.

The monsoon rains--35 inches in the first 40 days--slowed airfield development, almost destroyed the road network, and made base construction nearly impossible. The lack of airpower and the poor supply lines lengthened the campaign, but finally Eighth Army began the mopping-up phase on 25 December. Sixth Army had another job-Luzon.

*Poor drainage, heavy rains, and military traffic made maintenance a problem on Highway **1** going north from Burauen, Leyte Island, 5 December 1944.*

The reconquest of Luzon was the largest joint operation of the Pacific war to date, and it was the first Pacific land campaign to provide for the employment of mass and maneuver on a scale even approaching that of the European and Mediterranean theaters. Luzon, rather than Formosa, was approved as the next objective when General MacArthur said that he could mount the operation in December and that he would not need the Pacific Fleet aircraft carriers after the first few days. His engineers would provide a field in the beachhead area for land-based planes, in the event the Luzon landing moved back to January when Leyte lasted longer than expected.

Still, a January date would allow use of the November to May dry season for most of the campaign. Thus, dust rather than mud would be the main irritant for the engineers. Once through the swamps and rice paddies behind the Lingayen Gulf beaches, the engineers would face few natural obstacles other than numerous small streams and rivers in the Central Plains. Highway 3, a two-lane, all-weather, paved road, would provide a 100-mile, high-speed approach to Manila with only the Agno and Pampanga rivers as significant potential problems.



Central Luzon

While prewar experience helped the Americans in the terrain and weather area, air photos and the guerrilla information network gave them a good idea of the Japanese defense scheme. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, 14th Area Army commander, had available a force of about 275,000 troops in his one tank division, some seven infantry divisions, and Naval and Air Corps units. Short of supplies, equipment, and transportation, Yamashita organized three groups in static defensive positions in the mountains.

To confront the Japanese defenses, General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army had I Corps with the 6th and 43d Infantry Divisions and XIV Corps with the 37th and 40th Infantry Divisions. In reserve he had the 25th Infantry Division and the 1st Cavalry Division. The 4th Engineer Special Brigade, reinforced with two boat and shore regiments, would put this force across the Lingayen Gulf beaches. General Casey's Service Command had only nine engineer aviation battalions, but General Sturgis' Sixth Army engineers had six of them plus the 5202d Construction Brigade. However, the engineers were short in the bridging area with only one heavy ponton battalion and three light ponton companies available.

General Krueger planned to land his Sixth Army across the Lingayen Gulf beaches, drive down the Central Plains to seize Manila and the forts in Manila Bay, and then go into a mopping-up phase. During the advance, the engineers planned for repeated use of floating bridges, leapfrogging them forward and replacing them with semipermanent structures. Sturgis put one light ponton company with each corps and kept one, plus the heavy battalion, at Sixth Army. In addition he had all engineer battalions carry 150 feet of double-lane Bailey bridging and 200 feet of timber trestle.

Service Command's first project was construction of a temporary 5,000-foot runway in the beachhead area within six days of the landing. Within the first 15 days they were to have ready two all-weather strips. In addition, the Service Command was responsible for constructing Base M at Lingayen to support the drive down the Central Plains.

The Luzon campaign started on 9 January 1945 when the 4th Engineer Special Brigade brought the Sixth Army ashore over a 15-mile series of beaches in Lingayen Gulf. The 544th Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment supported the XIV Corps' 37th Infantry Division on Yellow Beach while the 594th Engineers supported the 40th Infantry Division on Orange Beach. In the I Corps area, the 543d Engineers were in support of the 6th Infantry Division on Blue Beach while the 533d moved the 43d Infantry Division across White Beach. Opposition was light with fewer casualties among the amphibian engineers than for the Leyte operation.

General Casey's Service Command was to function as the Sixth Army construction agency for the first month of the operation. Casey came ashore on 10 January with a first priority to construct a fighter strip in the beachhead area. He immediately put 400 Filipino civilians to work filling bomb craters on a damaged Japanese strip near the town of Lingayen. On 13 January, the 836th Construction Battalion began work, and on 14 January, the 1879th Aviation and the 43d Construction Battalions reinforced them. Little earth moving was necessary, so the engineers smoothed the surface, covered it with palm fronds, and placed steel mats on top. By 16 January, a 5,000-foot runway was ready. Meanwhile, two other strips were built by Service Command aviation battalions during the first two weeks of the operation, thus freeing the aircraft carriers for return to the control of Pacific Fleet.

In constructing Base M, Service Command engineers built gasoline storage tanks and rehabilitated a wharf on the banks of the Dagupan River. They also improved and maintained over 40 miles of road, and rehabilitated 35 miles of railroad before they went out of business on 13 February. When the SOS took over, Casey returned to his position as theater engineer.

Meanwhile in the drive south through the Central Plains, the XIV Corps was on the right pushing toward Manila with I Corps on its left protecting the flank from strong Japanese forces in the mountains. The XIV Corps' 40th Division, with its own 115th Engineers and the corps' 530th Light Ponton Company followed Highway 3 toward Manila. The division crossed the Calway and Agno rivers using engineer assault boats, and when it reached the Tarlac River, the engineers repaired a poor Japanese bridge demolition effort in two hours. Within two weeks, the 40th Division reached Bamban, halfway to Manila. The corps' other division, the 37th, crossed the Calway River on a bridge repaired by its own 117th Engineers with help from the 530th. On the 16th, the engineers repaired a railroad bridge over the Agno River and built 8-ton and 16-ton ponton bridges.

In the I Corps area, the 6th Infantry Division's 6th Engineers built a 150-foot Bailey bridge over the Binlac River. By 20 January the division was over the Agno River using a ponton bridge built by the 6th Engineers with help from the 506th Light Ponton Company, a Sixth Army unit. The 43d Division had little trouble in its area using railroad bridges reinforced for heavier loads by the 118th Engineers.

The Sixth Army's 5202d Engineer Construction Brigade used the 556th Heavy Ponton Battalion, the 506th Light Ponton Company, and the 1011th Treadway Bridge Company to put a steel treadway over the Calway River and a ponton and a treadway over the Agno at Wawa by 20 January. The 5202d's aviation battalions built semipermanent bridges and repaired demolished bridges along the roads of the Central Plains and restored most of the bridges on the Manila railroad as well. By 29 January, the railroad was open from Lingayen to Tarlac, halfway to Manila.

During the rapid advance south, combat engineer missions were almost exclusively river and stream crossings. It was not until the drive reached the Clark Field–Fort Stotsenburg area, that the engineers encountered any significant Japanese mine warfare attempts. There, the 117th Engineers removed almost 1,300 aerial bombs used by the Japanese in a rather ineffective minefield. Once the covering fire was subdued, engineers, using A-frame pulleys mounted in trucks, removed the bombs by disarming them and pulling them out.

On 31 January, the 1st Cavalry Division was committed in the XIV Corps area for the drive to Manila. With the 1st Cavalry on the left and the 37th Division on the right in the swampy terrain, the drive got underway on 1 February when the 37th crossed the Pampanga River at Calumpit using 117th Engineer driven M-3 rafts. Since the rafts could not carry heavy equipment, the 556th Heavy Ponton Battalion began installing a treadway bridge. Joined by the 530th Light Ponton Company on 3 February, the engineers had the bridge ready for loads up to 16 tons by the next day. In the last 30 miles before Manila, the 530th installed seven bridges of more than 150 feet each for the 37th Division.

On the left flank, the 1st Cavalry avoided the swampy terrain; and after it crossed the Pampanga River near Cabanatuan on 1 February, using a wooden trestle bridge repaired by its 8th Engineer Squadron and the 1011th Treadway Bridge Company, only the Angat River remained between it and Manila. That obstacle was crossed on 2 February over a treadway built by the 8th Engineers and the 556th Engineers. The 1st Cavalry reached the northern outskirts of Manila in the early evening of 3 February.

The Japanese withdrew south of the Pasig River, destroying all the bridges in the process, to defend the government buildings and the old walled section-Intramuros. By 6 February, the 1st Cavalry and the 37th Divisions controlled all of northern Manila while the 11th Airborne Division, which had landed at Nasugbu on 31 January, approached the city from the south.

Infantry support rafts on the Pasig River.

The 117th Engineer Combat Battalion ferried the 148th Infantry, 37th Division, across the Pasig on 7 February using 30 assault boats in five waves. The last 4 boats came under intense enemy small arms, mortar, and artillery fire. The next day, the 530th Light Ponton Company, with the help of the 117th, after several delays caused by Japanese fire, threw a 350-foot bridge across, completing it under cover of darkness.

The Japanese, in strong defensive positions, used land mines profusely as they fought tenaciously for each building. Suffering casualties trying to remove the mines in defended areas, the engineers changed their approach to an engineer–tank–infantry team method. While riflemen in buildings on both sides of a street suppressed the Japanese covering fire, a tank, with a tow cable attached to the front, moved toward a mined area, all weapons firing. An engineer four-man mine disposal unit followed closely behind. Upon reaching the mined area, the tank stopped firing its main gun, but continued to fire its machine guns. An engineer then rushed from behind the tank to the nearest mine, disarmed it, and attached it to the tow cable. The tank then pulled out the mine by backing away. With this type of fighting, it was not until 3 March that the Sixth Army could declare Manila free of Japanese defenders.

With that declaration, a city rehabilitation effort moved into high gear. A task force construction command of eight engineer units, the advance echelon of the 5202d Engineer Construction Brigade, was organized on 1 February. Units assigned included the 43d Construction and 1876th Aviation Battalions, the 1504th Water Supply and 963d Maintenance Companies, a depot platoon, a utilities detachment, and elements of a heavy ponton battalion. Their mission included installing floating bridges, clearing streets, rehabilitating and operating the municipal water and electrical systems, fighting fires, and demolishing unsafe buildings.

On 6 February, the task force moved into northern Manila with its first priority the rehabilitation of the water supply system to see the city through the remainder of the year's dry season. Fortunately, the engineers reached the reservoirs before the Japanese could destroy them. But, because of battle damage and years of neglect, the water supply pipes had

Engineers cut steel reinforcers in concrete from the Manila City Hall building. Here Major General Hugh J. Casey speaks to PFC Perry Alexandeer, a welder with the 1879th Engineer Aviation Battalion, 23 March 1945.

thousands of leaks, making them unreliable. Establishing water supply points for both soldiers and civilians, even while fighting was raging in the city, the engineers and rehired water system employees were able to keep water distributed throughout the city while they repaired or replaced the pipes.

The enemy had more thoroughly demolished critical parts of the electrical system, leaving the city without electricity. Beginning with temporary power sources, such as the generating units of a local brewery, the engineers rehabilitated the power distribution system as they restored generating facilities. They also demolished weak structures, repaired the streets and docks, and reestablished the fire department. In rehabilitating the city, they began to repair the immense destruction caused by both Japanese destruction efforts and the fighting needed to recapture the city.

Fighting continued on Luzon even as the engineers worked in Manila. In the mountains, the Japanese held out in strong defensive positions and combat engineers had to use armored bulldozers to keep the trails and roads open during the monsoon season. At times, they provided their own

infantry cover while clearing well-defended minefields. It was mid-June before southern Luzon was cleared; and on 1 July, when the Eighth Army began the mopping-up phase, there were still almost 65,000 Japanese troops scattered throughout the mountains of northern Luzon. Sporadic fighting continued to the end of the war on 14 August 1945.

Sources for Further Reading

The following are suggested additional readings on the liberation of the Philippines. Karl C. Dod, *The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Japan, United States Army in World War II* (Center of Military History, 1966), and *Put 'Em Across; A History of the 2d Engineer Special Brigade, 1942–1945*. Studies in Military Engineering, Number 2. Reprint (Fort Belvoir, VA: Office of History, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1988).

Another study is from the Office of the Chief Engineer, General Headquarters, Army Forces, Pacific. *Engineers of the Southwest Pacific, 1941–1945: Volume I, Engineers in Theater Operations* (Washington, DC: Army Forces, Pacific, 1947).

James B. Lampert's article, "Combat Engineering—Lingayen to Manila," *Military Engineer*, Volume 38, Number 246. (April 1946) pp. 143–148, is only one of many about various phases of combat in and the reconstruction of the Philippines in the 1945–1947 issues of this magazine. Kenneth J. Deacon published a one-page series titled "Combat Engineers" in this magazine between 1960 and 1965 that the serious researcher should consult.