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Report date: 17 March 1945

Title: Report on the Los Banos Prison Operations

Abstract: Report of the Los Banos Prison Operations in Luzon, Philippine Islands includes a narrative of the rescue of internees at Los Banos Prison Camp by the 11th Airborne Division on 23 February 1945

Number of pages: 8 p.

Notes: From the MCoE HQ Donovan Research Library, Fort Benning, GA. Documents collection. Call #: D793.33 .U311

Classification: Unclassified; Approved for public release

D 793.33 REPORT ON THE LOS BANOS PRISON
U 311 du OPERATIONS. LUZON P.I.

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HEADQUARTERS 11TH AIRBORNE DIVISION

APO 268

LUZON, P. I.

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Following is a report of the operation by which the 11th Airborne Division freed the internees of the LOS BANOS PRISON CAMP, LOS BANOS, LAGUNA, P. I. on 23 February 1945.

C O N T E N T S

NARRATIVE OF OPERATION

Enclosures:

- No. 1 - G-3 Periodic Report, Hq 11th Abn Div, 21 Feb 1945.
- No. 2 - F.O. #18, Hq 11th Abn Div, 21 Feb 1945.
- No. 3 - F.O. #13, Hq C.T. 8, 22 Feb 1945.
- No. 4 - F.O. #2, Hq 1st Bn, 511th Inf, 22 Feb 1945.

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17 March 1945.

NARRATIVE OF THE RESCUE OF INTERNEES AT LOS BANOS PRISON CAMP
BY 11TH AIRBORNE DIVISION ON 23 FEBRUARY 1945.

While the 11th Airborne Division was at PARANAQUE, on the fourth of February, the third day after the division landing at NASUGBU, a directive was received from the Commander-in-Chief, Southwest Pacific Area, directing preparations be made for a flying column to be dispatched to rescue the internees at LOS BANOS INTERNMENT CAMP. (MAP) The Commanding General pointed out that, at that time, his troops were heavily engaged with the enemy in SOUTH MANILA and that, of the 8000 troops of the division, no flying column of sufficient strength could be made immediately available, LOS BANOS being 50 miles from the place where the troops were engaged, with five bridges blown between the division and the objective. He recommended that the mission be suspended until it was practicable to disengage a force of the necessary size from contact with the Japs. This recommendation was approved.

General Swing then assembled the division staff and directed that they prepare a detailed plan for the rescue. He stated the general plan as follows:

- (1) To infiltrate selected personnel into the area prior to the attack with the mission of marking a parachute drop zone, the landing beach, and ascertaining routes of approach to launch surprise attack on all sentries;
- (2) To destroy the Japanese garrison with paratroops dropped close to the camp;
- (3) To land a beachhead force equipped with vehicles for transporting the internees to safety;
- (4) To launch a strong ground attack on all arms at a distance from the camp in order to force the Jap to divert his strength away from the camp and surrounding strongpoints to defend against this attack;
- (5) To establish a camp well within friendly territory for the housing, hospitalization, and medication of the rescued internees.

He stressed the following particular considerations which would affect the mission, and which he desired the staff to bear in mind during the plan-

(1) The possibility of an enemy reaction in force against the effort from his mobile reserve to the South in the SANTO TOMAS - BALABALO area, and the necessity for planning counter moves to forestall this reaction;

(2) The necessity for detailed planning and for the careful briefing of each individual in the operation;

(3) The absolute necessity for accurate timing, coordination, and surprise;

(4) To avoid any indication of the movement from the then occupied positions in the direction of the camp until troops could be moved under cover of darkness to assembly areas immediately prior to H-hour.

The probable presence of many war correspondents, reporters, and photographers, who would be interested in internees, and would ignore and hinder military operations, and jeopardize the secrecy of the plan.

The tendency of Americans to carry heavy baggage, no matter what the occasion, and the added burden of this baggage on the internees.

acknowledgment

and to perform such as to

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On the days prior to the operation, the Division Commander had many indications that the proposed operation was known to the enemy. At midnight of the night prior to the operation, a P-61 night fighter reported many Japanese trucks moving into the area with lights. An Alamo Scout received a report at the same time that the garrison had been reinforced by 2,000 Japs. One escaped internee stated that the internees were holding the Airborne Division Rescue Day drills daily. These reports were not regarded as reliable, though they caused the Division Commander and his staff much concern, and they were not transmitted to the participating troops. They did cause the Division Commander to decide to move an advance division CP to CALAMBA, to alert the 2d Battalion of the 512th Infantry as a possible reserve, and to abandon his plan to jump with the paratroopers. He remained at Colonel SOULE's CP, prepared to assume immediate command of the tactical operations in case a serious engagement was joined.

On the beach at MAMATID, extensive preparations had been made to receive the internees. Eighteen ambulances and twenty five two and one half ton trucks were lined up on the beach awaiting the arrival of the first wave of amtrack. Military police of the division guided the amtrack to a waiting truck, loaded internees in the truck and litter cases in ambulances. Convoys of trucks and ambulances were sent immediately to the NEW BILIBID PRISON under guard. Since the MAMATID BEACH was within enemy artillery range, and within the range of an enemy counterattack, the division commander directed that correspondents would not be allowed to interview internees on the beach, nor would the Red Cross employees be allowed to distribute refreshments there as they had intended.

The Division Reconnaissance Platoon was assigned the mission of destroying the prison guards by a surprise assault in an effort to eliminate as far as possible a fire fight between the guards and the attacking parachutists which would endanger the lives of the internees. With the assistance of two escaped internees, and an intensive study of photographs of the area, routes were selected which would enable the platoon to reach positions as close as 15 yards from the guard posts without detection. The escaped internees and a group of specially selected Guerrillas, familiar with the area, accompanied the platoon on the mission. This platoon embarked from the west coast of LAGUNA DE BAY in native bancas at H-36.

Adverse wind conditions were encountered which nearly doubled the time originally estimated for the crossing. Sufficient leeway had been allowed for just such a contingency, and after a grueling march through rice paddies knee-deep in mud, the members of the platoon occupied their positions only a few minutes before H-Hour.

On the night of 21-22 February, all troops were moved to concealed assembly positions in the vicinity of MUNTINLUPA, the southernmost terrain occupied by the division. They remained concealed all day the 22d, and at the night of the 22d moved to positions at MAMATID and CALAMBA ready for the attack. The artillery occupied its positions under cover of darkness, the infantry deployed and occupied positions along the beach at MAMATID. Company B of the 511th Infantry moved to NICHOLS FIELD and slept with the planes during the night. At 0515 the amphibious force entered the water, and set off for the landing beach. The amtracks moved out in column of 3's. As the column came parallel to the landing beach, 9 boats at a time performed a right flank movement, which permitted the landing to be made in 6 waves of 9 boats each. The course was 7.4 miles long, and due to the pitch black darkness, had to be steered by compass. This was a new twist to amtrack navigation, and was splendidly performed by the tractor battalion. At 0630, the nine C-47's took off in formation from NICHOLS FIELD, which had been captured and secured by the division only four days before.

At 0658, at gray dawn, two columns of white phosphorous smoke ascended on the landing beach, and two identical columns ascended from the drop zone. This was the first indication that the Division Reconnaissance Platoon had accomplished its mission, and was a welcome sight to the men in the amphibious tractor zone who were awaiting H-Hour on the north bank of the SAN JUAN RIVER. Later, the C-47's in a column of 9's, passed over the tractor zone on way to the Drop Zone.

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Comms... informed... able to pass the LOS BANGS... It was felt at this time that NICHOLS-STEED and FORT MCKINLEY, in which operation the division was involved, would fall around the eighteenth. (CHART)

FORT MCKINLEY fell the 19th of February. The troops selected for the operation were withdrawn from the lines, staged at PARANAGUE, and alerted for the operation. The troops designated for the operation were the 1st Battalion 511th Parachute Infantry, commanded by Major HENRY A. BURGESS; 1st Battalion, 188th Paraglider Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. ERNEST EARLANNE; 675th Paraglider-Field-Artillery-Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. ERNEST L. MASSAD; the 472d FA Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. THOMAS F. BIANVANO; Battery D, 457th Parachute FA Battalion, commanded by Captain LUIS M. BURRIS; the Provisional Division Reconnaissance Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant GEORGE SKAU; and the 672d Amphibious Tractor Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. JOSEPH W. GIBBS (attached to the Division on request to the Commanding General, XIV Corps). Colonel ROBERT H. SOULE was designated as commander of troops, and his regimental Headquarters Company was his Force Headquarters. These troops with the least casualties, and most fresh, were selected for the operation, and resulted in the composite force. The force was designated the LOS BANGS FORCE.

Strength of the amphibious and airborne elements of the LC was as follows:

- Parachute: "B" Co, plus MG Plat, Hq Co, 511th Prcht Inf - 125 men
- Amphibious: "A", "C", Hq Co (-) 1st Bn 511th Prcht Inf, 1 Btry FA - 350 men
- Troop Carrier: 9 AP's from 54th TC Wing

The final plan, which was arrived at after much detailed study by the division staff, was submitted to the Commanding General, XIV Corps, approved in principle, and the date was set for 23 February.

A summary of the plan will certainly be of interest. (Map with details of plan, including summary of G-3 estimate).

As soon as the mission was assigned, G-2 immediately, through Major VANDERPOOL (GMC representative with the Guerrillas in BATANGAS Province), contacted Guerrillas in the mountains in the vicinity of the internment camp. Members of his section were infiltrated to these Guerrillas and were able, with the help of escaped internees, civilians living in that vicinity and Guerrilla patrols, to prepare a detailed plan of the camp, to include the exact location of every sentry, the commandant's headquarters, guard barracks, the building containing weapons and ammunition, and covered approaches for small groups to reach and attack all sentries simultaneously. The parachute dropping ground was thoroughly reconnoitered and preparations made for Guerrillas to arrive during the night to protect the landing of the paratroops.

Simultaneously parties of the 127th AB Engr Bn were reconnoitering the roads and bridges on Highway #1 from ALABANG to CALAMBA with a view of making the road passable to tank destroyers and 105mm guns and prime movers. Of prime importance was their reconnaissance for near and far shore landing sites as in many places the shores of LAGUNA DE BAY are muddy prohibiting the movement of any type of vehicle.

The secrecy of the entire LOS BANGS operation was particularly difficult to maintain. In order to procure information of the area, it was unavoidable that a number of Guerrillas became cognizant of our intentions. Further, it was necessary to have some 57 amtracs to their point of departure on the shores of LAGUNA DE BAY in the vicinity of MAMATED. Nonetheless, the operation proved a complete surprise to the Japanese. Statements of the Japanese indicate no change in the daily routine of the guards, and that as the attack was launched, a detail was being formed at the camp gate to proceed to LOS BANGS to procure supplies for the day.

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to [redacted] At
time the [redacted] pillbox with
three machine guns in it was destroyed by [redacted] squad of
selected men.

The airborne phase which consisted of B Company of the 511th Parachute Inf, with 1 platoon of LMG's attached had loaded in the C-47's at 0600. The planes took off in darkness at 0630, rendezvoused over the field, and proceeded by a previously selected route to the Drop Zone. At 0700, just before sunrise, the green light flashed, and all jumpers left the planes. All men landed in the Drop Zone without injury, in a perfect pattern, assembled in three minutes, and arrived at the camp 17 minutes after the first chute opened. Enroute, the company quickly reduced one pillbox manned with a light machine gun. Arriving at the camp they completed mopping up the few remaining Nips, set up a perimeter defense around the camp, and began to organize the internees. At this point the amtracs arrived, and the evacuation began.

The first waves of amtracs that landed split into two groups. One group, C Company, 1st Bn, 511th, moved immediately to MAYONDON POINT to silence a small enemy force on this high ground and then proceeded toward LOS BANOS and set up a defensive road block; the other group, A Company, 1st Bn, moved on the road to BAY and occupied the high ground dominating the approaches from the east. D Battery of the 457th FA occupied position in the center of the beachhead, and opened fire on the enemy machine guns firing from MAYONDON POINT. The succeeding waves of amtracs, preceded by mine detecting engineers, were led by Major BURGESS direct to the camp. There he met the Company Commander of his B Company. The amtracs were loaded with internees, and sent immediately to the beach, where they embarked and commenced the return trip to MAMATID with the first 1500 internees. The 1st Battalion, less amtrac guards, formed a cordon around the remaining internees and marched them to the beach. Guerrillas carried the heavy baggage.

The original plan contemplated two serials of amtracs to transport internees back to the MAMATID shore, and then for the 1st Bn, 511th Parachute Infantry to force its way to contact the ground forces attacking from the west. It was apparent, though, from the number of internees packed into the first vehicles, that the entire attacking force could be brought back in the second serial by amtrac. The division commander ordered this done. The battalion commander then ordered the two companies maintaining road blocks to the east and west to withdraw toward the beachhead and to establish a strong defensive perimeter with the assistance of "B" Company and the Guerrillas, and to hold the position until the amtracs returned. They then loaded onto the tractors and set out for MAMATID. Enemy resistance on MAYONDON POINT and the road from LOS BANOS had been destroyed. All internees and all division troops had been returned to MAMATID BEACH by 1500 hours. We had suffered only one man wounded in action and two civilian internees were slightly wounded.

To the west, the remainder of the LOS BANOS FORCE had commenced across the SAN JUAN RIVER at 0700. By 0745 the 1st Bn, 188th Infantry had seized LECHERIA HILLS dominating the road to LOS BANOS. Resistance was light, and by noon the battalion had advanced to DAMPALIT RIVER. By this time, it was obvious that the entire amphibious force could be withdrawn by amtrac, and the battalion was ordered to withdraw and to hold the SAN JUAN bridgehead and the LECHERIA HILLS.

By 1700, the operation was completed. 1st Battalion, 188th Infantry held a bridgehead across the SAN JUAN RIVER, and was attacked by the Japs the night of the 23d. 1st Battalion, 511th Infantry was in perimeter around the beachhead guarding the internees, and preparing to return to the front lines south of FORT MCKINLEY on the following day. Colonel SOULE and his headquarters company returned to PARANAQUE and continued to command his regiment, less the 1st Battalion, which was fighting the Japs east of FORT MCKINLEY. Our casualties had been two killed in action, and three wounded in action. 214 internees had been rescued and returned to the comforts of a government hospital, reporters, and the American Red Cross. Two hundred and forty three Japs were killed during the day's operation.

The Field Orders of the division, task force, and amphibious force as

well as the division periodic report covering the operation are available for examination, and present the military factual data of the operation.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The complete success of the LOS BANOS OPERATION, including on a small scale all the elements of a landing on hostile shores, demonstrated once again these facts:

1. That through the employment of airborne troops, tactical surprise can be obtained to a degree not possible in strictly ground operations. Only by swift movement of troops by air can we be assured that the direction and intent of the attacker is maintained in secrecy.
2. That the sudden appearance and presence of hostile troops behind defensive installations cause confusion and disruption of communications, and has an effect on the defender far greater than the number of troops employed by the attacker would warrant.
3. That airborne troops are properly employed in the role of "spearhead troops" in the initial stages of an operation. Their use as reinforcing troops should be limited to situations of grave emergency.
4. That an operation involving airborne, amphibious, and ground troops can be successfully accomplished with pin point precision when it is carefully and exactly planned and executed with rapidity.

Recommendation:

1. That in future operations in this theater, the use of airborne troops in their proper role (TC 113, WD 1943) be given great consideration by the planners.

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