

Deadeye History... Our Heritage is our Strength

The Leyte Landing, A-day, October 20, 1944

By Donald Dencker, Company L, 382nd Infantry, 96th Infantry Division. Author of "Love Company: Infantry Combat Against the Japanese on Leyte and Okinawa."

In early September 1944, I, as a member of Company L, 382nd Infantry Regiment, 96th Infantry Division, U.S. Army was aboard Landing Ship Tank (LST) 745 heading for an October 5th landing on Japanese held Yap Island.

However, due to very weak Japanese aircraft opposition against U.S. Navy carrier aircraft strikes in the central Philippines, it was decided to cancel the Yap assault and move up the Leyte, Philippines landing from December 20th to October 20th.

This shift of objectives moved the Army 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions from the Central Pacific Command under Admiral Nimitz to the Southwest Pacific Command under General Douglas MacArthur.

The 96th Division Convoy was large, totaling 45 ships, including 12 troop transports and 23 Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs). This convoy carried 20,000 Army men, 5,000 of whom, from engineer, anti-aircraft, quartermaster and medical units, would be detached from the 96th Division after landing.

A typical heavily loaded LST's top deck would hold men and equipment. The Tank Deck below would be loaded with amphibious tanks and landing vehicles.

The October 20th A-Day landing at IDAM employed four Army Divisions, with a north landing by the 1st Cavalry and 24th Infantry Divisions and the south landing by the 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions. A distance of 24 miles separated the two landing areas. Our opposition was the Japanese 16th Infantry Division.

My company came ashore in eight Landing Vehicle, Tracked

(LVT-4). I rode in the upper right LVT. After so many months of training and such a long trip aboard ship, I think our morale actually soared as we moved towards the hostile shore.

A number of men raised their right arms above the side of the LVT and pumped their fist up and down. This was the Army hand signal for "Double Time."

Our landing day was not without cost though, as Company L (Love Company) had 21 battle casualties.

After the fighting in the Blue Beach 1 area ceased at about 2 PM, I saw an old Filipino man and a young girl about 6 come out of the jungle on a trail. The old man was carrying an American flag on a pole and they were both singing the song "God Bless America." I think it certainly took courage to teach a young girl "God Bless America" under the oppressive Japanese occupation.

During their occupation of the Philippines, the Japanese promoted their own version of the liberation of the Philippines. On October 15, 1943, the Japanese granted the Philippines independence, their version.

A leaflet was given to me by a Filipino who said it came from the Japanese collaborating mayor of Burauen, Leyte. After the U.S. taking of Burauen, this mayor was captured by guerrillas and taken down to the river for "cleansing," except his head was held under the water too long.

On Red Beach, where the 24th Infantry Division had landed, General MacArthur came ashore at about 2 PM. He had, as promised, returned to the Philippines. On the beach he read his "Proclamation to the Philippine People." This was indeed a day of triumph for General MacArthur.

Another event happened on "Liberation Day" that I clearly remember. It was about 5 PM and I had to go back to the beach for more mortar ammo-

munition. About half way back to the beach, I ran into a young Filipino man. He was clad only in shorts. He was very happy and excited to see me. He spotted my canteen and said something about a drink. At first I thought he wanted water, but he kept saying "Tuba." As I watched, he climbed to the top of a coconut palm tree. After climbing to near the top of the tree he took off the tree a container made of large leaves. The young man climbed down and brought the leaf container to me saying, "Tuba, drink."

To be friendly with this thankful young man, I got out my canteen cup. He was about to pour the liquid in my cup when I looked into the leaf container, there were dead flies floating on the liquid. I pointed to the liquid and said "Flies, No."

The young man pulled a dirty handkerchief out of his hip pocket, spread it over my canteen cup, and proceeded to pour the Tuba through it. This did strain out the dead flies, but what about other disease, I thought. Nevertheless, in the cause of Filipino-American friendship, I drank half of the tuba. Then, I handed the canteen cup to him, and he drank the rest.

Starting the next day, a major impediment to our progress was rain and swamps. Starting about 1,200 yards inland were extensive swamps which had been described in our intelligence as farmland. It rained about every day during the first month on Leyte. Love Company lost about 50 men to diseases such as yellow jaundice, dengue fever, schistosomiasis, dysentery, and jungle rot. My Fatigue uniform just about rotted off my body before I got a new uniform at Thanksgiving time.

As the American and Filipino defense of the Philippines collapsed, individual Philippine provinces had issued their own currency. I have a hand-printed two-peso note printed on Leyte.

Concurrently, the Japanese gov-

ernment issued Philippine currency, illustrated by their ten peso note. We brought ashore pre-war Philippine money imprinted with the word "VICTORY."

It didn't take long to come into contact with Philippine guerrilla forces. They over time had become more effective in harassing the Japanese. I exchanged a new Philippine "VICTORY" note for a Japanese 50 centavo note with a young guerrilla from Tabontabon. This was before Tabontabon was destroyed in battle with the Japanese 16th Infantry Division making a stand

there. Only the brick walls of the Catholic church were left standing.

After a 1984 visit by 96th Division veterans to Leyte in commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the Leyte Landing, a project was started to build and stock libraries for the school children of the island. This project was successful in building and stocking new libraries at Jaro, Burauen, Tabontabon and Dagami, Leyte. Each library cost about \$20,000 plus the cost of getting books to Leyte. In addition, donated books were delivered to 20 other libraries on Leyte.

COMMEMORATION OF 65th ANNIVERSARY OF LEYTE LANDING & MACARTHUR'S RETURN TO THE PHILIPPINES

By Don Dencker

On October 17, 2009, I had the honor of speaking at a the nicely attended event at the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virg. This gathering commemorated the 65th Anniversary of our Leyte, Philippines landing and General MacArthur's return to the Philippines. My talk centered on the 96th Infantry Division landing on Leyte on October 20, 1944, especially that of Company L, 382nd Infantry Regiment and the taking of Hill 120. Our opposition was elements of the Japanese 16th Infantry Division.

I also talked about my first day in contact with Filipinos which included my first drink of tuba. There was a Filipino-American Color Guard in World War II uniforms at the ceremony, plus a number of Filipino-Americans in the audience and Len Lazarick of K Company, 382nd Infantry, also was there. After the program, there was a wreath-laying ceremony at the MacArthur tomb which Len and I took part in.

Len and I were invited to a gathering that evening at the Filipino Cultural Center. A ride to the cultural center was provided and we both spoke of the events of October 20, 1944 to an audience of about 250 people. Audience response to our talks was overwhelming. I can say that Filipinos still greatly appreciate our driving the Japanese from their land.

My daughter Lynn Wahl and granddaughter Hannah attended the Norfolk events.