

Saddles and Sabers

Filipino Armored Force in the Korean War (1950-1953)

by CDR Mark R. Condeno

On Sunday, June 25, 1950, after an artillery barrage, the 6,000-man-strong 105th Armored Brigade of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) – with its 120 Russian-built T-34/85 tanks, along with a battalion-sized infantry unit – crossed the border with South Korea. This invasion marked the start of the hostilities in the Land of the Morning Calm that came to be known as the Korean War.

The NKPA assault was coordinated from coast to coast, with the initial offensive beginning on the Ongjin Peninsula and later concentrated along the Uijongbu Corridor that led directly to the Republic of (South) Korea's capital of Seoul. The Republic of Korea (RoK) was caught off guard by this surprise attack. The RoK's small military force faced overwhelming odds, so it sought help from the United Nations Security Council that requested member nations to militarily support the embattled country.

The first to answer that call from Southeast Asia was a young republic that had recently suffered the ravages of war five years earlier (during World War II), and at the time, it was also fighting a growing Communist-led insurgency of its own. The Republic of the Philippines did not hesitate to send its troops into a foreign land and answer a neighbor's call for help to preserve the freedom of its people and the democratic way in which they lived.

The Philippines was one of the first countries to recognize the newly independent RoK in 1949. Filipino assistance and support to South Korea began even before the war with economic aid in the form of food and agricultural materials.

Pre-deployment

In July 1950, 10th Battalion Combat Team (BCT) was designated to be the Philippine contingent to the United Nations Command (UNC) in the Korean Campaign. The 10th BCT was the country's sole armored battalion. Formerly known as 3rd BCT, the Fighting 10th had in its inventory 29 M4A1 composite-hull Shermans and 10 M5 Stuart light tanks left behind by American troops from World War II. The battalion was composed of three rifle companies, a medium tank company (Sherman), a reconnaissance company (light armor) and a field-artillery battery comprised of six M2A1 105mm howitzers.

When the United Nations' request came in, the Philippines deployed 16 M4A1 Sherman tanks and one M18 Hellcat tank destroyer. This small armored force augmented the other Allied armor during the early days of the Korean conflict. The small Filipino armored force was brought in by then-2LT Francisco S. Tamondong, along with two noncommissioned officers, in July 1950.



Figure 1. In July 1950, 16 M4A1 Sherman tanks were deployed by the Philippines to Korea, brought in by then-2LT Francisco S. Tamondong to augment UNC's armor.

Unknown to many, the Philippine army of that period possessed roughly 500 American-built M4 Shermans of various models, M7 Greyhound armored personnel carriers, M10 Wolverine and M18 Hellcat tank destroyers, M3 armored halftracks and M7 Priest self-propelled artillery, among other vehicles. As mentioned, these were left behind by U.S. forces after World War II.

It was promised that the 17 tanks deployed to Korea would be replaced with medium and heavy tanks upon arrival in Korea. Unfortunately, the tanks brought in by the Philippine army were destroyed during early operations against the North Korean and Chinese Communist forces. Therefore, history has it that the Filipino soldiers arrived in Pusan without an armored element. However, that is inaccurate.

M24 Chaffee tanks

A few weeks after arrival in Korea, one of the Filipino battalion's officers, LCDR Emilio S. Liwanag, requested permission from battalion commander COL Mariano C. Azurin and the deputy battalion commander, then-MAJ Delfin Argao, to secure tanks and heavy weapons from the American depot in Pusan.

Why was a naval officer serving in an Army battalion? A few months before the start of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, Liwanag finished a gunnery course at Fort William McKinley located in Manila, the Philippines. With the outbreak of war in Korea, the Philippine army requested he join 10th BCT. His recent training would be put to use seven months later on the ridges of Yuldong, when he commanded the field-artillery battery during a pivotal battle there.

Upon gaining permission from his superiors, Liwanag proceeded to the weapons depot and informed them of the battalion's lack of armored firepower. By the end of the day, the sole naval officer in 10th BCT brought in seven M24 Chaffee tanks and an assorted array of heavy weapons to the Filipino camp.

It was decided that the tank company under CPT Conrado D. Yap would be reconstituted into a special/heavy weapons company, while the Chaffee tanks were assigned to the reconnaissance company under CPT Marcos T. Garcia. Yap and one of the heavy-weapons-company platoon leaders, 1LT Jose Artiaga Jr., made the ultimate sacrifice during the Battle of Yuldong April 23, 1951.

Yap was a 1949 graduate of the U.S. Army Armor School, then at Fort Knox, KY, and Artiaga was a 1948 graduate of the Infantry Officer's Course at Fort Benning, GA. Yap was posthumously presented the Philippines' highest honor, the Medal for Valor. Artiaga was posthumously presented the U.S. Distinguished Service Cross in 1952.



Figure 2. CPT Conrado D. Yap aboard his tank.

After his stint with the Filipino battalion, Liwanag served as deputy commander of the United Nations-Philippine Liaison Group in Tokyo, Japan.

First tank action

Situated in a mountainous area of North Korea, the village of Miudong-Singye was the site of the Filipino tankers' baptism of fire. Entrenched in the village were two battalions of the NKPA, comprising 1,200 soldiers. On Nov. 10, 1950, 10th BCT's Companies A and B, commanded by captains Maximo C. Dumlao and Paulino E. Sanchez respectively, proceeded to the smaller village of Sinmak to decoy the North Koreans from the Filipino unit's original objective of Singye and Miudong.

Without enemy resistance at Sinmak, the Filipinos marched toward Singye. All was calm until a Filipino truck hit a landmine and veered to the side of the road. With that explosion, all hell broke loose as the North Koreans opened fire from entrenched positions. This pinned down most of the Filipino troops and tanks without a chance for them to return fire.

Then, despite the raining metal, 1LT Bonny Serrano braved the enemy fire to lead his soldiers with their 81mm mortar to the base of a ridge overlooking the enemy positions, where they began counterfire. CPT Mariano C. Robles saw Serrano's mortar crew take the hill despite enemy fire and directed his howitzers to counter the NKPA assault.

In a pinned-down position nearby, 1SG Maximo P. Young, one of the Chaffee tank commanders, took a chance and pulled his tank into a ditch. Then, using the tank's periscope, he saw a large number of enemy soldiers preparing to attack. That's when Young, a 1948 U.S. Army Armor School graduate, mounted his tank's cupola and began firing the tank's .50-caliber machinegun at the onrushing enemy, scattering the North Korean troops.

The tank's machinegun was without any gun shield. Years later, then-MAJ Young remembered the incident as "a kill or be killed situation."



Figure 3. Young and his crew aboard a Chaffee. Young, a U.S. Army Armor School graduate, remembered North Korean ambush fire in the Filipinos' march toward Singye as a "kill or be killed situation."

Almost an hour after the battle begun, Filipino troops discovered 42 North Koreans killed in action and roughly 100 enemy soldiers wounded in action. The Filipinos suffered a number of wounded. Nevertheless, the Filipinos achieved their objective. The battle was witnessed by senior officers of the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division and 187th Airborne Regiment, who sent congratulatory messages and praises for the successful operation to Filipino soldiers.

Filipino tanks to rescue

On April 20, 1951, two U.S. Army M26 Pershing tanks went on a recon patrol above the Filipino troops' area of operations, which was the bank of the Imjin River. The surprise appearance of American tank crews near their camp alerted the Filipino soldiers that something was wrong.

Upon investigation, they learned that American tanks were bogged down in the mud. While trying to extricate U.S. tanks, the Filipinos became targets of Chinese artillery fire. An operation was quickly planned to retrieve the Pershing tanks. A Filipino reconnaissance platoon led by 1LT Victoriano Yapchanco, along with two M24 Chaffee tanks for fire support, got the mission.

As events developed, the Chinese also sent a contingent to capture the American tanks. Within an hour of the Filipinos' deployment, the Chinese opened fire on the Filipinos and Americans. During the ensuing battle, the

Filipinos routed and killed eight Chinese soldiers, but more importantly, the Americans got their tanks back and drove them to the Filipino camp.

Saving British battalion

After the Battle of Yuldong, the Filipinos were placed under operational control of the British 29th Infantry Brigade, commanded by BG Thomas Brodie. On April 24, 1951, three Chaffee tanks of 10th BCT, with British Centurion tanks, led the assault on the village of Solma-Ri.

Unfortunately, the combined Chinese Communist and North Korean firepower was superior to the Allies at the site. The lead Filipino M24 tank suffered a hit, instantly killing its crew, led by CPL Zacarias Escaro and composed of PVT Romeo P. Aspiras, PVT Jorge L. Atrero and PVT Amador C. Espanola. To date, the loss is still debated as to whether the tank was destroyed by Chinese anti-tank artillery or by a mine.

The engagement was considered part of the Battle of the Imjin River, where the Filipinos lost one Chaffee tank (and its crew) and one other soldier killed in action. In addition, they suffered 10 wounded and three missing soldiers. The 10th BCT and the British tried to continue but, facing massive enemy firepower, they were stalled just 2,500 yards from some trapped British Gloucestershire Battalion troops.

The Filipinos received orders to withdraw before dusk. As they fell back, the enemy concentrated its fire on them. The 10th BCT soldiers fought on, including their remaining Chaffee tanks. As they approached the village of Masan-Ni, enemy mortar fire targeted the Allied troops. During the melee, SGT Nicolas L. Mahusay detached from his platoon and engaged enemy forces in NKPA bunkers. Thanks to his actions, pinned-down Filipino troops were able to regroup.

Mahusay was posthumously awarded the Philippines' Gold Cross Medal.

During this battle for the Imjin River, Filipino M24 Chaffee tank gunner PVT Luminoso A. Cruz was wounded in action, taking shrapnel in the head.

Task Force Pagala-Quinn

Another notable operation involving Filipino tanks was with the Canadian forces. Detailed information about this action is largely unknown to this day. By May 1951, 10th BCT was attached to the Royal Canadian Brigade, in which jokingly the Filipinos said they were the "Royal 10th BCT." During the counteroffensive, a combined task force was formed under the Canadian army's MAJ James Quinn and the Philippine army's Company C platoon leader 1LT Erdulfo G. Pagala.

TF Pagala-Quinn was composed of 10 tanks – Canadian Shermans and the Philippine army's remaining M24s, along with 10th BCT's pathfinder platoon. Driving northward through the Hantachon River, they swept the area of the enemy and acquired leftover artillery pieces and machine parts used by the North Korean infantry.

Last engagement

The last Filipino tank engagement against the Chinese was also during this period as the Allied offensive moved toward the front. The 10th BCT command post was secured by a platoon led by 2LT Faustino Villanueva, along with two Chaffee tanks. There was a belief that a Chinese attack was impeding, so Villanueva positioned the tanks ahead of the infantry to block the road to the command post.

Sure enough, using the pitch-black night as cover, Chinese soldiers were able to infiltrate Allied lines to reach the area behind the tanks. The enemy was headed directly toward 10th BCT's command post. TSGT Crispin Paciente, one of the Chaffee tank commanders, ordered gunner PFC Antonio F. Agaton to fire blindly at the Chinese to their rear. This woke up the crew of the other Filipino Chaffee tank, whose commander asked, "What are you were firing at?"

Paciente informed the other tank's commander it was the Chinese. At first the other tank's commander, CPL Rafael Membrado, jokingly teased Paciente that he and his crew were just dreaming. Then suddenly, Membrado recognized the enemy presence and alerted his own crew.

Paciente shouted the daily password into the dark of night, which was not answered as Chinese troops scurried past.

Agaton shouted, "It's the enemy, shoot!" After which, Paciente sprayed the area with the tank's .50-caliber machinegun while Agaton fired in support with his Thompson sub-machinegun.

Paciente then shouted for driver CPL Aurelio Budomo to back up the tank to illuminate the area. The illumination revealed the bodies of two Chinese soldiers on the ground. The enemy soldiers had been carrying a 60mm mortar with an assortment of ammunition toward the command post. Paciente and his crew were praised by 10th BCT officers for their feat.



Figure 4. An M24 Chaffee crew led by TSGT Crispin Paciente.

Lessons-learned

During the Korean War and the years immediately following, the Philippines deployed five BCTs. However, of the five BCTs deployed from 1950 to 1955, only four were equipped with tanks. This presented problems for the Filipino armored force.

The Korean War was the first overseas joint armed-forces operation for the Philippines. As such, the Filipino armored force showed its prowess on the battlefield by attacking entrenched enemy positions and providing fire support during the battles of Naktaedong, Yuldong and Eerie Hill. It also provided an opportunity for the armored force to hone its skills by operating in a multinational command.

Hindsight indicates that post-World War II provision of a heavy tank to the Filipinos, such as the U.S. M26 Pershing, would have been a tactical and strategic advantage to the Allied forces in Korea, especially during the opening years of the conflict there.

Conclusion

The tank operations described in this article were mostly about the first Philippine contingent, 10th BCT. Later, the 20th, 19th and 14th BCTs of the Philippine Expeditionary Force to Korea (PEFTOK) were also equipped with Chaffee and Sherman tanks. This brief narrative is a compilation of some the Filipino tankers' first overseas missions to document their exploits and preserve their legacy.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

BCT – battalion combat team (Philippine usage)

NKPA – North Korean People's Army

PEFTOK – Philippines Expeditionary Force to Korea

RoK – Republic of Korea

UNC – United Nations Command