



The First U.S. Tank

by Colonel Thom

In direct contrast to the lightning-like thrusts of U.S. armored divisions across France and Germany during the last year of WW II, the first U.S. tank action was a slow, difficult, retrograde movement on the opposite side of the world in the Phillipines.

In July, 1940, there was only one Reserve tank battalion, the 70th General Headquarters (GHQ) Reserve Tank Battalion (Medium) stationed at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland. It was sadly lacking in personnel.

When news came to Major General Adna R. Chaffee that the War Department planned to use many similar units as special task forces, although they had made no provision for their organization, the "Father of the Armored Force" could foresee that without authorization for these reserve units, his armored divisions would be chopped to pieces to supply them and he dispatched a letter of protest to Chief of Staff Marshall. "So, already they are contemplating breaking up our divisions to fritter them away for small purposes," he wrote indignantly. "G-3 has set up no additional GHQ Reserve tank battalions so far. At least four more should

be set up at once. We will have material."¹

In October 1940, General Chaffee wrote to Major General William Bryden, Deputy Chief of Staff, repeating his plea for "prompt formation of efficient GHQ Reserve Tank Battalions."² It was his proposal to use 18 scattered National Guard tank companies to provide personnel for the immediate formation of 4 tank battalions, with training of cadres for 10 more battalions to begin soon.

General Chaffee's work resulted in the first of these additional battalions being formed about 1 month later when, on 25 November 1940, the 192d GHQ Tank Battalion was inducted into Federal service at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Three more battalions were soon organized: the 193d at Fort Benning, Georgia, on 6 January 1941; the 194th at Fort Lewis, Washington, on 22 January 1941; and the 191st at Fort Meade, Maryland, on 3 February 1941.

Inasmuch as these battalions were only expected to be in Federal service for 1 year, no attempt was made to standardize them or to make them conform with any established tables

of organization or equipment.³ Two of these units, the 192d GHQ Tank Battalion (Light), and the 194th GHQ Tank Battalion (Light), along with the 17th Ordnance Company (Armored), would soon become the Provisional Tank Group, U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE).

After the formation of USAFFE in August 1941, General Douglas MacArthur, then commanding, had asked for an armored division. However, the Provisional Tank Group was to be the only armor in USAFFE and its nucleus was never augmented; although a medium GHQ tank battalion had been completely equipped and was on 48-hour standby for departure for the Phillipines when its orders were cancelled on 10 December 1941. Furthermore, the Group would have little time for training before embarking for the Phillipines. The 192d GHQ Tank Battalion from General Sylvester's 1st Tank Group at Fort Benning, Georgia, had carried out a defensive role in the 1941 Louisiana maneuvers. The 194th GHQ Tank Battalion had come from the West Coast where it had been taking part in minor maneuvers with, what was at that



Action in WW II

Booley, USA (Retired)

time, Fourth Army. Both battalions had worked during this maneuver period with early models of the *M1* light tank.

The first of the units to arrive in the Far East, the 194th tank battalion and 17th Ordnance Company (Armored), reached Manila on 26 September 1941. One tank company of this battalion and a part of the battalion headquarters company had been detached to Alaska. Upon movement to Port of Embarkation, this battalion (as was the 192d later) was reequipped with new *M3* light tanks and half-tracks. The armament of these new tanks was strange to the personnel. The *M3* had for its main battery the 37-mm gun with a .30 caliber machinegun coaxially mounted in the turret. The two fixed sponson guns (fired by remote control by the driver) and the anti-aircraft machinegun were all new to the crews. This light tank was heavier and longer, had better flotation, and was equipped with radio facilities that were different from those of the *M1*. So little time and direction had been possible before departure that the unit had thought it necessary, in installing

the new radios, to remove the right sponson gun to make space, and to spot weld armor over the gun port.

The 194th was assigned to Fort Stotsenberg adjacent to Clark Field, in Pampanga Province. Before the group commander arrived, this unit undertook limited reconnaissance in North Luzon. It did not accomplish any firing problems nor cross-country driving as no ranges, fuel, or ammunition were released for these purposes.

The group commander, Brigadier General, (then Colonel) James R. N. Weaver, with Headquarters and Group Headquarters Detachment and the 192d GHQ Tank Battalion (Light) arrived in Manila on 20 November 1941. The headquarters detachment consisted of 10 enlisted men, no tanks, two half-tracks, two 2-way radios, two ¼-ton command and reconnaissance (C&R) cars, one sedan, and no trucks.⁴ These units were also stationed at Fort Stotsenberg and were housed in tents pending completion of semipermanent housing to be built of *sawali*, a siding for houses and buildings made by the natives who wove 2-inch reeds onto a bamboo frame. The only training at this time was

limited reconnaissance work as far north as Lingayen and Baguio, the Philippine summer capital.

The Provisional Tank Group, USAFFE, was organized on 21 November 1941. Eight days later on 29 November, the 17th Ordnance Company (Armored) was assigned to the group at Fort Stotsenberg.

On 27 November, a general alert had been sounded for all forces in the Philippines, but for some reason or through the oversight of someone, the tank units were not included in the warnings. However, the commanding officer of Clark Field had been ordered by Far East Air Force (FEAF) to execute two alerts, one by day—one by night, before 2 December, and the tank group had been asked to participate, and on 1 December moved into battle positions for the defense of Clark Field.

The general change in commands which became effective about 22 November, may have contributed to the disrupted communication channels: FEAF, North Luzon Force, South Luzon Force, and The Philippine Division, all had new commanders. On 28 November, when General

Jonathan Wainwright arrived at Fort Stotsenberg to take command of North Luzon Force, his staff consisted of a chief of staff, two officers in the G-3 section and one in the G-2 section.

In the chain of command, the Provisional Tank Group was a separate tactical command under the commanding general, USAFFE, and was associated with the General Reserve only for administrative reports. The major unit of this reserve was the Philippine Division.

Clark Field Attacked!

On 8 December, (7 December in the U.S.) when the news of the Pearl Harbor attack was received, the crews were at their tanks, and at 0830 the word was passed that Japanese planes were 40 minutes away. Final checks were made as the men stood by, but no attack came. However, at 1230, while the noon meal was being served, a surprise attack was made on Clark Field. Bombers at about 20,000 feet accurately blasted Air Force installations throughout the Stotsenberg area. The tank weapons were of no use until the strafers came in low immediately after the bombing. In this action Technical Sergeant Temon "Bud" Bardowski, B/192d is credited with the first enemy plane brought down by a U.S. armored unit in WW II. (The first armored soldier to die in combat in WW II was Private Brooks of Company D, 194th. (*Brooks Field, the main parade ground at Fort Knox, KY is named in his honor. Ed.*)

After the attack, the tanks were redeployed, with the 194th moving about 3 kilometers northeast and the 192d spreading out to more fully protect the relatively unbroken terrain to the south of the airfield.

There were two more air attacks, on 10 and 13 December, but the group losses amounted to only one half-track destroyed and two men wounded. During this time, tankers brought in the first prisoners of war, who were apparently Japanese naval aviators.

With landings imminent in Southern Luzon, the group headquarters moved to Manila and the 194th moved to an area north of Manila after having sent reconnaissance and liaison groups to the areas of Muntinlupa, Nasugbu Bay, Balayan Bay, Battaangas Bay and east and north around Lake Taal.

After the tank group commander arrived, General Wainwright entered Rosario. Movement of any kind was hampered due to unopposed enemy air activity, for after the airstrikes on 8 December, FEAF, on Luzon, con-

sisted of only a few P-40s, useful only for sneak reconnaissance missions, and a few Philippine Army BT-1s, which were good only for courier service. The general situation was not clear, but reports indicated that two companies of the 11th Philippine Army Division were engaged north of Damortis. Elements of the 26th Cavalry were enroute from Rosario to the point of contact but, as witnessed by the writer, the horse troops were at the mercy of enemy fighter-bombers.

An enemy motorized unit was reported approaching Damortis and General Wainwright asked the tank commander, "What can you do?" Resupply gas had not yet arrived, but the company fuel resources were pooled and a single tank platoon was gassed up and sent to contact the enemy reportedly moving on Damortis. This platoon was commanded by Lieutenant Morin.

First Tank-versus-Tank Action

The platoon did not encounter opposition as they moved north out of Damortis and they continued on to Ago. There they met an enemy tank unit on the road and the first U.S. tank-versus-tank action occurred in WW II. The enemy tanks were of low silhouette, had no turrets, and with sloped sides so that penetration was difficult to achieve. On the other hand, their 47-mm gun was quite effective against our tanks with their perpendicular sides and high profiles—points that had caused their rejection by our allies before the war. Lieutenant Morin's tank, which had left the road in an attempt to maneuver, was hit and caught fire. This was the first U.S. tank lost in tank-versus-tank action in WW II. It was later determined that the crew survived and was captured, making them the first armored force POW's in WW II. The other four tanks were all hit but were able to pull out, one under tow. However, they were all lost later in the day to bombings and mechanical mishaps. The assistant driver of the platoon sergeant's tank, Private Henry Deckert, B/192d, had been decapitated when a direct hit penetrated the forward deck at the ball and socket joint of the bow gun mounting. This man was the first armored soldier killed in tank-versus-tank action in WW II. Hits on enemy tanks with our 37-mm guns had been observed during the fight, but many of the shots were seen to ricochet off the sloping armor.

Later, the situation around Damortis decayed to such a degree that it was imperative that tanks be used to

cover the withdrawal of the 26th Cavalry. The company at Rosario (gas had finally arrived by truck) was sent in with instructions to cover the withdrawal with a series of leap-frog actions.

Later that day the tanks were deployed to the north and west of Rosario but the rapidly developing situation caused the Commanding General of the 71st Philippine Army Division to order all elements south of the Bued River bridge, which was burned in the face of advancing Japanese tanks and cyclists. (*See "26th Cavalry in the Philippines, ARMOR Jan-Feb 1983. Ed.*)

The 192d at this time was deployed to the east of Highway 3, and on 24 December, because of the dire straits of the North Luzon Force, the 194th Battalion (less Company C) was sent from the south of Manila to the west flank of the arterial highway.

About this time a British ship, which had been unable to reach Singapore, put in to Manila and from its holds came potential augmentation for the tank group. Some 40 Bren gun carriers were made available and the initial plan called for organization of two companies. Bren machineguns were not available, but ordnance was to arm the carriers with either .50-caliber or .30-caliber Browning machineguns. Had this organization been completed, the tanks would have been strengthened by a much-needed economy force capable of carrying out both reconnaissance and security roles. Notice of the impending enemy landings in the Lingayen Gulf area, and subsequent moves of the tanks, halted this augmentation. Eventually all carriers were armed—Those operating with tank units, with salvaged guns from tank casualties. About 20 of the carriers were kept with the tank group and the remainder were sent to the Philippine Army divisions and to the 26th Cavalry. The latter group of Bren carriers, commanded by a Veterinary Officer, did noble work throughout the Bataan campaign. Those carriers that were retained by the tank units did good work in emergency supply runs and on cross-country reconnaissance patrols over doubtful terrain before committing tanks to action. It was soon found that the heat-baked ground that gave the appearance of good driving conditions was only a crust that would not support the 4-ton Bren carriers.

Tankers Move to Lingayen Gulf

At a staff conference at USAFFE Headquarters on the evening of 21



December, orders were received to dispatch one company from the 192d by midnight and by resupplying with gas at Gerona and at Bauang, to get to the Lingayen Gulf area by daylight, where, according to reports, it was anticipated the enemy would land a sizable force at first light. The 192d was ordered to move up Highway 3 for such supporting moves as the battalion commander might direct after his contact with the commanding general, North Luzon Force (General Wainwright).

When the group commander arrived in the Lingayen Gulf area, he found the company which had been dispatched before midnight, stranded at Rosario, out of gas. The tank company commander reported that contradictory orders had prevented his refueling at Gerona and that his mission had been changed to that of providing cover for the rear elements of the 11th Philippine Army Division. This instance of changed orders was to be the case on several occasions in the next few weeks due to the confusion and lack of coordination between units of untrained troops and staffs.

It is only fair to explain that all Philippine Army divisions were comparatively untrained and understrength. Many of the troops had gone through 5 months of Philippine military training but some had not even had this background. Also, some of the units that were now moving to contact with well-trained Japanese divisions, had not been mobilized until after the declaration of war.

No steel helmets or individual entrenching tools were available to

Philippine Army troops. The uniforms habitually worn by these units were light tropical hats, fatigue clothes, and canvas-topped shoes. All men were equipped with bolt-action Enfield rifles, but very few spare parts were available. This point was of concern to unit commanders due to the many malfunctions caused by broken ejectors.⁵

Since the Orange Plan (the pre-WW II operational plan covering the Philippines) was in effect, the mission assigned the Provisional Tank Group was to cover the withdrawal of the Filipino-American Forces into the Bataan peninsula. There, the troops were to make a stand and await reinforcements from the States. But the Philippines had already been written off and the reinforcements never came.

Tankers Prevent a Rout

The withdrawal plan called for a retrograde movement to delaying positions on four successive phase lines (map 1, Lingayen Gulf to Clark Field). The tanks carried out this mission amid much confusion. Because of the tropical nature of the terrain, all units were instructed to plan each delay position to occupy all north-south roads and at the same time they were to reconnoiter for exit routes that would tie in with Highways 3 and 5 (the two north-south axial roads). Tanks occupying positions on the main routes were ordered to pay particular attention to enemy mechanized units, and were given detailed instructions on how to cover turns in the highway and to coordinate their

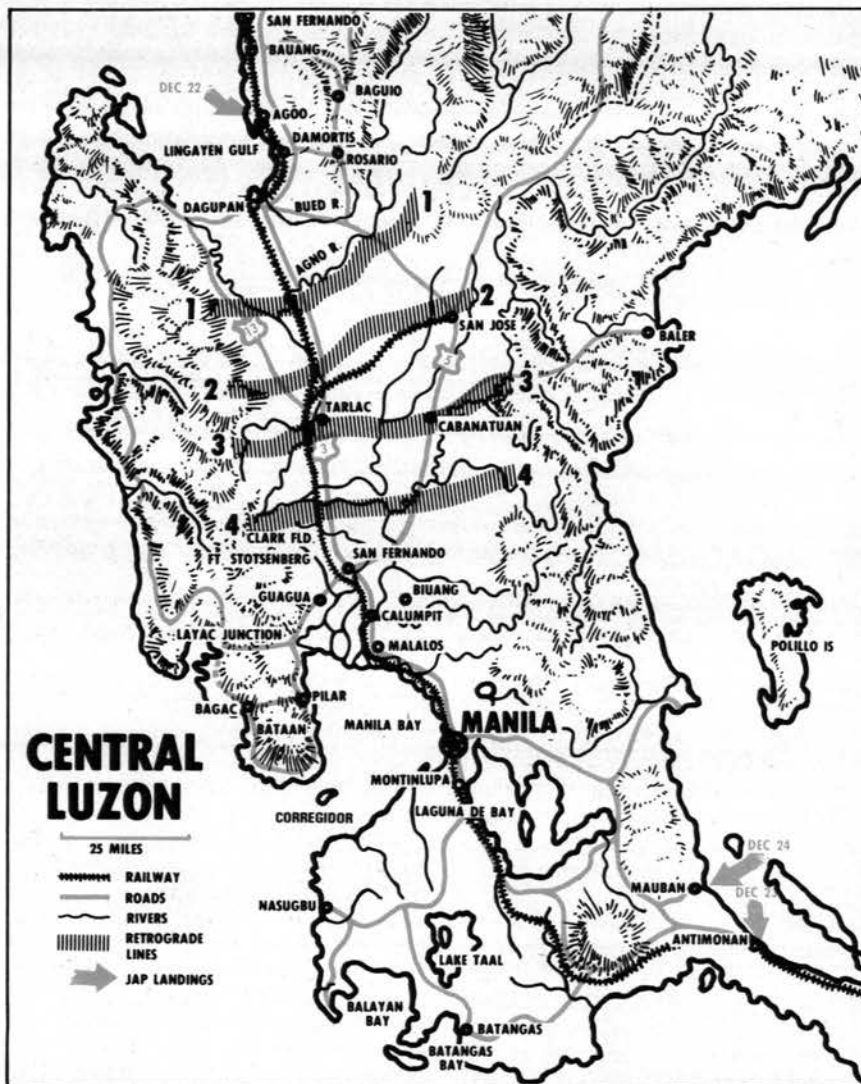
efforts with the self-propelled 75-mm guns mounted on half-tracks.

A number of tank actions now took place, one of the most notable of which was the action at Baliuag, Pampanga where two platoons of C/192d in a back-and-forth fight through the town, bagged eight Japanese medium tanks and prevented a complete rout of American and Filipino troops in the area.

Another, more tragic, incident occurred north of the Agno River when, due to lack of coordination between units, 10 tanks had to be abandoned due to blown bridges and a hard-pressing enemy.

The first phase of the final action before the withdrawal into the Bataan peninsula came in covering the Calumpit bridge position. At this junction, the last troops of the South Luzon Force joined the route of the North Luzon Force. The Calumpit bridge was blown during the night of 31 December-1 January. After the destruction of the bridge, the 192d was passed through the 194th, now reduced to about 30 tanks. Because of this reduction, Company A of the 192d was attached to the 194th and this force was to cover the retirement from the Calumpit junction to the Layac Junction position.

The attached company, in one instance, attempted a makeshift counterattack in the vicinity of Gagua with elements of the 11th Philippine Army Division. The infantry elements at one time mistook our tanks for the enemy and laid down very accurate mortar fire. They repeated this tactic on the group



commander's jeep as he attempted to establish some sort of coordination. The tank company, by trail and cross-country travel, and with the eventual loss of three tanks, rejoined the 194th on Highway 7 at a point west of Guagua.

On the afternoon of 5 January, C Company of the 194th, supported by four self-propelled 75s, ambushed an enemy unit of about seven or eight hundred infantry, and caused losses of about 50 percent. This group worked continuously during the withdrawal at retrieving tank gas cached along the route.

One other firefight marked the covering action just before entry into Bataan. This engagement, with few casualties, lasted from 1430 to about 1700 when the enemy withdrew. It is of particular interest only because it marked the first use of smoke by Japanese units.

The period from 6-26 January was marked by further covering actions in

the East Coast road and one attempted foray in the west (I Corps sector.) The covering action on the east was to aid II Corps in pulling back after a main effort was made by the Japanese in the Abucay Hacienda area.

The new and last main line of resistance (MLR) was along the Pilar-Bagac Road.

The action in the I Corps sector was an attempt to open up a road to extricate the 1st Philippine Army Division that had been cut off north of Bagac by a sizable infiltration of Japanese units. In this attempt, the lack of close-in infantry protection and the cleverly concealed Japanese road mines caused the loss of two tanks and the eventual withdrawal of the foot troops, without their heavy equipment, over a circuitous beach trail.

Also, during this period, the bulk of the tank units gained their first respite since 8 December, in a bivouac area south of Pilar. The tank units

were reorganized, companies of the 194th being reduced from 17 to 10 tanks; platoons from five tanks to three. This same reduction was shortly to be imposed upon the 192d. Tank overhaul and maintenance was done by the 17th Ordnance Company (Armored) that carried out third- and fourth-echelon maintenance using ordnance stocks on South Bataan that had not been released before 8 December. For the first time since hostilities began, crews were fed from their own kitchens, but this luxury was dampened due to the forced reduction in supplies on 6 January, which placed all troops on half rations.

Tanks Not Used Properly

During this period, the lack of knowledge among the infantry commanders of the characteristics, capabilities, and limitations of tanks was noted when requests were made for tanks to seek out and destroy snipers, flush Japanese troops from sugar cane fields, and to make sorties in front of the MLR into areas that had been extensively mined by our own troops.

The beach defense of the East coast was assumed on 28 January, and with it came contingency missions for the tank units: the 192d overwatched the north half of the East coast and was on call to support the western half of the II Corps front; the 194th was assigned the southern half of the beaches and was to provide secondary support to the western half of II Corps. The difficulty in supporting any frontline unit was accentuated by the narrowness of new trails. The old trails leading off the coast road were dead-end avenues, originally having been cut for timber operations.

On 1 February, composite platoons of tanks and half-tracks were assigned to each of three airfields that had been built on the peninsula in anticipation of the reconstitution of local air force units that were to have assisted the beleaguered troops.

Upon the request of the I Corps Commander, the 192d (less one company) was dispatched to the western sector to support foot troops in erasing three enemy pockets: The Tuol pocket formed by the infiltration of Japanese units on the I Corps front before the MLR had been cleared and definitely established; and the Aglaloma and Anyasen pockets formed through the uncoordinated Japanese landings in their attempt to cut the main supply route (the West Coast road).

The difficulties typical of these actions can best be described by quot-

ing from the citation awarded Lt. John Hay of the 192d:

"During this period and in the terrain involved, a rugged, dense jungle wherein tank movement had to be limited to the space cumulatively cleared by repeated charges of a few yards each, Lt. Hay's gallantry, persistence, and complete disregard of personal danger, in an entirely new phase of tank warfare, pre-eminently contributed to the ultimate success of the tanks and troops which they supported."⁶

In the Tuol pocket, the tank-infantry combination worked very effectively against the Japanese dug in around banyan trees, and Lieutenant Bianchi of the infantry company was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Also in this action, one U.S. tank was lost when its crew was blinded by a Japanese flame thrower (the first used in the campaign) and the tank became wedged between two trees, which necessitated abandonment.

After the clearance of the pockets in the I Corps sector, the tank group instituted a plan for a comprehensive instruction in tank-infantry tactics among Philippine Army troops, but this was limited, due to gas rationing and lack of personnel. Although movement was at a minimum due to lack of gasoline, ammunition was adequate and ordnance personnel contributed to the effectiveness of the tanks by converting considerable armor piercing (AP) 37-mm to high explosive (HE) and cannister. These shells were much more useful in the absence of enemy armor. After the entry into Bataan, enemy tanks were never observed in strength—never more than three at one time—usually less, and these only in April during the last days of Bataan when U.S. artillery and AT weapons had been virtually reduced to inaction.

On 3 April, the Japanese started their all-out offensive and as enemy activity increased on the II Corps front, the 194th took on its contingency mission as its primary mission and moved its companies to support the frontline units to the west of the East Coast road. The 194th was later supported by one company of the 192d. The activities of the tank units in the next five days, with the resultant confusion of untrained, half-fed, malaria-ridden troops attacked by a superiorly-equipped, better-trained, better-organized enemy, can hardly be given in detail. Suffice it to say that the tank units supported the infantry

at every opportunity and on every trail that was not completely blocked by the supply vehicles of the retreating troops. At about 1830 on 8 April 1942, the tank battalion commanders were given the following order: "You will make plans, to be communicated to company commanders only, and be prepared to destroy within 1 hour after receipt by radio, or other means, of the word "CRASH", all tanks and combat vehicles, arms, ammunition, gas, and radios: reserving sufficient trucks to close to rear echelons as soon as accomplished."⁷

Decision To Surrender Is Made

At about 2230, 8 April, Major General E.P. King, commanding Luzon Forces, announced that further resistance would result in the massacre of the 6,000 sick and wounded in the area and of the 40,000 civilian refugees now congested closely about; that he was not in touch with any troops that were still resisting behind the closely drawn lines; that there were less than 25 percent effective of those in being; that at most he could not expect to hold more than one more day; that upon his, and his only, responsibility, he would send a staff officer with a flag of surrender across the lines the next morning. When asked by the tank group commander if any help was in prospect, General King could answer only, "No." The destruction of the main ordnance dump was to commence at 2340. Troops were to destroy all arms and ammunition and cease resistance at 0700, 9 April 1942.

After the surrender, the tank group commander and his staff were quizzed several times by the Japanese and from these investigations it was learned that the:

- Japanese had feared most the artillery and the tanks.
- Tanks, by their cordon coastal guard, had caused the Japanese to cancel an invasion from Manila Bay.
- Japanese had overestimated our tank strength by from 33 to 900 percent (158 to 1,080).

The Japanese had about 200 tanks, inferior to ours in armor, but better adapted to tropical terrain and better armed with a very effective 47-mm gun. (Report and recommendations on armored equipment was radioed to the War Department, by direction, sometime after the withdrawal to Bataan.)

These were the actions and circumstances that brought the members of the Provisional Tank Group, USAFFE, to that state, which is so ably described by Mr. Winston Churchill as:

"Prisoner of War! It is a melancholy state. You are in the power of your enemy. You owe your life to his humanity, your daily bread to his compassion. You must obey his orders, await his pleasure, possess your souls in patience. The days are very long. Hours crawl by like paralytic centipedes.

"Moreover, the whole atmosphere of prison, even the most easy and best-regulated prison, is odious. Companions quarrel about trifles, and get the least possible pleasure from each other's society. You feel a constant humility in being fenced in by railings and wire, watched by armed men and webbed about with a tangle of regulations and restrictions."⁸

Footnotes

¹ Mildred Hanson Gillie, *Forging the Thunderbolt*, p. 195, Military Service Publishing Company, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1947.

² *Ibid.* p. 195.

³ *Ibid.* p. 194-196.

⁴ Operations of the Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East, 1941-1942.

⁵ Report of Operations of North Luzon Force and I Philippine Corps in the Defense of North Luzon and Bataan from 8 December 1941, 9 April 1942.

⁶ Operations of the Provisional Tank Group, United States Army Forces in Far East, 1941-1942.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Winston Churchill, "A Roving Commission", *The Reader's Digest*, July, 1940.



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