

MARCH 23, 1945

THEY WERE COMBAT VIRGINS

The 96th Division has had days of action now but when it first met Japs on Leyte, almost every man

Until their Philippines landing, these men of the 96th Infantry Division were new to combat, but in the mud of Leyte they learned about it quickly.



By Sgt. BARRETT MCGURN

YANK Staff Correspondent

WITH THE 96TH DIVISION AT THE JAP MLR IN LEYTE VALLEY, THE PHILIPPINES — We slumped lower in the slit trench to get our heads below ground level. We were in an artillery-liaison hole with the infantry at the Jap MLR (main line of resistance) for Leyte Valley in the wooded foothills of the lofty Leyte Range.

In our hole we were talking about how combat differs from what new men expect. When they hit the beaches of Leyte, these GIs of the 96th Division saw action for the first time. The guys in this trench and at every other spot we visited along the front and behind the lines agreed that combat was not the way they had imagined it, despite all they had studied and heard—at least, combat with the Japs was not. Their opinion was about evenly divided as to whether combat was rougher or easier than they'd thought it would be, with maybe a slight edge for the easier. We slouched against the consoling earth in the hole and talked. The "pow-pow-pfew" of Jap sniper bullets cracked above us like toy caps.

"It's not as rough as I figured it was going to be," said Cpl. Hampton E. Honaker of Phoenix, Ariz. "I don't think the Japs are as good fighters as they're cracked up to be. As long as you keep down, they can't hit you. It's just these guys that stand up and gawk around that get hit.

"The Japs are definitely fanatical. The third day they tried to attack a tank with knives. The tank backed up and mowed 'em down. Another group tried to pull a walking banzai. They came right up to our front lines night before last, about 400 yards from here. There were easily 100 Japs. We got 17 in front of one tommy gun. They were just walking up, firing an occasional shot and yelling their heads off. We only had three casualties."

"I think a guy's imagination works a hell of a lot more before he gets into combat than after he has been in it," said Cpl. Richard Boeck, an artillery observation scout from Des Plaines, Ill. "I know it was that way with me. I was more scared three days before I landed than I have been since. If a man could forget combat until he got into it, he'd be a lot better off. You imagine stuff a lot worse than it actually is."

A slice of sky was blotted out over us by heavy black smoke from a flame thrower.

"One of the things that surprised me," Boeck went on, "was the use of American equipment by the Japs. They had RCA radio equipment, Remington Rand ammunition and a lot of American Ford V-8 trucks."

"Over here is a Dodge bulldozer," Pfc. Oren Anderson of Decorah, Iowa, chipped in.

"The Japs had American fountain pens, too," said S/Sgt. Paul Cropper, a cook from Hoopes-ton, Ill., who had walked over after the flame throwing and the sniping stopped. "They even had Lux toilet soap," he added.

A chaplain came over with an addition for the list—an American .38 revolver. "They've been using some of our medical supplies, too," he said. "We found that out in Tabontabon."

Other men declared the Japs had Enfield bayonets from the last war and horses that could understand English and that might have come from cavalry stables around Manila. One man told how the Japs waylaid an American patrol but took only a diamond from an officer's ring and the medical kits from each man's belt. Others said the Japs were using captured MIs and carbines, as they had at Palau.

"When you hear the bullets whining, even if it sounds like our weapons, you better get down," Honaker said.

The conversation turned next to whether the Japs were smarter or dumber than had been ex-

The 96th Division



Two tired T-4s, Adam Ernst and Orval Enget, take 10 during muddy march to Leyte front.

pected. Cropper thought they were dumber. "This morning," he said, "a Jap out on the road there began setting up a knee mortar, muttering. 'Killum Americans, killum Americans.' The spot the Jap picked was on the edge of the *barrio* (small Filipino village) of Hiabanban, in the heart of the American positions. "We mowed him down," said Cropper. "He must have been battle happy."

A thin, low "pfew" slit the air again. "Gee, that was close," somebody said, sounding as if he didn't think it fair for the Japs to snipe any more, now that the flame thrower had been in action. A minute later we heard a "shew" sound above us. "Sounds like a piece of shrapnel," one man said. A few feet away the medical-aid station bestirred itself. Litter-bearers had brought in a soldier with a blood-spattered face and a hole between his eyes. The snipers had found a target. A doctor in a khaki undershirt bent over him, worked a few moments and then walked back past us.

"What did he do, Doc, die?"

"He's going to."

Except for a few medics who began giving the wounded man plasma on an off chance of saving him, the others in the area went back quietly to whatever they had been doing.

This was the first combat experience for Pvt. Luther Kinsey, even though he has 18 years in the Army behind him, including 25 days of pre-war maneuvering on Bataan. He told what he found surprising. Just a short way from us as we talked—about half the distance from home plate to first—a soldier leaped forward and pitched a grenade at a half-hidden figure, then threw himself back and down to escape his own shrapnel. Jap infiltration attempts are often irrational.

"I'm surprised it isn't going faster," drawled Kinsey, who is bodyguard to the colonel of the 382d Infantry of the 96th Division. "I knew they were camouflaged and dug in, but I didn't know so few of them could hold up so many of us. I've talked to a lot of men who have been in combat before and they all told me you had to dig the Japs out. But I still thought we'd go faster."

FOR many men, the biggest surprise in their first combat against the Japs was to see how many of the renowned suicide fighters were willing to back down. "They're more cowardly than I figured they would be," said Pfc. Lewis Traugott of Versailles, Ky., a half-track driver in a motor pool so close to the hidden enemy that our artillery shells were bursting with bright red flashes scarcely beyond shrapnel range through the trees. Traugott had his first experience with the Japs on the march across Leyte Valley before we reached the MLR. "When you go in, they won't fight close," he said. "They like to sneak up. I haven't seen one come out in the open yet."

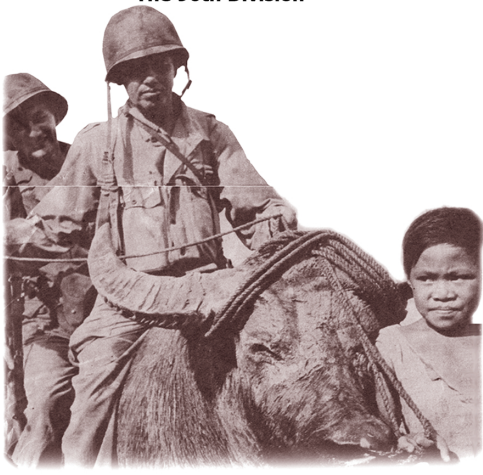
"They usually stay where they are and try to hide," said another GI. "They let you pass them."

"That's what they did today," a fourth said. "We went by them four times."

"I didn't expect them to holler for mercy on a *banzai* raid," said Sgt. Clarence Schulz of New Orleans, La. "One of them hollered, 'Don't shoot. Help me,' as he ran right up on a machine gun." And T-5 Paul Vanneste of Company A of the 382d told about a Jap sitting in the weeds in the battalion CP hollering: "Honorable general, honorable general!" Both these Japs were killed, the one on the *banzai* still clutching a rifle, and both were clothed.

"The only Japs we take prisoners are stripped," 1st Sgt. Thomas H. Goodwin of Mulberry, Ark., explained. Often, here as on Bougainville and in other campaigns, Japs pretending to surrender have sprung traps to kill those accepting the offer. Even Japs stripped to the loin cloth, a sort of diaper they wear, have been known to hold a grenade inside their crotch band.

The 96th Division



Their jeep stuck in mud, so Gen. C. M. Easley and driver T-5 Anthony Postl share carabao.

"They cry and jabber like babies when they're hit," said T/Sgt. Theodore R. White of Fort Morgan, Colo. "And they're not a bit quiet at night. They talk like hell. Our orders are to stay silent along the front after dark. And I figured they'd get on a line and hold. Instead they're like a bunch of monkeys. They get in some trees and shoot a while, then run."

Sgt. White told of a time when some Japs pretended they were sleeping while he led his platoon through a group of Filipino thatch huts on a combat patrol. One Jap, however, didn't play possum. He looked Sgt. White squarely in the eye when White peered into a hut and cracked the pin on one of his grenades to arm it for throwing. "I shot him twice and ran," White said. "The grenade blew his whole arm off."

In that one day, the 38 men with White accounted for 25 Japs by searching from shack to shack.

BUT not all the Japs were lacking in bravery. GIs on this patrol who were getting their first view of the enemy found some Japs even bolder than expected, though their daring was the hopeless sort that achieves nothing but self-destruction.

In the rough fight for Tabontabon, which some GIs call "Bangbang" for short, one Jap calmly strode up to an American tank, tossed a light machine gun on top of it and then began climbing up after the gun as casually as if he were a GI hitching a ride on a 6x6. He was shot off before he got a leg up on the top.

Another Jap tried to climb up on an M7 and chose a remarkable route—up over the mouth of the gun. The crew was firing by peeking through the breech so they didn't see him when they let the next round go. If it had been an HE shell, the M7 would have blown up. Luckily it was a canister round—62 pounds of steel balls. The Jap was splattered over an area the size of a football field. Some men figured the Jap had actually planned to destroy the M7 by blocking a shell, but most thought he had been just punch drunk.

Most of our men were surprised to find so many wild marksmen on the enemy's side. "Everyone's been shot at 15 or 20 times, but casualties are very light," said a lieutenant in the 381st Infantry.

"That sniper fire—they told us we wouldn't pay any attention to it," White said. "We thought we would anyway, but you get so you don't bother. If you run, I don't think they can hit you."

"I had always expected that combat would be a constant battle all the time. Instead we just get shot at from time to time. Another thing I noticed was that the Japs won't open up until we open up ourselves. The noise of our rifles then drowns out the noise of theirs. Because of their smokeless powder we can't tell where they are unless we hear the crack of their rifles, so they stop shooting when we stop."

Sgt. Raymond E. Jennings of Murphysboro, Ill., squad leader in a rifle platoon of the 383d Infantry, worked out a plan to get Jap snipers. He studied the way the bullets were coming and figured out the only possible place from which they could be shot at that angle. Then he patiently watched that place. Once, after staring at a tree for half an hour, he saw a movement and fired. He knocked down a Jap sniper with his M1 at 200 yards. Another time he saw grass move where it shouldn't and killed another Jap.

White's reaction to enemy camouflage was not flattering. "I don't think the Japs are good on camouflage," he said. "I think we could be just as good in this grass. I could lay there and let them walk up on me, and my platoon, too."

T/Sgt. Earl E. Wright of Gibson City, Ill., an acting platoon leader in the 382d, didn't agree. "It's harder than you think, that camouflage," he said. "It's damn rough. They got camouflage nets with different colored grasses. But one thing they give themselves away on—wherever there's bamboo you'll find a gun emplacement. Whenever I move my men forward, I'm going to use glasses on bamboo."

The 96th Division

Pfc. Norman D. Fiedler of New York also thought Jap camouflage good: "You can't see them. They build themselves a hole in the shape of a wine flask, narrow at the top and wider at the bottom. The artillery can't get them. The only way to get them is to go up with the infantry, man for man."

But Fiedler thought *banzai* charges were less terrible than they had sounded in the States. "To me a *banzai* attack is just a suicide attack," he said. "The Japs come running into you with rifles at high port, hollering: 'Banzai! Kill the American!' Then all the machine guns and carbines open up around you. Nothing can come through that. You feel good when you see all those tracers."

Weather conditions in the Philippine swamps during the typhoon season were an unpleasant surprise to Fiedler. "That night we hit the beach, we started digging in swampy ground at 0530," he said. "About a half-hour later the Japs opened up with their mortars and artillery and were hitting all around us. Every time you dug out a shovelful of sand, the hole would fill up with a shovelful of water. And every time you heard a mortar shell whining, you stuck your face in the water. By the time it got dark, everybody was shoulder high in the water. We spent the whole night like that. During the night it got so cold we preferred being below water to being above it. The water warmed a little from our body heat, but if we moved we'd stir up cold water. So we sat motionless except for our chattering teeth."

From what they had heard, the GIs of the 96th expected the Japs to shoot about 18 inches off the ground, but instead they seemed to shoot mostly at hip level, possibly because troops here have been walking erect more than they have crept.

Pfc. Robert Bolen of Jackson, Ohio, an assistant BAR man in the 382d, listed the upright walking as his biggest surprise in combat. "On maneuvers," he said, "we used to crawl around on our bellies. Here in the front lines we stand up and walk around."

Jap wooden and paper bullets, equipped with full powder charges, surprised the GIs of the 96th. Some thought the bullets were just for target practice; others thought that since the bullets had only a 50-yard range they were fine for an infiltrating sniper, who could fire in any direction without danger of hitting his own men.

At Tabontabon, the Japs dug their honey-combed system of trenches and tunnels under deserted native thatch houses. It was tough to get at them until T/Sgt. Joseph K. Mock of Hutchinson, Kans., had a bright idea. He decided to try using the phosphorous smoke shells in an M7 to burn the grass huts down over the Japs' heads. That worked perfectly. Soon 80 percent of the Jap cover had been destroyed.

THE Jap attitude toward medics, litter-bearers and wounded was worse than most men expected. The Jap tactic, as on Palau, was to hit a man, wait for a medic to come to help him and then clip the medic. Five litter-bearers were killed in one brief action along the MLR, and once a wounded soldier had to fire from his stretcher.

Pfc. Joseph DeVito of Chicago, Ill., told how a squad went up after six American dead and were reaching for their dog tags when the Japs, who had evidently been lying in wait near the bodies, opened up with automatic weapons. Because there was an American company in the woods behind the Japs, the squad couldn't return the enemy fire and had to withdraw, leaving the dead behind. Once T-5 Homer V. Carlson of Rockford, Ill., a chaplain's assistant, had to put aside his religious chores and do some quick firing with his M1 as his chaplain bent over some dead.

Pfc. Frank Williams of Oklahoma City, Okla., said that another chaplain had given the best summing up of combat with the Japs: "The chaplain told us that he was surprised to learn you can cuss and pray at the same time."

YANK