

Operation “Storm:” The Liberation of Negros Oriental during World War II

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ABSTRACT

The Filipino nation commemorates in 2019 the 75th anniversary of the Leyte Landings during World War II in October 1944. In highlighting this historical event, it is essential to include in the narrative the local experiences of provinces and personalities during the war, particularly during 1944. In this sense, a holistic picture of the whole Visayas region is vital to provide a better view of what was going on in the Japanese occupied areas at the time of the return of American Forces headed by Gen. Douglas Mac Arthur.

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This paper is based solely on primary documents and personal accounts examining the written diaries of the officers and men of the 7th Military District housed at the Robert B. Silliman World II Papers Collection at the Silliman University Library.¹ These handwritten documents recount the details of Operation Storm that was an operational plan designed to liberate Negros Oriental from the Japanese forces. On July 27, 1944, Col. Salvador Abcede, the Commander of the 7th Military District, issued a field order code-named “Storm.” The order radically changed the nature of the Filipino forces from skirmish operations to engagement in force, and its mission from enemy containment was upgraded to destroy the enemy and liberate designated occupied areas. The targeted areas of “Storm” held economic and strategic tactical importance. On September 3, 1944, the 77th Infantry of the 7th Military District launched operation “storm” and by October 11, 1944, the operation ended, its mission accomplished in 38 days and the targeted mission areas freed from enemy occupation by a ragtag army of Filipino volunteers and guerilla forces. This situation was indeed a real value for the liberation forces whose landing was imminent by that time.

KEYWORDS

Operation Storm, Negros Oriental, Bais Sugar Central, 7th Military District, 75th Infantry Regiment, Dumaguete Airfield, Lorenzo Cimafranca, Col. Salvador Abcede, Engr. Eduardo Blanco

77TH INFANTRY REGIMENT OF THE 7TH MILITARY DISTRICT USFIP (UNITED STATES FORCES IN THE PHILIPPINES)

Major Juan E. Dominado² assumed command of the unit by early May of 1944. The unit was composed of two rifle battalions and a combat company. This restructured unit came from the remnants of a disbanded unit of Col. Gador, USAFFE stragglers, and volunteers. The establishment of a safe submarine landing area in southern Negros transformed frustrated hopes and dreams of liberation into a touchable reality that raised the morale and combat capability of the unit.³ Among the materials provided by the successful submarine landings were 81 mm mortars, .50 caliber machine guns, .30 caliber M1 carbines, shells and ammunitions, grenades, cigarettes, canned goods, sewing kits, chewing gums, and chocolate bars.

At first, the unit was tasked to gather enemy information that could be of value to the General Headquarters of the Southwest Pacific Command (SOWESPAC). Later, rigorous training was done to enhance its capacity for combat effectiveness with a mission to limit the Japanese to their occupied perimeters and deny them more territories.

OPERATION STORM

On July 27, 1944, Col. Salvador Abcede, the Commander of the 7th Military District, issued a field order addressed to the 77th Infantry of the 7th Military District code-named "storm."⁴ The order was delivered by Captain

Felicesimo Cunanan, the District Dental Surgeon in the unit's headquarters at Campuyo, Manjuyod, Negros Oriental. This order radically changed the nature of the regiment's function from skirmish–strength operations to engagement in force, and its mission from enemy containment to enemy destruction and liberation of designated occupied areas. “Storm” identified the Bais and Tanjay occupied areas as the main objective of liberation and assigned the 77th Infantry Regiment as the leading implementer of the operation plan. The sudden change of mission and its enormity made Major Dominado anxious and apprehensive about the capability of his men because they were not battle-tested, and they were just organized within the last three months. Another reason was that their logistics were far below the norm needed for extended operations. Although they outnumbered the Japanese within the scope of the mission, the enemy had more automatic firepower than they had. Most problematic was the presence of two Japanese assets by which the unit had no defense. These two were the air support and the heavy reinforcement from the Dumaguete garrison. In Dumaguete, a section of the 31st Flight Training Corps of a Japanese Army Command based in Del Monte, Bukidnon, operated the airfield with five operational planes consisting of 3 trainers and 2 fighters. In Col. Dominado's view, the planes could be utilized by the enemy to conduct bombing and strafing sorties that could “scare freeze” his men, and the sizable reinforcement from Dumaguete by land or sea routes that could take only an hour away would rout them surely. The odds were against the unit due to the enemy's superiority in weaponry and battle experience.⁵

"Yet, odds notwithstanding, the mission must be accomplished—at least attempted anyway" (Dominado personal diaries). The targeted area of 'Storm' held economic and tactical importance. First was the presence of a well maintained and operational Luca Wharf. Second was an airstrip located in Sitio Manipis, San Jose in Tanjay, that was still in good condition. Third, the sugar central was intact and undamaged that could be rehabilitated readily to operate. Fourth, inside the central compound was a vast warehouse called "Bodega de Materiales," storing almost 3,000 piculs of sugar, sacks of rice, corn, salt, soap, and rolls of woolen materials (used in paper processing.) Indeed, all these were needed not just by the skimpily clad guerrillas but by the general populace as well. Furthermore, the infrastructure available in the area could be of real value to liberation forces whose landing was imminent at that time.

DUMAGUETE AIRFIELD AND HEROISM OF ENGR. EDUARDO BLANCO AND JOVENAL SOMOZA

Neutralizing the threats of enemy air support and reinforcement capability was critical to the success of the operation storm. The Dumaguete airstrip, which was located in Sibulan, was restricted and upgraded just before the Japanese occupation began to bed it more solidly. Also, it was lengthened, widened, and facilities for storage of fuel and oil, bombs and other explosives, plane cover and maintenance, security pillboxes, and quarters were constructed. The project was supervised by Provincial District Engineer Eduardo J. Blanco and his Assistant Engineer, Juvenal Somoza. The airstrip became an airfield

just weeks before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941.⁶

During the occupation, both engineers were inside occupied Dumaguete and were still functioning their respective designations. The main objective of the Filipino forces was to acquire information about the airfield. Major Dominado lost no time to dispatch Lt. Tatel and operative Lorenzo Cimafranca to deliver a letter to Engr. Blanco requesting for all project blueprints relative to the airfield. After four months, Lorenzo Cimafranca handed Major Dominado a complete set of blueprints covering in detail the layout of the Dumaguete airfield. This daring act of Lorenzo Cimafranca involved inserting the blueprints in the seat post of his bicycle, and as he puts it:

I learned of the Resistance Movement being organized in the hill through Major Juan Dominado who invited me to join the guerrillas. I did. After my induction, I was detailed with the Intelligence Section under Major Dominado and I was immediately assigned to the Occupied Area (Dumaguete City). My task was to gather information regarding Japanese Troop movements, to secure medical and office supplies. I had to go to the hills as occasion arose. On one of these occasions, I was assigned to deliver two letters: one letter from Dr. Robert Silliman (sent through the late Atty. Rodrigo Tugade) for the late ambassador Jose Romero, and another letter from Major Juan Dominado for engineer Eduardo J. Blanco, then District Engineer of Negros Oriental.⁷

When I received the letters I was afraid to approach the two gentlemen as I was not known to them. We were living two dangerous times and you could never know who the enemy was. So I sought the help of the late Mayor Mariano Perdices, then municipal Mayor of Dumaguete, who readily consented to help me. He first went to see the two gentlemen to find out whether they were willing to receive me and accept the letters. After Mayor Perdices visited the two gentlemen, I was informed that I could deliver the letters the next day. I went alone to the residence of the late ambassador Romeo whose wife Elisa received me and to whom I entrusted the letter. Mayor Perdices accompanied me when I went to see Engineer Blanco. After I was introduced to Engineer Blanco, the two of them conversed in Spanish. Since I could not understand Spanish, I was anxious to know as what was going on, and so I inquired from the Mayor, "unsa man to?" In return, the Mayor informed me that Engineer Blanco said that this was an opportunity for him to do something for our country as many people do not have the chance to do so. I was asked to return after a week's time. Engineer Blanco was to indicate the strategic location of the armory, the oil storage, the ammunition dump, the barracks, as well as where the airplanes were located.

Back I went to see Mayor Perdices after a week's time to request him to go and inquire from Engineer Blanco if the map was ready. Upon the Mayor's return, I was told to pick it up the next day.

The following afternoon, as I approached Engineer Blanco's house, I saw the late Engineer Jovenar Somoza, assistant to Engineer Blanco, coming out of the house. That was the last time I saw Somoza alive. When Somoza was gone, I went up Engineer Blanco's house. He asked me to sit while he went into his room to bring out the map. His four little children were playing in the sala, the two older ones curiously looking at me, while the two younger ones were lolling on the mat on the floor. As Engineer Blanco handed the map to me, he looked at his children and said, "These are my children. Should anything happen to you, do not involve me." This was our gentlemen's agreement.

Blanco then asked how I was going to bring the map to the mountains. It was drawn in manila paper. I asked him to come downstairs with me where I parked my bicycle. Removing the seat of my bike, I rolled the map as small as I could, tightened it with a rubber band which I brought along, and inserted the map into the bar of the bike. Then I put back the seat.

"My gosh! I never thought of this idea. I thought you were going to carry it in your person!" exclaimed Blanco. He was happy. Before I left, I told him that in past day's time, if everything went well, I would bike past his house. He was to watch for me.

After three days, I biked past Blanco's house. He was at the window that afternoon. We looked at each

other without showing the faintest recognition, although there was a sort of a smile on his lips. All was well. That was the last time I saw him alive."

Eventually, these blueprints were forwarded by submarine to the General Headquarters SOWESPAC, which by that time was already in New Guinea.

The Dumaguete airfield was attacked twice by American carrier-based planes. The first was on September 12, 1944, which was a strafing and reconnaissance sortie. Nevertheless, weeks later, 18 Grumman Hellcats bombed the airfield in numerous passes. The destruction was complete, and the planes hit their targets with pinpoint accuracy. The targets did not miss their marks. Blanco's map worked.

Soon after that, Mayor Mariano Perdices, Tirso Uytengsu, Engr. Eduardo Blanco, Engr. Juvenal Somoza, Jesus Chi, Silva (a Portuguese), Jose Laspinas, and Laloy Pastor were picked up by the Japanese Kempetai and were interrogated and incarcerated in the Davao Cottage of Silliman University.⁸ On October 12, 1944, all but four were released—Engineer Blanco, Engineer Juvenal Somoza, Jesus Chi, and a Portuguese by the name of Silva. A few of those who were released just answered with tears and choking emotions when asked about the fate of the four. After the liberation, Narciso Nalipay of Ayuquitan (now Amlan), who was the machinist of the motor launch used by the Japanese, narrated the ordeal of the four. They were placed individually inside weighted sacks that were

tied and thrown overboard some three kilometers from the Dumaguete Warf.⁹

THE SUGAR BOWL LIBERATED

By the end of August 1944, a string of supply stations had been established and stocked along the hills overlooking the Bais sugar central. The 2nd Battalion of the 75th Infantry under Captain Demetrio Alviola was attached to the 77th Regiment that was directed to station his troops along the Sibulan – Ayuquitan portion of the provincial road with the mission to obstruct the road with felled coconut trunks and other obstructions to deny the use of the road from Japanese reinforcements for the area covered by Operation Storm. However, the plan to sabotage and destroy the motorboats that could be used by the Japanese for reinforcement from the sea was unsuccessful.¹⁰

On September 3, 1944, Operation ‘Storm’ was launched with its units deployed as follows:

TABLE 1. OPERATION ‘STORM’ UNIT DEPLOYMENT

UNIT	COM. OFFICER	ASSAULT AREA	ENEMY STRENGTH
1 st Batallion	Capt. Villarin	Tanjay and Bais Poblacion	9 and 11 EM
2 nd Battalion	Capt. Antonio	Bais Sugar Central	3 Os and 21 EM
3 rd Battalion	Capt. Alviola	Sibulan – Ayuquitan Area	undetermined

The operation was a step-by-step engagement by the soldiers that involved attacks and counter-attacks, including hand-to-hand combats. The last bastion of the Japanese defense was the concrete laboratory inside the sugar mill. The Filipino forces used an 81 mm mortar with only nine shells. After firing six shells that missed their mark, Major Dominado decided to instruct Lt. Tirso Macias to spare the last three shells. They also tried to use explosives to destroy the concrete walls but to no avail. They thought of burning the central to drive the Japanese to the open by using bales of bagasse and alcohol, but the conservation of the mill, which readily could be made to produce sugar as soon as the war ended, deterred the decision to burn the mill. While strategizing on how to take the sugar central, a Japanese plane that had been harassing the forces made a direct bomb hit of the 'bodega,' burning it and destroying the materials and supplies inside. This caused the burnt, melted sugar to overflow into the roads trapping anything in its sticky path.

Two days after the bombing, Major Dominado ordered a direct assault towards the laboratory. The attack was headed by the "E" Company led by Lt. E. Batobato, a Philippine Scout trainer. The assault started at 3 in the afternoon, and immediately the Filipino forces were pinned down by automatic rifle fire. Their movement was limited to inches, and the casualty toll was increasing. Just before nightfall, a withdrawal was ordered so that the Filipino soldiers could recoup and eat their dinner. A commotion broke out in the evening with an alarm of the Japanese counter attack. This proved to be a false alarm since, by early morning, they learned that the Japanese holed up in the

laboratory had withdrawn during the night. In their hasty withdrawal, they overran the medical aid station behind the sugar mill as they scampered their retreat southwards.

On October 11, 1944, Operation 'Storm' ended, its mission accomplished in 38 days, and the targeted mission areas freed from enemy occupation by a ragtag army of Filipino volunteers and guerilla forces.

CONCLUDING NOTES

The significance of Operation Storm to the whole campaign of the Filipino combatants and guerillas offered a viewpoint that before the return of Gen. Douglas Mac Arthur to Leyte, the combined forces of Filipino soldiers and guerrillas liberated already some areas in the Visayas. Further, it is important to note that in Eastern Negros Island, said combined forces already neutralized the strategic areas occupied by the Japanese forces even before the return of Gen. MacArthur.

This spelled doom for the Japanese war efforts because the area covered by Operation 'Storm' was essential for the Japanese supply of sugar and alcohol since it was the "sugar bowl" of Negros Oriental. A cursory look at the whole operation would yield a carefully coordinated intelligence operation that led to planning and execution. It must be underscored that the success of operation 'storm,' which ended on October 11, 1944, coincided with the devastating destruction of the Dumaguete airfield. This phenomenon led the Japanese command to abandon the Dumaguete station, that eventually resulted in their retreat to the areas

of the Cuernos de Negros mountain ranges in order to make their last stand.

NOTES

- 1 Robert B. Silliman World War II Papers, Special Filipiniana Collection, Silliman University Library, Dumaguete City. Robert B. Silliman was a professor of History at Silliman University when the war broke out. He was later appointed as Deputy Governor of the Sixth Civil Administrative District of the "Free Negros" Government.
- 2 Major Juan E. Dominado assumed command of the 77th Infantry regiment of the 7th Military District on May 1, 1944.
- 3 Higinio De Uriarte, *A Basque Among the Guerrillas of Negros*. Translated by Soledad L. Locsin (Bacolod: Editor of Civismo Weekly, 1962) p. 100–110. The information came from "The United States Submarine Operations in World War II," published by the US Naval Institute, 1949 ed.
- 4 Circular of Gov. Montelibano to the Civil Officials dated June 23, 1943. Taken from the files of Col. Abcede at the WW II Papers of SU.
- 5 Juan E. Dominado, "Negros Oriental Sugar Bowl Liberated," Unpublished Diary (1946). SU War Records FN 54 Dominado, Juan. World War, 1939-1945—Personal Narratives, Filipinos.
- 6 Lorenzo A. Cimafranca, "The E.J. Blanco Story," Unpublished Manuscript (1946). SU War Records FN 49 World War, 1939-1945—Philippines --Veterans. World War, 1939-1945--Literature And The War. Silliman University --History.
- 7 Ibid.

- 8 Ramon Ponce de Leon "World War 2 Diary," unpublished (1946). SU War Records FN 38 Ponce De Leon, Ramon--Diaries. World War, 1939-1945--Personal Narratives, Filipinos.
- 9 Ibid. Cimafranca Diary.
- 10 Ibid. Dominado Diary.

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