

Engineers in the Philippines a Century Ago

By James W. Dunn

When the United States declared war on Spain on 25 April 1898, the cry was "On to Cuba," and the War Department immediately began assembling Army units in Florida in anticipation of a land campaign that ultimately would include Puerto Rico as well as Cuba. While Companies C and E, Battalion of Engineers, headed for Tampa, a naval battle halfway around the world resulted in other engineer units deploying to California for another land campaign—this one in the Philippine Islands. Thus, the Spanish-American War, initially seen as a crusade to free the Cuban people from harsh Spanish rule, became a two-ocean war, which would eventually involve the Americans in operations against newly liberated Filipinos.

On 1 May, Commodore George Dewey's U.S. Navy Asiatic Squadron defeated a Spanish flotilla in Manila Harbor, but he knew that ground forces would be needed to take the city of Manila. Emilio Aguinaldo, leader of the Republic of the Philippines, had 12,000 Filipino irregulars besieging the city, but he could not hope to successfully attack the 13,000 Spanish regulars defending it. An American Army force was needed for such an attack.

As Major General Wesley Merritt organized the U.S. Army's VIII Corps in the San Francisco area in preparation for movement to the Philippines, Company A, Battalion of Engineers, commanded by Additional 2d Lieutenant William D. Connor, left New York City by railroad for San Francisco to join the VIII Corps. General Merritt sent his force to the Philippines in three expeditions. The first left without engineers on 25 May, but Lieutenant



Connor and a detachment of 20 enlisted engineer soldiers accompanied the second expedition when it left on 15 June. The third expedition left on 27 June with the rest of Company A and arrived at Cavite, in Manila Harbor, on 1 August.

By that time, Connor's detachment had moved forward from Cavite to Camp Dewey, just three miles south of Manila. Lieutenant Connor conducted a reconnaissance of the Spanish lines and made a rough topographic map. He then put his engineers to work building portable

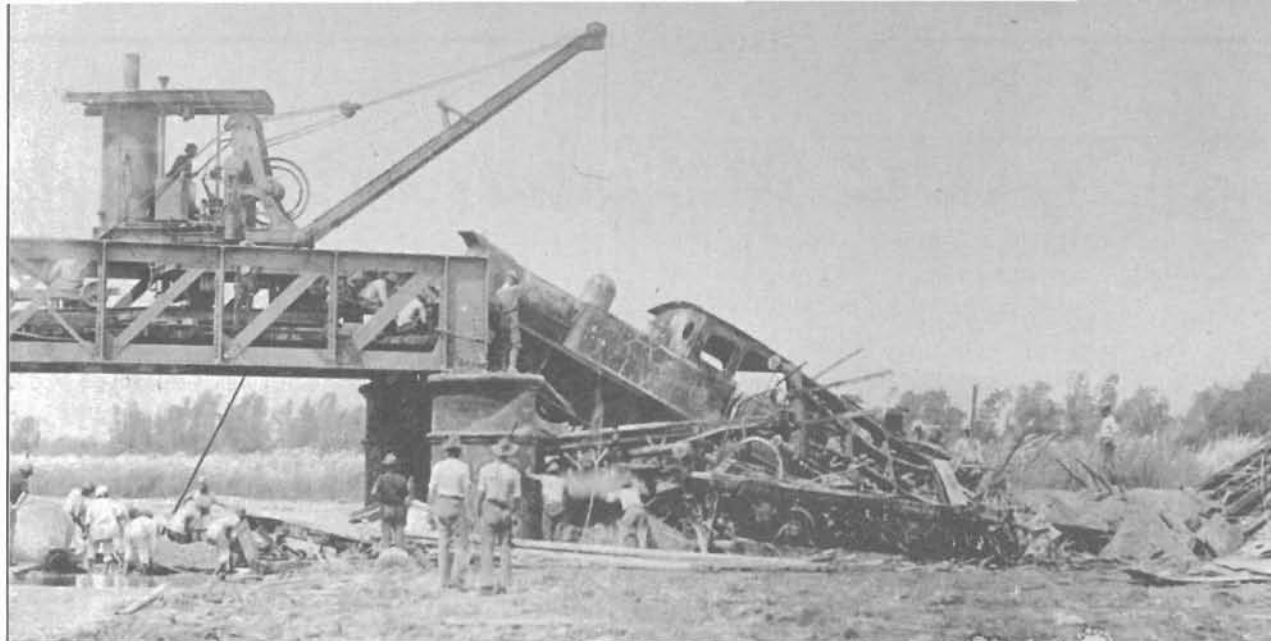
trestle bridges to cross San Antonio Creek in front of the Spanish lines. By the time the rest of Company A arrived at Camp Dewey on 7 August, the plan of attack and the engineers' role in it were in place.

General Merritt organized his attack force into a division commanded by Brigadier General Thomas M. Anderson, with two infantry brigades under Brigadier Generals Francis V. Greene and Arthur MacArthur. Merritt planned to advance the two brigades north astride the road from Camp Dewey to Manila with newly promoted Rear Admiral Dewey's squadron providing cannon and machine-gun fire against the Spanish defenses. Greene's force, with Connor's platoon in support, would have its left flank on Manila Bay, while MacArthur, with 1st Sergeant James Reardon's platoon supporting, was to move forward on the right of the road. The Spanish, realizing their difficult position, had agreed to surrender after a show of force, but the Americans were uncertain about how much of a show of force they could expect.

The two brigades attacked at 0930 on 13 August through gaps the engineers had cut in defensive wire under cover of darkness. Engineers accompanied the first troops into Manila, repairing bridges and destroying field fortifications along the route of advance. It was all over by 1130.



A U.S. Army engineer ferry in the Philippines, in 1899.



U.S. Army engineers retrieve an engine that insurgents had run off a washed-out railroad bridge near Angeles, Philippines, in 1899.

The Spanish troops were defeated, but a threat from another source hovered over Manila as the engineers got busy cleaning up a city surrounded by Filipino irregulars eager to reap the rewards of the Spanish defeat. But the Filipinos gradually realized they had traded Spanish rule for American rule. As the Americans took over, General Merritt put Lieutenant Connor in charge of the city's water-supply system, while Sergeant Thomas F. Kennedy led a detachment of 20 enlisted men to clear the Pasig River for navigation. Engineers also reconnoitered and surveyed the city and immediate surrounding areas, including positions occupied by Aguinaldo's Filipinos. On 29 January 1899, Aguinaldo arrested Sergeant Henry L. Fisher and his four-man engineer detachment when their reconnaissance took them into the Filipino lines. They were released unharmed on 3 February, but the next day a battle erupted between the American and Filipino forces. The Philippine Insurrection had begun.

On 28 March, the Americans, knowing they were not strong enough to defeat Aguinaldo, began a drive north along the railroad to San Fernando to gain time and operating room and to await reinforcements. Engineer 2d Lieutenant William P. Wooten and a 25-man detachment from Company A supported the drive, repairing the railroad and building bridges and rope ferries over rivers. MacArthur arrived in San Fernando on 5 May and ordered operations to stop for

the duration of the rainy season. When Captain William L. Sibert's Company B, Battalion of Engineers, arrived in Manila on 10 August, the Philippine Command formed the engineers into a provisional battalion of two companies. Meanwhile, the Americans built up ground troops in preparation for an offensive.

In the fall, near the end of the rainy season, the Americans began a three-pronged drive north toward Lingayen Gulf. MacArthur attacked along the railroad toward Dagupan, while Brigadier General Henry W. Lawton's cavalry heavy force protected the right flank with a drive through San Jose toward San Fabian, and Brigadier General Lloyd Wheaton conducted an amphibious assault at San Fabian. On 5 November, engineer Lieutenants Sherwood Cheney and Horton Stickle, with a detachment of 20 enlisted men from Company A, departed Manila aboard the troop ship *Aztec* as part of an amphibious assault force. While some of those engineers unloaded men, supplies, horses, and mules from transport ships anchored a mile offshore in Lingayen Gulf, others cleared the beach of obstacles, opened access roads, and repaired bridges along the route of advance inland. Meanwhile, Lieutenant John C. Oakes, with a 40-man detachment from Company B, supported the cavalry drive by repairing roads and bridges, and Captain Sibert led the rest of Company B in supporting MacArthur by putting the railroad into operation as part of the line of communication.

By mid-December, Aguinaldo's Filipinos were defeated as a conventional force, and the Americans thought the war was over. But they soon realized that, while the conventional war was over, a different type of war had begun. The Filipinos simply melted into the hills to conduct guerrilla operations against the Americans for several years into the new century. Finally subdued in the years before World War I, the Filipinos became staunch American allies in World War II. In that war, two more amphibious operations took place in Lingayen Gulf: one when the Japanese attacked the Philippines in December 1941, and another when General Douglas MacArthur's American troops returned in January 1945. The Philippines gained independence from the United States in 1946, and today the two nations have mutual interests in the western Pacific.

Additional Reading

Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1941*; U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1998, 319 pages.

Graham A. Cosmas, *An Army for Empire*; White Mane Publishing Company, 1994, 349 pages.

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