

# WORLD WAR II

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## AMERICA'S FIRST

WHY AN OBSCURE CLASH IN THE PHILIPPINES DESERVES A PLACE IN HISTORY

## TANK VICTORY

Plus:

**TOM  
HANKS**

ON HIS LATEST FILM



*An American tanker  
atop his M3 light tank  
in Luzon, 1941.*

★ **THE DENTIST WHO  
SINGLE-HANDEDLY  
FOUGHT OFF A  
FRENZIED BANZAI  
CHARGE**

★ **A B-17 GUNNER  
RECALLS THE DAY  
HIS FIRST MISSION  
BECAME HIS LAST**

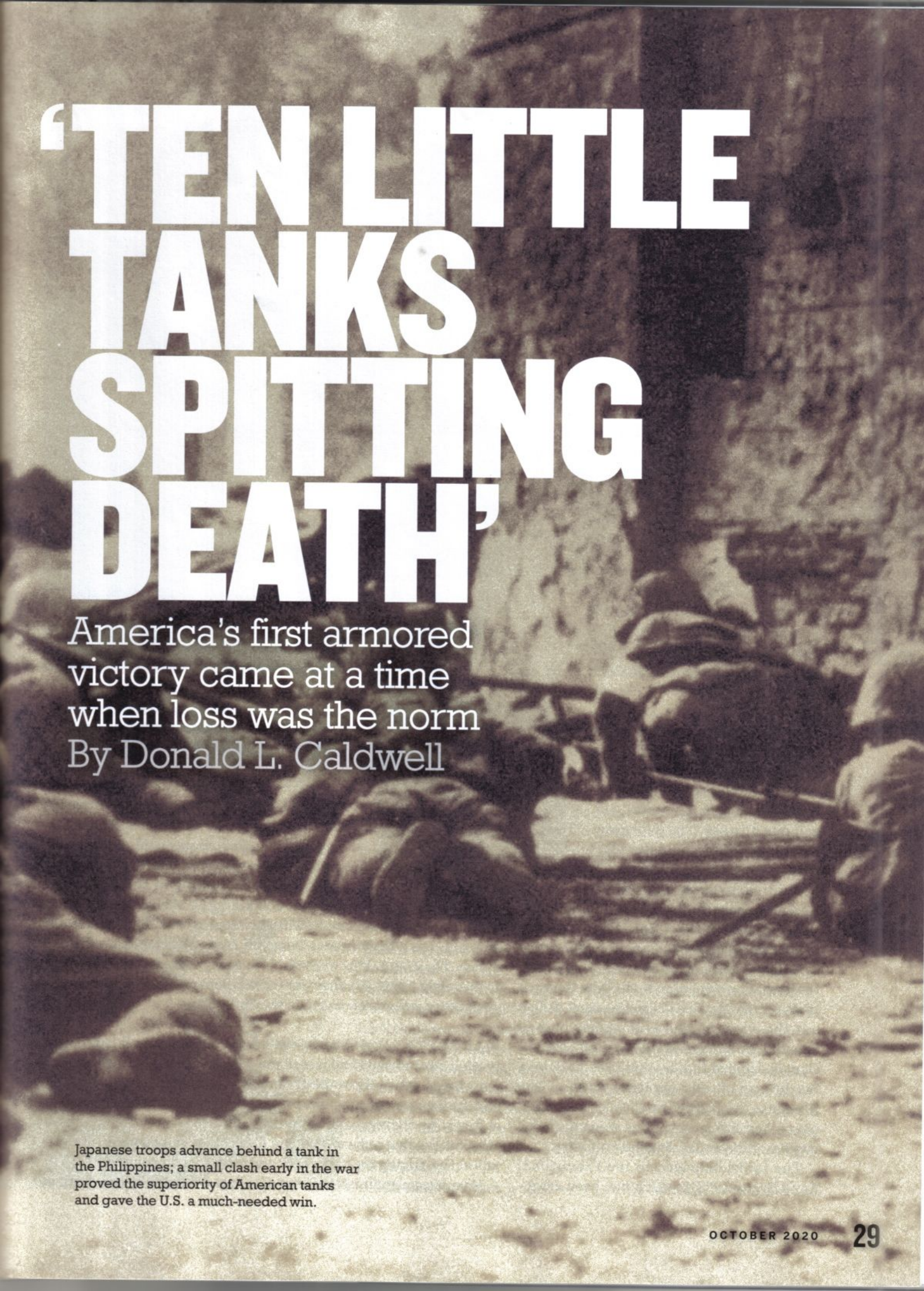
DISPLAY UNTIL  
NOVEMBER 24, 2020









A sepia-toned historical photograph showing Japanese soldiers in a combat environment. In the foreground, several soldiers are lying on the ground, some appearing to be dead or wounded. In the background, more soldiers are visible, some standing and others moving. A tank is partially visible in the distance, with soldiers advancing behind it. The scene is set in a field with some trees and structures in the background.

# 'TEN LITTLE TANKS SPITTING DEATH'

America's first armored  
victory came at a time  
when loss was the norm

By Donald L. Caldwell

Japanese troops advance behind a tank in the Philippines; a small clash early in the war proved the superiority of American tanks and gave the U.S. a much-needed win.



**F**irst Lieutenant William H. Gentry checked the placement and camouflage of his platoon's five M3 light tanks. He had positioned them beneath a handful of stilted huts in a village on Luzon, the largest of the Philippine islands. The day before—December 27, 1941—Japanese infantrymen had forded a wide river just north of him and were making their way relentlessly southward. As was their custom, the Philippine Army infantry had pulled back early in the evening; most of the U.S. 192nd Tank Battalion's Company C followed the retreating army. Bill Gentry's tank platoon had been left behind.

Gentry, 23, had been with the company less than a week, but his platoon had already been selected several times as its rear guard. This time headquarters gave him an additional order: to radio back the tactics the Japanese used in their attack.

The Japanese came into view that afternoon of the 28th; to see clearly, Gentry had to stay outside his tank. He covered himself with brush and began his report. He had much to say. The Japanese troops double-timed down the road, dropping to the ground periodically although they weren't under fire, giving shouts including the soon-to-be-famous "banzai," then standing up and resuming their march. According to Gentry's account, one curious soldier left the formation and began to climb on Gentry's tank. Gentry reached behind his back, pulled out the wavy-bladed *kris* dagger he had bought in Manila, and slit the man's throat. Gentry decided that by that time he'd done his duty and fired a prearranged shot. The five tanks then turned on their sirens, pulled out of their hides, and roared down the highway past the startled Japanese infantry.

The tanks belonged to the Provisional Tank Group (PTG), which had been estab-



Looking for an alternative to farm work, Bill Gentry (inset) joined a National Guard tank company before the war and wound up leading a tank platoon in the Philippines.

lished in the Philippines the previous month with the arrival of its commander, Brigadier General James R. N. Weaver. The PTG's organization was unique in the army: it comprised two tank battalions—the 192nd and 194th—each consisting of three National Guard tank companies and each containing 54 M3 light tanks and 22 M2 and M3 half-tracks along with the required auxiliary vehicles, all new; plus the 17th Ordnance Company (Armored) for heavy maintenance. The 17-ton M3s were the U.S. Army's latest model (see "No Lightweight," page 38); they were of excellent mechanical quality and would soon prove their worth in the Philippines.

BILL GENTRY HAD had a good war so far. A Kentuckian, he, his brother, and a friend had joined the 38th National Guard tank company in his native Harrodsburg in 1936, fascinated by its machinery and the prospect of a regular paycheck. Harrodsburg had no armory at that time; the company housed and serviced its two light tanks on the Gentry tobacco farm. Bill and his brother gained points for promotion by driving the tanks back and forth to town for drills.

He managed to finish one year of college but knew he was destined



The M3 light tank—here on prewar maneuvers—was the army's newest model. Opposite: an assembly line of M3 tanks gets their turrets.



to remain on the farm as a hand, so he was glad when Harrodsburg's tank company was federalized in November 1940 as Company D of the 192nd Tank Battalion. He applied for and received a commission as a second lieutenant and, as was standard procedure, was transferred to another company. He reached the Philippines in November 1941 as the 192nd Tank Battalion communications officer. Gentry had been allotted an excess of men and spare equipment, with the intention of his setting up a new school for Philippine Army radiomen, but the onset of war fated him to remain within the 192nd.

When the Japanese landed at Lingayen Gulf on Luzon's northwest coast on December 22, intent on advancing across central Luzon toward the capital city of Manila, the 192nd had been ordered north from its base at Fort Stotsenburg, near Clark Field. They were to support Major General Jonathan M. Wainwright's North Luzon Force in defending the beaches—but the captain who had brought the battalion's Company C overseas had a complete breakdown and had to be relieved. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore F. Wickord—a former ConEd lineman from Maywood, Illinois, who had risen through the Guard ranks by the time-honored methods of correspondence courses and seniority—chose First Lieutenant Harold Collins, the company's senior platoon leader, as the new company commander. To fill Collins's old role, Wickord selected Gentry from his own staff.

The senior platoon leader served as the company's executive and





The Japanese invasion (above, a Type 95 Ha-Gō light tank) left Generals Jonathan Wainwright and Douglas MacArthur (top) scrambling to mount a defense.

maintenance officer, so Gentry's experience made him a good fit for the position. But Collins, now a captain, proved to be a weak leader, and Gentry wound up in effective command of the company. According to Gentry, Collins was personally brave and could follow orders, but could not make decisions. He was afflicted with what Gentry called the "10,000 mile stare"—far worse than the "2,000 yard stare" combat artist Tom Lea evoked later in the war in that it reached all the way to Collins's home in Ohio.

ON THEIR WITHDRAWAL from Lingayen Gulf the day after the Japanese landings, Company C, Gentry's platoon included, had been under orders to move down a secondary highway on the North Luzon Force's eastern flank as it looped around and reached the main north-south highway at Cabanatuan, a major crossroads town in central Luzon. There they were to turn left and then head south for 50 miles until turning west and joining the rest of the defenders.

General Douglas MacArthur's prewar plan to defend the Luzon beaches with his Philippine infantry had not lasted past the day of the landings: the inexperienced infantry broke and ran, and the few supporting forces—Philippine Scout cavalry, Philippine Army artillery, and American light tanks—could only follow them to the next quickly-established defensive line. So MacArthur—who had already decided to declare Manila an open city in hopes of sparing it—reverted to an earlier plan. What had begun on December 23 as a panicked retreat from the beaches now had a goal—to reach the defensible Bataan Peninsula in good order.

On the evening of December 28, a sergeant in the 192nd Battalion's reconnaissance platoon scouted Cabanatuan and discovered that Japanese from a second wing advancing south via a more westerly approach were setting up artillery to cut off the company. His radioed warning allowed the leading elements of the company to bypass the ambush and join the highway south of Cabanatuan. After its brush with the Japanese earlier that day, Bill Gentry's platoon was still well behind the rest of the company; now it circled around the roadblock and attacked it from the rear, overrunning the Japanese field pieces before they could be manhandled around to face the onrushing tanks. The platoon sustained no losses; Japanese losses are unknown, but American communiqués call them "considerable."

Gentry and his men then put enough distance between themselves and the enemy to rejoin the rest of Company C the next day, 10 miles south of Cabanatuan at a barrio called Gapan. Everyone was covered in grime and bone-tired, having been on rear-guard duty and without sleep for nearly a week.

The Japanese force pursuing Company C down the road was heading for its intersection with a road coming up from Manila that passed through the town of Plaridel. To the west of Plaridel lay the broad Pampanga River and the two bridges crossing it at the town of Calumpit—the Japanese capture of which would block the defenders of southern Luzon from entering Bataan and also head off the other half of General Wainwright's force, then pursuing a more westerly route south from the gulf.

The American commanders scrambled to set up a defensive line at a barrio called Baliuag, six miles to the northeast of Plaridel. Built mainly of stilted bamboo huts, with a downtown area of stucco churches and other buildings, Baliuag was a town of some 3,000 people along the Angat River and its tributaries. Although the Americans had infantry from two Philippine Army divisions at their disposal, one was down to just 200 effectives, most of the missing men having already fled for their homes. There were also a couple of Philippine artillery units and Company C's light tanks.

The tankers received fuel, ammunition, and rations in Gapan and then proceeded down to Baliuag, where they bivouacked south of town and planned for a longed-for full night's sleep. They didn't get it. As Gentry recalled, "We were awakened in the middle of the night by





the radio operator, who said, 'I've got a message, I've got a message here, and I've had them repeat it and repeat it, and I get the same answer every time.' And we said, 'Well, what is it?' And he said, 'Hold at all costs.'"

CAPTAIN COLLINS again gave Gentry an important mission—this time, the most critical mission in the Philippines. The defense of Baliuag was to be Gentry's responsibility. He had the long-range support of field artillery and half-tracks, and he was given tactical control of another platoon's five M3s—Second Lieutenant Marshall Kennady's—in addition to those of his own.

The next morning, December 30, recon troops and Gentry himself scouted the approaches to Baliuag. Philippine Army engineers had destroyed all but one of the bridges across the Angat and its branches; they left a narrow-gauge railroad bridge leading into the western outskirts of town intact. Planking would be required before tanks and other heavy equipment could cross, but the Japanese attack would then be funneled into the barrio's narrow streets, where Gentry's tanks would be waiting. Was the bridge deliberately left unblown as bait to attract the Japanese?

This would have been the most adept tactical move in the campaign, but it has never been confirmed. No surviving American commander took credit for the decision.

Lieutenant Gentry spent the rest of the day positioning his defenders. As he had done days earlier, he placed his five tanks beneath stilted huts—these about half a mile south of the bridge. The huts were some 8 to 10 feet above the ground, giving Gentry's men a clear view of the railroad bridge across drained rice paddies. They camouflaged the tanks with foliage and bamboo mats to further hide them from the Japanese infantry and did the same to Lieutenant Kennady's five tanks on the other side of town. Captain Collins's company headquarters blocked the only road exiting the town to the south.

That evening, Japanese troops began crossing the bridge and camping on its south side, short of where Gentry's tanks were hidden. More troops continued to cross the next morning—the 31st—closely watched by Lieutenant Gentry from his hut. At his signal, the Philippine Army's 15 75mm artillery pieces and half-dozen half-tracks began shelling the Japanese infantrymen, who dug in, waiting for their Type 89B medium tanks.

A Japanese Type 89B medium tank—then the standard Japanese infantry-support tank—heads for Manila over an improvised bridge.

**MacArthur's prewar plan to defend the Luzon beaches with his Philippine infantry had not lasted past the day of the landings.**





of another building just down the street.

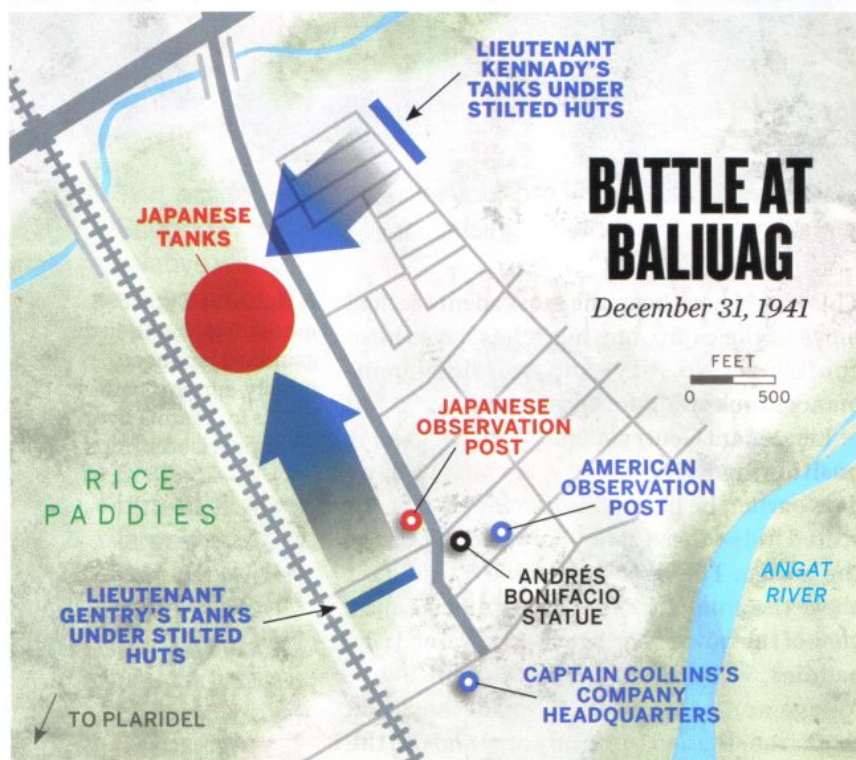
One of the men there was Sergeant Al Allen of C Company's recon platoon. Allen, 21, had enlisted the previous January. Sharp and inquisitive, he was a good fit for the company's reconnaissance section, where he quickly rose to sergeant and senior enlisted man. Allen had already lost the first motorcycle he had been assigned when an officer took it on an unauthorized drunken spin to Manila and crashed it into a tree. Allen made sure to hide his replacement Harley-Davidson securely within the observation post.

The officers with him had binoculars, good observation perches, and a working radio. After the shooting began, they kept battalion headquarters well informed, leaving Gentry free to conduct the battle.

Gentry continued to observe the Japanese until about 5 p.m., when he was interrupted. Major John Morley, the battalion intelligence officer, came riding into Baliuag in a jeep, stopped outside Gentry's hut, and came in. "I informed him that we were sitting there looking at a collection of Jap tanks out in the field," Gentry recalled, irritated that Morley was calling attention to their position, "and, also, that the Jap lookout in the church steeple was quite excited as to why Morley was there. And that the only thing for him to do was to get in his jeep and drive out of town just as though nothing happened. And we would hold fire until we thought he was clear of the town, and then we would attack."

Before opening fire with his own tank, Gentry sent a prearranged signal to Kennady and the artillery, radioed his men, and burst from cover. His main targets were the Japanese tanks, two of which immediately burst into flames.


The Type 89Bs turned out to be ineffective against American armor. Their 57mm guns fired only high-explosive ammunition, which could not penetrate armor—even that as thin as an M3's. The Japanese infantrymen had no antitank weapons, and their small-caliber 6.5mm rifle and machine gun fire plinked harmlessly off the American tanks' skins. As the Japanese tanks raced into town, Gentry's tanks immobilized the parked artillery pieces without wasting armor-piercing 37mm ammunition on them: they rode over them, broke wheels off, knocked barrels askew, and overran trails. The M3s then wheeled into town.



In a battle lasting all of 90 minutes, 10 American M3 tanks (like the one shown at top) dominated a unit of Japanese Type 89Bs and troops in the village of Baliuag. The map is derived from one hand-sketches by Lieutenant Gentry.

Armed with a short-barrel 57mm gun and weighing only 14.1 tons, the diesel-engine Type 89B was then the standard Japanese infantry support tank. The Japanese tankers, in turn, waited for the engineers to lay planking on the bridge. By mid-morning the tanks began to cross and park in an open field. The nervous Philippine Army infantrymen south of town took off farther south for Plaridel, without orders. The Japanese infantry moved deeper into the town and established an observation post in the largest church—unaware that some Americans had set up their own observation site in the tower





The victory bought the defenders time to retreat to Bataan. Allied troops would eventually return to take on the Japanese, but not until much later in the war. Here, American GIs advance behind M4 Shermans in March 1945.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in the war with the Japanese, American tankers were in complete control of the battlefield—and they took advantage of it. The remaining Japanese tanks and an estimated 400 to 500 enemy infantrymen fled into the town, away from Lieutenant Gentry, only to come under fire from Lieutenant Kennady's platoon. According to Sergeant Allen, the opposing tanks chased each other up and down the streets, but the American M3s—much faster and more agile than the Japanese Type 89Bs—did most of the chasing.

Gentry reported that the turrets of the Japanese tanks could traverse only a few degrees, although in theory they were fully traversable. It's likely that the Japanese gunners, untrained in tank-to-tank combat and stunned by the surprise tank attack, simply could not hand-crank their turrets quickly enough to follow the speeding American M3s, which sustained no damage from the Japanese tank guns. The careening tanks did considerable

damage to the barrio, smashing through the bamboo huts and setting them on fire with tracers, and knocking great chunks of masonry off the permanent buildings. The equestrian statue of the Filipino revolutionary leader Andrés Bonifacio that dominated the town square lost its head to a shell fired by a sergeant who told Sergeant Allen later that the head was an aiming point for sighting his cannon.

After neutralizing the enemy tanks, the Americans turned their attention to the infantry; the four .30-caliber machine guns on their M3s—more in number than on any later U.S. tank—were ideal for slaughtering exposed men. The Americans reportedly killed most of them, driving the survivors back toward the bridge.

The battalion staff had been tuned in to Gentry's radio frequency and burst in with words of encouragement, as if cheering on a football team. Sergeant Allen, the only C



A savvy recon man, Sergeant Al Allen warned U.S. leaders about nearby Japanese troops—all the while protecting his prized Harley-Davidson motorcycle.





Filipino engineers prepare to demolish a bridge on Luzon (right). Following the tank victory, Gentry (above) was hailed as a hero.

Company member among the battalion brass in their observation post, left early to report to battalion headquarters several miles west of the Pampanga, either under orders or because—as he said, possibly in jest—he wanted to protect his precious new motorcycle.

He proceeded alone south down the highway until he chanced on the rear echelon of the 194th Tank Battalion in Plaridel. These men were directing the 194th's Company C and the supply and Philippine Army units that were heading north from Manila and reorganizing behind the Calumpit bridges before continuing their retreat west to Bataan. Sergeant Allen informed the 194th supply officer that the rumbling they all could hear was artillery in Baliuag and that the rear guard would soon be coming down the highway, followed by the Japanese. This 194th tank company had been fighting in southern Luzon, and its officers had no idea that the Japanese in northern Luzon were so close; Allen was ordered to find the 194th commander, Colonel Ernest B. Miller, and give him the news.

Miller was the only World War I veteran in the Provisional Tank Group; some of the men thought he considered himself superior to everyone else in the theater. He was loath to

listen to an enlisted man—Sergeant Allen—until Miller's supply officer arrived and confirmed Allen's story. The rumbling had grown louder, as had the distinctive roaring of the M3s' radial engines. Miller got his men to Calumpit, and they made it across the bridges safely.

Gentry's force stopped firing at about 6:30 p.m. when it ran out of ammunition. As it pulled south of Baliuag to its earlier bivouac, Gentry took a minute to inspect a Type 89B that had been immobilized on the town square and shot at by every passing M3. The corpses of the four Japanese tankers were inside the tank, which was perforated by 40 to 50 37mm holes. Many of the shells had come in one side of the tank and out the other. In his after-action report Gentry said that the American M3s were superior to the Japanese mediums in all respects.

The Philippine Army artillery resumed firing on the Japanese, who had retreated back north of the river. The Filipino artillery ceased fire soon before nightfall of the 31st, prepared their guns for movement, and headed south, followed at about 10 p.m. by C Company, which had finally been ordered to withdraw.

The Japanese reentered Baliuag cautiously that evening and followed the Filipino and American forces at a distance. At Plaridel, the Philippine Army rear guard held the Japanese off briefly and then headed for Calumpit. General Wainwright, the Luzon commander, waited impatiently on the western side of one bridge, accompanied by his engineering officer and General Weaver. At 6:15 a.m. on New Year's Day, after the last troops had crossed the bridges, they detonated explosives. Seven tons of dynamite erupted, dropping the twin spans into the river. The Filipino and American soldiers were only a few days away from entering the Bataan Peninsula, where they wrongly believed the U.S. Navy would relieve them—but as the Japanese put it, they were just "entering the sack."

BILL GENTRY AND HIS MEN were treated as heroes when they finally reached battalion headquarters. C Company's only casualty was



Ultimately, the retreat to Bataan proved a dead end; here, a Japanese guard watches over American and Filipino prisoners captured there.



one man who sprained his ankle jumping from his tank there to tell his story. The Americans were credited with destroying eight Japanese tanks and killing several hundred men in Baliuag. The accuracy of this claim is unknown, as the area was evacuated after the battle, but the American armor's performance definitely impressed the Japanese, who did not again use their own armor aggressively until the final days of the Bataan campaign.

This was the first victory in the war by American land forces, an event eagerly awaited in the United States. Gentry's men had held up the Japanese advance for a full day, allowing the defenders of Luzon to escape to Bataan. Frank Hewlett of the United Press interviewed Gentry two weeks after the battle (he had been in the hospital, down with a fever), and news media across America picked up Hewlett's account of the "ten little tanks spitting death." Baliuag was a clear-cut victory and important in bucking up home-front morale in January 1942, when the war news was almost all bad. For his performance on December 31, Gentry was awarded a Silver Star, one of the few in the campaign.

He went on to survive the Bataan death march and was rescued before the war's end during the January 30, 1945, U.S. Army Ranger raid on the prison camp at Cabanatuan. Gentry returned to Harrodsburg to a hero's welcome but remained bitter that the military—with the war not yet over and afraid of provoking Japanese retaliation against remaining POWs—had ordered him not to reveal the terrible details of the men who'd died as prisoners.

Later events quickly overwhelmed the minuscule battle, and it was soon forgotten by anyone who had not taken a direct part. General Wainwright's version of it in his memoir is so confusing as to be totally useless as history. Colonel Miller's bitter memoir, *Bataan Uncensored*, slights the battle and its participants entirely, for which Al Allen never forgave him. U.S. Army historian Louis Morton's *The Fall of the Philippines* devotes one page to the engagement, which it calls the "Battle for Plaridel." A tiny group of American tankers had won a victory at Baliuag when victories were very rare. This deserves to be remembered, and under its own name. ★

**Company C's only casualty was one man who sprained his ankle jumping from his tank to tell his story.**



# NO LIGHTWEIGHT

## DOUBLE DUTY

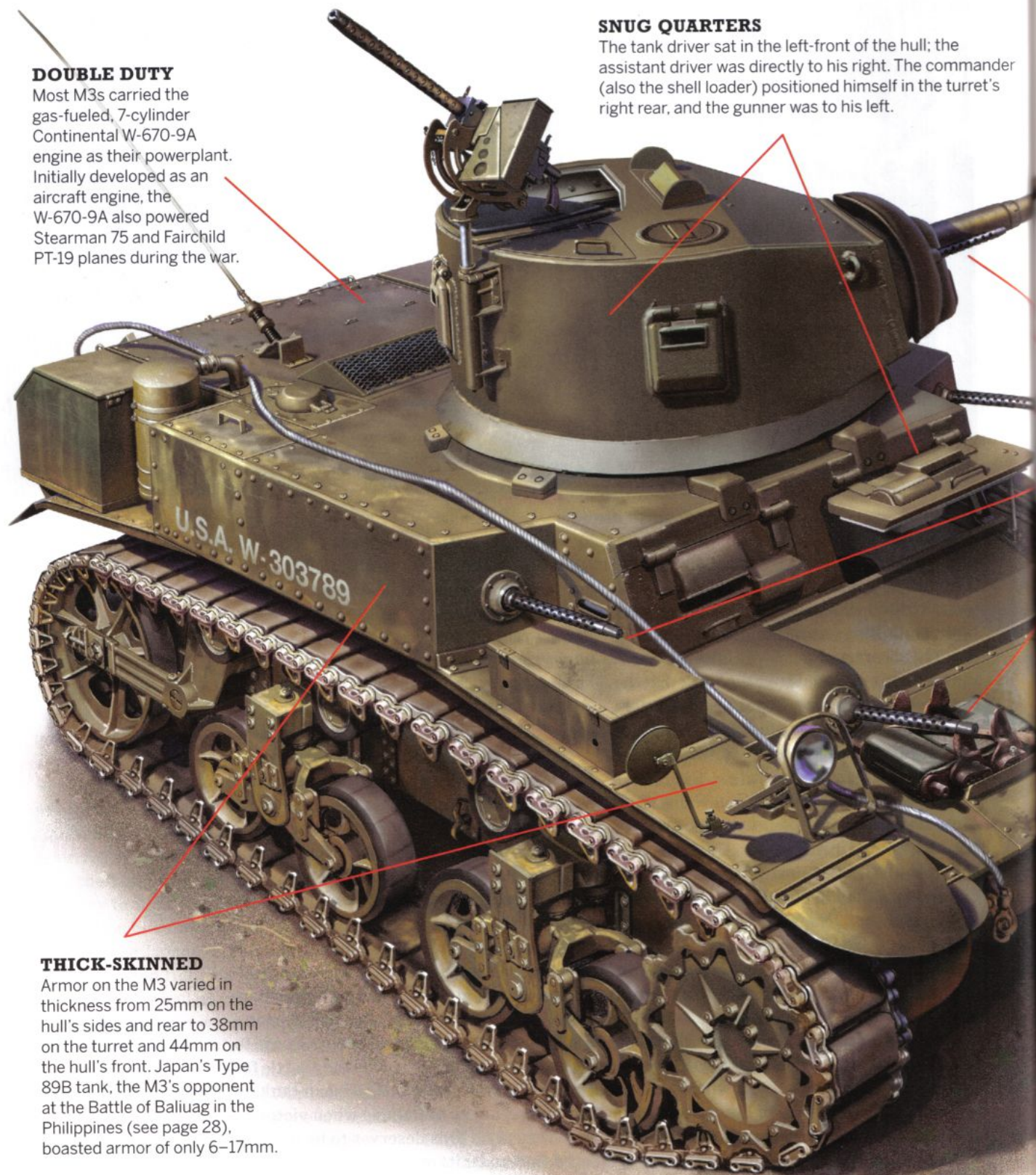
Most M3s carried the gas-fueled, 7-cylinder Continental W-670-9A engine as their powerplant. Initially developed as an aircraft engine, the W-670-9A also powered Stearman 75 and Fairchild PT-19 planes during the war.

## SNUG QUARTERS

The tank driver sat in the left-front of the hull; the assistant driver was directly to his right. The commander (also the shell loader) positioned himself in the turret's right rear, and the gunner was to his left.

## THICK-SKINNED

Armor on the M3 varied in thickness from 25mm on the hull's sides and rear to 38mm on the turret and 44mm on the hull's front. Japan's Type 89B tank, the M3's opponent at the Battle of Baliuag in the Philippines (see page 28), boasted armor of only 6–17mm.





## FIREPOWER

The early model M3's main gun was a 37mm antitank M5 with a 103-round capacity. Although the mid-war M3 upgraded to a longer-barrelled M6, the gun remained most effective against other light tanks and the M3 soon became obsolete in Europe against Germany's heftier medium tanks.

## AND ONE MAKES FIVE

The M3 carried more machine guns than any later U.S. tank, with four .30-calibers mounted on the hull. A fifth, mounted atop the turret, served as an anti-aircraft weapon.

The M3 light tank was admired by the British Army in North Africa, who dubbed it the "Stuart" and, more affectionately, the "Honey."



AS WORLD WAR II BEGAN, the 1930s light tanks that had served Europe and the U.S. were slowly being upgraded to better-armored models. The result in America was the M3 light tank, made by the thousands by the American Car & Foundry company from 1941 to 1943.

The M3 served initially as a Lend-Lease tank for the British and Soviets; its tour of duty started in November 1941 with the British in North Africa. The M3's performance earned it fans in the British Army, but combat against larger German medium tanks revealed its deficiencies and pushed it into a secondary role as a reconnaissance and supply vehicle.

The M3 found its niche when the U.S. entered the Pacific War. More nimble, faster, and better protected than its Japanese opponents, the M3 served with distinction in the Philippines (see "Ten Little Tanks Spitting Death," page 28), Guadalcanal, Saipan, and other major Pacific campaigns. Gradually replaced by the M4 Sherman medium tank, the M3 was retired by all major combatants soon after the war's end. —Larry Porges

### AMERICAN M3 LIGHT TANK

Crew: 4 / Number produced: 4,800 / Length: 14 ft. 10 in. / Weight: 28,000 lbs. / Maximum speed: 36 mph / Maximum range: 87 miles / The M3 saw action for the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union on every major front of the war.



### THE COMPETITION

#### GERMAN PANZER II

Crew: 3 / Number produced: 1,856 / Length: 15 ft. 9 in. / Weight: 17,800 lbs. / Maximum speed: 24.5 mph / Maximum range: 120 miles / The Panzer II played a critical role in the Wehrmacht's early campaigns against Poland and France.



#### JAPANESE TYPE 95 HA-GŌ

Crew: 3 / Number produced: 2,300 / Length: 14 ft. 4 in. / Weight: 14,800 lbs. / Maximum speed: 28 mph / Maximum range: 130 miles / The Type 95's ineffective thin armor made it susceptible to enemy shells and even small-arms fire.



#### ITALIAN L6/40

Crew: 2 / Number produced: 283 / Length: 12 ft. 5 in. / Weight: 13,600 lbs. / Maximum speed: 26 mph / Maximum range: 120 miles / The L6/40, best suited as a scout, also served with regular Italian army units due to medium tank shortages.

