SECTION VI

Combat Engineering: War in the Far East

For the United States, World War II began in the Pacific. By December 1941, the war in Europe was already more than two years old, but in the Far East it was more than four years old. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and conquest of the Philippines were new stages in Japanese expansion, which had led to the outbreak of war with China in July 1937. As British, French, and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific fell before the onslaught of the Japanese, the newly allied western powers improvised desperately to preserve what they could of their prewar empires.

The basic outline of the Allied wartime strategy in the Far East was easily arranged, partly due to necessity. Already under heavy pressure from the Germans in Europe, the British confined their efforts to protecting India and Burma. The rest of Southeast Asia and the Pacific became the United States' responsibility with Australia and New Zealand playing important roles. Although the Allies agreed early that the European theater should have priority, the Pacific theater required a heavy commitment of America's scarce military resources. Dislodging the Japanese from the empire they conquered quickly in late 1941 and early 1942 turned out to be a difficult and costly task.

Early in 1942, while the Japanese were still advancing, the Joint Chiefs of Staff established the basic command arrangements that would persist throughout the war. Geography dictated that the Navy and air power would predominate in the Pacific war, but General Douglas MacArthur's stature and the necessity for cooperation between the Army and Navy resulted in two Pacific theaters: the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) under MacArthur, and the Pacific Ocean Area (POA), which covered the bulk of the ocean, under Admiral Chester Nimitz.

Both theaters required an enormous engineer effort. Most of the Pacific islands lacked even rudimentary modern facilities, and climate and terrain conspired to make the construction of even basic facilities difficult. The American strategy, however, called for an abundance of facilities such as airfields, ports, huge logistical depots, and roads. Fighting weather; terrain; shortages of equipment, supplies, and troops; and also the enemy, the engineers labored to provide the modern military infrastructure that the island-hopping Pacific campaigns demanded. The engineer effort was so important that General MacArthur referred to the war in his theater as an "engineer's war."

In the Southwest Pacific, American engineers arrived in the theater early and began work quickly. The first American troops on the strategically important island of New Guinea were engineers. When MacArthur decided to defend Australia by blocking the Japanese advance in New Guinea, he launched a two-year campaign to defeat or bypass the enemy troops holding the island. New engineer missions and new types of engineer units were tested during this arduous campaign. Specially equipped and trained aviation engineers built dozens of airfields to support the new air warfare, which played a critically important role in the Allied victory in the Pacific. To assist in the many amphibious landings that geography and strategy dictated, the Army fielded new and unusual engineer amphibian units. All military operations in SWPA eventually culminated in the reconquest of the Philippine island of Luzon, the largest American land campaign in the Pacific. From the landings on Lingayen Gulf through the rapid advance across the island to the bitter street fighting in Manila, the engineers made a major contribution to the American victory in SWPA.

While most of the war in the Far East was fought in the warm tropical waters of the Central and South Pacific, American forces also engaged the Japanese on the edges of the frigid Bering Sea. As part of the campaign that culminated in the Battle of Midway, the Japanese seized and held two remote Aleutian islands in 1942. Reconquering the islands was a difficult and bitterly fought operation in which engineers made important contributions, including fighting as infantry.

Further south in Nimitz's theater, where the Navy and Marines provided the bulk of the forces, the Army and its engineers played a smaller role. But the Army component command of POA and its engineers, drawn heavily from the prewar Honolulu Engineer District, constructed facilities throughout the theater and fought in ferocious battles like the one on Okinawa. As American and Allied forces got nearer to the home islands, Japanese resistance became more desperate, leading American planners to anticipate a bloody invasion. But the impact of fire bombing and the two atomic bombs forced the Japanese government to surrender in August 1945.

The essays that follow touch briefly on a few of the engineer activities that contributed to American victory in the Far East. The first essay describes the activities of aviation and amphibian engineers in MacArthur's difficult, two-year campaign to take New Guinea and surrounding islands as a springboard for his return to the Philippines. Leaving the tropical South Pacific, the second essay surveys the little-known campaign to wrest the Aleutian island of Attu from its Japanese conquerors. During the last year of the war, American troops fought the two largest battles in the Pacific on the islands of Luzon and Okinawa, and two essays discuss these important campaigns. American forces and engineers fought and built in many other Far Eastern locales, but these essays give some idea of the range and nature of the engineer contribution in the Pacific.