

ROLAND “BO” STURHAHN



US ARMY 1944-1946

ROLAND “BO” STURHAHN US ARMY 1944-1946



CPL. Roland (Bo) Sturhahn served 1944-1946 in the U.S. Army 2nd Division, 706 Tank Battalion during World War II, stationed in the Philippines. Roland was discharged in August 1946 from Fort Sheridan Illinois. Roland had attained the rank of corporal. Roland earned the following medals and ribbons:

- Asiatic Pacific Theater Campaign Medal Ribbon w/Oak Leaf Cluster
- American Defense Medal
- World War II Victory Medal
- Army Occupation Medal Ribbon
- Good Conduct Medal
- Marksman Carbine

More about Bo’s service during the war can be found below.

Before Bo was drafted he was fascinated by military history. Bo clipped and kept articles from the St. Louis Newspapers about the war and started a scrapbook. When he returned home from the war, he discovered that his father had continued to clip the articles for his scrapbook while he was overseas. Bo’s collection includes all theaters of the war. This unique collection of original newspaper photos and reports offers a rare view of the progression of the war as reported to the folks back home.

Bo’s Lasting Gift to the Museum

The donation of Sturhahn’s pre-war album, leading up to and including, the attack on Pearl Harbor, allowed the St. Charles County Veterans museum to recognize the unsung heroes of World War II -- the Merchant Marine. Roland and his wife Sue lived nearby the museum in O’Fallon MO and often visited the museum to see the exhibit. Ralph Barrale, the founder of the museum, was committed to recognizing the Merchant Marines for delivering the goods; and Bo’s newspaper collection helped to tell their story. Roland and Sue had one child: Christine. Roland Sturhahn of O’Fallon, MO, passed away at the age of 94 on 15-MAR 2021. He is buried at Manchester Methodist Cemetery in Manchester Missouri.



The Merchant Marine fleet was placed in harm’s way, long before war was declared. Making matters worse, in the early years Merchant Marine ships were not armed or were very lightly armed. The Reuben James, the Lehigh and the Beacon Grange were some of

the ships that were sunk before the United States declared war. In all, 17 Merchant Marine ships were sunk before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. More than 200 Merchant Mariners died in these pre-war attacks. The Merchant Marine would suffer a higher casualty rate than any other branch of service.

Ralph Barrale, the museum's founder, was committed to recognizing the Merchant Marines as the true veterans they are, and for delivering the goods across the ocean. Bo's newspaper collection tells their story.

Several iconic headlines from Sturhahn's collection hang in the museum today. Sadly, Roland died in 2021. His wife Sue supports and often visits the museum to honor his memory.



More about the Merchant Marine



The Merchant Marine was never designed for front-line combat on the battlefield or on the ocean. It was made up of mostly civilian members who conduct almost any type of maritime trade in peacetime, from fishing tours to oil shipping. During a war, the federal government could make these sailors into an auxiliary of the U.S. Navy.

During World War II, these men went through light training before crewing ships that had to brave not only the seas and storms, but German U-boats that were organized into wolfpacks and ordered to hunt the Merchant Marine, forcing these men into the worst of the fighting, despite their largely non-combat role.

German U-boats patrolled the American coasts, sinking ships — sometimes within view of their ports just off the United States coasts! Whenever possible, German U-boats operate on the surface, drawing oxygen to run their diesel motors, and attacking with deck guns that could punch holes in ships' hulls and doom them to the deep. When that was too dangerous, they would hunt underwater and attack with torpedoes.



The general cargo ship Beacon Grange sinks after being torpedoed amidships by U-552 on April 24, 1941. Photo taken from the submarine's conning tower.

For the sailors of the Merchant Marine, this was terrifying. They were under threat of German attack from the moment they left the range of the shore guns until they reached European ports. American waters were actually some of the most dangerous as U-boats hunted the coast at night, looking for U.S. ship silhouettes blocking out lights from shore. Once they had the target, the subs could attack and disappear.

Including the waters around the American Philippines, Alaska, and the Gulf of Mexico, the Merchant Marine lost approximately 196 ships **in U.S. waters**. Officially, the U.S. lost 1,554 ships in the war. Approximately 8,000 to 12,000 Merchant Marine sailors were killed. More than 17 Merchant Marine ships were sunk BEFORE the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.



Editor's note: Bo supplied this report on the 706th tank battalion from his memoirs.

THE 706TH TANK BATTALION REPORTS

Like a cry from the wilderness, the 706th Tank Battalion answers the call of the editors for news from separate tank battalions. Not having had any previous articles in the Armored News, probably a few historical facts will serve as a basis for introduction.

On 10 September 1943, the Third Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, 4th Armored Division, was separated from its parent organization, forming the nucleus for the 706th Tank Battalion, Company C, 1st Battalion and elements of the Service and Headquarters and Headquarters Companies of the 37th Armored Regiment were added to make up the standard T/O separate Tank Battalion. Lt. Col. Stokes, Executive Officer, and member of the 37th Armored Regiment was appointed Battalion Commander, with Major Rivers as Executive Officer and Major Kellett as S-3. The two months following activation were devoted to training and ITP tests. Then on 17 November 1943 we jumped on the "merry-go-round" that we are still riding, going to Camp Pickett, Virginia.

While stationed at Pickett, the battalion spent a period dry running amphibious operations and then moved to Camp Bradford for a week of "wet runs". The entire month of January was spent at Fort A. P. Hill Military Reservation, in the field, conducting field problems ranging from platoon to reinforced battalion problems, reinforcing units being elements of the

77th Infantry Division. This was our first formal introduction to the men and officers of the famed "Statue of Liberty Division: which was to play a very important role in our young lives, as will be hereafter note.

The five weeks following our return to Camp Pickett on 2 February 1944, were spent in preparation for movement overseas. On 6-MAR 1944, the battalion shook the Virginia mud from its heels and left for the West Coast POE. For two weeks we were subjected to the monotony of the last stages of processing, and on 28 March we embarked on a ship and became tanker sailors. Since leaving the states, the battalion has spent a total of approximately 90 days at sea) - arriving at Naval Training Station Oahu TH 7 days later. We were stationed at Fort Hase, assigned to the XXIV Corps and attached to our stateside acquaintances, the 77th Infantry Division.

For the next few months, the battalion experienced some revolutionary changes in tank tactics. Fighting the pernicious Japs in jungles of the Pacific was far different from the sweeping flank movements and spearheads which we had been training for. Lt. Col. Stokes, in collaboration with Lt. Col. Kimbrell of the 77th Infantry Division, knuckled down to work and produced a new standing operating procedure (SOP) on the tactics of the "Tank-Infantry Team."

On the 9th of July, the 706th moved past Aloha Tower, Honolulu, heading toward the island of Guam, the largest, most populous, and southernmost of the Mariana Islands to assist in wresting that former possession from the enemy. We were attached to the 77th for the operation and rumbled across the beaches of Agat, (now Hagat) Guam, on the morning of the 21st of July 1944, to receive our initiation in battle.

The battalion had one medium tank company with each regimental combat team (RCT), holding the light tank company in reserve. Here, our "tank-infantry" training proved itself, and we shattered the enemy's resistance time after time, driving across the center of the island and then moving north. Much of the island was dense jungle, wherein the defenders had all the advantages and where fanatical "Nips" like in wait with satchel charges, ready and willing to exchange his humble life for a medium tank for his eternal glory. The 706th Tankers crashed through these jungles, breaking a trail for the closely following infantry, over-running machine gun nests, blowing pillboxes and firing into caves, killing hundreds of the enemy. There were approximately 70 Jap tanks, both light and medium, on the island and gunners of the 706th accounted for a goodly portion of them. During the seemingly

interminable nights, the tankers remained at the front with the infantry, assisting in repelling the frequent "Banzi" raids and infiltrations. The light tankers were loaned to the "Provisional Marine Brigade" for two days in the assault on the Orote Peninsula where the fighting was heavy and difficult against well entrenched Nips, making a last-ditch stand. One platoon of the light tanks killed approximately 300 Japs in about three hours' time and on the following morning these tanks had reached the end of the peninsula in support of the Marines.

The enemy, retreating to the northern sector of the island, apparently decided to make his stand in vicinity of Yigo, a small village surrounded by dense jungle thicket, the ideal terrain for defensive action. The infantry had tried countless times to break through the defense or outflank it but were unsuccessful. Upon orders of the Commanding General, 77th Infantry Division, Lt. Col. Stokes assembled A, B, and D Companies on the morning of 7 August for the purpose of cracking the enemy defenses at Yigo. The battalion crossed the LD at 1200 and by 1300, one hour later, had completed the mission so successfully that the enemy was thereafter unable to offer any further organized defense. The enemy defenses at Yigo included mines, machine gun nests, Anti-tank, and artillery pieces, and "dug-in" tanks-everything that goes to make up a tough nut to crack. The fighting during the one long hour was intense and bitter. The Nips desperately attacking the tanks, with any and all means available to them. Anti-tank fire was thrown at us from ranges as short as 50 yards, from concealed positions in the jungle thicket. The enemy we learned, were perfectionists in the art of camouflage.

The next few days the advance kept rolling Northward, eliminating isolated enemy pockets, ferreting out the elusive fanatics. On 11 August, Guam was declared secure and for the following week the tankers were employed in the customary thorough mopping-up operations that are SOP when fighting out here.

So ended our first campaign, throughout the operation, the weather was a tankers nightmare. Torrential rains were pouring forth daily, turning the countryside into a sea of mud, and rice paddies spotted the terrain from one end of the island to the other so that we were continually fighting terrain as well as the enemy.

A period of rehabilitation followed for the next few months and on the morning of 23 November 1944, we crossed the beaches

of Leyte, FI. We were still attached to the 77th Infantry Division and now came under the control of the 8th Army, for this, our second operation.

The enemy had been beaten back to the north-west sector of Leyte and through a spasmodic flow of reinforcements that had gotten through the naval protective cordon, had managed to slow down the American advance. Another landing from the rear was decided on to smash the enemy lines of communication and, the city of Ormoe, being the hub of the enemy's activities, was chosen as the objective.

The 77th Division and attached troops were designated for the mission and on December 5th preparations were completed to strike the Japs a fatal blow on December 7th, a grim reminder to the Japs that we had not forgotten their sneak attack on us three years previous. Parts of the battalion were loaded on landing crafts, while other elements went overland. The success of the battle of Ormoe is well known to all, including the enemy. The enemy was taken by surprise, split into numerous pockets, and methodically crushed between elements of the XXIV corps, advancing from the four points of the compass. The 706th Tankers were once again fighting terrain as well as Japs but managed to be up there when needed, blasting the enemy from their intricate fortifications, supporting the infantry, and blowing up their artillery positions, causing the Japs to flee to the Northwest sector. A Platoon of D Company, under the command of Lt. Harry W. Gee, participated in a second surprise landing at Palompon, reinforcing an infantry battalion. Once again it was decided to break into the Japs back door, and on Christmas morning the force landed in Palompon, again successfully stunning the enemy. The resistance and mopping up operations were commenced.

The last two weeks of January and the month of February were spent in rehabilitation of equipment and for the first time since leaving Oahu, the battalion had the luxury of sleeping on cots in pyramidal tents and attending movies every night. But we were destined to move on.

March 6th, the 706th Tank Battalion loaded on ships again, embarked on their third operation - destination, the Ryukyus, the Jap's own backyard. This time we remained afloat for a stretch of seven weeks, which practically qualified us for deep-sea mariners as well as dust-eating tankers. The Battalion was still attached to the 77th Infantry Division, whose mission was to capture the small islands in the "Kerama Retto," located approximately 10 miles west of Okinawa,

commencing on D minus 6 and completing the mission before invasion of Okinawa. Tentative plans for the capture of Ie Shima, a small island a few miles NW of Okinawa were prepared to take place shortly after D Day on Okinawa.

Finally, on 18-APR 1945, the 706th landed on the beaches of Ie Shima, supporting the assaulting infantry. The island was only 11 square miles but contained the best air strip in the entire Okinawa Gunto. For the first time we encountered terrain favorable to tanks since leaving the states.

The first day of the fighting was met with moderate resistance and outlooks were generally optimistic. But during the second day, enemy resistance suddenly stiffened and in the ensuing three days, the island became a little "Iwo Jima", and not so little at that. The Japs had an elaborate and intricate system of defense with well camouflages and concealed positions that were easily overlooked during the initial advance. For three days the island rocked with bitter and intense fighting. The 706th Tankers could always be found in the an of the attack, with guns belching forth destruction and death to the fanatical enemy. Five-hundred-pound aerial bombs were used by the Japs as land mines. Japs, carrying satchel charges, charged at the tanks, blowing themselves to a thousand pieces in order to get one of our tanks. Jap snipers were everywhere and tank commanders whose heads were exposed were their favorite targets. Enemy anti-tank guns, artillery and large caliber mortars were trained on the tanks, from concealed caves and pillboxes. Every yard gained by us was bitterly contested and relinquished by the Nips only after annihilation. At the close of the third day, the enemy had been driven into a pocket around the conical shaped mountain in vicinity of the town of Agril-Mae. During the night, a large "banzi" raid was hurled against the ridge of the edge of Agaril-Mae that was held by infantry and one tank platoon of C Company. The attack was repelled only after a period of bloody fighting. The combined might of the tanks and advances progressed steadily, reducing the enemy pocket by relentless pressure until late in the afternoon we had reached the mountain and planted the flag of the United States on the highest pinnacle on the island. Ie Shima was declared "scoured" and the 23rd and 24th were devoted to mopping up the remnants of the enemy. Thus ended our third island operation within a period of 9 months, which was moderately considered a substantial record of accomplishment. But we were to better this record. On the evening of the 24th of April, the battalion was ordered to load on landing ships ana proceed to the island of Okinawa, a few miles distance.

April 25th found us landing on the island, a procedure that was fast becoming a habit. A few days of rest in a bivouac in the rear area, and then we were off again. On the 29th the Battalion moved to the forward area with the 77th Division and proceeded to take over a sector of the front line, a few miles north of the town of Shuri, the enemy's strong point of resistance to the American advance.

The next day, May 30th the 706th was committed in the front lines, once again to do battle with the Japs.

Editor's note: Roland Sturhahn joined the unit as a replacement in late June 1945.

During our progress across the Pacific, fighting the Japs in thick jungle, over mountainous and rocky terrain, from the Marianas to the Ryukyu, via the Philippines, we have become aware of the changing enemy tactics and increased fanaticism of the Jap soldier, as we move nearer to his sacred soil of Japan. But the men of the 706th, being dyed-in-the-wool tankers, firmly believed that with more armored units over here in the Asiatic theater, the Japanese will soon witness the swift disintegration of his once proud war machine. The members of the battalion have acquired some records. One Distinguished Service Cross; three Silver Stars; sixty-five Bronze Stars and ninety-four Purple Hearts. Commendations received by the battalion also include one from the Commanding Officer, First Provisional Marine Brigade.