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The Importance of Rare Earth Elements

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It was a close call, but it was not the first time US soldiers like these had found themselves in the enemy’s midst and succeeded in remaining undetected—nor was it to be the last time.

US Navy for its battlefield intelligence. General Krueger signed the order creating the Alamo Scouts and the Alamo Scouts Training Center (ASTC) on November 28, 1943.

General Krueger selected as the ASTC’s first commanding officer a US Army lieutenant colonel named Frederick Bradshaw. Colonel Bradshaw’s task was clear: create a training program that would provide the Sixth Army with an elite reconnaissance force comprised of six- to seven-man teams capable of carrying out missions behind enemy lines.

On December 3, 1943, Colonel Bradshaw, his staff, and the first class of Alamo Scouts trainees began setting up the initial ASTC on a secluded island located off the coast of New Guinea called Fergusson Island. The instructors Colonel Bradshaw chose to train the first class of Alamo Scouts recruits included soldiers from the Sixth Army, seamen from a disbanded US Navy Naval Amphibious Scouts training camp, and members of the Australian, Philippine, and Dutch armed forces. Together these instructors taught the trainees the skills necessary to wage clandestine warfare.

Three US Army soldiers crept through the jungle along the fringes of Highway 5, deep behind Japanese lines on the island of Luzon, the largest of the Philippine islands. Suddenly, the heavens opened up, releasing a torrential downpour. The GIs sought cover in an old thatched-roof hut located at a junction in the road. Peering through the holes in the hut’s walls, they saw a sight that chilled the blood in their veins—a column of Japanese soldiers coming down the road.

The Japanese soldiers were so close the Americans felt as if they could reach out and touch them. After what seemed like an eternity, the enemy marched on down the road and out of sight. It was a close call, but it was not the first time US soldiers like these had found themselves in the enemy’s midst and succeeded in remaining undetected—nor was it to be the last time. These three Americans were part of a small, elite reconnaissance force that existed for only twenty-four months between 1943 and 1945. Technically, the group was known as the Sixth US Army Special Reconnaissance Unit, but history knows it as the Alamo Scouts.

A New Force
The Alamo Scouts were the brainchild of US Army LTG Walter Krueger, commander of the US Sixth Army, which in late 1943 was fighting against the Japanese in what was termed the Southwestern Pacific Area. General Krueger, who was from San Antonio, Texas, had great admiration for the defenders of the Alamo and wanted the Sixth Army, which was known as Alamo Force, to have its own intelligence-gathering unit so that it did not have to rely on the
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Selection and Training

Soldiers accepted for training at the ASTC were carefully selected from volunteers who came from throughout the ranks of the Sixth Army. According to General Krueger's orders, those soldiers who were accepted for Alamo Scouts training needed to "possess the highest qualifications as to courage, stamina, intelligence and adaptability." A successful candidate for the ASTC had to have perfect vision and had to be able to swim. Although combat experience was also mandatory, sheer aggressiveness was not an attribute the ASTC was looking for in potential Alamo Scouts. For instance, if a candidate told the screening officer that he wanted to kill the enemy, he was immediately eliminated from the selection process. The ASTC's executive officer and chief training officer, US Army CPT Homer "Red" Williams, later said: "We needed men who could go behind enemy lines and gather intelligence and fight only as a last resort."

Colonel Bradshaw made his interest in developing a force that was smart as well as tough very clear in his first official speech to the ASTC's inaugural forty-four-man class of trainees. "You may have had the idea that the Alamo Scouts is an outfit where all the men do not show off their biceps and toughen," Colonel Bradshaw said. "You will find that isn't so. We want you to be tough—just as tough as you can make yourselves, but we do not have any place in the organization for a tough. This type of work does not call for bums and tramps. It calls for the highest qualities of soldiering."

During the twenty-four months the Alamo Scouts were operational, there were six-week training classes comprising anywhere from forty-five to one hundred soldiers held at the ASTC, which changed locations throughout the war. The rigorous course emphasized physical fitness, but along the way, candidates also received instruction in a wide variety of skills, including wilderness survival, scouting and patrolling, rubber boat handling, and the use of both American and Japanese weapons. Alamo Scouts also learned cover and concealment skills that helped render them invisible to the enemy. They used makeup and mud to camouflage their skin, and they wore a piece of camouflage clothing known as a "frog suit" to help them blend into the jungle greenery of the Pacific islands on which they would carry out their missions. They learned to use natural noises to remain undetected by the enemy as well.

For instance, the sounds of the jungle and the noises created by the ocean surf each helped mask the sounds of their movements. Scouts also learned to use patience to go undetected and would sometimes crawl so slowly that it would take them a full half an hour to travel just twenty-five feet.

Training was intense, and large numbers of those who entered the ASTC did not make it through. Out of the original forty-four men who came to Pfeiffer Island for the first training class, for instance, only twenty-four men were ultimately kept on as Alamo Scouts and arranged into teams named after the team leaders (McGowan Team, Barnes Team, Sonhar Team, and Thompson Team). All told, only 117 out of the 250 enlisted men who passed the ASTC course actually went on to become Alamo Scouts, and only twenty-one out of seventy-five graduating officers ended up becoming Alamo Scouts.

First Missions: The New Guinea Campaign

General Doolittle, who was the Allied commander in the Southwestern Pacific Area, planned to use General Krueger's Sixth Army to invade the Admiralty Islands in early 1944 as part of the New Guinea Campaign. In particular, MacArthur had wanted the Sixth Army on Los Negros Island on February 29. The US Fifth Air Force estimated that the Sixth Army would face only about three hundred Japanese troops when it landed on Los Negros Island. General MacArthur's intelligence outfit thought that there were a little more than four thousand Japanese troops on the island, and the Sixth Army's 1st Cavalry Division, which was tasked with making the landing, believed that Los Negros was home to as many as 4,900 Japanese soldiers. Because of the disagreement over the enemy's strength on Los Negros Island, General Krueger decided to use the Alamo Scouts to verify the disposition of Japanese troops before the 1st Cavalry Division went ashore.

Colonel Bradshaw chose to send in the McGowan Team and the Barnes Team to determine the enemy's strength on Los Negros Island on February 29. He designated the McGowan Team as the operational team—the team that would actually carry out the reconnaissance mission—and he made the Barnes Team the contact team. It was the contact team's job to travel to the landing area before the
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start of a mission and determine exactly how, when, and where the operational team would go ashore. The contact team then accompanied the operational team during their insertion and returned to extract them.

On the morning of February 27, 1944, two days before the 1st Cavalry Division was scheduled to go ashore, the McGovern Team made its way into the jungles of Los Negros Island. At one point the men stopped, held their breaths, and prayed as fifteen Japanese Imperial Marines walked past them only ten yards away. The scouts' training in cover and concealment served them well. They went undetected, and the intelligence they ultimately brought back to Sixth Army headquarters proved invaluable.

After doing their own reconnaissance and meeting some of the inhabitants of Los Negros Island, the McGovern Team learned that the Japanese had not in any way evacuated the Admiralty Islands, as some US intelligence outfits believed, and that a large number of enemy troops remained on Los Negros Island. Thanks to this and other intelligence gathered during the McGovern Team's foray onto the island, the 1st Cavalry Division and the US forces supporting it were able to make some important changes to their battle plans.

First, the beach that had been chosen for the 1st Cavalry Division's landing was changed, a move that resulted in lighter-than-expected casualties when the troops went ashore. Second, the US Navy was able to double the number of destroyers it sent to bombard the island in support of the landing. Finally, as a result of the McGovern Team's reconnaissance mission, both the US Navy and the US Army Air Force knew more precisely where to direct their fire and drop their bombs during the 1st Cavalry Division's assault.

Alamo Scouts Training Subjects

Besides physical conditioning, the curriculum taught at the Alamo Scouts Training Center included instruction in the following areas: rubber boat handling, survival, communications, scouting and patrolling, intelligence gathering, navigation, and weapons. Within these various categories of skills, Alamo Scouts' trainees learned, among other things, how to care for and maintain their rubber boats, how to interpret aerial photographs, how to fight with a knife, what plants were edible and inedible, how to navigate by the sun, how to stalk, and how best to cross rivers. During weapons training at the Alamo Scouts Training Center, Alamo Scouts' trainees became proficient in the use of small arms, like carbines and submachine guns, and learned to use explosives, mortars, snares and booby traps, the garrote, and weapons used by the Japanese. — Earle Rickard

The men held their breaths as fifteen Japanese Marines walked past them only ten yards away.

As a result of the New Guinea Campaign, the Alamo Scouts proved themselves to be a valuable intelligence-gathering asset in General Krueger's arsenal. In the course of the campaign, the scouts conducted a total of thirty-six missions, during which they captured twenty-four enemy soldiers and rescued 500 civilians. Individual scouts were highly decorated during the campaign and received a total of nineteen Purple Hearts, eighteen Bronze Stars, and four Soldier's Medals (the US Army's highest noncombat medal for valor).

Return to the Philippines

Whereas the Alamo Scouts had previously been used in relatively straightforward reconnaissance roles, when US forces began the push to retake the Philippines in 1944, the typical Alamo Scout mission changed in composition as well as duration. In the Philippines, the Alamo Scouts often found themselves acting as lieutenants between US forces and the numerous Filipino guerrilla groups that inhabited the archipelago. The scouts were also given the job of resupplying and arming these guerrilla groups. At the same time, the geography of the region meant that the scouts' missions were now much longer than they had ever

Japanese were hard pressed and had transferred the majority of the surviving Allied prisoners they had taken at Bataan and Corregidor and throughout the Philippines to other locations in their rapidly shrinking empire. Some of the survivors of Bataan and Corregidor, however, were kept on in the Philippines, and when a report reached General MacArthur's headquarters that the Japanese were holding five hundred such prisoners at a camp near Cabanatuan on the island of Luzon and that they planned to execute them, a rescue plan was put together.

The daring plan to liberate the prison camp was built around a reinforced company of the 6th Ranger Battalion and two Filipino guerrilla groups. To the Alamo Scouts fell the important job of finding out how the prison camp was laid out.

During the initial reconnaissance, which was done on January 28, 1945, the Alamo Scouts' Nellist Team and Rounsville Team discovered that a Japanese division was bivouacked near the prison camp. They also learned that these troops would move out of the area the next day. As a result, when Nellist and Rounsville reported this to the unit's commander, LTC Henry Mucci, whose 6th Rangers had set up a staging area a few miles from the camp, they recommended that Colonel Mucci postpone the mission for twenty-four hours. Colonel Mucci took their advice, but he sent Nellist Team and Rounsville Team back to the camp to gather more information.

Back at the prison camp, LT William Nellist and PFC Rufu Vacular donned native clothes and wide-brimmed hats and then brazenly walked through the tall grass in front of the camp. "We just sauntered up," Nellist later recalled, "looking at the plants and got in this shack—a nipa hut. It was some three hundred yards north of the camp. From there we could see everything."

Lieutenant Nellist sat at the front window holding an army surveillance photo of the camp and a paper overlay to fill in. Through the back door, Private Vacular ushered in Filipinos who worked in the camp and could give them vital information about its layout. "We knew which way the gate opened," Nellist remembered. "We knew how many guards there were, what time they changed, how many strands of wire there were, the works. The natives would get the appropriate people, bring them in to us, and we would write down exactly just what we wanted to know." That night, while the Filipino guerrillas struck nearby Japanese forces, Colonel Mucci's Rangers and the Alamo Scouts descended on the camp and freed the surviving prisoners of Bataan and Corregidor.
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Out of the Shadows

Up to this point in the war, the Alamo Scouts had successfully lived in the shadows and were little known even within the Sixth Army. The raid on the prison camp near Cabanatuan, however, changed all that. The raid made headlines back in the United States. An article about the raid published in the February 26, 1945, issue of Life magazine mentioned the Alamo Scouts briefly, and three months later, an entire article devoted to the scouts appeared in the June 30, 1945, issue of The Saturday Evening Post, placing the unit firmly in the spotlight. Eventually, two Alamo Scouts and a dozen Rangers who participated in the raid were sent back to the United States to take part in a war bonds tour that took them, among other places, to the White House.

Although the shadow soldiers were now visible in the United States, back in the Pacific they continued to bedevil the Japanese during the struggle for control of the Philippines. From January 9 to June 30, 1945, during operations on Luzon, the Alamo Scouts conducted forty-three intelligence and reconnaissance missions, helped coordinate guerrilla activities, and aided Allied prisoner liberations. In February, reconnaissance by the Alamo Scouts helped liberate 2,147 civilian internees being held at the Las Batas camp twenty-four miles behind enemy lines on the shores of Laguna Bay.

The End

The Alamo Scouts were disbanded, although never actually deactivated, after the Japanese surrender late in 1945, and the ASTC, which was then training its ninth class of scouts at Subic Bay on Luzon, closed its doors on October 10, 1945. US Army LT Robert Sumner, leader and namesake of Sumner Team, was there when it closed. “I was the last one to leave. I took down the flag and shut off the lights,” he later said.

During the twenty-four months that General Krueger’s Alamo Scouts were operational, the unit built up an impressive service record. From February 1944 to war’s end, 138 shadow soldiers conducted a total of 112 recorded missions and never lost a man. After the Alamo Scouts were disbanded, the scouts themselves faded away like the shadow soldiers they were. Some of them returned to their original units while others went on to join Ranger units. Following the war, the Department of Defense incorporated the knowledge gained by the Alamo Scouts’ missions into numerous military training programs, and in 1988, more than forty years after the end of World War II and the scouts’ last mission, the Alamo Scouts were finally recognized by the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School as being a forerunner of the US Army Special Forces; as part of this prestigious recognition, each Alamo Scout was awarded the coveted Special Forces Tab.

An Aborted Mission: Corregidor

ON THE NIGHT of January 26, 1945, a team of Alamo Scouts set out aboard a US Navy PT boat to attempt to infiltrate the Philippine island of Corregidor, which was located in Manila Bay and was then held by the Japanese. Unfortunately, when the PT boat reached a point about seven miles from the scouts’ objective, two enemy destroyers appeared on the boat’s radar. The team of Alamo Scouts ultimately opted to abort the mission. “We were in between Bataan and Corregidor when we called off the mission,” Alamo Scout William Blaise, who was a sergeant at the time, later recalled. “It was hairy! Manila was on fire and the whole sky was lit up. We were getting tracer fire coming in from Bataan and Corregidor.”

US Army SGT William Blaise.

—E. RICHARD

For further reading, consult Silent Warriors of World War II: The Alamo Scouts Behind the Japanese Lines and Silent No More: The Alamo Scouts in Their Own Words by Lance Zedric.