

The Provisional Air Corps Regiment at Bataan, 1942

Lessons for Today's Joint Force

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*We're the Battling Bastards of Bataan,
No Mama, No Papa, No Uncle Sam,
No aunts, no uncles, no cousins, no nieces,
No pills, no planes, no artillery pieces,
And nobody gives a damn!*

—Frank Hewlett, “The Battling Bastards of Bataan”

War Creates the Unforeseen

Frank Hewlett would have known an iron law of warfare: war indeed creates the unforeseen—for those in command and on the front lines. As Manila bureau chief for United Press (the news agency known later as UPI), Hewlett was the last war correspondent to evacuate Corregidor during the fateful events that led to the destruction and capture of the men of the Provisional Air Corps Regiment (PACR) on the Bataan Peninsula—one of the US military's great defeats.

During desperate times throughout World War II, troops were compelled to perform actions and duties beyond their training and intended purpose. Ad hoc battalions of sailors and Marines were ordered to carry out raids on land. The Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine had to fight under unfamiliar circumstances to meet the Allied advances toward Germany from east and west.¹ Before that, Soviet Marines joined Red Army comrades to fend off Hitler's invasion, and Soviet sailors fought to the death against the Nazi invaders despite their lack of training to fight Hitler's SS or Panzers.² In the Pacific, when Imperial Japanese Navy units fought US Marines and Army formations at Guadalcanal, Attu, Tarawa, Saipan, Leyte, Luzon, and Okinawa, it did not matter whether the Japanese soldiers and sailors were front-line combat units or construction battalions; everyone was expected to take part in the defense. And at Bataan, American airmen were ordered to move up to the front lines and fight alongside infantry, tanks, and artillery.

Many airmen today have extensive counterinsurgency experience fighting on the ground, calling in airstrikes, and rescuing wounded troops from hostile insurgent strongholds. But there are no incoming aircraft to strafe their positions, or enemy artillery batteries hammering away at their trench lines day and night, or frontal as-

saults by infantry and armor. Supply is not an issue today, as American troops in the field benefit from secure routes of communication, supply, and support. Thus, few airmen today can comprehend the hardship their predecessors endured between December 1941 and April 1942 on Bataan, a tiny peninsula in the Philippines. Many will recognize the American struggle in the Philippines as the “Death March.” But that is only the aftermath of a desperate. In the end, a joint American–Filipino force was compelled to surrender, and that is the narrative we describe in this article.

War Plans

Before the war, the United States had multiple war plans, including the Rainbow war plans (the plans for war with Japan were Orange). In 1939, the Joint Army and Navy war plans were approved; Rainbow 4 was the strategy to secure and control the Western Pacific as rapidly as possible and maintain the defense.³ Under Rainbow 4 in 1941, War Plan Orange-3 (WPO-3) was approved, although it was already outdated. Under WPO-3, “American troops were not to fight anywhere but in Central Luzon. . . . The mission of the Philippine garrison was to hold the entrance to Manila Bay and deny its use to Japanese naval forces.”⁴ WPO-3 was flawed because the plan called for a tactical withdrawal from Luzon to the Bataan Peninsula by all Allied divisions to establish a series of defensible lines of resistance (LORs), utilizing terrain and concentration to create a headache for any attacking force attempting to push the defenders from the Philippines. A series of island forts was constructed at the mouth of the bay, directly under the Bataan Peninsula. The island of Corregidor would become the HQ for MacArthur and his staff during the campaign.⁵ Servicing large shore batteries as large as 14 inches, Corregidor and the surrounding island forts prevented any shipping from reaching Manila by sea and provided significant fire support to Bataan itself. WPO-3 was opposed by many in the Army and Navy. Planners saw the island archipelago as indefensible if invaded by a significant and determined force.⁶ Other officers, including General MacArthur, believed that with the influx and training of new Filipino reserve divisions and additional supplies from Washington, he could establish a new war plan that would repel the invaders at the water’s edge and undertake a more active defense. The general saw WPO-3 as a “defeatist” plan, and unfortunately the war would come sooner than anticipated. What’s more, the active defense of Luzon, and a campaign that would be waged with the understanding that America’s full might would be directed toward Hitler and Europe first, meant that MacArthur would start the conflict against the Japanese with one hand tied behind his back. Washington also determined that the defenders in the Philippines, including the Filipinos, were expendable.

During the Japanese campaign to take the Philippines, the United States Army introduced a new fighting unit to its Bataan defense: the Provisional Air Corps

Regiment. This new ground infantry formation was formed from airmen whose jobs were no longer germane to the military situation. Men were drawn from maintenance, ordnance, communications, intelligence, ground staff, and aircrew squadrons. The regiment comprised two battalions: 1st Battalion (Headquarters Squadron of the 20th Air Base Group, 19th Air Base Squadron, 27th Materiel Squadron, 28th Materiel Squadron, and 7th Materiel Squadron); 2nd Battalion (2nd Observation Squadron, 48th Materiel Squadron, Headquarters Squadron of the 27th Bomb Group, 91st Bomb Squadron, and 17th Bomb Squadron). Each squadron represented roughly a company-sized element in infantry terms. This formation was extraordinary in concept and something that American airmen had never been asked to do in mass prior to the Japanese offensive. To understand how and why this formation was created to defend the Bataan Peninsula, we must look back.

On Sunday, 7 December 1941, the six carriers of the Imperial Japanese Navy launched their aircraft for a surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The attack destroyed an overvalued portion of our fleet but failed to locate and destroy the main assets that would determine victory or defeat in the Pacific—the aircraft carriers. As battleship row and the many Hawaiian airfields burned, the Japanese blitzkrieg that followed Pearl Harbor attempted to seize and secure the resources and defense perimeter necessary to maintain the integrity of the empire. On 8 December, across the international date line, other Allied installations such as Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong, Malaya, Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines were also attacked.⁷ As the bulk of the Imperial Japanese Army was bogged down in heavy combat on the Chinese mainland, the task of securing this “defense perimeter” and raw materials would fall to the Imperial Navy.

At 0230 hours on 8 December 1941, Asiatic Fleet HQ in the Philippines received a radio message that Pearl Harbor had been attacked.⁸ The Philippines was 18 hours ahead of Hawaii time.⁹ The first Japanese aircraft took off to hit Davao on Luzon from the light carrier *Ryujo* at 0400 hours.¹⁰ At 0500 hours, Gen. Lewis Brereton, commanding general of all Far East Air Forces (FEAF), the largest concentration of American aircraft outside the continental United States, requested permission to launch his B-17 squadrons against Japanese air bases on Formosa (Taiwan). Gen. Douglas MacArthur's aid, Gen. Richard Sutherland, told Brereton that MacArthur did not have time to see him.¹¹ At 0900 hours, Brereton launched his available B-17s to conduct naval reconnaissance to spot any potential landings by the Japanese, the only course of action he could take to get his air assets off the ground to avoid being attacked while sitting on the tarmacs.¹² Unfortunately for the FEAF, the launch of the B-17s at this time would be based on false alarms; the main Japanese attack on Clark Field would not arrive until 1245 hours that day, just as the bombers were being refueled and respotted.¹³ Nearly 10 hours and 15 minutes after being notified

that the United States was at war with Japan, General MacArthur had failed to appreciate one of the most important principles of modern warfare: time. The advantage in the coming struggle had been lost. On the morning of 8 December, the FEAF possessed roughly 277 aircraft.¹⁴ By early afternoon, this robust force was diminished to a shadow of its former self while inflicting acceptable losses to the Japanese attacking force. The American forces in the Philippines had effectively lost air superiority due to MacArthur's lack of action. The loss of air supremacy so early in the campaign would prove to create an even more untenable situation for an already doomed defense. Herein lies the origins of the PACR and the situation that required its formation as a ground combat unit.

WPO-3 as a concept may have looked well constructed on paper, but in reality it was far from effective. The first brigade of 3,000 Japanese troops landed on Northern Luzon at Aparri and Vigan.¹⁵ These initial landings received little opposition from Gen. Jonathan Wainwright's Northern Luzon Force. With the loss of critical air cover to attack landing forces, incoming convoys, and enemy aircraft, the situation quickly spiraled out of control. MacArthur's strategy for an active defense had stalled, and after two weeks of what must have been considerable internal debate and careful calculation, he decided to call for all available units to fall back to Bataan and establish and hold a series of defense positions until relieved. The lull in allowing subordinate corps commanders to take necessary actions to properly prepare the defenses and logistics required to hold Bataan according to plan had been cut short. Massive amounts of food stocks, ammunition, medical supplies, and other material needed to be transported from locations across Luzon and the rest of the Philippines to the peninsula.

This large and complex logistical operation also required that most valuable asset in military affairs: time. With the loss of air superiority or even having a properly contested airspace above the battlefield, the Allied troops faced overwhelming odds. Several large delaying actions were needed to block the masses of Japanese units landing at multiple points on Luzon's endless coastline. From Northern Luzon to Lingayen Gulf, the Japanese landed and advanced, squeezing the Allies and pushing them back farther and farther. This great withdrawal is another key moment to consider for the formation of the air regiment we are looking back on in this article. The men who formed the PACR would be forced to travel the packed roads of troops, trucks, and Filipino civilians back to Bataan to defend themselves while undermanned and undersupplied. Engineers painfully awaited orders from commanders to blow a bridge, knowing that a friendly unit was just up the road, across the river, holding back the tide of Japanese troops to buy precious time for retreat. When the order was sent down to destroy the bridge, many of these Allied units were cut off and could no longer retreat. The men re-

treating to Bataan were aware of the necessity and held tight to the belief that the US Navy would soon charge to the rescue at the last moment. This hope of eventual relief and reinforcements ensured by General MacArthur would also seep into the ranks of the PACR as they began to experience ground combat on Bataan.

The Beginning of the End

With the war on and the Japanese actively attacking US forces in the Philippines, logistical and manpower issues became evident immediately. During the first air raids by the Japanese, barely anyone could receive medical attention before the next round of Zeros would come in to finish off anything moving or shooting.¹⁶ Pfc. Lee Davis, a future PACR member, and 2d Lt. John Posten, a pilot with the 17th Pursuit Squadron, recalled that aircrews and maintenance workers on the airfields would take cover under anything available. Fuel trucks and containers were the first targets to explode, leaving the ground covered in charred bodies.¹⁷ Although most of the aircraft on the ground were destroyed by bombs or bullets, some pilots would still try to take off to defend the airfields. Lieutenant Posten stated that, even though he was able to take off his P-40 Warhawk, eight other aircraft were lost on the strip.¹⁸

A month later, at the beginning of January, US forces were ordered to leave the airfields; the Japanese were pushing through Lingayen Gulf, so the aircraft, food, and supplies that could be taken to Bataan were burned.¹⁹ Across the forces retreating to Bataan, such decisions would only exacerbate the logistical issues and starvation that haunted many troops later in the war.

Early Reflections

One of the most important lessons to draw on from the beginning of this campaign is the loss of air supremacy. To lose control of the air is a painful experience to those who must fight it out on the ground. When a military force controls the air, it also holds an important tactical advantage against enemy ground forces. To control the air is to control all who dwell underneath. The failure to adhere to available signal and physical intelligence and take decisive and swift action was the first blunder for the United States Army Forces Far East (USAFFE). In fact, Japanese reconnaissance aircraft had been spotted over Luzon as early as 5 December!²⁰ This observation should have triggered a maximum alert combined with the war warnings that Washington was sending to all US outposts. Had the information confirmed at 0230 hours on 8 December been acted on, and had the commanding general acknowledged the necessity to meet with his primary air commander in the region on urgent request, we might have seen a different start to this “second Pearl Harbor.”

As events unfolded, General Brereton continued to ask throughout the early morning on 8 December for permission to at least conduct a reconnaissance flight/sortie of the Formosa bases to update his crews' target folders, but he was further delayed. It is fair to say that, short of violating orders, Brereton did all he could to try and launch the FEAF to make an early impact, but MacArthur did not appreciate the urgency. The FEAF, after being notified, could have launched a strike on the Japanese airfields on Formosa just as the fog lifted later that morning over the island. Some Imperial Japanese Army Air Force (IJAAF) aircraft, runways, ammunition, and support facilities could have been knocked out early in the campaign. Allied dispersion airfields that were unknown to the Japanese planners could have been utilized to recover the B-17s after a first strike on Formosa. The large B-17 force in the Philippines could have been preserved for a longer duration of this battle, rather than suffering the fate of being struck on the ground and rendered useless due to lack of preemptive action taken by MacArthur.

The failure to decisively release the airpower under MacArthur's command was not the only initial mistake made in December 1941. Due to the known Japanese assault on multiple heavily contested regions of the Pacific, any staff would have recognized that the Imperial General Headquarters could not afford to send an overwhelming mass of forces to the Philippines for an initial assault.²¹ The Allied forces in the Philippines were anything but an offensive force, and the reserve Filipino division lacked modern equipment and a standard language to communicate, therefore making them an inferior force compared to the Japanese. Oftentimes, officers and enlisted personnel could not understand each other due to the multiple languages spoken on the islands.

The failure to pick a plan and stick to it is relevant as well. If the generals on the Philippines had been more proactive during the early morning hours of 8 December—with the clear understanding that the United States had been attacked by Imperial Japan—the forces in the Philippines could have begun unloading the warehouses and deploying all units to Bataan. Food stocks could have been organized, ammunition and supply stationed properly, and the refugee crisis diminished with an orderly and smooth transition to the peninsula. All these actions could have taken place with time to spare. Full units with intact formations would not have had to sacrifice precious lives and materiel holding back Japanese advances at the last moment. An aggressive attitude by the air forces and the relocation of all ground forces combined could have created a serious headache for Gen. Masaharu Homma, the Imperial 14th Army commander, and his troops. Homma knew that his timetable for taking the Philippines would not rest solely on his ability to take Manila. That objective would be a breeze, as MacArthur decided not to defend it. If any Filipino units were to be used before the Bataan defense,

it would be in Manila. A city battle would be the last entanglement that the Japanese would desire to tackle while attempting to concentrate on the multiple Allied corps placed in well-prepared defensive positions along a narrow front and a defense in depth with strong interior lines.

This scenario, however, was only a fantasy in hindsight. The decisive actions needed to be taken according to the war plan had been scrapped for two weeks and then reinstated. On 24 December 1941, MacArthur had changed his mind and committed to the defense of Bataan. MacArthur was trapped by his vanity, and his inability to estimate the combat potential of his adversary would cost him his garrison and the Philippines.

The men of the PACR would now be placed at the front to fight the Emperor's soldiers face to face. With the loss of the majority of USAFFE airpower, either destroyed or on the way to safety in Australia, the men of the air corps were left without a job and no aircraft to support. Once behind the first defensive line on Bataan, the Mauban–Abucay Line with a volcano at its center, the PACR began field training as infantry. Some men in the air regiment had been prior infantry or combat branch personnel before service in the Air Corps, which would soon come in handy. There would be two corps-sized units operating in Bataan: I Corps under the command of General Wainwright, and II Corps under Gen. George Parker. The PACR would be under the jurisdiction of II Corps on the eastern side of the Bataan front. These two corps would take direction from General MacArthur, stationed in his bunker on “the Rock” (Corregidor Island). It must be appreciated that the general officers on Bataan spent much of their time at the front or close to it. General Wainwright was famous for directing troops while under heavy air and artillery fire. During the retreat to Bataan, Wainwright's Northern Luzon Force held the line against Japanese assaults as General Parker's Southern Luzon Force made the long and difficult journey to Bataan from south of Manila.

Formation of the PACR

Airfields were few and hastily constructed on Bataan.²² The few remaining aircraft, including a few beat-up P-40s provided the main air cover for the defenders. The airfields were located at Pilar, Orani, Cabcaban, Bataan Field, and Marivales.²³ Available aircraft support personnel were far in excess to theater requirements. For example, a full squadron of A-24 Banshee maintainers, ordnance specialists, and aircrews had arrived in the Philippines before their aircraft could be flown to the islands in time to meet the Japanese attack.²⁴ By 6–7 January, all available units had successfully withdrawn to the peninsula to set up the first line of defense. The Japanese were slow to pursue the Allied positions and did not make contact with the main LOR until 9 January due to a lack of concentration,

as many other Japanese units were still en route after securing other sections of Luzon. The initial LOR was referred to as the Abucay Line but was quickly broken and reestablished farther south. The second and more permanent main line would be referred to as the Orion–Bagac Line and extended across the peninsula from east to west with a volcano at its center. Meanwhile, behind the II Corps sector on the western end of the line, the PACR was under initial formation.

2nd Lt. John Posten, the fighter pilot with 17th Pursuit Squadron, recalled the start of the PACR, stating that some of the best crew chiefs (all enlisted men) now had to be a part of squadrons that would make up infantry units.²⁵ Cpl. Fred Gifford from the 21st Pursuit Squadron mentioned that he hated being in the Army as an infantryman.²⁶ The 21st and 34th Pursuit Squadrons early on were tasked with flushing out an entire division of Japanese, but instead they were stuck and had to retreat, forced to give up ground while taking heavy losses.²⁷

As the PACR trained for ground combat, it was frequently interrupted by attacking aircraft, a result of the miscalculations early in the campaign. Advanced infantry training is a very difficult course for modern US military personnel to complete, not to mention while under constant air and artillery fire while learning the realities of the front. The regiment was officially formed on the night of 8–9 January outside Barrio Bilolo, 2 kilometers west of the town of Orion. They were assigned to take positions along the II Corps front, specifically a 2,000-yard section codenamed “Subsector B.”²⁸ On their flanks would be Filipino army elements with the US 31st Infantry Regiment in reserve to plug any holes or to check infiltration of the lines by the Japanese.²⁹ The prepared defensive positions were well constructed with clear and interlocking fields of fire located on terrain at the foot of rising ground that merged into a rice paddy.³⁰

Their weaponry consisted of a hodgepodge of available arms taken from crippled bombers and fighters along with assorted small arms. The standard World War I-era Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifle was a mainstay, along with Tommy guns and BAR light machine guns. Air-cooled machine guns and jerry-rigged .50-caliber aircraft machine guns were fitted into defensive positions and on several vehicles. They had outdated World War I pineapple grenades, and some men were able to trade their cigarettes for a precious new weapon, the M1 Garand, from the Philippine Scouts.³¹ Uniforms consisted of Air Corps variants with the occasional flyer wearing a flight jacket or cap. World War I-style pot helmets were standard during the Bataan campaign as well. Many do not remember that the standard-issue helmet worn by US personnel when World War II broke out was of relic design and resembled those of our British and Commonwealth Allies. The regiment had no antitank weapons available and relied on the 192nd or 194th Tank Battalions to come to their relief when Japanese tanks broke through. The

US forces also possessed several M3 gun motor carriages (half-tracks), mounting a 105mm gun on a fixed chassis that could knock out armor when employed properly. These limited armored formations were held in reserve for both corps fronts to react to any breakthrough and provide an antitank capability, which all units along the LOR would need at some point during the campaign.

The approximate strength of the PACR for front-line duty ranged from 1,000 to 1,400 personnel, with some squadrons being recalled to the rear airfields to perform their primary functions as air support personnel. Capt. John S. Coleman, commander of the 27th Materiel Squadron, described his men's equipment and tactical situation when he stated: "We had 163 men of which an average of about 100 were on the front lines near Orion. We had about 44 back at PNAD [Philippine Air Depot], some on crash boat crews, some driving half-tracks, and tanks. We had on the frontline 3 machine guns, of which 2 were water cooled Brownings' and one marlin machine gun. We had two BARs; the rest of the enlisted men had .30 caliber rifles and officers had one pistol each. We had 2 grenades each. Some carried 4 each on patrols. The first battalion had about 34 machine guns. About two-thirds of them were machine guns taken off wrecked airplanes, of the .50 caliber class and were too heavy to carry around. Most of these were in front-line trenches and offsets well concealed and fortified by sandbags and sod."³²

Throughout the beginning of the PACR's front-line duty, technical advisers from the US 31st Infantry were spread throughout the squadrons to assist in developing fighting skills and preparing defenses.³³ Along with their barbed-wire entanglements and prepared defensive positions, tin cans were secured to the wire in order to trigger the presence of oncoming Japanese infiltrators at night (flares were in short supply). The PACR positions were bombed daily by dive-bombers such as the Ki-30 Ann and Aichi D3A Val, which were consistently striking the lines and producing casualties.³⁴ As bombers roamed at will without any presence of Allied aircraft to interdict their strikes, the morale of the regiment diminished. On 28 January, the regiment was called for main front-line combat duty when the 51st Filipino Division disintegrated and a large Japanese force began to infiltrate along the left flank of the II Corps line. The PACR filled the gap, cut off the infiltrators, and restored the line. Some units of the regiment were withdrawn to the rear of the line to conduct offensive combat training, due to speculation that a relief force was making its way to the Bataan Peninsula.³⁵

This further exemplifies the lies told to the troops fighting tooth and nail to hold fast and await a rescue that would never come. President Franklin Roosevelt, General MacArthur, and rumor intelligence continued to provide false hope of rescue, but this hope gradually faded as the men on Bataan grew more aware of their doomed situation. The regiment's morale slightly increased when a convoy

with .50-caliber machine guns shot down two dive-bombers. However, this small victory would not clear the skies above or stop the bombing.³⁶ Other than patrols, antiair activity, and static defense, the regiment settled in for a siege. The Japanese did not launch any air attacks on the line at night, which helped morale and the ability to get some sleep.³⁷ If this brief period of rest had been interrupted, as with the Marine and Army units on Guadalcanal more than a year later, the men's ability to function and maintain their sanity would have decreased.

Starvation and One Final Stand

On Bataan, the PACR and the other forces defending against the Japanese were not only undermanned and undersupplied but also faced starvation. By January, all personnel were placed on half-rations, and in March this amount was reduced to quarter-rations. Their daily two slices of bread were no longer available, and the calories fell well below 1,000 daily.³⁸ Two 1-pound cans of salmon were issued to a group of more than 100 men at a time, and sugar was rarely available at the amount of 2 pounds per squadron.³⁹ The men crafted substitutes for their coffee, such as dried leaves of the mango trees. Some Clark and Nicholas Field personnel had brought stocks of canned and perishable foods to Bataan, but those were confiscated by the Quartermaster Corps in January to be redivided among the garrison. These food stocks were never seen again. It was rumored that rear-echelon and commanding officers were eating better than the front-line troops, and PACR troops sometimes passed out in the chow line due to malnutrition. Many diseases such as malaria, scurvy, and beriberi took root in the ranks and severely diminished the ability to defend positions. The CO of the 27th Materiel Squadron described his squadron's combat readiness, reporting that every man but one had malaria before the surrender; only 47 men were able to walk when surrender came due to starvation and malaria.⁴⁰ Some units issued patrolling troops with one sandwich per man for 36 hours.⁴¹ Sometimes when the artillery and air attacks became intense, baby monkeys would scurry into the men's fox-holes. Many of these monkeys were eaten out of desperation, but many men found it impossible to eat them due to their humanlike appearance at that age.⁴²

Malnutrition was destroying the fighting strength of the PACR troop as well as the garrison on the peninsula. General Parker, the II Corps commander, on 15 March reported that his combat efficiency was at 20 percent. Antimalarial drugs such as quinine were quickly becoming unavailable, and overall medical care for the wounded was below standards, with many wounded men who, under normal circumstances, would be evacuated took their place back in the lines. As March arrived, Gifford of the Philippine Army and Posten recalled that the food situation was now at its worst.

The men had resorted to eating monkeys and even lizards. Many reportedly were too weak from hunger to fight or fly.⁴³

The month of April 1942 marked the beginning of the end for Bataan's defenders. Bataan was on its last levy, and the Japanese blitzkrieg down the peninsula began pushing them closer and closer to the shores of Manila Bay.⁴⁴ Airmen acting as infantry had to conduct a fighting retreat not only through infantry but also armor and air forces. This retreating action lasted three days, and the Provisional Air Corps Regiment heroically broke out of pending encirclement. But this small feat of American stubbornness by unlikely soldiers would not produce a different outcome. On the morning of 9 April, Gen. E. P. King Jr., without the blessing of General Wainwright, ordered all Allied forces on Bataan to surrender, although Corregidor still held.⁴⁵ After hearing of the surrender, General Wainwright sent a cable to President Roosevelt, stating "I have done all that could have been done to hold Bataan, but starved men without air support and with inadequate field artillery support cannot endure the terrific aerial and artillery bombardment that my troops were subjected to."⁴⁶

The Death March

When Americans think of the Philippines during World War II, they normally refer to the Bataan Death March as if it were the only source of knowledge associated with the fall of the garrison, but this article explores more than the horrors following the Allied surrender. The only situation worse than the five-month campaign was what followed the men who had thought they lived through hell. Upon the surrender of General King, General Homma and the leadership of the Japanese 14th Army assured the American general and his staff that they would be treated humanely by their captors. The orders from Homma's General Headquarters, however, would not be carried out by the lower levels of command responsible for transporting the roughly 75,000 prisoners north into central Luzon. Many of the lower-level commanders allowed their soldiers to act with extreme brutality against the American and Filipino prisoners.⁴⁷ To surrender in Japanese culture was to bring dishonor upon yourself and your family. The way of the warrior (the Bushido code) did not allow the soldier to fall into enemy hands, and to the Japanese such men were a disgrace. American troops had not faced a surrender to the Japanese before this moment and found out the hard way what would happen to them and other Allied troops who decided to surrender to the Imperial Japanese military, which for years had been brainwashed to take their ancient Samurai traditions to the extreme.

Men were forced to march with little food or water and subjected to Japanese troop columns thundering south while laying siege to Corregidor and the final

American holdouts. Along the road, crowds of Filipino civilians would stand on the path and toss the Americans water and food, but when the troops would reach for them, the Japanese guards would shoot or bayonet them. They would be subjected to moments of sheer terror as men who fell out of line due to extreme exhaustion, thirst, or hunger would be killed by the Japanese. There were many accounts of Japanese troops riding on trucks or tanks laughing with their swords and bayonets out as they traveled along the road, slicing into the dazed prisoners as they shuffled north.⁴⁸ Thousands of Americans and Filipinos would die on the march, and many more would perish in captivity from hunger, disease, and brutality. The mentality of the soldiers can only be described by someone who lived it. Staff Sgt. Alf Larson told his story: “One the march started, everything just sort of froze in my mind. I was pretty numb the whole time. I didn’t think and I didn’t feel. I was like a robot and just kept moving. Other than daylight or dark, I lost all track of time. I had to blank everything out and focus straight ahead. I lived from day to day, in fact, hour by hour. The only thing I thought about was the moment and ‘The good Lord willing, I’ll get through the day.’”⁴⁹

The men of the PACR who remained alive after the desperate fight on Bataan would endure this road of death alongside their Navy, Army, Marine, and Filipino comrades. Another account of the march from Cpl. Hurburt Gater of the 200th Coastal Artillery mentioned that “[o]ccasionally, a Jap would run out and hit one of us with his rifle. No one slept.”⁵⁰ Canteens were taken from the men and sometimes used to beat the already old, weak, and sick military forces or civilians in the Death March. Each morning, everyone would be woken up to start marching; the Japanese soldiers would order the weakest to start in the front of the two columns, and as the day wore on those at the front would drift to the back. Some of their comrades would try to hold them in the middle, pushing them along, because if they reached the back of the line and could no longer walk, they were shot on the spot.⁵¹

Concentration Camps

After the Death March, many of the forces still alive were kept in concentration camps; there the men would have to learn how to survive and scrape by until either death or liberation. One of these was Camp O’Donnell, a former American airfield. There, Americans were stripped of everything they had. One US officer possessed a Japanese fan, which he was accused of stealing; he was then given a death sentence for stealing items off of dead Japanese. Those who remained at Camp O’Donnell were put to work; one, Pfc. Andrew Aquila, was placed on graveyard duty. Aquila reported a death rate of 40–50 people per day; 1st Lt Mark Herbst stated that on the Filipino side 100 were dying each day, as they were called out as traitors by the Japanese.⁵² In order to survive the killing and disease, many volunteered for detail work.

Capt. Theodore Bigger was placed on detail to rebuild bridges that the Americans destroyed when retreating to Bataan.⁵³ Hard labor and volunteering for detail duty was one of the only ways to survive the hardships while waiting to be liberated. Anyone caught trying to fight or run suffered grave consequences. TSgt. James Caire and Captain Bigger recalled how one man successfully escaped. On 11–12 June, the prisoners heard that Japanese soldiers were shot, and one man escaped, and for this action the Japanese soldiers rounded up 10 other men who worked alongside the escapee, stood them in front of the other prisoners, and shot them, stating that for every one who escapes 10 will die.⁵⁴

Another POW camp was located at Cabanatuan City. There, prisoners heard of the 10 men executed at Camp O'Donnell. Much of the same treatment occurred at Cabanatuan, but Private Aquila reports that many had to deal with dysentery and malaria while enduring hard labor. Some of the men would even crawl under the huts and die in the excrement. Others learned to survive by trading within the camp. Due to the unsanitary conditions, rat colonies were plentiful, and Sgt. Forrest Knox recalled that men would collect rat carcasses to trade for cigarettes; some men would eat the rats to prevent starvation.⁵⁵

Many would later be packed like sardines into the dark bowels of “hell ships” bound for the Japanese home islands or Taiwan. Many of these ships would be mistaken for regular transport ships by American submarine wolf packs and sunk during the journey.⁵⁶ Many POWs did not survive the rest of the war.

They had been left behind, but they had not been forgotten. On 9 January 1945, MacArthur would return to the main island of the Philippines, which he had considered home for most of his professional life. Nearly three years after their capture, the few survivors of Bataan and Corregidor would be liberated—and not a moment too soon. Militarily, the invasion of the Philippines defied the strategy MacArthur had used in campaigns throughout the Southwest Pacific, but for him the liberation of the Philippines was personal. The need to redeem himself for his initial failure and the presidential-ordered escape from his situation took precedence over the more efficient Central Pacific strategy of island-hopping and the isolation of large pockets of Japanese forces by cutting off their supplies. The liberation of the Philippines was not a linchpin in the surrender of the Japanese home islands, as were the losses of Tinian, Guam, Saipan, and Iwo Jima. This time, Manila would not be spared; it would be engulfed in a desperate and fanatical defense that mirrored Stalingrad.

Legacy and Heritage

The story of the Provisional Air Corps Regiment is one of desperation and heroism. The airmen who performed their part in America's attempt to hold fast in the

face of overwhelming odds should be a moment celebrated across the United States Air Force today. Maintainers, aircrews, communications, munitions, signals, intelligence, and staff personnel of all types picked up a weapon and went up to the line. It was a moment rarely experienced by Americans and was one that likely will never happen again—but the possibility never fades completely away. This regiment must be remembered, and lessons provided to us by these men's actions must not be lost to history. The PACR will go down as a unit that fought a much better equipped and experienced enemy, but the overall campaign for Bataan and Corregidor should be studied intensely by future joint force air war planners. Never in our history has the lesson of controlling the air been so well instructed.

Lessons

Today in the Pacific we can observe the capability of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to present the Allies with the problem of defending the sovereignty of a vast area far from American shores. The first advantage lies with Beijing and time is with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) if it attempted to achieve President Xi Jinping's stated goal of reuniting the Chinese mainland with the free and democratic Chinese Nationalist bastion of Taiwan. The first 12 hours of any move by the PRC to achieve that reunification will be decisive in the determination of the outcome. Learning from MacArthur's hesitation, the US reaction would have to be swift and determined. Hesitation due to lack of political will and domestic political divisions could create a disaster. During the decisive first 12 hours, the United States would have to respond with any allied forces in the Pacific as well. Like the Filipinos assisting the Americans in World War II, a twenty-first century conflict would require the South Koreans, the Japanese, the Australians, and possibly the Filipinos to come together to face the Chinese adversary. Assets that are deployed far from the arena of battle will be required to respond as quickly as possible to repel or stem the crossing of the Taiwan Strait by the PLA and Chinese navy. Air supremacy would be contested in a way not experienced since World War II. The few main US air bases we possess within range of the first island chain are pretargeted and could be hit and neutralized on the first day of battle. The Chinese can also opt to avoid direct combat with the United States and its allies if they chose not to strike our bases first and only assaulting Taiwan. This would be their best chance of causing maximum hesitation among the Americans, because, unlike the Imperial Japanese, the PRC would not gift a Pearl Harbor first strike to unite American resolve. If the United States attempted a relief expedition to Taiwan, the PRC could redirect reserve assets to strike forward bases as well as naval assets making their long voyages across the Central Pacific and into the Philippine Sea. Many new technologies would be tested for the first time in a near-peer conflict.

War is a contest of wills and is never certain. In a war that includes multidomain capabilities, full-spectrum dominance is never guaranteed. There are great powers with the political will to compete, contest, and conquer to achieve geopolitical interests. To prepare for the conflict before the worst-case scenario is crucial, especially in the Pacific theater. Air defenses and multidomain defense and capabilities do not begin and end with basic security forces and basic air defense systems. In the twenty-first century, to prepare for such a conflict the United States should integrate forces with joint operations and equipment plus combined multinational forces. Air bases as well as strategic domestic installations should possess all means necessary to sustain operations in a near-peer environment. This lesson comes from the Philippines directly: the US forces on Bataan and Corregidor did not have the necessary equipment to endure a long conflict and instead ran out of supplies. Instead, the United States should dedicate resources such as surface-to-air missiles, antimissile defenses, and counter-UAV operators so that coalition bases can defend against complex attacks in each domain, which is what can be expected from the Chinese adversary. To balance the scales, a multinational coalition in the Pacific needs to be formed; combined air defenses should include the most advanced and capable systems to avoid a worst-case scenario in the Pacific theater.

In the Pacific, misinterpreting intelligence, or disregarding intelligence to sustain the status quo, can create the very worst scenario. As in the Philippines and at Pearl Harbor, we may fail to identify clear signs of a buildup due to a lack of acceptance that the unthinkable is really taking place. Beijing might bet that the West has no stomach for a high-end fight or is unwilling to spend lives and treasure necessary to decisively contest the battlespace. Miscalculations can lead to a war that neither side wants and can cause unintended disasters that no side could foresee.

If a worst-case scenario takes place, the air bases that provide the first line of air assets in response would be subject to attack from cruise missiles or amphibious assaults. This seems characteristically outrageous to contemplate; however, one mistake that is regularly made in war planning is not believing that one's opponent will act within your own parameters of what you believe possible or likely. If air bases and installations are attacked by a conventional force, the support personnel at those locations must be willing and able to supplement the defense of their positions to hold until relieved. Of course, the battles on Bataan are an extreme case, but history has a nasty habit of repeating itself. Only the names, dates, places, and technologies change. The nature of war remains the same. However unlikely it may seem, the senior airmen working the flight line at Kadina may find himself or herself loading an M4 rifle or manning a 240 machine gun on a line next to the local Marine Detachment as PLA Marine Corps units move across the tarmac. ✪

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