

THE U.S.
CAVALRY'S

LAST

CHARGE



With obsolescence looming and the Philippines in peril, American horse soldiers rode in an unlikely but successful fight

Japanese troops land on northern Luzon (above), as part of a force encircling Manila—a conflict American and Filipino horse soldiers had trained for (opposite) in the preceding months.

By David Sears



"SKINNY" WAINWRIGHT WAS FIGHTING mad. With the Japanese poised to cross the Batalan River unopposed, he hastened to Bagac, a village on the west coast of the Bataan Peninsula, part of southern Luzon in the Philippines. It was January 16, 1942. After five weeks on half-rations, Major General Jonathan Wainwright looked even more gaunt than usual as he climbed from his green Packard scout car to confront Brigadier General Fidel Segundo, commander of the Philippine 1st Division.

Wainwright had earlier dispatched some of Segundo's infantry to Morong, a village about four miles north on the coastal road, along the Batalan's south bank. The American had hoped to delay the Japanese at Morong, but Segundo had withdrawn. The Batalan was the only natural obstacle to a Japanese advance against the Mauban Line, which defended the western half of Bataan. Wainwright ordered the Filipinos back to Morong; an advance guard would reconnoiter, then hold the village until reinforcements arrived.

Also in Bagac were the remnants of the U.S. Army's 26th Cavalry Regiment, a Philippine Scouts unit led by American officers. The skeletal men and horses of the depleted regiment's E and F Troops had consolidated into one understrength unit. A young officer from G Troop was on hand. His unit had just been sent to the rear after completing a grueling reconnaissance, but he had stuck around because he knew the area and wanted to help. Captain John Wheeler, who commanded E and F troops, was standing alongside the man from G troop when Wainwright,

a cavalry veteran, recognized the fellow.

"Ramsey, isn't it?" Wainwright barked. "You played in the polo match at Stotsenburg? You take the advance guard. Move out!"

Wheeler started to explain Ramsey's presence.

"Never mind!" said Wainwright. "Ramsey, move out!"

Sixty years later, Ramsey recalled that moment. "You know the old saying in the Army, 'Keep your bowels open, your mouth shut, and never volunteer?'" he said. "Well, I violated all three."

JAPAN'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE Philippines, begun with an air strike hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, succeeded spectacularly. In less than two weeks the invaders had destroyed American air and naval power in the islands and landed strong detachments on Luzon and Mindanao.

Japan's strategy was to encircle the Philippine capital, Manila, by landing troops all around the island of Luzon. Preliminary landings began on December 10 in areas of northern Luzon defended by General Wainwright's North Luzon Force—three unseasoned Philippine Army divisions along with the 26th Cavalry and a field artillery unit. Owing to the December 11 destruction of the U.S. Far East Air Force and Wainwright's decision not to oppose the incursion on the northern coast, the Japanese, under Fourteenth Army commander Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma, easily established a firm foothold in northern Luzon.

On December 12, the Japanese invaders achieved a

From left, snapshots of cavalry life in the prewar Philippines: 26th Cavalry Regiment troopers in a recently acquired armored car chat in October 1940 with a comrade on old-school messenger duty; Philippine Scouts prepare for a January 1937 exhibition; Lieutenant Edwin Ramsey rides at a U.S. Army parade ground on Luzon in 1941. Soon after, he would order the last U.S. Cavalry charge ever.



THE 26TH'S HEART WAS ITS NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS, SOME WITH 20-PLUS YEARS OF SERVICE.

second lodgment 260 miles southeast of Manila. As several thousand imperial soldiers advanced northwest on December 23, the Filipino 51st Division, part of the South Luzon Force, withdrew from that region.

The day before, from Northern Luzon, Japanese forces penetrated to within 170 miles of Manila. To the west, 43,000 men of Homma's Fourteenth Army were splashing ashore at Lingayen Gulf. Soon, after landing troops on Luzon's southeast coast, the Japanese were also threatening the Philippine capital from that direction.

"The rat," Skinny Wainwright conceded, "was in the house."

Wainwright's best fighting force was the 26th Cavalry, part of a storied tradition. American cavalymen—known as "Yellowlegs," after the yellow stripe down the seams of their uniform trousers—could trace their lineage to the Revolution. (See "Hooves on the Ground," page 52.) At the turn of the century, they fought Philippine rebels; the "Stotsenburg" Wainwright mentioned was a U.S. Army fort 50 miles north of Manila named for a cavalryman killed in

that insurgency. By the 1930s, however, American military horseflesh was giving way to machines. In 1939 Chief of Cavalry Major General John K. Herr insisted to Congressional skeptics that horse cavalry had stood "the acid test of war"—but even then it had been three years since the army had published the final edition of its horse cavalry manual.

Nearly all the 26th's 50 officers, mostly Americans, and its about 800 enlisted troopers, mostly Filipinos, were garrisoned at Fort Stotsenburg, where the unit had formed in 1922. The 26th's ranks included a headquarters troop, a machine-gun troop, and a platoon with scout cars and trucks. The regiment was the first Filipino unit to be issued the new M1 Garand rifle, which mounted troops stowed in saddle scabbards. The unit's heart was its cadre of noncommissioned officers, some with more than 20 years' service. Many of the younger men in the unit had been literally raised in the cavalry. Private Dominador "Dan" Figuracion, 21, for instance, had been soldiering less than a year, but had been born at Fort Stotsenburg; his father, Juan, still served in the regiment. Before the war,



Ramsey found his way into the cavalry through polo.



friction had arisen between the Filipino troopers and their white officers over perceived disparities in discipline. But under the leadership of Colonel Clinton A. Pierce, a legendary cavalryman, the regiment had regained its historic cohesion and esprit de corps.

Wheeler and Ramsey, two of Pierce's spirited young officers, were a study in contrasts. John Z. Wheeler, son of a St. Paul, Minnesota, physician, had grown up in affluence, with piano lessons, NRA marksmanship badges, summers spent boating, and daydreams of battlefield valor. Following his junior year at Minnesota State, where he enrolled in the Reserve Officer Training Corps, Wheeler toured Europe. After graduation and a stint at Harvard Business School, he joined the army. In December 1941, Captain Wheeler was a troop commander on Luzon. "I am very happy here," he wrote home, "happy selfishly because I love the island, happy unselfishly because I know I am doing a man's job, a necessary job, and doing it well."

Edwin Price Ramsey, 24, born in Illinois and raised in Kansas, was the scrappy product of a broken home. Jailed on charges of beating his wife, Ramsey's father had killed himself. Ed's mother, Nelle Brown Cozad, raised her son and his sister Nadine while operating a thriving cosmetology business. Nadine Ramsey became the first woman to deliver U.S. airmail and was later a stunt pilot. Ed's adolescent drift carried him to the discipline of Oklahoma Military Academy—and polo. Love of the mounted sport led him to law school at the University of Oklahoma, home to a championship team, and a commission in the U.S. Cavalry, where polo was a prestigious pastime.

Polo and climate lured Ramsey from the 11th Cavalry, then patrolling the California/Mexico border, to the 26th, which was recruiting. "The mountains along the border... are pretty cold and miserable," he wrote later. "I didn't even

know where it was when I first volunteered except that it was a warm country, it was tropical, they had a good polo team."

WHEN JAPAN ATTACKED IN EARLY December, Wheeler and Ramsey deployed in opposite directions. "We had been playing polo the day before war broke out," Ramsey said; Wainwright had officiated. "I didn't know we were at war until I woke up the next morning." Ramsey and his horse Bryn Awryn were trucked out of Fort Stotsenburg with Troop G 120 miles northeast in case the enemy landed in that vicinity. Attacked by air but not by land or sea, G troop remained there through Christmas before being rerouted south.

During that time, most of the 26th, including Wheeler and Troop E, had been clashing relentlessly with the Japanese south and east of Lingayen Gulf. Whenever Wainwright's defenses sprang a leak, he plugged the 26th into the hole. After General Douglas MacArthur's command fled to Corregidor, the best Wainwright could achieve was delay; the longer he withstood the Japanese surge, the more of his battered corps would be able to siphon south into siege positions. The 26th fought five rear-guard battles in as many days—losing a quarter of its men and nearly half its horses.

On December 23, near the barrio of Rosario, inland of Lingayen Gulf, John Wheeler reined up at what he thought to be a straggling American tank.

"What the hell's the idea?" the horseman shouted before realizing that the head rising from the turret hatch was Japanese. Squeezing off a round from his .45 pistol, Wheeler joined a costly, panicked stampede. Finally the remnants of his troopers crossed a bridge over the Apangat River, with Japanese armor and infantry in hot pursuit. Wheeler and two others blocked the span with a flaming truck—a

HOOVES ON THE GROUND

For more than a century, the U.S. Cavalry carried America's banner into battle

REVOLUTIONARY WAR 1775-1783

Combat often occurs face to face, as at the 1781 Battle of the Cowpens.



CIVIL WAR 1861-1865

Cavalrymen fight en masse in huge battles such as Brandy Station, in northern Virginia.



INDIAN WARS 19TH CENTURY

Circa 1900, an Indian artist paints the June 26, 1876, Battle of Little Big Horn.



From Essential to Outdated

Until World War I, America's most mobile ground force was the U.S. Cavalry. After 1918, though, unit after unit mechanized. Cavalry regiments and even divisions existed on paper or as actual National Guard units, but time was not on the horse soldiers' side.

Invoking Russian and German success early in World War II on horseback, diehards imagined a hybrid force

trucking its mounts into battle and fighting in tandem with vehicles. However, hooves and harnesses lost out to all-wheel drive and armor.

The 26th Cavalry Regiment, in the Philippines, was one of the few active U.S. Cavalry outfits abroad. The United States had annexed the islands upon defeating Spain in 1898, inheriting and prolonging an insurgency that triggered

decades of American military presence. Even in the late 1930s, troopers of the 26th Cavalry and other Philippine Scout outfits were battling their own countrymen.

Japan's December 1941 invasion poised the 26th, headquartered on Luzon, for what history would record as the last combat charge by the U.S. Cavalry. —*Michael Dolan*

feat that earned each man a Distinguished Service Cross. As Wheeler's force clattered through darkened Rosario, F Troop horsemen, including Dan Figuracion, on his horse Santango, provided them with covering fire.

By the time Figuracion reached the command post in Rosario, Santango had a loose shoe and his rider was the sole survivor of an eight-man squad. Turning Santango loose, Figuracion jumped aboard a scout car bound north for Baguio, an inland city east of the mouth of Lingayen Gulf. At the Kennon Road Bridge, which crossed the Bued River, flowing to the southeastern shore of Lingayen Gulf, an officer told Figuracion to follow him. The man leaped from the car and dashed onto the span. While Figuracion stood lookout, the officer wired the bridge, which already was rigged with explosives. After the men retreated to the scout car, the bridge blew, severing a line of Japanese advance from the north.

Perhaps the most memorable stand came on Christmas Eve outside Binalonan, a gateway to the vital Agno River.

Crouching all morning in filthy ditch water, men from B and E Troops, armed with pistols, rifles, machine guns, grenades, and gasoline-filled soda bottles—and eventually reinforced by A Troop—blunted assaults by two columns of Japanese tanks backed by screaming waves of infantry.

A sustained attack would have crushed Wheeler's line, but "the tank crews contented themselves with firing their main guns," he said. Still, the tankers' 47mm rounds inflicted fearsome losses. At midafternoon, the remnants of A, B, E, and F Troops, alternately riding and leading their mounts as regimental scout cars motored ahead, withdrew. They moved in stages through Binalonan and east across the Agno River to a new line of defense.

By January 10, 1942, Americans and Filipinos far south had established Bataan's newest rampart, the Mauban Line. Troop G, assigned to secure its seaward flank, ceaselessly scoured the coastal countryside.

"The animals were scarcely able to lift their feet over the vines that clogged the trail," Ramsey wrote. "The troopers

Company L of the U.S. 6th Cavalry poses at the Ming Tombs north of Peking, China.

PEKING, CHINA 1900



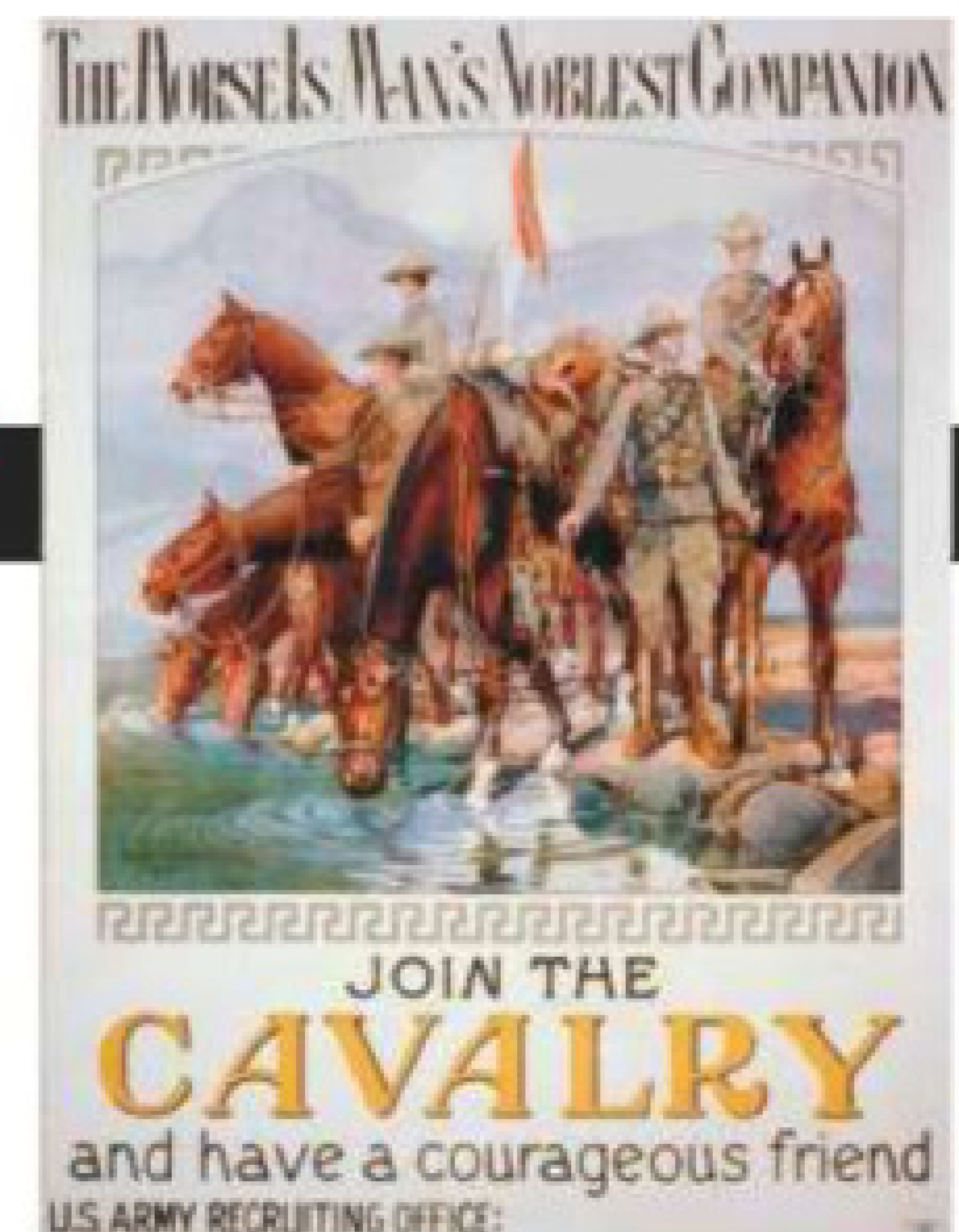
Brigadier General John "Black Jack" Pershing leads American cavalry troops in Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa.

MEXICO 1916



Cavalrymen briefly see action before being made couriers but recruiting continues.

WORLD WAR I 1914-1918



slumbered in their saddles.” Limping into Bagac on January 15, Troop G was ordered to the rear, with Ramsey remaining behind to assist Wheeler.

The next day, wearily responding to Skinny Wainwright’s orders to reconnoiter Morong, Wheeler roused E and F Troops. Because Ramsey knew the coast road—really, a rutted trail—he took the lead with the first platoon, three squads totaling about 27 men. Wheeler followed with the second and third platoons. Ramsey ordered his troopers—among them Dan Figuracion—into a staggered column of twos, hoping to present less of a target. Four men rode point, 30 yards ahead of the main body.

It was the dry season, so the horses hooves’ kicked up powdery gray dust that stung men’s eyes and throats. From either side, dense underbrush poked and slapped, impeding the riders and severely reducing visibility.

“It was an invitation to an ambush,” Ramsey recalled.

Outside Morong, Ramsey halted his column and pulled out a pair of binoculars. Three trails branched from the road. The middle one led directly into the village, a jumble of nipa grass huts atop bamboo stilts rigged to pen livestock. A towering stone church commanded Morong’s central plaza.

Ramsey raised his left arm and gestured toward the middle trail. He divided his platoon into a column of three squads. On his signal, every man reached for his hip holster and withdrew his Colt .45 pistol. Ramsey ordered the point riders to advance into Morong. As this vanguard, pistols aloft, trotted into the outskirts, the rest of the men steadied their mounts and listened for opposing gunfire.

None came. Ramsey nudged Bryn Awryn forward, his platoon following. Even though Morong seemed deserted Ramsey halted short of the square.

Beyond the town lay dense coconut groves inclining through a swamp stretching to the sea. To their right coursed the narrow Batalan River, spanned by a crude wooden bridge. Ramsey’s vanguard had turned into the square and out of sight. His three squads followed cautiously, pistols at the ready and eyes on the huts.

Suddenly explosions erupted. Birds screeched and soared away in a flutter of brilliant plumage. Horses reared or bucked. As riders swiveled their heads and struggled to rein in their mounts, rifle and machine-gun fire chattered from the north. Ramsey could see scores of Japanese infantrymen who, he said later, “turned out to be the advance guard of the Japanese who had been landed from Subic, north of Morong.” Following behind these skirmishers came rank upon rank of what appeared to be hundreds more enemy soldiers, some wading the chest-deep river, others crowding the ramshackle bridge.

Ramsey’s point men galloped back. One, Private First Class Pedro Euperio, had been shot several times in his left arm and shoulder. Remarkably, Euperio “held his... pistol with his right hand while the rein of his mount still remained hanging in his left elbow.” Ramsey ordered the wounded trooper to the rear for medical treatment.

It was now fight or flee. With the Japanese attackers advancing on the church, Ramsey drew on ingrained training. “I formed a line,” he said later. Then, pistol aloft, he shouted, “Charge!”

Riders of the 26th Cavalry Regiment pass an American light tank in January 1942. Mechanization in the U.S. Army quickly diminished the cavalry’s role in combat to the vanishing point.



OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED, TROOPERS SLAMMED INTO THE JAPANESE, TRAMPLING SOME.

THE COMMAND WAS AS OLD AS MOUNTED cavalry—and as stirring to Ramsey’s “Yellowlegs” as it had been to generations before. Instinctively, men crouched low in their saddles, hugging their horses’ necks. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Scouts galloped forward and slammed into the Japanese, trampling some and felling others with point-blank pistol shots. When Dan Figuracion and other troopers found themselves blocked by bamboo fences, they dismounted, holstered their .45s, unsheathed their M1s, and continued afoot.

Panicked enemy soldiers vaulted into huts. Others bounded for the river. “They say Japanese don’t run but they did that day,” Figuracion said. “We caught them by surprise.” One kill rankled Figuracion long after.

“I shot him in the back, still bothers me,” the cavalryman said. “But he was the enemy.”

Knowing he had to hold Morong long enough for Wheeler to arrive and reinforce him, Ramsey halted the charge. While a handful of troopers grabbed reins and led horses to shelter, one squad established a perimeter, hoping to pin down the main Japanese column.

With his second squad Ramsey galloped into Morong, intent on clearing its huts. Mounted and afoot, the men systematically fired into windows, doors, and grass walls. The men inside returned fire, and crossfire erupted from Japanese advancing on the eastern flank and enemy light mortar crews whose 50mm projectiles set huts ablaze and terrified horses. The hooves of riderless mounts thumped and skidded along Morong’s paths. One horse, standing calmly near the church as its rider fired into a hut, took the brunt of a mortar blast. The doomed animal reared, screamed, and “crumbled onto its haunches,” as the trooper, wounded and enraged, regained his feet and resumed shooting.

AMID THE EXPLOSIONS, SMALL-ARMS fire, shouts, and horses’ shrieks, the troopers barely heard approaching hoof beats: John Wheeler’s reinforcements had arrived. In a letter to his father, Wheeler had written, “I have found myself entirely equal to everything we’ve been up against, steady and unafraid.... As for my men, they

have proved themselves splendid fighters.” Now, steady and unafraid, Wheeler waved one platoon of his splendid fighters to reinforce Ramsey’s riverbank line while he and his other platoon joined the door-to-door melee. Several of Wheeler’s horsemen chased fleeing Japanese, leaving enemy bodies in their wake all the way to Morong’s outskirts and pressing the chase to the banks of the Batalan.

In Morong, Wheeler’s reinforcements joined Ramsey’s Scouts in securing the town center. For hours, as enemy mortar rounds landed and riverbank sharpshooting held off the Japanese main column, the cavalrymen secured Morong. At midafternoon, Fidel Segundo’s infantry regiment, accompanied by Wainwright, poured into town and chased the Japanese into the jungles beyond Morong.

Enemy casualties littered the area. One horse soldier lay dead; at least six had serious wounds, including Pedro Euperio, who had not gone for care. “Here he is standing, waving a pistol in his hand,” Ramsey said. “[H]e said, ‘Sir, I am still on guard.’ He was so brave. I thought he was dead.” Wheeler had been shot in the calf. Shrapnel had caught Ramsey’s knee, but more than blood stained his breeches. “I had wet myself,” he said. “The fear and frenzy of the fighting had anesthetized me both to that and to the shrapnel.”

The 26th’s glory proved short-lived. The Japanese soon overwhelmed Fidel Segundo’s troops. The cavalrymen withdrew but within days their rail-thin mounts had gone to army quartermasters for butchering—but no matter how hungry they got, no one in the 26th ate horse meat.

When Bataan fell on April 9, Wainwright, Pierce, and Wheeler were among those captured; Wheeler died in the subsequent ordeal. Others, including Figuracion and Ramsey, avoided capture. Ramsey originally thought “to get out of Bataan, down and across into the Sierra Madre, south to where we could get a boat and work our way to Australia. It was very ambitious, probably stupid....”

He made it into the hills, organized guerrilla forces—and at one time he led 40,000 irregulars—and survived to become an attorney and author of a best-seller about his wartime experiences. Edwin Price Ramsey died in 2013 in Los Angeles, California. Dan Figuracion, 94 and living in California, may be the only surviving veteran of the last charge by U.S. Cavalry horse soldiers. ★