

One of the biggest military defeats in US history took place in the Philippines, where more than 100,000 American and Filipino prisoners were taken by the victorious Japanese in 1942



FALL OF BATAAN

For three desperate months a battered Allied army held a small peninsula against formidable Japanese firepower. But the valiant defence of Bataan ended in catastrophe

WORDS MIGUEL MIRANDA

BATAAN PENINSULA, CENTRAL LUZON 6 JANUARY 1942 – 9 APRIL 1942

Toughened by years of combat in mainland China, Japan's powerful military was poised to carve up Southeast Asia during the summer of 1941. In June that year the surrender of France to the Nazis emboldened Tokyo's aggression, and Indochina was quickly made a 'protectorate'. Retaliatory sanctions by the US on Japanese oil imports had the opposite effect to that intended, hastening the countdown to total war in the Pacific. Strategists understood that dominating Asia meant seizing the Strait of Malacca on one end together with an archipelagic nation on the other – the Philippines. So the high commands in Tokyo and Washington, DC readied themselves for a mighty struggle.

Even after months of frenzied preparation, the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) was completely unprepared for the Japanese onslaught on Luzon, the Philippines' northernmost landmass. The former Spanish colony had been under American control since the turn of the century. In 1935 it was granted quasi-independence as a 'commonwealth' while garrisoned US forces were responsible for national defence. In the last month of 1941, however, the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur and other highly regarded generals was cast in doubt.

In Clark Field, B-17 bombers and an assortment of fighters were left outside their hangars for a possible pre-emptive strike on Formosa (now called Taiwan), where the most recent intelligence indicated a build-up of Japanese air and naval assets. On the morning of 8 December, just after news of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor reached the USAFFE leadership, bomber formations appeared from nowhere and laid the idle American aircraft to waste. The USAFFE was slow to react, and the Japanese army's air fleets were able to attack first. From that moment on, the sizable US garrison in the Philippines struggled to mount an earnest defence of the entire archipelago.

In the weeks after the raids on Clark Field and nearby Fort Stotsenburg – a barracks for the US Army – Japanese pilots managed to control much of Luzon's airspace, and at least two small-scale amphibious landings were carried out to test local defences. On 22 December a fleet appeared in the Lingayen



Above: General Masaharu Homma led the 14th Army's invasion of the Philippines. He was the first Asian general to ever defeat a superior American force in a conventional war. Homma was executed by the Allies in 1946, for war crimes

Gulf carrying General Masaharu Homma's 14th Army. MacArthur's nemesis was atypical in many respects. 1.83 metres (six feet) tall and recognisable for his shaved head, the soft-spoken Homma had studied in Britain and travelled widely. On 17 December 1941 he departed Formosa with his 43,110-strong invasion force, dreading an American counterattack once they reached Luzon. But after a difficult landing in Lingayen, two days went by without meeting serious resistance. In fact, a battery of US 155mm howitzers near Dagupan, the largest town along the Lingayen coast, never fired a shot at the Japanese.

The same farce unfolded again and again in the plains of Central Luzon. On paper, the USAFFE had five impregnable layers of defences buttressed by the Cordillera mountains in the northeast. MacArthur assigned General Jonathan M. Wainwright to command the North Luzon Force that enjoyed the lion's share of artillery and armour – 100 M3 light tanks that had arrived months before. There was also a South Luzon Force, a Harbor Defence Force in Manila, a Far East Air Force, a Visayas-Mindanao Force, a Reserve Force, and the combined strength of the Philippine Scouts and the Philippine Constabulary. The Philippine army was mobilised as well, with a

manpower pool estimated to reach 100,000 men. Unfortunately, in stark contrast to the well-provisioned Americans, Filipino soldiers lacked sufficient firearms, training and uniforms. Not surprisingly, Filipino units fell apart whenever they tried skirmishing with the Japanese, whose soldiers were seasoned in fighting pitched battles.

WPO-3

As each of the North Luzon Force's hastily prepared defensive lines crumbled in the days following the Lingayen landings, MacArthur decided it was best to concentrate his forces in a last-ditch attempt to hold the Philippines until help arrived. This scenario was known to American commanders as 'War Plan Orange', 'Plan Orange' or simply 'WPO-3', and involved using Luzon's geography to the defender's advantage. Rather than disperse the USAFFE over the jungles and mountains in Luzon's extremities, which is what American-led guerrilla units later did during the occupation years, Plan Orange required a single bastion to withstand a very long siege. For decades, the Bataan Peninsula was the ideal location, since it had been a hideout for insurgents even during the Philippine-American War from 1899 until 1906. Forming the eastern rim of Manila Bay, Bataan's rugged interior was covered in greenery that carpeted its many peaks, foremost being the Mariveles Mountains that offered a superb view of the South China Sea.

Once MacArthur and his staff, along with an ailing Philippine President Manuel L. Quezon, had relocated to the island fortress of Corregidor, which guarded the entrance to Manila Bay, the North Luzon Force fought minor delaying actions until enough supplies reached Bataan. This effort proved wasteful, since nearly all the American tanks and significant numbers of heavy artillery were either abandoned or lost in the process. Entire bases were given up as well, such as the naval depot in Subic Bay and the aerodromes in Clark Field and Nichols Field just outside Manila. Bridges and roads were either dynamited or booby-trapped. Tons of food and fuel were left behind in the rush southward. Sadly, the capital of the Philippines, along with every government building in it, were left as spoils for Homma's 14th Army.

As waves of Japanese bombers dropped ordnance on Corregidor on a daily basis, the Americans and Filipinos seeking shelter in concrete bunkers did what they could to celebrate the holidays. For many it would be the last Christmas and New Year's Eve to enjoy roast turkey, rum punch, canned fruit and maybe a cigar. For most it was the last December without hunger and sickness. But for the thousands of soldiers in the Bataan Peninsula, their misery had just begun.

In the span of just 15 days, what used to be the North Luzon Force fought a delaying action, reorganised its entire structure and established fortifications in the Bataan Peninsula. As the rest of USAFFE's manpower poured in, along with countless refugees, Bataan's territory was reorganised. The peninsula was halved between two new formations, I Corps under General Edward P. King in the west and II Corps under General George M. Parker in the east. Then each corps subdivided its territory into sectors joined by overlapping fortified lines. The main battle position stretched from the town of Mabatang in the east until the town of Mauban in the west. A physical barrier to offensive operations was provided by Mount Natib, whose peak still remained unoccupied.

Several kilometres behind the main position was the rear battle position,

“SO FLAWLESS WAS THE INFILTRATION THAT IT TOOK A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE AMERICANS ARRIVED IN FORCE TO BLOCK THEM”

covering the lower half of the peninsula. The rear battle position was the last line of defence for the supplies stockpiled in the service command area, which had access to Corregidor via boat from the town of Mariveles.

Homma's 14th Army launched its attack on Bataan a week into the new year, but it soon became bogged down with heavy casualties, as less experienced Japanese army units were thrown into the maelstrom. Now the Filipinos showed their grit. One American veteran, Colonel E.B. Miller, recalled the fighting in his memoir: “Shells, landing in the area, vomited and spewed death and destruction,” Miller recalled. “Jap aircraft bombed and strafed. The din was deafening. The very earth, under our feet, shook with the intensity of the attack... the Scouts turned the tide again with acts of heroism that made history. These were the Scouts who also loved and believed in America!”

Holding steady

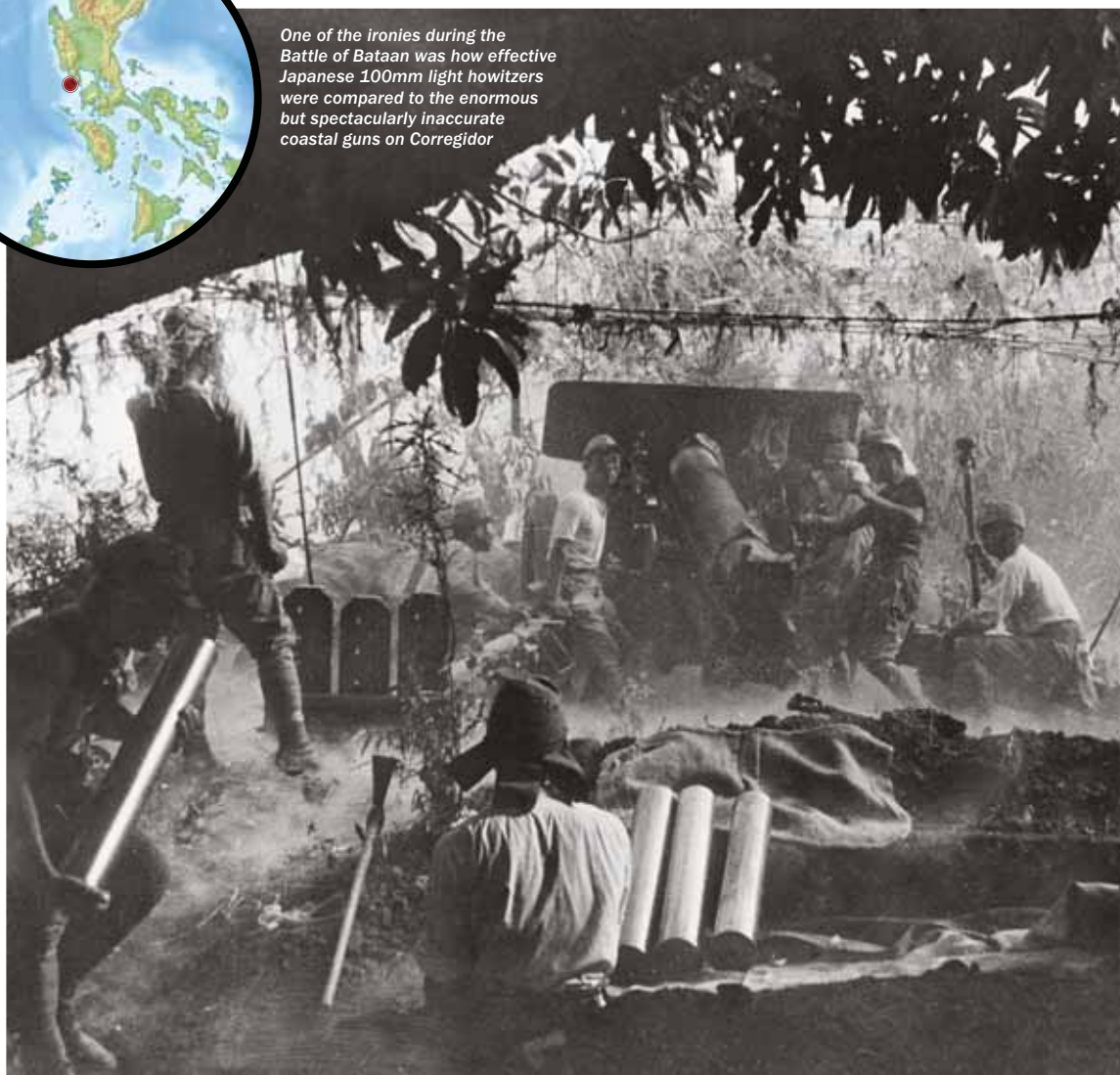
But the initial victories against the Japanese were shortlived. The reality of the situation was that Homma's troops were exhausted from their sprint across Central Luzon, which had a negative effect on their morale. Overly cautious and worrisome, Homma was aware the 40,000 men in his expedition were stretched thin. It didn't help that the Imperial Command Headquarters in Tokyo had mandated a 50-day campaign to subdue the entire Philippines. As the dreaded 50th day neared, Homma approved ever more daring tactics to settle the Bataan conundrum once and for all.

On 23 January three Japanese regiments departed Subic Bay and the coastal town of Moron to launch an attack on Bataan's western flank, which formed part of the service command area. A series of coves became landing areas densely held by Japanese infantry. So flawless was the infiltration that it took a few days before the Americans arrived in force to block them.

Colonel Miller, who led an armoured column at the time, was in the thick of the fighting. “We learned later, that on this same day, a landing had been effected by the Japs on the west of Bataan,” Miller recalled. “We had not known they were in the area. And they did not know that we were in position along this north and south trail.”



One of the ironies during the Battle of Bataan was how effective Japanese 100mm light howitzers were compared to the enormous but spectacularly inaccurate coastal guns on Corregidor



OPPOSING FORCES



USAFFE

LEADERS:

Gen. Douglas MacArthur
Maj. Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright
Maj. Gen. Edward P. King
Brig. Gen. George M. Parker, Jr.

FORCES:

I Corps
II Corps
Philippine Scouts
Philippine Constabulary
Philippine army

VS



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

LEADERS:

Lt. Gen. Masaharu Homma

FORCES:

14th Army;
48th Division
22nd Field Artillery
4th Division
4th Tank Regiment
7th Tank Regiment

A USELESS FORTRESS

BRISTLING WITH GUNS AND CANNONS, CORREGIDOR WAS MEANT TO DEFEND MANILA FROM A MARAUDING NAVY. BUT JAPAN'S MULTI-PRONGED ASSAULT ON LUZON LEFT IT REDUNDANT

When the United States began its conquest of the Philippine Islands in 1899, among the more curious spoils taken from Spain's former colonial possession was a rocky islet with a small fort. Situated at the mouth of Manila Bay, no ship could approach the Philippine capital without falling under its gaze. At least this was Corregidor's intended function.

When Commodore George Dewey's squadron of battleships annihilated the Spanish navy off Manila in 1898, for example, Corregidor failed to alert the coastal defences in nearby Cavite of the intruders' presence. Still, the new American administration that governed the Philippines embraced the idea of an impregnable fortress and poured funds into rehabilitating Corregidor.

But as the work dragged on for years the rationale behind Corregidor's purpose seemed stuck in the past. At the end of World War I, when huge leaps in air and naval technology made static defences obsolete, 12-inch M1895 coastal howitzers were placed in Corregidor. Additional batteries of giant mortars were added later.

Soon the amenities on the island rivalled a country club and an elaborate tunnel complex with its own hospital was carved underneath its highest peak to function as a command centre.

As the Spanish Civil War and the Second Sino-Japanese War proved the devastating effectiveness of bombers, anti-aircraft batteries were spread out over Corregidor. In order to withstand a siege, engineers built subterranean munitions stores containing thousands of rounds for artillery, cannons and machine guns.

The strangest improvement on Corregidor was the transformation of an outlying rock named El Fraile (the Friar) into a 'battleship'. A concrete superstructure was built over it resembling a surface combatant. Pivoting 14-inch and 6-inch gun turrets were added and quarters for its crews had enough supplies to last weeks. The oddity known as 'Fort

"THE AMENITIES ON THE ISLAND RIVALLED A COUNTRY CLUB AND AN ELABORATE TUNNEL COMPLEX WITH ITS OWN HOSPITAL WAS CARVED UNDERNEATH ITS HIGHEST PEAK"

Drum' was meant to make Corregidor even deadlier. Coastal outposts were built along the rim of Manila Bay to complete a multi-layered defensive grid.

Much to the dismay of the US commanders in the Philippines, Japan launched its invasion with an overwhelming aerial bombardment, and the landings at Lingayen Gulf far to the north meant Corregidor was little use in the actual fighting. Once War Plan Orange came into effect on 24 December the island fortress became the last bastion for the USAFFE leadership and the Philippine government, who had abandoned Manila as an 'open city'.

As the Battle of Bataan raged on for months, Corregidor provided an umbrella over the USAFFE holdouts, lobbing shells day and night at General Homma's forces. It's unclear how effective this bombardment was because there are no reliable accounts listing Japanese casualties from artillery fire. Truly disappointing were the anti-aircraft guns on Corregidor, which didn't have the range to hit the Japanese bombers that swept over Luzon.

None of Corregidor's defences managed to beat a determined amphibious landing by the Japanese army on 5 May. The total surrender of the island took place the following day. Just like in Singapore, the elaborate weaponry on Corregidor failed to serve its purpose.

Battery Cheney, a gun emplacement on Corregidor, part of the island's powerful defences



The curious Fort Drum was a heavily armed 'concrete battleship' south of Corregidor



The ruins left on Corregidor, along with a memorial to American servicemen



By 1941, Corregidor had a total of 23 artillery batteries installed. These included 12-inch, 10-inch, 8-inch, 6-inch guns and 155mm howitzers, with cavernous magazines located in underground bunkers





01 THE PERILOUS PEAKS

With the Japanese 14th Army steam-rolling down the plains of Central Luzon in late December, War Plan Orange comes into effect and the Bataan Peninsula is fortified, with its mountains serving as natural barriers.

02 CORREGIDOR HQ

On 23 December General MacArthur decides to abandon Manila and relocate USAFFE's HQ to Corregidor. The underground bunkers in the Malinta Tunnel serve as the command and control nexus for General Wainwright's orchestration of the battle for Bataan.

03 MAIN BATTLE POSITION

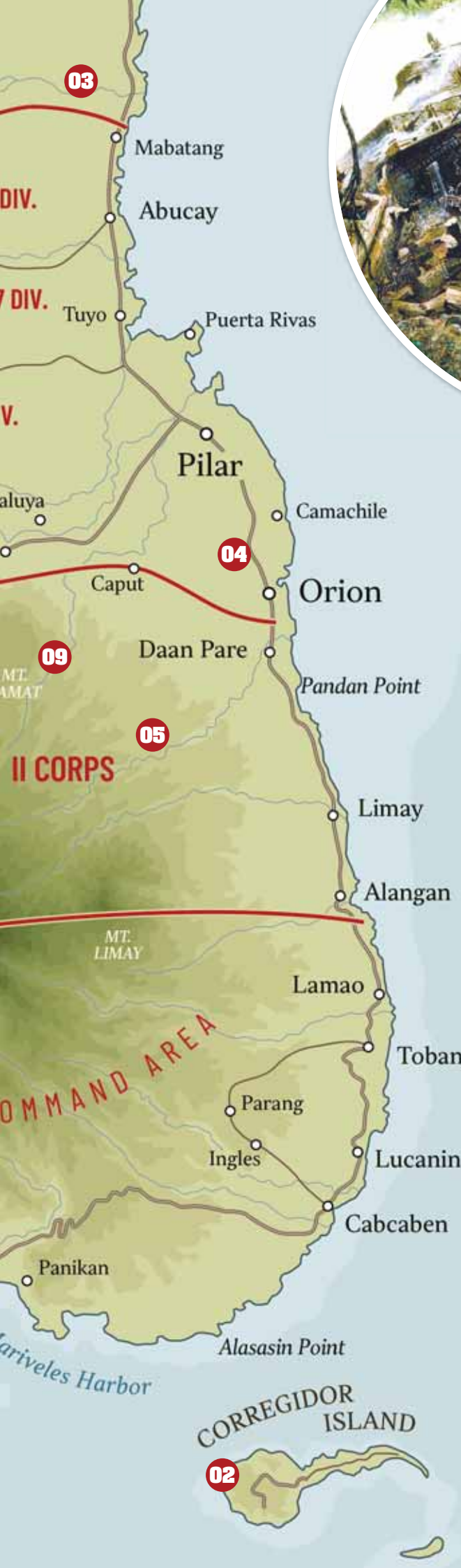
The defence-in-depth strategy for Bataan involves layers of trenches. The main battle position immediately comes under attack on 6 January, but General Homma's exhausted forces are repulsed. The main battle position's 'wings' would finally collapse by 4 April.

04 REAR BATTLE POSITION

The secondary defensive layer, or rear battle position, is manned by rear echelon units and reserves meant for reinforcing the main battle position. During the 3 April offensive, however, it too would be broken by Japanese forces.

Great Battles

FALL OF
BATAAN



Above: An American tank attacks a Japanese roadblock during the struggle for the Philippines

Miller's account of the ensuing combat is valuable for its description of a tank versus infantry battle in Southeast Asia. "They far outnumbered us, but for the present, we had the advantage in armor plate," he wrote. Miller's description of the encounter barely concealed his enthusiasm for the fight: "Our self-propelled mounts (half tracks with 75mm guns) could not have been placed in a better position for the action, had we been there in daylight, and planned it a long time before."

He also illustrated the value of the M3 light tanks in Bataan, where they functioned as mobile pillboxes: "In every available place along the entire line, wherever cover was afforded in which there might be Japs, they [self-propelled mounts] dropped their shells. The result was astonishing. The [Japanese] poured out like fleas off a dog. As they appeared, they were picked off by the tankers."

What became known as the 'Battle of the Points' failed, and Homma's exhausted 14th Army ceased major combat operations for the rest of February. For a time, it seemed Bataan's defenders had reason to be optimistic and the worst they could expect was a torrent of propaganda leaflets dropped by Japanese planes. Meanwhile, Homma received fresh manpower and supplies. The elite 4th Division led by Lieutenant General Kenzo Kitano arrived from Shanghai, together with an artillery regiment from Hong Kong. An additional 60 medium bombers flew into Luzon to cement Japanese air superiority. As a dull stalemate settled over Bataan, hunger and disease began to take its toll. The stocks of food were rapidly diminishing and American servicemen suffered as a result. The Filipinos fared a little better, since they knew how to scavenge around the countryside for sustenance. A peculiar feature of the Bataan siege was how the Americans, after four decades stationed in the Philippines, couldn't wean themselves off canned food.

Unknown to the famished defenders was MacArthur's plans for a covert exit from the theatre. As soon as a seriously ill President Quezon was evacuated from Corregidor by submarine and brought to Australia, preparations were underway for MacArthur's own departure. On 12 March the general and his family, accompanied by his staff, boarded four PT boats and set course for Mindanao. After two days at sea the retinue arrived in the sprawling plantation owned by Del Monte, the fruit company, to await their extraction via plane from Australia. Command of all operations in the Philippines was to be directed by General Wainwright, who was placed in charge of the newly minted United States Armed Forces in the Philippines, or USAFIP.

Surrender and the 'Death March'

The hammer fell on the morning of 3 April. Japanese howitzers and mortars opened up on the main battle position's northeastern sector and were soon joined by medium bombers of the 22nd Air Brigade. The pounding lasted until noon, and brush fires sent tongues of fire twirling in the hellish smoke. Infantry, supported by medium tanks, broke through two demoralised Filipino

05 PARKER'S II CORPS
 Totalling 32,600 men, the II Corps controls the eastern half of the Bataan Peninsula and bears the brunt of Japanese air and artillery bombardment. Its force structure combines American and Filipino divisions.

06 KING'S I CORPS
 I Corps is tasked with protecting the Bataan Peninsula's western half. Its divisions have to make do with less, as much of their equipment has been lost in pitched battles across the plains of Central Luzon.

07 ATTACK FROM THE SEA
 On 23 January, General Homma directs his best troops to launch an amphibious attack on the Bataan Peninsula's western shore. Sailing from Subic Bay, these forces land on three coves and get bogged down by intense machine gun fire.

08 A TOWN CALLED MORON
 The coastal town of Moron is used as a staging area throughout the struggle for Bataan. The amphibious landings in late January are launched from here.

09 MOUNT SAMAT
 On 4 April the 14th Army's divisions have broken II Corps and reached Mount Samat. With his command in disarray and supplies running short, General King negotiates a surrender on 9 April, ending the struggle for Bataan.

Map: Battlefield Design



divisions, which triggered a wholesale collapse of II Corps. Japanese officers had Mount Samat in sight within a day and a half.

Knowing that Bataan was lost, General King informed his staff that he would reach out to the Japanese the next morning. Under no circumstances was his superior, General Wainwright, who had vainly ordered a counteroffensive, to be informed of this. Accompanied by his aides, King travelled to the Japanese lines around Mount Samat and requested an audience. King was informed that dialogue was only possible with the highest ranking Japanese officers at the front – Major General Kamaehiro Nagano along with Colonel Matoo Nakayama.

The single photograph that emerged from this minor drama immortalised the anguish of the American defeat. In it, Colonel Everett

Williams's discomfort is apparent as he covers his face. Next to him is a stoic King sitting ramrod straight and cross-legged, his face creased with exhaustion. Behind King, two majors squirm in their seats. The impromptu conference lasted a mere hour, and Bataan was finally lost at midday. Later that evening a Filipino officer recited a sombre memorial on the *Voice of Freedom*, a daily radio broadcast from Corregidor. Second Lieutenant Norman Reyes's words were meant to emphasise the nobility of sacrifice, and this spin on an unimaginable defeat is still used by American and Filipino historians who revisit the fall of Bataan: "The world will long remember this epic struggle that Filipino and American soldiers put up in the jungle fastness and along the rugged coast of Bataan," Reyes intoned with almost religious fervour.

Above, left: Few images captured Japan's triumph in the Philippines better than their exultant swords-held-high bravado once Corregidor was subdued. For a brief moment, theirs was the strongest army Asia had seen

Above, right: With their lines broken and ammo, food and water dwindling, General King had no choice but to negotiate a final surrender. Corregidor succumbed 30 days later in one of the lowest points in US military history

“THE LESSONS OF BATAAN SHOULD NEVER BE FORGOTTEN. IT WAS THE COSTLIEST MILITARY DEFEAT EVER SUFFERED BY THE US MILITARY IN A MODERN CONFLICT”



Dozens of memorials can be found throughout the Philippines commemorating the country's ordeal in WWII. A monument to the fall of Bataan lists the names of those who perished during the 'Bataan Death March'

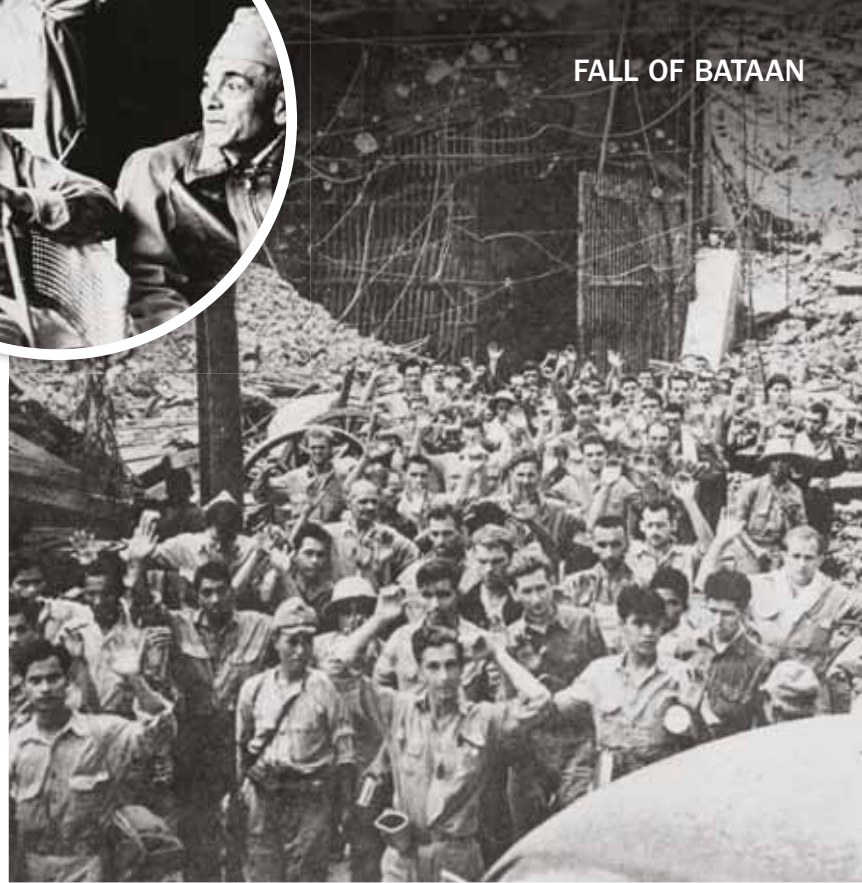
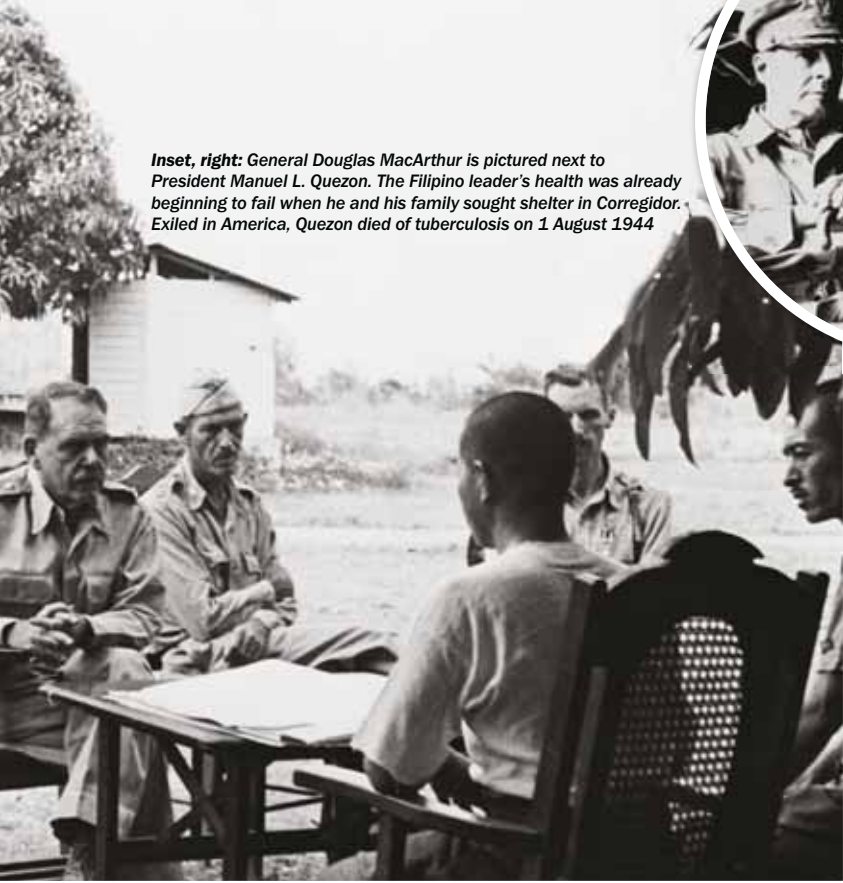
“For what sustained them through all these months of incessant battle was a force that was more than merely physical,” Reyes told his listeners. “It was the force of an unconquerable faith – something in the heart and soul that physical hardship and adversity could not destroy!”

The sudden panic that accompanied the fall of Bataan meant Corregidor's population swelled, as several thousand stragglers sought refuge in the bomb-ravaged island. In an effort to vacate the battle area with utmost haste, the Japanese assembled the prisoners of war for a long trek. It was imperative to incarcerate them as soon as possible, but the makeshift prison in Camp O'Donnell was more than 100 kilometres (62 miles) away in Pampanga.

The journalist Russell Brines recalled how much the prisoners suffered during the exodus from Bataan. “All Manila knew what happened in Bataan after the capitulation,” Brines wrote in his memoir. “The decapitation of men found with Japanese souvenirs; the murder of wounded and sick soldiers unable to keep up with the straggling columns in the... march to Pampanga; the burial alive of some of them; the refusal to give food and water to the starving and the thirsty; the beatings and the torture; the ‘sun treatment’; then later the forced labour of sick and weakened men... the beating and killing of those who tried to escape... thousands of deaths from disease for which there were neither medicines nor even primitive hospital facilities.”

It was three years before MacArthur took his revenge as commander of the South West

Inset, right: General Douglas MacArthur is pictured next to President Manuel L. Quezon. The Filipino leader's health was already beginning to fail when he and his family sought shelter in Corregidor. Exiled in America, Quezon died of tuberculosis on 1 August 1944



Above: A month after the surrender in Bataan, another 10,000 Americans went into captivity after General Homma's forces launched a successful air and ground assault on Corregidor

THE DEATH MARCH



Pacific Area. In February 1945 he beheld the ruins of liberated Manila and watched paratroopers retake Corregidor and root out Japanese diehards. At the end of the war Masaharu Homma, who had been discharged from the military, was arrested and brought back to the Philippines. He stood trial in Manila as the 'Beast of Bataan' with sole responsibility for the Bataan Death March. He was executed by firing squad on 3 April 1946.

Lessons learned

After the war, Bataan was either remembered as a testament to the Filipino-American alliance or as a sterling example of American heroism and sacrifice in a faraway land. What was less emphasised, of course, was the suffering imposed on those left behind after the battle.

But the lessons of Bataan should never be forgotten. It was the costliest military defeat ever suffered by the US military in a modern conflict. While the debacle at Kasserine Pass in February 1943 is often remembered as an infamous setback against the Axis powers, the loss of the Philippines took a greater toll. In terms of casualties, several thousand Americans and perhaps three times as many Filipinos were killed during the struggle for Luzon. The surrender of Bataan and Corregidor a month apart meant as many as 80,000 prisoners of war were condemned to endure years of brutal captivity and privation, and it's speculated 20,000 of them died as a result.

The material losses in Bataan, as well as the rest of the Philippines, were severe. Lost to the Japanese were more than 100 tanks and just as many armoured vehicles; 200 combat aircraft; several hundred artillery pieces; tons of fuel and spare parts stockpiled in Luzon's military bases. 17 million Filipinos suffered under the yoke of Japanese rule. To cite other reversals in subsequent wars, such as the Chosin Reservoir in Korea or the siege of Khe Sanh in Vietnam, is moot. These are skirmishes compared to

the knockout punch the Japanese army landed on the USAFFE and the USAFIP in 1942. If there are lessons to be learned from Bataan, a few valuable insights stand out. Foremost is the importance of adequate preparation. The Philippine Commonwealth already had a National Defence Act in 1935 that mandated a standing army. Yet it wasn't until 1941 that the army was properly organised under American leadership.

The failure of intelligence-gathering is another underlying fault. Despite evidence of Japanese preparations, USAFFE didn't anticipate an attack on Luzon. A less apparent factor that contributed to American defeat was the quality of its arsenal. Soldiers were equipped with kit from World War I, including Enfield rifles that were no longer mass produced. The artillery on Corregidor dated to the late 19th century. Except for the P-40B Warhawk, the Far East Air Force flew inadequate aircraft against the Japanese air fleets that descended on Luzon.

Understanding the tragedy of defeat matters, because its lessons are essential for upholding peace in troubled times. With the risk of war among the modern great powers still haunting the Asia-Pacific region, the fall of Bataan should serve as a stark reminder to never underestimate one's enemy.

FURTHER READING

- 📖 *Bataan: The Judgement Seat* by Allison Ina
- 📖 *Bataan Uncensored* by Col. E.B. Miller
- 📖 *Defense Of The Philippines To The Battle Of Buna: A Critical Analysis Of General Douglas MacArthur* by Lt. Col. Laurence M. Jones
- 📖 *The Fall Of The Philippines* by Louis Morton
- 📖 *Let Them Eat Stones* by Russell Brines