

TAC NEWS

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BAPTISM OF FIRE ON BATAAN

MacArthur's Phillipino Army at the Battle of the Pockets

It is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly describe Gen. Douglas MacArthur's strategy to defend the Island of Luzon and the Bataan Peninsula. However, a brief overview is necessary to set the stage for the Battle of the Pockets. Initially it was decided to defend Luzon and Manila by fortifying the Bataan choke point. MacArthur, for some reason, abandoned this strategy and opted to defend the landing beaches in the Lingayen Gulf. It was a disastrous decision. The untried Philippine Army melted away and fled south in the face of a hot pursuit to establish a new fortified line in Bataan.

The badly mauled 1st Division relieved the 45th Infantry on 26 January 1942. Three hastily reorganized battalions from the 1st and 3rd Infantry were pressed into the line and ordered to dig in. The Filipinos, without shovels or even steel helmets to dig with, scooped out their foxholes with mess kits and bayonets. As a consequence, the main line of resistance was actually a series of single man foxholes. Artillery pieces were poorly placed and camouflaged. No forward observation posts existed because there was no telephone wire to establish a communication network.

The pursuing Japanese arrived on 28 January. Col. Yorimasa Yoshioka's 20th Infantry quickly discovered a weak spot on a portion of the line where the high ground was undefended because Filipino officers exactly followed a general trace drawn hastily on a tactical map to plot their positions. The Japanese hit the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry, and drove back a rifle company. With no barbed wire to slow them, 1,000 Japanese slipped through the opening. With the jungle limiting visibility to ten

yards in either direction, no one knew the scope of the Japanese penetration. When the firing stopped, the Filipinos reoccupied the main line and resumed digging.

The Japanese continued their advance along the Tuol River. In the extremely dense jungle, the Japanese themselves became separated. One Japanese company stopped on a bamboo-covered hill only 400 yards behind the main line; this became the Little Pocket. The remainder of the Japanese pressed on another mile south until the jungle stalled them; this became the Big Pocket.

An enemy presence in the rear echelons became known on 29 January when the 11th Infantry regimental medical officer and his driver were killed in an ambush. A Bren gun carrier from the 2nd Battalion HQ was sent to the rescue, but it was driven off by heavy gunfire. The return of the Bren carrier, with its badly wounded driver, prompted the regimental commander to hastily deploy his clerical staff in a cordon across Trail 7 just south of the junction with Trail 5. He also ordered up the regiment's two reserve rifle companies.

The reserves, C and G companies, arrived three hours later. C Company was ordered to attack west across Trail 7, while G Company struck north of the trail to cut off the Japanese retreat. The attack was repulsed and the Filipinos settled in for the night, scrapping foxholes with bolos and knives.

With Bataan's main line now under continuous pressure and all of 11th Division reserves committed, I Corps ordered in the reserve battalion of the 45th Infantry. The 45th's reserve was the Scouts of the 1st

Battalion, 45th Infantry, temporarily pulled off the line to recover from previous fighting. The 1st Battalion's commander, Lt. Colonel Leslie T. Lathrop, was quick to move. He ordered B Company to board trucks and move out immediately with the rest of the battalion following on foot. As the Scouts fell in they shouted in unison, "*Petay si la.*" "They shall die."

Colonel Lathrop and his staff reached Trail Junction 5 and 7 at 2000 hours. B Company unloaded and formed on both sides of Trail 7 facing north. As he waited for the rest of the battalion to arrive, Lathrop conducted a reconnaissance. The rolling ground was thickly covered with bamboo groves, choking vines, and large banyan trees. One patrol drew heavy fire and Lathrop ordered it back. As the 45th hunkered in for the night, a concerted effort was organized for the next morning.

Early on 30 January, Lathrop, believing he faced just an enemy squad, deployed A Company on the left side of Trail 7, and C Company on the right. G Company of the 11th Infantry, along with some 37mm guns, formed the supporting firebase. Confident of light resistance Lathrop expected the battle to be done that afternoon. At 0800 hours, A and C companies moved out. Captain Archie L. McMasters, commanding C Company, put Lt Edward W. Stewart on the right flank of the company while he took the left. Lt Stewart, on active duty for barely eight months and still recovering from a wound, organized his platoon into a tight skirmish line with three to five feet between each man. The Scouts walked forward for twenty yards and came to a small clearing. Peering into the jungle Stewart spotted a

Japanese and yelled "Hit the deck. Heavy fire erupted in all directions, pinning Stewart and his Scouts. Stewart called for a runner. He sent word to McMasters that he was engaged with a dug-in enemy platoon. Stewart ordered one squad to the left and one to the right. To support the flanking move he reinforced his third squad with one water-cooled and one air-cooled machine-gun. The attack foundered under a withering hail of gunfire. Eventually the rest of C Company linked up with Stewart, but the fight had cost the Scouts four killed and six wounded. The estimate of enemy strength was now upped to a reinforced company.

The failure prompted I Corp's commander, Gen. Jonathan Wainwright, to commit Lathrop's entire battalion. The General watched the afternoon's efforts from the Scout's command post no more than seventy-five feet from the lead elements. Wainwright's appearance at forward positions, where he would spend three to six hours each day, set the tone for the American officers. Lt. Stewart was walking to the battalion HQ when Wainwright called him over. The General complimented Stewart on his performance and offered him a belt of Scotch whiskey.

As the fight continued, the Scouts began to pinpoint Japanese positions and ascertain their strength. The reverse was also true. When the Japanese knew they were facing Scouts and not regular Philippine Army they worked hard to quickly dig a network of connecting tunnels and dugouts. The fortifications were expertly done. Scout attacks on 31 January and 1 February were repulsed, with C Company, 45th Infantry, suffering twelve killed and twenty wounded out of 120 men committed. With this setback Wainwright decided to support Lathrop with a Corps asset, the 192 Tank Battalion.

Around noon on 2 February a four-tank platoon from A Company, 192nd Tank Battalion, reported for duty. One tank suffered mechanical problems so only three tanks could be used. The tank commander discussed the situation with Lathrop and both agreed the jungle was impenetrable. The tanks would advance on the trail with a platoon of infantry in close support. At 1500 hours, three tanks, their engine noise covered by heavy rifle fire, moved north along the trail. Buttoned-up in the stifling M-3s, the tankers drove and fired blind. With Japanese fire rattling off the armor, the tankers passed completely through the

enemy position, but the supporting infantry was stopped cold. A second attack was organized, but one Stuart hit a mine. Despite the loss of a track, the tank struggled back to friendly lines.

As night fell, the Japanese counterattacked. At 2200 hours Scouts of C Company spotted Japanese approaching their lines. Unfortunately for the Japanese, they stumbled directly into the heart of the Scout defense. Eight machine guns opened up along with two rifle companies worth of M-1s. Even machine guns from the nearby 11th Infantry opened up. The 11th blew off all their ammunition and even the Scouts fired too much. Col. Lathrop called McMasters and dressed him down about his fire discipline.

On 3 February a light tank supported by Scout infantry, ran into heavy Japanese fire. The Japanese gun was dug into the roots of a huge banyan tree. The roots formed a natural pillbox keeping the tank from crushing the defenders. The tank backed off, but could not depress its gun low enough to bear. Lt Willibald C. Bianchi, a Scout battalion staff officer, accompanied the supporting infantry platoon. Firing an M-1 rifle from behind the tank, Bianchi was struck twice in the hand by bullets. Unable to hold his rifle, he drew a pistol and continued to shoot. Bianchi then spotted another Japanese machine gun and silenced it with a hand grenade. Seeing the tank could not depress its main gun enough, Bianchi climbed onto the turret and blasted the Japanese with the tank's 50-caliber AAMG. Bianchi continued to fire even after being wounded again in the arm and chest. Then an AT round hit the tank and blew Bianchi off, wounding him a third time. The tank started to burn and Bianchi withdrew with the crew under the covering fire of the support platoon. This action won Bianchi the Medal of Honor.

By now additional Philippine Army units arrived on the scene and completed the encirclement. By 4 February the Japanese 20th Infantry's communications with the north were cut. The American's still underestimated the Japanese strength, even with the discovery of light artillery within the Japanese perimeter. It was guessed the enemy consisted of a reinforced battalion.

By 4 February three of A Company's tanks had been destroyed, so B Company entered the fight. The influx of replacement tanks

brought a rethinking of tactics. In the thick vegetation, Filipino and Japanese infantry became intermingled. Machine gun fire from the tanks hit friend and foe alike. It was decided to have the Filipinos ride the tanks into action and have the infantry and tanks fire freely into the surrounding area. Tank-infantry coordination improved with experience. A tank would drive over an enemy position with the tank "marines" firing down into the foxhole. The native Igorotes in the Philippine Army delighted in the close quarter fighting. They were headhunters, a practice just recently suppressed before the war.

The Japanese resisted these tank attacks fiercely, but they lacked armor-piercing rounds. Ironically the American tanks fired AP exclusively. The ammunition on both sides did not fit the mission. The tankers did develop a technique with the supporting Filipino infantry that supplemented their meager rations. As the tanks overran a Japanese position, the Filipinos stripped the dead of field packs and tossed them onto the tanks. When the fighting stopped the American and Filipinos divided the looted rations ofhardtack, corned beef, and sweet fried meats.

On 4 February the 24th Artillery, brought their 2.95-inch mountain howitzers into action. The battery pulled into position at night and set to work chopping down trees to open a spot and fire the howitzers. However, the guns were on a ridge 2,000 yards to the rear and without accurate maps, fire was sure to fall on the wrong spot. Short rounds and tree bursts were common, and one forward observer was wounded twice by the shells he was adjusting.

On 5 February the forces surrounding the Japanese consisted of five 1st Division companies, two 92nd Infantry battalions, two 11th Infantry companies, one Scout battalion, one Constabulary battalion, some tanks and artillery. The forces now settled in for a battle of attrition. Casualties were heavy among Filipino BAR men because the distinct noise of the automatic weapon drew enemy fire. Filipinos picked to be BAR men felt themselves doomed. Losses declined somewhat when BAR gunners stayed to the rear during each advance, but this drastically reduced the weapons effectiveness.

With the Japanese now cut off from overland supply, the Japanese air force attempted airdrops. Most of the bundles fell into

Filipino hands. A supply drop on 6 February followed a Japanese bombing strike. The bombs all fell squarely on the Japanese, while eleven of twelve supply canisters floated behind Filipino lines.

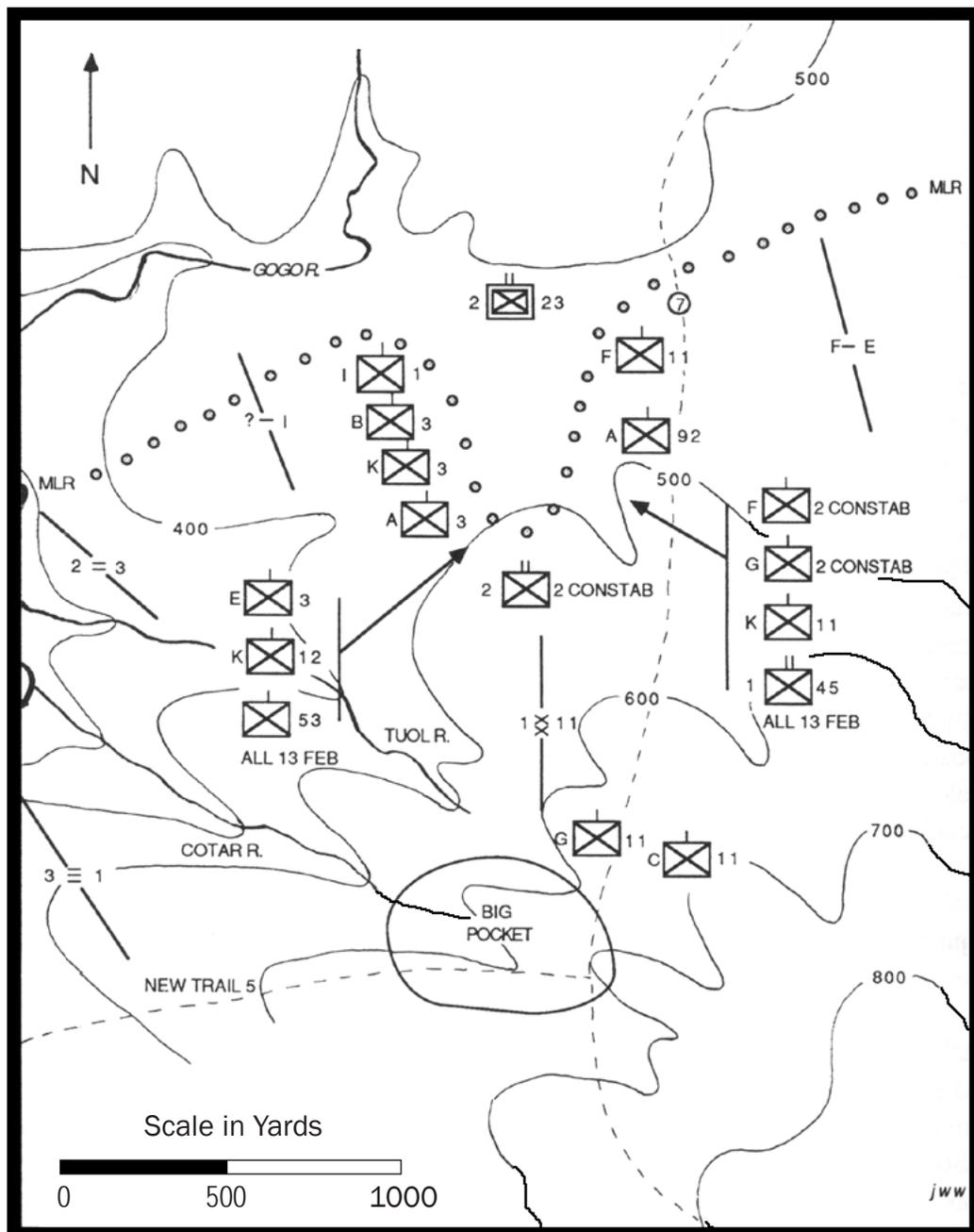
With the isolated 20th Infantry facing annihilation, the Japanese attempted to break through the main line with the 122nd Infantry and the 2nd Battalion of the 33rd Infantry. The first effort failed, but the Japanese rallied for another try on 6 February. The 2nd Battalion, 33rd Infantry, launched a night attack against the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 11th Infantry. The Japanese overran the 2nd Platoon of F Company, killing eighteen of its twenty-nine men. The service troops of the HQ detachment hastily organized a second line and stalled the Japanese 800 yards short of the Big Pocket. To contain the breakthrough, the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Constabulary rushed forward and hemmed the Japanese into a salient some 600 hundred yards deep. As a morale booster, the salient was dubbed the Upper Pocket.

With each attempt to reduce the pockets ending in bloody repulse, the American commanders finally decided to coordinate their efforts. It was agreed to firmly isolate each pocket, so the Japanese could not shift troops between them. With this accomplished, all efforts would center on reducing the Little Pocket first, and then the Big Pocket.

On 7 February the 1st Division firmly surrounded the Little Pocket and attacked. The attack started at 1500 hours and progress was slow. The Filipinos carried unreliable Enfield rifles, a few Browning automatic rifles, and a few machine guns. Indirect support came from old WWI Stokes mortars. The old bombs, stored on the islands for decades, had a high rate of duds. On one occasion 70 rounds produced only 14 bursts, another barrage of 22 rounds got only 5 bursts.

Bad equipment aside, the Filipinos were inexperienced and timid in offensive operations. It was decided to put American officers up front and organize a heavier supporting base of machine gun fire. The new tactics worked. The attack on 8 February flushed the remaining Japanese out of their holes and annihilated them.

February 9 and 10 were spent redeploying



the Filipinos from the Little Pocket to the Big Pocket. Using new tactics with invigorated morale produced steady but slow gains. Although there were no spectacular victories, it was apparent the Japanese were losing strength. Continuous pressure squeezed the Japanese closer and closer together and pushed them away from their only source of water, the Tuol River. On February 10 the Filipinos finally secured Trail 7. On February 11 the Filipinos overran the 20th Infantry's command post and captured its regimental colors. One of the M-3s lost earlier in the fight was also recaptured. The tank's tracks were disabled, but the guns still worked, so the Filipinos manned it as a pillbox.

On 9 February Colonel Yoshioka received orders dropped by plane to fight his way

back to friendly lines. He tried on the evening of 10 February to fight his way out, but was repulsed. Forced to try other tactics, Yoshioka ordered his heavy equipment destroyed. On 10 February, using stealth and the heavy jungle as a shield, just under 400 Japanese slipped out. Amazingly, carrying all his wounded, Yoshioka made it back to his own lines. By 12 February, the last living Japanese had departed the pocket.

The sudden end of resistance surprised everyone. The Americans believed, not illogically, that they had destroyed the entire 20th Infantry and grossly over estimated enemy dead at 2,400 men. Regardless of the actual losses, the battle was a great Filipino victory. After cleaning up the Big Pocket, the Filipinos marched north to the main line. Using infantry and tank teams,

NOTES ON MAC ARTHUR'S FORCES

along with vigorous close assaults, they set about reducing the Upper Pocket. By 26 February I Corps's line was restored. The Battle of the Pockets was over.

MacArthur's best unit was the 10,400-man Philippine Division. This division consisted of three well-trained and well-equipped infantry regiments. American officers and enlisted men exclusively manned the 31st Infantry. The 45th and 57th Infantry had American officers with Filipino enlisted men.

Divisional artillery consisted of the two-battalion 24th Artillery, with its 75mm guns drawn by British trucks and its 2.95-inch mountain howitzers

by mules. The one-battalion 23rd Artillery consisted of a single battery of 2.95-inch mountain howitzers and two batteries of 75mm guns. On paper the 31st Infantry's antitank company fielded the latest 37mm guns, but its actual strength was only 50 percent.

Just before the war, the Philippine Division was re-equipped with the new semiautomatic M-1 Garand rifle. The M-1's replacement of the 1903 Springfield did not sit well with the old salts. The M-1 encouraged volume of fire over accuracy, and some worried about fire discipline in actual combat. Although there were plenty of rifles, shortages existed of light machine guns, mortars, heavy machine guns, and 37mm antitank guns. Each rifle company had only three 60mm mortars, and each heavy weapons company only one or two 81mm mortars. Stateside, the authorized allotment of 81mm mortars was eighteen per regiment. Radios and the batteries to power them were virtually nonexistent; runners performed all communication duties. Regimental vehicle parks consisted of military vehicles, taxicabs, privately owned vehicles, and civilian buses.

The true strength of the Philippine Division, aside from the all-American 31st, was the 45th and 57th regiments. These were the Philippine Scouts. Scouts were men of elite martial heritage, intensely loyal to their regiments and to the United States Army. The 3rd Battalion, 45th Infantry was a typical Scout unit. On 8 December 1941 it mustered ten American officers and 520 enlisted Scouts. For

heavy weapons, the battalion had eighteen water-cooled 30-caliber machine guns, one 81mm mortar, and one 50-caliber machine gun. This allotment was markedly better than the typical Philippine Army unit.

Scouts dressed just like a US soldier with tropical woolen shirts, khaki pants, leggings, and steel helmets. Furthermore, scouts wore leather boots specially made for them in America, because the standard US Army boot was too narrow for the typical Filipino foot. Each enlisted Scout had between six months and twenty years service, with a mean average of seven-and-a-half years. Most were high school graduates and spoke a reasonable amount of English. Unfortunately, not all spoke fluent English. Experienced American Scout commanders gave their orders and then let the Scout first sergeant give the order again in his version of English. Another weakness of the Scouts was a fear of decision making and general responsibility. If a soldier took the initiative and made a mistake, the loss of face was humiliating. Regardless of this, the Philippine Scouts were America's Ghurkas and no finer soldiers could be found anywhere in the Philippines.

Philippine Army soldiers, were quite another story. Their principal problem was that of language. The Philippine languages of commerce were English and Spanish, but draftees from the remote areas spoke literally hundreds of dialects. Attention, forward march, and chow were the only words familiar to all. Some dialects lacked military terms, such as "trigger," which made rifle training an adventure. Another problem was the typical Filipino's level of physical endurance. Many Filipinos from mountain or jungle regions, existed on a subsistence diet that left them undersized and under-muscled. After a short march many collapsed under the weight of their field packs.

The 31st Philippine Infantry Division was a typical example. The 31st Division had three infantry regiments, the 31st, 32nd, and 33rd infantry. The Filipino infantrymen carried World War I .30-caliber Enfield and Springfield rifles with stocks too long for their short arms. There was a

single Browning Automatic Rifle for each rifle company, only eight 30-caliber water-cooled machine guns for each machine gun company, and only two heavy 50-caliber machine guns in an entire regiment.

The division's artillery regiment, had only two firing batteries armed with four wooden-wheeled 1917 British 75mm guns, without sights and without fire control equipment. The wooden wheels fell off when towed, so the guns were ported on truck beds. For high-angle fire, there were six 3-inch mortars for each regiment. The ammunition for the outdated 3-inch (75mm) Stokes mortar proved later to have a 70 percent dud rate.

The men of the 31st Division lacked entrenching tools and steel helmets. Headdress consisted of an odd looking helmet made of pressed coconut leaves called the gunit, which broke if dropped on a hard surface. Even individual uniforms were hard to find and soon wore or rotted off the men. Shoes were shoddy, consisting of canvas tops and rubber soles, and lasted two weeks in hard service.

The 31st Division had roughly forty American officers and twenty American or Scout sergeants serving as instructors. These men did not command, but were expected to correct Filipino commanders about to make a serious mistake. Many thought the system smacked of the Soviet model and was unworkable. As the war progressed, necessity forced the replacement of many Filipino officers, especially battalion commanders, by Americans.

There was never an accurate accounting of the Japanese forces involved. Aside from 1,000 soldiers, there was at least one horse-drawn mountain gun battery. We know it was horse drawn, because the Japanese ate the horses before withdrawing. The Filipinos captured one antitank gun, probably a 37mm. The first rounds of battle described a heavy volume of Japanese automatic fire, so we can assume there was a least one heavy weapons detachment, possibly a company.

By Edward Morris