

Past in Review



Battle, March, Remember: The Plight of West Pointers in the Philippines During WWII

By **Jerome Kleiman**, Guest Writer

(Organizer of Orangetown, NY's April 9, 2022 Living History event that commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Bataan Death March.)

On December 7, 1941, just nine hours after they carried out their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese struck the Philippines. Supremely confident, their timetable called for the Philippine Islands, then a U.S. commonwealth, to be conquered within 50 days. Against all odds, and despite being seriously under-supplied and ill-prepared for battle, the weaker American-Filipino force fought back stubbornly and tenaciously for 150 days before succumbing. This delay was to throw off kilter Japan's strategic plans to permanently control all of resource-rich Southeast Asia.

Defending the Philippines was the United States Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE), which was comprised of roughly 31,000 U.S. troops and

100,000 members of the Philippine Army. Among these troops were 299 graduates of the United States Military Academy (USMA). Before war's end, 179 of these West Pointers would make the ultimate sacrifice. To put this into perspective, a grand total of 487 West Pointers died from war-related activities during World War II; the Philippines cohort accounted for more than a third of these deaths.

On July 26, 1941, former Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, Class of 1903, who had retired from the Army in 1937, was recalled to active duty and given command of USAFFE.

Then, on December 8, at about noon Manila time, Japanese bombers flew over the island of Luzon, the largest in

the archipelago. Upon reaching Clark Air Base, they found all the American planes neatly lined up on the tarmac. Unloading their bombs on the inviting target, they damaged or destroyed the majority of the B-17s, in addition to putting 50 pursuit planes out of commission.

Captain Colin P. Kelly Jr. '37, a pilot from Heavy Bomber Group 19, 14th Bomb Squadron, was destined to become America's first mega-hero of World War II. On December 10, piloting a B-17, Kelly and his crew took off from Clark. Coming upon several enemy vessels, they unleashed their bombs. Through the smoke, flak and fog of battle, it appeared that they had hit a large battleship and caused sufficient damage to sink it. Returning to base, Kelly's Flying Fortress was intercepted by several Japanese pursuit planes and was severely shot up. Realizing that he would not be able to land, Kelly maintained control long enough for his crew, but not him, to bail out. When the plane crashed, Kelly died upon impact. For his selfless act, he was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Kelly was not the only Philippine-based hero of headline proportions from the Long Gray Line. The first American soldier to be awarded the Medal of Honor during World War II was Second Lieutenant Alexander (Sandy) Nininger, a member of the Class of 1941. Despite multiple wounds and disregarding his own personal safety, Nininger managed to neutralize several well-positioned snipers who had been raising havoc on his men, at the cost of his own life. Two other West Point graduates, both high-profile, were also to be awarded the Medals of Honor for their accomplishments during the Battle for Defense of the Philippines, namely MacArthur and General Jonathan Wainwright, Class of 1906.

The USAFFE troops, which were scattered throughout Luzon at the start of the war, retreated into a 30-mile-long by

Above: CPT Colin P. Kelly Jr. '37, as painted by Deane Keller of Yale University and featured in the Air Power Gallery at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force.

15-mile-wide strip of land bordering Manila Bay that is known as the Bataan Peninsula. Facing a hopeless siege situation, this was to be the battlefield upon which the U.S. troops would make their stand.

Cut off from reinforcements and with no realistic hope of being resupplied, they took to calling themselves the Battling Bastards of Bataan: “no mama, no papa, no Uncle Sam; no pills, no planes, no artillery pieces; and nobody gives a damn.” Nevertheless, they stood strong and refused to give up.

Although the Japanese plan called for conquest of the Philippines by January 15, which would allow their troops to be re-positioned to other strategically important locations, it wasn't until April 9 that General Edward King, commander of the joint Philippine and American force on Bataan, was finally forced to surrender. USAFFE troops on the nearby island of Corregidor, which guards the mouth of Manila Bay, continued to hold out until May 6.

The Japanese forced the tens of thousands of USAFFE troops from Bataan—most of whom were already suffering from severe malnutrition as well as malaria, dysentery, and other debilitating diseases—to walk 100 kilometers to a poorly constructed camp known as O'Donnell.

Although April is the Philippines' hottest and driest season, many of the guards refused to allow the captives to stop to drink water, even as they passed



GEN Douglas MacArthur, Class of 1903, and then LTG Jonathan Wainwright, Class of 1906, embrace each other upon Wainwright's release as a Japanese POW.



A monument on the grounds of Cabanatuan Camp # 1 of Corregidor Island, Philippines, that honors all West Point graduates who died in the Pacific Theater of Operations during WWII, either in combat against the Japanese or as a POW in one of their internment camps.

many streams and plentiful artesian wells. It is estimated that more than 600 Americans and possibly as many as 10,000 Filipinos died in what is now commonly referred to as the Bataan Death March.

As terrible as the Death March was, however, it is crucial to recognize that it was not an isolated incident. The fact is that the Bataan Death March was just one short and ugly chapter in the POW's excruciatingly long journey of torture and deprivation, which only ended with the ultimate defeat of Imperial Japan, three and a half years later.

When the POWs arrived at O'Donnell, many were barely alive. The camp had but one working water faucet and lacked all sanitary facilities. The Americans would remain there until June, during which time 1,547 died. O'Donnell was even worse for their Filipino comrades-in-arms. By late July, when the Filipinos were paroled and allowed to reintegrate into Philippine society, some 26,000 had died there.

Following O'Donnell, the Americans were transferred to a camp named Cabanatuan, where an additional 2,656 POWs died.

By autumn of 1944, when Allied troops landed on the island of Leyte to liberate

the Philippines, Tokyo decided to transport all remaining able-bodied Americans, many of whom were field grade officers, to Japan. Unfortunately, between October 1944 and January 1945, 156 USMA graduates died horrendous deaths aboard transport vessels, commonly referred to as Hell Ships, or in the aftermath of such voyages.

Of the nearly 299 West Point grads who were stationed in the Philippines on December 8, 1941, More than 60 percent would die from their ordeals by war's end. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine the suffering endured, both physical and emotional, by the survivors, which included General Wainwright, the highest-ranking American POW during the war. The story of their courage and the sacrifices they made is an important chapter in the annals of West Point, and one that must never be forgotten. ★

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