

Philippine Islands

When the United States focused its fighting power on the war in Europe, the Philippines, pivotal in U.S. war plans and of strategic importance, slipped in priority. The United States would not, however, fail to defend the islands, and in July 1941, General Douglas MacArthur was recalled from retirement to command a new organization composed of American and Philippine army troops, U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). With 10 mobilized Philippine Army divisions, MacArthur contended that he would have almost 200,000 men under arms throughout the islands and that, with the allocation of the correct numbers of bombers and fighters, he could defend the archipelago by March 1942.

By December 1941, however, the garrison boasted only 31,000 U.S. and Philippine Scouts plus 110,000 more in poorly equipped and untrained Philippine divisions. For air power and defense of the islands, 48 obsolescent Seversky P-35As and 100 Curtiss P-40 Warhawks stood ready. Thirty-five B-17 heavy bombers waited to attack Japanese air bases 600 miles north of Luzon on Formosa.

Like its attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan's military strategy for the invasion of the Philippines utilized surprise, speed, and a rapid gain of air superiority. With its navy's carrier strength devoted to Pearl Harbor, Japanese planners relied on approximately 500 land-based army and navy aircraft with the necessary range to fly from Formosa, equipping Zeros with long-range auxiliary fuel tanks, and on a naval armada of two battleships, 12 heavy and light cruisers, 38 destroyers, plus support ships and submarines.

At dawn on 8 December—7 December in Hawaii—a warning flashed from Admiral Kimmel to Admiral Thomas Hart. It soon spread to General MacArthur and General Lewis Brereton, commander of the Far East Air Force. Forces went on immediate alert, but no action was taken.

Heavy fog held the main Japanese aerial attack force on Formosa, but smaller attacks on the Philippines were mounted from the carrier *Ryujō*. A dawn raid on the navy base at Davao, on the southern island of Mindanao, included 13 Kates and five Mitsubishi A5M Claude fighters, which bombed and strafed the base, destroying two parked Catalinas. One Kate was shot down. Three hours later, another small attack was made. Neither brought forth defensive action and Brereton was denied his request for permission to launch his B-17s on an offensive raid against Formosa in accord with the war plan.

As the fog dissipated, 25 Kawasaki Ki-48 Lilys attacked the Tuguegarao airfield in northern Luzon and 18 Mitsubishi Ki-21 Sallys bombed Baguio, a resort town at Luzon's center. The Japanese Navy's 11th Air Fleet aircraft took off for attacks against the U.S. air bases around Manila. Despite advanced warnings, 26 Mitsubishi G3M Nells, 27 Mitsubishi G4M Bettys, and 36 Zeros caught the Far Eastern Air Force on the ground. Sixty fighters and 12 bombers were destroyed along with 30 additional airplanes.¹

Bad weather on Formosa on 9 December gave Philippine defenders a day to ready a force of 15 B-17s for a counterattack the following day. When word was received that the Japanese were landing troops on northern Luzon, the B-17s shifted their attack to the invasion site and P-35s and P-40s joined in, strafing the invaders as they landed. Many individual American pilots, including the USAAF's first ace, Lieutenant "Buzz" Wagner, and B-17 commander Captain Colin Kelly,

participated in heroic battles against overwhelming odds.

These individual efforts, like those at Pearl Harbor and on Wake Island, failed to stem the Japanese offensive. Air bases and their airplanes were largely destroyed. Although original air force strengths had been roughly equal, air superiority was lost to the Japanese. The remainder of the U.S. bomber force was moved to Australia. The U.S. Asiatic Fleet was decimated and a stockpile of torpedoes destroyed.

The Japanese acted quickly. Troops landed throughout the islands even during air raids. The main force—two divisions of General Homma's Fourteenth Army—came ashore at Lingayan Gulf north of Manila on 22 December. Despite opposition by Philippine army divisions, they surged forward and occupied Manila on 2 January 1942.

MacArthur moved his headquarters to Corregidor Island at the southern end of the Bataan Peninsula on the west side of Manila Bay. The concentration of U.S. Army Forces and countless fleeing civilians strained the limited supply of food, medicine, and war materiel. Homma's forces, weakened by unit transfers to other operations, suffered, too, from shortages of food and medicine and from disease. Nevertheless, battles for control of Bataan continued for four agonizing months, and weakened Japanese pushed weakened Americans to the tiny island of Corregidor. Subject to a relentless artillery barrage, MacArthur's successor, General Jonathan Wainwright, was forced into a tragic surrender on 6 May 1942, the horror of which was just beginning. The infamous Bataan "Death March," which moved the defenders into captivity as POWs, cost thousands of Americans their lives at the hands of their Japanese captors. Malnutrition, disease, and brutality exacted a monstrous toll.