

The fall of the Philippines and the siege of Corregidor 1942

American preparations 1937-41

Once Japan revoked the Washington Naval Treaty in 1937, the United States was free from the constraints on improving the defenses in the Philippines. That year, several additional 155mm GPF tractor-drawn guns and eight 8in. railway mount guns were sent to the Philippines. The 155mm guns were added to the islands' defenses, the 8in. guns were stored. The biggest changes came in 1940 as the United States began to react to the war in Europe and the Japanese aggression in China, with the passage of the Selective Service Act and increased funding for military weapons and naval construction. The defenses of Corregidor and Manila Bay were upgraded to active status in June 1940, but overall the Philippine defenses still remained a low priority.

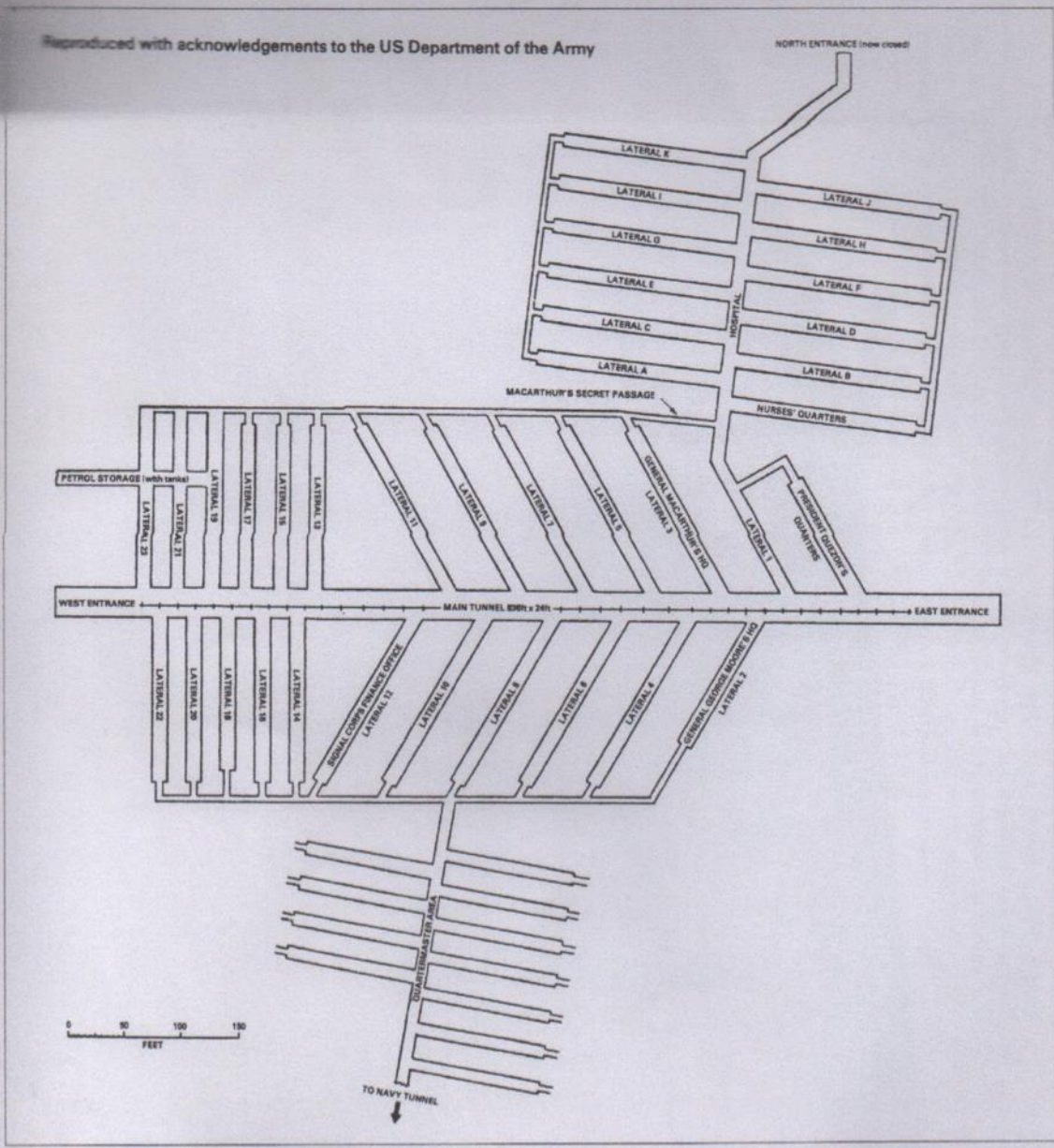
On July 26, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt mobilized the infant Philippine Army into federal service and simultaneously appointed General MacArthur to the command of the newly formed US Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). The War Department sent hundreds of airplanes and thousands of American soldiers (many recent draftees or activated National Guard units) to strengthen its forces around Manila Bay. MacArthur and his staff now worked feverishly to prepare for the defense of Luzon. A hasty Inland Seas Defense Program was initiated to utilize the 8in. and 155mm guns sent to the Philippines in 1937, but only surveys were completed by December 1941. Expansion of the Philippine Army was hampered by the lack of trained officers and military equipment, while language and cultural differences among the recruits also contributed to the difficulties in forming proper units.

The results in the Harbor Defenses of Manila and Subic Bays were much more satisfying. Nearly all the seacoast artillery guns were brought back to service condition by mid-1941. Mines, both the Army-controlled type and the Navy contact type, were deployed across the harbor entrance in July 1941. A systematic beach defense plan was implemented at each of the forts. Batteries of 155mm and



CAC soldiers around 12in. M1908 mortars on M1908 mortar carriages in Battery Koehler, Fort Frank, Carabao Island, in 1930. (Courtesy of Karl Schmidt collection)

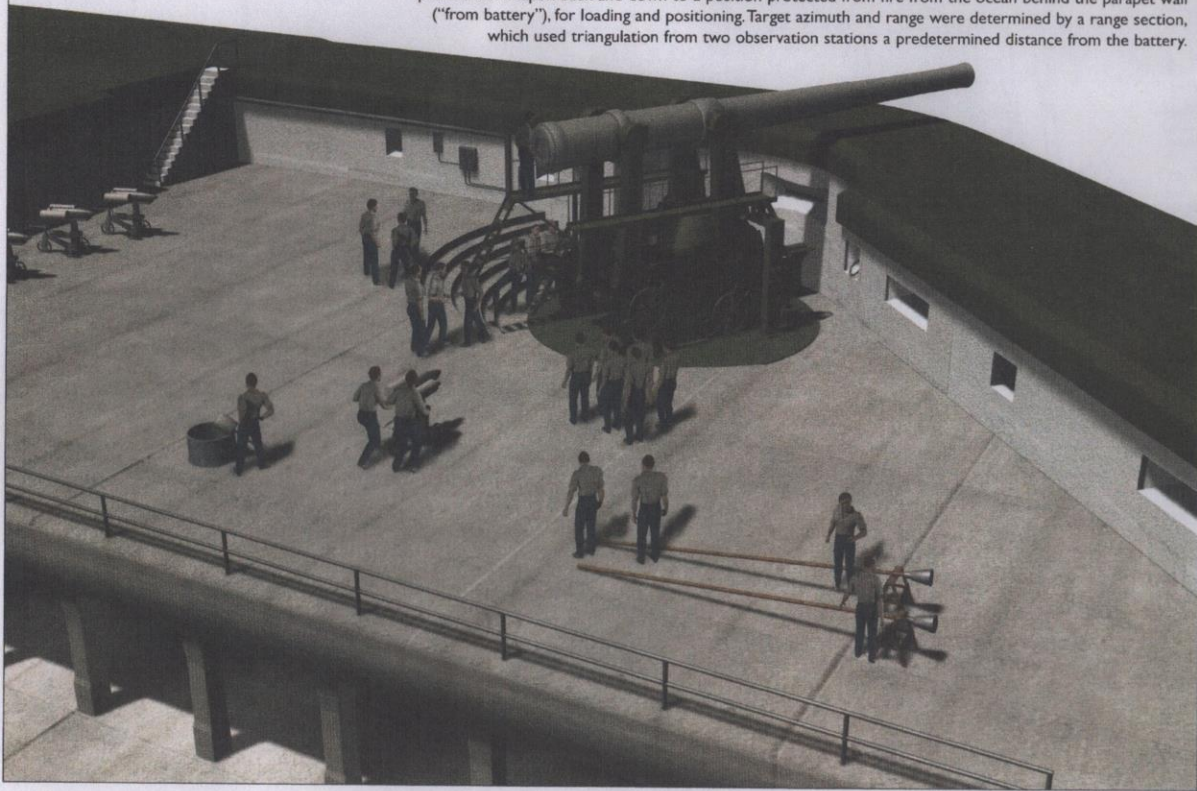
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75mm guns were deployed, along with barbwire and other obstacles. The four coast artillery regiments were brought up to full strength. The anti-aircraft units were provided with the most modern weapons available at this time, the mobile 3in. M3 gun on the M2 barbette carriage. Lt. Colonel Aaron A. Abston observed: "In April the 60th [Coast Artillery Regiment] received 1,200 raw recruits to bring the regiment up to full strength. The regiment was tasked to be at full readiness by January 1942. The pace now quickened with training the new troops and working on the new equipment. I expected that war would eventually break out with Japan due to their aggressive actions. Our regimental and battalion staff officers were well trained but lacking in experience. Looking back I don't see anything else we could have done to prepare the regiment more for the coming war."

The Malinta Hill tunnel system.

Battery Gillespie, Fort Hughes (Caballo Island), mounted a 14in. gun on a Buffington-Crozier "disappearing" mount. Counterweights suspended under the gun raised it to firing position ("in battery"). The recoil produced upon firing pushed the weapon back and down to a position protected from fire from the ocean behind the parapet wall ("from battery"), for loading and positioning. Target azimuth and range were determined by a range section, which used triangulation from two observation stations a predetermined distance from the battery.



As negotiations with the United States broke down and the war in Europe hotted up, the leadership of Imperial Japan decided to take this opportunity to seize the territories they wanted by military force.

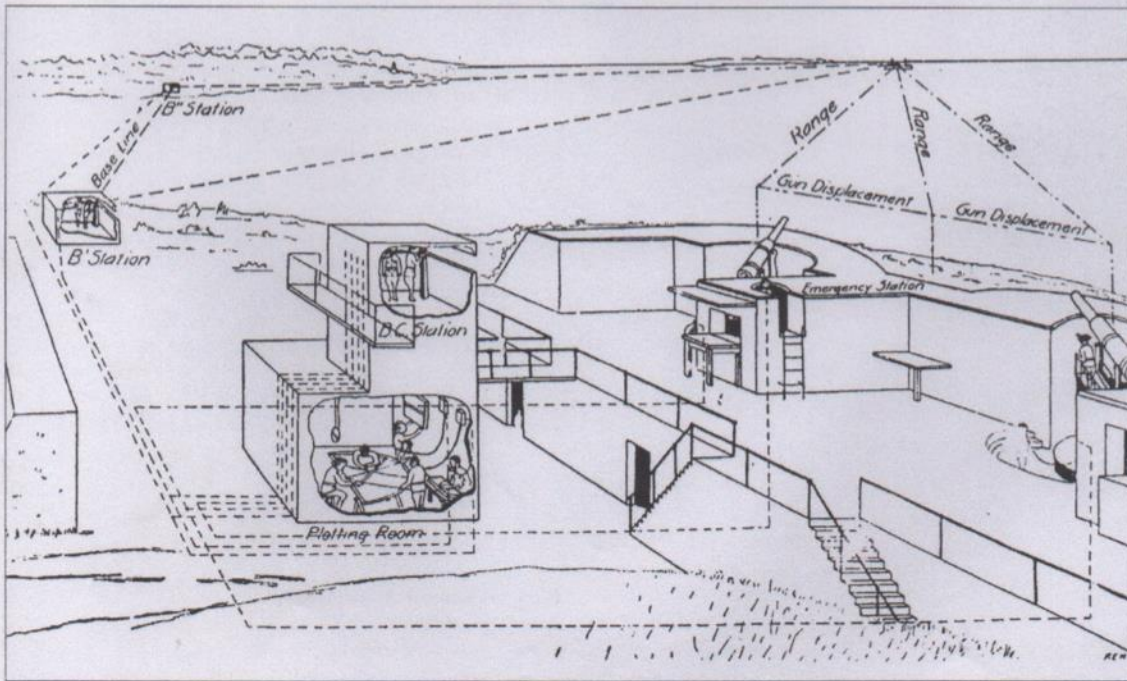
Japan attacks, December 1941

On December 7, 1941, airplanes of the Imperial Japanese Fleet achieved surprise in their attack on the US Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. In two hours they sank or crippled 18 warships, destroyed or damaged 188 of Oahu's 394 aircraft, and killed 2,403 American servicemen. A few hours later, Japanese pilots struck at the American forces in the Philippines and achieved similar surprise and success against Clark Field and the Cavite Naval Station. The attack on Pearl Harbor changed everything strategically for the Americans. With a damaged Pacific Fleet, the first priority immediately became to secure the Alaska, Hawaii, and Panama perimeter. There would be no relief for the forces in the Philippines, their duty was clear – delay the Japanese for as long as possible.

It is interesting to note that while nearly all of the officers were aware that help would not be coming from the United States, the enlisted men remained optimistic and talked about waiting for the relief to come. MacArthur, for all his talk and confidence, seemed both surprised and shaken by the attacks. The Philippine Army was nowhere near ready for the task of defending the island of Luzon. MacArthur would have to make do with what he had on hand. He organized his forces into two commands, one to confront invaders in the south and the other the invaders in the north. He still hoped to halt any invasion at the landing point, but was rapidly losing time.

The Japanese Army planned a swift 50-day campaign to secure Luzon and the rest of the Philippines. The amphibious assault was assigned to Lieutenant-General Masaharu Homma's 14th Army. Homma's initial landings, launched from Formosa, were on Northern Luzon on December 10, and they easily established a beachhead and began moving south. His main force landed at Lingayen Gulf on December 22, scattering the scarce forces arrayed against them. Two days later a secondary force landed in Southern Luzon and began to

A horizontal fire control diagram for the American coast artillery. The target was located by the method of intersection used in surveying; the direction of the target was determined from two known points. The system required a base line on the ground, the azimuth and length of which had been accurately determined by surveying; two observation stations, one at each end of the base line, in each of which was mounted an instrument for measuring azimuths; a plotting room with plotting board; and the necessary communication lines. In the resultant triangle, one side and the two adjacent angles were known; the result was drawn graphically on the plotting board. (US Army)





Japanese Mitsubishi Ki-21 bombers over the Tail section of Corregidor Island, 1942. (Japanese Army)

drive north. With no hope of halting the Japanese forces, General MacArthur fell back on an old plan: to cover a strategic withdrawal of the American forces to the Bataan Peninsula and to hold out there as long as possible.

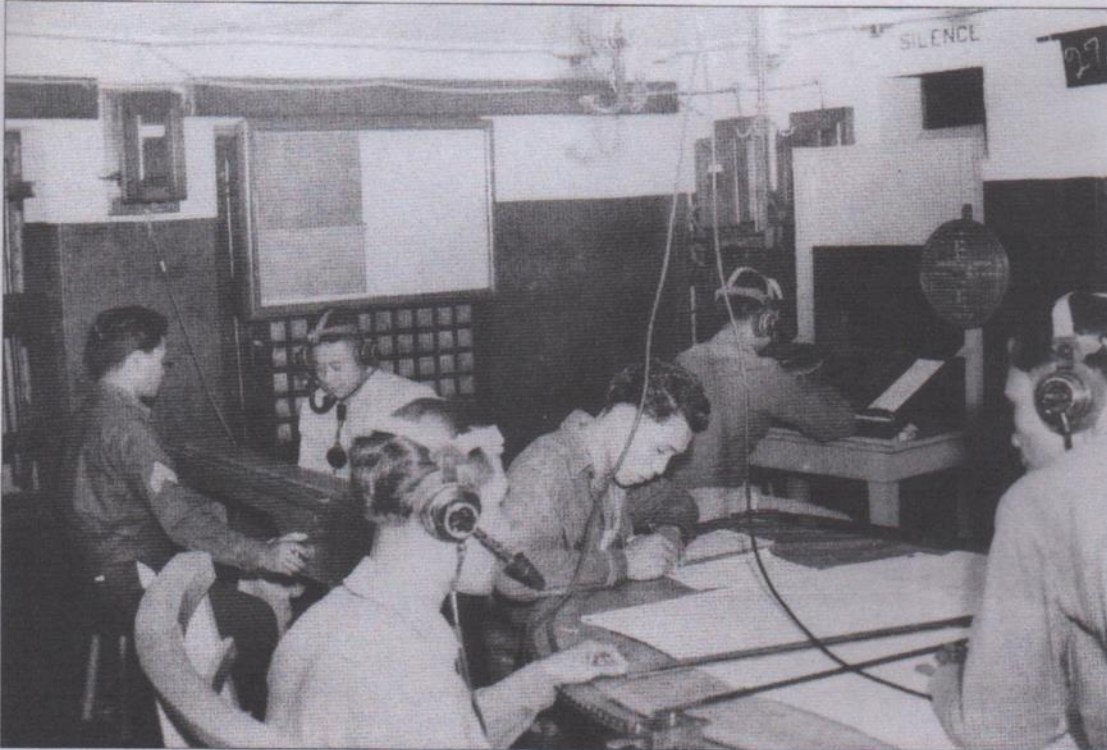
Ironically, the Harbor Defenses of Manila Bay were able to fulfill their mission. The Japanese Navy made no attempt to force their way past them, despite the fact that the defenses located on the four islands guarding the entrance were little different to what they were 20 years previously. The Philippine Coast Artillery Command, activated in August 1941, was commanded by Major-General George F. Moore and consisted of three seacoast artillery regiments (the 59th, the 91st Philippine Scouts, and the 92d Philippine Scouts) and one anti-aircraft unit (the 60th) comprising about 5,700 men. In addition there were about 600 Philippine Army soldiers in training that were organized into the 1st and 2d Coast Artillery Regiments (PA) but operated under the Philippine Scout units. The forces on Corregidor, now known by its nickname "The Rock," were divided into four commands: the seaward artillery fire command under Colonel Paul D. Bunker; the anti-aircraft fire command under Colonel Theodore M. Chase; and the beach defense and the inshore patrol commands which were both under Captain Kenneth M. Hoeffel, USN. The other forts were separate fire commands under the Philippine Harbor Defense Command: Fort Frank had a garrison of about 200 men; Fort Hughes 800 men; and the formidable Fort Drum 200 men. On December 24, Subic Bay was ordered abandoned and along with it Fort Wint. The small garrison there deactivated their weapons and headed for Corregidor or other assignments. The population on Corregidor soon swelled rapidly with the survivors of the US Naval Station at Cavite, then the US Army headquarters and service personnel from Manila. MacArthur's headquarters was established on Corregidor on December 25 along with the government of the Commonwealth of the Philippines and its president Manuel Quezon.

The island forts under siege, January–March 1942

Beginning on December 29, and then for eight straight days from December 31 through January 6, 1942, Japanese airplanes bombed the islands. The anti-aircraft batteries on the islands suffered from two problems: firstly, being on a small island they were located on the target which they were protecting, so they were unable to fire until the aircraft were already over their target; and secondly, their ammunition was designed for a maximum altitude which the Japanese planes could fly above. As a consequence, the Japanese planes were soon able to avoid the AA fire from the islands. The damage to the seacoast artillery was surprisingly light, and was easily repaired by the gun crews. The damage to the buildings on Corregidor, however, was extensive. Most of the houses and nearly all of the barracks had been hit. The electric train system was disabled as was the water distribution system. Nearly half of all the wooden buildings on the island had been destroyed by fire. Following these bombings, the troops on the islands began to dig in, building a bewildering array of tunnels and air raid shelters. At this point, the troops on the islands were put on half rations, to conserve dwindling supplies for the times ahead.

The successful withdrawal of American forces into Bataan had disrupted the Japanese timetable and a campaign against those forces was initiated on January 7. Towards the end of January, reports came in of the movement of Japanese artillery into the heights of the Cavite Province across from Forts Frank and Drum, and on February 5 the 105mm and 155mm guns began firing. The emplacements for the seacoast artillery weapons had not been designed for defending against attack from the rear. However, a few weapons could be brought to bear on the Cavite shore, especially the 12in. mortars at Fort Frank, Fort Hughes, and Fort Mills, and the 14in. turrets at Fort Drum. The American gunners at Fort Frank and Fort Drum returned fire, but had a difficult time

The plotting room detail of Battery E, 91st Coast Artillery Regiment calculates target information at Battery Grubbs. (NARA Still Pictures SC-118544, taken April 21, 1941)







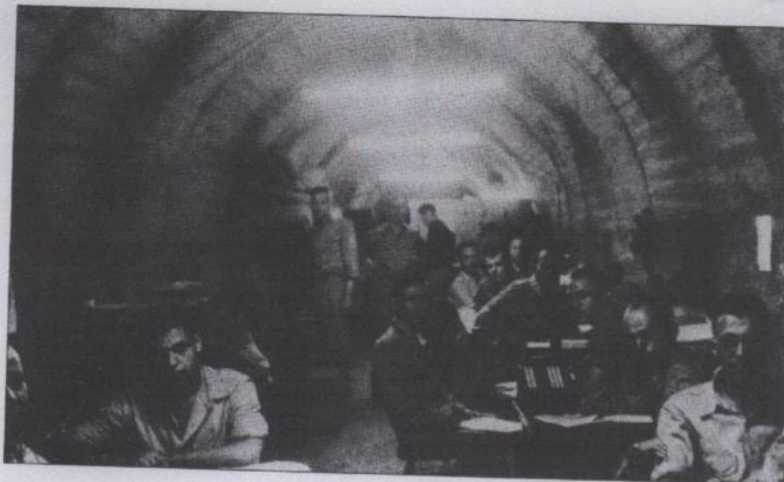
General Douglas MacArthur and Major-General Richard Sutherland in their office in the Malinta Tunnel, March 1, 1942. The tunnel was built as a protected site from aerial bombardment. During the 1942 siege it housed the various command staffs, a hospital, civilians, and supplies for the island's garrison. (US Army, NARA)

spotting their targets due to the defiladed position of the Japanese guns and the position of the sun. The limitations of the ammunition for 12in. mortar batteries soon became apparent – there was a short supply of the projectiles with instantaneously detonating fuses and they had to be used cautiously. Most of the ammunition was fused to explode after it penetrated the armored deck of a ship, but was less than effective against land targets. This artillery duel continued intermittently for the next two months. The bombardment caused little damage to the seacoast artillery. The worst blow was actually struck by the destruction of Fort Frank's freshwater pipeline from Calumpan on the Cavite shore on February 16. Despite several efforts, the pipe was not repaired until March 9, and the garrison had to rely on its distillation plant for a limited supply of fresh water. In late February, the American command decided they could ill-afford to have one of their highest-profile commanding officers killed or captured by the Japanese and so ordered MacArthur to leave the Philippines. On the night of March 10, he and his family, along with President Manuel Quezon and his staff, boarded four PT boats and made the dash for Mindanao, arriving on March 14.

By early March the Japanese had finished reinforcing and repositioning their artillery on Cavite, despite harassing fire from the Americans. On March 15 they opened fire with 240mm howitzers, pounding both Fort Frank and Fort Drum. Fort Drum withstood the bombardment well, but Fort Frank began to show signs of strain, losing most of its 3in. AA and 155mm guns, and a major explosion in one of its protected tunnels on March 21 killed 28 and wounded another 46. Despite this pounding, damage to the eight mortars and two 14in. disappearing guns was slight and quickly repaired.

On March 24 the Japanese began a new aerial bombing campaign to soften up Bataan for the final assault. Corregidor was a target as well; mostly to disrupt communications and supply support to Bataan. The bombing raids on the islands were sporadic, sometimes heavy, sometimes not at all. The attacks were considerably lighter during the first week of April as efforts were being concentrated on the defenders in Bataan. On April 8 orders were issued for the withdrawal to Corregidor of the 2d Battalion of the 60th Coast Artillery (AA): it had been operating in support of the efforts on Bataan, and it arrived that evening without its valuable equipment and ammunition. Parts of several other unauthorized units arrived on the island as well.

The finance office in Lateral No. 12 of the Malinta Tunnel, April 24, 1942. (US Army Signal Corps, NARA)



All during the night of April 8 batteries fired at Japanese positions on Bataan. Herbert Markland noted: "We fired until the Bataan line fell back to where we were masked by our own casemate hill. This was well after midnight. Battery Smith fired longer than we did; I guess they had a better field of fire for that shoot. That was also the first time I remember Battery Smith firing. Up until that time, Hearn and Geary had done most of the major-caliber firing from Corregidor."

On April 9, the remaining American forces in Bataan surrendered. Major General Jonathan M. Wainwright ordered all artillery fire on Bataan to halt for fear of hitting Americans in the process of moving along the roads. The island fortresses were now on their own.

The island forts under siege, April–May 1942

There was little hope for the island forts to last very long on their own once Bataan had fallen. On half rations, they only had enough food to last for six to eight weeks at most, given that there were almost 15,000 people on the island forts. Life under siege on the islands settled into a dreary routine. The men spent some of the day working on repair projects or building new communication and spotting systems. The rest of the time was spent whiling away the hours. Life everywhere on the islands went underground. The command elements of the US Army and that of the Philippine Government, along with the civilians on the island, were all housed in the Malinta Tunnel. A trip through the tunnel never failed to arouse wonder – Philippine and American government officials, officers of all services and ranks, nurses and medical doctors, war correspondents, laborers, barbers, convalescents, and soldiers all mixed up together.

Herbert Markland described the time in a fairly upbeat tone: "Our battery had its own mess section and fixed pretty good chow. Chow varied from company to company, depending upon the skill of the mess sergeant and the resourcefulness of the executive officer. We set up a field kitchen on a concrete platform behind the battery. We moved the coal stoves down from the barracks building so we could save gas. That fuel was critical as it was used in the mess section's field stoves. Long before Bataan fell, we improvised a water main for the kitchen. The mess section cooked right up to the end, and even a few meals beyond that time. We were lucky our mess section was not hit. We never lacked for good food. The kitchen was in a low spot, and was fairly well protected. We stacked old powder cans full of sand around the site. They were stacked about two or three deep and stopped most of the fragments."

As the American defenders on the islands showed no sign of surrender, Homma now had to plan an assault against Corregidor. Homma quickly ran

into some problems in arranging for this assault – it took time to bring his landing craft down from up north into Manila Bay, and an outbreak of malaria reduced the number of effective troops he had for about a month.

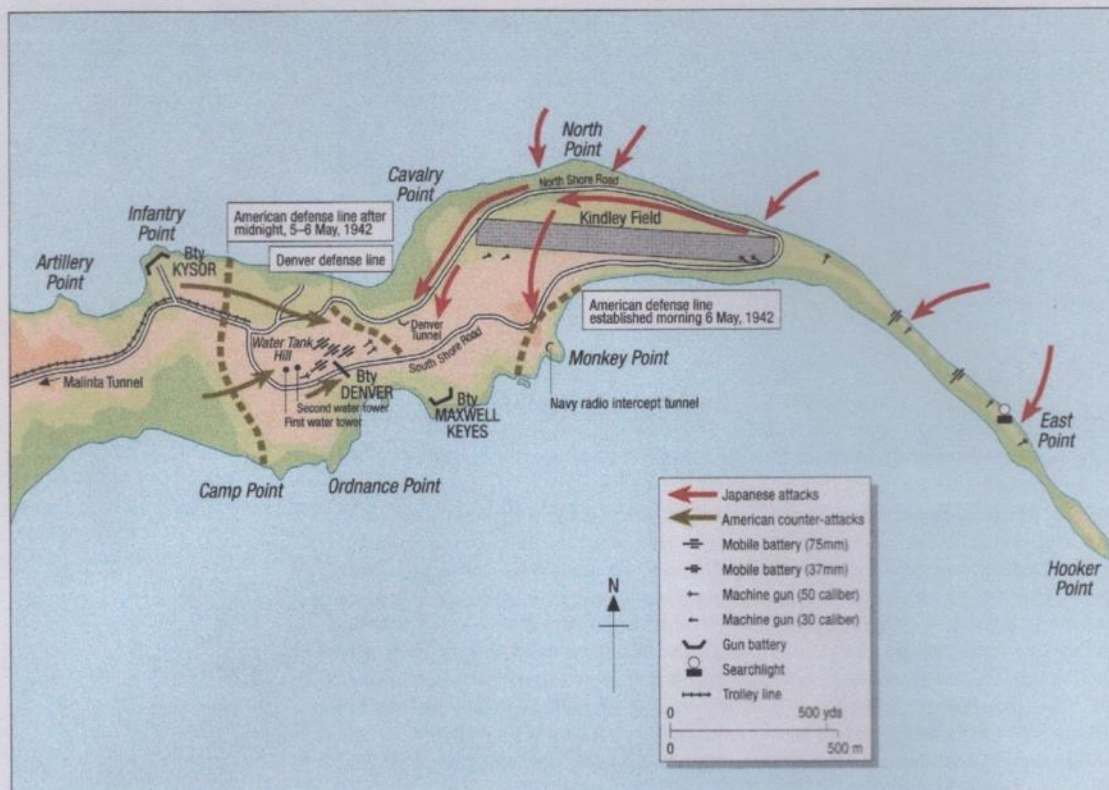
As soon as Bataan fell, the Japanese began emplacing heavy artillery on the heights above Mariveles and along the shore at Cabcaben. Some 18 batteries consisting of 116 artillery pieces were arranged on both sides of the channel, and quickly began to shell the islands. Up until this time, nearly all of the American artillery guns ready for action at the beginning of the campaign were still in operable condition. Any damage caused by the air bombardments and the shelling from Cavite had been repaired by the gun crews. On April 12 most of the Japanese batteries were in place and the bombardment of the islands, supported by aerial bombardment, began in earnest. "One day's shelling," remarked one officer, "did more damage than all the bombing put together." Pounded by 240mm, 150mm, and 105mm guns and howitzers, the continuous, close-range shelling began to blast away the reinforced-concrete structures of the fixed batteries. Even though many of the 240mm shells were duds, the sheer volume began to chip away at the defensive structures.

On April 24 Battery Crockett was put out of commission: both guns were hit, the ammunition hoists were ruined, and sections of the battery consumed by fire. Two 240mm shells exploded near the entrance to the Malinta Tunnel killing 13 and wounding 50. Several 155mm guns had been organized into "roving batteries" which moved around the island and provided some effective counter-battery fire. The other effective counter-battery fire was provided by the mortar batteries. On April 28 three mortars of Battery Way were fired for the first time. The Japanese soon concentrated their fire on Batteries Geary and Way. The bombardment began to tell on the garrison – power and water systems were knocked out, and food preparation could only be done at night. Water rations were reduced to one canteen per person per day, food rations were cut to one-quarter.

On May 1, the Japanese bombardment intensified. Concentrating on potential landing sites and on the remaining effective batteries, the defenders knew the Japanese were preparing for an assault. The next day was even worse. During a five-hour period some 3,600 240mm shells along with shells of other caliber fell in the vicinity of Batteries Cheney and Geary. The entire north shore of Corregidor was worked over, as was Malinta Hill and the island's tail. Then, at 1030 a 240mm round penetrated Battery Geary's magazine, which detonated with an explosion that rocked the island. The 10-ton mortars were strewn about, all eight guns were permanently out of action. The pace of the bombardment picked up each day through the next three days.



Surrender scene outside the Malinta Tunnel, May 7, 1942. (Japanese Army)

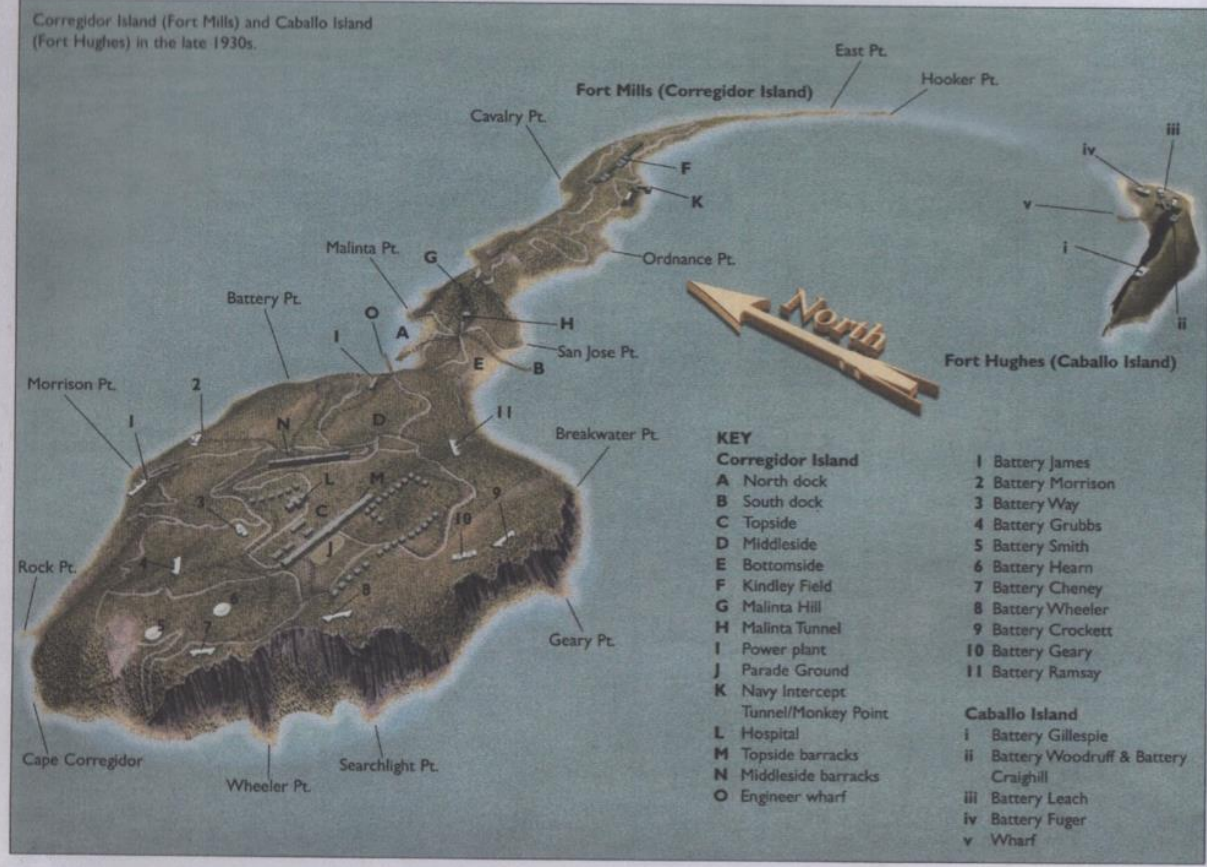


Japanese assault on Corregidor, May 5-6, 1942.

By the end of May 5, many of the gun batteries were out of commission, generally out of action for lack of a respite in the shelling to complete effective repairs. On Corregidor only three 155mm guns remained in operation; the 14in. guns of Fort Drum and those on Fort Frank were still able to fire, but their effectiveness was diminished by range. Most of the beach defenses were in ruins, and the soldiers were getting to the end of their limits of endurance.

The Japanese had arranged for the assault to occur in two waves. The first wave departed the evening of May 5, heading for an intended landing area at Infantry Point on the Tail section of Corregidor. Currents swept them further south to North Point further down the Tail. Somewhat confused and disorganized, the Japanese ran into a vigorous defense put up by American defenders on the shore who managed to sink several boats and inflict heavy casualties. As the second wave of attackers approached, the bright moon illuminated their boats and the Americans opened up with everything they had, including the 14in. guns of Fort Drum and the remaining mortars of Batteries Way and Craighill. Despite the appalling losses, the Japanese managed to get ashore and establish a beachhead. By 0100 on May 6 they had taken the hill north of Kindley Field, known as Water Tank Hill. The Americans now rallied their remaining forces to hold a position just south of Infantry Point, and began a series of counterattacks against the Japanese position. The see-saw battle continued for five hours with each side running dangerously low of ammunition. At 1000 on May 6, the Japanese brought up three small tanks to their position which was only a few hundred yards from the Malinta Tunnel. The Americans had no weapon to counter the tanks and were concerned about the impact of tanks firing into the crowded tunnel system. On the basis of these observations, Wainwright decided to surrender. He ordered the men to destroy their weapons and sent a message to the Japanese that he was ready to meet with their commander to talk terms.

Corregidor Island (Fort Mills) and Caballo Island (Fort Hughes) in the late 1930s.





Japanese troops gather by the 12in. M1895A2 gun on a long-range M1917 barbette carriage at Battery Smith, May 1942. (NARA Still Pictures SC-334320)

Herbert Markland remembers this as the saddest day of his life: "We all agreed that the Japs should never be able to make 'good ole Hearn' fire again, so as a group we decided to really destroy the gun by firing the drill shell backwards using the largest powder charge we had. The drill shell was too big for the bore, so we knew that would really damage the gun. Sergeant Touberville went down into the gun well and unscrewed the recoil oil plug and drained all the oil out. I gave my last 'Home, RAM!' when we rammed in the drill shell. Once the gun was loaded, I took a long lanyard and ran it back up over the casemate hill. Then we all went inside the casemate and closed the doors. We had no idea how this would affect the gun, but we knew it would hurt it badly. Once we were inside, I gave the lanyard a good hard yank! What a noise the gun made when fired! I went back out and there she was, ruined. We were right, we had really damaged the gun. The firing of the piece smashed the breech down against the well, cracked a trunnion, and broke the elevation segment. To top it off, that drill round probably stripped the bore, for it sure was not in the gun!"

The first siege of the fortified islands in Manila Bay was over. After the removal of most of the 14,700 American and Filipino prisoners of war from the four islands forts, the Japanese did not devote substantial resources to the restoration of the harbor defenses. Over the next three years, American prisoners of war were used to collect steel scrap for the Japanese war effort and to restore some of the damaged coast artillery to service.