

# The quiet years 1922-40

## Planning and strategy

After 1907 relations between Imperial Japan and the United States of America became strained. Despite the mutual alliance against the Central Powers during World War I, American military strategists considered Japan and, to a lesser extent, Great Britain to be the biggest threats to US influence in the Pacific. Defending America's possessions in the Pacific from attack was the responsibility of the US War Department, which in the years following 1919 prepared a number of "war plans" to deal with war against Japan (Orange). A joint US Army and Navy planning committee in 1919 laid out the strategic objectives for the United States military forces in the Pacific. They postulated that Japan and the US were on a collision course in the Far East in both the economic and political arenas. It outlined an ambitious plan to build a fortified base on Guam from which the US Navy could protect and re-enforce Hawaii and the Philippines from the continental United States. The mission of the US Army's Philippine forces was to defend Manila and delay the enemy long enough for a superior fleet to arrive from Hawaii and Guam and defeat the enemy fleet.



The parade ground, Topside Fort Mills, in the 1930s. The top image is from a series of photographs taken by a non-commissioned CAC officer in 1930 (courtesy of the Karl Schmidt collection). The large building nearest to the flagpole is the Post Headquarter. The bottom image was taken by M.Sgt. Charles Coffin. The buildings in the background are the married officers' quarters.

Topside, Fort Mills. The "mile-long" enlisted men's barracks is in the background, with the married officers' quarters in the fore, (NARA Still Pictures)



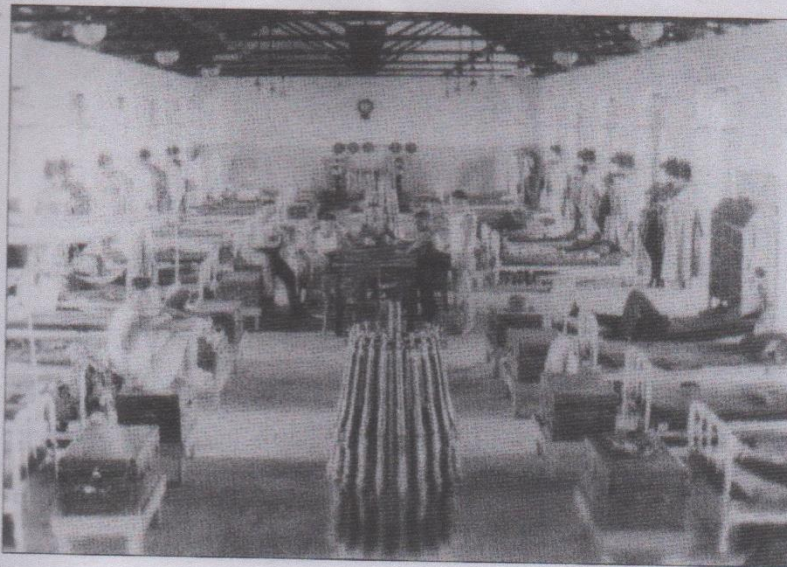
An enlisted man, Harbor Defenses of the Philippines, in the 1930s. (Courtesy Karl Schmidt collection)



These strategic considerations and war planning all changed as a result of the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. The treaty reaffirmed the current political status in the Pacific, set limits on tonnage and ordnance of capital ships maintained by the signing powers, and prohibited Japan, Great Britain, and the United States from building new or reinforcing existing overseas bases. The terms of the Washington Naval Treaty essentially eviscerated the American military's 1920 war plan. The treaty eliminated the planned fortified American naval base at Guam, and the projected naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines. It had a lasting effect on the defenses of Manila and Subic Bays by restricting the United States from expanding or improving these harbor defenses. The following years saw a continued erosion of American military might. The economic depression of the 1930s caused a general suspension of

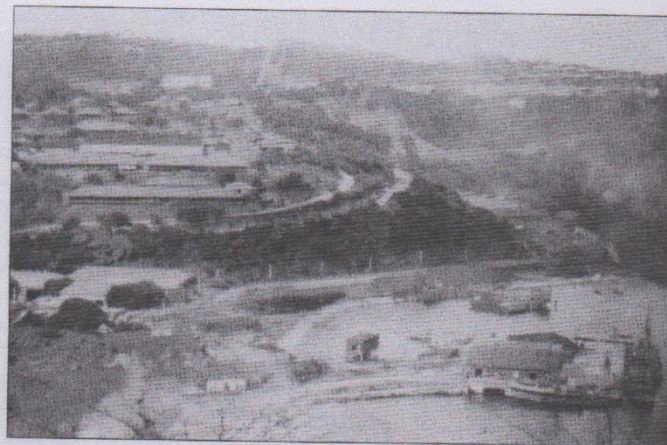
defense appropriations by the American government. Reductions in annual military funding and overall manpower resulted in placement of the smaller island forts on caretaker status from 1923 until 1937. The ability of the United States military forces to relieve the Philippines garrison had all but vanished by the beginning of the 1930s due to financial limitations placed on naval construction and the decline in army manpower. The Navy did not have the effective strength it needed to deliver a superior force to the Far East. The Army had its units "skeletonized," in many cases preserving only an administrative staff, therefore it would require time to recruit, train, and equip its forces and thus would not be available for offensive operations outside the continental limits of the United States for months.

There were some improvements to the harbor defenses in the Philippines in the early 1930s. One important project was the construction of the Malinta Hill tunnel system from 1931 to 1938. The tunnel system, though not strictly speaking allowed by the Washington Naval Treaty as a defense measure, was built under the auspices of a need to extend the island transportation system to the Tail section of the island. No direct funding of this tunnel system was allowed and the fort's local commander had to fund its development by diverting money from the island's annual maintenance budget. The Malinta Tunnel system was actually built for protection of supplies and personnel from air bombardment. Upon its completion



CAC soldiers in the enlisted barracks at Fort Frank, Carabao Island, 1930. (Courtesy Karl Schmidt collection)

it consisted of a main east-west passage 1,400ft long and 30ft wide, with 25 laterals, each about 400ft long, branching out at regular intervals from each side of the passage. A separate underground hospital section located to the north of the main system had 12 laterals of its own. On the south side of the complex was a Navy tunnel system, which was further excavated in 1940–41. The Malinta Tunnel was reinforced with concrete walls, floors, and overhead arches, with blowers to furnish fresh air. The island's electric trolley system ran through the tunnel's main corridor. No other major improvements in defenses occurred on the fortified islands until the coming of World War II.



Another key change in policy was the passing of the Tydings–McDuffie Act by Congress in 1934, which created a Filipino government in the Philippines, the Philippine Commonwealth, to supervise the transition to full independence in 1946. Thus by the mid-1930s, military planners had to consider the eventual withdrawal of their forces from the Philippines, while seeking to ensure the security of a valuable ally against Japan. In 1935 Douglas MacArthur retired from active duty and became the military advisor to the Philippine Commonwealth to help the fledgling government create its own armed forces. While MacArthur continued to support the notion that the Philippines could be defended from attack, the actual progress in creating an effective Philippine Army was slow.

The officers stationed in the Harbor Defenses of Manila and Subic Bays toward the end of the 1930s had few illusions about their fate in the event of war with Japan. Most were confident that the defenses were sufficient for keeping the Imperial Japanese Navy out of the bay. However, if land operations by the Japanese resulted in the capture of the heights on either side of the bay, the fortified islands would soon fall. The Japanese would have to be stopped at the invasion beaches for the Philippine forces to hold out for any appreciable amount of time.

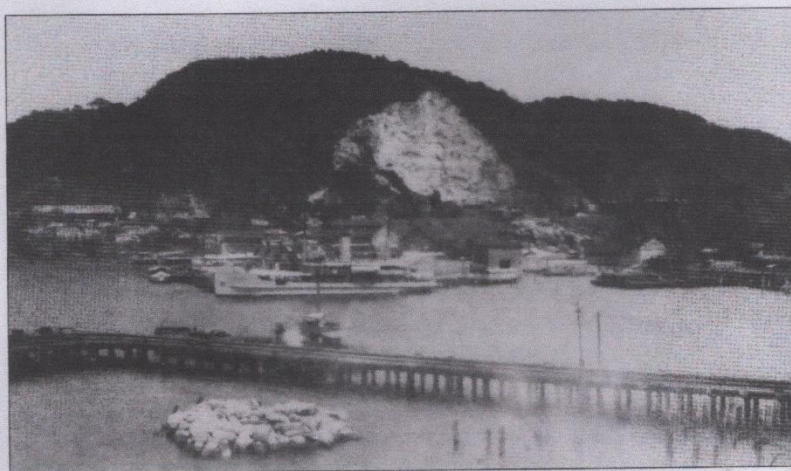
Bottomside and Middleside at Fort Mills, Corregidor Island, as seen from Malinta Hill. Starting at the North Mine Wharf, you can follow the road past the Quartermaster area to the large Middleside Barracks. In the far distance, the Topside Barracks can be seen. (NARA Still Pictures 77-PIA-97, taken August 6, 1920)

Meanwhile, back in the United States, the military planners came up with what turned out to be their final prewar plan. The US would reinforce the key overseas territories of Panama, Hawaii and Alaska, build up the necessary offensive forces, and then advance across the Pacific to defeat the Japanese forces. The defense of the Philippines would be left to the local garrison and whatever Filipino forces could be raised.

### Life in the Philippine forts

The life of the military personnel assigned to posts was fairly routine. Following the 1924 reorganization of the US Coast Artillery Corps, there were two regiments of Regular Army coast artillery, the 59th and the 60th, and two regiments of Philippine Scouts, the 91st and the 92nd officered by Americans, assigned to the defenses. These regiments retained more of their allotted strength than similar regiments in the United States due to their overseas location. Most of the officers who served with the Philippine Scouts thought highly of their men, they worked hard and learned their training well. In the words of veteran Charles F. Ivins: "They were a lean, sharp lot – their canvas gaiters scrubbed white, fitted over brilliantly shined shoes without a wrinkle, their uniforms made by Chinese tailors at their expense, fitted to their trim athletic bodies and bore no relation to the ill-shaped travesties of uniforms then issued to stateside garrisons. They could shoot well. Their drill was precise ... They talked of jungle marches, of the Igorrote head-hunters of Luzon, of the bloody treacherous Moros of Mindanao and Sulu ... These men were not intellectuals, probably a sixth-grade education was their limit, but they were tough and they were loyal and they loved soldiering." As usual with any army garrison they had their problems – tropical diseases and too much sun, as well as the usual problems with drinking, fighting, and venereal diseases, but all in all the American coast artillerymen seemed to get along reasonably well with the natives they lived and worked with. During the 1930s, with the cutbacks in military spending, many of the regular tactical and drill practices were not conducted for lack of funds. Despite all these cutbacks and neglect by the government back in Washington, D.C., the officers and enlisted men who served there were proud of their duty and served well.

Lt. Col. Aaron A. Abston recalled the lifestyle of the officers in 1940: "Officers and men could get a pass any weekend they were not on duty; leave was available at the commanding officer's discretion. Generally I would go to Manila. We would go every two or three months and stay at the Army-Navy Club. A few officers were able to visit some of the other islands or go to the mainland. The better points of service in the Philippines were the same as any



Malinta Hill, Bottomside, and the northside wharves at Fort Mills, Corregidor Island, 1930. A US Army mine planter is tied up at the North Mine Wharf. (Courtesy Karl Schmidt collection)



On top of Fort Drum, El Fraile Island, from a series of photographs taken by George Ruhlen, CAC, in 1935. The wooden barracks in the background were temporary, peacetime quarters. (US Army's Casemate Museum, Fort Monroe)

small army base, friends made in service together on a small post are friends for life. The bad points were the climate and separation from home. Quarters were roomy and as comfortable as an un-air-conditioned facility can be. Due to an overflow of bachelor officers, three of us were assigned to a married set of quarters where we were served by a cook and two house boys, paid in Philippine currency. For recreation we had swimming, tennis, golf, badminton, and the usual formal and informal military social activities."

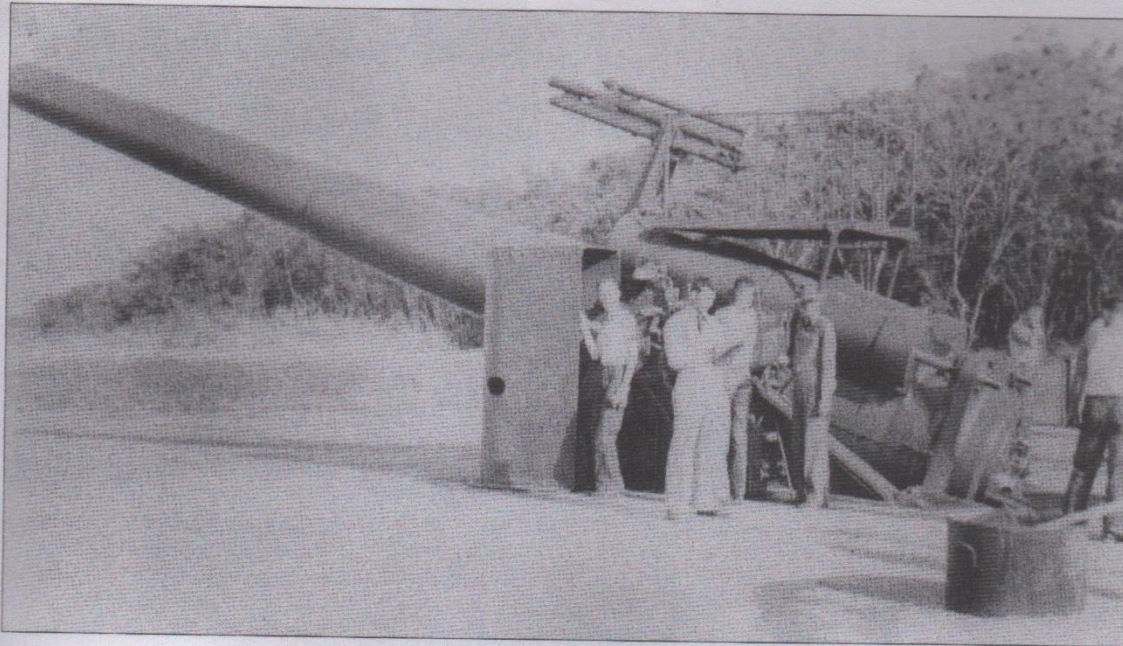
To the officers' wives, Philippine duty was probably not a general favorite. Mrs Kay Abston recalled: "I loathed Corregidor! It had intense heat and thieving servants, all on a small island. Fortunately, we had many good friends, which made it bearable. We played a lot of bridge, golf, Mah Jong, and such. I would shop, swim, golf, and bowl, except for six months we spent on Fort Hughes. Some officer's wives were hired to work in the post exchange, the hospital, and the school. With no air-conditioning, it was too hot in the afternoon, so we all took siestas. The climate caused many problems, especially mold and mildew during the rainy season. We always had cockroaches, rats (especially at Fort Hughes), ants, termites, etc., ad nauseam!"

An enlisted man's point of view comes from Master Sergeant Herbert Markland of the 59th Coast Artillery Regiment: "Life on Corregidor during peacetime was really nice. We worked hard, but also had ample time to ourselves. The weather was good, and the facilities for soldier recreation fine. The 'mile-long barracks' was really nice. It seemed like it was over 1,000ft long, but not quite as modern as Ft. Sill's barracks had been. The shower room and latrines were all on the ground floor. Each battery had its own mess on the ground floor. Everything except the barracks proper was on the ground floor; orderly room, supply room, barber shop, and day room. Regimental HQ was in the center of the barracks. The regimental HQ also had an indoor gym, library, shoe shop and other things around the perimeter of the upstairs HQ. The PX and the guardhouse were on the ground floor. This guardhouse was used to manage the guard mounts that were maintained for the batteries and other important structures on the island.

"Reveille was at about 6:00 in the morning, and you would fall out for Physical Fitness Training (PT). Then we went for showers and on to breakfast. First formation was called at about 8:00 or so, and we would march down to the battery for drill. We came back for lunch, and then in the afternoon back to the battery for maintenance or details. We never saw the officers in the afternoon. They were either at the golf course, conducting 'officer type' training, or doing office work. The afternoon belonged to the Corporals. We

Battery Smith in action. The gun section of a battery of the 59th Coast Artillery Regiment is loading the 12in. gun on an M1917 barbette mount.





knocked off at about 3:00 and got ready for retreat at either 4:30 or 5:00. One morning per week we would do close order drill on the parade ground with the band. We would wear our brown (almost green) flannel shirts for that, or cotton khaki. We always conducted drill with fixed bayonets. That was a tradition we held from the old foot artillery of the Mexican War. Using fixed bayonets during drill was a special privilege for only the Coast Artillery Corps, especially this regiment.

"The Regimental Parade was on Thursday afternoons. We marched in columns of fours and then formed battalion squares with three battalions. Each battery was a line in the battalion square. We had our own regimental march, 'The March of Lorraine', a French march. These parades were really something and I really enjoyed them. When the General (Harbor Defense Commander) reviewed the troops, a waltz was usually played. 'In the Good Old Summertime' was the most commonly played. The other regiments held parades on separate days. The 60th Coast Artillery (AA) paraded on Tuesday, and the two Philippine Scout regiments paraded on Mondays and Fridays.

"Friday mornings were devoted to infantry tactics and maneuvers. We concentrated on squad and platoon level drills for the protection of our beaches and the gun position proper. Individual techniques were also practiced, such as hand-to-hand combat and bayonet drills. Saturday mornings we had inspections. They were very rigid, and they usually ended at about 11:00 in the morning. Soldiers and junior NCOs were generally free for the rest of the weekend unless you had guard or a detail.

"Life was really good and pleasant, though a bit monotonous. The food was good. Topside itself was very comfortable and at night sleep was pleasant, unlike the rest of the Philippine garrisons. There were no mosquitoes since we were so high. The barracks was on the highest point of the island and you could see out to sea both ways. Middleside also had no mosquitoes. Unfortunately, Bottomside had mosquitoes where the barrio and Malinta Tunnel were."

Battery Hearn, Fort Mills, in the 1930s. The 12in. M1895A2 gun is mounted on a long-range M1917 barbette carriage. Note the Excalibur gun mount on top, which was used for practice firing. The container to the right foreground holds the rod for cleaning out the barrel after each firing.