

## Excerpt from “Bataan – Corregidor – Prisoner of War”

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### **A Brief History of the 31st Infantry – to December 7, 1941**

Organized in 1916, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment had the distinction of never being based in the United States. It earned its nickname – the ‘polar bears’ – from its deployment to Siberia in 1918. The nickname was later formalized in the regiment’s War Department-approved crest depicting the image of a polar bear over the regimental motto – ‘Pro Patria’ (For Country). The regiment returned to Manila at the conclusion of the Siberian Expedition (1920) where it remained for a dozen years.

Its next deployment came in 1932 when, at the request of the American diplomatic mission in Shanghai, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Major General Douglas MacArthur, ordered the regiment to the International Settlement at Shanghai to protect American interests threatened by the ongoing Japanese incursion into China. The regiment had remained in Manila since its return from Shanghai later that year. In late 1941, the ‘all-American’ 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was one of three infantry regiments that formed the heart of the U.S. Army’s Philippine Division, commanded by a former horse soldier, Brigadier General Jonathan ‘Skinny’ Wainwright. The other two regiments in the division were highly capable Philippine Scout units, the 45th and 57th Infantry.

In peacetime, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was one of the more desirable assignments in the army. The combination of tropical climate, a welcoming populace, cheap goods, and light duty put the Philippines at the top of the list of many career officers and enlisted men. The duty day was generally over by 1:00 p.m. and afternoon ‘quiet hours’ were kept in the barracks to allow troops to both rest up for and recover from nights on the town. Its past exploits earned the regiment the moniker

‘thirsty first,’ no doubt fueled by nickel beer and good-quality, inexpensive gin.

The regiment was quartered in Manila – the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and the headquarters company at the Cuartel de Espana in the centuries-old Intramuros (‘walled city’) – the other two battalions at Estado Mayor, several blocks east. In addition to its headquarters, headquarters company, anti-tank company, service company, and various detachments, the 31st Infantry was organized into three battalions of four companies each. Each battalion contained three rifle companies and a heavy-weapons company (machine guns and mortars). The three rifle companies of a battalion were comprised of two rifle platoons and one ‘weapons’ platoon (light machine guns and mortars).

Due to the unique circumstances of the Philippine Division (an overseas command) the authorized peacetime strength of its three infantry regiments was significantly smaller than stateside units. The prescribed strength of a regiment in the United States was 3,450 officers and men. In the Philippine Division, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was authorized just 1,729 men in peacetime; the two P.S. regiments of the division were capped at 2,435 each. By temporarily absorbing new American troops arriving throughout the summer of 1941, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry grew to over 2,000 before experiencing a significant drawdown in the late summer and autumn. Many of its officers and senior enlisted men were pulled out of the regiment to meet immediate requirements in General MacArthur’s expanding command.

The greatest draw on men from the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry resulted from the mobilization of Philippine Army reserves. Experienced officers and senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were needed to train and lead the reserve divisions being activated. MacArthur also needed experienced

men for his growing command, both to meet manning requirements of other American units and to staff newly created higher headquarters elements. The 3rd Battalion's L Company, for example, lost two junior officers and 17 senior NCOs. By late November every company of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry had been impacted, with rifle companies down to one officer and 95 enlisted men each, and heavy weapons companies at two officers and 120 men. By late November, this left the regiment with no more than 1,700 officers and enlisted men. The two Philippine Scout (P.S.) regiments of the division were now also under strength. These developments were intended to be temporary.

General MacArthur planned to completely reconfigure the Philippine Division with two American infantry regiments and one P.S. regiment as its core, to augment the division with additional artillery units, and to bring all division command elements to full wartime strength. Regarding the infantry regiments, the 31<sup>st</sup> (U.S.) and the 57<sup>th</sup> (P.S.) would remain and be joined by the 161<sup>st</sup> Infantry from the United States. Men from another infantry regiment coming from the states (the 34<sup>th</sup>) would be used to bring the 31<sup>st</sup> and 161<sup>st</sup> to their full wartime complements. The remaining legacy P.S. regiment (the 45<sup>th</sup>) of the Philippine Division would be disbanded and its men allocated to the 57<sup>th</sup> and other Scout units within the division. The arrival of the new infantry units and troops from the United States – over 5,000 men – was scheduled for the end of December. Those en route the Philippines at the start of the war were diverted to other ports; the final, planned shipments of reinforcements were cancelled.

