

## **The Odyssey of Private Guy Wright**

(Published March 2026 on [www.bataan-corregidor.com](http://www.bataan-corregidor.com))

From the book

### ***Bataan – Corregidor – Prisoner of War The Odyssey of an Underage Combat Infantryman in World War II***

**By Wayne A. Wright**

In the late summer of 1941, Guy G. Wright Jr. had grown tired of dusty old Albuquerque, New Mexico. He thought the United States military would be his ticket out of town, but he had a problem. He was only 15 years old. But he was a big kid for his age: 5 feet 10 inches, about 170 pounds. He thought he could pass for someone older.

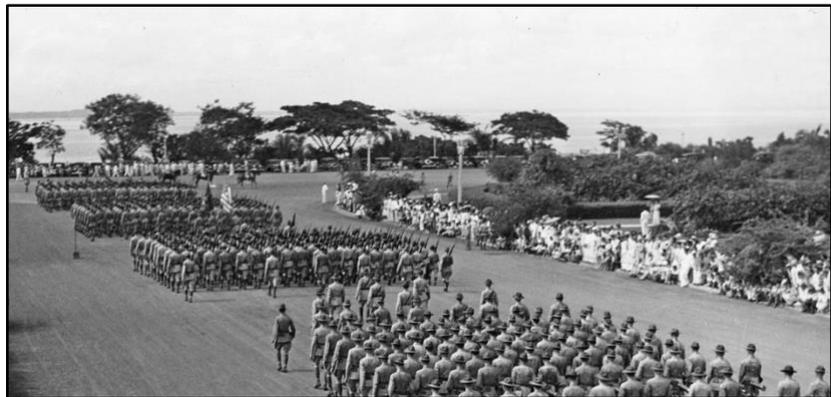
He approached the U.S. Navy recruiters in town. They asked to see a birth certificate. His “Plan B” was the United States Army. The Army recruiters said, “sign here!” Not only were they willing to believe the lie he told them about his age, but they also offered him a choice of duty stations. He chose the assignment farthest away from Albuquerque, New Mexico.

In late September 1941, young Wright took a train north to Santa Fe, was inducted into the U.S. Army, and the next morning boarded a train headed west, the start of a journey of several weeks that took him to his unit – the 31st Infantry Regiment, a component of the Philippine Division, based in Manila, the Commonwealth of the Philippines.

Historically, garrison duty with the 31st Infantry had been considered a choice duty assignment with parades and demonstrations for visiting dignitaries, and light duty interrupted only occasionally with field training. This would not be Private Wright’s experience. Had he been a student of current events, he would have known that the United States and the Empire of Japan had been edging toward war for some time and that the Philippines were a likely target of the Japanese military when war came.

### **Setting the Stage**

For years, every act of Japan’s aggression against its neighbors on the Asian mainland resulted in economic and other sanctions by the United States and other governments. A “last straw” of sorts came two months prior to my father’s enlistment when the Japanese moved into French Indochina (today’s Vietnam). Among



**The 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, Philippine Division, on parade in Manila – 1930s.**  
(Sources for all images/maps included at end of article)

other responses, which included punitive economic and trade sanctions, President Franklin Roosevelt recalled General Douglas MacArthur to active duty to take charge of a new command – U.S. Army Forces Far East, headquartered in Manila. The photo shows General Jonathan Wainwright, the Commander of the Philippine Division, in conversation with General MacArthur in the fall of 1941.



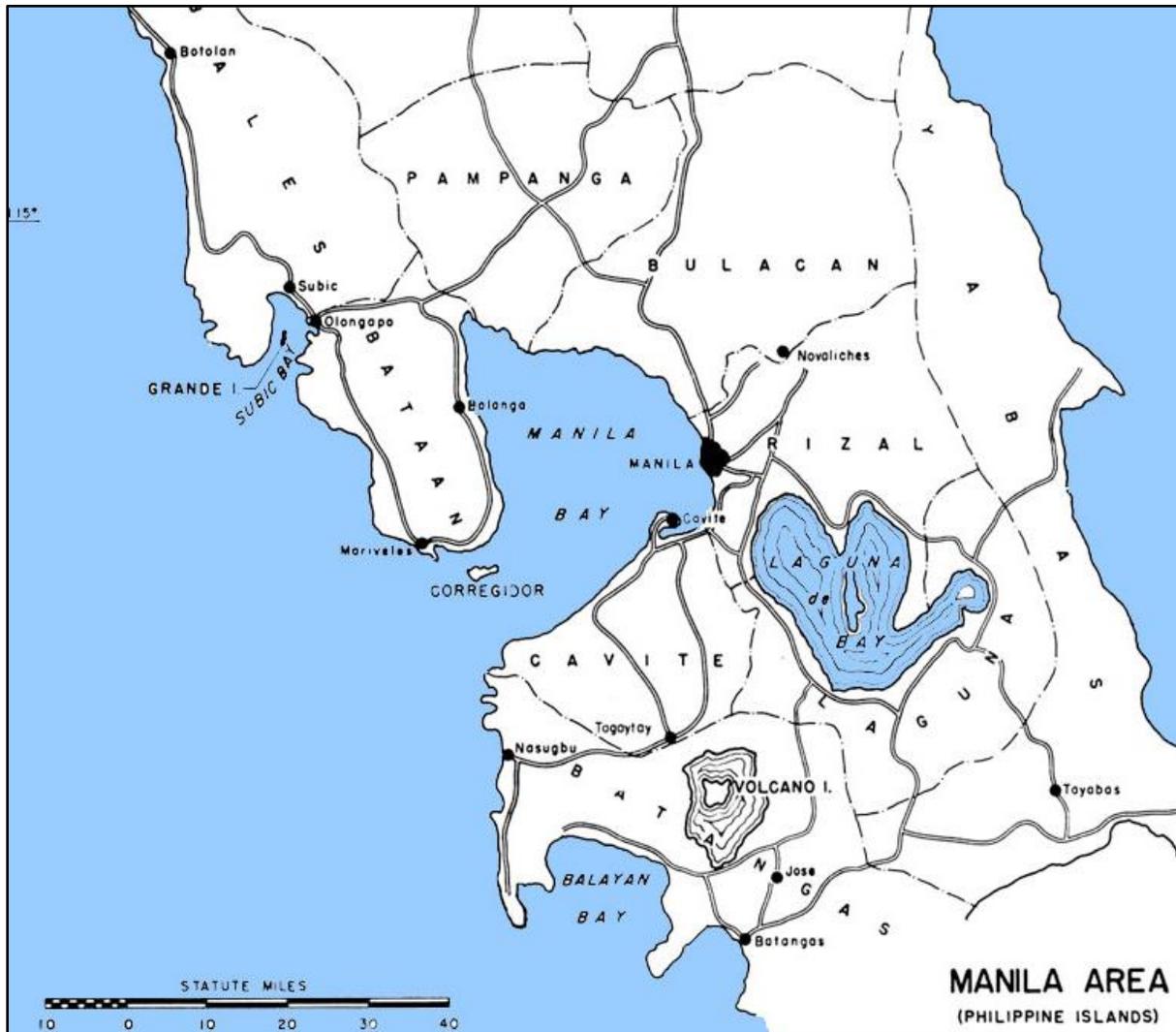
**Wainwright (l) and MacArthur  
on Luzon.**

In addition to the 31st Infantry Regiment, the other two infantry regiments of Wainwright's division were Philippine Scouts of the 45th and 57th Infantry. Philippine Scout units were comprised of Filipino enlisted personnel and led, in the main, by American officers. They were regular army units, highly trained and well respected. The "all-American" 31st Infantry was unique in that after being established in the Philippines in 1916 it had never been based in the United States. The regiment earned its nickname, Polar Bears, from an expedition to Siberia in 1917. Its motto, in Latin: Pro Patria (For Country).

Upon his recall to active duty, just about any request General MacArthur made for reinforcements for his new command was granted and those reinforcements had been flowing to the Philippines since mid-summer, 1941. The planned reinforcements included over 500 aircraft, including long-range and medium-range bombers, and pursuit (fighter) planes. Also promised were significant ground reinforcements: infantry, tanks, field and anti-aircraft artillery, and so on. However, it was not only Americans preparing for war in the Philippines. The bulk of MacArthur's command would be Filipinos: Philippine Scouts (such as the infantry regiments referenced above), a relatively small number of Philippine Army troops, and Philippine Army reserves. In September, ten divisions of Philippine reserves began their mobilization. When all was said and done, about 120,000 Filipinos were under arms in defense of their homeland, constituting roughly 80% of MacArthur's command.

For decades War Plan Orange had been the operative plan to be employed in response to hostilities with the Empire of Japan. In the Philippines, it assumed the Luzon garrison, the main Filipino-American force in the islands, would be overwhelmed by a superior Japanese force necessitating a withdrawal into the Bataan Peninsula which guards the mouth of Manila Bay (see map). With stores for six months, it was hoped that the garrison could hold out until the U.S. Pacific Fleet came to its relief. The historian John Costello referred to this plan as "a comforting fiction."

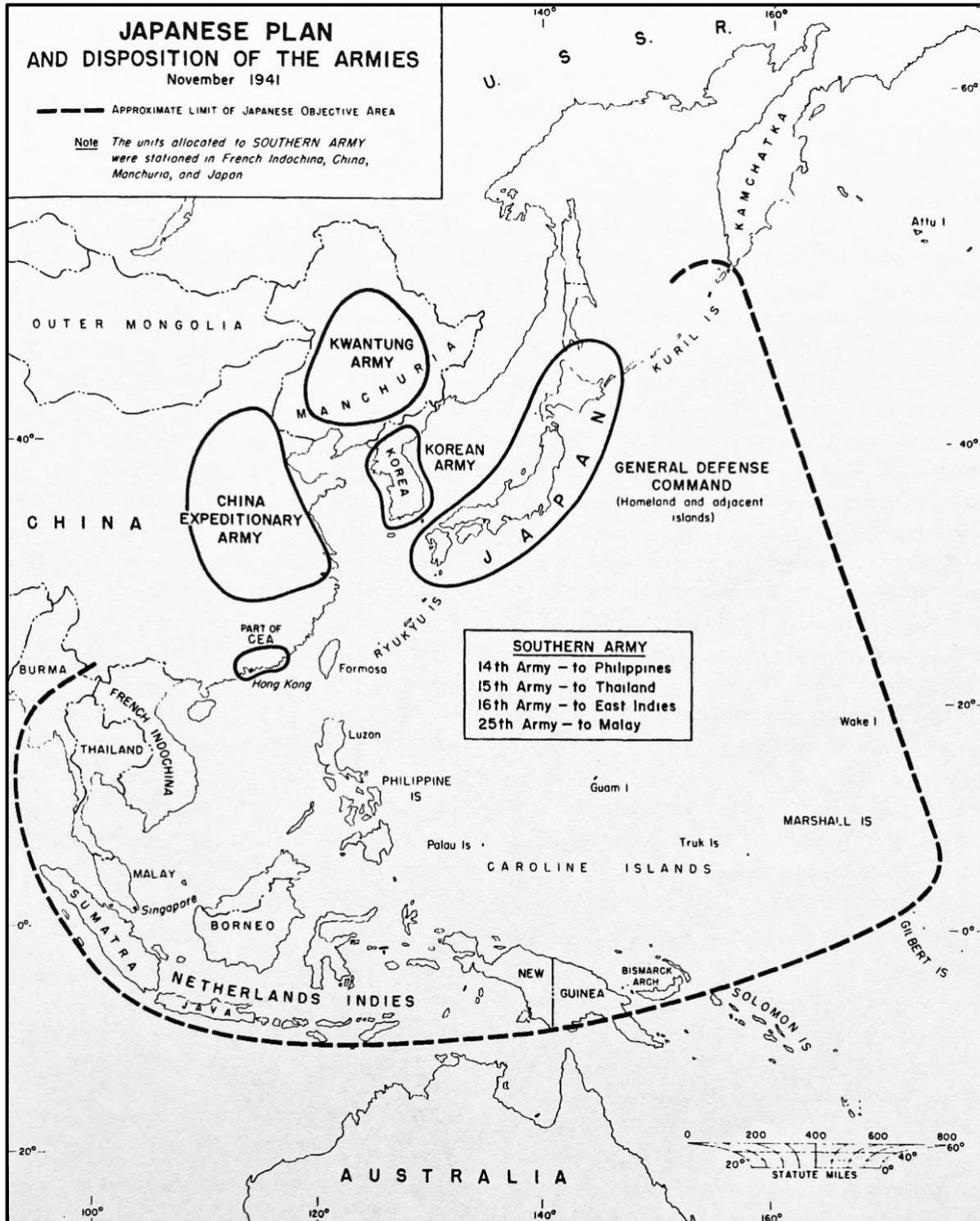
Not a proponent of defensive military operations, upon taking command General MacArthur argued that when he was fully reinforced, not only would he be able to hold off a Japanese invasion force, but he could then go on the offensive. As the United States updated its contingency planning for war, the Rainbow Plans, they were revised to reflect MacArthur's preferred strategy for the Philippines. However, there were two problems with MacArthur's plan. First, he would not be fully reinforced until April 1942. Second, the Japanese were not going to wait that long.



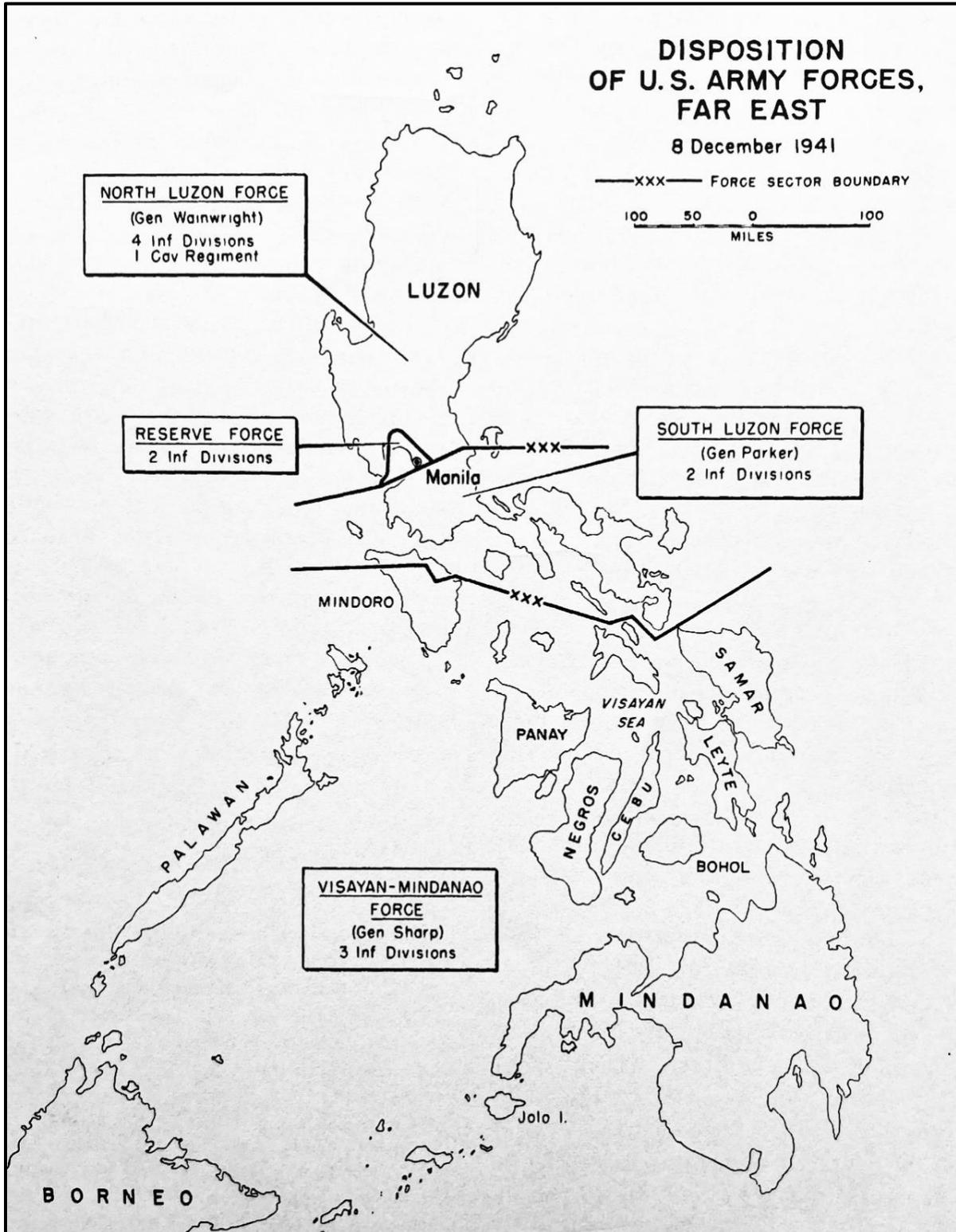
Most reinforcements for the Philippines arrived through the port of Manila. Private Wright was one of those reinforcements. This is a pre-war photo of Pier 7, called the “million dollar pier” due the cost of its construction 20 years earlier. My father’s troop transport arrived at Pier 7 in late October and after six weeks of basic training he reported to “F” Company in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1941. The following day, U.S. intelligence reported that Japanese invasion forces were ready to sail from Hainan Island, Shanghai, and Formosa (today’s Taiwan), with Japanese objectives likely to be British Malaya (Malaysia), Thailand, and the Philippines. The day **before** Private Wright reported to his regiment, the Imperial Japanese Navy’s Hawaii strike force put to sea. It was now transiting, undetected, to its launch point about 200 miles north of the island of Oahu.



The map here summarizes Japanese military objectives for what they called “Operation Number One.” They would seize key enemy installations out into the Central Pacific creating an outer defensive perimeter, while moving on their main objectives which included Thailand, the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia), British Malaya, Singapore, and the Philippines. If the United States would not provide the oil and raw materials for its war machine, Japan would get them through other means.



This map shows MacArthur's command structure in the Philippines in early December 1941. General Wainwright had given up command of the Philippine Division to lead the North Luzon Force. General George Parker commanded the South Luzon Force. The Strategic Reserves shown on the map near Manila included the Philippine Division. On the eve of war General MacArthur had



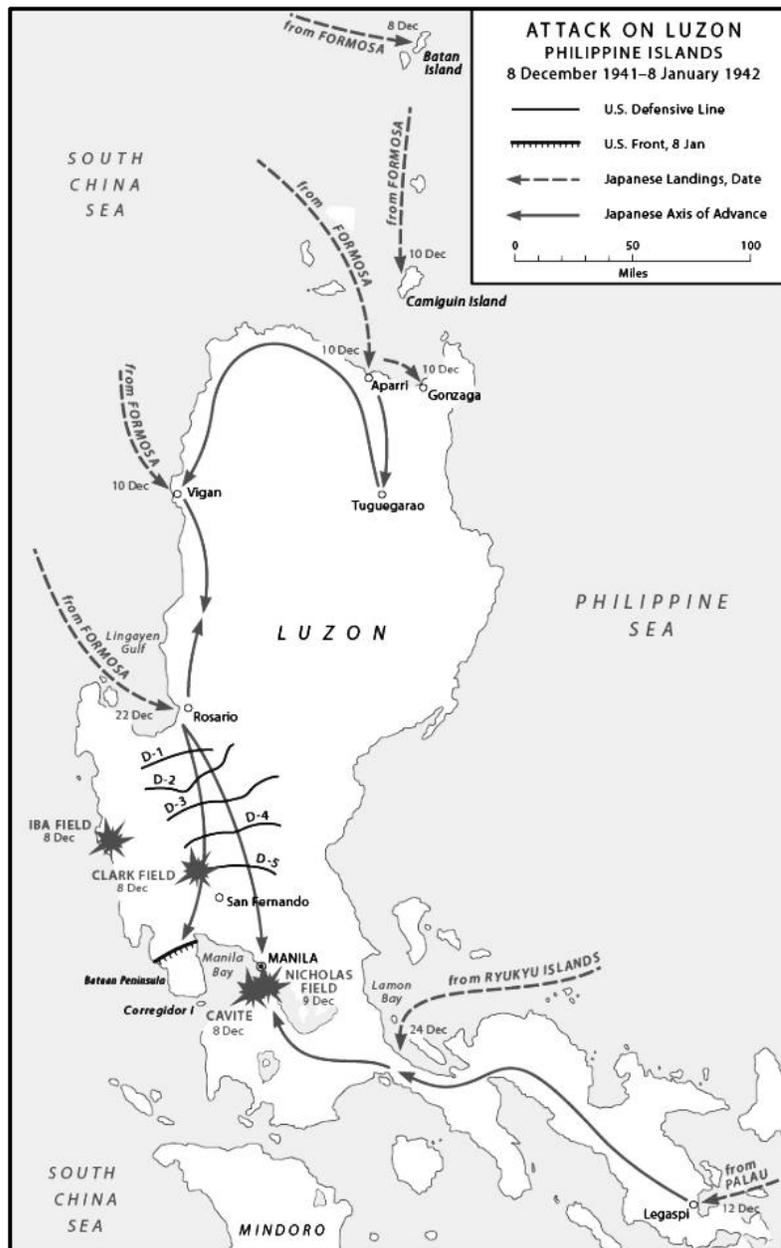
received just over one third of the planned Army and Army Air Forces reinforcements approved for the Philippines. Only 142 of the 500 aircraft he was promised had arrived. He was still short over 4,000 American infantry troops, still short of the artillery, modern weaponry, ammunition, and supplies promised.

With the planned reinforcements General MacArthur intended to bring the Philippine Division's infantry regiments to their wartime strength, over 3,000 men per regiment. At this point the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry had fewer than 1,800 men. Even worse, many of its senior officers and non-commissioned officers were reassigned during the late summer and fall to assist in the mobilization of Philippine Army reserve units. Although the mobilization of the reserves was almost complete by this time, these forces were underequipped and lacked the training to do anything more than fight from defensive positions. The only infantry units in MacArthur's command that were trained to maneuver under fire were the three regiments of the Philippine Division.

## War in the Pacific

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941 (December 7<sup>th</sup> east of the International Date Line), Japanese invasion forces moved on their objectives with the strike on Pearl Harbor leading the way. The Japanese choice to go to war was expected – the strike on Pearl Harbor was not. In the Philippines, to make a sad story short, after repeated raids by Japanese aircraft operating from Formosa, Luzon air defenses eventually were overwhelmed. Most naval forces were forced to withdraw to the south. The commander of the Japanese invasion force, General Homma, controlled the air and seas around the island of Luzon in a matter of days.

On December 22<sup>nd</sup>, the main Japanese amphibious landings came at Lingayen Gulf in north-central Luzon. With no air cover or naval support, General MacArthur ordered the withdrawal of Luzon forces into Bataan and moved his headquarters to the fortress island



of Corregidor in the mouth of Manila Bay. Ships at sea with the next wave of MacArthur's reinforcements were either turned back or directed to safe harbors.

Since the initial Japanese attacks on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry bounced from one assignment to the next. Initially, it was positioned to guard against a paratroop assault at Nichols Field near Manila that never materialized. Later it had taken a position on the Zig-Zag road above Olongapo, on Subic Bay, to guard against an amphibious landing that never came. For most of the first weeks of the war the regiment spent its time preparing defensive positions on Bataan. The weapon of choice at this point was the entrenching tool.

After failing to disrupt the enemy's Lingayen Gulf landings (a wish, more than an achievable objective) General Wainwright's North Luzon Force had been tasked to slow the Japanese southward advance by mounting a series of delaying actions in the Luzon central plain (see map above). These would provide time for the complete withdrawal of the Filipino-American garrison into Bataan. Just after the new year, on January 5<sup>th</sup>, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry got its first taste of combat at Layac Junction, as part of the final delaying action. Although successful, problems with leadership within the regiment were exposed. Subsequently, two company commanders were relieved of their responsibilities.

January 5<sup>th</sup> was also the day the daily food ration of the Bataan force was cut in half. War Plan Orange called for provisions to sustain 43,000 men for six months on Bataan. But there 80,000 troops on the peninsula: 15,000 Americans and 65,000 Filipinos were under arms. There were also 6,000 Filipino civilians supporting the military and an additional 20,000 Filipino refugees that had rushed in behind the defenses. Limited stores and too many mouths to feed would soon require additional cuts in the daily food ration of the Bataan defenders.

Of note, the first Medal of Honor earned by a member of the United States Army in World War II occurred at

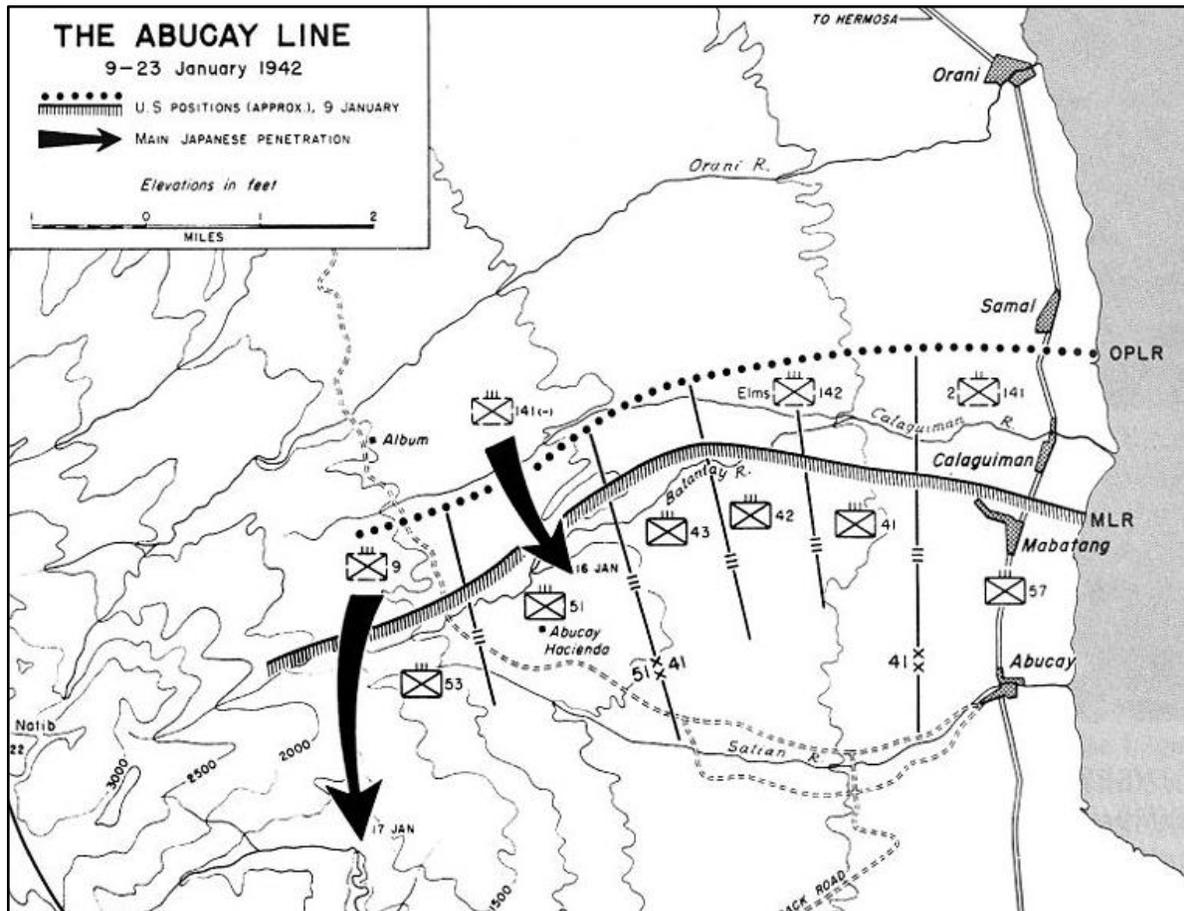


Layac Junction. A Philippine Scout, Sergeant Jose Calugas, of the 88<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, was recognized for his actions covering the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry and other units as they withdrew into Bataan.

The map above provides an overview of the organization of the Bataan Force at this point. MacArthur had cut the peninsula in half – north to south. General Wainwright was now commanding I Corps on the left; General Parker II Corps on the right. I've come to understand some of the Army symbology employed on this map. Any rectangle with an "X" in it is infantry; there are additional symbols indicating the name and size of each unit. The Philippine Division is posted as MacArthur's strategic reserve, indicated as "PD (-)." It was "minus" because the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry had been moved forward near Abucay. Worth noting here is the symbol of a rectangle with a slash across it. It denotes cavalry. Men on horseback. That's the 26<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Philippine Scouts) indicated on the map. The 26<sup>th</sup> holds the distinction of conducting the last cavalry charge in U.S. Army history in January 1942, while on a scouting mission in General Wainwright's sector.

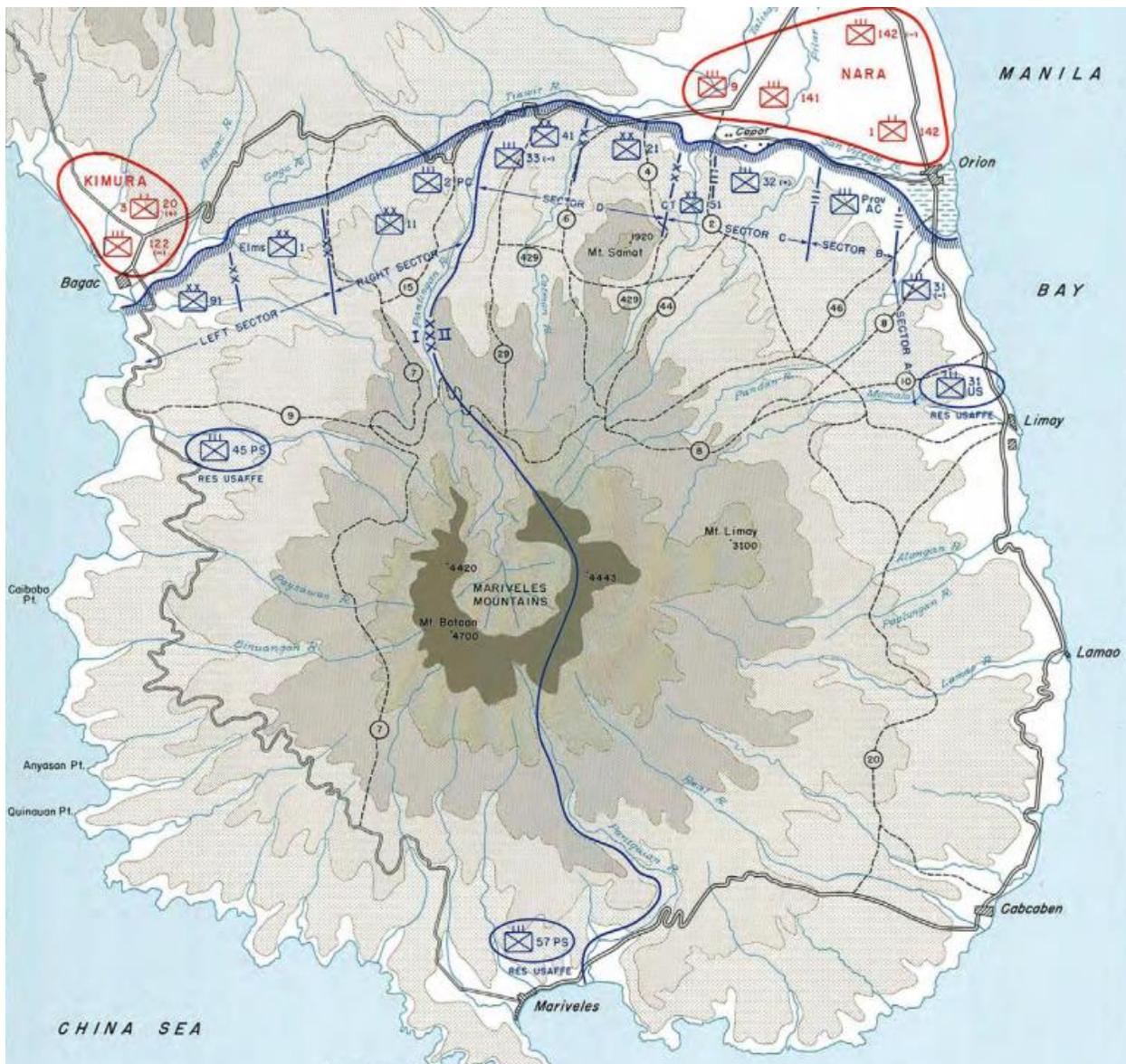
## The Battle of Bataan

The fight for Bataan began in earnest on January 9<sup>th</sup> with a sustained Japanese artillery barrage. First contact between opposing ground forces occurred on January 11<sup>th</sup>. Within three days the Japanese had established a break-through on the left of General Parker's line east of Mount Natib. The 31<sup>st</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments of the Philippine Division were ordered forward to counterattack and reestablish the line near Abucay Hacienda on January 17<sup>th</sup>. As these units moved into position General MacArthur sent a message to his forces urging them to hold fast, saying "Help is on the way..."



As Private Wright's "F" Company was exiting a deep ravine to get into position to counterattack, the Japanese attacked with small arms and machine gun fire, grenades and mortars. My father was down almost immediately – a grenade or mortar round exploded next to him blowing away his WW I-era helmet and his M-1 Garand rifle. He said there was blood everywhere. His company commander, Captain Eugene Conrad, was over him immediately tending to his wounds and was quickly relieved by a medic. After a few minutes the medic asked if my father was able to walk – he said yes – they took off back into the ravine and on to the battalion aid station in the rear. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 31st Infantry reported 20% casualties on the first day of fighting at Abucay Hacienda. At the aid station doctors determined that most of the blood Private Wright had observed was from a head wound. They removed a chunk of shrapnel (or a piece of his helmet) from his scalp, dressed the head wound and others to his left shoulder and leg, treated the powder burns on his neck and left ear, and sent him off to Field Hospital #1 near Limay.

Back at the front, the counter-attack on January 17<sup>th</sup> had failed as did subsequent attempts to reestablish Parker's line over the next several days. Eventually, the 31<sup>st</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments



pulled back and dug in below the hacienda. With a lingering headache and a better appreciation for steel helmets of any vintage, Private Wright rejoined “F” Company at that position several days later. Fearing General Wainwright’s corps could be outflanked by a further Japanese push on General Parker’s left, on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, General MacArthur ordered a withdrawal to the reserve or final defensive line on Bataan.

General Homma followed up quickly and made several attempts on the Fil-American reserve line suffering heavy losses over several days. With those and his previous losses, and rampant malaria among his troops, Homma pulled back on February 8<sup>th</sup> to rest and refit his army. He also called for reinforcements. This was the start of a pause in the struggle for Bataan that lasted almost two months.

What remained of the three regiments of the Philippine Division were assigned as a reserves for what was to come. As indicated in the map above, the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was on the right with II Corps near Limay; the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry on the left with I Corps; the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment to the south near Mariveles to support either side of the line.

## The “Battling Bastards”

A brief summary of the odds against the Filipino and American defenders of Bataan at this juncture: they had no air cover or naval support; they were plagued with faulty ammunition; they were outgunned in artillery; and they had received no reinforcements or additional supplies. However, to appreciate what had been **accomplished** one only has to compare the operations in the Philippines to those of allied forces facing the Japanese juggernaut elsewhere. As the lull in fighting on Bataan continued, Japanese successes accrued beyond the Philippines. Malaya and Singapore surrendered on February 15<sup>th</sup>, and Batavia (Jakarta) fell on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. The surrender of the rest of the Netherlands East Indies came six days later, the same day the Japanese captured Rangoon in Burma. In mid-March 1942, the only major operation in the Japanese war plan that was behind schedule was in the Philippines. By continuing the fight, the Philippine garrison had become a beacon of hope among a sea of defeats in the Pacific; General MacArthur became an international hero.

Within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, feelings were mixed. Captain Conrad of “F” Company later wrote that the hopelessness of their position seemed to make the men more determined. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion surgeon, Captain Ralph Hibbs, was more pessimistic. He thought that the men had fought well, but in return they would be rewarded with the opportunity to slowly starve, attempt to fend off the next Japanese attack, and probably fail. War correspondent Frank Hewlett captured the general mood on Bataan at this time with a poem:

*We're the battling bastards of Bataan,  
No mama, no papa, no Uncle Sam,  
No aunts, no uncles, no nephews, no nieces,  
No rifles, no guns or artillery pieces,  
And nobody give a damn.*

After the war, historian Louis Morton summed up the situation on Bataan in stark terms. He wrote that the fate of the Philippine garrison had been decided on the first day of the war, at Pearl Harbor.

## **Bataan Falls**

During the lull in fighting the defenders of Bataan reinforced and patrolled their lines, went through additional training, and scrounged for food. The food rations of the defenders had been cut to 1,500 calories a day in February, and down to 1,000 calories a day in March. Tropical diseases and forced malnutrition were taking their toll among the men. Malaria, dysentery (gastroenteritis), and the effects of various conditions resulting from vitamin deficiency were growing more obvious to medical staff. Many men required hospitalization.

The 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment was reinforced in March. It absorbed into its ranks over 400 augmentees (replacement troops) from non-infantry units. Many were from aviation ground crews who no longer had aircraft to service. As units reorganized, Private Wright was given a new assignment. He was now a BAR man. He had traded in his M-1 rifle for a Browning Automatic Rifle. His assistant gunner, Sergeant Frank DeStefan, was one of the replacement troops. He was previously assigned to an aviation chemical company.

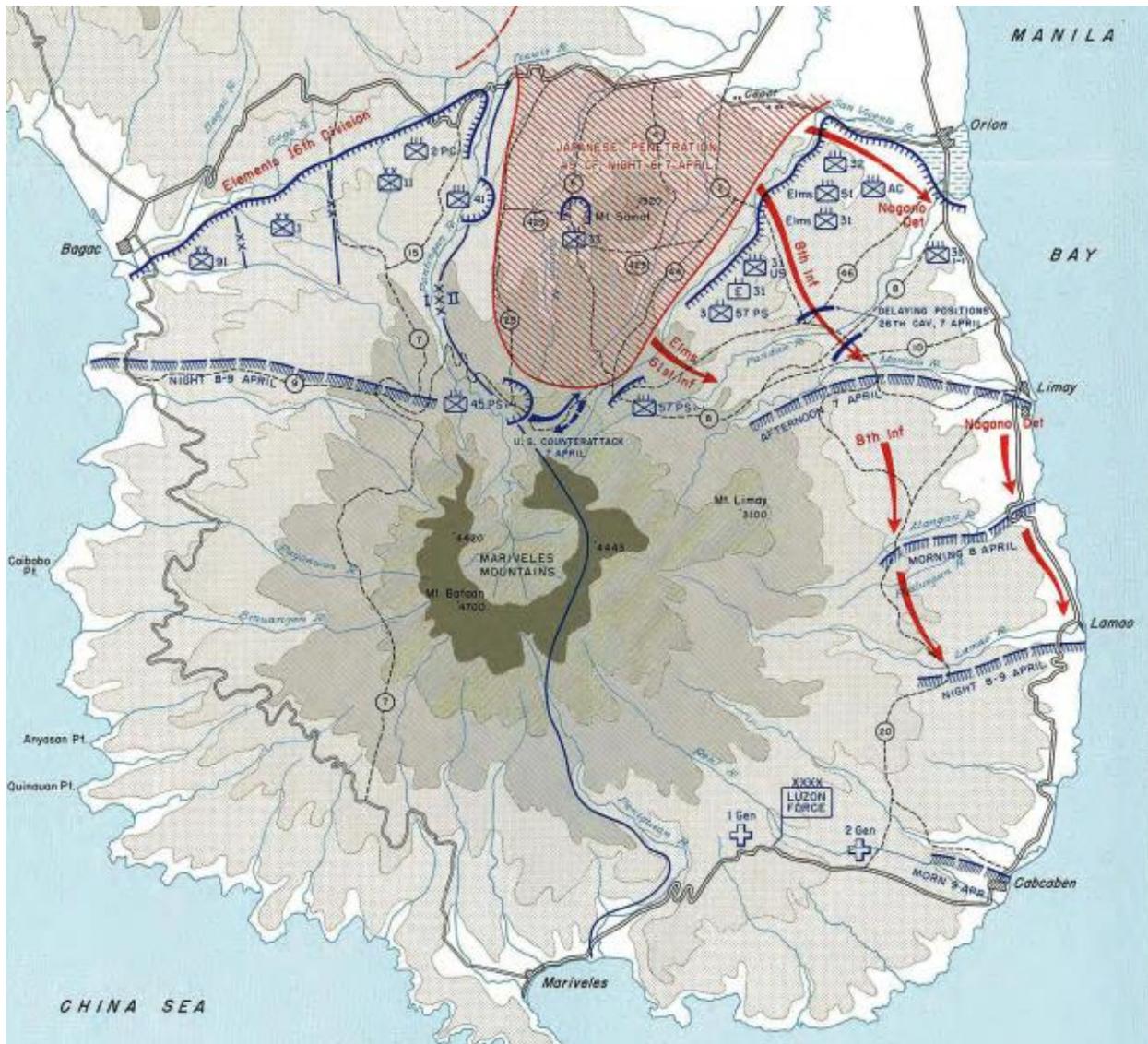
General MacArthur was ordered out of the Philippines in March leaving General Wainwright in command. MacArthur began his journey to Australia on March 12<sup>th</sup> where he, in reference to the Philippines, intoned his famous words “I shall return...” Around this time, planning in Washington related to the potential resupply of the Philippines was completely abandoned.

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, the Ides of March, the remaining 250 horses and 48 pack mules of the 26<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment were sent to slaughter, their meat added to the food ration of the starving troops on Bataan. That same day, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1942, Private Guy Wright celebrated his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In early April, General Homa launched his final push against the Bataan defenders. He assumed it would take a month to defeat the Fil-American force. He was off by three weeks. The left of General Parker’s line near Mount Samat began to collapse almost immediately when Japanese infantry supported by overwhelming artillery began their advance. The 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was ordered forward to launch a counterattack to begin the morning of April 6<sup>th</sup>. Even after the addition of over 400 replacement troops, the morning report of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry on April 6<sup>th</sup> listed the unit’s strength as 800 men. No more than half were in any condition to take up the fight. This was the general condition among all front line units on Bataan in early April 1942.

The planned counterattack by the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was over before it started as the Japanese pressed their advantage. The regiment was forced to withdraw cross-country (their escape route had been cut off) and set up a defensive position on the southeast bank of the San Vicente River. On April 7<sup>th</sup> the line at the San Vicente had to be abandoned and was followed by another cross-country scramble through the jungle. The map below shows the general collapse of II Corps over several days.

In the confusion Private Wright and Sergeant DeStefan were separated from their unit, ending up on April 8<sup>th</sup> at Cabcaban along Manila Bay where they heard talk of the impending surrender of the Bataan Force. After a very brief discussion, the BAR team decided they were not ready to be



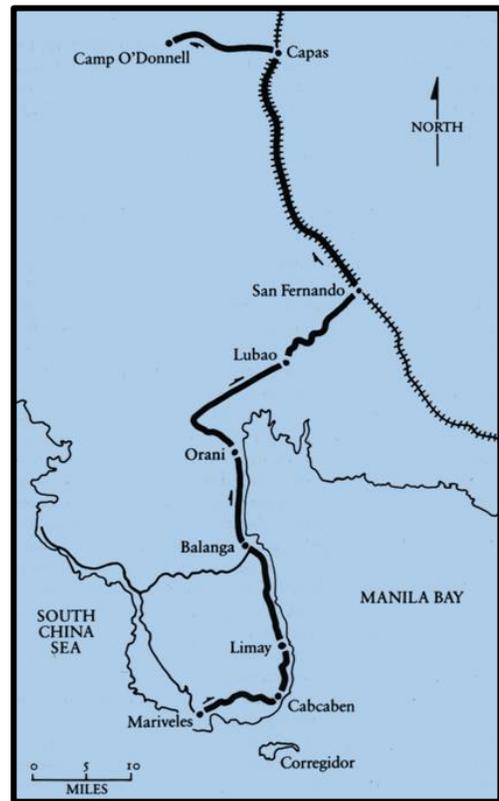
surrendered and moved on to Mariveles to see if they could get over to Corregidor. They found a Filipino Boat captain who said he was heading over after dark. Later that night they escaped Bataan to fight another day.

## The Death March

General Edward King, who made the decision (against orders) to surrender the Bataan Force, had requested that he be allowed to organize transportation for his starved and diseased men to any location chosen by the Japanese. His request was denied. The defeated troops were rounded up and headed north to Camp O'Donnell, a temporary POW camp. The route of what came to be called the "Bataan Death March," from the southern tip of the Bataan Peninsula, was 65 miles to San Fernando on foot. From there the men were entrained to Capas where they continued on foot for the last several miles to O'Donnell. No fewer than 6,000 men died on the Death March. According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, 700 Americans died en route Camp O'Donnell. The vast majority of the victims were Filipinos, accounting for no less than 5,300 of the deaths.

The Bataan Death March was just the beginning of what would become a first wave of death for the defenders of the Philippines, lasting from the surrender of Bataan through the end of 1942. Over the years the photo below (taken by the Japanese) has been used frequently in books, articles, and documentaries about the fall of Bataan and what followed. We now know who these men are. In the foreground is Private Samuel Stenzler, of “C” Company, 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry. Behind him, in profile, is Private Frank Spear, reassigned to 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry from the 4<sup>th</sup> Aviation Chemical Company during the lull in fighting in March. On the right is Captain James Gallagher, of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, Philippine Army. By the end of the day of the surrender of the Bataan Force, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1942, Captain Gallagher was dead. Private Stenzler died at Camp O’Donnell the following month. Private Spear was eventually shipped to Japan and died there before the end of the war.

At Camp O’Donnell, the terminus of the Death March, the dying continued. By the time the American compound at O’Donnell was closed in early June 1942, over 1,500 more American POWs were dead. After being limited to starvation rations out of necessity on Bataan, during their imprisonment at O’Donnell, the Japanese denied the men adequate nutrition and medications necessary for their recovery. As with almost all instances of Japanese brutality during this period, it was worse for the Filipinos. Over 15,000 Filipinos died at Camp O’Donnell during the first two months it was open. Over 10,000 more were dead by mid-summer, 1942.



Privates Stenzler and Spear, and Captain Gallagher (l-r).

## Corregidor

After the fall of Bataan more than 1,000 of the “Battling Bastards” had made it across the strait to the fortress island. As many as 300 men from the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry were included in this number. Many were sent directly into the hospital in Malinta Tunnel, in no shape to continue the fight. Those that could still carry a weapon were reassigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment which was responsible for beach defense on the island. The former BAR team from the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry was reassigned to Company K of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marines manning a .50 caliber machine gun position overlooking “Bottomside” and the North

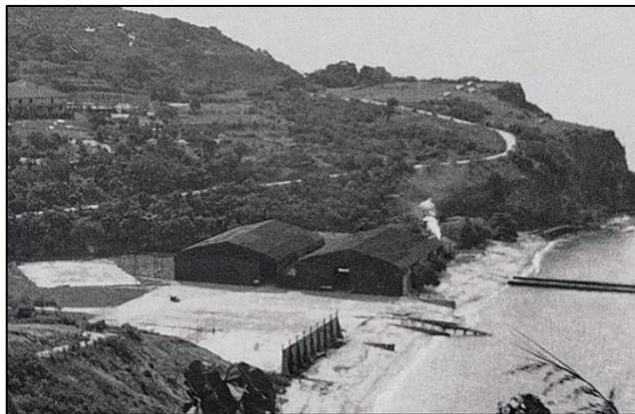
Dock. In the photo here, Malinta Hill is to the left and the North Dock and Bottomside are in the center of the image. Three weeks later, the combined effects of dysentery and his first attack of malaria put Private Wright in the hospital in Malinta Tunnel.



Aerial view of Corregidor.

As he did with his final offensive on Bataan, General Homma took his time organizing for the assault on Corregidor. It finally came in early May beginning with an

artillery barrage that lasted several days. Early on May 6<sup>th</sup>, Japanese troops landed on the east end of the island and despite the best efforts of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marines and its augmentees the predictable played out.



General Wainwright surrendered. Over the next two days the survivors on Corregidor were herded into an area known as the 92<sup>nd</sup> Garage. It was a former seaplane facility on the southeast shore of the island. In more recent years it had housed the 92<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery motor pool, hence, “92<sup>nd</sup> Garage.”

Over 12,000 Filipino and American prisoners were crowded into the 92<sup>nd</sup> Garage open-air prison camp. Included among them were the sick and walking wounded evicted by the Japanese from the hospital in Malinta Tunnel – like Private Wright. The prisoners were held here in the elements with little food and water for over two weeks, in part to put pressure on General Wainwright to ensure that his commanders in the rest of the Philippines followed his surrender orders. The photo above is a pre-war image of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Garage. The photo here shows the men of the defeated Corregidor garrison held at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Garage encampment after the surrender.



On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Corregidor prisoners were marched to the North Dock and ferried to ships anchored offshore: one ship for Filipinos, two for the Americans. The Filipinos were taken to a pier in the Port of Manila and offloaded. The Americans were dumped in 4-5

feet of water just south of the city where they waded ashore. They were then paraded through the streets of the Manila to Bilibid Prison. Bilibid became the main POW transfer hub in the islands and also housed the main POW hospital in the Philippines for the remainder of the Japanese occupation. This was the first of three stays at Bilibid for my father during his imprisonment in the Philippines.

## Cabanatuan Prison Camps

Over the next several days the Corregidor prisoners were entrained from Manila to Cabanatuan and a group of three prison camps nearby. Camp #1 was not ready to house POWs at this time. It would later become the main POW camp in the Philippines. The Corregidor men were sent to Cabanatuan Camps #2 and #3. Camp #2 was closed almost immediately due to water supply issues, forcing Camp #1 into service. Private Wright and about 6,000 other men from Corregidor were sent to Camp #3.

In early June the American survivors of the Death March and Camp O'Donnell were moved to Cabanatuan Camp #1. Prisoners continued to die from malnutrition, the effects of both amoebic and bacillary dysentery, malaria and other tropical diseases. The combined death toll for the Americans at the Cabanatuan camps through December 1942 was over 2,700.

My father thought the best strategy as a POW, when his health allowed, was to stay busy. At Camp #3 he worked on the wood cutting detail, the grave digging detail, and the burial detail. In October 1942 Camp #3 was closed and its prisoners



walked back to Camp #1 where all POWs were now consolidated, less those assigned to work camps and those held at the Bilibid Prison hospital. At Camp #1 Private Wright continued on the grave digging, burial and wood-cutting details, adding sod-busting to his resume. The prisoners were put to work at the main camp creating a large farm to grow crops to sustain them.

The first wave of death for the American defenders of the Philippines that began with the Death March finally ended when the Japanese increased prisoner food rations in November 1942 and released Red Cross food packages to the prisoners beginning just before Christmas. The positive impact on the health of the prisoners, measured in POW deaths, was almost immediate. After averaging over 400 deaths each month in the Cabanatuan camps since they opened, in December “only” 149 men died. In January 1943, 78 died. In February, just ten.

Even from Camp O'Donnell immediately after the Death March, the Japanese deployed POW work details as slave labor for any number of projects This practice continued with various work

parties mustered and sent out from Cabanatuan. There were also some inter-island transfers of prisoners, primarily to the island of Mindanao but also to Palawan Island, southwest of Luzon. In addition, in July 1942, the Japanese began shipping prisoners from the Philippines back to Japan and its other possessions in East Asia. In January 1943, Private Wright left Cabanatuan for the work detail at Lipa Airfield, in Batangas province, southeast of Manila.

## Lipa Airfield

The Lipa camp was maintained at about 400 POWs who were put to work at the airfield. They formed work gangs to move the materials necessary for runway construction: thousands of bags of sand, gravel, and cement. They also worked at leveling ground for the extension of the runway and the creation of a new aircraft taxiway. Finally, the prisoners took on simple pick and shovel work building gun emplacements and aircraft revetments.

Almost all of the men in the camp continued to be plagued by illness and malnutrition. Captain Herbert Coone was one of the senior camp doctors at the Lipa. He kept detailed notes while a prisoner, recording events and the details of his activities tending to the various maladies and injuries of his fellow prisoners. He hid his notes when he later shipped out of the Philippines. They were recovered after the war, providing materials for his memoir.

Captain Coone estimated the daily ration at the Lipa camp at no more than 1,400 calories a day, far from sufficient to make up for the daily workload assigned to the men. This kept many of them on the edge of severe sickness and even death. The table is Coone's list of hospitalization over the 6-month period ending in May 1943. It provides some insight into the various ailments that continued to plague the men as well as the dangers of airfield construction work.

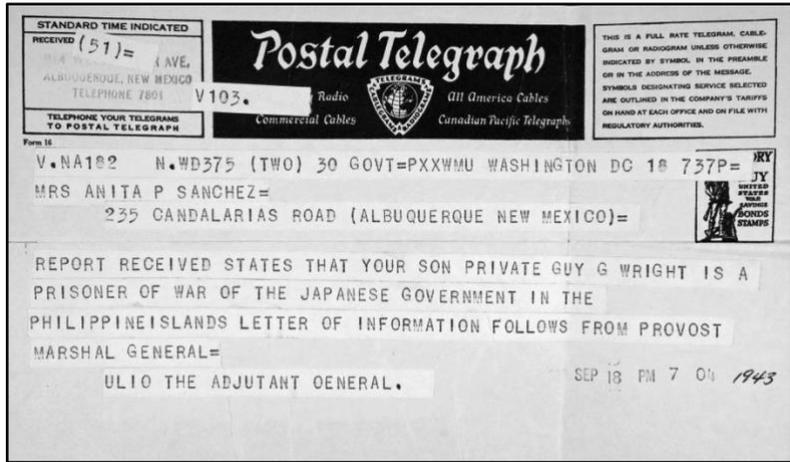
Camp Hospitalizations over Six Months	
Malaria	270
Beriberi	232
Pellagra	175
Xerophthalmia	68
Scurvy	8
Gastroenteritis	156
Injuries	262

Most hospitalizations at the camp were brief; extended stays in the camp facility were frowned upon by the Japanese. For life threatening ailments or significant injuries, prisoners were shipped back to the Bilibid Prison hospital. Some recovered, others died there. For lingering ailments and minor injuries, the prisoners had to keep working.

My father's gallows humor would frequently come to the fore when discussing his experiences in the war. He described to me an attempt by Captain Coone and the other doctors at Lipa to finally rid the men of their nagging dysentery. The camp hospital had been given a 5-gallon can of castor oil to treat the disease. My father said there appeared to be two possible outcomes after taking the castor oil treatment, and both were acceptable. You could either take a half of cup of the castor oil and be cured; or you could take half a cup of the nasty stuff and shit yourself to death.

My grandmother received the telegram below on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1943 – 16 months after the surrender of the Philippines. It was the first word she had received from the Army indicating her son was alive.

At all camps friendships and the buddy-system were incredibly important to the prisoners of war. The men looked out for each other, especially when one was having a tough time with some medical issue. My father made two good friends as a POW, beginning at Cabanatuan and on to the Lipa camp. Lieutenant Hugh Derrick, of the 71<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion, was from San Antonio, Texas. Private Jim Wagner, of the Quartermaster Corps, hailed from Tyndall, South Dakota. Wagner had a bad case of wet beriberi that continued to plague him throughout their imprisonment. My father made sure during Jim's frequent hospitalizations that he got more than the Japanese mandate of half rations for men that didn't work. Jim did the same for him during my father's less frequent stays in the camp hospital.

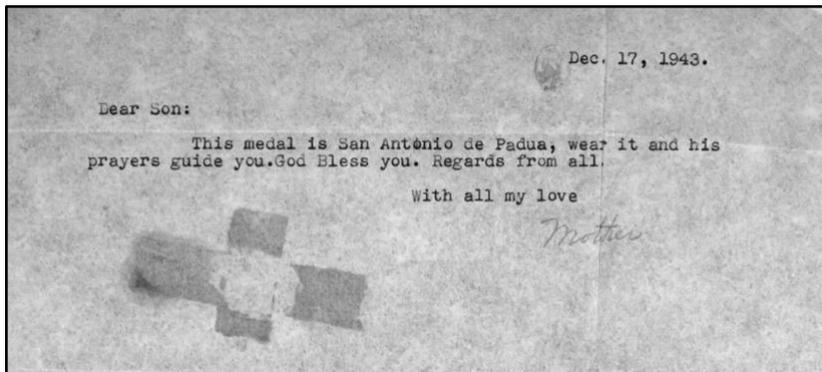


In mid-March 1944, the prison camp at Lipa airfield was closed and the men were trucked to Camp Murphy, next to Zablan Field.

### Camp Murphy/Zablan Field

Imprisoned now at Camp Murphy, the POWs were put to work at nearby Zablan Field, extending the earthen runways there. The crude runways were nothing more than layers of rubble with compacted earth on top. The men worked in a nearby quarry to reduce stone to a size that could be manhandled onto trucks and then on to a runway extension project. By this time most of the prisoners were without shoes; they worked in their bare feet at Zablan Field for six months.

Private Wright ended up in the hospital at Camp Murphy for an extended stay. In the process of reducing an old concrete building foundation to rubble, he put a pick through the top of his foot. There was no shoe leather to blunt the blow and no antibiotics to prevent the wound from getting infected. My father said his treatment involved the doctors digging at the wound each day to make it bleed profusely, removing any debris, and applying sulfa powder to the wound. This continued for two weeks until he was deemed healthy enough to continue chipping away at old concrete foundations or go back to work in the quarry.



My father received the letter shown here on August 17, 1944, eight months after his mother had posted it. She had attached to the letter a medal of San Antonio de Padua, the patron saint of lost or missing persons and things. Ironically, the medal of the patron saint of lost or

missing things was itself missing, perhaps taken by a Japanese censor or pilfered by someone else in transit. All that was left were the remnants of the tape his mother had used to secure the medal to the letter.

## Hellships

On August 20<sup>th</sup>, the American commander at Camp Murphy was told to identify 150 men to be sent to Bilibid Prison. They would be shipped out, headed for Japan, on what would later be called a “hellship.” POW shipments out of Manila ramped up over July and August 1944 and would continue through to the end of the year. Four of the ships listed here (those with an asterisk) had come from Singapore earlier in the summer loaded with British, Australian and Dutch prisoners. From Manila each of these ships made it to its destination to the north, either Formosa or Japan. The 150 men selected from Camp Murphy became part of the cargo on *Noto Maru*.

Ship	Departure	POW “cargo”
<i>Canadian Inventor</i>	July 17	1,100
<i>Nisyyo Maru</i>	July 17	1,600
<i>Hakushika Maru*</i>	July 23	609
<i>Sekiho Maru*</i>	July 23	1,024
<i>Asaka Maru*</i>	Aug 9	738
<i>Rashin Maru*</i>	Aug 9	1,065
<i>Noto Maru</i>	Aug 27	1,135

Four of the ships listed here (those with an asterisk) had come from Singapore earlier in the summer loaded with British, Australian and Dutch prisoners. From Manila each of these ships made it to its destination to the north, either Formosa or Japan. The 150 men selected from Camp Murphy became part of the cargo on *Noto Maru*.

Later in the fall the forced exodus of prisoners from the Philippines continued, setting the stage for the second wave of death for the former defenders of the islands. Most of these deaths would be the result of friendly fire. The Japanese ships transporting POWs in the Western Pacific had no special markings, no Red Cross emblems or anything indicating they carried allied prisoners of war. The POWs were scattered among the hundreds of Japanese freighters and transports moving north with cargoes from Japan’s conquests in the south. This made them the targets of allied forces – specifically, Pacific Fleet submarine and aircraft carrier forces.

The Pacific Fleet submarine force had struggled to have a significant impact early in the war due to a variety of problems, including a faulty torpedo design. These problems were eventually overcome. By early 1944 a high priority mission for Pacific Fleet submarines was the interdiction of Japanese shipping at a natural choke point between the Philippines and Formosa – the Luzon Strait.

Regarding fleet aircraft carriers, Admiral Marc Mitscher had led the development, implementation and refinement of the Fast Carrier Task Force (FCTF) concept in the Pacific. This involved the massing of multiple fleet aircraft carriers, escort carriers, light carriers, and various escorts to deliver, at its peak, up to 1,000 aircraft to an engagement. Mitscher commanded either Task Force (TF) 38 or 58 depending on which fleet admiral was in theater at the time – Admiral Halsey (3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet) or Admiral Spruance (5<sup>th</sup> Fleet). The constants were the ships comprising the Task Force and (through the end of 1944) Admiral Mitscher in command.

The FCTF had been key to allied victories in the Pacific that continued to mount in 1944. After the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June, when most of the remaining Japanese aircraft carriers were destroyed, Mitscher’s task force now operated with near impunity in the Western Pacific, seemingly withdrawing to safe anchorages only when it ran low on fuel and ammunition. The photo below was taken at the Ulithi Anchorage in the Caroline Island chain later in the war. Each aircraft carrier in view is an *Essex*-class ship.



Pacific Fleet aircraft carriers await their next mission.

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, Task Force 38 pushed forward in the Philippine Sea to launch attacks across the island of Luzon, including strikes at Camp Murphy and Zablan Field. A POW barracks at Camp Murphy was destroyed in one of the attacks, but none of the POWs was seriously injured. The prisoners realized that Navy aircraft meant the fleet was close at hand. They immediately had thoughts of being rescued, but that was not to be. Camp

Murphy was closed by the end of that day. The POWs were trucked to Bilibid Prison.

Of the final four ships to leave the Philippines with POW cargoes (see table), only one would make it to its planned destination. Of the over 5,800 allied prisoners of war loaded onto these ships, more than 3,800 would die after they put to sea.

Ship	Departure	POW “cargo”
<i>Hofuku Maru*</i>	Sep 20	1,289
<i>Hokusen Maru</i>	Oct 3	1,100
<i>Arisan Maru</i>	Oct 21	1,800
<i>Oryoku Maru</i>	Dec 14	1,620

The first of these hellships to depart was *Hofuku Maru*, another ship that previously had come north from Singapore. It was attacked on September 21<sup>st</sup> by aircraft from USS *Hornet* and *Wasp*, the same day the POW barracks at Camp

Murphy was destroyed. Seven of the 11 ships and escorts in the *Hofuku Maru* convoy were sunk or disabled. All but 242 POWs were killed when *Hofuku Maru* went down.

The luck of the draw put Private Wright in the forward hold of *Hokusen Maru*, the only one of these ships that would avoid friendly fire and make it through, though its convoy was repeatedly attacked by a Pacific Fleet submarine wolfpack. Of the 13 ships of the convoy and its eight escorts, four were sunk in submarine attacks over two days with USS *Cabrilla*, USS *Hoe* and USS *Sanfish* doing the damage. The remainder of convoy scattered. *Hokusen Maru* and three other ships ended up at Hong Kong.

*Arisan Maru* departed Manila on October 11<sup>th</sup> and pushed south near Palawan to avoid the onslaught of carrier based attack aircraft over Luzon. It returned to Manila on 20<sup>th</sup> and was underway again the next day. *Arisan Maru* was one of nine ships sunk by a literal swarm of submarines, three different wolfpacks. It was attacked and sunk by USS *Shark* on October 24<sup>th</sup>. Of the 1,800 POWs on board, only nine survived.

The last hellship to leave Manila was *Oryoku Maru*, shown dead-in-the-water off of Olongapo Point in Subic Bay in photo here. After leaving Manila on December 14<sup>th</sup> it was almost immediately attacked by aircraft from the aircraft carriers USS *Hornet* and USS *Hancock* of Task Force 38. Other ships were found to take on the survivors of this attack. One those ships – *Enoura Maru* – was later attacked by TF38 aircraft while at anchor in Formosa. The end result: only 549 of the original 1,620 POWs that boarded *Oryoku Maru* in December 1944 survived. Lieutenant Hugh Derrick, who became a friend of my father during their imprisonment at Cabanatuan, Lipa, and Camp Murphy, died on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, on *Brazil Maru*, the final hellship used to transport the survivors of previous attacks on to Japan.



## Hokusen Maru

Back on October 11<sup>th</sup>, *Hokusen Maru* and three other ships from its original convoy made it to what they thought was a safe harbor at Hong Kong, far from Admiral Mitscher's carrier-based aircraft and well clear of the submarines patrolling the Luzon Strait. Five days after their arrival, they encountered yet another threat. That day General Claire Chenault's 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force, operating from bases in China, launched a massive attack on the Kowloon Docks, Hong Kong, and nearby shipping. Thirty-four bombers and 38 escorts comprised the raid. The after-action report cited heavy damage to the



Kowloon Docks with 19 freighters pier-side or at anchor either sunk or damaged. The photo here was taken moments after the attack. The Kowloon Docks continue to smoke and burn; several freighters can be seen damaged and smoking in the harbor. Note the Japanese "Zero" in the middle of the frame. The POWs locked in the holds of *Hokusen Maru* were somewhere down there, at anchor. My father told me they had a near miss during the attack, but the luck of the men on his hellship continued to hold.

General MacArthur finally delivered on his promise to return to the Philippines on October 20, 1944, which actually worked to the advantage of the men on *Hokusen Maru*. When TF38 withdrew to the southeast to support the landings of MacArthur's forces at

Leyte, *Hokusen Maru* and several other ships immediately made for Formosa where they arrived on October 24<sup>th</sup> at Takao. After shifting some cargo and taking on four survivors from the sinking of *Arisan Maru*, *Hokusen Maru* made for Japan but soon turned back due to some real or perceived threat. It offloaded its POW cargo at Takao on November 8<sup>th</sup>.

Over the 39-day voyage of *Hokusen Maru* where the POWs were not much more than ship's ballast (and treated as such), 36 men had died. With their health always in some way compromised, the conditions on this hellship pushed the bodies of these men past the limits of their endurance. At this point, young Private Wright had completed his final growth spurt. He was now 6 feet tall. But he weighed just 107 pounds, having lost over 60 pounds since the start of the war. My father was among 300 prisoners sent to the Toroku Camp in central Formosa. The men called it the "schoolhouse" camp since it literally was a school and grounds turned into a prison camp overnight. They were allowed to recover at Toroku with more nutritious food and light duty for two months.

## Enoshima Maru

In mid-January 1945, the Toroku camp prisoners (less those too ill to travel) were off to their next hellship voyage. Dad's friend, Jim Wagner, from South Dakota, was one of those left behind. He died in Formosa two months later from the combined effects of beriberi and dysentery. As many as 50 survivors of the 39-day voyage of *Hokusen Maru* died later in captivity, having never fully recovered from that ordeal.

At Keelung over 560 POWs, including Private Wright, boarded their final hellship – the troop transport *Enoshima Maru*. Shipping in the harbor was attacked by Task Force 38 aircraft while *Enoshima Maru* was still at anchor. The prisoners experienced another near miss; their incredible luck continued. Two weeks into their very slow transit to Japan the *Enoshima Maru* convoy was attacked by a submarine and lost two ships. The hellship continued on, arriving at Moji, Japan, on February 10<sup>th</sup>. Private Wright was in a group of over 200 prisoners sent to the Wakinohama Camp to be slave labor at the Kawasaki Heavy Industries steel plant on Osaka Bay in Kobe.

General Curtis LeMay's firebombing campaign against Japanese major industries and cities began in earnest with strikes on Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe and other major cities a month after my father's group arrived at Wakinohama. That campaign continued into June. The photo here is an example of what chased the POWs out of the city. The image shows a B-29 payload drop over the Kobe docks. In May, the Wakinohama POWs were off to a new camp, their final Japanese prison camp of the war.



## An End

My father's POW group was evacuated from Kobe to Maibara, a village on the shores of Lake Biwa, the largest freshwater lake in Japan. The men worked in rice fields for the last few months of the war. Their final prison camp was the first in over three years of captivity where no POWs died.

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, six days after the second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, Emperor Hirohito announced that he had agreed to terms of surrender. Arrangements were made for air drops of food, clothing and medical supplies by Army Air Forces and Navy aircraft into the more remote POW camps. The now-free allied prisoners were told to sit tight until arrangements could be made for their evacuation. During their wait, one of the men had a seamstress in the nearby village make flags out of parachutes that had been used in previous airdrops. Representing the four nationalities of the men at the Maibara camp – Yanks, Brits, Aussies and Dutch – the flags can be seen flying at the camp entrance in the photo here. Eighty years ago last September 9<sup>th</sup>, a week after the formal Japanese surrender on USS *Missouri*, the former prisoners of the Maibara camp headed home.



Prisoners at Maibara Camp look skyward to a U.S. Navy aircraft.

My father, now Corporal Wright, made his way back home through the Philippines, San Francisco and Santa Fe, arriving in Albuquerque in October 1945.

## Epilogue

While researching the book that this narrative is based on, I wanted to summarize the impact of the war beyond the individual stories of my father and other men that fought in the defense of the Philippines in the early months of World War II. The Polar Bears of my father's 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment seemed a good choice. But I became frustrated in attempting to assess the broader impact on the regiment because no official rosters of that unit, and many others, survived the war. During the confusion of the last days of Bataan and Corregidor, routine documentation like daily "returns" (muster rolls) of the units comprising the Luzon garrison were lost or destroyed. I decided to try to recreate the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry's roster using primary and secondary sources, including some published/posted online. My starting point was a history of the regiment published by the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regimental Association in 2018.

## The 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment

Although my research continues, to date I have been able to account for 2,260 men who fought with the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment on Bataan, including the men from the regiment's medical detachment and many of the over 400 non-infantry reinforcements it received before the surrender. I found that the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry quite literally represented the United States of America of the 1940's; every state of the union and the District of Columbia was represented in its ranks.



It has been well documented that American prisoners of war in the Pacific had a death rate of about 40% which is even more shocking when compared to the less than 1% of Americans that died as prisoners of Hitler's Germany. It was even worse for the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry. I found that over 1,400 of the men of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment (more than 60%) lost their lives during the war, the vast majority while they were prisoners of the Japanese. They died in combat on Bataan and in Field Hospitals there; they died in the defense of Corregidor; they died fighting as guerillas throughout the Japanese occupation of the islands. As POWs they were victims of many of the Japanese atrocities visited upon the former defenders of the Philippines: the Bataan Death March, Camp O'Donnell, Cabanatuan, the hellships, the Palawan Massacre, and more. Almost 600 men of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry are still carried as missing in action by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency primarily due to the hellship sinkings and the use of communal graves at Cabanatuan.

The 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment was reconstituted after the war. It fought in Korea, Vietnam and, more recently, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, the "Polar Bear Battalion," continues to serve. It is based at Fort Drum, New York, a component of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division.

## Corporal Wright

A reader might ask, "What does a 19-year-old army veteran do after surviving almost four years of war, misery, and ill health?" He reenlists, of course! After a period of recuperation Corporal Wright reenlisted to be assigned to the Army Signal Corps. His infantry days were behind him. While undergoing training in New Jersey he met his future wife – my mother – got married and started a family. He left the service in 1949 and returned to Albuquerque. Within a year he was back East working at the Pentagon as a government civilian. My father had a long career in government, retiring out of the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland in the mid-1970s.

There was a significant passage of time before "Pop" was ready to talk about his experiences in the war, 41 years, to be exact. Of course, as kids, my siblings and I asked about his wartime experiences. He usually deflected our questions with a humorous anecdote; there was humor sprinkled throughout the misery. Then, in 1986, two things occurred that contributed to ending his silence. He began attending annual POW reunions in North Carolina, gatherings of a veterans' group, the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor. He also joined the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment Association. He subsequently created a presentation about his wartime experiences and began telling his story to, in his words, anybody that would listen. Much later he was asked by an interviewer why he waited so long to tell his story. I'll close with his answer.

My father said he had grown concerned that the sacrifices he and others had made in the Philippines, that many thousands had made with their lives, had been forgotten by his generation and that subsequent generations seemed totally unaware. He passed away in 2010. I published a book about the experiences of Private Guy G. Wright, Jr. in 2024. Since that time I have tried to pick up where Pop left off, telling his story to anybody that will listen. My hope is that once audiences/readers become familiar with that story, that they will **never** forget the heroism and sacrifice of the Filipino and American defenders of the Philippines in World War II.

Wayne Wright  
Boise, Idaho



Corporal Guy G. Wright, Jr. Late 1945. World War II  
veteran, Combat Infantryman, Purple Heart and  
Bronze Star recipient, former POW.  
Age – 19.

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