

RACE AGAINST DEATH

**THE GREATEST POW RESCUE
OF WORLD WAR II**

BY
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CHAPTER 1

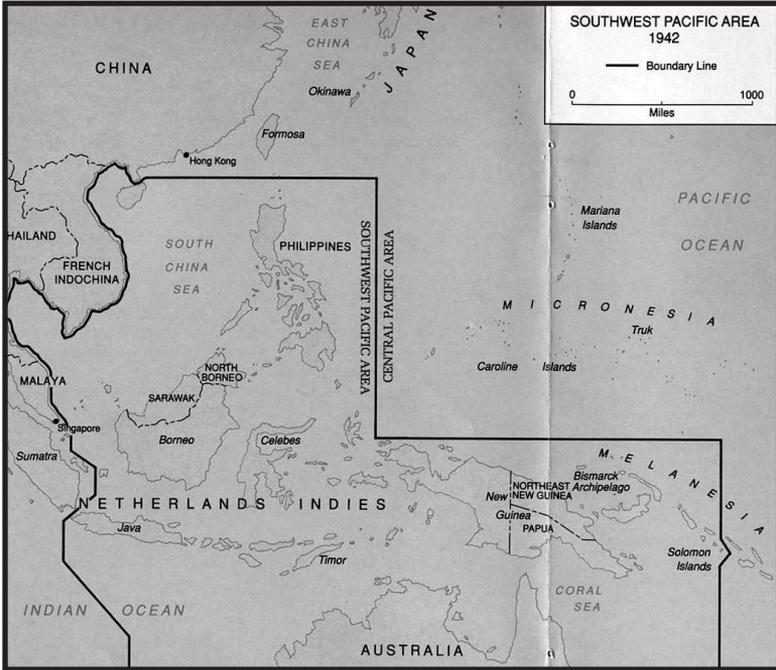
THE FIRST DAYS: HORROR AND DESTRUCTION

EYEWITNESSES: HANK COWAN, SAM GRASHIO,
LUCY WILSON, RALPH HIBBS

Day #1, December 8—Clark Field

One minute, Private Hank Cowan was coming back to work from lunch. The next, he was racing for shelter. The open spaces of Clark Field offered little protection. The best he could do was leap into a drainage ditch at the edge of the airfield. The ditch was soon crammed with other terrified soldiers.

Above them, wave after wave of Japanese planes descended out of a clear blue sky. The heavy bombers roared in first, followed by agile Zero fighter planes that strafed the field with machine gun fire. Japanese pilots later expressed surprise at seeing so many American planes lined up wing-to-wing like perfect targets—sitting ducks.



This map from 1942 shows the location of Formosa (now Taiwan), north of the Philippines. America's delay in launching an immediate counterattack against Japanese bases led to devastation at Clark Field.

"I snuggled as close to the side of the ditch as possible," said Hank. "If they [the attack planes] had come down the ditch they would have killed a lot of us."

The valuable bombers were the enemy's main targets, but even so, Hank was almost hit. "A burst of 20 mm fire knocked off the side of the ditch and partially covered me with dirt."

In an instant, Clark Field had gone from calm to chaos. "As the bombers passed over, the Americans could see the falling bombs glistening in the sunlight," wrote military historian Louis Morton. "Then came the explosions, hundreds of them,

so violent that they seemed to pierce the eardrums and shake the ground . . .

“The scene was one of destruction and horror, unbelievable to the men who only a few minutes before had been eating lunch or servicing the planes . . . Dense smoke and a heavy cloud of dust rose over the field.”

Hank had a front-row seat. “The Japanese did a thorough job of destroying our base,” he reflected. “After the attack, our troops were scared and demoralized, as well as bewildered.”

The destruction of American air power in the Philippines was the day’s second Pearl Harbor. Only seventeen of the



James "Hank" Cowan began his war at Clark Field and would become a prisoner at Cabanatuan until liberated on January 30, 1945.

thirty-five powerful B-17 bombers were spared. More than seventy-five other planes were destroyed, including fifty-three P-40 fighter planes. The attack also brought a heavy human toll: Eighty people were killed and 150 wounded.

Clark Field marked the start of Hank Cowan's war. He couldn't know it then, but his ordeal in the Philippines would last for more than three years—most of it as a POW at Cabanatuan prison camp.

Other young soldiers were also thrust into sudden combat that day. One of them, a fighter pilot named Sam Grashio, was almost shot out of the sky on the first day of the war—right above Clark Field.

Sam Grashio had been obsessed with flying ever since he was a boy. Born in Spokane, Washington, Sam had joined the Washington National Guard in 1939 with a good friend. It seemed “the only way near-penniless youths like ourselves would ever actually get to fly.”

Sam was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps in April 1941; he arrived at his post at Nichols Field, the other major air base in the Philippines, on November 20, just days before war broke out.

During flight training, the prospect of war had seemed



Fighter pilot Sam Grashio.

far off. “I thought of flying only in the narrow sense: taking to the air in the best World War I movie tradition, embellished with goggles and helmet, scarf waving in the breeze,” said Sam. “I thought little about why I was training and flying so much.”

Even after arriving in the Philippines, Sam hadn’t taken the rumblings of war too seriously. In fact, on December 6, he made a bet of five pesos with his squadron commander, Ed Dyess, that there would be no war with Japan. “Ed took the bet at once and laid another five that war would begin within a week,” said Sam.

William E. “Ed” Dyess, captain of the Twenty-First Pursuit Squadron of the US Army Air Forces, was Sam’s commander and friend. Ed had grown up in the small town of Albany, Texas. Like Sam, he’d fallen in love with aviation as a kid. After he graduated from college, he decided to become a pilot and joined the army in 1937.

Sam later wrote that Ed “was the most inspiring military officer I have ever known . . . He was impressive in bearing: tall, husky, with deep piercing blue eyes. He was intelligent, magnetic, and fearless: a natural leader who commanded respect without being intimidating. His pilots revered him and would have followed him anywhere.”

Unlike Sam, before Ed had shipped out to the Philippines on November 1, he’d heard enough about tensions between the US and Japan to convince him war was inevitable. Not only that, he had “no doubt that Manila would be Japan’s first target.”

Ed had it right.

After the news of Pearl Harbor broke on Monday morning, Sam and other pilots were sent up from Nichols Field to try out their new P-40 single-seat fighter planes, firing their machine guns into a lake as target practice. The planes were so untested that a few developed technical problems, forcing pilots to return to base.



Fighter pilot and squadron leader
Ed Dyess.

After target practice, Sam led three other pilots to check out the situation at Clark Field. At first, all appeared quiet: They saw nothing but peace and blue sky. But just as they were heading back to Nichols, a hysterical message from the tower operator at Clark came blasting into their headphones. Clark was being bombed—all P-40s should return to help.

“We turned back to Clark,” said Sam. “In the distance I got my first glimpse of the spectacular destructiveness of war. It was astounding! Where the airfield should have been the whole area was boiling with smoke, dust, and flames.”

Spotting enemy bombers, Sam ordered his group to attack. Suddenly, two Japanese Zero fighters closed in on him and opened fire.

“I veered sharply to the left. My plane shuddered as a burst hit the left wing, and blew a hole big enough to throw a hat through, as Ed Dyess put it later,” said Sam. “For the first time that day I had the hell scared out of me. Momentarily, I was sure I was going to die on the first day of the war.”

Recalling his training and the advice Ed had given him about dealing with a Zero, Sam didn’t try to outpace the faster planes. Instead, he plunged into a deep dive. “The wind shrieked past me and the earth flashed upward at horrifying speed. According to the book, I was courting suicide,” he said.

The manuals advised against a dive like this in a new, untested plane. Sam’s P-40 had been in the air for a grand total of about two hours! But what choice did he have?

Sam’s luck held and he made it back to Nichols. Later that day, Ed Dyess ordered the P-40s and their pilots to Clark Field to spend the night, on the assumption that the enemy wouldn’t strike Clark again so soon. Ed wanted the planes away from Nichols Field: He figured it was likely next on the target list.

Once again, Ed was correct.

Day #2, December 9–Nichols Field

Lucy Wilson (later Lucy Wilson Jopling) worked the night shift at the military hospital at Fort McKinley, not far from Nichols Field.

Pearl Harbor had already turned her life upside down. As soon as the twenty-four-year-old army nurse from Texas had gotten off duty Monday morning, she’d been fitted with

a helmet and gas mask—all to prepare for the air raids sure to come. Lucy didn't get a chance to sleep before going back on the ward Monday evening.

She wouldn't get much rest that night either.

Nurses were allowed to nap in an empty room during the night if their wards weren't busy. Lucy made sure her patients were settled. Then in the early morning hours of

Tuesday, December 9, she'd headed to the break room to grab some rest. "I had barely gotten to sleep when the loudest noise I had ever heard in my life began. I tore down the mosquito net getting out of bed. I was so scared I was nauseated."

She could guess what was happening: Nichols Field was under attack. "I kept looking at the ceiling and walls to see why they didn't come tumbling down," Lucy remembered. "After a few seconds I realized I would be receiving new patients and I had better get prepared."

Lucy sprang into action. She roused any patients well enough to stand and made them get out of bed to free up space. By the time she'd gathered morphine and other supplies, wounded men were being rushed in.

Lucy had no time for charts or paperwork: To keep track of those she'd treated, she simply drew an X mark on each



Army nurse Lucy Wilson Jopling.

patient's forehead after she'd given him one dose of morphine, a powerful painkiller.

Displaying the quick-thinking and battlefield nursing skills she would use throughout the war, Lucy had everything under control before doctors even got there. "I had a ward full of patients before they arrived—and began making decisions on who would go to surgery first."

On most mornings, Lieutenant Ralph Hibbs woke up in his off-base apartment and started his day with coffee and a newspaper. Originally from Iowa, the young battalion surgeon had been enjoying a relaxed peacetime lifestyle since arriving in the Philippines on June 20, 1941. So far, Ralph had only light duties as a junior officer with the Thirty-First US Infantry Regiment.

In fact, sharing an apartment in Manila with other physicians, Ralph had been able to play golf, enjoy nightclubs, and date twenty-four-year-old Pilar Campos, a young Manila woman who spoke five languages and had graduated from college in the United States.



The brave and vibrant Pilar Campos risked her life to bring food and medicine to American POWs—including her boyfriend, Dr. Ralph Hibbs.

(There are several languages spoken throughout the Philippines. In the 1930s, Tagalog [later also called Filipino] was selected as the national language; it is one of two official languages today, the other being English.) The daughter of a bank president, Pilar taught English at Philippine University and was the society editor for the newspaper *Manila Herald*.

At the end of November, as he and Pilar danced in the evenings, Ralph wrote his parents back home that an attack on the Philippines seemed unlikely. He was having fun, but as for action, this was the wrong place. “If I had to do it over again, I would have gone to England,” he told them. “There’s nothing going to happen here.”

And then came December 8. On Monday morning, he’d opened his newspaper to the devastating headlines. “A sinking nausea gripped my midsection—a feeling that was to be repeated so often during combat.”

Ralph made his way to his battalion headquarters at Nichols Field, where he was issued a pistol along with a shovel to dig his own foxhole for shelter. He slept on a cot in a tent on Monday night. That’s when the scream of falling bombs exploding nearby startled him awake, just as it had frightened Lucy Wilson at the hospital not far away.

“The shrieking crescendo filled me with terror. My whole body shook. The explosions seemed not to crack my ears, but to shake my insides.” Ralph dove out of his cot, making a hole in the mosquito netting. Outside the tent, men were frantically digging foxhole shelters in the earth.

“Damn it, in my panic, I couldn’t find my shovel!”

...

At daylight, Ralph got his first look at the damage. “Nichols Field was in shambles, covered with greasy smoke, fires burning out of control and collapsed buildings. The planes on the ground, the barracks, fuel tanks, repair shops; all lay in complete ruin. The last major U.S. airfield was destroyed,” he said.

“Obviously, we were going to have to fight the rest of the war without any significant air power.” Ralph was right. In just a matter of days, Japan had decimated America’s battleships and planes in the Pacific. But Japan’s well-planned onslaught on American defenses in the Philippines wasn’t over yet.



US Army Air Corps P-35s were attacked on Nichols Field on December 9 and 10, 1941.

Day #3, December 10—Cavite Naval Base

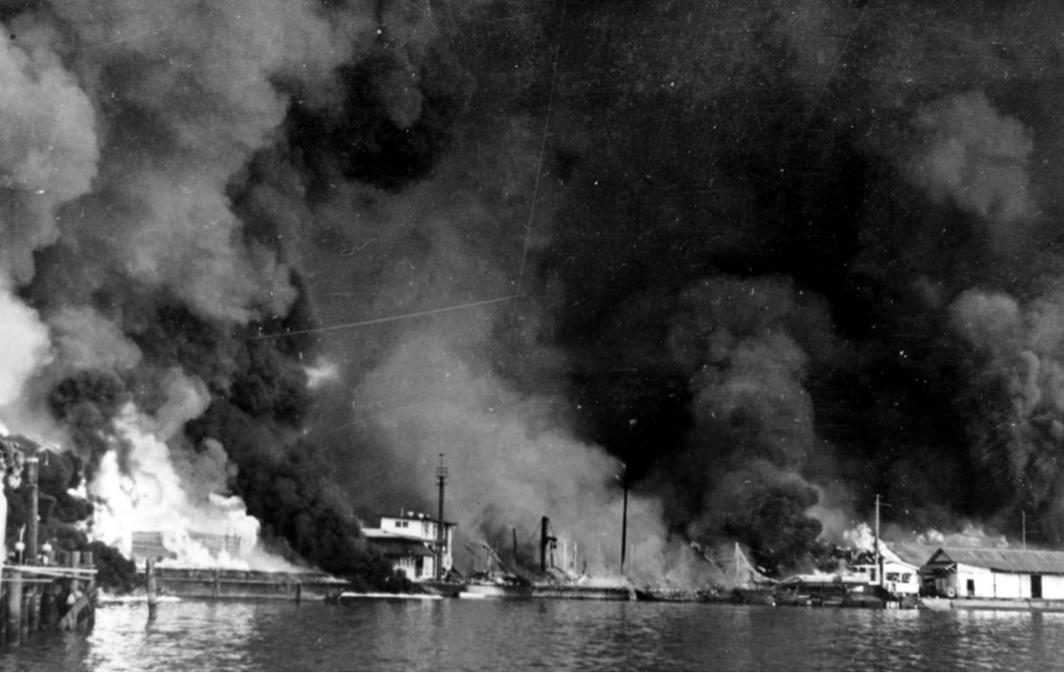
The start of the war also affected civilians in the Philippines, including Americans. One was Amea Brewin Willoughby, the young wife of a high-ranking US diplomat, who'd moved to Manila in 1939 with her husband, Woodbury "Woody" Willoughby.

As a diplomatic spouse, Amea didn't get paid (most still don't), but she was an active Red Cross hospital volunteer and kept busy with social duties. Woody was the second-in-command to High Commissioner Francis Sayre, who served as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's representative to the Philippine government.

Amea had been devastated by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. "The whole of my life had turned upside down," said Amea. "But, like so many other millions of Americans on that incredible day, I had no idea of the vastness of the change."

The shocks kept coming: Pearl Harbor, Clark, Nichols. Then, on December 10, Amea and Woody witnessed the destruction of Cavite Naval Base located on Manila Bay, one of the most strategic harbors in the Pacific. With American air support devastated, Cavite was an easy target for an enemy air attack.

Sitting on a seawall overlooking the bay, Amea saw the Japanese heavy bombers flying in a low V shape, almost like wild geese. They made straight for Cavite, about four miles away. No American planes rose to stop them.



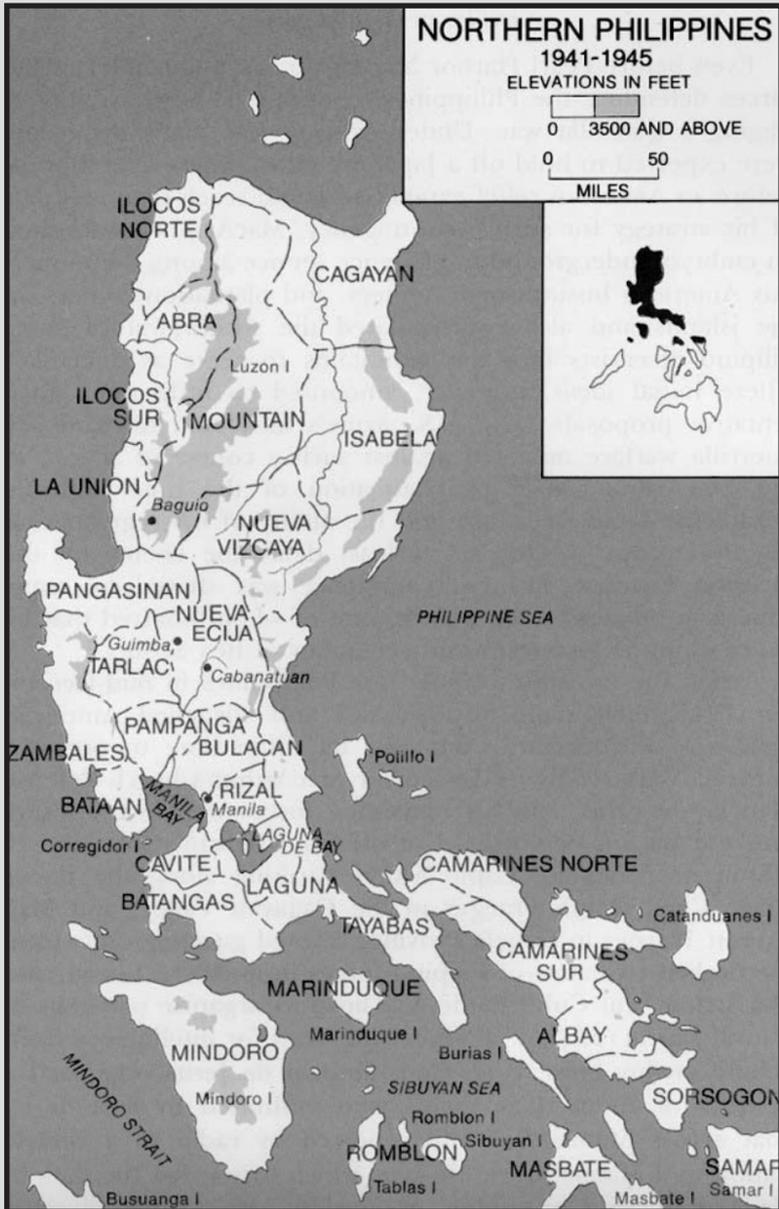
Cavite Naval Base on fire. The loss of Cavite meant that the US submarine base in Asia was forced to relocate to Australia.

Amea saw “heavy masses of earth thrown into the air, pushing before them dense clouds of smoke and debris. Then, seconds later, the overlapping cacophony and thunder of the explosions came deafeningly across the water and grew into one long, uninterrupted roar of bombs.

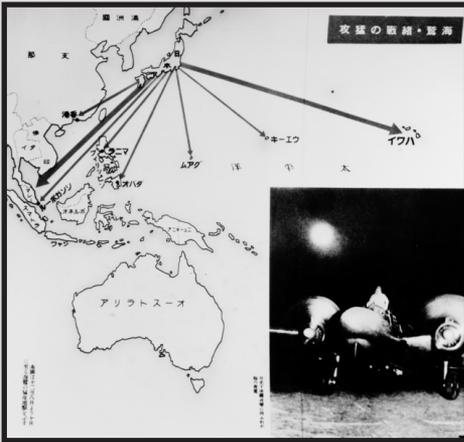
“Would it never stop? Was there ever a time when there had been no shock of bombs, no trembling of the earth?”

Amea and Woody could only stare in horrified surprise. “It was sickening and frightening to know of the destruction of so much of the little strength that we had. But right before us we could see with our own eyes the ruin of one of America’s greatest naval bases—and the only U.S. base in the Far East.”

The war in the Pacific was just a few days old, yet Japan now had a tremendous tactical advantage. “Everywhere the



The map above shows the Northern Philippines, including the island of Luzon, while the one on the next page illustrates the coordinated Japanese strategy that led to rapid domination of the Pacific region in the early part of the war. That map and inset photo of a Japanese plane (Mitsubishi G3M bomber) are from a Japanese book from the time entitled *Photographic History of Naval Strategy*.



The Navy History and Heritage Command translated the caption from the original Japanese as: "This chart shows points attacked by our Navy Eagles, 8–10 December. Left to right: Hong Kong, Kota Bharu (Malaysia), Singapore, Manila [P.I.], Davao, Guam, Wake, Hawaii."

Allies seemed dazed at the tempo of Japanese operations,” pilot Sam Grashio wrote later. “Each day seemed to bring news of some fresh disaster.”

Along with Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, Japan had struck American and British bases in Guam, Wake Island, Midway Island, and Hong Kong. In the Philippines, with America’s ability to defend the territory nearly crushed, Japan didn’t wait long for the next stage: invasion.

Invasion had been part of the enemy’s plan from the outset. Japan landed its first advance ground forces on December 8. On December 22, 1941, about forty-three thousand Japanese troops breached the shores of Lingayen Gulf on Luzon with orders to push south toward Manila. Any hope the Allies had of holding the beaches was, of course, now gone.

And so, as a delaying action until reinforcements could arrive, General Douglas MacArthur informed officials in Washington of his plan to withdraw all Philippine and American military forces to the peninsula of Bataan.

The Battle of Bataan was about to begin.

BEFORE WE HEAD TO BATAAN: A BIT OF BACKGROUND

The three-month siege known as the Battle of Bataan was one of the worst defeats in US military history. Yet it was also a remarkable feat of perseverance by young Filipino and American men. Many were recent recruits with little training; most were experiencing combat for the first time.

To understand why American diplomats and military were there in the first place, it's helpful to know a bit of history. The Philippines had been under the control of Spain since the sixteenth century. It became a territory of the United States in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American War, which was fought in both the Caribbean and the Pacific.

After America defeated Spain, the US took over lands that had belonged to Spain, including Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. (Today, Puerto Rico and Guam remain US territories, where residents are US citizens but lack some of the benefits of citizenship, such as voting in national elections and having voting representatives in Congress.)

People in the Philippines had been pushing for independence from Spain, and continued their efforts when America gained control. The United States eventually agreed, and in 1934, Congress passed legislation that set in place a ten-year process for the Philippines to achieve full independence, which took place in 1946 (the war delayed it for two years).

During the transition period, the United States would be able to maintain military bases in the islands and call

Philippine military forces into service. To prepare for independence, the interim Commonwealth Government of the Philippines also wanted to expand its own army and defense capabilities. And for this Philippine president Manuel L. Quezon turned to an old friend: General Douglas MacArthur.

Douglas MacArthur was born into a military family in Little Rock, Arkansas, and graduated from West Point in 1903. His father, also a well-known general, had served as governor general in the Philippines. MacArthur climbed the military ranks during World War I. In 1935, he became the chief military advisor to President Quezon.

MacArthur officially retired from the US Army in 1937, but was called back to active service in July 1941 and made commander of a new organizational entity, the US Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE), with the rank of major general. He was then living in Manila with his wife, Jean, and their young son, Arthur, who was not quite four.

The timing of MacArthur's appointment was no accident. War clouds were gathering; international tensions had



General Douglas MacArthur served as commander of the US Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE).

increased, and military planners in Washington wanted an experienced hand in this strategic territory in the Pacific.

At this time, the Philippine forces consisted of a little more than twenty-two thousand men, of whom nearly twelve thousand were Philippine Scouts, a military unit begun in 1901. The Philippine Scouts were trained Filipino soldiers who were part of the regular US Army thanks to the territorial status of the Philippines. Some notable Philippine Scouts such as Captain Juan Pajota (whom we'll meet in Part Three) became guerrilla fighters behind enemy lines after the Japanese invasion. Guerrilla warfare is an irregular type of combat conducted by small, mobile groups of fighters who launch small-scale operations such as ambushes, sabotage, or hit-and-run attacks.

But the Philippine Scouts represented only a small segment of the Filipino army. As tensions between Japan and the US intensified, MacArthur stepped up his recruitment efforts. On September 1, 1941, MacArthur began to mobilize Philippine army reserves, train more officers, and recruit more soldiers. The effort was barely underway when Japan attacked. The result was that many of the 120,000 soldiers in the Philippine Army (excepting the Philippine Scouts) were not well trained. Moreover, there was a shortage of vehicles and equipment.

Historian Louis Morton described the average uniform for the Philippine soldier as “shorts, short-sleeved shirt, and cheap canvas shoes with a rubber sole that wore out in about two weeks.” One division had gas masks but no steel helmets.

. . .

Back in Washington, with the experienced MacArthur now in place, the US War Department also stepped up support. The department authorized additional tanks, anti-aircraft artillery, planes, and personnel to increase defense capacity in the Philippines. This included the deployment of nurses like Lucy Wilson and the pilots and soldiers we've just met in this chapter.

It also encompassed activating the 200th Coast Artillery, an outgrowth of the New Mexico National Guard, whose members had been undergoing intensive artillery training in the United States before being tapped for overseas assignment. This deployment brought to the Philippines 76 officers and 1,681 enlisted men from New Mexico. The group included a number of Latino soldiers. Many of the soldiers were from small towns in the state and knew one another.

With nearly 1,800 men from New Mexico in the Philippines when war broke out, the state suffered terrible losses during the Bataan Death March and in prison camps. This connection between the state and the Philippines is honored to this day: Since 1989, New Mexico has commemorated those who suffered and died on the Death March with an annual marathon.

MACARTHUR'S DEFENSE PLAN, DECEMBER 1941

With the landing of Japanese ground forces imminent, MacArthur decided to move his forces away from Manila and make a stand on the Bataan Peninsula; he'd received approval for his overall defense plan for Luzon just weeks earlier from top officials in Washington. MacArthur hoped that in the hills and thick jungles of Bataan, American and Filipino troops could hold out until the US sent more reinforcements and supplies.

Initially, direct responsibility for forces on Luzon fell to MacArthur's second-in-command, General Jonathan Wainwright. (Later, when Wainwright assumed overall command after MacArthur's evacuation, General Edward P. "Ned" King took charge in Bataan. Both King and Wainwright would become high-ranking POWs).

General MacArthur chose to set up his own headquarters on the fortified island of Corregidor at the strategic entrance to Manila Bay. As Japanese troops surged toward Manila, protected by their now-superior air power, it was time to put that plan into place.

Retreat. Delay. Hold on. And hope that help would arrive.