

## Attempts to Supply The Philippines by Sea: 1942

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*En mai 1942, les forces américaines aux Philippines, sous blocus complet par les forces japonaises navales et aériennes, se sont rendus. Jusqu'au début de l'année 1941, les plans des États-Unis ne prévoyaient aucune disposition pour renforcer les Philippines pendant les six mois après la déclinaison de la guerre. Néanmoins, cet article démontre qu'à partir du printemps 1941 les plans ont été modifiés. Les efforts d'accroître les forces américaines aux Philippines étaient effectivement interrompus par la déclaration de guerre, avec l'attaque japonaise sur Pearl Harbor le 7 décembre 1941, beaucoup plus tôt que prévu par le gouvernement américain. Autant l'armée que la marine américaines ont essayé de réapprovisionner les Philippines, mais la destruction japonaise des forces navales américaines et alliées à la bataille de la Mer de Java en février a fait échec à ces efforts.*

The Japanese Imperial army's defeat of United States forces in the Philippines resulted in the loss to death in battle or captivity of over 30,000 American officers and men.<sup>1</sup> Casualties were also heavy for the 75,000-man Philippine Commonwealth Army

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<sup>1</sup> The breakdown of organization which started on 3 April on Bataan, as well as the loss there of most unit returns which were either abandoned or destroyed, prevents making anything close to an accurate assessment of casualties for the American/ Filipino army on Bataan. John W. Whitman in his excellent work, *Bataan Our Last Ditch* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990), 605, claims, "returns for April 3 carried 78,100 Filipinos and Americans still on the rolls." The Army's historian, Morton, infers that around 2,000 personnel were evacuated from Bataan to Corregidor about the time of the surrender -- that figure generally agreeing with other accounts. Whitman's research came up with 45,000 Filipinos and 9,300 Americans located at the prisoner of war compound to which they were marched -- that figure being tallied within the statistical period 10 April to 4 June 1942 and representing those who had survived the "Bataan Death March." From Whitman's figures, it can then be determined that between the opening of the Japanese offensive on April 3 until June 4, nearly 22,000 of the American and Filipino troops who had been on Bataan had simply disappeared. That figure may not, however, include those wounded who had been admitted to the base hospitals located on Bataan prior to 3 April. The fate of those wounded has not been accurately determined, but it is probable that many either soon died or were killed by the Japanese. After some months, most of the Filipino troops taken prisoner were released by the Japanese; however, the Americans continued to be held as prisoners for the duration of the war. Whitman does not give the number of Bataan veterans who died in Japanese POW camps following 4 June 1942.

# THE PHILIPPINES



which had been mobilized and integrated as part of the U.S. Army Forces, Far East under the command of Field Marshal Douglas MacArthur. The fall of the Philippines was not only the worst defeat in the history of American arms, but the siege that preceded the surrenders created conditions of deprivation seldom experienced by an American armed force before or since.

In the spring of 1941 U.S. military planners were of the opinion that war with the Japanese empire, although thought to be a certainty, would not come before the summer of 1942 -- and probably not until 1943. Agreements with the British were that once war broke out the U.S. Navy was to take responsibility for the Pacific Basin as far west as Japan, but that coverage was not to be inclusive of the waters surrounding the Philippines. Instead, the United States Asiatic Fleet, in large part based at Manila Bay, would join with the British in the defense of the Malay Barrier.

From the standpoint of the U.S. Army, the defense of the Philippines was to be concentrated on the island of Luzon, the location of Manila, the capital, where plans called for a holding action to last six months. Within those six months troop reinforcements would come from the United States under the protection of the U.S. Navy and throw the Japanese back into the sea. This plan had been designated "War Plan Orange 3" under which United States forces, together with the Philippine Commonwealth Army, would fall back onto the Bataan Peninsula for the six-month holdout action. The island fortress of Corregidor, together with its satellite installations lying off the south coast of Bataan, were intended to deny the entrance of the Japanese navy into Manila Bay. Under a joint Army/Navy plan there were to be heavy troop reinforcements for the Hawaiian Islands when the shooting started but nothing for the Philippines. The troops bottled up on the Bataan Peninsula under "War Plan Orange 3" would have to hold their ground and wait<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1941, the Japanese established bases in Vichy French Indochina, the result of which was that the Philippines became virtually surrounded. The Japanese were already in the Caroline Islands to the southeast and in strength in the Marianas to the east. The darkening situation brought reconsideration of policy for the Philippines. Not to do something of real substance would appear to America's prospective allies in the Southwest Pacific as defeatist and to the people of the Philippines as an outright abandonment. That August, the Army's chief of staff, General George C. Marshall ordered the Philippines reinforced by 8,500 officers and men who -- upon their arrival in the fall -- brought U.S. Army troop strength on the islands to 31,000. By December another 11,000 left San Francisco aboard a convoy of seven transports under escort of the cruiser *Pensacola*. Upon nearing the Fiji Islands, the convoy commander received word of the attack on Pearl Harbor to be followed shortly by instructions to divert to Australia. Upon the convoy's arrival there, considerable discussion took place between Washington

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<sup>2</sup> For a full overview of the "War Plan Orange" plans as they were developed during the 1930s, see Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange, the U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan 1897 - 1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991). Also see Louis Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953), 61-64, which gives an excellent summary of "War Plan Orange 3."

and the senior Army command then in Australia as to whether the ships were to proceed to their original destination, which was Manila, or to discharge the troops and their equipment in Australia.

Meanwhile in the Philippines, MacArthur had hoped to stop the Japanese invaders on the beaches of Luzon, but he found that impossible. His troops, which consisted in substantial part of ill-trained and ill-equipped Philippine divisions, were in full retreat. With disaster staring him in the face, MacArthur ordered "War Plan Orange 3" into effect which meant the complete withdrawal of the American/Filipino force onto the Bataan Peninsula. Heavily pressed by the Japanese, the withdrawal was completed by 8 January 1942.

A supply buildup for Bataan had been instituted, but what had arrived there turned out to be wholly insufficient for a number of reasons. First, no one -- the least of all MacArthur -- had expected things to transpire within such a short time frame. Second, MacArthur's chief quartermaster, Brigadier General Charles C. Drake, found himself faced with the problem of feeding many more troops than "Orange 3" had envisioned. Third, the carnage created by the Japanese attack against Pearl Harbor canceled out any hope of relief within the six months that "Orange 3" had anticipated. In fact, once the forces were bottled up on Bataan, the tabulation of mouths to be fed against supplies on hand indicated that there were only enough rations to last, at best, three months. On Drake's recommendation, MacArthur immediately ordered all troops on half rations. If the army on Bataan and Corregidor was to be adequately sustained supplies would have to be brought in from the outside.

As viewed in retrospect, the odds of successfully sending supply ships from Australia, or from the United States, would have been reasonably good at the beginning of the siege of Bataan. At that time, Japanese naval strength and air power was occupied in covering their operations against the Malay Peninsula as well as those being conducted against the southern islands of the East Indies. The allied American, British, Dutch and Australian (ABDA) naval forces were still very much a threat to Japanese successes. This situation would last until the end of February when the ABDA fleet was virtually destroyed during the Battle of the Java Sea and the naval actions that followed. After that, Japanese naval deployments shifted to Philippine waters with the result that successful infiltration of the Japanese blockade became difficult if not impossible.

Why an effort to get resupply to MacArthur was not attempted during this grace period when the approaches to Manila Bay were left virtually unguarded by the Japanese can be explained by the lack of hard intelligence as to the whereabouts of the enemy and by confusion inherent within the neophyte American command then undergoing organization in Australia. There was also a good deal of uncertainty of the priority to be given the Philippines. To the American command, the vulnerability of Australia, which the Japanese might soon decide to exploit, was of vital concern; there was also the matter of merchant shipping then in critically short supply. An understandable reluctance was evident over sending valuable ships on such a mission when the chances of getting through might be slight indeed. However, the question of what to do about the Philippines soon became clear. The War Department dispatched Brigadier General

Patrick J. Hurley, a former secretary of war in the Hoover administration to Australia, with orders to take charge of a supply effort for MacArthur. A radio message from the Chief of Staff, General Marshall, directed that "Money is to be spent without stint... Bold and resourceful men, well supplied with dollars to fly to islands not yet in Japanese hands, and there to buy food, charter ships, and offer cash bonuses to their crews for the actual delivery of cargoes."<sup>3</sup> As to the money, it arrived in Australia in the custody of Colonel Stephen J. Chamberlin and Lieutenant Colonel Lester J. Whitlock and consisted of letters of credit in the amount of \$10 million.

The first ships to be sent north left from Brisbane, Australia. They had been part of the *Pensacola* convoy, and included the Army transport *Willard A. Holbrook*, the chartered American merchantman *Portmar*, and the Dutch merchantman *Bloemfontein*. Each was loaded with food and munitions. Before they cleared northern Australian waters, U.S. Army headquarters at Brisbane received the news that the Japanese had occupied the islands of Rabaul and Kavieng in the Bismarcks as well as Kendari, a port town fronting on the Molucca Passage. Alarmed by these developments, the Army ordered all three missions aborted and the ships diverted to the northern Australian port of Darwin. Also leaving for the Philippines from Australia at that time were two Hong Kong registered freighters. When only two days out, their unlicensed crews mutinied, refusing to continue, with the result that these ships also turned back to Australia.

A more willing ship's company had been that of the Filipino-owned *Don Isidro* which had been delivered by its owner for the use of the U. S. Army. Leaving Brisbane in mid January with a full cargo of foodstuffs and munitions, *Don Isidro's* routing was to be a circuitous one. She was to pass south of Australia, touch at Freemantle on Australia's west coast and from there sail north to Java.

The following month, three more ships were dispatched from Australian east coast ports for the Philippines. The first was the American freighter *Coast Farmer* which left on 16 February on a routing which took her along the western coast of New Guinea, thence through the Djailolo Straits to approach Mindanao on its eastern side before entering the Surigao Straits and then on to Mindanao's Gingoog Bay.<sup>4</sup> She arrived there without incident and offloaded onto two Filipino coasters which in turn then headed north for Corregidor. Only one of the Filipino coasters, *Elcano*, made it. The other was overhauled by a Japanese destroyer, ship and crew made captive.

The second ship to leave Australia was the Filipino-owned *Dona Nati* which left

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<sup>3</sup> Radio message dated 18 January 1942, Alvin P. Stauffer, *The Quartermaster Corps: Operations in the War Against Japan* (Washington, DC: Office of Chief of Military History, 1956), 21, 22, fn 63.

<sup>4</sup> The *Coast Farmer* returned to Australia without interception. The master of *Coast Farmer*, John A. Matson, would later be awarded the Army's Distinguished Service Medal bestowed under the authority of Army Regulation 600-45 as that regulation was dated 19 May 1947. He also received the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal, both awards being given for his service aboard *Coast Farmer* in 1942. One account of that operation can be found within the Chief of Transportation (Service of Supply) files: "Blockade Running from Z1, Report of OPNE, QMC, USA Philippine Command."



*Illustration 1: SS Coast Farmer. One of only three ships which succeeded in running the Japanese blockade from Australia to the Philippines during early 1942. Her Philippine destination was Mindanao. Grover Collection.*

Brisbane on 18 February. Routed eastward into the open Pacific, she would pass east of the New Hebrides and the Solomons before entering the Philippine inland sea via the Surigao Straits, her destination the port of Cebu City on the island of Cebu where she made safe arrival. The third ship to leave was the Hong Kong-registered *Anhui* which, in addition to rations and ammunitions, carried three boxed P-40 fighter aircraft as deck cargo. *Anhui* left Australia on 22 February, being routed to approximately follow the same path which had been taken by *Coast Farmer*. Her destination was also Cebu City, where she arrived on 10 March.

*Dona Nati* and *Anhui* both returned safely to Australia. Sadly, there is no evidence that any of their cargo ever reached Corregidor or Bataan. By the time it had been unloaded at Cebu City and warehoused awaiting reloading onto coasters for the final run northward to Corregidor, Japanese naval patrols were in place within the approaches to Manila Bay. Evasion of those patrols by blockade runners had by then become virtually impossible.<sup>5</sup>

The most ambitious plan for supplying MacArthur was inaugurated in direct response to the wireless instructions from General Marshall, resulting in the dispatch of a

<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Drake, "Report of Operations of the Quartermaster Corps in the Philippine Campaign, 1941-42," in two parts. This report is located at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Records of the Adjutant General, Report of Operations, Quartermaster Corps, WWII; also to be found within the records of Chief of Military History, Historic Manuscript File, call number 8-5.10.



*Illustration 2: SS Dona Nati. One of the three vessels which successfully ran the Japanese blockade from Australia to Cebu City, Island of Cebu, Philippine Islands. Grover Collection.*

mission from Australia to the Dutch island of Java. There, it was presumed that medium-sized freighters would be readily available and that crews, if amply rewarded, could be recruited to man them. To lead that mission, the War Department selected John A. Robenson, crusty cavalry colonel of long service. Colonel Robenson had not only a reputation as one who got things done, but he also had a strong personal motivation. Major General Jonathan M. Wainwright, Robenson's friend of long standing, was the senior troop commander on Bataan. On 24 January, accompanied by four junior officers and an enlisted clerk-typist, Robenson flew from Darwin to Soerabaja, a major port city on the northern coast of Java. On arrival, Robenson reported to the headquarters of the ABDA command where he received a depressing but realistic assessment of the situation along the Malay Barrier. The clock was ticking, and Robenson knew that if ships were not dispatched soon, the Japanese would close the door of opportunity. What the U.S. Army command in Australia had counted on was that ABDA would offer Robenson full cooperation. However such was not forthcoming. Only the Dutch offered any real help, but even that was stymied by the attitude of the British, shared by the American naval officers on the ABDA staff, who also looked upon the Philippines as a lost cause and felt that to risk shipping in an undertaking such as Robenson's was not militarily feasible.

At this juncture, Robenson's saving grace was the discovery of a Filipino ship, the *Florence D*, lying then at anchor up the coast at Batavia, and the arrival of the *Don Isidro*, its master holding instructions to report to Robenson for orders. Loaded down with food and munitions, these two ships left Soerabaja on 12 February and 13 February respectively. Their assigned routes were to take them south of Java for 150 miles before

turning east to transit the Timor Sea, thence to swing north toward the Philippines with the destination of Gingoog Bay on Mindanao. General Wainwright, was notorious for his love of beer, and as a gift Robenson bought a case which he entrusted to the master of *Florence D* for delivery. With the beer went a note:

Dear Skinny:

This token, I hope by all my faith in God, gets to you. I am doing the best that I can with the aid of the United States Treasury to get supplies to you. This ship contains a well balanced ration for several days and quite considerable ammunition. You've got practically all the 3" A.A. ammunition that there is in the Far East. I have full faith in the Captain of the ship and anything that you can do to help him on a return trip will be so much the better. You're doing a great job and everybody in the whole United States and the Far East knows it.

My best love and good wishes,

John A. Robenson, Colonel, Cavalry <sup>6</sup>



*Illustration 3: USAT Teapa, ex SS Teapa, ex USS Putnam. Former destroyer converted to a fast banana carrier. She was bareboat chartered by the Army Service of Supply to run the Japanese blockade of the Philippines during early 1942. While en route, the mission was canceled and the ship was reassigned to Alaskan duty. Grover Collection.*

Following the departure of the *Florence D* and *Don Isidro*, enemy air raids against Java's ports increased in intensity, and the damage they caused was no doubt the reason why the ABDA command was to soften its attitude over releasing ships to Robenson. Bomb damage to shipping in the harbor of Soerabaja had become especially

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<sup>6</sup> Colonel John A. Robenson, unpublished manuscript composed from daily diary entries Robenson made during the mission to the Dutch East Indies in order to supply the Philippines from Java.



heavy, and whether the ships were lost en route to the Philippines, or lost through air attack on Java was becoming an even bet anyway one looked at it, or so the ABDA staff must have rationalized. In any event, ABDA offered Robenson four somewhat shopworn China coasters. Concentrating efforts on the most promising of the four, the *Taiyuan*, Robenson and his officers supervised its loading. There was a further problem -- that of finding a crew willing to sail her as almost the entirety of the ship's original company had for sundry reasons not volunteered to sail her. Of the merchant seamen then at Soerabaja and Batavia, few were heroes. Despite the high monetary rewards Robenson offered, he was barely able to scratch together a mixed bag of Europeans, Americans, and Javanese seamen.

*Taiyuan* was finally ready to sail by 27 February. Tragically, on that very day, the battle of the Java Sea was being fought just a few miles to the north of Soerabaja, an action that crippled the ABDA fleet and which during the following two days resulted in its near total destruction. The merchant shipping then at Soerabaja, unable to escape, was ordered scuttled. And so ended *Taiyuan's* voyage before it had even begun.

Under instructions to evacuate to Australia, Robenson and his party were able to escape shortly before Java fell to the enemy. And what of the *Florence D* and *Don Isidro*? They both had the misfortune to have been on the flight path of enemy aircraft en route to a devastating raid against Darwin. Spotted by Japanese bombers on 19 February while transiting the Timor Sea, they were bombed and sunk.<sup>7</sup>

Although the U.S. Navy never showed any willingness to use its surface ships to assist the supply of the Philippines, whether for the carriage of cargo or as escorts, that reluctance did not apply to its submarines, but it took direct pressure from the White House to get action. Between mid-January and 3 May, eight U.S. submarines unloaded cargoes at Corregidor. For their return trips, they evacuated a total of 185 personnel together with the treasury of the Philippines as well as vital Army records. The quantity of the cargoes the subs delivered totaled 53 tons of foodstuffs along with various quantities of munitions and diesel oil. In aggregate, this was hardly enough to make a

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<sup>7</sup> The account of *Don Isidro's* loss is taken from an affidavit of Rafael S. Acosta. At the time of the loss of *Don Isidro*, Acosta was serving on the ship as its 3rd officer. After the ship's loss and Acosta's arrival at Brisbane, he was inducted as a commissioned officer into the Army of the United States. Acosta's affidavit is to be found at NARA, RG 407, Philippine Archive Collection, box 1566, folder Marine Statistics Branch, *Don Isidro*. Following Col. John A. Robenson's return to Australia from Java, he would again meet the masters of both *Don Isidro* and *Florence D*. Following their reunion, Robenson would write in his diary that both had received commissions in the U.S. Army prior to their meeting. It can be presumed that their assignments were with USAFIA, Service of Supply, for duty in relationship to Australian-based supply ship function. It is of interest that the table of organization for SOS in Australia for the year 1942 includes a Filipino-manned ship section.

The loss of *Florence D* is described in Robert M. Browning, Jr., *U.S. Merchant Vessel Casualties of World War II* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1996). Prior to her sinking, *Florence D* had picked up the downed crew of a U.S. Navy PBV, the chief pilot of which was Lt. Thomas A. Moorner who many years later was appointed chief of naval operations during the Nixon Administration.

dent in the overall need; nevertheless, it was an asset to the morale of the defenders. The personnel who the submarines evacuated were of considerable import as most of them were essential to the future conduct of the war.<sup>8</sup>

In the final analysis, efforts to supply MacArthur from outside of the islands, although not a complete failure, achieved little. Besides the small amount of materiel delivered by submarine, only that which arrived at Mindanao aboard *Coast Farmer*, and which *Elcano* subsequently delivered to Corregidor, ever reached the intended consumers. Even then, a good part of the foodstuffs that had arrived in *Elcano* had been rendered useless from spoilage and inherent vice during shipment. As a result of humidity, canned goods had lost their labels rendering their contents a mystery.

A separate program was put into effect during February. This involved four fast ships selected to leave Hawaii for the Philippines. Two of them were actually en route when it was determined that their chances of getting through had become so slim as to make the effort suicidal. Accordingly, the plan was aborted, and the ships were diverted to other missions.

There was, though, one shining moment, and this was the result of a plan put in force by MacArthur's quartermasters during early January to utilize ships which had been anchored off Corregidor since the evacuation from Manila in late December. Three were used, all being medium-sized Filipino coasters: *Legazpi*, *Kolumbugan*, and *Bohol II*. Between mid January and mid February, each of them made two round trips for a total of six deliveries of foodstuffs to Corregidor from the island of Panay as well as from Looc Cove in Batangas Province. *Legazpi* and *Kolumbugan* were victim to enemy interception on what would have been for each of them their third attempt. After those losses, it was decided that to send *Bohol II* again would have been futile since it was obvious that the Japanese blockade had effectively canceled out any hope of success. Although the three ships which sailed from Corregidor had a short operational history, they had all told brought in 5,800 tons of rice and other foodstuffs together with 400 head of livestock. It was not enough to stave off surrender, but it must have made the last days of the siege a bit more bearable.<sup>9</sup>

On 10 April, the American/Filipino force on Bataan was marched into captivity. On 6 May, Corregidor was surrendered. On 3 June, the last organized American/ Filipino unit fighting in the Visayan group surrendered. The defenders of the Philippines were not callously abandoned as many have come to believe. The cause of their capitulation was clearly a matter of logistical deprivation resulting from the enemy's domination of the sea and of the air.

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<sup>8</sup> The submarines were: USS *Seatrou*, USS *Sargo*, USS *Swordfish*, USS *Permit*, USS *Seadragon*, USS *Snapper*, USS *Spearfish*, USS *Sailfish* (ex *Squalis*). See *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* (8 vols; Washington: Department of the Navy, 1959-1981).

<sup>9</sup> NARA, Record Group 407, boxes 25, 109, 1565, 1566, 1568, 1570. Besides the episodes of *Legazpi*, *Kolumbugan*, and *Bohol II*, these boxes include the accountings of the multitude of Philippine ships and small craft. Individual records of these are listed in detail within Charles Dana Gibson, with E. Kay Gibson, *Over Seas: U.S. Army Maritime Operations, 1898 Through the Fall of the Philippines*. (Camden, ME: Ensign Press, 2002), 312-340.