

75 years ago on 15 December 1944, the First U. S. Army's 106th and 28th Infantry Divisions were resting and training in a quiet zone in the Ardennes Forest in eastern Belgium. The soldiers were confident that Germany was collapsing and they'd be home for Christmas. No one had an inkling that in two days, they'd be overrun by German tanks. Early the next morning, heavy German artillery fire began pounding their positions, experienced officers thought a "spoiling attack" (a counterattack designed to slow the advance of a superior force) was in progress. The morning artillery barrage was the opening move of a massive German offensive, known today as the Battle of the Bulge. The initial German thrust was immediately contained on the northern and southern flanks and stopped by heroic individual actions in a few days. The worst of the carnage continued for a month as the American counterattack drove the Germans back to their original lines. American infantrymen lived and fought outdoors in temperatures of 14 F - frozen feet, frostbite and enemy fire were equal threats. The Battle of the Bulge was in lives, the costliest single battle America ever fought, resulting in some 89,000 American casualties, 19,000 KIA, 23,000 MIA – surpassing even Gettysburg in bloodshed.

On that same day, across the world in the Philippines, the U. S. Sixth Army made the opening moves of the conquest of Luzon, with the objective of taking Manila and Clark Field. These would become major assembly areas for the coming attack on the Japanese Home Islands. On 15 December 1944, the U. S. Army landed on the island of Mindoro largely unopposed. By 20 December, our aircraft were flying from one of its two airports with the second opened by the end of the month, providing air support for the impending invasion of Luzon and reducing the threat of locally-based Kamikazes which had sunk a number of American ships. Eventually, MacArthur would command 10 divisions and 5 independent regiments in the Battle of Luzon, the largest force in the Pacific - more troops than fought in North Africa, Italy or Southern France. MacArthur would wrest the Philippines from Japanese occupation at a cost of far fewer troops than the Battle of the Bulge which was still raging on 9 January 1945 as 175,000 American Troops of the Sixth Army landed on Luzon at Lingayen Gulf.

From his headquarters in Manila, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, Military Governor of the Philippines and commander of the 225,000 man Japanese garrison on Luzon decided that the Battle of Luzon would be a delaying action. Two years after the fall of Bataan, it was the Japanese Army now on the defensive and the fighting in Luzon would buy time for Japan to prepare for invasion. Yamashita ordered his forces to abandon Manila and the Luzon central plain and harass advancing American forces from positions in the surrounding hills. Yamashita, a veteran of WWI, China, Manchuria, Malaya, and Singapore would continue resisting on Luzon until Japan's formal surrender.

Immediately after landing, the Sixth Army began its 100 mile march to Manila, advancing southward through the central plain toward Clark Field. They met little resistance until they reached Clark Field where the Japanese stood and fought. Clark field would not fall to the Americans until the end of January. Sixth Army commander Walter Krueger was at odds with MacArthur during the southward march. Krueger was concerned about enemy threats to his flanks but MacArthur deemed Krueger's caution unwarranted and an impediment to the advance. As it turned out, MacArthur's instincts were correct, no flanking threat materialized and MacArthur's constant pressure had American troops at the Northern suburbs of Manila by 3 February. On that day, American tanks advanced to Santo Tomas University where an infamous concentration camp held some 3700 allied civilians. A tank called "Battling Basic" broke through the gates, liberating the camp's starving population, many of whom were in captivity for two years in failing health, surviving on progressively smaller rations.

The Japanese had little regard for prisoners of war and considered them cowards for not dying in battle. They considered it acceptable to mistreat POW's – as we already knew from the Bataan Death March. As the Battle of Luzon progressed an urgency arose about liberating Japanese prisoners because U. S.

Intelligence was convinced that the Japanese intended to liquidate all allied prisoners if forced to surrender. Many of the Death March survivors were held in a slave labor camp at Cabanatuan, midway between the Linguyen Gulf and Manila. LTC Henry Mucci and his 6th Ranger Battalion, was ordered to push through American lines to liberate the Cabanatuan camp. Mucci coordinated with Filipino guerrillas and executed one of the most famous military raids in history. On 30 January, as the Filipino's advanced a diversionary attack, Mucci's Rangers eliminated the Japanese garrison and liberated over 550 American prisoners. With Filipino's covering the withdrawal, they marched back to American lines with a loss of 9 Filipinos wounded, 2 Rangers killed, 4 wounded and 2 POW's killed.

Manila was the gem of the Pacific, a modern, cosmopolitan city whose architecture was renowned. The U. S. Army landed a second force 45 miles southwest of Manila at Nasugbu to attack the city from the rear. This convinced Yamashita to declare Manila an open city and he ordered his troops to withdraw – raising the hope that this beautiful city would be spared destruction and it's population who had suffered terribly under occupation, would be saved. The withdrawal order incensed RADM Sanji Iwabachi, commanding Japanese Marines in Manila, who defied Yamashita and ordered his marines to defend Manila to the last man. They were joined by other dissident Army troops and the ensuing Battle of Manila became a bloody, block by block, house to house action which resulted in 6500 American military casualties (1,100 KIA) and terrible civilian losses. By the time Manila was captured, all but two of it's downtown buildings were destroyed and between 100,000 and 250,000 Filipino civilians were dead. My father of blessed memory, passed through Manila on his way home from Biak and was deeply moved by the destruction and loss of life. He returned in awe of the Filipino people and never forgot their suffering during the war. After Manila fell, the fighting in Luzon turned northward and Japanese resistance continued beyond VJ day until Japan formally surrendered on 2 September 1945.

General Tomoyuki Yamashita formally surrendered Luzon to American authorities in the presence of British LTG Arthur Percival, who had surrendered Singapore to Yamashita in 1942 and remained a POW for the duration of the Pacific War. With Japanese atrocities against Filipino civilians and allied prisoners fresh in the minds of Allied soldiers, General Yamashita was tried for war crimes and convicted. His case was appealed to the Supreme Courts of the United States and the Philippines, both declined to review the Military Tribunal's decision. Yamashita was sentenced to death. Before he was hanged, Yamashita gave a statement agreeing with the courts decision, expressing regret that he could not control his troops, praised his American captors for the kind way he was treated and praised the able defense his attorneys put up. Yamashita's defense argued that he did not order the atrocities and could not have realistically controlled every action by individuals in the large force he commanded. His conviction however, established the legal concept of "Command Responsibility" that endures to this day. It stipulates that a commander is ultimately responsible for any atrocities that occur under his command, whether he ordered them or not - and whether or not he was aware of them. Although Yamashita's trial was considered hasty and his defense upheld by legal scholars of my generation, Japan's conduct of the Pacific War – Pearl Harbor, their sanctioned atrocities against the Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, Pacific Islanders and Allied military and civilian prisoners of war was unforgivable. Yamashita personified these crimes and few veterans of the Pacific War would mourn his passing.

With the capture of Clark Field and Manila, the American focus shifted to the invasion of Japan itself which would open – and close – with three major battles. The United States opened the Japanese Campaign with the near-simultaneous invasion of two Japanese islands: Iwo Jima for a base to provide fighter escort for long-range bombers attacking Japan and as a safe haven for aircraft in distress and Okinawa for air bases and assembly areas for the coming invasion of Kyushu, the southernmost of the Japanese home islands. The third great battle took place on a hilltop in New Mexico by scientists who fought to build humankind's deadliest weapon and then fought over whether it should be used.