

To chronicle U. S. operations in the Philippines during the Pacific War, a look back at the relationship between America and the Philippines is instructive. My father, of blessed memory, rarely ever passed a Filipino in the post-war years without striking up a conversation. He passed through Manila on his way home from Biak in 1946 and never forgot the destruction of the city or heroism of the Filipino people which was legendary after the war. But there weren't always warm feelings between America and the Philippines as our relationship evolved throughout the years following the Spanish-American War. This piece is not intended as a history of the Spanish-American War, or the Philippine-American War so my review will be brief. Just prior to the Spanish-American War, the Filipino people began a revolt against Spain's colonization of their archipelago. In 1898, while America fought Spain in Cuba, Admiral Dewey's fleet sailed into Manila Bay where an opportunity arose to inflict further defeat on Spain by joining with the Philippine Revolutionaries. Secretly however, the U. S. arranged with Spain for us to capture the city of Manila. After the capture, Spain would surrender to America without Filipino participation, leaving America with a new colony. The Filipino struggle against Spain ended with them no closer to independence than before – one colonial master simply replaced another. Filipinos continued their anti-colonial struggle and the Philippine-American war ensued.

American forces in the Philippine-American War were eventually led by General Arthur MacArthur Jr., a Civil War Medal of Honor winner whose son Douglas at the time was attending West Point. Philippine fighters were badly over-matched by the U. S. Army, resulting in the war devolving from conventional land battles to a guerrilla conflict (now called Asymmetric Warfare.) As in any asymmetric conflict, the stronger U. S. army suffered casualties in hit and run attacks by a small, determined enemy aided by locals. In retaliation, the U. S. inflicted murderous reprisals against the civilian population and ordered forced re-locations of large populations for "security" reasons which resulted in perhaps 200,000 civilian deaths from disease – all well-hidden from the American Press.

The Filipino guerrillas held no illusions of defeating the U. S. Army. They hoped to sway the U. S. electorate away from William McKinley who was attempting to extend U. S. involvement in Asia. McKinley's opponent, William Jennings Bryant was a moving force in the Anti-Imperialist movement which followed the logic of the Founding Fathers who decried foreign involvement. Although Bryant lost the election, isolationist America had enough of this war and the Government arranged a cease-fire. American pride and the strategic location of the Philippines made it difficult for America to simply abandon the country but throughout the early 20th Century, progressive legislation gave the Philippines more freedom and in 1935, semi-independent commonwealth status with full independence set for 1944. Independence came in 1946, delayed because of the Japanese invasion in 1941, Japan's dubious attempt to "integrate their Filipino nieces and nephews into the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere."

The Philippine archipelago sits strategically between Indonesia (then the East Indies) and Japan. The South China Sea to the west was the major shipping route for oil, rubber and other raw materials required by Japanese industry. Through a series of treaties, the United States both actively defended the Philippines and developed and trained the Philippine Army in the years after the Philippine-American War. This military role was minimal until Japanese expansionist moves began in the region, making the need for a strong Philippine army crucial to counter Japan. The Philippines required an experienced military leader, familiar with the region, to organize their forces - who better than Arthur MacArthur's son, Douglas who by then, had risen to become the U. S. Army Chief of Staff. Douglas MacArthur's first assignment in 1903 after graduating from West Point was in the Philippines, ironically with the Corps of Engineers surveying the port of Tacloban – where he would eventually return to liberate the nation. After rising to Chief of Staff following a storied Army career - including being the first father and son Medal of Honor winners and General Officers - Douglas MacArthur, a vocal opponent of isolationism, retired from the Army in 1937 and took the position of Military

Adviser to the Independent Commonwealth of the Philippines. (His position gave him the pay of a U. S. Major General and the official rank Field Marshall of the Philippine Army, with its corresponding compensation.) MacArthur was nothing less than a brilliant military leader, organizer and tactician and the performance of the Philippine Army against impossible odds after the Japanese invasion reflected his competence. In late July, 1941, President Roosevelt, in response to the growing threat of Japanese occupation, federalized the Philippine Army and recalled MacArthur to active duty as Commander of U. S. Army Forces Far East.

Four months later, on 8 Dec 1941 (7 Dec in the U. S.) as Pearl Harbor came under attack, Japanese bombs began falling all over the northern Philippine islands. American airfields and naval installations were particularly targeted and fully half of U. S. aircraft were put out of action on the first day of America's Pacific War. Japan's invasion of Luzon and other Philippine Islands commenced on the same day. By 8 January, American and Philippine forces were driven from Luzon to the Bataan Peninsula. The Japanese by then had a complete and unchallenged blockade of the Philippines in place. America, left with a crippled Pacific fleet, could not promise relief to the American and Filipino soldiers defending against the inevitable. Even if the resources for such aid existed, the United States, under the cajoling of Winston Churchill, adopted the position of "Europe First" and earmarked all its military strength to the European Theater – all except for its most powerful Pacific weapon, Douglas MacArthur, whom the President wisely ordered to Australia. Frankly, the criticism that arose over MacArthur's evacuation was unjustified – MacArthur's defensive plan allowed the Army to hold out on Bataan for 5 months – 3 months longer than the British defense of Singapore. This delayed the Japanese timetable for conquest of the resource-rich East Indies. What Douglas MacArthur's strategies would accomplish in the ensuing two years of the Pacific War – at so low a cost in U. S. troops - would make his rescue one of the most brilliant decisions by any American president.

Bataan fell on 9 April, followed by the complete surrender of American and Filipino forces on 8 May 1942. The Japanese slaughter of American and Filipino prisoners of war during the Bataan Death March became a rallying cry to U. S. Army forces in the Pacific Theater. Atrocities against Filipino civilians and the Santo Tomas Internment Camp, a concentration camp for Allied civilians, drove the Filipino people, no strangers to guerrilla warfare, to develop a formidable resistance movement. Filipino guerrillas harried the Japanese everywhere possible, forcing the Japanese to commit an inordinate number of troops, vitally needed elsewhere, to garrison the Philippine Islands. The Filipino resistance proved instrumental in bringing about the eventual liberation of the Philippines in 1945.

From his headquarters in Australia, Douglas MacArthur planned the reconquest of the Southwest Pacific commencing with major operations in the Northern Solomon Islands and New Guinea. He developed new infantry tactics for the terrain which included a new take on maneuver warfare, utilizing amphibious landings to flank enemy strongholds. He perfected the art of coordinated amphibious operations which would soon reach their apex at the young Lieutenant MacArthur's first duty station.

As Douglas MacArthur sailed from Corregidor, he made a public promise to the American and the Filipino people that he would return. 75 years ago, on 20 October 1944, 200,000 troops of the American 6th Army landed on Leyte with the assistance of 3,000 Filipino resistance fighters. Later that day, MacArthur walked ashore at Tacloban, 41 years after his first visit. The fulfillment of his promise is immortalized in a famous photo by Gaetano Faillace and lifelike statue of the event on the spot he landed. Responding to the invasion, 3 great Japanese fleets sailed to destroy the beachhead and the powerful US Navy task force supporting the landings. The ensuing Battle of Leyte would be the greatest naval battle in history, featuring the last full broadsides exchanged by the last battleships ever built and the first sinking of an American ship by a Kamikaze suicide pilot.