



Triumph on Bataan

At a place that evokes loss, America forged an unlikely victory

By John D. Lukacs

AS SEEN FROM LT. WILLIAM E. DYESS'S new vantage point, this war was not going well. Not for the United States. Not for his men. And certainly not for him. In mid-January 1942, Dyess, the commanding officer of the 21st Pursuit Squadron, was out of a cockpit and out of his element. Instead of leading missions in the skies above the Philippines, he was crawling through the Bataan jungle, leading puzzled Army Air Force pilots and mechanics on an infantry training exercise. The tall, 25-year-old Texan with blue eyes and recruiting poster good looks had two aerial kills and a destroyed Japanese truck convoy to his credit, but he had little training and even less patience for his current assignment.

It's easy to picture the folksy, frustrated flier tramping through the steamy jungle, rifle in hand, grouching that he would rather be home, staring "at the south end of a north-bound mule." Little did Dyess know just how difficult the proverbial plowing in the Philippines, not to mention elsewhere in the Pacific, would become.

Reeling after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the "ABCD" powers—American, British, Chinese, and Dutch—had been powerless to stop Japan's war machine. By the last week of December 1941, the Rising Sun flew over the American outposts of Guam and Wake Island, as well as the British colony of Hong Kong. The Solomon Islands, New Britain, the Dutch East Indies, and Singapore were in their sights. The last barrier to the successful completion of Japan's opening offensive was the Bataan Peninsula, the spine of volcanic rock and jungle into which the defenders of the Philippines had retreated after a 43,000-man Japanese invasion force had overrun Luzon, to the north. But just how long that besieged bulwark could stand depended on a single piece of paper.

On January 10, Gen. Douglas MacArthur had signed Field Order No. 4 of the United States Army Forces Far East (USAFFE), which authorized the temporary transfer of most Army Air Force personnel to infantry commands. The decision was born of necessity and desperation. American army lines lacked depth; the Far East Air Force, decimated in the devastating attacks in the war's early hours, lacked planes. This fateful order had grounded Dyess indefinitely, as a reserve army was carved out of the planeless pilots and airmen of five pursuit squadrons. Dyess and his 218 officers and men were now one of several provisional battalions assigned to fill gaps in army lines in western Bataan. Shipless sailors marooned by the departure of the

A motley crew of Americans and Filipinos stands at attention on Bataan in early January, 1945. Such mixed units of soldiers, sailors, and airmen fought in Bataan's Battle of the Points.

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Asiatic Fleet would also be impressed into the infantry.

Within two weeks, Field Order No. 4, and the force it conjured, would play a key role in delaying Japan's conquest of the Philippines—a delay that would have severe consequences for Japan's greater war aims in the crucial months of early 1942.

Indeed, as Japanese landing barges churned toward shore in the final hours of January 22, no one—not MacArthur, not his Japanese counterpart, Gen. Masaharu Homma, and definitely not Ed Dyess—had any notion that a ragtag force of pilots, airmen, sailors, and other hastily assembled troops created by MacArthur's obscure order were the only things that stood between Japanese success in a daring operation perhaps years in the planning and a swift and potentially calamitous American defeat. Taking place months before the fall of the Philippines and the well-chronicled, savage aftermath of the Bataan Death March, the Battle of the Points would become a strategically pivotal fight as the Americans sought to disrupt Japan's conquest timetable. The battle would also see America's first amphibious landing of the war against the Japanese, as well as provide a frightening first look at their fanaticism on the field of battle. And it would provide America with its first, if fleeting, taste of victory.



Ed Dyess's colorful exploits include leading the first amphibious assault of the war against the Japanese.

THE JAPANESE BELIEVED the ill-equipped and inexperienced Allied forces were incapable of prolonged resistance. Indeed, one Japanese officer described the retreat of Filipino and U.S. troops into Bataan as a "cat entering a sack."

The Imperial General Headquarters was so confident it detached half of Homma's original force to aid in the southern thrust to the Dutch East Indies, yet still expected him to adhere to his 50-day deadline for the capture of the Philippines. Left with only the Fourteenth Army's 16th Division and the 65th Brigade to accomplish the task, Homma was forced to attempt an amphibious end-run.

The plan called for landing roughly 2,000 troops on the rocky, finger-shaped promontories on Bataan's southwestern coast, delineated as difficult-to-pronounce "points" on American maps, in late January. The 2nd Battalion of Lt. Col. Nariyoshi Tsunehiro's 20th Infantry Regiment would sever the West Road which led from Bagac to Mariveles on the peninsula's southernmost tip, disrupt communications, and wreak havoc in the Americans' rear.

Homma would then launch a frontal assault, crumple the American I Corps line, flank II Corps, and roll up the remaining American positions, precipitating the fall of the Philippines.

Just after midnight on the morning of January 23, Ed Dyess awoke to news of enemy landings not far from his bivouac outside of Mariveles. The 21st Pursuit, attached to the Philippine Army's 71st Infantry Division under Brig. Gen. Clyde Selleck, was not the only such unit to receive a wake-up call from the Japanese. MacArthur had just ordered a pullback from the defensive line spanning the widest part of Bataan, to the north. But the army did not immediately understand the size, nor the significance, of the landings. Rather than risk withdrawing regular troops from the skeletal main line of resistance just to the south, additional ad hoc units would be mobilized.

While Dyess headed west to Quinauan Point, a U.S. Navy unit took the lead in action near Longoskawayan Point, 3,000 yards southwest of Mariveles. Three hundred troops from Tsunehiro's 2nd Battalion, which had been fractured due to a chance encounter with a U.S. Navy motor torpedo boat, *PT-34*, had scaled the sheer 100-foot cliffs and melted inland. The Naval Defense Battalion—composed of sailors, PBY seaplane pilots, and marine artillerymen reinforced by Philippine Scouts (crack Filipino troops under American officers who were widely considered the best combat units in the command), as well as men from the 3rd Pursuit Squadron and the 301st Chemical Company—was immediately dispatched to the area.

The provisional battalions' first hours in the field were tragicomic. Arriving at the

thousand-yard promontory that tapered into Quinauan Point on the morning of January 23, Ed Dyess's outfit was melded with Philippine Constabulary troops—essentially a military police force—and the 803rd Aviation Engineer Battalion. The mission was to root out a loose aggregation of what was reported to be 30-odd Japanese soldiers. Signal whistles blared and the motley troops in M1917 "doughboy" helmets crashed into the jungle, chattering and smoking cigarettes, blithely unaware that they were likely being observed by snipers or scouts.

At Longoskawayan, the men of the Naval Defense Battalion had displayed interesting initiative in using coffee grounds to dye their whites, but the exasperated call of one sailor, holding his rifle aloft during a patrol, not only exposed the provisional battalions' inexperience in infantry tactics, but also a frighten-

Battle of the Points January 22 – February 18, 1942



ing unfamiliarity with their weapons: "Sarge, how do you get the bullets in this thing?"

WAS A FAMILIAR REFRAIN. The weapons issued to the 21st Pursuit, Dyess later remarked, looked as though they "might have been picked up at an ordnance rummage sale." The antiquated arsenal included old navy Marlin and Lewis machine guns, .50 calibers stripped from P-40 wrecks, Browning automatic rifles, British Bren gun carriers, grenades, Springfield rifles, 45 revolvers, and, finally, three bayonets. "But this was all right," Dyess explained of the latter, "because only three of our Air Force men knew anything about using them."

The dense jungle in the points area caused widespread confusion. When asked his whereabouts, one perplexed member of

the Signal Corps, perched atop a telephone pole near the Anyasan-Silaiim points area, offered an honest reply: "For Christ's sake, sir, I don't know. I am somewhere between asinine and quinine points." There was also the strange argot of their army handlers. "Maintain your interval," thundered one infantry officer at Quinauan Point. A frustrated airman fired back: "Let the son-of-a-bitch who gave that order try to maintain it!"

Enveloped in a sinister labyrinth of swamps and bamboo, the soldiers spent patrols swearing and chasing silhouettes. Tall hardwood trees and the fronds of banana and nipa palms formed a canopy that blotted the blazing sun. Groping along in the purplish, perpetual dusk, they clutched the bandoliers and rifle stocks of their comrades to stay in formation. Razor-sharp blades of cogon grass shredded their clothes and skin. They tripped over boulders

and logs and were ensnared in giant spider webs. Intermittent gunfire echoed through the emerald walls of jungle, but it was the skittering monkeys and snapping twigs that made them jittery. Rarely seen, the Japanese seemed to be nowhere, yet everywhere.

At Quinauan Point, a paranoid airman fired some staccato bursts from his BAR. A few seconds later, a weary American voice emanating from the direction of the supposed enemy target replied, "Hell, you're shooting kind of low."

"The flank had pulled over in front of us," explained Sgt. Jack Donohoe of the 21st Pursuit. "That's how well trained we were."

The situation went from bad to horrific once the real shooting began. The provisional battalions discovered the Japanese were well trained in jungle and night warfare, as well as in battlefield subterfuge. The Americans could not see their well-camouflaged enemy until it was too late; bullets scythed through the stifling, humid air, mowing down rows of poorly-dispersed troops. And to the Americans' surprise, they were subjected to artillery barrages, facing everything from large shells to terrifyingly effective mortar fire. (See "Spies, Coffins, and Weapons Caches," page tk.)

The Japanese also proved adept at setting traps. Early in the Longoskawayan fight, the Japanese allowed a patrol to advance all the way to their beach supply area just so they could ambush the party on its return inland. Corpses were booby trapped with grenades; firecrackers gave the impression of multiple machine-gun emplacements. The Japanese also played dead and hid amid corpses before jumping up to shoot or bayonet unsuspecting troops, a tactic Dyess called "possuming" and one that had but one sure remedy: "We countered this by never passing a 'dead' Jap without shooting him to make sure he was hors de combat."

By nightfall on January 24, the gritty Naval Defense Battalion had secured the high ground of Mt. Pucot and succeeded in driving most of the Japanese invaders back to the tips of Longoskawayan and Lapiay points.

But the unit did not have enough men or weapons to clear the area. That same evening found a newly-promoted Capt. Ed Dyess and his men facing a more serious situation at Quinauan Point. No one on the ground at Quinauan or at Allied headquarters realized that the majority of Tsunehiro's 2nd Battalion, approximately 600 men, had come ashore in that vicinity and was well-armed and expertly entrenched. Instead, it was believed that General Selleck was simply not aggressive enough; he was relieved by Col. Clinton Pierce, a rugged cavalry officer who would soon make brigadier and later make history as the first American general to be wounded in the war.

Dyess and his comrades were fighting on many fronts—against the Japanese, against faulty equipment and shoddy intelligence, against the jungle, against hunger. Getting an enemy in sights was difficult; killing him, nearly impossible. Their rusty Springfields frequently jammed. Some constabulary troops fired a three-inch Stokes mortar, only to have one shell smack an overhanging tree branch and fall at their feet. Luckily, as was usually the case with their ordnance, it was a dud. Grenades, so heavy they had to be thrown sidearm, leaked gunpowder and were almost useless. In fact, in the pages of a captured diary, one Japanese soldier professed to be more afraid of getting hit by the objects than he was of the grenades actually exploding.

Shelter halves and mosquito nets were scarce, so the Americans slept in foxholes and shell craters, under unrelenting attack from swarms of insects, shaking and sweating as the



At the points, Dyess's untrained and ill-equipped battalion faced well-armed and experienced Japanese soldiers like these.

It became clear that many Japanese preferred death to surrender. Some jumped from the cliffs to perish on the rocks below

chills and fevers of malaria spread through the ranks. Since mess trucks had difficulty navigating the jungle roads, they were fed at odd intervals, if at all. With dabs of cotton in their nostrils to block the putrid, omnipresent odor of rotting corpses, the Americans ate sourdough bread and salmon gravy washed down by water ladled from oily fuel drums.

But the men of the provisional battalions kept fighting. Although January 25–26 saw no appreciable advances, more importantly there were no retreats. At Quinauan, Ed Dyess was proving as talented a leader on the ground as he was in the air. The Japanese were unable to penetrate inland according to plan. But Dyess could not continue the act indefinitely, nor could the men of the other provisional battalions. Accustomed to bunking aboard ships or working in hangars—not in a jungle battle zone—they grew increasingly irritable, sick, and bewildered. Their maps and their army commanders said they were making progress, but the closer they advanced toward their respective points, the more resistance they met from the Japanese.

IT WOULD TAKE a Japanese attempt to reinforce the troops at Quinauan on January 27, as well as alarming casualty reports from the provisional battalions, to finally awaken American commanders to the gravity of the situation. A series of skirmishes along the Allied main line of resistance—now several miles farther to the south—had revealed that the points landings were not supplementary feints: they were the primary attacks.

MacArthur immediately ordered the Philippine Scouts to help the exhausted provisional battalions drive the Japanese into the sea. On January 27, 12-inch mortars on the island of Corregidor in Manila Bay blistered Longoskawayan Point; the next day, a detachment from the 57th Philippine Scouts relieved the weary sailors of the Naval Defense Battalion. Within three days, all Japanese resistance at Longoskawayan Point was eliminated.

It would not be so easy at Quinauan. On January 28, Dyess's men were relieved by more than 500 scouts. Yet six days later, Dyess and his now battle-tested veterans returned, picked up the M-1 Garands made available by the scouts' heavy losses, drew batches of hand grenades, and rejoined the fight.

With the aid of portable radio sets and Stuart light tanks from the 192nd Tank Battalion, the outfit gnarled its way forward through the corpses, human entrails, and unexploded ordnance that littered the mangled vegetation, and penned the Japanese into an area nearly 100 yards wide and some 50 yards from the seaward edge of the point's sheer cliff. It was there that Americans first started to get a sense of the enemy they would face for the next three years. It became clear that many Japanese preferred death to surrender. Some jumped from the cliffs to perish on the rocks below; others dove into Agloloma Bay and swam into the South China Sea, there to drown.

A few Japanese waited for the arrival of reinforcements. But the wait would be in vain: American artillerymen and the handful of remaining P-40s in the Bataan air force had seen to that.

In the moonlit early morning hours of February 2, four P-40s attacked a convoy of 13 landing barges carrying the Japanese 20th Infantry's 1st Battalion just off Quinauan Point. Shore-based searchlights illuminated the craft and the pilots swooped down to drop fragmentation bombs and spit thousands of rounds of .50 caliber bullets into the barges. By 3 a.m. they had all but destroyed the flotilla—and nearly half of the 1st Battalion.

As debris and corpses lolled in the surf, interpreters used bullhorns and sound trucks to entreat the Japanese to surrender. Again, the Americans were confounded by the illogical responses. Holed up in caves and scattered redoubts on the rocky beach, the Japanese usually answered with bullets, occasionally with actions and words. Two Japanese, their ammunition expended, threw their shoes at an American tank. When they refused to surrender, the tank ran them over.

The American and Filipino troops established a tight perimeter at the edge of the cliffs. It was here on the west coast of Bataan that the first American forces in the Pacific would attempt to evict well-armed, fanatical Japanese holdouts. And without the aid of flamethrowers, bazookas, and air and naval support, the task would prove even more difficult for the defenders of Bataan than it would for Allied troops island hopping across the Pacific years later. They improvised, hurling gasoline bombs, as well as jury-rigged land mines and sticks of dynamite lashed to bamboo spears that were thrown like javelins. They attempted to smoke the Japanese out of their hideouts with oil-soaked rags and smudge pots, and detonated 50-pound boxes of dynamite at the mouths of caves.

Finally, after days of negligible results, Ed Dyess was summoned to the 45th Philippine Scouts' command post. There he learned that now-General Pierce wanted men from the 21st Pursuit to board navy landing craft and storm the beach at Agloloma Bay, which had a far more accessible landing spot than the adjacent point, to put an end to the Japanese resistance once and for all. Once again, the pilot's job description had changed. Dyess, in so many words, was now a marine.

AS DAWN BROKE on February 8, the steel-plated bows of the launches plowed through the shimmering waves, leaving a gurgling, foamy wake receding in the distance. Dyess watched the sunbeams wash over the coastline and burn the blanket of fog off the land, revealing the verdant hills and rocky cliffs, spattered with the vivid orange and red blooms of talisay trees.

The grounded pilot was leading what is now believed to be the first amphibious landing of U.S. forces against the Japanese



An exceedingly rare sight: Japanese prisoners captured in early 1942 on the western coast of Bataan. Most fought to the death.

the whaleboats, which drifted off with the tide through the turquoise phosphorescence, Japanese bombers still droning like angry bees above them. Clambering aboard his barge, Dyess found his landing party frozen with fear. “I thought you guys were the men of the outfit!” he yelled, in an effort to break the spell. Several tense, agonizing seconds passed. “Well, are you?”

Dyess got his answer. As salt spray stung their faces, they tumbled over-

board into the neck-high waves and lunged through the crystal churn. Burdened by their cumbersome arsenal, the airmen stumbled ashore, rushing for cover as Japanese fire swept the beach. Working in teams and armed with rifles and Thompson submachine guns, Dyess’s men scrambled across the sand, lobbing grenades into caves and foxholes while Dyess and Sgt. Cecil Ammons sprayed the brush with their Lewis guns.

Meanwhile, Jack Donalson’s party was making progress 200 yards to the north. Employing tactics similar to those of Dyess’s men, Sergeants Bob Miller and Bryan Gibson were making short work of the enemy redoubts. Donalson was leading the charge, firing his Lewis gun from his hip, oblivious to the bullets spattering the sands around him. The smoke eventually began to clear, and by 2 p.m. the battle for Agloloma Bay was over. As was, for all intents and purposes, the Battle of the Points.

THE JAPANESE holdouts at Anyasan and Silaiim points—several hundred soldiers from the 20th Infantry’s 1st Battalion, the survivors of the relief force that the P-40s had destroyed near Agloloma, had washed up there—were neutralized by the 17th Pursuit Squadron and the 45th and 57th Philippine Scouts in mid-February. By the conclusion of the battle, it was estimated that the provisional battalions, with help from the scouts, had wiped out nearly the entire invasion force. While a few were taken as prisoners, only 34 Japanese were believed to have survived the battle and returned to their lines. The gambit cost Homma two full battalions—some 2,000 men.

By comparison, in the course of the battles for Quinauan Point and Agloloma Bay, the 21st Pursuit Squadron lost less

than one-tenth of its total strength. The defenders of Longoskawayan Point suffered 22 dead and 66 wounded. At Anyasan-Silaiim, the final count was 70 dead. When one weighs the odds that faced the provisional battalions against their collective accomplishment, the numbers are extraordinary.

For their efforts at Agloloma Bay, Dyess, Donalson, and Goodall would receive Distinguished Service Crosses, and the enlisted men Silver Stars. Dyess and his men were also rewarded with the announcement that the 21st Pursuit would be relieved of its infantry responsibilities and reassigned to flight operations at the Bataan and Cabcaben air fields, the Far East Air Force’s new, hidden airdromes on the besieged peninsula. The news, Dyess later wrote, “touched off a wild charivari of clanging tinware, shots, and Indian yells.”

While the immediate threat to the Allies’ western flank had been eliminated, the ultimate consequences of the battle would be revealed by time. Viewed through the wide-angle, panoramic lenses of hindsight and history, the Battle of the Points can arguably be considered America’s first strategic victory of the Pacific War, for it forestalled an earlier fall of Bataan, severely altering Japan’s chronology of conquest in both the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. Homma, missing his deadline—the Philippines would fall in 149 days instead of 50—would have to shamefully request reinforcements in order to end the campaign. This siphoning of reinforcements and resources, which could have been used elsewhere in other battle zones, would ultimately slow the momentum from Japan’s opening offensive, momentum the Japanese would never recover—momentum that might just have been Japan’s only hope for winning a negotiated peace in the Pacific.

Though the primary goal of Japan’s opening thrust would eventually be reached—the capture of the resource-rich Dutch East Indies—and Nippon would eventually expand its empire across seven time zones, from Burma to the Aleutian Islands, by mid-1942, the loss of those 100 days on Bataan effectively prevented Japan from ever consolidating its newly-conquered possessions, penetrating the Malay Barrier, threatening Australia and New Zealand, and, most significantly, from fully fortifying its holdings in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in order to interdict Allied shipping.

Had Japan been able to do so, and lay siege to Australia—a vulnerable, nearly defenseless target—and deny the Allies a local base of operations, the Americans would have been forced to stage offensive operations from perhaps as far away as Hawaii and could have conceivably been fighting the Japanese on Vanuatu, or perhaps Fiji, instead of on Guadalcanal in late 1942.

This crucial turn of events would never have been possible if not for USAFFE Field Order No. 4, proof that battles cannot be won, but they can—in the most extraordinary of circumstances—be decided on paper. More importantly, it could not have occurred if not for the blood, fighting spirit, and sacrifices of the men of the forgotten provisional battalions of Bataan. ★

Spies, Coffins, and Weapons Caches

THE BATTLE OF THE POINTS WAS NOT EVEN concluded when one of the most intriguing legends of the war was born: that Japanese agents had surreptitiously cached ammunition and weapons, from machine guns to artillery pieces, on Bataan well before the start of hostilities. Otherwise, how could the Japanese have lugged heavy weaponry off landing barges, over sheer cliffs, and through impenetrable jungle? And how else to explain why they almost never ran out of ammunition for their artillery and Arisaka rifles in more than two weeks of constant combat?

Since Japanese intelligence had almost certainly been aware of America’s pre-war strategic plans for the Pacific—War Plan Orange, which dated to the 1920s, called for U.S. forces to withdraw into Bataan and wait for the navy to relieve the Philippines—the idea cannot be dismissed. Southwestern Bataan was, after all, largely uninhabited, making the clandestine caching of arms a fairly easy proposition.

Moreover, one veteran, Eugene Bleil, has recalled the bizarre, accidental discovery of foreign-made guns in coffins in a lava tube during the fighting near Anyasan-Silaiim points. Bleil and his 17th Pursuit Squadron buddies entered the tube seeking shelter and emerged with their own arsenal. Bleil kept a Finnish machine gun for himself. “It was a beautiful weapon and I carried it until we were ordered to surrender,” he remembered, “then I threw it in the bay.”

Bleil’s discovery indicates particular care was taken by whoever cached the weapons so that they could not be traced to Japanese agents. And lava tubes on the volcanic peninsula were typically used as crypts by locals. Whoever stored the weapons was counting on the fact that most Filipinos were strict Catholics who would not disturb the coffins, or their contents.

A surviving USAFFE intelligence report supports Bleil’s claims and suggests that Japanese pre-war plans were more extensive than previously believed. According to the “G-2 Info. Report of January 31, 1942” at the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia, “Evidence uncovered in the occupation of Longoskawan [*sic*] Point by our troops indicates that the Japs had buried several artillery pieces at this point prior to the war.”

The definitive proof may be in the offing: there is considerable excavation currently taking place in conjunction with real estate developments in the points area of southwestern Bataan. —*John D. Lukacs*

in the war. Dyess surveyed his landing party, which he had hand-picked for the mission. The group included 20 enlisted men who had proven themselves at Quinauan, plus Lt. I. B. “Jack” Donalson, one of Dyess’s favorite pilots. Their four-vessel convoy chugging up from Mariveles was led by two 35-foot launches that had been converted to gunboats under the command of Lt. Comdr. Henry “Hap” Goodall. The gunboats, products of the talented artificers of the USS *Canopus*, an old submarine tender anchored off Mariveles, each towed a motorless whaleboat containing 10 airmen.

The tactical plan was a simple one. Two squads, one led by Dyess, one by Donalson, were to land on opposite sides of the bay. Dyess would attack from the right, or southern side of the Agloloma Bay inlet, and Donalson’s men were to be deposited on the northern shore, and advance toward the center, eliminating all resistance encountered en route to their rendezvous.

Shortly after 8 a.m., the navy gunners spied the white bed sheets, visible among the clusters of shrubby balibago trees, that Filipino and American troops had used to mark Japanese positions. At Goodall’s signal, the bow-mounted, 37mm guns commenced a furious 10-minute cannonade. Suddenly, a sailor alerted Goodall to a flight of Japanese dive-bombers in the eastern sky. Dyess, who had been riding in the lead gunboat in order to direct the bombardment, watched in admiration as Goodall ignored the enemy planes. “To hell with the airplanes, sailor,” Goodall barked, before pivoting to address Dyess. “Where do you want the next shot, Captain?”

But Goodall did take evasive action as bombs splashed around them, rocking the vessels and shooting geysers of water onto the decks. As Goodall veered in, the sailors released

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