

**Philippine Scouts** by Col. John E. Olsen, from the Quan

“Stand aside, the Scouts are coming.” These simple words contained in a poem written by an American officer in a Japanese POW camp shortly after the fall of Bataan reflect a sincere and respectful tribute to some of the finest soldiers ever to serve in the U.S.

Army. In the desperate resistance Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s beleaguered forces on Bataan and Corregidor put up against the Japanese invaders in early 1942, units of the Philippine Scouts were the mainstay of the defense. When the scouts moved up to bolster the hard-pressed units or to attack the many landings made by the Japanese troops behind the main line of resistance, morale of other Filipino and American troops rose markedly.

Who were the Philippine Scouts? Little known outside the Philippines and largely forgotten by the U.S. Army of which they were a proud part, the Scouts were soldiers par excellence. How did the Philippine Scouts come into the U.S. Army and what contribution did they make to this country’s military heritage?

The Scouts were the first and last of what some might call American colonial troops. But they were not colonials. The first Scout organizations were created in 1901 during the early days of the American occupation of the Philippine Islands by the induction of Filipinos into the service of the U.S. Armed Forces. Their mission was to help restore order and peace in a troubled area.

In the ensuing two decades, the Philippine Scouts took part in subduing the fierce and warlike Moro tribes on the island of Mindanao and in the Jolo Archipelago and in establishing tranquility throughout the islands.

Following WWI, Congress approved induction of the Philippine Scouts into the regular U.S. Army. A strength of 6000 was authorized and tactical units were created with designations of the regular establishment, but with the suffix (PS) indicating “Philippine Scout.”

The Philippine Division was activated with two infantry regiments, the 45<sup>th</sup> (PS) and the 57<sup>th</sup> (PS) subordinate to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade of the Philippine Scouts. The supporting artillery, engineers, quartermaster, medical and other divisional elements were manned by Filipino enlisted men officered by Americans and a few Filipinos. For the defense of Manila Bay, two Philippine Scout artillery regiments, the 91<sup>st</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup>, were created. Last, but not least, the 26<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (PS) was formed. They were stationed on Luzon at Forts Wm. McKinley and Stotsenburg, Camp John Hay, the Harbor Defenses of Manila and Petit Barracks on Mindanao.

When war came in 1941, the Scouts were trained and ready. The 26<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (PS) supported by the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> FA Battalions, distinguished itself in the first days after the initial Japanese landings at Lingayen Gulf in the late December by attacking the assault forces. During the stubbornly contested withdrawal of the Northern Luzon Force, commanded by Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright to the Bataan Peninsula, the 26<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (PS) was the rear guard. Mounted on horses or riding in personnel carriers with thin armor and only light machine guns, the Scouts continually and aggressively counter-

attacked the Japanese tanks and sacrificed their lives to protect the Filipino and American troops as they fell back. On Bataan, the 14<sup>th</sup> Engineers (PS) labored to prepare defensive positions. Once Bataan was reached, the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry (PS) was charged with holding the line astride the one major road into the peninsula. At the Battle of Abucay from Jan. 11 until Jan. 15, 1942, the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry (PS) withstood the onslaught of the best elements Gen. Masaharu Homma, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Expeditionary Forces, could hurl against it. After four days of bitter hand-to-hand combat, the Japanese ceased their attempts to penetrate the Scouts' line. They shifted their weight westward into the jungle-covered mountains. From there, they outflanked the Scouts and forced them to fall back.

But the Japanese gained a Pyrrhic victory. So heavy had been their casualties, that they gave up the attempt to break the Filipino and American line on the eastern side of the peninsula. Instead, they launched a series of amphibious assaults against the rear of the western flank of General MacArthur's battered troops. Again, they found themselves opposed by Philippine Scouts. Not only was their nemesis the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry (PS), but also two battalions of the 57<sup>th</sup>'s sister regiment, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry (PS) and the 8<sup>th</sup> and 88<sup>th</sup> FA Battalions(PS). In a series of bloody actions waged in the thick jungle at the southwestern end of the peninsula two enemy infantry battalions of approximately 1,200 men were annihilated. Again, the Scouts had proved their superiority.

After two months of regrouping and reinforcing their troops with new units from the successful campaign in Malaya, the Japanese launched their final offensive. Unfortunately, the front was too broad for such a small number of Scouts. In addition, the enemy were too numerous and too strongly supported by artillery and close-support aircraft. Though Scout artillery outshot the enemy and infantry units inflicted more casualties than they took, the odds were too great. Even so, when the order came to surrender on April 9, 1942, the Scouts' units were still fighting and were determined to carry on.

From Corregidor, the 91<sup>st</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup> Coast Artillery Regiments (PS) fired up to the last minute in spite of heavy bombing and shelling. On the island of Mindanao, Companies E and F, 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry (PS) fought the last battle of the Philippine Campaign. Companies A and B, 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry (PS) who were cut off by the initial Japanese landings, withdrew into the mountain provinces of Luzon and became guerillas.

While the majority of the Scouts obeyed the order to surrender, their spirits were not subdued. Of those who survived the Death March and the starvation and sufferings at the Camp O'Donnell POW camp, or Capis as the Filipinos called it, many went out to form or join guerilla bands to carry on the fight after their release. They harassed the enemy for three years and provided vital intelligence to General MacArthur's headquarters. During the bleak years of 1942-44, they strove to establish contact with General MacArthur's headquarters in Australia and to contest the Japanese control of the Philippines. When the long awaited return of American forces to the Philippines arrived in October 1944, they were met at the beaches by survivors of the Philippine Scouts. In

the months of intense fighting to subdue the Japanese forces in the Philippines that followed, the former Scouts played a major role.

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