

# The valiant defense of the Philippines by Coast Artillery forces

By Capt. Ethan Augustine

Prior to the rising tension between the East and West Empires in the midst of the 20th Century, a small island of strategic value lies within the South Pacific. On Dec. 10, 1898, the Spanish Crown ceded control of the Philippine Islands to the United States as a result of Spain's defeat during the Spanish American War.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the next few decades the U.S. maintained control of the Philippines, further fortifying it while forward stationing a vast naval and aviation presence with only enough infantry to hold the key islands. Seeing the higher potential for threats toward this asset as World War II loomed closer, Lt. Gen. Douglas MacArthur asked the War Department for additional troops to reinforce defenses.<sup>2</sup> After assessment of the Philippines' garrison's strengths and weaknesses, Congress federalized the 200th Coast Artillery Regiment Anti-Aircraft out of New Mexico's National Guard for immediate deployment to the Philippines in 1941. Unbeknownst to the newly reinforced regiment, they would become one of the most iconic defenders of the Pacific theater and would be key in the defense of the Philippines. As a result of the tenacious defense of the Philippines, the U.S. and Australian forces had time to build their



*Soldiers of the 200th Coast Artillery Regiment, New Mexico Army National Guard deployed to the Philippines, circa 1942. (Courtesy photo)*

forces as the Philippine defenders occupied the Imperial Japanese Forces.

The 200th CA (AA), commanded by Col. Charles G. Sage, consisted of over 1,800 men. Most of those men were bilingual, fluent in English as well as Spanish. The regiment had been training the eight months prior to deployment as a transitional infantry regiment with hundreds of new selective service troops to fill in the ranks.<sup>3</sup> Upon arrival to the island of Luzon, the largest Island in the Philippines, housing the capital, Ma-

nila, the regiment set up at Fort Stotsenburg.<sup>4</sup> The 200th CA fell in alongside over 23,000 U.S./Filipino troops already placed to defend various critical assets. Upon arrival at Fort Stotsenburg, they were placed under the authority of the Philippine Coast Artillery Command and the United States Forces in the Far East under the command of Maj. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright. Their mission was to set up a defensive posture, utilizing their three-inch anti-aircraft cannons, .50 caliber machine guns, as well as several Sperry

1 E M. Flanagan. *Corregidor: The Rock Force Assault, 1945* (California: Presidio Press) 1988 pg. 1-2

2 Clayton Chun. *The Fall of the Philippines 1941-42* (Great Britain: Osprey Publishing), 2012, 8-11

3 "A History of the 200th and 515th Coast Artillery." *Angel Fire*, accessed Aug. 26, 2018, <http://www.angelfire.com/nm/bcmfofnm/history/briefhistory.html>

4 Society "Organization of the Coast Artillery in the Philippines" Accessed August 26, 2018 [http://corregidor.org/chs\\_moorerpt/moore1.htm5](http://corregidor.org/chs_moorerpt/moore1.htm5)



*A map depicting key locations during the campaign in the Philippines. (Rick Paape)*

Searchlights around Clark Field, one of the two bases where B-17 Bombers were housed.<sup>5</sup> On arrival, the unit did not have any practice rounds to continue training, so the first rounds the 200th CA would fire were during engagements with Japanese aircraft.

**Airfield critical assets, beginning of war**

Clark Field was one of the largest airstrips on Luzon and was located on the northern part of the Island. It housed the 28th and 30th B-17 Bomber Squadrons along with multiple fighter squadrons.<sup>6</sup> The importance of these aircraft could not be understated as the bombers were key to maintaining a higher level of aerial dominance within the region. The other bomber squadrons were located at Del Monte Field on a nearby Is-

land; both airfields would become primary targets for the Imperial Japanese forces as they were vital for control over this section of the Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Without the protection of the fighters on those fields, the B-17s would not have near the effect. The total air corps stationed on the island comprised of around 277 aerial assets consisting of 107 P-40B/E Fighters, 52 P-35 A Fighters, and 35 B-17 C/D Bombers.<sup>8</sup> Commander of the Far East Air Force (FEAF), Maj. Gen. Lewis Brereton had requested additional air support, but those reinforcements would not make it to the Philippines prior to the start of the war. Those aircraft were not all manned by U.S. personnel though; the FEAF was an amalgam of U.S. Army Air Force and Filipino Air Force pilots and

fighter planes. The FEAF would become a primary target as the Japanese needed the airstrips to increase their short-range fighter operations in the Pacific. As valuable as the aerial assets were, it was put on the shoulders of the 200th CA to defend them.

Because of the international dateline, members of the 200th CA woke on the morning of Dec. 8, 1941, with the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Navy. They continued to maintain and reinforce their positions in preparations for combat. At 12:35 p.m. local time Dec. 8, Japanese bombers and fighters could be heard roaring in the distance.<sup>9</sup> As the ever encroaching Japanese Air Force moved toward the island of Luzon, the U.S. Air Forces scrambling to get airborne would prove too late, so the 200th CA

5 "Coast Artillery in the Philippines"

6 Chun, Fall of Philippines, page 19

7 Chun, Fall of Philippines, page 19

8 Chun, Fall of Philippines, page 20

9 Chun, Fall of Philippines, page 39

would become the first unit to engage the enemy. The CA only having powder train fused shells to shoot at the incoming bombers resulted in ineffective AA fire as the shells could not reach the Japanese bomber's altitude.<sup>10</sup> The combination of surprise and ineffective AA fire allowed the Empire of Japan to successfully destroy most the FEAF Fighters as well as the B-17s on Clark Field. The other airfields across the island would share the same fate. As a result of the success of the Japanese bombardment, what was left of the aerial assets and the entire Asiatic Fleet under the command of Adm. Thomas C. Hart retreated to Australia to join with their Royal Fleet, for they could not be successful against Japan's overwhelming aggressing force.<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the first day, the 200th CA (AA) annihilated five planes, but the aerial assets on Luzon were either destroyed or moved to Australia for later engagements.<sup>12</sup> The 200th CA and the rest of the land forces were now on their own with no chance of resupply or reinforcement, but they held on, knowing they could buy the rest of the world some time. In order to maximize coverage of critical assets in preparation for the prolonged engagement, the 200th CA had to create a smaller detachment that would move south to provide anti-aircraft coverage as the 200th CA remained in the north.

While continuing to defend wave after wave of the Empire of Japan's air force, the 200th CA decided to split a contingent off of the main regiment with the purpose of protecting the airfields at the southern end of the island of Luzon, while the bulk of the 200th CA stayed up at Clark Field defending the northern avenue of approach. A detachment consisting of 30 officers and over 500 enlisted personnel under the command of Lt. Col.

Harry M. Peck.<sup>13</sup> This detachment would join with 750 Filipino soldiers to form the 515th Coast Artillery.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. service members began training their Filipino counterparts on anti-aircraft strategies and gunnery, all while continuing to engage aircraft. By late December, the 515th CA was fully emplaced and engaged daily defending Manila.<sup>15</sup> On Dec. 10, 1941, Lt. Gen. Homma Masaharu, commander of the Imperial Japanese Army's (IJA) 14th Army, ordered the landings of seaborne infantry at Aparri and Vigan beaches.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. and Filipino infantry divisions were unable to repel or hold the IJA forces on the beaches for very long. Soon the order came down for the 200th CA and 515th CA to respectively retreat and provide anti-aircraft coverage of the bridges leading to the Bataan Peninsula until the rest of the ground forces could cross. As commander of the forces in Southern Luzon, Maj. Gen. George Parker, Jr., became commander of the Bataan Defense Forces responsible for the retreat and defense posturing. On Dec. 24, 1941, the 200th CA Regiment moved from Clark Field to Hermosa-Layac Junction-Dinalupihan area to provide anti-aircraft coverage for the Calumpit spanning across the river south to the Bataan Peninsula.<sup>17</sup> They were to hold the bridges at all costs until the last U.S. and allied units crossed to the Peninsula.

The 515th CA was also given the same mission, but came from the south and was able to reach the bridges before the 200th CA where they were to hold until relieved. Once the 200th CA arrived, the 515th CA fell back up the Bataan Peninsula to establish defense of the Cabcaben Air-

field.<sup>18</sup> The coverage provided by both the 200th CA and 515th CA allotted the surviving forces from North and South Luzon safe passage to the Bataan Peninsula to set up for the oncoming IJA.

By early January 1942, with almost 30 days of non-stop engagements and no resupply in sight, the 200th CA and 515th CA as well as the rest of the surviving ground forces were ordered to cut their food intake to half rations. The Soldiers' feelings of malaise and general muscle weakness began to set in mere hours after they began half rations. As the days went on, malaria and dysentery were on the rise, decreasing the combat effectiveness of the unit. Due to close proximity, poor diet and lack of hygiene, the effectiveness of all U.S. and allied forces began to decrease.<sup>19</sup> Despite disease and malnutrition, the AA regiments continued to fire and maneuver to maintain coverage for the peninsula, facilitating the movement of all allied ground forces.

One aspect the coast artillery regiments dealt with during this campaign centered on the use of outdated weapons. According to an air defense artillery article published in 1992, *The Battle of Bataan*, "the three-inch guns utilized by the AA regiments, utilized powder-train fuses that had ceased production nine years earlier in 1932. A lot of the fuses were badly corroded and therefore did not detonate after being fired. Sage witnessed the firing of 17 of the rounds but only two of them actually detonated."<sup>20</sup> This lack of quality rounds further reduced the effectiveness of the AA fire and qualified how many rounds each gun could fire per target as the battle raged on.

On April 8, 1942, with no alternative options and a need to prevent the advancing force from using their own weapons against future allied troops, the order came down for both the 200th

10 "200th and 515th."

11 Chun, *Fall of Philippines*, page 41

12 "200th and 515th."

13 "The Battle of Bataan," *Air Defense Artillery*, (March-April 1992) 18-24 ADA Publication Division page 21

14 "Bataan," 22

15 "Bataan," page 21

16 Chun, *Fall of Philippines*, page 41

17 "Bataan," page 21

18 "Bataan," page 21

19 "Bataan," page 22

20 "Bataan," page 21



Maj. William Massello. (Courtesy photo)

CA and 515th CA to scuttle their anti-aircraft weapons and join the defensive line as rifle men.<sup>21</sup> The regiment continued to fall back and re-establish defense lines for as long as they could, engaging tanks and infantry, but they could not hold out for much longer.

### Conclusion, aftermath

As disease became rampant, the 200th CA and 515th CA along with the rest of the remaining defenders went days without food and had no more ground to fall back to. On April 9, 1942, both regiments, under the order of Maj. Gen. Edward P. King, Jr., surrendered to the continuously reinforced Japanese forces. After surrendering, those left had to face an even greater tragedy, that of the 65-mile "Death March" from Mariveles to San Fernando.<sup>22</sup> They would wait for rescue for almost three years.<sup>23</sup> Out of the 1,800 men originally deployed, only half made it out; a third of those who survived died within the next year due to complications from torture and/or malnutrition.<sup>24</sup>

Despite being heavily outnumbered, the 200th CA and 515th CA anti-aircraft regiments were able to successfully engage 86 Japanese aircraft and were able

to hold off their advance for four months.<sup>25</sup> They accomplished this using badly corroded ammunition, fighting rampant disease and surviving on an extremely limited food supply. Only when there was no more room to fallback and their health had significantly deteriorated did they surrender the island of Luzon. The defense of the Philippines was vital for setting the stage for further campaigns against the Empire of Japan for control of the Pacific. As a result of their efforts occupying the Japanese at the Philippines, the Australian military with the U.S. were able to regroup and build their forces for the eventual push to remove the Japanese from the very territory they took. In December 1945, Wainwright was quoted in reference to the battle for the Bataan Peninsula, as saying the 200th CA (AA) was the "First to fire, and last to lay down their arms!"<sup>26</sup>

### Story of Maj. William Massello

Many Soldiers, both U.S. and Filipino, were courageous and tenacious during the defense of Luzon and the Bataan Peninsula. There is one among the coast artillery that would stand out in the aftermath of the campaign. Maj. William (Bill) Massello had already served two tours in the Philippines and was on his third tour when the war broke out. After taking command of "Erie" Battery, 2nd Regiment, 60th Coast Artillery Regiment Anti-Aircraft, Massello, then a captain, was ordered to move his battery and set up defensive positions around the Bataan Peninsula following warnings of potential hostilities with Japan on Dec. 2, 1941.<sup>27</sup> Erie Battery would remain in that position until April 8, 1942, when he and his men were ordered to Corregidor Island. Massello, who

was a major by then, immediately volunteered himself, the eager remnants of Erie Battery, and around 100 other men to assist in the defense of Corregidor as mortar men.<sup>28</sup>

April 28, 1942, Massello, along with all of those he led, began firing the four recently emplaced, twelve-inch M1890 mortars of Battery Way.<sup>29</sup> By May 5, 1942, there was only one piece of concrete-emplaced artillery still capable of firing on the Japanese forces on both Corregidor and the Bataan Peninsula. Massello continued to personally man the last mortar while his men lay under cover from constant counter-battery fire, unable to receive any orders to surrender as he had ordered his men to destroy their only communication device for that reason.<sup>30</sup> As Massello loaded the last shell, fragments from the incoming artillery peppered his body causing several wounds to his leg and almost severing his right arm. When his men rushed to drag him to cover he ordered them to get out there and fire the last round.<sup>31</sup> As a group of Soldiers did as ordered, they noticed the breechblock had warped as a result of the superheated mortar tube cooling, making it inoperable. Massello and his men would continue fighting until May 6, 1942.<sup>32</sup>

After which he and what was left of his men would endure the hardship of being a prisoner of war until September 1945. For his actions Masello was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star, two Presidential Unit Citations, four Purple Hearts and numerous campaign and theater ribbons, ultimately becoming one of the most decorated Coast Artilleryman of the Philippine Campaign.<sup>33</sup>

21 "Bataan," page 21

22 "200th and 515th"

23 "200th and 515th"

24 "200th and 515th"

25 "200th and 515th"

26 "200th and 515th"

27 Thomas N. Murphy. "Wild Bill's Memorial" The Corregidor Historic Society: Accessed September 17, 2018 [http://corregidor.org/ca/btty\\_erie/massello.htm](http://corregidor.org/ca/btty_erie/massello.htm)

28 Murphy, "Wild Bill"

29 Murphy, "Wild Bill"

30 Murphy, "Wild Bill"

31 Murphy, "Wild Bill"

32 Murphy, "Wild Bill"

33 Murphy, "Wild Bill"