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James Black, Jr.

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Notes and Comments

The Manila Harbor Forts: 1942

JAMES BLACK, JR.

This article covers not only Corregidor but also its three outpost forts at the entrance of Manila Bay, which together with Fort Wint on Grande Island in Subic Bay were collectively known as the harbor forts of Manila and Subic Bays. The four islands, are first, Fort Mills, Corregidor Island, only kilometers from Bataan and the largest of the coast defense artillery. Second is Fort Hughes on Caballo Island, just 1 1/2 kilometers south of Corregidor and the last to be completed. Third is Fort Frank on Carabao Island, some 12 kilometers south of Corregidor and only 700 meters from the Cavite mainland. Last but not least is tiny Fort Drum on El Fraile Island, otherwise known as "The Concrete Battleship." No other fort like it exists anywhere in the world. La Monja Island, west of Corregidor, remained the only island in the Bay that was not fortified.

THE LEGEND

There have been a number of stories as to how the islands were named, but the best is the legend of Maria Velez.

In the olden days, says the legend, only a swampland, separated Bataan and Cavite. On the northern slopes of Bataan, there was a monastery and nearby, a convent. Here a friar fell in love with a *monja*, named Maria Velez. They broke their vows. The punishment for this was very severe, so under cover of darkness they escaped southward on horseback. Upon reaching the swamps the fugitives transferred to

a carabao which of course slowed them down, enabling their pursuers to gain on them. They were overtaken and brought before a judge, called the Corregidor—or corrector – for trial. For their great sin the Corregidor decreed that they be eternally separated and eternally imprisoned, one on each side of the swamps. However the benign and merciful deity who watches over the destinies of faithful lovers looked down from heaven and was displeased by the authority which the judge arrogated upon himself “I shall show this proud Corregidor,” said, “that he may not decree eternal punishment on anyone, much less a pair of faithful lovers. However it is true that they have broken their vows, so not only shall I make them a permanent example of my justice, but also a monument to fidelity.” He therefore decreed that Maria Velez should be laid in permanent rest on top of the mountain on the northern slope, now known as Mount Marivelez. And just below her is La Monja Island. He froze the fraile’s face in stone and placed him on the opposite side of the bay where he can gaze forever upon his lover. As for the proud Corregidor, he too was transmuted into stone and placed between La Monja and El Fraile, forever separating the two lovers. The horse and the carabao were not forgotten either, so now we have Caballo and Carabao Islands.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE FORTS

What was the purpose or more properly, the objective of these Harbor Forts? To prevent entry of an enemy naval force into Manila Bay was only part of the objective. In 1851, the U.S. Army Chief of Engineers, Gen. Joseph Totten stated that the objective of a harbor fort was to deny an important coastal commercial center naval harbor to an enemy invasion fleet and force it to land at some distance from its objective, usually in an area preselected by the defenders. This would force the enemy into a long march overland toward their objective, thus giving the defenders both time and opportunity to organize and defeat them.

The classic example of a harbor fort achieving this objective occurred during the war of the 1812 between England and the United States. After occupying and burning Washington, D.C. a British force set sail in sixteen warships for Baltimore, Maryland. However, the entrance of Baltimore Harbor was guarded by Fort McHenry some two-

and-a-half miles or so from the city, forcing the British to land on the opposite shore, an additional seven miles away. That additional seven miles gave the Baltimore Militia just enough time to organize and help the army troops defeat the British almost within sight of the city. Meanwhile the admiral commanding the British fleet tried to force his way past Fort McHenry in an effort to help his soldiers. But after an unsuccessful siege lasting twenty-five hours, he too had to admit defeat, picked up the remnants of his badly battered army and sailed away.

How does this objective, and the example cited, apply to the harbor forts of Manila Bay? The important commercial center of course is the city of Manila and the important naval harbor is Manila Bay, plus Cavite Navy Base. Bar the bay entrance to an enemy fleet and where would the invaders be forced to land and take the city and bay? A quick look at a map of Luzon shows that along the east coast, the Sierra Madre Mountains form a continuous natural barrier from Cape Engano all the way south to the Bicol Peninsula. In the north, the Cordillera Mountains branch westward from the Sierra Madres, isolating the Cagayan Valley and turning the Ilocos Provinces into a narrow coastal strip. On the west coast, from Cape Bolinao, Pangasinan south to the tip of Bataan Peninsula are the almost impenetrable Zambales and Bataan mountains. South of the bay entrance, the Pico de Loro Mountains and Tagaytay Ridge of Cavite and Batangas, although not as rugged, are still high broken ground favoring the defenses. This leaves just one area where an enemy could possibly establish a beachhead, Lingayen Gulf, with room for maneuver down the Central Plain, but nevertheless 180 or so air kilometers from Manila. Obviously the Japanese were reading the same textbooks on military tactics and strategy because that was precisely what they did in December 1941. So did General MacArthur when he landed in Lingayen in January 1945.

So in a very real sense, when Gen. Homma landed the bulk of his fourteenth army at Bauang and Damortis on 22 December 1941, the harbor forts did achieve the primary objective they were built to meet, and did so without having fired at a single enemy warship. They did that just by being there. This was still an era when it was doctrine in all navies of the world that the seacoast gun was the master of the ship. As Admiral Lord John Fisher, Head of the British Navy from 1904 to

1910 and Father of the Modern Battleship put it, "only a fool would attack a fort."

Spain had previously fortified Corregidor, Caballo, and El Fraile, but they grossly neglected these fortifications. They paid a heavy price for it when on the night of 1-2 May 1898, Admiral Dewey sailed past with impunity, dropped anchor off Cavite City to wait for daybreak and then proceeded to sink the Spanish fleet at leisure. He then blockaded Manila until the arrival of reinforcements in August. With that, Spain lost the Philippines.

The Americans of course were not about to let anyone pull the same stunt, so in 1904, they began a massive fortification program in Manila Bay. At the time, both Japan and Imperial Germany were intent on carving out Asiatic Empires. The Russo-Japanese War broke out the same year. Germany had already precipitated an armaments race in Europe and in the Pacific had taken over the former Spanish colonies: the Marianas, Marshalls, Caroline and Palau Archipelagos, all of which stretched across the western Pacific, isolating Guam and the Philippines from Hawaii and the U.S. mainland. Because of this isolation in the midst of potential enemies, priority was given to the Philippines equal only to the Panama Canal, then under construction, and greater than the U.S. west coast. A war scare between Japan and the U.S. in 1908 helped accelerate this program, so that by 1911 the defenses were essentially completed. The U.S. did not stop there. New coast artillery weapons and tactics were being developed which were incorporated in the defenses as rapidly as possible. For example in 1907 the army developed their first fourteen-inch gun. Of the first three built, one went to the Panama Canal, two went to Carabao Island.

Meantime, military planners, mindful of the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, addressed themselves to the possibility of a sudden Japanese invasion. A contingency plan, formulated initially even before World War I, called War Plan Orange III, envisioned a landing at, naturally enough, Lingayen Gulf, against a much weaker defending force. In this eventuality the defenders would commence a fighting retreat into Bataan Peninsula, abandoning Manila to the enemy. There they would hold on, denying Manila Bay to the enemy while the navy fought its way across the Pacific with reinforcements. Estimated time for the navy to do so was six months. In this plan, the harbor forts were given a second mission, that of defending Bataan from flanking attacks

from both the China Sea and within Manila Bay.

A third mission was also given the harbor forts. In case Bataan fell, they would hold on as long as possible, to continue denying the Japanese the use of Manila Bay. Unfortunately this would be an impossible mission. For if Bataan and Cavite fell, the enemy would be occupying much higher ground on both sides of the bay entrance, overlooking the islands. From these heights the enemy could easily pinpoint the island defenses and subject them to accurate crossfire while keeping their own artillery hidden from direct observation behind reverse slopes on higher ground.

In such an event the twenty-four twelve-inch mortars on Corregidor with their near vertical trajectories would be the only effective means of counterfire. Their plunging fire could reach into valleys and reverse slopes and therefore cause considerable damage. The guns with their relatively flat trajectories would, on the other hand, be largely ineffective. The solution for this problem was a plan called the "Land Defense Program of 1917," which called for the emplacement of high angle fire siege guns and howitzers on Corregidor, Caballo and Carabao Islands. This plan was modified later and in 1922 twelve 240-millimeter howitzers, plus the mortars and those guns that could fire towards the mainland, could at least make the reduction of the islands a costly proposition. However, there was still the need for observation—the need to locate enemy artillery and direct their own counterbattery fire. For this there was no solution. There was no way observers could see behind those reverse slopes. This, and this alone, would be the fatal weakness, the primary cause for the defeat of the harbor forts in 1942.

THE NEGLECT OF THE FORTS

Other factors led not only to the defeat of the harbor forts but also Bataan as well. Up to the end of World War I the defenses of the Philippines were pretty much kept up to date. However in March 1922 the Washington Disarmament Treaty between the U.S., Japan, Britain and France was signed. One of the provisions of this treaty was that the U.S. desist from further fortification and improvement of existing fortifications in the Philippines, Guam, and Wake Islands. The twelve 240-millimeter howitzers then enroute to the Philippines were turned

back, eventually becoming incorporated in the seacoast defenses of Hawaii, where the need for them never arose. The Land Defense Program was never revived.

Even after Japan unilaterally abrogated the Washington Treaty, the effects of the Depression, coupled with a growing isolationist and antiwar sentiment in the U.S. resulted in a reduction of the U.S. Armed Forces to a state of near impotence. In the Philippines, in 1922 the U.S. Army was down to only 4,900 officers and men, and was even lower still in the years to follow. The two American and two Philippine Scout Coast Artillery Regiments were reduced to less than battalion size each. As a consequence the harbor forts began an inexorable decline towards obsolescence. Even more significantly, during this between-war period, rapid developments in aviation were making air power a force to be reckoned with. With the exception of Fort Drum with its armored turrets and twenty feet of concrete deck, the rest of the defenses would be vulnerable to attack from the air. Recommendations made as early as 1936 to correct this weakness were not acted upon for lack of funds.

Not until early 1941, with the world already at war did the U.S. begin to correct its nineteen-year neglect of the Philippine defenses. Early that year, troop reinforcements began to arrive and priority was given to building up its air defenses. In the harbor forts old plans were dusted off, updated and by March funds were requested. By July the five civilian communities on Corregidor became ghost towns as all nonessential civilians were evacuated from the island. That same month funds finally became available. In September the navy laid an extensive minefield across the bay's south channel. From then on, all shipping entering or leaving the bay had to be escorted through a controlled minefield in the narrow channel. The following month construction contracts were let out, but it was too late, for time had run out, not just for the harbor forts but the entire Philippines as well.

THE BATTLE FOR THE FORTS: 1942

On 27 November, Washington issued a war warning to all theater commanders in the Pacific. It is worth noting that at Pearl Harbor both Admiral Kimmel and Gen. Short merely ordered a sabotage alert. In the Philippines however, Admiral Hart promptly ordered all major

elements of his tiny Asiatic fleet southward, while Gen. MacArthur swiftly disseminated the warning to all his subordinate commanders. Brigadier General George Moore, Harbor Defenses Commander, quickly ordered his troops on a full wartime footing, with all defense positions manned and ready. All barracks were emptied that night, and to quote Moore's report, "By daylight the command was as ready for war as was possible with the means available." Ten days later the rude awakening occurred at dawn at Pearl Harbor.

On 22 December, Gen. Homma landed his fourteenth army at Lingayen. Corregidor's primary objective had now been met. The following day, Gen. MacArthur ordered War Plan Orange III in effect, and the mass retreat to Bataan began. The forts were not touched until the twenty-ninth when a ninety-one plane raid was mounted against Corregidor and Caballo. Above-ground installations were heavily damaged, the railroad permanently. But to everybody's surprise the open artillery emplacements proved invulnerable to everything except direct hits on the gun itself. The AA gunners, despite their overage and faulty ammunition shot down seventeen of the attackers, forcing them to fly at much higher altitudes thereafter, which in turn spoiled their aim even further. In this respect the anti-aircraft defenses also achieved the objectives of all anti-aircraft defenses, which is not just to shoot down planes but to make it impossible for the bombers to achieve their mission.

On 13 December the first surface action took place when Fort Drum opened fire upon a steamer loaded with troops approaching its rear, damaging the ship and forcing it back to Naic. On the twenty-sixth Corregidor joined for the first time when battery Geary's twelve-inch mortars assisted ground troops in repelling a Japanese landing at Longoskawayan Point in Bataan. In three days the point was cleared of all enemy. A few days later the three 155-millimeter guns of Battery Kysor fired upon and sank a Japanese boat that was reconnoitering Bataan's east coast. The harbor forts were performing their second mission—guarding Bataan's flanks and rear.

Meanwhile Japanese artillery moved into the Naic-Ternate area in Cavite, unopposed by the forts for fear that firing into the area would create casualties in the civilian population. By the first week of February the enemy was securely emplaced on hilly ground, in the vicinity of what is now Puerto Azul, and on the eighth, commenced

fire on the harbor forts, with Drum and Carabao the principal targets, marking the beginning of what was to become the only large-scale mass artillery battle in the Pacific.

Early during the first bombardment period, Japanese artillery, composed of only ten 105 and 158-millimeter guns and howitzers proved unequal to the task. In March however, these were reinforced by an additional ten 240-millimeter howitzers and in six days Fort Frank was devastated. The garrison, composed mostly of Philippine Scout and Philippine Army Coast Artillery troops suffered the greatest percentage of casualties among the forts. Drum on the other hand suffered only five wounded, only one requiring hospitalization, throughout the entire siege. Corregidor and Caballo were at extreme range of the smaller caliber and still out of range of the 240s and so suffered very little.

Through this period the defenders had a superiority, both in numbers and caliber of counterbattery artillery versus the enemy: eight 12-inch mortars and four 155-millimeter guns at Carabao, two 14-inch, two 6-inch and one 3-inch gun at Drum, four 12-inch mortars, one 14-inch gun and two 6-inch guns at Caballo, at least three 155's and battery Hearn's 12-inch long range gun on Corregidor against ten of the enemy. The twelve mortars alone should have been able to easily wipe the enemy out. But the enemy was well hidden in defilade positions so could not be located.

At one time Capt. Jesus Villamor, the Filipino Air Ace, volunteered to fly over the Ternate area to photograph the enemy positions. He made it safely back to Bataan with his precious pictures, which may have contributed to an abrupt halt in enemy fire in late February, but a repetition was not possible. During the mission the two P-40s covering Capt. Villamor were shot down by Japanese Zeroes. A patrol composed of Philippine Scout and Philippine Army troops from Carabao, led by an American officer, attempted to infiltrate the mainland to locate and direct fire on the enemy positions. They managed to get close enough to hear the guns firing but before they could actually see the guns they were discovered by a Japanese Patrol and barely managed to escape back to Carabao.

On 22 March the enemy again abruptly ceased firing as they began moving their 240s to Bataan. Eighteen days later events came to a brutal end in Bataan. On the eighth of April Gen. King asked artillery

support from Corregidor, so at six o'clock P.M. that night Batteries Hearn and Smith opened road interdiction fire toward the vicinity of the Pandan River Bridge, expending thirty-four rounds each through the night. But two twelve-inch guns, firing blind could not change events and at five o'clock A.M. of the 9th they ceased fire. The men on Corregidor could only look on helplessly as their comrades on Bataan marched away into captivity.

The harbor forts were now alone and surrounded by the enemy on two sides and above. This time the enemy would have the overwhelming advantage in numbers of artillery pieces. Nevertheless the forts still had the advantage in caliber and weight of shell. The 12-inch mortars alone, firing a rolling barrage could bring all of Bataan within range. But never during those last days did the enemy feel the full weight of American artillery, as the guns and mortars were committed only piecemeal. For not all the batteries were manned, as there was a shortage of trained artillerymen. Of the six coast artillery regiments, only the sixtieth anti-aircraft was at full strength. The fifty-ninth which was the controlling organization, was short two batteries. The ninety-first Philippine Scouts was at half strength, as was the First Coast Artillery, Philippine Army. The ninety-second Philippine Scouts had lost two valuable batteries in Bataan so were down to four. The Second Coast Artillery Philippine Army was a regiment in name only, with two officers and seventy-four enlisted men. As a result, for example, Battery Geary with eight twelve-inch mortars should have had a complement of six officers and about 250 enlisted men. Its actual complement was one officer and seventy-nine enlisted men and could fire only half the battery at a time. Battery Way, the second mortar battery, had one mortar unserviceable due to lack of peacetime maintenance and did not have any troops assigned until a searchlight unit from Bataan was ordered to take over. Battery Craighill at Caballo Island with its four long-range mortars was manned by gunboat sailors.

Compounding this was a lack of ammunition suitable for land defense. The forts had thousands of rounds of delayed fuse armor piercing shell, suitable against ships but almost useless on land. The 155's, being basically field artillery pieces had an ample supply of high explosive shell but there were only 900 rounds for the 12-inch guns and mortars and none whatsoever for the 14-inch guns and other calibers. Numerous requests for suitable ammunition had been made

in peacetime but none were ever acted upon.

On 12 April the Japanese opened fire and by the end of that day destroyed or effectively neutralized the batteries along the north shore facing Bataan. By the 15th, nearly all large caliber guns and most of the 155's capable of fire into Bataan were put out of action. Corregidor was being swept from end to end by 119 artillery pieces. The thick jungle vegetation was burned away, exposing other batteries to view. The defenders fired back as best as they could, often while a rain of shells was coming down around them. For the most part they were firing blind at an enemy hidden from sight on higher ground. Agonizingly few were the occasions when observers would succeed in triangulating on a flash or a single wisp of smoke, giving them at least something to aim at. Japanese artillery also commenced pinpointing the anti-aircraft batteries. By the end of April enemy bombers were flying low over the island with no opposing ground fire.

Battery Way's three mortars went into action finally on the 18th reinforcing Battery Geary. Geary seemed to lead a charmed life, invisible to the enemy by virtue of being located in a defiladed hollow on the south side below topside. That ended on 2 May, however, when Geary, pinpointed by aerial spotting, was subjected to a day long, 3,600 round bombardment by the 240-millimeter howitzers. At about 4:30 P.M. a shell finally penetrated Geary's center magazine, setting off forty tons of explosives, totally wiping out the battery. Two days later Way lost two mortars that suffered direct hits on the mortar tubes. Corregidor was now left with only one mortar and three 155's still capable of firing into Bataan.

The following day, bombardment shifted to the north shore east of Malinta Hill and by nightfall, to quote Gen. Moore, "barbed wire entanglements, land mines, machine gun emplacements, personnel shelters and most of the 75-millimeter beach defense guns were destroyed. The north side of the island was bare of trees and the ground powdered dust. All wire communications had been shot away. Command could be exercised and intelligence obtained only by the use of foot messengers, which medium was uncertain under heavy and continuous artillery and air action."

Von Clausewitz said: "The artillery conquers, the infantry occupies." That night Japanese infantry were on the island of Corregidor and by ten o'clock the next morning were only 100 yards from Malinta

tunnel's east entrance. At this time Gen. Wainwright decided to end the battle and ordered white flags raised over all four forts at twelve o'clock noon. Battery Way's lone mortar ceased firing at about 11:30 but Fort Drum's four 14-inch guns continued to fire until 11:55. They were the last to cease firing.

As it turned out the battle for the harbor forts was the only mass artillery battle in the Pacific, as well as the greatest battle and longest siege ever fought by an American harbor fort. One veteran of Corregidor said years later: "We fought the wrong battle at the wrong time at the wrong place with the wrong weapons. We knew we could not win, but we fought anyway."