



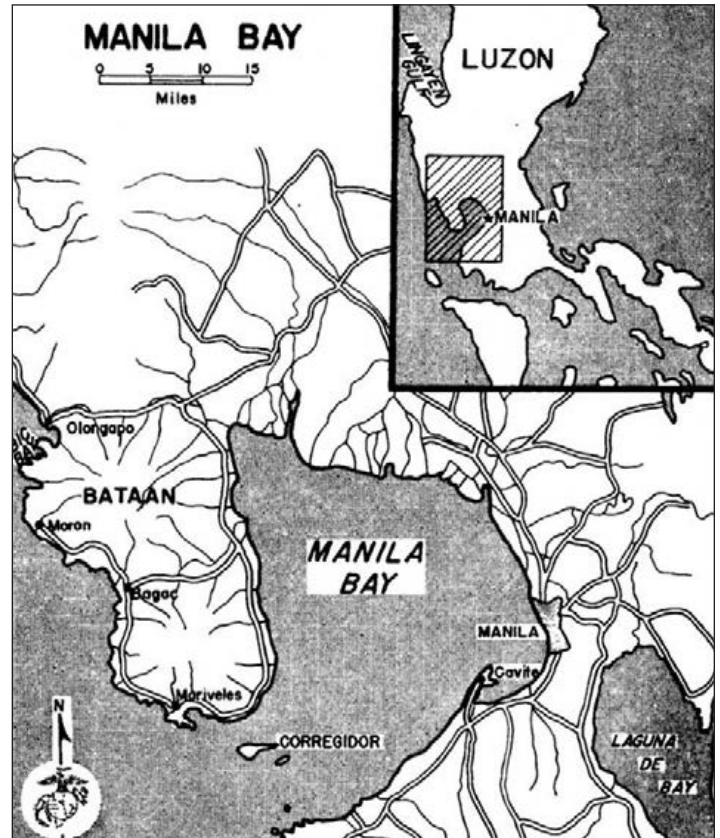
The Battle of Corregidor: *Then and Now*

SSG HARPER H. EVANS

There is nothing new in war. The weapons and fields may change, but since Alexander the Great conquered the known world with its first “fire and maneuver,” conflict has been decided by aggression, discipline, and decisive leadership.

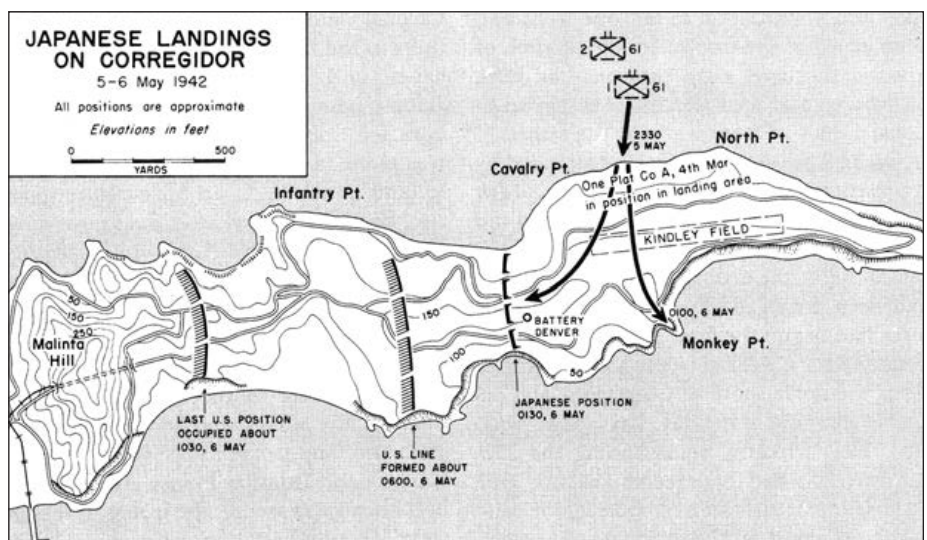
I was given the exceptional privilege to represent the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, as we commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Corregidor. While it is well established that history is relevant to our operations today, the event — which gave me unique insight and otherwise inaccessible stories of this incredible undertaking — marked a highlight of my career. What I experienced walking the island was a combination of some of warfare’s worst terrain: dense jungle foliage, steep hills, dug-in defenses, and coastal cliffs which denied any possibility of reinforcement, retrograde, maneuver, and — should the landing zones or beachhead fall — escape. What I met in the people of Manila was a community that still fiercely remembers our shared struggle against indescribable tyranny and oppression.

While the Japanese capture of the island in May of 1942 was hard fought, the loss was felt in the American homeland. Not just a critical strategic stronghold, the millions of dollars invested in Fort Mills on the island prior to World War II made it the symbolic and tactical last stand with the best chance at halting the Japanese invasion as it swept across the Philippines. This mythos grew as the island held fast, the only point in the otherwise unstoppable wave where the enemy failed to meet its timetables. The American and Allied defenders’ prolonged resistance allowed for strategic withdrawal that preserved massive amounts of combat power. Their eventual surrender saved the lives of thousands of civilians but at the cost of the last stronghold of the Pacific; the homefront knew its first defeat of the war.



From Shanghai to Corregidor: Marines in the Defense of the Philippines by J. Michael Miller

Map 1 — Manila Bay of the Philippines



The Fall of the Philippines by Louis Morton

Map 2 — Japanese Landings on Corregidor, 5-6 May 1942

Nearly three years later, America returned on the heels of the Airborne. Surprise, adaptability, and tenacity had won the beach on D-Day, but the transition to a traditional warfront and the recent calamity of Operation Market Garden had cast significant doubts on the future of the paratroopers in warfare. Despite the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment's successes following airborne assaults in Markham Valley and Noemfoor (remembered to this day by two of the three parachutes on the Distinctive Unit Insignia of the 503rd), the regiment struggled with desperately low morale as cavalry units led the charge to liberate Bataan and Manila. Despite the doubts of senior command (both American and Japanese, as fate would have it), paratroopers would be given a chance to lead the recapture of "The Rock" as General MacArthur embraced flexibility and aggression to fulfill his promise of 1942: "I shall return."

The aggressive terrain created one of the most dynamic and difficult battlefields imaginable. To my modern jumpmaster's eyes, the drop zones were shockingly small — a literal parade field that couldn't fit my battalion. Once members of Rock Force hit ground pulverized by a month of bombardment, they would face impenetrable jungle with visibility in knife-fight distances or the lethal vista of Topside's commanding view over the beaches below. This was the harsh reality that cost the Japanese naval assault force 2,100 casualties when it took the island in 1942. The commander of their defense, Captain Ijn Itagaki, committed completely to their prior experience and doctrine. While he anticipated American employment of paratroopers, three years of forced labor had prepared formidable defenses against the only attack that made sense — a combination of amphibious and airborne assault on the relatively forgiving terrain at Monkey Point or Middleside (the tail and middle of Corregidor's "tadpole" shape).

On 16 February 1945, the stage was set: aggressive Allied flexibility versus rigid Axis doctrine. The fate of the Pacific,

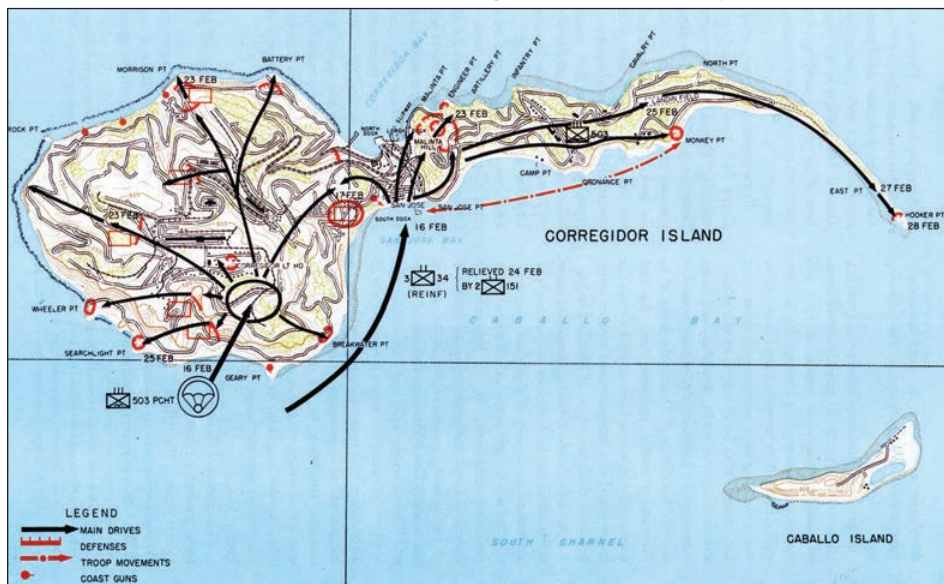


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Paratroopers, supported by ground forces, land on Corregidor during the combined assault launched on 16 February 1945.

the eyes of the nation, and the future of the Airborne hung in the balance. An entire theater of war came to rest on a drop zone the size of a football field and an impenetrable island to be pried from the grip of a fanatical enemy one bloody yard at a time.

Map 3 — Recapture of Corregidor, 16-28 February 1945



Reports of General MacArthur: The Campaigns of MacArthur in the Pacific, Volume I

Embracing the lessons of D-Day, the American offensive to recapture Corregidor relied on two key factors. First was flawless coordination between land, sea, and air. Across every inch of the island, dozens of Soldiers and literal tons of bombardment were separated by minutes or seconds. The complexity of this part of the operation relied on the unsung diligence of planning staff and the absolute trust of the Soldiers on the ground.

The second factor was the sheer, unpredictable boldness of the plan. The concept was simple: establish a foothold on Topside with paratroopers to deter enemy defenses from hindering the larger amphibious assault. The execution was by design and, quite literally, inconceivably difficult.



Photo by SSgt David Owsianka, USAF

Bobby Bell, American Battle Monuments Commission deputy superintendent, talks to 503rd Infantry Regiment Soldiers during a ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of the retaking of Corregidor Island in Manila, Philippines, on 17 February 2020.

The concept was the same one we train today: Each paratrooper understands the commander's intent to mass combat power and establish a foothold at all costs. Unlike today's mass tactical jumps, pilots of the 317th Troop Carrier Group watched from their flight altitude of 500 feet or less as paratroopers were dragged by high winds off the cliffs surrounding the drop zone; sticks were reduced to as few as three jumpers per pass. Though the final strafing runs against the two small drop zones had ended just one minute before the first jumper, sporadic but fierce Japanese resistance was met on the ground. The 2-503rd spent the first few desperate hours struggling to establish a tenuous perimeter. Without a foothold on Topside, the island couldn't be taken, but with any understanding of the attack plan the Japanese defenders easily could have overwhelmed the drop zones.

The enemy commander's commitment to the most likely avenue of attack lasted just long enough to cause their overwhelming downfall. Captain Itagaki and his staff were positioned near Breakwater Point, observing the oncoming amphibious assault and preparing for a coordinated counteroffensive that could, with one timely piece of intelligence, have been directed towards the drop zones. His observers were so intent on their sectors that they failed to notice the guns had lifted off Topside.

Of the many paratroopers dragged by their parachutes (which had no quick release at the time) off the drop zone, 17 were carried south of the golf course used as "Drop Zone B." Unable to climb back up the cliffs and without a senior NCO or officer to lead them, these men executed the most sacred battle drill of the airborne: They formed little groups of paratroopers (LGOPs), marched to the sound of guns, and caused mayhem along the way. Unnoticed, they observed a

group of Japanese soldiers along their route back to Topside; firsthand accounts mention a brief discussion of bypassing the enemy to get directly back to the relative safety of their company, but violence of action quickly won out. What these young paratroopers didn't learn until weeks later was that the enemy position they had silenced included the enemy's commanding officer of the entire island.

This moment would define the success of the entire battle and summarize the ethos of the paratrooper; in the absence of orders, they took initiative, seized opportunity, and shaped the battlefield. The remainder of the enemy's 6,700-man defense force, without orders, dug in. In those few hours of confusion, the Allied assault established a decisive foothold on Topside and the landing beaches of Middleside. Although the commitment of the remaining defenders was absolute, the outcome of the rest of the battle was determined by the first day.

On the home front, the recapture of "The Rock" was the decisive return blow for the black eye of Pearl Harbor. On the eastern front, the tactical victory on the island marked a massive strategic and logistical turning point in the protracted "island-hopping" campaign to recapture the Pacific. The Battle for Corregidor was long, painful, and won by more than just paratroopers. The battle for the Pacific would drag on, but a thousand good men, at the right time and in an impossible place, inevitably tipped the scales.

Just as today's paratroopers are taught to commit completely only at the decisive point, the eyes of an entire theater rested on the locked door of the only deep-water port that could allow us to finish the fight our enemy started. As the paratroopers fell on Topside, so fell any hope of a Japanese victory. As the foothold was established, we established the inevitable victory in the Pacific. The legacy of the Rock Regiment was born in one day on one tiny island, yet it echoes to this day — a legacy of the discipline, adaptability, pride, and trust of the American paratrooper.

As a final note, I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to our hosts, both on and off the island, who welcomed us so graciously to the Philippines. It is rare and humbling to see our heritage cherished so deeply. I strongly encourage those with ties to the airborne, the 173rd, or who possess a passion for history to explore the exceptionally rich living history of the island.

SSG Harper H. Evans enlisted as a combat medic and served in the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment and the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade. While serving as a medical training NCO and jumpmaster in Vicenza, Italy, he has earned opportunities to revisit history and represent the 173rd Airborne Brigade at the 75th anniversaries of D-Day in Normandy and the Battle of Corregidor in Manila, Philippines.
