

CORREGIDOR

an airborne assault



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During World War II a significant number of the airborne assaults that were attempted either failed entirely or did not justify the high percentage of casualties that resulted from them. A few of them, however, did achieve varying degrees of success. The most successful, and perhaps the most spectacular airborne combat assault of the global conflict, occurred during the latter stages of the war in the Pacific on the island of Corregidor.

The success of that operation offers some lessons that may be valuable in the future employment of airborne forces.

SITUATION

On 9 January 1945, elements of the Sixth U.S. Army landed at the Lingayen Gulf in the north of Luzon, the major island in the Philippine chain. These landings were followed by secondary amphibious assaults on the east coast of Luzon, above the Bataan Peninsula at San Antonio, and south of the entrance to Manila Bay, at Nasugbu. By the end of January the capture of Manila had become crucial because the engineers could not construct enough port facilities at the Lingayen Gulf.

The Japanese forces in the city had received orders from General Tomoyuki Yamashita to abandon it, but Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi, commander of the Manila Defense Force, had disobeyed. As a consequence, Sixth Army units encountered stiff resistance in the city and found Japanese garrisons still manning the harbor fortifications.

Corregidor, known since pre-war days as the Rock, held no value for the Japanese in their defense plans, but until it could be neutralized it posed a threat to any Allied shipping that might try to enter Manila Bay. Well before the invasion of Luzon, the Sixth Army commander, General Walter Krueger, and his G3 section had considered the possibility of capturing the island. As a result, when General Douglas MacArthur informed General Krueger of his desire to take Corregidor by amphibious or airborne assault or by a combination of the two, it took General Krueger's G3 section only two days to come up with a plan. It was to be conducted by elements of the Sixth Army, code named Rock Force.

ROCK FORCE

The 503d Regimental Combat Team (Parachute), supported by elements from the 462d Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and a company from the 161st Airborne Engineer Battalion, would make a parachute assault. An amphibious assault would be conducted by the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry, and by the 151st Regimental Combat Team (RCT). Aircraft of the 317th Troop Carrier Command would transport the airborne forces while the 592d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment would be responsible for landing the infantry.

This force, the planners believed, would be adequate to deal with the Japanese garrison on Corregidor, which they estimated at no more than 850 to 1,000 men. This turned out to be a significant intelligence error; there were in fact more than 5,000 Japanese on the island under the command of Naval Captain Akira Itagaki.

To the planners, the island of Corregidor resembled a tadpole with an oversized head facing east out of the bay. The widest point measured one and a half miles. The end abruptly narrowed to a softly curving tail. The total length of the island was about three and a half miles. The head — except for three steep ravines which led to the sea — had cliffs that plunged to the narrow beaches from heights of 400 to 500 feet. This part of the island, known as Topside, had a relatively flat surface.

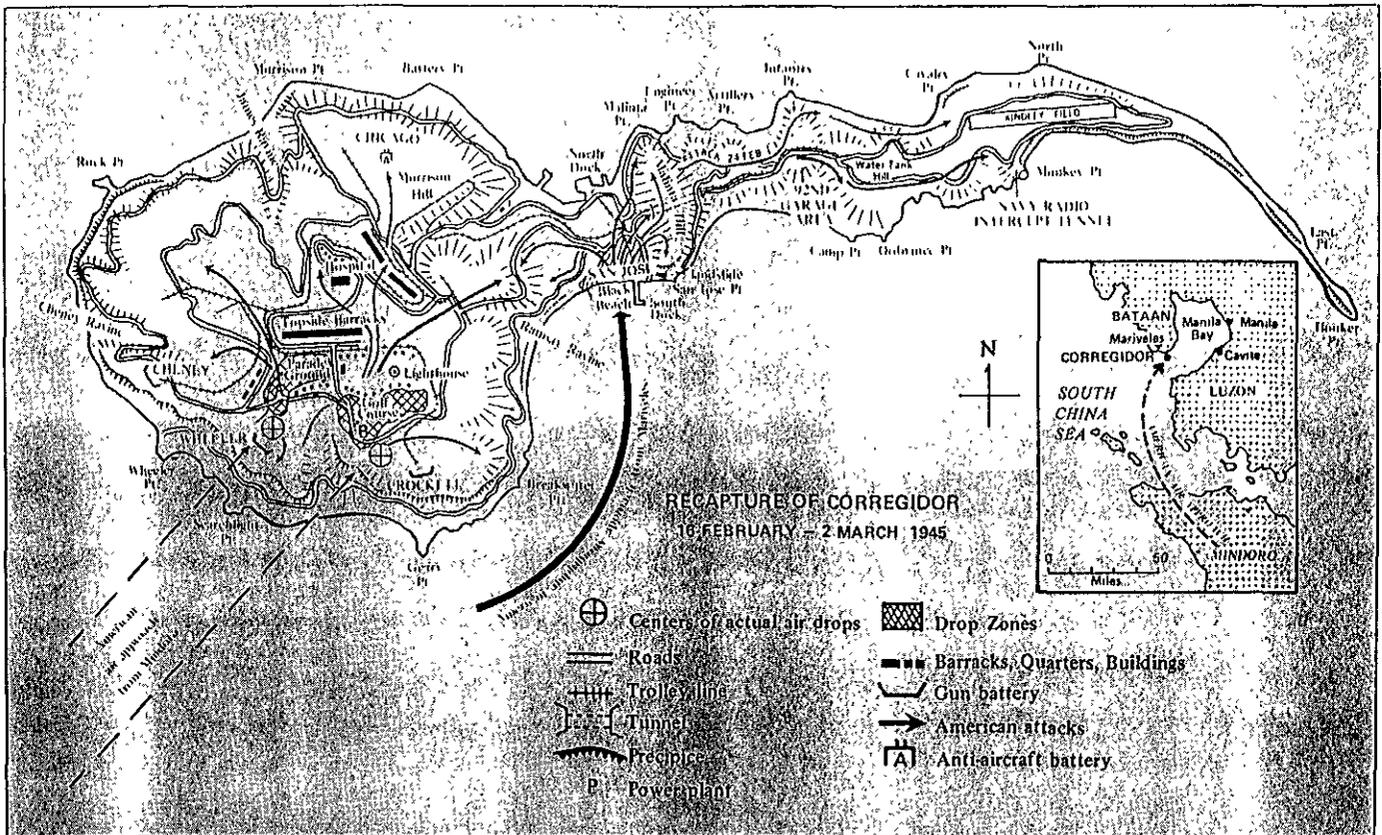
The bombed-out shells of the buildings and gun emplacements that had been built and occupied by U.S. forces before the war marred the island's surface, and amid the rubble were splintered trees and bomb craters. The only areas that were moderately clear of debris were an old parade ground and a golf course. The parade ground was only 325 yards long and 250 yards wide, while the golf course was 350 yards long and 185 yards at its widest.

At the neck of the tadpole, called Middleside, steep slopes led to a saddle, some 500 yards wide and about 100 yards above sea level. This area, Bottomside, contained the ruins of a small village, San Jose, as well as docking facilities on the nearby beaches. Black Beach, on which the amphibious landing would be made, was to the south. Malinta Hill with its pre-war tunnels was west of the saddle. Then, from Malinta, the terrain gradually sloped to the tip of the island not more than 150 yards above the sea. A single-strip airfield occupied a portion of the wooded terrain at the tip.

The planners wanted to use airborne forces to obtain surprise, so they made two assumptions: The Japanese, having taken the Rock themselves by an amphibious assault in 1942, would not expect an airborne invasion; and the enemy, scanning the sea approaches from underground bunkers, probably would be distracted by the approach of the amphibious assault forces and would not see the paratroopers in time to react to them.

The selection of drop zones (DZs) thus became of primary importance. Colonel George M. Jones, who commanded the 503d RCT, after making an aerial reconnaissance, recommended Kindley Field, a small landing strip at the tail of the tadpole. Because of the rugged terrain and the debris and ruins on the rest of the Rock, he believed a jump anywhere else would cause a high percentage of injuries, enough to render his force ineffective. General Krueger, however, vetoed the suggestion, explaining that a drop on Kindley Field would not secure key terrain. Besides, troops dropping there would draw as much fire as if they had come from the sea. (In 1942, when the Japanese had landed by sea in this area they had suffered many casualties.)

The only other way to achieve surprise, therefore, was to land the troops on Topside. But steep cliffs to the



south and west bordered the area, and a strong or shifting wind could bring the paratroopers onto the cliffs or into the sea below. The advantages of a landing on Topside outweighed the disadvantages, though, and the parade ground was designated DZ "A" and the golf course, DZ "B."

The troops of the first serial were to secure and hold both DZs in preparation for the second lift. With the additional troops they would then clear Topside, provide covering fire for the amphibious assault, and then establish contact with the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry. The entire force would then conduct mopping up operations.

MAIN AIRBORNE ASSAULT

At 0700 on 16 February the C47s of the 317th Troop Carrier Command rose from airfields on Mindoro, circled, and then headed in a wide westerly sweep north to Corregidor. A half-hour later a second flight followed bringing the total to 51 aircraft. At 0830 the first wave of aircraft was ordered to proceed with the drop.

Two columns of C47s, one for each DZ, flew on a course from southwest to northeast, and the "V" formation used in the flight from Mindoro broke into an "in trail" formation. Aircraft trailed 600 feet apart at a speed of 100 miles per hour, flying 650 feet above Topside. Given that speed, each aircraft had only ten seconds over its designated DZ, a time that did not allow all of the troopers to exit in one pass. This meant that each plane had to make three passes, releasing a stick of six to eight men each time.

Because of the prevailing winds over the bay the jumpers could not use a prearranged "go" count when the green light flashed on. Instead, the pilots counted seconds after passing the "go" point. This became especially necessary when the wind speed increased. Also, since the approach headed into the wind, an increased count allowed the troopers to drift back onto the DZs instead of falling short onto the cliffs or into the bay. Accordingly, the jumpmasters paid attention to the green "go" light and not to the DZ below. A verbal warning indicated ten minutes from the objective, and when the aircraft was three minutes out the red light went on.

As the first stick of chutes blossomed from the doors, the command aircraft noted that the twelve-knot wind from the north-northeast was causing the troopers to drift short of the "go" points and onto the cliffs. As planned, the pilots increased the count, first to six and then to ten seconds after the "go" point. As a consequence, troopers left the aircraft past the DZ. The pilots, concerned about getting their troopers within the DZ, cut their airspeed from 100 miles per hour to 85 and dropped from a height of 650 to 500 feet above Topside. According to the pilots, jump discipline, except in one or two cases, was excellent. As it turned out, 90 percent of the men who landed outside the two DZs fell short either on the cliffs or into the sea, where PT boats braved Japanese fire to pick them up.

The airborne assault came as a complete surprise to the Japanese. The first troopers drew no fire as they floated down at 0833, three minutes late, and only sporadic rifle and machinegun fire met those who followed. The first lift consisted of the 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry; Battery C and a platoon of Battery D, 462d Parachute Field Ar-

illery; Company C, 161st Airborne Engineer Battalion; and a portion of the regimental headquarters and headquarters company.

By 0945 Colonel Jones had assembled the men of the first serial. They had three missions: Secure the DZs, prepare to secure Topside after being reinforced by the second serial, and establish positions to provide supporting fire for the infantry landing on Black Beach. All of these missions had been accomplished by 1028 when the first of 25 landing craft, carrying the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry, lowered their ramps on Black Beach. Distracted by the parachute assault, the Japanese ignored the first four waves. By the time they reacted, tanks of the 603d Tank Company were already ashore, and at 1100 several companies of the 34th Infantry stood on top of the key terrain feature, Malinta Hill.

At 1240, 25 minutes late, the second aerial serial, made up of the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry; Battery B, 462d Parachute Field Artillery Battalion; Service Company of the 503d; and the balance of the headquarters floated to the ground, meeting only scattered sniper fire. By nightfall the united airborne elements had enlarged the existing perimeter while several companies moved down Middleside to within 250 yards of the 34th Infantry.

SECURING THE ROCK

The clearing of Corregidor consisted of numerous small-unit actions against disorganized and scattered Japanese defenders. When a jump on 17 February was cancelled, the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, reached Bottomside by landing craft to aid in clearing out the remaining bunkers, pill boxes, and tunnels.

The most serious challenge to the U.S. occupation of the island came on the 24th when more than 600 Japanese launched a counterattack, but more than half of them succumbed to the artillery and small arms fire of the infantry and dispersed.

On 26 February at 1100 a tremendous explosion, a suicidal *tour de force*, marked the end of the organized resistance. On 2 March Colonel Jones reported the island secure.

Jump casualties had been amazingly light. As it turned out, only 25 percent of the men in the first drop had jump-related injuries. Even with the increasing wind, the second drop had even fewer injuries as the pilots became more adept at dropping their sticks. Out of the 2,019 paratroopers who jumped, 279 suffered jump-related casualties, or 13.8 percent. Twelve died; one man's chute failed to deploy and the remaining eleven were shot while descending or while still in their harnesses after reaching the ground.

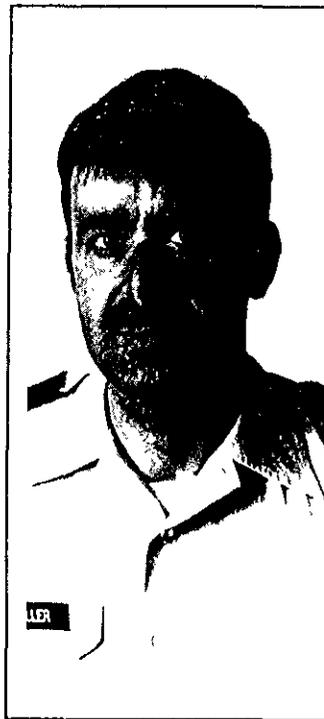
The success of this airborne operation can be credited

to a number of factors. The first was the element of surprise. The Japanese, as a result of their experience in 1942, had surmised that the only way the island could be taken would be by amphibious assault. The terrain as it appeared in 1945 was certainly not conducive to parachute landings, especially not on Topside, and the Japanese did not believe anyone would attempt such a maneuver. As a result, the airborne forces were able to trap the large garrison below ground in caves and tunnels or in positions that had been situated to repel an amphibious assault in the ravines leading to Topside and on the tail of the island. Captain Itagaki had even stationed his reserves, as the Americans had in 1942, in the tunnels of Malinta Hill.

Meticulous planning also contributed to the victory. The close working relationship of the men of the troop carrier group and the paratroopers, along with the fact they had trained and previously gone into combat together, were essential ingredients in the success of the operation.

Another reason for success was the use of a command ship that circled the objective; it alerted pilots if they deviated from the approach path and gave instructions for the jumpmasters to increase the count before releasing the troopers. This control measure certainly helped keep the number of jump casualties relatively small.

The human factor must also be mentioned. The officers and men of the 503d Regimental Combat Team (Parachute) exhibited a great deal of spirit and courage. Because they did, their operation stands as an excellent example of the successful use of airborne troops.



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