

ANGELS OF WAR: THE IMPACT OF THE AIRBORNE FORCE DURING THE RECAPTURE OF CORREGIDOR

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Summary of Corregidor's Recapture

General Walter Krueger, commanding US 6th Army, determined that the capture of the island Corregidor was necessary to accessing the port at Manila.¹ In 1945, Corregidor—previously an American fortress until captured by the Japanese in 1942—guarded the entrance to Manila Bay. 6th Army intelligence assessed the Japanese garrison consisted of approximately 850 combatants.² The plan for Corregidor's recapture called for the 503rd Parachute Regimental Combat Team to conduct an airborne assault on the island's dominating terrain feature known as "Topside" [reference Figure 1].³ Meanwhile, the 34th Infantry Regiment's 3rd Battalion would perform an amphibious landing on Corregidor's southern Black Beach in San Jose Bay.⁴ In support of the operation, Naval Task Force 77.3's cruisers and destroyers would lay down a pre-invasion bombardment and provide fire support missions throughout the engagement. In conjunction, the 5th and 13th Air Forces pounded Corregidor from the sky with waves of A-20 Havoc and B-24 Liberator medium bombers. Complete air superiority also afforded the American troops on Corregidor critical close air support missions.⁵

¹ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 335.

² *OPERATION M-7 SOUTHERN ZAMBALES & CORREGIDOR* (WWII Operations Report, 24th Infantry Division 1940-1948) 30. American intelligence inaccurately reported total Japanese strength on the island which numbered close to 6,000 combatants.

³ Lawrence. Browne, *AIRBORNE OPERATION ON CORREGIDOR* (Instructor Training Division General Instruction Department The Armored School, April 10, 1948) 6.

⁴ *OPERATION M-7 SOUTHERN ZAMBALES & CORREGIDOR*, 129.

⁵ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 340.



Figure 1: Overview of Corregidor with Topside in the foreground.

The invasion began on February 16th, 1945 with a massive sea and naval bombardment at 0715.⁶ Elements of the 503rd PRCT's 3rd Battalion began dropping from the sky at 0833, followed up by the amphibious phase at 1030 [reference Figure 2]. The 503rd rapidly secured a perimeter on Topside while the 34th seized Malinta Hill. Throughout the remaining half of the day intense combat engulfed the island, yet 2nd Battalion was dropped on Topside in the second airborne lift. The 503rd began the arduous process of reducing the Japanese defenses along Topside but the Japanese launched incessant counterattacks during the night. Meanwhile on Malinta Hill, the 34th held their key position, prompting nightly suicidal Japanese attacks. As the process of rooting out the Japanese and fending off counterattacks took on a repetitive nature, fighting was interrupted by an explosion in Malinta Tunnel—under Malinta Hill—on February 21st; perpetrated by the Japanese, the failed attempt to blow the Hill cost the Japanese heavily.⁷ Enemy resistance ceased on the island's western sector, while the 151st Infantry Regiment's 2nd Battalion

⁶ B.R. Trexler, *ACTION REPORT- MARIVELES- CORREGIDOR – MANILA BAY OPERATIONS, 13-18 FEBRUARY 1945* (Task Group 77.3, March 27, 1945) 19.

⁷ George M. Jones, *HISTORICAL REPORT CORREGIDOR ISLAND OPERATION* (Headquarters 503D Regimental Combat Team, March 6, 1945) 6.

relieved the 34th.⁸ The final phase of the Battle began on the 27th, and after a tough fight Corregidor was secured by March 2nd. Corregidor's recapture was considered by Generals MacArthur and Krueger as an overwhelming success; however, the complex planning, significant resource allocation, and high jump casualties associated with the airborne operation raises the question: how crucial was the airborne element in the overall American success on Corregidor and could the island be recaptured without the 503rd?



Figure 2: 503rd PRTC landing on Corregidor.

Japanese Dispositions and Plans

Imperial Japanese Navy Captain Akira Itagki prepared defenses for the island with three infantry companies, two artillery companies, and 4,000 naval personnel, close to 6,000 combatants.⁹ Captain Itagki received orders from

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ *OPERATIONAL RECORDS OF SHIMBU GROUP* (Japanese Monograph No. 8, October 1946) 12. The Japanese Monograph is solely from perspective of 14th Area Army staff officers and chronicles the Battle of Corregidor in a few paragraphs. The Monograph provides little more than troop strengths and the limited guidance sent to Captain Itagki regarding the island's defense. There are also no written records from any Japanese soldiers on Corregidor, since the majority were killed; however, the 503rd PRCT obtained valuable information regarding Japanese strategy and intentions by interrogating Japanese POWs. Since there is a lack of Japanese sources, this assessment

General Tomoyuki Yamashita, 14th Area Army Commander, to prevent Corregidor's capture and deny the Americans Manila Bay.¹⁰ Itagki received warnings from 14th Area Army HQ regarding a possible airborne attack on the island.¹¹ However, Itagki assessed the Corregidor and decided an airborne assault was impossible.¹² Consequently, outward defensive preparations consisting of strongholds at Malinta Hill, Cheney, James, and Ramsay Ravines along Topside were developed exclusively to face an impending amphibious attack.¹³

Element of Surprise

The element of surprise constitutes the most vital element of all airborne operations. Without surprise, airborne units could confront a prepared enemy who would neutralize them on the ground before they had the chance to assemble and attack, resulting in failure. As mentioned on Corregidor, Captain Itagki believed an airborne attack was unfeasible, so he failed to prepare a contingency plan for such an event. According to 3rd Battalion staff officer Major Blair, "The element of surprise worked to perfection in the 3rd Battalion assault".¹⁴ Captain Hudson Hill, a 503rd company commander, echoes Blair's sentiment and claims the Japanese did not react to the first airborne drop for over an hour.¹⁵ Captain Hill goes further, adding the first landing force should have been "annihilated" in the opening minutes of the attack since the Japanese severely outnumbered the paratroopers; Japanese forces although were in disbelief when they witnessed paratroopers falling on their positions.¹⁶

relies primarily on the credibility of American source material.

¹⁰ Lawson B. Caskey, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM IN THE RECAPTURE OF CORREGIDOR ISLAND, 16 FEBRUARY – 8 MARCH 1945* (The Infantry School Fort Benning, Georgia, 1948-1949), 10. Major Caskey commanded the 503rd's 2nd Battalion and landed during the 2nd airborne lift.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² John H. Blair, *OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 503D PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT IN THE LANDING ON CORREGIDOR, P.I., 16 FEBRUARY - 2 MARCH 1945* (The Infantry School Fort Benning, Georgia, 1949-1950) 11.

¹³ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 339.

¹⁴ Blair, *OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 503D PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT IN THE LANDING ON CORREGIDOR, P.I., 16 FEBRUARY -2 MARCH 1945*, 28.

¹⁵ Hudson C. Hill, *THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "E", 503D PARACHUTE REGIMENT AT WHEELER POINT, ISLAND OF CORREGIDOR, PHILIPPINE ISLANDS 23 FEBRUARY, 1945* (The Infantry School Fort Benning, Georgia, 1947-1948) 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

Consequently, the Japanese focused exclusively on a seaborne invasion and could not effectively react to the airborne threat until over 1,000 paratroopers were already on the ground. Second Lieutenant Edward Flash conveys the paratroopers exploited the situation and “seized key terrain without any resistance”.¹⁷ 3rd Battalion paratroopers quickly secured the drop zones for the second airborne lift at 1230 and continued expanding the perimeter on Topside.¹⁸ During the first airborne lift, Captain Itagki and his staff—located at Breakwater Point —were killed by a party of miss-dropped paratroopers.¹⁹ In the opening hours of the invasion, the Japanese commander including his command team were eliminated, collapsing the Japanese command structure. Not only were the Japanese dealing with an unexpected attack from the sky by elite paratroopers, but they lost their commander and the ability to properly lead and coordinate their forces. The Japanese failure to plan for this attack quickly compounded until it was too late to dislodge the paratroopers on Topside. Another point that merits attention is the ensuing amphibious landing at San Jose Bay. At 1030 companies L and K spearheaded the landing and reached their objectives on Malinta Hill by 1130.²⁰ The rather light resistance encountered on the beach can be partially attributed to the confusion caused by the 503rd and loss of Captain Itagki. Collectively, the airborne component achieved complete surprise and exploited the initiative with significant success.

¹⁷ Edward T. Flash, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM IN THE RECAPTURE OF CORREGIDOR ISLAND, 16 FEBRUARY – 23 FEBRUARY 1945* (The Infantry School Fort Benning, Georgia, 1949-1950) 26.

¹⁸ Jones, *HISTORICAL REPORT CORREGIDOR ISLAND OPERATION*, 3.

¹⁹ Browne, *AIRBORNE OPERATION ON CORREGIDOR*, 11.

²⁰ *OPERATION M-7 SOUTHERN ZAMBALES & CORREGIDOR*, 136.



Figure 3: Map of Corregidor, not Japanese strongholds faced outwards from Topside toward the ocean and approaches of the hill.

Impact of Seizing Topside

Topside's immediate capture by the 503rd during the opening hours of the invasion paid significant dividends [reference Figure 3]. According to an American Army pamphlet analyzing the nature of the Pacific War, Japanese defensive doctrine called for a strong emphasis on frontal protection due to an expectation “of stopping us [Americans] cold”.²¹ The pamphlet asserts the Japanese despised flanking assaults and would either retreat or launch furious counterstrokes in the event of an American flanking attack.²² On Corregidor, instead of striking the Japanese to their front and even flanks, Americans paratroopers attacked from behind. Since the Japanese discounted an airborne assault, their defensives across Topside faced toward the ocean. In addition to being completely surprised and dis-coordinated by the 503rd's paradrop, the

²¹ *BATTLE EXPERIENCES AGAINST THE JAPANESE* (Headquarters European Theater of Operations United States Army, May 1, 1945) 17. This pamphlet was created by reports from the US War Department. The European Theater of Operations most likely developed this document to distribute to units—such as the 13th and 101st Airborne Divisions—slated for the upcoming invasion of mainland Japan and provide them with baseline information in regard to fighting the Japanese.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

Japanese had the Americans in their rear, compromising their entire defensive posture. The 503rd immediately began reducing Japanese strongholds Topside at Wheeler and Morrison Points from behind; rooting out Japanese defenders from their bunkers and tunnels continued until organized resistance ceased on Topside. Japanese forces also launched suicidal banzai charges every night to destroy the paratroopers in their rear. These attacks in the open were slaughtered on a nightly basis.²³ The fighting was intense and close, but the Japanese exposed themselves to American fire and paid a heavy price. During one such attack on February 19th, 200 Japanese combatants were killed for a meager 20 American WIA and 10 KIA [reference Figure 4].²⁴ If the Japanese decided to stay in their positions and force the Americans to attack them like they did at Iwo Jima or Okinawa, American casualties would have been significantly higher. Instead these suicidal attacks—although frightening—made the Americans’ job on Corregidor easier.

²³ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 346.

²⁴ Flash, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM*, 20. During this action Private Lloyd McCarter confronted a large Japanese force alone. Private McCarter was wounded and out of ammunition, but repeatedly exposed himself to acquire the ammunition to carry on the fight. When McCarter was relieved, 30 dead Japanese were found around his position: he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.



Figure 4: Pvt. Lloyd McCarter receiving the Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman

Support to the Amphibious Landings

The overwhelming majority of airborne operations acted in support of ground forces, such as the 82nd and 101st Airborne Division's objective to support the 4th Infantry Division's landing at Utah Beach during the Normandy invasion. Often the level of assistance the airborne arm contributes to ground forces aids in determining the impact of the airborne operation. Similar criteria applies to Corregidor, and one of the 503rd's objectives was to provide direct fire support to the amphibious landings at San Jose Bay.²⁵ The 3rd Battalion of the 34th Infantry Regiment hit the beaches at 1030; Companies L and K in the first two waves met minimal resistance and advanced immediately to their objective: Malinta Hill [reference Figure 5].²⁶ When the amphibious landings began, elements of the 503rd provided direct fire support onto the beaches from the elevated position on Topside. Major Caskey, commanding 2nd Battalion, claims

²⁵ Hill, *THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "E", 503D PARACHUTE REGIMENT*, 4.

²⁶ *OPERATION M-7 SOUTHERN ZAMBALES & CORREGIDOR*, 135.

the 503rd laid down .50 caliber machine gun support.²⁷ Major Blair confirms the presence of .50 caliber weapons, but also indicates the employment of an M1 75mm pack howitzer as well.²⁸ Aside from a few vehicle losses due to mines, amphibious landing forces experienced minimal casualties and advanced rapidly toward their objectives.²⁹ The question arises, how effective was the 503rd's direct fire support on the landings? Likely small due to the greater effect of Naval Task Group 77.3's pre-invasion bombardment. Two days prior to the invasion, 14 destroyers and light cruisers began reducing the island's beach defenses.³⁰ Also during the leadup to the invasion the 5th and 13th Air Forces pummeled the island with 3,125 tons of ordnance.³¹ Meanwhile, no more than two platoons from the 503rd probably provided support on the beaches since the majority of 3rd Battalion was securing the drop zones and maintaining a perimeter for the ensuing second airborne lift. Interestingly, the 34th Infantry's subsequent fourth and fifth waves experienced heavy enemy fire, including heavy machine gun fire from Malinta Hill and Breakwater Point [reference Figure 6].³² Heavier enemy resistance later during the landing could be indicative of the Japanese delayed response attributed to the confusion caused by the initial airborne assault. Amid reacting to the 503rd, the Japanese must have shifted their attention from the beach defenses to the growing threat on Topside, reducing Japanese readiness and strength on the beaches. Although the 503rd's direct fire support did not contribute significantly to the amphibious landing, the chaos caused by the airborne component in unison with the naval and aerial bombardments produced success on the beaches.

²⁷ Caskey, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM*, 16.

²⁸ Blair, *OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 503D PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT*, 16. Major Blair's account claims the presence of a 75mm pack howitzer, while Major Caskey indicates only .50 caliber machine guns were used. Interestingly, Major Caskey's 2nd Battalion was not even on Corregidor at the time of the landings and did not even begin to land on Corregidor until 1215. Since Major Blair was on the ground during the amphibious landing, his account holds more weight, so a 75mm howitzer was most likely utilized in support.

²⁹ *OPERATION M-7 SOUTHERN ZAMBALES & CORREGIDOR*, 135. The 34th received only 20 casualties during the landings and 75% of them were WIA.

³⁰ Trexler, *ACTION REPORT- MARIVELES- CORREGIDOR*, 10.

³¹ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 340.

³² *OPERATION M-7 SOUTHERN ZAMBALES & CORREGIDOR*, 136.



Figure 5: 34th Infantry's 3rd Battalion storming the beaches at San Jose Bay.



Figure 6: 34th Infantrymen engaging Japanese positions

Supply Situation

The issue of logistics and supplies act as another determining factor for the airborne component at Corregidor. During WWII, airborne forces were designed to operate behind enemy lines for a limited period because they required provisions and ammunition to sustain combat effectiveness. For the 503rd PRCT at Corregidor, their options of resupply comprised of aerial supply drops—due to complete air supremacy—and a land supply route to the beaches once contact could be established with the amphibious forces [reference Figure 7]. On the first day and a half of the operation, February 16th-17th, the 503rd received water and ammunition supplies via paradrop.³³ According to Major Caskey, Japanese attacks were neutralized throughout the first night, and on the second day the paratroopers attacked Morrison and Wheeler Points: demonstrating the 503rd had sufficient ammunition to repulse attacks and go on the offensive.³⁴ When contact was established with the 34th Infantry around 1600 on the 17th, supplies such as water began to flow from the beach.³⁵ The direct supply route acted concurrently with aerial supply drops to sustain the 503rd on Topside during the coming week leading the 503rd's supply officer, CPT Robert M. Atkins, to assert “The Flow of supplies was excellent”.³⁶ Second Lieutenant Flash reiterates Atkins attitude, “Re-supply on Corregidor was of no problem to this regiment ... Air superiority allowed complete freedom of movement by re-supplying aircraft in sufficient quantities”.³⁷ It appears the 503rd did not have any supply or logistical issues, illustrating the paratroopers were adequately supplied to complete their mission. If this was not the case, the airborne element could have been a liability to the operation and required relief from the 34th Infantry Regiment.

³³ Robert M. Atkins, *503rd RCT Supply Section Historical Record* (Headquarters 503d Regimental Combat Team, March 3, 1945) 1.

³⁴ Caskey, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM*, 20.

³⁵ Atkins, *503rd RCT Supply Section Historical Record*, 2.

³⁶ Atkins, *503rd RCT Supply Section Historical Record*, 4.

³⁷ Flash, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM*, 25.



Figure 7: C-47 Dakota Skytrain resupplies 503rd from the air.

Casualty Analysis

During course of the Battle the 503rd suffered 165 KIA, 285 WIA, 330 injured for a total of 780 casualties; while the 151st and 34th suffered collectively 225 casualties.³⁸ Principally, the 503rd accounts for 2/3 of the total manpower on Corregidor and was tasked with eliminating the bulk of enemy forces located on Topside: explaining the higher number of casualties than the 34th and 151st. Roughly half of the 503rd's casualties were caused by jump injuries—entailing broken bones, fractures, sprains, etc.—due to the high winds on the drop zone.³⁹ Despite a 10.7% jump casualty rate, American planners anticipated an “acceptable” jump casualty rate of 25%.⁴⁰ Given the significant advantages of the airborne assault, these jump casualties were worth the cost. In the absence of airborne troops, American forces would have experienced significantly higher combat casualties: serious wounds and KIAs. Captain Browne sums it up well, “[during the amphibious invasion of Tarawa] There were 4,836 Japanese combat troops ... Of the total 4,690 were killed. Marine casualties were 990

³⁸ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 350.

³⁹ Browne, *AIRBORNE OPERATION ON CORREGIDOR*, 19.

⁴⁰ Browne, *AIRBORNE OPERATION ON CORREGIDOR*, 19.

dead and 2,296 wounded. There were 5,783 Japanese troops on Corregidor. 4,773 KIA and 23 POWs. Our casualties [503rd] 169 KIA, 284 WIA” [reference Figure 8].



Figure 8: 503rd Paratrooper engaging a dug in Japanese position with an M1A1 Rocket Launcher.

Recapture of Corregidor without an Airborne Assault

Given the previous assessments, we can simulate, to an extent, the recapture of Corregidor without the airborne component. The Japanese capture of Corregidor in 1942 reveals some indication of the potential outcome. Japanese forces decided to launch an amphibious night attack on the northeastern shores of the island.⁴¹ The Americans, anticipating the assault, constructed beach defenses and laid in wait for the attack. Like the Japanese two and a half years later, the Americans experienced horrendous artillery fire daily—from the Bataan peninsula—in addition to repeated aerial bombardments. Yet the Japanese lacked an airborne element and invaded exclusively from the sea. During the night of May 5-6th American Marines and coastal artillerymen opened on the Japanese with .30 and .50 caliber weapons. In the words of one Marine, “it was like shooting fish in a barrel”.⁴² Japanese

⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

⁴² John C. McManus, *Fire and Fortitude The US Army in the Pacific War, 1941-1943* (New York: Caliber, 2019) 152.

Lieutenant Machizuki asserted, “If it had not been for the fact that it was the dark hour before dawn, I doubt if any of us would be alive today to tell the story”.⁴³ The Japanese ultimately established a beachhead and moved inland prompting General John Wainwright to surrender the island, yet the Japanese lost approximately 900 killed and 1,200 wounded.⁴⁴ Fast forward to 1945, if both the Japanese defense system across the island was not compromised by the 503rd and Captain Itagki was alive to coordinate the battle the amphibious landing would have been bloodier, perhaps on par with the losses on the beaches of Tarawa. Similarly, the Japanese would have maintained control of Topside, forcing the Americans to attack up the hill.⁴⁵ Without the airborne assault, the island would eventually be overwhelmed by American material and firepower superiority; however, combat casualties would have been far greater.

Conclusion

Seldom in military history has there been a more daring airborne operation than the 503rd's assault on fortress Corregidor. The immediate impact of the first airborne drop psychologically defeated the Japanese and paralyzed their ability to effectively react to the Americans. Japanese failure to plan contingencies for an airborne attack permitted the paratroopers to achieve the element of surprise. Since the Japanese focused their complete attention to the 503rd, the amphibious invasion landed with little resistance and rapidly established a beachhead. Capturing Topside compromised the outward Japanese defense structure, allowing the paratroopers to attack the Japanese from behind. Subsequently the Japanese launched furious banzai attacks to destroy the paratroopers, while exposing themselves to American weapons superiority: accelerating the Japanese defeat. Supplies and provisions proved not an obstacle for the 503rd, and the predicted jump casualties were lower than anticipated. Even though the 503rd had higher casualties than the 34th Infantry, they comprised most of the total force and shared a greater portion of the fighting. Overall, these significant advantages were only possible through an airborne assault and allowed 3,000 Americans to defeat close to 6,000 Japanese

⁴³ McManus, *Fire and Fortitude The US Army in the Pacific War*, 153.

⁴⁴ Morton Louis, *The Fall of the Philippines* (Washington DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 1953) 560. Morton does not provide exact numbers, but rather estimates for the Japanese casualties

⁴⁵ Eugene B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed* (New York: Ballantine Books) 136. The American 1st Marine Division faced horrendous losses fighting up the ridges and hills in the Umurbrogol mountains during the Battle of Peleliu. The Japanese forces created a fortress of tunnels, pillboxes, and bunkers across the ridges. Fighting on Peleliu raged for two months as Marines and later soldiers from the 321st RCT attempted to fight the Japanese in a frontal offensive.

defenders. The necessity of an airborne element in this operation cannot be expressed enough, and without the 503rd the Americans would have lost significantly more men in a prolonged battle. The order of the 503rd's presidential unit citation encapsulates the Battle best, "One of the most difficult missions of the Pacific War, they attacked savagely against numerically superior enemy, defeated him completely, and seized the fortress. Their magnificent courage, tenacity, and gallantry avenged the victims of Corregidor of 1942 and achieved a significant victory for the United States Army" [reference Figure 9].⁴⁶



Figure 9: Paratroopers of the 503rd PRCT

⁴⁶ Caskey, *THE OPERATIONS OF THE 503D, PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM*, 34.