The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the February session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is James Scott, author of Rampage: MacArthur, Yamashita, and the Battle of Manila. Veterans of the campaign on Luzon will join him to discuss aspects of the battle.

By the opening of 1945, Japan faced calamity. The loss of the Marianas in mid-1944 paved the way for their use as B-29 bases against the Japanese home islands. That aerial bombardment began in earnest in November. Meanwhile, the initial American landings in Leyte in the Philippines in October precipitated the enormous Battle of Leyte Gulf, which resulted in the Imperial Japanese Navy being destroyed as a fighting force. Japan was now nearly severed from its southern conquests that produced all its oil and strategic minerals.

The American landings on Luzon on 9 January 1945, marked the beginning of the final American effort to cut this lifeline, while also liberating the Philippines. The main landings at Lingayen Gulf, on the western coast of Luzon, successfully deposited 175,000 troops of Gen. Walter Krueger’s 6th Army ashore. That same day, Gen. Douglas MacArthur set foot on Luzon for the first time in nearly three years, thereby fulfilling his promise to the Philippine people to return and liberate them. While I Corps began pushing the Japanese towards the Cordillera mountains north of the beaches, XIV Corps advanced south. Its goal: recapturing Manila. A week later, a second landing put the 11th Airborne Division ashore south of Manila, thus placing the capital between hammer and tong.

The highly capable Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita, who had gained the moniker “The Tiger of Malaya” for his lightning conquest of Singapore at the beginning of the war, commanded Luzon’s defenses. The collapse of his archival Hideki Tojo’s government in September 1944 had rescued Yamashita from near-exile in a backwater Chinese posting, and sent him to the Philippines. Yamashita’s plan called for a retreat into several mountain bastions and there wage a slow, grinding battle of attrition. Yamashita hoped to exact as many American casualties as he could in this way. He had no interest in fighting in Manila, and shortly after the landings ordered all forces to move into the hills.

Enter Rear Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi, commander of the Japanese naval forces in Manila, who was disgraced off Guadalcanal in late 1942 when he failed to go down with his battleship, the Kirishima. He was determined to redeem himself by defending Manila to the death, and Yamashita’s orders be damned. Iwabuchi’s forces comprised a motley assortment of some 12,500 sailors and naval infantry, along with the 4,500 remaining Army troops still in the city. He set his men to turning the center of Manila into a warren of bunkers, barricades, and mines. Inextricably mixed in with these newly-minted urban defenses, nearly a million Filipino civilians now found themselves trapped between the two armies.

The Americans opened their assault on 3 February, attacking Manila from the north, east and south. Kreuger’s men initially made good progress, and declined using their artillery for fear of killing civilians and destroying the elegant architecture of a city many people called “The Pearl of the Orient.” Very shortly, though, the Americans encountered Iwabuchi’s dug-in troops, and the usage of firepower sharply escalated on both sides. On 9 February, MacArthur declared Manila captured. The reality was that the battle, and the suffering of Manila’s civilians, had only barely begun.

As the Americans pushed remorselessly towards the city center, Iwabuchi’s frustrations mounted. With his defenses crumbling under American guns, he determined that what remained of the city, along with its population, should be annihilated. On 8 February, his men began unleashing an orgy of unspeakable violence against any civilians they could get their hands on. Beatings, beheadings, mass executions by the most grotesque means possible, violent gang rapes, and more were meted out with no apparent rhyme or reason. Trapped civilians huddled in their bombed-out houses, trying to hide from the Japanese, while fire-fights raged around them, and massive American artillery bombardments screamed overhead. Starvation set in, along with dysentery and other diseases. Thousands died daily in a nightmare that continued for more than three weeks.

Iwabuchi’s strongest redoubt centered around the Intramuros, the 16th-century walled city that formed the heart of old Manila. Iwabuchi’s men capitalized on its thick stone

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com
walls to construct a maze of bunkers, trenches, mines, and barbed wire, backed by heavy weapons and machine guns. Pushing in from the east, the Americans took it back, block by bitter block, room by room, as their artillery and tanks flattened nearly every building and pounded the ancient walls to rubble. The Intramuros fell on the 26th, compressing Japanese resistance southeast into three final pockets around the legislature, finance, and agriculture buildings. The next day, Iwabuchi committed suicide. But fighting continued until 3 March, when Manila was finally declared secure.

By the end of the battle, downtown Manila was devastated. Only the street fighting in Stalingrad and Berlin surpassed it in scale and intensity. In the Intramuros, 95% of the buildings were leveled. The rotting corpses of 16,665 Japanese lay unburied in the rubble, along with more than 100,000 Filipinos. Another 150,000 civilians were wounded. American service troops and field hospitals were overwhelmed by hordes of refugees from the city, most of them starving, sick, wounded, and traumatized. Though eventually rebuilt, Manila never regained its pre-war charm.

After Japan’s surrender, Tomoyuki Yamashita was tried for war crimes at the Manila Tribunal. Blamed for the conduct of forces not under his effective control due to Iwabuchi’s insubordination and severely degraded Japanese communications, Yamashita claimed he had no knowledge of their conduct and was unable to influence their behavior. The trial was and remains controversial, involving uncharted legal territory and dubiously slanted trial rules. The seemingly endless queue of witnesses for the prosecution recounted a litany of horrors so bestial that one listener “wondered whether he was living on this green earth or in a bloody gash on the corpse of hell.” Ultimately, his defense claims were rejected, resulting in what many American observers thought was a pre-ordained verdict. Yamashita was hanged in February, 1946.

Further Readings:
Walter Boren, MacArthur at War (Little, Brown, 2016).
Robert Eichler, Our Jungle Road to Tokyo (Viking, 1950).
Max Hastings, Retribution (Knopf, 2008).
Announcements:
Vietnam War Roundtable - 17 Feb. 2020, Agent Orange - rossandhainess@comcast.net
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 26 Feb. 2020 - Roberts, Plague of War: Athens, Sparta and … Ancient Greece - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com
Civil War Symposium - 4 Apr. 2020 - info@tcwrt.com
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org
8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 11:30 - https://www.8thafmn.org
Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com
Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org - Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjer45@hotmail.com
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org
We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2020
10 Mar. OPERATION VARSITY
24 Mar. Bedel Smith
9 Apr. THURSDAY Tanks at Bataan
12 May Last Battle

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We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2RT!

Generals Krueger, Yamashita, RADM Iwabuchi

See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt.