

SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES



**The U.S. Army Campaigns
of World War II**

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. To commemorate the nation's 50th anniversary of World War II, the U.S. Army has published a variety of materials to help educate Americans about that momentous experience. These works provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Stephen J. Lofgren. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

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Southern Philippines

27 February–4 July 1945

In early 1945 American strategists watched with guarded optimism as the war against Japan entered what they believed would be its penultimate stage. In the central Pacific, two Marine Corps divisions stormed ashore on Iwo Jima on 19 February, and within six weeks a joint Army–Marine Corps force would invade the island of Okinawa in the southern Ryukyus. In the Southwest Pacific Area, where General of the Army Douglas MacArthur commanded U.S. forces, the liberation of the Philippine Islands had been under way since October 1944. That month had seen MacArthur’s forces invade Leyte, in what marked both the initial American return to the Philippines, as well as the critical battle in the contest for the islands. With the Japanese willing to stake so much on the battle for Leyte—stripping some 45,000 troops from other garrisons in the Philippines to reinforce their troops on the island—the American victory was a bitter blow that weakened their grip on the surrounding islands. As operations on Leyte entered the mopping up stage, General MacArthur had sent his forces into Luzon in January 1945, thus beginning a monumental ground campaign that would continue until the very end of the war. But even at that moment, MacArthur looked to the remaining Philippine islands and contemplated their recapture. Within a month of invading Luzon, he resolved that the moment had arrived to begin the liberation of the remaining Philippines.

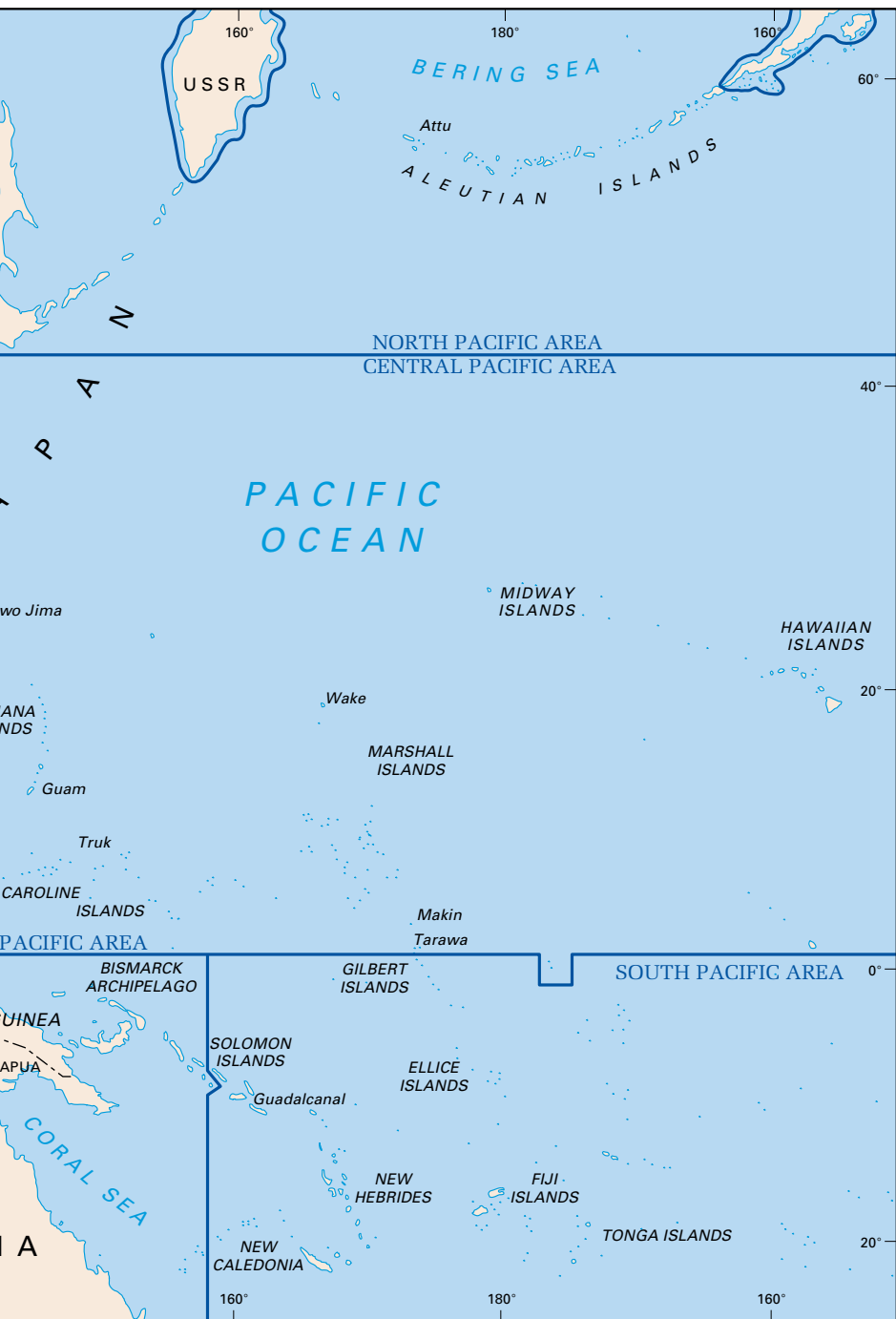
Strategic Setting

“It is still somewhat of a mystery how and whence,” eminent naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison once pondered, “General of the Army Douglas MacArthur derived his authority to use United States forces to liberate one Philippine island after another.” At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, General George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, had told his British counterparts that only a few American forces would be involved in the reconquest of the remaining Philippines. Australian troops and elements of the new Philippine Army were to be the primary forces for these operations. In fact, General MacArthur had received no specific directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for any operations after Luzon. Morison’s considered judgment was that MacArthur simply believed that, “as Allied

THE PACIFIC AND ADJACENT THEATERS 1945

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theater commander in the Southwest Pacific, he had a right to employ the forces at his command as he thought best for the common cause.”

In February 1945, however, several issues heavily influenced MacArthur’s plans. Foremost was the issue of prestige—both his and that of the United States. MacArthur believed that his promise to return to the Philippines meant all of the Philippines, not just Leyte and Luzon. So long as one Philippine citizen remained under the Japanese flag, his pledge remained unfulfilled and American prestige, tarnished by the 1942 surrender of American forces in the Philippines, remained diminished. MacArthur probably also believed that a continued series of military victories would enhance his own chances of being chosen to command the projected invasion of Japan itself.

Two additional motivating factors were also present: one military and the other humanitarian. Militarily, the islands, with their cities, ports, and airfields, could be used to support future operations. Their capture would permit Allied aircraft to interdict more completely the line of communications from the Japanese-held Netherlands East Indies through the South China Sea to Japan and, likewise, would support planned amphibious landings against the enemy in the Netherlands East Indies. The Philippine Islands were also a logical staging area for the vast numbers of men and quantities of equipment which would be required for the invasion of Japan. From a humanitarian point of view, freeing subjugated Filipinos from increasingly brutal captors was simply an obligation to be met as soon as possible. In the end, absent JCS directives to the contrary, and without a pressing need for either the Seventh Fleet or the Eighth Army outside his area, General MacArthur proceeded with his plans and ordered his forces into action.

Operations

MacArthur’s major commands in the Philippines included Lt. Gen. Walter Krueger’s Sixth Army, fighting on Luzon, and Lt. Gen. Robert L. Eichelberger’s Eighth Army, part of which was assisting Krueger on Luzon with the remainder temporarily in reserve. The Eighth Army’s future area of operations was vast, stretching over 600 miles from west to east and some 400 miles from north to south. Within this expanse, all south of the largest island in the Philippines, Luzon, were thousands of smaller isles which together constituted the bulk of the archipelago. At the extreme south was Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines, while the major islands lying between Mindanao and Luzon included Bohol, Cebu, Negros, and Panay, (collectively known

as the Visayas) which stretched in an east-west line from American bases on Leyte to just southeast of another American enclave on Mindoro, which had been seized in December. Outside of the central islands, the Sulu Archipelago extended southwest from Mindanao's Zamboanga Peninsula almost to Borneo in the Netherlands East Indies. Farther west, Palawan island lay between Borneo and Mindoro and fronted on the South China Sea. All of the larger islands possessed imposing terrain, ranging from sea-level mangrove swamps to rain forest-covered and ravine-scarred mountains that jugged thousands of feet high, and all offered formidable opportunities to a determined defender. Enemy garrisons dotted the islands, generally concentrated around ports and smaller seacoast towns. Additional dangers awaited in the forms of disease and a generally enervating environment. For Eighth Army planners, moreover, the very number of contemplated operations and the distances between the sites would demand skill, with staffs forced to juggle assets and to schedule events in sequence with an eye to the limited shipping capabilities available to support such scattered and simultaneous operations.

Since first taking over the stalled offensive at Buna, on Papua, New Guinea, in late 1942, General Eichelberger had progressively received more important tasks from MacArthur, culminating in his assignment as the commander of the Eighth Army with the responsibility for liberating the southern Philippines. Eichelberger long remembered the lessons he had learned at Buna in 1942, where ground operations had bogged down partly because of insufficient small unit training and leadership. Ever after he strove to imbue his troops with the drive and knowledge they would need for success in the demanding small unit actions to come. Above all, Eichelberger stressed aggressiveness and innovative tactics so that small units could capitalize on surprise and exploit opportunities that arose in the confusion of combat. Such training would pay great dividends during the reconquest of the Philippines, where the majority of the amphibious assaults would be conducted by battalions and companies and success would hang on small groups of men pushing through the jungle and engaging the Japanese in fierce small unit actions.

Opposing the Eighth Army was the *Japanese Thirty-Fifth Army*, initially commanded by Lt. Gen. Sosaku Suzuki, who would later be killed in mid-April during an effort to sail from Cebu to Mindanao. Although his troops numbered approximately 100,000, they were scattered throughout the Eighth Army area of operations and his number of trained combat troops was much lower, perhaps about 30,000. Suzuki's best unit, the *30th Infantry Division*, was stationed on Mindanao, but

even that division had lost half of its troops as reinforcements to the battle for Leyte. The strongest Japanese defenses were at Cebu City on Cebu, on the Zamboanga Peninsula in western Mindanao, and around Davao City in southern Mindanao. Most of the understrength and ill-equipped Japanese garrisons did not anticipate large pitched battles with U.S. Army forces. Instead they somewhat complacently expected to be bypassed and left alone until the end of the war. Nevertheless, as events would show, they were prepared to resist if attacked and ultimately proved dangerous foes under any circumstance.

On 6 February 1945, three days after elements of Krueger's Sixth Army entered Manila, General MacArthur issued the first order for operations in the southern Philippines, code-named VICTOR. Planned well in advance, the numbers of the individual VICTOR operations denoted the order in which planners had expected them to occur, not as they were actually conducted. MacArthur directed that General Eichelberger's Eighth Army seize Puerto Princessa on Palawan (VICTOR III), and then proceed into the Zamboanga Peninsula of western Mindanao and parts of the Sulu Archipelago (VICTOR IV). These objectives were chosen to complete the process of isolating the islands of Panay, Negros, Cebu, and Bohol, and to expand the range of Allied air operations. Planes flying from Palawan could venture as far as Indochina, and cut off Japanese sea lanes in the South China Sea; from Zamboanga and the Sulu Archipelago, aircraft also could reach Japanese oil installations on Borneo. Eichelberger chose Maj. Gen. Jens A. Doe's 41st Infantry Division to conduct the VICTOR III and IV operations.

Like most of the Philippine Islands, Palawan was a disagreeable site for an attacking force. Well over two hundred miles in length and up to thirty miles wide, the numerous reefs, sand banks, and mangrove swamps of the island's coast offered few hospitable landing sites. Farther inland, the coastal plain gave way to heavily forested mountains that offered great potential for defenders. For the Palawan operation, General Doe vested command in his assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Harold H. Haney, and provided him with the 186th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) as his principal combat unit.

Naval support for these operations, and throughout the campaign, came from the forces of MacArthur's naval command, Vice Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet. Task forces of cruisers and destroyers would protect the landing forces on their journeys to shore and then remain to provide gunfire as needed. Actually carrying the troops and supplies would be elements drawn from a Seventh Fleet component command, Rear Adm. Daniel E. Barbey's VII Amphibious

Force. Admiral Barbey generally gave tactical control to one of his amphibious group commanders for the larger operations. For the Palawan operation, Rear Adm. William M. Fechteler commanded the amphibious assault group, Task Group 78.2. Planning between the Eighth Army and the VII Amphibious Force for the first assault on Palawan began informally on 5 February. Within two weeks planners had completed all the complex logistical arrangements and assembled the necessary shipping.

After two days of air strikes and a naval bombardment, the first assault wave began moving ashore at Puerto Princesa on the morning of 28 February as General Eichelberger observed from a B-17. The absence of suitable landing areas slowed the largely unopposed unloading operation, but the process would have been even slower, as Admiral Fechteler later explained, “except for the very efficient Army Shore Party and Boat Company” from the 2d Engineer Special Brigade. The men of the 186th quickly fanned out, with two battalions striking north along the eastern side of Puerto Princesa Harbor while a third battalion crossed the bay at its midpoint and then pushed north.

As the first day progressed, it became clear that the Japanese would not contest Puerto Princesa and had withdrawn into the hills to the northwest. More disturbing was the revelation of a massacre of approximately 150 American prisoners of war the preceding December. Believing that the presence of a nearby Allied convoy presaged an invasion, the alarmed Japanese had herded their prisoners into air-raid shelters, subsequently setting the shelters afire and shooting prisoners who tried to escape. Miraculously, a few men survived immolation and escaped the shooting. Sheltered by natives until the Americans landed, they now emerged to tell their horrifying tale, which only hardened American resolve to end Japanese rule over the island.

The 186th encountered little opposition until its third day ashore when fierce fighting erupted as soldiers entered the hills that lay about ten miles north of the harbor. Five days of savage combat eliminated the strongly defended Japanese pockets while in the weeks that followed, smaller units of the regiment seized the small islands directly north and south of Palawan. Mopping up activities on Palawan itself lasted until late April, when the remaining Japanese simply withdrew farther into the trackless mountain jungles of Palawan—a pattern that would repeat itself during all of the major operations in the southern Philippines—after which many were stalked and killed by U.S. troops and Filipino guerrillas. As would be the case throughout the Southern Philippines Campaign, casualties on Palawan were unbalanced. U.S.

Army forces lost 12 killed and 56 wounded, while Japanese dead numbered almost 900—approximately one-half of the Palawan garrison.

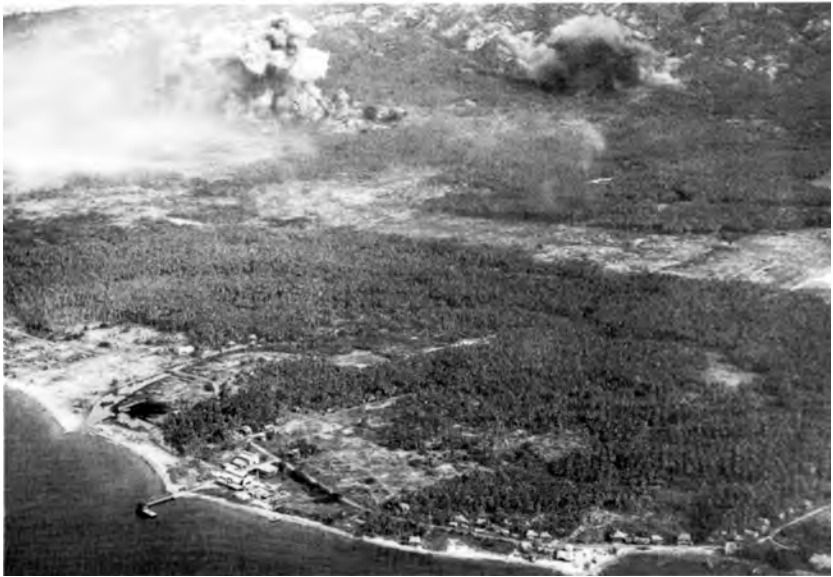
General Eichelberger also wanted the 186th Infantry to seize the small islands directly to the north and to the south of Palawan. On 9 March a reconnaissance party landed on Dumarán Island to the northeast of Palawan and found it unoccupied. A month later, Company F, 186th Infantry, landed on Busuanga Island, killed 10 Japanese, and reported the island secured. Subsequently, the regiment also seized nearby Culion and Coron. To the south, parties from the 2d Battalion landed on Balabac on 16 April and on Pandanan six days later. Both landings were unopposed.

Meanwhile, airfield construction began almost immediately on Palawan. Although marshy soil conditions slowed the engineers' progress, fighters were using the Puerto Princessa airstrip by late March. Construction of an all-weather runway for heavy bombers came too late to support Eichelberger's next operation, but it subsequently was used to interdict Japanese supply lines in the South China Sea and support the Borneo operations that began in May 1945.

Concurrent with the Palawan operation, the remainder of the 41st Division carried out VICTOR IV, the seizure of Zamboanga, the large peninsula of Mindanao that extended to the southwest. Intelligence reports had indicated that a sizable Japanese force occupied the area. Numbering almost 9,000 men and built around the *54th Independent Mixed Brigade (IMB)*, they had established strong defensive positions around of the city of Zamboanga at the southern tip of the peninsula.

Tactical air support posed a problem because of the slow construction of the airfield on Palawan. When Filipino guerrillas reported that they had seized a makeshift airstrip at Dipolog, some 145 miles to the northeast of Zamboanga City, the Americans rapidly exploited the opportunity. Two reinforced companies from the 21st Infantry, 24th Division, were immediately airlifted in to bolster the guerrillas and ensure control of the airstrip. Soon thereafter, Marine Corsairs from Col. Clayton C. Jerome's Marine Aircraft Group, Zamboanga, were using the airstrip to cover naval bombardment and landing preparations off Zamboanga City.

Following bombings of the landing areas by the Thirteenth Air Force and a three-day naval bombardment, the American assault began mid-morning on 10 March. The 162d Infantry, with the 163d following, landed three miles west of Zamboanga City. Despite occasional harassing fire, the Japanese did not contest the landing from their prepared shoreline positions. Quickly securing their immediate objective, an airfield one-half mile behind the landing beach, General Doe's infantry



Amphibious landing area on the Zamboanga Peninsula.
(National Archives)

soon gained control of Zamboanga City, largely destroyed by the pre-invasion bombardments. By the end of the second day, the Americans held the coastal plain but ran into strong resistance the next day when they attacked enemy positions in the hills overlooking the plain. Supported by marine aviation and naval gunfire, the infantry fought the Japanese for two weeks in terrain so rugged that tanks could not be used. The Japanese positions were formidable; deep earthen emplacements, barbed wire, minefields, and numerous booby traps guarded the five-mile front. After heavy fighting, the center of the Japanese line finally broke on 23 March, and over the next three days the 162d Infantry eradicated resistance in this central sector. At this point elements of the 186th Infantry from Palawan began replacing the 163d and continued the attack. The 54th IMB pulled out a week later, harried by guerrilla forces that stymied its efforts to retreat up the peninsula in orderly fashion and ultimately forcing the Japanese off their route and deep into the jungle. Mopping up operations continued for some time, with total U.S. Army losses numbering 220 killed, compared with 6,400 Japanese dead.

Concurrent with the Zamboanga operation, smaller units of the 41st Division were invading the Sulu Archipelago, a long stretch of islands reaching from the Zamboanga Peninsula to North Borneo. Taken in

rapid succession were Basilan, Malamaui, Tawi Tawi, Sanga Sanga, and Bangao. Determined opposition was encountered only at Jolo on 9 April. There a 3,900-man Japanese garrison anchored its stubborn defense around Mount Daho in the center of the island. Hard fighting by elements of the 163d Infantry, fighting alongside Filipino guerrillas, finally took the position on 22 April, although some enemy infantrymen fled to the west, where they held out for another two months. In the struggle, 40 soldiers of the 163d Infantry were killed and 125 wounded by mid-June, by which time some 2,000 Japanese had perished.


Almost immediately after the landing at Zamboanga, engineers began augmenting existing airfields and constructing new ones. Marine Corps aircraft used these fields to cover the Sulu Island landings, and to support later operations on Mindanao. Captured airfields on Sanga Sanga and Jolo were also extended, subsequently supporting further operations against the Japanese-held East Indies.

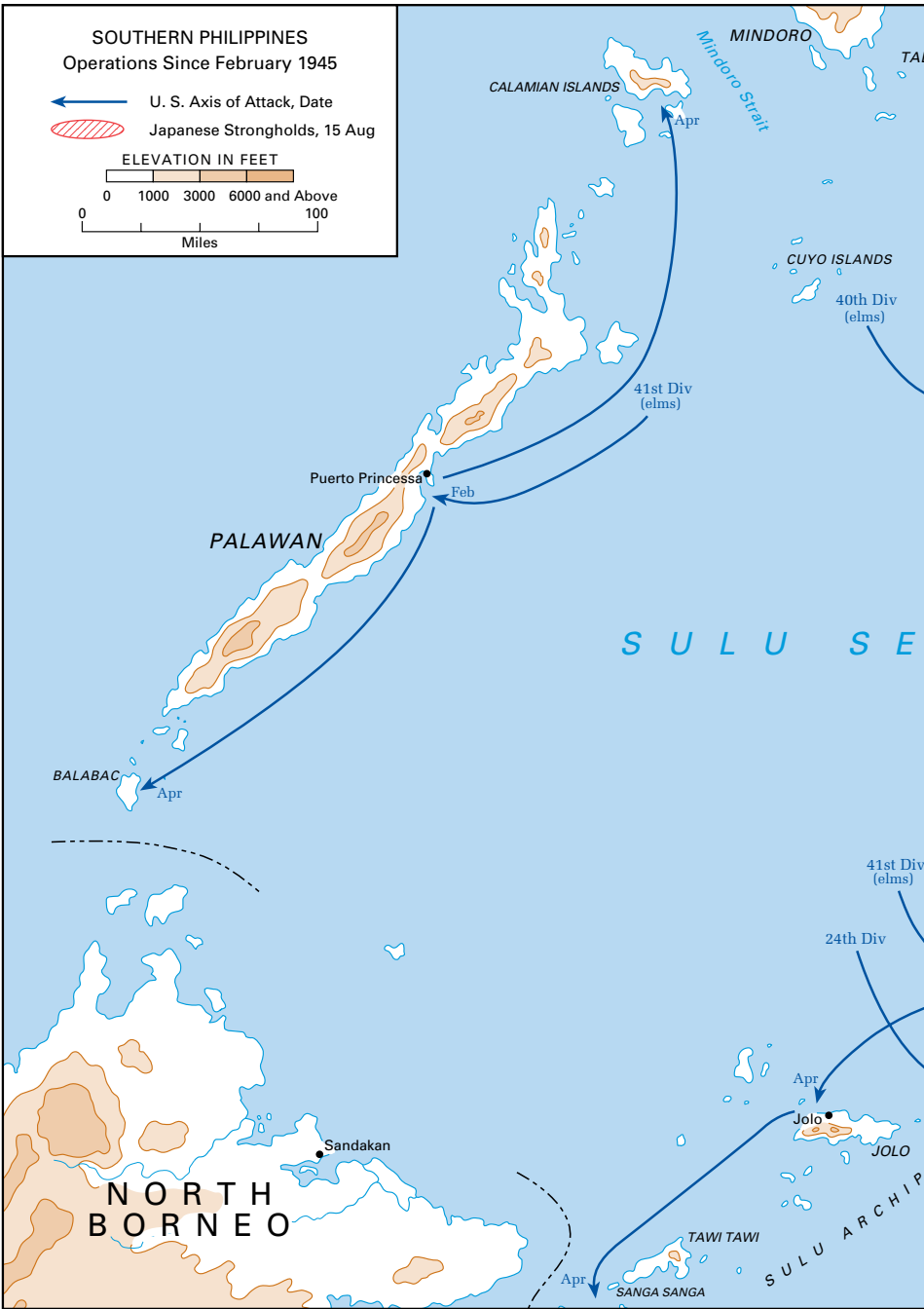
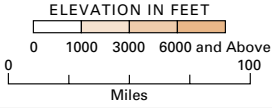
Within two weeks of issuing the Palawan and Zamboanga orders, General MacArthur directed the capture of the now-isolated Visayan islands of Panay, Negros, Cebu, and Bohol. While Filipino guerrillas controlled much of the countryside on the four islands, 30,000 Japanese troops held the vital coastal towns, including Cebu City and Iloilo on Panay, the second and third largest cities respectively in the Philippines. Beyond his immediate desire to clear the Japanese from the islands, MacArthur envisioned these two port cities as important staging areas for the expected influx of troops scheduled to invade Japan. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recently had told MacArthur to be prepared to stage twenty-two divisions for the invasion of Japan at Philippine bases by November 1945, with eleven more to follow by the next February.

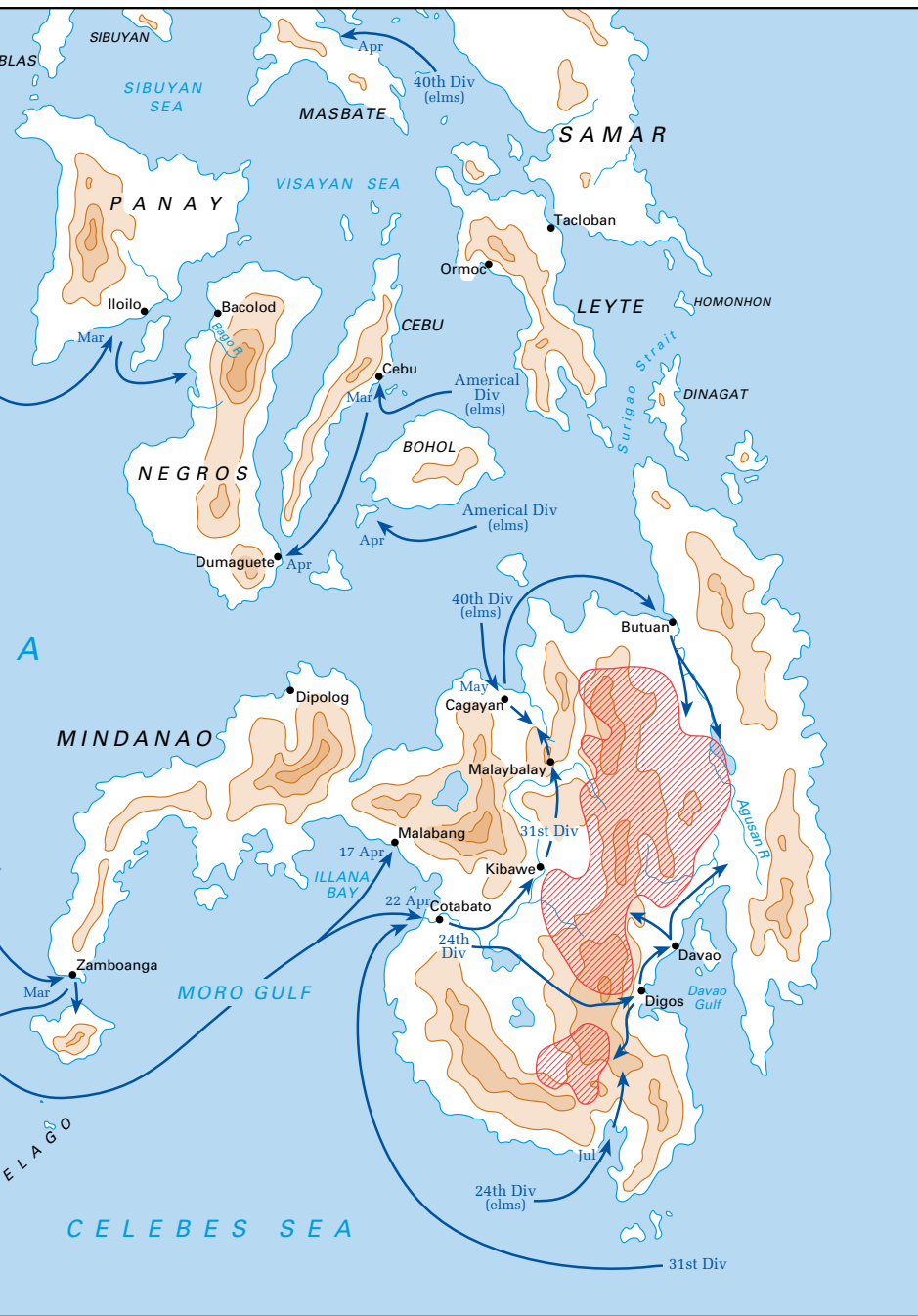
Although the four islands were in close geographical proximity, the dominant terrain feature of Negros, a high mountain range that ran north-south down the middle of the island and split it in two, suggested dividing the entire region into two areas of operations. To seize the western area, Panay and northwestern Negros—Operation VICTOR I—General Eichelberger chose Maj. Gen. Rapp Brush's 40th Division, veterans of the recent Luzon fighting. The 503d Regimental Combat Team (Parachute) was to provide additional support. Eichelberger assigned responsibility for capturing Cebu and Bohol and the south-eastern section of the island of Negros—Operation VICTOR II—to the Americal Division.

General Brush's first objective was Panay. After more than two weeks of air attacks on Japanese positions, the 185th Infantry, 40th Division, splashed ashore on 18 March, landing several miles west of

SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES
Operations Since February 1945

- ← U. S. Axis of Attack, Date
-  Japanese Strongholds, 15 Aug





Iloilo. There they were greeted by Col. Macario L. Peralta's Filipino guerrillas drawn up in parade formation, and General Eichelberger recalled in his memoirs how the guerrillas stood "stiff in starched khaki and resplendent with ornaments." The strong guerrilla force of 23,000 had secured most of the island, except the area immediately around Iloilo where 2,750 Japanese were ensconced. The 40th Division quickly swept through the Japanese outposts and then drove the Japanese from the city in two days. Again the Japanese withdrew after the initial fighting into the inaccessible mountain jungles. In the fighting, the Americans lost 20 men and the Japanese 80. Responsibility for mopping up was turned over to the Filipino guerrillas and the 2d Battalion, 160th Infantry. Some 1,500 Japanese later surrendered at the end of the war. Because General MacArthur planned to stage two divisions from Iloilo for the invasion of Japan, engineers began repairing the local airfield and starting base construction at once.

On 20 March, the same day that Iloilo fell, units of the 40th Division seized Guimaras Island in the strait separating Panay from Negros and, on the following day, nearby Inampulugan. They encountered no opposition on either island. Meanwhile, soon after entering burnt-out Iloilo with General Brush on 20 March, General Eichelberger set 29 March as the date to start the next stage of operations, the seizure of northwestern Negros. There some 13,500 Japanese soldiers defended the coast, with their headquarters at Bacolod, the island capital and also the site of several airstrips. Lacking many essentials, even small arms, the Japanese abandoned their beach defenses in northern Negros. Expecting only to delay the Americans on the coastal plain, they planned to withdraw deep into the central mountain range to make their stand.

American reconnaissance revealed two important considerations: first, a stretch of beach fifteen miles south of Bacolod near Pandan Point was the only suitable landing site; second, the key initial objective had to be the 650-foot steel truss bridge across the Bago River, the sole span that could support movement of heavy weapons and equipment across the wide river separating Pandan Point from Bacolod. Filipinos reported that the bridge had been mined for demolition. If the Japanese blew it up, the wide river channel would become a significant logistical obstacle and might derail the entire operation.

Sacrificing a naval bombardment in the interest of surprise, the first element of the 185th RCT slipped ashore to secure the bridge about 0500 the morning of 29 March, several hours ahead of the main landing. Led by Lt. Aaron H. Hanson, the reinforced platoon from



90-mm. antiaircraft gun firing ground support, northern Negros. (National Archives)

Company F, 185th Infantry, surprised the Japanese guards and seized the span, holding on for several hours until reinforcements arrived.

The main body of the 185th Infantry landed at 0900 without opposition. Eichelberger thought the Japanese decision not to contest the landing beach had been a mistake, judging that, properly deployed, the Japanese could have decimated the first two American battalions to land. Perhaps more significantly, defense of the beach would have gained the Japanese sufficient time to destroy the Bago River bridge. Because eight more bridges, each prepared for destruction, lay along the division's route from the landing site to Bacolod, Hanson's capture of the first bridge enabled the Americans to advance so rapidly thereafter that they were able to seize each bridge in turn. Bacolod itself was taken the following day, 30 March.

The 160th Infantry came ashore two days after the 185th, and the 503d Regimental Combat Team (Parachute), originally on call for a possible airborne assault, followed by sea. Off-balance and with their defenses ruptured, the Japanese tried to delay the American advance,

but the soldiers of the 40th Division simply overwhelmed the delaying forces and continued their attack. By early April the 40th Division had captured most of the coastal plain of northwestern Negros. The Americans then consolidated their forces before moving inland.

On 9 April the offensive resumed with all three regiments attacking abreast. Combat now intensified as the Americans pushed east beyond Bacolod into the rugged, mountainous interior. Even with guerrilla assistance, combat was fierce and booby-trapped terrain unforgiving. The Japanese resisted stubbornly, holding their fortified defensive positions by day and conducting harassing attacks by night. The 40th Division's advances came slowly as small parties crept past tank traps and minefields and scrambled uphill across open fields of fire to attack Japanese positions with rifle, grenade, and flamethrower. Staff Sgt. John C. Sjogren, Company I, 160th Infantry, led one such attack against a ridgetop position on 23 May. Despite being wounded by enemy gunfire, Sjogren accounted for some 43 Japanese casualties, and destroyed nine pillboxes as he cleared the way for his company to follow. For his initiative and courage, the sergeant was awarded the Medal of Honor.

On 4 June the Japanese began a general withdrawal, retreating even farther into the unexplored mountains of Negros. After eight weeks and at a cost to itself of 370 dead and 1,025 wounded, the 40th Division overcame these final defenses, killing more than 4,000 Japanese and scattering the remainder far into the jungles. More than 3,300 Japanese subsequently died from starvation and disease, leaving 6,000 to surrender at the end of the war.

Within a week of ordering the Panay and northwestern Negros operation, MacArthur ordered the execution of VICTOR II, the seizure of Cebu, Bohol, and southeastern Negros. Eichelberger gave the assignment to Maj. Gen. William H. Arnold's veteran Americal Division, recently released from Leyte but without its 164th Infantry, which was in Eighth Army reserve. Americal's first objective was Cebu, held by 14,500 Japanese. About 8,500 Filipino guerrillas, commanded by Lt. Col. James M. Cushing, kept 2,000 of the Japanese contained in northern Cebu. The remainder, under Maj. Gen. Takeo Manjome, held the area in the center of the island around Cebu City on the east coast. Although burdened by 1,700 civilians and large numbers of poorly trained and equipped soldiers, about one-third of Manjome's combat troops were fully prepared for the upcoming battle, with extensive defensive positions around Cebu City. Arrayed in depth, the defenses did not include Cebu City itself. An outpost line—initially built to be the main defensive line—ran through the high



LCM carries troops up the Mindanao River. (National Archives)

ground two and one-half miles inland beyond the coastal plain and overlooking the harbor. Concrete pillboxes, caves, and tunnels honey-combed the hills. Overgrown in the months since their construction, the positions now blended perfectly into the jungle foliage. A second line, the main defenses, lay a mile behind the first, while a last-ditch line stood behind the second. Additionally, the Japanese recently had sharpened their beach defenses, adding an intricate series of barriers, antitank ditches, and minefields.

For the landing site, planners chose a beach four miles west of Cebu City that was broad enough to accommodate two regiments landing abreast. The first wave of the Americal Division hit the beach at 0828 on 26 March after an hour-long naval bombardment. Although there was little active Japanese resistance, enemy mines destroyed ten of the first fifteen LVTs (Landing Vehicles, Tracked) to move ashore, inflicting numerous casualties and effectively stopping the advance. With the 182d Infantry on the west and the 132d Infantry on the east, subsequent landing waves stacked up behind the first, creating a huge traffic jam that stopped forward movement. Fortunately, the Japanese failed to fire their artillery at this lucrative target, and the Eighth Army escaped its first encounter with an elaborately mined landing beach at relatively low cost. At approximately 1000 beach traffic began to disperse as the troops cautiously picked their way through the dense



Filipino residents of Cebu City welcome American soldiers.
(National Archives)

minefield and pushed into abandoned Japanese positions. The advance soon quickened once pontoon causeways were rigged to circumvent the mine barriers.

General Arnold's men moved into Cebu City on 27 March, too late to keep the Japanese from destroying it. The next day Lahug airfield, two miles northeast of Cebu City, was captured, but now the troops of the Americal began to butt against the Japanese fighting positions in the outpost line. The 182d Infantry attacked two strongly defended hills a mile north of Cebu City on 28 March, securing one. As the regiment continued its attack the following day, the Japanese detonated an ammunition dump on the second hill. Company A, already under-strength, lost 50 men killed or wounded in the explosion. Grimly resuming the attack on the 30th, the regiment finally swept the hill.

For several more days the division tried to grind through the Japanese lines beyond the city, attacking individual positions with tank-infantry teams and receiving crucial fire support from Seventh Fleet destroyers just offshore. Although the Japanese kept up a punishing fire from their automatic weapons and mortars, they slowly gave ground.

Although unsuccessful in his attempt to punch through the Japanese line quickly, General Arnold had gained its measure and devised a plan to envelop the Japanese right flank. Obtaining the

return of his third regiment, the 164th (minus one battalion), he secretly moved it by means of night marches twenty-five miles to the west, well behind the Japanese line on the American left flank. The division then attacked with all regiments on 13 April, striking the Japanese from two directions—from the front with the 132d and 182d and from the rear with the 164th. Although the attack was not as successful as had been hoped, the new threat forced the Japanese to withdraw. Recognizing that the continued pressure of air and artillery fire and the Americal ground attack would soon destroy his entire force, General Manjome ordered his troops on the night of 16 April to start pulling back into the mountainous northern reaches.

After clearing the remainder of the Japanese line, Arnold's men began pursuit on 20 April. Together with Cushing's guerrillas, they killed any Japanese who turned to fight. Still, thousands of Japanese gained refuge in the impassable northern region of Cebu, where 8,500 survived until the war ended. In the course of this gruelling struggle, the Americal Division incurred 410 men killed and 1,700 wounded. Another 8,000 men were classified as nonbattle casualties, most of whom succumbed to an outbreak of infectious hepatitis. In turn, some 5,500 Japanese soldiers lay dead. Major harbor and storage construction now began at Cebu City, from which MacArthur planned to stage three divisions for the invasion of Japan.

Well before the fighting had concluded around Cebu City, the Americal Division was in action elsewhere, as Arnold complied with General Eichelberger's urging to begin operations against Bohol and southeastern Negros. On 11 April a battalion of the 164th Infantry landed at Tagbalaran on the western coast of nearby Bohol. Assisted by the local guerrilla force, the battalion pushed inland, located the defenders, and by the end of the month had cleared the island of active Japanese resistance at a cost of seven men killed. The remainder of the 164th Infantry went ashore in southeastern Negros on 26 April, approximately five miles north of Dumaguete. There it soon made contact with the Reconnaissance Troop of the 40th Division, which had worked its way south along the eastern coast without encountering opposition. Two days later the 164th attacked the 1,300-man Japanese garrison that occupied forbidding hill positions ten miles southwest of Dumaguete. Combat continued until 28 May, when the Japanese positions fell and the ever-present guerrillas largely assumed responsibility for mopping up. On Negros, the 164th Infantry lost 35 men killed and 180 wounded, while killing 530 Japanese and capturing 15.

Even though some Japanese survived deep in the jungled mountains, Eighth Army had liberated the Visayas. Back in Brisbane,

Australia, MacArthur was pleased with the performance of Eichelberger's forces, contrasting his fast-moving and decisive operations with the slow methodical fighting of Krueger's Sixth Army on Luzon. On 21 April MacArthur sent a congratulatory cable to Eichelberger telling him that his Visayan operations were a "model of what a light but aggressive campaign can accomplish in rapid exploitation."

Attention now focused on Mindanao. At the same time that the Americal Division was breaking the Japanese line on Cebu, other Eighth Army units were launching their assault on central Mindanao, which, with the exception of northern Luzon, was the sole remaining concentration of significant Japanese combat forces in the Philippines. Mindanao posed a greater challenge than most of the VICTOR operations for three reasons: the inhospitable island geography, the extent of the Japanese defenses, and the size and condition of the defending force.

Like most of the Philippine Islands, indeed like most of the places where the U.S. Army operated in the Pacific, the geography of Mindanao offered little to inspire the soldiers who would have to fight there. The second largest island in the Philippines, Mindanao boasts a long and irregular coastline. Inland, the topography may be kindly characterized as "rugged" and "mountainous." Most of the terrain is covered by rain forests and contains innumerable crocodile-infested rivers, except for those areas that are lake, swamp, or equally trying grassland. Within the grassland regions, furthermore, the cultivatable areas contained dense groves of *abaca* trees that produce not only Manila hemp fiber, but also a vision-limiting, strength-draining obstacle through which soldiers would have to force their way. Exacerbating the problem of movement on Mindanao was the existence of only a few roads worthy of the name. Two were operationally significant. Cutting across the southern portion of the island, from just south of Parang on Illana Bay in the west to Digos on the Davao Gulf in the east and then north to Davao, was the generously named Highway No. 1. At Kabacan, about midway between Illana Bay and Davao Gulf, the main north-south road, the Sayre Highway, ran north through the mountains to Cagayan and Macajalar Bay on the northern coast.

The Japanese had long expected MacArthur to begin his reconquest of the Philippines with an invasion of eastern Mindanao. Believing that the American attack would come in the Davao Gulf area, they had built their defenses accordingly. Greatest attention had been paid to defenses around Davao City, the island's largest and most important city. Strong coastal defenses stretched along the shoreline,

which bristled with artillery and anti-aircraft batteries. Davao Gulf itself was heavily mined to counter an amphibious landing. Inland, the Japanese had prepared defenses in depth, in keeping with their intention of prolonging the campaign as much as possible. Anticipating that they ultimately would be driven from Davao, the Japanese also prepared defensive bunkers in the jungle behind Davao to which they could retire. Situated from two to four miles inland, the extensive fortified positions ran from approximately thirteen miles southwest of Davao City to about twelve miles north of the city.

There were 43,000 Japanese troops on Mindanao under the command of Lt. Gen. Gyoosaku Morozumi. The *100th Infantry Division* and the *32d Naval Base Force* were concentrated around the prepared defenses north of Davao. The *74th Infantry Regiment* and the *2d Air Division* were at Malaybalay in the center of the island. The *30th Infantry Division* held the area between Malaybalay and Cagayan in the central region and northern coast. Finally, and as noted earlier, the *54th Independent Mixed Brigade* remained on the Zamboanga Peninsula.

On paper the Japanese forces seemed formidable. But numerous supply shortages—artillery and ammunition, communications equipment, and transportation vehicles—left the defenders unable to compete with the Americans at the operational level. Further complicating life for the Japanese was a vibrant guerrilla force led by Col. Wendell W. Fertig, an American reservist who had escaped from Bataan in 1942. By mid-April 1945, Colonel Fertig's 24,000-man force controlled most of the island, keeping the Japanese confined to their garrison towns and to the major roads. The guerrillas were prepared to participate actively in future actions. Also working against the Japanese was their belief that the March 1945 operations in the Zamboanga Peninsula by General Doe's 41st Division constituted the extent of American plans for Mindanao.

On 11 March General MacArthur formally ordered the Eighth Army to clear the rest of Mindanao in Operation VICTOR V. MacArthur expected that the campaign could take four months. Eichelberger thought otherwise. Based on his knowledge of how the Japanese units were disposed, he expected the strongest Japanese resistance to be centered around Davao City, in eastern Mindanao. In just over two weeks of hard work, Eichelberger's Eighth Army staff produced an operation plan to deal with the Japanese dispositions as efficiently as possible. Instead of the expected frontal assault into the teeth of the Japanese defenses, the plan called for securing a beachhead at Illana Bay in the undefended west, then a drive eastward more than one hundred miles

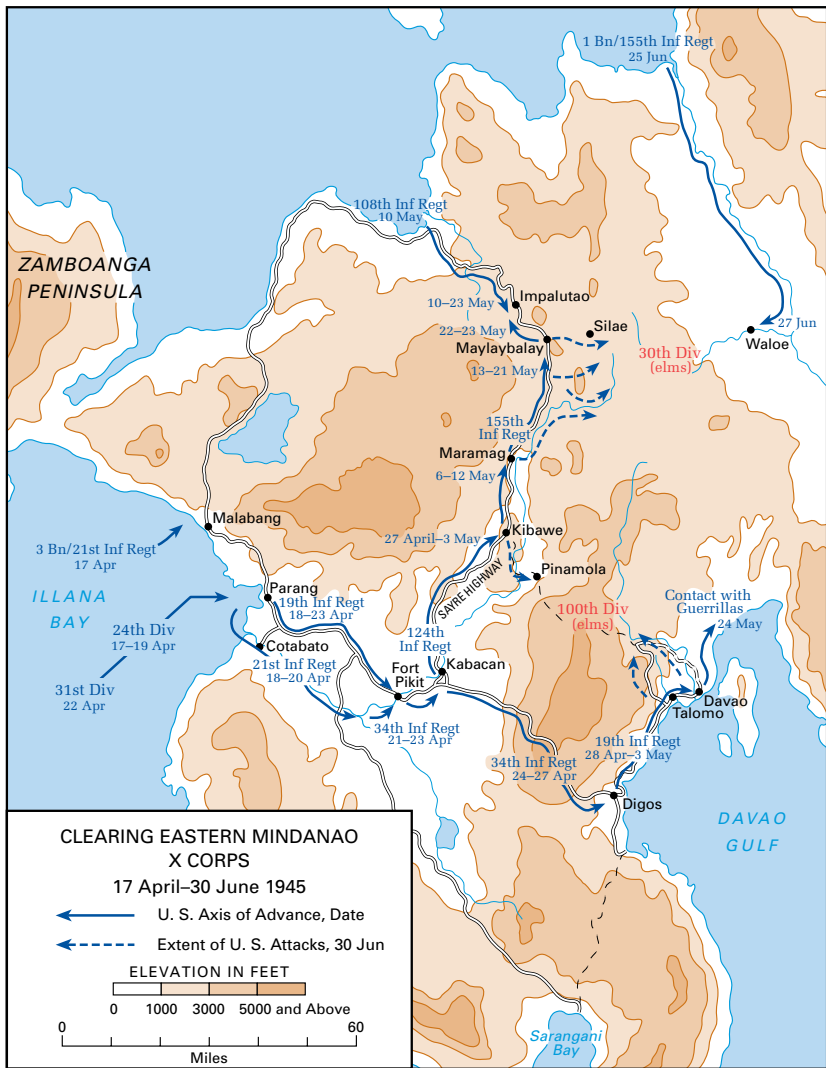
through jungle and mountains to strike the Japanese from the rear. If the invading force achieved surprise and pressed forward quickly and aggressively, Eichelberger calculated, the attack would unhinge the Japanese both physically and psychologically. The plan was not without risk. Success was highly dependent on the beachhead performance of the landing force at Illana Bay and then on the ability of the Americans to maintain the momentum of their attack. The invading force had to move faster than the Japanese could react and had to do so before the rainy season arrived and turned every island road and trail into a morass.

Eichelberger assigned ground operations to Maj. Gen. Franklin C. Sibert's X Corps. Sibert's principal combat units were the 24th Infantry Division, under Maj. Gen. Roscoe B. Woodruff, and the 31st Infantry Division led by Maj. Gen. Clarence A. Martin. The plan called for Task Group 78.2, now under Rear Adm. Albert G. Noble, to carry the 24th Division and the X Corps headquarters to the assault beaches near Malabang on 17 April to secure an advance airfield. Then, five days later the 31st Division would be transported twenty miles farther south to Parang, located near Highway 1, the route to Davao.

As Task Group 78.2 moved toward Illana Bay, Colonel Fertig sent welcome word that his guerrillas owned Malabang and its airstrip. Earlier, Fertig's men had trapped a battalion-size force of Japanese within Malabang, but could not evict them. Beginning on 3 April, Colonel Jerome's Marine aviators from Dipolog landed at the airstrip, received targeting information from the guerrillas, and then bombed the Japanese positions. This broke the stalemate, and by 14 April the surviving Japanese had fled through the guerrilla lines.

With friendly forces in complete control of Malabang, an opportunity was presented to speed the initial penetration of central Mindanao. Generals Sibert and Woodruff and Admiral Noble quickly changed their plans to take advantage of the new developments. Although one battalion from the 21st Infantry would still land at Malabang, the bulk of the 24th Division was to come ashore at Parang, much closer to Highway No. 1, and thus speed up the entire operation.

The landing at Parang on 17 April went unopposed, and the division quickly headed inland along Highway 1. Correctly perceiving that the Japanese would destroy the bridges along the highway, the planners decided to use the 533d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment, 3d Engineer Special Brigade, to exploit the Mindanao River. This waterway ran roughly parallel to Highway 1 and was navigable for thirty-five miles, some ten miles west of the crucial town of Kabacan and the



north-south Sayre Highway. On 21 April Lt. Col. Robert Amory led a small fleet of gunboats upriver and seized Kabacan and the junction of Highway 1 and the Sayre Highway the next day. The Japanese garrisons, startled by the sudden appearance of an American freshwater navy, fled north and west. The Mindanao River soon became the main line of supply as troops and supplies were offloaded far upriver. If “not for the suc-

cessful completion of this river campaign,” Admiral Noble stated, “our forces would be at least a month behind their present schedule.”

General Martin’s 31st Division began landing on 22 April, the same day that Marine Air Group 24 arrived at Malabang to provide air support for Mindanao ground operations. With both divisions ashore and ahead of schedule, Sibert ordered them to undertake separate thrusts. General Woodruff’s 24th Division, minus the 21st Infantry in corps reserve, was to continue its advance along Highway 1 to Digos, then seize Davao City. General Martin’s 31st Division would follow to Kabacan and then attack north up the Sayre Highway toward Macajalar Bay.

In hindsight, the Japanese erred in allowing the Americans to seize the key road junction of Kabacan so easily. Not only did X Corps build momentum and develop its lines of supply uncontested, but the American advance split the *30th* and *100th Divisions*. General Morozumi’s two main divisions became hopelessly separated, with the *30th* in central and northern Mindanao and the *100th* near Davao. Both divisions now were vulnerable to destruction in detail by Sibert’s X Corps. The Japanese “error,” however, was the direct result of the surprise achieved by Eichelberger’s decision to land at Illana Bay—surprise that the X Corps subsequently exploited and capitalized on with its rapid advance from the beachhead.

General Woodruff’s 24th Division moved so rapidly that his troops were almost on top of the Japanese around Davao before Morozumi learned that the western landing was, in fact, not a feint. Reaching Digos on the Davao Gulf on 27 April, the Americans quickly overwhelmed the Japanese defenders who were prepared only to repel a seaward assault—not an attack from their rear. The division then turned north and headed toward Davao City. On 3 May, its combat elements entered Davao City against less opposition than had been expected. The Japanese had contented themselves with destroying the city as best they could before withdrawing inland.

In just fifteen days, despite severe heat and humidity and near-constant rain, Woodruff’s two regiments had traveled 115 miles and seized the last major Philippine city under Japanese control. Eichelberger’s plan had succeeded. MacArthur was enthusiastic, and he paid Eichelberger what probably was his greatest compliment: “You run an Army in combat just like I would like to have done it.” That same day MacArthur announced that “strategic victory had been achieved on Mindanao.”

Up to this point General Woodruff had bypassed the main defenses of the *100th Division*. Now, he turned to eliminate them. The battle last-

ed into June. The “soldiers of his outfit,” wrote a chronicler of the travails of the 24th Division, considered the post-Davao operations to be “the hardest, bitterest, most exhausting battle of their ten island campaigns” against the Japanese. In addition to the tenacious Japanese defense, another punishing aspect of the subsequent combat was the proliferous fields of *abaca*. As the same 24th Division reporter recalled:

To the foot soldiers fighting in the Davao province, the word *abaca* was synonymous with hell. . . . Countless acres around Davao are covered with these thick-stemmed plants, fifteen to twenty feet high; the plants grow as closely together as sugar cane, and their long, lush, green leaves are interwoven in a welter of green so dense that a strong man must fight with the whole weight of his body for each foot of progress. . . . In the *abaca* fields visibility was rarely more than ten feet. No breeze ever reached through the gloomy expanse of green, and more men—American and Japanese—fell prostrate from the overpowering heat than from bullets. The common way for scouts to locate an enemy position in *abaca* fighting was to advance until they received machinegun fire at a range of three to five yards.

In such an environment, the 24th Division fought the Japanese for the next two months. It now did so at full strength. Recognizing the need to bolster his line troops, General Sibert had obtained the release of the 41st Division’s 162d Regimental Combat Team from reserve on Zamboanga. Sibert sent one battalion to protect the 24th Division’s immediate rear and assigned the rest of the regiment responsibility for the area from Illana Bay to Kabacan, thus allowing the 21st Infantry to return to General Woodruff.

As Woodruff’s infantry assaulted the Japanese defenses, platoons and squads cautiously worked through the *abaca* and surrounding jungle seeking out Japanese bunkers and spider holes. On the left flank, the 21st Infantry encountered intense resistance clearing the Libby Airdrome and the village of Mintal, some five miles west of Davao City. Pushing headlong into the Japanese defenses, the regiment was assailed from three sides by a numerically stronger enemy. Individual acts of heroism often spelled the difference between victory and defeat in the desperate fighting. Pfc. James Diamond of Company D was one of many who performed acts of great courage—killing enemy attackers, volunteering to repair a bridge that was under Japanese fire, creeping close to Japanese positions to direct fire, and volunteering to evacuate wounded soldiers while under fire. On 14 May he was leading a patrol to evacuate more casualties when his small force came under heavy attack. Disregarding his personal safety, Diamond sprinted to an abandoned machine gun, drawing enemy fire and allowing the rest of



19th Infantry on Route 1 moving through hemp plantation toward Davao. (National Archives)

the patrol to reach safety. Wounded, he died while being rushed to an aid station and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Combat was just as severe along the rest of the 24th Division front. The 34th Infantry tried to make headway in the center as it moved up the Talomo River and into the middle of the *100th Division*, while the 19th Infantry consolidated its hold around Davao City and probed north along the coast. Progress was slow.

On 17 May the 24th Division renewed its offensive. The 21st and 34th regiments attacked in the west, while the 19th Infantry prepared to swing around the Japanese eastern flank and join up with a division of Fertig's guerrillas. As before, the fire of Japanese artillery, mortars,

rockets, machine guns, and small arms made the advance slow and costly, but the infantry crept forward behind the steady pounding of artillery and Marine close air support. In such fashion, and reinforced by the 3d Battalion, 163d Infantry, the two regiments chewed through the main Japanese defenses, inflicting heavy casualties on the defenders. Beginning on 29 May, the 19th Infantry and Filipino guerrillas caved in the Japanese eastern flank, seizing the town of Mandong on 15 June and the eastern bank of the Davao River, which flows from north to south into Davao City. By now, the defenses of the *100th Division* had collapsed, and the sorely weakened unit was in retreat. To this point, the 24th Division had lost 350 men killed and 1,615 wounded; the Japanese had lost approximately 4,500 killed.

The surviving Japanese moved back toward the mountains to the north, making stands of varying intensity, as the Americans pursued and began the usual and deadly process of mopping up bypassed pockets. During these actions, Col. Thomas “Jock” Clifford, the commander of the 19th Infantry, was killed by mortar rounds fired by bypassed Japanese. Colonel Clifford, whom both Sibert and Eichelberger described as one of the best combat leaders they had known, was a veteran of New Guinea and Leyte. Although mopping up operations continued to claim American lives, the relentless 24th Division pursuit destroyed the *100th Division’s* cohesion, forcing it to abandon its last efforts at organized defense in mid-July. Breaking into small groups, the Japanese soldiers dispersed into the mountains, followed by Filipino guerrillas.

Meanwhile, in late April General Martin’s 31st Division had traversed Highway 1 to Kabacan, then forged north on the Sayre Highway toward Kibawe, some forty miles distant. The so-called highway, General Eichelberger later recalled, was soon “discovered to be something of a fraud.” A thirty-mile stretch had never been completed and dissolved into deep mud whenever it rained—and it rained virtually every day. Furthermore, the combination of Japanese and guerrilla activity had destroyed every bridge along the route. The first twenty-five miles north of Kabacan alone contained at least seventy bridges that required some degree of repair or reconstruction.

Departing Kabacan on 27 April, Col. Edward M. Starr’s 124th Infantry led the division’s advance up the primitive road. Colonel Starr planned to compensate for his transportation shortage by leapfrogging his battalions up the highway—each with a battery from the 149th Field Artillery attached. At approximately 2200 during the first evening of the advance, the division vanguard—Lt. Col. Robert M. Fowler’s 2d Battalion with Battery B—ran into a Japanese infantry battalion hurry-

ing south. Although darkness and the jungle prevented coordinated maneuver during the ensuing engagement, Fowler committed his force unit by unit into the fighting. Behind him, Battery B had immediately moved off the highway after hearing the first shots. Within twenty minutes the battery was firing into the enemy as observers at the front adjusted range by the sounds of the exploding shells. Fowler's battalion killed at least 50 Japanese and sent the remainder fleeing.

Meeting little further resistance, except from the terrain, the 31st Division pressed on and reached Kibawe on 3 May. Kibawe was the northern terminus of a supposed Japanese supply trail that twisted and turned south until it reached the ocean shore town of Talomo, a few miles west of Davao City. American planners had initially regarded the Kibawe-Talomo trail as an important line of communication for the *100th Division*, and the 31st Division was prepared to begin a major push down it. Inspection of the trail, however, soon reinforced Colonel Fertig's opinion that the trail's importance and capabilities had been vastly overrated. Following his own aerial survey of the trail, General Eichelberger told his X Corps commander to limit trail operations to a reconnaissance-in-force. Sibert ordered General Martin to send a battalion-size force down the trail, and also to continue his division movement north along the highway. A battalion of the 167th Infantry began moving down the Talomo trail on 11 May. A 1,000-man Japanese force held the trail, but jungle rain forest, torrential rains, and abysmal trail conditions were the real obstacles. With the route impassable to motor vehicles, supplies had to be airdropped to the otherwise isolated infantrymen. Eighteen days were required to reach the Pulangi River, some thirteen miles down the trail, and the sheer physical requirements of occupying the trail soon entailed committing the entire regiment to the operation. Yet even with the assistance of Filipino guerrillas, it took the 167th Infantry until 30 June to move five miles beyond the Pulangi River and seize the Japanese trail-force headquarters at Pinamola. By that time the enemy was already retreating farther south, and the 167th was content to let them go. Skirmishing along the trail cost the American regiment 80 men killed and 180 wounded, while counting almost 400 Japanese dead.

The 124th Infantry had resumed its progress up the Sayre Highway on 6 May, even before the Talomo trail reconnaissance had begun. In doing so, the regiment moved into its toughest fight of the Mindanao campaign, if not of the Pacific war itself. Difficulties stemmed from two separate factors. First, the regiment initially lacked artillery support. Destroyed bridges, rain, and generally impassable terrain had left the artillery battalions farther and farther behind the

hard-pushing infantry. Second, General Morozumi had decided to consolidate his *30th Division* around Malaybalay before undertaking a final withdrawal eastward into the Agusan Valley. In an effort to gain time for this movement, Morozumi ordered an infantry battalion to delay the Americans for as long as possible around Maramag, some thirty miles to the south.

For six days the 124th Infantry fought its way from Kibawe to Maramag. The troops later named the battle area Colgan Woods, in remembrance of Capt. (Chaplain) Thomas A. Colgan, who was killed during one of his repeated efforts to aid wounded soldiers on the battlefield. The battle was one of the many brutal struggles in the Pacific theater that never made any headlines. Firing from dugout positions, from camouflaged spider holes with connecting tunnels, and from virtually invisible pillboxes, the defending Japanese chose to die in place rather than retreat. *Banzai* charges struck the regiment twice, first on 7 May and then on the night of 14–15 May. The latter ended in a rout, as American automatic weapons stopped the attackers, killing 73 Japanese and marking the end of the battle. In the fighting for Colgan Woods and Maramag, the 124th Infantry lost 69 men killed and 177 wounded.

With the end of most of the Japanese resistance around Maramag, Col. Walter J. Hanna's 155th Infantry passed through the 124th on 13 May and resumed the advance north on the Sayre Highway. Pressing on against little opposition, the 155th occupied Malaybalay on 21 May. With the former Japanese airstrips at Maramag and Malaybalay now in hand, air resupply for the leading ground troops became feasible, and the supply situation began to ease. On the afternoon of 23 May another supply route opened when the 155th Infantry linked up with American troops heading south on the highway at the town of Impalutao, ten miles north of Malaybalay.

As the 31st Division was fighting up the Sayre Highway, General Eichelberger had ordered the 108th Infantry, 40th Division, to land at Macajalar Bay and open the Sayre Highway from the north. The regiment, commanded by Col. Maurice D. Stratta, moved ashore unopposed on 10 May and headed south. On 13 May Stratta's regiment ran into strong Japanese defenses in a steep river canyon that loomed over the highway. Four days were required to take the enemy positions, but afterwards the regiment encountered little opposition. The 108th Infantry's juncture with Hanna's 155th Infantry meant total American control of the Sayre Highway.

Now General Morozumi and the *30th Division* showed a marked disinclination to fight, preferring to retreat into the mountains to the east. The continual pursuit by the 31st Division led to a sharp engage-

ment on 5 June, during which Cpl. Harry K. Harr saved four fellow soldiers when he threw himself on a Japanese grenade. Harr was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Still the Americans pursued and the Japanese continued their withdrawal beyond Silae into the Agusan Valley. As before, both attackers and defenders had to deal with the island's terrain and weather, as torrential downpours turned every piece of ground into a quagmire and exacerbated the problems of movement and supply.

On 24 June, the 1st Battalion, 155th Infantry, landed east of Macajalar Bay and moved sixty miles south along the Agusan River valley to assail the eastern flank of the beleaguered *30th Division*. Receiving all of their supplies by airdrop, the "troops lived for weeks in green stinking swamps with crocodiles and snakes as companions," as they scouted out Japanese concentrations and called in air and artillery fire to decimate them. Operations continued in this area until mid-August, when news arrived of the Japanese surrender.

Farther south on Mindanao, smaller X Corps units carried out a series of minor operations in early June, clearing the Japanese from the entrances to Davao Gulf and seizing Sarangani and Balut islands, off the southern tip of Mindanao. On 4 July, PT boats transported a reconnaissance platoon from the 24th Division to the southeast side of Sarangani Bay. When the scouts encountered a strong Japanese force in the interior, the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry, followed on 12 July and spent the remainder of the war pursuing the Japanese through the jungle. At a cost of 14 men killed and 13 wounded, the soldiers killed more than 400 Japanese and captured 25.

On 30 June General Eichelberger reported to General MacArthur that "organized" Japanese resistance had ended. But as the Japanese did not fully share that view, small unit mopping up operations continued for some time. Throughout Mindanao, pockets of Japanese troops, safeguarded by the impenetrable terrain of the island's unexplored jungle expanses, survived until the end of the war, when some 22,000 emerged to surrender. More than 10,000 Japanese died in combat, while 8,000 or more died from starvation or disease during the campaign. From 17 April to 15 August 1945, 820 U.S. soldiers were killed in eastern Mindanao and 2,880 were wounded. The Philippines had been liberated.

Analysis

The Southern Philippines Campaign usually is given short shrift in popular histories of World War II. The campaign, which the U.S.

Army recognizes as ending on 4 July 1945, actually lasted until news of the Japanese surrender in early September. Recapturing the southern Philippines cost the Eighth Army approximately 2,100 dead and 6,990 wounded. The *Japanese Thirty-Fifth Army* lost vastly more. Overall, the campaign's primary objective, eradicating Japanese military power on the Philippine Islands, was achieved quickly and, compared to other campaigns in the Pacific, at relatively little cost.

There were several reasons for the success of Eighth Army in this campaign. At this point in the war Japanese tactical doctrine had abandoned beachfront defenses for prolonged inland defense in depth. On several occasions, rigid adherence to the new doctrine caused the Japanese to miss opportunities to inflict a tactical defeat on landing forces, opportunities that might have contributed to their goal of making each battle as long and as costly as possible. Concerns of Japanese commanders about the tenuousness of their command and control probably contributed to their unwillingness to countenance tactical flexibility, as did waning morale, the poor physical state of their troops, and general supply shortages. Thus, the Japanese soldiers waited in their prepared inland positions, relatively immobile, and were subsequently ground down in bloody small unit actions until they fled into uncharted jungle reaches where, starving and in ill health, they tried to survive until the end of the war.

Another reason for success was the great assistance that organized Filipino guerrilla forces provided. In today's parlance, the guerrillas constituted a valuable "force multiplier" for Eichelberger's units. Before landings, guerrillas harassed Japanese units and provided valuable intelligence about Japanese dispositions and the relative suitability of landing beaches. After each landing, the Filipinos eagerly fought alongside the Americans and pursued the Japanese throughout the island interiors.

The most important reasons for success, however, were the skill and determination of the entire Eighth Army. From its leader, General Eichelberger, and his staff, down through the divisions and regiments to the individual soldiers who waged the battles, all levels of Eighth Army displayed the hardened competence and professionalism that marked it as a veteran command. Even as elements of the Eighth Army fought on Luzon, Eichelberger's staffs and their naval counterparts undertook the rigorous work of planning, and then coordinating, the demanding VICTOR operations. The success of these many amphibious operations demonstrated a high level of skill and efficiency. Planners had to continuously juggle available resources and invasion dates in order to assemble the required shipping for each opera-

tion, particularly the Army and Navy amphibian and landing craft that carried out much of the ship-to-shore movement during the campaign. Heading the staff of Eighth Army were Brig. Gen. Clovis E. Byers, the chief of staff, and Col. Frank S. Bowen, who, as the operations officer (G-3), was particularly responsible for drawing up the VICTOR plans. Talented officers, both men were combat veterans with multiple decorations for gallantry, including the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest award for bravery. When combined with dedicated leadership and courageous soldiers, the result was that "Eighth Army conducted a clinic in amphibious warfare."

Any narrative of a series of operations and battles like the Southern Philippines Campaign ultimately focuses on the combat forces and their commanders. Throughout the campaign, however, supporting units provided constant and critical assistance. Although generally not recognized by either medals or newspaper headlines, their effort was as important, as strenuous, and often as dangerous as any task in the theater. Medical personnel, especially those attached to infantry units, were one such integral part of combat operations. The Medical Detachment, 124th Infantry, 31st Division, for instance, became one of only four divisional units to receive battle honors during World War II for the heroic actions of its members during the brutal fighting in Colgan Woods on Mindanao. In the course of that battle several medics were killed and others were wounded, often while aiding wounded soldiers still under fire.

Similarly pressed to their physical limits were engineer units, particularly the combat engineers. While the need to maintain a continuous advance across Mindanao placed great strain on the infantrymen, and subjected the artillery units to severe hardship, it was engineers, like those of the 24th Division's 3d Engineer Combat Battalion, who performed the herculean tasks of removing the many Japanese mines and building numerous bridges under the most primitive conditions. Farther to the north, the 31st Division's 106th Engineer Combat Battalion did the same, removing mines and rebuilding bridges over the many deep gorges, rivers, and tributaries, all in ground that seemed to consist of nothing but thick slimy mud. Such labors were crucial for achieving victory.

Ultimately, however, the success of each operation depended on the Eighth Army's lowest level, the GIs who individually and in small groups engaged the enemy. The compartmentalized terrain of the Philippines made the exercise of command and control difficult, with most tactical contests depending on the actions of small unit leaders and their men. Combat was an extremely personal affair, generally

requiring soldiers to kill the enemy at close range. In this respect, the huge casualty disparity between the Japanese and Americans is remarkable. The difference was partly a tribute to the infantry scouts and “sneak patrols” who, at great risk to themselves, forged ahead and doggedly uncovered enemy ambushes and positions. Given the dense jungle growth, General Eichelberger remembered, “in the end,” the only way to find a Japanese position “was to send in a man with a gun.” Unlike their German counterparts, Japanese bunkers were largely underground, protruding only a couple of feet above the surface. Such small camouflaged protrusions were virtually invisible, and generally for the muddy, thirsty scout warily pushing through thick underbrush, his first knowledge of a bunker’s location was when the enemy soldier in it began firing at him. Once a position was discovered, the grim and frightening task of closing with and killing Japanese soldiers fell to small groups of infantrymen employing weapons they could carry—usually rifles, grenades, and flamethrowers, but sometimes knives and hands.

Given the realities of jungle combat and the rapidity with which these battles were concluded, the degree to which some of the operations were pressed might be questioned. The bitter fighting on northern Negros, where the majority of U.S. casualties occurred in the northern mountains with the attack being pushed relentlessly against a trapped enemy, the eastern Mindanao “reconnaissance-in-force” of the Kibawe-Talomo trail, and the expedition into the Agusan Valley all come to mind. Nevertheless, the moral imperative of freeing Filipino soil from Japanese occupation was a responsibility not easily abandoned. Thus, from February through July the Eighth Army conducted more than fifty landings, many of which were large operations. The Southern Philippines Campaign showcased both the U.S. Army’s mastery of amphibious and littoral warfare and its ability to simultaneously conduct numerous far-flung operations over a vast area. The very success of the many operations is the best tribute to the men of the U.S. Eighth Army.

SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES 1945

Further Readings

Robert Ross Smith's *Triumph in the Philippines* (1963), a volume in the official history series, *The United States Army in World War II*, provides the most detailed examination of this often overlooked campaign. Also useful are Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Liberation of the Philippines, 1944–1945* (1959); Stanley Falk, *Liberation of the Philippines* (1971); and Maj. Charles W. Boggs, Jr., *Marine Aviation in the Philippines* (1951). Contrasting views of Eichelberger are offered in Paul Chwialkowski, *In Caesar's Shadow: The Life of Robert Eichelberger* (1993), and John F. Shortal, *Forged By Fire: General Robert L. Eichelberger and the Pacific War* (1987). Eichelberger provided his own account in *Our Jungle Road to Tokyo* (1950). The view from MacArthur's Southwest Pacific headquarters is covered in D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, vol. II, *1941–1945* (1975). Much anecdotal evidence about the bitter combat and harsh environment can be found Jan Valtin, *Children of Yesterday: The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Division in World War II* (1946). Other unit histories include Capt. Francis D. Cronin, *Under the Southern Cross: The Saga of the Americal Division* (1951); *History of the 31st Infantry Division: In Training and Combat, 1940–1945* (1946); *40th Infantry Division: The Years of World War II, 1 December 1941–1 April 1946* (1947); and William F. McCartney, *The Jungleers: A History of the 41st Infantry Division* (1948).

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Cover: *Troops on the beach after the landing on Cebu Island.*
(National Archives)