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THE EARLY STAGES OF WORLD WAR II

The material that follows was extracted from official history of the U.S. Army; see sources listed below. It is repeated here to remind the reader of the consequences of events following the allied victory in World War I which led to the transformation of the U.S. Army from a modern-day military force to one of obsolescence. The reader should reflect on these historical events and relate them to the course the Army may be forced to take in this period after the allied victory in the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. Deja vu?

The Outbreak of War

About one o'clock in Washington, D.C. on the afternoon of December 7, 1941, the first news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, reached the War Department.

It caught by surprise not only the American people at large, who learned of the attack a short while later, but also their leaders, including the very officers who had earlier been so much concerned over the possibility of just such an attack.

The same day (December 8 in the Philippines), about noon, Formosa-based bombers caught the bulk of the U.S. Far East Air Force lined up on Clark and Iba fields not far from Manila in Central Luzon and virtually destroyed it.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was one of the most brilliant tactical feats of the war. From 6 carriers, which had advanced undetected to a position 200 miles north of Oahu, some 350 aircraft came in through the morning mist, achieving complete tactical surprise.

About 170 aircraft were destroyed and 102 damaged, all 8 battleships were sunk or badly damaged, besides many other vessels, and total casualties came to about 3,400, including 2,402 service men and civilians killed.

These two attacks—on Pearl Harbor and on the Philippines—effectively crippled American striking power in the Pacific. The Philippines and other American possessions in the western Pacific were isolated, their loss a foregone conclusion. The Hawaiian Islands and Alaska lay open to invasion; the Panama Canal and the cities, factories, and shipyards of the west coast were vulnerable to raids from the sea and air. Months would pass before the United States could regain a capacity

for even the most limited kind of offensive action against its oriental enemy. As Japanese forces moved swiftly southward against the Philippines, Malaya, and the Netherlands Indies, Japan's Axis partners, Germany and Italy, promptly declared war on the United States.

The pace of rearmament and mobilization, in the summer and fall of 1941, was actually slowing down. Signs pointed to a policy of making the American contribution to the defeat of the Axis, as columnist Walter Lippmann put it, one "basically of Navy, Air, and manufacturing."

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines changed the picture. A wave of patriotic indignation over Japanese duplicity and brutality swept the country. Isolationism virtually evaporated as a public issue, and all parties closed ranks in support of the war effort. Indeed, in retrospect, despite the immediate tactical success the Japanese achieved at Pearl Harbor, that attack proved to be a great blunder for them, politically and strategically.

The President, early in January, dramatized the magnitude of the effort now demanded by proclaiming a new set of production goals—60,000 airplanes in 1942 and 125,000 in 1943; 45,000 tanks in 1942 and 75,000 in 1943; 20,000 anti-aircraft guns in 1942 and 35,000 in 1943; half a million machine guns in 1942 and as many more in 1943; and 8 million deadweight tons of merchant shipping in 1942 and 10 million in 1943.

Vanished were the two illusions that America could serve only as an arsenal of democracy, contributing weapons without the men to wield them, or, conversely, that the nation could rely solely on its own fighting forces, leaving other anti-Axis nations to shift for themselves. "We must not only provide munitions for our own fighting forces," Roosevelt advised Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, "but vast quantities to be used against the enemy in every appropriate theater of war."

A new Victory Program boosted the Army's ultimate mobilization goal to 10 million men, and the War Department planned to have 71 divisions and 115 combat air groups organized by the end of 1942, with a total of 3.6 million men under arms.

Late in December 1941 President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met to establish the bases of coalition strategy and concert immediate measures to meet the military crisis; they agreed that the first and main effort must go into defeating Germany, the more formidable enemy.

In the first few weeks after Pearl Harbor, while the navy was salvaging what it could from the wreckage at Pearl Harbor and striving to combat German submarines in the western Atlantic, the War Department made desperate efforts to bolster the defenses of Hawaii, the Philippines, the Panama Canal, Alaska, and the U.S. west coast. By the end of December, the danger of an attack on the Hawaii-Alaska-Panama triangle seemed to have waned, and the emphasis shifted to measures to stave off further disasters in the Far East.

For a time it seemed as though nothing could stop the Japanese juggernaut. In less than three weeks after Pearl Harbor, the isolated American outposts of Wake and Guam fell to the invaders, the British garrison of Hong Kong was overwhelmed, and powerful land, sea and air forces were converging on Malaya and the Netherlands Indies.

Singapore and its British force of over 80,000 troops surrendered on February 15, 1942. In a series of actions during January and February, the weak Dutch and Australian naval forces, joined by the U.S. Asiatic Fleet withdrawing from the Philippines, were destroyed piecemeal, only four American destroyers escaping south to Australia.

Before the end of April the Japanese had completed the occupation of Burma, driving the British westward into India and the bulk of U.S. Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell's Chinese forces back into China; General Stilwell and the remnants of other Chinese units retreated into India.

By May 1942 the Japanese had thus gained control of Burma, Malaya, Thailand, French Indochina, and the Malay Archipelago, while farther to the east they had won strong lodgments on the islands of New Guinea and New Britain and in the Solomons, flanking the approaches to Australia and New Zealand from the United States. This immense empire had been won at remarkably little cost through an effective combination of superior air and sea power and only a handful of well-trained ground divisions.

Fall of the Philippines

When the Japanese struck, the defending forces in the islands numbered more than 130,000, including the Philippine Army which, though mobilized to a strength of ten divisions, was ill trained and ill equipped. Of the U.S. Army contingent of 31,000, more than a third consisted of the Philippine Scouts.

The Far East Air Force, before the Japanese attack, had a total of 277 aircraft of all types, mostly obsolescent but including 35 new heavy bombers. Admiral Thomas C. Hart's Asiatic Fleet, based on the Philippines, consisted of 3 cruisers, 13 old destroyers, 6 gunboats, 6 motor torpedo boats, 32 patrol bombers, and 29 submarines. Before the end of December 1941, however, American air and naval power in the Philippines had virtually ceased to exist.

The main Japanese invasion of the Philippines, following preliminary landings, began on December 22, 1941. While numerically inferior to the defenders, the invading force of two divisions with supporting units was well trained and equipped and enjoyed complete mastery of the air and on the sea. On December 23 MacArthur ordered a general withdrawal into the mountainous Bataan Peninsula, across Manila Bay from the capital city. Manila itself was occupied by the Japanese without resistance.

American and Filipino losses were heavy, and the unavoidable abandonment of large stocks of supplies foredoomed the defenders of Bataan to ultimate defeat in the siege that followed. An ominous portent was the cutting of food rations by half on the last day of the retreat.

By January 7, 1942, General MacArthur's forces held well-prepared positions across the upper part of the Bataan Peninsula. In the first major enemy offensive, the "battling bastards of Bataan" at first gave ground but thereafter handled the Japanese so roughly that attacks ceased altogether from mid-February until April, while the enemy reorganized and heavily reinforced. The defenders were, however, too weak to seize the initiative themselves.

By April the troops on Bataan were subsisting on about fifteen ounces of food daily, less than a quarter of the peacetime ration. Weakened by hunger and poor diet, thousands succumbed to malaria, dengue, scurvy, beriberi, and amoebic dysentery, made impossible to control by the shortage of medical supplies.

The American lines crumpled, and in a few days the defending forces virtually disintegrated. On April 9, Maj. Gen. Edward P. King, Jr., commanding the forces on Bataan, surrendered.

Deploying American Military Strength

After more than a year and a half of rearming, the United States in December 1941 was still in no position to carry the war to its enemies. On December 7, the Army numbered some 1,644,000 men (including about 120,000 officers), organized into 4 armies, 37 divisions (30 infantry, 5 armored, 2 cavalry), and over 40 combat air groups.

By spreading equipment and ammunition thin, the War Department might have put a substantial force into the field to repel an attack on the continental United States; 17 of the divisions at home were rated as technically ready for combat.

But these divisions lacked the supporting units and the training necessary to weld them into corps and armies. More serious still, they were inadequately equipped with many weapons that recent operations in Europe had shown to be indispensable—for example, tank and antitank guns, antiaircraft artillery, radios, and radar—and some of these shortages were aggravated by lack of auxiliary equipment like fire control mechanisms.

Above all, ammunition of all kinds was so scarce that the War Department was unwilling to commit more than one division and a single antiaircraft regiment for service in any theater where combat operations seemed imminent. Only one division-size task force, in fact, was sent to the far Pacific before April 1942.

Against air attacks, too, the country's defenses were meager. Along the Pacific coast the Army had only 45 modern fighter planes ready to fly, and only twelve 3-inch antiaircraft guns to defend the whole Los Angeles area. On the east coast there were only 54 Army fighter planes ready for action, while the total number of modern fighter aircraft available was less than 1,000.

To deploy these forces overseas was another matter. Owing to the desperate shortage of escort vessels, troop movements had to be widely spaced. Through March 1942, as a result, the outflow of troops to overseas bases averaged only about 50,000 per month, as compared with upwards of 250,000 during 1944, when shipping was fully mobilized and plentiful and the sea lanes were secure.

There seemed a real danger early in 1942, however, that German U-boats might succeed in reducing transatlantic deployment to a trickle by sinking the slow cargo ships on which the forces overseas depended for support.

During the spring of 1942 tankers and freighters were torpedoed in plain view of vacationers on east coast beaches, and coastal cities dimmed or extinguished their lights in order that ships might not provide silhouetted targets for the U-boats.

The Navy lacked the means to cope with the peril. In late December 1941 it had only twenty assorted surface vessels and about a hundred aircraft to protect the whole North Atlantic coastal frontier. During the winter and spring these were supplemented by another hundred Army planes of longer range, several British trawlers, and as many improvised craft as could be pressed into service.

But the toll of ship sinking increased. In March 788,000 deadweight tons of Allied and neutral dry cargo shipping were lost, in June 936,000 tons. Tanker losses reached an all-time peak of 375,000 tons in March, leading to complete suspension of coastal tanker movements and to gasoline rationing in the sea-board states.

Slowly with many setbacks a system of countermeasures was developed. Convoying in coastal shipping, with ships sailing only by day, began in the spring of 1942. North-south traffic between U.S. and Caribbean and South American ports was also convoyed, on schedules interlocked with those of the transatlantic convoys.

In November shipping losses from all causes soared above 1.1 million deadweight tons—the peak, as it turned out, for the entire war, but few at the time dared so to predict.

Sources

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