They Were Expendable

By W. L. White

Laughter of Jap swimmers turned to moans: 10,000-ton tanker another night victim of prowling speed boats; 2,000 American Army Regulars, 1,200 Filipino Scouts and 2,700 native trainees shouldered Bulk of defense on land.

CHAPTER 11

"I'll never forget that night," said Ensign Cox, because I had a curious assignment in the afternoon. It seems our artillery on Bataan was being bothered by long-range Jap guns which were being installed on the other shore—the Batangas side. The artillery major had appealed to Bulkeley for help. So my assignment was to take the major aboard about five in the afternoon, and ride along the Batangas shore with him tempting the Japs. When they opened fire at us, the major would make careful note of their position.

"I hope the major got what he wanted. I know before it was over I had all I wanted of being a voluntary target for the Japanese, and my men were looking around for some targets of their own. Just then we were passing a beach, and there was a whole company of Jap infantry, no hats, stripped down to their waists, wearing white underdrawers. We thought at first they were natives, and then noticed every man had on glasses, which always gives them away. Instead of running, curiously got the better of them—they crowded down to the water, pointing at us, and then they began to laugh and jeer, showing their crooked monkey teeth. Our boys had had about enough of it, so they broke it up by spraying them with a battery of 50-calibers, and considerin' what we'd been through, it felt good seeing them spinning around, or kneeling and then slumping as the bullets hit. We learned later from spies that we'd killed eight and wounded fourteen.

"We always knew just what was going on on the mainland. There was, for instance, a bamboo American—some guy who'd married a Filipino wife and gone native—who managed a big pineapple plantation; he organized it into quite a system. He had a pass from the Japanese to bring vegetables into Manila. I think it was because he had a Swedish passport, although he'd lived in the States or the islands almost all his life and spoke without an accent. For three dollars he'd deliver a message from Corregidor to anyone in Manila. And for one hundred dollars he would bring anyone out of Manila and deliver him to Corregidor—if he didn't mind being buried under pineapples in his wagon for a while. We got our report on the casualties from him."

"When we went out that night," said Bulkeley, "we didn't dream we were to take our final cruise at the Japs off Bataan. I took two boats—Kelly in the 34, riding myself with Akers in the 35—to see if we couldn't bag one of the Jap destroyers which the Army could see in Subic Bay. They'd been driven far back, but from the highest ridge of the Bataan mountains they could still look down into Subic with their 20-power binoculars.

"But the Admiral had said we weren't to go into the bay. We must coax them outside. The Japs had the bay's rim lined with guns, and it would be suicide. We got outside of Subic about 11 o'clock. All according to plan. Kelly hid his 34 boat in a cove just outside the bay, while I went into the entrance and raised a little hell—fired my machine guns so they could see the tracers, hoping a Jap destroyer would follow me out, whereupon Kelly was to come out of the cove and lam a couple of torpedoes into their engine room. It didn't work. The Japs had had all they wanted of us. But just as I was about to leave, I saw from the entrance the outline of a big ship—tied to Olongapo dock."

"She was a big one," said Akers, "maybe 10,000 tons. A tanker, we learned the next day. So we turned back, sneaked toward her—there was no fire on us yet—and cut loose two torpedoes. By the time they exploded, we had cleared the mouth of the bay. But from the mountains of Bataan the Army watched her burn all night, and in the morning there she was, sunk at her dock."

"They were our last torpedoes fired in defense of Bataan," said Bulkeley. "Since Dec. 7 we had probably sunk a hundred times our own combined tonnage in enemy warships. While we'd lost two of our six boats, neither had been hit by the enemy—both had gone aground in the dark. For every man in our combined crews, we'd probably killed or drowned ten Japanese, and our casualties to date were only one man wounded. We were to lose more men later, and all our boats but the Japs were to pay at almost the same ratio.

"On the way back I realized that we had fired our last torpedoes, except those we would need to fill our tubes for the run to China. And we had just about enough gas to get us there, with hardly a barrel to spare. If we were ever to make the run, we must make it soon. And it was getting plain that we couldn't do much more for Bataan, which was on its last legs."

"I can tell you about the Army," said Cox. "I used to get bored at Sisiman Cove and take trips to the front—sometimes up into the outposts. There were a lot of men in uniform on Bataan, but the front-line fighting soldiers consisted, first, of about two thousand Americans, well seasoned and good fighters. Then, about twelve hundred Filipino Scouts—equally well trained and equally good. Lastly, they had in the fighting line about twenty-seven thousand Filipino trainees—young kids who had never worn a uniform until a few weeks before the war started. As soldiers, they would compare with American selectees who had had the same amount of training, which is to say they weren't worth a damn. They couldn't hit anything they shot at; if their guns jammed, they didn't know how to fix them; and the Japanese could scare them with firecrackers—and sometimes did.

"Their officers were equally untrained. Toward the end, it was grotesque. Tough, experienced Regular Army privates would be giving orders to Filipino generals.

"Those 2,000 Americans and the 1,200 Scouts were the only real fighting men on Bataan, and they were run ragged every time the Japs punched a hole in the line, these experienced troops would have to be thrown in to plug it—everywhere at once.

"Then there was the item of equipment—no spare parts. They had a few tanks left, with their treads falling off. A missing fan belt would put an entire tractor out of the war—for want of a tread, a tank would be junk by the roadside.

"I drove an ambulance in France in 1940, and in some ways it was the same story on Luzon. The same lack of equipment, planes, communications. The same disorganization — everybody falling back, or maybe fighting without hope just because it was a habit. Both in France and on Luzon you threw the book away—and did what you could with what you had.

"But there were differences. In France it was Scram, the Germans are coming, we can't hold 'em!—and they'd drop their arms and run.

"But on Bataan, even when they knew in their hearts it was hopeless, they'd say, 'Damn it, we're not backing up to Corregidor—we're going to hold them here!' They kept on fighting even down to the last ditch, when they were so tired they staggered—and I have watched them stagger—and when they surrendered, it was with their arms in their hands."

"That's more or less how it looked to us on March 11," said Kelly, "which is a day I'll never forget. It started off in a curious way—it seemed that General MacArthur wanted to take a ride on one of our boats with Bulkeley. We felt honored, but I couldn't just understand why the General would choose a time like this for a pleasure trip. Still, orders were orders, and even the air force got theirs—or rather what was left of it, which was exactly four decrepit P-40's patched together from the pieces of many others.

"This proud American air force guaranteed us air superiority over that area of the bay while the General was out on the water. The area was only four square miles, and the time only half an hour—about all the superiority this pathetic air force was able to guarantee. While the General was having his ride I was worried — suppose something had come up which might upset our dash to China? I could see the men didn't understand it either, and were starting to speculate and gossip.

"But the General explained everything when he returned from the ride. He officially presenting Bulkeley with the order decorating him with the DSC. We'd known about it for weeks, but this, it seemed, was the official presentation. He also congratulated the men on the fine work they had done, and handed each a package of cigarettes. It wasn't until that night that Bulkeley told me all this had been camouflage. For that morning the General had called him in and told him of the new plan. China was out for us, all right. Because Washington had made MacArthur Commander-in-Chief for all the Pacific and ordered him to leave. A submarine had been suggested, but MacArthur had said Bulkeley was the only commanding officer he knew in whom he had complete confidence—he was sailing with Buck. But he'd wanted to make a trial run first, and so added the little ceremony to allay the suspicions of the men. Because we were leaving Bataan in absolute secrecy and very soon.

"Of course to us this meant that the China trip—our last hope of seeing America and escaping death or a Japanese prison—was gone forever. Now the MTB's were like the rest here in the islands—the expendables who fight on without hope to the end. So far as we knew, we would now finish up the war in the southern islands, when the Japs got around to mopping up the last American resistance there.

"And yet I was curiously glad. Mostly, I think, it was because of Peggy. I wasn't guilty any more. Now we both had our duty to do here in the Philippines. Of course I would never see her again—her job was here in Corregidor, and mine would be down in the southern islands. But our end would be the same. We were both expendable now. I wasn't running out on her and I felt a lot better."

Next Chapter: General MacArthur sets date for flight.

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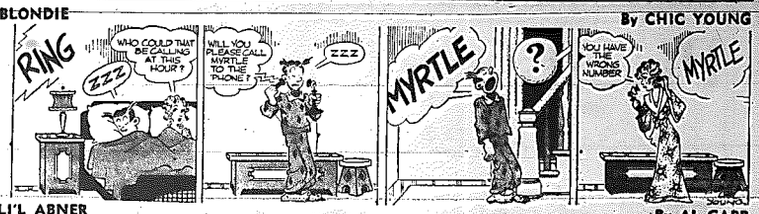

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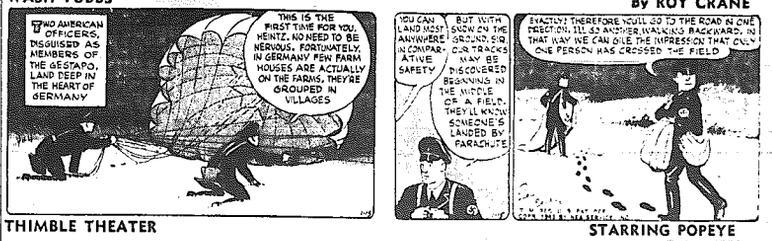

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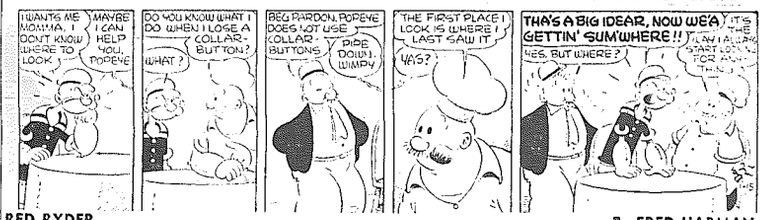

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