



2012-066

John Gordon, *Fighting for MacArthur: The Navy and Marine Corps' Desperate Defense of the Philippines*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. Pp. viii, 370. ISBN 978-1-61251-057-6.

Review by Steven Pedler, Wright State University–Lake Campus (steven.pedler@wright.edu).

The defeat of the garrison of the Philippine Islands in the opening months of the Pacific War was one of the greatest military disasters in American history, yet the Philippine campaign has received relatively little attention from historians. In *Fighting for MacArthur*, US Army Lt. Col. (ret) John Gordon examines one previously neglected aspect of the campaign—the contributions the US Navy and Marine Corps made to the defense of the islands.

Gordon's narrative begins with the lead-up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The opening chapters recount the frantic preparations by US Navy personnel in the Philippines as war with Japan appeared ever more certain. Gordon also provides a detailed account of the Navy's dispositions in the islands as of December 1941, including both the vessels of the Asiatic Fleet and the personnel of the 16th Naval District, which was responsible for maintaining the vital shore facilities of the Cavite Navy Yard. He offers high praise for the preparations made by senior Navy officers, particularly the Asiatic Fleet's Commander-in-Chief, Adm. Thomas Hart, "a stickler for detail and discipline, ... regarded in the Navy as highly competent and a realist" (4). Gordon argues that, despite overseeing a command whose vessels were largely obsolete and facing constant and severe shortages of vital materials, Hart and other naval officers did much more to ready their men for the coming storm than Gen. Douglas MacArthur did as commander of the far larger US Army Forces, Far East (USAFFE). While, for the most part, US Army and Navy personnel in the Philippines enjoyed a positive working relationship, MacArthur, in the months prior to the Japanese attack, exhibited "an increasingly insulting, condescending attitude" toward Hart (29). Correspondence from mid-December 1941 between MacArthur and the War Department in Washington suggests that the USAFFE commander was seeking to set the Navy up as a scapegoat if the Philippines could not be held (78-82).

Four chapters (3-6) address the decisive stage of the Philippine campaign, when the Japanese gained air superiority over Luzon and then made a successful amphibious landing at Lingayen Gulf, forcing the island's garrison to retreat to the Bataan Peninsula. Gordon briefly relates the still poorly understood circumstances that led to the destruction of the bulk of US airpower in the Philippines in the opening days of the war, with such dire consequences for the Navy garrison. The devastation of the Cavite Navy Yard in a bombing raid on 10 December greatly hampered efforts to defend the islands. Drawing on Navy administrative records, Gordon concludes that, while personnel losses during the attack were considerably lighter than initially reported, the destruction of the Yard's machine shops and large stocks of ammunition, particularly torpedoes, were losses the Asiatic Fleet could ill afford.

After neutralizing US airpower and crippling the Navy's shore facilities, the Japanese launched a major amphibious landing of their 14th Army at Luzon's Lingayen Gulf on 22-23 December. The American response was both sporadic and ineffectual and, Gordon writes, constituted the Navy's greatest failure during the Philippine campaign. At the war's outbreak, the Asiatic Fleet possessed the largest concentration of modern submarines of any US Navy command. But faulty intelligence, questionable deployments, and chronically defective torpedoes reduced a would-be powerful striking force to little more than a nuisance:

The fact remains that the Asiatic Fleet submarine force failed to seriously threaten the largest Japanese convoy of the entire Pacific War. Given the poor quality of the torpedoes, it is possible that even if more boats had succeeded in intercepting the Japanese before they entered Lingayen Gulf the overall results would have been no better. Even so, the Army, which was now fighting a desperate battle against the rapidly advancing 14th Army, was upset that the submarines had failed to seriously interfere with the enemy landing. Clearly, the Army had a right to feel that way. It was the worst performance of the U.S. Navy submarines in the Pacific War. (87)

The Japanese 14th Army's successful occupation of Lingayen Gulf sealed the fate of the defenders of the Philippines.

The heart of Gordon's narrative deals with the contributions of Navy and Marine Corps personnel to the defense of the Bataan Peninsula and Corregidor Island between December 1941 and the garrison's surrender in May 1942—it is the volume's most original contribution to World War II scholarship. While the first part of the book focuses on the Asiatic Fleet commanders and the evolving strategic situation in and around the Philippines, the second half places junior officers, enlisted men, and NCOs at center stage. During the early phases of the siege of Bataan, the 14th Army tried to outflank the defending troops by amphibious landings behind American lines. Since all available US and Philippine Army troops were needed to hold the front lines, the initial responsibility for containing these landings fell to an ad hoc battalion of sailors, who had very little training or experience in land combat operations. This proved costly, for “despite all their guts and enthusiasm the Naval Battalion did not have the expertise to drive the Japanese back into the sea” (158). Nonetheless, the heroic resistance of the Battalion during the crucial period 23 January–1 February 1942 restricted the Japanese landings, pinning down the invaders until a battalion of the Army's Philippine Scouts could be shifted from the front lines to finish them off.

Gordon concludes with a discussion of the activities of Navy and Marine personnel after the fall of the Bataan Peninsula, as the Japanese sought to reduce the defenses of Corregidor Island, the garrison's redoubt in Manila Bay. He pays considerable attention to the vessels of the “Inshore Patrol”—an assortment of minesweepers, gunboats, PT boats, and converted yachts that supported the garrison after the withdrawal of the Asiatic Fleet's primary surface combatants. These tiny ships played an outsized role in the campaign, providing gunfire support to troops ashore, interdicting Japanese efforts to move troops by sea, and evacuating personnel from Bataan as US resistance on the peninsula collapsed. All this in spite of the constant threat posed by Japanese aircraft, ships, and artillery, as well as increasingly serious shortages of fuel and ammunition. Naval personnel played a major role in the defense of Corregidor right up to the garrison's surrender.

When the Japanese mounted their final amphibious assault upon Corregidor on the night of 5–6 May 1942, the 4th Marine Regiment, comprising both Navy and Marine Corps personnel, served as the backbone of the defenders' resistance. But the Regiment suffered from a severe lack of heavy weapons, which Gordon attributes to miscalculations by the commanders on Corregidor and the Army's refusal to withdraw tanks from Bataan to reinforce the island's defenders (313–14). Once the Japanese succeeded in landing tanks of their own, Corregidor's badly outgunned defenders were forced to surrender.

*Fighting for MacArthur* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on the Pacific War. Gordon makes extensive use of the US Army, Navy, and Marine Corps archives and interviews with veterans of the Philippine campaign. This is a well-written, engaging treatment of the steadily deteriorating position of the defenders in the Philippines. Many helpful maps detail the areas where key battles of the campaign unfolded, clarifying the progress of specific operations.

Some may feel Gordon's criticisms of MacArthur are overdrawn. The USAFFE commander and his staff officers certainly made serious errors in defending the Philippines; and, too, MacArthur's tactless dealings with the Navy caused needless interservice friction throughout the Pacific War. But, as serious these mistakes were, they had little impact on the outcome of the Philippine campaign. The strategic situation facing the American garrison in winter 1941 was so unfavorable that the course of events would not have changed substantially even if MacArthur had cultivated a stronger relationship with the Navy. Gordon himself observes in his conclusion that the only questions facing the garrison “were how long were they going to be able to hold out, how much it was going to cost the Japanese ... and how many men would be lost in the process...” (312).

This is a relatively minor quibble, however, about a very solid scholarly work that offers a fresh look at one of the more neglected campaigns of the Second World War. Especially valuable are the accounts of the activities of the vessels of the Inshore Patrol and of the role of Navy personnel in the fighting for Bataan and Corregidor, despite their lack of training for such actions.