

Military history of the Philippines during World War II

In September of [1940](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), and [Japan](#) had allied under the [Tripartite Pact](#). In July of 1940, the [US](#) banned the shipment of aviation gasoline, to Japan, and by [1941](#), shipments of [scrap iron](#), [steel](#), [gasoline](#), and other materials had practically ceased. Meanwhile, American economic support to [China](#) began to increase.

In April of 1941, Japan and the [USSR](#) signed a neutrality pact and Japan increased pressure on the [French](#) and [Dutch colonies](#), in [Southeast Asia](#), to cooperate in [economic matters](#). On [July 22, 1941](#), Japanese forces occupied the [naval](#) and [air](#) bases of southern [Indochina](#). The Philippines were almost completely surrounded.

US Army [Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall](#) states, "Adequate reinforcements for the Philippines, at this time, would have left the [United States](#) in a position of great peril, should there be a break in the defense of [Great Britain](#)."

The Far Eastern Command

On [July 25](#), US Secretary of War [Henry L. Stimson](#) requested that US President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) issue orders calling the military forces of the Commonwealth into active service for the United States. Stimson explains, "All practical steps should be taken to increase the defensive strength of the Philippine Islands."

The following day, President Roosevelt froze all Japanese assets within the United States and issued the orders to absorb the forces of the Philippine Army. That same day, the [War Department](#) created the [US Army Forces in the Far East \(USAFPE\)](#) command, with jurisdiction over the [Philippine Department](#) and the military forces of the Commonwealth. At the same time, MacArthur was recalled to active duty and designated as the commander of USAFFE.

Naval Forces

At the outbreak of war, the [United States Navy's Asiatic Fleet](#) was stationed at [Cavite Naval Base](#), in [Manila Bay](#). Also stationed here was the [Offshore Patrol](#).

Mobilization and Reinforcement

In July of [1941](#), MacArthur was informed that it was now the policy of the United States to defend the Philippines, whereas, the goal had formerly been to merely train the Philippine Army. According to Secretary of War Stimson, the success of the [B-17 heavy bomber](#), in the [European Theatre of Operations](#), had convinced the War Department that a striking force of such bombers could be used, against the Japanese, from bases within the Philippines.

MacArthur ordered mobilization of the Philippine Army, beginning on [September 1](#). Elements of 10 Filipino reserve divisions were to be called into the service of the United States Army by [December 15](#). It was also necessary to quickly construct housing for 50,000. To each of these divisions were assigned 40 US Army officers and 20 American or Philippine Scout noncommissioned officers, who served as instructors.

The reinforcement of US troops was expected to be completed by April of 1942 and the reinforcement of Filipino troops was expected to be completed by July. Mobilization and assimilation of Filipino forces into the US Army was incomplete (and none of the antitank battalions were ever organized), by the time of the Japanese invasion, in December. However, a force of 100,000+ Filipinos was raised.

On [August 14](#), Brigadier General [Leonard T. Gerow](#) argued that the Philippine Department could not resist a Japanese attack. He thus recommended that the Philippines be reinforced with [antiaircraft artillery](#), modern aircraft, and [tanks](#). On [August 16](#), MacArthur was informed that, by [September 5](#), he could expect the [200th Coast Artillery Regiment \(AA\)](#), the [194th Tank Battalion](#) (less Company B), and a company of the [17th Ordnance Battalion](#).

On [September 5](#), Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall asked MacArthur if he wanted a [National Guard](#) Division, probably the [41st](#), MacArthur replied that he did not need any additional divisions. MacArthur states, "Equipment and supplies are essential. If these steps are taken, I am confident that no further major reinforcements will be necessary." MacArthur was promised more aircraft, guns, and equipment. Marshall explains, "I have directed that the forces in the Philippines be placed in highest priority for equipment." MacArthur responds, "With such backing, the development of a completely adequate defense force will be rapid."

During September and October, in addition to the above-mentioned reinforcements, MacArthur received the [192nd Tank Battalion](#) and 75 self-propelled 75mm gun mounts.

MacArthur strove to reorganize the [Philippine Division](#), from a [square formation](#), into a [triangular formation](#). This plan involved shipping an American [infantry](#) regiment, and 2 [artillery](#) battalions, to the Philippines. This would free [Philippine Scouts](#) for other positions (such as [Harbor Defenses](#) or complementing forces at [Forts McKinley](#) and [Stotsenburg](#)) and allow USAFFE control of 2 American combat teams. These plans also involved the formation of 4 tactical commands, each of corps level, along with various additional support units.

By November, the War Department had approved additional reinforcements of 1,312 officers, 25 nurses, and 18,047 enlisted soldiers. Ironically, the [34th Infantry Regiment](#) was scheduled to shipout on [December 8, 1941](#).

By December 5, there were 55 ships carrying 100,000 [ship-tons](#) of cargo to the Philippines. General Marshall informed Lt. General MacArthur, "You will soon receive

all your supporting light artillery (130 [75mm guns](#)). You will also receive 72 [155mm howitzers](#)."

When the Japanese [attack on Pearl Harbor](#) took place, there were 52 [dive bombers](#) of the [27th Bombardment Group \(L\)](#), 18 [P-40s](#), 340 vehicles, 48 [75mm guns](#), 3,500,000 rounds of .30 and .50 caliber [ammunition](#), 600 tons of bombs, 9,000 drums of [aviation fuel](#), 2 light [field artillery battalions](#), the ground echelon of the [7th Bombardment Group \(H\)](#), and various other supplies; all enroute.

(See also: [National Defense Act of 1935](#))

Material and Training Deficiencies

The Philippine Army received clothing that was of poor quality. Their rubber shoes would wear out within 2 weeks. There were shortages of nearly every kind of equipment. There were shortages of blankets, [mosquito bars](#), shelter halves, [entrenching tools](#), [gas masks](#), and [helmets](#).

During August, MacArthur had requested 84,500 [Garand](#) rifles, 330 [.30-caliber machine guns](#), 326 [.50-caliber machine-guns](#), 450 [37mm guns](#), 217 [81mm mortars](#), 288 [75mm guns](#), and over 8,000 vehicles. On [September 18](#), he was informed that, because of [lend-lease](#) commitments, he would not receive most of these items. As a result, the Philippine Army was forced to continue using [Lee-Enfield](#) and [Springfield Rifles](#).

The shipment of supplies depended upon the US Navy limited cargo capacity. In September, the Navy announced its intentions to convert three transports into [escort carriers](#), but, this was not done, after MacArthur observed that the loss of three transports would delay his reinforcements by more than two months.

Then, the army approved requests for [105mm howitzers](#), [75mm pack howitzers](#), 75mm guns, .30-caliber machine guns, 37mm guns, 10 250-ft station hospitals, 180 sets of regimental infirmary equipment, jeeps, ambulances, trucks, and sedans. By November, there were 1,100,000 tons of equipment, intended for the Philippines, piled up in US ports. Most of this never reached its destination. Meanwhile, the Navy did manage to transport 1,000,000 [gallons](#) of [gasoline](#) to the island. Much of this fuel would be stored on the [Bataan Peninsula](#).

In [1941](#), many Filipino units went into battle without ever having fired their weapons. Many of the troops had never even seen an artillery piece be fired. The [31st Infantry Division \(PA\)](#) signal officer was unable to establish radio communication with units in the same camp. Commander of the Philippine 31st Infantry Division, Colonel Bluemel states, "The enlisted men are proficient in only two things, one, when an officer appears, to yell attention in a loud voice, jump up, and [salute](#); two, to demand 3 meals per day."

Training and coordination were further complicated by language barriers. Enlisted Filipinos often spoke one language (such as [Bikol](#) or a [Visayan](#) language), their officers

would speak another (such as [Tagalog](#)), and the Americans would speak [English](#). There were some [first sergeants](#) and company clerks who could neither read nor write.

The Japanese Decide to Attack

The [economic sanctions](#) imposed by the United States, the [United Kingdom](#), and the Netherlands were weakening the [Japanese economy](#). The leaders of Japan were faced with a choice: End the war in China and southeast [Asia](#), so as to end the sanctions, or obtain additional resources by some other means.

The Japanese government decided to seize resources under the control of Britain and the Netherlands. As the United States was their ally, it was decided to attack the American territory of the Philippines as well. Japanese military planners argued that the British (and the USSR should they decide to declare war) would be unable to effectively respond to a Japanese attack, given the threat posed by the [Third Reich](#).

(See [Battle of the Philippines \(1941-42\)](#) for details of successive events.)

See also

- [Military History of Japan during World War II](#)
- [Military History of the United States](#)