

The Struggle in Bamban: A Perspective on WWII History in a Locality

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ABSTRACT

The small town of Bamban is located about a hundred kilometers north of Manila. Its terrain constitutes mostly of a series of hills and ridges emanating from the Zambales mountain range and overlooking the flatlands of southern Tarlac and the grounds of the former Clark Airbase (now the Diosdado Macapagal International Airport). This particular location of the town had a strategic role in our nation's history during the Philippine-American War as a seat of power of General Emilio Aguinaldo on 6 June 1899 and as a defense position in the fight

against the American forces advancing to the north in November 1899. Bamban once again played a significant role in another national struggle in 1941, this time against the Japanese invaders. This paper aims to present the role of Bamban as an important airfield coveted by the Japanese and American forces and a stronghold of Filipino guerrillas during World War II.

KEYWORDS

Bamban in WWII, Japanese occupation, Bamban Battalion, Aeta Squadron, Bamban Airfield, Battle of Bamban Hills, Japanese Kembu Group

DEFENSE OF D-5 LINE AT BAMBAN BRIDGE

Bamban lies a few kilometers north of Clark Field and Fort Stotsenburg in Pampanga. Before the War, the hills of Bamban and its dry river bed used to be part of military drills and bivouacs of the 26th Cavalry of the Philippine Scouts stationed at Fort Stotsenburg, and later by the 31st Infantry, 192nd and the 194th Tank Battalion. Pan Paruman, an Aeta, mentioned in an interview that he experienced going with Filipino and American Philippine Scout units to the mountain trails where they conducted military exercises with their horses. Paruman later served with the guerrillas during the War.¹

After the bombing of Clark Field on 8 December 1941 by Japanese forces, Major Gen. Jonathan Wainwright,

commander of the North Luzon Force, moved his headquarters from Fort Stotsenburg to Bamban, at the former Bamban Sugar Central on 13 December 1941.² From Bamban, General Wainwright transferred the North Luzon Force field headquarters in Alcala, Pangasinan on 18 December 1941 in order to conduct operations in the front.³

However, on 23 December 1941, Gen. Douglas MacArthur put into effect War Plan Orange No. 3 which ordered the troops to withdraw into Bataan Peninsula, which caused General Wainwright to return to Bamban headquarters the next day.⁴ He outlined five positions from the town of Aguilar in Pangasinan to Bamban, Tarlac where soldiers could stop the advancement of Japanese forces. The last of the defense lines, USAFFE D-5 Line (Bamban Line) anchored on Bamban Hills stretching to Mt. Arayat and Sibul Springs in northern Bulacan province, was organized for extended defense to allow the South Luzon Force to pass into Bataan Peninsula, thus completing the retrograde movement of the North Luzon Force.⁵

On the afternoon of 30 December 1941, Japanese forces entered Tarlac, Tarlac a distance to the Bamban Line. By early morning of the following day, the 21st Division was already in Bamban Line ready to engage the incoming Japanese forces. Seventeen soldiers from the 21st Division infantry, artillery, and medical units who were from Bamban would taste the battle in their hometown.

The battle for the defense of D-5 Line in Bamban started in the evening of 31 December 1941 when

the Japanese advance troopers, mounted on bicycles, approached Bamban Bridge. The Filipino combat patrols from Company C, 23rd Infantry Regiment 21st Division of the Philippine Army on the north approach of the bridge wiped out the incoming enemy troops. A heavy battle followed with the arrival of a bigger Japanese reconnaissance troops at around 1:30 a.m. of 1 January 1942. The defensive positions on the north and south of the riverbanks as well as the machine gun detail at the bridge led by 3rd Lt. Gregorio L. de Gracia put up a punishing fire on the enemy troops as they tried to cross the bridge. Lt. de Gracia was killed in the battle. He became the first casualty officer of the 21st Division in the early days of the war.⁶

The battle continued with the arrival in the northern sector of the town by the Japanese Kanno Detachment and 9th Infantry with field artillery contingents at 9:00 a.m. The officers and men of the 21st Division defended the river line against the onslaught of the enemy. On the east of the D-5 Line, the 11th Division of the Philippine Army held the line along the boundary of Bamban and the Magalang-Concepcion road.

In the heavy exchanges of artillery from both sides, the 21st Division's 37 mm anti-tank guns destroyed the Japanese tanks at the south bank of Bamban River.⁷ The Filipino defenders of D-5 Line from the 21st and 11th Division held their positions until they stopped the advancing troops of the enemy and enabled the bulk of the South Luzon Force to move to San Fernando, Pampanga and to Bataan. The North Luzon Force, on the other hand, was able to withdraw to Porac-Guagua Line.⁸

The D-5 Line defense was one of the successful military operations of General Wainwright's North Luzon Force as it enabled the movement of the USAFFE forces into Bataan Peninsula.

THE 101ST SQUADRON AND THE NEGRITO MOUNTAIN PATROL

The Japanese military occupied Bamban when the North Luzon Force retreated to Porac-Guagua Line and then into Bataan. The Bambanenses or locals of Bamban, who were loyal to the Commonwealth Government, showed no sympathy to the invaders. To sow terror and fear to the locals, Sergeant Miyogi Tamura and his local Kempeitai publicly executed four male Filipino civilians from San Jose, Nueva Ecija at the back of the local municipal building.⁹ But some patriotic individuals chose to fight the new masters. Corporal Fortunato V. Anunciacion of the 12th Medical Company of the Philippine Scouts, who survived the Death March, organized Bambanenses in the resistance against the Japanese forces.¹⁰

Anunciacion later met with American officers who decided not to surrender after the fall of Bataan and sojourned in Bamban Hills. One of them was 2nd Lt. James H. Hart of Company D, 194th Tank Battalion. He escaped behind Japanese lines in Moncada and reached the mountain enclaves of Sitio Kalangitan near Bamban on 7 January 1942. He later settled in the hills of Sitio Tapuak, Bamban where the local guerrilla unit was born.¹¹ Another American officer who did not surrender and established his guerrilla force in Pampanga was Lt. Col. Claude A. Thorpe.

Lt. Hart became Lt. Col. Claude A. Thorpe's official representative of the USAFFE Luzon Guerrilla Force with Cpl. Fortunato Anunciacion as local organizer and commander. The unit was designated as "101st Squadron Bamban Tarlac Southwest Sector, USAFFE Luzon Guerrilla Forces."¹² Lt. Col. Thorpe, who had recently escaped from Japanese troops that attacked his Timbo headquarters in the mountains of Porac, inducted the officers and members of the 101st Squadron on 23 September 1942 in Bamban Hills.¹³

Years before the outbreak of WWII, several Aeta tribal chiefs living in the mountain enclaves around Clark Field-Fort Stotsenburg developed friendly relations with the American military personnel. They were Chief Lucas and Tomas, King of the Negritos of Mt. Pinatubo. The friendly relations explain the participation of the aetas to take part in the resistance movement.

In September 1942, Pedro Margarito, a full-blooded Aeta and former carpenter at Fort Stotsenburg, with an assembly of assembly of Aeta warriors armed with bows-and-arrows and spears met with Lt. Col. Thorpe in Pindangan Damulag, Bamban Hills. Organized as the Negrito Mountain Patrol, the group was formally inducted in the service of the USAFFE Luzon Guerrilla Forces by Lt. Col. Thorpe.¹⁴

In August 1943, the Aeta warriors were further organized and consolidated under Capt. Alfred D. Bruce, Capt. Wilbur Lage, and Private Rudy Bolstead. In August

1944, the group was named “Squadron 30” by Capt. Bruce.¹⁵

Along with the 101st Squadron, the newly formed Aeta Squadron carried on guerrilla operations that included intelligence-gathering, mountain patrol, ambushes, and providing protection for American officers in between the Japanese important military facilities of Clark Field-Fort Stotsenburg and Camp O’Donnell in Capas, Tarlac. Meanwhile, the Japanese Kempeitai regional headquarters were located at the former Bamban Sugar Central. The growing USAFFE guerrilla units in Pampanga and Tarlac became a menace to the Japanese military in these provinces.

THE JAPANESE REPRISAL

The Japanese military became more determined to suppress the menacing guerrilla activities. On 28 October 1942, Lt. Col. Thorpe was captured at his headquarters in Mt. Pugadbabi, Patling, Capas, Tarlac. On 3 September 1943, Lt. Hart was killed in an early morning raid of his Tapuak outpost.¹⁶

In 1943, the Japanese military doubled its “zoning” with the aid of Filipino spies and some Constabulary men. It resulted in the apprehension, punishment, and torture of hundreds of civilians and suspected guerrillas. They killed 20 men at the garrison near the Bamban Sugar Central and another four at the municipal building area.¹⁷ A total of 16 USAFFE guerrillas from Bamban were tortured and killed. Seven individuals from O’Donnell, Capas suffered the same fate.¹⁸ Aside from Lt. Hart who was killed at a raid

in his outpost, two other American officers were killed by the Japanese: Staff Sgt. Eugene Zingheim of the 194th Tank Battalion, and Ensign Robert Lee Clary, an ace aviator of the Fighting Squadron 28, *USS Monterey*.¹⁹

The punitive operations against the guerrillas were carried out by Lt. Yamaguchi, Sgt. Miyogi Tamura, Sgt. Oto, Capt. Honda, and Lt. Fugi.²⁰ The resistance, however, never waned. Instead it gained momentum when Capt. Bruce took over the command of all USAFFE guerrilla units in the South Tarlac area on 14 November 1944.

THE AIR WAR OVER BAMBAN AND KAMIKAZE SORTIES

On 21 September 1944, American planes carried its first air operations against Japanese facilities and military targets in Clark Airbase including the Bamban Airfield. This development inspired the combat operations of the guerrilla units in Bamban and South Tarlac areas, including rescue missions for American pilots shot down over the airfields.²¹

The Japanese used Bamban Airfield as an important staging airbase for the *Sho Ichi Go* (Sho Victory No. 1) Philippine Operations.²² The Japanese First and Second Air Fleet including Air Groups 206, 653, 201 (311 Squadron), 141, 762 and 701 had A6M Zero fighter-bombers, Kawanishi N1K-J “Shiden,” Nakajima’s C6N “Saiun” (Myrt), Nakajima J1N1 Gekko (Irving) and Aichi D3A (Val) carrier-borne bombers, were some types of aircraft used during the War.²³ The units were mobilized

from September to October 1944 at the Bamban Airfield for Leyte operations particularly for air intercept missions. Part of the dry riverbed of the Bamban near the edge of Mabalacat West Airfield became the secret base of the Japanese Navy where A6M Zero fighters were hidden from American fighter sweeps.

The Japanese Fourth Air Fleet also mobilized its units in Bamban. The air fleet included the 20th Independent Squadron (July 1944), 31st Independent Squadron (September 1944), and the 20th Air Regiment (22 October 1944). The 72nd and 73rd Air Regiments (3-4 December 1944) had the following: Nakajima Ki-49 “Donryu” (Storm Dragon), Mitsubishi Ki-21 II (Sally) heavy bomber, Nakajima Ki-43 IIb “Hayabusa” (Oscar) fighter, and Nakajima Ki-84 “Hayate” (Frank).²⁴

American carrier fighters, bombers, and torpedo-bombers from the U.S. warships: *Wasp*, *Hornet*, *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *Monterey*, and *Lexington* operated relentlessly against the Japanese air force in Bamban from October to 14 December 1944.²⁵ Japanese A6M Zero fighters from Air Groups 203, 653 and 221 (Fighter Hikotai 407) assigned at the Bamban Airfield conducted air intercept missions against American air attacks especially on October 29 and November 5–6. These air intercepts were recorded as major air battles in the Philippines during WWII.²⁶

Among the Japanese ace pilots that conducted air intercept missions were from the 653 and 203 Kokutai, Warrant Officer Ki-ichi Nagano and Lieutenant Junior Grade Hiri-yoshi Nishizawa (Air Group 203). Nagano died

over the Bamban area on 6 November 1944 in a dogfight. Nishizawa was Japan's top naval ace pilot. He escorted the first successful special attack mission in 25 October 1944.²⁷

On 19 November 1944, the Japanese First and Second Air Fleets moved its headquarters from Nichols Airfield to Asahiyama Hill west of Bamban. This was to command and carry out the tactical and special attack operations of the Japanese naval air forces in the Philippines. Pilots assigned at the air groups of the First and Second Air Fleets at Bamban Airfield were selected for special (*kamikaze*) missions. The two air fleets became the combined land-based air force on 26 October 1944 with Vice-Admiral Shigeru Fukutome as the fleet commander and Vice-Admiral Ohnishi Takijiro as chief-of-staff. The new headquarters were located inside a tunnel of the Asahiyama Mountain known as the Bamban Naval Headquarters.²⁸

The Japanese 4th Air Army launched a suicide attack (*kamikaze*) operation designated as "Seika-Tai" by the 73rd Air Regiment led by its commanding officer Major Teruo Misumi. It took off from the Bamban Airfield on 8 January 1945 to battle against American surface vessels in Lingayen Gulf. On 13 January 1945, the 72nd Hiko Sentai of the "Seika-Tai" special attack under Maj. Eisuke Tsuzaki conducted the last suicide attack sortie from Clark Airfield.²⁹

In January 1945, the Japanese combined air fleets left Bamban Naval Headquarters because of the failure of the Sho Go Operation and the loss of airplanes. Vice-Admiral Fukutome of the Second Air Fleet and his staff

moved out of the Bamban Naval Headquarters on January 6 while Vice-Admiral Ohnishi of the First Air Fleet left on January 10 for Taiwan to carry out future air operations including special attacks. Many of the officers and men of the air groups previously assigned to the Clark-Bamban areas including ground crews were formed into auxiliary infantry and later assigned to the naval combat sectors in Bamban Hills.

GUERRILLA RESCUE OF AMERICAN PILOTS

At the height of the air war over the Bamban area, guerrilla units played significant role of rescuing American pilots whose planes were shot down by the Japanese forces. On 5 November 1944, Capt. Melencio Wage of the Bamban Battalion rescued Ensign Russel O. Burnham and ARM2c Herbert A. Diner from Torpedo Squadron 14 from the *USS Wasp* and took them to Capt. Bruce's headquarters in Malasa in Bamban Hills.³⁰ The Squadron 30 Negrito Special Troops under Lt. Pedro Margarito rescued Lt. Francis Joseph Grassbaugh of the VT-11 Squadron from *USS Hornet*. Lt. Grassbaugh was shot down in an air intercept battle over Bamban Airfield on 5 November 1944. On 6 January 1945, Lt. Margarito's group also rescued Ensign Allen J. Stover of the VF-81 Squadron from *USS Wasp*.³¹

In another air strike at Bamban Airfield, Lt. Alexander Vracui and Lt. David Baker of The Fighting Squadron 20 (VF-20) of the *USS Lexington* were shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft fire in the morning of 14 December 1944. Lt. Vracui was rescued alive by the Capas Battalion of Bruce

Guerrillas. Lt. David was found dead in a crash site near the airfield and was buried by the local guerrillas.³²

THE JAPANESE KEMBU GROUP'S EXTENSIVE TUNNEL SYSTEM

With the losing air Japanese airfleet and abandonment of Vice-Admirals Fukutome and Ohnishi in early January 1945, General Tomoyuki Yamashita's 14th Area Army consolidated the remaining Japanese Army and Navy units into a single command to face the advancing allied troops toward Clark Field. The highest officer left in command was Rear-Admiral Ushie Sugimoto of the plane-less 26th Air Flotilla of the First Air Fleet. He occupied the underground headquarters overlooking Bamban proper at Rock Mountain (present Rotary Ridge) adjacent to Asahiyaama.³³ Vice-Admiral Kazumae Kondo of the Naval Air Arsenal, although more senior to Rear-Admiral Sugimoto moved to Bamban Hills in the naval combat sector overlooking Clark Field.

On 10 January 1945, the combined Army and Navy units at Clark-Bamban called Kembu Group was formed under the command of Maj. Gen. Rikichi Tsukada of the First Raiding Group.³⁴ Upon arrival from Japan on January 10, he ordered the completion of defensive positions in the mountains including tunnel systems, fortifications, trenches, and the final formation of the provisional Army and Naval combat units. On 17 January 1945, he gave the order for the occupation of the designated defensive lines in the Bamban-Clark area.³⁵

The Kembu Group was composed of the Army's four detachments—Takayama, Takaya, Eguchi, and Yanagimoto Shitai—and the Navy's five combat sectors and auxiliary units. Army and the Navy had a combined strength of 30,000 men. Other Japanese sources indicated a force of 42,000 men.³⁶ The First Line of the Kembu Group was located on the northern anchor of Bamban Hills and west of the town facing the highway with the Takayama detachment occupying the defensive position. The Takaya detachment composed mainly of airborne paratroopers was located in the Main Line in the area of Monikayo-Lagare Mountain.

The Group's Naval combat sectors were in the areas of Mataba, San Martin, Burog, Calapi, Haduan, and General Mountain. These areas are now part of the Aeta ancestral lands.³⁷ Automatic weapons were salvaged from wrecked airplanes to augment its limited artillery. The Kembu Line was intended to hinder the American advancement to Manila and the use of Clark Field, and to sustain a delaying war. It was a shift from the initial plan to face the forces of General MacArthur from Lingayen.

The Kembu Line was an extended front that stretched about 11 kilometers with a depth of more than 15 kilometers of mountainous terrain of Bamban. General Tsukada decided that the Kembu Group would not engage the American forces at the expanse of the airfield areas but on the defensive positions and protective installations in Bamban Hills.³⁸

The Kembu Line in the Bamban-Stotsenburg Hills with its fortifications and installations of tunnels, trenches, gun emplacements, and pillboxes was described as “one of the most elaborate and extensive systems of cave and tunnel defenses encountered in the Southwest Pacific” by the *U.S. Army Military Bulletin*.³⁹ The tunnels were used as depot, shelter, machine gun and artillery positions, field hospitals, communication, and headquarters. Bulk stores and aircraft parts from Stotsenburg-Clark were moved to these tunnels in Bamban in the mid-1944. Anti-aircraft guns, and numerous aircraft cannons were stripped from Clark Air Center and brought to these tunnel positions.⁴⁰

The builders of these tunnels were personnel from the Japanese *Setsueitai* (Army) and *Settetai* (Navy) construction and labor units assigned to the Clark-Bamban area were Chinese, Koreans, and Taiwanese with some Filipino forced laborers and prisoners. Later, during the Kembu mobilization, Japanese soldiers and some Filipino “Makapili” or “Yoin” (Filipino soldiers in the Japanese Army) who worked in the labor and construction units dug the tunnels.⁴¹

The Capas Battalion reported the major tunnels built at the former Bamban Sugar Central ridge as early as January-March 1944. Construction continued in late November through January 1945 during the Kembu Group mobilization period. These tunnels made the battles in Bamban Hills difficult in the liberation of Luzon.⁴²

THE LIBERATION OF BAMBAN TOWN

In January 1945, General MacArthur directed the conduct of air strikes on Japanese targets in the Bamban-Clark area. The mission was to destroy enemy military facilities, troop concentrations, and supply depots located in Bamban.

Thus, on 18 January 1945 at 11:00 a.m., air strikes were carried out by 25 Consolidated B-24J “Liberators” of the 494th Bombardment Group (Heavy) - 7th Air Force with the specific mission to destroy Bamban, thus leveling the town.⁴³ Further aerial bombings followed. On January 20, by the B-24Js Heavy Bombers of the 22nd Bombardment group (H) - 5th Air Force. Another was on January 21 by the 494th Heavy Bombardment Group. The targets were the Japanese troops concentrated in nearby Bamban Hills and Bamban Airfield as a prelude to the U.S. ground operations in Tarlac.⁴⁴

On 21 January 1945, the town of Tarlac was liberated. The town of Capas followed the next day. On January 23, the main body of the American 40th Division U.S. Army with the 3rd Battalion, 160th Infantry entered the burning ruins of Bamban town with the Bamban Battalion. The troops fought the Takayama detachment the whole day and cleared the Bamban Airfield, the town center, and the Bamban Sugar Central area. The 37th Division of the U.S. Army was positioned east of Bamban and cleared any vestige of Japanese forces especially along the eastern edge of the airfield and the banks of the Paruao River.

But the liberation of Bamban was not without a fight. The Japanese infantry and its snipers holed up in the burning ruins of the town and around the premises of the Catholic church met the advancing troops.⁴⁵ Japanese 150 mm artillery fired from the direction of Clark Field greeted the 160th Infantry at Bamban but before sundown, the Takayama troops retreated to the mountain positions of the Kembu Group tunnel defense system in the mountains.

BATTLE OF BAMBAN HILLS AND THE DESTRUCTION OF KEMBU GROUP

The control of Clark Field depended on the final containment of the Japanese Kembu tunnel defensive positions where Takayama retreated from Bamban town.

On 24 January 1945, MacArthur proceeded with the M-1 Operation IX Corps of his 160th and 108th Infantry, 40th Division with troops, artillery, tanks, destroyers with aerial support to destroy the Kembu Group's First Line defended by the Takayama Shitai. The 37th Division advanced at Clark-Stotsenburg area in the southern Kembu Line, forcing the combined Yanagimoto-Eguchi Shitai to retreat further west.

On January 26, MacArthur celebrated his 65th birthday with the troops at the Bamban front.⁴⁶ On January 29, the Kembu Group Headquarters retreated from the "Top of the World" (the Hilton Clark Hotel) at Fort Stotsenburg to Takamoriyama (called Honmaru by the Imperial Japanese Navy) in Bamban Hills.⁴⁷

Eventually, Fort Stotsenburg was retaken on 30 January 1945. Lt. Gen. Walter Krueger, commanding general of the U.S. 6th Army raised the American flag amid the ruins of the headquarters of Fort Stotsenburg fronting the parade grounds.⁴⁸

The fighting in the Kembu First Line in Bamban saw the Japanese in a fanatical and suicidal attacks characterized by “banzai” charges. As a prelude to the combat operations on the Kembu stronghold south of Bamban of what is now Calapi ridge, the 40th Division artillery conducted “the strongest artillery barrage so far fired against a single target in the Pacific War.”⁴⁹ After the collapse of the Kembu First Line, the remaining Japanese forces at Clark and north of Bamban retreated to Kembu Main Line located in the hill mass area of Monikayo-Lagare-Calumpang. Gen. Tsukada’s primary airborne troops of Takaya Shitai defended the Kembu Main Line until the middle of February 1945 with one of the strongest fortifications located at Monikayo-Lagare Mountain.⁵⁰

After the collapse of the Main Line, the 40th Division focused its attack on the naval combat sectors located on the high terrain overlooking Clark-Fort Stotsenburg until the end of February 1945. This high terrain is now part of the Aeta ancestral domains on Bamban Hills: Calapi, Bunduk Heneral, Galudgud Asu, and Haduan. However, the rough terrain pockmarked with heavy concentrations of tunnel defenses put the American infantry to a halt. The impasse led to the two-day (21–22 February 1945) aerial bombardment of 222 Consolidated B-24s by the U.S. V

Bomber Command in what became “the heaviest bomber attacks in the Pacific” at the time.⁵¹

When Kembu’s last stand positions fell at the end of February and in the early days of March 1945, the remaining Kembu Group units conducted a series of delaying actions in the deeper western parts of Bamban Hills and Zambales Mountain against the U.S. 43rd and 38th Divisions. The Kembu Group headquarters were transferred from Takamoriyama (present Bunduk Heneral) to 1st Shinzan and later to 2nd Shinzan Mountain until it settled in the eastern slope of Mt. Pinatubo on 28 March 1945.

On 4 April 1945, the headquarters of the 14th Area Army through General Tsukada ordered the Kembu units to disperse and fight as small guerrilla units.⁵² Some units were directed to the north in western Tarlac in Sula, Moriones, and Iba areas, and others to western Pinatubo area in Iba, Zambales where they were engaged by local guerrillas. By May and June 1945, the U.S. 6th Division aided by local guerrillas hunted down the remaining troops of the Kembu Group. Many of them were dying of hunger, combat wounds, and disease.

By end of August, the Kembu Group acknowledged the end of the war. On 10 September 1945, Lt. Gen. Rikichi Tsukada along with Major Eguchi of the 10th Air Sector came down from Mt. Pinatubo with the surviving 780 Army and 450 Navy personnel. The group suffered a heavy loss of 28,500 (95%) of its original 30,000 men.

Rear Admiral Ushie Sugimoto of the Navy Command was killed west of Pinatubo by Filipino guerrillas patrolling the vicinity of Iba, Zambales. Retired Vice-Admiral Kazumae Kondo of the Navy Air Arsenal took refuge in the naval combat sectors, Bamban Hills in February 1945 and was never heard of, and presumed to have died in one of the hundreds of tunnels.⁵³

CONCLUSION

From the defense of USAFFE D-5 Line and the Japanese occupation and guerrilla resistance, to the Battle of Bamban Hills, Bamban provided shelter and refuge, mountain positions, and headquarters. Sadly, it was also a place where soldiers suffered and died.

The local Bamban USAFFE guerrillas and the Aeta guerrilla unit demonstrated their heroism by fighting behind enemy lines. The Aeta guerrillas operated in their ancestral lands where they became both a menace and a terror to the Japanese troops. Rumors of cannibalism by these loyal Aeta jungle fighters, especially eating the heart and liver of a captured enemy had circulated during the war and added dread to the enemy.⁵⁴ Bamban was leveled to the ground by aerial bombings and artillery fire; first by American aerial bombardments and later by Japanese artillery.

After the liberation, General MacArthur conducted war crime trials in his headquarters in Tokyo for the atrocities committed by the Japanese officers and men particularly the torture and death of civilians and suspected

guerrillas. Reports revealed that the Japanese Kembu Group displayed suicidal and fanatical defense, resulting in the loss of 28,500 men.

The success of the American divisions in the destruction of Kembu Group could not be achieved without the support of Bamban Battalion, Squadron 30 Negrito (Aeta) Special Troops, Biniayan (Aeta) Company, Capas Battalion, O'Donnell Regiment, 1st Tarlac Regiment, and Squadron 155 from northwest Pampanga.⁵⁵

After the Battle of Bamban Hills, the American flag was raised on 25 February 1945 by the 185th Infantry, 40th Division on the summit of Gusi Hill (Hill 1700) signifying victory over the fanatical Japanese soldiers. It was one of the rare flag-raising scenes captured on camera in the Philippines.

However, Bamban paid a heavy price as it was one of the most devastated towns in the country during WWII. Many civilians and guerrillas became victims of Kempeitai's atrocities and suffered torture and death. For the American soldiers, "killing was all life became for the men buried in the Zambales mountains."⁵⁶ The rough terrain of Bamban, the valleys and rivers became the open tombs and burial grounds of the thousands of Japanese soldiers who died in combat, of hunger, or disease. The stories of violent struggles reminded one of the vicious war that was fought in Bamban during WWII.

Expressive of a deeper understanding and knowledge of the history of WWII in Bamban, the words of Captain

Melencio Wage of the Bamban Battalion provided a fitting and final tribute to the heroism of Filipino war veterans:

...officers and men of the Bamban Battalion have the glory written on the lips of their countrymen, who would hand down to generations to come, their children and their children's children, the noble and bloody epic of their achievements. As long as the ranges of Bamban Mountains stands with their verdant drapery that hid them thru those years of Japanese monstrosities, as long as peace remains for which they fought for, reminding them of democratic way of life under a regime of fraternity, liberty and justice, just so long will they be happy until their dying hours, glad that they so few have done so much to so many.⁵⁷

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