

From Clark Field to Leyte: Connecting the Events and the Role of the Clark Air Center in the Leyte Operations in 1944

RHONIE C. DELA CRUZ

ABSTRACT

In October 1944, the fate of the Japanese homeland depended on the outcome of the Philippine campaign which the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters designated as *Sho Ichi Go* or Sho-Go. It was also considered by the Japanese High Command to be the “decisive battle,” also known as the Leyte operations or the Philippine campaign. Under this Japanese military strategy, all resources were mobilized for the Philippines to counter the

American advance and landing. The failure of the Sho-Go operation eventually led to the invasion of the Japanese homeland by the American forces.

The Leyte landing and the subsequent Leyte operations including the Battle of Leyte Gulf were milestones in the history of WWII, the latter being the largest naval battle. There is a need to connect other events in that historical episode that affected the whole air campaign from both the Japanese and the American sides. More than 600 kilometers to the north of Leyte, the Clark Field facility, Japan's largest aerodrome center in the Philippines, determined air operations from conventional to special attack missions. Clark Field and Clark Air Center, constituting the many air strips located in Central Luzon and utilized by the Japanese Army and Navy air forces, were important facilities during the Leyte operations and subsequent operations in 1944.

This paper highlights the role of Clark Air Center located in the provinces of Pampanga and Tarlac in the conduct of air operations from both the Japanese and American military establishments, the subsequent air war over the Clark-Bamban areas, the reaction of the Filipino guerrillas, and the effects of the Japanese retaliation on the local population in the latter part of 1944. It also uncovers the fate and final disposition of the 4th Air Army and the Japanese naval ground crews both utilized in the Sho-Go

operation and which remained at the Clark-Bamban Hills area in late 1944 as auxiliary infantry troops.

KEYWORDS

Clark Field, air intercept battle, Japanese air attacks in Leyte, *Kamikaze* special attack forces, Japanese raiding paratroops, USAFFE guerrillas, American prisoners of war (POWs), downed American pilots

INTRODUCTION

The landings of US forces in the Philippines began on 17 October 1944. These maneuvers culminated with the main landing at Red Beach, Palo, Leyte on 20 October which was a major starting point in the liberation of the country from the Japanese occupation. Subsequent events led to a major campaign between the American and Japanese land, sea, and air forces in what became known as the Leyte operations or the Philippine campaign. Some 670 kilometers from Leyte, Clark Field in Central Luzon played a vital role in the Leyte operations and ensuing campaigns for the rest of 1944. It was at Clark and its satellite airfields that the Japanese military hoped to deter the imminent American advance into the Philippines and Japan itself. Today, Clark is a sprawling international airport, a gateway to the country, and a premier freeport zone. Seventy-seven years ago in October 1944, it became a crucial part of the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters' military strategy called *Sho Ichi Go* or Sho-Go. As the American invasion of Leyte became evident, the Sho-Go operation was activated

on 18 October 1944 making the Philippines as theater of decisive battle.¹

CLARK FIELD

The Clark Air Center located along the strategic rail and highway network on a 16-kilometer radius of Clark proper with the Zambales Mountains anchored on the western edge was capable of handling hundreds of aircraft.² The original Clark Field was constructed in 1917 adjacent to the US Army Fort Stotsenburg which was established in 1903 in the aftermath of the Philippine-American War. In 1919, the US Army Air Service developed its westernmost air strip half a mile to the east and by 1920, Clark Field was formally established with the 3rd Aero Squadron with De Havilland DH-4 fighters.³



Clark Field, with the Thomas-Mores MB-3s biplanes of the 3rd Pursuit Squadron, circa 1924. Zambales Mountains in the background. From the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Prior to the outbreak of WWII, Clark Field was the largest air base in the Philippines and a first-class airfield where most of the small air force units were based. On 8 December 1941 at 12:47 p.m., Clark Field was attacked by 108 twin-engine bombers and 84 A6M Zero fighters from the Japanese Navy 11th Air Fleet based in Formosa. The Japanese destruction of the US Far East Air Force at Clark Field and the other airfields in Luzon was comparable to that of Pearl Harbor, and one of America's greatest military disasters in WWII. The aerodrome complex was occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army after the withdrawal of the 21st Division Philippine Army (PA) at the USAFFE D-5 Line in Bamban, on 2 January 1942.⁴

In the final Japanese offensive on 3 April 1942, the 22nd Air Brigade under Major General Kizo Mikami was mobilized at Clark Field including the headquarters, 60th and 62nd Air Regiments (heavy bombers), 11th Air Sector, and supporting units. With the fall of Bataan and Corregidor, Clark Field became an important Japanese Army air base in the Philippines with the 22nd Air Brigade as the main unit of the 4th Air Army in the Philippines.⁵

AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR AT CLARK FIELD

After the capture of Clark Field, construction of additional air strips was considered by the Japanese military to accommodate large numbers of fighters and bombers for the Philippine operations. Japanese Army Air Service and airfield construction units began expansion works in mid-1942. Between 400 to more than 1,000 American prisoners

of war (POWs) mainly from Cabanatuan and Bilibid camps worked in the construction and maintenance of the air strips of Clark from May 1942 to August 1944. The 31st Airfield Battalion under Major Toshisaburo Baba was the main unit in charge of the field work using prisoners. The American POWs and some Filipino laborers worked for 8-9 hours with little food and were mostly beaten by Japanese guards.⁶ The atrocities committed against the POWs at Clark became the subject of investigation after the war. By late 1943, the 33rd Independent Mixed Brigade was in charge of the Japanese infantry at the Clark-Stotsenburg area. By June 1944, the unit was expanded into the 105th Division and controlled all Japanese infantry units in the area.⁷ The use of American POWs at Clark prevailed until late 1944.



American prisoners of war (POWs) at Clark Field, early 1944, with Japanese baseball team manager. Many of these American POWs were used in building and maintaining air strips. From the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

THE CLARK AIR CENTER



Aerial photograph of Clark Air Center showing air strips in Angeles and Clark proper, 21 September 1944. From Terrain Study No. 94.

By September 1944, Clark Field covered nine fields with a total of 13 air strips located in Bamban, Tarlac province; and Floridablanca (Del Carmen), Porac, Angeles, Mabalacat, and Clark proper in Pampanga. At the time, the Japanese Navy's 1st Air Fleet (5th Base Air Force) was in charge of the navy's air defense of the Philippines with its 201st Air Group and the 761st based in Mabalacat, Bamban, and Clark proper while the Army's 2nd Air Division units were stationed in the Clark Center.⁸ USAFFE guerrillas led by Captain Alfred Bruce of the South Tarlac Military

District and Captain Henry Clay Conner, Jr. of Squadron 155, both of the Luzon Guerrilla Force, were operating around Clark along with Filipino HUKBALAHAP guerrillas. From these USAFFE guerrilla forces, Ayta warriors designated as 1st Provisional Company of Negrito Scouts-155 Squadron; Squadron 30, Biniayan Company; and Special Negrito Troops-O'Donnell Regiment, Bruce's Guerrillas were operating around Clark-Fort Stotsenburg.⁹



Ayta warriors of Bamban Mountains belonging to Squadron 30, Bruce's Guerrillas, circa 1945. Many of these mountain patrols rescued downed American aviators during the air campaign in WWII. A 40th Division Photo, from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

However, on 21 September 1944, carrier-borne fighters and bombers from the American Task Force 38 under Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher conducted the first major air operations against the Japanese assets in Manila areas and Clark Air Center with devastating effects. The Japanese Imperial General Headquarters anticipated the

American advance into the Philippines and prepared a general plan for the Philippine operations.

***SHO-ICHI GO* “LEYTE” OPERATIONS**

In early October 1944, the Japanese air forces had barely a 100-plane strength in the Philippines. Vice-Admiral Shigeru 2nd Air Fleet air bases in Formosa (Taiwan) were attacked by Mitscher’s Task Force 38 on 12-14 October, in what was known as the Formosa Air Battle. The next day, Task Force 38 conducted air attacks in Manila and Clark districts. With great loss at Formosa, Vice Admiral Masafumi Arima (26th Air Flotilla) made the first sacrificial attack on Task Force 38.4 located 386 kilometers off Manila, taking sortie on a Mitsubishi G4M Type 1 bomber from Clark Field which became the precursor of the official special attack force by Vice Admiral Takijiro Ohnishi.

On 17 October 1944, Admiral Soemu Toyoda, commander-in-chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, ordered the operational status of the *Sho Ichi Go* with the arrival of the first American forces (Dinagat Attack Group) near Suluan in the mouth of Leyte Gulf. On the same day, Vice Admiral Ohnishi assumed command of the Japanese Imperial Navy 1st Air Fleet from Vice Admiral Kinpei Teraoka.¹⁰ The Japanese Imperial General Headquarters envisioned *Sho Ichi Go* to be the pivotal campaign that would break American advance into mainland Japan. The Sho-Go operation required the mobilization of resources and military assets by the Manila Air Depot and the Air Services, bringing in the Navy and Army air units along with the necessary logistics personnel, ground crews, engineers,



Vice Admiral Masafumi Arima (commander of the 26th Air Flotilla, 1st Air Fleet) conducted the first suicide attack on US Navy's Task Force 38.4 in conjunction with the Formosa Air Battle in October 1944, taking off at Clark Field. From the Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.

and labor. As Clark Field became an important staging base for the Leyte operations, thousands of maintenance and ground crews and other air force support personnel were also assigned in the area.¹¹

MOBILIZATION OF JAPANESE AIR FORCES

With the ongoing Leyte landings, both the Japanese navy and army air forces mobilized the tactical units at Clark Air Center in compliance with the *Sho-Ichi Go*, including Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukutome's 2nd Air Fleet

consisting of 250 navy planes and 50 army bombers from Formosa, and the Army's 30th Fighter Group (11th, 12th, and 16th Air Brigades comprising the 1st, 20th, 11th and 200th Air Regiments). By the end of October, several mobilizations of Japanese Imperial Navy tactical air units from Formosa and China arrived for the Leyte operations. The 4th Air Army deployment of units for the *Sho Ichi Go* was completed on 23 October 1944 while the 2nd Air Fleet completed mobilization of tactical units to Clark Air Center on the 22nd. At the end of the month, many units of the 2nd Air Division located at Clark Air Center had assembled 323 aircraft for the Leyte operation.¹² Two hundred and fifty fighters and other naval aircrafts from Fukutome's 2nd Air Fleet from Clark launched conventional attacks on



Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukutome (commander of the 2nd Air Fleet) at Clark Field in November 1944. Many of the 2nd Air Fleet's air group units from Clark conducted sorties in support of the Leyte operations. From the Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.



Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukutome (commander of the 2nd Air Fleet), during the ceremony for the pilots of the Japanese Imperial Navy's special attack "Kongo-Tai" Unit at Clark Field, late 1944. From the Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.

24 October in support of Admiral Takeo Kurita's forces against American targets in the Sibuyan Sea.

Similarly, the Japanese 2nd Air Division conducted sorties originating from Clark for the Leyte operation with 120 aircraft, and on 25-26 October with 160 planes.¹³ Second Air Fleet units assigned at Bamban Airfield, the 653 and 203 Air Groups, as well as the 1st Air Fleet units participated in the general attack in the Leyte areas from November to December 1944.¹⁴ General Kyoji Tominaga's 4th Air Army scheduled numerous deployments of its newer Nakajima Ki-84 army fighters from the 30th Fighter Group in November until December 1944 using airfields in Del Carmen, Porac, Angeles, Mabalacat, Bamban, and Clark proper as staging bases for the Leyte and Philippine operations.

THE *KAMIKAZE* SPECIAL ATTACK FORCES



Aerial photograph of Mabalacat East Airfield, part of Clark Air Center, 5 November 1944. Note the numerous Japanese fighters scattered on the air field that were expended on *Kamikaze* special attack sorties in the Leyte Gulf. From the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

The town of Mabalacat is considered in WWII history as the official birthplace of the Japanese special attack force known as the *Kamikaze*. Out of Japan's Sho-Go operation

in Leyte, the Japanese Special Attack Force was born and adopted firstly by the Navy under Vice Admiral Ohnishi on the evening of 19 October 1944, designated as the *Shimpu Tokubetsu Kogekitai*, and later adopted by the Army as the *Shimbu Tokubetsu Kogekitai*, or simply abbreviated as *Tokko-Tai*.¹⁵ Vice Admiral Ohnishi was an important personage in the Japanese Imperial Navy, being one of the architects of the Pearl Harbor attack and regarded as the Father of *Kamikaze*. On 19 October 1944, Ohnishi presented to the pilots of the 201 Air Group in Mabalacat the plan of organizing suicide attack units of A6M Zero fighters each armed with 250-kg bomb to crash-dive into American carriers. From the original 24 volunteer pilots led by Lt. Yukio Seki of the 201st, the special attack strategy was adopted by many of the navy and army units in the Philippines for the Leyte operations. On 25 October, there were already *Kamikaze* units operating in Cebu and Davao (*Kikusui-Tai*) that conducted suicide missions even before Seki's successful hit on the carrier *USS St. Lo*.¹⁶ After the conventional air offensive of 2nd Air Fleet, Vice Admiral Fukutome finally adopted the special attack strategy on 26 October 1944. With a unified tactic, the South West Area Fleet created the Combined Land Base Air Force with Vice-Admiral Fukutome as commander and Vice Admiral Ohnishi as chief of staff.¹⁷ The Japanese air army formed its own special attack units in October although its actual *Kamikaze* operations in the Philippines were carried out in early November with *Hakko No. 2* and *Fugaku* units on 7 November 1944. Later, other units from the 4th Air Army conducted suicide sorties in the Leyte area. On 6-8 January 1945, the last Zeros from the navy took off from Clark and

Mabalacat airfields for *Kamikaze* missions. The Japanese air army launched its final suicide missions in Luzon by the Nakajima Ki-84 Hayate fighters of the *Seika-Tai* on 13 January 1945. *Seika-Tai* comprised the 72nd and 73rd Sentai from Bamban Airfield and other units from the 30th Fighter Group based at Clark.¹⁸ The headquarters of the Combined Land-based Air Force was transferred from Nichols Field to an obscure small hill overlooking the Bamban town, north of Clark on 20 November 1944. From the Bamban Naval Headquarters, command directives and communication with the naval air forces in the Philippines were conducted until early January 1945 when most of the aircraft were expended in conventional and *Kamikaze* operations.¹⁹



Japanese army *Kamikaze* pilots for Type 4 heavy bomber from *Fugaku* Unit at Margot Airfield, November 1944. From the Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.

THE AIR INTERCEPT BATTLES OVER CLARK

During the Battle of Leyte Gulf, hundreds of enemy aircraft took off for conventional and special attack missions from Luzon and Clark Air Center. American Task Force 38 carrier-borne fighters and navy bombers conducted fighter sweeps on the early morning of 29 October 1944 on Clark airfields targets. Japanese army and navy fighters engaged American navy raiders in what had been the major air intercept battles or dogfights over Clark Field with 142 fighters on both sides participating.²⁰ In the succeeding weeks, Japanese aircraft at Clark Center provided air cover for Japanese ship convoys and conducted air raids on American-held Leyte and Tacloban airfields. From 5-12 November 1944, 88 Japanese navy aircraft carried special attack sorties against American targets in Leyte and east of Luzon with sorties from Clark, Mabalacat, and Angeles airfields. To counter the threat of *Kamikaze* attacks, US Task Force 38 navy fighters and bombers again conducted aerial sweeps over Clark Air Center. However, the Japanese had fortified the vicinity of the airstrips with deadly anti-aircraft batteries that shot down American planes. On 5 November, Japanese interceptors took off from Clark against the marauding American naval airplanes for air intercept battle with more than 80 fighters participating in the dogfights over the Clark-Bamban area. These air intercept battles greatly diminished the Japanese air assets in the Philippines to the least number in January 1945.²¹ Further air operations in late December 1944 by the carrier-borne fighters and bombers of the US Navy and the US Army Air Forces in January 1945 against facilities at Clark and in Luzon decimated Japanese air strength.

THE JAPANESE RAIDING PARATROOPS



Japanese *Teishin* paratroops from the 3rd Raiding Regiment at Clark Field preparing for *Operation Te*, December 1944. From G. Rottman and A. Takizawa, *Japanese Paratroop Forces of WWII*.

In the aftermath of the Leyte occupation by the US forces, Gen. Kyoji Tominaga, the leading sponsor of the 4th Air Army's special attack, formally adopted the paratroop suicide units known as *Teishin* raiding forces. The 2nd Raiding Brigade code-named *Takachiho*, with the 3rd Raiding Regiment under Major Tsuneharu Shirai and 4th Raiding Regiment led by Major Chisaku Saida numbering 750 men were mobilized for the Leyte operation and assembled at Clark Field in late November 1944. Their mission was to conduct suicidal attacks and sabotage interdictions at American airfields in Leyte by paratroop

drops and crash-landings of transport gliders. The airborne mission was code-named *Operation Te* while the ground operation was designated as *Operation Wa*, using Army Type 100 Heavy Bomber (Nakajima Ki-49, Allied name Helen) and Type 100 (Mitsubishi Ki-57, Allied name Topsy) aircraft as transports. Major operations were conducted on the night of 6 December 1944 by the 3rd Raiding Regiment that departed from Angeles Airfield with 34 transports and 4 heavy bombers with main drops over the Burauen-San Pablo airstrips and some at Tacloban-Dulag airfields.

Other Japanese raiding operations were conducted by the 4th Raiding Regiment between 8 to 14 December in the Ormoc area, also coming from the Clark Airfields. The Japanese attack at Burauen fields defended by the US 11th Airborne Division was a rare case of airborne engagement by opposing forces in WWII. Less than a hundred of the original 750 men managed to survive including Major Saida in the aftermath of the paratroop suicide raiding operations from Clark.²²

GUERRILLA RESCUE OPERATIONS

The Fast Carrier Force of the US 3rd Fleet conducted massive aerial fighter and bomber sweeps over Clark Air Center since 21 September 1944 with major operations on 29 October, 5-6, 19, 26 November and 14-16 December 1944. Many American naval aviators were shot down by anti-aircraft fire and air interceptions by Japanese fighters. With the presence of active guerrilla forces operating around Clark, orders were issued by the Luzon Guerrilla Force under



Ensign Allen J. Stover (VF-81 Squadron, *USS Wasp*), and Lt. Francis Joseph Grassbaugh (VT-11 Squadron, *USS Hornet*), both rescued by Ayta warriors from Squadron 30, Bruce's Guerrillas, at the field headquarters of the 40th Division US Army, circa 1945. A 40th Division photo, from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Col. Gyles Merrill to Captain Bruce of the South Tarlac Military District and Captain Henry Conner of Squadron 155 of the northwest Pampanga to rescue American downed aviators. Aytas operating in the mountains surrounding Clark were the Squadron 30, Biniayan Company, the Negrito Unit of the O'Donnell Regiment, and the Negrito

Company of Squadron 155.²³ Aytas from Squadron 30 under Lt Pedro Margarito successfully rescued Lt. Francis Joseph Grassbaugh (VT-11 Squadron, *USS Hornet*) and Ensign Allen J. Stover (VF-81 Squadron, *USS Wasp*) while those from the Negrito Company, Squadron 155 under Captain Kodiario Laxamana saved Lt. Herbert C. Hogan and his crew, ARM1c William Bill McGrath, both from Bomber Squadron 20 (VB-20), *USS Lexington*.²⁴

Some downed American aircrews were killed by the Japanese patrols who arrived before the guerrillas could swooped down on them while others died during dogfights or burned inside the cockpits of aircraft wrecks. It was a high price paid by these American naval pilots who did their duty and gave the ultimate sacrifice for the liberation of the Philippines.²⁵



US Navy bomber Curtiss SB2C Helldiver from *USS Wasp* (CV-18) passing over the Bamban Airfield after conducting air raids on Japanese facilities. From Aircraft Action Report – *USS Wasp*, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

AMERICAN NAVAL AVIATORS STERLING GRAHAM AND ROBERT LEE CLARY



Photo of American aviator, ARM1c Sterling Eugene Graham (rear gunner, Bomber Squadron Eighteen *USS Intrepid*), killed by Japanese patrol in Concepcion, Tarlac on 29 October 1944. From Resty Farmer, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.

During the air war over Clark-Bamban, several American naval aviators bailed out and civilians and guerrillas attempted to rescue them. On 29 October 1944, Aviation Radioman First Class Sterling Eugene Graham and Lieutenant Elmer Namoski, flying a US Navy Curtiss SB2C-3 “Helldiver” from Bomber Squadron Eighteen (VB-18), *USS Intrepid* were shot down over Clark. Lieutenant Namoski died in the course of the dogfight with a Japanese air interceptor. ARM1c Graham managed to bail out of the



Photo of Corporal Sofronio Perez, Bamban Battalion, South Tarlac Military District, killed in December 1944 during punitive actions on the local guerrillas of Bamban at the height of the air war, 1944. From the family of Sofronio Perez, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.

bomber by parachute, only to be shot down by Japanese patrol as he descended in a rice field in Concepcion, Tarlac.²⁶ Another rescue was led by Filipino guerrillas and civilians on 5 November when Ensign Robert Lee Clary, flying his Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat from Fighting Squadron 28, *USS Cabot* (CVL-28) was shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Bamban Airfield. Lt. Yamaguchi's raiding party from Bamban *Kempetai* (military police) arrived before the local guerrillas (Bamban Battalion, South Tarlac Military District) could rescue the pilot. He was shot by Lt. Yamaguchi while inside the burning Hellcat. The guerrillas

were just a few meters away hiding from the Japanese patrol but could not do anything to save the life of the American pilot.²⁷

FILIPINO REACTIONS AND THE JAPANESE RETALIATIONS

As the men of the USAFFE guerrillas in south Tarlac and northwest Pampanga in the vicinity of Clark were conducting dangerous rescue missions to save American pilots, the Japanese forces in the areas were also on full alert during the air war. Loyal civilian sympathizers and local guerrillas cooperated to save the downed American aviators in spite of the danger of reprisals. The Japanese patrols and *Kempeitai* knew that the local guerrillas and civilians were also on the move to get any American pilot that bailed out or survived the crash landing, especially in Bamban, Capas, and Porac towns. Guerrillas were also active in killing downed Japanese pilots they captured.²⁸ The situation so angered the Japanese officers that the local garrison troops and the *Kempeitai* conducted many “zoning” of suspected guerrillas in the barrios. They tortured, beat, and killed many suspects, an obvious punishment and retaliation by the Japanese for the loyalty of the Filipinos to the Americans.²⁹ War crimes analysis in the areas around Clark for the period beginning 21 September to December 1944 indicated that the Japanese garrison force and *Kempeitai* conducted raiding operations against civilians and suspected guerrillas resulting in numerous atrocities, tortures, and killings. These operations were aimed to purge the local resistance that became more active during

the war in the Clark-Bamban area, as well as to capture the American pilots rescued by the guerrillas.³⁰



Administration building of the former Bamban Sugar Central (Central Luzon Milling Company) used as cell and torture chamber for suspected local guerrillas, circa 1945. From the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

THE CASE OF US NAVY ACE PILOT LIEUTENANT ALEXANDER VRACIU

A classic example of a successful guerrilla rescue of an American pilot was that of naval ace aviator Lt. Alexander Vraciu of the Fighting Squadron 20, *USS Lexington* with 19 official kills. On 14 December 1944, VF-20 fighters conducted aerial sweeps over Clark Air Center. Many of the American naval ace pilots participated in this air operations, including Lt. JG Douglas Baker (Killed-In-Action, 16 kills) who was a squadron mate of Lt. Vraciu. On the second sweep of the VF-20 fighters at Bamban Airfield, Lt. Vraciu's Grumman F6F was shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft fire. He managed to bail out and landed on the



American Consolidated B-24J heavy bomber from 494th Bomb Group conducting air raid over Clark Field, December 1944. Fort Stotsenburg is at the lower right. From the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

farm of Luis Ramos in Caranto, Capas, Tarlac. Actually, Ramos was an intelligence officer of the USAFFE Capas Battalion under Captain Bruce and managed to save the famous ace pilot minutes prior to the arrival of a Japanese raiding patrol. The Japanese garrison was located more than a kilometer from the landing site. The celebrated pilot was brought to Captain Bruce's headquarters in the deep recesses of the Malasa Mountain, Bamban and became a captain in the South Tarlac Military District for 5 weeks before the American landing in Lingayen.³¹ In retaliation, the Japanese troops conducted punitive measures on the people of Capas by killing 19 guerrillas and civilians in

the vicinity of the crash site. Zonifications and raids were carried out several times by garrison troops that resulted in the beatings of men, women, and even children. Numerous houses were burned by the Japanese soldiers looking for the American ace pilot. Weeks after that fateful escape of Lt. Vraciu, the Japanese continued to terrorize the people and many Filipinos paid the heavy price including death for the safety of Lt. Vraciu.³²

THE REMNANTS OF THE JAPANESE ARMY AND NAVY AIR FORCES

With the failure of the Sho-Go operation, the once formidable Japanese air power in the Philippines was left with just a handful of transports and reconnaissance aircraft, with the remaining units transferred to Echague, and later to Formosa and Japan.³³ In December 1944, Vice Admiral Ohnishi, while at the Bamban Naval Headquarters, planned the Japanese navy's defense position in Bamban Hills in anticipation of the land battle in the Clark area. By late December 1944, there was an order for the transfer of the naval air units to Formosa and Japan, leaving ground crews, technicians, engineers, airfield construction personnel, and support crews to be assigned to the Naval Combat Sector as auxiliary infantry. The Japanese army's ground personnel, airfield battalion, and support troops were also left behind to form into infantry units for the defense of Clark. With the landing of MacArthur's forces in Lingayen, Vice Admiral Fukutome and the 2nd Air Fleet headquarters moved out of the Bamban Naval Headquarters on 6 January 1945, followed by Vice Admiral Ohnishi on 10 January 1945. The command of the Japanese navy at

Clark was left to Rear Admiral Ushie Sugimoto of the 26th Air Flotilla, 1st Air Fleet. The 4th Air Army followed suit including the navy pilots and moved to Echague from Manila and Clark.³⁴



East and west hill of Asahiyama, site of the Japanese Imperial Navy's Combined Air Fleet headquarters led by Vice Admirals Fukutome and Ohnishi in Bamban in late 1944. Photo circa 1978. From Moji Chikanori, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.

The remnants of the Japanese army and navy air forces stationed at Clark Air Center for the Sho-Go operation numbering more than 20,000 were assigned to ensure the security of Clark under Major General Rikichi Tsukada of the 1st Airborne Raiding Group or *Ran Force*. 14th Area Army designated General Tsukada as commander of the Clark Defense Force composed of the Kembu Group with 33,000 men. The defense of Clark was positioned on the high ground of the Bamban Hills utilizing the tunnel defense system fortified with artillery, mortar and automatic cannons retrieved from Clark's damaged aircraft.³⁵ The battle of Bamban Hills began on 23 January 1945 in a brutal fighting between the Kembu Group and American

divisions aided by local guerrillas and Ayta warriors until the war's end on 3 September 1945. Only 1,500 of the Kembu Group survived the war and came down from Mt. Pinatubo. Most of the officers and remnants of the Japanese air forces at Clark including Admirals Ushie Sugimoto and Kazuma Kondo died in the course of the campaign.³⁶



Japanese war dead from the Takayama detachment on the battlefield of the Bamban Hills, February 1945. A 40th Division Photo, from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

EPILOGUE

The failure of *Sho Ichi Go* operation in Leyte led to the American liberation of the Philippines. More than 20,000 Japanese army and navy air and ground personnel which remained behind as infantry troops in late December 1944, were annihilated in 1945 by the combined American, Filipino, and Ayta forces as well by diseases and hunger. To the Americans, the Clark airfields

were very important facilities needed for the success of air campaign in the Philippines, China, and Japan. The Filipinos supported the American war efforts by becoming guerrilla members. Unfortunately, in return, many of them paid the ultimate price of Japanese reprisals. In fact, many locals who conducted intelligence and espionage on enemy air activities around Clark Field were caught and beheaded by the Japanese.³⁷ For the Ayta warriors, the battle spilled over into their ancestral lands that they had no choice but to fight alongside the Americans to be able to get rid of the common enemy. These events and narratives of the role of Clark Field in 1944 form a significant part of the Leyte operations and in the history of WWII in the Philippines.

NOTES

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- 4 Relative to the attack and capture of Clark Field, see Walter D. Edmonds, 98, 108, 110; Louis Morton, *US Army in WWII The War in the Pacific – The Fall of the Philippines*, Commemorative edition (Washington DC, Center for Military History, United States Army: 1989), 84-86, 213.
- 5 On Japanese air units at Clark Field in the Bataan campaign, see *Philippine Air Operations Phase One, Japanese Monograph No. 11*, General Headquarters, Far East Command Military History Section, Japanese Research Division, 24, 33; and Col. Matsumae, *Record of Air Operation – 4th Air Army* (Philippine Operation, Second Phase) Volume 46, “Agreement on Air Operations Between the Army and Navy and Scope of Operations - C1a,” First Demobilization Board October 1946.
- 6 The number of American POWs taken at Clark Field from the middle of 1942 to 1944 was staggering, based on the testimony of the survivors. After the war, these former prisoners implicated Captain Baba and some Japanese non-commissioned officers in the mistreatment of the prisoners working at Clark Airfield. See *Testimonies of Donald W. Bridges*, San Francisco, California, December 28, 1945; *Captain Toshisaburo Baba*, Tokyo, Japan, April 15, 1948; *M/Sgt. Frank N. Bearden*, Chester County, Tennessee, May 15, 1945; *S/Sgt. James C. Kent*, Texas, March 27, 1946; and *Charles P. Thomas*, Hawthorne, Nevada, August 21, 1946, *Report No. B-100 – Clark Field*, War Crimes Office, Judge Advocate General Department – War Department, General Headquarters United States Army Forces – Pacific War Crimes Branch, General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the

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- 7 *Report No. M-69, File No. 40-329* “Identification of Japanese Units and Their Commanders,” manuscript, April 15, 1947, General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers SCAP, US National Archives NARA, College Park, Maryland.
- 8 Col. Matsumae, “Strength and Disposition of 1st Air Fleet”; “Composition of the 4th Air Army – Beginning October 1944.”
- 9 For information on the Ayta mountain patrol in the vicinity of Clark Field, see *Squadron 155 Luzon Guerrilla Forces (LGF)* [folders 1-2], (Box 489, File 286-13); and *Squadron 30 (Negrito) Southern Tarlac Military District (STMD) Luzon Guerrilla Forces* (Box No. 486, File No. 286-5): National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
- 10 Some sources indicated a total number of 203 Japanese navy and 237 army aircraft. On Arima’s first apparent suicide sortie, some accounts described his aircraft to be of Yokosuka D4Y Suisei (Judy). Other accounts of the *Sho-Ichi Go* operation stated that the order of execution was on the midnight of October 19, 1944. See Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 4; Samuel Eliot Morrison, 68-69, 101, 119; and Ikuhiko Hata, Yasuho Izawa and Christopher Shores, *Japanese Army Air Force Fighter Units and Their Aces 1931-1945* (London: Grub Street, 2002), 75.
- 11 Col. Matsumae, “The Army Operational and Directional Plan – January 1945,” “Maintenance and Supply”; Samuel Eliot Morrison, 96.
- 12 For the Japanese Army and Navy units under the 2nd Air Fleet and 30th Fighter Group mobilization to Clark Air Center, see Ikuhiko Hata, Yasuho Izawa and Christopher Shores, 74-75; Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 48; and Col. Matsumae, “Application of Sho Operation No. 1.”

- 13 Samuel Eliot Morrison, 165; Col. Matsumae, "Application of Sho Operation No. 1."
- 14 For the mobilization and conduct of Japanese Army and Navy air force operations against American targets in Leyte, see Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 54-55; Col. Matsumae, "Air Operations October 1944"; *Japanese Navy Ace Pilot Warrant Officer Yoshijiro Shirahama War Diary*, an original book in Japanese translated by Shigeki Kito, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum; and Ikuhiko Hata, Yasuho Izawa and Christopher Shores, 79-80, 80-81, 84-86.
- 15 Richard O' Neil, *Suicide Squads – The Men and Machine of WWII Special Operations* (London: Salamander Books Ltd, 1999), 119; Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 7-13, 20.
- 16 Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 7-13; Richard O' Neil, 128-129; Mordecai George Sheftall, *Blossoms in the Wind – Human Legacies of the Kamikaze* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006), 15.
- 17 Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 68.
- 18 On the Japanese Army's special attack forces, see Ikuhiko Hata, Yasuho Izawa and Christopher Shores, 84-86; Col. Matsumae, "Charts Showing the Results of Our Attack on Enemy Vessels in the Philippine Operation"; *The 72nd Hiko Sentai*, the original text written in Japanese and translated by Jin Arai, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum; and Hideyoshi Yoshitomi, *War Memoirs of Hideyoshi Yoshitomi (Imperial Japanese Army pilot)*, translated by Hiriyoshi Jin Arai, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum.
- 19 Moji Chikanori, *At the Far End of the Sea and Sky for the Spirits of the Dead Soldiers – A Visit to Philippine Islands*, translated by Hitoshi Jin Arai (Tokyo, Japan: Kojinsha, 1989), 232; Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 99-101.
- 20 Samuel Eliot Morrison, 342; Ikuhiko Hata and Yasuho Izawa, 431; Barret Tillman, *Hellcat Aces of WWII – Osprey Aircraft of the Aces* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 1996), 56.

- 21 Including the preceding sentences on air raids at Clark, see Samuel Eliot Morrison, 348; Ikuhiko Hata and Yasuho Izawa, 87; *Aircraft Action Reports Nos. 122, 123, 124, 125, 1265, 23, 153, 154, 149, 150* “Aircraft Action Reports *USS Wasp* and *USS Hornet*, Task Force 38 – November 5-6, 1944,” National Archives NARA, College Park, Maryland; B.H. Roberts, *Fighting Squadron Twenty VF-20* “A History of the Fighting Twenty (*USS Lexington*) – Chapter III Section D Principal Actions,” manuscript, Office of Editorial Research, Navy Department, Washington D.C., National Archives NARA, College Park, Maryland; Barret Tillman, 56; Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, “Appendix A: Kamikaze Attack Operations in the Philippine Areas,” 212-213; and Masayoshi Nemoto, *Japanese Navy Air Forces and Tokko Unit*, translated by Hiriyooshi Jin Arai (Tokyo: Shinjinbutsu Oraisaha, 2000).
- 22 Including the foregoing sentences on the *Teishin Rentai* paratroop operations from Clark, see Mordecai George Sheftall, 234; Col. Matsumae, “Raiding Operations of the 2nd Raiding Group”; G. Rottman and A. Takizawa, *Japanese Paratroop Forces of WWII* (New York: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2005), 46-51; and Philip Jowett, *The Japanese Army 1931-45* (New York: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2005), 19-20.
- 23 With the first carrier-borne aircraft conducting aerial bombardments of Japanese assets at Clark Field in September 1944, the guerrilla units were ordered to commence combat activity of rescuing American downed pilots. For further reading, see *Headquarters STMD Bruce’s Guerrillas* “Brief Historical Sketch of STMD LGF Bruce’s Guerrillas,” “Directive Z,” File No. 286-1; *Capas Battalion STMD LGF Bruce’s Guerrillas* “A Brief History of the Capas Bn Luzon USAFFE Guerrilla Forces STMD,” “The Horrors of Saving Lt. Alexander Vracui, US Navy Ace Pilot and His Delivery to American Liberating Forces By the Capas Bn During Hectic Days of Luzon Campaign”; *Squadron 30 (Negrito) Southern Tarlac Military District (STMD) Luzon Guerrilla Forces* (Box No. 486, File No. 286-5); and *Squadron*

155 Luzon Guerrilla Forces (LGF) “Chronology of Squadron 155” [folders 1-2], (Box 489, File 286-13), National Archives (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

- 24 Lt. H.C. Hogan (Bomber Squadron Twenty VB-20) shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Clark Field and was rescued by the Aytas from Squadron 155. He was awarded the Navy Cross for participating in the sinking of the Japanese battleship *Musashi* on October 24, 1944. See Roy A. Grossnick, *Dictionary of American Naval Aviation Volume 1* (Naval Historical Center: Washington DC, 1995), 155; *Aircraft Action Report No. 24 November 5, 1944 Strike on Luzon USS Wasp; Squadron 30 (Negrito)* “Captain Alfred Bruce’s Commanding Officer certification, May 24, 1945”; *Squadron 155, Luzon Guerrilla Forces (LGF)* “Chronology of Squadron 155”; Malcolm Decker, *On a Mountainside: The 155 Provisional Guerrilla Battalion Against the Japanese on Luzon* (New Mexico: Yucca Tree Press, 2004), 173-174; Bob Welch, *Resolve: From the Jungles of Bataan, The Epic Story Of A Soldier, A Flag, and A Promise Kept* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 2012), 232-234; David Sears, *American Ace Guerrilla Warfare*. History Network. Accessed August 7, 2019. <http://warfarehistorynetwork.com/daily/wwii/alex-vraciu-u-s-navy-ace-philippines-guerrilla>.
- 25 *Identification of Unknown Deceased (X-3501) – Lieutenant Junior Grade James Darracott* “Interrogation of Pacifico Sangalang by 4th Platoon 609th QM Grave Registration Company dated August 9, 1946,” manuscript, Bamban Historical Society Collection, Bamban Museum; *Report No. 139, The Murder and Torture of Filipino Civilians by Members of the Japanese Military Police at Bamban, Tarlac, Luzon, P.I. in February 1942 and in October and December 1944, Manila* “Testimony of Romulo Lumboy – November 1945,” General Headquarters United States Army Forces – Pacific War Crimes Branch, 1946; *Squadron 30 (Negrito) Southern Tarlac Military District (STMD)* “Brief Official History of Squadron 30 – Negrito Special Troops”; Letter of Capt. Agustin Capulong dated December 13, 1947, *Squadron 155, Luzon Guerrilla Forces (LGF)* “Letter of Capt. Capulong,” [folders

- 1-2], (Box 489, File 286-13). All papers are from the US National Archives NARA, College Park, Washington DC.
- 26 The killing of ARM1c Graham on October 29, 1944 became the subject of the war crimes trial in Concepcion; see *Report No. 315, The Killing of Sterling Eugene Graham: An American Flier at Concepcion, Tarlac PI Sometime in October 1944*, Manila: GHQ Supreme Commander for the Allied Forces – Legal Section, US National Archives, College Park, Washington DC., 1946.
- 27 The death of Ensign Robert Lee Clary on November 5, 1944 in Bamban was the subject of the war crimes investigation; see *Report No. 139, The Murder and Torture of Filipino Civilians by Members of the Japanese Military Police at Bamban, Tarlac, Luzon, P.I. in February 1942 and in October and December 1944* “Testimonies of Miguel Ballesteros, Dionicio Dizon and Federico Maristela – November 1945,” Manila; General Headquarters United States Army Forces – Pacific War Crimes Branch, 1946, US National Archives NARA, College Park, Washington D.C.
- 28 *Volume II Correspondence* “Captain Alfred D. Bruce to Col. Eliseo Mallari, Letter dated November 6, 1944 – Mallari,” Box 256, Entry 1094, Philippine Archives Collection, Record Group 407, National Archives NARA, College Park MD.
- 29 Most of the atrocities committed by the Japanese garrison troops and *Kempeitai* including zonifications, arrests, torture, and death of suspected Filipino guerrillas happened after the major American naval fighter sweeps and air intercept battles from September to December 1944; *Report No. 139, The Murder and Torture of Filipino Civilians by Members of the Japanese Military Police at Bamban, Tarlac, Luzon, P.I. in February 1942 and in October and December 1944*; *Squadron 155, Luzon Guerrilla Forces (LGF)* “Letter of Capt. Capulong,” [folders 1-2], (Box 489, File 286-13); and *Squadron 52 Northwest Pampanga Military District NWPM*, “History and Activities of 52nd Squadron by Captain Tomas Lumanlan,” File No. 107-3: US National Archives NARA, College Park, Washington DC.

- 30 The Japanese counter-guerrilla operations that were prevalent from September 21 to December 1944 became the subject of war crimes trial investigations in 1945. See *Report No. 315; Killing of Sterling Eugene Graham – An American Flier at Concepcion, Tarlac PI sometime in October 1944*, Manila: GHQ Supreme Commander for the Allied Forces – Legal Section, US National Archives, College Park, Washington DC., 1946; *Case Nos. F-43 & F-44 Handwriting Diary of Keiji Hishibori of Abe Force* “December 11 and 17, 1944: and Narratives of events linked to the beating and killing of Filipinos in Mabalacat,” ATIS SWPA Bulletin No. 2062, US National Archives, College Park, Washington D.C., December 1945.
- 31 Barret Tillman, 58-59; Hugh Power, *Carrier Lexington: Text and Contemporary Photographs* (Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 20-21; David Sears, *American Ace Guerrilla Warfare*.
- 32 Many of these Japanese raids on the civilians of Capas were cited in the official reports of the Capas USAFFE guerrillas. See; *Capas Battalion STMD LGF Bruce’s Guerrillas* “A Brief History of the Capas Bn Luzon USAFFE Guerrilla Forces STMD,” “The Horrors of Saving Lt. Alexander Vraciu, US Navy Ace Pilot and His Delivery to American Liberating Forces by the Capas Bn During Hectic Days of Luzon Campaign”, US National Archives NARA, College Park, Washington D.C. Accessed on 7 August 2019. <http://collections.pvao.mil.ph/Guerilla/GuerillaInformationDownload/GUA-0001113>.
- 33 Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 110, “Appendix A: Kamikaze Attack Operations in the Philippine Islands Area”; Col. Matsumae, “The Withdrawal of our HQ Units from Echague and Subsequent Battles.”
- 34 Then Rear Admiral Fukutome was captured by Filipino guerrillas under Lt. Col. James Cushing when his flyingboat crash-landed in the waters of Bohol Strait on 1 April 1944. See Inoguchi, Nakajima and Pineau, 100, 105, 102, 115-116; Col. Matsumae, “The Withdrawal of our HQ Units from Echague and Subsequent Battles”; Shinjo Akamatsu, *Diary of the Last Man Standing – An*

Epitaph for the 42,000 Japanese Killed in Clark Area, translated by Hitoshi Arai/Takashi Fukuda (Tokyo, Japan: Kojinsha, 1973), 33-35; Koizio Kuazaki, *The Luzon Naval Construction Unit Fighting Diary*, translated by Takashi Fukuda (Kojinsha, Tokyo); Okasawa Yu, *The 318 Pioneer Naval Construction Unit (318 Kaigun Setsueitai Senki)*, translated by Takashi Fukuda (Tokyo: Kindai Tosho Corporation); and Greg Bradsher, *The Z Plan Story - Japan's 1944 Naval Battle Strategy Drifts into U.S. Hands*, accessed September 18, 2019. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/fall/z-plan-1.html>.

- 35 Although, official US Army records put the number of Kembu force at 30,000, other sources including Shinjo Akamatsu and US Intelligence reports put the figure at 42,000 and 33,000 respectively. See Col. Matsumae, "The Defense of Clark Air Base," "B. The Campaign After the Withdrawal of Our Headquarters Group from Echague"; Rikihei Inoguchi, Tadashi Nakajima and Roger Pineau, 100; and *Enemy on Luzon*, General Headquarters, US Army Forces Pacific, Military Intelligence Section – Command and General Staff, Fort Leavenworth, Texas, December 1945, 3-4, 178; Shinjo Akamatsu, 118.
- 36 Japanese naval air group units from the 1st Air Fleet participated in the Leyte operations that were mostly left in the Naval Combat Sectors – Kembu Group, Bamban Hills in January 1945 comprised the 201, 341, 153 and 221 Kokutai (air groups) including the commanding officers: Commander Tadao Funaki (341 Air Group), Captain Tetsujiro Wada (153 Air Group), Lieutenant Commander Tadao Saeki (221 Air Group), and Yasuji Okada (Colonel, Chief of Staff of the Kembu Group). Admiral Sugimoto (26th Air Flotilla commander) was killed by Filipino guerrillas near Iba, Zambales on June 10, 1945. See *Japanese Monograph No. 9* "Outline of the Kembu Group Operation – Clark Sector, Record of the Philippine Operations Record of the Philippine Operation Vol. III Part 3," First Demobilization Bureau, November 1946; Shinjo Akamatsu, 118; Moji Chikanori, *Reminiscences of Admiral Ohnishi*, translated by Jin Arai and Takaoki Fusejima (Tokyo, Japan: Kojinsha, 1989), 196-198; and Shinjo Akamatsu, *Diary*

of the Last Man Standing – An Epitaph for the 42,000 Japanese Killed in Clark Area, translated by Hitoshi Arai (Tokyo: Kojinsha, 1973), 118.

- ³⁷ In one case alone, 12 Filipinos in Mabalacat, Pampanga were beheaded by Japanese troops on December 11, 1944 for spying and espionage. See Case Nos. F-43 & F-44: Handwritten Diary of Keiji Hishibori of Abe Force.

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