



Dewey's Dash Passed the Guns: Coastal Defense Artillery in Western Pacific Counter-Maritime Operations from 1898 to Today

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Dewey's squadron entered Manila Bay at dawn on 1 May 1898. At 0515, Admiral Montojo's fleet opened fire on the Americans, but Dewey tactically chose not to return fire for 20 minutes! This patience was intended to conserve ammunition until the American battle line steamed into range. Dewey, stationed on the conning platform suspended above the conning tower, calmly spoke into his voice pipe connecting him to Captain Charles Gridley on *Olympia's* bridge stating, "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley."

In the Indo-Pacific theater many would think that the only United States military branches that would participate in a 21st Century conflict would be the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force, but there is still a critical slot for the other uniformed services. As the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues their rhetoric of prioritizing the unification of one China in the coming years, this places Taiwan, the U.S., and many other nations in the near vicinity on edge. Nations like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines also focus their efforts on diplomatically and militarily preparing to absorb the shock of a potential conflict in the East and South China Seas within the first island chain. Although, the Japanese and South Korean militaries are well supplied and technologically advanced the Philippine presence is not quite as strong but is the place where the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps can play a crucial role.

Recently the U.S. and the Philippines have been discussing the sustained presence of U.S. military units in the Philippines like back in the 1940s era of World War II. The exact nature of this presence is still up for debate and interpretation, but this discussion offers a potential placement of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps coastal defense capabilities onto the battlefield. The reasoning behind why coastal defense in the Philippines is such a critical factor can be identified by the study of two eras within the country. First being in 1898 when the Spanish owned the Philippines. Second being World War II.

The 19th Century

On 25 April 1898, President William McKinley asked Congress for the modern equivalent of an authorization for use of military force against Spain.¹ The 12-year-old Spanish King, Alfonso XIII, made a clear position to retain the crown jewels of his remnants of Empire, Cuba, and the Philippines. The American Asiatic Squadron at Hong Kong under the command of Commodore George Dewey received a directive from the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, on 25 February to set sail for Manila Bay and destroy or capture Rear Admiral Patricio Montojo's Spanish South Pacific Squadron should war

break out after the second-class battleship *USS Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor.²

After the U.S. declaration on 25 April, the squadron prepared for battle and assembled provisions, setting sail from Mirs Bay off Hong Kong for the Philippines. Dewey's intelligence indicated that the Spanish had a mixture of 26 elderly muzzle loading and modern breech loading gun emplacements on the islands guarding the entrance to Manila Bay and several batteries located along the coastline of the city of Manila and Cavite with rumors of multiple lines of mines laid across the spans that crossed between the entrances to the bay.³ Through creative and cunning pre-battle intelligence gathering, Dewey determined the Spanish mine threat as a minor factor in deterring his column's entrance from the south of Corregidor.⁴ Due to the squadron being located at Hong Kong, every move Dewey made could be observed and reported by the Spanish consulate relayed via telegraph directly to the Spanish waiting in the Philippines, knowing exactly when the Americans had made steam from Mirs Bay, China.⁵ The American consul in Manila made for Dewey's position in the Chinese anchorage with the latest description of the Spanish defenses. While preparing for the neutrality of other nations to keep him away from any close coaling stations, Dewey purchased 2 British transports as mobile resupply vessels that would be vital to keep the squadron in the fight for extended periods without any guarantee of relief from America.⁶ Dewey was also aware of other imperial ambitions that were lurking around the Pacific in the form of the Kaiser's Germany who possessed a powerful Pacific Squadron and a possible hunger to gain more territory left over from any Spanish vacuum an American victory would bring.⁷ As Dewey's ships departed Hong Kong in full international view under the tune of the "Star Spangled Banner" many European officers did not believe their American colleagues would return from their Spanish adventure with one Royal Navy officer stating, "What a very fine set of fellows. But unhappily, we shall never see them again."⁸

The Asiatic Squadron arrived off the southern tip of Lingayen Gulf off Luzon's west coast on 30 April 1898 and after an uneventful scouting of Subic

Bay, the Americans pushed for the mouth of Manila Bay. During the initial penetration Dewey's guns would remain loaded, but with their breaches opened to act as a safety against firing and giving away the position of the column as they steamed through with only a single rear light for each ship in line to follow in front of it.⁹ On 30 April, under the cover of darkness, Dewey's squadron passed close by the Spanish shore batteries at the mouth of Manila Bay through the channel of Boca Grande.¹⁰ Dewey, an aggressive Civil War veteran and Admiral David Farragut mentee, took key lessons he learned while observing Farragut's command style at actions against Confederate Forts guarding New Orleans, Port Hudson, and Fort Fisher. Farragut possessed a tactical habit of running his ships passed heavy coastal defenses under the cover of darkness while not stopping to directly engage the fort's artillery.¹¹ Steaming in single column with all nine blacked out warships, protected Cruiser *USS Olympia* took the lead, while drawing limited and ineffective fire from the fortresses on Corregidor, El Fraile, and Caballo Islands.¹² Dewey combined his current challenge against the Spanish with the attitude of his mentor Farragut's famous order "Damn the torpedoes! Go ahead!" against the Confederates at the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864.

The next morning the American squadron, led by Dewey's flag *Olympia*, found the Spanish battle line off Cavite and within 6 hours had destroyed or captured Montojo's fleet with no U.S. ships lost and 8 Americans wounded.¹³ As the two fleets engaged, American bands played the popular tune "There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" (which seemed to be played at any point music was called for, including the night before the battle).¹⁴ Although some hits were scored by Montojo's gunners, none were critical while in contrast the entire Spanish squadron was either sunk outright by American gunnery or so badly damaged, they were scuttled by their crews. Some eyewitness accounts of the battle reported some Spanish gun crews defiantly firing until they slipped beneath the waves as if the warships' talons spent their final moments clawing at the sky above.¹⁵ The subsequent duel with the Spanish shore guns near Cavite resulted in the white flag being raised over the batteries after

sustaining severe casualties from U.S. naval gunfire. It remains one of the most decisive and one-sided victories in U.S. Military history and deserves recognition similar to the triumph of the U.S. led coalition forces during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 over Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The naval victory over the old European global empire of Spain marked a new horizon for the United States and its reputation as a global power with a first-class fleet that would soon displace the Royal Navy as the primary guarantors of the global commons to this day.



Duel at Sangley Point Battery between 2 Spanish 5.9-inch coastal defense artillery guns guarding Cavite and armored cruiser *USS Olympia* and protected cruiser *USS Baltimore* on 1 May 1898 at 0735. The Spanish guns were sighted at 2,000 yards as the Spaniards did not believe the Americans would have the audacity to close to 1,500 yards allowing the misguided gun rounds to fall long over the American ships. The guns would eventually be silenced with no American loss. - Osprey Publishing, page 30.

After the Americans received the Philippines from the Spanish as a territorial concession in the signed of the 10 December 1898 Treaty of Paris, the U.S. realized that the entrance to Manila Bay must be defended with more sophistication and vigor than their previous opponents. The protection of

American interests in the Far East could be secured in a future battle against a serious naval contender by denying Manila Bay as a strategic anchorage through the proper placement of fortifications, coastal defense artillery, and mines. Japan and Germany came to mind as the primary threats that could attempt to force the bay entrance and threaten Manila, the Pearl of the Orient.

Congress authorized a massive modernization program to rebuild America's Civil War era coastal defenses due to the U.S. public hysteria revolving around the possible vulnerabilities of American ports and cities to attack by the Spanish fleet. The Coastal Artillery Corps was created in 1901 as a branch within the Army separate from the field artillery.¹⁶ More modern guns and battery dispositions accompanied by technological innovations and doctrine rapidly built up around continental American harbors and seaports including the Philippines, Panama Canal Zone, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii. The new doctrine centered around forcing an invading fleet to land forces away from the seacoast defenses and force a lengthy land drive to capture any target city or port, giving the Army time to prepare defenses and forcing the enemy to attack the first from the flanks which at that time would have been a tall order for anyone attempting to subdue the United States.¹⁷ This is the tactic the Japanese would have to employ in 1941-42 to eventually assault and silent the forts that guarded Manila Bay.

The 20th Century

To guard the entrance to Manila Bay, the Americans built their own "Gibraltar of the Far East" with it centered on Corregidor, affectionately known by those who would be stationed there as "The Rock." Just as the lack of coordinated sea and coastal defenses spelled rapid and decisive defeat for the Spanish in what was described by the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain John Hay as America's "Splendid Little War" of 1898, the robust buildup of America's defenses on 7 December 1941 successfully kept the Imperial Japanese Navy from entering Manila Bay. These successes were between January 22 and February 2 1942 during the Battle of the Points. At this time the Japanese

attempted to bypass the American defensive line and stage multiple amphibious landings, although due to the coastal defenses set up on the southern side of the Bataan Peninsula, the Japanese were repelled as they took heavy losses.¹⁸ Only after slowly chipping away at the American defenses over time could the Japanese land a successful amphibious assault on the coastal defenses.

After the long and bloody Luzon and Bataan Campaigns of 1941-42, the Japanese victory in the Philippines could not dislodge the stubborn Americans and their coastal defenses on the islands guarding the mouth of Manila Bay. Only by executing an amphibious assault did they finally clear final resistance and silence the American batteries. Amphibious assault infantry, siege artillery, and tanks, brought an end to the Manila forts on 6 May 1942 with Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright surrendering the remainder of all U.S. and Filipino forces in the Philippines to the Japanese.¹⁹ American forces under General Douglas MacArthur would not return until the landings on Leyte in October 1944.²⁰ The Filipino guerilla movement, which was the largest anti-Axis resistance of World War II other than the Polish Home Army, would continue the fight against the occupation throughout the archipelago until the Japanese surrender in September 1945.

The fact that Dewey could not hold Manila with a significant expeditionary force other than a loose band of sea detachment marines and bluejackets (sailors acting as infantry) signifies the importance a joint defense must have in stopping a naval force from projecting their forces onto land. Dewey's request for an expeditionary force to take Manila prompted the official American seizure of the Spanish colony, prompting a successful counter-insurgency campaign against the Filipino Insurrectos that would last until 4 July 1902.²¹ A naval force alone may be able to secure an open door to a landing, but without this amphibious force political control over a piece of ground is not sustainable. Target selection and prioritization when defending against an amphibious force is essential to any coastal battery when attempting to find, fix, and finish the enemy.



3-inch anti-aircraft gun and its crew on Corregidor, 1942.

The 21st Century

Today, the American-led alliance in the Pacific faces an increasingly aggressive challenge from the Communist Chinese and the armed wing of the Party, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The national dream of total communist reunification with the de facto independent and democratic island of Taiwan by force seems to be an ever-increasing possibility. With the possibility of conventional war between the great powers in the Pacific looming on the near horizon, the establishment of a joint, interlocking conventional deterrent is required to keep the peace. With the establishment of long-range precision land-based missiles, the PLA Rocket Force holds our modern equivalent of Dewey's Asiatic Squadron under a deadly umbrella as it inches closer to the Taiwan Strait if war were to break. To conventionally return the favor, the Joint Force must maintain stand-in forces armed with long range fires capability in the nearby islands within and in proximity to the First Island Chain to provide a credible first echelon of response against a possible PLA naval assault. To support major military operations in the Pacific Theater the Army and Marine Corps Coastal Artillery is required to serve as the land-based contribution to the Joint response against communist ambition. Not only are

the services required but advanced long range coastal defense rockets are the upgrade necessary to have an equal effect as in 1941. Bases on the coasts of Luzon and Okinawa are vital as battery locations for these systems to ensure a ring of coastal rocket defense artillery on the southern and northern shoulders of the approaches to the Taiwan strait.

As it stands the current battlefield lends the PRC the element of surprise on when the conflict will begin, yet all other opposing nations must stand ready to repel the first few hours of conflict from the Eastern shores of China. The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force will play a major role in the front lines but within the first island chain the reinforced line of combatants will be the U.S. Army and U.S. Marines at land-based locations with long range cruise missiles (LRCMs) and land-based artillery. Without this defensive positioning inter-mixed with the forward line of military assets, logistic supplies, maritime lines of communication and land-based ports or airfields could be prime targets for the PLA. Additionally, the presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines will also close the capability gap between the PLA and the Filipino military as well.



U.S. Army M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) firing during an exercise in the Philippines, 2023.

US Army and Marine Coastal Artillery batteries must maintain mobility and concealment in combat conditions and utilize decentralized command and

control to receive targeting information and properly engage the enemy's center of gravity, the amphibious assault forces. The M142 HIMARS and M270 MLRS mobile rocket artillery systems with long range naval strike missiles can create yet another layer for Communist planners to further throw the timetable and window of attack beyond the level of acceptable risk the party is willing to condone throughout the critical current decade of decision.²² With the proper mix of stand-in attack submarines, long range aviation, and coastal rocket artillery forces, conventional deterrence may prevail and provide an essential moment of pause for Chairman Xi and his associates in the Central Military Commission (CMC) in Beijing.

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