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The Battle of Leyte in the Pacific campaign of World War II was the amphibious invasion of the Gulf of Leyte in the Philippines by American and Filipino guerrilla forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, who fought against the Imperial Japanese Army in the Philippines led by General Tomoyuki Yamashita from 20 October - 31 December 1944. The operation code named King Two[4] launched the Philippines campaign of 1944-45 for the recapture and liberation of the entire Philippine Archipelago and to end almost three years of Japanese occupation.

For the US, capturing the Philippines was a key strategic step in isolating Imperial Japan's military holdings in China and the Pacific theater. It was also a personal matter of pride for MacArthur. In 1942, a month just before Japan forced the surrender of all USAFFE forces in the Philippines, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt had ordered MacArthur to leave the Philippines and organize the US forces gathering in Australia which were meant to relieve the USAFFE. Those relief forces were non-existent; Roosevelt's true intentions in ordering MacArthur to flee the Philippines had been to prevent his capture by the Japanese. Still, MacArthur had vowed that he would return to the Philippines. He repeatedly stated that it was a moral obligation of the US to liberate the Philippines as soon as possible.

From September to early October 1944, planes from the aircraft carriers of the US 3rd Fleet under Admiral William F. Halsey carried out several successful missions. During the Palau and Morotai campaigns, they destroyed some 500 enemy aircraft and 180 seagoing merchant ships. These successful actions in the Philippines, Okinawa and Formosa (now Taiwan), indicated that an invasion of the Philippines itself was now feasible.

Leyte, one of the larger Philippine islands, has numerous deep-water approaches and sandy beaches which offered opportunities for amphibious assaults and fast resupply. The roads and lowlands extending inland from Highway 1, that ran for 40 mi (64 km) along the east coast between Abuyog town to the north and the San Juanico Strait between Leyte and Samar Islands, provided avenues for tank-infantry operations, as well as suitable ground for airfield construction. American air forces based on Leyte could strike at enemy bases and airfields anywhere in the archipelago.

A heavily forested north-south mountain range dominates the interior and separates two sizable valleys, or coastal plains. The larger Leyte Valley extends from the northern coast to the long eastern shore and contains most of the towns and roadways on the island. The other, Ormoc Valley, situated on the west side, was connected to Leyte Valley by a roundabout and winding road, Highway 2; it ran from Palo town on the east coast, then west and northwest through Leyte Valley to the north coast, it then turned south and wound through a mountainous neck to enter the northern Ormoc Valley. This continued south to the port of Ormoc City, then along the western shore to Baybay town. The road then turned east to cross the mountainous waist of the island and it connected with Highway 1 on the east coast at Abuyog. Below these towns, the mountainous southern third of Leyte was mostly undeveloped. High mountain peaks over 4,400 ft (1,300 m), as well as the jagged outcroppings, ravines, and caves typical of volcanic islands offered formidable defensive opportunities. The timing late in the year of the assault would force combat troops and supporting pilots, as well as logistical units, to contend with monsoon rains.

Leyte's population of over 900,000 people—mostly farmers and fishermen—could be expected to assist an American invasion, since many residents already supported the guerrilla struggle against the Japanese in the face of harsh repression. Japanese troop strength on Leyte was estimated by US intelligence at 20,000; mostly of the 16th Division under Lieutenant General Shiro Makino.

Preliminary operations for the Leyte invasion began at dawn on 17 October with minesweeping tasks and the movement of the 6th Rangers who were accompanied by one company from the 21st Infantry Regiment toward three small islands in Leyte Gulf. Although delayed by a storm, the Rangers were on Suluan and Dinagat islands by 12:30. On Suluan, they dispersed a small group of Japanese defenders and destroyed a radio station, while they found Dinagat unoccupied. On both, the Rangers proceeded to erect navigation lights for the amphibious transports to follow three days later. The next day, the third island Homonhon, was taken without any opposition. Meanwhile reconnaissance by underwater demolition teams revealed clear landing beaches for assault troops on Leyte.

Following four hours of heavy naval gunfire on A-day, 20 October, Sixth Army forces landed on assigned beaches at 10:00. X Corps pushed across a 4 mi (6.4 km) stretch of beach between Tacloban airfield and the Palo River. 15 mi (24 km) to the south, XXIV Corps units came ashore across a 3 mi (4.8 km) strand between San Jos  and the Daguitan River. Troops found as much resistance from swampy terrain as from Japanese fire. Within an hour of landing, units in most sectors had secured beachheads deep enough to receive heavy vehicles and large amounts of supplies. Only in the 24th Division sector did enemy fire force a diversion of follow-up landing craft. But even that sector was secure enough by 13:30 to allow Gen. MacArthur to make a dramatic entrance[5] through the surf and announce to the populace the beginning of their liberation: "People of the Philippines, I have returned! By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil."

By the end of A-day, the Sixth Army had moved 2 mi (3.2 km) inland and controlled Panaon Strait at the southern end of Leyte. In the X Corps sector, the 1st Cavalry Division held Tacloban airfield, and the 24th Infantry Division had taken the high ground on Hill 522 commanding its beachheads. In the XXIV Corps sector, the 96th Infantry Division held the approaches to Catmon Hill. The 7th Infantry Division took the town of Dulag, which forced Gen. Makino to move his command post 10 mi (16 km) inland to the town of Dagami. The initial fighting was won at a cost of 49 killed, 192 wounded, and six missing.

The Sixth Army made steady progress inland against sporadic and uncoordinated enemy resistance

on Leyte in the next few days. The 1st Cavalry Division of Maj. Gen. Verne D. Mudge secured the provincial capital, Tacloban, on 21 October. On 23 October, Gen. MacArthur presided over a ceremony to restore civil government to Leyte. 1st and 2nd Cavalry Brigades initiated a holding action to prevent a Japanese counterattack from the mountainous interior, after which the 1st Cavalry was allowed to move on.

On the X Corps left, the 24th Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. Frederick A. Irving, drove inland into heavy enemy resistance. After days and nights of hard fighting and killing some 800 Japanese, the 19th and 34th Infantry Regiments expanded their beachhead and took control of the high ground commanding the entrance to the northern Leyte Valley. By 1 November, after a seven-day tank-infantry advance supported by artillery fire, both regiments had pushed through Leyte Valley and were within sight of the north coast and the port of Carigara. The next day, the 2nd Cavalry Brigade captured Carigara. In its drive through Leyte Valley, the 24th Division inflicted nearly 3,000 enemy casualties. These advances left only one major port on Leyte—Ormoc City on the west coast—under Japanese control.

From the XXIV Corps beachhead Gen. Hodge had sent his two divisions into the southern Leyte Valley, which already contained four airfields and a large supply center. Maj. Gen. James L. Bradley's 96th Infantry Division was to clear Catmon Hill, a 1,400 ft (430 m) promontory, the highest point in both corps beachheads, and used by the Japanese as an observation and firing post to fire on landing craft approaching the beach on A-day. Under cover of incessant artillery and naval gunfire, Bradley's troops made their way through the swamps south and west of the high ground at Labiranan Head. After a three-day fight, the 382nd Infantry Regiment took a key Japanese supply base at Tabontabon, 5 mi (8.0 km) inland, and killed some 350 Japanese on 28 October. Simultaneously two battalions each from the 381st and 383rd Infantry Regiments slowly advanced up opposite sides of Catmon Hill and battled the fierce Japanese resistance. When the mop-up of Catmon Hill was completed on 31 October, the Americans had cleared 53 pillboxes, 17 caves, and several heavy artillery positions.

On the left of XXIV Corps, the 7th Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. Archibald V. Arnold moved inland against four Japanese airfields between the small towns of Dulag and Burauen. On 21 October, the 184th Infantry took Dulag airfield, while the 32nd Infantry Regiment cleared both sides of the Calbasag River. The bloody fight for the airfields and village was decided by flying wedges of American tanks which cleared the way for the infantrymen. At Burauen, the 17th Infantry overcame fanatical but futile resistance from Japanese spider holes and suicidal attacks to stop the American tanks by holding explosives against their armored hulls. A mile north, 32nd Infantry soldiers killed more than 400 Japanese at Buri airfield. While two battalions of the 184th Infantry patrolled the corps' left flank, the 17th Infantry, with the 184th's 2nd Battalion attached, turned north toward Dagami, 6 mi (9.7 km) above Burauen. Using flamethrowers to root the enemy out of pillboxes and a cemetery, US troops captured Dagami on 30 October, which forced Gen. Makino to evacuate his command post further westward. Meanwhile, on 29 October, the 32nd Infantry's 2nd Battalion, preceded by the 7th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, moved 15 mi (24 km) south along the east coast to Abuyog for a probe of the area, and then over the next four days patrolled west through the mountains to bring Ormoc Bay under observation, all without opposition.

As the Sixth Army pushed deeper into Leyte, the Japanese struck back in the air and at sea. On 24 October, some 150 to 200 enemy aircraft approached American beachheads and shipping from the north. Fifty American land-based aircraft rose to intercept them, and claimed to have shot down between 66 and 84 of the attackers. Day and night air raids continued over the next four days, damaging supply dumps ashore and threatening American shipping. But by 28 October, counterattacks by US aircraft on Japanese airfields and shipping on other islands so reduced enemy air strength that conventional air raids ceased to be a major threat. As their air strength diminished, the Japanese resorted to the deadly kamikazes, a corps of suicide pilots who crashed their bomb-laden planes directly into US ships. They chose the large American transport and escort fleet that had gathered in Leyte Gulf on A-day as their first target and sank one escort carrier and badly damaged many other vessels.

A more serious danger to the US forces developed at sea. The Imperial Japanese Navy's high command decided to destroy US Navy forces supporting the Sixth Army by committing its entire remaining surface fleet to a decisive battle with the Americans. The Imperial Navy's plan was to attack in three major task groups. One, which included four aircraft carriers with few aircraft aboard, was to act as a decoy, luring the US 3rd Fleet north away from Leyte Gulf. If the decoy was successful, the other two groups, consisting primarily of heavy surface combatants, would enter the gulf from the west and attack the American transports.

On 23 October, the approach of the enemy surface vessels was detected. US naval units moved out to intercept, and the air and naval Battle of Leyte Gulf—the largest naval battle in the Pacific and also one of the largest naval battles in history—was fought from 23-26 October—the Japanese suffered a decisive defeat. Nonetheless by 11 December, the Japanese had succeeded in moving more than 34,000 troops to Leyte and over 10,000 short tons (9,100 t) of materiel, most through the port of Ormoc on the west coast, despite heavy losses to reinforcement convoys, including engagements at Ormoc Bay, because of relentless air interdiction missions by US aircraft.

The Japanese reinforcement presented severe problems for both Krueger and MacArthur. Instead of projected mopping up operations after clearing the east side of Leyte, the Sixth Army had to prepare for extended combat in the mountains on its western side, which included landing three reserve divisions on Leyte, this pushed MacArthur's operations schedule for the Philippine campaign back and the War Department's deployment plans in the Pacific.

The 1st Cavalry and 24th Infantry Divisions linked up at Carigara on 2 November highlighted the successful opening drive of the campaign. After 17 days of combat operations, the Sixth Army had all of its first and second phase objectives under control, as well as one third-phase objective, Abuyog. In addition, elements of the 7th Division had pushed across the island from the southern end of the XXIV Corps sector and controlled approaches to the town of Baybay on the west coast. Only one key area, Ormoc Valley on the west side of the island, remained to be taken.

To clear Ormoc Valley, Gen. Krueger planned a giant pincer operation, with X Corps forces moving south through the mountains and XXIV Corps units pushing north along the western shore. To overcome the expected increased resistance, especially in the mountain barrier to the north, Krueger mobilized his reserve forces, the 32nd and 77th Infantry Divisions, while MacArthur activated the 11th Airborne Division. The 21st RCT pulled out from the Panaon area to rejoin the 24th Division and were replaced by a battalion of the 32nd Infantry. On 3 November, the 34th Infantry Regiment moved out from west of Carigara to sweep the rest of the northern coast before turning south into the mountains. The 1st Battalion soon came under attack from a ridge along the highway. Supported by the 63rd Field Artillery Battalion, the unit cleared the ridge, and the 34th Infantry continued unopposed that night through the town of Pinamopoan, recovering numerous heavy weapons abandoned by the enemy, then halted at the point where Highway 2 turns south into the mountains.

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