

AMERICAN GUERRILLA

The Forgotten Heroics of Russell W. Volckmann

The Man Who Escaped from Bataan,
Raised a Filipino Army Against the Japanese,
and Became the True “Father”
of Army Special Forces

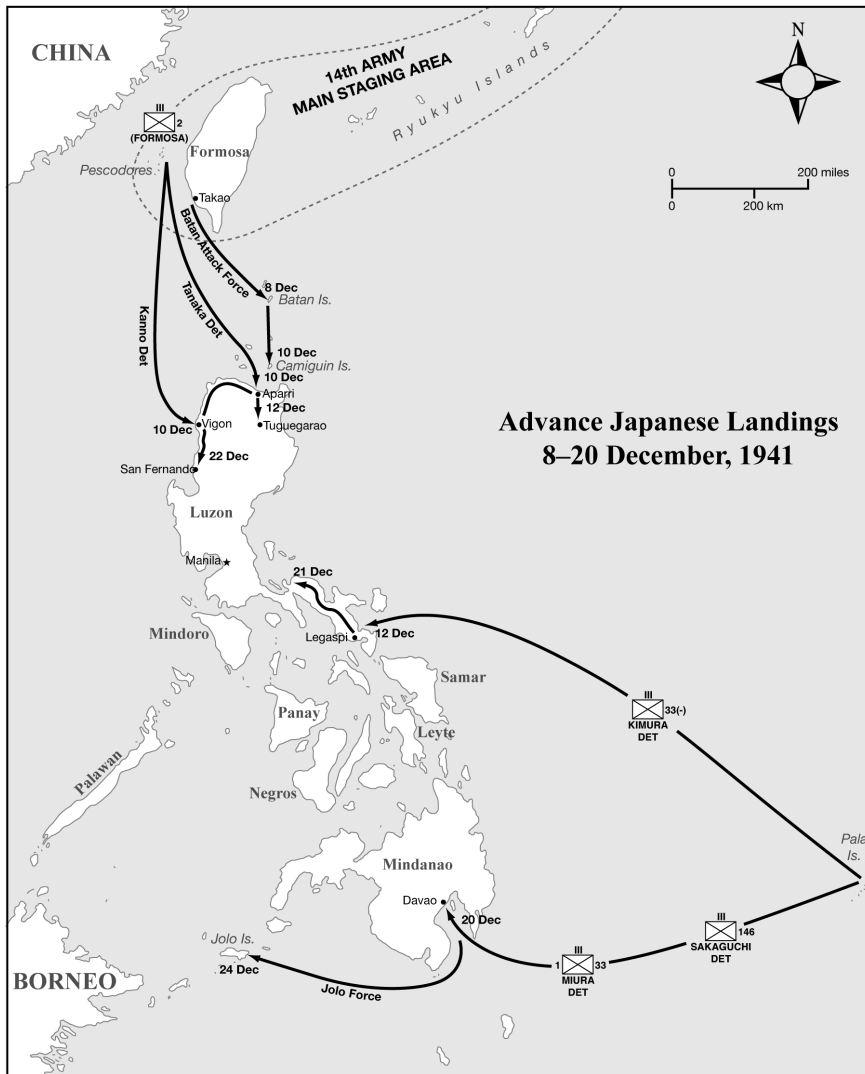
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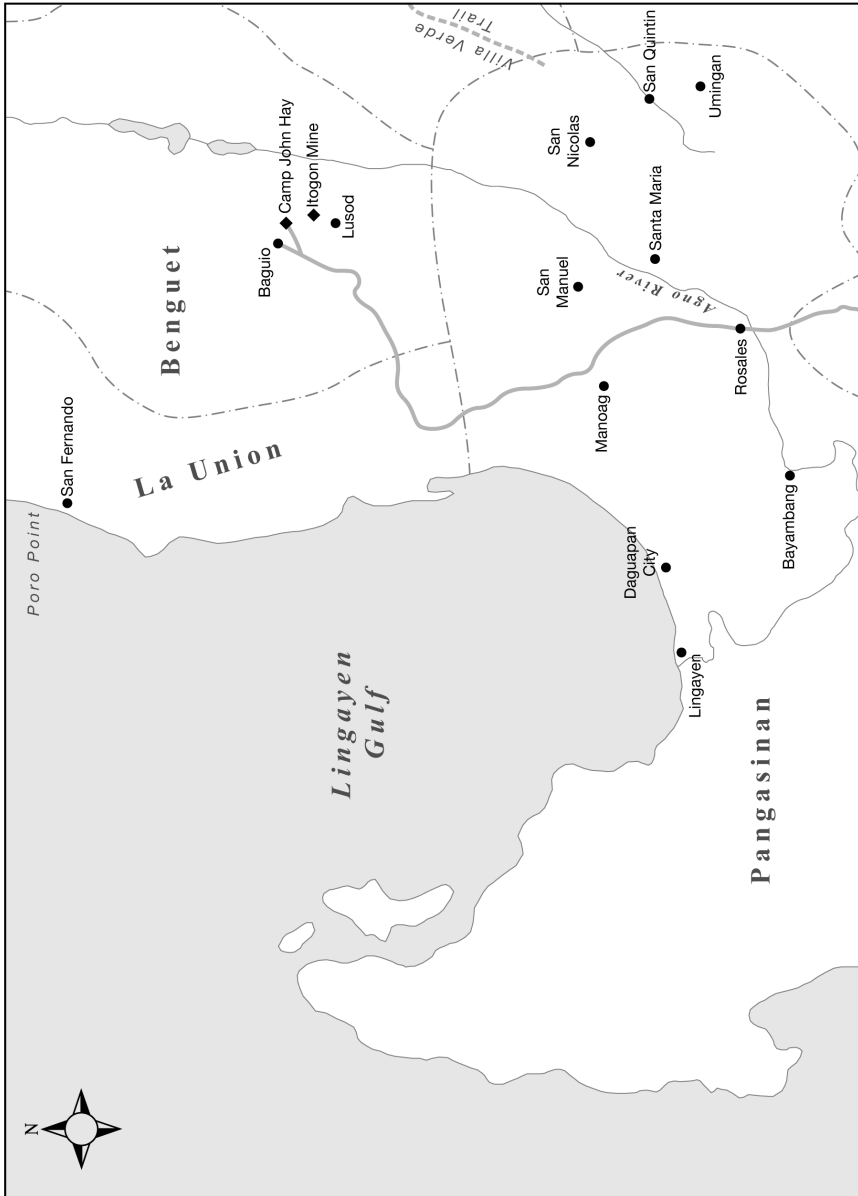
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Japanese invasion of the Philippines. The 14th Army landed simultaneously at Aparri and Vigan on 10 December 1941.



Map of Lingayen Gulf and the immediate vicinity on the western coast of Luzon. The Lingayen beach—from Dagupan City in the east, to the Agno River delta in the west—marks the site of the 11th Infantry's first defensive position.

CHAPTER 1

The Road to Luzon

The military career of Russell William Volckmann began on 12 June 1934, the day he graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point. Prior to his matriculation at the Academy, however, surprisingly little is known about Volckmann's early life. Born on 23 October 1911 in Clinton, Iowa, he was the eldest of three children born to William Volckmann and Hattie Mae Dodds. As the only son in the family, "Russ" enjoyed a childhood that was typical of most boys growing up in small-town Iowa. Boy Scout jamborees, competitive sports, and other vigorous activities punctuated the young Volckmann's life.¹

From an early age, Russell Volckmann possessed a remarkable fascination with all things military. At the tender age of six, during World War I, he volunteered his services as the unofficial "mascot" for C Company, 133rd Infantry of the Iowa National Guard. C Company's wartime responsibility was to guard the town's bridges over the Mississippi River. Clad in a child-sized khaki uniform and brandishing a toy rifle, Volckmann was a regular sight around the Company Headquarters. With his imagination firing on all cylinders, the young lad would engage in epic battles against pretend foes and cheer wildly as he vanquished one enemy after another.²

Developing an appetite for military history, Volckmann spent considerable time reading about the United States Army and its heroic leaders throughout the years. Indeed, by the end of his grammar school career, the young Volckmann knew that he had found his calling. In the spring of 1926, he entered the Shattuck Military Academy—now

Shattuck-St. Mary's—in Faribault, Minnesota, an all-boys military school well-steeped in the traditions of the Episcopal Church. Graduating from Shattuck in 1930, Volckmann wrote to Congressman Charles E. Swanson requesting a nomination to the United States Military Academy and entered West Point with the Class of 1934.³

Although he was an outstanding cadet at Shattuck, Volckmann did not repeat that same performance at West Point. Graduating 189th in a class of 250, he was a below average student—known more for his golfing and swimming prowess than his academic skills.⁴ Despite his class standing, however, he was an excellent soldier. Physically strong and mentally tough, he was drawn to the “rough-and-tumble” world of the Infantry.

On graduation day, as a newly minted Infantry officer, Volckmann requested a duty assignment in the Philippine Islands.⁵ A United States Commonwealth at the time, the Philippines offered the best of Army glamour. The tropical climate, expansive beaches, and Manila—the “Pearl of the Orient”—made it one of the most sought after assignments in the U.S. military. However, his class standing made him less competitive for such a popular assignment and he instead received orders to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, then home to the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division. After completing his tour of duty as a rifle platoon leader and company executive officer at Fort Snelling, Volckmann attended the Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the fall of 1937. Shortly thereafter, he received orders to Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Although his “dream assignment” still eluded him, “Fort Sam” proved to be just the stepping stone Volckmann needed.⁶

In the spring of 1940, after returning from field maneuvers with the 2nd Infantry Division—Fort Sam's tenant unit—Volckmann discovered that many of the junior officers in his regiment had received orders to Panama—another exotic outpost. Sensing an opportunity, Volckmann wrote a letter to the chief Adjutant General in Washington, D.C., asking for a reassignment to the Pacific. In doing so, he called attention to the fact that his name had been on the Philippine volunteer roster for the past six years.⁷ One week later, Volckmann received his orders.

By the time of Volckmann's arrival, the Philippines Islands were in the midst of their transition to full sovereignty. With the ratification of the *Tydings-McDuffie Act* in 1935, the United States had authorized a ten-year timeline for Philippine independence. By the time of its ratifi-

cation, however, *Tydings-McDuffie* was little more than a formality. For the past thirty years, the Philippines had enjoyed virtually limitless autonomy: Filipinos elected their own leaders, made their own laws in the Philippine Assembly, conducted free trade with other nations, and enjoyed the full protection of the United States military. Central to the *Tydings-McDuffie Act*, however, was a plan calling for the reorganization of the Philippine Islands' defense scheme.⁸ Since becoming an American territory in 1898, defense of the archipelago had been the exclusive province of the U.S. War Department. Now, the Commonwealth Government of the Philippines had to confront the challenge of creating its own defense structure.⁹

The first legislative action taken by the Philippine Assembly in this regard was ratification of the *National Defense Act* (1935). It called for a standing army of 10,000 men and a reserve component of nearly 400,000—anticipated to reach full strength by the summer of 1946. The attendant problem, however, was finding and training adequate personnel. Aside from the Philippine Scouts and the Philippine Constabulary, the Commonwealth had no military tradition upon which to build a standing army. The Philippine Scouts were an American Army unit in which most of the enlisted men and junior officers were Filipino. This well-trained force of only 10,000 men was the closest thing the Philippines had to an indigenous fighting force. The Philippine Constabulary, established in 1901, was the national police force, but their training and organization had always been military in nature.¹⁰

Calling on Washington for assistance, Philippine President Manuel Quezon enlisted the help of General Douglas MacArthur, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. Assuming the title "Military Advisor to the Commonwealth," MacArthur set about the task of creating a Philippine Army. To fill the immediate need for officers, MacArthur and President Quezon drew personnel from the Philippine Scouts and the Constabulary. By the end of 1939, despite the enormity of the task and massive budgetary constraints from the U.S. Congress, the Philippine Army had swollen its ranks to 4,800 officers, 104,000 reservists, and developed a standardized curriculum for infantry, field artillery, and coastal defense artillery.¹¹ However, until Quezon's army could fulfill its projected end-strengths, the U.S. military would continue to shoulder the burden of the Philippines' defense.

American forces in the Philippines fell under the jurisdiction of the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). Commanded by an Army General, USAFFE encompassed all U.S. military assets in the Philippine archipelago.¹² This included American ground forces, the Far East Air Force, the Asiatic Fleet, and the semi-autonomous Philippine Army. USAFFE's mission was simple: continue providing combat-capable units for the Commonwealth's defense and assume responsibility for training the Philippine Army.¹³

Despite these mission parameters, however, USAFFE remained in a deplorable state of combat readiness. In the midst of their isolationist fervor, Congress reallocated defense dollars away from any area that was not considered to be an imminent theater of war. As a result, USAFFE perennially subsisted on less than half of the money and equipment it needed for an adequate defense of the Philippines.¹⁴

Meanwhile, twenty-nine-year-old Captain Russell Volckmann loaded his family—wife Nancy and their young son, Russell Jr.—aboard the *USS Grant* en route to the Philippine Islands. It was the summer of 1940, and it had been nearly seven years since he put his name on the volunteer roster for the Philippines. Fresh from his tour of duty at Fort Sam Houston, Volckmann welcomed his new assignment to the Pacific. Orders initially assigned him as the commander of H Company, 31st Infantry Regiment. The 31st Infantry was an American Army unit suffering under the same budgetary constraints that had plagued the U.S. military for years. Still, the men of H Company were comparatively better equipped than their counterparts in the Philippine Army.¹⁵

Volckmann commanded H Company for nearly a year. During this time, he and his men drilled under the Emergency War Plan, which called for H Company to perform extensive maneuvers throughout Southern Luzon. The exercises gave him an intimate knowledge of the southern landscape. Unfortunately, it was knowledge Volckmann would never use, for in July 1941, he was reassigned to a new position in the Philippine Army.

The opportunity that lay before him was one seldom given to a young captain. The Philippine Army desperately needed senior-level staff officers for its newly activated divisions. Normally, the Army gave these billets to Majors and Lieutenant Colonels, but there were simply not enough of these high-ranking officers available to meet the demands for the Philippine defense project.

At first, Volckmann had only a cursory understanding of what his

new assignment entailed. He knew that the Philippine Army needed American officers for its higher echelons, and that this would likely be the norm until the Filipinos had sufficient training to take over the command structure. He also understood that Americans like himself would be the minority—all of the enlisted personnel and most of the company-grade officers would be Filipino. Finally, he had no indication where he would be assigned or what his new position might be.

United States Armed Forces—Far East (USAFFE)

Sector	Troop Assignment	
	U.S. Army	Philippine Army
North Luzon Force	Force HQ and HQ Co (US) 26th Cavalry (PS) One battalion, 45th Infantry (PS) Battery A, 23d FA (PS) Batteries B and C, 86th Field Artillery (PS) 66th Quartermaster Troop (PS)	11th Division 21st Division 31st Division 71st Division (used as directed by USAFFE)
South Luzon Force	Force HQ and HQ Co (US) HQ Battery, Battery A, 86th Field Artillery (PS)	41st Division 51st Division
Visayan-Mindanao Force	Force HQ and HQ Co (PS)	61st Division 81st Division 101st Division
Reserve Force	HQ Philippine Dept Philippine Division (less one battalion) 86th Field Artillery (PS) Far East Air Force	91st Division HQ, Philippine Army
Harbor Defenses	Headquarters 59th Coastal Artillery (US) 60th Coastal Artillery (AA) (US) 91st Coastal Artillery (PS) 92d Coastal Artillery (PS) 200th Coastal Artillery (US)	

Chart depicting all USAFFE land and air assets as well as the Philippine Army, 8 December 1941. *U.S. Army Center for Military History.*

It is unclear to what extent Volckmann knew of the Philippine Army's readiness issues prior to his reassignment—or if he was even aware of them at all. Reporting for duty, however, he discovered these inconvenient realities firsthand. At USAFFE Headquarters in Manila, Volckmann's new orders designated him the Executive Officer of the 11th Infantry Regiment, 11th Division (Philippine Army).^{*} Traditionally, it was *unthinkable* for a captain with only seven years of service to become the Executive Officer for an entire regiment. However, the Army's newfound exigencies had broken down the traditional rank and meritocracy barrier.

Arriving at Regimental Headquarters at Camp Holmes, near Baguio, Volckmann discovered just how problematic it would be to mold the 11th Infantry into a cohesive unit. Many of the soldiers spoke little to no English, and their native dialects would often differ from company to company. The language barrier, however, was the least of the regiment's problems. Filipino officers and enlisted soldiers had virtually no knowledge of basic military skills. What little they did know was either wrong, obsolete, or had no practical use in battle. To make matters worse, they carried outdated weapons to which they had no spare parts or ammunition.^{**} The Filipino soldier knew little beyond the basics of close order drill and a few marching commands. And most of the officers were political appointees who, in many cases, had less training than the men they were expected to lead.¹⁶

The 11th Infantry's Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) called for a headquarters (HQ) battalion and three combat battalions. The HQ battalion consisted of an administrative company, medical company, and a heavy-weapons company. The three combat battalions each contained four companies: three 100-man rifle companies and one 96-man machine-gun company. The total strength of the Regiment came to 1,850 officers and men. Aside from his rifle, the Filipino soldier had little to carry. He was issued only one uniform, one pair of shoes, a cotton blanket, and a pith helmet. Other items, such as bayonets and

^{*}An "Executive Officer" is the second in command of an Army unit. Volckmann's regiment was one of many that had been recently activated as part of the Philippine defense plan. A regiment normally consisted of two or three battalions, each containing four companies (a total strength of approximately 1,000 men).

^{**}The line companies were equipped with the M1917 Enfield rifle—a mechanically complex and troublesome rifle absent from U.S. inventories since World War I.

entrenching tools—necessities by American standards—were unheard luxuries in the 11th Infantry. Even the officers had no access to these items.¹⁷

Volckmann, undaunted by the challenges that lay before him, scoured the countryside for interpreters and began teaching basic infantry tactics to his men. Indeed, by the end of the summer, the soldiers of the 11th Infantry had mastered some basic commands in English and their tactical skills continued to grow. As the Filipinos celebrated their military benchmarks, however, the Japanese continued their march of conquest. In August 1941, as Japan tightened its grip over the Pacific, USAFFE evacuated all military dependents in the Philippines, including Volckmann's wife and son.* As per the Philippine Army Mobilization Plan, the 11th Infantry Regiment began building its primary defensive line along a five-mile stretch of coast on Lingayen Gulf.¹⁸

On 15 November 1941, Volckmann received a visit from General Douglas MacArthur, the newly appointed USAFFE commander.** MacArthur arrived at Lingayen early that morning to receive the Regiment's progress report. Volckmann politely voiced his concern over the unit's critical needs. The lack of adequate weapons, clothing, fire support, and transportation were among his chief complaints. The General appeared to appreciate the unit's handicap, but told Volckmann not to worry. Volckmann asked him, "Sir, how do you assess the situation? What are your plans?" MacArthur's response did not inspire him:

"Well, I'll tell you Russ, I haven't got anything really on paper, yet. I've got it all in my mind, but we really don't have to worry about things at this point. The Japanese have a second-rate navy and about a fourth-rate army, and we don't have to worry about them until around July [1942], or in the summer months, during the dry period."¹⁹

*Sending Nancy to her parent's home with Russell Jr. in tow, Volckmann promised to write to her as often as he could. The last letter that she received from him was dated March 1942, shortly before the surrender. It would be the last time Volckmann's family would hear from him until January 1945..

**MacArthur had retired in 1937 while serving as the military advisor to President Manuel Quezon. However, in July 1941, President Roosevelt recalled him to active duty and appointed him commander of all U.S. forces in the Philippines.

On the merits, MacArthur's assessment made virtually no sense. The Japanese and their "fourth-rate army" had conquered Manchuria in less than six months. Furthermore, this "second-rate" navy that MacArthur spoke of had taken on—and defeated—the best of Czar Nicholas's fleet in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Whatever the basis for MacArthur's assessment, the Japanese were about to prove him wrong.

Before the General departed later that afternoon, he confirmed that the 11th's mission was to defend the five-mile stretch of coast along the Lingayen Gulf. For the final weeks of November, units of the 11th Infantry Regiment continued to drill and maneuver in the sweltering heat. Although it was no easy task, the indigenous soldiers of the 11th Infantry were coming together as a cohesive military unit. Finally, after three months of continuous training, Volckmann earned a three-day pass for Thanksgiving weekend.²⁰

Relaxing at the officer's club in Baguio, however, Volckmann's weekend was cut short by an urgent phone call from General William Brougher, the 11th Division's commander. According to Brougher, every unit in the Philippines had been put on high alert and all weekend passes had been cancelled. Volckmann was ordered to return to his regiment that same day. With his weekend spoiled and not knowing why the alert had been called, Volckmann hastened himself back to Lingayen Gulf. Upon his arrival, he found no further news from either the Regimental or Division Headquarters.²¹ Could this have been just another drill?

The Army was quite fond of conducting these "drills," and Murphy's Law stipulated that an officer's weekend pass always coincided with one. However, the following morning, on Monday, 1 December, Volckmann learned that USAFFE Intelligence had detected a large Japanese naval convoy entering the South China Sea.²² Volckmann hoped that the alert would pass without incident. Perhaps the Imperial Japanese Navy was on its way to Borneo...or Indochina.