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American Caesar in Peril

By John McManus

General Douglas MacArthur had an unusual relationship with mortal danger. Decorated multiple times for bravery in World War I, conferred with the Medal of Honor for his courageous leadership during the disastrous Philippines campaign in 1941-1942, he also demonstrated a penchant for ghost writing misleading communiques that all too often seemed to place him at the front lines, risking the same perils and suffering the same privations as his combat troops. In truth, with the exception of the invasion of Los Negros and a manic couple of weeks during the Luzon campaign when MacArthur frequently roamed a battlefield whose terrain he knew intimately, he seldom visited the front, as was perfectly appropriate for a theater commander. Even so, the general's finest personal quality might well have been the steady, cool physical courage he always displayed under fire, a nobility of character sometimes curdled by his seemingly pathological need to exaggerate his already impressive exploits. The truth of his actions should have sufficed. In fact, MacArthur faced the most danger, by far, of any American theater commander in World War II. Nothing exemplifies this more than the Leyte campaign in the Philippines in the fall of 1944 where his remoteness from the front lines meant anything but safety for the general and his headquarters staffers.

Following a successful invasion of the island by four U.S. Army divisions, General MacArthur established his headquarters at Tacloban inside a spacious, two story, twelve room stucco house, formerly owned by Walter Scott Price, a 68-year-old Philippine-American War veteran who had settled on Leyte after he left the Army, married a local woman, and earned a fortune from a variety of enterprises, particularly road construction. In 1942, the Japanese had apprehended Price and sent him to an internment camp for Allied civilians at Santo Tomas University in Manila. With Price incarcerated, they had appropriated his comfortable house as an officer's club and headquarters before vacating it in the wake of the U.S. invasion. MacArthur opened his headquarters in the house on October 26, immediately after the U.S. Navy's victory in the famous Battle of Leyte Gulf made his permanent presence on Leyte feasible. Within a few days, a vast network of Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) headquarters sections followed the general to Tacloban, occupying nearby warehouses, office buildings, homes and two pair of prefabricated structures hastily erected by engineers. "Our communications center was located in what had once been an automobile repair shop," Major John McKinney, an officer in SWPA's sophisticated signals section, later wrote of one typical headquarters building. "It had a concrete floor and a roof that didn't leak, two enormous assets in Tacloban."

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At the Price house, MacArthur settled into the master bedroom where Walter and his wife Simeona had once slept. A private shower room and porch, for the general's use only, adjoined the bedroom. From his new home MacArthur ran the campaign, seldom leaving the building. The lousy roads, oceans of mud, deplorable conditions and remoteness of the battle areas many miles to the west precluded any possibility of front line visits. Indeed, when Major General Roscoe Woodruff, the commander of the 24th Infantry Division, wanted to visit one of his forward units, it took him three back breaking hours slogging through mud "the consistency of thick pancake batter," just to get there and another three to get back to his headquarters. "It was a good thing I didn't realize what I was getting into," he wrote. "I think I was as tired as I have ever been. Although I thought I was in pretty good condition physically, I was quite stiff for three or four days." Any such similar journey for MacArthur, who was eleven years older than Woodruff, would simply have been out of the question. At Tacloban, the mere act of crossing the street could mean inundation in mud. "The rains came almost every day and the streets in this sleepy little town were ankle deep in mud," McKinney commented. "We had wooden sidewalks that kept us out of the mud as long as we stayed on one side of the street and kept within a single block. If we had to cross the street, we were in trouble."

Ironically, MacArthur's distance from the fighting afforded him little security, an unhappy byproduct of the ongoing contest for control of Leyte's airspace. The Japanese knew that MacArthur lived in the Price House and made repeated attempts to bomb it, subjecting the general to the most intensive bombardment—and by far the most dangerous—since his unhappy tenure on Corregidor almost three years earlier. With almost monotonous frequency, Japanese medium bombers and fighters raided Price House and the surrounding blocks, usually at night, provoking a fierce response from American antiaircraft gunners and fighter planes. For some in the general's entourage, the experience reprised terrible memories from the unhappy days when the Japanese defeated MacArthur's forces in the Philippines. "Those who sweated out the events of Corregidor were different from those who did not," wrote SWPA stenographer Paul Rogers, promoted by now to warrant officer after more than three years of serving the general as an enlisted aide. "All of us had given ourselves up for dead. We had no hope of salvation. When we were confronted with Tacloban, it was like being sent back to the tomb. It was not the bombs of Tacloban we suffered, but the reenactment of memories we had tried desperately to forget."

If MacArthur shared any of these emotions, he suppressed them well. He survived multiple near misses with scarcely any hint of concern, even as the bombs inflicted numerous military and civilian casualties throughout the area. During one conference with senior commanders, low flying Japanese planes strafed the area and antiaircraft batteries blasted at them furiously. "The noise was terrific but the Big Chief went right on talking," an

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approving Lieutenant General Robert Eichelberger, commander of the Eighth Army, wrote to his wife Emma. The preternaturally courageous Eichelberger, who loved to lead from the front, and who would prove himself to be among the finest American ground commanders of the war, later added, "Since the Supreme Commander was deaf to the violence around him, the rest of us maintained the elaborate pretense that we couldn't hear any bombs falling either." On one occasion, enemy ordnance smashed through the ceiling and wall of an adjoining bedroom to MacArthur's, but did not explode. Another time, a pair of bullets shot by a strafing enemy fighter barely missed him as he stood shaving in front of a mirror; his only reaction was to ask an aide to dig one of the bullets out so that he could give it to his young son Arthur as a souvenir. MacArthur even came close to death from friendly fire when American antiaircraft shells hit the house. One American round zipped into his room and landed on a couch opposite his bed. MacArthur discreetly asked the antiaircraft commander to have his crews raise the barrels of their guns a bit.

Always, he comported himself with an intrepid, almost awe inspiring calm. "He thought that nobody ever made a bullet which could kill him," Frederick Marquardt, a visitor from the Office of War Information, later marveled. "The man had complete courage, there's no question about that." To Turner Catledge, a war correspondent who observed him first hand at Tacloban, "he seemed to be disdainful of air raids, refusing to interrupt a conversation or to rise from his bed to seek shelter during an attack." Sergeant Vincent Powers, a SWPA staffer who worked in a building immediately across the street from MacArthur's bedroom porch, often saw the general react to the raids with just this sort of contemptuous reserve. "Day and night he could be seen on his porch. Should the air alert sound, he would knock the glowing ashes from his pipe, stand by the rail in the center of the porch, peer into the sky, watching the red tracers and ninety mm's [millimeters] blast at the enemy. The raid over, he would resume his pacing."

Seemingly, every evening the raiders arrived as he ate dinner with an array of visitors, headquarters intimates, and subordinate commanders. "His was to preside at the dinner table with eight or ten generals and Larry [Lehrbas] and me," wrote Lieutenant Colonel Roger Egeberg, a SWPA physician who had by now become perhaps MacArthur's closest confidante. "The Japanese ritual was to try to bomb our house at that time." Heedless of the hair raising sounds of screeching engines, whistling bombs and strafing, MacArthur hardly batted an eye, eating or holding forth with a monologue as if hosting a dinner party, safe and secure in his home. With this example set, the others at the table could do little else but parrot MacArthur, though inwardly most wanted to flee in terror. "It was a terribly long wait," Egeberg recalled, "to see who would receive the bomb, our dinner table, our friends near us, or an empty street. Then the explosion, usually within a hundred yards, sometimes terrifyingly loud, sometimes muffled." In the wake of the raids, Egeberg

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often left the table to care for the wounded. Everyone else stayed put, unless mercifully called away for some official duty.

Amid the frequent bombings and the dreariness of the long, bloody campaign, MacArthur enjoyed few pleasures beyond an occasional peaceful meal or some personal reading time. He received good news on December 16 of his promotion to five star rank, along with William Leahy, George Marshall, Chester Nimitz, Ernest King, Hap Arnold, and Dwight Eisenhower. He was particularly satisfied to learn that Congress had afforded him seniority over Ike, against whom he nursed a petty, jealous resentment from the bygone days when Eisenhower had worked for MacArthur as one of his key aides. MacArthur employed a local silversmith to fashion a unique circular five star emblem made from American, Dutch, Australian and Filipino coins that embodied Allied partnership in the Pacific. Effectively isolated in the narrow world of his Tacloban headquarters, he so yearned for outside contact that one day he enthusiastically received two convalescing 11th Airborne Division paratroopers who showed up uninvited and demanded to know why their outfit did not receive more official recognition for its fine combat record. The complaint was common among many units in SWPA, where almost all publicity focused, by design, on the commander. MacArthur fielded their questions graciously. He showed them his situation map of the entire island where he highlighted the role of the 11th Airborne and explained that he did not mention them in his dispatches because he did not want the enemy to know of the division's presence. At his request, they pointed to the location of their company. He then asked them to convey to everyone from division commander Major General Joseph Swing downward his deep appreciation and awareness of the vital part the division was playing in the Leyte fighting. "With a mixed feeling of eminence and satisfaction, and with the feeling that their mission had been most successfully accomplished, the men departed," the division historian wrote of the cordial meeting. "They had proved to themselves that their outfit was not forgotten; they had shown, at least to themselves, that the only way to find out things was to ask the man who knows."

In total, MacArthur spent just over two months at the embattled Price House headquarters in Tacloban, from October 26, 1944 to January 4, 1945, when he boarded USS *Boise* for the invasion of Luzon. He was anything but safe aboard the venerable cruiser. The Japanese launched a wave of kamikaze attacks against the Allied invasion fleet, damaging over two dozen ships, killing 503 sailors and also Lieutenant General Herbert Lumsden, the British liaison to MacArthur's headquarters who perished in a strike against the battleship USS *New Mexico*. Fortunately, *Boise* and its famous passenger remained unscathed. By the time MacArthur returned to Luzon, a place he thought of as home, he had faced more danger, by air, sea, and land than all other theater commanders combined. Whatever failings this enigmatic, conniving, vexing man might have had, a dearth of courage was not among them.¹

1. Frederic Marquardt, oral history, no date, Record Group 32, Oral History #34
Turner Catledge, interview with Dr. D. Clayton James, March 25, 1971, Record Group 49, Miscellaneous File, Part II
Dr. Paul Rogers, letter to Dr. Roger Egeberg, circa 1981, Record Group 46, Box 1, Folder 7, Paul Rogers Papers
John McKinney unpublished memoir, no pagination, all at Douglas MacArthur Memorial Archives, Norfolk, VA
Roscoe Woodruff, unpublished memoir, pp. 60-61, Roscoe Woodruff Papers, Box 1, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS
Sarwell Meniano, "Tacloban's Price Mansion Brings Back World War II Memories," *Philippine News Agency*, October 18, 2019, at www.pna.gov.nh
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Among other American theater commanders, only Joseph Stilwell during his famous trek out of Burma and the siege of Myitkinya, faced any real personal danger, though not nearly to the same degree as MacArthur.