



The Liberation of Panay

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The re-conquest of Central Visayas by the Allied Forces, beginning with Panay Island on March 18, 1945 was motivated by their strategic value and concern of leaving their huge populations at the mercy of Japanese Occupation forces. The aim was to capture the Visayan waters' navigation routes, which would reduce the travel time of US supply ships navigating between Leyte, site of General Douglas MacArthur's return in October 1944, and Luzon, where the campaign of liberation by Filipino guerillas and US forces, was already in full swing.



The Allied Forces' retaking of Panay on 18th of March 1945, capped the liberation campaign begun three years earlier by the local guerillas. Practically the whole island was already a liberated zone, courtesy of the 6th Military District, (around 20,000-strong towards end of the war), under the command of Colonel Macario Peralta, Jr. In truth, from the early days of the Japanese occupation, much of Panay had been under the joint administration of Governor Tomas Confesor, who was Panay's governor during the Commonwealth era, and of the resistance fighters led by Col. Peralta.



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In October 1944, Peralta received an order from General MacArthur to prepare Panay Island for the landing of US forces there on March 18, 1945. Preparation involved two parts - intensification of gathering of intelligence, particularly on changes of the enemy's movements and positions, which were crucial to the Allied landing plan; and the continued harassment of the enemy in order to disorient him and limit his movements. The 6th Military District carried out the order until the final phase of the struggle began in January 1945. From Lawa-an, Antique, the 6th MD moved its headquarters to Cabudian, Duenas in Iloilo Province to begin preparations for the last battle with the enemy.

The guerrillas' primary targets were the Tiring landing field, which had been garrisoned by some 250 Japanese soldiers, and the city proper of Iloilo itself, with more than 2,500 enemy troops scattered all over the city. A radius of obstacles, however, comprising of garrisons, pillboxes, breastworks, etc. - existed around the city. These were the challenges the guerrillas had to overcome before they could capture their targets.



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Full-scale attack began in early February, with units of the 6th MD approaching from various directions, north, as well as from northwest of the beach, and from the north road. Engagements took place in sundry sites: sitios Jibaoan and Takas in barrio Mandurriao, Iloilo City and the towns the towns of Pavia Oton, Molo, San Miguel, La Paz, and Tigbauan, the last two with Japanese garrisons.

Jaro, where the Japanese had erected garrisons in several places and buildings (at Barrio Balantang; at the Jaro Municipal building, at the Javelosa and Charito buildings) was the site of heavy fighting - also occurring along the Jaro River, in Barrio Buhang; Dungon Creek, etc.). Several thoroughfares (Jaro-Iloilo, Tigbauan-Oton, Jaro-Pavia, and Takas-Jaro roads) saw the guerrillas scoring against the enemy, thus obstructing flow of enemy reinforcements and supplies.

The sandy stretch from Dumangas in Iloilo to Capiz' northern area, was also guarded by the guerrillas, to prevent the enemy from attacking guerrilla positions in Jaro.



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Fighting also took place in several places in Capiz- Culasi and Lantayan, Tinigban on Poo Hill; and in Antique- in the capital of San Jose de Buenavista, where the enemy had a stronghold.

On Guimaras Island, 150 guerrillas assaulted the municipal building, which had been converted into Japanese barracks. Meanwhile, the garrison at Bagongon Point on Pan de Azucar Island, northeast of Iloilo, was captured by the guerrillas on February 19.

The battle for Panay extended until the end of February with enemy casualties exceeding 700. The battle resumed around 7th of March, after Peralta's return from MacArthur's headquarters in Leyte. This time, the guerrillas had air support from US planes.

In the early morning of March 18, US naval forces arrived off the southern waters of Panay. Immediately, minesweeping operations were conducted, under the protective firing from destroyers, directed at the enemy positions on the island. Soon, troops of the 40th Division led by Major General Rapp Brush, of the United States' Eighth Army (under the command of General Eichelberger), landed on the beach of Tibauan, 22 kilometers to the west of Iloilo City. Instead of meeting the enemy, however, they received a rousing welcome by Filipinos, civilians and fighters alike, led by Col. Peralta and elements of the 6th Military District.



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Meanwhile, with US ground forces advancing into Iloilo City, and the blocking operations of the 6th MD, the Japanese forces were forced to abandon their last stronghold and retreat to the hinterlands. Mop-up operations were later conducted on the rest of Panay, Guimaras and other islands.

On the 20th March, General Eichelberger and his contingent entered a city freed of enemy troops, but welcomed by crowds of cheering Filipinos. On 22 March 1945, General MacArthur officially declared Iloilo City liberated.