

Lieutenant Colonel Edwin P. Ramsey, USA-Ret.

By Bob Seals

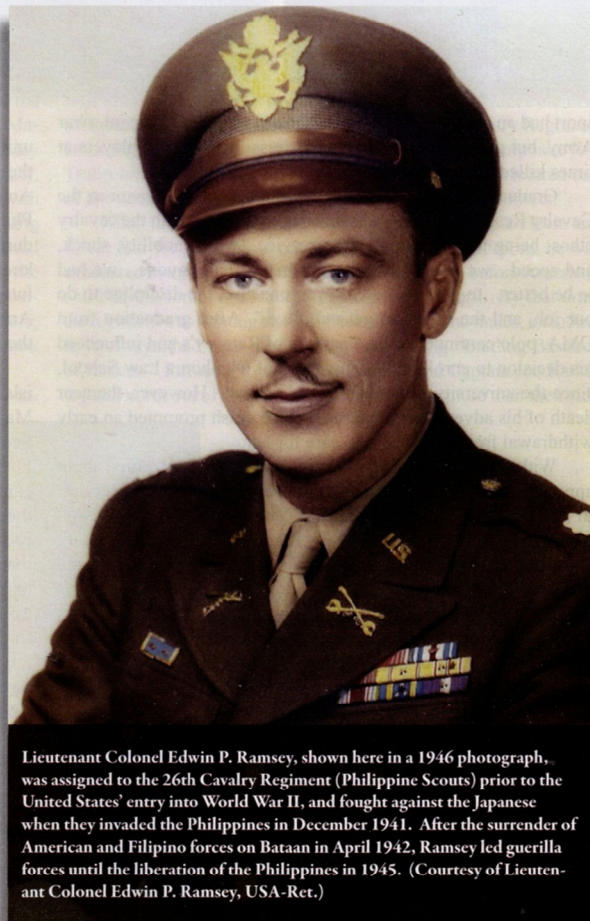
"I brought my arm down and yelled to my men to charge. Bent nearly prone across the horses' necks, we flung ourselves at the Japanese advance, pistols firing full into their startled faces. A few returned our fire, but most fled in confusion, some wading back into the river, others running madly for the swamps. To them we must have seemed a vision from another century, wild-eyed horses pounding headlong; cheering, whooping men firing from the saddles."

This meeting engagement on Bataan at the village of Morong, led by then First Lieutenant Edwin P. Ramsey on 16 January 1942, was to be the last horse-mounted charge by a U.S. Army cavalry unit. Surviving early days of defeat and disaster, Ramsey was destined to have one of the most challenging and interesting wartime careers of the Pacific Theater during World War II. His four years of combat, mostly spent behind Japanese lines, reads like a pulp fiction novel or a Hollywood screenplay. An illustrative example of an interwar generation of hard-charging Cavalry officers who worked hard and played hard, Ramsey rose to the occasion after the Japanese invasion of the Philippines began in December 1941. Refusing to surrender on Bataan in April 1942, he led tens of thousands of guerrillas on Luzon in one of the most successful resistance campaigns of the war against ruthless Imperial Japanese Army occupation forces. His remarkable career encompassed the end of several storied American military institutions, including the Philippine Scouts and the Army's horse cavalry, while helping to lay the doctrinal foundation of an Army branch not born until after the war, the U.S. Army Special Forces.

Edwin Price Ramsey was born in Carlyle, Illinois, on 9 May 1917, but spent his formative years growing up in Kansas. Visits to an uncle's farm awakened a love for horses and riding and gave him direction in life. Like so many others during the Great Depression, Ramsey's family experienced significant economic hardship, an existence further exacerbated by the tragic death of his father. Deeply concerned about his aimlessness, his mother suggested that the teenaged Ramsey enroll in the Oklahoma Military Academy (OMA) in Claremore, Oklahoma. Popularly known at the time as the "West Point of the Southwest," OMA, by 1936, was a state-sponsored institution with a highly rated and respected senior level Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program, one of only three junior colleges in the nation to have a branch-specific cavalry program. OMA also had one of the best intercollegiate polo squads in the nation, the "Flying Cadets," with legendary local humorist and resident Will Rogers being one of the collegiate team's biggest supporters.

In a timeless military school rite of passage, the young

Ramsey was to be sorely tested at OMA by the "rabbit" system and overzealous upperclassmen armed with wooden paddles. Fighting back against bullies and the inevitable hazing of the day, Cadet Ramsey earned the respect of his peers and superiors alike by refusing to inform upon others. Learning to properly ride and care for horses, he became a superb horseman and a skilled member of the OMA varsity polo team. "Polo was the game I was made for," according to Ramsey. It also served as the perfect venue for training would-be cavalry officers in the finer arts of decision making, teamwork, and aggressive leadership. This ancient



Lieutenant Colonel Edwin P. Ramsey, shown here in a 1946 photograph, was assigned to the 26th Cavalry Regiment (Philippine Scouts) prior to the United States' entry into World War II, and fought against the Japanese when they invaded the Philippines in December 1941. After the surrender of American and Filipino forces on Bataan in April 1942, Ramsey led guerilla forces until the liberation of the Philippines in 1945. (Courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Edwin P. Ramsey, USA-Ret.)



FAR LEFT: Prior to entering the Army, Ramsey attended the Oklahoma Military Academy from 1936 to 1938. (Courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Edwin P. Ramsey, USA-Ret.)

LEFT: First Lieutenant Ramsey is shown here in this 1941 photograph atop his mount Brynn Awrynn while serving with the 26th Cavalry (Philippine Scouts). In addition to serving as a cavalry trooper in the 26th, Ramsey played on the regimental polo team, considered one of the best in the Army in the 1930s and early 1940s. (Courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Edwin P. Ramsey)

sport had an undeniable hold upon the officer corps of the interwar Army, but polo was a dangerous mistress indeed, with players at times killed or crippled.

Graduating from OMA in 1938 as a second lieutenant in the Cavalry Reserve, Ramsey was thoroughly imbued with the cavalry ethos, being the "...elite...of the service, [with] mobility, shock, and speed...we knew that we were better than anyone...we had to be better...to get in ahead of everyone else, the discipline to do our job, and the brains to get out alive." After graduation from OMA, polo continued to be a passion of Ramsey's and influenced his decision to enroll in the University of Oklahoma Law School, since the university had an active polo squad. However, the near death of his adventurous sister in a plane crash prompted an early withdrawal from law school to care for her.

With global war already a reality, and deeply concerned about appeasement in Europe, Ramsey volunteered for active duty service. In 1940, the day of the horse had not yet ended in the Cavalry. Assigned to 2d Squadron, 11th Cavalry Regiment (Horse), in February 1941, he was stationed at Camp Moreno, California, a mountain and cold weather training site near the border with Mexico. With his considerable horsemanship skills, Ramsey was assigned duties as a remount officer, training both raw mounts and draftees who were beginning to flesh out the skeleton of the woefully under-strength Regular Army cavalry regiments of the day. Many vestiges of the Old Army remained. "We wore riding breeches and high boots, and our round campaign hats were tilted at a meaningful rake across one eye, the strap stretched beneath the chin. I was twenty-three years old, proud and invincible," remembered Ramsey.

Less than enthused with the cold weather of Camp Moreno, Ramsey jumped when volunteers were requested for the 26th Cavalry Regiment (Philippine Scouts) in the then Commonwealth of the Philippines, commonly known at the time as the "Country Club of the Army." Another plus for Ramsey was the fact that the 26th Regiment also had one of the finest polo teams in the Army.

The 26th Cavalry Regiment was, in many respects, the elite unit of one of the most unique institutions of the interwar Army, the Philippine Scouts. Formed in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Scouts were authorized by the Army's Philippine Department in 1901 and proved to be extremely effective during pacification operations throughout the islands, utilizing their knowledge of the native language and local geography. Organized into company-sized units with Filipino enlisted personnel and U.S. Army officers, the Scouts were tough and reliable, with two earning the Medal of Honor.

After World War I, Philippine Scouts were the mainstay of the islands' meager defenses against both internal and external threats. Many Scouts served lengthy enlistments, and it was common for Scouts to serve in the same company or troop for thirty years. Formed in 1922, the 26th Cavalry, whose motto was *Our Strength is in Loyalty*, was one of the remaining horse cavalry regiments in the Army in 1941. Organized into two squadrons of three troops each, with service and machine gun troops, the 26th was smaller than horse cavalry regiments stateside, and did not possess mortars or antitank weapons. The regiment did, however, possess scout cars and motorized assets, including four-ton semitrailers or large trucks for long-range transport of mounts and men. The 26th was relatively well-equipped in small arms, with troopers armed with the modern semi-automatic M1 Garand rifle, the M1928A1 Thompson submachinegun, and the M1911A1 pistol.

Reporting for duty at Fort Stotsenburg, north of Manila near Clark Field in the foothills of the Zambales Mountains, Lieutenant Ramsey was assigned to Troop G, 2d Squadron. In addition to Ramsey, the small troop consisted of a captain, one sergeant, a corporal, and twenty-five privates. It was a rather enjoyable colonial army life on the small post in the summer of 1941. With comfortable quarters, friendly native servants, and dress uniforms required for dinner, it was more akin to "Gunga Din" than the twentieth century.

A serious threat, however, hung over the islands—the nearby

Empire of Japan. With war in Asia now in its tenth year, indications abounded of a possible strike by Japan to take the Philippines. By 1941, reconnaissance over-flights, espionage, and aggressive moves elsewhere in Asia had convinced senior American military leaders to take precautionary measures in the islands. These included sending dependents home, mobilizing the nascent Philippine Army, and shipping additional air and ground reinforcements westward to bolster anemic island defenses. Retired General Douglas MacArthur was recalled to active duty and given command of the new United States Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). From the Philippines, MacArthur informed the War Department that "Military forces maintained here by the United States are entirely inadequate...little more than token symbols."

Inadequate or not, by the fall of 1941, USAFFE and the 26th Cavalry Regiment were training hard and preparing for an uncertain future. Regimental officers were now fully engaged with exacting drills and maneuvers during the day, followed by Tagalog classes in the evening. Forces assigned to the islands had a daunting task of defending some 7,000 islands and 11,000 miles of coastline with 22,000 troops, with 12,000 of those crack Philippine Scouts.

Appropriately enough, there was to be time for a final pre-war polo match at Fort Stotsenburg on 7 December 1941 between the Manila Polo Club and the regiment, with Ramsey playing on the four-man home squad. With North Luzon Force Commander Major General Jonathan M. "Skinny" Wainwright as umpire, Ramsey rode well in a losing cause. After a memorable post-match party, Ramsey began World War II on Sunday morning, 8 December with a considerable hangover. Confusion abounded that first morning of war. Nevertheless, Colonel Clinton A. Pierce, the regimental commander, had the presence of mind to immediately move the 26th from its garrison to preplanned dispersed battlefield positions. Avoiding the chaos of the Japanese air attack on Clark Field, Ramsey and his platoon moved across Luzon to the east and took up positions at Baler Bay.

Two days later the Japanese 14th Army, led by General Ma-

saharu Homma, began landing at Lingayen Gulf and drove south towards Manila. In a classic cavalry delaying mission, the 26th Cavalry Regiment attempted to slow the Japanese advance, giving time for American and Filipino forces to sidestep into the Bataan Peninsula. South of the invasion beaches, the regimental S-3 recalled that "It was a wonderful thing, to watch...soldiers who'd never before seen a gun fired in anger, calmly choosing their positions, adjusting their rifle slings, and proceeding to pick off Japs as though they were silhouette targets on the rifle range."

By the time the last bridge had been blown over the Layac River leading into Bataan, the 26th Cavalry was roughly down to half strength, with only one composite squadron remaining with "...men haggard and showing signs of malnutrition...horses that were left could scarcely walk." With a defensive line now established across the peninsula, Ramsey and the regiment were ordered to the west coast of Bataan to support Wainwright's I Corps and the Philippine Army's 1st Division. Volunteering to remain and guide a replacing troop, Ramsey, on his mount Bryn Awryn, entered Army history on 16 January 1942 when he led the last horse-mounted cavalry charge in U.S. Army history. Ordered to take point by Wainwright, who recognized Ramsey from December's polo match, he rode north on reconnaissance, leading a horse mounted column. At the small village of Morong, Ramsey's platoon charged into an advance element of Japanese Colonel Yunosuke Watanabe's 122d Infantry Regiment and succeeded in driving the infantry back until the composite E-F Troop arrived. Ramsey joked years later that he had violated one of the three basic principles of soldiering—"never volunteer."

After the charge, Ramsey was awarded the Purple Heart and Silver Star for gallantry in action. Wounded and jaundiced, he was evacuated to a jungle hospital but rejoined the 26th before American and Filipino forces on Bataan surrendered on 9 April. By that time, the regiment was fighting on foot, since all horses and mules, including Bryn Awryn, had been used to feed the starving "Battling Bastards of Bataan." Refusing to surrender, Ramsey and Captain Joe Barker walked north out of the peninsula, carrying little more than their side



On 16 January 1942, Ramsey led the last horse-mounted cavalry charge in U.S. Army history when he and his platoon from the 26th Cavalry (Philippine Scouts) attacked elements of the Japanese 122d Infantry Regiment near the village of Morong, as depicted in John Solie's print, *U.S. Cavalry's Last Charge*. (U.S. Cavalry Association)

arms. Uncertain about their future, or legal status, the assumption by both was that they would be dead in ninety days or less.

As officers now in search of a command, the two were able to eventually link up with Colonel Claude Thorp, a USAFFE staff officer sent north by MacArthur to organize resistance against the Japanese before the fall of Bataan. Luzon had been divided into four areas of operations, with Barker and Ramsey given Manila north to Lingayen Gulf. This command was designated the East Central Luzon Area Force. The cavalry tenets of shock, mobility, surprise, and a borrowed copy of Mao Tse-Tung's work on guerrilla warfare guided the "war criminals" as they began their efforts. Challenges were plentiful. Intelligence gathering was the first priority as underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla forces had to be established in East Central Luzon. Getting information out of the islands was a challenge, but this improved considerably after contact was made with the Allied Intelligence Bureau. Ramsey's "first real contact with the outside world had come from MacArthur personally," with Ramsey, instructed via radio message, to remain on Luzon and continue his efforts. By 1943, Ramsey, now promoted, had assumed command of the force after the capture of Barker in Manila. Moving up to number two on the Japanese counter-intelligence kill or capture list, with a price of \$200,000 on his head, Ramsey forged an effective resistance force with more than 38,000 men and women under his command.

Service with the guerrilla forces on Luzon was fraught with danger. Ramsey fought both Communist Huks and Japanese troops, escaped an assassination attempt, underwent an emergency appendectomy without anesthesia, and organized resistance efforts in Manila. By the fall of 1944, an estimated 250,000 resistance fighters, organized into eleven major groups, were conducting effective combat operations against the Japanese occupation troops.

With the landings on Leyte Island on 20 October 1944, MacArthur and the United States finally "returned" to the Philippines. The information provided by the guerilla forces, such as those led by Ramsey, was vital to MacArthur's return. On 9 January 1945, U.S. forces invaded Luzon. Army official histories credit an "abundance of information" on Japanese strength, dispositions, capabilities, and intentions on Luzon to the "veritable hotbed of guerrilla resistance" at the time. Finally linking up with the U.S. Sixth Army, the East Central Luzon Area Force provided additional support to conventional forces moving south towards Manila.

On 13 June 1945, MacArthur presented the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) to then Major Ramsey for "...extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with the Philippine Guerilla Forces, East Central Luzon Guerrilla Area, in action against enemy forces from 21 April 1942 to 30 April 1945, in the Philippine Islands." Also honored with the DSC at the same ceremony were surviving fellow American guerrilla leaders Bernard L. Anderson, Robert Lapham, Ray Hunt, and others. Promoted to lieutenant colonel, Ramsey, clearly ill and suffering from malaria, amoebic dysentery, anemia, acute malnutrition, and a state of general collapse, was ordered back to the States three days later by MacArthur. It would take almost a year in a stateside hospital for a complete recovery. Medically retired from the Army, Ramsey would go on to complete his law degree at the University of Oklahoma and have a successful business career with Hughes Aircraft in Manila, Hong Kong, and Tokyo.

Deserved recognition and honors followed over the years. The Republic of the Philippines awarded him the Philippine Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Conduct Star, Distinguished Service Star, and Wounded Personnel medal. His wartime unconventional warfare (UW) experiences, with those of fellow guerrilla leaders Russell W. Volckmann, Lapham, Donald D. Blackburn, and Wendell Fertig, helped to establish the doctrinal and organizational structure of the U.S. Army Special Forces in 1952. The commanding general of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, recognized Ramsey's wartime UW accomplishments with the award of the Special Forces Tab and Green Beret during a guest speaker visit to Fort Bragg in 2001.

One of the last living Philippine guerrilla leaders from World War II, the "Grand Old Man" of cavalry remains delightfully active at age ninety-four, and is now retired in Los Angeles, California. Ramsey can often be seen at the U.S. Cavalry Association Annual Bivouac and was recently inducted into the Oklahoma Military Hall of Fame in 2010. He had to give up polo in 1964 after a near-fatal fall, but his last charge mount, Bryn Awryn, is remembered now in the annual Army vs. Marine polo match, with the best playing pony award named in his honor. Appropriately enough, both man and mount will always be remembered for their accomplishments on both the polo field and battlefield.



An old soldier that refuses to fade away, Ramsey mounts up at a recent bivouac of the U.S. Cavalry Association. (Courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Edwin P. Ramsey, USA-Ret.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Seals is a retired Special Forces officer employed by General Dynamics Information Technology in the Battle Command Exercise Division of the U.S. Army Special Operations Battle Command Training Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He is a graduate of the Norwich University School of Graduate Studies Master of Arts in Military History program. Current duties include service as a stable sergeant in North Carolina for his horsey wife and son, who is a rising young polocrosse player. He is proud to count among his friends Ed and Raqui Ramsey.