



Y E S T E R Y E A R S

JANUARY 1942: THE LAST CHARGE

Sunday, December 7, 1941, is deeply etched in American history. The same day (December 8, local time) was the opening of the polo season in the Philippines and everyone anticipated it would be a ferocious battle—but they had no idea what imminent tragedy and ultimate triumph would be unleashed in the hours ahead.

The Manila Polo Club came to Fort Stotsenburg, 75 miles north of the Philippine capitol, to challenge the U.S. Army's elite 26th Cavalry, America's pre-eminent, polo-playing regiment. Maj. Gen. Jonathan "Skinny" Wainwright, one of the Army's cadre of dedicated polo players, organized the match and served as head umpire. The challenging national team, who had been playing for years and carried near-professional handicaps, bested the newly formed Army team in the six-chukker game. Nevertheless, the tough defense and aggressive tactics of the new officer playing at No. 3 produced a memorable performance.

First Lt. Ed Ramsey had volunteered for service in the Philippines just so he could play polo with the 26th Cavalry, and he was having the time of his life. "Polo was the game I was made for ... I loved polo as surely as I loved horses and because I loved horses." He learned polo at Oklahoma Military Academy (where Will Rogers was a patron of its team) and was a member of Oklahoma University's varsity polo squad.

"The ostensible reason for schooling us in the sport was to sharpen our equestrian skills, improve our teamwork and hone our spirit of competition," says Ramsey.

"But inescapably, the game was meant to build courage, as well as an outlet for our pure, unbridled verve. For me, polo was the perfect blend of my native recklessness and the discipline I was acquiring. It meant teamwork, control and a careful regard for the rules, but it also entailed risk, danger and a headlong disregard for consequences. Hearing about the broken bones and the fact that two cadets had been killed in matches fueled my interest; I devoted myself to a full year mastering the sport.



This illustration by John Solie, titled The U.S. Cavalry's Last Charge, depicts player Ed Ramsey and polo pony Bryn Awryn, center, leading the Philippine Scouts in the last charge. It is reprinted with permission of Brig. Gen. Philip L. Bolte, chairman of the U.S. Cavalry Association. Prints can be ordered at uscavalry.org.

"The charge is the epitome of the game. In our military training we had learned to shoot pistols from horseback, hitting at gallop targets that infantry strained at prone. And we had rehearsed the ancient arts of saber play, the slash and stab, the wrist-breaking lunge and disengage. But polo concentrated the charge upon that sucking sphere, a melee of mallet shafts and legs, tons of headlong horses and men pounding the air, pounding the earth, pounding at one another."

Competitive interscholastic and intercollegiate polo had helped turn a boy into a warrior. On the same day of his inaugural polo game in Asia, Ed Ramsey found himself riding off to war on his favorite polo pony and cavalry charger, Bryn Awryn, a 15.2-hand, mixed-breed, chestnut gelding with a small blaze on his forehead. Ramsey fell in love. Bryn Awryn was "clever, aggressive ... turning on a dime ... brave."

Within hours of the game Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor and virtually wiped out American air power in the Philippines at Clark Field, which was part of Fort Stotsenburg—an

attack that sent lethal ordnance across the polo field. As enemy forces landed, the 26th Cavalry was sent to cover the beaches and delay the invasion to buy time for the outnumbered and unprepared American and Filipino forces to retreat to the Bataan peninsula for a last stand.

By mid-January, the 26th Cavalry had lost a quarter of its troops and half the regiment's 800 horses, but again and again the troops were thrown into the breach to stabilize a weakening front line. When a strategic gap opened up in the town of Morong Bataan near the China Sea, Gen. Wainwright spotted one of his polo players coming back from an exhausting mounted patrol. Ramsey remembers: "Ramsey, isn't it?" he barked at me.

'Yes, sir.'

'You played in the polo match at Stotsenburg?'

I said that I had.

'You take the advance guard,' he said. 'Move out!'"

After a hard ride on jungle trails, Ramsey's platoon of only 27 mounted cavalymen entered the town from one side as hundreds of Japanese infantry were swarming in from across the river that bordered the village.

The two forces surprised and engaged each other in the center of Morong, and their advance guards traded shots.

"Over the rattling gunfire I ordered my troopers to deploy ... and I raised my pistol. A charge would be our only hope to break up the body of Japanese troops and to survive against superior numbers. For centuries the shock of a mounted charge had proved irresistible; now the circumstances and all my training made it instinctual.

"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 ... To them we must have seemed a vision from another century, wild-eyed horses pounding headlong; cheering, whooping men firing from their saddles.

"The charge broke clear through the advance unit and carried

on to the swamp, where we dismounted and grabbed our rifles from the scabbards. I threw out a skirmish line of one squad along the river to keep the main column from crossing and let the rest back into Morong to search for snipers."

The other mounts had followed Bryn Awryn through the firefight as surely as the men had obeyed Ramsey. At approximately noon on January 16, 1942, the 1st Platoon, E Troop, 26th Cavalry Regiment, Philippine Scouts, many mounted on polo ponies and led by a polo player, literally charged into history. They had conducted the last mounted charge in the annals of U.S. military history—and won!

Despite this and many other courageous fights, the battle for Bataan had been lost before it started. The American and Philippine forces were expected to hold out for only two months until they could be reinforced by the U.S. Pacific—help that would not come as the fleet lay at the bottom of Pearl Harbor.

Ramsey left Morong with a commendation for bravery and a bullet through the leg; one of his best friends was killed by a sniper while retrieving the ponies. It was only in the hospital that he

Ed Ramsey on Bryn Awryn, the polo pony that lived life like a cavalry charger

learned that Gen. Wainwright, a great lover of horses, had to order the slaughter of all the animals in order to feed his starving command. Unbeknownst to his men, Wainwright had his own thoroughbred, Little Boy, a prize-winning hunter-jumper, sacrificed first.

With no naval or air support, out of ammunition and food, 75,000 troops and civilians surrendered on April 9, 1942. Of the front-line troops, 80 percent had malaria, 35 percent beri beri and 75 percent dysentery. It was the greatest defeat in American military history and the Japanese celebrated by having the prisoners (including the wounded) walk for six days with neither water nor food, bayoneted and beheaded for straggling, in what became the infamous Bataan Death March, during which 10,000 POWs died. The surrounded island of Corregidor held on for a month before it too fell.

