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EICHELBERGER IN MINDANAO:  
LEADERSHIP IN JOINT OPERATIONS

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DAN K. McNEILL

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89 6 19 026

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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Eichelberger in Mindanao: Leadership in Joint Operations		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Individual Study Project
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) LTC Dan K. McNeill		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. Army War College Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS		12. REPORT DATE 31 Mar 89
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 41
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)  See reverse		

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General Robert L. Eichelberger was an extraordinary and brilliant leader. He was a selfless man who loyally and diligently served an egocentric taskmaker in General Douglas Mac Arthur. Eichelberger was the American version of the British Field Marshal William Slim of Burma fame. In a six-month period in World War II, Eichelberger's Eighth US Army made 52 amphibious landings in the Southwest Pacific Theater. In each of those operations, Eichelberger skillfully used US and Allied ground troops, naval forces, and aircraft. While his Army was normally assigned a supporting or "mopping-up" role, the Mindanao campaign was solely Eichelbergers. The purpose behind this study is to explore Eichelberger's leadership in the joint operations on Mindanao Island in the Philippines.

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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**EICHELBERGER IN MINDANAO:  
LEADERSHIP IN JOINT OPERATIONS**

**AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT**

by

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Justification .....	
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Availability Codes	
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## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Dan K. McNeill, LTC, IN

TITLE: Eichelberger in Mindanao: Leadership in Joint Operations

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DATE: 31 March 1989      PAGES:      CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

General Robert L. Eichelberger was an extraordinary and brilliant leader. He was a selfless man who loyally and diligently served an egocentric taskmaker in General Douglas MacArthur. Eichelberger was the American version of the British Field Marshal William Slim of Burma fame. In a six-months period in World War II, Eichelberger's Eighth US Army made 52 amphibious landings in the Southwest Pacific Theater. In each of those operations, Eichelberger skillfully used US and Allied ground troops, naval forces, and aircraft. While his Army was normally assigned a supporting or "mopping-up" role, the Mindanao campaign was solely Eichelberger's. The purpose behind this study is to explore Eichelberger's leadership in the joint operations on Mindanao Island in the Philippines.

*Keywords: Terrain, guerrillas, military strategy. (KAC)*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

During the period of February to July 1945, the US Eighth Army made 52 separate landings in the Southwest Pacific theater of operations. The Commanding General of Eighth Army during this time was Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger, a leader of extraordinary ability. Many of these landings were the jumping-off point for a series of combat actions which were code-named the VICTOR operations. VICTOR I-IV cleared Palawan, Panay, Negros, Cebu, Bohol, the Sulu chain, and Zamboanga peninsula. Mindanao, the second most important island in the Philippines, was the operational area for VICTOR V.

Eichelberger's VICTOR operations were masterful actions which were very similar to General Imamura's operations in 1941 and 1942, when the Sixteenth Army moved into the Indies during the Japanese centrifugal offensive...One interesting difference was the American development of riverboat operations in Mindanao, probably the only such actions in the Pacific War.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to examine the campaign of the Eighth Army in Mindanao. The relevance of this operation lies in the fact that it is somewhat similar to campaigns that might be executed by our warfighting CINC today. The focus will be on leadership in the joint arena. My intent is to look closely at General Eichelberger's role in Mindanao and specifically at how he went about leading his army through the prosecution of this complex task. In its active days in the Philippines, Eighth Army saw a myriad of divisions and tactical

organizations come and go as frequently as the Army planned and executed its island campaigns. The consistent factor was the brilliance of Eichelberger. And General Eichelberger clearly was at his best on Mindanao.

#### ENDNOTES

1. John H. Brady, et al., "The Second World War: Asia and the Pacific," in The West Point Military History Series, p. 202.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE TERRAIN

Mindanao is the southernmost of the major islands of the Philippines. It is bounded by the Mindanao Sea to the north, the Pacific on the east, the Celebes Sea to the south, and the Moro Gulf on its west coast. It is a rugged, tropical environment with ample jungle growth, swamps, and mountains. The Zamboanga peninsula, which is the westernmost extension of the island, adds about 100 miles to the approximately 250 miles of width of the main part of Mindanao. It measures about 300 miles north to south. Operations on the Zamboanga peninsula will not be addressed in detail in this paper inasmuch as they were not a part of the VICTOR V operation. The 36,000+ square miles of Mindanao represented almost one third of the land area of the Philippines.

Davao City was the most important town on Mindanao. It had a pre-war population close to 100,000. To the southwest of Davao City and also on the coast of Davao Gulf was the town of Digos. Highway Number 1 ran north and west from Digos to the town of Parang on the Moro Gulf. From Parang it ran along the west coast and then along the north coast. Roughly midway along Highway Number 1 between Digos and Parang was the town of Kabacan. The Sayre Highway ran north from Kabacan to Bugo on the coast at Macajalar Bay where it intersected Highway 1. These two roads were to play important roles in the campaign.

Mindanao has about 1,400 miles of rough, broken coastline. There were a number of natural harbors along its coast but none had anything resembling a modern harbor facility. On the east, Davao Gulf provided an excellent shelter. Since it was closest to the line of the Allied advance from New Guinea, the Japanese naturally expected landings to take place along the coast in the vicinity of Davao and Digos. It was fortified accordingly and the adjacent waters were treacherous with Japanese mines and offshore island batteries.

Following the coast line in a clockwise manner, one comes next to Sarangani Bay in the south. The beaches at Sarangani were equal to those along Davao Gulf, but once ashore, a force would have great difficulty moving off the beaches since there were no roads leading from the shore.

Illana Bay on the west had numerous beaches which could support amphibious landings. At the town of Malabang, landing craft could unload directly on the beach at high tide. The shore was firm, sloping gradually to a low bank inland. The beach at Malabang was even more important as it was within two miles of the airfield at Malabang. Pollac Harbor, located just to the south of Malabang, also provided a suitable landing area although the beaches might hinder trafficability somewhat. Parang, which was situated on Pollac Harbor, was the western terminus of the main cross-island highway. The Mindanao River joined the Moro Gulf just south of Parang.

Macajalar Bay on the north of the island was a deep harbor which was generally free of obstacles. Its beaches could easily support an amphibious landing. High ground dominated much of the shore. An opposed landing in Macajalar Bay could have been disastrous for the assaulting force if the defending force has positioned itself carefully along the high ground which overlooked the beaches.

Many parts of the coast line would have supported amphibious assaults. But once ashore at most of those locations, ground units would have found almost insurmountable obstacles in the topography. Mindanao was mountainous and heavily vegetated. Two chains of volcanic mountains generally ran north-south. The Mount Apo chain was close to the west side of Davao Gulf and had a highest elevation of approximately 9,700 feet. The Diuato Range on the east side of Davao Gulf had elevations greater than 6,000 feet.

In between those two mountain ranges and to the west of the Davao Range were countless square miles of swamp which generally restricted movement to men on foot. Wheeled and tracked vehicles were limited to road movement with a few exceptions in the open in the valleys.

The main rivers on Mindanao were the Mindanao which ran easterly from Cotabato on the west coast to the central part of the island; the Pulangi which ran northerly from Kabacan in the center of the island toward Macajalar Bay on the north coast; and the Augusan River which ran southerly from Butuan Bay in the extreme northern portion of Mindanao. Those rivers and

their network of feeder streams crossed the island's network of roads and trails at many locations. From the outset of the campaign, bridges were critically important to Eighth Army's movements.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ENEMY

The Eighth Army report written after the campaign states, "Davao...City...in prewar days had been the outstanding example of Japanese economic penetration of the Philippines..."<sup>1</sup> In planning the campaign the estimated size of Japanese forces was put at thirty thousand. While that certainly seemed to be a force of considerable size, it was spread over a relatively large area. The lack of good internal lines of communication and shortage of transportation would further reduce the Japanese ability to react to Allied attacks. The largest force was believed to be located along Davao Gulf as this was estimated by the Japanese to be the point of the main Allied effort when the landings came.

Samuel Morison, the naval historian, noted, "the guerrillas controlled ninety-five percent of the island confining Japanese activity largely to the towns and principal roads." Some Japanese forces were probably moved from Mindanao to reinforce Leyte once that campaign was underway. After the Leyte landing, the Japanese knew that Mindanao would not be the initial, and probably not the main, Allied effort in the Philippines. Likewise, the VICTOR operation into Zamboanga probably drew some enemy forces from the interior or main part of Mindanao. At a minimum, the Japanese likely believed that

the assault on Zamboanga would be the only effort in Mindanao. As Morison recorded, "Mindanao had no strategic value after Luzon and the Visayans were secured."<sup>2</sup>

After the campaign, it became clear that the initial estimate of enemy strength of thirty thousand was considerably under the actual strength. The strength of the Japanese force on Mindanao [less Zamboanga peninsula] on the day of Eighth Army's initial landing was probably more than fifty thousand, including twelve thousand plus civilians who were pressed into military service of one sort or another.

Frequently in letters to his wife, General Eichelberger was given to racial and ethnic derision in referring to the Japanese. His feelings about the Japanese were common amongst Americans -- especially fighting men -- during that period. Nevertheless, he had a great respect for the Japanese as fighters. His battles as a corps commander at Buna and Biak, and as an army commander in the follow-up campaigns on Leyte and Luzon had taught him that the Japanese were well-trained, dedicated, and fanatical soldiers.

Admiral Daniel Barbey, the commander of "MacArthur's Navy", recalled a particularly telling episode.

[MacArthur] asked me if the Navy could carry out its part of such an operation [continuation of the assault on Hollandia to include the Wake area]. I was all for it and told him that our preliminary planning had already been done and that such changes as would be necessary could be done by radio. General Krueger [army commander] was noncommittal, but General Eichelberger [corps commander] was vehemently opposed to the idea. He pointed out that our initial success did not mean we would not run into heavy fighting and that it would be dangerous to take on another operation before this one was further

along. Eichelberger still had bloody memories of the Japanese combat capabilities in the Buna campaign some fifteen months before. As he was to learn later, however, their capabilities had greatly deteriorated since those hard fought days.<sup>3</sup>

Almost two years after the war had ended in the Pacific, General Eichelberger wrote to BG Bluemel that, "I too know of the Japanese deceit and brutality since I served with the Japanese military in Siberia during World War I and fought against them in World War II. My hatred for them was very real and I probably enjoyed fighting them more than any other officer."<sup>4</sup> Such words coming from a man of compassion, who would not allow Japanese POW in his command to be mistreated as American POW had been under the Japanese, would seem curious indeed.

#### ENDNOTES

1. United States Eighth Army, Report of the Commanding General Eighth Army on the Mindanao Operation VICTOR V, p. 48.

2. Samuel E. Morison, "The Liberation of the Philippines: Luzon, Mindanao, the Visayans, 1944-1945," in History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XIII, p. 240.

3. Daniel E. Barbey, MacArthur's Amphibious Navy, p. 173.

4. Robert L. Eichelberger, Eighth US Army, letter to BG Bluemel, 12 Jun 1947.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE GUERRILLAS

It is possible that General Eichelberger's audacity in prosecuting the campaign on Mindanao was related to his assessment of the Japanese inability to put up a tough defense. Doubtlessly, he was somewhat worried about Mindanao as his staff formed their plan, as he had a great appreciation of the difficulty of fighting over Mindanao's terrain regardless of the size of the Japanese force.

General Eichelberger had a considerable amount of information on Japanese dispositions which he received from the guerrilla forces on Mindanao which were, he thought, "the most efficient and best organized in the Philippines."<sup>1</sup> The guerrilla forces on Mindanao were led by Colonel Wendell Fertig, an American mining engineer in the Philippines before the war, who was subsequently called to active duty. Fertig's force numbered about twenty-five thousand and had been successful in keeping the Japanese bottled up in the towns and their movements confined to the island's few roads. Fertig was a key source of information in Eighth Army's campaign planning for Mindanao.

As a lieutenant, General Eichelberger was intrigued with the stories of American veterans of the Philippine Insurrection. At that time he probably had few thoughts of

himself fighting in Mindanao, let alone fighting alongside the indigenous people of that island. On the day of the VICTOR V landing, he wrote to his wife that,

One of the interesting things to me was to see the Moro guerrillas for the first time. They look about the same except that they have highly colored headdresses of various types. I imagine that these Moros are going to be hard to lick now that they have arms. It would not surprise me if the Filipino government will have many a headache in years to come.<sup>1</sup> [Add vision to Eichelberger's list of attributes.]

The alliance between Eichelberger and the guerrillas was an uneasy one at best, and was based solely on a mutual need to rid Mindanao of the Japanese quickly. Eichelberger would have preferred forcing the Japanese into the northeastern wilderness, isolating them, and letting them starve to death or surrender. Such a process would have saved American lives and conserved resources. On the other hand, the indigenous guerrillas, after suffering some years of enemy subjugation of their homeland, probably saw greater retribution in killing as many Japanese as possible.

And while the guerrillas were successful in keeping the Japanese on Mindanao largely at bay, only the combat power of the Allies would eliminate the enemy. In such a situation the guerrilla might have tended to provide inaccurate or unsubstantiated reports of the enemy's strength in order to encourage an expedited Allied landing on Mindanao. General Eichelberger would have been justified in his skepticism of guerrilla reports.

Likewise, he had learned in the "mopping up" campaigns that General MacArthur and his staff could fail frequently to appreciate the true picture of the Japanese fighting strength. Certainly General Eichelberger's pre-landing concerns were with merit.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Robert L. Eichelberger, Our Jungle Road to Tokyo, p. 217.
2. Robert L. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, ed. by Jay Luvass, p. 256.

## CHAPTER 5

### EICHELBERGER GOES TO THE PACIFIC THEATER

Robert L. Eichelberger was among 28 individuals of the US Military Academy Class of 1909 who would go on to become a general officer. He was the son of a prominent lawyer of Urbana, Ohio and a Southern lady who had known the harshness of total war as a youth in Port Gibson, Mississippi during the War Between the States.<sup>1</sup> He would seem hardly a candidate for the profession of arms, but nevertheless he began an illustrious career in the 10th Infantry at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. His stateside assignments ranged from coast to coast and went as far south as Mexico. Outside the US he saw the final days of construction to the canal in Panama and spent part of World War I with the American forces in Siberia. In between the wars, his overseas service included tours or extensive travel in the Philippines, Japan, and China. He was no stranger to the people and places of south Asia and the Pacific.

Solely on his geographic experience, he was well qualified to plan and execute campaigns in the South Pacific area. But the reasons for General Eichelberger's assignment to General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific command are much more complex than picking a man with experience in the geography. Additionally, the MacArthur-Eichelberger relationship, which had been established in previous years, may have played a role in the latter's assignment.

Eichelberger was a superb professional who variously was called brilliant, proud, capable, and an outstanding soldier. He had a distinguished career between the wars when his talents were observed and appreciated by many senior officers including General MacArthur, for whom Eichelberger had served as Secretary of the General Staff when the former was Chief of Staff of the Army.

Eichelberger was a Brigadier General and the Superintendent of USMA when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Within months he was assigned to command the 77th Infantry Division which was being organized at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. His superb leadership did not falter as the 77th quickly came on line as a fighting unit.

Shortly after the Division's activation, General Eichelberger was instructed to put on a training demonstration of the Division for Winston Churchill. The British had been at war for almost two years. Their military leaders and forces were combat veterans. They had doubts about the fighting abilities of their American allies. A solid performance by the 77th would go a long way in fostering the Anglo-American alliance which would be needed to whip the Axis powers. And Churchill was impressed with what he saw of the 77th Division.<sup>2</sup>

Doubtlessly, General Eichelberger's star was rising quickly.

...[H]e was in Washington, where plans were afoot to give him command of a proposed amphibious corps for use in the forthcoming North African landings. On 22 June [1942], he was named commander of I Corps, and early in August, while observing amphibious exercises of the Ninth Division in the Chesapeake Bay, he

received a sudden summons to the office of General George Catlett Marshall. There had been an abrupt change of plans. The officer originally designated for a corps command in the Southwest Pacific Area, Major General Robert C. Richardson, objected to serving under Austrailians. Eichelberger and his staff were available; they had some acquaintance with amphibious forces; and Eichelberger had got on well with MacArthur when the latter was Chief of Staff. Accordingly Eichelberger and I Corps headquarters were ordered to proceed to Australia without delay. After ten days of preparation and briefing, General Eichelberger and a few of his staff boarded a B-24 bomber bound for Australia, where MacArthur was organizing his forces for a counteroffensive against the Japanese in New Guinea.<sup>3</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, p. 4.
2. Ibid, p. 15.
3. Ibid.

## CHAPTER 6

### SERVING "SARAH"

General Eichelberger faithfully wrote his wife during the days of World War II. Clearly, his letters to Miss Em, as he addressed them, were labors of love. They had no children and Eichelberger probably had a bond with his wife that was unique among those around him. They had been married since 1913 and she had always been his closest confidante. Miss Em had shared the ups and downs -- mostly ups -- of his remarkable career.

But the days under MacArthur were to be far from halcyon times. General MacArthur was a brilliant strategist but nonetheless a vainglorious and self-centered man. The manifest destiny of the Pacific theater was his and he was loath to share it with anyone. A high quality soldier such as Eichelberger was a threat. Admiral Barbey's opinion was,

Eichelberger, an able officer with a warm personality, was well liked by the press and not adverse to friendly publicity. He had strong friends in the War Department and was known to be a close associate of Colonel Edwin M. [Pa] Watson, the military aide to the President. With a successful campaign [Buna] behind him, and with all these other attributes, it was assumed he would be in the forefront of the leaders of all upcoming operations. But it didn't turn out that way. There was no place in the Southwest Pacific for two glamorous officers. For almost a year he fretted his time away in comparatively unimportant training roles in northeast Australia.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign at Buna was Eichelberger's first big test. MacArthur needed New Guinea as a jump-off for his islands strategy. But things were not going well at Buna. The 32nd Infantry Division, commanded by Eichelberger's classmate, MG E. F. Harding, was bogged down and not showing signs of being able to whip the Japanese. MacArthur ordered Eichelberger into the fray to take charge of the operation. His instructions were to relieve Harding and all officers who would not fight. He told Eichelberger, "to take Buna, or not come back alive."<sup>2</sup>

One could argue that was sound leadership. Give a solid leader a fire and brimstone pep talk, hand him the authority, and put him in the fight. It worked at Buna. However, MacArthur had a different agenda. As Admiral Barbey noted, General Eichelberger had well placed connections. MacArthur doubtlessly was aware of those connections, and possibly considered Eichelberger somewhat of a Department of the Army "spy." If Eichelberger was successful at Buna, MacArthur was a leadership genius. If Eichelberger failed at Buna, he would be discredited. Ergo, Eichelberger would pose no threat to MacArthur regardless of the former's real or perceived relationship to authorities in Washington.

At any rate, Eichelberger's success at Buna was his alone. As he noted to Miss Em, "I was always the senior American commander north of the mountains, if you get what I mean."<sup>3</sup> This was an inference to MacArthur never making a trip to the Buna front. Eichelberger considered it a must. A good

commander could not possibly be a good combat leader without frequently visiting the fighting to learn firsthand what is going on.

As a corps commander in later fighting, Eichelberger's immediate boss was to be General Walter Krueger. Admiral Barbey was probably the one non-Army officer who was most familiar with the personalities of MacArthur's command. In his words,

An entirely different type of officer was Lieutenant General Walter Krueger who was assigned to command the Sixth Army, a job that Eichelberger had hoped to get. Krueger arrived from the States a few weeks after I did and set up his headquarters at Camp Columbia, a few miles outside of Brisbane. He was a taciturn Prussian officer of the no-nonsense sort who commenced his military career as a private. What his seniors wanted done, he wanted done -- and well. He had an excellent military reputation. He shunned publicity, which was all to the good in the Southwest Pacific.<sup>4</sup>

Sometime after the Buna fighting, Eichelberger learned that he was to receive a DSC for his actions. But the bitterness he felt toward MacArthur, and to a lesser extent certain members of MacArthur's staff, was not assuaged. To Miss Em he wrote, "If I could see you that would be all I would want, and I wouldn't care a damn for the publicity or a chest full of ribbons. If I could get away from the Southwest Pacific area to some place where I could know that my enemies were all in front of me, that would be some satisfaction."<sup>5</sup>

General Eichelberger was a great one for praising and rewarding those who deserved such. He was extremely liberal with decorations to his subordinates. Throughout his time with MacArthur he was to chafe at the lack of recognition for his soldiers and himself. A letter to Miss Em a few months before he was to take command of Eighth Army said, "I agree with you that nobody is trying to give any one else any publicity around here. Naturally the central organization is built around the great central figure, and Walter's organization is build around him. One of the two is not particularly newsworthy and therefore has not received very much."<sup>6</sup> Doubtlessly he was replying to a letter from his wife in which she had compared his lack of press coverage to the abundance his friends were receiving in Europe. His feelings about the lack of recognition he received from MacArthur and Krueger were to stay with him throughout the war. That is not to say that those feelings degraded his performance in any way. He was much too good a soldier to allow such to happen. But a few months before the end of the war, he wrote to Miss Em, "I don't know why it became my fate to land among some elderly gentlemen whose motives are not always as nice as I would like to have them to be."<sup>7</sup>

General Eichelberger was not obsessed with publicity. It was important for him to have his wife know of the terrific job he was doing. After all, she was the love of his life and arguably his only family. And with the "Europe first" national strategy and MacArthur's tight control of South Pacific press

releases, Miss Em was bombarded with the exploits of General Eichelberger's USMA classmates. To ensure Miss Em got a full report of his accomplishments, he always tried to include them in his letters. Sometimes he found it necessary to refer to MacArthur in less than complimentary terms. To foil the censors in those cases, he cryptically referred to MacArthur as "Sarah" for Sarah Bernhardt, the actress.<sup>8</sup>

As the Mindanao campaign was closing, Eichelberger noted to Miss Em,

It is true that a lot of our publicity is sappie Dick Bergholz [Associated Press] said yesterday that it was all designed to publicize one person. Insofar as it helped build him into a great General I think Sarah is right. I do think that it tended to make...[MacArthur] a big frog in a small puddle, and that a different type of advertising would have been more efficacious. However, I do not know. Certainly [MacArthur] is one of our great generals, and this country would lose a lot if anything were to happen to him.<sup>9</sup>

I take this to be a tacit statement that while he begrudged MacArthur for not "sharing the wealth" of publicity with his subordinates, he understood how it fit in the greater context. General Eichelberger was a loyal lieutenant.

Still, his compassion for the worth and contributions of the fighting soldiers on Mindanao compelled him to note to Miss Em toward the end of the campaign,

I wish I cared more for those for whom I must fight. Of course one fights for one's country and not for individuals, and as you know, I have asked for little. It does get one's goat a bit when you realize that our fighting...has been as hard and more bloody than that at Okinawa and yet there is little credit given for that terrific fight...<sup>10</sup>

Serving "Sarah" was the most difficult task General Eichelberger had in the Pacific.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Barbey, Ibid, p. 27.
2. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, p. 32.
3. Ibid, p. 54.
4. Barbey, Ibid, p. 27.
5. Eichelberger, Ibid., pp. 54-5.
6. Ibid., p. 118.
7. Ibid., p. 286.
8. Ibid., p. 20.
9. Ibid., p. 274
10. Ibid., p. 280.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE STRATEGY

Late in July, 1944 MacArthur, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and President Roosevelt met at Pearl Harbor to discuss future strategy for the war in the Pacific. This meeting was to have significant effect on General Eichelberger and the soon-to-be-formed Eighth Army.

MacArthur was summoned to the conference without receiving notice of its purpose. Except for his natural ability to deliver eloquent oration, he was ill-prepared to defend his concept of strategy in the Theater. On the other hand, his nemesis, Admiral Nimitz, was on his home ground and could quickly handle any exigency if he, as MacArthur, was unaware of the reason for meeting with the President.

The Allies had landed on the continent of Europe and the war in the Pacific was not going too badly either. The Allies had the initiative and the Axis powers were generally in retreat. But the "Germany First!" policy remained. The issue then was how should the fight in the Pacific proceed to the Japanese home islands.

The old Strategic Plan for the Defeat of Japan, approved by the Joint Chiefs in the spring of 1943, aimed at securing control of the South China coast, Luzon, and Formosa. That would make it possible to seize and develop air bases in China to bombard Japan and cut its lines of supplies. Now, flushed with recent successes, some Washington strategists wanted to bypass Luzon and strike directly for Formosa or even the main islands of Japan.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, MacArthur would have none of the Philippines bypassed. Admiral Nimitz supported him to the extent that Nimitz had no objection to the bypassing of Luzon as long as other islands in the Philippines were seized to provide air bases to support the attack toward the Japanese home islands. Fundamentally, Army planners wanted to take Luzon, and Navy planners wanted to bypass the Philippines and go straight for Formosa.

At the time of the Pearl Harbor meeting, President Roosevelt had been nominated for his fourth term in office. There can be little doubt that he was mentally and physically exhausted. He would die within nine months. Much has been written about MacArthur's persuasiveness in his argument for the Philippines. But one should keep in mind that Nimitz was probably equally as good at presenting his position of bypassing Luzon. And the Joint Chiefs, with such personalities as Admiral King and General Marshall, who had frequent and close contact with Roosevelt, were also in a strong position to advance their concept of moving straight to Formosa. One can easily imagine that in his debilitated condition, Mr. Roosevelt simply lacked the desire to jump into the fray. Rather, he seemed to be content to let each faction scramble for its own destiny.

If MacArthur did not get a green light to conquer all the Philippines, he certainly did not get a red light from the meeting at Pearl Harbor. This was extremely important to General Eichelberger, for as he wrote to Miss Em, "From what I

get from many sources...Before [MacArthur] returned home...[he] had won out and that is one reason why this outfit [Eighth Army] can still be organized."<sup>2</sup> The drive to Mindanao, albeit convoluted, was underway.

Mindanao, the second largest and southernmost island of consequence in the Philippines, was the planned site of the Allies first landing in the archipelago. The Japanese anticipated an Allies assault on Mindanao and made preparations, especially in the Davao area, to repel the landings. But several events transpired to make a landing in Luzon more viable than one in Formosa. Naturally, an initial assault in the Philippines would be more useful to the campaign strategy if that initial landing was to occur on a site closer to Luzon.

Aircraft from Admiral William Halsey's command conducted raids in the southern Philippines in September, 1944. Pilots reported that the Japanese defenses had been pounded badly and few enemy aircraft rose to meet them. Halsey recommended that Mindanao be bypassed and landings be made on Leyte. Since this would speed up the timetable for assaulting Luzon, MacArthur concurred and the JCS subsequently approved the change. MacArthur informed the JCS he could land on Luzon in December, long before a landing could possibly take place on Formosa. Additionally, a Japanese offensive on the Chinese mainland had overrun most of the Allied air bases in east China, which could make a forced landing on Formosa extremely vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> Suddenly, the Luzon strategy was in and Formosa, out.

A semblance of a ruse was maintained as Allied air attacks and raids continued on Mindanao to deceive the Japanese as to the Allied intent to take Leyte. Mindanao then continued to play a strategic role in the Philippines campaign. But with the landings on Leyte on 20 October 1944, the drive to Mindanao took an abrupt detour.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Ronald H. Spector, Eagle Against the Sun, p. 418.
2. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, p. 154.
3. Spector, Eagle Against the Sun, pp. 419-420.

## CHAPTER 8

### "LET NOTHING STOP YOU EXCEPT BULLETS"

The Eighth Army was activated officially on 9 September 1944. On Christmas Day of that year, General Eichelberger and his new command took over on Leyte for the "mopping up." As had been the Allied experience in Buna, the Leyte mop-up was to be bitter and costly fighting. General Eichelberger was to write, "I recommend the military, and the correspondents, and everyone else concerned, drop the phrase 'mopping up' from their vocabularies. It is not a good enough phrase to die for."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, operations on Leyte were good for the few-months-old Eighth. They gained valuable combat experience, not to mention the staff work and logistic experience for the complex tasks which were in their future. While still on Leyte, the Eighth Army, at MacArthur orders, begin to plan the VICTOR series of actions. Those operations were to seize and clear the Visayans of Japanese forces and would culminate in the campaign on Mindanao.

When Eichelberger formed the Eighth, he began with a competent and well-trained staff. Throughout his service with the Army he considered his staff to be the finest ever assembled anywhere. Perhaps he was right. It clearly was a responsive and flexible organization. The Mindanao campaign, more than any other, proved the mettle of his command. The plan for assault prescribed landing at Malabang. However,

while the Eighth was at sea en route, the guerrillas on the island reported that Parang, a better landing area south of Malabang, was free of Japanese. Eichelberger and his staff quickly revised and reissued their landing plans. Two days later, and almost without incident, the Eighth hit the beaches at Parang. One would doubt the ability of a joint task force today to execute such a complex task to such perfection.

But why attack at Mindanao? The Japanese that were left in the Philippines by the of spring 1945 offered no strategic threat. Samuel E. Morison recorded,

Since the guerrillas controlled 95 percent of the island, confining Japanese activity largely to the towns and principal roads, there seems, in retrospect, to have been no sound military reason for throwing American troops into this big island. Even the official Eighth Army report admits that Mindanao had no strategic value after Luzon and Visayans were secured; it even indicates that this operation was undertaken for reasons of prestige, and to please our Philippine allies.<sup>2</sup>

Morison concluded the "campaign was brief and brilliant, deserving more detailed study...as an example of flexibility, improvisation and perfect cooperation between Army, Navy and Air Forces."<sup>3</sup> Speed of movement was the essential element. What General MacArthur had predicted would take months to accomplish, was completed in days. Twelve days after their amphibious assault at Parang on the west coast, the 24th Division had moved 110 miles cross-country and culminated their movement with the seizure of Digos on the east coast.

### Racing Krueger to Japan

If Mindanao had little strategic value to the Pacific Theater, it was nonetheless important to General Eichelberger. Still hungry for the recognition that was rightly due to his soldiers and command, he correctly recognized what a quick victory in Mindanao could mean. The Sixth Army was having trouble closing out Luzon. Normally, MacArthur's fireplug, Eichelberger, would be available to put out the fire, but that would be impossible with Mindanao in full swing. If he could finish in the south before Krueger and Sixth Army could tame Luzon, Eighth Army would have more time to rest and refit for the attack on the Japanese home islands. His "boys" would be in a much better position to lead the main effort. Even MacArthur would be powerless to stifle the glory such an operation would bring. And Eichelberger and the Eighth Army rightly deserved it.

MacArthur surely used his leadership abilities to get the most from Generals Eichelberger and Krueger. It is doubtful that either of them was oblivious to MacArthur's tactic. He told his wife in a letter during the campaign that, "After a fine dinner...[MacArthur] talked for at least 1 1/2 hours about coming events [the invasion of Japan] and even said that [Krueger], for a certain type of frontal assault, was equal to anyone in our military history."<sup>4</sup> The following day he wrote further,

[MacArthur] said he wants me to be the one who lands in the north and pushes across the Tokyo plains...In this discussion he did not mention again his hope of making me Chief of Staff, but talked about me entirely in terms as Army Commander of his moving flank. He told me that he had turned down Bradley to come over here and reemphasized the fact that he had offered Richardson an Army, which he had refused...<sup>5</sup>

General Eichelberger was not an egotistical man, but he could he not have helped being affected by such heady statements.

And Krueger was getting his, too. In a note to his wife Eichelberger wrote,

[MacArthur] said that he called [Krueger] and told him to throw power in after breaking through at Balte Pass and move rapidly on Aparri, but that [Krueger] says his men were too tired. He said: 'If you don't do it by July 1st I shall bring in Eichelberger and he will do it for you.' Don't you know that this burned up [Krueger].<sup>6</sup>

#### Audacity

The 31st Division landed in the Parang area on 22 April. Eighth Army had given the 31st no orders for its combat operations subsequent to the administrative landing. General Eichelberger took a calculated risk in omitting an initial combat scheme for the 31st inasmuch as he wanted to retain a maximal amount of combat power which might be necessary to maintain flexibility and speed in the initial phases of the campaign.

It is possible that Eichelberger assessed the enemy situation to be such that he could keep the Japanese off-balance by quick thrusts and flanking movements. The intelligence reports of the terrain on Mindanao would seem to

refute this. The limited number of roads and trails on the island and the incredibly poor quality of the surfaces of those overlaid routes which did exist would seem to have dictated a slow and painstaking campaign. In fact, it would have seemed that attacks would have narrow fronts and long, exposed flanks.

Doubtlessly, potential flexibility and speed could have been enhanced by keeping the 31st Division in a position to conduct an amphibious assault at some other location on the island in the event the 24th Division had become bogged down. General Eichelberger had noted in a letter to his wife that, "I am afraid that I am not going to get much amphibious help in Minandano because of the great use for transportation. I am sure I can bring all the troops I need into the area [Parang] where we are fighting now."<sup>7</sup> The D-Day had been slipped from 12 April to 17 April because of the shortage of ships.

The reduction of Japanese air and naval forces in the Philippines obviously gave Eichelberger to even greater audacity in his strategy. Without air or naval support, the Japanese were unlikely to pose any serious threats to Eighth Army's flanks or lines of communications. Additionally, Eichelberger had noted the recent change in Japanese defense doctrine of defending inland vice on the beaches. As previously noted, the absence of Japanese air in the Philippines was a key factor in bypassing Mindanao for an assault on Leyte in October, 1944.

There can be little doubt that Eichelberger meant to take Mindanao as quickly as possible. After the war he wrote, "I had told Woodruff [CG, 24th Division] as he began his drive across Mindanao, 'Let nothing stop you except bullets.'; he took me at my word."<sup>8</sup>

The tactical headquarters he would use to conduct the fighting was X Corps which was commanded by MG F. C. Sibert. A day before the initial landing Eichelberger wrote to his wife that, "In a message to Sibert I urged a rapid advance inland and stressed the importance of not sitting down and sending reconnaissance parties out, but of pushing forward in full strength."<sup>9</sup> A few weeks before Mindanao, to assuage Miss Em's concern, Eichelberger had said to her, "You understand, of course, that when I go in on these operations I do not assume personal command. I merely land there as an Army commander. Of course what I want done is done, but I try to keep out of the tactical handling of troops. It would not be right for me to take personal command of small force."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps not, but he certainly meant to dictate the tempo.

#### Moving Inland

By 27 April, the 24th had made a lightning thrust to Digos on the east coast, by going overland and on the Mindanao River in the Army engineer boats. The 31st had completed their move inland and had initiated their attack north along the Sayre Highway. The Eighth Army report notes also on this date,

...[Eichelberger] notified General MacArthur that the Japanese apparently intended to take up final positions in the hills northwest of DAVAO CITY. In order to employ a full corps in the envelopment of the Davao area, he proposed that the 108th RCT be landed in the Macajalar Bay area to drive south of the Sayre Highway, and the 162nd Infantry be brought from Zamboanga to guard the LOC from Malabang and Cotabato.<sup>11</sup>

General MacArthur approved the request the following day and, according to Eichelberger, said that anything else Eichelberger wanted would be done.<sup>12</sup>

On 6 and 7 May, elements of the 41st Division landed and began relieving units of both the 24th and 31st from their missions of protecting the rear areas. This enabled the 31st to put more pressure in the north along the highway. The 24th had begun their drive from Digos to Davao on 30 April and had taken Davao on 4 May.

#### Fulfilling a Promise

On 10 May elements from the 40th Division landed unopposed in Macajalar Bay. This force immediately began their drive south along the Sayre Highway to linkup with the 31st Division. By 12 May, they had moved inland and seized Delmonte Airfield. Their progress would have seemed satisfactory considering their advance after the beachhead was against fairly well fortified positions. But several days later, after he had flown into Del Monte and visited with LTC M.E. Stratta, commander of the 108th RCT, Eichelberger noted to his wife,

we went at once to where the fighting was going on...The commanding officer is a very courageous one, but I can see that he does not like to have his men hurt. Therefore, he will be slowed up quite a bit. If necessary, I will send Bob Shoe over there, since he is the number two man in the 40th Division and the fighting on Negros is about over.<sup>13</sup>

When Eichelberger had received the ready-made army staff in 1944, it came with BG Bob Shoe as its chief of staff. At that time Eichelberger noted to his wife that,

Shoe was here...and I find him a very attractive person and doubtless an efficient one...I told him that if I was able to put it over, that I would try to get Clovis [Byers] in his place if I get command [of the Eighth Army]...I told him that if he were relieved on account of Clovis, I would try to get command duty for him...what he would like to have.<sup>14</sup>

On 21 May after having made reasonable progress while commanding three battalions from the 40th and one from the Americal Division in his RCT, Stratta was replaced by Shoe. The desire for speed notwithstanding, this was a curious command decision for General Eichelberger.

### Closing Out the Campaign

As they continued their drive to the north, the 31st also began a drive along the Kibawe-Talomo trail to make contact with the 24th which had begun a drive north and west of Davao. The Japanese appeared to be preparing their last stand northwest of Davao in the rugged hills.

Approximately 20 May, General Sibert informed General Eichelberger the Kibawe-Talomo trail was nonexistent east of the Pulangi River. The possibility of the 31st becoming bogged

down in some tough jungle fighting concerned Eichelberger. Doubtlessly he considered it more prudent to hold the 31st and let the 24th force the Japanese into the jungle where they would die from starvation or sickness. Therefore, he instructed Sibert to maintain the pressure to give some relief to the 24th drive, but not to press the attack southeast.<sup>15</sup> Certainly the lives of many Allies were saved by this decision and with no great loss to the campaign strategy. It was just another example of the superior balance of leadership traits which Eichelberger possessed.

The 31st and the 108th RCT made contact on the Sayre Highway on 23 May. Two days later they began pursuit to the east of the road in the northeast area. The 24th was, meanwhile, continuing their attacks in the mintal-Tugbok and Tamogan areas. Several more landings, two battalion-sized, were made at various locations on Mindanao and some of the small offshore islands. There was much of the mop-up fighting to do yet. But as the Eighth Army report recorded, "The enemy had been thoroughly defeated, and the campaign was officially closed on the last day of June."

#### ENDNOTES

1. Eichelberger, Our Jungle Road to Tokyo, p. 182.
2. Morison, p. 240.
3. Ibid.
4. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, pp. 280-281.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 277.
7. Ibid., p. 258.
8. Eichelberger, Our Jungle Road to Tokyo, p. 237.
9. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, p. 250.
10. Ibid., p. 240.
11. United States Eighth Army, Report of the Commanding General Eighth Army on the Mindanao Operation VICTOR V, p. 34.
12. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, p. 260
13. Ibid., p. 266.
14. Ibid., p. 146
15. Commanding General Eighth Army, p. 68.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

General Eichelberger was an extraordinary and brilliant leader. He was at his zenith on Mindanao. MacArthur compared him to General Stonewall Jackson of the CSA and War Between the States fame.<sup>1</sup> He was a selfless man who loyally and diligently served an egocentric taskmaker who knew, but would not acknowledge, the outstanding accomplishments of Eichelberger and the Eighth Army. In my estimation, he rates as one of our greatest joint commanders in my estimation. Eighth Army was dependent upon the Navy to get them into the fight and to sustain them; the Marines to provide the close air support which was indispensable in jungle fighting; and the Air Force [Air Corps] to provide tactical movement of units and aerial lines of communication. He asked for only what he thought he needed and he made do on what he got.

But it would be appropriate to give General Eichelberger the last word,

You may be sure that I realize all the implications of the lack of publicity which followed my winning of the Visayan and the Sulu Archipelago-Zamboanga campaigns...A certain great leader not only wants to be a great theater commander, but he also wants to be known as a great frontline leader. This would be very difficult to put over if any of his particular leaders were publicized...By not publicizing the Eighth Army he leaves the impression with the people back home that he has been the one who has been doing the frontline fighting. This does not mean that he does not appreciate what I have done or that he does not give me a lot of mental credit. He just wants all of it for himself. Unless one understands this dual feeling on his part of wanting to be a great strategic...and also a frontline leader it will be

impossible for anyone to understand the setup here. You can readily appreciate why he did not want Omar [Bradley] to come as a group leader because he wants to be his own group leader and I believe he will do a grand job...Uncle Sam...will not suffer, because [MacArthur] will get a lot of victories...There are many writers who would like to write these things up and will someday do so...In comparison the leaders out here have lost ground because there has been a tremendous amount of publicity for the European leaders. By the time we get home there won't be anything in the nature of a reception.<sup>2</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. Spector, Eagle Against the Sun, p. 527.
2. Eichelberger, Dear Miss Em, p. 284.

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4. Eighth United States Army. Report of the Commanding General Eighth Army on the Mindanao Operation Victor V. Tokyo: Eighth Army Printing Plant, 1946.
5. Luvaas, Jay, ed. Dear Miss Em: General Eichelberger's War in the Pacific, 1942-1945. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1972.
6. Morison, Samuel E. History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II. Vol. XIII: The Liberation of the Philippines: Luzon, Mindanao, the Visayan, 1944-1945. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959.
7. Spector, Ronald H. Eagle Against the Sun. New York: Random House, 1985.