

# Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964)

by **Wu Wenjie**



## EARLY LIFE

Douglas MacArthur was born on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1880 at Little Rock, Arkansas. He is the third son of Arthur MacArthur Jr., then Lieutenant General of the United States (US) Army and Mary Pinkney Hardy. MacArthur entered the West Point Military Academy in 1899 and graduated first in his class. In 1903, he commissioned in the Corps of the Engineers and was sent to the Philippines. Promoted to the rank of first lieutenant within a year, MacArthur accompanied his father on a tour of Asia and commanded a company of engineers in Kansas before becoming Aide-de-camp to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906.<sup>1</sup> He then joined the General Staff of the War Department in 1913 and took part in the Vera Cruz expedition in Mexico.

## WORLD WAR I

In August 1918, MacArthur was promoted to Colonel and made Chief of Staff of the 42<sup>nd</sup> 'Rainbow' Division. Shortly after, he was promoted to Brigadier General and led his division on the Western Front. He assumed command of 42<sup>nd</sup> Division in the Champagne-Marne Offensive and 84<sup>th</sup> Brigade in the Battle of Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne Offensive shortly before the Armistice of *Compiègne*

was declared. During his battles, he was wounded twice in the front line and was decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, the Silver Star (seven times) and other foreign decorations.<sup>2</sup>

## Army's youngest General

Returning to the US, MacArthur became the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Within a few years, he introduced reforms and revamped the academy's overall structure and curriculum, doubling its size and restoring its reputation prior to World War I.<sup>3</sup> In 1922, he was sent to the Philippines to command the Military District of Manila. At the age of 43, he became the army's youngest Major General and was appointed President of the American Olympic Committee in 1928.

MacArthur was appointed Chief of Staff of the US Army in November 1930. He was once again the youngest man to hold the position, serving presidents such as Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1935, the president of the Philippines, President Manuel L. Quezon, requested MacArthur's help to create the Philippine Army.<sup>4</sup> With the approval of both the US and Philippines, MacArthur

became the Military Advisor to the Commonwealth Government of the Philippines. MacArthur then retired from the US Army in 1937 and held the appointment of Field Marshal in the Philippine Army.

## WORLD WAR II

However, peace was short-lived when negotiations with the Japanese government fell through in July 1941. This led to the attack on Pearl Harbour, which resulted in US involvement in and the engagement with Japan in the Second World War (WWII). In response to the impending war, President Roosevelt recalled MacArthur to active service as Major General and appointed him the Commander of the US Army Forces in the Far East. MacArthur was then granted \$10 million and 100 B-17 Flying Fortress to defend the Philippines.<sup>5</sup>

### Attack on Pearl Harbour

On 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1941, the Japanese Air Force conducted a surprise military strike on Pearl Harbour. The main objective was to cripple the US Pacific Fleet, which will prevent the US from intervening in Southeast Asia. Hundreds of aircrafts flew over the skies of Hawaii, sinking the battleships and destroyers while killing more than 2,000 and wounding 1,178 Americans in the attack. The news of the outcome, however, did not reach the Philippines in time. MacArthur who had read the report of the attack “was still under the impression that the Japanese

had suffered a setback at Pearl harbour.”<sup>6</sup> On the following day, air strikes reached the Philippines and half of MacArthur's air force was obliterated. The miscommunication led to MacArthur being criticised for overestimating his Philippine troops as he had been told to move his air force after the loss in Pearl Harbour. With no air power and reinforcements, the Japanese forces took this opportunity and set their eyes on the south-west pacific region.

### Escape from the Philippines

President Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to go to Australia, fearing that the island of Corregidor would be lost to the Japanese forces and MacArthur would be captured as a prisoner. Knowing that his departure from the Philippines will greatly affect the morale of the newly formed army, MacArthur postponed his departure to Australia. However, he was finally persuaded by General George C. Marshall to relocate to Australia as he was needed there urgently.<sup>7</sup> Thus, MacArthur, along with his family and some of his commanders, escaped from Corregidor to Mindanao in four PT boats. Under the terrible weather and choppy seas, they were able to avoid detection from the Japanese fleet blockade, reached Del Monte Airfield and flew to Australia via B-17s shortly after midnight on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1942. It was during this period that MacArthur had made his famous speech, “*I came through and I shall return.*”<sup>8</sup> This

was MacArthur's promise to the Philippines that he would liberate them from the Japanese.

## THE ALLIED OFFENSIVES

### New Guinea Campaign

Shortly after MacArthur arrived in Melbourne, he was appointed as Supreme Commander of the South-west Pacific Area (SWPA), holding authority over all the Allied forces. In July 1942, he moved the SWPA headquarters from Melbourne to Brisbane in an attempt to hold the line that would repel the Japanese forces from conquering Australia. However, they were too late as the Japanese had already taken over Rabaul, Solomon Islands, which became the main base for Japanese reinforcements. MacArthur decided to strike the enemy instead of going on the defensive as he concluded that such an action would have more chances of repelling Japanese forces.

The defence of Port Moresby was crucial for the Allied forces to gain strategic advantage over the Japanese forces as it would force them to fight on unfamiliar and difficult terrain.<sup>9</sup> The Allied forces then won in the Battle of Coral Sea and MacArthur established an airbase to protect Port Moresby. Japanese forces attacked Port Moresby again despite their defeat—however, their plan was already anticipated and was repelled by the Allied forces at the Battle of Milne Bay in August 1942. The battle over the control

of East Papua led to several land and naval engagements between the two forces over the next eight months.

The New Guinea offensive in 1943 was a brilliant orchestration of Australian and American sea, land and air forces. Despite having an inferior number of troops, MacArthur was able to predict the movements of the Japanese forces moving through the islands and, utilising signal intelligence to his advantage, he landed his troops at the weaker points of the Japanese forces. MacArthur developed what became known as 'island hopping' tactics—deploying amphibious landings on less fortified islands, his forces had the advantage of avoiding frontal assaults with huge concentration of Japanese troops and thus reducing the number of casualties.<sup>10</sup>

By 1944, 100,000 Japanese soldiers were trapped at Rabaul and the entire Japanese Eighteen Army was trapped in New Guinea. In September, US forces had taken complete control of New Guinea. MacArthur was finally given permission to recapture the Philippines. On 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1944, General Krueger and the US Sixth Army landed on Leyte, a strategic island located between Luzon and Mindanao. The battle of Leyte Gulf resulted in the destruction of four Japanese carriers, three battleships and ten cruisers. The victory over Letye Gulf ensured that the pacific was now under the control

of the Allied forces, securing the success of their future amphibious operation.<sup>11</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, Allied troops landed on Luzon, the largest of the islands of the Philippines—occupied by General Tomoyuki Yamashita's forces. Yet within a month, MacArthur's forces advanced into Manila and forced General Yamashita to withdraw into the mountains. Manila was liberated shortly after in March 1945 and the US Eighth Army landed in Mindanao and swiftly reclaimed the island from the Japanese forces.

### Battle of Okinawa

MacArthur's last major amphibious operation was at Okinawa. The capture of Okinawa would allow the Allied forces to station their navy, air and land forces just close to the Japanese mainland so that a major assault can be launched. However, it was heavily defended with over 120,000 men and 10,000 aircraft, led by General Mitsuru Ushijima who was appointed Commander of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Army.<sup>12</sup> To avoid the constant naval bombardment, General Ushijima stationed his men at the volcanic mountain of Shuri, located south of the island to form a defensive line.

On 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1945, 1,300 ships invaded Okinawa. Lieutenant General Simon Buckner initially led a landing force of 155,000 into the battle. However, by the time the battle finished, more than 300,000 soldiers were engaged. Over the

period of two months, The US forces fought fiercely to break the Shuri defensive line. The Japanese deployed everything they had to repel the US forces, sending 700 pilots on a *kamikaze* raid on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1945, sinking and damaging 13 US destroyers.<sup>13</sup> The Japanese battleship, *Yamato*, along with five other warships, was also sent out on a suicide mission (known as Operation Ten-Go) and was eventually sunk by the US forces before reaching Okinawa.

On 11<sup>th</sup> May, General Buckner ordered another offensive on the Shuri defensive line and finally forced the Japanese to withdraw. However, he was killed on 18<sup>th</sup> June by artillery fire and was replaced by General Roy Geiger. On 22<sup>th</sup> June, the US forces had taken over the island of Okinawa. Realising that the battle was lost, General Ushijima committed *hari-kiri*.<sup>14</sup>

### Surrender of the Empire of Japan

The battle of Okinawa had cost the Americans 50,000 in casualties. More than 110,000 Japanese were killed on the island. Civilians who were caught in the battle amounted to more than 40,000 people, making it the most brutal battle in the Pacific War. While the Allied forces prepared for the invasion of Japan, a B-29 Superfortress bomber dropped an atomic bomb (known as Little Boy) on Hiroshima on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1945. Japan did not surrender immediately and a second atomic bomb (known as

Fat Man) was dropped on Nagasaki three days later. Pressured by the Soviet Union's declaration of war against Japan and the dropping of the atomic bombs, the Japanese surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1945.<sup>15</sup>

On 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1945, MacArthur presided over the formal surrender ceremonies of Japan, which was held in the battleship, *USS Missouri*, in Tokyo Bay. He was appointed the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers and the head of the Allied occupation of Japan. MacArthur was given responsibility of organising the War Crimes Tribunal in Japan and was heavily criticised for his treatment of Tomoyuki Yamashita, who was executed on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1946.<sup>16</sup> However, during the next five years, his efforts to de-militarise Japan and rebuild its economy and politics received recognition. MacArthur allowed the creation of democratic institutions, religious freedom, civil liberties, land reform and emancipation of women and the formation of trade unions.

## KOREAN WAR

Beginning in late June 1950, when North Korea began the Korean War, MacArthur was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations (UN) Command which consisted mainly of US forces. The

initial surprise attack from the North Koreans enabled them to occupy the entire South, except for the area around the port city of Busan. MacArthur recognised that Incheon was the enemy's supply position—a decisive factor that would break the North Korean offensive front as the capture of Incheon would cut off the supply line and force the North Korean to retreat.<sup>17</sup> He planned a daring amphibious operation and landed the American and South Korean Marines at Incheon, 200 miles behind the North Korean line on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1950. The operation was a success and the UN forces recaptured Seoul while pushing the North Koreans northwards to the Yalu River. MacArthur suggested that the UN forces should advance to stamp out the communists forces in North Korea.

President Harry S. Truman was worried that invading North Korea would be viewed as a hostile act towards China and would trigger the communist government to intervene in the war but MacArthur reassured him that the chances of such an occurrence were slim. However, the situation took a turn for the worse as the Chinese communist forces took them by surprise. With the help of the Chinese communist' forces, the UN

forces were forced to retreat and Seoul was taken over again by the communists in January 1951.

## Removal from command

MacArthur was insistent on delivering bombing-raids on China to win the war, but President Truman and Secretary of State, Dean Acheson disagreed and told him to limit the war to Korea.<sup>18</sup> While the US government was talking of a political settlement, MacArthur made a public statement stating that there was "no substitute for victory."<sup>19</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> April, 1951, President Truman removed MacArthur from his command of the UN forces in Korea, along with all the positions he held concurrently.

## PERSONALITY

MacArthur was regarded as one of the most enigmatic military leaders in history. Lieutenant General George H. Brett who worked with MacArthur as an air commander during WWII, described him as *"a brilliant, temperamental egoist; a handsome man, who can be as charming as anyone who ever lived, or harshly indifferent to the needs and desires of those around. His religion is deeply a part of his nature... Everything about Douglas MacArthur is on the grand scale; his virtues and triumphs and shortcomings."*<sup>20</sup>

MacArthur had a strong personality, as seen when he left the Philippines and retook it afterwards. He was able to garner the respect of the forces he commanded and the support of the public when he was removed from command. In the battlefield, MacArthur was adept in tactical skills and able to grasp the situation even when his forces were outnumbered—hence, he was often regarded as a genius of his time in the military world.

## DEATH

Douglas MacArthur died at Walter Reed Army Medical Centre, Washington, D.C. on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1964. He was given a state funeral and buried in the General Douglas MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia.

## LEGACY

Douglas MacArthur has been a popular subject of many historians and writers. His autobiography, *Reminiscences* was published in New York in 1964. To date, he was well-received by the American public—having streets, public works and children named after him. The Douglas MacArthur Memorial, also known as Norfolk City Hall, was the tomb for MacArthur and a museum tribute to his life during military service, along with those who were under his command. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

1. David Horner, "MacArthur, Douglas (1880-1964)." Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University.  
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macarthur-douglas-10890>
2. West Point in the Making of America, "Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964)."  
[http://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/history\\_6a1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/history_6a1.html)
3. United States history, "Douglas MacArthur." <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1607.html>
4. "World War II – Pacific Theatre: Yamamoto versus MacArthur." *POINTER* 31, n\_3 (2005), 96.
5. *Ibid.*, 97.
6. Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1964), 117.
7. *Ibid.*, 141.
8. *Ibid.*, 145.
9. *Ibid.*, 154.
10. *Ibid.*, 166.
11. "World War II – Pacific Theatre: Yamamoto versus MacArthur." *POINTER* 31, n\_3 (2005), 96-98.
12. John Simkin, "Mitsura Ushijima." <http://spartacus-educational.com/2WWushijima.htm>
13. *Kamikaze* – known as *Tokubetsu Kōgekitai* (Special Attack Unit) were suicide attacks by military aviators from the Empire of Japan against Allied naval vessels in the closing stages of the Pacific campaign of World War II, designed to destroy warships more effectively than was possible with conventional attacks.
14. *Hari-kiri* is a form of Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment. It was originally reserved as Part of the samurai bushido honour code, and was either used voluntarily by samurai to die with honour rather than fall into the hands of their enemies, or as a form of capital punishment for samurai who had committed serious offenses, or performed for other reasons that had brought shame to them.
15. Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1964), 263.
16. *Ibid.*, 295.
17. *Ibid.*, 350.
18. History, "Apr 11, 1951: Truman relieves MacArthur of duties in Korea."  
<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/truman-relieves-macarthur-of-duties-in-korea>
19. Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1964), 386.
20. Australian War Memorial, "Chapter 1 – Reinforcements of Australia." Volume V – South-West Pacific Area – First Year: Kokoda to Wau (1st edition, 1959). <http://static.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1070130--1-.PDF>