

# **When Angels Fall**

From Toccoa to Tokyo, McArthur's Secret Weapon  
& Heroes of Los Baños  
The 511<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment in World War II

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# Prologue

March 13, 1945  
Real, Luzon

Droplets of warm, tropical rain pinged off steel helmets as ninety-six drenched paratroopers of Dog Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 511<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment shared news from home or joked with buddies while methodically going about their preparations. Lucky Strike cigarettes were lit and K-rations consumed as squad leaders hovered like gruff mother hens while medics double-checked the bandages, plasma and morphine they would soon use. Jump knives hung in sheaths and carefully oiled rifles and submachine guns were checked and rechecked. Ammo bandoliers were distributed, grenades clipped to harnesses and silent prayers offered as the men stole glances towards their hilled objective two miles away.

With a commanding view of the area, Mt. Bijang allowed the Japanese to impede Allied movements and I and D Companies had been assigned the task of clearing the hill.

Part of America's 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division whose nickname was "The Angels", there was a hard glint in the "old-timers'" eyes. Having endured over thirty days of fighting in Leyte's jungles and mountains plus forty days liberating Manila and southern Luzon, the Angels felt respect and antagonism for the enemy.

The vicious battle to liberate Luzon had involved five weeks of house-to-house and hand-to-hand fighting. Landing on Tagaytay (tah-gay-tie) Ridge on February 3, 1945, the 511<sup>th</sup> PIR raced north to the outskirts of Manila where they encountered the Genko Line, a defensive monstrosity that included two- and three-story blockhouses, reinforced pillboxes and interlacing tunnels. The Japanese had prepared to hold off multiple Allied divisions by entrenching machine guns, mortars, antiaircraft guns, and naval guns, all laid to fire on the "low angle" to inflict maximum damage. Using small arms, grenades, mortars and flamethrowers, the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne broke through, then wheeled east in a campaign that brought them to Mt. Bijang.

Under Major General Joseph May Swing, the Angels came to Luzon to liberate, but D Company was still angry about those they had been too late to save. An estimated 100-250,000 civilians died during the Battle for Manila during which Japanese naval forces committed barbarous acts including ruthless mutilations and massacres like those at the Manila Cathedral, the Philippine National Red Cross or the San Juan de Dios Hospital where patients were strapped to beds before the facility was set on fire. Japanese sailors cut unborn babies out of their mother's wombs and threw them into the air to spear them with bayonets for sport. In the Ermita district, a Japanese selection committee chose two dozen women and girls, some only twelve years old, and took them to a nearby hotel where officers and enlisted men raped them day and night. When local Filipinos later told the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Angels they could hear the girls screaming out for their mothers, it made the Americans' blood curl.

D Company was ready to send "the Jap devils" on Bijang to hell.

## **"Move Out!"**

Using shell craters and shattered tree trunks for cover, D Company made their way up the hill, climbing over ancient lava flows whose fine dust mixed with rain to coat their boots. As temperatures rose to nearly ninety degrees with only a slight breeze to assuage the paratroopers' expended energies and with dry mouths, churning stomachs and racing hearts, the Angels strained their eyes and ears for signs of the enemy. Then everything went silent.

## **Once More Unto the Breach**

Arisaka rifles, Nambu pistols, and machine guns opened up and bullets snapped through the air, chopping down men and leaves as they went. The Angels had again met Dai Nippon Yeikoku Rikugun (the Imperial Japanese Army) on the field of battle and slowly, yard by blood-yard minute, D Company pushed their foe back towards the hilltop. As Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu taught, the 511th PIR knew themselves and their capabilities and knew their enemy and as such were prepared to win a thousand victories. Or so they thought.

Shortly before noon, the Japanese counterattacked and as enemy mortars exploded around him, twenty-four-year-old Captain Stephen E. "Rusty" Cavanaugh observed that the enemy was placing direct fire along his entire front.

Reports soon came in that ammunition was running low, especially in 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon whose machine gun crews were hand-feeding their belts by stripping the dead. A runner then reported that 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon's new CO, Lieutenant James W. Osmun, Jr., had taken a bullet to the head. The morning's foray was quickly turning into a battle for survival against an enemy full of *yamato damashii*, or Japanese spirit, who the Angels knew would fight to the death.

Firing his rifle, Cavanaugh shouted for radio man Private Roy C. Lipanovich to ask Regimental HQ for aid and resupply. The response came back that it would take hours to reach their position. Lipanovich shouted for his captain's attention and Rusty turned to watch a bullet fly through the radio operator's jaw. Screaming for a medic, Cavanaugh was vaguely aware that another figure had crawled towards him and was firing at the enemy from a nearby ditch when a Japanese machine gun burst ripped through the air.

"Steve! I've been hit!" Stunned, Cavanaugh risked a glance towards the new arrival and swore. 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Andrew Carrico, his recently promoted Executive Officer, had been ordered to stay behind the lines during the attack. After months of intense combat, Andy had seen enough action and death.

"Carrico!" Cavanaugh shouted at his XO. "What the hell are you doing here?!" The response astonished the captain only moments before another blast tore into his own body.

"I needed to be up here with my men."

