
Urban Disaster Wrought by Man: The Battle for Manila, 1945

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Abstract

Urban warfare tends to be intimate. If soldiers do not see the faces of those they kill—and they frequently will—those men and women will hear the screams or muffled groans of the wounded. US forces waging the battle to recapture Manila in 1945 experienced these horrors. Yet it was the noncombatants who suffered far more; 100,000—approximately one of every ten Manileños at the time—died during the fighting. Thousands more suffered wounds, disease, or struggled with hunger and malnutrition. Recent fighting in Syria, Ukraine, Khartoum, and elsewhere tells us too little has changed three-quarters of a century later.

Though urban warfare is a special case of disaster, its lessons are relevant when floods, earthquakes, typhoons, or other forms of crisis strike a city. This article goes beyond confrontations between enemies and the resultant civilian suffering to identify the challenges inherent in preserving noncombatant life during and in the aftermath of these clashes. *What* is targeted will impact both immediate and longer-term recovery just as will decisions regarding *how* a force inflicts destruction. The lessons of 1945 have much to tell today's and future leaders preparing for, responding to, and guiding recovery from combat and other forms of urban catastrophe.

Introduction

Manila today stands as Earth's sixth most populous urban area.¹ The city and its surrounds offer much found in any 21st-century megalopolis, e.g., vibrancy born of hosting its country's brightest, most motivated, and entrepreneurial citizens drawn by the magnetism of professional, economic, and social opportunities. This is despite the Philippine capital's often cheek-by-jowl living and traffic congestion second only to India's Bangalore.² Such magnetism proved attractive even during the dark days of Japanese occupation during World War II, if for different reasons. People were so impoverished in the countryside that the city beckoned despite the looming threat of fighting for its recapture, limited food availability, and proximity to occupier cruelty. It was, in retrospect, an ill-fated attraction given the suffering to come.

Manila in 1945 demonstrates the brutality of urban combat, violence the innocent often experience in far greater numbers of killed and wounded than the opposing combatants. Unfortunately, little has changed as Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine have demonstrated in recent years. If there is an unseen benefit in this dark cloud, it is the fungibility of lessons available when combat visits cities. Warfare is but one among urban disaster's many forms. It differs from other types in that targeting decisions made during its waging can dramatically impact the experience and the cost, duration, and difficulty of recovery in its aftermath. Yet urban disaster brought about by combat offers much in the way of lessons pertinent to calamities borne of other causes. Given that no megacity (commonly understood to mean urban areas with a population of ten million or more) has ever suffered major wartime devastation, it is the destruction resultant of combat in one of the world's most populous cities in 1945 that we look for insights into future contingencies.

Urban Combat: The Nature of the Beast

Combat is often feral. That in cities, however, is exceptional, possessing a primordially our prehistoric ancestors would have found familiar. Urban struggles tend to be intimate. If the soldier does not see the faces of those he (and, increasingly, she) kills—and he frequently will—the individual will hear the screams following the grenade thrown through an open door or muffled groans of those suffering limbs and organs crushed in the

aftermath of the bomb, artillery round, or thermobaric blast he called for to avoid the high-risk, often deadly activity of clearing building after building floor-by-floor, room-by-room.

Though hell for the soldier, the victims of urban combat's ferocity are rarely the province of combatants alone. It might be because of physical immobility, incomprehension of the challenges awaiting those who do not evacuate, or sheer misfortune. Noncombatants—the innocent—are all but inevitably caught up in the fighting that invades their neighborhoods. The consequences are often as much or more a disaster than the devastation due to earthquake, tsunami, flood, fire, terrorism, or volcano. The number of attacking Americans killed during the battle of Manila totaled 1,010. Some 14,000 Japanese defenders lost their lives.³ Terrible numbers, but nothing like the 100,000 Filipinos perishing during those days of fighting in early 1945, one in ten from a population of about one million as the battle began. Many others were injured, widowed, or orphaned.⁴ Urban combat remains hyper-lethal for civilians today. International Committee of the Red Cross research found that urban casualties numbered eight times the number of civilians killed in rural environments during fighting to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in March 2017-July 2018 Iraq and Syria.⁵

Japanese forces occupied Manila after General Douglas MacArthur declared the Philippine capital an open city in December 1941. Many of the pre-war population remained during the interim years. Others joined them as months went by, some involuntarily as prisoners of the occupiers with others seeking shelter, food, or the work that made the formers' purchase possible. Some idea of how hard it was to survive in the countryside is evident in Manila, having achieved the urban area's largest wartime population in early 1944 despite the oppressive policies of the Japanese. Only with the beginning of Allied bombing in the autumn of that year did numbers start to lessen, though not so much as to reduce the population level to that seen before the occupiers' arrival.⁶ The worst was yet to come as US Army forces approached from north and south. Manila's 1945 defenders had no intention of declaring the Philippine capital an open city a second time. Manilaños would see no repeat of 1942's reprieve from combat's devastation.

MacArthur had made good on his promise to return. Three divisions accompanying him would engage those 14,000 Japanese army and navy defenders in the capital. MacArthur and his staff underestimated the difficulties ahead, planning for a grand victory parade soon after entering the city. At first, they placed severe restrictions on artillery and air bombardment hoping to save civilian lives and minimize damage.⁷ Yet years of advancing from island to island meant the Americans were unpracticed in urban combat. Commanders at echelons below MacArthur's learned vital lessons at the cost of soldiers' lives. For example, the staff drew boundaries along either side rather than down the middle of a street to avoid confusion in times of limited visibility. Exhausted soldiers peering into darkness, dust, or smoke would otherwise not know whether the vague forms approaching were the enemy or those from the American unit across the way. Assigning the street to one team meant the Americans owning the thoroughfare knew those vague forms were either enemies or innocents unless their leaders had informed them to expect some of their own. Barring this, anyone carrying a weapon was a target.

The US Sixth Army's XIV Corps moved into Manila from the north with two divisions on February 3, 1945 (the 1st Cavalry and 37th Infantry). General Robert L. Eichelberger and his Eighth Army's 11th Airborne Division advanced from the opposite direction several days later. American soldiers found an enemy sometimes poorly—if at all—trained in ground combat tactics but rich in automatic and large-caliber weapons stripped from naval vessels.

Japanese commanders positioned relatively few defenders in the northern parts of Manila, expecting the Americans to attack from the south or via an amphibious landing from the bay to the west. A post-battle summary noted that fifty US soldiers, from the 1,010 who would eventually fall, were killed in the earlier fighting.⁸ American leaders continued to insist on restricted use of artillery, considering the initial low casualty numbers. Losses quickly mounted as the attackers approached Manila's core, however. MacArthur felt he had no option but to let loose those bigger dogs of war. The army's official history recalls:

Casualties were mounting at a much too alarming rate among the infantry units....If the city were to be secured without the

destruction of the 37th and the 1st Cavalry Divisions, no further effort could be made to save the buildings; everything holding up progress would be pounded, although artillery fire would not be directed against structures such as churches and hospitals that were known to contain civilians. Even this last restriction would not always be effective, for often it could not be learned [*sic*] until too late that a specific building held civilians. The lifting of the restrictions on support fires would result in turning much of southern Manila into a shambles....On the other hand, restrictions on aerial bombardment would remain in effect [though Army Air Corps aircraft did strike targets on the city's periphery to deny the enemy resupply and reinforcement].⁹

Ultimately, the exchanges of artillery fire caused the most significant loss of civilian life.¹⁰

The Spanish-era Intramuros fortress, with forty-foot-thick and twenty-five-foot-high walls, proved particularly tough to reclaim. Were those walls not challenging enough, Japanese defenders took advantage of the fort's tunnel system to move from one part of the massive structure to another without exposure to American fire. Innovation became critical to the attackers' success. Artillery firing unfused rounds from short-range knocked holes in walls. (Unfused rounds did not dissipate their energy by exploding on impact, instead transferring all momentum onto the target.) Progress was slow; creating passage for infantrymen's final assaults required 150 or more rounds. Elsewhere, the use of flamethrowers or the expedient of pouring gasoline into subterranean passageways and igniting it proved effective in dealing with trapped enemy forces. US soldiers dusted off doctrinal manuals, advising them to clear a building from the top down. The guidance proved wise. Units unable or choosing to do otherwise found their foes on upper stories and had cut holes in floors so defenders could toss grenades down onto their attackers. Nor was enemy fire the only threat faced by MacArthur's soldiers. The Japanese had strewn streets and alleys with mines and booby traps, including buried anti-ship mines. Elsewhere, they blocked passages with earth-filled barrels and steel rails driven into the ground, hindering supporting tanks and artillery's ability to keep pace with infantry forces.

American soldiers soon learned to minimize time in open areas, avoiding the city's broad boulevards and even narrower streets when possible. Moving between buildings only after hacking holes through walls using hand tools was a slower but more survivable way of advancing. A grenade or blast from a flamethrower preceded room entry through these mouse holes, barring knowledge of civilian presence. Attackers also found that firing their weapons when moving into rooms assisted both in seizing the initiative and causing defenders to open fire prematurely, helping the Americans to detect where the enemy awaited in ambush. The tactics unquestionably reduced US casualties, but the approach was far less helpful in preserving the lives of unfortunate Filipinos caught between the opposing forces. The Japanese used noncombatants as human shields when they realized the Americans refrained from firing when Manilaños were in a building.

Those defenders' weeks of preparation meant Americans would repeatedly advance to find themselves under fire from within nearby buildings where the enemy had cut openings in walls to ambush the attackers. US tanks accompanied the advancing foot soldiers when possible, providing overwatch and eliminating defenders. The American two-pronged north-south advance meant that by February 8th, commanders designated a boundary between Sixth and Eighth Army units across which neither could fire to avoid friendly fire casualties. Trying to prevent such fratricide proved more complicated than first realized, especially when artillery was involved. Limited distances to access targets and the toughness of materials used in construction meant artillery engaged from as close as 150 yards. American soldiers were happy for the support...unless they were on the receiving end of fragmented debris, ricocheting rounds, or those passing over a target to land among their own.

Filipino civilians fortunate enough to escape the fighting quickly became a concern of a different sort. Japanese defenders set fire to neighborhoods, flooding the streets with noncombatants fleeing flames and smoke. These civilians unwittingly helped enemy soldiers infiltrate American lines by concealing themselves in the crowds. At times, noncombatants' behavior surprised US soldiers. Civilians would casually stroll Manila's streets once they thought themselves sufficiently distant from combat, unaware of how far modern weapons could reach out to kill or maim. (Americans in early 21st-century Iraq found the same behavior during fighting in Baghdad and

other cities.) Elsewhere, Manileños sheltering in the hoped-for safety of their homes became unintended casualties when bullets passed through the walls of thatched or other thin-skinned dwellings with hardly a notice. Most people dwelling in those or more substantial structures hungered for the Americans' return after years of Japanese abuse. Some risked passing vital information to US soldiers despite the potential consequences if caught.

Enemy soldiers and Manileño noncombatants were not the only concerns for the attackers. The city's internment camps held American and other prisoners in the thousands, suffering severe malnutrition and lack of medical care. Santo Tomas University alone, long since turned into a prison, held some four thousand. Soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division raced forward to seize the camp, given fears the enemy might slaughter its occupants. The Japanese camp commander took two hundred prisoners as the Americans arrived, demanding free passage to his men and himself without surrendering their weapons. Refusal would mean the hostages' execution and a defense to the death. The American commander agreed, taking on the difficult task of feeding the newly freed once the Japanese departed. The task proved harder than expected as prisoner digestive systems initially rejected the rich military rations after prolonged dietary deprivation.

Caring for these and other civilians was a responsibility and a hindrance to attackers trying to maintain their momentum. Pauses became necessary as civilian masses overwhelmed the soldiers' capacity to care for their new trusts and continue the assault. Some amidst the population were fortunately able to relieve the burden somewhat. Marcial Lichauco and his wife converted their home and a nearby property into a makeshift aid facility. The Lichaucos and fellow volunteers would provide care to over twelve hundred Filipinos. The local Red Cross director likewise converted his organization's headquarters into a refugee center. Military units set up to feed US soldiers and hospitals found themselves providing journalists, aid workers, and other unexpected guests. Some locals turned to looting. To MacArthur's disgust, some former prisoners profited by selling army handouts to others in more dire need.

According to post-combat accounting, fighting destroyed 11,000 of Manila's buildings, leaving 200,000 Filipinos homeless in addition to the

100,000 killed. Death and the spread of disease were both possibilities if—among other prophylactic initiatives—the attacking Americans could not maintain the flow of potable water.¹¹ Controlling sources, treatment facilities, and significant pipelines pulled additional soldiers away from street fighting. Water sources were sometimes many kilometers distant from the capital and exposed to possible interdiction by enemy forces. Survivors initially had no running water despite the efforts to secure its flow. Nor were electricity and sewage treatment available. The combination left one army doctor amazed that the city had no cholera epidemic. Rats thrived where humans suffered, posing yet another potential source of disease.

Capitalizing on Urban Disasters' Commonality

It took four weeks to clear Manila of occupiers. Recovery took much longer. Civilians continued to die after the fighting ended, many as victims of not-yet-removed enemy mines and booby traps. Thousands of unexploded artillery rounds required disarming, detonation in place, or movement to locations for safe neutralization. Aircraft flew overhead, spraying insecticide to subdue mosquitos feasting on the weakened population and a fly population gorging on carcasses, corpses, and untreated waste. The line between civilized behavior and anarchy was sometimes a knife's edge thin under such conditions. Other efforts to relieve suffering included military civil affairs units hiring over 27,000 Manileños to provide some income; the War Damage Corporation stepped in to cover losses insurance would not.

The above often have parallels in disasters spawned by other causes. Structural collapse threatens anyone returning to earthquake-damaged homes in hopes of recovering belongings no less than Manila's lingering explosives, and some are sure to ignore warnings just as others discount alerts advising them of dangers when disturbing unexploded ordnance. Combat produces types of wounds that demand specialized expertise during treatment. So, too, other catastrophes inflict injury types disproportionate to normality. Crush wounding over-presents in the aftermath of tremors. Respiratory ailments characterized those suffering from Tokyo's 1995 sarin nerve agent terrorist attacks. Similar disorders will be threatened when future accidents or terrorist episodes involve chemical or biological hazards. Such was true during 9/11 when escapees

and responders inhaled pulverized concrete and other materials after the Twin Towers collapsed in New York City (NYC). The lesson is clear: plans should identify injury types coincident with various disasters and align these with procedures to link victims with locations and personnel best able to treat them.¹²

Just as military preparations seek to identify expected challenges and effective responses before combat, better civil disaster plans account for difficult choices best made before a calamity. An assembly of pre-COVID New York City experts recommended who should receive medical attention during crises when personnel, equipment, pharmaceutical, or other shortages overwhelm capabilities. Those with little—if any—chance of recovery consume limited resources while the more robust succumb. Individuals die when policies fail to provide guidance, or decision-makers lack the courage to enforce well-advised triage procedures. Such was, at times, unfortunately, the case in 2020 COVID-plagued NYC.¹³

Care provided by Marcial Lichauco and Manila's Red Cross chapter demonstrates a ubiquitous truth: Select residents will voluntarily assist fellow urban dwellers in times of crisis. It is a reality oft-noted in highlighting individual actions; local newspapers, radio, television, and—indeed today—social media find and draw attention to these cases. The result can be a mistaking of the commonplace as exceptional. The presumption of exceptionality helps to explain why authorities too seldom formally prepare those who might become first responders (volunteers who come to the aid of neighbors and other disaster victims) before calamities occur. Some thirty-eight percent of victims making their way to hospitals during the 1995 Tokyo sarin attack did so not in ambulances or other official vehicles but via taxis or rides offered by private citizens.¹⁴ Another thirty-five percent walked alone or assisted.¹⁵ An estimated 270,000 of Lower Manhattan's workers and residents evacuated not by a formal plan on 9/11; those departing did so via largely spontaneous maritime transport piloted by private or public providers.¹⁶ Contrast this with Tokyo, where formal arrangements between a civilian boat service and the city exist to evacuate personnel should a large earthquake preclude ground escape. Dictates also require local Tokyo authorities to prepare and distribute disaster preparedness maps. These identify areas notably exposed to earthquake damage, fire, liquefaction, flooding, or other hazards. The maps and related citizen training also facilitate providing

citizen aid to others during disasters. Preparing residents and visitors to protect themselves is wise. Preparing them to assist fellow residents in times of need borders on the brilliant. These examples are only a few demonstrating the fungibility of wartime lessons applicable to other disaster types and vice versa. Manila offers others further when it comes to recovering from an urban disaster.

Wartime Manila's Lessons for Recovery from 21st-Century Urban Combat

Manila foretold events regarding ongoing Ukrainian urban combat: Too little has changed when war visits today's cities, towns, and villages, regardless of whether the conflict predominantly features conventional or irregular forces. Coalition soldiers in early 21st-century Iraq found it necessary to secure water sources remote from urban areas, as did those in the Philippines. Controlling access to Tigris River dams upstream of Mosul and Baghdad became a priority, albeit as much to prevent the enemy's destroying the dams and flooding civilian communities as to maintain water supplies (a concern that brings the June 2023 Kakhovka Dam breach in Ukraine to mind).¹⁷ Fighting to secure Mosul in 2016-2017 provided parallels in safeguarding noncombatant life. Civilians in the Iraqi city became virtual prisoners. ISIS denied noncombatant occupants medical care and other essentials, targeting them during attempts to flee the city, in some cases spreading corrugated metal sheets on streets, the noise of which would reveal civilians trying to escape after dark. In a revolting variation on using civilians as shields, ISIS positioned injured infants as bait during daylight hours to lure noncombatants into snipers' engagement areas.¹⁸

Writing years after the liberation of Manila, one author looked back on the physical damage to the Philippine capital, observing the battle for the city dramatically.

Showed a need for planning post-combat [recovery] operations in detail. Foremost among many competing requirements is the disposal of health-threatening human remains....While front-line units fought and moved on, logistics forces moved into areas contaminated by disease resulting from large numbers of unburied dead. Traumatized civilians tried to care for their own dead.... Planning for

mortuary affairs for US casualties only is insufficient.... Medical support for noncombatants heavily taxes standard military medical organizations....Other aspects of the urban combat environment require early planning, especially the restoration of public services. Efforts to restore food, water, electrical, fire, police, and sanitation services need the work of specialists....It is not a task to be handed off lightly to an infantry division that has just fought through the city.¹⁹

As the world has increasingly urbanized, so too have its wars. More so than with disasters due to other causes, mankind has much to say regarding the extent of a population's suffering and the type and extent of damage wrought. The nature of targeting will impact both immediate and longer-term recovery. Are they military targets, infrastructure of dual use in character, or undeniably civilian or proscribed facilities such as schools and hospitals? Urban complexity can stupefy military leaders. US forces bombing targets in 1991, Baghdad consciously avoided the destruction of medical facilities while disabling power plants, transportation nodes, and fuel supplies that might benefit the adversary. Urban infrastructures' inherent interdependency nevertheless significantly restricted the provision of civilian medical care as hospitals lacked power once backup generators ran out of fuel and doctors, nurses, and critical support personnel could not travel to work. How a force inflicts destruction will similarly have a dramatic effect on recovery. Using chaff (shredded metal strips dropped from the air) to cause temporary shorting in Baghdad power stations rather than destroying generators that could take years to replace sought to quicken post-combat restoration of electricity in 1991.

Conclusion

Lessons from 1945 Manila have much to offer today's leaders whose cities suffer warfare's devastation or on whom responsibility for planning recovery falls. Preventing disease outbreaks, mobilizing resident cooperation, constraining the darker side of human behavior, bridging the gap between immediate provision of necessities and permanent restoration, identifying critical components of and prioritizing infrastructure repairs: These are merely a handful of the challenges that lie ahead whose solutions have seeds in the urban disaster that was Manila. That the Philippine capital was one of the world's most populated cities in

1945 hints at the magnitude of such challenges should primary combat operations occur in a megacity for the first time. Lessons from that World War II battle certainly have insights of value for Ukrainian leaders confronting the challenges inherent in restoring damaged physical and social urban infrastructure. How national and local leaders—and those rendering international assistance—bring their resources to bear during and after the devastation will significantly influence the extent of resident suffering and recovery duration. These decisions should not await the end of combat or, for urban catastrophes yet to come in Ukraine or elsewhere, disaster’s arrival.

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