

Colonel John A. Robenson, U.S. Army, was a veteran cavalryman: tough, resourceful, and levelheaded. But at 5:30 A.M. on a day in late January 1942, he was completely nonplussed. A young captain had just awakened him in his hotel room in Soerabaja, Java, to deliver a dirty canvas package containing \$250,000 in small bills—with no requirement to sign for the money or any instructions about what to do with it. Robenson assumed it was part of a large sum at his disposal to forward supplies to General Douglas MacArthur's beleaguered forces in the Philippines. But he already had several million dollars to draw on, and the extra cash was more nuisance than necessity.

The colonel was on Java as part of a hasty, frantic effort to round up small ships, load them with food, and slip them through the tightening Japanese blockade around the Philippines. He had come to Soerabaja from Darwin, Australia, a few days earlier, having reached Australia on board a seven-ship reinforcement convoy originally headed for the Philippines. When the Japanese invasion of those islands forced the convoy's diversion, the forces and supplies it carried became the basis of a major program to support MacArthur from Australia. Everything possible was to be done to assist the Philippines, and Robenson, with six assistants and generous letters of credit, was sent to Java to run things.

Japanese forces had landed in the Philippines in December, within the first few days of the war. By the beginning of January 1942, American and Filipino troops on the main island of Luzon had been pushed back onto Bataan Peninsula and the tiny island of Corregidor, guard-

ing the entrance to Manila Bay. With Japanese air and naval units controlling the waters around the Philippines, the defenders were completely isolated.

Washington officials quickly concluded that there was no possibility of sending a relief expedition to the Philippines. But President Roosevelt and General George C. Marshall, army chief of staff, were determined to do all they could to help MacArthur. They allocated \$10 million to support the Philippine resupply effort from Australia and sent Brigadier General Patrick J. Hurley, a former secretary of war, to expedite matters there.

From Corregidor, MacArthur reminded them of the serious food situation he faced—his men were already on half rations—of the need for other supplies, and of his conviction that the Japanese blockade was paper-thin. "I am professionally certain," he informed Marshall, that it "can easily be pierced."

Marshall, in turn, ordered American commanders in Australia to organize "comprehensive" blockade-running efforts. "Use your funds without stint," he directed. "Call for more if required." The chief of staff added:

Arrange for advance payments, partial payments for unsuccessful efforts, and large bonus for actual delivery. . . . Organize groups of bold and resourceful men, despatch them with funds [to the Netherlands Indies]... to buy food and charter vessels. . . . dispatch blockade runners from Australia with standard rations and . . . ammunition. . . . Movement must be made on broad front over many routes. . . . Only indomitable determination and pertinacity will succeed and success must be ours. Risks will be great. Rewards must be proportional.

Within a few days of this directive, on January 24, Colonel Robenson and his assistants were on their way to Java. From American army supplies already on that island, plus additional shipments from Australia, Robenson was to round up two months' rations for MacArthur's men, load them onto whatever vessels he could charter, and rush them to the Philippines. Large quantities of additional food and ammunition would follow in later shipments, either via the Netherlands Indies or directly from Australia. Altogether, half a year's supplies would be sent, an ambitious and certainly unrealistic undertaking in the face of the rapid southward Japanese advance.

By now, indeed, the Japanese were firmly established on Borneo and Celebes, the two major islands directly between Java and the Philippines, and their air and naval forces dominated the surrounding waters. To avoid this area, blockade-runners from Java would have to sail east through the Timor and Arafura seas, turn north to skirt the coast of western New Guinea, and then make a dash through open waters to the large southern Philippine island of Mindanao, where a large force of Filipino troops under American command was stationed. But even this route was extremely hazardous—and there remained the dangerous task of moving supplies from Mindanao through the close Japanese blockade to Bataan and Corregidor.

Not surprisingly, then, Robenson had little luck in accomplishing his mission. It was not too difficult to get hold of large quantities of food and ammunition, but finding ships to carry them was another matter. Many small coastal vessels from mainland Southeast Asia had

*We tried to resupply the Philippines, but one by one
blockade-runners were sunk, captured, or scuttled.*

by Stanley L. Falk

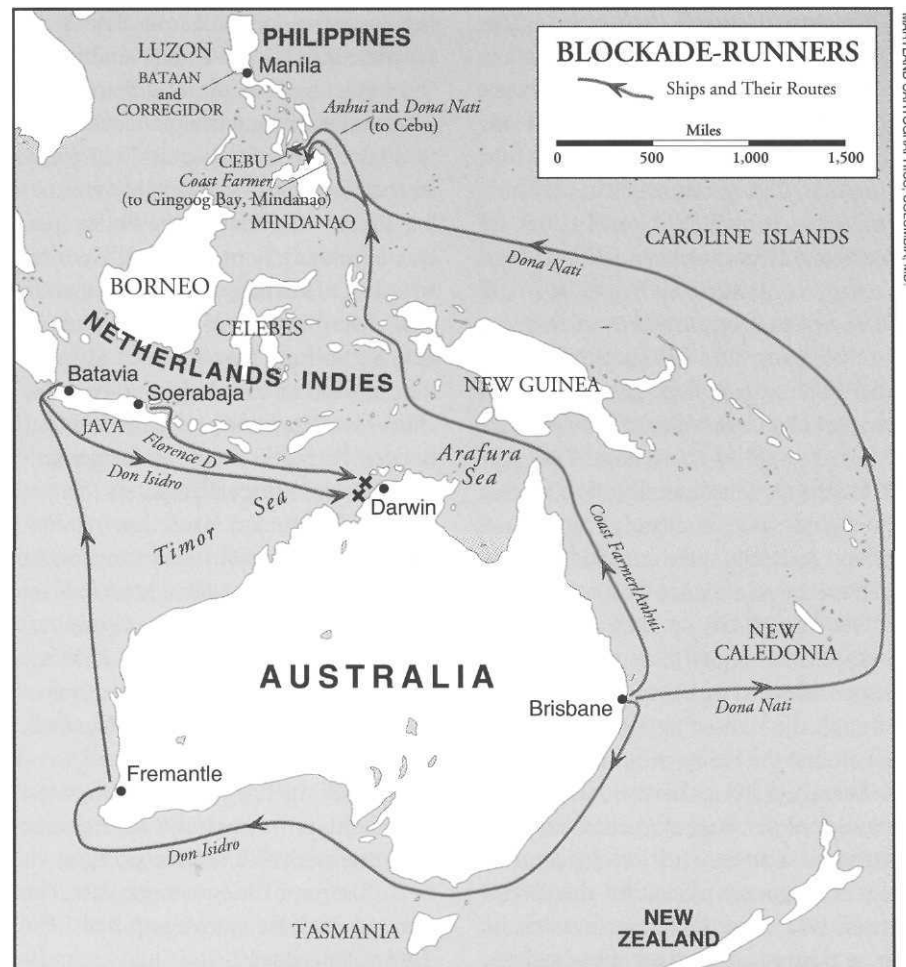
SHIPS THAT NEVER CAME IN

sought shelter in the Indies when the war began. Yet the controlling Dutch and British authorities were unwilling to expose them to almost certain disaster.

Nor was Robenson any more successful in chartering other private shipping and hiring crews, no matter how much money he offered. His efforts followed an almost predictable course. He would contact the captain of a ship, promise him a large sum of money, and conclude negotiations with a bottle of Scotch. Thus persuaded, the captain would agree to risk the voyage. The next day, however, he would report that his officers refused to take the chance, or that his crew was untrustworthy and he had to replace them, or that he lacked authority for such a dangerous venture without consent of the owner, who could not be reached. Robenson would then have to find another captain and start all over again.

It took nearly three weeks for him to locate a ship and persuade the American naval authorities in control to release her. The Filipino captain and crew had strong personal incentives to make the trip, reinforced by the generous bonuses and insurance arrangements that Robenson offered. The *Florence D* left Soerabaja on February 14, with a cargo of 250,000 rations and large quantities of antiaircraft and small-arms ammunition. She passed through Bali Strait into the Timor Sea and then sailed east—directly into the face of a major Japanese carrier strike force on its way to raid the Australian port of Darwin. When a Japanese scout plane strafed the ship, the captain made the unfortunate decision to turn south and seek shelter there. On the morning of February 19, a flight of Japanese bombers headed for Darwin spotted the *Florence D* and quickly sent her to the bottom.

Robenson succeeded in lining up only one other ship, the Chinese coaster *Taiyuan*, and he had much difficulty in doing so. When he finally got her released from British control, he found he had to replace the Chinese crew, whom the British wanted to try for mutiny; the captain, who was a drunk; and the engineers and radio operators, who refused to make the trip. It was February 25 before Robenson could get all of this done, load the *Taiyuan* with food, medicine,



Col. Robenson on Java and Gen. Hurley in Australia led strenuous efforts to find ships to help resupply besieged American and Filipino troops in the Philippines. Only three blockade-runners from Australia made it to the Philippines at all, and almost none of the supplies they carried reached Corregidor or Bataan. (Eight submarines were also successful, but they could deliver very little food or ammunition.) Other surface vessels were sunk at or near Darwin, returned to port, or simply vanished.

and ammunition, and ready her to sail. She departed on the next afternoon's tide—but was never heard from again.

By this time, the Japanese controlled all of the Netherlands Indies except Java itself, and an invasion of that island was expected momentarily. Robenson clearly could do no more in Soerabaja, and he left that same day for Australia. He was able to salvage whatever cash he had in the local bank and carefully balance his records for future accounting. But his mission had obviously failed.

Meanwhile, attempts by General Hurley to launch blockade-runners from Australia were only slightly more successful. To begin with, there just weren't very many fast ships that could carry enough fuel and supplies to make the long trip both feasible and worthwhile.

Indeed, the shortage of such vessels had been one of the main reasons for sending Robenson on to Java. Yet even when suitable shipping could be found, there was little incentive to risk it—or for captains and crews to endanger their lives—on such apparently suicidal missions.

Nevertheless, a total of seven ships left Australia for the Philippines. Some were armed with machine guns, and a few had dummy smokestacks and neutral or Axis flags in an attempt at deception. Only three, however, reached their destination.

The first to sail was the *Don Isidro*, a small, fast Philippine freighter that followed an inexplicably circuitous course. Leaving Brisbane, on Australia's east coast, at the beginning of February with a load of rations, the *Don Isidro* proceeded south around that great continent to

the west-coast port of Fremantle and then pushed north to Batavia, Java. There Robenson added ammunition and more food to her cargo, and she sailed east through the Timor Sea—just in time to run into the same Japanese carrier force that had sunk the *Florence D*. Mortally wounded by bombs, she managed to beach herself on an island but quickly burned to a smoking hulk.

The February 19 Darwin raid had still further impact on efforts to resupply the Philippines. Not only did the *Florence D* and *Don Isidro* fall victim to it, but also a large American transport, the *Mauna Loa*, scheduled for a run to the Indies, was destroyed in her berth by a Japanese bomb. On the same day, the crews of two small Chinese vessels, out of Fremantle with cargoes of rations, refused to go any farther when they learned of the Japanese attack. Both ships turned back to seek shelter in Darwin.

There was, however, one bright spot on an otherwise gloomy February 19. On that date the small, slow ship *Coast Farmer* reached Mindanao with a cargo of rations and ammunition. She had left Brisbane on February 4, avoided detection by the Japanese, and dropped anchor in Gingoog Bay on the island's north shore. She was safely back in Australia by mid-March. Her arrival in the Philippines prompted MacArthur to emphasize again to Washington the "thinness" of the Japanese blockade and to urge renewed efforts to supply him, including a direct run from Hawaii across the Pacific.

MacArthur's recommendation was seconded by General Hurley in Brisbane. By March 4, Hurley had concluded that further blockade-running attempts from Australia would be futile. He, too, suggested switching to a central Pacific approach. This ended efforts in Australia. The War Department decided to rush supplies from Hawaii aboard six converted destroyers—but the Philippines surrendered before they could sail. A chartered freighter did leave Hawaii, yet it was also too late and had to turn back.

Two other blockade-runners finally managed to reach the Philippines from Australia, both ironically about a week after the decision to halt shipments from that continent. The *Dona Nati*, a large

freighter with a heavy load of rations, ammunition, and other supplies, sailed from Brisbane to Cebu, in the central Philippines. She had followed a long, round-about course, first heading due east beyond New Caledonia, then turning north, and finally running northwest between New Guinea and the Japanese-held Carolines. The *Anhui*, a smaller Chinese ship, followed the more direct route through the Arafura Sea. She held less cargo but carried on her deck three crated P-40 fighter planes, which would later see action against the Japanese on Mindanao.

Yet there was little else to cheer about. The only other vessel to attempt the voyage from Australia was a Dutch freighter that had left with a heavy load of food in late February but vanished without a trace. By now, Japanese propaganda broadcasts were taunting the hungry men on Bataan with the old song "Ships That Never Come In."

The *Coast Farmer*, *Dona Nati*, and *Anhui* brought with them to Mindanao and Cebu some 10,000 tons of rations, millions of rounds of small-arms ammunition, thousands of rifle grenades and heavy-mortar and antiaircraft shells, and medical, engineering, and signal equipment. Also on hand were ten small shipments of medicine and equipment flown to Mindanao from Darwin by the few long-range planes available in Australia.

To carry these supplies to Corregidor through the close waterways of the central Philippines, American officers chartered some two dozen small, fast motorboats that could each carry several hundred tons of cargo. Nine of these craft were loaded and dispatched. They dashed north under cover of darkness, hiding during daylight in small, sheltered coves, and proceeding in careful stages toward Manila Bay. All but one, however, were sunk or captured by Japanese patrol vessels. The single exception, the *Elcano*, reached Corregidor in late February with 1,100 tons of rations. A few planes small enough to land on the island's tiny airstrip brought in an additional twenty tons of medicine from Mindanao.

These supplies were all that came of the entire effort to resupply MacArthur from Australia and Java. Ferried at night in small craft across the narrow channel

to Bataan, they would feed the troops there for just about four days.

Almost equally frustrating were attempts to ship provisions from the as-yet-unoccupied, food-rich central and southern Philippines. Those islands produced large quantities of rice, beans, vegetables, fruit, coffee, and other needed commodities. Cebu also had a major U.S. Army quartermaster depot, well stocked with food, clothing, and medical and other supplies. Despite great hopes, however, only two small interisland steamers managed to get through to Corregidor, with barely 2,200 tons of supplies. The *Legaspi* made two successful runs from Cebu before she was cornered and run aground by Japanese patrol boats. The *Princesa* made one delivery but then had to be scuttled to avoid capture. All other vessels committed to this effort were sunk, captured, or scuttled by their crews.

An additional 1,600 tons of fresh food reached Corregidor from the southern shore of Manila Bay aboard two motorboats. But minefields and increased Japanese surveillance quickly ended these deliveries.

Perhaps the most successful effort to pierce the Japanese blockade was made by American submarines, when they could be spared from other, more pressing duties. Yet they could carry very little. The total supplies brought in by the eight subs that reached Corregidor amounted to less than a day's ration for the defenders, plus a small quantity of ammunition. More important was the submarines' role in evacuating nurses and key personnel, a mission they performed almost up to Corregidor's last hours.

Like the defense of the Philippines itself, the attempt to supply MacArthur through the Japanese blockade was doomed to failure. That it was tried at all is notable. That it accomplished so little is unsurprising. That it is so rarely remembered is a shame.

STANLEY L. FALK is former chief historian of the U.S. Air Force; the author of several books on World War II in the Pacific, including *Bataan: The March of Death*; and editor of *FOO, A Japanese-American Prisoner of the Rising Sun: The Secret Prison Diary of Frank "Foo" Fujita* (University of North Texas Press, 1993).