

Batson Of The Philippine Scouts

by

DR. EDWARD M. COFFMAN

Colonial troops—the term evokes images of exotically uniformed Bengal Lancers, Sikhs, Gurkhas, or Spahis. In the 19th century, Britain, France, and other nations in the race for territory formed native units to help win and hold their empires. Paradoxically, these troops are probably better known to Americans than those who served the United States. For Americans, at the turn of the century, also found it necessary to recruit a colonial army, and the Army officer who founded that unit is now virtually forgotten.

The Spanish-American War had brought the Philippines under the Stars and Stripes at slight cost, but within months a nationalist movement posed strong opposition to continued American rule. On the night of February 4, 1899, on the outskirts of Manila, fighting broke out between these so-called "insurrectos" and the Americans. Although the Filipino army outnumbered the 21,000 Americans, the latter had little difficulty defeating their poorly armed adversaries in conventional battles. But there was more to bearing "the white man's burden" than it seemed in those early days of the war. After all, the tiny American force in and about Manila could not expect to control the seven million people scattered throughout 7,000 islands. They, the terrain, and a later change to guerrilla tactics would work to the advantage of the Filipino nationalists. By the end of 1899, there were nearly 60,000 American troops in the Philippines. A year later almost 70,000 were attempting to put down the nationalist forces. And the Americans found it necessary to rely increasingly on Filipino auxiliaries in this struggle.

In June 1899, at the peak of the fighting, Matthew A. Batson, a lieutenant with the 4th

US Cavalry, pondered the difficulty of the conflict. If the United States intended to carry on the war to victory, he saw only two options. The first, which he considered unlikely, was that it must send an army of 100,000 to win and hold indefinitely every town on Luzon, the largest island in the archipelago. The more plausible possibility was to recruit Filipinos and shift much of the burden of the war to them.¹ This was the genesis of the Philippine Scouts (not to be confused with the Constabulary which was organized later under the civil government).

Matthew A. Batson is not a name familiar to even the more erudite military historians; yet in creating and leading the Scouts he briefly played a significant role in the Philippine insurrection. Besides, he was an interesting man, different from his brother officers, and this difference made it possible for him to take the part he did in the war.²

Although the United States had used Indian allies throughout the Indian Wars, and all of the senior officers in the Philippines had survived that era, they were reluctant to call upon the Filipinos to perform a similar function. Even as it became obvious that his troops needed all the help they could get, Major General Elwell S. Otis, commanding the 8th Army, was afraid to take this step. First, could they be trusted not to turn against the Americans? Second, could they be depended upon to do their share? Batson had no such qualms, and he found a patron in Major General Henry W. Lawton, Commander of the 1st Division, 8th Army Corps. In September 1899, Lawton persuaded Otis to allow Batson to organize two companies of Filipinos as an experiment.³ Ambitious, intelligent, and optimistic, Batson made the best of this opportunity.

He was 33—not old for a first lieutenant of

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 1977		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1977 to 00-00-1977	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Batson of the Philippine Scouts				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Army War College, 47 Ashburn Drive, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5010				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 5	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

that time. Born in Illinois, he grew up in the Ozark mountains of Missouri and attended Southern Illinois University for one term. After two stints of schoolteaching and a year of studying the law, he enlisted in the Army in 1888. Three years later, as a cavalry corporal, he successfully passed the examination and received a commission in the Ninth Cavalry Regiment—one of the four Army regiments then composed of black soldiers led by white officers. He married and settled down to the routine of garrison life. The Spanish War found him still a lieutenant in his seventh year of commissioned service.

The war, in which he made a creditable record in combat in Cuba, contributed to his disillusionment with the Army. He was appalled by the inability of older officers to break with peacetime routine in the face of the war's demands. He was also angered by his failure to receive promotion or any other distinction for his service, which he believed was much more meritorious than that of others who had been so honored.⁴

Neither attitude was uncommon among his brother officers but, in Batson's case, his Philippine service exacerbated these earlier irritations. But there was something else bothering this officer. He seemed to have been more detached and critical than his fellow officers. Others complained—most did at one time or the other. But in Batson's letters to his wife criticisms appear that one rarely, if ever, finds in letters of his peers. He considered many of the officers narrow-minded and told his wife that "Army officers are the most selfish class in existence."⁵ As he became more bitter, he referred to the Army as "this rotten institution."⁶ Here was a man who was not as tightly bound to the Army and its ways as his fellow officers, explaining perhaps, why he was more willing to gamble on an innovation such as native troops.

The term "native" implies racism, and the situation at the turn of the century in the Philippines was redolent of that characteristic. This, again, isolated Batson from many of his colleagues. He simply did not share their views about the Filipinos or about the

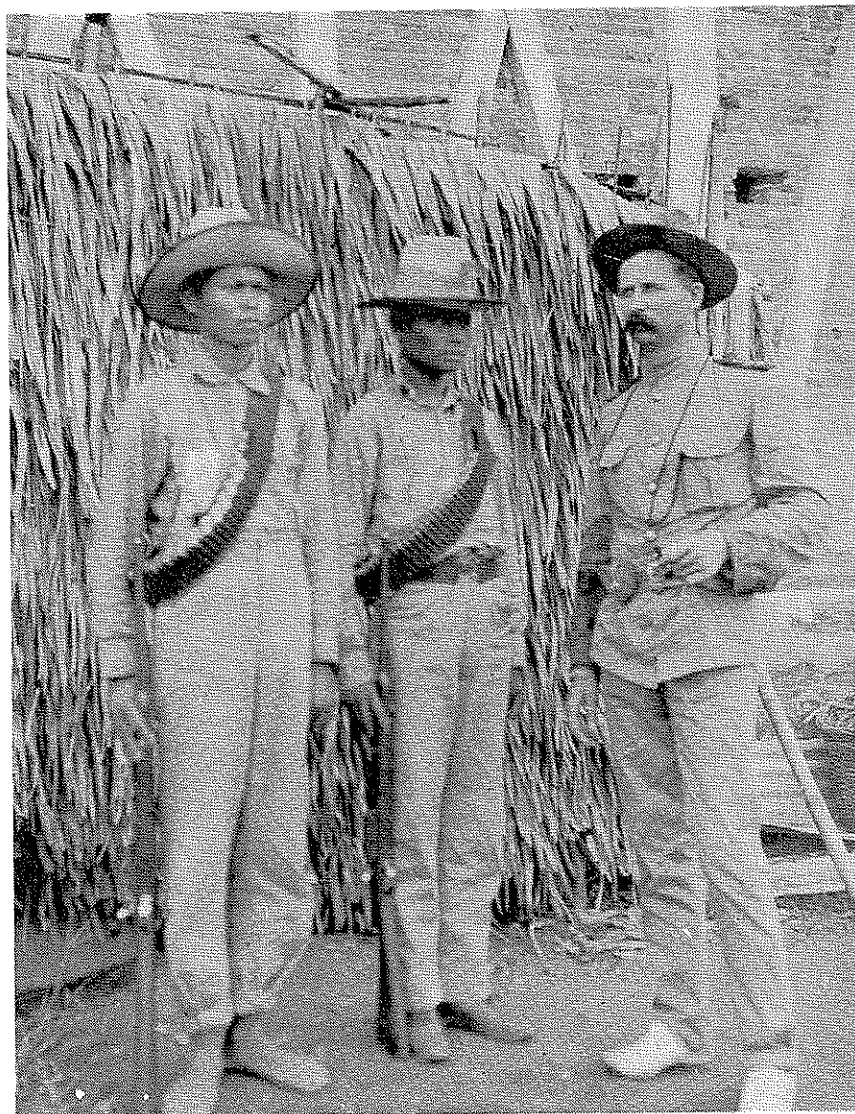
conflict. Perhaps his years with black troops and the favorable impression their combat record in Cuba made on him helped him to see matters in a different light. Whatever the reason, he liked and respected Filipinos, while others thought of them as "gugus" or "niggers." As for the war, in late May 1899, after he had seen four months of the fighting, he commented to his wife: "Why if I was a Philipino [sic] I would fight as long as I had a breath left. . . . We come as a Christian people to relieve them from the Spanish yoke and bear ourselves like barbarians."⁷

Batson was outraged by the misbehavior and atrocities of his fellow Americans. In particular, the volunteer troops drew his ire, but the regulars did not escape entirely. It was the destruction of a friendly village by a regular infantry unit that evoked his comments in the May letter. In his mind, however, the volunteers were worse: ". . . the conduct of these volunteers has been such that it could only irritate the inhabitants. Some things are too scandalous to write." Yet, in the same letter he did mention their shooting at women and children.⁸

In turn, Batson discounted the atrocity rumors that abounded about the insurrectionists. "They are not savages," he wrote. "I find them an exceedingly interesting people and when you hear of our people sending missionaries here tell them they had

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Lt Matthew A. Batson, right, with two of his Macabebe Scouts, 1899.

learned English faster than he himself picked up Pampangan.¹⁰ He also talked with other Filipinos who confirmed this favorable impression.

At this time the Americans were struggling almost as much against the terrain as against the enemy in the swamps of Pampanga Province, northwest of Manila. Campaigning in this difficult area would obviously be made easier if natives would help as guides and boatmen. As it happened, some of these people—the *Macabebes* (incidentally, Jacinto was a Macabebe)—were traditional enemies of the Tagalos, who spearheaded the nationalist's movement. Many had served in the Spanish Army, hence had some military training. They had also suffered at the hands of the "insurrectos" for opposition to their cause.

better put their missionaries to work in New York."⁹

Two developments, in May and June 1899, perhaps served to crystalize Batson's desire to organize a Filipino unit. He got to know at least one Filipino rather well at a time when the American troops were in a situation which begged for native assistance. This particular Filipino was his servant, who greatly impressed him. Jacinto was bright, could read and write, and studied language with him. Indeed, the lieutenant thought that Jacinto

On June 1, Batson told his wife of an abortive attempt to recruit Macabebes. He went with two captains, a reporter, and some forty soldiers to the town of Macabebe, where they were hospitably received and entertained. Although he did not explain what happened to the recruitment plan, Batson learned more about these "industrious and prosperous" people and came away with still further confirmation of his high opinion of the Filipinos.¹¹

Whatever his views about the Army and the

Filipinos, Batson continued to distinguish himself with his bravery in battle. "I have been very fortunate ever since I landed [in the Philippines] in getting into all the fighting," he remarked on August 2. A week before, at Calamba, he swam a river in face of fire and drove the enemy from their entrenchments. This was only one of many brave feats he had performed both in Cuba and in the Philippines, but for this the Army awarded him, two and a half years later, the Medal of Honor.¹²

For two months in the fall of 1899, Batson rode the crest as his rapport with the Filipinos and his skill and bravery as a combat leader combined to make a success of the experiment he had long hoped for. In mid-September he went back to Macabebe, where he noted, "I am treated here like a king." He quickly recruited 108 "well disciplined and brave" veterans of the Spanish colonial army and within days drove insurgents out of two villages.¹³ The next week he doubled the strength of what would become known as "Batson's Macabebe Scouts," still with all veterans. He boasted "... for discipline and the observance of the rules of war they can give our own soldiers many pointers... the men were not one fourth as hard to control as our own men."¹⁴ General Lawton shared this enthusiasm. He told Batson that he considered one Scout worth as much as two American volunteers and, in October, he authorized him to recruit another three companies.¹⁵

As the war began to change from a conventional to a guerrilla phase, the Macabebes became increasingly valuable to the Americans. Batson led his men through dense jungles to strike at the enemy. He claimed that he had destroyed one battalion and dispersed another company. On October 29 he wrote, "... I am spreading terror among the insurrectos... Word reaches a place that the Macabebes are coming and every Tagalo hunts his hole."¹⁶

His men were doing well, and battles—which Batson enjoyed—were frequent. There was also the possibility of his gaining the rank of full colonel if Lawton's recommendation to form a regiment of

Macabebes were accepted. It was an exhilarating time for this first lieutenant. But that was the one cloud on his horizon—he was still a first lieutenant. By November he commanded five companies—a task commensurate with the rank of major or lieutenant colonel. He had also distinguished himself in combat many times, yet, unlike others who held commands of similar strength or who had performed comparable deeds and won promotion, he was still a first lieutenant. Understandably, this rankled him, and he suspected a high-ranking enemy within the Army or his lack of political influence as the cause of this situation.¹⁷

While there may be some justification to his suspicions, a more reasonable explanation was the status of his beloved Scouts. Although enlisted as fighting men by the United States, they were not taken into the Army as either regulars or volunteers. Instead, they were designated as civilian employees of the Quartermaster Department and paid a wage half that of American soldiers.¹⁸

But on November 19, 1899, the war ended for Batson. In an action near the coast of northern Luzon, a Mauser bullet struck him in the left foot. Despite the pain, he directed that the one litter be given to a wounded Scout while he continued to ride horseback. A subordinate officer, James H. Blount, saw him wounded "while directing with his usual clearheaded intrepidity the fire of part of his battalion to protect the crossing of the rest of it over the Aringay River."¹⁹ The next day, Batson wrote his wife: "It is too bad that this occurred just now for I don't think Genl Young could very well spare me as no one can handle the Macabebes like I can, and I do hate to be laid up at this interesting stage of the game... because I was hot on Aggie's [Aguinaldo, the leader of the nationalist movement] trail."²⁰

Although amputation seemed necessary at first, doctors were finally able to save his foot. In a month Batson was able to enjoy the attention he received as a hero in a Manila hospital. Yet his hopes for the future took another serious blow when his staunch supporter, General Lawton, was killed in mid-December.²¹

The rest of Batson's life must have been anti-climactic for him. He did receive a major's commission in volunteers and, in 1901, promotion to captain in the regulars, as well as the Medal of Honor a year later. He even spent an additional year in the Philippines with another Filipino command, but the laurels he had desired evidently were not as satisfying as he had hoped. When he left the Philippines in the summer of 1901, he appeared to an Army doctor to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Seven months later he retired. For the remaining 15 years of his life, he was unable to find any real success in civilian endeavors and twice returned to temporary active duty as a recruiting officer. On January 15, 1917, while serving his second such tour, Matthew A. Batson, the founder and organizer of the Philippine Scouts, died. He was 50 years old.

The Scouts continued to flourish, but the Macabebe monopoly was short-lived, as members of other tribes joined the organization. Together with the Filipinos in the ranks of the Constabulary, the 5,000 Scouts made up more than 40 percent of the American forces in the Philippines in 1903 and played a crucial role in bringing the war to an end. By this time they had been made part of the Regular Army and were recognized formally as soldiers rather than as civilian employees. During World War I, when a sizable part of the American forces in the Philippines went to Siberia, the Army depended heavily on the Scouts to maintain the Philippine garrisons. In the 1920's and 30's, the Scout infantry, artillery, and cavalry regiments consisted of hand-picked men and were known for their discipline, pride, and loyalty.²² When the Japanese invaded the Philippines in World War II, the more than 11,000 Scouts did their share of the fighting on Bataan. After the war, with the advent of

independence in 1946, the Scout units ceased to exist as a part of the American Army. In their 47 years of existence, they had been a major factor in establishing, maintaining, and defending the American colonial power in the Philippine Islands. Batson would have been understandably proud of their record.

NOTES

1. Matthew A. Batson, letter to his wife, 15 June 1899. All Batson letters are in the Batson Collection, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. Subsequent references to these letters will cite same source followed by pertinent date(s). I am also indebted to Batson's daughter, Mrs. Phyllis Batson Davis, for information about his personal life.
2. Details of Batson's career are in his biographical sketch in Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington, 1903, reprinted by University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1965).
3. Charles H. Franklin, "History of the Philippine Scouts: 1899-1934" (manuscript chronicle, Record Group 407, National Archives), pp. 1-7; for an excellent memoir/history of the early days of the Scouts, see J. N. Munro, "The Philippine Native Scouts," *Journal of the United States Infantry Association*, Vol. II, No. 1 (July 1905), 178-90.
4. Batson, letters, Batson Collection, 18 June 1898 and 18 June 1899.
5. *Ibid.*, 18 June 1899.
6. *Ibid.*, 14 December 1899.
7. *Ibid.*, 21 May 1899.
8. *Ibid.*, 21 April 1899.
9. *Ibid.*, 21 May 1899.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 1 June 1899.
12. *Ibid.*, 2 August 1899.
13. *Ibid.*, 17 September 1899.
14. *Ibid.*, 24 September 1899.
15. *Ibid.*, undated letter fragment.
16. *Ibid.*, 29 October 1899.
17. *Ibid.*, 30 December 1899.
18. Franklin, pp. 8-10. In his Table C, he details pay and allowances.
19. James H. Blount, *The American Occupation of the Philippines, 1898-1912* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p. 119.
20. Batson, letters, Batson Collection, 20 and 26 November 1899.
21. *Ibid.*, 23 December 1899.
22. Franklin, *passim*.

