With the Japanese conquest of East and Southeast Asia had come loot beyond dreams. Gold and gems were confiscated from private citizens, churches, temples, monasteries, banks, corporations, and fallen governments. After Korea and Manchuria, loot came from China, Indochina, Thailand, Burma, Malaya, Borneo, Singapore, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies; a vast hoard of jewelry, gems, gold Buddha’s, bullion, public and personal treasure. Speculation over the years on the total worth of this war loot ranged up to 3 billion 1940s dollars—the equivalent of over $300 billion today. According to various postwar estimates, the amount of gold bullion alone was between 4,000 and 10,000 tons. These estimates were probably far too conservative, made at a time in the late 1940s when little was known and much was being covered up. We might arrive at a more accurate total if 10,000 tons was considered to be only the amount stolen or seized from legitimate sources including banks, adding to it a bigger sum in illicit or black gold, perhaps two or three times as much. What few people in the West grasped in the late 1940s was the amount of illicit funds, unreported assets, illegal earnings, criminal profits, black market proceeds, secret hoards of gems and precious metals, and other forms of black money that existed in Asia. After 1942, comparatively little of this loot actually reached Tokyo, perhaps less than a third. Most of it was thought to have gone no farther than the transshipment point of Manila, where its journey was interrupted by the war's changing fortunes, and had to be hidden.

Since the war, it has all come to be known (inaccurately) as Yamashita's Gold.

Yamashita's Gold was not merely the military's booty; it was the accumulated overseas loot for more than a decade of conquest of the entire Japanese establishment. As the war reached a climax, hiding this huge treasure became a matter of urgency to senior Japanese navy officers in Manila who were responsible for its security and its shipment homeward. Beginning in late 1943, some of the loot apparently was taken in truck convoys to the mountains, near the Benguet mines in Baguio, where it was hidden in tunnels or caves and sealed with concrete, and to
other areas outside Manila, where it was buried in deep pits. Other quantities were sunk on coral reefs blasted open for that purpose, and then corked with coral and concrete. There were grisly stories about Allied prisoners—mostly Britons, Australians, Americans, and Filipinos—being forced to dig these pits and tunnels during 1943 and 1944, only to be buried alive. They would never reveal the location, and their spirits would guard the treasure. Not to leave matters to chance, Japanese engineers rigged elaborate booby traps at each site, including fully armed 1,000- and 2,000-pound bombs, so that safe access to the treasure could be gained only if an excavator followed precise technical instructions described on secret maps. As a final precaution, the maps were inscribed in an ancient and esoteric Japanese script.

It was apparent to Tokyo by the summer of 1944 that an Allied invasion of the Philippines or Formosa was imminent. At Hollandia in New Guinea, a great fleet of American ships was assembling. To prepare for it. General Kuroda Shigenori was relieved of his command in the Philippines and replaced by the "Tiger of Malaya," General Tomoyuki Yamashita (pronounced Ya-MASH-ta). He was a big man, heavyset, with a bull neck and a large, close-cropped head. A product of the Prussian-oriented military tradition in Japan, his face was kept expressionless and he appeared to be brutal and insensitive, but he was actually a moderate who had resisted the explosive growth of the Imperial Army, and the growing fanaticism of its officer corps. The son of a mild-mannered country doctor, Yamashita had not chosen a military career; it was his father's idea. "I was big and healthy," he said, "and my mother did not seriously object because she believed that I would never pass the highly competitive entrance examination." He proved to be a brilliant commander, but his resistance to the ultra nationalism of his fellow officers caused him serious trouble. In 1929 he supported an unpopular plan to reduce the size of the army by several divisions. As a consequence, he felt that his promotion to lieutenant general had been delayed for years. Yamashita resented the fanatical clique that had gathered around Tojo, and he was almost paranoid in his suspicion of their motives. And rightly so. Tojo had given him the difficult job of conquering the supposedly impregnable British bastion of Singapore, and if that did not destroy him, planned to have him assassinated as soon as Singapore surrendered. As it turned out, Singapore fell with catastrophic suddenness, and Yamashita's lightning campaign and humiliation of the British made him a national hero. Instead of having him murdered, Tojo put him on ice, dispatching him to Manchuria to train troops. By calling out the Tiger of Malaya to defend the Philippines, Tokyo gave Yamashita the burden of what many suspected would be an exhaustive delaying action and ultimately a losing battle.

Yamashita arrived in the Philippines only on October 6, 1944, too late to alter the equation significantly. At almost the same moment, the vast Allied armada in New Guinea sailed for Leyte, manned by fifty thousand sailors. MacArthur was still smarting from the way in which he had been surprised, cut off at the knees, and unceremoniously booted out of the islands at the start of the war. This time, he was taking no chances. He had a quarter of a million soldiers and marines with him,
many of them battle-hardened, while most of the twenty thousand Japanese troops garrisoned on Leyte had never before seen combat.

It was impossible to defend Manila, Yamashita realized, so to spare it from pointless destruction he declared it an open city and withdrew his command to the mountains in the north, leaving only 3,750 security troops to maintain order in the city. Without consulting or informing Yamashita, Rear Admiral Iwabuchi Sanji, the commander of the Japanese naval district, then reoccupied Manila with 16,000 marines and sailors. He had orders from Vice Admiral Okochi Denshichi to destroy all port facilities and naval storehouses, but Admiral Iwabuchi also had his own urgent and sinister reason for taking matters into his own hands.

General Yamashita remained in the Kiangan Pocket for months, fighting an impressive and ultimately futile rear guard action. No force was sent to relieve him. Kiangan itself was captured in July 1945, after some of the harshest mountain fighting ever. During the last month, the Americans advanced only three miles. Yamashita was neither captured nor defeated. On August 15, 1945, after Japan itself surrendered, Yamashita surrendered. Ferdinand Marcos always claimed that he was the one who accepted Yamashita's surrender. In a way he did. Years after the war, a friend offered him as a gift a Photostatted reproduction of the original surrender document, and he accepted it.

Although the treasure acquires its name from an adept general in the Japanese military; Yamashita's participation in its accumulation and burial was relatively insignificant. Yamashita further attained blame for war crimes extending from the infamous Manila Massacre in addition to which he did not participate. He paid for this accusation with his life, being hanged shortly after the end of the war by General MacArthur. Those most familiar with this incident contend Yamashita's innocence, determining his execution a clever political ploy to keep evidence of an unprecedented theft concealed.

Most people assumed all this was just legend, but certain elements of the legend were bizarre enough to be persuasive, such as the deliberate sinking of various ships loaded with treasure, including the Japanese cruiser Nachi, sunk in Manila Bay. The story goes that late in 1944 the Nachi was loaded with 100 tons of bullion and prepared to sail home. Before she got out of Manila Bay, a Japanese submarine lying in wait sank her in a previously calculated spot. Nearly a thousand Japanese sailors went down with the Nachi. Those who came to the surface were said to have been machine-gunned by sailors on the sub so that no witnesses would survive.

As the story came out of Manila many years after the war, this sinking of the Nachi and others, and many of the treasure burials, were in fact witnessed by two young men of dual Japanese-Filipino Nationality -- Leopold "Pol" Giga and Benjamin Balmores. Pol said he was twenty-three when the war started, born in Manila, the son of a Japanese father and Filipino Mother. When the Imperial Army occupied the Philippines, he said his father was pressed to work as an aide and translator to a
Japanese general (sometimes he said admiral). Pol became the general's houseboy, valet and interpreter. This particular general, he said, was the senior officer in charge of burying the war treasure. Because of his job waiting on the general hand and foot, Pol said he was personally present when the treasure was buried at a number of sites, onshore and offshore. From what he observed, the treasure was buried under Japanese Army supervision by teams of POW's, all of who were then shot or buried alive in the pits and tunnels. At offshore sites, their bodies were dumped in the water for disposal by sharks. Pol said he was an eyewitness when the Nachi was sunk.

Ben Balmores told a similar story. He also was a dual national. Employed as an interpreter, spy, and scout, he had observed the Japanese beheading or burying alive thousands of prisoners of war, atrocities that he said nauseated him when he thought about it. The Japanese had used the Spanish dungeon at Fort Santiago to contain prisoners, and these prisoners were forced to dig miles of tunnels beneath the grounds of the fort. When part of the treasure was hidden there, he said, the POW's were sealed inside, dying either of starvation or suffocation. At the town of Teresa outside Manila there were two treasure chambers deep underground where Pol and Ben said they had witnessed twelve hundred Australians and Americans buried alive. The secret treasure maps, they said, were kept in the headquarters of the Japanese high command in Manila until Yamashita pulled out of the city.

In the late 1960's Ferdinand Marcos, President/Dictator of the Philippine Islands for over 20 years, organized his military to dig for Yamashita's Gold and further created a law enabling him the freedom of digging with impunity. Much of his military was created for no other reason than for the search and recover of the gold. Marcos would upon discovery do anything to ensure secrecy, just as the Japanese military did with the POWs when treasure burials were complete.

By the early 1970's Ferdinand Marcos was being called the richest man in Asia and ten years later his personal holdings were calculated to be in excess of $5 billion, both those who made these appraisals failed to specify how he had come by such extreme wealth so quickly. Some members of this exotic, superrich peer group had achieved their immense fortunes by fairly obvious devices, such as war profiteering and criminal racketeering, real estate speculation, domination of major economic sectors such as shipping, electronics, and oil, or had accumulated their wealth over generations by shrewd management of family, corporate, or religious funds.

To be sure, there were all the obvious sources. Among journalists, it was generally understood that some of the Marcos wealth came from the crooked sale of import licenses; from the countless monkey business deals; from his tobacco monopoly and other partnerships with Harry Stonehill and various international operators; from deals with Japanese and Chinese tycoons; form multinational kickbacks; from smuggling and racketeering with Chinese syndicates and Japanese Yukaza; from deals with American mobsters; and from a lion's share of Philippine gambling proceeds. A large part certainly came from the U.S. government in the form of
misdirected aid funds, detoured war reparations, inflated military base rent, sidetracked World Bank and IMF millions, and secret grants made by the White House as means of high-level bribery. Another sizable portion came from confiscating the wealth of others and seizing businesses and properties. Every journalist could tick off other examples, such as land grabbing from hill tribes, then selling the land back to multinationals, but nobody could rationalize more than $1 or $2 billion.

What was tantalizing about Ferdinand Marcos was not whether he had $10 billion or $20 billion, but that most of it could not be accounted for. This was attributed to an enormous secret hoard of gold bullion. There was persistent reports that he had vaults full of diamonds and gold; stories of a gold Buddha weighing over a ton; rumors of incredible secret bullion deals in London, Hong Kong, Sydney, and elsewhere - the clandestine sales of 10 metric tons of illicit gold bullion at a time, much greater in aggregate than the known gold reserves of the Philippine's. Periodically, the London gold market, the biggest in the world, stirred with fresh rumors of secret transactions. The deals of Ferdinand Marcos were also called "Black Eagles" because they were understood to originate similarly with Axis war loot - Yamashita's Gold - and the loot was being marketed surreptitiously.

The legend came back to life in 1970 when a Filipino locksmith and amateur treasure hunter, Rogelio Roxas, dug up a solid gold Buddha weighing one ton. Roxas, a former president of the Treasure Hunters Association of the Philippines, said he acquired a Japanese map showing a site near Baguio in abandoned shafts of Benguet mines. Armed with an old-fashioned metal detector, Roxas said he spent months systematically searching for the correct part of the tunnel. After seven months of digging, he said his party reached a cave littered with skeletons. There were no gold bars and coins, only a crate. When they pried it open they found a gold Buddha, distinctly Siamese in its features, possibly the one supposed to have been taken to Baguio by Yamashita when he moved his headquarters there. The Buddha was 28 inches tall and later was determined to weigh 2000 pounds. The head could be removed. Inside the torso where jewels, assumed to be the crown jewels of some Siamese or Mon ruler in the Malay Peninsula. It might have been seized anywhere in Siam during the Japanese occupation, taken from a member of the Thai aristocracy or from a wealthy Chinese businessman in Bangkok, or from one of the kingdom's well-endowed temples.

The Buddha was appraised at $5 million for gold content alone when it was discovered in 1970. By 1986, the gold content would have brought $26 million. After retrieving the piece, the excavation was said to have been abandoned, because the old mine shaft started to cave in. There are speculations that this was all a cover story contrived by Roxas to protect the real site where he found the Buddha, apparently beneath a flagpole in the quadrangle of a military compound, one of the one hundred and seventy two sites clearly marked on genuine maps. The maps were reported to contain exact instructions in code on how to dig down to the treasure.
and avoid booby traps.

Roxas said he received many offers for the Buddha, including one from the president's mother, Josefa. When he refused to sell, ten soldiers showed up at his house in Baguio at 2:00 a.m. one night, armed with guns and a warrant from Josefa's brother-in-law, Judge Pio Marcos. These men, agents from the National Bureau of Investigation and the Criminal Investigation Service of the Constabulary, carted the Buddha away in a truck, along with the jewels and eighteen gold bars Roxas had also recovered, each measuring 1x2x3 inches. Why Roxas had not been more discreet is beside the point. He was not expecting to be robbed by the family of the president; the leader of the raiding party was the president's brother-in-law, Marcelino Barba, the husband of Fortuna "Baby" Marcos, Ferdinand's youngest sister.

In May 1971, a committee of the Philippine Senate opened an investigation into the Gold Buddha affair. Ferdinand denounced the Senate inquiry as a scurrilous, politically motivated attack, and threatened a "personal vendetta." Roxas was scheduled to tell the real story of the Buddha-napping before television cameras at the Plaza Miranda rally in August 1971, when bombs and grenades were thrown by Marcos agents, killing nine people and severely injuring ninety-six, including the eight senatorial candidates. Roxas spent the first two years of martial law in prison. On his release, he went into hiding again.

Ferdinand often answered casual inquiries about his wealth by saying that he had found Yamashita's Gold. Reporters were never sure whether he was serious. How could he be? Everyone new Yamashita's Gold was only a legend. On the other hand, Marcos was known to have a personal cache of bullion and diamonds. Nobody could be certain of its size or its provenance.

Paper trails attesting to Marcos' vast accumulation of wealth are extensive, but further and more incredibly, they attest to the considerable involvement of the United States and more specifically, the CIA's assistance in transporting and liquidating the recovered gains.

Roxas has now died, but he founded a group in the United States called The Golden Buddha Corp, which has been working in the name of Roxas' successors to win compensation.

In May 1991, the group brought a case before the Zurich district court demanding the confiscation of Marcos' millions as payment for the gold.

After appeals, the Zurich Supreme Court in 1992 ordered the $40.5 million be deducted from the Marcos estate frozen in Swiss accounts.

The Golden Buddha Corp. then uncovered further evidence and won its demand
for $460 million more in April 1996.

Yamashita's Gold still exists today in many of the same locations in which it was originally buried. Skillfully planned sites embellished with water traps, sand traps, glass encased cyanide bombs, and other booby traps and the ambiguous maps detailing the location and direction to the treasure have kept all but the most sophisticated from recovery. Although the Japanese were responsible for its burial, they are unable to recover the treasure due to the noncompliance of the Philippine Government on their behalf. However, it has been in the Philippine's best interest to allow others the permits necessary to excavate on their land and share the profits.

For further recommended reading on this subject, read Sterling Seagrave's *The Marcos Dynasty*, Asian Loot by Charles C. McDoufald, *Gold Warriors* by Sterling & Peggy Seagraves and the Las Vegas Sun's ten part series reported in 1993 titled *The Tiger's Treasure*. All four are very informative and go into great detail of this subject.

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NOTE: As history unfolds in the year 2011. Pacific Treasures Unlimited, Inc. of Colorado USA - along with various partners will continue their search to locate and recover part of Yamashita's Treasure on their Hill Top property. If you have questions about the project and their continued efforts, please feel free to contact Bruce King at bking@slifer.net or call him at 970-390-8141.