

The Forgotten Men

In 1934, the Philippines became a Commonwealth of the United States in preparation for full independence in 1946. Manuel L. Quezon was inaugurated as the Commonwealth President. Quezon obtained the services of former U.S. Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur, who became Field Marshal of the Philippine Armed Forces. His task was to organize and train the Filipinos, preparing them to defend the archipelago. Perhaps to encourage the troops, he was given to bombastic statements like "give me 10,000 Filipino soldiers and I will conquer the world."

With war raging in Europe and China, preparations were made to defend the Philippines. From the National Archives at St. Louis - *"on July 26, 1941, a new command in the Far East was created, known as the United States Army Forces Far East (USAFFE). On the same date, President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt, issued Presidential Order (6 Fed. Reg. 3825), which called the Philippine Commonwealth Army into the service of the Armed Forces of the United States"*. MacArthur left his post with the Commonwealth Army and became Commander of USAFFE.

The Japanese bombardment and invasion of the Philippines came on Dec. 8, 1941 (still Dec. 7 in Hawaii). But even after 5 years under MacArthur's tutelage, the combined U.S. and Philippine forces were unprepared for the Japanese juggernaut. Patriotic fervor was high in the weeks before and after the attack. Including those already in the Commonwealth army, an estimated 200,000 Filipinos served under USAFFE. (Estimates vary depending on the source. A U.S. Army website stated that there were 63,000 Filipino troops in Bataan alone.)

On March 27, 1942, the United States Congress passed Title 8 of the Second War Powers Act, which *"granted non-citizens who served in the United States Armed Forces during the war United States citizenship status. Subsequently provided every member of the USAFFE, certain individuals who served in the Commonwealth Army of the Philippines, and certain Philippine Scouts equal treatment under the law as provided by the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution."* Less than 2 weeks after the Act's passage, USAFFE surrendered in Bataan, followed a month later by the fall of Corregidor Island. The Americans and Filipinos held out longer than the French, the British in Malaya and the Dutch in Indonesia.

Of all the Southeast Asian countries, only the Philippines engaged in a widespread, organized and effective resistance against the Japanese occupation. The Indonesians wanted to get rid of the Dutch colonizers and cooperated with the occupiers. Thailand even formed an alliance with the Japanese and declared war on the U.S. and England. In the Philippines, practically every province had a guerrilla force. Some were led by Filipino leaders like future President Ramon Magsaysay, Ruperto Kangleon and Macario Peralta. Both Peralta and Kangleon were decorated with the U.S. Distinguished Service Cross by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Kangleon led the guerrillas in Leyte, paving the way for MacArthur's landing. Other guerrilla units were led by Americans who refused to join the surrender at Bataan and Corregidor. Some areas of the country had guerrillas so effective that they virtually ran their own government. Read the exploits of an American named Wendell Fertig who controlled a large swath of Mindanao.

In the United States, Filipino Americans joined the military services in droves. There were 2 Filipino units, the First and Second Filipino Infantry Regiment. They fought in the southwest Pacific theatre. Some were sent to the Philippines to conduct intelligence operations. They are not well known, unlike the Japanese American 442nd Regimental

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Combat Team. A documentary of the First and Second's history and exploits was produced in 2002, called "An Untold Triumph." It was narrated by Lou Diamond Phillips, who is part Filipino.

There were decorated combat heroes like Ramon Subejano. He was a Filipino version of Audie Murphy. An immigrant to the U.S., he was not part of the Filipino Regiment but served with the 90th Infantry Division that fought its way from Normandy to Germany. Subejano was credited with killing 400 Germans and was awarded the Silver Star. When he died in 1988, the New York Times wrote an obituary. Subejano is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Jose Calugas was a Philippine Scout in Bataan and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. At least Calugas was not one of the forgotten ones. He survived the Bataan Death March, fought as a guerrilla then continued his military career in the U.S.

The promises of Roosevelt or the U.S. Congress plus the exploits of the Filipinos and Filipino-Americans were ignored by the 79th Congress. On Feb. 18, 1946 this Congress passed, and President Harry Truman signed, what became known as the Rescission Act of 1946. Basically it said the service of the Filipino USAFFE veterans would not count as service in the U.S. military. The long travails of the Filipino veterans had just begun.

Through the years, various American legislators tried in vain to compensate the Filipino veterans. Most notable are U.S. Senators Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka, both of Hawaii. Inouye is now the longest serving Senator. He is also a decorated veteran of the 442nd. Another is Rep. Michael "Mike" Honda who represents the Silicon Valley area of California. All of them have sponsored the Filipino Veterans Equity Act. Such Act has been introduced at every Congress since 1993 but has typically gone nowhere. The Act made it through committee but not for a vote on the floor of Congress. The legislatures of Hawaii and California have passed resolution after resolution asking for recognition of the Filipino veterans. Congresswomen Patsy Mink (Dem-HI) and Nancy Pelosi (Dem-CA) have implored their colleagues to pass the Equity Act. But the act lingers and the issue festers. I couldn't help but notice that those who worked tirelessly for the Filipino veterans are all Democrats.

It took the 2008 election of Barack Obama to finally redress the slights and injustice fostered on the "forgotten men." As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (the stimulus act), \$198 million was set aside for surviving Filipino veterans, with a maximum benefit of \$15,000.

Like "the greatest generation," the vast majority of the USAFFE veterans have passed on. Their numbers dwindle every single day, but they have not been forgotten. Remember them this coming Veterans Day.

*"Sleep in peace, comrades dear
God is near." – from Taps*