

Heroes, Brigands, and Spies: The Guerrilla Movement in Leyte and its Deadly Internal Struggles

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ABSTRACT

It is the common perception that Filipino World War II guerrillas were brave men and women who fought against the Japanese with courage and audacity, in the true spirit of patriotism and utter selflessness. It did not seem to be so in Leyte. While there were a few exemplary souls who relentlessly pursued the enemy with the weapons they could muster, it seemed the majority of them were far from the ideal soldiers that many thought them to be. Many were ambitious men who took advantage of the chaotic situation, who hungered for power,

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and who had spurious motives in their involvement. They operated independently in their own turf and acted like warlords in their fiefdom. Worse, deadly rivalry developed among them. While they may have contributed to the struggle against the Japanese, they scarcely made a dent against the Japanese occupation forces. Their efforts might have been more significant had they been a united force. This article explores the guerrilla resistance movements in Leyte.

KEYWORDS

Leyte, guerrilla movement, military operations, guerrilla leaders, fragmented group

THE TRAGEDY OF DULAG

On 18 October 1944, the town of Dulag, Leyte was the first to be liberated from the Japanese occupation forces. Dulag's liberation looked like a funeral with thousands of dead, dying or wounded because of the terrible firepower of the guns and artillery unleashed by American gun ships and war planes.¹ Some 4,000 other civilians perished during the bombing.²

That day, Dulag became history. Its houses were burned down and its people battered, maimed or buried alive that left its surviving residents shocked, terrified out of their wits or shaken up, many of them deeply traumatized. Eyewitness accounts told compelling stories.

Gloria Saño Malinao was only a grade two pupil then. She recalled that the event was “ghastly” and the town’s destruction as “near total.”³

Delia Jurado, then a writer for *The Freeman*, a Cebu daily, wrote: “By noontime, the eerie quiet would be pierced by whistle sounds of airborne shells fired from naval ships... Amid the screams of terror and tears, the blinding smoke, dust, and falling debris, the body of Consuelo Bardillon lay on the floor, blood spewing from her mouth and nostrils. She was sitting across me when a huge shrapnel hit her at the back killing her instantly.”⁴

Adelaida Lagunzad Filamor, a retired English teacher, related that their shelter was L-shaped and large enough for one to stand up, change clothes, and store food and water. Capt. Isao Yamasoye, a Catholic Japanese who had made friends in Dulag, advised her family to construct their shelter in that particular manner. The structure would save her but her father, Dulag Mayor Marcial Lagunzad and sister Sonia, did not survive the bombing onslaughts.⁵

Camilo Bigael, a member of the underground resistance movement under Alejandro Balderian, recalled that when he entered the town, he was shocked to find it in complete shambles. Bigael, who was one of the first to enter the town after the shelling, could no longer find his family or relatives. Houses and other public buildings, many of them of 19th century vintage and handovers from Spanish colonial days, were shattered into smoldering debris. No one was spared as the targets were not selective. Only the house of Andres Marchado’s family was left standing but it

was severely damaged. The trees around it were scarred by shrapnels and bullet holes. Even the centuries-old Catholic stone church and its wooden convent were reduced to rubble. Along with it were burned precious old documents that recorded the births and deaths of its residents since the Spanish period.⁶

Questions were later asked: “How come this happened in Dulag? Was Dulag not informed of the impending bombing?” Gen. Douglas MacArthur sent a trusted aide, Lt. Col. Frank Rawolle, G-2 from the U.S. 6th Army, and Lt. Cmdr. Charles Parsons of the 7th Fleet to warn the people in advance through Leyte guerrilla chief Col. Ruperto Kangleon. The civilians living near the coasts were supposed to be evacuated just a week before the bombing. Kangleon promised that he would do as ordered but by the looks of it, he failed to deliver.⁷ The information was not properly relayed to the population. Apparently, the Japanese forces were better informed. They knew the Americans were coming and they even told the civilians of the impending bombing, urging them to build bomb shelters.

Such a destruction did not appear in the official reports of the U.S. military establishment. What were shown in the books were photos of destroyed buildings and a church and wounded civilians being attended to at the tents on the beach.⁸ The extent of destruction and big number of casualty in Leyte during the liberation could be the result of the shortcomings of the guerrilla movement.

HEROES OR BRIGANDS

The guerrilla movement in Leyte was composed of different units led by men of different characters and questionable conduct during the war that one would ask if they were heroes or brigands, and see the “bad eggs” from the good ones.

Antonio Cinco was a rig driver in Tanauan, Leyte, before the war. When the Japanese came to Leyte in May 1942, Cinco killed one who tried to commandeer his horse and *calesa* and fled to the hills. But the Japanese caught him, beat him up, and put him in prison. He managed to escape though and once more fled to the hills, forming his own guerrilla band that operated around five Leyte towns. Then he began pillaging the countryside, sending his men to the villages for food, clothing, women, money, and ammunition. His men insisted on taking more than they needed. If a civilian refused, his house would be burned and his wife or daughter taken to the hills.⁹

In nearby Palo, Leyte, Ciriaco Centino and his son Isabelo took over the group of Eusebio Teraza who was killed in an encounter. This group operated in the towns of Jaro, Pastrana, Palo, Tanauan, and Dagami. To survive, the members often resorted to banditry and extortion activities. When the 92nd Division was organized comprising all guerrilla units in northeastern Leyte under Balderian, Isabelo became the commanding officer of its 95th Infantry.¹⁰

In the town of Inopacan, an American mining engineer Chester Peters established his own independent group. Inopacan was the birthplace of his wife, Julia Manapsal. Peters was working at a mine in Mariveles, Bataan when the war broke out.

A year prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Peters was commissioned as a reserved officer by Gen. Dwight Eisenhower. The latter was then a military adviser to President Manuel L. Quezon. Thus, Peters was already toting the rank of major when he escaped to Leyte with his wife and four other Americans and avoided the fall of Corregidor on 6 May 1942.

Armed with weapons and ammunition, Peters started his little war in Leyte. He blew off Panaliwad-on Bridge with dynamites. The deafening explosion sent the people scampering back to the hills in fright. He also destroyed Taotaon Bridge north of the town with a loud bang that immediately caused the Japanese military officers encamped in Hilongos about 10 kilometers away to send a truckload of soldiers to look for the perpetrators.

Peters' relationship with the civilian population was not good and it further deteriorated after his helper named Alao, acting like a guerrilla executioner shot the town police chief, killing him instantly. This violent act angered many people who wanted to kill the perpetrator and his American superior. Peters abandoned his headquarters and moved inland to Mara-o, a kilometer away. Thereafter, he assumed the *nom de guerre* of "Major X" while his wife Julia Manapsal called herself "Joan of Arc." Both would

prominently figured in a disastrous guerrilla unification conference towards the end of 1942.¹¹

Thankfully, there were more exemplary guerrilla officers than the bad ones:

Sgt. Filemon Pabilona in Alangalang was one of the army officers who refused to surrender to the Japanese. He led his unit like a political-military group by integrating his guerrilla activities with political action. He became a person of authority in his area of operation where he established a guerrilla council with teachers, lawyers and others from the educated gentry as members. The people of nearby towns of Barugo, San Miguel and Babatngon set up their own guerrilla councils following the council in Alangalang. Sgt. Pagbilona also organized the "Volunteer Guards" in each town, treating them as his auxiliaries. Consequently, he was favorably looked upon by the civilians both as an intrepid fighter and as a law-abiding man in his dealings with the population.¹²

Capt. Glicerio Erfe, of Ilocano descent, established his base in the mountains near the towns of Burauen, La Paz, and Dulag after his superiors surrendered. He was the highest-ranking official of the USAFFE in Leyte that did not surrender to the Japanese. He tried to assert his authority in the initial phase of the guerrilla movement. A dreamy-eyed soldier, he liked to dwell on military concepts and theories and preferred the safety of his guerrilla camp to harassing Japanese troops on patrol. He simply ordered his men in the field to go on combat operations. He organized guerrilla brigades in municipalities, each composed of

several regiments set along the regular military lines, and assumed that all those operating in the Dulag-Abuyog-Burauen-La Paz areas were under his jurisdiction as part of the province-wide confederation. But Alejandro Balderian and other leaders with different guerrilla mindset, however, did not really heed.

Toward the end of 1942, Capt. Erfe had drawn up an operational plan to launch a simultaneous attack against the Japanese with the objective of confining them only in Tacloban. Had the general attack gone off as planned, he might have gained enough prestige to unify the entire guerrilla movement before the arrival of Kangleon.¹³

Felix Pamanian, a technical sergeant of the USAFFE attached to the Leyte provincial government was another officer who refused to surrender. In Capoocan, he set up his operations in the mountains and began harassing Japanese patrols and transportation in the area. The success of his operations soon reached Capt. Crescencio Corpin who was hiding in Biliran. Corpin was also a USAFFE who fought in Pangasinan with the 91st Division and a Bataan veteran. With Pamanian as his model, Corpin formed his own group in Biliran and eventually joined up with Pamanian until they had a formidable guerrilla force operating from Capoocan to Biliran.¹⁴

Alejandro Balderian was a former lieutenant in the USAFFE who fought with the 91st Division in Pangasinan. He escaped from the Bataan Death March and sailed home to Leyte where he attached himself to the Leyte Provisional Regiment under Lt. Col. Theodore Cornell. He was

subsequently assigned company commander of the Bolo Company stationed in Jaro.¹⁵

After Cornell's surrender, Balderian fled to the interior parts of Jaro. He gathered arms and ammunitions dumped by USAFFE soldiers and civilians in the mountains. On the first week of June 1942, he convened a secret conference to launch the guerrilla movement in Dagami and surrounding municipalities. About 200 civilians and former USAFFE soldiers attended the conference and pledged to fight the Japanese, protect life and property, capture Japanese equipment and supplies, and uphold the Commonwealth government.¹⁶

Balderian unleashed a series of military operations during the first week of October 1942. To get back at him, the Japanese tied his parents to a horse and dragged them around the town of Dagami until they died.¹⁷ He had established his polico-military government in December 1942 and moved south beyond Abuyog.

Urbano Francisco established his group in the southern part of the island on 9 June 1942, less than a month after the surrender of Lt. Col. Cornell. Together with Lt. Enrique Carson, he gathered the remaining members of the 3rd Leyte PC Company at Barrio Maslog, Malitbog. Fifty-three responded to his call, majority of whom were members of the PC and soldiers of the Philippine Army who escaped from Bataan.¹⁸

Francisco's group took an initial shot against the Japanese by executing their chief spy, Gelacio Andrade,

in an ambush. Francisco, Carson, and four other riflemen easily overpowered Andrade and his four companions and killed them. This triggered punitive measures from the Japanese who went after unarmed civilians in their effort to locate the guerrillas. A few were arrested and tortured by the Japanese Kempeitai or military police.¹⁹

Capt. Sergio Nuique formed his group in the mountains of Sogod, Southern Leyte. He was later joined by American Navy serviceman Gordon Lang. On 13 August 1942, Lang led a platoon of Nuique's group against a Japanese patrol on board a truck in the vicinity of Divisoria, Sogod. Thirteen Japanese were killed, including an officer. Nuique's continued operations in the area prompted the Japanese to abandon their garrison in Malitbog in October that year.

Lt. Jose Nazareno, who used to be part of Nuique's group, established his center of operations in Panaon Island. A trained soldier of USAFFE, he successfully harassed Japanese ferries passing the narrow strait between Leyte and Panaon and soon established his reputation to the invaders. His group constituted the so-called "Southern Leyte Guerrilla Area" under the leadership of Ruperto Kangleon in 1943.²⁰

THE WESTERN LEYTE GUERRILLA WARFARE FORCES

Among the local guerrilla groups, however, it was the Western Leyte Guerrilla Warfare Forces (WLGWF), organized by Lt. Blas Miranda that had the semblance of an

army organization with its 15,000 members, coming from different smaller guerrilla groups that previously operated on their own. The WLGSF operated in the towns of Palompon, Kananga, Albura, Baybay, and Ormoc City.

At the center of the organization was Lt. Miranda, described by American historian Elmer Lear as either a “mountebank or a genius” for having set up a well-oiled machinery to fight the Japanese menace. Lear wrote: “Small of stature and with a boyish visage, he did not immediately impress one as a commander of a guerrilla division, much less the alleged executioner of many. To engage Miranda in conversation for any length of time was to come under the spell of a very magnetic personality. A fertile mind and an articulate tongue held their audience captive....”²¹

Miranda succeeded where others of higher rank did not. The WLGSF was a mixture of soldiers, former members of the Philippine Constabulary and civilians. He did not include any former Japanese prisoners because he considered them as potential traitors. With him were Lt. Conrado Sabelino, a native of Ormoc and former aide of Gen. Sharp in Mindanao, as his first chief of staff; Maj. Marcos Soliman, who came all the way from Mindanao; and Capt. Aristoteles Olaybar. The last two were Miranda’s former superiors but they subordinated themselves to his command apparently in respect for his pioneering initiatives.²²

Miranda’s WLGSF was patterned after the regular military divisions with modifications to suit guerrilla purposes. It had six regiments that operated more or less

independently, but its general headquarters had a strong mobile combat team that could be moved from one locality to another in case a regiment was hard-pressed. By June 1943, it already had 417 officers and some 12,000 men scattered in its six regiments.

ENTER KANGLEON

Of all guerrilla leaders in Leyte, however, it was Ruperto Kangleon who made a more permanent mark on the local guerrilla movement. He was also the most controversial as many of his actions were dubious. Kangleon was the highest-ranking USAFFE officer to surrender to the Japanese in Monkayo when Gen Jonathan Wainwright ordered all officers to do so in May 1942. He was among the surrenderees who were transferred to Butuan and along the way, he vigorously campaigned for other USAFFE soldiers to give up.²³

At the Butuan Provincial Jail, which the Japanese transformed into a POW camp, Kangleon was allowed to roam around, unlike other prisoners who were confined to their quarters. He became associated with the underground organization within the camp. During this time, he was also a confirmed member of the Japanese BC. Kangleon's freedom came on Christmas day in 1942 when the Japanese authorities raided the prison underground that included him, Esguerra, Sanchez, and an American. The latter was confined within more secure quarters, while the other two were publicly executed. Kangleon, however, "escaped,"—or so he claimed.

How Kangleon was able to escape under the tight Japanese security, Sgt. Alfredo Calo, a surviving veteran, could only guess. Kangleon had managed to find his way to Barrio Ampayon, about five kilometers away from Butuan proper, to the house of Calo, from where he was taken to Cabadbaran, a coastal town 30 kilometers away. There, Graciano Capili, a guerrilla from Southern Leyte met Kangleon and put him on a small sailboat to Macrohon, his hometown.²⁴

A few years before his death, Capili narrated to journalists that he pretended insanity and visited the POW camp often. He said the Japanese left him to his own devices and thus he was able to arrange for Kangleon's "escape," a story that does not fit into the sworn statements of Sanchez and the veteran Calo.²⁵ In subsequent interviews with Lear, Kangleon preferred to keep his story as vague as possible, which explains why Lear placed his "escape," in quotation marks. His "escape" from the Japanese internment camp in Butuan was "set in obscure circumstances," remarked Lear.²⁶

Kangleon claimed that the local guerrillas raided the Butuan Japanese POW camp that Christmas day of 1942, thus freeing him and several other guerrillas. But Col. Ernest MacLeish, who led the northeastern Mindanao guerrillas at that time, could only recall one raid which took place only in December 1943, a year after Kangleon's alleged escape. Kangleon was not among those freed by MacLeish. It is no wonder why Kangleon would brushed the "escape" story aside and shift to another topic whenever journalists asked about it.²⁷

Did the Japanese deliberately free him for their own purposes in Leyte? At that time, the island was a hotbed of several guerrilla groups operating independently of each other. Among the civilian population, the Japanese fielded their own agents and informants who were actively gathering information on everything that was of vital interests to them. But apparently they had no one among the guerrilla groups.

Kangleon made his initial contact with the group of Urbano Francisco whose operations had in the meantime deteriorated into pure and simple banditry. In the absence of any other local force to contend with, Francisco's group asserted itself among the civilian population and successfully created enemies among the well-to-do personalities whom they had initially victimized. Francisco's group also pursued other guerrilla groups like Balderian who they suspected to be operating with Miranda.

With Kangleon, who was chosen as military adviser by the southern guerrilla leaders at a conference in Sogod organized by Capt. Nuique in 1943, a group of 60 to 70 guerrillas was hastily organized and intercepted Balderian in Sogod. Balderian was caught by surprise and allowed himself to be disarmed without a fight. He explained that he had no designs of aggression, that he was completely misunderstood, and that the idea of his acting in collusion with Miranda was preposterous.

During this time, Kangleon could not show any appointment papers from any military authority. In the

report of Jesus Villamor, Allied Intelligence Bureau chief at that time, he remarked: “Kangleon’s actions in posing as an approved district commander is disgraceful.”²⁸

THE MACARTHUR CONNECTION

In April 1943, Charles “Chick” Parsons, MacArthur’s new master spy, got in touch with Kangleon and offered him the command of the 9th Military District which included Leyte and Samar.

Parson’s first choice among the guerrillas leaders in Leyte was Kangleon, especially since his contacts—I.I. Richardson, Truman Hemingway, and Joseph St. John—found Kangleon to their liking. He was not aware of Kangleon’s incarceration and subsequent “escape.” At first Kangleon begged off from the responsibility, citing his health as his main problem. But Parsons was insistent.²⁹

Parsons never knew that Kangleon had been busy since his arrival in December, and that the latter had already taken the command without his prodding and even without appointment papers as he had yet to confer with Col. Wendell Fertig, commander of the 10th Military District of Mindanao and Sulu, who also had to relay to his superiors in Australia. But Kangleon have started acting like he already had his appointment papers from MacArthur. Parsons’ visit only emboldened his resolve to wrest control of the guerrilla leadership in Leyte. The precious appointment papers did not arrive until November that year.³⁰

MIRANDA VS. KANGLEON

Kangleon also pursued the guerrilla group of Miranda. He tried to invade Miranda's Kampo Langit in the Ormoc mountains but his troops withdrew because the camp was well-fortified. His troops waited instead for Miranda's men in Baybay where deadly encounters took place. Some of Miranda's men were captured and interred in Kangleon's camps, Terranova in Matalom and Sleepy Hollow in Malitbog, for a few months.

Kangleon called Miranda a bandit and a killer, and issued shoot-to-kill orders for him. But Miranda was warned by sympathizers from Kangleon's camp to take the necessary precautions. Kangleon continued to monitor Miranda's camp with a radio stationed in Barrio Maybog until it was raided by Japanese troops during a stormy night in December 1943.³¹

Evidently, the Japanese had knowledgeable guides who knew the way to Kampo Langit even at night. Miranda barely escaped the Japanese and fled to Camotes. He eventually hid in Bohol for the rest of the war. When the Americans arrived in 1944, he did not surface because Kangleon still had him in his sights.

A good part of the officers and enlisted men of WLGWF remained loyal to the organization until mid-1944. But after Kangleon received the "American aid" and unimpeachable confirmation of his appointment as island commander became known, Miranda's men had no reason but to dissolve their general staff. Those who

were absorbed into the 96th Regiment acquitted themselves creditably, especially in combat with the Japanese after the American landings. They, however, were disgruntled over the discrimination shown toward them in promotions and assignments. Consequently, many of them worked actively to reactivate their organization and secure a belated American recognition.³²

CONCLUSION

Kangleon became a hero to many Leyteños who were eternally grateful to him for leading the local guerrillas because of official pronouncements and history books mentioning about his exploits. They do not know about the controversies surrounding his life as a military man during the Second World War and the internal wars that he waged among his own guerrillas. They never learned that his failure to inform Dulag residents of the impending invasion and carpet bombing by the American gunships and war planes led to the deaths of possibly a few thousand residents holed up in their makeshift bomb shelters on 18 October 1944.

They never learned of his open collaboration with the enemy while in the Japanese POW camp in Butuan, of his “escape,” or of the radio set that mysteriously found its way to the Japanese.³³ Nor would they learn of his free access to his family that was hostaged by the enemy in Tacloban. While Kangleon was able to put the other Leyte guerrillas under his command by reason of his rank, albeit with reluctance, not everyone submitted themselves

to him, especially those who were aware of his dubious background.

What Leyte had was a fragmented guerrilla organization, made up of assorted elements that hardly made a dent against the Japanese occupation forces. True, they might have lend a hand in the later part of the war with Gen. MacArthur's landing and made themselves useful as guides and porters of the allied troops. Nonetheless, these roles demeaned their participation in the war to free the island from the Japanese occupation forces. Such a participation might have been greater, nobler, and more significant had they been a united force.

NOTES

- 1 Jose Burgos, interview with Avelina Remandaban, Dulag, Leyte, 28 October 2004. The casualty figures reaching more than 4,000 were supplied by Ret. Col. Simeon Kempis.
- 2 The 4,000 casualty figure was supplied by Ret. Col. Simeon Kempis.
- 3 Interview with Mrs. Gloria Saño Malinao, Dulag, Leyte, 28 October 2004
- 4 Delia Jurado, "Remembering Leyte in D-Day 60 Years Ago." *The Freeman*, 15 November 2004.
- 5 Interview with Adelaida Lagunzad Filamor, Dulag, Leyte, 28 October 2004.
- 6 Interview with Camilo Bigael, Dulag, Leyte, 28 October 2004.
- 7 Carlos Quirino, *Chick Parsons: America's Master Spy in the Philippines* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1984), 94.

- 8 M. Hamlin Cannon, *Leyte: The Return to the Philippines*. (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1954), 74.
- 9 Royal Arch Gunnison, "Filipino Firebrands," *Colliers*, CXIV, Dec. 16, 1944, 74, as quoted by Elmer N. Lear in *The Japanese occupation in the Philippines Leyte: 1941-1945* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1961).
- 10 Lear, 22–23
- 11 Pedro N. Compendio, "Inopacan: Its Wartime History," an unpublished account. Compendio is a retired public schools superintendent and an officer the Veterans Federation of the Philippines.
- 12 Compendio, 36–37.
- 13 Lear, 37.
- 14 Lear, 50.
- 15 He was popularly known in Dagami as "*Bungot*," the vernacular term for moustache or beard.
- 16 Lear, 18–19.
- 17 *Leyte-Samar Weekly Express*, Oct. 12–18, 1996 issue, S15, as cited in Uldarico Baclagon's "Philippine Campaigns."
- 18 Pedro Abrenica, unpublished MS thesis, "Leyte Area Command: Its Organization and Role in the Resistance Movement in the Philippines," Adamson University, 1950, 41.
- 19 Lear, 25.
- 20 Lear, 26.
- 21 Lear, 55.

- 22 Soliman in a letter to Peralta, June 5, 1943, 3–4, as quoted by Lear in his footnotes, 58.
- 23 Sworn statements of veterans Celso T. Bolloso and Arturo Labrador. They said that along the way from Mawab, Nabunturan and Monkayo, the majority of Kangleon's men deserted and joined the evacuees who lived with the Aeta minorities of Davao.
- 24 Capili was promoted from private to captain for this deed, but he died keeping a deep and dark secret.
- 25 Bolloso.
- 26 Lear, 64.
- 27 Testimonies of Lorenzo Sanchez, a retired Customs official, and Camilo A. Esguerra, president of the Agusan Historical Society, a 1957 UPLB graduate, and a retired principal of the Agusan Provincial High School. Affidavit was executed on 3 November 2003.
- 28 Maj. Gen. Charles A. Willoughby, *The Guerrilla Resistance Movement in the Philippines, 1941–45* (New York: Vantage Press, 1st ed., 1972), 279. The remarks were part of Villamor's official report.
- 29 Quirino, 39–40.
- 30 Abrenica.
- 31 Justimbaste and Burgos interview with Arsenio Amo, former radio battery operator, in Maybog, a *sitio* of Barrio Caridad, Baybay, Leyte.
- 32 Lear, 90. More than 3,000 guerrillas of the WLGWF remain unrecognized until today and have no privileges as World War II veterans.
- 33 Willoughby. Mosot in the interview with the author disclosed that the radio was guarded by Margarito T. Micabel who was

almost caught by the Japanese when they found the radio hidden under a felled log in Kangleon's camp.

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