

The Setting of the Rising Sun in Negros

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ABSTRACT

The 1941-1945 war in Negros was waged by the guerrillas, the former members of the United States Army in the Far East who refused to surrender. To assist their operations, the guerrilla leaders established a civil government to assist in non-military work while the guerrillas waged the armed resistance. There was a clear delineation of function

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and purpose and it worked well to the end of the war.

The USAFFE was initially bedeviled by units that refused to submit to higher military authority. It was not until a unit sent by General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Negros that the rival units came under a unified command. From there on their operations were coordinated. Guerrilla espionage operations helped the Americans pinpoint enemy positions and capabilities.

The main battle in 1945 in the Mandalagan-Marapara mountain ranges was fought initially entirely by the American 40th Division and the 503rd Parachute Regiment. However, before the American landing, the Negros guerrillas had already the Japanese retreating to the mountains where the U.S. forces later inflicted the major blow to Japanese forces. When the U.S. forces withdrew to prepare for the invasion of the Japanese mainland, the battle in Negros was left to one American and one Filipino regiment until Japan surrendered three months later.

KEYWORDS

Civil and guerrilla leadership, propaganda war, collaborators, civilian morale

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of the events in World War II from the time the army of the Land of the Rising Sun occupied the island of Negros in May 1942 to its capitulation in August 1945. This presentation, however, deals mainly with the military aspects of that war and the support from non-military sources.¹

The resistance movement began immediately after Negros Island surrendered to the Japanese with the capitulation of the United States Army Forces in the Far East. The disbanded soldiers engaged in a series of bloody encounters among themselves until the Allied command in Australia intervened and united the rival units. The unified command was supplied with war materials by the U.S. through the submarine shuttle from Australia. In return, the Negros guerrillas provided the Allied Command with hard intelligence through the Allied Intelligence Bureau on Japanese dispositions and intents and the inclinations of Filipino political leaders.

By the time the Allied Forces under General Douglas MacArthur launched the invasion of the Philippines, the guerrillas in Negros were prepared. After MacArthur landed in Leyte in October 1944, the guerrilla units were ordered to attack Japanese installations and force the Japanese into a pocket of their final defensive position in the Marapara and Mandalagan mountains. The American 40th Division landed on March 29, 1945. The 7th Military District (7MD) composed of guerrilla units joined the battle until the Japanese surrendered on August 30, 1945.

NEGROS SURRENDERS

When the United States Army Forces in the Far East capitulated on May 6, 1942, General Masaharu Homma, the commander of the 14th Army that invaded the Philippines, refused to accept the surrender only of the Philippine and American troops in Luzon. Instead, he wanted the entire USAFFE command in the Philippines. Homma was already four months delayed in the timetable for the conquest of the Philippines.

After General Douglas MacArthur left the Philippines in March 1942 on orders of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, the USAFFE was renamed United States Army Forces in the Philippines, with the understanding that General Jonathan Wainwright who was in command of the Luzon forces, was limited only to USAFIP. However, when he sent word to General Homma to end the fighting, Homma wanted the surrender of the entire Philippine forces.

Under threat of a massacre, Wainwright issued the order for capitulation. However, the Visayan-Mindanao Sector commander, General William Sharp, and Negros commander Colonel Roger Hilsman, refused to obey, arguing that Wainwright was under duress. Wainwright finally persuaded General Sharp to end the fighting while Hilsman complied under threat of a court-martial.

On May 20, Japanese occupation troops from Iloilo arrived in Bacolod but found only one battalion of Filipino

troops and their American officers ready to surrender. Colonel Kumataro Ohta, the commander of the Negros occupation force, was furious and rejected the surrender unless all troops had been accounted for.

There was a problem, however. The Negros Force was composed of five battalions of Filipinos all commanded by Filipino officers. The units were spread out in the different areas of the island as the plan of defense was to allow the Japanese to land and defend Negros in several inland positions. When Hilsman issued the order to surrender, the battalion commanders went into hiding so they could not receive the order. The battalion commanders in a meeting in Bacolod had voted earlier not to comply. Hilsman was not aware of this agreement.

Several attempts to deliver the order to surrender failed. Homma threatened the massacre of all nurses in Corregidor if the Negros Force remained unaccounted. The wait was futile; and because he was already delayed by two weeks, Ohta agreed to accept on June 3 one battalion of troops and all the American officers assembled in Bacolod.

The battalion finance officers paid the salaries of the Filipino soldiers when the battalion commanders instructed their men to go home, hide their weapons, and wait for the password, "The stars are rising in Cansalongon" and the response, "The waters are rising in Guintabuan." The troops would then report to their designated assembly areas to begin guerrilla warfare.

AFTERMATH OF THE CAPITULATION

While many followed the orders to go home, others did not because of the shame of having surrendered without a fight. They remained in their hiding places and eventually led the life of the hunted. Armed and without leadership and means of supporting themselves, they turned to banditry, looting the countryside and killing Spanish *hacendados* who were perceived as enemies because Spain was a member of the Axis Powers. They burned hacienda houses and cane fields and fought against each other. They became known as the Wild Units, mostly headed by non-commissioned officers who claimed officer's rank.

The Japanese tolerated the Wild Units because they did not pose a threat to their presence. Also, the Wild Units' lack of discipline worked well with the Japanese who became the protector of the civilians. Victims reported the Wild Units to the Japanese who responded at the opportunity to kill the armed groups. The people had nowhere to go because law and order had collapsed, the local governments had either evacuated or left them under the Japanese puppet officials.

LAUNCHING OF GUERRILLA WAR

After he disbanded his battalion in June 1942, Captain Salvador Abcede decided to move to Sipalay, the southernmost town of Occidental Negros, and wait for the opportune time to strike. He passed by the evacuation site of the Municipality of Binalbagan in its mountain slope and Mayor Augurio Abeto invited him to stay as the mayor

had plenty of food for him and his men. Here Abcede stayed for a while.

Captain Ernesto Mata planned to go home to Ilocos, but he got sick. His men brought him to the hacienda house of Bacolod's former Mayor Alfredo Montelibano in the mountain town of Murcia. He recuperated, and Montelibano urged him to reorganize because the Wild Units were indirectly helping the Japanese and weakening civilian morale. Convinced of Montelibano's financial support, Mata decided to stay and began calling his men to reassemble in his last bivouac area in Mt. Silay.

Just a week after they were disbanded in June, a half platoon of Sgt. Manuel Digon ambushed a Japanese patrol in Barrio Masulog, La Castellana. In August, a platoon-size of USAFFE soldiers ambushed a truckload of Japanese in Himamaylan town, killing most of them. Then they disappeared into the mountain. The news of Digon's action and the Himamaylan ambush spread. Thus, armed resistance against the Japanese had sprung to life.

Inspired, Abcede contacted the other battalion commanders. He learned that Captain Ernesto Mata had lodged with Montelibano in Murcia and had reorganized. Abcede issued the call to reassemble. Although he knew of the running encounters among the disbanded units and was not certain of their loyalty, he invited them nevertheless.

Mata and Abcede met in the Higinio Uriarte hacienda outside La Carlota. There they agreed to initiate guerrilla war not just against the Japanese but also against the Wild

Units. Mata was named North Negros commander while Abcede took care of the south. Since Abcede was a senior officer, he was chosen as the island commander. He then declared martial law in the absence of the national and local governments.

The division of Negros into two sectors did not sit well with the other commanders, but most complied; and the 72nd, 73rd, and 74th Regiments were reorganized. But there were claimants to the top posts. Thus, other commanders refused to accept Abcede's command, claiming seniority over him. The rivalry, often bitter and violent, divided the Negros 7th Military District. The units fought against each other for supremacy.

ORGANIZATION OF THE FREE CIVIL GOVERNMENT

When the Japanese occupied the towns of Negros in June of 1942, several civil governments evacuated to the mountains, while others that remained in the towns were without officials. The Japanese rounded up the local officials and ordered them to function. In other places where the civilian authorities could not be found, the Japanese appointed their puppets. But these puppet officials could not do anything without clearance or order from the Japanese garrison commanders.

In the meeting of Abcede and Mata, they agreed that a civil government must be organized to be responsible for the needs of the guerrilla army especially food, enforce

national laws, and perform duties that were proper to a civil government, like adjudicating disputes and legalizing marriages. The civil governments were to provide also the military with intelligence, maintain peace and order in the countryside with their own police force, and wage a propaganda campaign to keep the Filipino morale high.

They appointed Alfredo Montelibano as military governor, who divided Negros Island into eight administrative districts and designated a deputy governor for each. When Judge Jesus Perez told Abcede that civilian authority had to remain supreme over the military even in a state of war, Abcede lifted martial law and entrusted to Montelibano all the functions of a civil government.

Aside from the deputy governors, Montelibano appointed mayors and all sorts of officials and personnel of a local government. Thus, for the duration of the war, Negros had two civil governments—the Free Civil government in the mountains, and the puppet governments in the occupied areas.

THE PLANET PARTY

Just before the dawn of January 14, 1943, U.S. submarine, *Gudgeon* surfaced in a cove in Hinobaan, at the southern tip of Negros Island. It discharged its cargo of five men and assorted equipment in two rubber boats. Headed by Major Jesus Villamor, the group, code-named Planet Party was sent directly from Australia by General MacArthur to verify the source of radio messages emanating

from the Philippines and claiming to be guerrilla forces loyal to the United States.

The new arrivals hid their boats and cargo; but earlier, just before they hit the beach, they were spotted by a fisherman who paddled away. He probably reported the presence of strangers that a guerrilla patrol went to the landing site. They captured the new arrivals and brought them to their headquarters in Barrio Hinobaan where the Japanese had never entered.

After an interrogation, one officer recognized Villamor as a pilot who was decorated by MacArthur for his feat in fighting the Japanese planes over Manila. Hence, they placed themselves under Villamor's order. After a briefing, Villamor asked the guerrillas to invite Abcede to Hinobaan. Abcede arrived with his staff ten days later, acknowledged Villamor's direct authority from MacArthur, and reported on the state of the guerrilla forces and their problems and plans. After this, Villamor summoned all guerrilla commanders to Hinobaan.

Villamor told the commanders that he was given authority directly by MacArthur's overall guerrilla units in the Philippines regardless of their pre-war ranks. His mission was sent to verify the loyalties of Filipino officials, organize the Allied Intelligence Bureau to gather intelligence, and unite the guerrilla units. Further, his mission was to open the avenue for the transport of war materials, equipment for communications, medical supplies, and other necessities to help the guerrillas boost Filipino morale, and to prepare for the eventual return of MacArthur to the Philippines.

UNIFICATION OF GUERRILLA UNITS

Initially, the meeting was chaotic. Commanders who outranked Villamor tried to impose on the new guerrilla organization, but Villamor threatened to remove them from the roster that would be prepared for recognition by the United States. Except for one colonel who eventually was forced out of Negros, the rest followed Villamor's orders. The Negros Force was united with the reactivation of the 72nd and 73rd Divisions with Abcede as the 7th Military District commander. To allow more operational flexibility, the commands were divided into the North Negros and South Negros Sectors with one division each. Specific spheres of command and operation were also designated.

Guerrilla units were trained with new weapons brought in by submarine and tactics as well as coordinated operations against the Japanese. The other companions of Villamor spread out into other islands as they organized spy networks for intelligence collection and transmission by radio or runners. Villamor, however, stayed in Hinobaan with headquarters in different locations within the southern Negros area where the Japanese had not established a garrison and had seldom operated.

Villamor also summoned Montelibano and the deputy governors and their staff. With the authority of President Manuel Quezon in exile in the United States, Villamor appointed Montelibano as the civil governor with the same functions as when he was a military governor. Montelibano was tasked also to intensify intelligence collection and

determine the loyalties of civilians. To boost civilian and guerrilla morale, mimeographed newspapers were published with the latest information from radio broadcasts from the United States, and newspapers and magazines brought in by regular submarine run from Australia.

GUERRILLA OPERATIONS

With new weapons, enough ammunition, and better training, the Negros guerrillas intensified their operations against Japanese patrols and forward bases and installations. Members of the Wild Units who recognized the authority of the new Negros command were absorbed, but many remained outside the guerrilla organization even after the war. They were hunted down and killed by the Philippine Constabulary, but those who survived were absolved by the general amnesty proclaimed by President Manuel Roxas in 1946.

The guerrillas, however, did not enter the towns to engage the enemy. They preferred ambush, a truly guerrilla tactic, driving the Japanese to increase their forces in Negros; but they refrained from operating far from their garrisons. While the Japanese ventured out on patrols, they returned to the safety of their garrisons by nightfall.

Guerrilla spies inside enemy garrisons as cooks and janitors warned the guerrillas of Japanese planned patrols, while civilians outside the towns sent signals when they spotted a patrol. Food was hidden along the routes of guerrilla messengers, and shelters in villages were identified.

News of Allied Forces moving in towards the Philippines called for intensified training and intelligence collection. Coast watchers were positioned in several mountain areas with the clear observation of the southern, northern, and western seabords of the island. These were strategic locations that could observe enemy ships crossing the Visayan Sea to the north, the Mindanao Deep to the south, and Guimaras Strait to the west for ships of the Luzon-Mindanao route.

THE JAPANESE OPERATIONAL AND DEFENSE PLAN

On April 8, 1944, Lieutenant Colonel James Cushing, the Cebu guerrilla commander, reported to MacArthur's headquarters that they had in custody Admiral Shigera Fukudome whose plane crashed in a guerrilla-held beach. Fukudome was the Chief of Staff of the Imperial Combined Fleet. Fishermen saved the Admiral and his men and sent them to Cushing while the Japanese launched a search with a threat that civilians would be punished if the Admiral and his men were not returned. After a negotiation that no harm would befall the civilians, Cushing released the Admiral.

Unknown to the Japanese, the fishermen also found documents that contained the Japanese Plan "Z" detailing operational maps, air and naval bases, wireless stations, emergency landing sites, triangulation points, and other information on the Japanese defense plans. The most crucial document was the operational order of the entire Japanese Fleet. Allied Headquarters directed Cushing to

send the documents immediately to Australia by submarine through the Negros guerrillas. MacArthur's headquarters copied the documents.

Fukudome returned to Japan after his release and it was only then that he realized he also lost the vital documents. The Japanese launched a search but found nothing. They suspected the guerrillas might have them; and on May 22, the Japanese dropped leaflets demanding the return of the documents by noon of May 30. Knowing he could not produce the documents on time, Cushing launched attacks on Japanese garrisons to divert attention. The Japanese eventually believed that the guerrillas did not have them and that said documents could have been lost. In which case, the Allies would not have known about them either.

The documents were encoded and sent to Hawaii and Washington. All naval units were informed of the Japanese fleet dispositions and plans. On June 19, the battle of the Philippine Sea broke the Japanese air and naval power from which Japan never recovered. It was the twilight of the Rising Sun.

The speed of the transmission of the Japanese documents through sea lanes and the mountain trails of Negros showed the organizational unity and operational efficiency of the Negros guerrillas and cooperation among the guerrilla units in the Visayas. By 1944, they were ready for the big fight.

That same stormy night when Admiral Fukudome's plane crashed, the plane of Commander of the Japanese

Combined Fleet, Admiral Meneichi Koga, also plunged close to Davao. The documents with Fukodome were referred also to be those with Koga.

SOFTENING THE AMERICAN INVASION

Well trained and better equipped, the Negros guerrillas increased the frequency of their attacks against the Japanese, this time against the garrisons and installations. The ambushes on Japanese patrols were effective forcing the Japanese to stay closer to their garrisons. Coast watchers in the north, south, and west of Negros Island were increased particularly in the high grounds with panoramic views of the Visayan Sea and the Mindanao Deep, which were the routes of the Japanese fleet and planes. Intelligence collection was intensified especially on enemy troop and logistics movement.

The reports of American advances in the Pacific and European theaters and the increased flow of materials from Australia emboldened the freedom fighters. The training was intensified further in preparation for the awaited American invasion. On September 3, 1944, American planes began strafing and bombing the five still operational Japanese airfields. Japanese planes were destroyed on the ground and in the air. The guerrillas were instructed to help the American aircrew that would crash. U.S. pilots were instructed also to get into the mountain areas if they had to bail out. Several members of the U.S. Air Force were saved during the bombings and air combat operations over Negros. They were returned immediately to their units by submarine.

After the landing of American forces in Leyte on October 20, 1944, General Douglas MacArthur addressed the Filipino people telling them that he had fulfilled his promise to return. He then rallied the people to “strike” at the enemy at every opportunity. The Negros guerrillas were prepared for aggressive operations. The regiments organized Combat Teams with orders to attack all Japanese garrisons.

On March 1, the liberation of Negros began. The U.S. 7th Fleet bombarded San Carlos in northeastern Negros, followed by an assault of the North Negros Combat Teams that pressed on the retreating Japanese forces. The Combat Teams in Kabankalan in the south also assaulted Japanese positions to take the Japanese airfield in Himamaylan and the strong Japanese garrison in the Binalbagan Sugar Mill.

The Combat Teams had a running battle with the Japanese that retreated by the day until the middle of March when the Japanese disengaged and retreated to their main line of defense in Mt. Marapara range.

FINAL BATTLE: THE SETTING OF THE RISING SUN

At the dawn of March 29, 1945, a reinforced platoon of the 40th Division sneaked into the beaches of Pulupandan. Guided by a guerrilla operative, the platoon moved quickly to take Bago Bridge. After a brief firefight, the Americans took the bridge and the rest of the Division followed. Japanese rear units were caught fleeing the area

with the guerrillas at their tail. From there the Americans took over. Several 7th MD officers were sent for training in the U.S. The rest were prepared also for the invasion of Japan.

With small units of the 40th Division attached to them, guerrilla units took control of all the towns of the island with little or no resistance. The Japanese had abandoned the towns in Oriental Negros as well by the time the Americans landed there. The civil government also came down and began the work of rehabilitation with American aid workers.

With only enemy rearguards in place to delay their advance, three regiments of the 40th Division, reinforced by the 503rd Regimental Combat Team, were spread out for the assault of the Patag and Lantawan main Japanese defense line. One regiment attacked from the south, another from the north, and two from the west, the main line of attack.

The Japanese had prepared their positions well from high ground. Strong points of the enemy rearguards delayed the American advance. The 40th Division got stalled when they were within range of Japanese guns. The Japanese also dug tank traps and cut the narrow precipitous roads along deep gorges towards the enemy positions. The obstacles prevented the tanks from advancing and forcing the infantry to advance down the ravines dotted with caves. These were disposed of in slow and ferocious fighting. Above, the Americans had to bring in bulldozers that worked under

enemy fire. As the Americans moved closer to the Japanese defense line, Kono's snipers and night crawlers made life difficult for the U.S. advance units. These snipers scored many hits on the American and Filipino attackers.

The U.S. Air Force pounded the Japanese positions daily while the American artillery fired their guns at the Japanese position on regular intervals of twenty minutes during the daytime, like office hours at eight in the morning to five in the afternoon. U.S. planes dropped daily hundreds of tons of 100, 500, and 1,000 pounder bombs but with little effect. The Japanese had established a series of interconnecting tunnels, caves, and concrete bunkers on the reverse slopes of the mountains and emerged once the bombing had ceased and the artillery fires had been lifted.

The U.S. infantry had to move inch by inch from the low ground and under the rain of fires and grenades, but they eventually reached the peaks and neutralized the enemy. Sgt. John Sjogren earned a Congressional Medal of Honor in this operation. But the enemy was tenacious. The Negros campaign was completed by end of May 1945, but the battle raged on.

General Douglas MacArthur was concerned with the slow progress that he visited the battlefield to find out the cause of the delay. He needed the division for the planned invasion of the Japanese mainland. The enemy suffered heavy casualties from combat losses, lack of food and medicine, and suicides. The enemy was weakening, sustained only by the will to fight to the death. Thus, MacArthur ordered the

40th Division to ship out. The 503rd Regiment and the 7th Military District of the Negros guerrillas were left to finish the job.

Japan surrendered on August 14, 1945. General Kono surrendered on August 28. Of his 17,000 officers and men, 7,100 died, 5,525 of them killed in action. The Americans suffered a casualty of 7,467, of which 381 died in action. The Negros guerrillas suffered 1,000 dead and over 400 missing in action.

For fifty-two months, the forces of the Empire of the Rising Sun had scorched Negros until August 30, 1945, when that sun finally set.

END NOTES

World War II Negros validates again the importance of a guerrilla war in a situation where the enemy forces are strong. The war in Negros, however, proved another vital ingredient—the active support of the civil population. Negros established a civil government as the logistical arm of the guerrillas as well as the propaganda organization to retain the loyalty of the population against an invader.

The civil and military authorities defined their role clearly. While civil authority was supreme over the military even in a war situation, the civilian government in Negros at the time considered itself more as a helpmate rather than the deciding authority. Thus leadership was unified.

In a war situation where the invader occupied the lowlands and controlled most of the population, propaganda is vital to keep the people's loyalty to the nation.

The Japanese and top-ranking officials of the Philippine Commonwealth were used by the Japanese to persuade the Filipinos to persuade the guerrillas to surrender and to support the occupation forces with a promise of immediate independence and propaganda that the United States has already abandoned the Philippines. But the Filipinos remained loyal to the US and the Philippine Commonwealth because of the propaganda arm of the guerrillas that belied Japanese promises.

The guerrilla war in Negros was not clean. There were abuses in the mountains, spies in the lowlands, USAFFE soldiers turning on their people, and top officials of government kowtowing to the Japanese.

Despite their anti-Filipino activities, the Japanese collaborators escaped accountability and punishment because the first President of the Philippine Republic, Manuel Roxas issued a general amnesty that exonerated all their crimes. So much and so many perpetrators of injustices had escaped responsibility.

NOTES

- ¹ This paper was originally delivered at the National Conference on the 75th Anniversary of the 1944 Leyte Landings held on 17-19 October 2019 at Leyte Normal University in Tacloban City,

and consists of passages and excerpts taken from the author's two-volume book, *Against the Rising Sun: Guerrilla War in Negros Island 1941-1945*. References from over 200 pages of primary documents, and over a hundred books, secondary materials, and photographs on the war in Negros including the plight of the civilians and their role in the conflict were taken from archives and libraries in the Philippines and the United States and family collections, Japanese prisoners' interrogations, captured enemy documents and interviews with veterans in the Philippines and the United States, and personal experiences.