

Prelude to Biak-Na-Bato: The Mt. Arayat–Sitio Camansi The Encampment of General Francisco Makabulos of November 1897

LOUIE ALDRIN L. BARTOLO

ABSTRACT

Unknown to everybody, the strategic plateau of Camansi in Mt. Arayat is one of the strongholds of revolutionaries. Before the revolution broke out, the mountain itself was the site of *tulisanes* and *bandidos* that robbed nearby towns. Due to the expansion of agriculture, portions of the foothills of Mt. Arayat was made into an experimental station in 1885 by the Spanish colonial government. After the Pact

LOUIE ALDRIN L. BARTOLO is an elementary teacher at Sta Cruz Elementary School, Magalang South District, Magalang, Pampanga. He is the local historian and author of *The Magalang Book The Historical Life and Culture of a Kapampangan Town (1605-2015)* published by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts in 2016. He is also the administrator of local historical websites Amlat Magaleño and Museo Virtual de Amlat Magaleño.

of Biak-na-Bato was signed, military campaigns against revolutionaries intensified which led to their campaign in Camansi. On 28 November 1897, they finally captured Camansi and the officers in command escaped. In subsequent years, Camansi was made a hideout for a guerrilla campaign against Americans. It was also made as a base for resistance groups fighting the Japanese during World War II. Government forces also set up their base in Camansi during the Huk insurgency in the 1950s.

KEYWORDS

Camansi, revolution, Magalang, Mt. Arayat, guerrilla, resistance

OVERVIEW

The 1896 Philippine Revolution quickly spread throughout the islands, and owing to various geographical and strategic reasons, revolutionaries preferred to set up their lines of defenses and camps in highly elevated places. For instance, the Kapampangan revolutionaries established their encampment in Camansi, a plateau located in Mt. Arayat. It was here where they initiated new members of the Katipunan and later made their revolutionary camp. After the Revolution, the camp was reused during the Philippine-American War, and lastly as one of the important havens of resistance in Central Luzon during the Japanese occupation.

LOCATION

The plateau of Camansi is located on Mt. Arayat or Bunduc Alaya, and is politically part of Barangay La Paz Turu, Arayat, Pampanga. However, this place may be more easily accessed through the neighboring Barangay Turu, Magalang, Pampanga. According to Manuel Sastron's *La Insurreccion en Filipinas y Guerra Hispano-Americana en el Archipelago*, this plateau measures 500 meters in length and has two routes, with the main route going through the mountain and down to the nearby town of Arayat¹. Camansi is 100 feet high with a small stream on the foot of the plateau.² Atop the plateau, one can see prominent places as far as the towns of Concepcion, Tarlac to the north, and Cabiao, Nueva Ecija to the east.

ACTIVITIES IN MT. ARAYAT BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Group activities already existed on Mt. Arayat even before the Revolution broke out in 1896. According to the newspaper *La España*, *tulisanes* or *bandidos* were already encamping Mt. Arayat. In 1868, the said newspaper reported a group of armed *tulisanes* led by Isidoro Guintu who robbed the town of Magalang, especially the church which was then in the primary stage of construction. After the raid, they successfully escaped to Mt. Arayat through the nearby Barrio Buensuceso, Arayat.³

After the ransack of Magalang, nothing significant was recorded or reported about the later activities of *tulisanes* and *bandidos* on Mt. Arayat. In 1885, a Royal Decree was

promulgated transferring *La Granja Modelo de Luzon* from San Isidro, Nueva Ecija to the *falda* or foothills of Mt. Arayat in Magalang.⁴ This experiment station cleared 900 hectares of forest land for the extensive experimentation of various crops and livestock. This institution is survived to this day as the Pampanga State Agricultural University.

MAKABULOS AND MAGALANG'S REVOLUTIONARY CIRCLE

As popularly mentioned in the 1954 Historical Data Papers of Magalang, as well as several other accounts, Gen. Francisco Makabulos recruited several men to the Katipunan which they signed in to with their own blood.⁵ He also formed the local revolutionary committee composed of the elite in Magalang. One such member was Lorenzo Camaya who was initially promoted to *comandante* and later colonel of the revolutionary army. Comandante Camaya oversaw the transfer of Spanish captives from San Fernando originally destined to be detained in Mt. Arayat, but they were confined instead in the church convent of Magalang in 1899.⁶

On 1 November 1897, the Biak-na-Bato Constitution was signed, which both Gen. Makabulos and Maj. Servillano Aquino were signatories. With the ratification of the document, the departmental governments of Central Luzon and Batangas were absorbed by the Biak-na-Bato Republic. To counter this belligerency, the Spanish colonial government led by Gov.-Gen. Fernando Primo de Rivera intensified its military campaigns. He believed that the

rebellion in Central Luzon would be crushed if the camp of Makabulos in Camansi was taken over.⁷

RECONNAISSANCE TO CAMANSI

According to Manuel Sastron, around 14 September 1897, Gen. Ricardo Monet sent three military columns to conduct reconnaissance missions around Camansi.⁸ These columns were led by Col. Joaquin Milans del Bosch, Lt. Col. Jose Maria Olaguer Feliu,⁹ and Lt. Col. Fernando Carbo. Units of Col. del Bosch passed through *La Granja Modelo de Luzon*, Barrios San Miguel, San Antonio, and finally San Ildefonso with light resistance from the revolutionaries.¹⁰ These Spanish units established their base in Sitio Balitucan in Barrio San Ildefonso while the advanced units of Lt. Col. Carbo reached Barrio Turru¹¹ on foot through the rice paddies. On the same day, the column of Lt. Col. Feliu passed through Barrios San Bartolome and San Isidro,¹² crossed Sitios Aminang and Caballon-carul¹³ and Barrios San Miguel and San Antonio, and finally linked to the units of Carbo in Turru. Col. Feliu observed that there were several trenches dug by the revolutionaries along the way.

THE BATTLE OF CAMANSI

On 27 November 1897, Gen. Ricardo Monet had to make preliminary adaptations for his troops, choosing the other side of the mountain—the town of Magalang—as the buttress of his forces.¹⁴ He ordered his troops to seal off Camansi by its main routes: one going to Camansi itself, and another going down to San Juan Baño in Arayat. He

set up three defensive lines to prevent the revolutionaries' escape to the Zambales Mountains. These three lines were composed of:

1. The line covering the town of Concepcion
2. The line covering the towns of Paniqui, Tarlac, and Capas
3. The line covering the towns of Camiling and Moriones¹⁵

A company of 50 Macabebe volunteers was deployed in Piedra Blanca ("white rock") in Mt. Arayat. The rest were composed of four units:

1. 600 men under Comandante Angel Fernandez
2. 650 men under Lt. Col. Olaguer Feliu and Eugenio Blanco
3. A reserved force composed of 350 Guardia Civil under Lt. Col. Eduardo Oyarzabal
4. Mountain Artillery unit under Capt. Terraza

At the dawn of 27 November, the column of Lt. Col. Feliu and the artillery unit were tasked to attack Camansi from the extreme left flank, while the column of Comandante Angel Fernandez led by Gen. Monet was in charge with attacking Camansi from the right flank, passing through the forest and La Granja. Around ten in the morning, the unit of Fernandez eventually linked with the columns of Feliu and the Macabebes. Meanwhile, a unit of Feliu led by Capt. Vistory exchanged fire with the revolutionaries and forced them to retreat to the nearest trenches.¹⁶ Around 11:00 a.m., Feliu's artillery unit started shelling

the rebel positions. He continued his advance and placed his artillery unit 150 meters away from enemy trenches. The fire caused by extensive shelling became widespread in the Filipino lines which forced them to retreat. However, the column of Fernandez also backed down owing to exhausted artillery support and 23 casualties. He returned to Magalang and formed a military council to assess their actions in Camansi. Throughout the day, the units of Feliu continued their attempts to conquer Camansi totaling six attacks, but to no avail due to incessant heavy rains.

At the dawn of 28 November 1897, Nemesio Javila y Bravo, a *capataz de cultivo* or crop foreman of La Granja escaped from the hands of the rebels and ran towards the Spanish forces. Around nine in the morning, Spanish columns finally reached Camansi. In this battle, they killed 93 rebels and seized considerable military equipment including horses and carabaos. Gen. Francisco Makabulos and his aide-de-camp Maj. Servillano Aquino escaped to the forests of Arayat and later to Manangi, a remote *sitio* in Tarlac.

THE TORRE HELIOGRAFICOS AND BLOK-HAUS

To guard any possible attempts by the revolutionaries to regain Camansi, Gen. Monet ordered his troops to transfer the encampment of Cazadores No. 4 to Barrio San Antonio, Magalang, and to construct their *blok-haus* there.¹⁷ He also ordered the construction of the Torre Heliografico in the town of Mabalacat. These so-called heliograph towers were mirrored communication devices used to send messages in Morse code by flashing reflected

sun rays to a distant station. These towers proved to be very useful and greatly aided the Spanish troops in retaining their control over Camansi. Aside from the heliograph tower constructed in Mabalacat, there were other towers constructed in several *barrios* of Magalang and Concepcion before or during the battle. Only two of them are left standing today which are located in Barrios Sta. Cruz and San Isidro in Magalang. In 2015, the National Museum of the Philippines declared these existing towers as Important Cultural Properties.

CAMANSI IN LATER YEARS

Despite his subsequent defeats, Brig. Gen. Servillano Aquino still chose to re-establish his encampment in Camansi in late 1899 where he waged guerilla warfare against the Americans. A brief battle was fought in this plateau on 5 January 1900.¹⁸ Around 3:15 am, the Americans' Company B of the 25th Infantry—known as the Buffalo soldiers—together with a surgeon and detachment of hospital corps, left Magalang and marched to Camansi. While they were conducting reconnaissance around Camansi, heavy fire poured on them from the troops of Gen. Aquino. The Americans repelled the attack and eventually made advances until they overran Camansi. The Filipinos escaped to the woods while the Americans discovered five captives laden with gunshot wounds and bolo cuts. Two of these captives died. Before they returned to Magalang, they burned every building and outpost shack in Camansi. Gen. Aquino's operations lasted until 1901 when he was captured by the Americans and was brought to Manila to face charges.¹⁹

During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, resistance groups once again established their presence in Camansi. One of them was the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon or Hukbalahap led by Eusebio Aquino, a distant relative of Gen. Servillano Aquino. Camansi became a haven for American soldiers escaping from the Death March, notably Capt. Donald Blackburn, Capt. Russel Volckmann and others.²⁰ They were taken care of by Eusebio Aquino and they witnessed operations and executions done by the Hukbalahaps to the Japanese collaborators. It was mentioned in the biography of Blackburn that there was “a beautiful woman who is a daughter of the mayor of Mexico [a town in Pampanga] who was killed by the Japanese, so she joined the guerillas and was bent on revenge.”²¹ That *amazona* was no other than Remedios Gomez, also known as Commander Liwayway.²² As a side note, it is interesting to know that there is a boulder in Camansi known as the “Execution Rock.” This boulder earned its moniker for the public decapitations during Spanish rule. Spies, informants, and collaborators were all executed in this place.²³

Before the return of the American liberation force led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur to reclaim the Philippines, on 5 March 1943, Japanese planes bombed the encampment of the Philippine Chinese Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Forces known as Wha Chi in Camansi.²⁴ Later, they were attacked by Japanese soldiers with artillery shelling from Cabiao, Nueva Ecija. However, Wha Chi managed to kill 20 Japanese soldiers before they withdrew to the northwestern part of the forest. On 6 September 1944, a combined force of Hukbalahap and Wha Chi guerillas waged an all-out offensive against the Japanese based in Mt. Arayat. During

this battle which lasted until 5:00 p.m., the guerrillas managed to capture the base and inflicted losses on the Japanese. Over 300 Japanese were either killed or wounded and 140 of the Japanese-sponsored Constabulary were captured. On the other hand, 63 Hukbalahaps and 3 Wha Chis were killed, and 23 and 4 members of the respective units were wounded.

After the war, Camansi was briefly used as an encampment of the Philippine Army during the Huk insurgency. Nowadays, Camansi is already full of thick tall grasses and the place is still farmed with vegetables. There are some traces of evidence of the historic events in Camansi, such as rocks encircling one hectare of the place to serve as cover for soldiers guarding Camansi. Treasure hunters are also rampant in Camansi, as they believed that this place had hidden treasures stored by the revolutionaries and even the Japanese.²⁵

Camansi is one of the important sites during the Philippine Revolution. May the day come when this place is put on the map of historic places because of its prominence and contribution to Philippine history. May the present and future generations appreciate Camansi that will make them proud not only as Kapampangan but also as Filipinos.

NOTES

- 1 Manuel Sastron, *La Insurreccion en Filipinas y Guerra Hispano-Americana en el Archipelago* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Sucesora de M. Minuesa de los Rios, 1901), 304.
- 2 *Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900).
- 3 The said *tulisanes* and *bandidos* were already armed with rifles, *retacos*, revolvers, pistols and *campilans*. From *La España*, 13 August 1868.
- 4 Miguel Rodriguez Berriz, *Guia del Comprador del Terrenos Baldios y Realengos de Filipinas* (Manila: Establecimiento Tipo-Litografico de M. Perez, 1886).
- 5 Ceferina T. Cruz, et al. "Historical and Cultural Life of the Municipality of Magalang in the Province of Pampanga" (1954) in the Historical Data Papers of the National Library of the Philippines.
- 6 Casimiro Alcubierre, "España en Filipinas, Los Ultimos Años de Su Dominacion En El Archipelago," *El Imparcial*, 1910.
- 7 Lino L. Dizon, *Francisco Makabulos Soliman: A Biographical Study of a Local Revolutionary Hero* (Tarlac City: Center for Tarlaqueño Studies, 1994).
- 8 Sastron, *La Insurreccion en Filipinas y Guerra Hispano-Americana*, 295-297.
- 9 He also led the Spanish forces in the Battle of Kakarong de Sili on 1 January 1897.
- 10 *La Granja Modelo de Luzon's* original territory was composed of 1,050 hectares stretching to Barrios San Ildefonso, San Agustin, San Vicente, Ayala, and Sto. Niño in Magalang, Pampanga.
- 11 Known today as Barrio Turu, Magalang, Pampanga. The original *barrio* was then under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of

Arayat, Pampanga. In the late 1950s, this *barrio* was divided and Barrio Turu was ceded to the Municipality of Magalang. The remaining part of Turu was reorganized as Barrio La Paz Turu and was ceded to the Municipality of Arayat.

- 12 Part of Concepcion, Tarlac.
- 13 Known today as Sitio Cabayung Sarul of Barrio San Ildefonso, Magalang, Pampanga.
- 14 Sastron, *La Insurreccion en Filipinas y Guerra Hispano-Americana*, 304-307.
- 15 Presently known as Barrio Villa Aglipay, part of San Jose, Tarlac.
- 16 “Las Ultimas Operaciones de la Guerra,” *La Epoca*, 8 January 1898.
- 17 Taken from the signed report of Gen. Ricardo Monet dated 8 May 1898, informing the Governor-General of the completion of the heliograph tower overlooking Mt. Arayat. This original document is in the possession of Dr. Lino L. Dizon, commissioner of the National Historical Commission of the Philippines.
- 18 *Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 356-357.
- 19 Louis A. Stone, *Two Years In The United States Volunteer Army Or Around the World Under Stars and Stripes* (Kentucky: Louis Stone, 1901).
- 20 Capt. Donald Blackburn and Capt. Russel Volckmann escaped from the Death March and took refuge in Camansi wherein they were taken care by Eusebio Aquino. After their brief stay with Aquino, they continued their journey to Northern Luzon. There, they took command of the United States Army Forces in the Philippines - Northern Luzon (USAFIP-NL), the largest guerilla force in Northern Luzon. This group was responsible for the capture of Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita in 1945.

- 21 Mike Guardia, *Shadow Commander: The Epic Story of Donald Blackburn Guerilla Leader and Special Forces Hero* (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers and Book Distributors LLC, 2015). This book is based from Blackburn's diary and other sources while he was stationed in the Philippines from 1941-1944.
- 22 Vina Lanzona A., *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion, Gender Sex and Revolution in the Philippines* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 154.
- 23 See Blackburn, op. cit.
- 24 Philippine Chinese Anti-Japanese Vol. Corps guerrilla recognition papers of the Philippine Veterans Affairs Office (PVAO).
- 25 Interview with Mr. Marcelo S. Dayrit, a long-time resident of Barrio Turu, Magalang and a relative of Eusebio Aquino during the author's ocular inspection of Camansi on 30 November 2020.

REFERENCES

- Alcubierre, Casmiro. "España en Filipinas, Los Ultimos Años de Su Dominacion En El Archipielago." *El Imparcial*, 1910.
- Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1900*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900.
- Cruz, Ceferina T. *et al.* "Historical and Cultural Life of the Municipality of Magalang in the Province of Pampanga" (1954) in the Historical Data Papers of the National Library of the Philippines.
- Dizon, Lino L. *Francisco Makabulos Soliman: A Biographical Study of a Local Revolutionary Hero*. Tarlac City: Center for Tarlaqueño Studies, 1994.
- Dizon, Lino L. "Toponymy and Historical Archaeology in Upper Pampanga (Tarlac-Pampanga Border, Central Luzon, Philippines),

1593-1898.” *Alaya: Kapampangan Research Journal* (December, 2007).

Guardia, Mike. *American Guerilla: The Forgotten Heroics of Russell W. Volckmann*. Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers and Book Distributors LLC, 2019.

Guardia, Mike. *Shadow Commander: The Epic Story of Donald Blackburn Guerilla Leader and Special Forces Hero*. Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers and Book Distributors LLC, 2015.

Joaquin, Nick. *Aquinos of Tarlac*. Manila: Solar Publishing Corporation, 1986.

Lanzona, Vina A. *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion, Gender Sex and Revolution in the Philippines*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.

“Las Ultimas Operaciones de la Guerra,” *La Epoca*, 8 January 1898.

Rodriguez Berriz, Miguel. *Guia del Comprador del Terrenos Baldios y Realengos de Filipinas*. Manila: Establecimiento Tipo-Litografico de M. Perez, 1886.

Sastron, Manuel. *La Insurreccion en Filipinas y Guerra Hispano-Americana en el Archipelago*. Madrid: Imprenta de la Sucesora de M. Minuesa de los Rios, 1901.

Stone, Louis A. *Two Years In The United States Volunteer Army Or Around the World Under Stars and Stripes*. Kentucky: Louis Stone, 1901.

“Ultramar, Islas Filipinas.” *La España*, 13 August 1868.

APPENDIX



Camansi with Mt. Arayat at the background taken from 30 November 2020.



Ruins of former camp in Camansi taken from 30 November 2020.



Torre Heliografico located in Barrio Sta. Cruz taken on 4 February 2007. From Joel P. Mallari Collection.