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American Veteran in Exile: Manong Faustino “Peping” Baclig

CASIMIRO URBANO TOLENTINO

“I urge all Americans to recall the courage, sacrifices and loyalty of Filipino veterans of World War II and honor them for their contribution to our freedom.”

—President William J. Clinton on a Proclamation declaring October 20, 1996 as a day honoring Filipino veterans of WWII.

How I Know Manong “Peping” Baclig

For many of my generation growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, we did not have Filipino heroes to model our actions. Philip Vera Cruz, a labor union leader, was one of these heroes, whom I met and taught about when I was studying at UCLA. Faustino “Peping” Baclig has been added to that short list of heroes. Throughout this chapter I will refer to “Peping” with the Filipino term of *Manong*, a sign of respect, meaning “older brother” not necessarily a relative.

Manong Faustino “Peping” Baclig, as a Filipino soldier, fought alongside American soldiers during World War II and survived the infamous Bataan Death March.

During the past 60 years, he has led the struggle to claim benefits for Filipino American veterans. In doing so, he has brought honor and dignity not only to his fellow veterans but to both the Filipino and Filipino American communities.

I first met Manong Peping at a conference at the University of Southern California (USC) convened by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center in the late 1980s to educate and rally the Los Angeles County Filipino American community about veterans' issues. At that time, I had been researching the issue of the lack of veterans benefits for certain Filipino veterans. My father, Lucio Tolentino, also a Bataan Death March veteran, was one of the lucky ones who was able to transition from the Philippine Scouts to the U.S. Army with its attendant benefits. My godfather (*Ninong*), Franco Arcebal, who served with my father, was not so lucky and was in attendance at the conference. *Ninong* Franco introduced me to Manong Peping as his comrade and spokesperson for the equity issue.

Historical Background

At the beginning of WWII, the Philippines were under United States control. The Philippines became a U.S. territory in 1898. In 1934, Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act or the Philippine Independence Act. It provided that after a transitional period of 10 years, the Philippines would become independent.

On Nov. 15, 1935, the U.S. organized the Commonwealth of the Philippines, a transitional government that was to end on July 4, 1946. During this period, the Commonwealth government organized a Filipino army that was funded by the U.S. government.

Manong Peping, dressed and standing ramrod straight in Army khaki, spoke about the issue in passionate terms and the need to remember the personal sacrifices of Filipinos for freedom in the Pacific. A few years later, Manong Peping would chain himself to General MacArthur's statue at Los Angeles' MacArthur Park — in the same uniform.

A recent report in the *Los Angeles Times* explained the basis for the decades long struggle of the Filipino veterans:

"A 1942 legal opinion by the Veterans Administration determined that the soldiers were eligible for benefits on the same basis as U.S. veterans. But many saw that decision as disproportionately benefiting Filipinos because of the lower cost of living in the Philippines. In 1946, Congress decided those soldiers would 'not be deemed to be or to have been' in the military."

Fighting for the U.S. in World War II

Manong "Peping," a World War II veteran, is a passionate voice for the Filipino soldiers who fought under the American flag alongside American soldiers. He speaks as a veteran who experienced some of the most horrific aspects of the Pacific war.

In 1939-40, Japanese and U.S. relations worsened. In July 1941, President Roosevelt ordered the Commonwealth Army of the Philippines and U.S. Armed Forces in the Philippines to be merged forming the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (hereinafter, USAFFE). Under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, the USAFFE was composed of 19,000 U.S. army soldiers, 12,000 Philippine Scouts, and 118,000 Commonwealth of the Philippines soldiers.

Manong Peping was 19 years old in 1941. He became part of the USAFFE as a Commonwealth soldier in September 1941.

The Japanese began its air attack on the Philippines on December 8, 1941, one day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Japanese land invasion followed. Unable to stop the Japanese, MacArthur withdrew to the Bataan Peninsula and the island of Corregidor. In making their hasty retreat most of their supplies were lost, yet they continued to fight. President Franklin Roosevelt, in a radiogram to General Jonathan Wainwright, who commanded the USAFFE, stated that:

"In every camp, in every naval vessel, soldiers, sailors, and marines are impressed by the gallant struggle of their comrades in the Philippines. The



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN COALITION FOR FILIPINO VETERANS, INC.

workers in our shipyards and munitions plants redoubled their efforts because of your examples. You and your devoted followers become the living symbol of our war aims and the guarantee of our victory.”

Manong “Peping’s” squad was among the troops given the task of defending Bataan and Corregidor. Their resistance delayed the Japanese advance for four months, and kept a large Japanese army tied up in the Philippines long after Malaya, Singapore and the Indies had fallen.

Bataan Death March

The soldiers of the USAFFE fought valiantly against tremendous odds. But with no reinforcements and no food and ammunition, the decision was made to surrender. So on April 9, 1942, the Filipino and American soldiers on Bataan formally surrendered to the Japanese army.

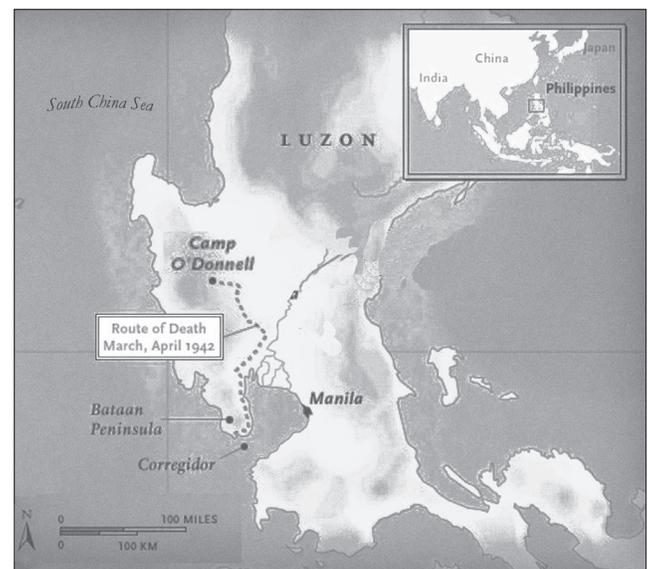
Manong Peping was one of the approximately 75,000 USAFFE soldiers who then became prisoners of war (POWs).

He and the others were forced to march to the destination that was to be their prison, Camp O’Donnell. The captured soldiers experienced unspeakable brutality over the forced five to seven day, 60-mile walk. No food, no water was the least of their suffering.

Manong Peping recalls soldiers beaten or bayoneted to death, or simply killed for falling out of line. Many prisoners of war were also overcome by dehy-

PHOTO: Above, U.S. troops surrender to the Japanese at Corregidor in the Philippines, May 6, 1942. A total of 11,500 Americans and Filipinos became POWs, including the commander, Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainright.

Map below, 78,000 Allied Prisoners of War (POWs) — 12,000 U.S. and 66,000 Filipino soldiers — are forced to walk 60 miles. The Japanese treated the POWs with extreme cruelty resulting in 11,000 deaths.



MAP COURTESY OF THE CORREGIDOR HISTORIC SOCIETY

“It is less painful to remember the atrocities and brutalities of the war than to think of the denial of our military service in the U.S. Armed Forces.”

– Manong “Peping” Baclig

PHOTO: AMERICAN COALITION FOR FILIPINO VETERANS, INC.,



Photo: Filipino veterans demonstrating in front of the White House on July 21, 1998 to appeal to the president to recognize the military service of Filipino WWII veterans.

dration, exhaustion, and disease. The exact number of deaths on the march is difficult to assess, the death toll ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 Filipino and 600-650 American POWs.

Surviving in the POW Camp

Arriving at the prison camp, conditions were no better. Hundreds of people were packed in bamboo houses that were designed for far less. There was no medicine. In camp, Manong Peping recalls “death everywhere” — 300 to 400 POWs died each day and eventually over 23,000 POWs died of dysentery, malaria, typhoid fever and other tropical diseases.

He vowed to himself that if he ever got out of the death camp, to work for his fellow man. Although Manong Peping was not a religious man at the time, he “found his own redemption” tending to the injured and dying POWs in the Bataan death camp.

On June 6, 1942, the Filipino soldiers were granted amnesty by the Japanese military and released. The American prisoners continued to be held. Instead of returning home, Manong Peping decided to continue to fight. He became a guerrilla. He was one of the valiant soldiers who made the Philippines one of the hardest fought resistance movements in Southeast Asia. These anti-Japanese guerrilla forces were scattered all over the Philippine islands and were strategically indispensable to the Allied war effort in the Pacific.

After the War: The Battle for Veterans’ Equality

“It is less painful to remember the atrocities and brutalities of the war than to think of the denial of our military service in the U.S. Armed Forces.”

– Manong “Peping” Baclig

Stricken with malaria, Manong Peping eventually recovered. He came with his family to America on June 16, 1986. He was 64 years old. A year later, he became a naturalized citizen. Ironically, the date was December 7, 1987.

As he grew older, he became more concerned about health benefits and found that even as a U.S. citizen he was unable to apply for U.S. veteran benefits. Manong Peping had served the U.S. and his homeland as a Commonwealth soldier and as a member of the guerrilla force and had endured many hardships

but he and his comrades were denied benefits that were promised.

Manong Peping was very angry. The passage of the Rescission Act of 1946 had denied Filipino soldiers the veterans' benefits they had been promised. He considered this as a grave case of injustice and lack of equity. The only difference he saw between the American soldiers he fought and sat beside in WWII was the color of his skin — brown. He decided to seek justice — to fight for what had been promised.

The Long Struggle

Aging Filipino veterans wanted the United States to live up to its promise to them and embarked on a crusade to gain recognition and their rights. The struggle has been long and marked by a series of hard won victories. Manong Peping has been in the midst of these efforts.

He worked for the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990 that recognized active military services with the USAFFE for naturalization purposes only. This legislation was a crucial victory. The law recognized the World War II role of Filipino veterans and granted them U.S. citizenship on the basis of that service. Since the passage of the law, more than 30,000 aging Filipino WWII veterans have become citizens.

However, even as citizens, Filipino veterans were still not eligible for VA benefits and many lived on their SSI payments. Realizing the need for greater awareness of the difficulties faced by Filipino veterans, Manong Peping and Manong Franco Arcebal organized the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans (ACFV). They organized conferences and coalitions to focus on the inclusion and recognition of Filipino veterans as U.S. veterans and to secure the benefits awarded in the GI Bill of Rights. Many Filipino Americans as well as the general American public did not know the role played by Filipino soldiers in the USAFFE, the Bataan Death March, and the history and the exclusion of Filipino veterans following the war — so creating awareness was a critical step.

Creating Awareness — Gaining Support

Many Filipinos who were in the “Old” Philippine Scouts, which later were incorporated in the U.S. Army, were recognized as veterans after WWII and awarded with American citizenship and the full list of veteran benefits.

“The only difference he saw between the American soldiers he fought and sat beside in WWII was the color of his skin — brown.”

The GI Bill

The GI Bill was enacted in 1944 and helped to transform the United States through its educational benefits. Also important were the benefits provided for health, disability, burial benefits, and to widows/dependents. These benefits are coordinated by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and historically available to former members of the different branches of the U.S. military.

“Manong Peping is a passionate voice for the Filipino soldiers who fought under the American flag alongside of the American soldiers.”

But Manong Peping and Manong Franco as Commonwealth soldiers who fought side by side with their Filipino and American comrades in Bataan, were denied the same GI Bill benefits. On June 14, 1997 Manong Peping and other Filipino veterans began a round the clock vigil at the statue of General MacArthur in MacArthur Park in Los Angeles to publicize their struggle. State and local legislators joined in the “camp out” and supported the need for “equity and justice” for the veterans. California quickly passed veterans benefits of \$181 per month.

Manong Peping also organized other demonstrations in Los Angeles, New York, San Diego, and Washington, D.C. to “educate and agitate our community.” He spent the next years flying from his home in Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. to lobby Congress and policy makers. He understood the importance of gaining the support of state and federal legislators.

Congressman Bob Filner (D-San Diego) was one of the early supporters of the Filipino veterans. Congressman Filner in September 1997 joined Manong Peping and other veterans who chained themselves in front of the White House to bring attention to the issue.

Demonstrators were arrested and fined \$50 each. They were successful in bringing attention to the failure of Congress to pass a bill that would have given the Filipino veterans equity with American veterans.

In 1999, Filipino veterans won passage of the Special Veterans Benefit Law allowing veterans to take 75% (approximately \$400 of their monthly Social Security benefits) when they return to the Philippines and Full Service Connected Compensation Benefit.

With the passage of (PL 108-170) signed by President George Bush in 2003, Filipino veterans were another step closer to their goal. This law provided official recognition and Veterans Administration (VA) medical care for approximately 11,000 Filipino WWII veterans living in the United States.

But Manong Peping continues to seek recognition and justice for all Filipino veterans. Today, there are still approximately 30,000 Filipino WWII veterans who reside in both the Philippines and the United States. He and the other veterans want the U.S. government to recognize their service as part of the United States armed forces during WWII. They seek the full veteran’s benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) promised them and a monthly permanent disability pension if they are poor and disabled. Many of these Filipino veterans have died, many are now aged (many are over 80 years of age),

“Manong Peping’s efforts honor both the veterans of America’s “great generation” but also the younger veterans fighting in the Middle East.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF FAUSTINO BACLIG

ill and disabled. It is for these comrades that Manong Peping has dedicated his time and energy. He wants them out of exile and given the hard earned “equity” due to all those who fought under the American flag.

Recognition At Last

In April 2008, the U.S. Senate passed S.1315 that awarded pension benefits to Filipino veterans living in both the U.S. and in the Philippines. The vote was 96 to 1.

Then-Senator Barack Obama was a strong supporter of the bill, noting:

“This legislation also makes good on our promises to Filipino veterans who served bravely alongside American service members during World War II. Nearly 250,000 Filipinos assisted Americans during the war, but for far too long these heroes have been denied benefits they are owed. This bill will finally provide surviving veterans and their survivors with the benefits they were promised so many years ago.”

The bill, however, needed the approval of the House of Representatives and the signature of the president to become law. Unfortunately, in the House, the bill experienced opposition and in the end, the House did not vote on the bill.

In the last days of the 2008 session, Congress turned its focus to the economic meltdown of the country and prospects for passage of any legislation on behalf of the Filipino veterans looked grim.

The new year 2009 brought a new President, Barack Obama and a new administration. On February 17, 2009 the first major piece of legislation, HR 1, the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the economic stimulus bill, was signed into law. Realizing that the ranks of the Filipino veterans were thinning, legislative supporters included a provision for the aging Filipino veterans in HR 1. The provision recognizes the military service of Filipino soldiers as U.S. veterans, and additionally provides one-time payments of \$15,000 to Filipino American veterans residing in the U.S. or in the Philippines, and \$9,000 to veterans who are Philippine citizens. It also contains a provision for spouses and protects eligibility for benefits currently received by veterans. Though not the benefit package sought by the veterans, it must be seen as victory in extremely difficult economic times. Manong Peping recognized the legislative supporters noting:

“Speaker Pelosi’s support was critical in moving this in the House. We thank her, as well as Rep. Mike Honda and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, as well as Rep. Xavier Becerra for keeping this issue alive. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner’s support for this issue has also helped bring us to this day.”

Signing of the bill was a belated birthday present for Manong Peping who celebrated his 87th birthday on February 14, Valentine’s Day. This is the last chapter of Manong Peping’s long struggle for justice. His efforts honor both the veterans of America’s “Greatest Generation,” and the younger veterans fighting in the nation’s current wars. He continues to inspire younger community activists showing them that perseverance for a good cause has no boundaries. Manong Peping truly embodies the spirit of the “Fighting Filipinos.”