

STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR ALBERT DEL ROSARIO BEFORE
THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH, 13 JUNE 2002.

Mr. Chairman, I am grateful for your kind invitation to appear before your distinguished committee and for your earnest desire to address a mistake and injury committed more than half a century ago.

Our two nations owe the veterans of World War II a lasting debt of gratitude for their sacrifice, bravery and faith beyond words. I am here today, not only at your behest, but because my life was saved by men very much like the old, yet unbowed, warriors now present in this room. My testimony comes firsthand.

In the battle for the liberation of Manila, after my father had been imprisoned and tortured, our home was razed by retreating Japanese soldiers. I was five years old at the time. I was wounded in one arm and a leg and had been knocked totally unconscious by a shrapnel wound to the head. My sister suffered serious wounds in her back as well. We were left for dead amidst the ruins. A band of guerrillas discovered us, bleeding profusely, and brought us to a neighbor's shed. We spent the night painfully alone until the guerrillas were able to return for us at dawn. They brought us to a hospital for treatment. It was several days later before my grandfather finally found us.

On July 26, 1941 U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an order inducting all military forces of the Commonwealth of the Philippines into the U.S. Forces Far East (USAFFE) under the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur. They were made to swear allegiance to the US Constitution. For more than four months, after the outbreak of war in December 1941, Filipinos fought side by side with Americans as U.S. soldiers, commanded by American officers, under the American flag. When Gen. Jonathan Wainwright surrendered his forces to the Japanese in May 1942 after a heroic struggle on Bataan and Corregidor, Filipinos were warned they faced court-martial if they refused to lay down their arms. More than 65,000 Filipinos and 10,000 Americans started out on the Bataan Death March. Nearly a third did not complete the march, having died by the wayside. Of those who made it to the camps, an estimated one half of the prisoners perished under brutal captivity.

Still loyal to the American flag and hopeful of MacArthur's promise to return, more than 200,000 Filipinos carried on a guerrilla struggle against the Japanese. The guerrillas fought according to American battle plans, sometimes under

American officers and were resupplied by American PT boats and submarines. They risked their lives, family and property to keep faith with the United States. For all intents and purposes, even before the guerrillas were officially inducted into the Commonwealth Army in October 1944, these units were fighting under American command. The Philippine effort occupied and depleted the Japanese Imperial Army of forces it badly needed elsewhere to consolidate its hold on the region.

Whether Commonwealth Army or “recognized guerrilla”, US records show these Filipino forces were strategically indispensable to the Allied War effort in the Pacific. Moreover, prior to the passage of the Rescission Act of 1946, these men proudly considered themselves, and were considered by the United States Government, as U.S. soldiers.

The shameful Rescission Act stated that service rendered by Filipino veterans “were not to be considered service for the purpose of veterans’ benefits,” effectively stripping them of benefits under the GI Bill of 1944. These benefits ranged from immigration privileges to healthcare and burial costs. Additionally, despite the fact that Filipino veterans had already paid portions of their salaries towards veterans’ insurance and pensions, the Act stipulated that they were to be paid such pensions at only half their value. As such, the Act did something even the Japanese could not do. It insulted their worth as men.

Although the Rescission Act has been amended several times, its basic provisions still stand. Filipino veterans, even if they became US citizens, would still not be eligible for full benefits. Those who have elected to remain in the Philippines are at an even greater disadvantage.

Gentlemen, it was an Act of Congress that trivialized these veterans’ contributions and deprived them of their due. It is appropriate therefore that Congress act to address this injustice. There are fewer Filipino World War II veterans everyday. Most are in poor health, several are destitute. You are in a position to ensure that their last days be comfortable and that they die with dignity. Please keep faith with them. They deserve no less.