

By Colonel Romeo M Monteyro PA (Ret.)

Every first Monday of the month, at the Seniors Center in Mira Mesa, San Diego, a group of Filipino-American World War II veterans meet regularly. The aging members, who fought valiantly and without regard to personal safety, for the U.S. and its territory, the Philippines, during World War II, dutifully recite the "Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America", before discussing the business of the day.

The pledge ends with, "With liberty and justice for all." In their particular case however, American citizens, just like you and I, "justice for all" does not necessarily apply. It would be more appropriate for them to end the pledge of allegiance with,"and justice for some." Why?

Today, sixty years after they were inducted into the U.S. Army on orders of then President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and after suffering the dire consequences of that lawful order, the United States government continues to discriminate against them. The fact that they have become U.S. citizens seems to be of no importance to the U.S. Congress.

These veterans, despite the many setbacks of the past, continue to hope for justice. Their champions in the U.S. Congress, Representative Bob Filner and Senator Daniel Inouye, himself a victim of racial prejudice, true to their pledge, re-filed the Equity Bill in the 107th Congress. If passed, it would finally rectify the injustices mercilessly wreaked upon them by that infamous public law rider, the Rescission Act of 1946.

These hapless veterans, drowning in frustration and hopelessness merely clutched at the proverbial straw so it seems, when the face to face discussion between former President Bill Clinton and then Philippine president Joseph Estrada produced no tangible commitment on the part of the U.S. president, to alleviate their sufferings. President Clinton's instruction to the USVA and the Office of Budget Management was merely to study ways these veterans could be assisted, within the framework of existing laws. But with the Rescission Act of 1946, hanging over the heads of both Federal agencies like the

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mythical *Sword of Damocles*, the report on the study, submitted just days before Clinton stepped down from office, as expected, simply put the veterans back on square one.

The attitude and sympathy, if we can call it that, of President Bill Clinton towards these veterans were ambivalent at best. Some years back, when a group representing

Filipino veterans asked him what he intends to do to about the Equity Bill, his reply was a non-committal "we will continue to look at it." But when he (belatedly) awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to a group of World War II veterans of Japanese and Filipino descents, his remark was a heart-rending, **"rarely has a country been so well served by a people it has so ill treated."** Well said, indeed!

It seemed then, that President Clinton changed his mind about the Filipino veterans. Did he finally recognize their heroism as well? What, if any, is the difference between their heroism and that of the Medal of Honor recipients? Did they not all fight in defense of America? When the president said, **"they risked their lives above and beyond the call of duty. And in so doing, they did more than defended America. In the face of painful prejudice, they helped to define America at its best."** he was praising their bravery and devotion to duty and acknowledging their worthy contributions in making this country, the greatest nation on earth. At the same time Clinton also admitted that there was **"painful prejudice"**.

The question: What did he do about correcting the prejudice, which in the case of the Filipino veterans translates to injustice? Was he just being polite to President Estrada, or was he sincere in his desire to correct the injustice? But Clinton is now history, and the struggle goes on.

For a time the veterans were also assisted by the Philippine government in the person of retired AFP Lieutenant General Raul Urgello, who succeeded retired Brigadier General Tagumpay Nanadiego as head of the Office of Veterans Affairs, (OVA) Philippine Embassy. Both of them worked with the U.S. Congress on behalf of all Filipino World War II veterans.

But why the need for champions and lobbyists? Or for that matter, to seek relief from the highest court of the land, if all else fails? These aged former freedom fighters

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are Americans, whose equal treatment by the government they so unselfishly served is mandated by the U.S. Constitution! They were technically Americans when they were called to active duty to defend America in 1941, and many of them are naturalized U.S. citizens now. They were called to combat duty by an American president, (Franklin D.

Roosevelt) in his capacity as president of the U.S. and its territories, and Commander-in-Chief of all its armed forces. The Filipino members of the then Philippine Commonwealth Army, the Philippine Constabulary and their reserve components were integrated into the U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). They and their American counterparts were commanded in battle by an American general, the legendary Douglas MacArthur.

The enemy bombs, shells and bullets, which killed or maimed many of the less fortunate among their comrades-in-arms, did not discriminate as to their color. The flag that was lowered by the enemy--the Stars and Stripes--under which these warriors fought so bravely-- was the same flag raised after victory was won—the American flag.

In the dire consequences of war: death, hunger and disease. In the righteous indignation of feeling abandoned, by America, during the battles for Bataan and Corregidor. In enduring the torturous "Death March" that followed the humiliation of surrender and the cruelty of incarceration by a merciless and sadistic enemy, these Filipino veterans were brothers with their American comrades-in-arms. But in the victory that ultimately saw their redemption from a common enemy, sadly, they had no share. They had not part.

Because while their American brothers-in-arms, who survived the war were given full veterans benefits, theirs was rescinded! As far as the Rescission Act of 1946 was concerned, they were aliens, and therefore disqualified. But the other aliens who served in the U.S. armed forces in World War II, from 16 foreign countries, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, were extended full veterans benefits and U.S. citizenship.

The original law which gave all of those who fought for America in World War II, full benefits, enacted in 1945, was attached a rider, the Rescission Act of 1946, which specifically excluded the Filipinos of the Philippine Commonwealth Army and of the resistance movement. The reason: They were not American citizens during their

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military service, and therefore not a responsibility of America. What about all the other aliens who served under the American flag? Were they Americans when they served during the war? Why were their privileges and rights not denied? Technically, all Filipinos who served in the U.S. armed forces in World War II were U.S. citizens, the

Philippines then being a Commonwealth of the United States of America, much like Puerto Rico, then and today. And Puerto Ricans who served in the war were extended recognition as U.S. veterans and given full benefits.

This is discrimination, pure and simple! In the land of the free and the home of the brave, freedom rings --even freedom from prejudice. And the Constitution of this great country guarantees justice for all. To the World War II American veterans of Filipino extraction however, there is no freedom from racial bias, and it is only "justice for some". And it will continue to be so, until Uncle Sam, in the goodness of his big heart, finally recognizes the unselfish sacrifices made by these, his most unfortunate nephews!

Isn't it long overdue for Congress to grant these hapless veterans full equity? Look at them. They are in the twilight of their lives. They have only a few years left on this earth. Their comrades who went ahead of them brought to their graves the bitter feeling of being abandoned by America, to whom they dedicated the best time of their lives, fighting to keep her free, during her darkest hours.

How much will it take in terms of dollars to give these brave warriors of the past their rightful dues? Old age pensions and health benefits to augment what the U.S. citizens among them receive from Social Security, and old age pensions and health benefits for those who are still in the Philippines, some 70,000 all together. Is that really too much for Uncle Sam who spends billions of taxpayer dollars bailing out other countries and people who never fought in defense of American freedom? How many more years will these veterans live and how much will their benefits cost Uncle Sam?

But is it really a question of money? Equal recognition would, in a larger sense bring back the dignity and honor taken away from them by the very country they so unselfishly served.

How loyal were the Filipinos to America, in World War II, and even now?

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In closing allow me to tell you the story of three very brave Filipinos who gave their lives for America.

The name Tomas Claudio, alas, is only known to Filipinos, who consider him a hero. Yet Tomas Claudio was killed in action in Europe during World War I, as a member of the American Expeditionary Force to France. He died for America.

And then there was Buenaventura Bello, a non-combatant. He was principal of a high school in the northern part of the Philippines when the Japanese invaded. When the enemy came to his school, he was ordered to lower the American flag, and replace it with that of the enemy's. He refused. Even when threatened with death, he still refused. Bello was hanged on the very flagpole, which flew the Star Spangled Banner, which he refused to lower. He too, died for America.

Last but definitely not the least, was Jose Abad-Santos, the Chief Justice of Philippine Supreme Court in 1941. Manuel L. Quezon, the president of the Philippine Commonwealth left him in-charge of the government, when the latter escaped to Australia upon orders of President Roosevelt. The Japanese Army caught up with him in Malabang, Lanao, in Mindanao. The enemy's request was simple: Renounce allegiance to the United States, and pledge allegiance to Japan. Abad-Santos refused. He chose death by firing squad rather than betray America. On the eve of his death, one of his sons was with him. He told the young lad, "Do not cry, my son. Show the enemy that you are brave. It is not often that a man is given a chance to die for his country." His country, which he refused to betray, was not the Philippines, but the United States of America.

How loyal are the Filipinos to America? You tell me!

One glorious day, victory against "**painful prejudice**" shall be upon these unsung heroes. Relying heavily on the intervention of God Almighty, these veterans pray that the hardened hearts of our national lawmakers and the new commander-in-chief may soon melt and show them compassion. On that day of victory, I will meet with these veterans and I will hear them recite the pledge of allegiance. At that time they will rightfully say, "...**with liberty and justice for all.**"

With God on their side, who could go against them?