

By Nestor Palugod Enriquez

History repeats itself; the December 7, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor is the grandfather of September 11. In 1941 and 2001, the US responded by calling volunteers and from what is now known as the National Guard from various States and Commonwealth territories.

On December 8, 1941, the Japanese Imperial Forces attacked the Philippines – just few hours after Pearl Harbor was bombed. Distant American outposts would also call reserve units. The most-ready reserve forces were the ROTC units from various colleges in Manila. One of the best-known units was the composed of the students from the University of the Philippines (UP). The Philippine Commonwealth Military units were integrated with the regular US armed forces in the Far East.

Dec. 7, 1941, Wake-up Call

Alfredo Diaz just celebrated his 91st birthday last Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2007, in Jersey City. He was an athletic student before the war at the UP. The Student-body president was Ferdinand Marcos, and he was a sportsman in his own right, as he was the rifle-shooting champion. Alfredo would dearly remember the world's fastest human coming to the Philippines in the mid-1930s. Ralph Metcalfe from Marquette University visited Manila and even held clinic with Alfredo Diaz and the best Filipino sprinter by the name of Deleon the Siliman University in Negros. He ran the track with Alfredo Diaz whose best time in the 100-yard dash was around 11 seconds. Ralph Metcalfe has already been clocked less than 10 seconds before his legendary run with Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Olympics with the WWII nemesis in attendance, Adolph Hitler. Ralph placed second to Jesse Owens but he won the gold medal in the 400-medley relay with his team mate Jesse. Their performance was a stunning refute to Adolf Hitler's Aryan supremacy. The next Olympics was slated in 1940 in Tokyo but it was cancelled because of the growing war tension. The Japanese Army was already moving inside Manchuria at that time.

UP Responders

At the campus of Diliman the ROTC cadets were watching the precursors of WWII while studying at the same time. The UP ROTC unit was called upon as the Imperial Japanese forces were about to land. Diaz, Marcos and the other ROTC cadets responded to the FDR call, pledged:

"I, __ [Name] __, do solemnly swear... that I will bear true faith and allegiance ... to the United States of America... that I will serve them honestly and faithfully ... against all their enemies whomsoever ... and I will obey the orders... of the President of the United States ... And the orders of the officers appointed over me ... according to the rules and Articles of War."

Almost a quarter of a million Filipinos stood gallantly in the Bataan and in the entire archipelago, Diaz and Marcos were among the estimated 70,000 prisoners trapped at the Mariveles peninsula for almost four months. Rather than obeying the surrender command, Diaz persuaded some of his comrades to escape to Hagonoy, Bulacan. They hitched a ride on a wood charcoal truck toward Manila. Avoiding enemy checkpoint he eventually returned to his brother house in Kamuning. The fall of Bataan did not end Diaz's resistance. He went back to his home province in Samar, sailing onboard a small-craft vessel. He helped in organizing and training the local guerilla. His unit conducted operations against the Japanese and sympathizer until they started spotting American planes on the sky. They ably assisted the landing of the American forces in Leyte in October 1944.

Ferdinand Marcos—with his embellished Guerrilla records—eventually ruled the Philippines as the nation's President. In 1986 the People's revolution ended the 20 years of Marcos' regime that forced his departure to, and exile in, Hawaii.

Almost parallel but with different situation, Diaz was able to immigrate to the US with his veteran's status on the same year. Marcos would die in 1989 in exile in Hawaii; otherwise, he would be also looking toward his 91st birthday this year. Fred eventually settled in Jersey City.

Metcalfe was also a WWII veteran and returned to Chicago, parlayed his track-and-war record and became US Representative (1971-1978). He would have been a strong supporter of the Filipino-Equity bill in his tenure in the US Congress but he died in 1978.

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The humble Fred kept his life simple, a life style that that may account for his longevity. He is also a very religious guy. He maintains his body lean and remains quick and agile. He realized that the fight for the Filipino WWII equity would be like a long marathon and not the short-distance race that he experienced with Ralph Metcalfe. The 100-yard dash was the glamour event of the pre-war track event where the fastest man in the universe was crowned. Diaz had that chance in his lifetime although it was just a boyhood dream.

Now, Fred is only nine years short of being a "century man." Diaz was an enlisted man in the Artillery Unit at the beginning of WWII. But like Metcalfe, he was soon promoted to lieutenant on the battlefield. Marcos started as a lieutenant, he having completed the UP Advanced ROTC.

Diaz is a true pioneer in the very meaning of the word, an advance foot soldier. He never lost his love for running but the war cost him a shot at an Olympics' medal. The next Olympics games were held in 1948 in London. It was too late for Metcalf for another gold medal and the long-shot dream of Alfredo Diaz. Perhaps they won't trade their military medals for all the gold in the lost Olympics of 1944.

President Roosevelt died just a few weeks before the Japanese surrender and his promise to the Filipino soldiers was shortly rescinded. After 10 US Presidents and over 60 congressional years, the remedy is still pending. Just this year alone six Filipino WWII veterans had fallen in Jersey City. It is too late for many of them, even if the bill is approved next year it will be another year to seek out the benefits. Life has an expiration date and even shorter memory.

Diaz is determined to win this last mission but victory will not be achieved without our "kababayan" and friends putting pressure to all the members of the US Congress. It is a race against time. The deployment of political empowerment has never been our strong suit. This is the only way to win this last battle in Washington DC. We have to scratch and scream to the entire elected congressional member every way, we can. It is not hard to notice that support for the Equity Bill is very weak with the representatives from the areas with low Filipino American voting population. We have to knock the out-of-state doors by asking our friends to do it for our forgotten veterans. # # #

Editor's Note: Please visit with Nestor Palugod Enriquez in his web site, www.filipinohome.com, and read his articles on "Coming to America."

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