

Written by Bobby M. Reyes

Sunday, 21 June 2009 12:55 - Last Updated Saturday, 11 November 2017 02:24

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**On the occasion of Veterans' Day of 2017, we are bringing back to the Front Page this article about a guerrilla leader in the Province of Sorsogon, Philippines, during World War II. It tells of some of the atrocities committed by and among the armed combatants of the different opposing forces. Yes, "war is hell ..." and hopefully mankind should have learned the lessons why there should not be any World War again to torment humanity. A Blessed Veterans' Day to all Soldier-Dads, Soldier-Moms and Soldier-Brethren. God bless you all, especially those who are now in the Great Beyond.**

During World War II, my father, Dominador (Domen) S. Reyes, was one of the officers of the 54th Infantry (Guerrilla) Unit. Then Major Licerio Lapuz of the Philippine Constabulary command in Sorsogon Province headed it. But he never wrote his wartime memoirs. He never bothered also to let me write about his wartime exploits, even after I finished journalism. He said that "war is hell and soldiers should not relish their wartime experiences." But I kept on asking people in Sorsogon, especially the guerrillas that served with him, about his exploits.

People at his hometown of Bulusan called him the "Agbaan," which was the local name of the most-elusive species of wild dove. The Japanese soldiers and their Filipino collaborators that belonged to the so-called Makapili brigade called him the equivalent of the "Birdman" because he escaped capture in quite a few instances.

## **My Father Was the Birdman and Butcher of Bulusan during the War and a Don Quixote Later in Life - Mabo**

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The Japanese soldiers captured Dominador once and confined him in a second-floor cell of their barracks in Bulusan. Just hours before his scheduled execution, he managed to escape by jumping out from a window in broad daylight. Another time he was cornered by the Japanese in a hut on a hill near Bulusan Lake. He escaped again, this time by rolling down the hill full of abaca plants. He did his Houdini-like escapes by outrunning and outwitting his pursuers.

But the Japanese, the Makapili mercenaries and the guerillas of the opposing guerilla camp led by Sorsogon Gov. Salvador Escudero, Sr., called him also the "Butcher of Bulusan." Dominador headed the Lapuz Guerrillas' so-called "Liquidation Squad" that hunted down the Makapili soldiers and executed Japanese officers that were known for their arrogant and abusive conduct. Some families in Sorsogon accused him and his squad members of capturing several Escudero guerillas, who were never seen again. My father refused to talk about these episodes; he refused to confirm or deny any of the accusations.

Major Lapuz ordered my father to hunt then Gov. Salvador Escudero, Sr. Domen found him in a remote area in Samar Province but the governor was barely conscious, as he was delirious with malarial fever. Domen did not harm Governor Escudero and left in peace. Later, he was asked why he did not kill him. He said that the governor was defenseless and besides, Christians ought to visit, and take care of, the sick and not harm them.

Editor's Note: Excerpts of this essay were read during a memorial service for Dominador S. Reyes in January 1999 in Sorsogon City.

## **How the “Butcher” Fought Japanese Invaders and the Makapilis**

Some of the soldiers who served with the Lapuz Guerrillas talked, however, of several instances that showed the wile and guile of my father as the alleged "Butcher of Bulusan."

The first incident told of how my father eliminated a Makapili ranking leader, who tortured Dominador's widowed mother, Baldomera, in trying to force her to reveal her son's whereabouts. (My grandmother suffered a nervous breakdown that she died within several months after her arrest.) The Makapili henchman and several of his fellow mercenaries had the habit of drinking tuba (coconut alcoholic brew) at a side of a barrio store in Gubat town. Almost daily at the same time the Makapilis were drinking, a woman fish vendor would pass by them. On the chosen day, Dominador disguised as a woman and pretended to be the fish vendor. As he passed by the makeshift table occupied by the Makapili mercenaries, Dominador pulled out a .45-caliber revolver from the wicker round basket containing the fishes and shot dead the target. He wounded also several of the Makapili volunteers.

There was also the report of how Major Lapuz was almost killed in an encounter with a Japanese squad led by a Makapili volunteer. Dominador was ordered to arrest the Makapili mercenary and after a few days, he did. A report said that when Dominador presented the Makapili volunteer to his commanding officer, Major Lapuz shot dead the Japanese collaborator on sight. Another version was that Major Lapuz just kicked the collaborator and handed him over to my father for execution. I could not tell which version really happened but the only fact my sources confirmed was that the collaborator was never seen alive again after Dominador

captured him.

There was also the killing of a Lieutenant Tanaka in the Irosin town public market. The Japanese officer was known for his bad temper and his habit of slapping people if they did not bow before him. My father's squad shot dead Tanaka in broad daylight, as he was inspecting the public market. The market did not reopen for many months after the assassination happened.

There was also the killing, nay, execution of an abusive Japanese sergeant at an airfield that the Japanese Air Force was constructing in the barrio of Polot in Bulan town. My father recruited a young man by the name of Borlagdan, who was relatively tall and quite muscular. Borlagdan applied to the Japanese as a volunteer for the construction crew at the airfield they were building. After a few weeks of pretending to be a model worker and after befriending the target, Borlagdan killed the Japanese sergeant with a blow of a pickax and fled. He took with him the other construction workers to join my father's guerilla unit.

## **Domen Leads in the Rescue of Lt. Deming**

In September 1944, Domen led his squad in rescuing a U.S. naval aviator, Lt. (J.G.) Wilbur Deming, Jr., who was shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft batteries over

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Albay

Gulf

. He hid Lt. Deming from Japanese patrols for nearly a month. After confirming that the Americans had landed in

Leyte

on

Oct. 20, 1944

, Domen led his men in bringing Lt. Deming in a sailboat (called "sibid-sibid" in Sorsogon and Samar

) to Tacloban to rejoin his unit. Domen refused to apply for a medal or commendation for the rescue of Lt. Deming. He said that his brother, Dr. Jose S. Reyes, was to become the Executive Secretary of then Commonwealth President Sergio Osmeña and he did not want people to say that he got the medal because of influence.

My mother, Justina, was a volunteer member of the Daughters of Tandang Sora (DOTS) when she met Dominador in a campsite in Bulan town. On June 5, 1945, she married Captain Reyes. She was then 18 years of age while he was a 36-year-old lawyer and army officer. Justina was a third-year high-school student when the war came and interrupted her schooling. In 1948, while pregnant with her third child, she decided to finish her high-school studies at the same Southern Luzon Institute where she studied before the war. She earned her high-school diploma in 1949.

## Sorsogon Politics

A fter the war, the position of provincial governor was vacant. Then Executive Secretary Reyes decided that no Reyes sibling was to be appointed governor, as he reasoned out that the clan was already involved in national politics. He asked Domen to nominate a Sorsoganon for the

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vacant position and my father picked a young lawyer, Vicente L. Peralta, who was his buddy in high school. Mr. Peralta was then appointed acting governor but he lost to former Governor Escudero in the following election. But my father's selection of Mr. Peralta made him a budding political star, as he did become one in the House of Representatives in the 1950s and 1960s.

During the postwar years, Domen and his siblings maintained the Nacionalista Party's provincial chapter. They were political adversaries of Governor Escudero and his fellow Liberal Party members. But they respected each other and often met for coffee.

This writer just laughs when friends and adversaries call him the "Filipino Don Quixote of Southern California

." The moniker simply confirms that he is a chip off the old block. His father was the first Don Quixote in the family and he is simply following in his footsteps.

After her husband was defeated in the congressional election in 1949, the family moved to the capitol town of Sorsogon, where Domen practiced law. Knowing that her husband was a highly-principled man who practically "invented" legal aid for the province's destitute litigants, Justina decided to become a teacher. She not only wanted to help increase the family income but she wanted to become a real teacher, which was her dream since her childhood. She enrolled at the Colegio de la Milagrosa in Sorsogon, Sorsogon, and took up a two-year course in Normal Education. She graduated in 1952. At the urging of friends, she took and passed the Civil Service examination in 1956 and started teaching at her husband's hometown, Bulusan. And every summer, she would continue to study at her alma mater, which is a college run by the Sisters of Charity. She eventually upgraded her résumé to include a four-year bachelor's degree in Education. She took up also graduate studies at the Annun  
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## **College**

in Sorsogon but she was not able to complete the thesis required for her to earn a Master's Degree in Education.

Justina became an expert in budgeting her time and income. For she was married to a lawyer who depended on voluntary fees paid by his financially-disadvantaged clients, who often paid with chicken, fish and other agricultural products. Her husband also was a non-traditional politician who thought that a poor but good man could win elections by simply helping the underprivileged and the oppressed in the style of a local version of Don Quixote. Her husband ran for governor in 1955 and 1959 and lost.

Then retiring Governor Escudero decided to back up Dominador in the latter's gubernatorial bid as an independent candidate in 1955. Domen won the Nacionalista Party's convention for governor but was not proclaimed by the party's national headquarters. Governor Escudero and Domen then fought the handpicked candidate of then President Ramon Magsaysay, Juan G. Frivaldo. Domen came in a close second, with the official Liberal Party candidate, former Congressman Tomas Clemente, coming in third.

## **Cheaper by the Dozen**

T hen Justina thought of constructing the family's own house, as the family was getting bigger.

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For all the years they lived as husband and wife, they simply rented houses. In fact when Domen ran for governor, his political critics said that a turtle was better off than him for the reptile had a house of its own while Domen was renting one. Through her savings, Justina bought a 200 square-meter lot. Then she started buying materials from lumber to the corrugated iron sheets for the roof. She literally had to force her husband to agree to begin the construction, which took several years to complete. Justina and Domen had to borrow money from friends and kin to pay for the construction costs. Finally the Reyes Family of Sorsogon (now a city) had a modest house they could call its own, albeit immediately mortgaged to the Government Service Insurance System so that Justina could pay off the lumberyard and contractors.

In 1967, Domen and Justina taught us the value of life and the evil of abortion. That year, Justina became pregnant and she was already 41 years of age. A medical practitioner advised her to terminate the pregnancy, as he said that there was a good chance the baby would be a Mongoloid due to the mother's age. But Domen and Tinay insisted that abortion was murder. The baby, the youngest of 12 children, appeared normal at birth and was named Audrey Justina. She was salutatorian in high school and graduated cum laude at the University of the Philippines

. She passed with flying colors the CPA Board exams in the Philippines and California

In 1973 Domen finally won an election. In the first election of the Sorsogon Province chapter of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines

, his peers elected him as their first president. This led Sorsogonans to say that if voters were as educated as the lawyers were, perhaps Domen would not have lost an election. Domen was to retire in 1987 as the dean and doyen of Sorsogon lawyers. When Domen retired, his law office had probably the biggest number of clients in the province but sadly lacking in income; in fact there were months when his wife and children would shoulder his law firm's rental and other expenses.



## **Poetic Justice**

It seems that there is indeed poetic justice in the world. While Justina and Domen could not accumulate material wealth, their union was blessed with 12 children who decided to help their parents and themselves get education. The elder siblings would help their younger brothers and sisters go to college. In turn when the younger brothers and sister managed to graduate and find work, they would help also the next in line. After what seemed an eternity, all the 12 children succeeded in getting college education.

Their children sent Domen and Justina on a tour of the United States after she retired from the Philippine Department of Education in 1986 as Grade V and VI teacher and librarian. Their daughter, Miriam, a nurse and who was already an American citizen, petitioned them as immigrants. And the couple opted to become themselves American citizens, more so since Domen was a World War II veteran whose unit was integrated with the US Sixth Army in 1945. Their US-based children urged them to retire in the

United States

because Domen, in his quest to do public service, failed to save for his retirement days. Miriam and another daughter, Sandra, who was also a nurse in New Jersey, said that at least senior citizens were being cared for better in the

United States

than in the

Philippines

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Domen and Justina visited annually with their remaining six children and their families in the Philippines

. The couple celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in

Sorsogon

City

in 1995.

But even a good love story has to end. Domen passed away at the Makati Medical Center in Metro Manila on

Jan. 10, 1999

, while he and Justina were spending their Christmas vacation with their children and grandchildren.

As the eldest son of Tinay and Domen, I just laughed off when friends and adversaries called me the "Filipino Don Quixote of Southern California." The moniker simply confirmed that I was a chip off the old block, to use an oft-quoted cliché. My father was the first Don Quixote in the family and I was simply following in his footsteps. # # #