

HAWAII'S FILIPINO AND FILIPINO AMERICAN SOLDIERS: A LEGACY OF VALOR AND LOYALTY

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Promises Made, Promises Broken

On July 26, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt invoked section 2(a)(12) of the Philippine Independence Act of March 24, 1934 (48 Stat. 457, also known as the Tydings - McDuffie Act) ordering all organized military forces of the Philippine Commonwealth into service under the command of the U.S. Army and Navy for the duration of “the existing emergency.” Some 250,000 Filipinos from the Philippines heeded this call to defend American interests in the Pacific region. By the end of the Second World War, more than half of them would die. As a commonwealth of the United States before and during the war, Filipinos were legally American nationals and were promised all the benefits afforded to those serving in the armed forces of the United States.

Five months following the surrender of Japan to the U.S., President Harry S. Truman signed, on February 18, 1946, the Rescission Act of 1946 (Public Law 70-301), reneging on the rights and privileges promised to those Filipinos who had fought under U.S. command during the Pacific campaign. Truman acknowledged the discriminatory nature of the legislation, yet he signed it into law, citing the dire economic conditions then facing the U.S. Of the 66 countries allied with the United States during the war, only Filipinos were denied military benefits.

A Legacy of Loyalty

Roosevelt’s call for Filipinos to serve under U.S. command – even prior to America’s entrance into World War II – was not the first time Filipinos were called upon to further U.S. interests. In 1899 Philippine revolutionaries turned their struggle for independence from Spain to a newly-established U.S. colonial regime. The revolutionaries resorted to less conventional tactics to defeat the better equipped and numerically superior U.S. military force. When American scouts experienced high casualty rates, U.S. military leadership turned to a practice used successfully in America’s conquest of Native American Indians – form indigenous scout units to support American forces. One of these units was the Macabebe scout unit, formed in Pampanga to conduct advanced scouting and intelligence functions. The Macabebe scouts, as well as other Philippine Scouts, proved to be vital in defeating the Philippine revolutionary forces.

During the World War I conflict, many Filipinos working on Hawaii’s plantations joined or were drafted into the Hawaiian National Guard to defend the recently annexed territory of Hawaii. While Filipinos were a small proportion of Hawaii’s total population, they made up the majority of the entire Hawaiian National Guard. Back in the Philippines, Senate President Manuel Quezon offered a whole division of Filipino troops to the U.S. as a sign of loyalty and a demonstration of the Philippines’ readiness for independence.

In the 1920's fifty Philippine Scouts, twenty-three wives, and seventeen children transferred to Hawaii. Although these Scouts were regular U.S. Army soldiers in the Hawaiian Division, they were selected from the best of the Philippine Scouts' cooks and musicians. Their homes were separate from the main post at Schofield Barracks and located in a "barrio-like" community in Wheeler Air Field called, Castner Village. In spite of or, perhaps, as a result of this segregation, the families of Castner Village formed a distinctive identity of being Filipino which has produced many distinguished careers in the U.S. armed forces.

With the Japanese invasion of the Philippines, followed by the attack on Pearl Harbor, Filipinos in the U.S. and Hawaii rushed to recruitment stations to fight Japan. Not eligible for U.S. citizenship, Filipinos were initially turned away. However, as residents they were eligible for the draft. Rather than wait for their number to be called, Filipinos began volunteering for service. This was the start of the 1st Filipino Battalion (later, the 1st Filipino Regiment). With the eventual establishment of the 2nd Filipino Regiment, the U.S. Army had over 7,000 motivated Filipinos with which to stage the U.S. liberation of the Philippines.

A Matter of Honor

After President Barack H. Obama was sworn into office on January 20, 2009, Filipino WWII veterans had hoped the House stimulus bill would include the authorizing measure for the veterans. The House version did not include anything for the Filipino veterans. When the economic stimulus bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate on February 2, 2009, Senator Daniel Inouye successfully included a provision in the Senate version providing the authorization for the disbursement of the \$198 million to the Filipino WW II veterans. Responding to critics of this provision, Sen. Inouye stressed that "the honor of the United States is what is involved."

It is about time we close this dark chapter. I love America. I love serving America. I am proud of this country, but this is a black chapter. It has to be cleansed, and I hope my colleagues will join me in finally recognizing that these men served us well.... At this moment, while I am speaking, hundreds lie in hospitals on their deathbeds. And I am certain, while I am speaking, some are dying.

On February 17, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which authorized the disbursement of a previously appropriated \$198 million for Filipino veterans. This amount nearly matches the \$200 million payoff offered to but rejected in 1946 by the Philippine Commonwealth government because the amount was to be paid in lieu of the promised benefits.

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