

## **GUERRILLA RESISTANCE IN NEGROS ISLAND IN WORLD WAR II**

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I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to participate in this seminar, not so much for the honor of it or even for the recognition of the worth of my work some years back on the subject of the Resistance Movement in Negros Island. I have always been fascinated by the response of the Filipinos to the Japanese occupation of our country. One cannot help but reflect with towering pride on the patriotism and courage of our people in that time of extreme stress. For nowhere in Southeast Asia was armed resistance against the Japanese more massive and intense as in the Philippines. With practically nothing but raw courage and dogged determination, the Filipinos fought against a superior enemy. They destroyed the enemy's lines of communication, denied him the material resources of the country, sabotaged his fuel and supply depots, ambushed him even in the most unlikely places and continuously spied on him to make his stay in the country truly miserable and unhealthy. Never before had the pages of Philippine history been emblazoned with the bravery and heroism of so many as during this most uncertain times. For three long bitter years, the people battled against tremendous odds — the Japanese, diseases, famine and the growing feeling of having been abandoned — but in the end proved themselves worthy of the adulation of all freedom-loving people.

Among those who rose first against the invaders were the people of Negros. Yet, it is sad to note that this particular interlude of our history suffers from scholarly neglect. While much has been written on the supposed beginning of the Pacific War and its dramatic ending, the years in-between have not been given due emphasis and attention. Thus laments Dr. Teodore Evangelista: "For in spite of the recency of the last War, with the ordeals from the enemy still vivid in the minds of most Filipinos, the saga of the occupation period has not been fully exploited by historians."

It is therefore my hope that this paper would arouse interest among the participants to this seminar on this particular episode of our history so that they would undertake similar studies.

## **The Rise and Development of the Guerilla Resistance**

Negros Island enjoys a strategic position, being centrally located in the whole archipelago, besides being endowed with rich natural resources. For this reason, the island played a vital role in the Japanese war strategy and became a major battleground in the Philippines resistance.

To the Japanese, Negros stood out as an almost inexhaustible source of strategic materials particularly sugar, lumber and alcohol. Desiring to affect maximum utilization of her bountiful resources, the Japanese spared Negros from the terror of air attacks, and scheduled it to be among the last islands in the Philippines to be occupied. In this way, the defending USAFFE forces (called the Negros Forces) would be led to believe that they would be by-passed and would not be provoked into destroying the sugar centrals and refineries and other industrial materials vital to the Japanese war effort.<sup>1</sup>

The Japanese finally occupied Negros Occidental on May 21, 1942, and Dumaguete, Negros Oriental five days later. Resistance against the invaders was evident almost on the first day of occupation as most of the USAFFE soldiers scampered to the hills in blatant defiance of the order to surrender. Once in the hills, the men formed themselves into independent armed bands.

Negros resistance did not begin as a united front against the enemy. It did not come about from a carefully laid-out plan of operation, with clearly recognized objectives or leaders, let alone a supporting ideology. Rather, it began as an incoherent, disjointed and often warring activities of outfits that begged justification for their existence for widely divergent causes, ranging from vengeance to plain stubbornness and bravado. For some, resistance, no matter how feeble, was the only means for self-preservation. How they should conduct themselves to attain this end was left almost entirely to chance.

Others were organized solely in the spirit of reckless adventure: Killing a Jap or two in a cowardly hit-and run ambushes was a fascinating tale that evoked awe and respect. Still others were organized to protect themselves from the lawless elements that ravaged the countryside. For with the sudden breakdown of peace and order, the mountains became breeding places for lawlessness and banditry.

The absence of a centralized command inevitably gave rise to rivalries among these lands.<sup>2</sup> But though ill-trained, poorly led and inadequately armed, these bands were inflicting considerable damage on

the Japanese. In true guerilla fashion, they ambushed Japanese foraging patrols, sniped them in their garrisons, engaged in petty sabotage such as destroying water systems and railroad tracks, blowing up ammunition dumps and ferreting out collaborators and spies.

What emboldened these guerillas to defiance?

In their formative stages, the resistance was somewhat encourage by a relatively weak enemy. Although primitive campaigns were sent out to scour the hills for unsundered soldiers, these campaigns were badly coordinated and lacked the necessary forceful resourcefulness. The Japanese had not yet totally accepted the fact that there was a guerilla warfare in the offing but rather dismissed these sporadic outbursts of partisan activities as the mere handiwork of bandits.

Hampered by inadequate reinforcements, they also lack detailed knowledge of the rugged terrain of Negros: Japanese patrols were often thrown at the mercy of the guerillas who knew every crag, rock or tree. Expressing the exasperation of the Japanese in Negros, a jittery officer remarked: "I no like this kind of fight. At unlikely places——pong! When we got into position, the bandits have disappeared."<sup>3</sup>

Added to this was the Japanese adoption of rigid tactical doctrine insisting on the inherent superiority of the offensive:

that it is more important to have spirit (*seiskin*) than men or weapons. The corollary to this fetish of the offensive is the rejection of defensive combat as a negative form of action unworthy of the Imperial Army trained in this doctrine: Japanese officers tend to order attack even though the situation patently requires some form of defensive action.<sup>4</sup>

This strategy while admittedly aggressive unnecessarily made them easy targets to the ambushers "because they stood erects as ramrods as they advanced."<sup>5</sup> Seeing these Japanese fall or flee in terror in these early engagements emboldened many men to join these bands. These bands had grown into a potent force by the time the Japanese woke up to the realization of an organized guerilla warfare in Negros.

### **Guerilla Abuses**

An unfortunate but an almost typical feature of the resistance in its formative years practically throughout the country was abuse committed by the soldier. Negros was no exception. There were indiscriminate looting of private homes, abuses on women, senseless murders of

innocent victims and other despicable crimes. In some cases, they were even worse than the Japanese, requisitioning food, destroying property, and bullying many of the inhabitants 'for the good of the war' but more often for their own personal gain.<sup>6 6</sup>

An American who lived through this period wrote:

A guerilla band would descend on a barrio to identify itself as fighters for freedom. They would levy on the people—take clothes, food, guns, whatever they would get including women.... They would even kill anyone who protested by simply describing him as a 5th columnist.<sup>7 7</sup>

What caused these soldiers to behave like criminals on the rampage? For one thing, the economic and social conditions in Negros was most pitiful. The laborers in the haciendas had always been the objects of exploitation by heartless hacendados, paid as little as 20 to 30 centavos a day, living in sub-human condition and in perpetual debt, while the wealthy landowning families were walled in ostentatious luxury. When war came, a great majority of those who joined the resistance were these unfortunate segments of the Negros population, people who had nothing to lose but their hovels and debts. With the power of the gun suddenly in their hands, they "seized upon the disordered times of war as an opportunity to wreak vengeance upon the rich."<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the guerilla had only a nebulous understanding of military discipline, and devoid of proper direction from responsible leadership, he was prone to succumb to the corrupting effects of power. He began to feel that he was doing an all-important patriotic duty, an illusion which the civilians encouraged because he was dined, wined and entertained wherever he went. He took this gesture of hospitality as a recognition of his superiority and importance. As a result, he became arrogant, over-bearing and less sensitive to the rights and feelings of others.

The average soldier is young, poor and provincial; he has little formal education, and has never before occupied a position of authority. . . he is suddenly placed in a position where he makes laws and regulations for others. You cannot expect too much justice without wisdom. The "underdog" is now having his day, and one shouldn't be surprised that it spoils him just a little. . .<sup>9</sup>

## Consolidation of Forces

As mentioned earlier, in the beginning these guerilla bands were led by humble sometime unlettered patriots. The indiscriminate looting of private property, the ravages of banditry and lawlessness and the frequent armed clashes among these independent bands aroused responsible and mature leaders in the island to take active part in the emerging armed struggle. Coming out from hiding, these leaders, like Ernesto Mata, Herminigildo Mercado, Placido Ausejo, Salvador Abcede, Roberto Benedicto, to mention but a very few, made frantic calls for sobriety and unity. In due time, they succeeded in unifying these warring groups, put them under responsible officers and assumed command over all of them. Thus guerilla warfare in Negros by late 1942 began to assume the dimensions of a united front against the enemy.

The next step towards unification was the agreement among the top leaders to divide Negros into four sectors (North, South, East, and West Sectors), each under a competent senior officer with well defined jurisdiction and specific area of operation.<sup>10</sup> Although initially understanding was reached among those concerned, on the whole, however, cooperative efforts did not last very long. Soon enough, conflicts over leadership and uncoordinated operations against the enemy began to take their toll. High pride and personal ambitions somehow continued to operate even in time of extreme exigency. What was desperately needed apparently was someone with the necessary rank and authority who could put all of the guerilla bands under one central command.

## Major Villamor and the Negros Guerillas

Fortunately, someone of that description did arrive by submarine in southern Negros. That person was Major Villamor, who was sent to the Philippines by MacArthur.<sup>11</sup> His primary mission was to establish an intelligence and secret service network throughout the Philippines to feed MacArthur with reliable information on the enemy and "to build up organization for subversive activities, propaganda, limited resistance and sabotage."<sup>13</sup>

Establishing his base in Negros, Villamor felt the need of strengthening the resistance movement in the island in order to provide security for his party thereby insuring the success of his mission. Inevi-

tably, he found himself enveigled into purely local conflicts. Finally convinced of the irreconcilable interests of the top guerilla leaders, Villamor assumed over-all command of the whole islands of Negros and Siquijor on May 14, 1943.

This settled once and for all the leadership conflicts in Negros. With the full support of Gen MacArthur, Villamor's authority was unquestioningly respected. It was truly the turning point of the war in the island. The resistance movement was revitalized and tremendously strengthened as the fighting men recognized only one commander.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, their morale was heightened in the knowledge that they were now in close contact with the Allied High Command.

### **The Civil Government of Free Negros:**

Guerilla warfare anywhere in the world cannot long survive without the sympathy and support of the civilian population. It is an army that grows spontaneously, very often without preparation for logistics or detailed plan for the execution of its objectives. It has no fixed source of support, "moving about like gas . . . without front and back," in the words of Lawrence of Arabia. Often in hiding, it can only lean upon the civilians for food.

The Negros guerillas were fortunate to have been led by farsighted men who saw the importance of the humble peasant in the war of attrition. They have always felt the need of establishing a civil government to restore law and order in the free zones and to provide the dynamic leadership in galvanizing the civilians into an effective arm of the resistance.

Thus, on December 16, 1942, the Civil Government of Free Negros was formally inaugurated at Igmaya-an, a mountain barrio in Murcia, Negros Occidental with the Hon. Alfredo Montelibano, Sr., as governor. From that day on, the resistance movement became a joint enterprise of both soldiers and civilians.<sup>14</sup> In various other ways, the civilians of Negros, through the dynamic leadership of Montelibano, shared the burden of the struggle against Japan, ranging from espionage to counter-propaganda. So successful was the civil government that Pres. Quezon wired Montelibano expressing his "highest commendation for your wisdom and self-sacrifice."<sup>15</sup>

## The Road Back

Following the final conclusion of the leadership controversy in Negros, the guerillas settled down to more peaceful activities. Their first concern was to strengthen the resistance forces, both military and civilian, so as to gain a potent striking force when the forces of liberation would come. In the remaining days of 1943 and in the early part of 1944, all guerilla activities under the direction of the SWPA<sup>16</sup> were geared towards preparing the combat units for the final offensive against the enemy.

Emphasis was laid upon further improvement of the guerilla organizations. To improve the combat fitness of the troops, service schools were established, which in effect served as screening places for the personnel in the military service. Through these schools, deserving ones were promoted and given assignment most fitted for them. Those who were found to be liabilities were either reclassified, demoted or simply separated from the service. In due time the Negros guerillas developed into a real army deserving of respect...

To replenish what was destroyed or taken away by the Japanese, food production was stepped up and given top priority. With the unselfish cooperation of the civilians, the army was able to gain a substantial quantity of food in due time.

It was at this time, too, that there was a radical shift in operations. On orders from Higher Headquarters the main task of the movement became that of espionage, that is, to spy on the enemy and report enemy movements and activities. As much as possible, head-on clashes were to be avoided as these would only provoke reprisals without attaining any strategic importance. SWPA was not interested how many Japanese were killed in an ambush. Rather the guerillas were to hold territories then under their control and quiet Japanese suspicions, giving the latter no provocation to send in more troops. In this way the guerillas would be accorded ample time and better opportunity to improve their organization and combat effectiveness as the Japanese, it was hoped, would be lulled into a false sense of security. Until the time to strike came, lives and resources must not be unnecessarily lost in vain outbursts of courage and passion.

It took a long time to prepare the guerillas but when the time came, they certainly had come of age.

## **The Guerillas on the Offensive**

As the tide of war continually turned against Japan and the return of America to the Philippines became a certainty, the Japanese envisaged making Negros an air operation and distributing center in the event the Allies made a landing anywhere in the Visayas. To succeed in this direction, the Japanese had to clear Negros of partisan activities which might harass their elaborate defensive installations and sabotage their huge stocks of oil, high octane gas and airplanes. Thus beginning in the early part of 1944, the Japanese launched a series of massive punitive campaigns in their desperate attempt once and for all to break the resistance movement. Thousands of lives were lost as hundreds of battles were fought.

For a time the guerillas, from inadequate arms and ammunition, faced a grim prospect of total disintegration as they could only offer feeble resistance in the wake of enemy terror campaigns.

With the arrival of vitally-needed equipment from Australia in much greater quantity, the guerillas lashed back at the enemy. Offensive operations and sustained harassing activities were launched in the different parts of the island, isolating the enemy in a limited number of fortified places particularly around airfields and supply depots. By the end of 1944, many towns had already been recaptured from the enemy.

In preparation for the American landing, the guerillas continued their drive to rid the lowlands of enemy garrisons in relentless fury. By March 1945, they had already succeeded in pushing the Japanese into the general area of the Patag-Lantawan mountains east of Silay in Negros Occidental and around Dumaguete in Negros Oriental.

The retreat of the Japanese into small pockets of resistance in the jungle fastness of Negros, hounded from all sides by guerillas, was a glorious years of blood, tears and bitterness.

## **Role of the Guerillas in the Liberation of Negros**

Although fundamentally the guerillas were quickly relegated to the background after the arrival of the American liberation forces, their function in the final task to liberate the island must not be considered secondary. Having been familiar with the Negros terrain, they effectively served as leading scouts and guides of the American forces to Japa-

nese hideouts in the unchartered jungles. Their round-the-clock vigilance over scores of bridges and the long thin lines of supplies and communication from the unloading supply beaches which the Japanese vainly sought to destroy by night infiltrations served an exceedingly useful purpose. At the same time, on the Division's flanks, guerilla battalions blocked enemy movements, sealed his escape routes and kept him under confining surveillance while the Americans relentlessly pounded the center.<sup>17</sup>

But above all these, these ragged bands of patriots, through their own initiative and efforts, had succeeded in pocketing the Japanese in the area between Pulupandan and Victorias, and in Dumaguete, pushing him into a limited area of operation where he could be destroyed by the massive firepower of the Americans. The people of Negros truly prepared the way for the final redemption of the island; it was only for the Americans to deliver the coup de grace on an adversary who was already on his knees. Thus, without this organized resistance, the struggle for the liberation of the island would have been longer, more arduous and definitely the Americans would have suffered much more in terms of lives and materials.

### Conclusion

By his own admission, Gen Takauji Wachi, Gen. Homma's Chief of Staff, declared that the resistance movement in Negros was among the earliest to be organized in the Philippines, and the first to fire the shots of defiance at the Japanese after the surrender.

The war against Japan in Negros was not instigated nor directed by higher Allied headquarters, but was rather a spontaneous outburst of patriotism and raw courage of the indigenous population. Throughout all this period, the guerillas fought on with meager combat equipment. Canteens for long marches were rare. They battled with few helmets for head protection, no adequate uniforms to shield them from the elements, and without countless other items of essential military equipment.

The war started as a reckless adventure. Without adequate arms, any chance for permanent success was practically nil. Besides, with the enemy in complete control of the air and the sea lanes, reinforcements could not be sent to them any time from one island to another. But as one soldier said: "We were just too busy fighting to think of obstacles."

Unlike other similar movements in the Island, where the Filipinos usually rallied behind an American leader who symbolized hope and freedom, that of Negros was an entirely Filipino affair. Throughout its duration, not one American rose to prominence to rally the people, with the possible exception of Roy Bell who was later evacuated to Australia before the war was over. The blood that drenched the island before the arrival of the liberation forces was purely Filipino.

The success of the resistance movement in Negros should not be attributed only to the guerillas who bore arms and did the actual fighting in the frontlines. Equally important were the civilians who offered food, clothing, medicine, and even guns and thus kept the fighting men fighting. They were those who incessantly spied on the enemy, who beat the *tultugan* at the approach of the enemy, or carried heavy burdens on their bare backs over precipitous trails, and performed countless other tasks concomitant in a war of attrition. They were those who stayed at home, hoped and prayed ——— “guerillas at heart, defiers only in spirit for that was all that their helplessness could do under the circumstances. Such were peddlers of rumors that gave courage to hearts that had weakened, rumors that strengthened hope and faith.” For in the mountains, the Japanese were not the only enemy but also the growing hopelessness, and the sad thought of being under the reign of atrocious foreign troops. These were the people who prevented the general breakdown of morale and somehow held defeatist paralysis at bay.

The guerillas were the most valuable sources of intelligence information for SWPA, and those in Negros were, to a large extent, responsible for the early destruction of the Japanese navy in the so-called First Battle of the Philippines Sea on June 14, 1944. As the Japanese fleet was steaming over Guimaras Strait, the Negros Guerillas immediately flashed this information to SWPA which enabled the US Navy to anticipate the enemy's movement. This development, plus the destruction of the enemy air arm in Negros hastened the return of the American forces in the Philippines by about two months.

The active partisan activities in Negros forced the Japanese to retain a substantial portion of their troops in the island, which otherwise could have been sent to other fronts. At the same time, the Japanese were denied the opportunity to fully exploit the rich economic potentials of Negros Island.

Finally, the people of Negros, by putting up active resistance

against the enemy, can claim proudly that in the darkest episode of the country's history, they had lavishly demonstrated their intense love for freedom, their readiness to defend the country in distress, and their bravery and courage in the face of a ruthless enemy.

### **Recommendations**

1. As of December, 1944, the 7th Military District had an aggregate strength of 12,829 officers and men who actually took active part in the war in Negros. But for some still unknown reason, the reconstituted guerilla troop roster of the district as prepared by the HQ, Philippine-Ryukyus Command dated 3 June, 1948 recognized only 10,007 bonafide officers and enlisted men, leaving out 2,822 others in the limbo of anonymity. This must be corrected through proper reassessment of existing records to give justice to whom it is due.

But what is more painful to contemplate is the fact that many of those who were given recognition by a swivel-chaired authority, sitting hundreds of miles from the scene of the struggle, were bogus guerillas, to the exclusion of some genuine ones. These were the opportunists, the 11th-hour patriots, who at the first whiff of aid, jumped into the Allied bandwagon, but who had wallowed in the comfort of the lowlands and the convenience of the fence-sitter during the darkest period of the movement. There is a crying need to separate the chaff from the grain and this can be realized only through an objective and meticulous re-appraisal of existing authentic records.

2. Records of the 7th Military District, particularly concerning the Civil Government of Free Negros, the civilian arm of the resistance movement, are most meagre. Most of these are still in the possession of surviving participants and the likelihood of these getting lost cannot be over emphasized. It is, therefore, highly recommended that the government initiate efforts to collect all these records, compile them for safe-keeping for the benefit of future researchers. These are a priceless heritage which should not be lost to posterity.

3. The bloody war in Negros should be taken as a confirmation of the constant struggle of the Filipino people against the forces of totalitarianism which, in the different period of our history, had reached out even into remotest recesses of the country. The Negrense, traditionally known for their being carefree and fun-loving, fought against overwhelming odds for the principles that they stood for. The tenacity and

dogged determination with which they conducted the war could only be matched by their intensity of purpose, their towering desire to uphold the ways of democracy. What happened in Negros is another shining proof of the Filipino love of freedom.

4. The available guerilla documents that had been salvaged after the war are all deposited in the Office of Military History, GHQ, AFP, Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City. But this researcher noted with utter dismay that these documents are haphazardly crammed in ordinary folder with no attempt made at organized arrangement. To save these documents, some of which were written in ordinary pad paper and bread wrappers, from the ravages of time, the proper authorities must take extra care to preserve them. If possible, microfilming of these should be undertaken.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Negros Force – USAFFE*, prepared by the Historical Division Headquarters National Defense Force (HNDF), Camp Murphy, Quezon City, dated 15 April, 1950, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Mutual jealousy, personal grudges, conflict of authority or jurisdiction over a territory, and the desire to show off were among the most common causes that gave rise to these internecine conflicts.

<sup>3</sup> Edilberto K. Tiempo, *They Called Us Outlaws* (Unpublished ms., Silliman University), p. 231

<sup>4</sup> Unit Record No. 1 (1 July 1944 – 31 July 1944), prepared by HQ, 73rd Provisional Division, 7th MD issued on 27 Aug., 1944, pp. 14-15

<sup>5</sup> Tiempo, op. cit., p. 82

<sup>6</sup> Don V. Hart, "Halfway to Uncertainty: A Short Autobiography of a Cebu Filipino", *University of Manila Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 3 July 1956, p. 277

<sup>7</sup> Ira Wolfert, *An American Guerilla in the Philippines* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), pp. 89-90

<sup>8</sup> A. V. H. Hartendorp, *The Japanese Occupation of the Philippines* (Manila: Bookmark, 1967), vol. I, p. 431

<sup>9</sup> Letter, Orville Babcock to his daughter, dated November 20, 1942.

<sup>10</sup> By the time sectors were organized, the guerillas had become aggressive and their missions had traces of offensive operations: "... the mission in all sub-sectors in Negros is to trouble and press the enemy so that they will be forced to either withdraw from the island or to concentrate in one place. To carry out this mission

you have to (a) surround and blockade the nearest garrison to cut off supplies and communication; (b) send small raiding and sniping parties to pick out enemy entries and outposts; (c) establish mobile patrols and intercept enemy patrols that may infiltrate out of the town." Letter, Capt. U. Baclagon to Capt. J. Dacanay, dated December 9, 1942.

<sup>11</sup> For details of Villamor's mission and activities, see *Allison Ind, Allied Intelligence Bureau: Our Secret in The War Against Japan* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1958), pp. 115-145. Villamor himself has written his memoirs entitled *They Never Surrendered: A True Story of Resistance in World War II*, as told to Gerald S. Snyder. This has yet to be published.

<sup>12</sup> Hamlin Cannon, *Leyte, the Return to the Philippines* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954), pp. 18-19

<sup>13</sup> Villamor relinquished his command to Maj. Salvador Abcede on July 23, 1943

<sup>14</sup> Editorial, *The Voice of Freedom*, Jan. 15, 1944 p. 4. This was the newspaper of the Negros Civil Government.

<sup>15</sup> Radiogram, Quezon to Montelibano, dated 20 April, 1944

<sup>16</sup> SWPA - Southwest Pacific Area. The term generally refers to Gen. MacArthur's Headquarters.

<sup>17</sup> At least one guerilla regiment was put in the main frontlines beside the Americans in the final assault against tenacious Japanese in their Jungle-covered caves and spider foxholes. It was credited with no less than 200 Japanese killed. Press Release, 40th Division Press Relation Office, date 1 June, 1945.