

The U.S. Navy Supply Corps and a Philippine Heritage

By *RADM Dan McKinnon, SC, USN (Ret.), Columnist*

Among all the U.S. Navy officer communities and corps, none have a more special relationship with the Filipino in our Navy than the Supply Corps. That partnership has a history that should be understood.

The history of the Philippines is remarkably intertwined with the United States. It was for half a century our colony. Its school system and governance are in our model. Along with Canada and Great Britain, it is arguably our nation's closest ally of the past century. It is the third largest English-speaking nation in the world and over 300,000 Americans live in the Philippines and four million former Filipinos live in the United States where Tagalog is the fourth most spoken language.

The history of the creation of the Philippine nation is well told. How the Spanish American War was intended to help the Cuban "War of Independence" against a European power. How the United States sent the Battleship Maine to the Havana Harbor to ensure the safety of Americans. How on February, 15, 1898 the Maine sank following a massive explosion with 266 men killed and a Spanish torpedo blamed. How a rallying cry "Remember the Maine" helped pave a road to war. How our blockade of Cuba led Spain to declare war on April 21, 1898. How Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt stepped down and became Teddy Roosevelt of the "Rough Riders", and as Acting Navy Secretary had ordered the U.S. Asiatic Squadron to Hong Kong. How Commodore Dewey on the other side of the world defeated the Spanish fleet in the "Battle of Manila Bay" and became our first, "Admiral of the Navy". Then came the Philippine-American War, "Benevolent Assimilation", colonialization, a commonwealth, and a World War that saw the devastation of Manila second only to the destruction of Warsaw.

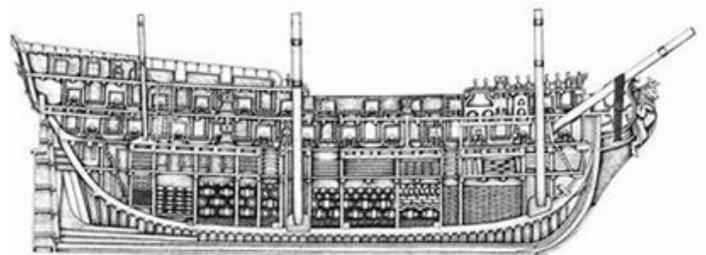
On the 4th July 1946, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the U.S. Army Forces, Far East (USAFFE), in front of the internationally famous Manila Hotel, declared the Republic of the Philippines a free nation. In 1935 it had become a self-governing commonwealth. Joining MacArthur, the Philippines first President of the independent Third Philippine Republic, Manuel Acuna Roxas, declared, "We have reached the summit of the mighty mountain of independence." Today the Philippines celebrates its independence on 12 June, the date in 1898 when the island nation declared its freedom from Spain. The Manila Hotel sat across the park from the famous Army Navy Club, parent of the Army Navy Club of Washington D.C., and birthplace of the Military Order of the Carabao. Stretching along the nearby waterfront



Popular World War Two poster published at a time when Americans and Filipinos were pushing Japanese forces out of their country. Earlier, after the fall of Bataan in April 1942, the infamous Bataan Death March across Luzon to Camp O'Donnell saw over 500 American deaths by abuse and wanton killing, while well over 5,000 Filipinos experienced the same fate. Brothers in blood then. Friends and comrades forever.

was the beautiful Dewey Boulevard which was later renamed Roxas Boulevard. Filipinos humorously describe their history as, "three hundred years in a convent and fifty years in Hollywood".

In 1901 President McKinley signed an Executive Order allowing the Navy to enlist 500 Filipinos. But Filipinos had been at sea in the Americas centuries before when the ships of "New Spain", that included the Philippine Islands, crisscrossed the Pacific via the "Manila Galleon Trade". Some sailors settled in Louisiana in the 18th century and Filipinos fought in the Battle of New Orleans as "Manilamen". You would find Philippine-Americans on both sides in the Civil War. Filipinos are credited with being the first Asians



For over 300 voyages, Manila galleons crossed the Pacific in ships cramped with cargo and crew. No wardroom. No stewards. No gedunk.

in California having arrived on a Manila Galleon in Moro Bay in 1587.

As a boy I loved movies of the famous “Spanish Galleons”. Three masted wooden warships at sea with their cannon, swords, heroes, and sometimes pirates. Who would have known that many were actually built in the Philippines and sailed as “Manila Galleons”? Hulls were stronger and built with wood that did not easily splinter under cannon shot. Ships became larger, took about 2,000 trees to provide the timber, and constructed in six months compared to two years in Europe. The islanders were known for their woodworking skills, and today one might mistake a Philippine religious wooden Santos for an antique from Mexico.

For over 200 years, Manila Galleons crossed the Pacific to Acapulco on the west coast of Mexico. Mexican silver would be used for trade in Manila and galleons would meet Chinese traders at the entrance of a great bay. The riches of Asia, spic-es, porcelain, elaborate fabrics, even Persian carpets, would return by galleon to Acapulco and then by donkey caravan across Mexico and again by sea on to Spain.

Many Supply Corps officers saw duty with the Navy commands at the old Spanish base at Cavite whose history included the galleon building shipyard, fort, hospital, graveyard and famous arsenal. Chinese merchants, or “Xiang-li”, conducted trade on a point of protruding land extending into the bay that became known as Sangley Point. Since defeat of the Spanish fleet by Dewey took place just off shore, some call the victory, the “Battle of Cavite”. Defeat of American forces by Japan at Cavite in 1942 saw the incarceration of prisoners of War including decorated Supply Corps heroes Ken Wheeler and Bob Granston, both of whom had been stationed with the Cavite Supply Department. Other Supply Corps officers died on the Bataan Death March or in prison camps. Ken saw his closest friend, Bill Elliott, whom he pulled ashore in Olongapo from the sinking hell-ship Oryoku Maru, shot because he was too weak to be of value in the slave labor camps of Japan.

Filipinos entering the U.S. Navy as members of the “Insular Force” in 1901 was only the beginning. They could bring their Philippine wives and until the end of WW I could enter several ratings. After the war, Filipinos joining the Navy meant becoming mess attendants and stewards, slowly replacing Chinese and Chamorros (Guamanians) over the next twenty years. (See, “Doris Miller, Messboy, Steward, Cook: Lion of the Sea”, in the Winter edition of “The Oakleaf” for the complex racial history of the Steward rate.) In 1947, under an agreement with the new Republic of the Philippines,



A beautifully carved 19th century Santos of Saint Javier, or Saint Francis Xavier, known for bringing the Catholic faith to the Malay Archipelago, India, and Japan, in the early 16th century. From the Philippine Island of Panay. This is the same island on which a heroic American sailor was born. Divine providence? (Writer's collection.)

its citizens could be recruited into the Navy. In 1952 the annual quota was increased to 1,000, and then later to 2,000, to meet a need for more stewards as Blacks began moving out to other ratings.

Laws on a path to citizenship became complex over the next few years, but service in the Navy was generally counted on as a means of becoming a U.S. citizen. Fifty years ago, Admiral “Bud” Zumwalt becoming CNO brought more change. Filipinos could be recruited for Seaman Recruit instead of Stewardman, and most ratings became open. (The famous Z-gram author also made sure that our commissaries offered food popular with Filipinos and other nationalities.) As “foreign nationals”, Filipinos could not enter ratings requiring access to classified information. That is why you saw many Filipinos with careers that began in the medical, clerical, and supply ratings. That was good news to every Supply Corps officer who served at sea.

When stationed in the Philippines from 1980 to 1982, many of my men, including a remarkable Command Master Chief, were Philippine Americans. Recruiting was on-going in the country, but the waiting list for testing and interviews had thousands of applicants. An annual public notice was not issued. Recruitment continued until 1992 when the Military Base Agreement failed ratification the year before. For those

of a certain age, this ended a beautiful time in history. The U.S. Navy lost its principal logistics and support hub in Asia. Today we observe the debate on how best to support de-deployed naval forces far from home, operating in a part of the world where diplomatic and military moves take place daily in the chess game of international competition. In Subic Bay and the modern city of Olongapo, we see a “free port” and a thriving international trading and tourist center.

Those of us who remember the Subic Navy base and liberty on Luzon and the nearby city of Olongapo, may also remember the “Aeta”. They, too, have a long history with the U.S. Navy. The “Aeta” were a small native indigenous people you would find on both the Subic Naval base and Clark Air Force base providing security. One of over 70 indigenous peoples of the 7,000-island archipelago, they arrived on the island of Luzon in the Philippines over 35,000 years ago and are considered the country’s first people. Sailors may remember buying their famous knives as souvenirs in route to liberty in Olongapo. Ships remember them going through trash looking for accidentally discarded classified correspondence. They could not read English, but they could recognize and return any piece of paper marked “Confidential”, “Secret”, or “Top Secret”. Naval aviators remember them teaching survival skills at the famous Jungle Environmental Survival Training center (JEST) on Cubi Point. Tourists today can learn the same skills as well as how to live within the beauty of nature and protect our environment. Veterans of WWII may remember them for saving downed pilots in the mountains of Luzon, or pulling Bataan Death March prisoners into the brush. A Philippine charity, the “Subic Indigenous Peoples Assistance Group” (SIPAG) is assisting the Aeta develop a livelihood center on the former U. S. Naval Magazine as they



Unusual early photo of Filipinos at sea in an unidentified ship, probably pre-World War One. Identifaction help welcomed.

attempt to maintain their original way of life on tribal lands now set aside by the Philippine government. The Project Handclasp Foundation (PHF) provided a “Tevelson Grant” of \$80,000 for the “Handclasp Aeta Partnership” to assist in establishing the center. The Aeta story is special. It will hopefully be told in a Philippine documentary, “A Forgotten Friendship, America’s 100 Year Relationship with the Aeta”.

The Navy’s Project Handclasp (PH) lapsed a few years ago. Many Supply Corps officers will remember bringing boxes on board ship of donated goods from private industry or charities; toys, school supplies, medical material, and family health articles. Donated skate boards became village transport, and feminine hygiene pads became soccer knee pads. Donations would be distributed ashore by Sailors and Marines on Community Relations (COMREL) excursions outside the United States. The U.S. Naval Supply Depot (NSD) Subic had a large inventory of PH material, as did supply commands in San Diego, Jacksonville, Singapore, and Sigonella. It would not be unusual to find NSD Subic families, American and Philippine, in a nearby town on a Saturday, painting a school, donating books, or distributing toys. The inventory was owned by the Project Handclasp Foundation, with a board composed of retired Navy officers and senior civilians. When the Navy terminated the program, the PH board was composed of four Supply Corps officers; Jim Davidson, Dan Stone, Chuck Stone, and myself. We were joined by the former Executive Director of the Navy Supply Center, San Diego, Charlie Smith, Milt Lowe, a brilliant retired

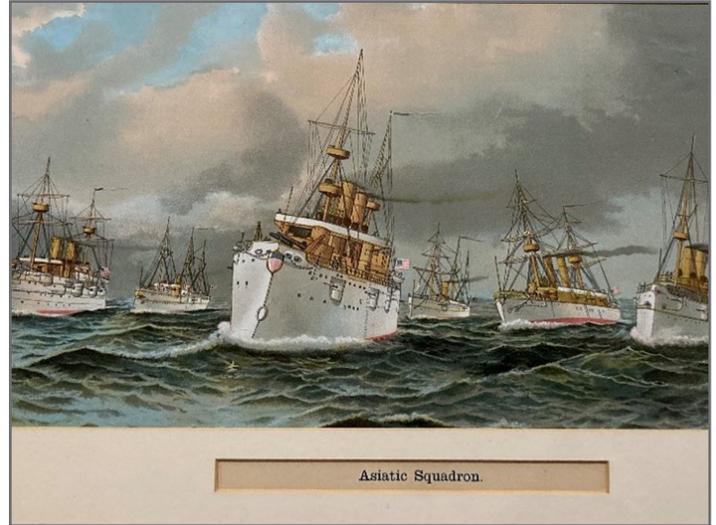


The Aeta and American Navy partnership began in 1905 with establishment of a Naval Station at Olongapo on the deep-water Subic Bay. This 1910 photograph shows new friends with Commander Cheser M. Knepper and U.S. Marine Maruice E. Shearer.

Navy JAG attorney, and Captain Charlie Ryan, a Line sea-farer skilled in command at sea. We decided that our remain-ing assets would go to charitable projects in the Philippines. All had served or been there often. We would make “Tevel-son Grants, or Donations”, in honor of the Navy’s long time program director, Commander Charles (Charlie) Tevelson, without whom it can be arguably, and accurately, stated the program would not have existed.

The first donation was over 130 pallets of water purifica-tion kits and treadle sewing machines that do not require electricity. It was to the Philippine Red Cross whose chair-man is Richard J. (Dick) Gordon, now a Senator and former candidate for President, Mayor of Olongapo in the 1980s, and friend to many Supply Corps officers. In 1980 he and I co-founded the Subic Bay Industrialization Opportuni-ties Foundation to provide training and employment for the youth of Olongapo. His sister Cecile is the wife of retired SC Captain John Mullen. The second donation was \$150,000 to create the Children of Marawi Project, which with the assis-tance of the US-Philippine Society (USPS), joined the Phil-ippine Disaster Relief and Resilience Foundation (PDRF) to establish a medical and education facility for Muslim chil-dren displaced in the 2017 Siege of Marawi on the island of Mindanao.

A final “Tevelson Grant” of \$140,000 will join and sup-port Filipinos with a life at sea. The Philippines, a 7,000-is-land seafaring nation, also ranks third in the world in natural



In 1898, Acting Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Asiatic Squadron to sail to Hong Kong and prepare for a war with Spain. Soon the Cruiser USS Olympia (C-6) with Commodore Dewey and his ships were about to make Philippine American history. (Chromolithograph, “Asiatic Squadron”, writers’ collection.)

disasters. There are over 300,000 Filipino mariners serving around the world on commercial ships flagged by many na-tions. From three to four months each year they return home to be with their families. An American charity and several Philippine non-profit entities created “Project Rise” to orga-nize these talented bi-lingual and technically trained skilled mariners and capitalize on their time away from the sea and bring them into a system to help their communities prepare for natural calamities. The result will be a system that pro-vides tools and training programs in disaster preparedness and recovery, especially in hardship prone areas, such as coastal communities subject to typhon.

With our nation’s remarkable history with the Philippines, and thousands of Filipinos having served in our U.S. Navy, it may be surprising to learn that there has never been a ship named to honor that service. There have been ships named for famous maritime battles in the Philippine islands, and in 1919 the USS Rizal (DD174) was commissioned and named for the Philippine hero, Jose Rizal. The ship was a Philippine donation by the legislature of the American-Colonial Insular Government to serve in World War One. It never did. For the next decade it remained in Asia with its predominately Philippine crew operating out of Manila and Olongapo, con-verted to a mine layer, and decommissioned in 1931.

That is hopefully about to change. Earlier this year a group of Philippine-Americans, veterans, community and other lead-ers, came together to form the “USS Telesforo Trinidad Cam-



Bataan Death March starting point marker used to note the April 1942 journey from Mariveles to Camp O’Donnell on the island of Luzon. The Aeta helped some POWs slip away.

paign”, or “USSTTC”. Telesforo Trinidad was a Second-Class Fireman who in 1915 on board the USS San Diego (ACR-6), an armored cruiser, following a boiler disaster, saved many of his fellow sailors. Nine perished. He received the Medal of Honor (MOH) for his courage and heroism and remains the only Filipino, and Asian American, in the U.S. Navy who has received this recognition. It has been recommended more than once by Navy historians that his heroism be recognized by the Secretary of the Navy in naming a ship in his honor. Not unlike the recent naming of a nuclear aircraft carrier for a heroic African-American, naming a surface combatant USS Telesforo Trinidad would also honor the thousands of Philippine-Americans who have served with distinction and valor in the United States Navy. It is a mystery why it has not happened before. I am confident it will happen now.

Tragically this Spring, events concerning hate groups targeting Americans of Asian heritage began to appear in the news. Philippine-Americans were not exempt. With May having been Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, many national leaders came forth to denounce the absurdity and sickness associated with treating any human on a basis other than understanding, tolerance, and respect. Both the Chief of Naval Operations and Acting Secretary of the Navy made their voices heard. The history of Filipinos becoming American Sailors enriched our ability to serve. I trust that was your experience as well.

Dan McKinnon retired from the U.S. Navy in 1991 as a Rear Admiral and Commander, Naval Supply Systems Command, and 36th Chief of Supply Corps. For eight years he served as President and CEO of “NISH-Providing Training and Employment for People with Severe Disabilities.” He and fellow retired SC officer **Dennis Wright** and Captain Brian Buzzell, a Naval Aviator, were recently honored by the Philippine Senate for their leadership in returning to the Philippines, “The Bells of Balangiga.”



Telesforo Trinidad was born on the island of Panay, entered the U.S. Navy Insular Force in 1910, and served through two world wars retiring in 1945. The USS San Diego (ACR-6) also served as command ship of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.