

Guerrilla Interview with Lorenzo Cornista

By David L. Dwiggin
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This interview presents a small cross section of, Lorenzo Cornista's guerrilla operations in the Philippines during Japanese Occupation, World War II. Rather than surrender, these great men chose to wage a different kind of war that was effective and further risked their lives. If not for the precise intelligence that the Filipino guerrilla organizations amassed, liberating forces could never have advanced so quickly to Leyte, Luzon and Japan eventually bringing a long waited freedom. The sufferings of fellow countrymen would have been prolonged.

Lorenzo Cornista of San Pablo City, Philippines is a surviving member of San Pedro's unit of Markings Fil-American Guerrilla Forces. Originally the organization was Hugh Straughn's Fil-American Irregular Troops (FAIT) but after the death of Straughn, Col. Marcos V. Marking took over the FAIT's command which he drummed up as Marking's Fil-Americans.

I consulted Lorenzo long ago about the possibilities of an interview and in agreement we decided that the late afternoon of September 9, 2006 we would meet up. My wife and I entered the 50 year-old, two-story, Spanish style bungalow and the Cornista's saw to it we were comfortably seated then Lorenzo found contentment in a wooden rocking chair. The rocker sat at its forward position as he poured over treasures and recollections of youthful days and the adventures of war spread out on a small table. Several folders and four books were within a hand's reach and after some greetings and pleasantries we settled into the interview.



On November 30, 2011 I was walking past Lorenzo's home and greeted him at the gate. I had my recorder and notebook and thus a second part has now been added.

Were you born in San Pablo City?

Yes, I was born in Barangay Sta. Cruz.

As a young man did you notice any changes around San Pablo before the war?

Three years before the war Japanese moved into this part of Laguna. I know five Japanese who came here. They were dealing in bicycles, refreshment parlors, sold toys and employed shops at the market. They were very friendly people. Kuyama was a dealer of the bicycle parts and a good friend. I use to go to him for bearings and rubber tires before the war. I was just a boy then and after the war he was gone.

The Japanese became familiar with the mountain and all of San Pablo and much of Laguna. We did not know but they were already planning routes to the mountain and knew where water supplies were located. They knew more than we knew. At night they could walk from Lipa City to the mountain passing through Tiaong without a guide. America did not think of the intelligence of the Japanese before the war. When war was declared the Japanese were ready.

One Japanese named Berto Hapon operated a homestead on the mountain at Tayak and many kamote were planted there. They were foreigners and could not own the land but they planted it, harvested it and planted again, having a homestead was not a problem.

Berto was a Japanese Captain. He invited me to his house and he would show me his Samurai sword. Nothing else was planted, only kamote. When we arrived on Tayak we could eat, even with your hand you could dig kamote with your hands because the soil was soft. This was good because we rarely had food at our reach. You

did not need to use a knife or hoe. Sometimes when there was plenty of rain, kamote would be infested with insects and worms. The kamote would be rotten and have a bad smell. We also ate santol but it was not as plentiful as kamote. Santol was a wild mangosteen and could be sweet or sour depending on ripeness. We hoped we could eat rice once a day but kamote was our main meal most days at Tayak. Sometimes we had Lugaw and coconut. We worried about food always until supplies were dropped into Tayak by the American DC-3s. We would open with our knives and bolos or slam them against the trees. Civilians at Tayak also planted white corn and it was soft and chewable. We boiled it.

The Japanese bombed San Pablo December 25, 1941. Do you remember that day and where you were?

When San Pablo was bombed I was near Franklin Baker along the national highway and I almost got hit by one of the bombs. If not for my niece who told me, Uncle I will die to go with you to the market. I told her, no! So I was delayed. Had I been that area I would have been hit by one of the bombs. Fifty meters away from Franklin Baker is the drug store of my uncle and I was there when it was bombed. The first bomb hit the gate of Franklin Baker. Another bomb dropped downtown San Pablo at the vicinity of the Metro Bank.

Did the bombing last a long time that day?

There were two waves of bombing. It started around nine o'clock and must have returned to refuel and load with more bombs. Between eleven and twelve o'clock another wave returned. I did not know the extent of the bombing because I returned to our house in San barrio Sta. Cruz.

Juan B. Hernandez of San Pablo barrio, Butokan, wrote a book, FOR LOVE OF FREEDOM, a history of San Pablo during World War II. As the bombing started and also when the Japanese were involved in atrocities, he told of folks moving to the mountains to the south for safety. Did your family experience moving away from home for safety and if so where did they travel?

My parents and family stayed in barrio Sta. Cruz and did not proceed to San Cristobal.

Do you remember when the first train of released prisoners of war arrived in San Pablo?

Well, I don't know the date but I know, that the first batch there are around 15 San Pableños prisoners in the first batch. Most of them are officers. My brother that died at Banahaw Compound was due for release the next day, but the night before he died. He died because of torture. You will be forced to drink water with a hose then the Japanese would jump on their stomachs. We had an inside man there that monitors the movement at that compound and what the Japanese are doing. We also have a woman vendor selling fruits and vegetables so that we could walk in and look around and sell it to the Japanese. She sold salted peanuts too.

What inspired you to join a guerrilla unit?

The first unit that I have joined is the Santa Fe Brigade that was composed of prominent people here in San Pablo. One was Col. De Guzman and Col. Catipon was our commanding officer but unfortunately when one of our comrades was captured by the Japanese . . . he squealed, so the whole unit was summoned by the Japanese. All members were summoned by the Japanese at the garrison at San Pablo Elementary School. We had to report at eight o'clock in the morning up to five o'clock in the afternoon, under the heat of the sun . . . no food no water. After two weeks of the ordeal, the third week I did not return. I went to Sta. Isabel and contacted Col. San Pedro of Marking's Fil-American guerrilla troops, who was our cousin. I told him I think I cannot anymore bear the burden of being under the heat of the sun... imagine, at eight in the morning up to five o'clock no food and no water! He said it is okay. My father has guns at home. I brought them because our father did not surrender our arms to the Japanese. When I join I have already arms. That's how it started.

Col. San Pedro of the USAFEE had been a prisoner of war previously and upon his release August 15, 1942 at 26 years of age, he joined Hugh Straughn's Fil-American Irregular Troops (FAIT). He started recruiting ex-USAFEE's, ex-Philippine Scouts, ex-Philippine Constabulary, Philippine Army reservists and trainees, civilian volunteers including professionals to constitute his outfit. His unit became known as the FAIT's 2nd Division of the III Army Corps under the immediate command of guerrilla Col. Justiniano Estrella, alias Alfredo M. David, who dubbed his corps, David's Command. After the death of Col. Straughn, Col. Marcos V. Marking took over the FAIT's command which he drummed up as Marking's Fil-Americans.

Were you ever suspected to be a guerrilla when you did not have your weapon with you?

I was already a suspected guerrilla when I was with the Santa Fe Brigade when I have no weapon. If they found out I was a guerrilla I would be a dead duck.

I was still a boy when the war started and I was soon employed by the Guerrillas as an observer. I would go to the Banahaw Compound where the Japanese barracks were located and stand outside the fence. They played softball without fielding gloves and I watched. When a ball came over the fence I would fetch it and throw it back to them. Once they were familiar with me they invited me in to play ball. Sometimes after the games they would give us kamote. I could count the number of barracks, trucks, jeeps and estimate the number of troops and how many vehicles came and went each day. I went there every day. One day I was there very early and they asked why was there before they were. I told them I came to watch them play ball. Another time I was gone for several days and they asked where I went. I told them I had work to do. They became suspicious of me.

One day Japanese surrounded our house about 6 o'clock, we lived near the City Hospital. Our home was 5 houses from Schetelig on the road to the hospital. My cousin who was in front of the house saw the Japanese were coming and hurried to give me the tip. There were plenty of big trees behind the house and on the way so I was able to slip away to the hospital to hide. After that I hurried to the camp and contacted San Pedro. He told me to never return to the Banahaw Compound again because I was a marked person and I never went back. That was the last time I entered town. After that I stayed at the camp.

Do you remember the Bamboo Parades?

Yes, that is what we called the bamboo army. You had to carry a bamboo pole. When we are attending the camp at the elementary school we had to bring bamboo pole. If you do not bring that, you already a guerrilla. So that's our pass to go there.

When all of the Filipinos joined in to march and show allegiance to the Japanese, even though it might be a fake allegiance, how did you feel about that? Did you feel uncomfortable?

Well they have a purpose also. At the first I think they already collaborators but no . . . that is one way to get information. Pretending to be a part enabled them to receive information.

Do you recall the inhabitants of the community bringing in their weapons when the Japanese requested them?

That was when the Santa Fe Brigade was discovered. More than 400 arms were surrendered by the Santa Fe Brigade then the Japanese asked for more. Well . . . they were really asking for all the arms of the guerrilla units. However some of them, especially the unlicensed ones were easy to hide but the licensed ones, they cannot hide. It needed to be surrendered because they were able to get the list of people holding permits with regular license from the city treasury office.

I was almost seventeen years old when I joined San Pedro's unit in September 1943. Attending the rudimentary school was reason enough to join. Imagine standing in the sun every day, all day without food or water! San Pedro's unit was under the command of the U.S. 6th Army based in Australia.

What was your main duty in the guerrilla unit?

I joined the guerrillas because we are high school students already and our fellow guerrillas most are only grade school. We taught them drills, close order drill, marching, how to fire a rifle. Close order drill was marching. That is the only way to train a soldier to fight and to obey orders. It was discipline. We were already high school students and during our high school we had the preparatory military training. We had that background training already. So we have to give them the commands attention, at ease, parade rest.

Did most of the guerrillas have the preparatory training in high school?

Very few of the high school students had been trained and very few of the rich people of San Pablo joined. Mostly we come from common families.

Being a guerrilla put you and your family at risk. Did your family or friends encourage or discourage you joining Marking's Fil-Americans?

As far as my parents were concerned, they preferred me to join the guerrillas. Two of my brothers died at Bataan already in the Philippine Army. My father told us if you will not join the guerrillas you might be picked up by the Japanese. It was good, one week after they raided our house. I was only 16 years old, why were they looking for me. God's will maybe.

I was surprised to learn that the Japanese released these men before the war was over.

The men were subjected to the Death March; they walked and suffered from Bataan to Capas. The men arrived by train from Manila and many were not recognized because they were so sick or starved. I was sent back because the commanding officer of the guerrillas here is a grandson of my father. So, when I joined he said you better get back because grandfather will get angry; you are too young to join. No, I told him I must join because I am already wanted by the Japanese kempetai. After a week they say okay, you stay here with us. They gave me a pistol. What's funny about the pistol given to me by the guerrillas; it is a 45 caliber, but only one shot.

How did Marking's Fil-American Guerrillas get organized?

Originally the unit was formed as Hugh Straughn's Irregular Troops (FAIT). Following Straughn's death Colonel Marking took over renaming the outfit Marking's Fil-Americans. This was a fine tuned network of guerrilla units. A segment of this network was Col. Gertrudo San Pedro's 2nd Division. He had been a prisoner of war previously, released with others August 15, 1942. This was a token of good will and friendship by the Japanese to gain the loyalty of Filipinos. Americans remained imprisoned. San Pedro recruited officers and men who were previously prisoners of war, USAFFE, Philippine Scouts, Philippine Constabulary, Reservists, ROTC, policemen and civilians volunteers including professionals. The Philippine Red Cross provided a list of prisoners because many of the men released in August were too weak and had to be fetched by their families. The list became a good recruiting list as well.

Division Staff Officers Recognized by the U.S. Sixth Army

Gertrudo San Pedro	Division Commander
Lt. Col. Vicente San Pedro	Chief of Staff
Major Benjamin Ignacio	G-1
Major Pedro Reyes	G-2
Major Rustico P. Luga	G-3
Major Raymundo Bombane	G-4

The objective of Marking's Fil-Americans was to send intelligence reports to the general headquarters of General Douglas MacArthur at Australia, through higher guerrilla headquarters. San Pedro provided mutual assistance to allied guerrilla organizations as a united front against enemy attacks. The front would include harassing and ambushing enemy troops and counteract enemy propaganda among citizens.

Where was your Command Center located?

Our headquarters in Sta. Isabel was our control. We had a detachment in Sta. Isabel. Our headquarters was in Bakungan; that is near Tayak. Therein that is our main headquarters. We had a detachment in Dolores; we had a detachment in Calauan. We had a real network.

Was communication a problem?

Sure, it was very hard. We had no radios at that time, we had a runner, and the runner usually used . . . horse . . . he'd ride the horse. Especially if there is an enemy approaching, our runner is arriving on the horse so that he could relay the message that is an enemy is coming . . . they are around us so much. So our problem of action is to leave at once or to meet them. But during that time we were short of ammo, so our action was to avoid confrontation.

Did you carry the M-1 carbine?

No! During that time I was using a 45 caliber Colt model 1911. Then we have also shotgun during that time which was good for an ambush.

Once you were with the guerrilla movement, did you return to your home?

Sometimes. We ask pass from our commanding officer so we could visit our parents and eat a complete meal. During our camp we only ate only twice a day. Sometimes if there is none, our supply officer cannot supply provide rice, we eat only once. Sometimes we go out eating the santol, fruit santol. That's our breakfast.

What was the most difficult thing you had to do as a guerrilla?

Our worst enemy was having enough food to eat. During the war the Philippines was hard up and having food was difficult. Few would send us a sack of rice. In the morning you know what we eat? Tubo, you know tubo of the coconut, the water of the coconut. We eat copas as breakfast. We cannot rely on our supply officer because people were so hard up. We eat kamote and kamote tops. We boiled the kamote tops. Tastes sour. Sometimes we eat prayer because we don't have anything to eat. Then we have a glass of water. Not all guerrillas suffered so much. It is only here. We have also rice fields but we have no access because the Japanese cut us off. We use to harvest rice at night. In Calauan, Bay and Pila, when there is a full moon we harvest the rice. We help the people harvest the rice because daytime we evaporate. That's when they dry it in the sun. At night again we go back to pound the palay to make it ready for cooking. You know, that's the first time I take hold of the tool to mash. I don't have any inkling that I would be pounding the rice but everybody must work. The people were afraid to give us food too because once they are spotted by the Japanese they are in trouble too and will die.

Was your unit ever in the Manila area during the war?

We were not in Manila because when the 5th Cavalry US Army came we joined them in liberating Quezon, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur as well as Batangas. We are the only unit in Southern Luzon attached to the 5th Cavalry.

The women who were guerrilla nurses, did they go out on patrol with you?

They did not accompany us on our daily operations. We had some wounded men but the nurses mostly helped with malaria cases. We had few cases of pellagra and dysentery as U.S. soldiers did. Malaria was the most prevalent sickness. We had a safe house in Sta. Isabel and we would take the sick there where the nurses could care for them. The safe house was located about one half kilometer from the roadside. Doctors and nurses from San Pablo City Hospital would smuggle medicine for us. Sometimes we would kidnap the doctors at night take them to the safe house for treatment of our patients and return them to the hospital before daylight. We also had two doctors who were permanent with our Fil-American Guerrillas, Dr. DeGuzman and Dr. Laborte. Both doctors were prisoners of war at Bataan. A month after their release at Capas, they joined us.

You speak of Batangas, Quezon, Los Baños and Tayak, that is a great distance. Did you travel by foot?

Yes! We even go to Infanta by foot. Infanta, Quezon!

Did you know Don Placido Escudero of the Hugh Straughn's Fil-American Irregular Troops?

Of course, a best friend of mine.

The Japanese garrison at Banahaw Compound was on Rizal Avenue in San Pablo, is that correct?

One of my brothers died in concentration there. One of my brothers died at Bataan in Mariveles. That's why we are already allergic to the Japanese at that time because both of my brothers had already died.

Tell us about the Battle of Sta. Isabel.

Here is the account of the Battle of Sta. Isabel. It was written by our Chapter Historian, Lgr. Victor T. Arañez. You can find the accounts that Lgr. Arañez has written here on the website.

The Battle of Sta. Isabel

San Pablo City, Laguna Province, Philippines

By Lgr. Victor T Arañez

Chapter Historian

Every year a small group of men, women and children gather themselves together under the shade of some coconut trees at an isolated place in Barangay Sta. Isabel, near the scenic Bunot Lake, one of the seven Lakes of San Pablo City. They are poor widows and orphans of more than a dozen unknown veterans of the last world war who gave their lives fighting for a principle. This lone group has no recognized leader to coach them into having this affair and annual gathering. But they regularly come of their own accord to join the reunion, bringing along with them their own limited baon as their

lunch. They just come to eat together and reminisce of the memory of their departed ones and reverently tread the hallowed ground on which the blood of their beloved ones was spilled. These are the widows and orphaned children of the unglorified members of Marking's Fil-American Guerrilla Troops who died in action November 22, 1944 in the tragic Battle of Sta. Isabel.

San Pablo City was formerly the seat of the Southern Luzon Military Administration of the Japanese Occupation Forces during World War II and later became the capital of the 4th Military District of the "Puppet" Republic. During this period the Japanese authorities consistently rounded up all civilians suspected of being guerrillas and had them unceremoniously killed without any questioning based only on the information given them by the Ganaps or Makapilis with headquarters in the heart of the city. Sporadic encounters between the Makapilis and the guerrillas were not uncommon.

During the dark days of the Japanese Occupation, San Pablo City was also known as the hot-bed of guerrilla activities. The PQOG "Cayacas" Unit under the command of Maj. Juan Eseo operated in the southern part of the city while Maj. Pedro P. Perez, also a PQOG, operated in the southwestern portion. One notable guerrilla unit operating in the city was Marking's Fil-American Troops under the command of Col. Gertrudo San Pedro. An ex-USAFFE, San Pedro had organized a motley band of guerrillas recruited from the USAFFE, Philippine Scouts, Philippine Constabulary, ROTC cadets, reservists, civilian volunteers and professionals. This unit had sworn to obstruct the Japanese administration economically by underground campaign, counter-act Japanese propaganda among civilians, harass and ambush the enemy where it will not endanger the safety of the civilians, and gather intelligence information for transmission to Gen. Douglas MacArthur through the headquarters of Gen. Agustin Marking.

November 22, 1944 was a fatal day for the Marking's Fil-Americans who had just established their headquarters at Barangay Sta. Isabel at a distance of a kilometer from the provincial road. Some days earlier intelligence reports received by Col. San Pedro revealed that the Japanese Authorities had knowledge of the existence of the guerrilla camp based on the information supplied by the Makapilis who were avid Japanese collaborators. There was no showing, however, that Col. San Pedro had prepared for this forthcoming attack.

On the early morning of November 22, 1944, a large force of about four hundred battle-tested Japanese soldiers armed with high-powered guns and trench mortars was on its way to attack the guerrilla camp. As early as 6:00 a.m., everyone in camp was busily making preparations for MOVEOUT due to information brought in by Lt. Col. San Pedro who had just arrived, clad only

in shorts, breathless and apparently shocked when he saw the long line of Japanese soldiers passing by his hut in Bunot Lake, a distance of only two kilometers from the camp. It appeared that the Japanese were not fully aware of the exact location of the camp so that Lt. Col. San Pedro was able to arrive ahead of the enemy. Then a few minutes later a runner from Barangay San Jose (Malamig), also about two kilometers from the camp, arrived to report that many heavily-armed enemy soldiers were passing said place.

Col. Gertrudo San Pedro, instead of ordering an immediate troop move out, gave orders to hastily serve breakfast before leaving. At about 7:00 a.m., the rationing was being done at a very fast pace. All the while that breakfast was being served, the first batch of Japanese advance guards were already nearing Outpost No. 1, manned by Sgt. Dominador de las Alas.

A few minutes earlier, Pvt. Fernando Caro was sent out of the camp with instructions to scout on the location of the enemy troops. He was caught and held prisoner. Sgt. De las Alas saw the approaching Japanese advance guards and immediately fired at them which served as warning shots to the men in the camp. This enabled Pvt. Caro to escape his captors.

Japanese soldiers approaching from the eastern flank suddenly appeared near the kitchen area. A few bursts of woodpecker machine gun fire instantly killed Mess Sgt. Eulogio Fernandez who was busy serving linugaw to the men lined up for breakfast. Everyone on the chow line scrambled for cover under the mess tables and slowly crawled towards the nearest coconut trunks. This writer recalls that only ten men had received their rations when the machine gun firing started.

Unfazed by the first rounds of heavy fire, the defenders returned their fire, shooting at close range, positioned behind coconut trunks. Their bullets accurately hit their marks, rarely missing their human targets. They had to be sure that every bullet spent would count due to inadequate supply of ammunitions. The first wave of assault brought severe losses to the enemy to the delight of the defending guerrillas. Then there followed a lull of almost an hour.

The delight of the defending guerrillas was short-lived when suddenly the second wave of enemy soldiers began to advance. They came from all directions which obviously showed that they were trying to encircle the camp. Amidst machine gun fire and grenade explosions, the beleaguered unit managed to fight back although outnumbered. Japanese snipers trying to climb trees to get vantage positions were gunned down one by one. Col. San Pedro was there, shouting orders on top of his voice boosting the morale of his men while the enemy was steadily closing in every minute. Everyone became tense and apprehensive but the human urge to survive gave them the fighting spirit needed at the moment.

The enemy forces were able to infiltrate and surround the camp completely thereby making escape and retreat practically impossible. Wave after wave the Japanese attempted to advance but the guerrillas stood their ground. Every attempt of the enemy was repulsed by guerrilla automatic and Springfield rifle firing. After three hours of fierce fighting the Japanese decided to retreat about 300 yards and started to use their trench mortars aimed directly at the guerrilla camp. In one instance a mortar shell directly hit a coconut trunk completely severing the upper portion.

Since the Japanese had cordoned the camp, Col San Pedro had no alternative but to decide a "BREAKTHROUGH". He ordered the main body to concentrate firing at the eastern defense so that withdrawal was maneuvered with such smooth efficiency that the unit was able to breakthrough with the least casualty.

During this battle the mettle of the defending guerrillas was tested to the highest degree. Among those who deserve to be cited for exemplary conduct in the field of battle are the following:

Mrs. Conchita Zeta was the Head Nurse and In Charge of the First Aiders. Amidst mortar explosions and machine gun firing, she managed to care for all the wounded, although almost all of them died of gunshot wounds later on. In one instance she was nearly shot at by Elpidio Briñas when she was mistaken for a Japanese sniper while slowly crawling towards one of the wounded guerrillas.

Mrs. Rosita Briñas San Pedro, wife of Col. Gertrudo San Pedro, was fatally hit while attending to a wounded guerrilla. Ironically, she was not recognized as a guerrilla due to her name's omission from the constructed guerrilla roster.

Sgt. Dominador de las Alas was in charge of Outpost No. 1. After firing warning shots to alert the men in camp, he engaged the advancing enemy soldiers before withdrawing into the main defense line. His name was also omitted in the reconstructed guerrilla roster and therefore not recognized.

Pvt. Perfecto Billosa was the only one wounded in action who survived.

The Marking's Fil-American Troops listed a casualty of fifteen men and women killed in action and one wounded. On the other hand, the enemy suffered no less than one hundred men killed or wounded. Reliable civilian eyewitnesses recount that they saw many trucks loaded with dead and wounded enemy soldiers passing the provincial road towards the city proper after that encounter.

In retaliation, the set fire to all the houses they could find in Barangay Sta. Isabel and the neighboring barangays of San Diego, Sto. Angel and San Jose (Malamig). Seventy-eight civilians were also massacred by the Japanese in Barangay San Jose. At Barangay Sta. Isabel and other barangays, the Japanese rounded up more than two hundred civilians. They were brought to the Japanese garrison at the Banahaw Compound in San Pablo City, tortured and then killed. Only a few were able to escape that garrison.

After that battle, the headquarters of Col. San Pedro was transferred to Tayak Hills, Mount San Cristobal where a landing field was temporarily constructed to affect the pick up of Maj. Charles Howe, Maj. Thompkins and Sgt. Britain, AC's, 5th Attack Group, U.S. Air Squadron. These three American pilots were rescued by the Marking's Fil-American Troops at Victoria, Laguna on January 24, 1945 when their plane made an emergency landing thereat. This writer also recalls that it was at this same landing field that Mrs. Virginia Llamas Romulo, wife of Gen. Carlos P. Romulo boarded her plane for Australia to join her husband there.

The Battle of Sta. Isabel started the guerilla offensive against Japanese forces. A month later the Marking's Fil-American Guerilla Troops staged an ambush on three trucks loaded with Japanese soldiers who have returned from their missing of setting fire to the houses at Barangay Sto. Angel and Barangay San Diego. Sixty-eight enemy soldiers were killed on this ambush without any casualty on the part of the guerillas. The liberation of Sta. Cruz followed, then the liberation of Los Baños. The rest is history.

The history of the Battle of Sta. Isabel would not be complete if due credit is not given to the daring and courageous men who have risked their lives in supplying the guerilla movement with arms, ammunitions, food supplies and medicines. Outstanding in this effort was the late Don Arsenio M. Escudero, philanthropist, whose assistance to the Marking's Fil-American Troops during the last war was duly recognized by way of a plaque of appreciation posthumously awarded to him by the VOM San Pablo City Chapter through Gen. Agustin Marking on May 27, 1979, at Villa Escudero, Tiaong, Quezon.

To these unsung heroes, this history of the Battle of Sta. Isabel is gratefully dedicated.

Battle of Sta. Isabel Casualties

November 22, 1944

Killed in Action

Rosita Briñas San Pedro, Gil Balcita, Rosauero Briñas, Natividad Corabo, Anastacio Cornista, Bella Exconde, Eulogio Fernandez, Isabelo Maghirang, Alfonso Paulino, Domingo Recto, Felipe Turno, Felimon Villanueva, Private Fred, Major Tiradas.

Wounded in Action

Perfecto Billoso

Survivors

Col. Gertrudo San Pedro Adelaido Abaña, Emilio Abalos, Dominador de las Alas, Rosauero Alvarez, Benjamin Amatos Cirilo Anlacan, Pedro Anlacan, Felizardo Aquino, Victor Arañez, Alberto Arrogancia, Aido Avanzado, Hermenegildo Baliton, Cesar Bañagale, Sebastian Bantinan, Galileo Barilla, Perfecto Billoso, Guillermo Boncayo, Gaudencio Bondad Justo Brion, Augusto Briñas, Elpidio Briñas, Maximino Bueno, Prospero Bumagat, Silvestre Bumagat, Ambrosio Cabance, Julian Calalo, Nemesio Calayag, Joaquin Capsa, Fernando Caro, Maximo Celerio, Bayani Cicerio, Lorenzo Cornista, Pablo Cornista Jr., Pelagio Cornista, Apolinario Coronado, Tirso de la Cruz, Romeo Dichoso, Andres Felicidadario, Marcelo Fernandez, Elpidio Garcia, Benito Gesmundo, Irineo Gesmundo, Luis Gesmundo, Romulo Gesmundo, Pedro Latoza, Vicente Lopez, Crisanto Lozada, Braulio Luga, Rustico P. Luga, Romeo Magampon, Federico Magnaye, Rufino Mamiit, Deogracias Marasigan, Plating Mariano, Walter Olson, Little Pancho, Ricardo Pasco, Mateo Primo, Pedro Reyes, Dondoy del Rosario, Vicente San Pedro, Rufino Sangkap, Domingo Suelto, Jose Tabora, Jose Talisayon, Francisco Teodoro, Andres Ticzon, Pastor Tiquis, Anselmo Velasco, Capt. Vega, Marcelino Zeta, Conchita Zeta.

Bella Exconde and three other family members were killed or allegedly killed on the same day as the Battle of Sta. Isabel. Can you offer us any answers regarding this matter?

Bella, we were in the same headquarters during the Battle of Sta. Isabel. The same unit, they are first-aiders. The others are also members of guerrilla units but different organizations. The others were missing in action. We were not able to locate them but they were brought by the Japanese to the garrison at Banahaw Compound and even our intelligence was not able to tell us where or how they died. It was very painful; she got married on the day before.

Our Marking's Fil-American Guerrillas, led by San Pedro joined forces with those from Liliw, Nagcarlan and Rizal who were already at Tayak, following the Battle of Sta. Isabel. Tayak was already a camp and was high in elevation. We could see the Japanese and their movements. Our runner was positioned at Rizal and any movements by the Japanese and the runner would come and inform us. We could also descend to many places easily, places like Nagcarlan, Pila, Victoria, Sta. Cruz, Tiaong and Dolores.



Lorenzo Cornista visits the memorial of the Battle of Sta. Isabel

How often do you meet at the Sta. Isabel Battle Memorial?

We do not actually meet at the memorial because the site is not always accessible because of the rainy season and the road is not open. We meet the last Sunday of every month at the Barangay Hall. I will give you also the narrative of the Battle of Sta. Isabel.

I understand from our earlier talks that you and the unit were a part of the Los Baños raid liberating over 2,000 civilian detainees a day before they were to be executed. At the Los Baños liberation what was your unit duties that day?

During the liberation of Los Baños we were the blocking force at Bay. If you remember there is a crossing, the road from Calauan and the road coming from Sta. Cruz and Quezon. We are tasked by the Sixth Army not to spearhead the liberation at Los Baños because they are preparing us to liberate Sta. Cruz. We also liberated the Americans at Lumban, Quezon. Do you know the prisoners of war at Lumban? Lumban, Quezon . . . that's after Sta. Cruz and Pagsanjan. Do you know the road going up where the power lines are? They were at the top of the mountain overlooking Laguna de Bay. Do you know when we first went there the Americans won't like to join us? They were afraid because if they get caught by the Japanese they would be liquidated. If you recall, the same thing happened at Sto. Tomas internees. That's the same thing with the Americans that were at Sto. Tomas, when the Sherman tank entered Sto. Tomas gate . . . the Japanese had already retreated. They won't come out of the building! Well they cannot come because they are a little bit afraid, they cannot believe that it's already the American Forces.

What weapons did Marking's Fil-Americans use while blocking the road at Bay during the raid at Los Banos?

We already have bazookas and 81mm mortars. The only arms we received were from Infanta, Quezon through Major Anderson who was an American who did not surrender. Major Anderson was in charge of distribution. Polillo Island was



Guerrillas at Sta. Isabel Memorial – Names in the future

a safe haven for submarines to come in because the water was deeper than at Infanta. The water was shallow at Infanta and at low tide could not stay submerged and undetected as easily.

Do you remember the first plane as the American Forces pointed their return toward Luzon, Southern Luzon and San Pablo?

The first plane we saw was the DC-3 at Tayak Hill then the P-38, double body and the last is the P-51 Mustang . . . pursuit. The American insignia for pursuit is “P” for fighter is “F”. During the bombing of San Pablo the church was not destroyed. That was destroyed only when we liberated San Pablo because now we are at Los Baños and there are troops, according to our intelligence, there are Japanese concentration in San Pablo. So we shelled it with the 105 howitzer from Los Baños. We also asked for air cover which made a carpet bombing and all the houses were almost leveled, only a few were spared, either destroyed by bomb or fire.

Do you recall when the Tayak Landing Field was constructed?

It was built in February 1945 after the liberation of Los Baños. The rescued pilot and crew returned to their home base in Mindoro they began to drop arms to Tayak Hill, arms, ammo, food and cigarettes, you know, things like that. After that time it was easier to wage war and ammo rationing wasn’t nearly so important. We got ordered by the Sixth Army to Liberate Pila, that’s the town before Sta. Cruz. Then they ordered us to liberate Sta. Cruz because Sta. Cruz is the town that is a check point between Laguna and Rizal. The Sixth Army ordered us to liberate it. At that time we had eighty-seven guerrillas already. During the liberation of St. Cruz all the guerrillas forces joined us but we spearheaded the operation because we had already Garand M-1 rifles, carbines, bazooka . . . but we had more than them . . . we had five 50 caliber machine guns.

The Battle of Sta. Cruz takes was a see-saw. March 7th we would attack the Japanese and they would retreat going to Rizal Province. The next day they counter attacked so we fight again. We push them again; it’s a four day see-saw. That is four days of constant fighting. On the last day, March 11th when we pushed the Japanese and they did not attack

anymore. Now that we have control of Sta. Cruz we are in the Sixth Army again and proceed to Calamba to join the 5th Cavalry Regiment.

Were you ever wounded?

I have a shot here right here (abdomen, right side) during the liberation of Sta. Cruz. But during that time I asked the doctor, Dr. Luna to have it extracted because we have very limited equipment and they cannot do it. He is asking . . . how do you feel, does it impale your movements, I say no. But whenever I pass at the security when I go to the states, I remove my shirt, my shoes, everything and the detector still goes off. I tell them I got wounded during the liberation and I have a shrapnel in my body and I cannot locate where it is now because it's small. They say why did you not tell that one? (As he laughs he tells) The alarm goes off every time.....Ring! Ring!

What was the roll of San Pedro's unit at Tayak Hill?

After the Battle of Sta. Isabel our headquarters was moved to Tayak Hill on Mt. San Cristobal near Rizal, Nagcarlan and Liliw. At that time we called it Sitio Tayak. That is a remote barrio. The nearest road to Tayak is passing through Rizal.

On January 24, 1945, our unit was able to rescue three American airmen whose plane had been damaged in a raid on Manila and went down in Laguna de Bay near Victoria, Laguna. The men were: Major Charles Howe, Major Thompkins and Sgt. Britain of the 5th Attack Group, U.S. Army. American Forces had not yet landed on Luzon so the nearest airstrip was in Mindoro. It was requested that we build an airstrip so a rescue plane could pick up the downed airmen and return them to friendly forces. We constructed a landing field at Tayak Hill. The landing field is on a plateau wherein the length of the runway is 300 meters, but the approach we are already up high enough on high ground when you take off, that's why the problem of a long runway is not necessary because after going 300 meters you are already airborne because of the plateau. Within a couple weeks we completed construction of the taxi strip and airfield near our headquarters on Tayak Hill. Intelligence informed authorities that the landing strip had been completed and soon an L-4 Piper observation plane flew in and then flew the men to safety in Mindoro. At the suggestion of Major Howe, the U.S. Armed Forces started dropping war material and food supplies on February 22, 1945.

At Tayak we slept on the ground, there were no barracks. We lay coconut leaves down and we laid on them. This kept the ants off of us. After the first supply drop our radio operator requested insect repellent be dropped the second day. Rolando Guia, nephew of Lorenzo Cornista knew most about Tayak among us but he died in 2013.

At what point during the war did you begin to receive arms and ammo regularly?

We received it only after the Tayak Landing wherein guns and ammo were dropped at Tayak Hill. I was using a 45 with only 7 rounds of ammo. Do you know why? Because we had two encounters already. One was with fellow guerrillas, when there was, you know, a supremacy battle between the guerrilla units, they want to control the area and we do not want to be under them. During the battle between two guerrillas much of our ammo was consumed there. Our federal believers want to control us and we are fully armed, 37 fully armed with rifles and pistol side arms, 100 rounds of ammunition of the caliber 30 Springfield, 30 Caliber Springfield! During the ensuing battle would consume so much and our ammunition is exhausted. After that we have the Battle of Sta. Isabel. Again our ammunition was depleted.

Some of the arms were dropped by C-47 or DC-3. Did you witness these drops?

That is the planes that dropped arms at Tayak. We called that a shape of like a fish . . . tambakol. That is the airplanes I have to test flight during liberation. That was our transportation after liberation. Japanese could see easily that food, arms, ammunition and perhaps reinforcements were being dropped at Tayak. Once Americans started dropping supplies from aircraft at Tayak's landing field, the Japanese were not keen on going near the mountain. Three DC3s came to Tayak circling and dropping supplies by parachute for one hour each. When one aircraft was unloaded another followed and it circled and dropped supplies. Supplies usually came by three DC3s. The first supplies to drop were chocolate bars, cigarettes. We are very happy. The next day our radio operator requested some insect killer to get rid of some of the bugs on Tayak.

On October 24, 1944, American warplanes bombed the Japanese warplanes at the airstrip of Lubang at Lubong Island just northwest of the main island of Mindoro. The explosion of bombs was heard at Barrio Maliig three kilometers away from the airstrip. Warplanes also bombed the Japanese battleship which passed by the sea near Barrio Vigo. The Lubang Aerodrome, located on Lubang Island northwest of Mindoro was built by Japanese

Imperial Army during Occupation. Japanese who were assigned at Lubang were not cruel to inhabitants and obliged local men to farm nearby so soldiers could have food. The U.S. setup at Lubang and the 5th Attack Group began bombing runs on Manila using A-20 Havoc aircraft. The DC3s that supplied Tayak flew from Lubang.

Where did the kempetai (military police) and Japanese Army soldiers stay during the occupation?

The kempetai made their quarters in the Escudero Building which is the presently the JolliBee Plaza. The Japanese Army quarters were located at the San Pablo City Elementary on Mabini Street. Even at the Escudero Building the kempetai could see American planes making supply and ammunition drops at Tayak Hill on Mt. San Cristobal. Tayak was only 7 kilometers from Rizal so it was in range of the 105 howitzer.

Are there any remains at Tayak today?

We left a marker there. We were not so historically minded so information on the cement marker was minimal. We did not include the name of the unit, a date or list the commanding officers. It was very simple. We fight the Japanese so that's enough.

Were you ever at a location where the submarines would go near shore and the arms would be unloaded by guerrillas on bancas?

That is in Infanta, the submarines landed there three times for the Anderson Guerrillas. Col. Anderson was a U.S. Army officer that did not surrender. We went there to receive arms. But we did not see the submarines.

Were you in the San Pablo area when San Pablo was burned?

We were in Tayak and we were observing from there since it was a higher elevation. I do not recall seeing the other towns being burned.

At the time of the fire San Pablēños had been ordered out of town by the Japanese telling that Butokan and Bulaho were safe areas and that anyone found in town were considered guerrillas. Do you recall this time period?

The people left the city because they were quietly informed by kempetai Captain here . . . Capt. Nakada; he's more friendly with the Filipinos, and he told people you go to the mountains, we will burn the whole city and massacre people. If you recall there are 700 Chinese and Filipinos that were murdered by the Japanese. They were told to go to the seminary for a gathering. During that time most of the people that were massacred there were concentrated or herded at the church and the masked Makapili (Filipino informers) were pointing them out. If he touch you, you are a suspect and will be liquidated.

Mt. Kalisungan was the last stronghold of the Japanese to be defeated prior to the liberation of San Pablo. My research of the local mountains, military maps and chats with Filipino residents does not reveal which volcanic peak is Kalisungan. Do you have that knowledge?

Kalisungan is only here and also has the name today of Imok Hill and Telefast! Very near, only seven kilometers away from here! That is where the anti aircraft guns of the Japanese was in place. That is San Mateo. At the west side it is known as Paliparan, the Japanese made that an emergency landing field. There was a tank of battalion there. Usually it was bombarded by the U.S. Air Force but while we were in Los Baños we shelled that area.

Do you recall how San Pablo was liberated?

When Americans had control of Manila we were advised to join forces with them. We joined the Sixth Army, 5th Cavalry at Calamba and at that time Capt. Langham (Longhorn?) asked who knew the town of San Pablo. I said I do, that's my home. I was with the lead tank in a column of vehicles including tanks, trucks and jeeps. We moved along the National Highway toward San Pablo from Alaminos April 3, 1945, zigzagging our vehicles **one side of the road to the other**. I rode on the tank. We passed through San Crispin then from there we proceeded up to the junction north of San Pablo City. After liberating San Pablo we stayed there only for two days. We drove to the intersection of Rizal Ave and the road to Calauan to meet another group arriving from Alaminos. There we were met with two Japanese wanting no fight. They surrendered at the intersection then we moved on to Calauan, Dayap, Victoria, Pila, Sta. Cruz, Luisiana to Lucena . We rested in Lucena two days before liberating Quezon Province to Bicol liberating Mt Isarog east of Naga in Camarines Sur Bicol. We stayed there for 15 days. After we reached the top and we meet with the 131st Infantry coming from Legaspi. There was a time in Mauban, Quezon when we encountered with the Japs there. We are in the same tunnel an older tunnel and the Japanese are only a distance of 50 meters a part. We are lucky that none of

our men were killed. We were able to kill around fifteen. That is Japanese marines. We were very familiar with the terrain and had an advantage.

Did you ever face the pointing of a makapili (traders who told Japanese who were guerrillas)?

Yes, that's why I was wanted by the Japanese because of the makapili. I was able to jump out the back door of the house. Two of my brothers were killed at Bataan so I was a guerrilla suspect because of this. The Japanese protected the makapili. July 10, 1945, Company A, 2nd Btn., 2nd Division led by Captain Brigido Cabrera and 1st Lt. Pedro Mangubat, apprehended 193 Makapilis, two were foremost in San Pablo City. They confiscated their pistols, rifles, ammunitions, flags, packs and medical supplies. All sketches, maps and other paraphernalia were turned over to the CIC Det., U.S. Army.

Once the war was over how soon did Marking's Fil-Americans cease to operate?

On August 15, 1945, as per letter of Headquarters XIV Corps, the 1st Battalion, 2nd Division Fil-Americans was relieved from the 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division and attached to the 38th Infantry Division. September 2, 1945 Col. San Pedro was relieved for the assignment at Calauan since the U.S. Army began establishing surrender points after the signing of the Terms of Unconditional Surrender to Allied Powers. On October 5 the 2nd Laguna Division was relieved from the 38th Infantry Division. We received a proclamation from the president stopping all hostilities and guerrillas were to be disbanded at Camp Morti in Maguindanao.

During the days after America arrived new guerrillas joined hoping to get benefits the regulars would receive. These guerrillas we called them Liberation Guerrillas. Once we were to go to Camp Morti many more jumped in to get undeserved benefits. When recognition was presented there was a priority to relatives and friends who had not participated like we did since 1943.



Men and women of San Pedro's Markings Fil-AM Guerrillas memorial camping at Tayak. Courtesy Lorenzo Cornista

How did you get rice?

We traveled at night by foot to Pila to harvest palay so we would not be detected by the Japanese. We would cut the palay, often on a moonlight night and leave it on the ground. When morning came civilians would take it to the rice mill in Pila. Guerrillas in Quezon Province were not afforded many flat areas like San Pablo, Bay and Pila to have rice paddies like from which to plant and harvest palay. We had to share with other Guerrillas so everyone had food. There were rice mills in Calauan had two rice mills, San Pablo one, Lumban two and Sta. Cruz. Japanese did not burn most of the rice mills or confiscate rice because they also needed rice too. Also by not confiscating the rice, Japanese propaganda disguised this gesture as a gift to citizens.

Yamashita

Yamashita, tabbed as the “Tiger of Malaya,” arrived in the Philippines October 5, 1944 and there was little he could do about MacArthur’s invasion of Leyte. During his tenure his forces engaged in an orgy of rape, torture and murder of the civilian population. It is estimated that during this period 8,000 civilians were killed and at least 500 women were raped. Japan surrendered August 15, 1945 and immediately Yamashita became a prisoner of war.

Once the war had ended, details of the last hideous days in the Philippines began to see the light of day. Details of slaughter and rape, of beheadings and burnings alive, of torture and wanton destruction, of the murders of the helpless-- women and babies and priests and American prisoners of war.

To his surprise and horror Yamashita was served with a generic charge of war crimes September 26, 1945. The charge read:

Between October 9 1944 and September 2 1945, in the Philippine Islands, while commander of armed forces of Japan at war with the United States of America and its allies, he unlawfully disregarded and failed to discharge his duty as commander to control the operations of the members of his command, permitting them to commit brutal atrocities and other high crimes against the people of the United States and of its allies and dependencies, particularly the Philippines; and thereby violated the law of war.

During his trial the defendant took the stand, and with dignity and eloquence, summarized his position:

I believe that I did the best possible job I could have done. However, due to the above circumstances, my plans and my strength were not sufficient to the situation, and if these things happened, they were absolutely unavoidable. I absolutely did not order nor did I receive the order to do this [commit atrocities] from any superior authority, nor did I ever permit such a thing and I will swear to heaven and earth concerning these points. That is all I have to say.

Yamashita was found guilty sentenced to die by hanging. In short time General MacArthur announced that he had carried out the sentence of the Commission on February 23, 1946, at Los Baños Prison Camp, 30 miles south of Manila. Tomoyuki Yamashita paid with his life for the crimes of his troops. At the site of the execution in Los Baños, Lagunais now a small, moss-covered shrine near the Boy Scout Jamboree camp site.

Did you ever see General Tomoyuki Yamashita (1885 – 1946)?

No. Where he was hanged we were able to see. Later when we proceeded to Calamba that was our assignment to find where Yamashita was hung. I remember it was between two mango trees. We met the 11th Airborne at Los Baños.

Books recommended for reading:

FOR LOVE OF FREEDOM - Juan Hernandez

MARKING, originally titled THE CRUCIBLE by Colonel Yay

BATTLE OF IPO DAM, 50th Anniversary

WORLD WAR II IN THE PHILIPPINES, Defense, Defeat and Defiance by Generoso P. Salazar, Fernando R. Reyes and Leonardo Q. Nuval.

Souvenir Program of the Battle of Sta. Isabel, San Pablo City Chapter; Dedication of the Memorial Marker.