

W VETERANS' UPDATES

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PNoy Joins Veterans in Mt. Samat, Lauds PVAO

"The Filipino nation will remain eternally indebted to our veterans," His Excellency, Pres. Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III pronounced during the 2011 Araw ng Kagitingan in Dambana ng Kagitingan in Mt. Samat, Pilar, Bataan.

In his speech, the President boldly stated that the issue on ghost pensioners is already history given the Philippine Veterans Affairs Office' large-scale campaign to clean up its roster of pensioners. He cited also that PVAO's shift to the Direct Remittance Pension Servicing System enhanced the delivery of pension to the veterans while the Revalidation Program and issuance of pensioners' ID resulted in the termination of pensions of recipients whose death remained unreported. Pres. Aquino stated that this generated about P4 Billion savings that was used to pay outstanding debts to our veterans.

Pres. Aquino also cited that PVAO has increased the number of accredited hospitals all over the country to facilitate better access even to those in the provinces. The President likewise announced the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the DND-PVAO and PhilHealth that guarantees health services and insurance to World War II veterans and their beneficiaries.

The President also lauded the Veterans Memorial Medical Center (VMMC) for improving its facilities and operations by adding more medical equipment and renovating its operating room & intensive care unit in order to better address the healthcare need of our veterans and their dependents.

Pres. Aquino also said his administration is strictly looking into the implementation of the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation Act signed by US President Barack Obama in 2009.

PNoy assured the people of his government's sincerity and loyalty by saying, "**You are still my boss**". The President also urged the people to remain in solidarity with one another and live by the examples set by our veterans to boost collective effort in battling the war against corruption and poverty.

His audience, age-embattled World War II survivors and legal dependents who trooped the Dambana ng Kagitingan conveyed confidence in PNoy's leadership. The veterans expressed their earnest hope that this administration will prioritize funding veterans benefits, especially the Total Administrative Disability Pension benefit which remain largely unpaid.

The celebration of Araw ng Kagitingan every 9th of April annually has already been a tradition in our country since the issuance of Executive Order No. 23 in 1987 by Pres. Aquino's mother, the late former Pres. Corazon "Cory" C. Aquino. Likewise, the April 5 to 11 has been instituted as Philippine Veterans Week (PVW) by virtue of Presidential Proclamation No. 466 on September 14, 1989. Both decrees by Pres. Cory aim "to promote, preserve and memorialize the principles, ideals and deeds of our country's revolutionary and war veterans."

This year's 2011 Observance of the Philippine Veterans Week and Araw ng Kagitingan also sought to enhance the awareness of the youth and appreciation for the veterans. The PVW Multi-agency Task Force organized youth-oriented events not only to maximize their participation but most importantly, to inspire and move them to become the future veterans—future leaders and heroes of our homeland. ■



His Excellency, Pres. Benigno Aquino III, assisted by PVAO Administrator Carolina awarding the students who win in the PVW painting & photo-essay contest during the 2011 Araw ng Kagitingan rites in Mt. Samat, Pilar, Bataan.

IN FOCUS: This article appeared in the column "EMPOWERING PEOPLE" of Former Pres. FIDEL V. RAMOS in the May 13-23, 2011 issue of BizNewsAsia Magazine. We are sharing this article to the veterans' community and our stakeholders with the permission of the author. Written by FVR himself, a seasoned veteran & a champion crusader of veterans' cause, this can be considered as a sweet reward for us whose duty is to serve our heroes and advance their total welfare.

PHILIPPINE VETERANS WEEK: The Survivors, the Young & The Leaders

"It won't be long before they just become a memory... forgotten heroism from a long-gone era... For this reason, we have taken on this mission to advocate the veterans' cause: medical healthcare for the old; and education for their young." - Filipino War Veterans Foundation

Celebration of Veterans Week was highlighted by fitting ceremonies at the "Dambana Ng Kagitingan" on Mt. Samat in Pilar, Bataan last April 9. In addition to the various veterans' organizations, the principals were there: President Benigno Aquino III, US Ambassador Harry Thomas and Japan Ambassador Makoto Katsura, plus the Multi-Agency Task Force (Organizing Committee) headed by Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and Veterans Administrator and Undersecretary Ernesto Carolina. Sixty-nine years ago, almost a month after Gen. Douglas MacArthur left the island fortress of Corregidor for Australia, some 78,000 intrepid Bataan defenders under the US Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) surrendered to superior Japanese forces after a relentless 100-day siege. More than 2,000 soldiers escaped to Corregidor and adjoining Central Luzon provinces.

Those who were left behind were forced into the infamous Death March, which further decimated the ranks of the vanquished (but unbowed). In commemorating Araw Ng Kagitingan, the Battle of Bataan is highlighted as a national patriotic watershed, of equal historical significance as the revolutionary spirit ignited by the first Cry of the Katipunan at Pugad Lawin in August 1886 and the People Power uprising at EDSA in February 1986.

Filipinos pay tribute to the valiant patriots who gave their lives during World War II as well as to all other soldiers who fought in the name of freedom in other battlefronts.

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"SERBISYO SA BETERANO, SERBISYO SA BAYAN."

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How many WWII veterans were able to make it yesterday to the Dambana on their yearly pilgrimage is unknown. Now averaging 87 years of age and suffering from the usual afflictions of the infirm/elderly, they are already a vanishing breed. As soldiers or guerrillas in their youth, they were inflicted with war wounds, debilitated by malaria and malnutrition, and traumatized by battle fatigue.

Days Of Valor

Their heroic defense of freedom and democracy in Bataan-Corregidor and in hundreds of other battlefields throughout our archipelago was extolled by Captain Salvador Lopez, later UP president and secretary of foreign affairs, in this stirring accolade: "Bataan has fallen. We have done all that human endurance could bear. What sustained us was a force more than merely physical. It was the force of an unconquerable faith, It is the thought of native land! All the world will testify, Men fighting with an unshakable faith, Are made of something more than flesh Bataan has fallen, But the spirit that made it stand -- A beacon 'to all the world -- cannot fall. Our defeat is our victory!"

The guerrilla resistance movement in his master opus "Victory in Northern Luzon," Dr. Cesar Pobre, former dean, PMA Corps of Professors, and long-time President of the Philippine Historical Association, records: "There is no doubt that the guerrillas and other Filipinos made the task of the US Army infinitely less difficult. That role was highlighted by the liberation of Northern Luzon by the guerrilla organization commanded by Col. Russell Volckmann-the US Army in the Philippines-North Luzon (USAFIP-NL). Theirs was the victory that redeemed Bataan." The Northern Luzon freedom fighters did not only make the Americans' job a lot easier and less costly in men and materiel. Their gallant struggles, mainly at Bessang Pass, speeded up the liberation of the Philippines by June 1945 and the ultimate defeat of Japan two months later. Also, together with other underground operations, the countrywide resistance movement pinned down large numbers of the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces, which, otherwise, could have been sent to higher priority destinations in the Asia Pacific.

How well the guerrillas played their self-imposed role may be better appreciated if one realized how severely handicapped they were in their death-defying operations in lonely places. To be sure, some of their leaders were seasoned, battle-tested officers or experienced senior civilian officials. But the rank-and-file were mainly the young trainees of the Philippine Commonwealth Army, augmented by raw recruits drawn from civilian volunteers. Most of these green troops had little or no formal military training at all. They were not equipped with enough arms, ammunition and rations, much less artillery and air support especially in the later stages of the fighting in Bataan-Corregidor. During actual combat there were not enough medics and engineers reinforcing them, nor were there reserves of warm bodies to take over the frontlines while they grabbed- most needful moments of respite. Indeed, it was their duty to endure fighting ceaselessly, day in and day out, against the hardened Japanese hordes that had fought in China and Manchuria.

Memorial events

This year's Veterans Week was preceded by traditional events aimed at increasing public awareness of the spirit of sacrifice on the part of our soldiers of yesteryears and the immeasurable impact their sacrifice made in our process of nation-building, notably:

- Symposium on the images of valor and victory, March 14, Camp Aguinaldo, led by Deputy Secretary Manuel L. Quezon III.
- *Alay Sikad Sa Kagitingan*, March 27, Capas National Shrine, managed by Elizabeth Sojo (sic).
- *Handog Sa Beterano*, March 31, Camp Aguinaldo, hosted by Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin.
- Veterans Cup Golf Tournament, April 2, Veterans Memorial Medical Center Golf Course organized by FILVETS.
- Wreath-laying, April 5, Libingan ng mga Bayani.
- Review in honor of the veterans, April 5, Hunters ROTC Guerrilla Field, Fort Bonifacio.
- Inauguration of the "Wall of Valor," April 6, AFP Museum! Historical Library, for "Medal of Valor" awardees.
- Tribute to all Filipino heroes, April 7, Filipino Heroes Memorial, Corregidor Island, led by Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor National Commander Rafael Evangelista.
- *Paggunita Sa Capas*, April 10, Capas National Shrine, led by Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin.

Liberty Exacts A High Price

For our veterans, the world has turned over many times since they were young warriors in the service of God, country and people. Those who have survived have earned their honorable retirement and justifiably should enjoy their remaining golden years in the loving embrace of their extended families and the caring attention of the government. But old soldiers cannot just fade away. For there are many battles Filipinos still must fight - against injustice, against bad governance, against poverty and corruption. Our veterans must still play the lead role as model patriotic citizens whose lives are devoted to serve the Philippines and the Filipino people. For the young Filipinos of today, it is essential-nay, a patriotic duty- to realize that liberty exacts a high price from those who value it. To honor our heroic dead veterans, we who are still living must try and live daily for some useful purpose in our remaining years.

A nation exemplifies itself not only by the citizens it produces, but also by those it honors and those it remembers. **"Call it (Bataan) therefore a success story, better yet, a legacy that forms part of our national heritage. It is a precious lesson from which we Filipinos can learn to develop a greater sense of belonging and stronger love of country,"** writes PVAO Administrator Carolina in his foreword to the **2011 Veterans brochure**.

Those rituals Filipinos observed at Bataan's Shrine of Valor will be meaningful only if we resolve to dedicate the rest of our days to the ideals for which those who lie in our military cemeteries and in unknown graves elsewhere gave their lives in the defense of freedom. Next year, the 70th year of the defeat at Bataan and Corregidor, there will be fewer numbers of that gallant generation of defenders, and their impacts will recede even more quickly into the fog of memory.

Benediction For The Surviving

To uplift the condition of our fading veterans, a joint legislative- executive benediction is absolutely necessary. Administrator Carolina puts it frankly in stark terms (and deserves a medal for saying so). Quoted by the *Philippine Star* (April 6), he appealed: **"The least we can do is, if we cannot make them live comfortably, at least we should not allow them to live in misery!"**

Their P5,000 monthly old-age pension and the P10,000 burial assistance to their families (RA 7696, s-1994) are not enough to meet current living standards." The WWII veterans are dying on the average of nine to 10 every day, or 3,285 to 3,650 each year. Father Time and further inaction of Malacañang-Congress may cause them all to be wiped out faster than the Battle of Bataan and the Capas POW Camp did. ■



FVR shares his insights with the PVAO Administrator during a Veterans Golf Cup, an fund-raising event to support the medical outreach of the Fil-Vets Foundation Inc.