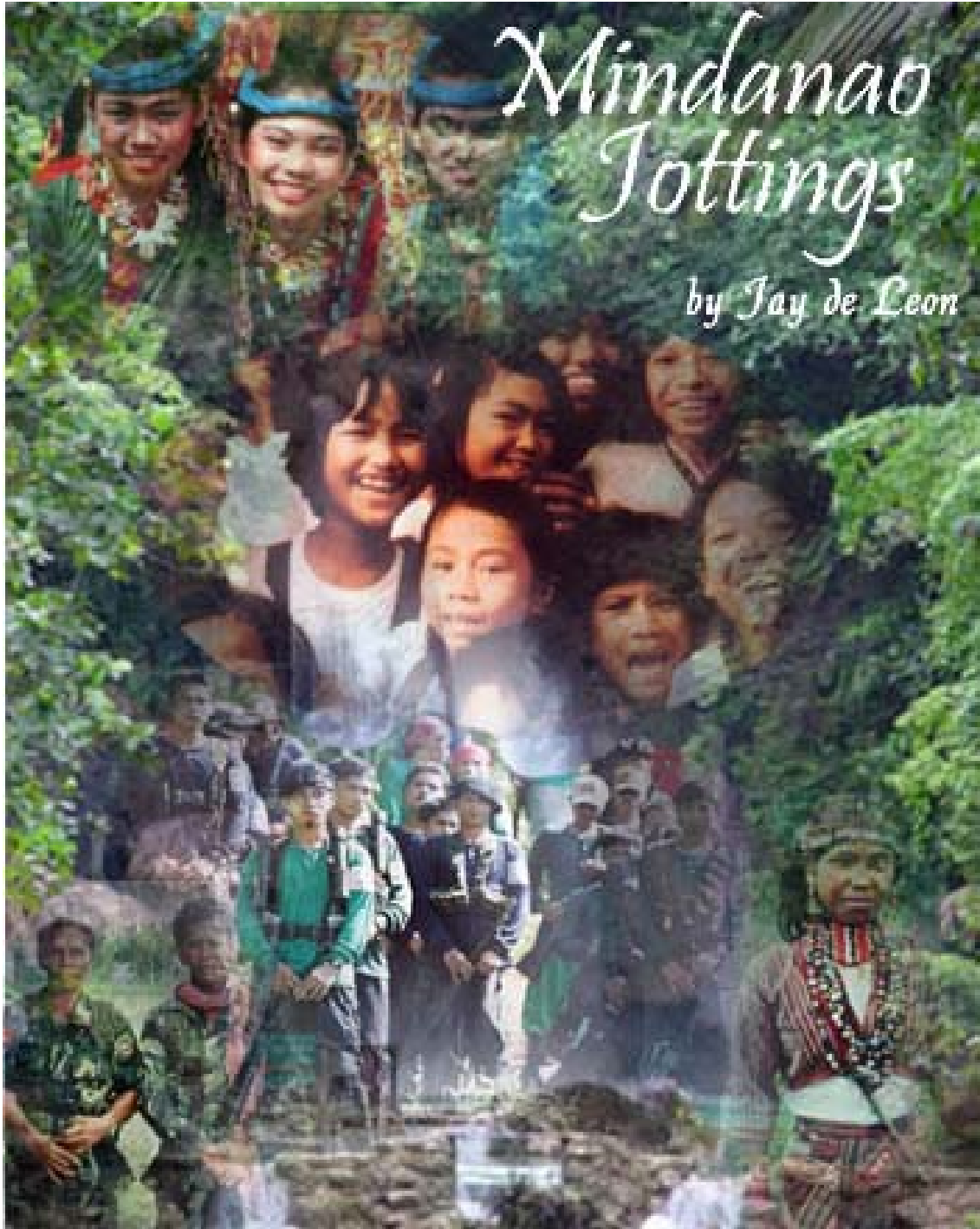


# Mindanao Jottings

by Jay de Leon



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## Prologue

I grew up most of my young life as a city boy in metro Manila, Philippines with many vacation trips to my dad's hometown in Binmaley, Pangasinan and to another grandfather's house in Jungle Town, Baguio City, Mountain Province. In 1971, I was a young executive at American pharmaceutical giant *MeadJohnson, Phil.*, in the financial district of Makati, in metro Manila.

All of these locations are in the island of Luzon.

When I got the chance to work in Cotabato, in Mindanao, I jumped at it. I went from shirt and tie and executive board room meetings to denims and t-shirt and rebel-infested areas in Cotabato.

Cotabato was right in the middle of the Christian and Moslem (also spelled as Muslim in the Philippines) conflict in Mindanao. There were arguably more dangerous areas in Mindanao like Lanao and Zamboanga, but Cotabato was dangerous enough, as you will read in the book.

I was there a year before President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law, and a year afterwards.

Right from the start, I kept a diary of events in Cotabato and Davao. I wrote down names, events, thoughts and sundry details in a spiral steno notebook that somehow has survived all my moves and relocation, including immigrating to the United States. I titled the notebook then "Mindanao Jottings" and I have decided to keep that title for this book.

All of the stories, characters, places, and events in the book are factual. I have tried to recount the details as accurately as an old man's memory will let him. Some of the names of the characters are fictitious, to protect both the innocent and the guilty. God knows there were a few guilty ones in Cotabato, including me.

This book is not an epic about the Muslim-Christian hostilities in the south of the Philippines, set against the backdrop of exciting road construction in the wilds of Cotabato. It is neither a glorification nor an expose' of the violence and graft and corruption during that time. It is not an indictment of

people caught up in the bloodlust and turmoil there. I just wanted to memorialize my own personal experiences of the humanity and spirit of those times in Cotabato.

I was fortunate to experience many things some people only read about. I dedicate this book to all my friends, lovers and employees in Cotabato and Davao who helped me survive, and actually even enjoy, my time in Mindanao.

I encourage you to familiarize yourself with this sad chapter in Philippine history, the Christian versus Muslim conflict in Mindanao. There are many good historical books and academic treatises about it. And the even sadder part of all this is that the same situation, problems and misery still exist today in that part of the country.

There are no pictures to go with the book. The few pictures I had during this period did get lost in my many moves and relocations. The only thing that survives now is my notebook and now this compendium of short stories called "Mindanao Jottings."

One day I hope to take a sentimental journey to Cotabato and finally take that ride on that fully cemented highway to Davao I never got to take. You might have to wait a while for that film documentary.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy reading my stories as much I enjoyed putting them on paper, occasionally reminiscing as old men are wont to do.

## Chapter 1 AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The construction project we were working on was one of the many infrastructure projects of then President Ferdinand Marcos. This particular project cemented the national highway from Cotabato City in South Cotabato Province to Davao City in Davao Province.

Such projects were usually subject to bidding, and the general contractor who won this bid was *Philrock*, a huge construction company based in Manila, with projects nationwide.

My company was a sub-contractor to the project. My father was a major stockholder of the company. Our contract was with *Philrock*. We would do most of the earth-moving, hence the fleet of dump trucks, and trucking the cement from Davao to the construction site, hence the stake trucks. All our trucks were brand new, purchased from *Hino* of Japan.

At the height of the road construction, the upper management at the site was an international crew.

The head of the *Philrock* contingent was an American named Bowie. He was probably in his fifties, with short sandy hair and a craggy, lined face. Other than initial negotiations on our contract, I had little operational contact with him when construction started. At night, he retreated into a bottle, and seemed to eschew any social contact with any human soul.

There was a consulting company hired by the Philippine government to oversee *Philrock*'s quality control. They exerted strong technical supervision over the construction. They gave the green light when compaction was strong enough to lay gravel on, when to pour cement, and whether the cement passed inspection or not.

This crew was headed by a Brit, and all his technical engineers were Italian. In the construction site, they all drove white Toyota pick-up trucks. Most of the time, they worked as a two-man crew.

The Italian engineers arrived at the site initially without their families. After a hard day's work, they all joined us carousing at night. One of them had an eye for the ladies, and his standard toast became our hedonistic battle cry, "Life is short. We must enjoy." After a couple of months, their families joined them, and they all withdrew into a life of domesticity.

Most of these foreigners, as well as the top managers at *Philrock* were career road construction people. They traveled from construction to construction, oftentimes from one continent to another. For example, the British chief told me his last project was in Aden.

Well into the project, a couple of Japanese engineers from *Hino* arrived at the site. They came at their expense to monitor the performance of their trucks that we bought. They spoke the most basic English and were extremely reserved and polite. There was no carousing or partying for them.

Most of the *Philrock* managers were also career construction workers, and would regale me with stories of their construction wanderlust. My favorite story was when they told me wistfully of the years they spent in construction in Okinawa.

This was after the war, Okinawa was poor and ravaged, and everything was cheap in Okinawa. They said that they lived in huge rented houses, and had about four or five house maids or domestic help. There would be the usual division of labor for the maids, such as cooking, cleaning the house, doing the marketing, etc. All of them, however, were expected to have sex with the master of the house or their employer, or employers.

I made friends with many of these managers and supervisors, both foreigners and Filipinos alike. They were a hard working lot. Many times we worked side by side at the construction site. When we could, we would have meals and seek diversion together. Just like me, they were transplanted from their home towns and sometimes felt homesick and lonely. We felt a camaraderie that can only exist from experiencing hardship, danger, joy and pain together.

## **Chapter 2**

### **EYEWITNESS TO A RUB-OUT**

The year was 1971, and the place was Cotabato City, Cotabato Province in Mindanao, Philippines. These were heady and exciting times for me. I was barely twenty-four years old, and I was Chief Operating Officer for a road construction company based in Cotabato City.

Cotabato Province was in the heart of Mindanao, with still a predominantly Moslem population. But steady encroachment by Christian settlers mostly from the Visayas had reached a point that the balance of power was shifting from Moslem to Christian. Cotabato was an extremely dangerous place, full of armed factions on either side of both the political, ethnic and religious divide.

The company office was in a suite at the Hotel Imperial II, at that time the newest and most modern hotel in the city. I had a chief accountant and two office clerks working in the office, together with a personal driver and security officer. I also lived in the hotel and my security officer slept in the office while I was in town, providing me and the office round the clock protection.

One of the guests at the hotel was another businessman who also had an office and a room at the hotel. His name was Architect Jovellano, who was working on a project in the town of Tacurong, probably a couple of hours away from the city. I believe he was working on the new town market. He employed a lone draftsman who worked in his office in the hotel.

Architect Jovellano was an interesting character. He was not physically imposing, but he had a colorful background. He was actually a well-to-do resident of the city. A few years ago, one of the powerful Moslem *datus* took a liking to one of his teen-aged daughters and kidnapped her, intending to marry her, by all accounts forcibly against her will.

Jovellano did not take this laying down, marshaled enough military and private muscle of his own and retook his daughter. Fearful of retaliation and to prevent another kidnapping, Jovellano moved his family to nearby Davao City, about a couple of hours drive away.

Now fast forward to several years after the incident, and Jovellano was back in Cotabato City working. I would say that we were probably in that hotel about the same time for about three months. During that period, his daughters came for a visit from Davao and I met them and exchanged a few words of pleasantries with them. The daughters were very good-looking, and I can understand why the kidnapping took place. I should probably also mention that Jovellano's brother Willy, who worked as a radio announcer at one of the city's radio stations, became one of my business friends.

On that particular day, it was mid-morning and I happened to be at the lobby of the hotel, chatting with a business friend. Jovellano came out of the elevator, hurrying to conduct business for the day.

He was dressed casually but smartly in a batik shirt, which looks like a colorful Hawaiian shirt but with ethnic designs peculiar to Mindanao. He had a sidearm, a Magnum .38 tucked in his waist, and he was carrying an automatic rifle to his car. Some of the hotel clerks greeted him by name, I said hi to him as he breezed by, and he waved and yelled a general greeting to everybody.

The hotel had double glass doors, and standing at the lobby, you can actually see out through the glass doors into the street outside the hotel. As usual, a smartly uniformed doorman was posted at the door. He actually opened the door for anybody coming in or coming out of the hotel, and warmly greeted known patrons of either the hotel or the hotel restaurant. The doorman opened the door for Jovellano, greeting him good morning.

Jovellano was parked almost right in front of the hotel, just a little bit to the right as you exit the hotel. I was probably the closest to the glass door other than the doorman.

Jovellano climbed into his vehicle, which was a *Fiesta*, a Philippine made Ford vehicle. The *Fiesta* had no doors that closed, but instead was open on both the driver and passenger side. Jovellano braced the rifle along the left side of the car, started the car and proceeded to shift to reverse gear.

At that moment, the first shot rang out. The doorman prudently moved from the glass doors to a few steps inside the lobby. I impulsively ran towards the

glass doors at the first shot. As I was rushing towards the glass doors, I could see the people on the other side of the street, frozen in their tracks.

By the time I got to the glass doors, it was all over. A gunman had stepped out of the sidewalk and had shot Jovellano four times point blank with a .45. Jovellano was slumped backwards against the driver's seat. There was a neat round red hole around his temple and his neck. There was a mass of blood around his mouth and jaw, and his chest. The front of the batik shirt now ran dark red with blood. The gunman must have shot rapid fire down the left side of the body—temple, jaw, neck, chest.

There must have been at least a couple of dozen eyewitnesses to the shooting, including several sales ladies in a store right next to the hotel. Predictably, only a handful offered any statements, and I was told that if by any chance it came to a trial, these witnesses would conveniently develop amnesia.

Willy and I would chat about the murder sporadically. At one point, I asked Willy point blank if it could have been the Moslem kidnapper, who was known to Willy. Willy said he did not think so, and if he ever found out that it was indeed he, Willy would simply just retaliate in kind. There were many conjectures offered as motive. It could have been the present project. It could have been a past project. It could have been a business association that had soured. In short, it could have been anything.

In the end, it became just another of Cotabato City's unsolved murders, unless they somehow solved it since I left for the United States. For me, it was just another sober reminder that, like Dorothy, I was no longer in Kansas. During my stay in Cotabato City, I received about a couple of dozen death threats directed either towards me personally or the company, and somebody pulled a gun on me several times.

Sometime that same day, I ran into Jovellano's draftsman on his way out of the hotel. He had his light jacket on, and he had cleaned out his drafting tools from the office. He gave me a wry smile, and we wordlessly waved at each other.

### Chapter 3

## INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS 101, COTABATO STYLE

I had my hands full with the operational and administrative functions of the company—payroll, billing, procurement, repairs and maintenance of the vehicles, security and so on.

But one of my critical job functions was probably what I called public relations with regulatory agencies, or to be more succinct about it, graft and corruption. I knew I would have to meet with each one of the government agencies as well as local government officials and make the necessary arrangements with them to be able to conduct business with the minimum hassle from these agencies.

I had a rough introduction to this public relations business, though.

The Philippine highways were patrolled by the *Metrocom*, which was the military arm in charge of the national roads, the equivalent of the CHP or the California Highway Patrol in California, and similar agencies in other states.

Arriving in Cotabato, I found out that two uniformed *Metrocom* officers on motorcycles patrolled the whole breadth and depth of the province. When I inquired about them, my employees informed me that these two officers made their royal appearances in the construction site probably about once a month.

I left word with employees at the camp and with the chief of police of Baguer, the base camp, to contact me as soon as the *Metrocom* officers showed up at the construction area.

One morning, my phone rang much earlier than my alarm clock. My bodyguard had answered the office phone, and it was the base camp requesting my presence as soon as possible. No reason was given, but I knew it had to be major emergency for them to drag me out of the city into the construction site.

After a quick shower and breakfast, my driver, bodyguard and myself made it to the site in record time. As we approached the road construction site itself, I saw all our dump trucks, idle and neatly lined up at the side of the

road. There, at the head of the column of trucks, were two *Metrocom* officers with their high boots and khaki uniforms.

After the proper introductions, we proceeded to the camp office. The two officers formally handed me violation tickets for each of the trucks, numbering close to about thirty at that time, not yet at full strength. Since the trucks were brand new, there were only a few minor infractions, like a busted taillight.

But all the trucks had no license plates, or tags. I explained to the officers that the company was currently negotiating with the *Land Transportation Commission (LTC)* in Manila, the government agency in charge of issuing such licenses, so that the trucks would be subject to a construction license, instead of a commercial license. That difference amounted to a several hundreds of thousands of pesos for the year.

The officers said they would call the *LTC*, and we would meet again the following day. At the meeting the following day, the officers told me that the *LTC* confirmed my story. However they pointed out that, by law, they could still impound the trucks for operating without a license on a public road.

I replied I would be amenable to an arrangement. They handed me a piece of paper, with a monthly amount and a list of other requirements. I negotiated the amount down, and only for the period that the trucks were without tags. Once we had the legal tags, the amount would substantially decrease.

As soon as we verbally agreed, the trucks started rolling out again. There was nothing in writing, other than the list he handed me. I can still remember some of the items they requested. In addition to the cash, the list included Sam Browne belts (imported, from the U.S.), a specific type of ammunition and some jackets. I telephoned the requirements to the home office in Manila, which approved of the arrangement and actually made the purchases for me.

I kept my end of the bargain, and so did the other two police officers. A few times we crossed paths on the road. I knew all was right with the world when the two officers, parked in the shade by the roadside and standing by

their motorcycles, smartly brought their heels together, and crisply executed a salute as my vehicle roared by.

I thought they looked downright smart and resplendent in their high boots and Sam Browne belts.

## Chapter 4 AN AFTERNOON WITH A TOWN MAYOR

It was right after lunch, and I had decided that day to stay at the office in Cotabato City. I was hoping that it would be a quiet, uneventful afternoon, and I could catch up on some much needed paperwork.

Of course, I had no such luck.

My bodyguard came into the office, and announced, “The Chief of Police of Sultan Kudarat is here to see you.” The Chief of Police was in full khaki uniform with a holstered sidearm, complete with what we called then a *Pershing* cap. He was very polite but firm, and informed me that the Mayor of Sultan Kudarat would like to speak with me, in his office.

Sultan Kudarat was the next big town right outside Cotabato City, on the way to Davao City, geographically the first town on the road construction project. It was probably about thirty minutes away. It was not everyday I was invited by a town mayor for an official palaver, with his Chief of Police as my escort. I was actually curious what he had to say.

But the biggest reason for going was, the town of Sultan Kudarat, as well as its mayor, chief of police and the majority of its inhabitants were Muslim.

The mayor was once a politically powerful man, part of the Muslim political machinery that ran Cotabato. Now, he was reduced to running a second-class enclave surrounded by Christian towns and politicians. Still, he was not a man to be trifled with or ignored.

I asked the Chief of Police if I could bring my security along. He said, if you wish, but there is no need. I will escort you myself, and bring you back here. I decided against bringing Joe, my bodyguard, along.

And so off we went in his official Land Cruiser jeep, with a uniformed policeman as a driver. Our actual destination turned out to be the house of the mayor itself. It looked just like the other nice houses in the city, just a little bit bigger and probably more elaborately furnished than the others.

The mayor was a short, squat dark man in his sixties, I guessed. We shook hands, and he smoked while I nursed a soda the whole time we talked. He was a soft spoken man who spoke slowly and deliberately in fairly good *Tagalog*. It was evident he was educated, and he spoke and moved unhurriedly.

He said he had seen many changes the past years, and he was sure that the new road construction would bring even more changes than before. He thanked me for helping bring about progress in that part of the country. I said that this was just another of President Marcos's many infrastructure projects, and we were just executing his plan. He made a crack about, yes, you guys work in the heat and dust and Marcos gets the glory. Well, I replied, we do get paid for it.

That eventually brought us to the whole point of the meeting. He hinted that after serving his people and the town for most of his life, he did not have much to show for it. He said if he would appreciate it if he could have some part in the construction project, not in an official capacity, but as a businessman.

I replied that his request was beyond my jurisdiction to fulfill, but I would look into it and get back to him.

I knew exactly who to pass the buck to. The following day, I had a meeting with the Number 2 man in *Philrock*, a very amiable, hardworking and efficient *Kapampangan* (from the province of Pampanga, in Luzon) named Tablante. As usual, he was very helpful and decisive about the whole thing.

In a few days, Tablante and I watched the mayor's three dump trucks working alongside my trucks. His decrepit dump trucks were a stark contrast to my brand new, bright-red, smart looking *Hino* dump trucks zipping around the construction zone.

The conversation between Tablante and myself went something like this.

Tablante : "I don't know how long those old trucks of his are going to last."

Jay : "And he is slowing my trucks down. But I guess my fifty trucks can co-exist with his three trucks."

Tablante : "They are going to be a pain, but it's a small price for us to pay, Jay. Good work with the Mayor."

Jay : “And thanks for handling it on your end, sir. Very smooth, as usual.”

Tablante : “Yes, the Mayor was pleased with the arrangement. Dinner and drinks and some fine women next week in the city, as usual?”

Jay “My treat, as usual. Looking forward to it.”

We shook hands and went our separate ways.

## **Chapter 5**

### **JUST ANOTHER DAY AT THE OFFICE, OR YOU THOUGHT YOU HAD DIVERSITY PROBLEMS AT WORK**

I grew up most of my life as a city boy in metro Manila. I only knew of Christian versus Muslim hostilities in Mindanao reading the newspapers and watching television clips. When I started working in Cotabato, I saw the violence and the animosity firsthand, even within my own company.

We set up our first base camp in a town called Baguer. It was a nice almost bucolic town, but the main reason why we decided on it was because it was a peaceful Christian town, and the chief of police was a no-nonsense guy who welcomed the business the road construction would bring to his town. Baguer went from a quiet, nondescript town to a bustling hub of construction activity.

Among other equipment, my company had a fleet of earth-moving dump trucks and stake trucks for long-distance hauls, bought from Japan. There was a long line of applicants for the numerous jobs available, but the premium jobs were still the driver's jobs.

A couple of months into actual operations, the construction superintendent proudly pointed to one of our trucks and said, "That is our first Muslim hire. He is an excellent driver and a good guy. And he is from Matalam."

The significance of that last statement was not lost on me. Just as we were now operating out of a forward base camp, we were scheduled to operate out of a final camp out of the town of Matalam towards the end of the construction. Matalam was a Muslim town, and considered a security risk. We needed all the goodwill we could get for that stay in Matalam. I commended my construction superintendent for such a pro-active move.

A couple of days later, one of my assistant superintendents approached me with the Muslim driver in tow. My employee introduced the Muslim driver to me and said the Muslim driver had an urgent matter to discuss with me. The driver requested if I could pay him whatever salary was due him, so he could leave for his hometown.

I asked him if there was any problem. He said that he had been threatened that if he did not leave that day, they would shoot him. When I pressed him who made the threat, he revealed that they were drivers who were on the waiting list. I told him this was against company rules, and I would take care of the problem. He said he would just prefer if he got paid and just leave quietly.

There was no doubt in his mind, and there was little doubt in my mind, that if these guys made such a threat, they would carry it out. Some of them did not even need a reason to shoot a Muslim, much less if the Muslim was actually taking a job from them.

I had been informed that I had in my employ, several notorious “Ilaga” commanders or former “Ilaga” commanders. The “Ilagas” were the para-military Christian commando units that waged wars against the Muslims. By day they were farmers, drivers, mechanics, laborers, etc. At night, they suited up in combat fatigues or dark clothes, took up their weapons and conducted clandestine raids into Muslim villages or murderous attacks against a Muslim individual or family. It was brutal fighting with numerous civilian casualties and usually involved atrocities committed by both sides.

As I was figuring out how much was due the driver and actually counting out the money from my wallet, I was profusely and genuinely apologizing to him. He said, “ Please, sir. Do not worry and there is no need to apologize. I know you are a good guy and you run a good company. That is why I wanted to work for you. But I promise you that I will take care of these guys when the construction gets to Matalam.”

If I was not afraid operating in a Muslim-controlled town or territory before, now I was. I could only keep my fingers crossed that months from now, he would still be able to remember and distinguish the good guys from the bad guys.

## Chapter 6 THE BUSINESS OF SECURITY, PART I

Next to the logging and construction industry, probably the next largest industry in Cotabato was the security industry.

Heavily armed, uniformed security guards were everywhere. Almost every business establishment hired security guards—banks, hotels, schools, large restaurants and nightclubs, and so on. And Cotabato City was already under *Philippine Constabulary (PC)* control.

For example, right next door to Imperial Hotel II, the hotel where I was staying, was a bank, Consolidated Bank. There were always at least four armed security guards posted at the front entrance—two outside the doors, and two inside the doors who had to unlock and lock the doors every time a customer entered or exited the bank premises. They were from one of the largest security agencies in Cotabato named *Minvets*.

In addition, there were many private and free-lance bodyguards and gunslingers all over the province, called “djangos.” It was not unusual to run into groups of armed men, half of them in army fatigues without any patches, and half of them in civilian clothes, and they would turn out to be a bigwig’s security detail.

One time, for example, we befriended the security detail of a Muslim Senator who was staying at the hotel. The head of the detail was a regular Philippine Army captain assigned to the Senator. The rest were either enlisted soldiers or “djangos,” and there was no telling who was which.

My company had its forward base camp at a town called Baguer. The camp itself was within a secure area of town, under the protection of the Baguer police department. In addition, Baguer itself was under the protection of a detachment of the regular Philippine Army, encamped probably a couple of miles away. For a long while, my friend Sgt. Bert commanded that detachment.

As a final layer of security, my company had its own security force. The decision was made to hire our own security guards, instead of contracting with one of the security agencies. The reason was simply one of economics.

Hiring our own security guards cut down the security expenses substantially by more than half.

Quite predictably, half of the security force was made up of former military and law enforcement people. The other half was something else. They were all former convicts and inmates of the nearby Davao Penal Colony. When I pressed the construction superintendent about the rationale and the prudence of having such men in our employ, he had a unique point of view.

He said that these men would be extremely loyal to a company that hired them, considering their “undesirable” employment status. He also said that there was an extra benefit to hiring them. He reasoned that the criminal elements would have to be extremely stupid or desperate to try breaking into our compound or picking a fight with the company, knowing the company had that kind of security within its compound.

Of course I made it a point to talk to all these ex-cons. One of them was named Fred. In my conversations with him, I learned that he was sent to prison for murder, was originally meted a life sentence, but was paroled after 17 years for good behavior, and the fact that the prison was overcrowded. He had prison tattoos all over his body, including a giant flying eagle on his back. In addition to a company-issued firearm, he was armed with a razor-sharp machete slung over his back.

Eventually, he was even promoted to “roving” security. Every time extra security was needed, Fred got the assignment. He usually rode in the open cab at the back of the company pick-up, cradling his shotgun. He became a fixture in front of Imperial Hotel II with other body guards, security guards and drivers. Where else but in Cotabato City would you find a recently paroled murderer armed to the teeth in the main streets of the city?

It is hard to assess whether his presence actually deterred any violence that was threatened or contemplated against myself and other employees of the company. While I never really got used to the violence and danger all around me, I eventually got used to the security people, just enjoying the human presence and loyal vibes I felt from them.

## Chapter 7 THE BUSINESS OF SECURITY, PART II

My personal bodyguard was a young man named Joe. He was a referral, meaning a relative of a trusted employee. He was a reformed hard case. He had washed out of the regular army for insubordination, served time for rape, and was a former uniformed security guard. At one time, he gave me a demonstration, assembling and disassembling his .45 in seconds. He claimed he could do it at a slightly slower time blindfolded.

His special qualification for the job was the fact that he was born and grew up in Cotabato City, spoke Muslim like a native because he lived in the Muslim part of town, and claimed to know all the killers and gunslingers in the city. He boasted that none of these guys would even be able to get close to me because he would recognize them immediately. I mumbled something like that was very reassuring to know.

He was my 24-hour bodyguard during my whole stay in Cotabato. At night, he slept in the company office in the second floor of Imperial Hotel II where I was staying. My room was on the third floor. At first I felt silly about having a round-the-clock bodyguard. But within two weeks, I quickly changed my mind.

It was about 2:00 A.M., and I was awakened by a knock on my door. I looked through the peephole and saw nothing. Now fully awake, I opened my door in one quick motion and immediately slammed it shut. In that split second, I saw two men with drawn guns flat against the wall on both sides of the door.

I picked up my gun, and called Joe from the hotel phone. There were no cell phones then. While I was on the phone, the two men started banging on the door, demanding that I open it.

During the night, instead of a uniformed doorman at the lobby, the hotel had a security guard armed with a shotgun. As per our arrangement, Joe went downstairs to the lobby, got the security guard who was Muslim, and both rode the elevator to the third floor.

There, the two armed intruders and the two security men faced each other with drawn guns. The two intruders turned out to be an army lieutenant and another soldier in civilian clothes. They were drunk, and their story was, they were looking for a stripper they wanted to arrest. Eventually, they were convinced they had the wrong room, and left the hotel.

Later on, I learned that those two men were Muslims and were perennial trouble makers. Fortunately, three of the four men in the confrontation were Muslim, and Joe spoke Muslim like a native, and I am sure that defused the situation quickly.

Fortunately, Joe never had to fire his gun in my defense. But it was not for want of trying.

One time, Joe and I were eating with a group of friends in the second floor of a restaurant. We were almost done when a guy came up with a message from a group that had just sat down downstairs for dinner. The message was, they would shoot me on sight if I came down the right stairway close to where they were having dinner. It was a group of thuggish business competitors playing the intimidation game.

Not wishing any senseless violent encounter, I told my group we would quietly exit the left stairway once we were ready to go. As we were leaving, Joe tried to quietly sneak down the right stairway. If I had not caught him, he would have gone down the right stairway and probably provoked a gunfight.

When martial law was declared, it banned civilians from carrying firearms. I decided against asking for a special permit for Joe and myself to carry firearms. That ensured that now, Joe would not have to carry and possibly fire a gun in my defense.

Somehow I was relieved more for his sake than mine.

## Chapter 8 CATFISH AND WATERFALLS

Not everything in Cotabato was violence and turmoil. On the contrary, I have very many pleasant and happy memories of Cotabato. And they did not involve big business deals or personal triumphs.

Here is one example, which was simply a lunch break.

About half my working time when I was in Cotabato actually involved field work. I would have to travel to the camp and the worksite with my driver, bodyguard, and sometimes with the company chief accountant.

Most of the time, I would actually have to do some administrative function, like distributing payroll, checking on the paperwork at the company gas pumps, or meeting with some official of *Philrock*, the general contractor for the road construction with whom we had our contract.

The rest of the time was either trouble-shooting, or just mingling with the employees to keep tabs on things. I wanted to make sure the employees knew I was available and approachable, and many of them would take the occasion just to say hi or thank you, or actually discuss a particular issue.

On the whole, I was happy when I was on the road. I enjoyed being outdoors, although sometimes it was in the heat and dust, and sometimes in the rain and the mud, depending on the season of the year. I enjoyed the personal interaction, and it was gratifying to offer employment to people and sometimes help resolve problems.

I tried to make the field work as enjoyable and interesting as possible. I remember one particular day that will forever stay in my mind. We were several miles from base camp, so I asked the driver to scout around and find us some good lunch.

When lunch time came, we drove to a house where the driver had contracted the lady of the house to cook lunch for us. We collected our lunch, which was unbelievably inexpensive. It was rice, fried catfish, vegetables and soda. Catfish is one of my favorite fish in the Philippines. For those of you that know fish, catfish are ugly creatures, but delicious.

My driver then took us to a secluded area that was nicely wooded with a small, gentle waterfall. We feasted on the lunch, and that was a great lunch for eating on the run in a road construction site. Then we all took a dip in the shallow pool with the waterfall cascading on us, frolicking like little children. Since we spent a lot of time on the road, we always had clothes and gear for emergencies like this one.

That was probably one of the best lunch breaks in my whole life. Where else can you take a two-hour lunch break with a nourishing, home-cooked meal, then take a dip in a natural pool and waterfall with a lush, sylvan setting?

In retrospect, the two-hour, 3-martini lunches I had in my corporate life pale in comparison with this roadside lunch.

Reluctantly, we drove back to work at the site. I don't know about my two other employees, but that was a magical day for me, to be able to work and briefly refresh the body, mind and spirit in a land full of violence and turmoil.

## Chapter 9

### THE BUSINESS OF GRAFT AND CORRUPTION, PART I

At the time I was doing it, I was proud of myself and thought I was doing the right thing. It was probably just as important as my operational and administrative functions. I am talking about the business of graft and corruption.

The culture of political and business patronage permeated all of business dealings in Cotabato, just as in the rest of the country. More than half of the company's administrative field personnel were hired as reciprocal business favors.

For example, we had employees such as mechanics, gas pump attendants and warehousemen who were in our employ as favors to certain business associates. These employees included close or distant relatives or clan members of the governor of Cotabato, the president of the bank that we banked with, the head of the *Land Transportation Commission* in Cotabato, mayors of various towns and assorted chiefs of police and other town functionaries.

On the whole, most of these favored appointees worked hard for their money just like the rest of the company employees, since they did not want to embarrass the benefactor who recommended them, and they needed the employment as well.

The more insidious relationships involved the government officials who benefited from their positions of power. And I think it would be accurate to say that this included every national, city and town government I came in contact with.

The list included the following, with comparative U.S. agencies in parenthesis: *Metrocom* (state Highway Patrol, like the California Highway Patrol), *Land Transportation Commission* or *LTC* (Department of Motor Vehicles or DMV), the *Bureau of Internal Revenue* or *BIR* (Internal Revenue Service or IRS), the *Social Security Service* or *SSS*, and town mayors and chiefs of police.

Most of the time, it entailed cold hard cash and some incidental goodies. In a separate chapter I described my encounter with the *Metrocom* police officers. Remember the Sam Browne belts and ammunition? With some agencies, there were some creative arrangements.

For example, with the *SSS*, the agents offered a special service. For a special fee, they would also prepare the quarterly reports to the *SSS* that companies had to submit and file, documenting their remittances. The special fee of course included substantial overage to more than compensate them for their time in preparing the reports and for their special handling of my account.

Speaking of special handling, there was an agency in Cotabato that required just that. This was the *Land Transportation Commission*. Right from the start, we had filed an application with the main office in Manila requesting for construction exempt status. Since we were a private, independent sub-contractor, we could only get construction exemption status only if we were working on a national government project, which we were. Getting this exemption would make a big difference in the fees we had to pay, but it required political connections and high level negotiations and maneuvering.

I met with the head of the *LTC* in Cotabato, who was Muslim. Delicately, I outlined the situation to him. In effect, I informed him that arrangements were being made at the home office level in Manila, and for him just to sit tight. As soon as arrangements were finalized, the benefits of the arrangement would “trickle down” to him.

It took a few months, but the deal eventually worked out for all parties concerned. I mention this because his predecessor, also a Muslim, was not so fortunate in his handling of business affairs. His predecessor was shot and killed on his way to work in a roadside ambush. The speculation was, he was liquidated because he did not “trickle down” certain benefits he had collected.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned I was proud of carrying out this function. After all, you just don't slap a government official on the back, and ask, “How much, you slimeball?” Bribing a government official required a certain skill set. It required the flair of a diplomat, the skills of a

negotiator, the sensitivity and sensibilities of a father confessor and the instincts of a “closer.”

At the end of my stint, I felt I could bribe with the best of them. Many years later, far removed from the situation, I saw the situation for what it was. I was as much of a problem as the corrupt officials were. Both of us were part of that insidious business cancer that still permeates Philippine government and business even today.

## Chapter 10

### THE BUSINESS OF GRAFT AND CORRUPTION, PART II

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I also had to make arrangements with the mayors and chiefs of police of the towns on the construction route.

You would think that they would be grateful to us for cementing the national highway that passed through their towns. For the most part, the current highway was made of asphalt that had now broken down in many parts. During the dry season, the road was pockmarked with holes, some as big as craters that exposed the dirt and created swirling dust. During the rainy season, the craters turned into giant mud holes that sometimes ensnared even big busses.

In one particular town, called Pikit, the road was a winding asphalt road over mountainous area. In some parts, the entire road had eroded, crumbling down the mountain side. Where there used to be road and asphalt, there was now a yawning chasm. There were not even road signs warning motorists of impending danger ahead.

But of course the town officials had a different point of view on the matter. We were private enterprise making money out of building the road on their territory. We therefore owed them, for the inconvenience of having construction in their area and for the protection they offered us while operating in their turf.

I personally met with many of these town mayors. It was a study in human psychology. The people I dealt with represented a wide spectrum of what was good and what was evil in humanity.

In fairness to them, most of them were decent people just hoping to get in on the action and take what they thought was their entitlement from the government or even private companies like us. I already told you of my experience with the Mayor of Sultan Kudarat.

Then there were the good guys. I remember one mayor who was almost even apologetic when he made his request. All he wanted was for us to cement a short, little side road in town. He explained that the road led to the town's only little Catholic church. The *Philrock* man Tablante and myself were only too glad to grant his request.

And then I will never forget the Mayor of Pigkawayan. Pigkawayan was a major Christian town, and it was whispered about that Pigkawayan was an “Ilaga” stronghold, with the Mayor as an active supporter if not a leader and financier of the movement in his town.

I finally got to meet this fabled mayor at a roadside restaurant in Pigkawayan itself. It was just him and myself at a table, but his bodyguards and mine were discretely positioned all around us.

He came straight to the point. My reputation had preceded me as a straight-shooter. All he wanted from me was to hire his son, treat him like a regular employee and make a model citizen out of him. His son used to be a wild one, drinking, carousing and occasionally shooting up the town. But he had recently gotten married, was now expecting his first child, and had promised his wife and father that he would reform his ways. I assured the father I knew exactly what to do.

I interviewed the son whom we shall call Roger. I read the riot act to him. I told him I had the perfect job for him—lead warehouseman at the base camp in Bager. But I expected him to perform responsibly, that he would be treated just like any other employee, and I would not hesitate to fire him if he proved to be inept or irresponsible, and I would so inform his father.

Roger turned out to be an exemplary employee. He streamlined the operations of the warehouse, which included keeping track of the numerous truck parts, tires and shop tools. I never heard of any pilferage or inventory problems at the warehouse. An added benefit was that nobody tried any shenanigans with him. It was safe to assume nobody was dumb enough to invite a visit from an “Ilaga” death squad from Pigkawayan.

Roger was still working for the company at the warehouse when I left Cotabato for good for Manila. He was one employee that I was genuinely thankful for, and I let him know it. Somewhere along the line, I had also let the mayor of Pigkawayan know his son was more than keeping his end of the bargain. I got a good worker an employer usually hopes for, and a father got a son he always wanted. I still believe it was one of my better deals.

## Chapter 11

### THE DAY PRESIDENT FERDINAND E. MARCOS PROCLAIMED MARTIAL LAW

September 1, 1972 was a historic day in Philippine history. It would not be overly dramatic to echo the cliché that it was a day that will go down in infamy. On this day, then President of the Republic of the Philippines Ferdinand Edralin Marcos issued Proclamation No. 1081, better known as Martial Law.

In effect, the Proclamation declared martial law over the entire country, suspended the writ of *habeas corpus* and essentially installed Marcos as dictator for life.

The day martial law was proclaimed, I was working in Cotabato. Early that morning, we had driven to the worksite, where it was business as usual. When I got back to the city in the early afternoon, I headed to my favorite watering hole, the restaurant at Imperial Hotel II where I was staying. It was only then, over some cold beer, that business associates told me the news and I learned of the declaration of martial law.

All television and radio broadcasting had been suspended. Instead, the government radio recited the riot act over and over. Among other edicts, there was no carrying of firearms except by military personnel, and there would be a curfew from midnight until 4:00 AM.

Rumors flew all over the place. Hundreds had been arrested in Manila and all over the country. There had been summary executions of known Marcos critics. Guerrilla warfare had now broken out in several parts of the country. It was next to impossible to sift fact from fiction, truth from rumor.

That night, a few minutes after midnight, a group of guys and myself stood at the sidewalk just outside the lobby of the hotel. Later, a military truck roared by, and somebody in the truck yelled at us to go back inside. With so many unanswered questions in our minds, we trudged back inside the hotel for a fitful sleep.

The following day, we had to make some minor adjustments. Now, we had to venture out of the city and into the neighboring towns and to the worksite

without any firearms. I usually went out with a driver and a bodyguard. The bodyguard was always armed, and I was armed most of the time. That day, we felt apprehensive and vulnerable going about the province without any weapons, but eventually got used to it.

During that first day, we saw several random military checkpoints. A typical scene would be, a public bus would be stopped and all the occupants had to file out and be searched by soldiers. There was a bare table by the side of the road, which eventually would be piled high with confiscated firearms. We never saw any prisoners as a result of the checkpoints, so we assumed the soldiers were just confiscating firearms but not arresting any firearm carriers.

For the remainder of my stay in Cotabato, we were stopped at random military checkpoints in the province. Sometimes, the soldiers would simply look inside the vehicle, ask us if we were carrying weapons, and then wave us on.

The road construction project had us working around the clock. Because of the midnight curfew, I had to go to the military authorities and request permits for each worker that had to work from midnight till 4:00 AM.

As an aside, instead of dampening the nightlife scene in Manila, the curfew probably generated more revenue for the nightclub owners. The nightclubs started having “stay-ins,” meaning partygoers simply stayed and partied in the club from midnight until 4:00 AM, the end of curfew time.

When I flew by plane, I remembered two things. Each domestic flight now carried an air marshal who was simply an enlisted man sitting at the rear of the plane armed with a sidearm and an Armalite. When I checked in at the airport, in addition to checking my I.D. against a long list of some sort, presumably of dissidents, the military also read through all the files I was carrying in my briefcase.

The Marcos Martial Law existed technically until 1981, when Marcos himself lifted it but still retained virtual dictatorial powers, and ended for good in 1986, when Marcos and his relatives and cohorts fled *Malacanang Palace* in helicopters supplied by the US, just as the *EDSA People Power* marchers were about to storm the Palace gates.

While it may be argued that the first years of martial law brought some tangible benefits to the country, the eventual Martial Law years trampled on human rights, enriched Marcos and his family and cronies by about thirty billion dollars mostly in the form of behest loans, and saddled the Philippine government with these loans for the rest of its life.

September 1, 1972 was truly a day of infamy, the effects of which are still felt by the people of the Philippines, and will probably linger for many more decades to come.

## Chapter 12

### DAVAO CITY, MY OASIS OF PEACE

Every chance I got, I traveled to Davao City. Every excuse I could find, I was on my way to Davao City.

The road we were constructing began in the province of South Cotabato and ended in the province of Davao. Where the road construction ended, Davao City was a scant half an hour away.

Compared to Cotabato City, Davao City was paradise in so many ways. First of all, Davao City was much bigger and more cosmopolitan than Cotabato City. In fact, Davao City has the distinction of being the largest city in the Philippines as well as the world in land area, covering almost 603,000 acres.

In addition, Davao City was a minor tourist destination in the South. It had white, sandy beaches, five star hotels and restaurants, exciting night life and entertainment and many ethnic festivals. The province of Davao is home to *Mount Apo*, the highest mountain in the Philippines and the monkey-eating Philippine eagle.

But those were not the reasons why I took refuge in Davao City as often as I did. True, to a large extent it took my mind away from work and the daily construction grind. The biggest factor was, Davao City was as peaceful as a major city could get. The province and the city were predominantly Christian, and peace and order was not a problem in Davao City. I could leave two things behind in Cotabato every time I traveled to Davao City—my guns and my bodyguard.

When business reasons warranted a trip, I took the company vehicle, the biggest Ford pick-up truck then with reinforced shocks, and the company driver who normally would be assigned to the construction site. I would reassign my personal vehicle, regular driver and bodyguard to help out in the camp or worksite.

The company had business associates in Davao City, and we would spend the evenings hitting the night spots. I remember going to several nice restaurants, a nightclub called the *Marrakesh*, and several massage parlors.

The massage parlors were not as plush and the masseuses not as comely as the ones in Manila, but they pretty much provided the same basic services. After a nice invigorating massage, the massage included, for a small gratuity, a handjob called “sensation” in those days.

When it was strictly a personal trip, I usually flew to Davao. For most of these trips, it was a junket with my girl friend Emma. We would stay either at the *Insular Hotel*, at that time the city’s premier hotel, or the *Apo View Hotel*, and spend a long weekend playing tourist.

We would go shopping, hit the beaches, dine at the restaurants and dance at the clubs just like any romantic couple. I enjoyed Emma’s company. She was very pretty, slender, educated, outgoing, articulate, even-tempered, passionate and fun to be with. I will always remember our good times, and I will always be grateful for her love and sweetness during those times. Those trips with Emma made Davao City even more memorable.

One time we took a regular bus on one of these trips. I found the trip uncomfortable, in fact downright miserable. There was construction in parts of the highway, we bounced all over the bus because of the rough road, and half the trip was in the dust, as the bus was not air-conditioned. That was the first and last time we took the bus.

I guess it was different when I was working, and I could put up with the travel inconveniences, but not when I was on vacation. Just like most people in the area, I found myself looking forward to the day when that road was finally complete and fully cemented from Cotabato City to Davao City.

## Chapter 13

### A TALE OF TWO SOLDIERS, PART I

After all these years, I wish I could tell you their real names and true identities. But I have decided to be prudent, for their sake and mine, and keep their identities a secret. The names used are fictitious, but the stories are true.

#### *The Sergeant*

I met Sgt. Bert during a business meeting with the Governor of Cotabato. At that time, he was the head of security for the Governor. When he was introduced to me, he was dressed in civilian clothes, was almost good-looking in a rugged way with a steely gaze. One of my associates later whispered to me, "He's a killer." and proceeded to tell me a couple of chilling stories about Sgt. Bert.

Sgt. Bert was the Philippine Army equivalent of James Bond, Agent 007. It was not because of his suave conquests of women or his weapon gadgetry. It was because he had a license to kill. He was what I would call a military hit-man.

The next time I saw Sgt. Bert, he was in full military green BDU's. He had driven into my construction camp, saluted smartly and shook my hand with a warm smile. He said he had grown bored with the security detail, had asked for field duty, and was now head of the army detachment camped about a couple of towns away. I was overjoyed with the news. Technically, he was in charge of the safety of my camp. He was equally happy to be back in his old stomping grounds.

We developed a friendship over the next months. He was a warm, family man, with a folksy smile and wry sense of humor. He never asked me for anything, except for a company contribution when his daughter was a contestant in a beauty contest at their town fiesta. The way these beauty contests worked, whoever sold the most tickets to the coronation ball won, so it was mostly a monetary, fund-raising contest. I made sure his daughter won by a landslide.

In spite of our busy schedules, we had a few quiet talks together. Over some cold beers, he told me some hair-raising stories.

He confirmed his most talked-about exploit. Alone, he had crept several miles into enemy territory during the night, tracked down his prey, a ruthless Muslim killer and leader of a murderous band, hacked him in the night, and managed to elude numerous pursuers and get back to camp safely. The chilling exclamation point to this whole exploit was the fact that he brought with him the head of his victim in a burlap sack (sako).

He told me another story of how he liquidated another Muslim rebel leader. This rebel leader somehow trusted Sgt. Bert. Sgt. Bert requested a face-to-face meeting with the Muslim, just between them, at a neutral location. Sgt. Bert described how he and the Muslim sat down on huge rocks, and started talking. Sgt. Bert's marksman picked off the Muslim from concealment, with one shot.

He confirmed that he had gone out on "Ilaga" sorties, either as a combatant or a trainer. "Ilaga" is an Ilonggo or Visayan word for "rat" and the "Ilagas" were the fierce Christian para-military units who fought against the Muslims. Most of the time, they were led by former soldiers. The regular Philippine Army was routinely accused by Muslims of either training or actually leading or accompanying "Ilaga" units.

Sgt. Bert revealed that there had been several assassination attempts on his life. He recounted to me his closest shave. He had spent most of the day at a "sabong" (cockfight) festival, and was on his way home. He was only armed with a .45 automatic and for footwear, was wearing only slippers.

He was ambushed by two men on either side of the road, one with an ArmaLite, an automatic military rifle also known as the M-16, and one with a automatic handgun. He said the guy with the ArmaLite fired and somehow missed him. Sgt. Bert drew his .45, fired one shot each at the two assailants, and killed them both on the spot.

I do not even remember the last time I saw Sgt. Bert. I believe it was one of those random road checkpoints that he occasionally conducted. Since there were other people and complete strangers on that public road, we only nodded civilly to each other.

I do not know what eventually happened to Sgt. Bert. Within a couple of years, I was living a new life in the United States.

In one of our conversations, I remember asking him if he was afraid of dying, that eventually his old enemies would catch up with him. He shrugged his shoulders and uttered a common fatalistic line, "If that is the will of God." Then he smiled his folksy smile, and said. "But they will have to be really good to get me."

## Chapter 14 TALE OF TWO SOLDIERS, PART II

### *The Lieutenant*

A mutual friend introduced me to Lieutenant Rudy. Lieutenant Rudy was the head of the *Philippine Constabulary (PC)* forces that maintained peace and order in Cotabato City. The *Philippine Constabulary* was a branch of the military, historically known to combat insurgency and banditry.

Normally, a city had its own police department to maintain peace and order. If a city's police department was deemed inept or corrupt, however, the *Philippine Constabulary* would be ordered to take over the city's police function, with the police department now reporting to the *PC* Commander. In the case of Cotabato City, it was probably a case of the city police being both inept and corrupt.

At the time I lived in Cotabato City, the political situation in the city was volatile. Cotabato City had just elected its first Christian mayor, Mayor Teodoro V. Juliano, who had unseated the powerful Muslim incumbent Mayor Datu Mando Sinsuat. His political enemies had sworn that Mayor Juliano would not survive his term.

Mayor Juliano moved about the city in a long convoy full of armed men. He rode in a custom-built, armor-plated vehicle that looked like the forerunner of the *Humvee*. In front was a driver and two armed bodyguards. He sat in the middle row flanked by two bodyguards. Behind him sat another row of bodyguards.

Directly behind his vehicle was an armored car with a mounted machine gun. His security consisted of regular military soldiers, city police, his own security detail and free-lance gunslingers, called "djangos" in Cotabato City.

On top of that, there was always the possibility of another Muslim versus Christian conflagration, and open fighting could break out again.

Lieutenant Rudy had his hands full.

But we found time to have a few leisurely lunches. He would come to lunch in full battle gear, with grenades hanging from his uniform while we dined at

the restaurant of the plush Imperial Hotel II. We would discuss politics, history, careers, business, money and delectable women.

I found Lieutenant Rudy to be intelligent, sophisticated and articulate. He was after all, a graduate of the *Philippine Military Academy (PMA)*, the Philippine equivalent of West Point, and was now a commissioned officer of the Philippine military, attached to the *Philippine Constabulary* branch with a very visible assignment.

Aside from the lieutenant's military uniform and the grenades, and an occasional digression into military life, for me it was just like lunching with another business associate.

Less than a year into our relationship, I was out in the field, by the roadside. An army convoy approached, and in the lead jeep was Lt. Rudy. He was probably keeping an eye out for me, and as soon as he espied me, he ordered the convoy to halt, stopping right at their side of the highway.

He alighted from the jeep, and we walked to a shady part of the road. The conversation went something like this.

Lt. Rudy "Hi. Have you heard the news?"

Jay "No. What's going on?"

"I have been reassigned. Just next province, to Davao. Just for a while. I am on my way there now."

"Why? What happened?"

"President Marcos caved in to some politicians who wanted me out of Cotabato Province."

"Why do they want you out?"

"Have you heard of the (name of Cotabato barrio) Massacre that happened a couple of years ago?"

"No. That was before I got here."

"Well, I ordered it."

Briefly, he told me the story. Before being *PC* commander of Cotabato City, he was an army operational officer in Cotabato Province. One day, one of his patrols got fired upon in an outlying Muslim barrio in Cotabato. The patrol took cover, radioed the camp and waited for reinforcements. Lt. Rudy came personally with heavy reinforcements.

By the time Lt. Rudy arrived, the armed men had fled from the barrio. All that was left were old men, women and children. Lt Rudy then ordered the barrio inhabitants massacred.

I remember him saying, “We killed every living thing in that barrio—old men, women, children, and animals.”

“So what will happen to you now?”

“Nothing. I will just sit it out in Davao for a while. If it was up to Marcos, he would give me a medal for the massacre. But he has to play ball with these Muslim politicians.”

We said our goodbyes, shook hands and the convoy moved on through the construction site.

That was the last I saw of Lt. Rudy, and I have no idea what eventually happened to him. Within a year, I was back in Manila, and within a couple of years, I started life anew in a new land, the United States.

Occasionally I think about him—a dashing military officer, educated, intelligent, resourceful, articulate, passionate, ambitious and patriotic. I always wonder though if he ever asked forgiveness for, or even noticed, the blood of innocent people on his hands.

## Chapter 15

### CEBU INTERLUDE

My Mindanao adventure would not be complete without mentioning Cebu, although Cebu is in the Visayas.

By some twist of fate, one of the company's officers named Tony was based in Cebu City. On one of my trips back to Manila, I decided to have an official stop-over at Cebu City to see Tony. I had never been to Cebu, and this was as good a chance as any to see it.

The airport in Cebu is in Mactan, and it is a good half an hour by taxi to get to the city. The driver of the taxicab was a loquacious one, and he had a mission to interview me as much as he could. Unfortunately, I did not speak *Cebuano*, other than the words you whisper in a young lass's ears that made her blush. And the cab driver did not speak *Tagalog*. So we spent a lively half hour conversing in English, at least in our own version of the Queen's language as spoken in Cebu.

Tony was a gracious host, and an efficient business partner. We took care of business in just a few minutes. But there was a different kind of opportunity that presented itself at Tony's house. Tony had the prettiest daughter I had ever met. Tony was good looking but really dark skinned. His daughter was the fairest and prettiest *mestiza* I had ever met, with the charm and graciousness of a Cebuana.

At first I thought she was just being a gracious hostess, but I guess there was a mutual spark of some kind. She ended up being my tourist guide during that trip. It was my first trip to Cebu City and I saw the city sights and the usual attractions in Cebu, including the cross of Magellan with her. We had this romantic dinner in a restaurant atop a hotel. The restaurant overlooked the city swathed in lights, and the whole restaurant floor revolved slowly while we were having dinner, giving you a 360 degree view of the city.

I fell hard for this *Cebuana*. Every time I flew to Manila, I would stop-over in Cebu. With all the girl friends and love entanglements I had in Cotabato, she was always on my mind.

Was this karma at work? Or was some love potion working its magic? Why did my true love have to be several islands away? I just wanted a junket to Cebu, and now I was love-struck. So every time, I flew to Manila, I would have a few days stop-over in Cebu.

On my final trip from Cotabato City to Manila, I agonized on whether to make that usual detour to Cebu. In the end, I decided against it. I loved that girl too much just to torture myself and her. I had to make a clean break, or else do something drastic like take her with me to Manila, or heaven forbid, marry her.

It took another year before I actually left for the United States. It did not take me long to get involved with another girl friend when I went home to Manila. But I would always find my thoughts straying to that sweet *mestiza* in Cebu City, wondering what could have been.

## Chapter 16

### SEX IN THE CITY--TRUE LOVE AND TRUE LIES

Suffice it to say that I probably witnessed and experienced the most violence in my life during my stay in Cotabato City. It is equally true that I experienced the most sex in my life in Cotabato City.

I could rationalize this period in my life and say that this was the period in my life where I was allowed to sow my wild oats. I was in my mid-twenties, with a responsible, stressful job, in a violent, wild West setting.

I could rationalize and say that I merely reflected the social and sexual mores of Philippine high society at that time, that of having lovers at every strata of society, so I will present my liaisons that way.

Again, I choose to keep names and identities confidential, but the facts and the stories are all true.

Upper class –Rose was the daughter of a wealthy businessman, going to college, extremely pretty, sweet, intelligent and articulate. She spoke flawless English and *Tagalog*. I also had the inside track in socializing with this particular lady, because her uncle and my dad were business associates in Manila at one time. That is exactly how I met Rose, while having dinner with her uncle. We dated on and off over a period of a year. It was a very loving, innocent courtship. I believe that I simply let the relationship die a quiet death, the moment I realized I would not have the longevity to carry off the relationship. If I had met her in Manila, it would have surely led to something more serious.

Upper middle class – Emma was my regular girlfriend. She was a professor at one of Cotabato City's colleges. She was pretty with mestiza features, statuesque, very outgoing, intelligent and a fun companion. She spoke excellent English and *Tagalog*, as well as the local dialects. She was no retiring schoolmistress, though. She had gone to college at the *University of the Philippines (UP)* in Quezon City in metro Manila, and was wise to the ways of the world, or at least the city. I suspect she had a regular boyfriend while in college.

We went on regular dates during the week like going to the movies and early dinner, making love at the hotel afterwards. We spent a few out of town weekends at Davao and other lovers' trysts, including one in Manila. We were lovers up till I left for Manila for good, valiantly kept correspondence for a short while but finally gave up on the relationship mutually.

Middle class – Her name was Valerie, and she was one of the comely hotel clerks at the Hotel Imperial II. She was pretty, really fair, very personable and a little bit on the conservative side. Of course we had a lot of occasion to chat, since I would see her regularly at the lobby desk. We started dating, eventually having dinners at the hotel restaurant and my room.

This was a strained, short-lived relationship. The convenience of her being right in the hotel also proved to be my undoing, as she eventually caught on to my other dalliances. I would say her greatest virtue was tolerance. She probably figured she could either handle or overcome any opposition to a relationship, but my guess is that after seeing quality time dwindle to an occasional tryst, she gave up on the one-sided relationship.

Lower class – I actually developed a crush on her. Mila was the cashier at the club at Imperial Hotel I. I lived in Imperial Hotel II, and of course Imperial Hotel I was the earlier version. Both hotels were within walking distance. But the night life was in Imperial Hotel I. Usually I would have dinner at the restaurant at Imperial Hotel II, and then move on to Imperial Hotel I for the nightly drinks and entertainment, and then walk on back home to Imperial Hotel II.

So I saw Mila almost every night. At first, we just started chatting casually in the course of the evening, then I started flirting heavily. She was pretty, very curvaceous but shy, spoke English and *Tagalog* with a *Visayan* accent, and was very conscious of our social difference. She fell hard for me, and we would go to movies, snack in the early afternoons before her shift, and occasionally she would go home with me after the Hotel Imperial I closed by midnight because of the curfew. Just like Emma, I saw Mila up until I left for Manila for good. I was actually sad when I said goodbye to her, and she was inconsolable.

Married class – For a long time I had a relationship with a sexy married lady named Maria. She spoke of her marriage as if it was a doomed relationship, and I never pressed her on the issue. It was probably a physical relationship

between us, not as though I needed another one. I gave her a monetary gift after each tryst, which was a mere pittance but she seemed to be grateful for it.

I remember one incident with Maria. I had a mix-up in schedule, and I ended up having a long business lunch at the restaurant at Imperial Hotel II, leaving Maria waiting for me in my room. Right before dessert and coffee, I excused myself to make a phone call in the office which was in the second floor, went up to my room on the third floor instead, and had a gratifying quickie with Maria. I rejoined the business lunch in time to finish my desert and pick up the tab.

It was a tough assignment in Cotabato City, but somebody had to do it.

## **Chapter 17**

### **SEX IN THE CITY--COMMERCIAL LOVE**

During my stay in Cotabato City, there were only two night clubs in the city that were classy and safe enough to unwind and actually relax after a hard day's work. These were the clubs at Hotel Imperial I and the Sultan Hotel. The crowd at the Sultan Hotel was a wee bit rougher and rowdier than the clientele at Hotel Imperial I, plus the Imperial Hotel I was right next door to me, so I ended up most nights at the club at Imperial Hotel I.

Very early in the evening, it was not unusual to see birthday parties or social dinners with families and friends at the Imperial Hotel I club. By around 8:00 PM, the singers would start the nightly shows, and the night patrons would start coming in.

By around 9:00 PM, the ladies of the evening would start showing up in force and would normally start off in small groups by themselves. As the evening wore on, the women would either get invited to tables, or might approach people they knew and get invited for a beer or two.

For regular patrons of the club like myself, after a while, you learn to assess quickly the available pool of talents for the night. Most nights, the prostitutes presented no temptations for me. I only kept my eyes peeled to keep tabs on the goings-on for the night.

Once in a while, a fresh, pretty talent might show up. It was a double-edged sword. Here was somebody pretty, fresh and exciting for a change. But it was unproven commodity. It might be tainted, or it might be difficult to handle.

During the course of the night, some of the regulars would approach me and ask if there were current openings for the night. Some would approach me and ask for a loan for some real or made-up emergency of some sort. If she was a tried and tested product, I would not hesitate to make the loan, knowing I could make use of her services in the not too distant future.

Let me explain that last statement.

As part of the company's business promotions, I would invite upper and mid-level managers of *Philrock* for a quiet business meeting in the city away from the construction side, and pay for the lodging and entertainment for the night. I needed to maintain good working relationship and good communication with their operational as well as administrative managers. I would on the average have at least one and possibly two of these meetings a week. The entertainment of course included my guest spending the night with one of these ladies.

And so, as sound business practice dictated, I needed reliable intelligence on the quality of the pool of talent available in the city. It was not for myself, you see, but for the entertainment of business clients. Occasionally I did have to do some product testing of the merchandise that I was providing for the *Philrock* managers and supervisors.

Again, as I said in the previous chapter, it was a tough assignment, but somebody had to do it.

## Chapter 18

### SEX IN THE CITY—ASSORTED MAYHEM

I ran into my first sex scandal probably the first week I arrived at the project in Cotabato. I spent the first month planning the company camp site, recruiting key personnel and most of the time just cooling my heels as the fleet of trucks trickled in from Japan.

*Philrock* had set up their camp by now in the town of Baguer, and I hung out at their offices and mess hall. Their camp was a mini-town, complete with offices, dorms, mess hall and kitchen, fuel depots, maintenance shops for their trucks, warehouses and other structures. This was my chance to meet many of the *Philrock* field personnel I would be working with, and I wasted no time in knowing the players and networking with them.

Among those I met was one of their top men, Mr. Kintanar, (not his real name). He was the field superintendent in charge of the project, and the #3 man at the site. He was portly, with a shock of white hair and a staccato speech delivery. I found him amiable enough. At breakfast one morning, I saw him solicitously talking to a very attractive young lady who appeared to be the kitchen help.

When I casually mentioned it to Tablante, the *Philrock* #2 man, Tablante growled, “He is having sex with her.”

I answered incredulously “She looks like a teenager.”

“She is a teen-ager. Not only that, she is married.”

“You’re kidding. Where is her husband?”

“I have no idea. Kintanar moved in on her as soon as we all started living in the camp.”

“And *Philrock* condones all this?”

“Welcome to road construction, Jay.”

And of course, the camp site was not the only place where there was a whole lot of loving going on. Imperial Hotel II was another hotbed of loving activity, I would find out.

Before I left for Cotabato, my dad mentioned to me he had two good business friends in the city, an insurance executive and a doctor.

The insurance executive and I quickly became acquaintances because he was a regular at the restaurant of the hotel. Many businessmen conducted business at the hotel, either at the restaurant, the lobby or in the several suites that served as offices in the hotel, including ours.

I found out that the insurance executive was doing more than selling insurance policies at the hotel. Together with his sidekick, the owner of a large retail store in the city, he had a love nest at the hotel. The two married middle-aged Lotharios shared several ladies, but their favorite was a pretty under-aged girl who sold “sampaguitas” (a kind of sweet smelling flower) in the streets of Cotabato.

It took me a couple of months before I met the doctor. I noticed that he checked in at the hotel for a few days on a periodic basis, maybe every two or three months. One day, I ended up having this casual conversation with the hotel manager, who was always a good source of information.

Manager : So you are good friends with the doctor?

Jay : Actually, he is good friends with my dad.

Manager : Well, he is a good man to know.

Jay : You mean because he is a doctor?

Manager : Well, because he is a specialist.

Jay : I do not know his specialty.

Manager : You mean you do not know why he checks in at the hotel?

Jay : No. What does he do during his stay here?

Manager : He performs abortions.

My dad, who was a stockholder as well as a member of the board of directors of the company, flew from Manila and visited the project one time together with other members of the board of the company. They spent a few days inspecting the worksite, the vehicles and equipment, touring the camp and reviewing my systems and procedures. They also had a couple of high-level meetings with the on-site *Philrock* officials. Of course, they all stayed at Hotel Imperial II.

During one of our private conversations in his room at the hotel, I told my dad about his two friends. He sat impassively and just shook his head.

Trying to goad him into a reaction, I wisecracked, “Nice friends you’ve got, Dad.” He got up and headed to his bedroom. “We have an early start tomorrow. Good night.”

## Chapter 19

### WALKING PAPERS

It just took one simple phone call. My dad called me and asked me to come back home to Manila. He had sold his holdings back to the construction company, as he was now preparing to immigrate to the United States.

Like many Filipinos, he had grown apprehensive of martial law and the deteriorating economic situation in the Philippines. He wanted a better future for his children, and he felt that the United States would provide a safe haven and better opportunities for his family.

My dad was a successful corporate executive, both in the banking and insurance industry. He had substantial landholdings in his ancestral province, and had stakes in several small businesses. He had extensive business and political connections. And now he was uprooting his family for a new life but uncertain future in another country. I think the bottom line was he was worried about the future of his children in the Philippines.

Now he wanted me to take care of business at home. And of course my mom had always worried about my safety in Mindanao. I guess I was ready to go home. I was ready to go back to normal life in Manila. And I knew it would be a matter of time and I would be following my dad and other family members to the United States.

The road construction project was probably about two-thirds complete. But I had laid the groundwork for the structure and operational systems and procedures for the company. From a professional point of view, I was satisfied with the work I had done.

I left Cotabato without much fanfare. I mailed a formal letter of resignation to the company's board of directors. The hardest part was saying goodbye to the loyal employees at the camp, my partners-in-crime at *Philrock*, all my girlfriends and to Joe, my bodyguard and Tony, my driver.

I had arrived at Cotabato almost two years ago with two pieces of luggage. I left with even less. I gave away many of my belongings before I left, including clothes. All I wanted to leave with was the good memories of

friends and employees over the two years. I will always treasure their love and friendship.

Mindanao was now but another closed chapter in my life, and I was now looking forward to more exciting ones, wherever that may be. But I will always treasure the unique, sweet as well as poignant memories of Mindanao stored in the windmills of my mind.

## Epilogue

After leaving Cotabato, I spent the next year back home in Manila. It was a good year. I saw a lot of my old friends. I was happy to see my mom, dad and all my siblings for a few months, until most of them left for the United States. Then, it was just a waiting game until I received my visa to rejoin them in the United States.

I went back to the carefree, suburban life in Quezon City, a suburb of Manila, that I was used to. Slowly, I re-established connection with old neighborhood chums, former classmates and officemates.

Within months, I had a new girl friend who was really gorgeous and loving and a true soulmate. She was a pre-med student at *Far Eastern University (FEU)* who got voted as Miss *FEU* Freshman during the time we were together. She healed my heart and soul in many ways. I also got back into martial arts. I was almost back to normal.

But inwardly, I knew I had changed. It might sound maudlin and a bit of a cliché, but I went to Mindanao a boy and came back a man, not in a physical and probably not even in an emotional way.

Mindanao had touched my soul. I had seen life and death, love and hate, greed and sacrifice, and the whole spectrum of human emotion played out in that part of the country. I had lived and worked with the common man, and saw firsthand the hope and despair in his and his family's everyday lives. I had seen the political and economic system wreak havoc on a land already savaged by ethnic strife.

In less than a year, I was also winging my way to the United States, together with my sister Cris and another brother Rey. That completed the whole family's emigration to the United States.

I foresaw I would have challenges, and I also expected to experience many new, exciting, exhilarating and maybe even uplifting experiences and successes in the United States. But I also knew that all those images and experiences of people and events in Mindanao would always be burned in my memory, and forever etched in my psyche.