

Filipino vets denied WWI benefits yet again

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and keeps in close touch with the Library of Congress where legislative reports are current within 24 hours.

Hopes had run high this year for the 5,000 Filipino vets in the United States. Half live in California; the rest are scattered around the country. More than 1,000 are in Los Angeles and 1,500 live in the Bay Area and Sacramento. San Francisco has 325 of them. Their numbers decline 10% a year as the aging vets die.

Compensation legislation has died during just about every congressional session since 1993, when Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, a disabled WW II vet himself, introduced the first equity bill. It was sent to committee and never saw the light of day.

But with each subsequent session, the drum beat and the demonstrations in Filipino communities got louder for a payoff, as the grim chapter of war in the Philippines was recounted.

On July 26, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt conscripted Filipino men and boys into the U.S. armed forces and promised them benefits.

The Philippine Commonwealth Army and the Philippine Scouts served with GIs in the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East.

It was a precaution against the hellish aggression that Japan launched in Asia in 1937. But it really broke loose when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and countries and islands fell like dominos. The combined forces on the Bataan Peninsula and Corregidor Island resisted until their food ran out.

The Japanese Army and Navy starved them into surrendering. The 75,000 captured Filipinos and GIs were sent on foot to POW camps. Their 60-mile trek came to be known as the Bataan Death March, characterized by Japanese atrocities and murder.

Estimates vary about how many died on the six-day journey to Camp O'Donnell, the main POW camp. Wikipedia says up to 10,000 Filipinos and 650 Americans died. With camp deaths later figured in, it's estimated that half the marchers perished.

But after the war — and after Roosevelt had died — Congress immediately reneged on the benefits promise in its Rescissions Act of 1946.

As of last year, there were about 18,000 veteran survivors, two-thirds of them living in the Philippines, according to the National Alliance for Filipino Veterans Equity.

This year's congressional effort to make things right dissolved in partisan quibbling.

"The Republicans stopped it," Antonio said. "They say, 'Why give it here when we should be giving it to Iraqi war veterans?' Iraq is the priority, not the Philippines."

In January, though, there were high-level assurances that the benefits bill would finally pass.

Speaker of the Philippine legislature, Jose de Venecia Jr., happily announced that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had assured him by phone that a \$90 million-a-year bill "is being prioritized in Capitol Hill."

Also in January, Sen. Inouye and Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, who was recently convicted of corruption, visited Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. They told her the Senate would soon pass an equity bill. Then Arroyo conferred on Stevens the "Order of the Golden Heart with the rank of Grand Cross" for working for "the amelioration and improvement of the moral, social and economic conditions of the Filipino people."

In April, the Senate passed a bill providing full benefits for the Filipino vets living in the United States and \$300 a month for the vets in the Philippines. The House gutted it in September, and passed Rep. Bob Filner's bill that called for one-time payments of \$15,000 to Filipinos who are U.S. citizens, and \$9,000 to noncitizen Filipino veterans.

Neither chamber liked the other's version. The deadlock meant the lame duck Congress was through with the subject this year.

Most of the vets in SoMa, the TL and the Mission exist on maybe \$600 SSI support and live in privately regulated SROs, Antonio says. The private SROs don't have the strict rules of those connected to city programs, she says. Men can stretch their dollars by living three to four to a room and sleeping on Army cots.

Two Filipino vets in SoMa who would benefit from such legislation are the Damil brothers, Felix, 85, and Ceferino, 93. They live in a two-story house on Minna Street on the second floor with four other people. They share a room to save money.

Felix Damil joined the Philippine Scouts, a part of the U.S. 45th Infantry, in March 1946, six months after



Ceferino Damil can't forget the horrors he suffered 66 years ago.

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Bataan survivor recalls Death March

CEFERINO Damil, 93, remembers precisely the details of the day the U.S. Army Forces Far East surrendered in the Philippines to the Japanese, April 9, 1942. He was 25.

"That's when we started marching," Damil says. He holds up four fingers. "Four by four, to Camp O'Donnell." He fiddles with the controls on the little black box in front of him on the table. Wires lead from the box to his hearing aid earphones.

"Hot?" he repeats, squinting, showing missing teeth. "Yes and very, very bad. They gave us no water. We started at 11 in the morning."

He was with 75,000 American and Filipino soldiers on the sweltering 60-mile Bataan Death March across the Bataan peninsula to prisoner of war camps. During the six-day trek the troops were starved, beaten and some got their throats cut, others were disemboweled, or beheaded. Stragglers got the worst of it.

"If you couldn't walk, you got the rifle butt or bayonet," he says, sitting in a conference room at the Veterans Equity Center in the Bayanihan Community Center.

He lifts his arms above his head as if he's holding a rifle, grits his teeth and makes two vigorous downward thrusts at the table.

Most of the prisoners' possessions were confiscated. When Japanese guards found American money, they tore it up, Damil says, but Filipino money they happily declared good and spendable.

He survived on a small piece of sugarcane each day.

POW camp conditions were little better than the march. Damil wore a thin shirt, a pair of pants, no underwear, a cap and flimsy shoes for six months. A rice bag was his blanket.

the war ended, and became a clerk. He served for three years.

Felix heard there was a move afoot in Washington to get benefits for the Filipino vets. So in September 2002, in a ceremony at the U.S. Embassy in Manila, he became a U.S. citizen. And the next year left the small family rice and tobacco farm to come here. His brother followed two years later.

The benefits never arrived, and it could be questionable whether he would receive them as a post-war vet, although he could be made eligible for medical benefits.

"I've been praying for it," Felix says. "Already we are very old. I'm at a dying age. We have no real means for a good living. Just a little something a month" from the government would suit him.

Felix, who gets SSI and food stamps, comes on Thursdays for Food Bank produce and canned goods delivered to the Bayanihan Community Center, where the veterans' group has its office.

"It's barely enough to live on," Felix says. "We have to pay for water, rent and food. It keeps going up. You have to keep adjusting."

In December, his brother Ceferino, a widower, is going back to the Philippines and "I'll be alone," Felix says.

Ceferino is a Death March survivor. (See side-

Damil was made a camp section leader for 90 men he chose and assigned to work details, including getting water, tending horses, digging graves. Even sick prisoners were made to work. If too weak to stand, they were sent to a camp hospital, basically to die, because, Damil says, there was no doctor or nurse.

Dead men were stripped and bound at the ankles and wrists and carried on a pole. The bodies were buried, lying on their sides, 15 to 18 per pit.

"We got a spoonful of rice to eat at 10 in the morning," Damil says, "and another at 3 o'clock. That's all. We got one gallon of water a day," he said, his eyes growing wide. "That's for 90 men."

Damil's weight dropped from 130 pounds to 100. He suffered from malaria, beri beri and malnutrition.

Many Filipino POWs were released on Oct. 5, four months after Japan granted an amnesty for Filipino soldiers, and Damil was among them. He immediately requested medical treatment and was hospitalized in Baguio until Dec. 20. Then he was taken by truck to Tuguegarao, capital of Cagayan Valley, where the governor honored him.

But the war continued. When Damil felt well enough he rejoined the army in February 1945. "I was strong like a bull," he says. "I gave everything to the army."

He was discharged on May 7, 1946, and went home to live with his family who supported him.

Damil still suffers from the war illnesses. Even now, at 93, he has chills related to malaria. ■

—TOM CARTER

bar.) About 15, according to the center, live in San Francisco. As an early-signed U.S. Army soldier, Ceferino receives benefits through the legislation Congress passed for WW II GIs who survived the Bataan Death March atrocities. But vets who are residents of the Philippines only get half the amount that U.S.-residing vets get, a hitch that's been bitterly contested.

Ceferino's application was approved in 2004 for 90% of the maximum benefit. The next year he came to the United States to join his brother. He receives \$2,527 a month, Ceferino says, about \$30,000 a year.

He has practically lost his hearing, walks with a cane — slowly and hunched over — suffers chills and lower back pain from beatings as a POW. He still gets incensed recalling the war's brutalities but he's too old and tired to think that luck will turn for the vets in the Philippines for full benefits.

"Maybe it (the legislation) will have a chance," Ceferino says. "It would be something to spend before I die."

The 111th Congress will be different, but shadowed by the nation's dark economic outlook.

"Sen. Akaka said he would revisit the issue in January," said Antonio, whose grandfather fought in the war and is buried in Arlington Cemetery. "We'll see." ■