Remember Bataan

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On November 11, 1919 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Veterans' Day to commemorate Armistice Day, the temporary cessation of war between Germany and the Allied powers, which took effect on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918.

Armistice day was generally regarded as the end of the “war to end all wars.” Ninety-four years later we all know that another World War took place alongside many other wars that sacrificed the lives of so many.

Over a year ago, I embarked on the Bataan Legacy project to address the lack of information on the Filipino defenders of Bataan and Corregidor. It started out on a personal level as my father, Luis Gaerlan, was with the 41st Infantry Regiment. I grew up hearing his stories about the Bataan Death March and Capas, which he told us with great animation.

Many years later, these stories inspired me to write a historical fiction novel, In Her Mother's Image, set during WW II in the Philippines. During public readings of the book, I was flabbergasted to learn that not too many people in this country...
had heard of Bataan and its place in history. And even young
people with Filipino ancestors who fought during World War
II were unaware of its significance.

Moreover, most history books only mention the American
defenders, even though seven-eights of the main line of
resistance was held by Filipino soldiers who died at a ratio of
more than ten to one compared with the American soldiers.
Most of the fighting and the dying were borne by the Filipinos. And yet, their sacrifices have been ignored, derided and sometimes even maligned.

During the outbreak of WW II, the entire U.S. army consisted of fewer than 200,000 troops and ranked 17th among the world’s armed forces. Despite the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931), Nanking and Shanghai (1937), massive recruitment of soldiers did not take place until after July 26, 1941 when President Franklin Roosevelt federalized all organized units in the Philippines into the service of the U.S. Army Forces of the Far East. This was in direct response to the Japanese occupation of French Indochina on July 22, 1941.

Moreover, the Japanese bombed the American gunboat Tutuila in Chunking, China, on July 30, 1941. The Filipino soldiers barely had any training. Most of them were given WW I artillery and ammunition (50 percent of the ammunition were duds) and they were garbed in one set of khaki uniform, rubber-soled shoes and coconut husk helmets.

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General MacArthur did not expect war to happen until April
1942. He also deviated from War Plan Orange, which called for the prolonged defense of the Philippines from the Bataan Peninsula in the event of a successful Japanese invasion, where reinforcements could be transported from the United States. Resources were distributed according to a new plan, which called for meeting the enemy on the beaches.

On December 8, 1941, six hours after Pearl Harbor was bombed, the Philippines was invaded. The majority of U.S. air power was destroyed during the first day with the bombing of Clark and Iba Air Bases and two days later, naval power was severely crippled with the bombing of Sangley Naval Base in Cavite. On December 24 General MacArthur declared Manila an open city, and the defense plan was switched back to War Plan Orange so that all troops in Luzon were ordered to Bataan.
By January 1942 the troops were already on half rations and by February, quinine was no longer distributed. By March, it was down to quarter rations and five hundred men a day became ill with malaria in addition to dysentery, beriberi, avitaminosis and other diseases. Combat efficiency was down...
to 25 percent. By the beginning of April there were no longer any reserve troops, and only a few days’ worth of rations remained. Most of the men were suffering from disease and starvation.

Since the beginning of the war, they were told every day that help was on the way. Little did they know that their fate was already sealed on December 22, 1941 when President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met in Washington, DC, in what is now known as the Arcadia Convention, when they agreed to save Europe first.

The Fall of Bataan on April 9, 1942 is always remembered as the biggest single surrender in U.S. military history. Some 75,000 troops consisting of 63,000 Filipinos and 12,000 Americans were forced to surrender and march some 60 miles away under extreme tropical conditions with no provisions for food, water or shelter. Those who could no longer go on were beaten, bayoneted and some even beheaded by their Japanese captors. And civilians who tried to help were dealt with in the same manner. Between 10,000 to 15,000 Filipinos and 750 American soldiers died during the march.
What is not remembered today is how the defenders of Bataan, despite massive illness and starvation, held on for four months to delay the timetable of the Imperial Japanese Army and prevented them from reaching Australia. This enabled the Allied Forces to harness the resources that eventually turned the tide of war and led to the Allied victory. It must be remembered that Singapore fell after only a week and Indonesia almost immediately.

But despite their sacrifice, the Filipinos were once again betrayed in February 1946 when President Truman signed the First Supplemental Surplus Appropriation Rescission Act. A rider was inserted in this bill, which deemed the service of the Filipinos as not being full-time, thereby barring them from receiving the full benefits under the G.I. bill of rights.

When the United States declared war against Japan, the ravages of war never reached the continental United States. The war was fought in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Philippines. Approximately a million Filipino civilians died
during WW II and Manila, once the Pearl of the Orient, became the second most devastated city, next to Warsaw.

The sands of time are running out on the few remaining Filipino soldiers who sacrificed so much to defend the freedom that all of us are enjoying today. As Filipinos, let us take great pride in their sacrifice. We must also remember that we have a duty and an obligation to spread this legacy so that this generation and future ones could learn the lessons of war.

NOTE: Bataan Legacy will be presented on Saturday, November 9 at 11 a.m. at the Holy Child and St. Martin Episcopal Church at 777 Southgate Ave. in Daly City. Admission is free. For more information, please go to www.facebook.com/BataanLegacy.

Cecilia Gaerlan is a playwright/novelist/activist based in Berkeley, California. She created the Bataan Legacy Project to address the lack of information about the role of the Filipinos during World War II in the Philippines and to seek justice for the Filipino veterans whose rights as soldiers were rescinded in 1946.
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