

The Bells of Balangiga:
A Tale of Missed Opportunity

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The Philippine-American War broke out in 1899 hard on the heels of the Spanish American War. Although the conflict began as conventional warfare, American troops unexpectedly found themselves engaged in a guerilla war. This article examines one small incident that occurred on the island of Samar. It demonstrates how American soldiers completely misread a situation that resulted in a massacre that was the American Army's worst defeat since Custer's demise in 1876.

KEY WORDS: Philippine-American War; United States Army; Philippines; Balangiga; Samar; Leyte Gulf; massacre; guerilla war; insurgency; insurrection

In October, 1897, a major typhoon struck the Leyte Gulf. The storm had a terrible impact on the Philippines. Father Jose Algue of the Observatorio de Manila described the '*montaña o masa de agua*' (the mountain or mass of water) and reported that Samar and Leyte bore the brunt of the storm.¹ As a result of the typhoon, fishermen and farmers lost their livelihoods. Virtually all provisions that had been stored were destroyed. The *Barrier Miner*, a newspaper from Broken Hill, New South Wales, reported that an estimated 7,000 people were killed. Numerous ships were wrecked and the crews were lost.² The few photographs that exist of the aftermath clearly show vast areas wiped clean of trees, houses, churches, and crops. The coconut trees that the locals relied on for income were decimated by the typhoon, and a coconut palm takes four to five years to become productive. Conservative estimates of the resulting food shortage and economic collapse placed the period for recovery at a decade.³ But the town of Balangiga on the island of Samar did not have a decade to recover. American troops would arrive in four short years. The stage was set for the United States Army's worst defeat since George Armstrong Custer met his end at Little Big Horn twenty-five years earlier.

As the Spanish-American War ended in 1899, Filipinos expected to be liberated from Spain. Instead, the United States purchased the Philippines for 20 million dollars. There were Filipinos who appreciated the improvements that came with the American presence. But many of those who fought against Spain were now determined to throw off the new occupier of their lands. The Spanish-American War ended, and the Philippine-American War began.

On August 11, 1901, Company C of the Ninth United States Infantry arrived in Balangiga. They had been sent in response to the mayor's request for protection from *insurrectos*.⁴ The arrival was amiable on the surface, but there was an underlying tension on both sides. Town officials went to the American transport anchored in the bay to meet with Captain Thomas Connell and his officers. The meeting was cordial enough, but each side had a warning for the other. Connell informed the town officials that Company C had come in peace. However, he made it clear that he would meet any hostilities "with immediate and vigorous action." That was no empty threat. Company C was no stranger to combat. The seventy-four seasoned veterans arrived in the Philippines from China, where they fought the Boxer rebels and helped to capture Beijing. They were confident in their ability to handle any hostile situation.

For his part, the mayor informed Connell that the locals had massacred an entire regiment, leaving not a single man alive.⁵ No such incident is known to have occurred in the Balangiga region. It is possible that the mayor was simply trying to impress on the Americans that they should not take the goodwill of Balangiga for granted.

In spite of the somewhat testy introduction on both sides, members of Company C reported that 'Every possible courtesy was shown us by them [the Filipinos].'⁶ The initial interaction between the soldiers and the native population was, in fact, quite friendly. The soldiers tried to teach baseball to the locals who in turn tried to teach Filipino stick fighting to the

soldiers. There were tales of a romance between an American soldier and a Filipino woman, identified as Sergeant Frank Betron and Casiana “Geronimina” Nacionales.⁷ Valeriano Abanador, the local police chief, found a willing chess opponent in Company C’s surgeon, Major Richard Sill Griswold.⁸

Then in September, 1901, two drunken American soldiers tried to molest a local girl. Her brothers injured them in the process of rescuing their sister. Captain Connell took action against the Filipinos for attacking American soldiers. He knew the post was due for an inspection, and he felt intense pressure to have his command in order.

Connell ordered 148 local men rounded up for forced labor. They were held with only two small tents for shelter. Their families were finally allowed to bring food and water to them the following day. The next order was the confiscation of all *bolos*. *Bolos* were Philippine machetes used by workers in the fields, but equally adaptable to military purposes. However, in an oversight on Connell’s part, the seizure was confined to the town proper. The outlying barrios remained armed. Connell then ordered the seizure of any stores of rice and fish as well as all livestock. In an effort to prevent food and supplies from reaching the *insurrectos* in the surrounding hills, Connell also closed the port.⁹ In doing so, he cut the town’s economic lifeline. The locals relied on income from coconut oil, an industry that was just beginning to recover from the typhoon. But selling the oil required shipping it to Tacloban on the island of Leyte, and that required the use of the port. In addition, Connell began to interfere in local customs and, in doing so, he made a bad situation worse. He attempted to ban cockfighting. This was probably less out of concern for the welfare of the roosters and more because of the gambling and drinking that invariably accompanied the activity. But the locals saw it as an intrusion into their way of life.

The locals no longer saw the Americans as amiable visitors with whom they could coexist. Connell was unaware of the growing anger. The Americans had no interest in learning about the local culture, so Connell was not familiar with the Samar concept of *awod*. *Awod* refers to shame or loss of face due to a public slight. Once present, *awod* can only be removed by taking revenge as public as the original insult. In fact, failing to do so only invites further abuse.¹⁰ As the townspeople contemplated Connell's actions, this ancient concept rose to the surface and fueled their determination to remove the *awod*.

The Balangigans sought guidance from Valeriano Abanador, the local police chief who had connections with Vicente Lukban's most trusted officers. Lukban was the senior insurgent officer on Samar. Two of Lukban's officers, Captain Eugenio Daza and Pedro Duran, Sr, joined five locals to develop an ambitious plan. They would organize about 500 men into seven units. The participants represented not only Balangiga but the nearby towns of Lawaan, Giportos, and Quinapundan.¹¹ They planned to attack while the soldiers were at breakfast when most of the Americans would be concentrated in a small area and most would be unarmed. Only a few guards would have their rifles.¹² The insurgents knew they had to be successful. Failure would result in a terrible retribution by the Americans. Little did they know that success would bring the same result.

The soldiers of Company C continued their daily activities, unaware that anything had changed. They supervised the labor gang of local men cleaning up garbage and chopping down brush that surrounded the town. The mayor offered to increase the size of the workforce by bringing in men from the countryside who owed taxes. Connell agreed to add the laborers to the workforce. Records put the number between forty and eighty. Some of the soldiers were nervous about the presence of these new workers. They were very muscular, and the soldiers

thought the men had a dangerous look to them.¹³ The new workers were, in fact, *insurrectos*. Unbeknownst to Captain Connell, he had just welcomed General Vicente Lukban's best *bolomen* into Balangiga.

The Americans had the greatest confidence in the power of their firearms. Lieutenant Edward Bumpus noted, 'We have scouted over all the country within a radius of several miles of this post, and have not been troubled by any *ladrones* [robbers] with *bolo* or gun. As we never go out without arms, and hardly ever alone, no native is liable to bother an American soldier if he values his health.'¹⁴

On September 7, Lieutenant Colonel Morris Foote, the commander of the garrison at Basey, located about ten miles from Balangiga, arrived to meet with Connell. On September 1, *insurrectos* had attacked a group of soldiers who were checking telegraph lines. Foote wrote, 'I went to Balangiga on the [September] 7th and warned Tommy Connell about them [the *insurrectos*]. . . . Possibly poor Connell did not fully realize just how treacherous and dangerous these devils are.'¹⁵

Abanador informed the Americans that Balangiga would celebrate the anniversary of its founding on September 27. People began to arrive from the countryside. Knowing of the shortages, most of them brought food. Six men carried a wooden box. The Americans examined it and found that it contained a statue of Christ. Had they examined it more carefully, they would have discovered *bolos* hidden under the statue. Connell was uneasy, but as long as the food was eaten in the town and not transported to the *insurrectos*, he would allow it. As sentry Adolf Gamlin paced his rounds, he noticed women and children leaving the town. He reported it to Sergeant Henry Scharer, but the sergeant did not investigate.¹⁶

There was a gathering at the church, which was normal on the day of a fiesta. It was not, however, normal for the men to wear dresses in an effort to disguise the lack of women in the town. The men in the church posted lookouts to watch for the approach of American soldiers. They tied their *bolos* and knives to their wrists so they wouldn't lose them in the fighting. The few women left in Balangiga prepared water tubes to take to the laborers in the morning. But this time, the tubes did not contain water. They contained *bolos*. All was in readiness.

Reveille sounded at 6 a.m. on the morning of September 28. Company C turned out as usual. By 6:30 the soldiers gathered at the outdoor mess for breakfast. Typically, most of them left their rifles in the barracks. Suddenly Abanador rushed out, grabbed Gamlin's rifle from him, smashed the rifle butt into the man's head, and tried to fire the weapon. But, unfamiliar with the Krag Jorgenson, he was unable to fire. Private George Allen later remembered, 'I can see the chief of police now as he made his attack.... Things happened so quickly after, that it is surprising to me that any of us were ever left to tell the tale.'¹⁷

The church bells began to ring as a signal that the attack had begun. The doors of the church slammed open and men swarmed out, *bolos* at the ready. It took the soldiers a moment to realize what was happening. The mess tent was a prime target. Many of the men there were killed where they sat. Those who were able to fought back with whatever they had at hand. They threw rocks and cans of food at the attackers. The cook dumped boiling water on his assailant. While some men were able to escape the mess tent, within minutes twenty soldiers lay dead there.

The soldiers were swarmed on five fronts by the *insurrectos*. The three American officers, who were in their quarters, were a main target. Two were killed almost immediately. Connell managed to grab his Krag and jump out a window, but was killed by more than a dozen

Filipinos as soon as he hit the ground. Some of the soldiers were able to get to their Krag. Others fought with axes, knives, and rocks. As soon as the bells started ringing, the laborers grabbed the smuggled *bolos* and rushed to the municipal building where they knew guns were stored. The soldiers also raced in that direction. Another twenty Americans were killed in the fight for weapons. Only a few minutes into the attack, and forty soldiers lay dead.

Abanador's main concern going into the attack was that his men would inflict great damage, but would not be able to keep all the soldiers from reaching their weapons. This is precisely what happened. And there was another difficulty: the Filipinos who were able to get rifles were unfamiliar with them, and could not consistently fire them. There were only twenty soldiers who were still able to fight, but they were armed with Krag and knew how to use them. The tide was turning. Abanador called for retreat. Some of the attackers were trapped in the municipal building. They tried to surrender, but the soldiers were in no mood to take prisoners and opened fire.¹⁸

When they went to breakfast at 6:30 that morning, there were 74 American soldiers in Balangiga. Twenty minutes later, 45 were dead or died shortly after of their wounds. Only five were uninjured. Over 100 Filipinos had been killed. The senior soldier was Sergeant Frank Betron. Betron didn't believe they would be able to hold the town until help arrived. He ordered an evacuation by boat. The soldiers removed the firing bolts from the Krag they didn't take with them and threw the bolts into the river. A few soldiers remembered that the American flag was still flying over the municipal building. They ran back to take it down and brought it with them. Five boats loaded with the survivors, most of them wounded, left Balangiga and headed for Basey. The Filipinos made a halfhearted attempt to pursue, but the soldiers held them off with rifle fire. Their progress was slow, and they didn't arrive in Basey until 4 o'clock the

following morning. One of the boats had been swamped and the men in it put ashore. They were finally rescued by the *USS Pittsburgh*.

Abanador's fears of retribution came to pass. The American public was outraged at news of the massacre. An article in the *Minneapolis Journal* was typical. The headline blared "The Acme of Treachery." The article went on to say that "The Filipino is a past master at treachery" and said the incident at Balangiga was typical of the Filipino character.¹⁹

General Jacob 'Hell-roaring Jake' Smith was put in charge of the response. Smith told Lieutenant Colonel Littleton Waller, 'I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn. The more you kill and burn, the better you will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms against the United States.' When Waller asked for clarification on the age limit, Smith told him ten years old. Somewhat stunned, Waller asked, 'Persons of ten years and older are those designated capable of bearing arms?' Smith confirmed that he meant exactly that. *The Manila Times* announced that 'Extermination has been decided upon in retaliation for the massacre.'²⁰ Thousands of Filipinos were killed, and the survivors were left to scavenge for food.²¹ Although the punitive expeditions left Samar a wasteland, Waller refused to carry out orders to kill ten year olds or carry out summary executions. He was acquitted of charges at his court martial. Smith also faced court martial. He was convicted and drummed out of the Army.

Members of the 11th Infantry occupied Balangiga and confiscated the bells. One of the bells is currently at Camp Red Cloud, the post of the 9th Infantry Regiment in South Korea. The other two are at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The Bells of Balangiga have not been forgotten. The people of Balangiga would like to have them back. In 2006, the mayor of the town said, 'Hopefully, [the bells] will be returned to us. The Americans already

cared for the bells for more than 100 years, and it is about time now that we ourselves would take care of those bells.’²²

It is a major understatement to say that the course of Philippine-American relations has not always run smoothly. The fighting in the Philippine-American War was intense and ugly on both sides, and is still a source of contested memory. The incident at Balangiga might have been a justified uprising on the part of Filipinos in resistance to foreign oppression. It might have been a treacherous and uncalled for sneak attack resulting in numerous American casualties. More probably, it was a little of each.

But hard feelings don’t last forever. On October 20, 1944 General Douglas MacArthur waded ashore at Palo Beach, fulfilling his promise to return.²³ The Filipinos once again looked to the United States for liberation, this time from Japan. The Philippines gained full independence on July 4, 1946, and it is no accident that the Philippine flag is primarily red, white, and blue. And although Philippine Independence Day is celebrated on June 12 in recognition of independence from Spain in 1898, July 4 remains Philippine-American Friendship Day. According to the *Manila Times*, ‘The celebration of Philippine-American Friendship is meant to remind us—and Americans—of our two countries’ long-standing friendship.’²⁴

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