

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Antonio Taguba Day 2

Please Note: Due to a machine-automated transcription process, there are significant errors. The times noted are taken from the unedited audio files and do not match the edited videos.

Antonio Taguba [00:00:05] Well, the Filipino Veterans Recognition Education Project was born out of frustration in 2014. It was a group of us that met every week in some Irish bar would be happy to hear the story like on a Wednesday or Thursday, and we discussed members, staff members from Congress and we didn't call ourselves feel better at the time. We're always strategizing of how are we going to get Congress to change their mind? How are we going to get Army and VA to give due to our veterans on their benefits and the fifty thousand dollars they're owed to them with their back pay or the nine thousand that they're resided in the Philippines?

Antonio Taguba [00:00:50] So we basically said we need to do a leap ahead. And when they asked me what's that leap ahead look like, I said, well, let's go after the recognition project, because I was involved with a Japanese American World War two veterans recognition project as well to get their congressional medal. So we explore that and we said that's doable, just takes a lot of hard work. We have to incorporate ourselves as a final on C three with an employee ID number from, uh, from IRS. So that took about a few months. We had a lawyer that was our general counsel. And around June of 2014, we launched the program and our mission was one to face mission is to create public awareness in order for us to gain recognition for the veterans with a Congressional Gold medal. The second part of our mission was to create an education program because we don't we didn't want just a recognition. We wanted to educate the American public on why we embark on this mission.

Antonio Taguba [00:02:13] And largely we were successful on the Gold Medal Act of twenty sixteen was passed by Congress on November 16, 2016, November 14, 2016. And President Obama signed it into law on December 16, 2016. So a lot of celebration, a lot of tears. And I was crying when Congress approved it that we actually accomplished that mission, even though was a lot of naysayers that said this is too hard, we'll never get that discriminates again, blah to us. I told my group that if if you feel like it's not going to pass, if you feel like it's going to fail, then I don't need you in my. Because we've postured for success, the veterans were postured for failure, even though they won the war, but they want us to be successful for them. So I need people who think what a winning attitude and we accomplish that. In fact, we have not done since October twenty four thousand seventeen. We've done 60 award ceremonies. So now, coincidentally, with that concurrently we have now embarked on education program. Now, why the education program? We want again to raise awareness and educate the American public on what is this medal about, what constituted having this passed by Congress who were to be honored and recognized tomorrow. Sixty thousand soldiers.

Antonio Taguba [00:03:56] So this is what we have today. This is why we're having this conversation today with we organize ourselves to just be providing award ceremonies. So we organize ourselves to have educators, these academicians, to help us conduct more research as one. We also partnered with other organizations that are willing to extend the story of two hundred sixty thousand soldiers, Americans and Filipinos, who fought for this war during World War Two in the Philippines. We've contacted institutions at the Smithsonian to help us to partner with us so we can launch this program in October. Twenty twenty. And we want to have this. This concept be realized is a website. It's like a school without borders are filled not just with historical artifacts associated with it. And we want to talk about the colonial period, the war, war period of World War to the post war with the recision and the contemporary period of what happened to them because they fought a war. Then they had to fight another war with Congress, with the passage of recision, and then they fought another war in there and their plight to gain US citizenship and then another one to gain recognition from this country, let alone the U.S. Congress.

Antonio Taguba [00:05:26] That story is not going to be told unless we do this education project and we committed ourselves to making sure that that story also becomes enshrined in American history, much like the Navajo code talkers, much like the Japanese American soldiers, much like the rest of America, the African-Americans who fought during the Civil War. Because this story is part of American history and we need to do this. For the longest time, nobody ever asked them what happened to them. We read about that. We saw footage on the news that they are protesting with no explanation of why they were protesting, chaining themselves on the fence outside the White House. So now we have this opportunity and they're very they're very open with it. At first they reluctant because maybe nobody will believe them. But now we have the opportunity for them to say something about it before they all die. And they know that they needed to say this. We need their family members to the extent that their stories, because unless we have the stories told to the American public, they'll die with them and we can't afford to fail them again. And that's what we're going to do. I know my mother will tell you three days or more, but it happened during the war because she was very vocal about it.

Antonio Taguba [00:06:51] My dad wasn't as much I know because we we never asked him until I asked him four months before he died in 2011. And then all of a sudden he lit up telling us how the Japanese treated them, telling us how his friends all were died along the way in the Bataan Death March. And I've always wondered why on a weekly basis, when we were all living in Hawaii on a Saturday or Sunday, he would drive down our barbershop and he would talk to his what to buddies until they all passed away. And so when I asked him what happened to them, he said he was beaten, they stole the Japanese soldiers, stole his ring and his watch, and he was marched off even though he was sick with malaria. Then he escaped and later became a gorilla, which we did not know that he was a gorilla because his record said he was a farmer and a truck driver. And I think there's something had happened to him that he did not want to elaborate, like every veteran which you go through the brutality of war. And maiming and burning and things of that nature, nobody would want to brag about that, and I think he kept to himself.

Antonio Taguba [00:08:13] One interesting thing, though, is that he never told us that he was married three times, which was a fascinating story. And then when I asked him if I had brothers and sisters, someone said there were nobody else but his own children. And but he did say the next day that he there was a baby boy to his wife, number two. So those are the kinds of stories that that we've never heard before and that was not able to record that other than writing it down, which I should. But my mother detailed for us kids what had happened during the war, which was a constant reminder of we should be blessed when

we eat our food. We should be blessed that we had close to where we shall be blessed that we had a roof over our head and we should be blessed that we were alive. So it was just me, my thinking when I asked my my my group, you know, if we don't accelerate this, if we do it sequentially, not concurrently, as what we had planned to do in two years time, most of these veterans will go through dementia. Most of this veterans will die. We were not able to record any of this stuff. The families probably will not record what had happened during the war. And that will be very sad because I was thinking about my own family on this.

Antonio Taguba [00:09:48] So I tell my kids and my brothers and sisters that if ever we saw a picture of my dad smiling a photograph and say, I wonder how old he was at the time and was he ever in the war? There's only one other picture of him with a group photo when he was repatriated in nineteen forty five. Nineteen forty six. That's the only picture I have of him. And so there was a group of men sitting us standing and just bear with me here. So I asked my brothers and sisters if you could find dad how he looked like when he was twenty one or twenty two at the time and they couldn't find him. I found him. I said, take a look at this picture when he later and take a look at this picture. Did he ever change the way he called his hair? You never did so easy for him, so you should be easy for us to picture this. A handsome man. You know, it's very obvious that we should be able to pick him up. But to answer your question, two years is how we want to develop, create, populate and launch a website and education curriculum education program that is like education without walls, classroom without walls. And if we don't do this in two years time, a lot of this documentation, a lot of the stories would be lost forever. And you can't bring veterans who have passed the way back into the living room. It's just that way. You know, a good example is Miss Jack Thatta. He lived across Capitol Hill when I met him several years ago. And I'll hear his stories about he would go to Congress, walk the halls of Congress to try and convince members of Congress that they should support their benefits. And I don't think his wife was with him. His children were not with him. And when he passed away, everything that he knew, what with him, everything he and his friends.

Antonio Taguba [00:12:11] Discussed went with them like Mr. Bacani, also that Mr. Jesse Baltazar, who I sat with when we launched this program in October of 2014, and he was sitting next to me and ninety six years old at the time, Stage four cancer had a heart attack. And you just basically said, General Taguba, how much longer do we have to wait? And he wasn't talking about the meeting that we were having. He wasn't talking about the lunch that he just ate. He was talking about when am I going to see that? What can listeners to your voice do today when people do to help make this a reality? Just by listening, just by when we launched this program, just by logging in, just by reading the content, just by looking at the pictures, much like the stories I shared, shared with the veterans like last night. There are three gentlemen there that didn't know anything about the Filipino World War, two veterans, let alone why, why what we're doing here, televising everything. So I basically asked why we we all know about D-Day. We celebrate that on June six of every year. But they didn't know about a day, which was the liberation of the Philippines. So it's a little bit of the education, a short version of it all. Six minutes of it showed them a video. And basically all of them said we never knew that happened. They didn't know that about the recision act. We didn't know that was two hundred sixty thousand people that fought. But they knew MacArthur famous man. And well, we want the soldiers to be as famous as General MacArthur. We want the faces of the soldiers to be with the photo of General MacArthur that that a lot of people, thousands of people fought for the United States, not just in Europe, but they also fought in the Pacific, mainly the Philippines, which they didn't know was a colony of the United States. So that's a lot of history that's obscured or forgotten or shelved in bookcases, collecting dust.

Antonio Taguba [00:14:38] And I think it will be a big fault for America's public if they didn't know anything about that when we started the program, they were it was painfully obvious that Filipinos were under the command of American officers. General MacArthur, most of the 90 percent of them were led by a Caucasian army officers. And we did not want them to be discounted as well. They fought as a unit. And if there were ever and it's not just entirely Army, we had Marines there. We had the United States Navy, all white Americans, that Coast Guard, harbor defense folks, Coast Guards. So we made it painfully clear in the law, public law, one one four two six five that any of these Americans fought with them or suffered with them. A baton or court order were also eligible for the Congressional Medal. We didn't want our bill to be looked at as entirely exclusive to the Filipinos. We want it to be inclusive for those who also fought, because those three thousand prisoners of war, Americans primarily who were on health ships, for example, there, were segregated from the Filipinos and put on ships and and prisoner of war camps in Japan, Korea and also China. But they suffered as much as the Filipinos. They bled the same way. So why exclude them? And that's part of our program that if any of them we could we'll just fill out the application. They, too, will be eligible for the Congressional Medal. And we have done that. We've done several ceremonies at White Sands, primarily members of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corridor or any other groups that they belong to. And there are very surprised that there were eligible. Why not? You know, we didn't want to. There were the Philippines where he discriminated back in World War Two because segregation, what his height until 1950 to. We want to include them and we want to include them in this story as well, so we're not going to discount them.