

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Chris Capozzola

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.

Chris Capozzola [00:00:05] I became a historian because I was interested in the stories in sort of the sense that everywhere you go, someone else had already been there before. They thought about the same questions that lived through many of the same things and that it just seemed like a way to kind of connect with with just different ways of living that I got excited about. So I'm particularly interested in 20th century American history. And for me, that is a history that's not just about what happens in the United States and the politics and the culture of the United States at home, but also looks at the United States in the world that particularly in the 20th century, Americans have always been traveling abroad. They've been immigrating to the United States. They've been involved in wars and trade. And that's, I think, a crucial part of our history. So I never really expected to become a historian of the Philippine military experience that this was, for me, a discovery and that I almost sort of stumbled on a history that I at least had never been taught. And it's a kind of very simple story of how I came across it, that I was sort of thinking a little bit of I was doing some other research about the First World War.

Chris Capozzola [00:01:35] And during the First World War, the United States had a draft. And I was talking to a group of other historians and one of them asked me, did the draft apply in Philippines and World War One? And it was a colony of the United States. And I simply didn't know the answer to that question. So I went and I looked it up and tried to figure that out. And then I realized the answer, by the way, is no. And that's a story for another day. But I realized that there's this organization that I had never heard about, that I had never been taught about, called the Philippine Scouts, and that over the course of the early 20th century, tens of thousands of Filipinos serve in the US armed forces. And I thought, well, why don't we know more about this? And that began for me, a kind of journey of historical research that then also connected me up with Filipino veterans who are still around today in eight in eighty ninety eight, the United States goes to war with Spain in the Spanish American war. This is largely a conflict in the Caribbean and dealing with Cuba and Puerto Rico. But one of Spain's other colonies is the Philippines. And in 1898, the United States Navy enters the Philippines and eventually occupies the Philippines. This is coming in the middle of a Philippine revolution, an independence movement that Filipinos are trying to claim their national independence from Spain. And they certainly don't want to give away their national independence to the United States instead.

Chris Capozzola [00:03:12] And what we end up with is particularly from eighteen ninety nine to nineteen to three years of very intense conflict and war, where Filipinos are fighting for their national sovereignty and Americans are fighting against that to to defend their new colony. In part, Americans realize they don't have enough soldiers in the Philippines, they

don't have enough boots on the ground, and they have experience from the 19th century in the 19th century army with a force called the Indian Scouts. And the Indian scouts were native soldiers who were fighting with American troops against other native nations. And the United States decides to replicate this model in the Philippines. And so in eighteen ninety nine, they established a force called the Philippine Scouts, and in nineteen no one comes officially part of the US Army. So the Philippine scouts originally were brought on to the US armed forces to be scouts, and it was thought that they would really know the territory and the language culture. And to a large extent, at the beginning in particular, that's what they do.

Chris Capozzola [00:04:24] But by the time that the Philippine American war starts to wind down in nineteen 02, it's time for a lot of the American soldiers to go home back to the United States. But the United States has this new colony and they need soldiers to defend it. And the Philippine scouts over the course of the 20th century start to become sort of the main troops in the region. By the nineteen twenties. There are more Philippine scouts in the Philippines than there are regular US Army soldiers. These are, for the most part, men who serve long periods of time, sometimes full 30 years, and often their own sons or grandsons would enlist after them. So they are incredibly disciplined soldiers. They're very well trained and they're some of the best marksmen in the entire US Army because they have sort of 30 years of target practice and they don't see a lot of action in the Philippines until the Second World War begins. And so as far as the war begins, Philippine scouts are the best trained in some ways the most experienced Filipino soldiers in the country. And many of them transfer to a new army, the Philippine Commonwealth Army, as its officers. And they play a key role in defending the Philippines in the period from late nineteen forty one through the defeats at Bataan and Corregidor in 1940 to the independence of the Philippines is a promise that's made by the US government by President Franklin Roosevelt in nineteen thirty four with the passage of a law called the Tydings McDuffee Act. And this law is passed in the nineteen thirties. But it says We promise we will give independence to the Philippines on July 4th. Nineteen forty six. Now, no one knew when the Tydings McDuffee Act was passed that World War Two was coming and no one knew that World War Two would end in August of nineteen forty five. But after American troops returned to the Philippines in nineteen forty four, after the Japanese are defeated, it's an open question. Will we still honor this pledge of independence? And Filipinos are asking Americans, will you honor this pledge? And President Franklin Roosevelt and then later President Harry Truman both agree very quickly that independence is going ahead on schedule.

Chris Capozzola [00:06:57] That independence is going to create a little bit of a puzzle for the Philippine scouts. These are Filipinos, these are citizens of the Philippines, subjects of the United States, but they're about to become independent, but they're soldiers in the US Army. And so the US Army decides effectively to close down the Philippine scouts. Some of them transfer into other roles. Many of them actually participate in the occupation and rebuilding of Japan after World War Two. But the force itself is closed down in nineteen forty seven. The very last scouts leave in nineteen forty nine. The Recision Act is at heart a broken promise, and to understand why that broken promise hurts so much, you have to understand the promise that was made at the beginning. So you have to back up to July nineteen forty one. So this is a point where Europe is already at war, where Asia is already at war. Japan and China are fighting each other. Japan is aggressive throughout Southeast Asia and in and in July, nineteen forty one Japanese troops move into the French colony of Indochina. What's now Vietnam. That the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, understands that this is a threat to the Philippines. He creates a new force

called Yusifiyah and US armed forces of the Far East. And what this is, it brings together basically all of the troops, all of the service personnel, different forces that are in the western Pacific already. So regular US Army troops, Philippine scouts and soldiers in the Philippines, Commonwealth Army. And he says basically, you are all now in the service of the United States. And they march under the American flag. They are collaborating to defend the Philippines from a possible Japanese invasion. Now, we all know that invasion comes right, that Pearl Harbor is not just an attack on one base in Hawaii, it's also an attack on the Philippines. And within days of Pearl Harbor, Japanese troops invade the Philippines, use U.S. soldiers are there to beat them. Filipinos and Americans marching together into the same forces under the same flag. And this looks like a combined effort to nations as brothers sort of fighting to defend this territory. Now, that comes with some legal consequences, some some promises that are that are promises made by law. So service in user fee is service in the armed forces of the United States. That's how everyone understands it during the war.

Chris Capozzola [00:09:59] And they understand that that means that all the rules that apply to to American soldiers also apply to Philippine soldiers, that that, for example, it's it's pretty sort of typical that if you're a if you're an immigrant or a noncitizen fighting in another army, that you'll be naturalized, then in fact, tens of thousands of Filipino Americans or who join in California and Hawaii and elsewhere are naturalized over the course of the war. You also assume that your army is going to take care of you if you're injured in war, that that your army is going to take care of your your children or your spouse if you're if you're killed in war. And those are promises and expectations that anyone would have in joining a military force. And certainly that anyone who's fighting side by side with American soldiers to defend American territory ought to be able to expect that. Now be when when the US returns in large numbers in nineteen forty four, when Douglas MacArthur returns to Tacloban and later in nineteen forty four, there are sort of tens of thousands of Philippine guerrillas. These are men and women who have been fighting in the mountains, in the jungles and the plains of the Philippines against the Japanese at great risk to themselves and their families. That the acting president of the Philippines, Sergio Mena, announces that the guerrillas are officially part of the Philippine army. When he does that, that also legally brings them into Yousefi. And in fact, Douglas MacArthur depends on he respects them and needs the support of the guerrillas. So they are also now fighting under the American flag for the defense and liberation of American territory. So here we have what looks to be a pretty straightforward situation. Promises are made, laws are passed, soldiers are fighting. And but that's when the rescission act comes out. And this, I think, really is one of the the rescission act is really one of the worst things Americans have ever done to the people who have served to them and.

Chris Capozzola [00:12:28] At the Rescission Act was a big sort of complicated law, but it has a couple of provisions that specifically affect use of soldiers, people who have served during World War Two. What it announces is that service in Yousefi was not active service in the armed forces of the United States. It was with the armed forces of the United States. And that difference between in and with and has enormous consequences for the lives of soldiers themselves and, of course, their families for generations to come because it excludes them from access to veterans benefits and health care and also from naturalization and citizenship rights. So there's an added complication that there are plenty of non-citizens serving in the US armed forces. During World War Two, there had been immigrants and people who join from from all over the world. The United States adopts at the very beginning of the war in nineteen forty two, a series of laws called the Nationality Act, which basically promises that people who are serving in the armed forces of the

United States can be naturalized as US citizens. And over the course of the war, plenty of them are from from dozens of countries all around the world. And some Filipinos who are serving in other theaters during the Second World War are naturalized. And many Filipinos who are serving in the Philippines, either in the scouts and the guerillas or other forces, believe, rightly that the Nationality Act applies to them. But what's complicated is that in order to become a US citizen, you have to find a naturalization officer. You have to file your paperwork and the United States government. And this is well documented in a crucial period from late nineteen forty five to early nineteen forty six withdrew from the Philippines.

Chris Capozzola [00:14:32] Any INS officers who had the legal authority to conduct naturalizations and those officers only returned after nineteen forty six after the Philippines was independent and after the provisions of the Nationality Act had expired. And so tens of thousands of Filipino soldiers who had just served the US during the war and had legal rights to naturalization simply didn't have anyone that they could take those rights to. And this is another sort of heartbreaking promise that I think is just as important as the decision act for understanding sort of why why Filipino soldiers and the feel that they had rights that were taken away from them. Well, I think we don't really know. And there are conflicting explanations for it. One of the explanations is that the Philippine government, the new civilian government that was set up right after the Japanese leave was worried that if if Filipino soldiers have the opportunity to naturalize and migrate to the United States, that one hundred thousand of their youngest, hardest working and best trained workers would leave the country. And this new country would start off sort of as as you know, would start off in trouble. That might be true. And there's another argument that says that it was the American government that that worried that one hundred thousand Filipinos without without a lot of English skills, without without jobs, without connections in America would suddenly sort of migrate and end up in in California or other West Coast areas, and that this would create social problems, unemployment and other issues.

Chris Capozzola [00:16:26] And if if there ever was an answer to this question in the archives, those documents are lost. And this this issue generated a series of court cases in the nineteen seventies. And a lot of historians and lawyers and even veterans themselves went looking for the answer to this question. And we just don't know. I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out why I never learned why the story of the Philippines in World War Two was not part of my American history classes. And I think there are a couple of explanations. The one is that I think Americans have never really grappled with the fact that we not only acquired territories in eighteen ninety eight in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and elsewhere, but that we maintained them and that the Philippines was a colony of the United States for almost 50 years, and that even when the Philippines ceased to be a colony of the United States, it was still connected to the United States through military alliances and through immigration and family connections. And I think American history has just erased so much of that because we don't like to think of ourselves as an empire, we think of ourselves as as a republic, an empire. Empires are those other countries that whether it was the British that we revolted against or or the evil empire of the Soviet Union we were battling against, it was it was never us. And I think it has been the task of Filipinos and Puerto Ricans and others to keep reminding Americans of that. But I think as a historian, it's also our task to teach Americans and as students to learn this history and to really make it part of of US history and not just Filipino history. I think this is a crucial part of the story of the greatest generation of the people who lived through World War Two and built the America that followed. And I think to really understand that generation, you need to understand all their stories and understanding the experiences of Filipinos in the Philippines during World War Two and the lives and the

efforts that they made after the war, whether in the Philippines or in the United States as part of just the great story of the 20th century.

Chris Capozzola [00:19:02] And I think it opens up windows into all aspects of America's history and America's history in the world with other countries. After the Recision Act was passed in nineteen forty six, there were critics who tried to get it repealed, who wanted it undone. Even President Harry Truman, who signed it, never really wanted to sign it. And he actually sort of right after he signed it, said this does not relieve us of our moral obligation to Philippine veterans. And he felt that it was a regrettable decision for the rest of his life. By the time you get to the nineteen sixties and seventies, some of the Filipino veterans are realizing that they might actually have a legal case and that they could make either that they had been discriminated against on the basis of race or just that the bureaucratic mechanisms that were used to deprive Filipinos of their rights were sort of were done illegally. So between the late sixties and the late 70s, you see dozens of cases in American courts where Filipinos are trying to kind of make these claims and they're documenting their service.

Chris Capozzola [00:20:21] They're digging into the history of the recision, and they're trying to convince courts that this was a form of discrimination, a deprivation of equal protection in the 14th Amendment. Those court cases fail almost every time, but by the late nineteen seventies, early nineteen eighties, and as opportunities are running out in courts, Filipino veterans and their advocates start to say, well, forget about the courts. Let's look somewhere else. Let's look to the legislature. And they're also realizing that after the nineteen sixty five Immigration Act, there are lots more Asian-Americans, not just Filipino Americans, but Asian-Americans from all different parts of the world. And they're voting and they have representatives in Congress, representatives including World War Two veterans who know this history, who know what Filipinos did during the war and who start to advocate for them. And it's a grassroots movement and that involves sort of ordinary Filipino veterans, people who are not political activists, people who are just learning how to kind of claim their rights. But they're connecting up with congressional lobbyists and staffers who know how to get bills passed. And they're finding leaders in the Filipino community, in the Asian-American community, in the veteran community who are looking to undo the mistake of the recision act. It is a decades long effort to achieve naturalization rights first in 1990 and then equity in veterans benefits in two thousand nine. But I think it's one of the great civil rights stories of the late 20th century. You know, when we think about the the civil rights movement, we think about African-Americans fighting for political and economic rights in the South and in other places, but they weren't in the end just fighting for African-American rights. They were actually fighting for all Americans rights, for redefining what it meant to be an American, redefining how you can make a claim on the Constitution and how to be a citizen in the fullest sense of the term.

Chris Capozzola [00:22:41] And I think that was one of the gifts of the civil rights movement to Filipino veterans. It showed them that you can file a court case, that you can go to Capitol Hill, that you can find allies that you might need to protest. And many of these veterans marched and many of them went on symbolic hunger strikes and many of them chained themselves to the White House. And these are the tactics of political action, of civil disobedience that they are learning from the civil rights movement. And I think as a historian, what this shows us is that these movements have consequences for decades to come and that all of us are learning from other Americans what it means to really be citizens of this country. What's striking about this history of Filipino veterans of the Second World War is that these are people who in twenty nineteen we can still meet and talk to

and they're not young, but they're still with us. And they have memories that go very far back of things that they fought for, things they wanted, things they dreamed of and that they sometimes got and sometimes were denied. And I think that that's a legacy that that any American of any age can sort of grab on to and learn from while we have this chance so that we can ask ourselves, if you're a young person today who, you know, what do I need to do to make sure that the military service of the people, of people in the United States is honored and respected because you don't want to have to apologize to someone who is one hundred years old down the road. So what are we doing today to ensure that that service is being honored and respected and and and and that rights are being respected as well?

Chris Capozzola [00:24:49] So I knew about the work of General Taguba on behalf of veterans, and I also knew about the efforts that many of his friends and colleagues have been making on their behalf, people like John Melegrito, Marie Blanco. I actually first met them in the archives reading documents and letters and petitions that they had been writing to Senator Daniel Inouye or Representative Patsy Mink, really sort of advocating for for veterans. And then I was sort of connected up with feel that rap as they were putting together the Congressional Gold Medal efforts because they needed they needed historians. They needed to get their facts right. If we were going to convince the American Congress to honor this military service, you needed to make sure that you had every T crossed and every I dotted to get that right. And so they they brought on. A group of us have historians, military scholars and others who could really sort of ensure that this history was getting told and accurate and objective way as possible. I think the Congressional Gold Medal. Honors individual soldiers and service personnel and their families, but so many of those people are gone by now. What I think the Congressional Gold Medal really does is it writes these people into history and it sort of documents for four centuries to come. Right. What they did and and makes you ask, so what did you what happened in World War two, that that was so important. And we'll go back to that question for years to come. I actually spent a fair bit of time in California and the Bay Area doing research and interviews for for my own research and spent a lot of time at two of the different veterans centers. And that was a work with mostly with senior citizen populations. And I was really struck by just the fact that sort of ordinary people who you see sort of walking around the neighborhood and have these stories of the Second World War of things that they saw, things they did, choices they made and that that are inspiring in some cases are really harrowing and quite frightening and others.

Chris Capozzola [00:27:21] And I was really struck by that and struck by the humility of all of the all of the veterans and their family members that I that I talked to working with. FilVetRep has been for me the first time, I've really seen how things get done in Washington. And, you know, in third grade, you learn about how a bill becomes a law. It's not that easy. Right. And it takes a lot of time and effort and persistence. And I've been able to kind of really see the persistence of FilVetRep members here, especially here in Washington, but also their support from all around the country. And that persistence helps us understand why these issue USAFE, was established in July nineteen forty one, it had three key components. It had the regular US Army, it had the Philippine scouts and it had the Philippine Commonwealth Army. This was an army and training for this country that was going to become independent in nineteen forty six. Now, when the Japanese invade and conquer the Philippines, those forces disintegrate and many of them surrender, they're on the Bataan Death March, many of them flee. But that doesn't mean that they stop fighting and that many of them sort of take to the mountains and reestablish their military organizations and recruit new soldiers into guerrilla armies. Some of those guerrilla armies

fight the Japanese face to face. Some of them engage in acts of sabotage or espionage. Some of them actually are actually mostly acting to protect civilians from from the Japanese right now to just sort of make the war or less violence rather than more.

Chris Capozzola [00:29:29] Now they are guerrilla soldiers, but they are also doing the work of the allies in the war against Japan and very early on by nineteen forty three, Douglas MacArthur, who is based in Australia, is in contact with with the guerrilla soldiers. He understands how valuable they will be both for fighting the Japanese and also for providing Americans the information that they need for a reinvasion in nineteen forty four. So what happens then is the United States returns to the Philippines in October nineteen forty four, and the sum of the first people who greet them are the guerrilla soldiers. And the United States also brings back to the Philippines the former colonial government under its temporary president Sergio Osmeña. So it was Osmeña is the guy in charge in the Philippines and he has the legal authority over one of these three forces, the Philippine Commonwealth Army. And so what he does is he says, well, that army kind of fell apart in nineteen forty two. But we have these other people who've been fighting for for two years, the guerrillas. And so I'm going to recognize them. And the recognized guerrilla units are incorporated into the Philippine Commonwealth Army. The Philippine Commonwealth Army has the legal authority to do that and Douglas MacArthur supports them in doing that. What happens is when he incorporates them, recognizes them into the Philippine Commonwealth Army, at that point, they have become legally part of the United States armed forces, and which means that they are basically in the service of the United States armed forces. They are marching under the American flag. So this gives them the same sort of legal claims on citizenship and and veterans benefits that the Philippine scouts or regular US Army soldiers had at the beginning of the war. Right now, in the years since and during the long fight over naturalization and equity of veterans benefits, there were people who said, well, these guys, these men and women were they were not fighting for America.

Chris Capozzola [00:31:45] They were fighting for their country, for the Philippines. It was still technically an American colony, but it was about to become independent and. First of all, that's legally not true, right, and the law is on the side of the veterans. And second of all, when you talk to the veterans, you realize it's not actually true in any way, that, of course, they love their homeland of the Philippines and they were fighting to liberate that from Japan. But they also knew that they were fighting in the US armed forces. They knew that Douglas MacArthur was their commander and they knew that they were that if they needed help from an American soldier, he would be by their side and that if he needed help, they would be by his side. Right. And so it's not a simple question of like they were fighting for one country or the other. Both those countries were wrapped up together and and they remain that way in the decades since. So when Sergio Semena incorporates Filipino guerrillas into the Philippine Commonwealth Army, he's doing that in a hurry on the battlefield, basically, and guerrilla armies are impromptu, ad hoc efforts from the very beginning, which means that they don't always have a lot of bureaucracy and paperwork to document. Who's a member of their organization and who isn't is all the more the case in the Philippines during World War Two, when there's no paper, there's no ink, there's just not enough sort of to go around. So what this means is that in the years after World War Two, it has been particularly difficult for people who served as guerrillas to document their service, to prove to a kind of a bureaucrat in a government office somewhere that they really served and that their unit was a real unit and that it was crucial to the war effort and should be part of the recognized guerrilla list. And now the US Army developed its own list in the years immediately after the war. And that's the list that has basically determined claims in the decades since then. But, of course, there were plenty of people who were on

that list by accident and plenty of people who were left off that list by accident as well. And so I think one of the crucial tasks that fill that has been doing is just giving a chance for people to document their own history, to tell their own stories. And I think that that history of World War Two can't just be reduced to one list in an office in and in the archives somewhere. And in fact, actually, it's a much bigger history than that.