

# Duty to Country

## *Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project*

### **Interview Transcript: Sonny Izon**

*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.*

**Sonny Izon** [00:00:06] I was born in December 16, nineteen forty six in Tondo, Manila, and it was essentially a war zone one when I was born. A lot of the material from World War Two was still there, abandoned trucks, radios, bullets. And so as a toddler playing when we would play war, my friends and I, we played with the real stuff, you know? And I think later on, as I was telling you earlier, kids having arrived on the scene of something big that happened and somehow I missed it was a curiosity as a child, but then became a lifelong obsession later on as an adult. Well, there were five of us, I mean, five children, eventually six and my parents, so big family, very close family, two brothers, four sisters, and we moved to the what would become the capital of the Philippines, Carson City, in nineteen forty nine, which is also another war ravaged area. And there was not I think there were three houses in the whole neighborhood when we moved.

**Sonny Izon** [00:01:25] And and so again, you know, there was the presence, the ever presence of war was around the two homes that I grew up in. I think some of the temporary bridges and buildings that the Americans built were so well built that they they lasted a whole lot longer than they they thought it would. And so you would still see those buildings in the 50s and 60s. But there was recovery, certainly. And then, of course, the new business district of McCarthy was built up. And so that was that's become the new Wall Street, if you will, of Mandela of the Philippines. Very heavy American presence and very heavy American influence. I went to the Jesuit school, which was run by American Jesuits. In fact, we had a one of the school rules was that you could not speak Tagalog while in school. You could only speak English, which is good and bad. And if you were caught speaking anything other than English, you got caned is like 15 for instruction. So we learned grade school, but it was always a second language to me because we spoke to Gallowgate at home and in fact, my mother would look askance at me if I spoke to her in anything other than to look like, what are you saying? I don't understand what you're saying. So she never encouraged English at home. It was always tagalog, which I'm thankful for because I've been here in this country now fifty two years. But it was so ingrained that I'm still very fluent in my native language, started my formal research, I guess around nineteen ninety five, and I probably seen every one or two documentaries there is and all pretty much all the archival footage because I fortunately live about two miles from the National Archives in College Park. So because I literally walk there and I spend a lot of my waking hours there just researching World War Two.

**Sonny Izon** [00:03:46] But my dad was with the Philippine underground, with the group in Lassonde called President Quezon's on guerrillas, on guerrillas, PQOG And in addition to his combat duties, he was also the publisher of Deliberator, which was an anti Japanese propaganda newspaper that basically gave hope to the Filipino people and let them know

what was true and what was not. Even back then, there was a lot of fake news going around. So my dad's job was to report to the Filipino people and his newspaper was so well produced and he'd even cut this stencil out of linoleum tile himself and do two or three color registrations so that the Japanese never thought that they were publishing anything other than Manila. And in fact, they were using a gas powered press in the mountains, doing it at night so the smoke could not be seen. And the Japanese eventually found out who my dad was. One of his art professors gave up his name by looking at the style of the illustration. So they were wanted posters of my dad plastered all over Manila. Fortunately, they didn't catch him or you would not be having this interview. But he was later awarded the Legion of Honor by the Philippine government for his service during that time and died nearly a few times because, you know, you got all kinds of diseases at that point.

**Sonny Izon** [00:05:33] And I have a sketchbook which I will share with you guys in terms of life in the camps, what life was like being a guerrilla. And he said he was days and days of waiting. And then you had to move every three days because you didn't want the Japanese strangulating on your radio signals. But it's a very, very poignant document of what life was in the camps in. Makeshift bathrooms. And he also painted I mean, sketched his companions in someone sometimes they're young boys because some of the the followers of the camps were young boys would not. Officially join the guerrillas, but wanted to help so they'd be these 12, 14 year olds there, and sometimes they also had older grandmothers who would follow the camp and cook for the men. They had a gas powered I think it was just Tetun or gas or press, which, of course, they would only operate at night because of the smoke and they didn't want the Japanese, you know, alerted to that, but because they also had a radio that would be transmitting to Australia, they would move every three days. And which is why some of his sketches are half finished, because, like one time I remember, he was sketching a Thanksgiving mass out in the jungle and he's got all the composition, you know, and all. And then you could see just traces of color where he's starting to colored in. But I guess they had to move. They never got a chance to finish.

**Sonny Izon** [00:07:23] And that was the other thing. He had to make his own watercolor paints out of berries and whatever he could find in the jungle and dilute and use them as his paints. He also carved a wonderful medieval chess set and made the dyes himself. But it was just, you know, it's it's one of my treasured pieces of the house went on fire. That's that's the thing I would run for because he he you know, he just whittled it out of two different types of woods and decided, you know, different colors and made a special box for it. But, you know, it's he figured he had a lot of time. He had two, three days. Sometimes he's waiting around, hanging around. He wanted to be productive. Know my dad was the kind of guy who would walk into a room and essentially ask, you got anything to fix? You know, he was that kind of guy that he could sit still. And and my wife says, I'm like that, too. So it's also part of being OCD. I think they had a very ingenious actually. They had a cadre of bicycle delivery boys. OK, now, but these smart boys, these are these are guys who are prepared to kill if necessary. So they would have a three stacked bread box. OK, so the top of it would be bread. The second tier would be deliberator, and then the third tier would be the forty five, OK, in case they had to shoot it out.

**Sonny Izon** [00:09:05] And I remember one story when my uncle was one of the delivery boys was bicycling to to one of my my relatives place. But the Japanese were already there because they already found out about my dad. And so she had to signal my uncle, you know, so she kept saying, we don't need any bread today. Do you hear no bread. You know, so that's how they distributed it was was through these, quote unquote, you know,

bread baskets that people would buy. But at the same time they would slip the liberator. And I've seen a copy of it at the Library of Congress, never keep strolling eBay to see one of these days. I'd love to be able to to get a copy. And, you know, but that's you know, that's how they're distributed. I remember my uncle told me one time he he had a checkpoint he had to go through. You know, and he realized realize like, OK. I got so many bullets, there's too many of them, I can only take out a few before they catch me. So, you know, he had to go through and they wanted to inspect everything. So he thought, OK, this is it. This is this is my shoot out. But then then he got this idea. What if I played like I was like a slow minded, feeble minded person, you know, he did everything like one tenth speed. You know, they're asking me he's doing slow mo and moving the bread and stuff like that. Finally, the Japanese got disgusted and just go, you know, so. He got saved because that would have been suicide. Were they evacuated out into the provinces because the cities were not really that safe and.

**Sonny Izon** [00:11:16] My in fact, my sister that I followed has been a nervous wreck all our life because she remembers as an infant my mom carrying her and then leading the children through fields while they were being bombed and strafed. And so that was her childhood. That was that was her first three years of her life. And so she I think it impacted her negatively that way. But my mom had to be the breadwinner is my dad was up in the mountains for three years. So she came very became very entrepreneurial and bought and sold meats and rice and stuff like that, both of which were contraband. So you couldn't get caught with them either. The Japanese were controlling everything, but I guess she made enough money to be able to feed the family.

**Sonny Izon** [00:12:15] Well. I joined a rock and roll band. In the 60s and still playing Roots, rock and roll band, blues band that we have a gig on Saturday playing for a fundraiser for organ donation. But it was it was a wonderful time that I had the nineteen sixty seven. You know, I had I have really close high school and grade school friends, in fact, that the current Philippine ambassador to the US is my second grade classmate. So we go way back and but I'm fortunate that we had we had a class that sort of really stayed together. I mean, we'll have reunions and there'll be one hundred one hundred twenty people show up, you know, wherever it is in the world, whether it's New Zealand or Washington, D.C. or the Philippines, that everyone shows up. So and there's there's a genuine caring for each us especially, you know, in the last decades of our life or, you know, realizing how important it is to just keep in touch, support each other. I was 20 and this is nineteen sixty seven, and I thought I would wait to finish college because I wanted to just explore, see how the other half lived and I had every intention of, after a year going back to the Philippines where everything was really set up. My folks had built a new home. There was a room waiting for me. There was a job waiting for me after I finished college and my dad's publishing house. And I think probably the fact that everything was so neatly laid out kind of scared me. I wanted to see if there was some other options.

**Sonny Izon** [00:14:16] And so I stayed longer. And the longer I stayed, the harder it was to leave. You know, you start forming friendships and relationships. But, you know, prophetically, when I left, the last thing my dad said to me was like. I know he's never coming back. You probably don't know that yet, but I know you're not coming back soon, but you have my blessing. It was San Francisco, 1967, Summer of Love. I knew I was not in Kansas or you know, but, you know, I think that part of the beauty of being an immigrant, especially if you are already somewhat of an adult, is that even though you're on the outside looking in, I think you have the ability to cherry pick the values from your home culture and your adopted culture and make an amalgam, make the best of it. And and I

think for me that that worked really well, that I was kind of an observer in the culture into the culture, while at the same time I was able to operate, you know, easily enough within it, but knew that there was a part of me. I mean, I think that's the price of admission for immigrants, is that there is a part of you that's always on the outside looking in.

**Sonny Izon** [00:15:51] And as I was telling you earlier, I think that it was one of the main impetus for my becoming involved not only in media and mass media, but also in terms of looking for subject matter that's not covered in the mainstream, in the, you know, the broad tapestry of American history and culture. One of the things I felt very strongly when I first got here was how invisible I was. I did not see my my face, my race, my stories validated. And it wasn't until I got to working for a television station that I realized how powerful, you know, television was when, you know, just on a regular PBS broadcast, if you have a national primetime broadcast, you were looking at three to four million people watching it just on one broadcast. And it's broadcast over four years, you know, and four times a year. That's millions and millions of eyeballs that you able to reach. And that's when I decided, OK, well, maybe this is my way to to help is to to get those stories that have not been told that are from underserved audiences, as they say. And so that's that's what put me on my track. I think what makes America great really is the fact that we are a work in progress. And, you know, for us to achieve our greatest potential, I think we need to know all the stories, not the one, not only the ones that had been written about in the past, but all the news stories that we're still writing, because when we know all the stories, we're so much richer, we're so much fuller as a nation, because these are not just Filipino American stories. These are American stories. And then we have this this universe of stories that we can all be proud of because, you know, the more inclusive we become, you know, I think the stronger we become. I think as as I approached a certain point in my life, I realized, hey, I'm not going to live forever, and I figured I should begin looking at hard stories and stories that can be legacy stories that can have a life of their own, you know, long after you are gone. Stories that can engage, that can educate, you know, that can still manage to instruct people, you know, about the diversity of stories that we have as a nation. And it's so for me, like having a young kid come up to me after a screening and tell me how proud they are. It's just. You know. There's no award that can come up to that, I started a trilogy on Forgotten World War Two Stories.

**Sonny Izon** [00:19:12] The first one was about the first and second Filipino infantry regiments of the US Army. These were. Filipinas up until nineteen thirty five were were called Nationals' so they could travel freely. They were subclauses citizens and that law changed in nineteen thirty five with the Tydings McDuffy Law, which essentially reclassified Filipino's as aliens and also limited the immigration of Filipinos to 50 persons per year, which is like the lowest of the low. The intent was clear. It's like if you can't in America, you can own land. You can't vote. And and, you know, had 50 per year, you can wipe it out in a generation and then they said no more Filipino's World War Two was the catalyst that changed that, because when World War Two came, they were like ten thousand Filipinos volunteering. They couldn't serve because they weren't citizens. So at first they couldn't. But then there was a national campaign to petition President Roosevelt to say, hey, you know, we want to help America, but we also want and want to help our our motherland. And so when Roosevelt saw the numbers, he just did an executive order that we need these Filipinos. So they were basically, you know, swearing them in in droves. And so that's the story that I did called an untold triumph.

**Sonny Izon** [00:20:57] And it's about these men. Who wanted to serve and fought just to be able to serve, and there were seven thousand distributed across two regiments and

they became MacArthur's spies because they knew the terrain in the language, they could blend in. And so, you know, they they became this this informal network of people reporting Japanese troop movements or locations and munitions. And they were transported to the Philippines by a submarine from Australia. They got the training in Australia and they would pick remote spots and various coasts and they would drop them off and then they would go in and something and eventually someone would work as waiters. At the Manila Hotel, there's this one story of this dance instructor. Who is, quote unquote, a waiter at the Manila Hotel, and they found out that one of the leading Japanese officers held the keys to the map room at the city hall. So that assignment was get the key, make a copy, make copies of the maps, get the key back. So they found out that the Japanese. Officer had a weakness for tango and he had two two left feet, so they got this Filipino waiter to teach him in his hotel room when no one was watching. He says, I'm going to make all the ladies swoon over you. You're going to be the best tango dancer. So in the process of teaching and Tango feels, Mae made a copy. They got the map. So by the time the American forces came to Manila, they knew exactly where everything was because of one of the Filipino Infantry Regiment guys who happened to be a dance teacher from Las Vegas.

**Sonny Izon** [00:23:03] There was a problem because and I think this is mainly a financial decision at this point in nineteen forty six, the musician acts were passed basically stripping Filipino soldiers. It's just Filipino soldiers of any veteran's rights. The rationale given was that, well. You fought under the Philippine flag, therefore. You know. You're the responsibility of the Philippines, despite the fact that Roosevelt promised that if you fight under the US flag and they were part of the United States, the United States armed forces in the Far East, if they were promised that they would be treated just like any American veteran. Well, that didn't happen. And there's this long, protracted, you know, diminishing returns kind of fight because they were dying off. There were over two hundred sixty thousand Filipino troops that fought. And by the time we get to two thousand sixteen, seventeen, eighteen thousand left and dying daily. So they had to mount a campaign, I mean, for decades just to get back to square one, to say you promised and we did our part. You know, we fought, we got wounded. We died. You've got to do yours, and there's still not quite there yet. Close, but it's taking over. Seventy five years to get it done. I've been involved with with with a number of organizations, the latest one being the Congressional Gold Medal, Filipino veterans education, recognition, education. It's just I guess, you know, having a journalist or a father is just kind of in your blood that you always want to get the truth out and help where you can. So I guess I've been involved since the early 70s. I met John Melgrito then, and we've been in and out of different things. And, you know, I know my father my mom wouldn't let him go. But when there was the people power protest in the Philippines, he wanted to go. But he was already advanced age at that point. But I think that having been immersed in the history of it, it's like it's a no brainer. You got to do it, you know?

**Sonny Izon** [00:25:55] And, um, so now I'm involved with with helping preserve the stories of Filipino veterans and their families and trying to share it on national and international stage. First and foremost, we're talking about a struggle for just equality, if I do something, then I want to be treated just like the next guy in terms of whatever contributions I make. And I think that oftentimes you get written out of history when you're not the one doing the writing. And I think that part of what my personal mission has been is to take those over ignored or overlooked pieces or populations that say this too, is part of who we are as Americans and we need to know these stories. Some are uncomfortable, you know, like when we intern, you know, so many Japanese Americans. I mean, these are not

Japanese. They're Japanese Americans born here. And it's instructive when you see what we've done in the past and know what we've been done in the past so that hopefully we don't make the same mistakes. But then you see the same challenges of immigration, refugees, you know. Hopefully, we will learn, but that's the importance of knowing these stories because it helps inform our present if we don't know. We go around blindly, uh, just doing the same thing over and over. I waited a while because, like I said, I was kind of like they had one foot on one continent, another foot here and. I there was part of it, too, that, you know, for a long time was struggling with whether I was being unfaithful to my land of birth, but then I got into my own business and it was just proved really difficult not to be an American citizen to try and compete.

**Sonny Izon** [00:28:18] In the marketplace, so essentially at some point, it was a practical consideration, like if I'm going to survive and succeed, I need to make the ground as even as possible. And citizenship was one of those. My identity, you know, is still evolving. Yeah, I. I think I dream pretty much in English now, you know, uh. Few times and I will dream in Tagalog, I'm married to an American Italian, so we don't speak at home. Both my daughters do not speak Tagalog. So as the years go, I'm finding it. Not as easy to remember things that I used to know by heart, but I think that. At the end of the day, I look myself more as the universal citizen in that there's so many things that I identify with, some of which are American somewhat, which are Russian, some of which are, you know, French, Italian, whatever is like. There's so many things about different cultures that you can admire. And I guess in a way, you know, being a bicultural person to begin with left me open for absorbing and appreciating the the beauty of other cultures. When I started the first project, which was about the, um, it passed in ninety seven.

**Sonny Izon** [00:30:11] I started working on Untold Triumph in ninety five, I showed him a trailer along his trailer like 15 minutes. And before he died, he probably he made me promise that I would complete it. So. There it is. For the longest time, like I told you when I first got here, I felt very invisible. I felt like. I had no touchstones when I first got here, and I think that having worked at different projects that I have has gotten me some roots here and have gotten me a feeling that, OK, you know, we're moving. It's slow, but it's starting to rise to the surface. In fact, like my next project next year, I'm doing hopefully a multi part documentary series on. The global diaspora of Filipinos around the world is, you know, I've done a lot of traveling the past couple of years taking one of my films to film festivals, and it just occurred to me like we're everywhere. I said, I want to know how we got there and what do we do in and then somehow tie it into historical things. For example, if I'm dealing with Bruno Mars, maybe I'll deal with the big dance that we brought over in the nineteen twenties and, you know, and who they were, what they did. Or if I'm dealing with an Olympic star, maybe I'll go back to nineteen forty six and talk about the multi Olympic gold medalist Victoria Dreyfuss, who was a diving champion. And so I thought it would be a great way to introduce Filipino's on a world stage. So that's it felt like the next natural progression for me.

**Sonny Izon** [00:32:18] My dad started working for the Philippine Free Press, which was the only non family owned publication. Everyone else was somewhat beholden to either the family or political parties or whatever. The founder. Of the Philippine Free Press, Mr. McCullough, Dick was a Scotsman, and he was very prescient, even back then 19. He founded it and he wanted to make sure it was always owned by the employees, I mean, ESOP, and that's pretty early. So there was always this motto that he had, which is let Tjepin know no friend or foe. Which basically says, you know, you've got to treat everyone equal. And so my dad started working for them in nineteen thirty four as a junior artist. He

was originally working, doing comic strips for another publication. And then when one Mr. Dick, the editor, saw his work, you're going to be working for us. And over the years, especially during its golden years, it was it was really known as the publication because people could count on what was there between the covers as a true news. And and so, in fact, I asked my dad one time, I said no because he's a very fine artist as well. He used to do all of this is wonderful portraits of rich people in the Philippines.

**Sonny Izon** [00:34:03] And so I said, what made you decide between? Because if you had pursued fine art painting, he would be like a national treasure and be commending these just astronomical fees for doing portraits. But here he was doing political cartoons. So I said, so what made you choose between one or the others? So he thought for a while and he said, you know, I think in the end, um. Truth, one of the beauty. So so he stayed there and so. Fast forward to December eight, nineteen forty one. It really was a natural progression for him in terms of, OK, you know, in addition to fighting and spying on the Japanese. What else can I do? And, you know, he returned to his old craft of both his his art and his publication skills. And like I was saying, that they were so well produced. The Japanese had no idea that it was produced in the mountains and not in Manila, that they only looked in Manila for my dad when they were trying to find out where he was because they didn't think they were capable of publishing something like that in the jungles. So I think that. You know, he is sort of continued what he was doing anyway, telling the truth and, you know, that was one of the two times on the Philippine Free Press stop publication. One was during World War two between nineteen forty two and forty six, and then during martial law, seventy two to eighty six. But it continued through.

**Sonny Izon** [00:36:10] Through the years, and in fact, technically, my father finished his last assignment, which was, um, he was doing a political cartoon on a Wednesday and he felt a little tired is that I'm just going to take a nap and when I wake up, I'll finish it. Of course, he never woke up and. The editor instructed one of the other artists to finish what my dad started in his style so that technically he didn't miss them. So that's what happened. And then the next week, they then had a special cartoon done political cartoon on the page. It's usually on page one of the Philippine Free Press, and they had my father's desk empty. And that was and then the editor wrote a wonderful tribute to. I think as far as the art, I think there's there's a lot that you observe. I never got any real technical aural training from my dad. I used to help him in the darkroom because he was also a very fine photographer. And all the homes we were in had dark rooms. And as soon as I could reach over the darkroom, I was helping my dad. And in fact, I was telling you, I had this notion that that every house had a darkroom because that's what my, you know, reference was. And so I'd go to friends houses and I said, so where's your darkroom? And a present looking funny, like, what are you talking about? So I think I learned a lot of composition. I learned a lot because I could also ask him because he painted also did a lot of oil paintings and he would do the Christmas cover from the Philippine Free Press. It was always an original oil painting.

**Sonny Izon** [00:38:14] And I remember one time that he was telling me Adoration of the shepherds. And one day I see this shepherd holding his staff upright, right. The crook, and the next day I see that it's on the ground. And what happened then, why did you do this? Well, I knew I wanted the staff because it symbolized so much in terms of, you know, the shepherd guiding his flock and all of that stuff. But where I placed it originally, I was too distracted that I kept going to that curve. I didn't want that. I just wanted the staff present, but not in such a primary position. So I put it on the ground. So it's things like that that I think you sort of absorb, you know, almost intuitively. And I think there's a lot to be said

about education, my observation. But we don't do enough of that in this country. I think we get too much rote memorization sometimes. But so there's that. And I think the with growing up, my dad and some of the best writers in the business, and they would congregate at the house and have drinks and snacks and they would just talk about all kinds of topics. And my sisters and I would just like, you know, mingle around. And, you know, Nick Bucheon was one of the celebrated writers. And it was it was like Uncle Nick to us. You know, he was always in the house. And so I think that there was so much absorption of of the advocacy of the, you know, the journalistic favor, fervor of wanting to to tell the truth and wanting to to make sure that the small guy, you know, got treated right. And I think all of that sort of seeped into early plus, you know, having a Jesuit education, you know, there the iconoclasts of the Catholic Church. So, you know, they teach you to question everything. So I think all those things kind of work me for life.