

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Alex Fabros

Please Note: Due to a machine-automated transcription process, there may be errors in this transcript.

Alex Fabros [00:00:06] My father, Alejandro DeLeon Fabros Senior, was born in Turlock in 1903. His mother died in childbirth. So he was basically raised by his aunts and uncles and relatives. His father was a member of the Philippine Constabulary, so he was very seldom around his son. My father grew up as an independent kid in Turlock, and once his father left to fight in World War One with the Wolfhounds, I forgot the regiment. My father didn't see him again until 1929. In between that, my father got a high school education, college education, and he learned sports from the American servicemen around Fort Stotsenburg. He was taller than the average Filipino. He was about five nine. He played football. He did boxing, baseball, basketball, the sports that all Americans use. So when he came to the States in 1929, the first few months, my grandfather told him, well, I don't want you hanging around here. I'm gonna send you out to the fields to work. My father got sent down to a place called Exeter, California right around September, and October they had the Exeter race riots against Filipinos. So my father went back to Salinas, said hey dad send me someplace else. So my grandfather sent him to Pajaro, which is just south of Watsonville. Of course, 1930 January, they had the race riots against the Filipinos. My father went back to Salinas and told my grandfather says, look, I'm going to go back to school. I don't want to work in the fields. I don't like working where the other Filipinos are working because of the race riots. He enrolled in Hartnell College in Salinas. Where, over time, he became the editor of the school newspaper. Became the editor of the college yearbook.

Alex Fabros [00:02:32] And he majored in about six sports. Which is unusual for a Filipino to be able to do that at the time. But he played football. He played baseball, basketball, tennis, swimming. He's an all around athlete. 1917, World War One happened. And they had units in the Philippines that were going to be deployed either to Europe or someplace in Asia. Any Filipino who was in the Philippine Constabulary at that time was permitted to enlist in the United States Army, in which case my grandfather enlisted in the Wolfhounds. That unit, along with maybe a couple hundred other Filipinos were sent to Vladivostok for about two years where they fought the Russians, the red Russians trying to protect the railroad line. After the war is over, the Wolfhounds never returned to the Philippines. They went straight to Hawaii. My grandfather finished his term of duty with the Army in 1923 and retired. He was a sergeant when he got out. And he's in Hawaii. He was hired to be a sort of like a plantation boss because he spoke very good English, because he served in the US military or the Philippine Constabulary, where English was a common language. So over time, he learned to speak English. He learned how to use it correctly. And I think he was an influence on my father. In learning the English language. So knowing English was an asset if you're in the Philippine Scouts, Philippine Constabulary or in the US Army, and then when he retired from the military, the fact that he could speak English and can speak with the plantation boss, plus he knew Ilocano and a few other dialects. He was hired to be an overseer or a boss of working groups in Hawaii, probably Kauai was where he's

working and that enabled him when he came to the United States to become a labor contractor.

Alex Fabros [00:04:55] He could put together a group of Filipinos, then go to the farmer and negotiate a contract for his workers. And he'd take a percentage of that. He's very successful at negotiating contracts. And because his English was good and the farmers understood him and he knew exactly what he wanted. They're examples of Philippine labor crews going up and trying to get work with these farmers. But the labor contractor didn't understand English, spoke very poor English. And they never were able to get good contracts. The 1920 sugar plantations strike was initiated by the Filipinos. Their idea was that we go on strike now before we start planting the sugar cane or pineapples, because if we wait until the end of the harvest season, then we go on strike. We have no leverage over the plantation growers. So the Filipino strategy was to go on strike before they planted the sugar cane or the pineapples. That forced the Japanese to join them in the 1920 strike. Unfortunately, that 1920 strike was not successful. And there's still a lot of discontent amongst the Filipinos. In 1924, some of the Filipinos heard about how much money they were making on the mainland. And if you are a worker in Hawaii in the 1920s, it was almost like being an indentured servant. They had you for three years working on that plantation. If you left a sugar plantation or pineapple plantation, you couldn't go back to the Philippines because you broke a contract. And then, the conditions were such that the plantation owners never paid the workers in America money or currency. They gave them chits, and the chits could be used to buy items from the plantation store. The markup was pretty good on the part of the plantation owners that they were able to get all this money back eventually.

Alex Fabros [00:07:13] And the Filipinos at the end of three years would take whatever chits they had and try to convert them over to dollars and they find out that they really didn't have very much. So in 1924, a lot of Filipinos started saying, we need to get more money. We want to make what they're making on the mainland. We want \$2 a day. And so they went on strike. I believe the strike started on September 9th, 1934. There was a standoff between a group of workers and plantation owners, their sheriff's, their deputies and what have you. Somewhere during that shouting period between the two groups. A shot was fired. They didn't know where it came from. But all of a sudden both sides were shooting at each other. 14 Filipinos were killed and I believe one American was killed. One sheriff's deputy was killed. The governor of the territory of Hawaii, then threatened to send in machine guns to force these people to go back to work. One of the reasons that the Filipinos were able to shoot back at the start of this confrontation was that some of them, like my grandfather, had served in the US military. But with the threat of machine guns, the Philippines went back to work. But at the same time, many of them went to the mainland. Because my grandfather had been a labor contractor in Hawaii. It was easy for him to organize work crews in the United States. One time he was running about five crews of about 50 people each. He was harvesting lettuce, crops, everything else from Sacramento down to the Imperial Valley and then back up to the Salinas Valley. So he's quite successful, more so than the average Filipino. My grandfather or my father told me that my grandfather was making about \$20 a day as a labor contractor, which was pretty good money back in the 1920s, 1930. 1932, there's another strike in Salinas Valley, and that's where a lot of the contractors who came from Hawaii settled. They wanted higher wages from the farmers and they went on strike in 1932. They didn't quite get what they wanted, but they got a little bit more money. In 1934, they wanted better working conditions and recognition of their union. And there was a standoff and a confrontation. And again, this is almost like being back in Hawaii. The growers brought in deputies who were armed. And at the same time, the state of California threatened to bring down machine guns to shoot

workers who would not go back to work. That was 1932-34. In 1937, my grandfather went back to the Philippines and settled out and never came back to America. In 1935, the Tydings–McDuffie Act was passed. It promises Philippine independence in ten years, makes it a commonwealth, and for all Filipinos in the United States they became aliens. They had no protections whatsoever from the Philippine government, and they had no rights in the United States. It cut the ability of Filipinos to come to America. There is no more immigration after 1935 to the U.S. And at the same time, because most of the Filipinos come to United States without women or wives, all of a sudden you cannot bring a woman from the Philippines to the United States. So you didn't have these communities. But overall, for the Filipinos in 1935, they decided they were not going to go back to the Philippines. They'd have to find a way to get status, to remain in the U.S. and eventually become U.S. citizens. After my father graduated from college around 1932, he and his cousin Delfin Cruz, acquired a newspaper through a poker game. It was called The Philippines Mail.

Alex Fabros [00:11:56] At first it was just a small local newspaper. But eventually the reach of The Philippines Mail was such that it covered events in Chicago, Washington, D.C., a lot of East Coast stuff and everything that's on the West Coast. Now, what that newspaper tried to do was, it was trying to labor in 1934 and 35 to change the status of Filipinos in America. My father is a journalist and a writer. When you go through The Philippines Mail and you look at it and go to the editorial pages, most of the editorials were written by my father. He's a very strong advocate for Filipinos. And when our status changed in 1935 to be Filipinos here in America. He and my Uncle Cruz went by train to Chicago, to Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, D.C., to the various Filipino communities there. And when they were in Washington, D.C., they went through the halls of Congress, knocking on doors, trying to find representatives and senators who would back a bill for Filipinos to eventually become citizens. Eventually, that bill was passed in 1942 that allowed Filipinos in America to become U.S. citizens. One of the things my father learned during this period was that in order to make things happen, you have to create coalitions. You have to educate the public as to why you want to have certain things changed. My father said, We're not looking for a handout. We're looking for a hand up. And we're here, we're productive citizens, we work hard, we provide food on your tables. Why can't we become citizens? When the Tydings–McDuffie Act was passed, only 50 Filipinos per year were permitted to come to the United States. It was a small quota amongst all of the allocations of immigrants allowed to come to America.

Alex Fabros [00:14:05] One of the reasons for that small quota was because of the racial bias in California. They wanted to get rid of the Filipinos. They were actually looking forward to deporting all Filipinos from America because there was this racial issue. One of the big problems is because the Filipinos, when they came here, expected to be treated like they treated the Americans in the Philippines. The Americans and the Filipinos were socializing with Filipino women. The Filipinos, when they came to America, some of them brought women with them and were socializing with white women. And during this period there were several laws that were passed against Filipinos, anti-miscegenation laws. And so one of the reasons probably why they had such a small quota was that they did not want any more Filipinos coming to America. And they're trying to deport Filipinos out of California because, one, they're causing trouble in the fields. Too many labor strikes. And two, again, the socializing with white women. One of the provisions of the Tydings–McDuffie Act was that Filipinos could return to the Philippines at government expense. However, if you accepted that ticket, you could never return to the United States unless you came in as an immigrant, one of the 50, which was very slim. December sixth, 1941. There was this big event up in San Jose which the community leaders from Sacramento,

Stockton, San Francisco, Salinas, Monterey were attending. Many of them stayed overnight in San Jose and in the morning around 10:00, 11:00, they heard the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When the men gathered for lunch, they started discussing about the possibility of them enlisting in the U.S. military. But then, there was a provision at that time that Filipinos could not join the U.S. military. But they wanted to be able to change that law so that they could join the military, and go back to the Philippines to liberate their country.

Alex Fabros [00:16:31] And so there is this community effort to change the law, Pacita Toto was making a lot of phone calls on behalf of the leadership. And eventually the leadership was able to change the law I think in April 1942, where Filipinos could then enlist in the US military. That would include Filipinos in the Army, the Navy, Army Air Corps and the Marine Corps. The idea came about around December 1941, when a group of Filipinos, said, Let's try to see if we can form an all Filipino unit. And they estimated, they're thinking about 5,000 Filipinos into that unit. So in the spring of 1941, there was a cadre that was put together down at Camp Roberts that consisted of mostly Filipinos who are stranded in the United States. Philippine Army, Philippine Scouts, Philippine Constabulary were here studying, and that cadre then got together at Camp Roberts. Eventually, the Filipinos who were permitted to join the military, started joining them down at Camp Roberts. And the idea was to create a Filipino battalion. Now, the difference in the title is they're called a Filipino battalion, not a Philippine battalion. That's to differentiate the fact that the Filipino battalions were a U.S. military unit, not a Philippine unit. So they started trickling in from throughout the United States. Eventually, that battalion grew to be a regiment size. They were eventually sent to Salinas California, where it reached a size of about 150% of a regiment. And so it was decided at that time then to create a second regiment, the second Filipino Infantry Regiment. And these two regiments then took care of the flood of Filipinos who wanted to enlist in the U.S. Army. Now, they were not segregated. There was no law that said that the Filipino regiments were to be segregated, unlike the black regiments.

Alex Fabros [00:18:58] There are a lot of people who go out and say that the Filipinos were segregated. It wasn't. It was a matter of choice. They formed their own units. Now, not all Filipinos joined the Filipino Infantry Regiments. You've got people like Rudolf Davila, who joined the U.S. Army, and he fought in Europe, in Italy. You've got others who joined the Marine Corps. You have others who joined the Army Air Corps that we have documentation of. So maybe the majority of them joined the Filipino Infantry Regiments, but the Filipinos were scattered throughout the military. And, of course, we still have that thing where Filipinos who joined the Navy could only become cooks and stewards. Whereas in the army they could be almost anything. They rose up the ranks. They took the men out of the regiment, sent them to OCS, where they became officers, and those Filipino officers then returned to the regiments to command platoons, companies. In 1943, General MacArthur decides he wants to have eyes and ears in the Philippines. They've established contact with the Philippines, but the people over there are not, They don't trust the messages they're getting from the Philippines. So they decide that they're going to create special units to return to the Philippines, to set up radio stations to keep in contact with the guerrilla movement. They came to the Filipino Regiments and they stripped about 50% of the officers from those regiments to go to Australia. And then they took another 200 volunteers to Australia. These men then became part of the first Reconnaissance Battalion and the Signal Service company. These men were trained in Australia, in guerrilla tactics and radio operations. Starting in 1943, these teams in Australia were being sent to the Philippines via submarine.

Alex Fabros [00:21:17] The teams were between 10 to 20 going into the Philippines and they'd meet up with the guerrilla units and then send information back to General MacArthur, that he could trust. So these Filipino Americans who got sent back to the Philippines establish the network throughout the Philippines, his radio network that kept him informed of what's going on. They're essential in identifying the best places, possibly for the U.S. to come back, and where to land, and which guerrilla units were available to support them when they came ashore. The biggest leak that the Japanese had came through the Manila Hotel. Japanese officers like to drink Saki and they'd just get roaring drunk. Most of the men and women in the Manila Hotel were spies working for the spy ring in Manila that provided information back to MacArthur. Once they heard that this Japanese colonel had the key to all of the maps and information in a cabinet, they needed to get it. The women who worked in the hotel learned that this man enjoyed doing the tango, but he didn't know how to do it. He's looking for lessons. He loved the music. Lieutenant Al Hernandez was in the area and before he joined the military, he was a well-renowned tango dancer here in the United States. So they said, Oh, we have a man here who can teach you to tango and Al Hernandez came in and he started dancing with this man, showing him the tango steps. And after a while, they kept on drinking and drinking. The colonel passed out. That's when some of the individuals in the spy ring came in, and they took the key from his neck, went over to his office, opened it up, and then opened the cabinet that had the maps that MacArthur needed to plan his invasion in the Philippines.

Alex Fabros [00:23:42] But this is a spy ring that was created in Manila, and centered in Manila Hotel. That information was very valuable in determining exactly where to go on invasion day, which would be Leyte. In 1944, McCarthy was planning to return to the Philippines, but one of the things he realized is he has to have civil affairs units following his combat units to ensure that the civilian population gets out of the way of his troops. At the same time, he also needs to have interpreters for his counterintelligence units. In order to do this, again, The first Philippine Infantry Regiment is going to be stripped of the core of their units. There were 7 PCALs. The invasion PCALs. And there's 30 men from the, in each unit who are Filipinos. These invasion PCALs, their primary mission was to come in behind the military troops and they would have with them lawyers, doctors and supplies to basically take care of the civilian population. At the same time, when you have combat, there's going to be a lot of people claiming damages to their homes and their property. So they had these people that were trying to work out these claims. Now, the reason they need to have these Filipinos in these PCALs was because they spoke Filipino and English. They were used as interpreters. They were used to move the Filipino civilians out of the way. And at the same time, they provided relief supplies. They had truckloads of material, food, cloth that they provided to the local population as needed. And they provided medical care to a lot of civilian casualties that were in the areas where they were operating. The PCALs, also because of the Filipino men, were able to pick up intelligence as to where the Japanese were located at that point in time and where possible positions to be located.

Alex Fabros [00:26:14] The counterintelligence units also accompanying the PCALs and the units they're assigned to were interrogating Japanese prisoners. As well as Filipino collaborators. The main mission basically, of the Filipinos in the CIC units was to identify the Filipino collaborators for the Japanese. They take these collaborators into custody, and then later turn them over to the Philippine government for justice. The Philippine PCALs, for example, my father's PCAL went ashore Leyte on invasion day. They were basically one ship behind the troops going ashore. They came ashore on their jeeps, their trucks. The trucks were loaded with food, supplies, what have you. And then my father's unit went up to Tacloban. He was liberated. They brought in supplies and items that the population had not seen in years. If you can imagine, a can of corned beef was considered a delicacy.

And they got a taste of this thing called spam, which quickly became an item that they're clamoring for. But they also provided them with cloth so they could make new clothing since they didn't have that during a time frame there. It's very, very scarce to get it. Sewing machines were provided to a lot of the population. Radios were dispersed so they could listen to what was going on. So the PCALs basically came in behind the fighting troops, tried to establish a civil government. They would identify who was a collaborator, move them out of the way, then identify leaders in a community who could then lead that community, take care of it and lead the civil government once the PCALs left. The PCALs were not that far behind combat. In fact, the men in the unit had to provide security at night against the Japanese. And on occasion, the Japanese would try to get into the PCAL compounds because they felt that it was easy to get rice from them and food from them.

Alex Fabros [00:28:49] And so, many of the PCALs ended up with Purple Hearts, Bronze Stars, because they were, they're involved in combat. People think of civil affairs units of being miles behind the combat troops. They're just one step behind what was going on in the Philippines. The Filipinos in the PCALs were in combat a lot of times. It's because they're, the Americans sometimes would bypass pockets to Japanese. Not knowing where they are, and then the Japanese would come out and try to attack the PCALs. So the second time the PCALs landed was in Lingayen Gulf. Some of the PCALs went towards Manila. The rest of the PCALs headed North chasing Yamashita up through the Cagayan Valley. And again, at the same time you're still establishing centers where people can come and get supplies. As my father's gone up through Bayombong, he saw this young lady, he liked her, got her name. And then his unit continued on to Isabela. When the war was declared over. Captain Pearson, who was the commander of my father's unit, later became a three star general in the United States Army. They were returning to Bayombong and to go back down to Manila. And it was a fork in the road. And Captain Pearson says, Look, Alex, I know you like that girl that you saw in Bayombong. I can't be there for your wedding, but I understand a couple of you guys fell in love with women there. So they said, take these two Jeeps and these trucks fully loaded with supplies and go to Bayombong. So my father went there, he came in with two trucks, he moved with his jeep, proposed to my mother, gave the truck to my grandmother as a wedding present.

Alex Fabros [00:31:12] There's a whole new generation of Filipinos here in America. They left the Philippines and they've come here to America, but they don't know the history of Filipinos in America. And it's important for them to understand that the liberties and rights that they have today was not given to them. It was earned by Filipinos who came here almost 100 years ago. They had a lot of struggle to go through. And as my father used to tell me, I travel with my father throughout the Salinas Valley and Central California. He'd point out the places that were of historical significance, and I never paid attention to it. When my mother died, my father started talking to me. I stayed with him for about 30 days. And he would talk story to me and said, Have you ever heard of the Exeter riots? I said, Yeah, briefly. Doesn't mean much to me. He drove me down to Exeter and he found the young man who got stabbed. I got a chance to talk to him. So I found out that the story that we've been told was completely different. And then being a historian, it's at that point I decided I was going to become a historian. I was going to dig up the facts and not the myths of what happened to Filipinos in America. I was fortunate when I retired that I gave a lecture and Dan Gonzales at San Francisco State heard it. And he suggested that I come to San Francisco State to continue my research. And he gave me the full resources of the university to recreate the history of Filipinos from 1920 to 1945 through the FAXRP. And in that collection of documents that we had, we discovered the men and women who actually fought for the rights of Filipinos to be in America in the 1930s.

Alex Fabros [00:33:18] It was not just a simple thing where, okay, I go up to a senator. They had to do it multiple times. They had to create coalitions. But that's a forgotten history. But because of what we did at San Francisco State, we now have a whole body of work that a lot of people are drawing from. For instance, we came up with facts about a woman who was buried alive, that became a documentary. We discovered the real reasons of what happened down at Delano . That became another documentary. But the thing is, people look at these documentaries, but they don't understand what's going on. They need to know the history of why we're able to still be here in America. Now we have a group of young Filipinos. Now, I call them young because gosh, I'm almost 80. But they're activists. They're out there fighting for the rights of Filipinos today. And I think part of it's because they were inspired by what they've learned about their past. If they didn't know about their past, they would not be inspired to go out there and make change happen. And for me, that was one of the reasons I became a historian, was to tell story to my students, and to write stories about that generation that everyone's forgotten. But because those stories are now written. People will someday remember exactly who and why we are, Filipinos, here in America. It was not a given, it was something we had to earn.