

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Cecilia Gaerlan

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

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:00:06] My father, Luis Gaerlan Junior, survived the Bataan Death March. He was with the 41st Infantry Regiment under General Lim. And yes, he survived the Bataan Death March. So when I was growing up in the Philippines in Imus Cavite, my father used to tell us stories of the war. But the way he told the stories, it was like cowboy story because my father was a natural comic, so he would make sound effects and he was like a stand up comedian. So we used to laugh at his stories. So it wasn't until probably 2000 when I started, I wrote, I actually wrote a screenplay about a mother and daughter that was partly set during World War Two. And the seeds of their estrangement go back to World War Two. And so I used to hear these stories from my father, my mother, my aunt. And there's a character in the story that was sort of based on my aunt, because my aunt was like probably seven years old during the war. So the character of the girl was based upon her. But it's the story's fiction, of course. And so my father used to tell us these stories, but it wasn't until I did the screenplay. So I did the screenplay first and then a book and then a stage play. It was during the stage reading of the story that I realized that not too many people have heard about the Bataan Death March. So I started researching. I met some veterans. And then one day I found this document. I think it was from Fort Leavenworth. It was part of an officer's training course. And it was an analysis of my father's regiment, the 41st Infantry Regiment. And when I started reading this, I cried.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:02:26] I was so heartbroken because I didn't know what he really went through during the war. And then it turned out that my experience was not unique because a lot of these men never told their children about what they went through because it was just too painful. During the last days of the war, in early April of 1942, when majority of the U.S. Army forces in the Far East were suffering from massive disease, starvation. And right before the surrender, the Imperial Japanese army started carpet bombing Mount Samat in Bataan. So that was the last stand. And so these were incendiary bombs that burned a lot of the soldiers. And when I was reading this, I was so heartbroken. And then in that analysis, I guess there were some soldiers who were so desperate that they took their own lives. And when I asked my father, dad, did this really happen? And at first he didn't answer. Did this really happen? Is it true that they took their own lives? And he broke down. And I ask him, how about you? Did you think about taking your own life? And then he said, I was starting to write a farewell letter. So that was the story about my father. And then, as I said, my story is not unique. Because when I started interviewing veterans, when, you know, a family member would be with them and suddenly they would break down. And, you know, I got so nervous interviewing these guys because they were elderly. They're now, they have passed on since then. And, you know, I didn't want them to have a heart attack during the interview. But a lot of the children would say, Dad, how come you never told me about this? So, yes, I think it was just too painful for them.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:04:38] And they had to go on with their lives. They had to rebuild their lives, especially in the Philippines, which was so devastated. So this is a story he told me during the march itself, you know, because they were not provided food or water. So during the march, one of the Japanese guards threw a rice ball in the air. And it landed on the ground. And as soon as the rice ball landed on the ground, the soldiers who were so, who were starving dove into the rice ball. And that's when the guards started shooting. But that's one of the stories. And I know he had this ring. I don't know if it's a family heirloom, because before the death march, the Japanese guards started confiscating watches, money, whatever jewelry you have. So instead of getting confiscated, he throw it in the air. And I don't know who got it. One of the probably civilians along the route. And yes, so that's one of the stories I remember. And then, of course, there are other stories. Once they got to Camp O'Donnell, this was the prison camp for the Filipino and American prisoners. And it used to be a camp, but this was like an old camp, and it was not equipped for prisoners. And actually, about approximately 20,000 Filipinos and 1600 Americans died while they were incarcerated at Camp O'Donnell. So my father's best friend, his name was Guillermo Garcia. We used to call him Chuemal, and he was actually the one who told me a lot of stories and encouraged me to do what I'm doing right now. So he was with the Philippine Army Air Corps, and as we all know, the Far East Air Force was destroyed after the first week of the war.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:06:56] So suddenly all these people from the Air Corps became infantrymen and they never even got to shot. I mean, they never used their guns. They never used guns before this. So he was telling me a lot of stories. But anyway, inside Camp O'Donnell, he said he almost died. And he was telling me he saw the white light and he credited my father for saving him. You know, my father force fed him because he was, he said he was one step away from the grave because he was lying down on this bamboo bed. And then next to it is a pit, was a pit. And then all they had to do was push the guy. That's how he, that's what he told me. But anyway, so 7/8 of the main line of resistance of the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East were Filipinos. That's why 20,000 Filipinos died inside Camp O'Donnell. And there were 16, approximately 1600 Americans who died at Camp O'Donnell. Well, my father was, if you had met him. He was bigger than life. And he wasn't going to let anything beat him. He was a fighter. And actually, I didn't know many stories about him until well after he died, one of his friends was telling me that he was with the Guava Detail. I knew he was with the Guava Detail. The Guava Detail was this group that gathered guava leaves outside Camp O'Donnell. So they were allowed to leave the camp, gather guava leaves because that was the only remedy for dysentery for whatever diseases they were having because they didn't have any medication. But I didn't know that he was smuggling in letters, cash from families outside. Letters, cash inside the camp.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:09:21] So, and then at one point, I think the Japanese didn't want him to be with the Guava Detail anymore. But the doctors within that group insisted that he be the one to lead the Guava Detail. So actually, he was really a survivor because he hung out with the doctors. Well, he knew these doctors from his province. And so the soldiers used to call him Doc, thinking that he was a doctor. So that was the story. But I didn't know that the you know, the extent of his involvement with the Guava Detail. When I was doing my research, I found out that these guys suffered from starvation. I didn't know that. And then when I started doing research, I found out that General MacArthur, after he told the guys or he told the soldiers that thousands of ships, thousands of soldiers and miles of ships are on their way. At the same breath, he issued an order for half rations. That was around January five. So if you can imagine, the war in the Philippines started that December eight, on December eight, a few hours after Pearl Harbor, was supposed to be a simultaneous attack, but because of poor visibility, they delayed that attack. And so

December eight and then January five, the soldiers were already on half rations. By February, there was no longer any quinine distributed to the soldiers in the field. Quinine was the medication for malaria, and Bataan was a jungle. There were a lot of tropical diseases and almost every one of them suffered from malaria. My father did, and my Chuemal did. So no quinine. By March, early March, they were on quarter rations and a lot of them were suffering from massive disease, starvation. And by end of March, I think there was only 20% combat efficiency.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:11:50] So that by April there were no longer any reserve troops. Because they were mostly sick. So a lot of the ammunition that was supplied to them, including the uniforms, if you see the uniforms, even the Philippine Scouts, they look like World War One uniforms. For the Philippine Commonwealth, it was even worse because they were given one set of khaki uniforms, shorts and short sleeves, rubber soled sneakers. Some of them or some of them had coconut husk helmets. Their guns were too big for them because these guns were used during World War One. And according to a report by General George Parker, who was the commander of the South Luzon forces, and he became the commander of the the two corps. He was one of the two commanders of Bataan, west and east. He was on the east side. According to General Parker's report, about 60, between 60 to 70% of ammunition were duds because they date back to World War One. The Japanese, as you know, have been fighting since 1931. And then 1937 in China. So it was a very formidable, it was a very formidable force with the latest equipment. The Japanese had the timetable of 50 days, but the Filipinos and Americans, the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East were able to hold on to Bataan for 99 days. As you know, the Bataan peninsula guards the mouth of Manila Bay. And according to War Plan Orange Three, the prime defense was in Bataan because they didn't want the Japanese forces to make a landing at Manila Harbor. War Plan Orange had been in existence since the 1920s. As you know, Japan defeated Russia in 1905. And as a matter of fact, President McKinley brokered a peace treaty between Japan and Russia.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:14:23] And he got the, he received the Nobel Prize, the Nobel Peace Prize for that. But then in the twenties, there was the Washington treaty in which the major powers tried to, it was like a nonproliferation treaty where they tried to limit the building of warships. And then so what happened was I think Japan left the League of Nations because they didn't want to take part in, they didn't want to limit the building of their warships. So at one point, they had the most formidable naval force, even bigger than the United States, because you know, we had the 1929 crash and then we had the depression in the early thirties. And then so by 1937 38, the United States armed forces was, I think, number 15 amongst the world's armies next to the Dutch. So the Dutch were even bigger than the United States. Yes. So War Plan Orange, because the United States only had a small presence in the Philippines. There was only the U.S. 31st Regiment. We had the Philippine Scouts, which was mostly Filipino professional soldiers with mostly American officers. And at that time, between 1935, which was the founding of the Philippine commonwealth, of course, the Philippines was still under the United States. Right. So between 1935 and the war, it took, well, I guess there were no funds to develop a Philippine Commonwealth army. And so it was only on July 26, 1941, when the order for the creation of the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East was created with General Douglas MacArthur as the commanding officer. And this was right after Japan took full military control of Thailand, Burma. And so that's when it happened. But initial mobilization of the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East did not start until September. My own father was only called in November so that by December eight, you know, a lot of the divisions were not fully formed yet. They knew that it would take about six months for the US forces to cross the Pacific and get to the Philippines. But they didn't anticipate the war in Europe. But as

we all know, in November of 1940, Admiral Harold Stark, the chief of naval operations, created this memo called Plan Dog Memo, and that was the basis for the Europe first policy. And so between January and April of 1941, as a result of that memo, there was the American, British, Dutch Australian conversation which resulted in Rainbow Plan Five and Rainbow Plan because each country had a color code designation. Between January and April of 1941. We had the American, British, Dutch, Australian, the ABDA conversations, which set forth the Rainbow Plan war plan, and in that is the War Plan Orange which was the war plan against Japan. And in it, one of the things in that war plan is to fortify Japan and defend it. To defend Bataan. To defend Bataan. In the war plan, if the enemy succeeds in overcoming the defense, the United States can abandon the Philippines. So what happened was Admiral Hart, Thomas Hart, the commander in chief of the Pacific fleet, left the Philippines on December 26, 1941. MacArthur received permission from Washington, D.C., around September of 1941 to spread the troops on the beaches of Luzon. He thought that the war plan was defeatist because the war plan called for the troops to defend Bataan, they were supposed to converge in Bataan and fight the enemy from Bataan. But General MacArthur thought it was a defeatist plan.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:19:49] So he received permission from Washington, D.C., to spread the troops on the beaches of Luzon. But what happened when the Japanese forces, the 14th army of General Homma, landed on December 22nd, 1941. It was so fast that on December 23rd, he reversed the order to go back to the original war plan. So you have the forces coming from the north, east, south, west converging on a single road. They were converging on a single road to Bataan. So that's what happened. So what happened was we were doing stage readings of this play that I wrote based on the screenplay, based on the book, and I realized not too many people had heard about Bataan, so in the research, I found this article, and I'm not sure if that was published by Stars and Stripes. It was a military publication. And in it, it said. During the fall of Bataan, it stated that Filipinos were flashing V not for victory, but for vacate. In other words. The author accused the Filipinos of vacating their positions. And I got so furious. I said, You're talking about my father here. So I vowed to myself, I cannot wait for someone else to do it. I have to do something in honor of my father. So it started out as a personal journey. But in meeting all these veterans and their families, I realized the legacy that they left, the legacy of sacrifice. That they did during World War Two. And you come to a point in your life when you say I cannot, I cannot sit here and do nothing. So what happened was I did a PowerPoint presentation with a few short films, and then the materials that I received that I was able to get and so many researchers were so generous with their time and with their research.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:22:24] So there were so many people who helped. And basically I marketed myself to speak at least twice a month. And a lot of them were veterans groups, and they didn't know the real story, and especially the part in which the Filipinos at the end of the war, they were stripped of their rightful veterans benefits with the passage of the Recession Act. And so many people were so shocked about this. They had no knowledge that this happened. And a lot of them said this is not the American way, you know, And they accepted me wholeheartedly. And then it so happened in 2011, the California legislature passed a bill called AB 199. And what it is, is it encourages for the inclusion of the role of Filipinos during World War Two in the Philippines in the social studies curriculum for California. Now, I learned about this in 2014, So 2011 so. Three years had passed. So I ask, So what happened to this bill? Nothing. Nobody knew. So I thought since I had no knowledge, I'm not in academia, so I had no knowledge about the curriculum process in California. So nobody was doing anything about it. Well, simply because the way the bill was written, because it says it encourages, it was not a mandate. It's not a requirement. And so what happened was, it so happened that California in 2014

was starting the revision of its curriculum framework for the state. And we happened to meet the California Superintendent of Education, Tom Torlakson. And initially, I think they proposed, including two events during World War Two in the Philippines, the Battle of Bataan, and the Battle of Manila. And so it was a public process where the subject matter committee, the history curriculum committee met, it was open to the public.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:24:57] But the only way the public could address the committee was during the public comments. But because there were so many people attending, so many signed up for the public comments, you were limited to one minute. So it became a battle in public relations. Not just during the process itself, but in public relations. And it became, it was a grassroots effort. The first time I went to the meeting, I was on my own and I saw the different groups and they brought their grandparents, their parents, the grandkids, they all spoke. I said, Wow, this is really grassroots action. And so the following meeting, you know, I made sure I brought people and so forth. So in 2016, it was approved. So first, the committee, the history committee had to approve it, and then it goes to a bigger package and then it goes to the state Board of Education, and they approve the package and the revision of the curriculum framework. It only happens probably every 10 to 12 years. And so on July 14, 2016, it was approved for inclusion in the Grade 11 U.S. history as part of Chapter 16. And from two events, from two lines, it became a page and a half in the framework. So we were able to include from the Philippine Commonwealth until the Battle of Manila and even events like the Hell ships, where thousands of American and allied prisoners of war were transported. And I think there were close to 5000 who died in these hell ships from the Philippines alone, by friendly fire. So that was included. And the good thing is, in California, California and Texas are the two largest consumers of textbooks in the country. And any changes in these two states curriculum framework, the publishers or the major publishers of the textbooks are obligated to include any changes in these two states, and these textbooks are distributed nationally. In other words, if this had happened in a small state like Wisconsin, Iowa, then they're not obligated to do that. But since this is California. So but of course, there is the challenge of implementation, even here in California, even though it's in the textbook, you know, teachers, history teachers, it's difficult for them to take on more subjects. So what we did in 2017 was we commissioned several Grade 11 history teachers to create sample lesson plans. And we only use primary documents like the report of General Parker. So there's no spin on the books. It's all primary documents. And they're available for free through the Bataan Legacy website. So before the approval, I received a phone call from the head of the committee. And he asked me, Cecilia, what's this? I hear that you said that the process was skewed. Because I had spoken to a reporter. And I didn't say, off the record. And so he said, I heard you said it was skewed. And I said, Oh my God, that's it. They're not going to approve it. And so I was able to compose myself. I remember I was carrying my groceries from Safeway about to load them to my car and then I said, Bill, please don't get me wrong. We appreciate all of your help in the committee. But this is the first time that this will be taught not just in California, but in the entire United States. And we have an obligation to get this right. But after that conversation, I was not hopeful right, because I didn't know how he reacted.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:29:48] So what happened was we met with the executive director of the State Board of Education to see if they could do something. So we went upstairs while the committee was meeting on the ground floor of the State Board of Education building in Sacramento. But the executive director said, no, all the work needs to be done by the committee because by the time it gets to the state Board of Education, they have a 1000 page document and they don't have time to read all the 1000 pages. So what happened was, so we met with her, then we came down. By the time we came down. They said, Cecilia, it's been approved. What do you mean, approved? Which one? Because I wasn't

expecting everything to be approved, right. And then, everything. You're kidding me. No. Why don't we go to the recorder? The one who was recording the meeting. So I go there. Which one was approved. They approved it. Which one? The left or the right? Because the left was the original draft. And the right one was our proposal. They approved this. The right one. What? And then, but I still didn't believe it until it was posted online. So that was, And you know, as I said, I'm not in academia. I didn't know the process. Probably if I were in academia, I wouldn't have gone into the process. But since I was ignorant of what it took, I just went in there and said, No, we have to, we have to do this. So that's what happened. Because when I started, you know, it was from a personal perspective and I had my father's picture there. And he knew I was doing it for him.

Cecilia Gaerlan [00:31:49] And every time I would do a presentation, Dad, Oh, they loved your story, and he would have this huge grin on his face. And yes, so when it passed, it was such an emotional experience, especially for the veterans. And I remember one veteran during one of the Bataan Death March events, and he whispered to me, Cecilia, thank you for doing this. We thought we had been forgotten. And I just cried. I said, No, I should be the one thanking you for all your sacrifices. I was sobbing actually, because there was this old veteran who I mean, he was with the 57th Infantry Regiment. He was in the front lines.