

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Derek Ledda

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

Derek Ledda [00:00:06] My dad was born in July 21, 1919, in the town of Balaoan in La Union. My mom was born in the same year, on April 19, actually a day after my birthday, in the same year, 1919. Well, as the story goes, my dad and my mom both went to Tondo High School, and at that time my dad was not the greatest student. He had not yet come to the point where he appreciated the value of education, whereas my mom was quite the opposite. She was actually a teacher's pet and would quite often be the person asked by the teacher to help with a variety of tasks for the teacher, grading papers. And my dad, I'm guessing from the way they talked, came to her attention because he was one of the poorer students that my mom had to work with. And one of their favorite stories was that quite often the communication between my mom and my dad was my mom telling my dad how much better he had to do, because when he would receive his paper back that she had evaluated, it was covered in red. Yes. I'm guessing that certainly before the end of his high school years, that he understood, that for him to make his way in life, because he did come from a very, from a poor background and didn't have a lot of money. He did not really have high expectations for what eventually he would be able to do. What he did decide would be a good thing to try is to go to a trade school and learn how to be a radioman, to work on cargo ships and so forth. So he thought that might be the way in which he could make his way in life.

Derek Ledda [00:02:16] And it just fortuitously and I believe I don't have quite, I'm not quite clear about this, but I believe it's the instructor or an instructor or instructors that he had while he was at the trade school that recognized his potential that he was a very smart person and he was a very determined person. And it was that person who suggested to him and helped him to be able to apply for what was then probably the most prestigious school of higher education, the Philippine Military Academy. And so with his assistance, he went through the process of being able to apply both in terms of his academic credentials, but also his physical preparedness to be able to be admitted to the PMA. Well, it was very, there was a very rigorous admission process, which, as I said, involved also being physically prepared. One of the things that all the aspiring cadets had to pass was basically to be of a certain weight for their height. My dad was rather a short person and quite thin. He was not quite sure that he'd be able to meet the weight requirement. So as he tells the story and he was certainly happy to tell it, the night before he was to go in for his physical, he ate a whole lot of bananas and drank a whole lot of water in order to pass the weight requirement, which he did. I think in the Filipino culture, because of its background as a colony of the United States, aspired to achieve a lot of the standards that they learned from the U.S. And so they would sometimes take the standards to an extreme at the PMA, the Philippine Military Academy. They didn't just take the traditions of West Point so that it would be much like it.

Derek Ledda [00:04:36] They would go to an extreme. And in my dad's case, what I learned most about the particular tradition that was so significant in his life was the hazing. The fact that the cadets, it was daily and constant, that they were basically being harassed, not just in terms of verbal harassment, but even harsh physical harassment to the point where he had no time to even study and would basically have to break curfew to be able to, after lights out, to be able under the bedsheets with a flashlight to be able to study. But I later learned that he credited with the level of physical abuse that he experienced with helping him to be prepared for the Bataan Death March, that he was already used to some level of pain and deprivation. So he was very sincere when he said that was instrumental in his having the wherewithal to be able to persevere in spite of all that he faced during the death march and in the concentration camp. Well, there was a couple of things from the Philippine Military Academy that became certainly significant in his life as a soldier, his experience during World War Two. One of which is that he majored in boxing. He was a boxer. And a very successful one. He was a very successful boxer. So much so that he was undefeated until he faced someone who thoroughly battered him and who later went on to become the champion of the Far East. But my dad said, well, I would have beat him, but I broke curfew to see your mom. But the point was that he, as part of that experience, knew what it meant to take a blow and how to get over it and how to persevere.

Derek Ledda [00:06:54] The other experience that he had at the PMA was that one of the sports in which he excelled, that he lettered in was equestrian arts. And he, of course, as a member of the cavalry, which was something that he used right after they were all commissioned at the very beginning of World War Two. He was with the cavalry on horses resisting the invasion from the Japanese. So the first counteroffensive was on horseback. My dad and his classmates were preparing for the prom as a culmination, social culmination of their time at the Philippine Military Academy, then December 8th, when the war changed their lives and ended the lives of many. And they were immediately commissioned to be out in the field in actual combat and never got to the point where they were able to graduate. They were all commissioned and their experience was trying to use what they had learned to resist an invading enemy. And I don't know the exact time period, but my impression in talking with my dad was that it happened very quickly, that it could have been within a month or, soon thereafter though they were out there because the Japanese were already invading. I learned about my dad's first experiences in the war to some extent from him, though he did not like to talk about the war. And also from what I had read in a book that was written by a fellow classmate who had actually met my dad during that first encounter during the war in resisting the Japanese invasion. My dad was in the group, whether it was a company or a battalion that first encountered the invasion, the Japanese forces. Because the captain was almost immediately killed. Somehow he was one of the lieutenants, he was the lieutenant that stepped up to lead that group. So he, as I understand from what I read and what my dad spoke about, he led the first and only counterattack to the Japanese invasion that was successful because after that, because of their disadvantage, they were poorly equipped, World War One equipment, and just by sheer force of numbers, they were quickly overwhelmed. But it was during that counterattack that my dad was hit by mortar shrapnel, which he carried to the end of his day. His lung was punctured. And actually rumors had gotten back to my mom that he had died. But they somehow managed to patch him up and he was back to the front lines in Bataan at a later time. My dad was also always a person of faith. Now, I'm not quite sure how he acquired that faith, because based on what I learned, he was a bit of a rascal in his early days. But he was, it was his faith that carried him through so many of the horrible

experiences that killed so many of his fellow soldiers. And in each of those occurrences, it was his faith that got him through. But in one particularly tangible way, his faith did literally save him in that he would carry a little pocket bible in his breast pocket. And in that encounter with the Japanese, the mortar, some of the shrapnel actually hit the Bible that was covering his heart. Had it not been there, he would have died then. And I had asked him before, where is it? But he couldn't find it. He had it somewhere, but he couldn't find it. I do have his other Bible that he'd continue to carry with him throughout the rest of his life.

Derek Ledda [00:11:41] But faith was strong in him and, I think in everything that he did in his service life, his family life, his entire life was also about his faith and the values he learned at the Philippine Military Academy. Well, I do know that, as most people can probably imagine, there is so much deprivation and illness, dysentery, malaria, no food. He once told me, because my dad, not exactly a foodie, but he loved food. And he did say that he could survive on anything and that they would eat monkeys if they had and enjoy it. But despite all that, those group of remaining fighters were very committed to fighting to the very end. My dad told me that they were prepared to go the distance, whatever it might take to fight on behalf of the United States and their homeland. But they finally did accept surrender only because they're ordered to do it. Otherwise, he said, we would have continued, no matter what the cost, they would have continued to fight. And of course, he was among the Filipinos and in leadership position, he understood maybe better than most what it meant to have a role in trying to pursue something as challenging as what they're doing. My dad was not comfortable. I think like many, he wanted to put the memory of that terrible time, that experience after the surrender, being part of the death march, and then from there becoming incarcerated in the concentration camp. Some of the snippets of what he would share with me, I've heard from other folks that lived through it. Some were fortunate enough to be able to escape. For him, it was a daily struggle to just stay alive, not by virtue of only what you were able to do for yourself, but so much depended on the people that were around you.

Derek Ledda [00:14:30] People that maybe, he told me had, he may not have ever met before, that he only got to know them or be near them at all during the march. Those soldiers, those folks who experienced the death march together, however it developed, it developed quickly the sense of responsibility for each other. That they all either died separately or they survived together. And so for them, when one fell by the wayside, everyone to the extent they could, would make the effort to pick that person up. Otherwise, it was expected, you could count on if it was your misfortune, you would be killed. The Japanese, one of the Japanese soldiers, would bayonet you or shoot you. So it was, of course, in part, I'm sure my dad's faith, as I've mentioned before, that carried him through thinking, you know, just give me this, you know, get me through this one thing and then, until the next thing. And then his faith would carry him through that next thing. I have to believe too that he took to heart, however way he was able to internalize the motto of the PMA, which was courage, integrity and loyalty. And that really guided him not just through the war, but throughout his life. So it took certainly the courage and perseverance to get through that with the help of other people, which is something that he always emphasized. You don't do it alone. One of the first, I'm sure that one of the first experiences that they had, that the prisoners of war had when they arrived at the camps was to be checked for any valuables that they might have. And many of them still had their academy rings with them that they received for completing their courses at the PMA.

Derek Ledda [00:16:40] Many, because it was such an important symbol of what they had experienced during their time at the PMA, would refuse and would be immediately killed. And of course the rings were taken from them. My dad felt as they did, that this was so important. It symbolized, it was not just something you put on your finger, it symbolized so much more than that. And in order to try to keep it, to hide it from the Japanese, he hid it in his posterior. And that's how he was able to retain it. And to this day, I still have it at home. Though the markings, the design on the ring are already worn away. It's almost smooth, but it reflects so much more than just jewelry. And it talks about history, courage, loyalty, integrity, all of the things that the PMA taught them. And one of the things that I later learned through a documentary that he was involved with when he was interviewed, are some of the details of what he experienced at the concentration camp. And one of which was the fact that there was, as he described it I know, an endless procession of the dead that were buried in graves, collective graves, and that he was assigned to that duty. I never knew that. That they would be carried, I think, in bamboo poles, but in blankets tied to the pole, carried to the burial site where they're all dumped and buried. I think that left, certainly had to leave and I know from how he described it, it was something he never forgot. So much so that in his later years he was staying with me at that point, his health was not very good at that point.

Derek Ledda [00:18:52] It was the first time he had actually watched the documentary. And when that scene, I believe that it was that scene when it all rushed back to him and he, he actually had to be rushed to the hospital for emergency services. It impacted him so profoundly. It's interesting how he described that experience when he was released from the concentration camp. And I did know from him that it was simply to try to put what the Japanese were doing in a more acceptable light, maybe to the Filipino populace. But they released the most sick. I know my dad had dysentery and malaria when he was released from the camp. I know that when my mom first saw him, he was yellow, so thin from the malnutrition and was like a walking corpse when she saw him again. But my dad, for some reason that I still don't fully fathom, is that he seemed not to want to talk about his illness, that it was almost an embarrassment that he had the malaria and the dysentery. Unless it's because that takes away your last vestiges of humanity when you can't control your body in any significant way. So, at least it gave him the key out, and it certainly did not in any way deter him or dampen his commitment to continuing to fight on, because he then after that, after he and my mom got married in a civil ceremony, she had to pay the trolley fare. My dad said they went to the courthouse and were married. Which to me is another act of, it's a show of faith on both their parts, they're both extremely religious people. But soon after that, he left to join the guerrillas.

Derek Ledda [00:21:38] Well, I can only imagine how my dad must have felt to have survived all that he had with the death march and the concentration camp, to have been in many ways just less than human, because he was treated as less than human, to be embraced by a family. One of whom, my mom said, this guy, we're going to get married while he still carried the clear vestiges, the signs of his march and his incarceration. It was an act of commitment that goes beyond what most young people understand their vows to be. That my folks made this commitment to each other in the face of the horror of what life can hold in store and could continue to hold in store, because obviously they're still in the midst of the Japanese occupation. My dad was still required to report to the authorities. I think that for the soldiers and for their families, there was always the constant threat that they might be discovered doing anything that might appear to be against what the Japanese were ordering them to do. And certainly they demanded the population's

subservience. So I know that when my dad, after he got out, the whole family continued to be at risk. So the role of my dad was to help my uncle to protect our collective family from the Japanese while everybody was performing their duties to be able to continue the fight. I remember that one of the things, my dad was always very resourceful. He could not have survived and gotten to the position that he did as a full colonel in the U.S. Army without being a very smart, resourceful and could anticipate what was needed to solve any potential problem. And one of those is to put the potential for a bomb to land anywhere. So he took it upon himself to build a makeshift bomb shelter under the residence where they're staying, which, as it turned out, saved their lives because they were bombed. And when the air raid began, they all had a place to go which saved their lives. One of my dad's responsibilities at that time and others had the same, followed I think pretty much the same approach to it, was in distributing The Liberator on his bicycle with a basket which had three layers. The top would be something quite innocent like bread. They would be bread sellers or suppliers. The next level would be The Liberator, The Liberator paper. And then the bottom layer would be a gun, his revolver, because clearly that was just one of the things that you could expect could happen. So, and it certainly, he certainly came close, never got to the point where he had to use it. But on one occasion he was actually going to visit my aunt and, but the Japanese were there, for whatever purpose. But the Japanese were there right around the same area. As a warning, my aunt was smart enough, resourceful enough to yell out to my dad, We don't need bread. We don't need bread. You don't need to bring us bread. So my dad got the hint. He got the hint that something is wrong. So he was able to escape. But he'd had other close calls, too, in his efforts to distribute the newspaper, like one time when he was actually stopped and he was being checked by Japanese soldiers who were questioning him.

Derek Ledda [00:26:41] And he had every expectation that that revolver was going to come in handy. But rather, but he was not going to survive that, there were too many. So what he did was to, I think, play slow and dumb and wasn't picking up on what was being said to him. And so he was very slow, very deliberate, in trying to respond to what their orders were. The soldiers got so frustrated, they just let him go. Another key to my survival. His time with the guerrillas is something that I would like to learn more about because I did not hear as much about his activities during then, except that all the Filipino officers, basically whoever is left from the PMA, had a particular special role in being able to help coordinate the guerrillas out in the field so they had some semblance of order and unified action to what they're doing. So I'm guessing that my dad was no different in that regard, that throughout his remaining time in the Philippines, he did spend helping to coordinate guerrilla forces. You know, there's a lot of things about what my dad did that it's particularly sad for me now not to have explored while he's still alive. I know. And by accident I've run across and then more recently learned about a myriad of awards that my dad received for his courage, his bravery, his excellence in his service. I found out that he received four of the top medals that the U.S. Awards, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Legion of Merit and the Purple Heart, some of which he repeated. Purple Heart was because my dad was a veteran of three wars in combat during World War Two, of course, Korea and in Vietnam.

Derek Ledda [00:28:59] And he had received the Silver Star and Bronze Star, Purple Heart in World War Two, but he also received I believe it was the Purple Heart and I believe the Legion of Merit in Korea. Now, he may have received the Legion of Merit in Vietnam, but he was injured in all three and received the Purple Heart in all three wars. And there's a myriad of other wartime and peacetime medals that he received. And I don't

know exactly for what specifically, because my dad didn't talk about it. I only found out that he had received medals because I was going through some drawers when my dad was staying with me, going through some drawers when we're moving him. I pulled open a drawer. There's a whole bunch of medals just strewn, strewn in this, this little cabinet. And I asked him. Well, yes, Silver Star, Bronze Star, and this other stuff. And then eventually, when he was retiring, he received a plaque that had many of his top commendations, the Joint U.S. Army Commendation Medal. So many more. There was one from Vietnam, that was their highest award for courage. And of course, that is no longer. But he received that as well. So it's sad to me that I can, for my purposes, to help me to understand better not just what he went through, but the further example he set for me and to others. That's something that is lacking among our young people to have its heroes or especially early on, we're trying to look to other cultures to find our heroes, to take pride in who we were, to be motivated to emulate some of those characteristics and values that were there all along, but they just haven't been shared.

Derek Ledda [00:31:18] Again, you know, the PMA taught as its motto, courage, integrity and loyalty. And for my dad, he was loyal to the United States, when he was offered, invited to the War College, which was the next step to becoming a general. But he said that he'd done the three wars and he said that the younger officers coming up did not understand and appreciate the notion of patriotism and loyalty. So he felt that, that was really it for him. He continued to serve. And again, so many more medals for peacetime, his peacetime service in the face of another war that he fought, maybe a little less risky, but the discrimination he faced when he came here and became a target because he was a person of color, establishing himself in the upper ranks of military leadership, even though his medals, his accomplishments spoke for themselves, there were certainly like in all parts of our society, there are folks who did not want him to succeed, so they would give him the hardest tasks to accomplish, to break him so that he would fail and that would stop his rise in leadership. And his approach to that, quiet, humble guy, so they could not have expected that he would say, okay, I'll do it. But on this condition, yes, if I fail, do with me what you want, but you let me do it my way. Let me succeed on my own merits. And that's what he was able to do. He continued, as again, his recognitions, whereas his commendations reflected. He continued to do things extraordinary from, you know. So again, this poor boy from Tondo, who didn't have his first pair of pants until out of high school, that went to school in the wooden shoes that were the type that the poor people wore, that my mom would make fun of because she'd hear my dad clogging down, in the classroom and would scold him about it.

Derek Ledda [00:33:42] But it was for him always, This is what we're here for. As a military man, this is what I do out of a sense of loyalty, but also, I think very much a part of his faith and also his commitment to family. Those are the three things that really directed him. You know, I'm happily a reflection of my mother and my father's values. It was always clear, unlike sometimes being a military brat, you don't have the opportunity to develop a relationship with your father who's always gone, or nowadays it's also your mother. But in those days when my dad was back, we were a family. My mom would hold the fort and do all that was needed to keep us together. But I heard the snippets. I saw how he in his own humble, unassuming way, accomplished things that always had the good of someone else in mind. I know that one of the stories that I heard, including from some of my relatives was, and that I heard from him that when he was adjutant general, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group in the Philippines, he was the guy in charge. So what he would do is annually, he set up an event where the staff would be served by the officers because to

him that was important not only for the staff but also for the officers that they understood that they had a role in service to the Filipino people. That's why they're there. And I know one of my cousins just marveled and was delighted when he would see my five foot five, five foot six dad in his full regalia. And the ones who were saluting him and were there at his beck and call were these six foot Anglo guys.

Derek Ledda [00:36:03] But for my dad it was all about the fact that we're in it together. And that was what was important. So I think that for him, he didn't think twice about it. He didn't have to process it. He just knew this is the right order of things and would be very stern with people who did not understand that, not only the values, but to do everything to the best of your ability. And I picked that up from him, the integrity, being honest, taking on big challenges and relying on your faith, your family to help see you through, and that you worked as a team not just in a smaller group, but as a society that you had to do it together in order to meet the bigger challenges. Thanks, Dad. I love you.