Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Paul Ruiz

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

Paul Ruiz [00:00:05] My dad was Jose Torres Ruiz. He was born in 1914 and he was one of eight children to Francisco and Leandra Torres Ruiz. It's weird to think that my grandparents were born in the 1880s, but yeah, my dad was the youngest boy and he grew up in Agoo, La Union, Philippines. My grandfather, Francisco, was a bandleader and his students were poor kids in Agoo and they would pay with produce, eggs, things like that. But they became a band that wound up touring in the Philippines, and they won all these awards. So during the 1904 St Louis World's Fair, my grandfather conducted or composed a piece called Los Iris, Filipinas, Filipinas. And it was, it won the bronze medal in the 1904 St Louis World's Fair, and it was a composition that had music styles from all over the Philippines. Many of his students went on to become bandleaders in their own right in the 1940 and 1950s. I met an academician from Los Angeles who wrote a book called Empires of Music, something along those lines. And in it, my grandfather is mentioned. So she and I connected and she said, Oh, there's a Ruiz in my book. And that was him. So my father enlisted in the Philippine Scouts in 1934. He was 20 years old, and he did not have very good teeth. So the scouts had initially rejected him. But through some of his friends who vouched for my father's character and physical abilities, they said, you know, this is somebody that you want in our unit. So they made some exceptions. And my father was made part of the Philippines scouts. So my father was with the 12th Ordnance Company of the Philippine Scouts. I think they were in Fort Stotsenburg with the 26th Cavalry.

Paul Ruiz [00:02:23] And when the Japanese invaded December 8th, 1941, the Philippine Scouts were the backbone of MacArthur's troops In the Philippines. There were some 12,000 Philippine Scouts. Most of the enlisted were Filipinos. All of the enlisted were Filipinos. The officer corps were primarily Americans, white Americans. Many of them were West Point graduates. And it was considered an honor to be a Philippine Scout, and it was an honor to be considered a Philippine Scout officer. They were considered, I think it was in 1936, 1937, General Pershing had done a review of the Philippine Scouts and indicated that they were the most combat ready unit in the entire U.S. Army. Fantastic soldiers. And I had asked my dad about what made them so good. And he said it was their high level of discipline and training. So when the Japanese attacked December 8th, MacArthur sent the 26th Cavalry of the Philippine Scouts up north to recon the Japanese positions. Captain Eulalio Arzaga, who was then an enlisted man with the 26th Cavalry Philippine Scouts, at one of our reunions a number of years ago, talked about how he went up north and saw the Japanese landing on Lingayen Gulf. And he said it was terrifying to see the absolute masses of men and materiel being offloaded there. And he knew they were going to be in for a big fight. He also had been spotted by a Japanese airplane and he told the story of how this airplane started flying down to strafe him and he was trying to take evasive maneuvers to get away. So the airplane ran out of bullets. And as it flew down towards

him, the pilot waved at Captain Arzaga. And Captain Arzaga said it was the strangest thing. He just waved back at the man who was just trying to kill him minutes earlier.

Paul Ruiz [00:04:41] But that was one story that we heard. We heard another story from Captain Menandro Purrazzo, also of the 26th Cavalry. And Captain Purrazzo talked about how they mounted up their horses and rode north. Keeping in mind, this is a horse cavalry unit, and this horse cavalry unit during the war in January would conduct the last horse cavalry charge in U.S. Army history. And that was with Lieutenant Ed Ramsey, who recently passed away. Anyways, Captain Menandro Purrazzo said that they were blessed by the priest as they got on their horses and rode north to face the enemy. When they rode north, at some point contact was made. They received enemy fire. People started getting killed and they all jumped into a ditch and he told this story of how the commanding officer said, Where's my radioman? And he said, The radio man's dead, sir. Well, where's my executive officer? Well, he's dead, sir. And the commanding officer said, Well, get me my damn whiskey, then. So I don't know if that's true or not, but that was the story that Captain Purrazzo told, you know, a number of years ago at one of our old reunions. The Japanese soldiers were battle tested. They were battle hardened, they were experienced, and they were invading a country that had been at peace. The Philippine scouts were highly trained, but there were only 12,000 of them. There were American Reserve and National Guard units there as well. And there was a largely untrained Philippine army. The equipment that the Philippine soldiers had was basically World War One issue. However, what's really interesting is General Patton, in talking about World War Two, said that the M1 Garand rifle was a game changer in World War Two.

Paul Ruiz [00:06:48] And our history books talk about how the M1 Garand was first used in Europe in 1942, and that's factually incorrect. The M1 Garand was used by Philippine Scouts against the Japanese in December of 1941. Every one of these Philippine Scouts were expert riflemen and they made the Japanese pay dearly with that rifle. It was a repeating rifle. And so as opposed to bolt action, so highly lethal. And the Japanese soldiers during the subsequent death march, when they found out that you were a Philippine Scout, many of those soldiers were treated particularly brutally during the march. My father talked about how during the fight, the fighting was so ferocious on Bataan, that he said it was frustrating because the largely untrained Filipino soldiers would drop their weapons and run. He said the American soldiers did a pretty good job, but the only ones who could really stand up to the Japanese were the Philippine Scouts. And again, he talked about the pure discipline and training that these guys had been doing leading up to the war. That was the difference. When the U.S. forces were surrendered in the Philippines. My dad was at the tip of the Bataan Peninsula in Mariveles and you could start the Bataan Death March from different points on the peninsula. But he was at the very end and it took, I think, four days to walk the whole length before they arrived in San Fernando. And from San Fernando, they were put in boxcars and driven to Cabanatuan, to the prison camp at Camp O'Donnell. My dad talked about how they were so thirsty, the Japanese would not let them drink. You had to try and steal a sip of water where you could. He said at nighttime they would just sleep on the ground and there was a puddle nearby, and my father and a friend of his just started drinking, thirsty from this puddle. And in the morning they looked at it and it was just green algae all over that water. And he said, it just made you feel sick. But, you know, that's how thirsty they were. If you fell out, you were bayoneted during the march. Heads were chopped off, and so you just didn't dare fall out of the march. When you got to San Fernando, it was horrific because these cattle cars were stuffed with 100 men in a cattle car. And if you died, you died standing up. Men were

absolutely losing their minds, screaming in these cattle cars. And these were enclosed cattle cars in very, very hot, humid conditions. There was no ventilation in them. I was in the Philippines about ten years ago and we did part of the death march on April 9th, the same time of year. And it was very hot, very humid. And the idea of already having dysentery and malaria and being on half rations for four months and then walking 65 miles with very, very little water. And then just to make it to a cattle car and just to be crammed into this thing. Many men just died after going through all those horrors. And then when they got to Cabanatuan, the death rate there was extremely high. It was about 360 something per day at the prison camp. My father talked about being on the burial in detail. And when you take weak men who are starving and sick and you have them dig graves for their comrades, you don't have the strength to dig a six foot grave. These graves were three feet deep. And my father would talk about grabbing the wrists of a cadaver, of a dead person, and dropping them into the shallow grave and part of the skin would come off in your hands because he had been decomposing for a while. And you would cover the body and as hungry as you might be. And the Japanese gave you like a, just a handful of rice. They put it in a ball and they would just toss it at you. And that was your ration for the day. No matter how hungry you were, you just couldn't eat when the wind would come and you would smell the smell of death. And when the rains came, and there was a lot of rain in the Philippines, the mud, the dirt would wash away and you would see appendages sticking up from the ground. Absolutely horrible. When we were in the Philippines ten years ago, we went to Cabanatuan and it was, it's an eerie place. Even all these years later, even with all the monuments and the walls with the names over there. There's something very haunting about the place, the extreme suffering that went on at Camp O'Donnell. So after 360, some people were dying per day. The Japanese just couldn't deal with that. It was just too much. And so some of the soldiers were paroled. But my father did tell a story about how he and his friend were dying one day. They were leaning up against a Quonset hut and everyone was dying. Everyone expected to die. And his friend said to him, Well, Joe, it looks like we're next. And my dad said, Yeah, I'll see you in heaven. And they fell asleep. And my dad said, when he woke up, he looked at his friend and his friend's mouth was open and his face was covered with flies.

Paul Ruiz [00:12:45] And my dad just sort of thought, Well, I guess I'm next. And at that moment, somebody walked past my father, recognized him and said, Joe, you look horrible. Here are three quinine tablets. Take one now. Take one tonight. Take one tomorrow. I wish I could spare more, but this is all I can spare. And those three quinine tablets saved my father's life. I don't know if I could point to one thing that helped my father through this march or any of the other men who made it through. Being at these reunions over the years and reading the books that I've read on this subject. I think that part of it might have been the fact that it was horrific to see your colleagues being bayoneted or have their heads chopped off if they couldn't keep up on the march. I think that would make a very thirsty man continue walking rather than face that certain death. So maybe it was just, you keep one foot in front of the other. I do know that some of these prisoners tried to escape and some of them were lucky to escape. My father was a man of faith. I think many of these men were men of faith. And I think that probably sustained them through all of this, as well as the horrors. And I think there was also a high level of discipline that these men had. So that, you know, that served them well, too. But many of the civilians who tried to help these soldiers by the side of the road by giving them ladles of water were themselves attacked by Japanese soldiers. So that level of brutality was shocking to everyone. And I think maybe that kept many people going, until they couldn't to the point where they died in a box car after walking 65 miles.

Paul Ruiz [00:14:47] They literally walked themselves to death. My father was paroled, along with many other Filipino soldiers when the Japanese were trying to say, Look, we're on your side and we're going to let you go, but we need to know your family's location, names and all that. Because if you take up arms against us, we're going to, we're going to kill your family. And so soldiers who are paroled had to sign a piece of paper saying that they will not raise arms against the Japanese. And so that's what they did. They signed these papers. My father was released. And when he left the prison camp, his mother and his sister, his younger sister were there at the front gates to meet my father. And my dad walked right up to them and they didn't recognize my dad. They kept looking past him, to look for Joe. And Joe was standing right in front of them and. And that's the only time that I saw my father cry. My dad rehabilitated at home. My grandmother fed him and my father just ate copious amounts of food to make up for the weight loss. And just like many other Philippine Scouts, he served as a guerrilla afterwards. Of course, you didn't want to be captured. Or else that meant the end of your family. So that was a very precarious place to be. You know, fighting the enemy, but also risking everything. I talked to my dad when I was a teenager. Again, my dad was 50 when I was born. So when I was a 16 year old kid, my dad was already 66. And I would ask the kinds of sort of silly questions that a teenager might ask of his father. I asked him, Hey, did you ever kill anyone in the war? Stuff like that.

Paul Ruiz [00:16:57] And my father was very thoughtful in his answers. And he told me of a time when he climbed a tree with a friend of his as a lookout, and they waited for these deuce and a halfs to go past on on this country road, two and a half ton trucks with the canvas pulled over and troops inside. And my dad said when the last truck came through, he pulled the pin from a grenade and tossed it just right there in between all those guys. And they jumped out of the tree and he said he ran like hell. And then he heard the explosion. And, you know, sort of as a naive teenager, I said to him, you know, did you feel bad that in that instant you created, you know, orphans and widows and parents who had lost a son? And he said, no, they were doing the same thing to us. So he spoke of killing somewhat matter of fact. Maybe it bothered him deeply, but he never let on. Strangely, the times that I would speak to my father about the war. Would be after midnight mass. We would come home and everyone would go to sleep and my dad and I would stay up and we would drink Sanka. I don't know if anyone still drink Sanka coffee anymore. We would drink Sanka and eat Nilla Wafers. He just loved those things. And he would light up a cigarette and we would just talk. And I would ask him questions. I realize that those moments were few and far between, and they were precious. I recognized that even as a young person. And I remember. Asking him to tell me a story of something that had happened.

Paul Ruiz [00:18:58] And he said that when they were fighting as guerrillas, they rendezvoused with a submarine and the submarine contact showed them a map and said, we're trying to locate these Japanese positions for our bombers, but we don't know where they are. And my father knew the location, so he marked them on the map and he said the submarine took off. And the next day planes were overhead bombing those locations. So I thought, you know, that's kind of a remarkable story. And, it took me asking him for him to tell me that story. It's not, if it had happened to me, I'd probably tell everybody about it. But for my dad, you know, he would just kind of keep these stories to himself. So, 1946, my dad was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army and went over to Okinawa as part of the rebuilding process over there. The Philippine Scouts were highly regarded, as I've

mentioned, and as a result of that, or in large part because of that, he was offered and accepted citizenship, U.S. citizenship. My dad, even though he retired as a master sergeant, eventually, he was very proud of being given a commission in the U.S. Army. And his I.D. card, says first lieutenant. That was a big thing for someone who did not have a college degree to receive a U.S. Army commission. After the war, well, my father fought in the Korean War after World War Two, so his fighting days were not yet over. And his first wife, who passed away in the mid 1950s, was a long suffering woman, from what I understand. I think the personalities of many of these veterans were of hard drinking, depressed, carousing men and talking to relatives, my father was no different.

Paul Ruiz [00:21:03] He, I think, was an alcoholic. And he certainly smoked a lot until his late sixties, early seventies. He swore a lot, and that was part of his persona. My father separated from the Army after 26 years. He had been the first sergeant at Fort Dix. And then from there, he had retired at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. So my father enlisted in college, enrolled in college in 1961, where he met my mother. My mother was 27 years younger than my father. My mother, I think, wanted to move away from home, to put it mildly. And my father didn't mind having a young wife, to put it mildly. And so it was you know, it was a good match, I suppose. I was born in 1964, and we came to the United States in 1965. There is a photograph of the three of us on board the USS Mitchell right under the Golden Gate Bridge. And as we were coming under the Golden Gate Bridge, my father said, Wake the boy up. We're in America. And so there's this photo of 23 year old mom holding me and 50 year old dad with this grin on his face. And right above us is the underside of the Golden Gate Bridge. And it's interesting that as I've gotten older and some of my friends will, some of my non-Asian friends will speak disparagingly of, you know, people who come over here on a boat or boat people this, boat people that. I will advise them that I came over here on a boat. Literally, I came over here on a boat. So, it's a real precious moment in time to think of that picture and to think of all the other people in this country who have similar pictures or similar memories.

Paul Ruiz [00:23:06] We're a nation of immigrants. He tried to put me in the best schools. He put me in a private boy's Catholic school in the East Bay at great cost to him, even though I didn't want to be enrolled. Education was very key for him. And my mother continued to work. She became kind of the breadwinner of the family. She had very much an entrepreneurial spirit. Me and my sisters, we went on to high school. Two of us went on to college. I joined the Army right out of high school wanting to be a U.S. Marine. And my father said, Why would you want to be a Marine? All they do is guard Navy bases. And I said, Huh, Well, what should I do? And he said, Go into the army. Like me. So I joined the Army. I became a medic. And then I went to UC Berkeley and I enrolled in the ROTC program and became an infantry officer. And my father commissioned me on my commissioning day. And that was really cool because typically your parents pin your bars on and an officer will commission you. But in this case, since my father was a commissioned officer, he commissioned me and two of my high school friends pinned my bars on. And when they introduced my father to the auditorium and mentioned that he was a Bataan Death March survivor and a Philippine Scout, the entire auditorium rose to its feet and applauded for my father, including a lot of general officers. And my father was really taken aback. And I was so happy that day. He deserved that. On that day, when my father was commissioning me and the gallery had acknowledged his experience and his service to this country.

Paul Ruiz [00:25:03] It made me feel that he represented many others who go unrecognized. So my father calls me up. This is in 1991 and says, Why don't you come down here and talk to the doctors at the VA hospital? I went over there and the doctors met with me and I do medical malpractice for a living. I speak to doctors, nurses and hospital administrators. I'm comfortable with medical terminology and with medical care. And the doctors basically said, your father has leukemia. He has two months to live and his options for treatment are chemotherapy and radiation, in which case he'll still die, but maybe after nine months if he's lucky. But that's kind of the, that's the prognosis. And after having some back and forth with the doctors, they left the room. And I sat there with my father, me just sitting on a hospital bed in my five foot six, 120 pound dad sitting right next to me, Just kind of a diminutive man in physical stature, but a giant in spirit. And I just thought, wow, I'm going to lose my father. And I just lost it. I just started weeping uncontrollably. My body was just heaving and my father nonchalantly reaches over for a box of Kleenex and he hands it to me and he says, Hey, pull yourself together. I'm the one who's dying. And I just started laughing. I mean, that was just, that was pure Joe right there. So my father wanted to have the chemotherapy. He wanted to go down swinging. And he said that he did not want a do not resuscitate. He wanted them to resuscitate him. Even if he went into heart failure, which means that they crack your ribs when they do CPR. But he just would not accept that death was right around the corner.

Paul Ruiz [00:27:09] He told me that there were so many things he wanted to do and see. And in fact, the last time I saw my father alive was my 27th birthday in 1991. It was at the start of the Gulf War, and I was on a business trip from San Francisco to Chico. I stopped at the V.A. hospital. I met with my father. I said, I'll just be here for 15 minutes, a quick visit. And I wound up staying there for an hour, just spending time with him. And he said, you know, I want to see the year 2000. I want to see your mom finish law school. I'd like to see you get older and maybe get married and have kids one day. And my dad said, I'm going to pray the rosary every night. I'm going to ask God to give me a miracle that I can fight this cancer. And I had tears just running down my eyes as my dad was telling me this. And then he just kind of like, looks down at the ground and he says, But if it doesn't work, well, f*** it. And again, that was just pure Joe, you know? I mean, what are you going to do? It's out of your hands. But he's going to do everything he can up to that point. And I just love that story because that just encapsulates him right there. Consistent with never giving up. That's right. So I went up to Chico. I was on a business trip and my sister calls me up. This is February five, was my birthday. My dad, you know, was at the two month level of his diagnosis. And my sister's birthday was February six, 1:00 in the morning. On February 7th, my sister calls me in the hotel room crying, saying that dad's in a coma.

Paul Ruiz [00:28:51] So I jumped out of bed. I start racing down Highway five to get to the Bay Area. I'm thinking to myself, this is it. I'm going to lose my dad. And right at that moment, I could smell the hospital inside the car. It was this overpowering smell. I didn't know he had passed away at 1:30 in the morning. I was unaware of this, but it was so overpowering that I was looking around the car saying, Where is this smell coming from? And then I found out later that he had passed away at 1:30. So I get to the V.A. hospital. I see my mom and my sister and I see my dad. We collect ourselves. We go back to our house in Concord, and it's quarter to five in the morning now. And the house lights were on inside the house, which was inexplicable because my mom and sister had been at the hospital all day. So we get out of our cars, we walk to the house, and as soon as we walk to the house, the lights inside the house flicked off. And my sister said, Did you see that? And I said, Yeah. And my mom said, That's your father waiting for us. He wanted to see

the house one last time. I don't know if that's true or not. I don't know if we blew a fuze in the house or if there was a timer issue, but that was just too weird. And the third strange thing that happened was that at 8:30, that same morning, we were at the dining table. And my mom was, we were planning the funeral and my mom was an absolute basket case. She was so emotional.

Paul Ruiz [00:30:37] And I said to my mom, finally, you know, Mom, if dad were here, he would walk through the front doors. He would sit right there at the head of the table where he always sits. And he would tell us that it's okay. And as soon as I said that, the front door swung open and my sister and I, our jaws just dropped. And I thought, okay, I don't know if this is all coincidence, but I don't believe in any of this stuff, and neither did my dad. But maybe, maybe he was trying to send a message from the great beyond that he was okay somewhere. And I found that very comforting. Yes. So when I was meeting with my dad in the hospital and my father was very upset about his prognosis and frustrated that the chemo and radiation wasn't working so well. I reminded him, I said, Hey, dad, do you remember that story you told me when I was a teenager about how, how you and your friend were expecting to die and your friend, your other friend gave you three quinine tablets. I said, you know, you should have died in 1942, and here we are in 1991, and you're still alive. I go, How awesome is that? That you've lived all these extra decades to see history, to get married a second time, to have three kids, to have this sort of second lease on life. That's amazing. And it made him feel good. He said, Yeah, you're right. It was a good feeling, to be able to provide my dad some comfort in his most trying moments. And I feel fortunate that I was an adult at the time and I had the mental wherewithal to be able to communicate that to him.

Paul Ruiz [00:32:25] Had I been 12 or 13 or 16 or 18, maybe, maybe not so much. But as as a grown man at the time, on my 27th birthday, I was able to communicate something to him, to mirror back a story to him that provided him comfort and for him to realize that even though his life may be coming to an end, it could have ended decades earlier. And I think that was very, it helped him in his last days because he would die two days later. And my sister actually said to me that dad's last birthday gift to her was in holding on and then not dying on her birthday, which was February sixth. So my father passed away at 1:30 in the morning, February 7th. So we can take from that whatever we might project on to that. But for my sister, it was my dad's last birthday gift to her. My dad's legacy to me, life is precious. We only get one shot at this. Don't hold back. Make good use of your life. I am not impressed by celebrity. I'm not impressed by wealth. I'm not impressed by fame, because there were a lot of good men who died on that death march or in that prison camp. Their stories will never be told. What matters in this life is helping each other out. People say, Well, I'm trying to figure out what the meaning of life is. I think the meaning of life is to serve your fellow human beings. That's the meaning of life. You have an education. You have, maybe you have a little bit of money. You have the health and the motivation. Help alleviate some of the suffering in this world. That's the meaning of life. To me, That's Joe's message to me.