

BROTHERS

(who, years later, became commanding general of the Air Force). As it took off from Awang airport to Mati, loaded with crated ammunitions and with security escorts, the plane's right landing gear failed to retract. Faced with the control tower's instructions to either divert and land at the Mactan, Cebu airport which had adequate equipment to handle "belly-landing," or dump the ammunition load into the sea before attempting a landing, Venadas chose to land the crippled C-47 at Awang airport, with load intact. The plane touched down on its left wheel. The pilots were hoping the right unretracted gear would hold. When the plane landed, its weight bore down on both wheels. The plane swerved to the right and stopped at the unpaved portion of the runway. In an instant, the pilots, crew and troop escorts, fearing an explosion, jumped out. They dashed to safety amid the cheers of troops and airmen. To the relief of everyone, the explosion didn't happen.

Upon arrival, the 6th IB was designated as the main ground force of the newly formed Task Force Durian concurrently headed by its battalion commander. The Davao Oriental PC Command was reinforced. On May 1, it conducted a counter-attack against the MNLF which was occupying the town of Tarragona. Six days later, the town was liberated as the rebel troops retreated.

Gringo's Hit

Greg sized up the situation. Landmines were planted on the axis of attack. Rebels were well-entrenched behind coconut tree trunks in strategic positions. Being on higher ground, they were protected by the hill from direct fire from below. Snipers were positioned in tall trees. Scattered bushes and some coconut trees were the military squad's only shield against sporadic fire from the rebels.

Greg's main worry was the rapid demoralization of his men. Casualties were mounting. Cotabato was just 30 minutes away by helicopter but air rescue was problematic because of the risk of being fired upon from the ground. Worse, the onward flight to Cotabato would not be possible because of poor weather and possible aircraft damage.

Under intense fire, he signaled the three men on his left to attempt another flank movement. Bullets grazed the side of the tree trunk a few feet above his head. While crawling and seeking cover, a sniper opened fire and hit him. Immediately, his squad formed a human shield to protect him from further enemy bullets. Greg was well-liked

by his men and they were willing to take bullets for him. Though seriously wounded, he refused to leave them. Because of the loss of blood from his wound, he would go in and out of consciousness. Every time he became conscious, the first words he would utter were, "How are our men?"

As the battle raged, the Air Force advance command post received an urgent message. At Lebak, rebels were inflicting big casualties on assaulting Army units. The pilots had no inkling who the casualties and wounded were. The battle area was just 15 minutes away but it was already unsafe to fly because it was past sunset, the cloud ceiling was low and their helicopters were not equipped for night flying. They had no night vision goggles that allowed images to be produced even in total darkness. Perhaps the mention of Greg's name as one of the wounded helped in making the decision to mobilize two helicopters with one gunship to assist the extraction of casualties and wounded. But they had to do it fast before total darkness would make the mission impossible.

Air Force Pilot First Lieutenant Libby Brawner PMA '67 with Major Oscar Canlas PMA '63 as his co-pilot flew the helicopter with the mission to extricate Greg; while Air Force Second Lieutenant James Santos PAFFS 70B were in another helicopter to secure the evacuation. Red Kapunan acted as forward air controller. In a daring maneuver, the UH-1H helicopter piloted by Brawner flew on top and in-between trees to reach the landing site.

It was already nighttime when the helicopter skids touched down. When they got hold of Greg, blood was oozing from his wound so they had to put pillows on the wound to stop the flow. The normal extrication procedure was to have separate flights for the wounded and the dead for morale reasons. For this mission, they had to carry all bodies, dead or wounded, because there won't be any second flight that night.

Libby had to force Greg to board the heli. The latter didn't want to leave his men. "Greg, you have lost a lot of blood and you may die," Libby pleaded. He finally acceded.

Greg was airlifted on the next available flight to the military's V. Luna General Hospital in Quezon City. While confined, Greg was awarded three gold medals for gallantry in action in the fields of Lebak, Jolo and Zamboanga.

There were hundreds of soldiers wounded in combat at the hospital. One day as he was walking around with his crutches, Greg saw his classmate, Romy Dominguez, being admitted for gunshot wounds.

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Romy almost lost his leg when the rebels ambushed him in the town of Pigkawayan, 27 kilometers east of Cotabato City. Other wounded '71 classmates – Johnny Velasco, Rafael Galvez and Marte Chioco – were also there. Raffy was wounded during his assignment with the 5th IB which was deployed in Mindanao to recover lost territories attacked by the Muslim rebel forces. Marte was with 10th IB which was deployed to Lanao Del Norte. He was tasked to fetch a group of draftees from Baloi airport in Iligan City, Lanao Del Norte. On their way back to the battalion headquarters, his unit was ambushed. There were casualties among the draftees, who were in Mindanao for less than 24 hours. Marte was wounded.

At the hospital, Romy saw that Greg was still the same person he knew when they were cadets. Greg openly criticized the hospital staff for the preferential treatment given to officers at the expense of the enlisted patients. To Romy, Greg exemplified the class penchant for reform, which led to the formation of the Reform the Armed Forces Movement 12 years later. Two incidents attesting to the class of '71's zeal for reforms occurred during cadet days.

While entertaining friends at the lounge of the cadets' mess hall, a member of the class discovered that the sala set being used in that room were actually donations intended for the "First Class Club" – the senior cadets' social room. He discovered this when he was searching for something under the couch. It was written there that the set was a donation for the cadets. The finding was confirmed and later validated. The sala set was initially placed in the "First Class Club" until a directive from Tactics Group was issued to place it in the new mess hall. In a later gripe session, Rolando Garcia PMA '71 brought up the furniture issue. "This should have been in our First Class Club or at the Cadet Visitors Room at Melchor Hall."

So one morning after breakfast, they hauled the furniture to the cadet barracks. All seniors (firstclassmen) who knew what was happening wanted to get involved. Each placed a finger or two on the furniture so that he could rightfully say that he was one of the haulers. That was the first concerted action of PMA Class '71. The PMA authorities could not do anything because the seniors threatened a mass resignation if the authorities tried to stop them.

In another instance, an attempt by senior staff members of the Corps Magazine – the quarterly publication of the cadets – to publish an issue with the theme "Dissent in the Military Academy" was disapproved by officers of Tactics Group, the unit tasked to train the cadets. The magazine's cover and theme did not sit well with them and

Defending Mindanao

the superintendent. Articles talking about certain malpractices at the Academy were viewed with scorn.

Rolly Degracia PMA '71, the Corps' editor-in-chief, said that that particular issue was supposed to be scrapped but instead it was heavily censored. The writers were told to submit revisions. The cover was also ordered changed. Rolly rewrote his editorial. The revisions were submitted to Major Ramon Sadsad, the magazine's adviser, and Colonel Cesar Pobre PMA '52, the Dean of the Corps of Professors. After reviewing the articles, they were allowed to publish them, but it [the issue] was already behind schedule so they decided to combine it with the incoming issue which was almost complete. As far as many cadets were concerned, the issue was scrapped.

From one of the wounded soldiers from Lebak who was admitted to V. Luna, Greg got an update on the developments in the field. On June 24, 1973, Colonel Gonzalo Siongco PMA '52 took over the command of the Lebak operation. More troops were sent in. The 21st IB under Lieutenant Colonel Rodolfo Commandante and the 25th IB under Colonel Jose Espinosa PMA '54 joined the operations. The Armed Forces retook control of Tarungan, Lebak three months after the siege began. The operation ended on August 4, 1973.

War Casualties

The battle at Lebak alone left at least 422 MNLF rebels killed in action, 39 captured and 1,036 surrendered. On the part of the government, 48 were killed in action, 148 wounded, and one missing. Subsequent battles in Central Mindanao led to heavier casualties. The Army reported at least 1,227 MNLF deaths, 311 of which were actual body counts, and 380 wounded. The government side had at least 149 deaths and 506 wounded. That was staggering!

Cagayan de Oro City was literally crawling with soldiers on furlough, recuperating or about to be sent to combat zone. The city was the site of the headquarters of the 4th Infantry Division in Camp Evangelista. The two funeral parlors – Cosmopolitan and Somo – were always crammed with dead soldiers. It was so sad because most of these soldiers didn't have relatives in the area. The C-130s and C-47s would depart Lumbia Airport in Cagayan de Oro City in quick succession carrying the casualties. The same thing was happening at Edwin Andrews Air Base in Zamboanga City. Scenes were even more pitiful at Nichols Air Base in Manila. Caskets were lined up on