

THE DEATH OF GENERAL GREGORIO DEL PILAR  
IN THE FAMOUS BATTLE OF TIRAD PASS  
(Dec. 2, 1899)

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"Who is there," once asked the late President Manuel L. Quezon, "that can tread the level of loyalty and gallantry exhibited by Gregorio del Pilar, who, like a Spartan soldier, offered his life as a holocaust to duty?" Certainly not very many among our martyred dead and probably none among the living. For that reason the example of his sacrifice at Tirad Pass in the mountain fastness of Ilocos Sur on December 2, 1899, is the more inspiring. In the hero's own deathless words, "No sacrifice can be too great."

General Del Pilar could have saved himself had he wished to, for even Aguinaldo whose retreat he was covering with his so-called Bulacan Battalion had tried to restrain him from joining his valiant soldiers in the defense of Tirad against the oncoming American forces. But the young general, ever the man and ever the patriot, answered that "it is better for me to be there, President, for then they will be able to ascend the mountain only when we are dead!" And die they did - fifty-three of the sixty men - including their staunch leader, who, to quote an American eyewitness of the dramatic encounter, was continually afoot under the heavy fire, sometimes in full view of the American sharpshooters, "urging his men to greater efforts, scolding them, praising them, cursing, threatening one moment to kill them himself if they did not stand firm and the next instant appealing to their love of their native land." It was such an impressive sight that the foes themselves did not know "whether to pray for a hit or miss" when an American soldier of Company H. of Major Marsh's battalion of the Thirty-Third volunteer infantry, who had squirmed his way out to the surface of a high flat rock, took steady, deliberate aim.

But one spiteful crack of the ominous Arag rifle echoed and then the place that, in the words of an orator (Benito Soliven), "was a massive and tremendous altar, built as it were for the Titans, caressed by the rolling clouds of morning, lighted by the stars of dusk," became hallowed with the spirit of one of the most stirring episodes in our struggle for freedom. In April of 1929 a veteran of the Revolution, standing on the sacred spot where the Leonidas of Philippine history was believed to have fallen, murmured these words after a short prayer and meditation: "The youth of this country should visit this place and learn here what cannot be taught in schools, the real meaning of patriotism."

When the enemies, who originally numbered 400, came to the place, one of them was reported to have said, "That's old Pilar, I guess he's sorry he ever went up against the Thrity-third." The "Old Pilar" was only 24 years old - "still in the flower of young manhood." But what a life he had led! He had not yet completed his schooling at the Ateneo Municipal de Manila when he took the oath as member of the Katipunan in the presence of its supreme head, Andres Bonifacio. At the age of 19 he was a colonel in the revolutionary army; at 20 he was Aguinaldo's confidant and friend and as such accompanied the latter to Hongkong, Saigon, and Singapore; and at 22 he was a general in command of a brigade with a well nigh brilliant record of military victories behind him. These victories included the capture of the town of Paombong in Bulacan - which was his first heroic showing, according to Aguinaldo - and the towns of Panasajan, San Rafael, San Miguel, and Quingua, where Colonel Stotsenberg was killed. Following his arrival from Hongkong he was nominated dictator of the provinces of Bulacan and Nueva Ecija.

Courageous in martial exploits, he was no less courageous in acts that required the moral touch. At one time he chided an irascible fellow general for having impinged on the tender honor of a woman. His subordinates he prohibited from "engaging in banditry and burglary and rape." Once he compelled his own brother, Colonel Julian del Pilar, on pain of incarceration, to apologize to an old woman whom the officer had run over a little road in the barrio of Taliptip, municipality of Bulacan. Again, notwithstanding that all around him were countrymen who