

DEL PILAR - THE FILIPINO LEONIDAS

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A Romantic figure in Philippine history is the 24-years old general who magnificently took part in the Battle of Tirad Pass on December 2, 1899, when 60 ill-equipped Filipinos engaged 300 better-armed American sharpshooters in a six-hours bitter fight to the finish. That officer, the youngest general in local annals, was Gregorio del Pilar, the Leonidas of the Philippines.

Everything about the Battle of Tirad Pass, sometimes referred to as the Battle of the Clouds because it took place on a 4,500-foot peak where clouds nestled, served to make it the most memorable and most heroic stand in the Philippine-American War. When the Americans finally scaled the peak, they found the youthful Del Pilar and 52 of his men already dead. Found on the body of the Filipino Leonidas was a hastily scrawled note:

"I bow to the terrible destiny that defeats me and my brave men, but I am glad to die fighting for my country."

If Gregorio del Pilar had accomplished nothing else in his life except lead a handful of men against overwhelming odds, his niche in history would nevertheless have been assured. But the youthful officer distinguished himself throughout the Philippine Revolution.

On several occasions, he was appointed official spokesman of the revolutionary forces. At Biak-na-Bato he was unanimously elected to the Supreme Council despite the fact that he was then only 22 years old. He was the youngest officer to sign the Provisional Constitution of the Philippine Republic promulgated on November 1, 1897.

General Emilio Aguinaldo, commander-in-chief of the revolutionary forces, had so much faith in young Del Pilar that Aguinaldo repeatedly made him his emissary on important missions despite the presence of older and more experienced officers in the Filipino ranks.

After hostilities broke out between the Americans and the Filipinos on February 4, 1898, the general from Bulacan was elected to present the military group again and again during the ceasefire periods to discuss terms.

Strangely enough, the boy general nurtured the ambition of becoming a teacher during the early part of his life. This was the reason he studied for the degree of bachelor of arts at the Ateneo de Manila, then called Ateneo Municipal. Call it fate, or anything you want, but had it not been for a combination of circumstances, Del Pilar would now be an obscure maestro instead of a national hero.

Uncle Marcelo's Influence

A born marksman, Gregorio as a boy was a master of the sumpit or blowgun. He bought his sumpits from Ka Apan, an old man in sitio Paniqui, San Jose, Bulacan. These blowgun measured from 2.5 to 3 meters long and were very powerful. Although their ammunition consisted of hard clay pellets, they could kill a man if he was hit on the forehead.

Goyo hunted birds with his blowgun. Atty. Heracleo H. del Pilar, a surviving nephew of the hero, says: Tio Goyo could hit a kiliawan (oriole) from a distance of 10 yards. He preferred high targets, particularly those directly overhead, to horizontal ones. He seldom missed."

Del Pilar was born on November 14, 1875 in Bulacan Bulacan. He was the youngest child of Fernando H. del Pilar, brother of Marcelo H. del Pilar, the Great Propagandist, and Felipa Sempio.

Goyo was Marcelo's favorite nephew. Plaridel was like a second father to the youngster. So close was the relationship between uncle and nephew that the Great Propagandist made Goyo one of the principal distributors of his writings denouncing the Spanish authorities for their abuses.