

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Gringo Comes to Manila

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Dear Peter,

I was going to report to you about the military training program for Philippine officers in the U.S. and how, according to the U.S. manual, it "encourages military professionalism." But, events took another twist last Friday.

Earlier, I learned from Americans how their part of the program worked. I had also set up a trip north to the Philippine Military Academy, and later to the army training center at Ft. Magsaysay, to see, among others, Col. Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan. Instead, he brought 800 men down to Manila for a coup. And when I arrived at Camp Aguinaldo, military headquarters, for an appointment with the chief of personnel, his office and the entire headquarters building was engulfed in the fire set by Col. Honasan's mutinous troops.

What follows is a narration of the coup attempt from a limited perspective. For a more thorough picture of what happened, and an assessment of U.S. training, please wait for future newsletters.

Rumors of a coup attempt had drifted around for a while and I had brushed off hints from an officer that my interviews on Friday might not occur. So I was still startled when I was awoken before dawn by what seemed like every radio in the neighborhood blaring the government's assurance that everything was O.K. I hopped in a cab and rushed out to the government TV station, channel 4. Arriving at the station in quiet residential neighborhood, I found large crowds of spectators clustered around the compound. Occasional shots were a reminder that earlier in the day a New Zealand correspondent had been killed. This was one coup not worth dying for, so I decided against following others into the sprawling compound.

Events slowly unfolded. At one point, seven government troops, part of the contingent guarding the station, crawled

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through a hole in the wall to escape from the rebels. Scared and looking more like renegades wearing headbands than soldiers, they were greeted by a sympathetic crowd that gathered around them to provide protection.

Things did not look good for the government eight hours after the coup had started at 1 am. No government helicopters overhead, no reinforcements outside the compound. The only government presence were city police in three patrol cars who stayed well away from the station and didn't know who was in charge.

Around noon, the leader of the rebels in the compound, Col. Eduardo Matillano, Honasan's classmate from the academy, issued an ultimatum for the government troops remaining in the station to leave. When the called for reinforcements failed to arrive in time, some thirty haggard looking government troops left the compound, lugging their bedrolls and provisions.

Seconds later, the reinforcements arrived led by Police Brig. Gen. Alfredo Lim. They looked impressive: two columns of 200 police sprinkled with SWAT team members in flak jackets armed with an assortment of M-16s and combat shotguns. But a few moments after the police had advanced toward the compound, the real soldiers--the rebels--opened fire with their heavier armaments. The police beat a hasty and totally disorganized retreat for two and a half blocks through the suburban streets.

At the north end of the television compound, an Armored Personnel Carrier roared out of the compound and up the main highway, flying the rebel symbol, a large inverted Philippine flag with the red band on top. Terrified bystanders scattered, but not a few enthusiastically shouted, "There go the anti-communists."

I left for other parts of the city where the situation was equally bleak. There were power blackouts in some areas. With all but one of the television stations either in rebel hands or not functioning, the President and Gen. Ramos had yet to appear on the air. (In the morning they had made short, separate radio statements). The number two Air Force officer had taken over Villamore Air Base so the skies were still empty of government aircraft. Down in Cebu city, the second largest, the regional military commander announced his support for the coup. And the entire cadet corps of the Philippine Military Academy pledged their support for the coup and were reportedly on their way to Manila, led by another classmate of Honasan's.

It wasn't surprising that the coup seemed to follow the script from February 1986: grab the television stations, attempt to wrest airpower, and take Camp Aguinaldo as main base. Both military revolts were spearheaded by Col. Honasan and his classmates from the Philippine Military Academy. (Their patron, former Defense Minister Enrile remained silent and out of sight). On one television station, a young spokesman for the rebels read their statement that they were willing to give up their lives in this moment of service to the people. Their

bottom line was that "the military structure is ineffective in dealing with the communist menace" and they called for Gen. Ramos to step down.

It was "not a war of bullets, but a psychological war," one Philippine officer told me who was deciding which side to join. As the afternoon wore on, the rebels still seemed to be winning. Senators and congressmen made statements denouncing the coup from the Presidential palace, their congressional offices had earlier been captured. Conspicuously absent from the airwaves were the President, Ramos, or any military officer from the government's side.

Finally at 3:30 President Aquino went on the air. Speaking in what seemed a relatively calm voice, she said, "there will be no terms. I have nothing to say to those traitors." In Tagalog she added that rebel troops had fired upon her only son, wounding him and killing his three bodyguards, and later sprayed innocent civilians with automatic rifle fire.

I arrived at Camp Aguinaldo during the final offensive to retake the camp at 5:30, but not in time for my interview with the head of personnel. The old wood and plaster general headquarters building was an inferno after the rebels had set it afire to flush out loyal troops in the building. Moments later, vintage T-28 "tora tora" propeller airplanes fired rockets at the rebels attacking general headquarters. Impressive as the combined artillery and rocket fire was, it produced relatively few rebel casualties, five dead and two wounded out of a force of about 800. Many government soldiers tended to fire up in the air. Yet, it was significant, that unlike in previous coup attempts, the military was willing to fire upon renegade soldiers.

Despite the clatter of machine guns, crowds of spectators surged toward the action, only to flee when the firing was too intense. Many who lived near the camp said they liked Gringo Honasan; those who came from further away cheered the government tanks when they rumbled past.

After the firing had died down, I joined most of the foreign press corps near one of the front gates along the highway. A Marine amphibious tracked vehicle had broken down a gate in leading part of the assault on the camp. It was now just a matter of time: many rebels had surrendered, and television stations had also been retaken. I asked a Marine sergeant what he thought of Honasan, instead of condemning his opponent, he replied that Honasan was "magaling," or skillful. As evening fell, the firing slacked off and small groups of Marines further infiltrated the camp.

By Saturday morning it was all over. Col. Honasan had escaped by helicopter, the rebels had surrendered, and Gen. Ramos led a walking tour of the camp. It was a time for kudos all around. Ramos pointed to his charred office in general headquarters where Gen. Ermita had fought off the rebels, noted the small craters where the six rockets fired by the planes had struck, and recommended the Marine colonel who led the

operation for promotion to general. In one afternoon, Ramos had laid to rest months of criticism of weak and vacillating leadership.

Ramos had sharp words for Honasan, calling him a "traitor" and a "big liar" and saying that he might be shot if he resisted arrest. Yet, despite the tough stance, it seems unlikely that the military really wants to throw the book at the hero of the February revolution. At one point, I tried to ask one of Ramos's closest aides whether it had been a mistake to place Honasan as chief of special forces training at Ft. Magsaysay after he had been involved in previous coup attempts. I put it as tactfully, and indirectly as I could, saying that Honasan was charismatic and the young trainees impressionable. I was misunderstood. The colonel began to speak well of Honasan's communication skills.

It was also a time for Ramos to echo the unspoken complaint of the coup leaders: that the soldier's pay is too low. Currently, senators and congressmen are stumbling over each other in a rush to legislate pay raises. The pay for the average recruit is relatively low. But unless the coup leaders are caught and fairly punished, for the government to grant one of the rebel's demands so soon will only teach the lesson that squeaky wheels are greased.

The track record on punishing officers for breaking military regulations, much less civilian laws, is not impressive. Participants in past coup attempts from over half a year ago have yet to serve time (as opposed to waiting in detention prior to court martial). Today, some of the charges against a colonel implicated in several coup attempts were quietly dismissed. And the fourth anniversary of the death of Senator Benigno Aquino while in military custody passed without appreciable progress in the trial of his alleged assassins.

Until now, the government has been reluctant to put the squeeze on mutinous, corrupt, or incompetent soldiers for fear of further widening the rift between the military and civilian government as well as within the military itself. But it can be done. In the early 1970's, Indonesia weeded out over one quarter of the entire military who were corrupt or unfit. In the 1950's, the Philippine government removed corrupt or incompetent officers despite considerable resistance. To be sure, the Aquino government has less of a grip on the military than these other governments, but she also still enjoys considerable latent public support. After some hesitation, Aquino has unsheathed the sword of war against the insurgents. One hopes that the coup and the wounding of her son will provide the will to take a rolling pin to the reprobates in the ranks.

Sincerely,


Erik Guyot