ENDLESS JOURNEY

A MEMOIR

Jose T. Almonte
as told to
Marites Dañguilan Vitug

"Building our nation is a continuing struggle, a collective work in progress. It is an endless journey, like a relay, without end. All we can do is pass on the baton—forged in the core values our heroes died for: dignity, honor, freedom, justice, self-determination, peace, *malasakit*—to the next runner, to the next generation."

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PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

"*Endless Journey* has made me feel especially exuberant. My thoughts about the People Power Revolution in 1986, which were declining in 2015, started to pick up again because I read the first few chapters of JoAl's book."

Fidel V. Ramos, former President of the Philippines

"*Endless Journey* is Joal passionately doing what is right for our country even though the heavens fall, and it is remarkably truthful...Once you start reading he book, it is hard to put it down."

Antonio Carpio, Supreme Court Justice

"...written in the creative nonfiction style, [the book] does read like a fast-paced political thriller focusing on the underside of public events. JoAl narrates crucial moments in our nation's history with a sharp eye for detail–and a penchant for sweeping gloss–that can leave a reader both awestruck and incredulous."

Randy David, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

"Journalists like myself who have had the privilege of covering General Jose Almonte know him to be a most congenial and transparent news source. For a military officer whose expertise is intelligence, he was probably the most talkative and open. His memoir now allows the public to see him in a whole new light–out of the shadows–so that others may learn from his experiences."

Jessica Soho, Journalist/TV Host

"...JoAl's almost single-minded crusade [was] to diffuse the undue market power of prominent monopolies and cartels in our economy. As *Endless Journey* details, his efforts were relentless, and his methods skillful and resourceful."

Cielito Habito, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

"The enigmatic JoAl finally spills the beans. Marites draws out the 'confession' for a fascinating read on pivotal moments in the nation's history and the General's role in them."

Ces Drilon, News Anchor and Senior Correspondent, ABS-CBN Corporation

"Almonte's childhood is one for the movies–the rustic village in Albay, the rice paddies, his dying mother–but so are his suspenseful adult forays into dangerous zones as a soldier and intelligence expert."

Ceres Doyo, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

"This is a space shuttle ride–the kind that yanks you back to earth at each chapter's end, and then slingshots you right back out. I suggest a pause in between chapters and intense focus while reading–the words are sparse, the writing restrained–because they define the boy in the belfry who grew up to be the man who did what was right."

Pia Hontiveros, Broadcast Journalist

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13 October 2017

His Excellency Dr. M.,
The father of modern
Malaysia. [signature]

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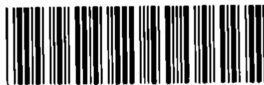
A MEMOIR

JOSE T. ALMONTE

As told to Marites Dañguilan Vitug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Endless Journey
A Memoir

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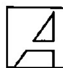

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For Professor Yutaka Katayama
who, despite the challenges,
started this memoir

and to the youth everywhere, the generations to come,
they who are the purpose of it all

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Jose T. Almonte

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INTRODUCTION

It was in 2001 when I met Gen. Jose T. Almonte for the first time. I invited him as one of the guest speakers for a symposium held at Kobe University. Dr. Carolina G. Hernandez, one of my oldest friends, recommended him since she was not available for that occasion. I was very excited because I had already known well who Gen. Almonte was.

When he came over to Kobe, I had one day to accompany him for sightseeing in Nara. I took full advantage of that opportunity to ask many questions I had long nurtured regarding his role in the Ramos administration. Almost all his responses referring to meaningful episodes were inspiring to me. I was convinced that he was one of the most important witnesses to Philippine political development from the time of President Diosdado Macapagal up to that of President Fidel V. Ramos.

What impressed me most were his clear analyses. He usually analyzes almost everything in a larger context, which sometimes goes far beyond the Philippine context. I always wonder how he acquired that kind of unique perspective or frame of reference in his career as a professional soldier.

Since then I decided to visit him at his humble office in Greenhills almost each time I went to the Philippines. Usually I brought a digital recorder with me when I interviewed him, because his narratives were always so engrossing that I could not digest them fully while listening to him.

From 2007 to 2010, I conducted an oral history project funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) focused on the technocracy during the Marcos era. I worked with Dr. Cayetano W. Paderanga Jr., Dr. Teresa E. Tadem, Dr. Temario C. Rivera, and Dr. Hiromu Shimizu, among others, and we included Gen. Almonte as one of our interviewees. However, since this research was intended to interview the key technocrats involved in major decision-making and management of Philippine affairs, from the 1960s to the 1980s until the downfall of President Ferdinand E. Marcos, we were not able to spend enough time with him.

In the course of the project, I repeatedly gave Gen. Almonte unsolicited advice to write a memoir. His response was always the same. “I am just a soldier. It is not my style.”

I felt a subtle change of his response around 2012, when several new

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memoirs were published in the Philippines, including those of President Ramos and Senator Juan Ponce Enrile. I tried again to convince the General to write his own memoir.

The response was still the same at first but I sensed a more nuanced reply which gave me a slight opening. So I quickly added that the memoir would not be for his honor but for the younger generations of Filipinos. If he would share his valuable experiences with the Filipino youth, they would certainly be greatly inspired and would be ready for the problems of the Philippine State and society that they will face in the future.

He seemed to be impressed by my words. Then I asked who the writer could be, promising him that I would do my best to convince him or her to work on the project.

After a brief exchange of opinions, we reached the conclusion that Ms. Marites Dañguilan Vitug would be the best candidate for the task. Immediately after I left his office, I called Marites and asked her to assist us.

Since we had no financial resources to implement this project, I promised Marites that I would work hard to get her accepted at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at Kyoto University as a visiting scholar for six months to concentrate on the draft of the memoir. The CSEAS was where I started my academic career in 1981. It is known to be one of the most important academic research institutes in the world specializing in Southeast Asian Studies.

I contacted Dr. Hiromu Shimizu, then director of CSEAS, and asked him to consider Marites as a foreign visiting scholar, if possible at full professor status.

Dr. Shimizu immediately agreed but added that it was not so easy to include Marites in the long list of candidates for the foreign visiting scholar slots at the CSEAS because she was not connected to the academe. He did everything to invite her during the Japanese academic year in 2014 starting in April, including pursuing a tough negotiation with the Kyoto University President's Office, which had just adopted a new policy on visiting scholars. They were reluctant to give full professor status to a journalist. But finally Dr. Shimizu succeeded in convincing the President's Office.

Before Marites came over to Kyoto in April 2014, she finished a series of intensive interviews with the General. Upon joining the CSEAS, she started to write a draft and finished it before she left Kyoto in October.

This is how we started this project.

Needless to say, it totally depends on the readers how they read and analyze this memoir. However, I am confident that almost everybody

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would agree that Gen. Almonte is one of the most significant witnesses to contemporary Philippine politics. Many would also be impressed by his deep and clear analyses. I am very proud of being a member of this project.

Dr. Shimizu is equally proud of the fact that the CSEAS was able to offer an opportunity to share Gen. Almonte's memory and testimony of his time with Filipino scholars and the general public through Marites's meaningful work. "Gen. Almonte has the responsibility to share his far-reaching plans and ideas as well as his experiences as an architect of reform and insider of the Philippine government," Dr. Shimizu told me.

I deeply appreciate the cooperation extended by many friends and colleagues to this endeavor.

Yutaka Katayama
Professor Emeritus, Kobe University
Vice President, Kyoto Notre Dame University

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Part One

THE BEGINNINGS

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Chapter 1

ROOTS

Albay, 1931-1952

My mother Priscilla was a constant presence at home. It was a distant, sometimes sad presence that I came to understand as I learned more about the world around me. She was bedridden. I took care of her, fetching her water, attending to her needs. It dawned on me later—I cannot remember when—that she was permanently immobile, paralyzed after giving birth to my younger brother Flavio. My grandmother Rosa told this to me. She came to live with us to look after my brother and me.

I was 17 when my mother slipped away, receding into the depths of my memory. She was the second death in the family. I had an elder sister but she died of dysentery when she was two years old. I thought all along that her name was Teresa, which was why I named my eldest daughter after her. But I later learned from my cousin Leticia that her name was Salvacion.

My father Luis worked as a conductor with a bus company so he was always away. His work frequently took him to the big cities of Tabaco and Naga.

My grandmother, whom we called Tuta, was a loving person and the dominant figure in our home in Estancia, a barrio of Malinao town in Albay province. It was in this rustic village of huts and rice paddies, of streets of baked earth that turn to mud during the rainy season, that I was born in 1931. Estancia has since seen more houses, wooden and concrete, and paved roads, with tricycles as a common form of transport. It remains sleepy and agricultural.

Our house was by the road and, from the window, we relished a clear view of the bright green fields draped by the rays of the sun. The days were predictable. I woke up before sunrise lit up our home, began my day with household chores followed by classes in school, and capped it with more home duties while daylight waned. Life, however, seemed to be one of absences, of my mother forced by circumstances to lie still in bed; of my father's job taking him away from us all; and of an elder sister I hardly knew.

I had no sense, though, of how life unfolded for others in our community and beyond. I did not know if others were more endowed, if they lived better

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lives. I had no idea of class divisions, of how wealth defined some people and separated them from the rest of us.

I was confined to our small place with Tuta and my mother, where we used the undivided space for dining and sleeping. The floor served as our sturdy mattress. We were nourished by rice, root crops, and wild fruits.

I must have been ten when I felt something tugging at me. It was the uneasy thought that I had to do something to improve the life of our community. It struck me like an epiphany, arising from the ordinary day-to-day experience of my young life. Things had to be done. Something had to change. That stuck in my mind. The only thing was, I didn't know what to do. And how.

When I started to become socially and politically conscious as a young military officer fighting the Huks in the Sierra Madre, I questioned why we were killing our own people. We were of the same stock, with roots in the countryside soil.

More importantly, I asked myself, why were these poor Filipinos rebelling?

The thought that gnawed at my mind when I was a young boy came back—and it deepened the connection to my new environment. Here, in the brutal jungle, was the answer to my question: we need to improve the living conditions so that poverty and injustice do not drive our countrymen to take up arms. If we can make these changes, if our men and women are given access to opportunities so that they can create wealth, there would be no rebels.

Looking back, this instinctive feeling to do something was perhaps mystical or even folded in mystery. I had no books to awaken my mind, except for a few textbooks in class, none of which left an impact on me. I lived under the shadow of the majestic Mount Mayon, with its sprawling base and perfect cone towering over us. Whenever Mayon erupted, ashes would fall over our barrio. We were a few kilometers away from the base, but near enough to be reached by the spray of ashes. Historians would later describe Mayon as a mystical presence. "Mayon's imposing heights and perfect symmetry aroused among the lowland residents a commanding reverential awe and a sense of eerie mysticism," Danilo Madrid Gerona wrote.

Decades later, when I was national security adviser to President Fidel V. Ramos, a TV network visited my roots and took some footage of where our hut used to be and its environs, showing unremarkable progress in our barrio. At the time, I was campaigning for reform against the oligarchs and monopolists, and the tone of the TV feature was that I came from nothing and I was a nobody, *putok sa kawayan*. The TV anchor did not inform me

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that they had come from Albay. I cannot blame them. They were just being truthful by showing where I came from. But I felt that the way I was being asked questions was to show that I had really nothing much of a background to speak of. It was meant to humiliate me but I accepted it.

WE LEFT ESTANCIA when I was in my early teens during the war, in 1942, and moved to a nearby barrio, Malolos, about 15 kilometers away. My mother, who was a teacher before illness debilitated her, had some savings that she used to buy a patch of land.

In Malolos, we never went hungry; we planted root crops like sweet potato, tuber, yam, and corn and vegetables. This was our food during the war. I learned to plow the fields. I went to the market to barter some of our produce for salt.

Malolos was quite isolated because it was close to a mountain, secluded by it. This was its blessing because we were spared from the horrors of war; the Japanese were unable to reach our village. (Malolos, however, would much later be the seat of the communist New People's Army in Albay.)

Classes were very sporadic so my father sent me to the public school in the nearest town, Malinao, to continue my elementary education. It was generally subsidized but we had to pay minimal fees.

In our remote village, the biggest event that gathered all of us together was the fiesta. It was only during this time of the year that a holy mass was held. I knew it was special because my mother prohibited us from eating the eggs of the chickens that we were raising. These were reserved for the priest, she said. There were no other celebrations because we did not mark our birthdays, Christmas and New Year. These red-letter days were spent ordinarily, like any other day in the calendar.

But for me, Malolos was a completely different place because of the big river that ran through it. It was where we played, where our fish came from. It was a source of joy and life. Once there was a flood and the river swelled and overflowed, reaching our house. I enjoyed it because there were so many fishes carried by the flood. The sight of abundance exhilarated me.

During the rainy season, however, the floods overpowered us, drowning even the carabaos. But the kids in our barrio were undaunted and we competed to cross the river.

The big river was almost a daily challenge for me. I had to cross it whenever I went to school. I woke up at four in the morning to prepare my meal, feed the carabao, and fetch water for home. Then I would walk

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barefoot about two hours going to town and another two to return home. My feet were better than rubber-soled shoes; they gripped the earth when it was slippery and they deftly evaded thorny plants. Even when the thorns pricked my feet, they didn't reach the tender flesh. My feet adapted to the environment. On the rare times that I had to wear shoes, I could not even manage to walk on the sand.

When the river was impassable due to the strong rains, I had to sleep in town, at my cousins' home. The times I spent at their place turned out to be transformative, broadening my horizons.

My mother's sister, Mama Nene, had six children. The eldest daughter was Leticia. She was a few months older than me. She was very bright, number one in class, and she topped all of her subjects. She taught me a million things, from English grammar to arithmetic. I felt my mind, which was like a dull knife, sharpen. Suddenly, I had concepts, numbers, and words within my grasp. Leticia made this feat possible. She was a star, my idol. She would later become the principal of Tabaco High School in Albay where the students gravitated to her because she was an endearing personality.

A few years ago, she got very sick. I visited her at St. Luke's Hospital in Quezon City and it was a happy reunion after decades of not seeing each other. I left Albay in 1952 to study at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) in Baguio and never returned, except to bury my father in 1968.

Leticia wrapped me in an embrace. She appeared to be in high spirits. We talked for a while, a wave of elation washing over us. There was so much to catch up on, so many memories to revel in, but we had little time. When I returned to my office, I received a text message that she had died. A pang of sadness hit me. I lost a mentor, a person who was generous in sharing her knowledge and vastly contributed to my growth as a person.

Apart from the education Leticia gave me, Malinao expanded my world. In my early elementary education in Estancia, Pepe and Pilar were the central characters. "When crossing the street, look left and right," Pepe and Pilar were told. It did not make sense to me because our streets were empty except for carabaos and a smattering of people. I never understood that until I was in Malinao where there were cars, commonly called *berlina*.* I had to be careful of speeding vehicles—I looked left and right, otherwise I could meet an accident. It was a discovery which made me feel funny.

In elementary school, I had a teacher whom I can never forget, Rosario Cariño Benedito. When I retired, I tried to look for her but my efforts were in vain. She had moved out of Albay. If it were not for her, I would not have finished grade school. Mrs. Benedito took care of me and saw to it that my

my PERDANA LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION YAYASAN KEPIMPINAN PERDANA

family's poverty did not get in the way of my education. She must have seen some potential in me, despite my rumpled clothes soaked in sweat after hours of walking to school. My shirt was a riot of patches, with little trace of the original clothing. I must have looked untidy.

As a graduation requirement, she assigned us to create a scrapbook. We had to find 50 pictures of animals to compile in an album. That posed a big problem. How and where could I find 50 photographs of animals in the barrio when all I had access to were pieces of scrap paper used to wrap dried fish and salt which, during the wet season, melted with the rains? I needed to be creative, so I tried to simulate a 50-page scrapbook with about six pictures, the most I could find. I indicated the pages with the pictures as follows: 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 50 and hoped that Mrs. Benedito wouldn't mind the missing pages. She did notice, of course, that my scrapbook was flimsy.

There was an element of deception there, but it was dictated by my situation. To my surprise and great relief, she gave my scrapbook passing marks. She didn't tell me anything nor did she call me after class to talk to me. She was such a good person; she understood my predicament. It seemed she was amused by my cheating. But she also appreciated my foolishness, that little imp in me. Perhaps that was why she thought that I would make a good presidential adviser.

When we graduated from elementary school—I was already 14 because the war interrupted my studies—I ended up third in class. Mrs. Benedito had big dreams for the three top students and she announced these in class. She foresaw that the class topnotcher would become president of the country, the second would be vice president, and the third would be an adviser to the president. That was a wild, unthinkable scenario at the time. But, close to half a century later, I was to fulfil her prophecy.

She also asked me to give a speech, like the top two students. I was unprepared for this assignment and I didn't have the confidence to write a speech. I did not know what was on her mind but she wrote my speech, in English. I merely delivered it. I no longer remember what it was all about.

MY GRANDMOTHER was the main influence in my early years. There are two things I could not forget about her. One, she instilled in me the fear and love of God. She never explained the Christian faith to me, only that there is a God and that I should live properly, correctly, and not do anything bad to others. That initial schooling I got from my grandmother has been a very important foundation. With time on my hands after leaving government, I

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have been searching for her grave, but I cannot locate it anymore. I would have wanted to spruce it up and pay my respects. Still, she continues to shimmer in my memory.

The other legacy of my grandmother lives with me till today. It has to do with my name. I was born Jose Malagueño Almonte. But she told me that her husband, my grandfather on my mother's side, came from northern China (possibly a member of the Mongol ethnic group) and that his family name was Tan. He was among the Chinese smuggled into the Philippines. That story never left my young mind. She lovingly talked about him and the children they had. My grandmother lived with him but they did not marry. I never met my grandfather but I kept him in my thoughts. So when I was in grade school I changed my middle name. When the teacher asked me to write my middle name, I wrote Tan.

As I grew up, I learned that there was discrimination in the province against the Chinese, so my grandmother had to hide and protect my grandfather. All the children therefore took her family name, Malagueño.

I did not encounter any problem with my new name—Jose Tan Almonte—until I graduated from high school and got accepted into the Philippine Military Academy. It almost caused my expulsion.

After the war, we transferred to Tabaco town, where I went to high school. Tabaco was the base of the bus company that my father worked with. It has since become a bustling city, energized by its international port. My school, Tabaco High School, has grown immensely; it now sits on a sprawling campus with its own gymnasium and local museum, with a wide swath of land left for future expansion.

We were among the landless in Tabaco. We lived in a nipa hut and squatted on land owned by the Catholic Church. This was where my mother died. We shared the lot with a number of families. But I felt I was in a prosperous area because we were in the center of town, at the back of the church.

School was nearby, an effortless walk from home. Whenever classes were over, I rushed to the belfry, which towered above the church. I climbed the steep stairs to the level just below the bells and sat with my books, by the window. Shafts of the afternoon light bathed my narrow space, my library, my study room. There, in solitude, I read and prepared for the next day's class.

The beauty of it all was that the church tower stood at the end of the road that led to the port. Whenever I was at the top of the tower, I could see a spectacular panorama of ships in the sun-spangled harbor, and beyond that the undulating blue sea. It was a sweeping and majestic view.

In class, I admired our principal, whose name I now forget. He was also

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I visited a Mongolian community during a trip to Peking to explore opening of ties with the People's Republic of China.

our teacher in English. He was excellent but quite strict. One day, he told me that I had to pay ₱10 or ₱20 a year to cover my entrance fee and tuition. Generally, in Tabaco, if they saw that students were poor, they let them study even if they didn't pay up. But at a certain point, they insisted on collecting fees. My favorite teacher explained to me that he could no longer justify my non-payment. That meant that he had to kick me out of school. My heart sagged. I was forlorn. But there was no time to wallow in despair. I had to find a way to continue my studies.

Immediately, I made an offer. I told the principal that we had a carabao in Malolos and I would bring it to Tabaco. I would walk hours to fetch it, I said, and then tie it to a tree near his office. This would guarantee my payment. Every time he would go to his office, he would see the carabao and be reminded that I would not renege on my word. He paused for a moment, regarded me seriously, and dismissed me. From then on, he no longer mentioned any fees.

The last hurdle was the graduation ceremony. The school required us to wear real shoes, those made of leather, the kind that fully wrapped the feet and hid the toes. But I only had a pair of wooden clogs *(bakya)*, perhaps the

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equivalent of today's flip-flops. I was unable to join the ritual. But I graduated just the same.

Thoughts of becoming a lawyer or doctor crossed my mind but it wasn't an obsession. It was just some dream perhaps influenced by society's norms. Usually, parents wanted to have a doctor or lawyer in the family, professions that signified achievement and high status.

Hardly had I thought about college when one man whom I did not know was to change my life: David Abundo, a student at the same high school who was two years ahead of me. Unexpectedly, I received a letter from him. He was studying at the PMA, he wrote, where education was free. This was the door to a college education. He urged me to take the entrance examination. His letter stirred my hopes of making it to college. It opened a path to a world I would never have known were it not for his kindness.

Tabaco High School, however, was an agricultural school. We did not have algebra and geometry; we had general mathematics, but it was not intensive. To pass the examination in the PMA, David advised, I had to be well versed in spherical geometry and algebra. He instructed me what to do, what books to study. I avidly followed his advice.

Who would have expected the good news? I received a telegram from the PMA accepting me and instructing me to report to the V. Luna Hospital and to Fort McKinley (which would later be re-named Fort Bonifacio) in the southern suburbs of Metro Manila for physical examination.

At the PMA, perhaps because of the formalities of hierarchy, I did not get to know David well. I wish I did. I learned that he was a deeply religious person. He usually led the plebes in preparing the gym for Sunday mass since we did not have a chapel. He was an acolyte and served in the masses. In the Armed Forces, David rose to become the commander of the Army Special Warfare Brigade, next to Major Fidel V. Ramos, and after training at Fort Bragg in the US. He was a high achiever and a well-respected officer.

One early morning, a few years later, on the way to Fort Magsaysay, Nueva Ecija, a fatal vehicular accident wasted his promising military career.

Manila and Baguio, 1952-1956

FRESH FROM high school graduation, I made my first trip to Manila in 1952. I was 21, tall, skinny, and quite dark. My sun-bleached hair, speckled with light brown strands, was dry and scraggly.

I stayed with Rodolfo, my first cousin, a policeman. He was the son of my

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very loving aunt, Mama Ining. Manila was a city under siege, with the Huks at their peak, threatening to storm the capital. The *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan*, more popularly called Huks, started out as an armed anti-Japanese movement and transformed into a communist-led peasant rebellion with a strong base in Central Luzon.

One of the battalions securing Manila was composed of members of the Nenita Unit. It was a special Philippine Constabulary force that operated against the Huks. They wore their insignia—a skull and crossbones—on their shirtsleeves. They were known to be fierce and were reported to have committed abuses against civilians. I would encounter remnants of this dreaded unit when I was deployed to the Sierra Madre. It was disbanded after complaints from local officials, which were already festering during the term of President Manuel Roxas, reached President Elpidio Quirino.

The atmosphere in Manila was tense and checkpoints proliferated. I was on a jeepney on my way to Fort McKinley. At the first checkpoint we encountered on Otis Street in Pandacan, a soldier took a look at the passengers and pointed at me, asking me to get off. He suspected me of being a Huk and brought me to their outpost. The officer in charge asked me where I came from and why I was in Manila. I fished out of my pocket the folded telegram from the PMA. After reading it, he let me go.

The jeepney had left by then. In the confusion, I must have dropped the rest of my money and found my pocket empty. I then walked to Fort McKinley till I reached the Pateros gate hours later. Seeing a weary *probinsiyano* in ragged clothes with a weather-beaten face, the sentry, a military policeman, asked me sternly where I was going. I said I was scheduled to take a physical examination for the PMA. He was incredulous and insisted that I was a Huk. I presented the telegram again, that little piece of paper that proved that I was not one of the peasant rebels.

Four years later, after I graduated from the PMA, I passed the same gate and found the sentry to be the same person. He recognized me—this time I was in uniform, clean and shaven—and apologized for the gaffe. We became friends and shared bottles of beer.

When I reported to the Academy, the one thing that surprised me most was the hazing. It was among the traditional tools intended to help prepare the plebe—this was what the first-year cadets were called—to be worthy of the Academy's mission: "to possess the character, the broad and basic military skills and the education essential to the successful pursuit of a progressive military career." In this context, the pain caused by hazing—emotional, psychological, physical—was expected to fortify one's capacity to

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Taken on my second year–a yearling–at the Philippine Military Academy.

confront any challenge. There was no such thing as a hazing manual so every upperclassman was limited only by his creativity. Hazing punishments often involved tedious exercises—for example, to write the PMA mission together with its core values a thousand times or to write the Seven Last Words of the Lord Jesus Christ a thousand times. Some plebes were made to face the wall standing for hours on end or do the usual dozen exercises of the Army.

I cannot remember the specific hazing punishments inflicted on me but I am sure I had a generous share. As a plebe, I could be accosted by an upperclassman anytime and commanded to do anything. Since I came from the mountains, the physical exertions did not cause a problem. I saw some of my batchmates in tears. All the more they were made to do strenuous activities. My background became an advantage, but it was an experience I would not want to go through again.

Through all this, I understood and imbibed the spirit of hazing. We were required to go through such rigorous training to empty us of the habits and notions we acquired while we were out of the Academy because it was introducing us to a new set of values. The PMA, as stated in its mission, is a place for character training. To the credit of its founders, the PMA built my character. I already had that basic sense of what was right, but it strengthened my foundation and deepened my appreciation of values such as honor. It also prepared us to become military leaders.

Most of my classmates in the Academy came from the lower classes; only a few were from the middle class. In fact, we entered the Academy, as my

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classmates liked to say, not because we loved the country, but because we had no money. We needed a ticket to a free education. In Europe, the tradition was different. Even members of the royal family entered the military.

Meals and the general lifestyle at the Academy were sources of culture shock for me. Since the PMA was an extension of West Point, its supplies came from the renowned US Military Academy, from the lesson plan, called the vault file, up to the shaving lotion and the cigarettes. All these struck me as immensely different from my straitened upbringing. Amenities I had never encountered were provided, including the gleaming rich butter at breakfast and the bunk beds complete with mattresses. In addition, we were given an allowance. I adjusted to the novel surroundings and tried to learn as much as I could.

I did not regard student organizations as fountains of learning; thus I did not join any, except for *The Corps*, the student publication, where I was prevailed upon to be associate editor. My duty was to write essays. In our graduation yearbook of 1956, *The Sword*, where each one of us was featured on a page with our photograph and accomplishments, I was the only one without a list of extracurricular activities. My page, to others, may have looked pitiful and inadequate. But I did not mind this, as my attention was focused on catching up on readings which I missed out on in my youth.

In class, I did not stand out. But I studied enough to pass. It was in the library where I spent most of my time. It was a fascinating place to be in, where stories of countries, peoples and cultures were within reach. I read many books that were not required in our curriculum. I read anything about society, everything that caught my interest. It was as if my mind was parched and I needed to quench it. Some of the books I found dense, but I read them just the same.

There was another challenge that I felt was even more important: to understand issues and processes that could help improve the community, the thread that had been unifying my thoughts, driving my thirst for knowledge since I was an elementary student. So I read up on Marxism, Leninism, the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions, different faiths—Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity—and on Confucius and other philosophers. I read up on the roots of rebellions. I had difficulty absorbing all these, but my deep interest was there. Reading was what I found most compelling. That was why I was not keen on the physical training and academics. I just needed to pass those.

Some of my classmates used to tease me about the stuff I read. They jokingly called me a "loose screw" because I talked about revolutions in a setting that hardly encouraged them. A few thought I was a communist. I

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would wake up my roommates—there were ten to 12 of us in a room—to prepare for reveille which began at 5:50 a.m. with an unusual chant, "Peasants arise, you have nothing to lose but your chains!" My loud cry would come before the bugle sounded, which was the official call to duty, to give birth to a new day at the Academy.

I particularly remember Antonio "Tony" Fernando, who incessantly ribbed me. He was a smart student and became managing editor of our monthly publication, *The Corps*. He found my ideas out of this world, especially when I wrote an essay on a united Southeast Asia for *The Corps* (I no longer have a file of this) and when I would talk to my classmates about the upheavals that radically changed China and the Soviet Union. I was just starting to form my views on geopolitics.

In classes, we did not discuss the rebellion that was seething in Central Luzon. Recitations were limited to theories, strategies, and tactics. It was only in our final year that officers visited our class to speak about the Huk insurgency, giving us a situationer, those typical military briefings with maps and headcounts. Our classroom lent itself to these presentations since our walls were teeming with space, plastered with blackboards, convenient for charts, graphs, and texts. We were literally surrounded with information.

Since the PMA was modeled after West Point, our education was totally insulated from politics, from what was happening outside the gates of our institution. My classmate, Antonio "Tony" Lukban, would later describe the setting of our education as "pure and beautiful." The cool climate of Baguio, the green polo fields, and the clean mountain air made our stay idyllic, keeping us distant from the rumblings in the Sierra Madre.

In my parallel universe at the PMA library, I was also trying to understand the teachings of the Lord, searching for a faith that would be my anchor. His teachings, I found out, were of social significance. Thus I would write in *The Corps* in 1954, when I was in my third year, that religious training in the Academy transformed us, made us absorb "the unequivocally firm belief of the existence of the Almighty God." But this was not forced into our minds. Rather, it became a way of life, "that invisible power which we may call faith."

Reading this essay 60 years later made me realize that my spiritual moorings developed in the halls of the PMA, nurtured by the books that filled the library's shelves and the policy of the Academy to "encourage and open all the possible ways to religious development." The essay, of course, could have been written in a more lucid way than the jumble of words that it seems today.

Many years after, when I was already out of the PMA and was a young

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The Delta Company, Philippine Military Academy Class 1956: I am on the front row, second from left.

officer assigned to the field, I wanted to leave the Catholic Church. During mass, I found that the priests did not preach the Gospel fully and they were disgustingly boring. I found that it was not easy to read the Bible, so I reached out to other Christian groups like the Baptists. They explained the Bible better than anybody did.

I also turned to C.S. Lewis, a broadcaster and atheist turned Christian, who, in his book *Mere Christianity*, wrote that while he could not prove the existence of God, he could not dispute His teachings. I was particularly struck by how he interpreted the virtue of loving one's enemy, which is not regarding him or her with fondness but simply wishing for his or her good.

What made me stay with the Catholic Church, though, was the path-breaking Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s convened by Pope John XXIII. I read all the documents that came out of Vatican II—and these would later shape my political and social beliefs and inspire me in crafting programs to improve the conditions in communities and, ultimately, the country. This does not mean, however, that I am a good Catholic. I am simply a follower of the Christian faith.

IN MY FIRST year, while I was still getting used to life in a military academy, which was radically different from my roots, I was confronted with my past. The Academy charged me with a violation of the Honor Code, a cardinal sin. It could have caused my separation from the PMA and deprived me of the

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About the book

Seen by many to be the gray eminence, Jose T. Almonte—audacious, uncommon, otherwise known as "JoAl" or "the General"—recounts, in his own words, the steps that brought him to the corridors of power, and the steps he and his principals took to address age-old inequities in Philippine society and to level the playing field in business and politics. The book contains many stunning revelations, but none more absorbing than the heart and mind of Almonte himself—as soldier, as commando, as warrior, as citizen, as reformer, as thinker, and as crafter of national policy in some of contemporary Philippines' most critical years.

PHOTO BY RIZIEL CABREROS

About the co-author

Marites Dañguilan Vitug is one of the Philippines' most accomplished and respected journalists, winning awards and public recognition for her books and reportage on Philippine justice, security, and politics. A former Nieman Fellow and Asian Public Intellectual, Vitug edited the pioneering political newsmagazine *Newsbreak*. She is editor-at-large for Rappler.

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