

Setting the scene for the events in “Amigo”

by Paul Bloom, member of the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota

(Please stay for the discussion after the film)

The story takes place in 1901 north of the capital city of Manila, on the island of Luzon, during the guerilla war that characterized the later phases of the Philippine–American War (In the U.S. this was formerly known as the Philippine Insurrection, or even less accurately, as the “Spanish-American War.”)

In 1898, after the sinking of the USS Maine in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, the U.S. declared war on Spain. Already the Hearst-owned newspapers had set the stage for war by printing nonfactual stories about the Spanish role in Cuba. As soon as war was declared, the Pacific fleet under Adm. George Dewey was ordered to sail to Manila Bay.

Spain had been the colonial ruler of the Philippines for 350 years, but was not effectively managing its colonies. As in Cuba, Spain faced a local population that was increasingly upset with their status as colonial dependents. Dewey also transported Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo, and other leaders of the failed 1896 Philippine Revolution, from exile in Hong Kong back to the Philippines. On arrival in Manila Bay on May 1 Dewey quickly sank most of the small and decrepit Spanish fleet. As Dewey awaited arrival of US Army troops, Aguinaldo mustered his army to fight the Spanish.

As forces loyal to Aguinaldo were fighting against the Spanish across the Philippines, the army under the command of Gen. Aguinaldo surrounded the main Spanish garrison in Manila. On June 12, 1898 Filipinos declared independence from Spain. They subsequently wrote a constitution and formed the Philippine Republic, electing Aguinaldo as President. Facing the humiliation of being defeated by the Philippine Army, the Spanish arranged with Dewey to hold a mock battle resulting in Spain’s surrender to the U.S. One of the Army units that participated in the one-day battle of Manila, on August 13, 1898, was the 13th Volunteers from Minnesota, (predecessor to our National Guard). Gen. Aguinaldo agreed to stay out of this exercise and let the U.S. occupy Manila.

In the U.S., a lively debate heated up between those who called themselves “anti-imperialists” and those who supported the takeover of the Philippines as a way for the U.S. to gain access to the China trade. In the fall of 1898, Minnesota elected Gov. John Lind, who was identified with the anti-imperialists. Gov. Lind wanted the 13th Volunteers to come home. President McKinley supported takeover of the Philippines and in late 1898 negotiations began in Paris that led to the U.S. arranging to pay Spain for the Philippines.

After a period of increasing tension between the U.S. and Philippine armies, war broke out on Feb 4, 1899 after U.S. sentries shot several unarmed Filipino soldiers who were walking home from a party. The Filipinos were easily out-gunned by the U.S. forces, which included the 13th Minnesota regiment, and they slowly retreated north toward Central Luzon. The population supported the Philippine Army, and U.S. soldiers were subject to harassment by local irregulars, especially at night, often with the *bolos* (long knives that were the all-purpose farm implement of Filipino peasants). During the day everyone was an “amigo,” but not at night.

Many soldiers became very disillusioned with the war. Some wrote letters back home that were printed in their local newspapers, expressing their feelings that they had been deceived, and their reluctance to fight against Filipinos seeking independence. A few, notably black and Irish immigrant soldiers, even defected to the Philippine side. The U.S. Army was forced to suspend their initial offensive during rainy season in the summer, 1899, and 13th Minnesota Volunteers were allowed to go home that August.

By the time of the story in “Amigo” (early 1901), Aguinaldo had retreated to a remote hideout in northeastern Luzon and the Philippine resistance was being conducted by bands of guerilla fighters. On March 23, 1901, Aguinaldo was ambushed and captured and on July 4, 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt declared that the war was over, but guerilla bands continued their resistance for several more years. Except for the years of Japanese occupation during WWII, the U.S. ruled the Philippines as a colony until 1946.

In 1948, the 13th Minnesota Volunteers were memorialized in a plaque on the wall of Rotunda in the Capitol building. Unfortunately, that plaque states that, “They battled to free the oppressed peoples of the Philippine Islands” and does not recognize that all but one of the battles listed on the plaque were fought against Filipinos. The Minnesota Filipino community won an 8-year campaign to install a corrective plaque, which was placed in the Capitol Rotunda in 2002.