



THE FILIPINO VETERANS RECOGNITION  
AND EDUCATION PROJECT

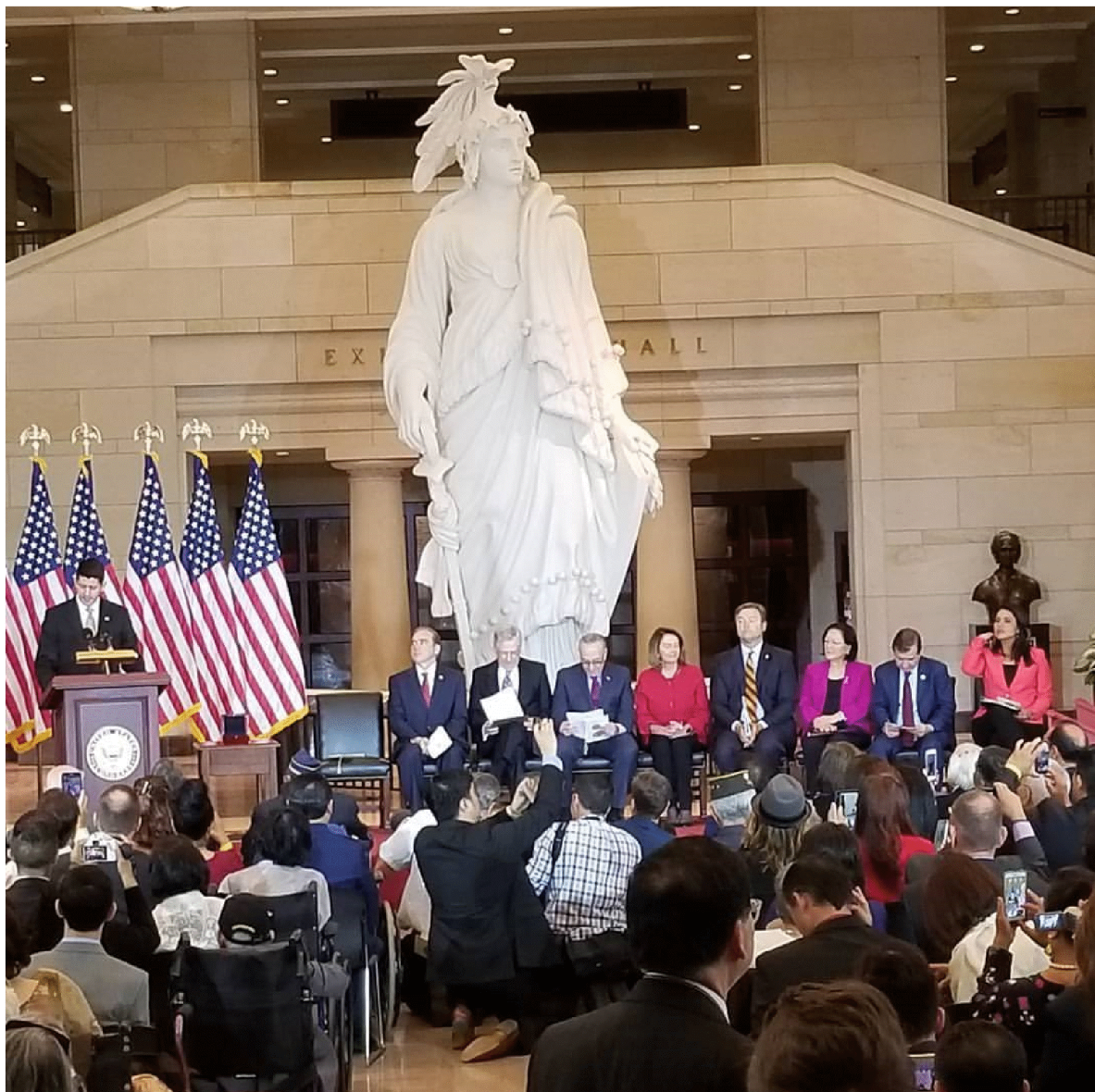
# A Ceremony & A Celebration

**Congress bestows its highest honor to Filipino Veterans of  
World War II**



“Congratulations to the Filipino Veterans of World War II – Filipinos, Americans, and Filipino Americans who have waited a long time for the U.S. to recognize your service and sacrifice,” said Major General Antonio Taguba (US Army, Ret), on the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award bestowed by the U.S. Congress. “You deservedly earned this period in American and Filipino history for your loyalty to country, dedication to duty, and intrepidity in defense of the United States.

“This historic moment is 75 years in the making,” added Taguba, chairman of the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project (FilVetREP). “It took that long for Congress to finally recognize the 260,000 Filipinos who fought under the American flag. To now honor them with the Congressional Gold Medal is to heal a wound they have lived with for most of their lives.”



Speaker Paul Ryan acknowledged this sentiment before the 21 living Filipino veterans and more than 700 family members, Congressional leaders and community supporters gathered in Emancipation Hall on Oct. 25 for the presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal. “Let this ceremony serve to ensure that those who fought for freedom are never forgotten, and always remembered,” he said.



It's an honor that is "long overdue," added Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI), the Senate lead sponsor of the bill, S. 1555, awarding the medal to Filipino veterans. "Their service was practically erased from American records. After serving our country, it is frankly shameful that these veterans had to fight so hard for what they were promised."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer noted that the U.S. "made a grievous error. But we recognized it and pledge to never let it happen again."

"We are here today to finally right this wrong," stated Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI), the House lead sponsor of the same measure.



In his acceptance remarks on behalf of his comrades – 57,000 of whom died in battle – 100-year-old Filipino veteran Celestino Almeda said that after the war, "thousands of us felt underappreciated and unrecognized for fighting for our country. I have waited along with my Filipino and American soldiers for this moment to come."

But "What else could we have done?" he asked in a pained voice.

Almeda got a standing ovation at the end of his speech, when he said, “In the words of the soldier’s creed, I am an American soldier. I am a warrior and a member of a team. I believe I served the people of the United States.”

**‘A Glorious Day’**



Early that morning, more than 300 family members of living and deceased veterans from across the country arrived at the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) for the congressional ceremony. They came from as far as California, Hawaii, Washington, Canada, Philippines and South Korea. Others flew in from Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Nevada and Texas. And many more drove for hours from New York, Ohio and Virginia.



Among those who patiently waited in line to enter Emancipation Hall were Melchoir and Magrit Kilchmann Baltazar of Falls Church, Va., son and widow of Purple Heart Awardee Jesse Baltazar; family members from California led by Luisa Antonio, executive director of the San Francisco Veterans Equity Center; Filipino veteran Aniceto Bagley and his son Robert of Hunstville, Alabama, and Filipino veteran Lucio Sanico of Hawaii and daughter Donna Chee. “This is a glorious day,” Sanico said. “I’m happy to be here.”

**Presentation Ceremony**

The highlight of the morning ceremony was the formal presentation of the Congressional



Gold Medal. Receiving the medal are (from left) Celestino Almeda, representing the Philippine Commonwealth Army; Frank Francone, American veteran representing the Philippine Scouts; Aquilino Delen, representing Guerrilla units; Alicia Benitez, Magrit Baltazar and Caroline Burkhart – all next of kin of Filipino and American veterans. Joining Speaker Ryan on stage are (from left) Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Sen. Dean Heller, Sen. Mazie Hirono, Rep. Ed Royce and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard.



A single Congressional Gold Medal was struck by the U.S. Mint and was on display at the Ceremony. The front (“obverse”) of the medal shows a Filipino Scout, an infantryman and a guerrilla. The other side (“reverse”) highlights the theme “Duty to Country” and shows the flags of the US and the Philippines and a list of the major battles fought in the country: Bataan & Corregidor, Luzon, Leyte and Southern Philippines.

The medal was made pursuant to the provisions of the “Filipino Veterans of World War II Congressional Gold Medal Act of 2015,” Public Law 114-265 (114th Congress). It passed with more

than the two-thirds majority required in both chambers. On December 14, 2016, President Barack Obama signed the measure into law.

The medal will be displayed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, where it will be seen by millions of visitors from all over the world. Complementing the medal will be a planned digital exhibition, which is envisioned by FilVetREP to educate the public about the service and sacrifice of Filipino veterans.



After the morning ceremony, members of Congress visited with their constituents. Sen. Hirono met with three living veterans from Hawaii: Lucio Sanico, Oscar Bangui and Salome Calderon. She also took time to chat with Ciriaco Ladines of Bowie, Maryland. The 90-year-old former guerrilla who helped unload munitions from a submarine as U.S. troops marched to liberate the country, is battling stage four cancer. Despite being weakened by two strokes, he insisted on witnessing the historic event.

Filipino veterans like Gualberto Pumento shared their stories with mainstream media organizations like CBS, CNN and NBC. He lives with his granddaughter, Christine Pabico, in Manassas, VA. "If I had to describe the day in one word, it'll have to be WOW!" Pabico said. "It was extremely gratifying and was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The entire day was heartwarming, seeing our well-deserving veterans get the recognition they have all been waiting for."

"Being his 'assigned companion' gave me the opportunity to escort him to all the events," Pabico added. "What a great honor for me to be able to serve and care for him. Another priceless gift was the opportunity to hear him share his stories throughout the week. It made me realize how there is so much about his past we did not know. I already had so much admiration for him before. I didn't think it would be possible, but am more in awe of him now, hearing what he and his comrades went through at such a young age. I am glad that my daughter, Lauren, (Bert's great grand-daughter) was able to be a part of this experience since this entire week has been an enduring lesson about sacrifice, courage, resilience, triumph, and fruits of perseverance."

## Presentation of Medals

Following the congressional presentation at Emancipation Hall, FilVetREP held its own ceremony at the Ritz Carlton in Tyson's Corner, VA. to individually present bronze replicas of the medal to living veterans and next of kin.

The ceremony was conducted consistent with military protocol in awarding medals to those who served.

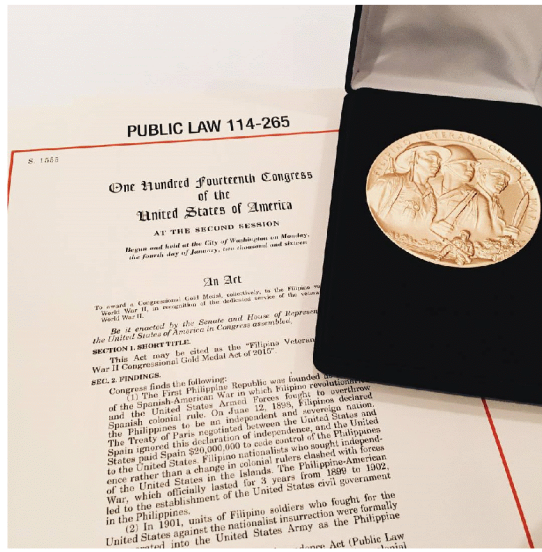


Among the living veterans who received their medals are, from left, **Arsenio Dizon** (New York City), **Rudy Panaglma** (Washington, DC), **Celestino Almeda** (Gaithersburg, MD), **Sylvia Sandalo** (Farmville, VA), **Jose Cadisal** (Washington, DC), **Rey Cabacar** (Ft. Washington, MD), **Segundina Garcia** (Dallas, TX), **Petra Ruiz** (Tulsa, OK), **Marcelina Bandico** (Ann Arbor, MI), **Emiliano Tutol** (Calif.), **Oscar Bangui** (Honolulu, HI), **Salome Calderon** (Honolulu, HI), **Tomas Mayor** (Mesa, AZ), **Byron Gambulos** (Texas), **Frank Francone** (Denver, Colo.), **Gualberto Pumento** (Oakland, Calif.), **Lucio Sanico** (Honolulu, HI), **Aquilino Delen** (San Francisco, Calif.) and **Ciriaco Ladines** (Bowie, MD.). Not in photo are **Regalado Baldonado** (Las Vegas, NV) and **Aniceto Bagley** (Huntsville, AL) who were unable to attend the medals presentation.



Presenting the medals are (from left) Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba to Jose Cadisal; Maj. Gen. Eldon Regua to Sylvia Sandalo; Philippine Veterans Affairs Administrator Lt. Gen. Ernesto Carolina to Segundina Garcia; and Brig. Gen. Oscar Hillman to Rey Cabacar.

In addition to 21 living veterans, more than 400 next of kin each received a bronze replica and a copy of Public Law 114-265 for every veteran who served. FilVetREP will continue to add names to the National Registry to ensure that all living veterans and next of kin of deceased veterans will receive their medals.



## National Celebration Dinner & Program





More than 700 dinner guests, dressed in *barongs* and *ternos*, black tie and evening gowns, and Military Class-A and formal dress mess uniforms, graced the Grand Salon of the Ritz Carlton Wednesday evening.

Among the dignitaries present were U.S. Rep. Colleen Hanabusa of the First District of Hawaii; LTG Thomas C. Seamands, U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-I; U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA), Philippine Embassy Charge d' affairs Patrick Chuasoto, Philippine Veterans Affairs Office Administrator LTGEN Ernesto Carolina, Philippine Congressman Leopoldo Bataoil, LTG Ed Soriano and MG Eldon Regua.

In his remarks, Mr. Chuasoto said "Tonight, we mark a moment of shared history and shared victory. Regardless of their circumstances, and regardless of their backgrounds, our Filipino veterans came forward to serve the same causes and principles as that of the United States – to uphold the same values of democracy and liberty for all."



Philippine Concert King Martin Nievera serenaded the guests with a musical rendition of favorite hits, such as "It's a Wonderful World," which prompted spontaneous dancing from some guests. Emceed by Ginny Barahona and Dr. Kevin Nadal, the dinner and program was a memorable one for Filipino Veteran Petra Ruiz of Houston, Texas, who celebrated the evening with a glass of chardonnay.

### **The Filipino World War II Veteran Experience**

A major attraction at the Ritz Carlton was a Philippine Scouts Honor Society (PSHS) display





of mementos, memorabilia and personal artifacts, which encompassed the breadth of the Filipino veteran experience. The exhibit included full size replica flags of the Philippine Commonwealth Army, Philippine Scouts, Guerrilla Forces, 1st and 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiments, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion photographs, and WWII equipment and uniforms. US Army Retired Col. Cedric R. Jasmin coordinated the display, with assistance from Donald Plata, BG Oscar Hillman and Sonny Izon.

### Remembering Our Heroes



On Thursday, Oct. 26, more than 60 veterans and family members braved the early morning chill and gathered at the National World War II Memorial. The Philippine and US flags fluttered, and a bugler played taps during the solemn ceremony.

Maj. Gen. Taguba thanked all those who came to remember the heroes who risked their lives to fight for freedom. PVAO Administrator, LTGEN Ernesto Carolina, AFP Retired, recalled that to many Filipino veterans, recognition was more important than compensation. “We must now ensure that they are never forgotten,” he said.

Filipino Veteran Rey Cabacar invoked memories of his comrades who chained themselves to the White House fence, protested in the streets of Washington, and whose numbers dwindled over the years. The Rescission Act of 1946 “was a slap in the face” to Filipinos who “fought to protect the integrity and freedom of the United States,” he said.

In summing up the historic events in the nation’s capital, American Veteran Frank Francone noted: “It is estimated that 57,000 Filipino veterans died, and 900,000 civilians lost their lives. We’re here today to memorialize this sacrifice and it couldn’t be in a better place. But the memory will only be maintained as the story is told to our children and grandchildren.”

### ‘Last Reunion’

In his message marking the historic celebration in the nation’s capital on October 25, Major General Taguba said:

“This once in a lifetime experience has brought together comrades who have not seen each other since World War II. This reunion may be their last, but it will be memorable for all to experience.

“Let us remember why we honor the legacy of the veterans – those still living today and many who have since passed – grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, brothers, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Their patience and fortitude to overcome adversity and prove their loyalty to America are true testaments of their lasting patriotism and citizenship.”



### The Soldier’s Creed

*I am an American Soldier. I am a warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army values. I always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade. I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills. I will always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself. I am an expert and I am a professional. I stand ready to deploy, engage and destroy the enemies of the United States in close combat. I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life. I am an American soldier.*

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[Photos by Bing Brainigin, Wahlbert Castillo, Eric Lachica, Jon Melegrito, Les Talusan, Paul Tanedo.]

