

# SUCCESS in the SHADOWS

Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines  
and the Global War on Terror, 2002–2015



Barry M. Stentiford



Combat Studies Institute Press  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Cover image: The Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) patch.

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Diane R. Walker

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<b>Contents</b>	<i>page</i>
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: A Problem Long in the Making, 1521–2001 .....	15
Chapter 2: The War on Terror Comes to the Philippines, 2001–2007 .....	33
Chapter 3: Consolidating Gains, 2007–2012 .....	57
Chapter 4: Completing the Mission, 2012–2015 .....	83
Afterword.....	95
About the Author.....	107





## Illustrations

*page*

Figure 1. Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE) training .....	37
Figure 2. 2007 Dental Civic Action Program efforts .....	47
Figure 3. Disposition of US forces in the Philippines in 2007 .....	51
Figure 4. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines organization prior to 2012.....	60
Figure 5. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) organizational chart .....	63
Figure 6. Key locations in 2007.....	68
Figure 7. Local children with US Special Forces Soldiers .....	75
Figure 8. Soldier with friendly but fierce-looking dog .....	76
Figure 9. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines organization after 2012 .....	89



## Introduction

The Global War on Terror turned out to be, in one important aspect, what was originally predicted—a generational struggle, although one being waged by only a small percentage of the current generation of Americans. While Afghanistan and Iraq garnered most of the public attention in the war, other smaller theaters have been active and one in particular could provide a framework for future operations. Specifically the US effort in the southern Philippines was a complex generational effort that, viewed over the long term, was remarkably successful in achieving US strategic goals in the region. Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P)—as the US involvement in the southern Philippines was dubbed—was quite different from its counterpart in Afghanistan. Rather than a dramatic battle against terrorists and the establishment of a new government, OEF-P became, for the Americans, a largely steady-state application of multiple US government resources to fundamentally alter the relationship between the Philippine government and security forces and the people of the southern Philippines in support of American and Philippine strategic goals. OEF-P changed the situation in the southern Philippines from one in which various terrorist groups openly conducted operations while Philippine government institutions behaved as a besieged force or occupying force, to one in which the Philippine security forces were accepted by the local population as a legitimate presence in the region. The terrorists, while still deadly, were reduced to a chronic law enforcement problem.

The US military made the first tentative steps toward returning to the Philippines in March 2001—six months prior to the 9/11 attacks—to address a very specific strategic problem. Much of southern Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago had effectively become what political scientists call “ungoverned space.”<sup>1</sup> The Philippine government in Manila was internationally recognized as having sovereignty over the region but, in practice, that sovereignty was tenuous. The local civilians, especially the Muslims who demographically dominate parts of the region, saw the Philippine soldiers, marines, and National Police as a foreign and illegitimate occupying force. The Philippine military units in the region in turn conducted themselves as an occupying or even as a besieged force

in a foreign land. Philippine Marine Major General Juancho Sabban, who spent decades fighting terrorists, described how the military had favored aggressive commanders who could claim large body counts, but the burning of schools, razing of houses, destruction of crops, and unintended civilian casualties only led to more people joining the groups fighting the government.<sup>2</sup> A different approach was needed.

What became Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines began following 9/11 in 2002, when the United States sought to open a second front in the larger war against Islamic terrorist networks by engaging al Qaeda-linked organizations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiya (JI), organizations that were taking advantage of the relatively ungoverned space in southern Mindanao and in the Sulu Archipelago.<sup>3</sup> In this sovereignty vacuum, violent terrorist groups such as JI and the ASG were able to operate with impunity. One catalyst for US forces to enter the region was the kidnapping of an American missionary couple who were taken, along with others, from the Philippine island of Palawan on 27 May 2001 and brought to the region. Initially employing Task Force 510, and later Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P), the United States worked to increase the capability of the Philippine security forces (including both the armed forces and later the Philippine National Police) to defeat ASG and JI. Concurrently, JSOTF-P conducted Civil Military Operations (CMO) and Information Operations (IO) throughout the region to help Philippine government institutions enhance their legitimacy in the region. In all these endeavors, the long-term goal was to build the capacity of the Philippine security forces, strengthen the legitimacy of the Philippine government throughout the southern Philippines, and end the power vacuum in which the ASG and JI had flourished.<sup>4</sup>

The main support and coordination for OEF-P had been based at either Camp Navarro, in Zamboanga City, or at Camp Aguinaldo, in Metro Manila. The number of troops fluctuated during the first years from lows of around 50 to a high of around 1,200 Americans. About half were in staff and support roles at Andrews Air Force Base, Camp Navarro in Zamboanga, or Camp Aguinaldo near Manila. The remainder of the forces were distributed mainly in

team houses, normally co-located on Philippine military posts and camps, scattered from Davao to Tawi Tawi. “reMost teams were US Army Special Operations Forces, US Marine Special Operations Forces (MARSOFF), or US Navy SEALs. Additional personnel came from the conventional forces of all branches. JSOTF-P personnel usually met daily with their Philippine counterparts to exchange information and conduct Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEE). The work was quiet, constant, and not dramatic, but it brought profound long-term results. Rather than massive numbers of personnel and firepower, OEF-P relied on longevity and persistence to meet American and Philippine government goals. OEF-P was waged largely out of the eye of the American public, more from its small size and lack of drama than from any scheme or malfeasance. While the numbers of US military personnel serving in the Philippines for OEF-P varied, for most of the decade the number of Americans in OEF-P hovered around 600. While not intentional, the very obscurity of OEF-P aided in its success by allowing the time required for the United States and the government of the Philippines to realize their goals in the region through a persistent low-key, whole-of-government approach. The resource that a successful counter-insurgency needs more than any other is time—time for a basic shift in local civilian attitudes, a shift that can take a decade or two as a new generation comes of age under a different reality. OEF-P, which lasted longer than a decade, had the benefit of that sorely needed time and largely achieved the strategic goals that the United States sought when its military forces began conducting Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines in 2002.

The Philippine armed forces share a common DNA with the US military. The Philippine Army traces its origins back to the Philippine Scouts established by the US Army in 1899, while the Philippine National Police stems from the Philippine Constabulary that the US civilian government established in Manila in 1901. When the Philippine Armed forces were originally separated from the US military in 1935, its first head was General Douglas MacArthur—on leave from the US Army. However the legacy of its origins as an essentially colonial army remained strong. When the United States initially established these two forces, the officers were white

Americans—originally US Army officers, but later mainly American NCOs on leave from the US Army who took commissions in either the Scouts or Constabulary. Over time, more and more Philippine officers were commissioned, but initial practices of disallowing Philippine NCOs to make decisions or show initiative remained entrenched. The modern US Soldier in the Philippines who interacts with the Philippine military is often struck by this fundamental difference in the role of the NCO from that in the US Army.

The years following the 2001 return of the US military saw only limited interest in the Philippines by historians and journalists. Mainstream journalists gave some space to OEF-P, although much of the coverage tended to cast a skeptical eye on US efforts in the region.<sup>5</sup> Much of what was published was written by OEF-P participants, or appeared in official military publications.<sup>6</sup> The larger wars in Afghanistan and Iraq greatly overshadowed the small war the United States waged in the southern Philippines. Most American military personnel who were assigned to JSOTF-P and its predecessor acquired some knowledge of previous American military activities, with an emphasis on incidents from the Moro Wars, especially the fighting at Bud Datu and Bud Bagsak on Jolo. However, US involvement in the region lasted much longer than the initial period of the United States asserting its sovereignty over the region, and many of the local civilian population understood the length and something of the complicated relationship between the region and the United States. 2001 would see the start of a new chapter in the long interaction between the United States and the Moro region of the Philippines.

When American Special Forces Soldiers returned to the Philippines in 2002 as part of the larger Global War on Terror, they were confronted by a Philippine military that had moved far from its American roots. The common heritage was obvious in uniforms, rank structure, and recast orders. The Philippine military commissions most of its army officers through its own Reserve Officers Training Corp (ROTC) program and through a military academy modeled after the US Military Academy at West Point. The Philippine armed forces use English for most official functions. Some Philippine military traditions preserve practices no longer part of the US military, such as the “daily dozen” during morning

physical training and the existence of the Women's Army Corps. But the commonalities make the differences all the more striking. The poverty seen on bases, which often seem plush when compared to the living conditions beyond the limits of Philippine military installations, is nevertheless jarring. In direct contrast to American bases, old unused equipment on Philippine bases is not a static display for heritage reasons but often was simply left unrepaired where it broke down. Some of that rusting equipment, such as APCs and aircraft, is sorely needed by the military.

An element of Philippine law unintentionally expands the chasm between the US and Philippine militaries in terms of funding. The Philippine military by law receives less money from the Philippine government than is spent on education. This is a laudable standard, but given the poverty of Philippine schools, the military has been ill-equipped to oppose several dangerous terrorist and insurgent groups. The limited government spending on the military only became an issue in the early 1990s. Until the closing of the US military installations in the Philippines, mainly Clark Air Force Base and Naval Base Subic Bay in 1991 and 1992, the US government paid rents for those bases that went to the Philippine military. The closure of these facilities, desired at the time by the Philippine government and not by the United States, ended the major source of funds for the Philippine military. Additionally, while the US bases were in operation, the American military gave much indirect support to the Philippine military through joint training and the transfer of older equipment. After the withdrawal of US forces from the Philippines, the threats faced by the republic remained yet the Philippine government was unable to fill the funding gap faced by the Philippine armed forces.

The very idea of US troops operating in the Philippines in any capacity brings with it a lot of baggage, underscoring the complex relationship between the two countries. When the United States acquired the Philippines in 1898 via the Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish-American War, the United States had sovereignty over the islands. That sovereignty was transferred to the new Republic of the Philippines only on 4 July 1946, albeit with the islands under Japanese occupation from early 1942 into 1945. Originally, the US and the Philippines shared their days of national independence. How-

ever, in 1962, Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal changed the official date recognized in the Philippines to 12 June 1898, commemorating the declaration of independence from Spain and in essence delegitimizing the entire period of US rule. Today Filipinos refer to the period of US rule as “occupation.” However the Philippine people by and large are among the most pro-American people on earth. The Philippines is one of few countries where American English, not British English, is the desired form. While Filipinos on the far left and far right of the political spectrum make a lot of noise about American neocolonialism, most Philippine people are happy to see Americans and to absorb American popular culture.

The return of the US military to the Philippines was an issue of enormous importance in the Philippines itself. While most Philippine people remain well-disposed toward Americans and welcomed the return, the more extreme left and right elements of Philippine politics and the media opposed the return, and remained remarkably consistent in their opposition to the American return in subsequent years. Their message has been that the Americans returned to establish a quasi-colonial relationship over the nation and that the honor of Philippine women, whom American servicemen would treat as prostitutes, would bear the brunt of the presence. On a more conspiratorial level, rumors circulated that the Americans had returned to surreptitiously search for “Yamashita’s Gold”—a legendary cache hidden by the Japanese near the end of World War II—or perhaps to find oil deposits that American companies would later exploit. Over the first decade after Americans returned to the Philippines, their presence remained a hot political topic but, by and large, the local people in the southern Philippines were won over and came to see the Americans as the “honest brokers” in the region. However, the strict rules the Americans imposed over their own forces in the name of force protection inadvertently kept alive basic curiosity, ignorance, and suspicions regarding the US presence. Local civilians in the towns and cities near the US camps knew that the Americans were there, but their limited interactions with or even sightings of US troops kept alive a feeling that something else was going on besides what was reported.



Regardless of initial perceptions of the US military's reasons for returning to the Philippines, the importance of the joint US-Philippine partnership quickly became apparent. On 27 May 2001, while the Special Forces detachment was training the new Philippine Army counterterrorism unit, ASG members raided the Dos Palmas Resort on the Philippine island of Palawan and kidnapped 20 people, including three American citizens. The hostages were taken across the Sulu Sea to the island of Basilan in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. The ASG beheaded one American, Guillermo Sobero, apparently as a warning to the other hostages and demanded a large ransom for the other two Americans, a missionary couple named Martin and Gracia Burnham.<sup>7</sup> After completing the training in July 2001, the US-trained Philippine Army light reaction company deployed to Basilan to plan how to end the hostage situation with conventional Philippine Army forces.<sup>8</sup> On 7 June 2002, after the Burnhams had been in captivity for more than a year, the Philippine 15th Scout Ranger Company raided an ASG site in Zamboanga del Norte in an effort to rescue the Burnhams and other hostages. Unfortunately, while Mrs. Burnham was rescued (although wounded during the raid), her husband and a Filipina hostage were killed.<sup>9</sup>

US Soldiers did not participate in the raid on the ASG site. Many of the initial Special Forces Soldiers who went to Basilan in December of 2001 and January of 2002 assumed that they would soon be fighting the terrorists, but two issues worked against allowing the American military to take direct action against terrorists in the Philippines. First, most Filipinos interpreted that their constitution did not allow foreign troops to engage in combat inside the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> The constitutional restrictions would form the basis for much of the political opposition to the presence of US forces in the region, and the question of exactly what the Americans were doing remained a political issue in the Philippines, especially in the early years.<sup>11</sup> Thus whether the American forces would simply provide advice and training for their Philippine counterparts or something more aggressive became an important question. More fundamental to American objectives in the region would be the likely long-term results of having US forces directly engage and kill or drive out

the ASG and JI, rather than empowering the Philippine forces to do that. US forces remained confident that they could destroy any and all terrorists in the region. Most American operators believed this could be accomplished in four to six weeks.<sup>12</sup> However, allowing the Americans to engage and kill the terrorists would not solve the root problem or bring about the desired end-state of having the Philippine government exercise sovereignty over the entire region.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, allowing the Americans to operate in such a manner would only further weaken Philippine sovereignty and legitimacy. The imperative was for US troops to enable the Philippine military and National Police to successfully engage the terrorists and build the legitimacy of the Philippine government in the region.<sup>14</sup> Achieving that goal would take years and require other assets, such as engineers, Civil Affairs (CA) units, Military Information Support Teams (MISTs), and a host of government agencies.

At the strategic level, the US sought to bolster the legitimacy of the Philippine government and military in the region—ending the ability of the JI and ASG to move about and use the area at will. To achieve this goal, the Americans used a multipronged approach. Most overtly, US Special Forces troops began working with Philippine army and marine units. For Philippine domestic political reasons, the interaction between the armed forces of the two nations was characterized as joint training exercises. But in reality, US Special Forces Soldiers conducted evaluations of the Philippine forces, identified weaknesses, and developed programs with their Philippine counterparts to address shortcomings. The Americans held Subject Matter Expert Exchanges in weapons maintenance, marksmanship, patrolling, first aid, and other basics of military effectiveness. Aside from tactical improvements in the Philippine Armed Forces, the US military sought to change the nature of the interaction between the Philippine Armed Forces and the people of the region. They hoped to create a situation where the local population viewed the Philippine security forces as a legitimate presence to blunt the influence of the ASG and other transnational extremists.

And therein was the long-term goal of OEF-P: ensuring the Philippine government was able to fully exercise sovereignty in the region as well as ending the existence of ungoverned space that gave

sanctuary to terrorist groups that threatened Americans and United States interests. That desired end-state needed to be achieved by the Philippine security forces with the Americans providing advice and assistance, some logistics, and an example of how a professional military interacts with civilians but not taking the lead.

Recent irregular warfare experience, especially in conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, provided one irregular operations model for US troops, but important caveats existed that made those wars less applicable for future irregular wars. After Afghanistan's Taliban government refused to turn over al Qaeda operatives sought after the 11 September 2001 attacks, the US added the overthrow of Afghanistan's Taliban government as an objective of the Global War on Terror. Removing the Taliban would allow the United States to pursue al Qaeda operatives directly as well as prevent al Qaeda and other terrorists groups from again using the Afghanistan territory to train for and plan attacks on the United States and its allies. Using Special Operations Forces and airpower in conjunction with the Northern Alliance, the United States was able to effect the removal of the Taliban. Then the relatively difficult part began—ensuring the existence of a legitimate government in Afghanistan that could exercise sovereignty over the country and not allow it to again become a haven for al Qaeda and other unsavory groups. The war in Iraq began with a largely conventional fight against the Iraqi army and Republican Guard. The insurgency began only after the Iraqi conventional forces had been defeated and disbanded by the United States, and the Ba'athist government abolished.

Both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began with the overthrow of an existing government. In the power vacuum that soon developed, insurgencies took root and the US military together with Coalition forces found themselves fighting a counterinsurgency. However, in the early part of these insurgencies, no recognized government existed in these countries. Although new governments were soon cobbled together, they remained too weak and unstable for several years to place many limits on Coalition forces. US forces could operate with little or no regard for the desires of local civilian governments. As the new governments gained sovereignty, the situation

changed and Coalition forces had to deal with increasing restrictions placed on their actions by the governments that the Coalition was trying to maintain in power.

Despite irregular warfare examples from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, neither situation is likely to repeat itself soon. The United States delegitimized the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Ba'athist government in Iraq. Thus aside from overthrowing and dismantling those governments, US forces did not have to deal with them diplomatically, and only had to work with new national governments in the areas in which US forces were conducting military operations after establishing those new governments. The changed situation was often frustrating for US forces in that they could no longer act largely with impunity but had to bow to host government demands. In short, US forces did not have to follow the wishes or laws of either government at the start of combat operations nor during the first years of the counterinsurgencies. The US military only had to follow US government laws and policies as well as some international agreements. With the establishment of the new governments, that impunity and freedom of action ended. While often maddening to the troops on the ground, such changed circumstances were absolutely necessary for the larger US strategic and political goal of legitimizing the new governments. A new government that must defer to the United States, or any foreign power, on issues of sovereignty will quickly lose legitimacy in the eyes of the population—making all efforts to stabilize the country moot.

The situation in the Philippines was quite different. The United States was seeking to bolster an existing government and not replace it. The US military forces in the region had to revert to the “by, with, and through” mantra common to US Special Forces—with the emphasis on “through.” US forces had to abide by Philippine laws, and understand that they were there with the permission of the Philippine government. Thus OEF-P from the start would have to be conducted quite differently than the early years of Operations Enduring Freedom–Afghanistan, Noble Eagle, or Iraqi Freedom. US forces had to focus on improving Philippine security force capabilities and enhancing the relationship between the local Muslim populations and the Philippine security forces. Above all, the Americans had to

ensure that the Philippine army, marines, and National Police reduced the existence of ungoverned space in the southern Philippines that had allowed terrorist groups to roam openly in the region. OEF-P would only be called successful when the local Muslim population saw the Philippine security forces in the region as a legitimate presence and the Philippine security forces had the training, organization, and equipment that would enable them keep the terrorist groups marginalized.

## Notes

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3. Richard Swain, "Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines," U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Center, October 2010, 2.
4. Colonel Gregory Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF–Philippines and the Indirect Approach," *Military Review*, November–December 2006, 3–4.
5. See, for examples, Walden Bello, "A 'Second Front' in the Philippines," *The Nation*, 18 March 2002, and Mark Munson, "Has Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines Been a Success?" *Small Wars Journal*, 5 April 2013.
6. See, for example, David Fridovich and Fred T. Krawchuk, "Winning in the Pacific: The Special Operations Forces Indirect Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 44, 2007, 24–27, and the entire issues of *Special Warfare* 17, no. 1, September 2004, and *Special Warfare* 27, no. 1, January–March 2014.
7. Gracia Burnham with Dean Merrill, *In the Presence of My Enemies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 2003).
8. Dr. C.H. Briscoe. "Rescuing the Burnhams: The Unspoken SOCPAC Mission." *Special Warfare* 17, September 2004, 46–51.
9. Burnham, *In the Presence of My Enemies*.
10. The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, 1987, Article XVIII, Section 25 states: "After the expiration in 1991 of the Agreement between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America concerning Military Bases, foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate, and when the Congress so requires, ratified by a majority of votes cast by the people in a national referendum held for that purpose, and recognized as a treaty by the other contracting state." While this Article apparently forbids any foreign troops to enter the country without a treaty rather than prevents foreign troops from engaging in combat, most of the Philippine media and opposition political leaders cite it as banning combat by foreign troops. The US position is that the "Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines of 31 August 1951" satisfies the constitutional requirement. Colonel David S. Maxwell said this explicitly in his article, "Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?" *Military Review*, May/June 2004, 22.
11. See Herbert Docena, "Unconventional Warfare: Are the US Forces Engaged in an 'Offensive War' in the Philippines?" in Patricio N. Abinales and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, eds., *US and the War on Terror in the Philippines* (Pasig

City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2008), and Roland G Simbulan “Exposing the VFA/Balikatan War Machine in the Philippines,” *YONIP Editorial* 62, November 2009, for examples from that debate.

12. Maxwell, “Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines.”

13. Maxwell, “Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines.”

14. Wilson, “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation,” 9.





## Chapter 1

### A Problem Long in the Making, 1521–2001

The unrest in the southern Philippines was not a new phenomenon in 2001. Indeed, its origin arguably stretched back centuries to the creation of the Philippines as a Spanish colony in the 16th Century. Successive governments in Manila had never quite integrated the people of the south into the larger nation. To be sure, the region experienced long periods of stability, but the unrest that swept the region after the 1990s, while tied to international Islamic terrorism, had deep roots in the region's history.

The heart of the problem for both the Philippine government and US military in the late 1990s and early 21st Century was the Philippine government's lack of legitimacy in the region. Essentially ungoverned space that developed in the southern Philippines allowed groups such as JI and the ASG to operate openly. That situation did not come about suddenly but was centuries in the making. Successive governments in Manila had been unable to establish internal legitimacy over the southern region since the time of Spanish conquest.<sup>1</sup> The Spanish acquired their initial claim to what became known as the Philippine Archipelago as a result of Ferdinand Magellan's landings on Luzon in 1521. He died there in the Battle of Mactan after getting involved in local power struggles, but elements of his fleet eventually made it back to Spain, and the Spanish Crown decided to act on Magellan's claim.

The consolidation of the entire archipelago took several generations while competing claims from the Dutch, Portuguese, and later the British were settled without the involvement or consent of the local populations. As the Spanish consolidated their hold over the islands internally and externally, they introduced the Roman Catholic religion and repressed a host of indigenous and introduced belief systems. Indeed, bringing souls into the church—and thus into salvation—was one of the main justifications for Spanish conquest. At the same time Islam, already established in some of the islands to the south such as Jolo, expanded its influence over more of the southern tribes, with a few outposts in the Visayans and on Luzon. Here on

the opposite end of the world from Iberia, Spanish Catholicism and Islam were again on a collision course.

A religious fault line formed between the peoples and tribes of southern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, and those to the north who had been converted to Christianity. In a break with their practices in the New World, the Spanish put far less emphasis on establishing the Spanish language as the common language in the Philippines. While some of the population—particularly the Mestizos of Manila and other administrative centers—adopted the Spanish language, the vast majority of the islands' populations had little or no knowledge of it. Instead, the islands remained divided into ethnic and linguistic groups.

However, much of the Philippines adopted a modified form of Spanish colonial culture, and central to that was Roman Catholicism. While the church had a prominent position in all lands under control of the Spanish monarchs, the Philippines was more directly ruled by the church, creating what can be described as a “Friarocracy” on the islands during much of Spanish rule. Under the control of the friars and the army, the Philippines remained largely cut off from the larger world, with a strictly limited number of ships allowed to leave New World ports—mainly in Mexico—bound for Manila. Likewise the number of ships leaving Manila for the wider world—mainly to bring New World silver to China—was also severely restricted. Still, when the British occupied Manila during the Seven Years War, they were surprised to find that rather than welcoming them or at least maintaining neutrality, the Filipinos—mostly Tagalogs and Mestizos around Manila—supported the churchmen in their opposition to the British. The Hispanicization of much of the Philippine people was well underway.<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish referred to the Islamic peoples of the southern islands as “Moros,” transferring the Spanish term for the Islamic Moors who conquered much of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 C.E., and whose presence was not completely removed from Spain until 1492. Indeed, much of the formation of Spanish national identity revolved around the centuries-long struggle against the Moors. That Spain began its overseas expansion in the same year the *Reconquista* was completed was not a coincidence. When the growing Spanish

presence in what were originally referred to as the easternmost islands of the East Indies bumped into the expanding Islamic presence, hostilities ensued. However, the Spanish were not powerful enough for a maximum effort against Islam or Islamic tribes on the far end of their insular possessions on the other side of the globe.

With Spanish power in the archipelago centered on Luzon, the Islamic tribes at the southern fringes of the colony continued much as before—with occasional brushes with Spanish forces but in general beyond the reach of officialdom. The Spanish built forts in ports along the coast but in general did not penetrate deeply into interior areas under Muslim control. The pattern had been set that internationally the Spanish were recognized by other nations as sovereign over all of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. However, as a practical matter the Islamic tribes in the region had little official interaction with Spanish authorities and certainly did not see themselves as subordinate to the Christians in Manila. That pattern would last into the 21st Century.

United States involvement in the Philippines began during the 1898 Spanish American War when the US Navy's Far East Squadron under Commodore George Dewey steamed into Manila Harbor on 27 April and in one morning's work sank the Spanish Far East Fleet. The situation in the Philippines changed drastically with the transfer of sovereignty over the islands to the United States following the 1898 Treaty of Paris, ending the war.<sup>3</sup> Almost immediately, the Philippine nationalist forces under Emilio Aguinaldo had a falling out with the Americans and began an insurgency.

After the capture of Aguinaldo in March 1901, the insurgency became more irregular and less centered, evolving into several ethnic and island-based movements. While President Theodore Roosevelt declared the Philippine Insurgency—now more commonly referred to as the Philippine War—over in 1901, irregular warfare would continue at least through 1907. US military forces fought originally against a relatively conventional force consisting mainly of partially Hispanicized Tagalogs and later against a host of smaller decentralized forces on separate islands—culminating for practical purposes with the Pulahan Campaign on Samar from 1904 to 1907.<sup>4</sup> Samar would, arguably, never be fully pacified. Yet after 1907, the unrest on

the island could better be characterized as lawlessness rather than rebellion against American rule. The US military in the islands during the early years of American rule—even while the initial military operations against the nationalist insurgency were ongoing—developed civil government mechanisms that served to both reconcile much of the population to American rule and begin the institutions that would largely inherit control of the Philippines once the Americans left.<sup>5</sup>

To assist in the conquest and governance of the Philippines, the Americans created two institutions that would have long-lasting import—the Constabulary and the Scouts. The Constabulary was created in 1901 by US Army Captain Henry T. Allen, who was attached to the civilian Philippine Commission that was trying to establish civilian government for the new territory. While chronically underfunded and under-equipped, the Constabulary—with officers drawn from US Army NCOs and Volunteer officers—did give the newly established civil government a means for reacting to lawlessness without the need to call for military forces. The Constabulary would later evolve into the Philippine National Police.

A similar although sometimes rival organization developed with the creation of the Native Scouts, later rechristened the *Philippine Scouts*. The Scouts were created by the Americans on 10 September 1899 after some success with locally recruited auxiliaries. The initial 100 recruits came from the Macabebe ethnic group. For several years, the Army avoided the use of Tagalogs due to uncertainty about their loyalty. The Scouts, unlike the Constabulary, were considered a component of the US Army and by June 1901, around 5,400 had been recruited.<sup>6</sup> With the Scouts, the US Army had a force that allowed locals familiar with the languages, terrain, and Philippine people to assist the US Army in subduing the archipelago. The Philippine Scouts would eventually evolve into the Philippine Army. But in the first decades, officers for the Scouts—like those in the Constabulary—were generally recruited from US Army NCOs and Volunteer officers, with native Philippine officers only slowly becoming common.

Initially the United States forces paid minimal attention to the Islamic people of the south, having their hands full with the Visayan and Luzon peoples, but eventually American rule came to the Mo-

ros. From the early period of American rule over the Philippines, the US Army recognized that the Islamic peoples of the southern region were quite different from their mostly Christian neighbors to the north and thus adopted different approaches to governing the region. The Americans created Moro Province, or *Moroland*, in 1904, combining much of Mindanao with the Sulu Archipelago. Governing Moroland would be a challenge even under the best of circumstances. The terrain included high mountains, immense swamps, and jungles and extended over the Sulu Archipelago, containing the larger islands of Basilan, Jolo, and Tawi Tawi, as well as numerous smaller islands and islets stretching across 200 miles. Unlike other Philippine provinces, the United States did not establish a separate civilian government but instead appointed a succession of US Army officers as a combination of governor and military commander.

From the first, American Soldiers who served in Moroland found the local people to be a strange mixture of the exotic and savage. Their colorful costumes, fanatical adherence to their own version of Islam, and apparent willingness or even eagerness to die in battle fascinated more than a few Americans. Armed with mainly handheld weapons like swords and knives plus a few ancient cannon, the Moros' fighting style was individualistic. In the *juramentado*, a warrior sought to kill as many Christians as possible before being killed. For many in the Army and out, the Moros came to be seen as the successor to the American Indian—the romantic warrior opponent who would have to either become civilized or be eliminated. Like the American Indian, Moro warriors placed a high value on individual combat and preferred the use of ambush. Facing an overwhelming conventional force, they tended to retreat into fortified blockhouses made of stone and dirt, known as *cottas*, in which they were vulnerable to modern artillery.

The use of the term “Moro” for the Islamic peoples of the southern Philippines implied a collective identity that was largely absent in reality. The region was populated with an assortment of tribes, clans, and factions—many under the leadership of a hereditary headman, or *Datu*, which traditionally fought against each other as much or even more than they did against the Spanish. The so-called “Moro Wars” that the US Army fought during the first decade and a half of

the 20th Century were a collection of large and small actions fought mainly against individual groups rather than against the Moro people as a whole. Indeed, in another echo of the long struggle that the US Army fought against Native Americans, the Army found numerous Moro groups that were eager to assist the Americans in campaigns against other Moro groups and even sought the alliance of US forces as a defense against other US forces. Some Moro leaders apparently did not comprehend that the US Soldiers and their Philippine auxiliaries formed a single whole. Two issues made the Americans something different than simply replacements for the Spanish. For one, the Americans—while mostly Protestant Christians—had no state religion and no imperative to replace Islam with Christianity. At the same time, the Americans were less complacent about local notions of sovereignty and expected the tribes to acknowledge that they were under American rule, which meant prohibitions on two deeply entrenched elements of local culture: slavery and polygamy.<sup>7</sup>

Initially, the Army took possession of the coastal towns and largely ignored the Moros in the hinterland in a fashion similar to what the Spanish had done. Eventually the Army had to respond to Moro attacks on coastal towns and, more specifically, on US Soldiers. Captain John J. Pershing, as with most US Army officers of the early years, pursued a policy of not treating the Moros as a collective. This approach assured some Moro leaders of American benevolence while allowing US troops to pursue specific groups that were actively fighting against US forces.

That policy changed with the arrival of Brigadier General Leonard Wood as governor of Moro Province in August 1903. Wood took a much more hardline approach against the Moros, apparently believing that they would respond to harsh treatment better than any other method. Wood believed that once their spirit was broken, the Moros would—if they had any sense—accept the benefits of American rule. If not, they would have to be wiped out and the area opened to settlement by people who were more receptive to the benefits of civilization. Under Wood, the Army aggressively pursued hostile Moro groups, but his policies also tended to make almost all Moros hostile. The policy perhaps reached its climax in March 1906, when hundreds of Moros, including women and children, established a

defensive position on top of 2,000-foot-high Bud Dajo on Jolo in reaction to a new head tax. An attack by around 750 Soldiers and Scouts against perhaps 1,000 Moros resulted in as many as 400 Moros being killed, leaving a grisly reminder of the benefits of American civilization.

Reaction against Wood's actions in the United States, including in the Senate, was fast and strong, but he survived the uproar. He was soon promoted away from Moroland and replaced by Tasker H. Bliss, who reverted to a less confrontational approach to the Moros. He treated raiding and killing as civil law enforcement issues rather than military affairs. Under Bliss, the Constabulary did most of the work controlling the Moros, with the Army reserved as a last resort. When Pershing replaced Bliss in 1909, he continued the same policies. During a 1911 attempt to enforce a confiscation of firearms, some 1,300 Moros again retreated to Bud Dajo. Rather than a direct assault, Pershing established a siege which, after a week, succeeded in bringing about the surrender of the Moros. Unlike the 1906 battle, only an estimated 12 Moros were killed in the Pershing-led operation.

However, two years later in 1913, the climax of a similar campaign would be far bloodier. At first Pershing used a similar siege technique to starve out some 10,000 Moros occupying Bud Bagsak on Jolo between January and March. The situation worsened in June and the Moros returned to Bud Bagsak. This time Pershing assaulted the heights, using artillery to blast away Moro strongholds. From 11 to 15 June, the Scouts—many of them Moros themselves—played a prominent role in the assault that left some 500 defenders dead, including an estimated 10 percent who were women and children. In retrospect, the battle at Bud Bagsak was the end of large-scale fighting between Moros and the US Army.<sup>8</sup> But the legacy of the “Battle of the Clouds,” as it was sometimes called, was a ready reference point for people of the region who opposed Americans or rule by any outsiders.

Despite the emphasis given to episodes of violence between Moro tribes and the American military during the Moro Wars, as early as the mid-teens, the two sides were reaching a period of accommodation and mutual respect. In March 1915, Sultan Jamalul

Kiram, the Sultan of Sulu, relinquished his political power and accepted American rule under the so-called Carpenter Agreement. The Moros understood that the United States was not going away, but they also understood that—unlike the Spanish—the United States did not seek to Christianize the locals if they did not want it.

The battle at Bud Bagsak was the end of the Moro Wars. The Americans built roads, schools, and established markets. Pershing had long recommended removing regular US Army units from Moroland, and General Franklin Bell agreed and removed the Regulars after Bud Bagsak. Instead, the Philippine Constabulary—forerunner of the National Police—would be the main instrument for policing Moroland, with roughly four battalions of Philippine Scouts on hand if a situation arose that was too large for the Constabulary. For the next 25 years, the US Army was concerned with Moroland only tangentially—through the Philippine Scouts—but in general the region was as peaceful as it had ever been. The only cloud on the distant horizon was looming issues with Philippine independence. During the last decades of US rule, the US military in the Philippines was far more concerned with external defense of the islands, mainly against the Japanese threat, than internal control.

The United States had committed to the eventual independence of the Philippines shortly after taking possession of the islands from Spain. This occurred while the Philippine Insurrection was still raging, although a formal declaration of the intent of the United States to grant sovereignty to the Philippines did not come until the Philippine Autonomy Act (Jones Act) in 1916.<sup>9</sup> Eventual independence became more concrete in 1934, when the US Congress passed the Philippine Independence Act (Tydings-McDuffie Act), which planned for independence in 1944.<sup>10</sup> In preparation, the United States began separating itself from the administration of the islands. The 1935 creation of the Philippine Commonwealth gave the Philippines self-government, although still under US sovereignty. The Philippine Scouts and Constabulary fell under the new Commonwealth government and were transformed into the nucleus of the Philippine Army and National Police. The United States did, however, reserve the right to retake control of the Philippine armed forces in case of emergency until actual independence.



For the Moros, the concrete steps toward Philippine independence were ominous. The Moros had reached an accommodation with the United States and enjoyed a sort of autonomy. They feared that any eventual Philippine independence would place them under the rule of the Christians to the north, particularly the Tagalogs who dominated Luzon and the Philippine Commonwealth government. They hoped that the US would carve off the Moro region from the Philippines and either give it separate independence or retain US sovereignty over it. Neither option was desired by the United States or the Philippine Commonwealth government. The government in Manila, which was Tagalog-dominated, desired to keep the Philippines intact.

The December 1941 invasion of the Philippines by Japanese forces destroyed pre-war plans for an orderly transfer of sovereignty. The Japanese occupied the islands for three-and-a-half years, during which time they tried unsuccessfully to get the Filipinos to cast off all Western influences. For the vast majority of Philippine people, their entire ethnic identity was so bound up with Spanish and American influence that the idea of casting off Western cultural influences was absurd and bitterly resisted. The Moros found the Japanese to be obnoxious and cruel and yearned for the day when they could be rid of them. Throughout the islands, people took General Douglas MacArthur's promise to return at face value. Some Philippine leaders, however, accommodated themselves to Japanese rule and worked with them to establish a nominally independent puppet government under Japanese tutelage, an issue that would later work against Philippine political stability.

Shortly after the liberation of the Philippines began—symbolized by General MacArthur wading ashore at Leyte Gulf on 20 October 1944—the liberation of Moroland began. Units from the 41st Infantry Division, which included the 163rd Infantry Regiment from the Montana National Guard, performed an amphibious landing just west of Zamboanga City. In the assault and successive operations to clear the Japanese from the area, local Moros fought on the side of the Americans—eager to see the last of the Japanese. The operation to clear the Japanese from the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao took until the very end of the war. For the Americans

it might have been more of a sideshow relegated to the status of a mopping-up operation, but for the Moros it was liberation. They had suffered heavily under Japanese occupation. One detail about US military operations in the region during the last year of the war should have influenced later American thinking about the problems in the southern Philippines in the first decade of the 21st Century: The Moros welcomed the Americans back in 1944 and took pride in their record of fighting alongside the Americans to rid their region of the loathed Japanese. That the US military in the southern Philippines during World War II apparently had no concerns or problems with what would later be called *force protection* speaks volumes about the local population's attitude toward the returning Americans. The United States had bought a lot of goodwill from the people of the region with the shared blood of its warriors in a common struggle. However, later generations of Americans often overlooked and failed to capitalize on this advantage. But with the war over and Moroland liberated, the future of Moroland remained outside of the control of the region's people.

The formal transfer of sovereignty over the entire archipelago to the new Republic of the Philippines came on 4 July 1946, two years after the date called for by the Tydings-McDuffie Act. The territorial integrity of the Philippines as ruled by the Americans from 1898 to 1946 was transferred as a whole to the new sovereign Republic of the Philippines. The geography of the new republic—two large islands, a dozen medium-sized islands, and thousands of small islands stretching more than 1,150 miles—made governing problematic. The war's immense physical destruction on the islands, especially in Manila, led to calls to delay independence, but Philippine leaders feared reneging on the promise and the US worried that a delay would set a precedent as the US pressured European nations to grant independence to their remaining colonies. Perhaps equally destructive had been the impact of collaborationists on the political situation in the Philippines. The inclusion of many former collaborators in the new government caused great tensions that did not bode well for the new Republic's stability.

After granting independence, the US military maintained a heavy presence in the Philippines, but that presence was focused on the Cold War as well as the Korean and Vietnam Wars rather than

on maintaining control of the Philippines. US Air Force and Navy installations that remained in the Philippines under treaties between the United States and the newly sovereign Republic of the Philippines were part of the US Cold War power projection in the Far East and played little direct role in internal Philippine affairs. Large bases such as Fort William McKinley and Camp Murphy near Manila were turned over to the Philippine government, while Clark Air Force Base in central Luzon and Naval Station Subic Bay continued to be major US installations until they closed in the early 1990s at the behest of the Philippine government. Even while the Philippine government faced internal Communist threats from the Hukbalahap during the “Huk” Rebellion (1946–1954) and later from the New Peoples’ Army, US assistance to the Philippine armed forces was mainly limited to advice and equipment.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, US government rent payments for its Philippine military installations represented a substantial percentage of the total Philippine military budget. While the United States and the Republic of the Philippines maintained a mutual defense treaty following independence, internal threats faced by Manila were the responsibility of Manila. But with its handling of the Huks, the Philippine government showed that it could succeed in a counterinsurgency.<sup>12</sup>

For the Islamic peoples in the south, the independence of the Philippines in 1946 was simply trading one colonial overlord for another. Without the American presence, the Christian Tagalogs of the north could rule or ignore the predominantly Muslim populations of the south without interference and the people of the south had good reason to feel they were not part of the new nation. Recent statistics demonstrate something of the poverty of the south. While the life expectancy of the nation as a whole is more than 70 years, life expectancy in Mindanao is 52 years. Likewise, although the 2008 average annual income in the Philippines was about US \$1,600, the average in Mindanao was less than \$700. While these figures suggest the central government’s systematic neglect of the Muslims, the region’s demographics make the story more complicated and suggest that the concentration of wealth around Manila are the cause. Following independence, Manila has tended to pursue a policy of increasing its Christian population, landownership, and

political power in the south, at the expense of the Muslim population.<sup>13</sup> A century earlier, Mindanao was more heavily Muslim. After decades of Manila's policy of resettling Christians on the island, only about 30 percent of the 18 million or so residents of the island are Muslim.<sup>14</sup> Muslims of the south are twice as likely to live below the poverty level as other people in the country. Under various administrations and especially under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (1965–1986), the Moros saw what little political and economic power they had ebb away.

After the “People Power Revolution” toppled Marcos in 1986, the regime of the new president Corazon Aquino was under immense pressure to remove the US military presence from the nation as many Filipinos saw it as a vestige of the former colonial relationship.<sup>15</sup> The Philippine and US governments renegotiated the *Military Bases Agreement of 1947*, which resulted in the “Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines.” However, the Philippine Senate would not ratify the treaty and formally rejected it on 13 September 1991. Although President Aquino was loathe to end the US military presence at that time, she formally informed the US government that it needed to leave Subic Bay by the end of 1992. The naval base officially closed on 24 November 1992. With the end of the Cold War and after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo did massive damage to Clark Air Force Base, the US Air Force had few reservations about closing the air base. The US Navy, however, bitterly resented the loss of the Naval Station Subic Bay, which was its key western Pacific base and largest base outside of the United States. Following the withdrawal, the 1952 Mutual Defense Treaty remained in effect but the militaries of the two nations were largely divorced from each other. This also ended rent income that the Philippine military had received from the United States as well as the plethora of military equipment that the US routinely gave to the Philippine military. The two militaries had little to do with each other until 1998, when the two governments negotiated the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) allowing US military personnel to come into the Philippines for training exercises.

Internally, the Philippine security forces faced a variety of threats. The most dangerous was and continues to be the Marxist

New People's Army (NPA), which though weak or even non-existent in the southern Philippines absorbed much of the attention of the Philippine security forces. Indeed, through the Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P) years, the NPA—active on Luzon, northeast Mindanao, and in the Visayas—remained the main internal threat faced by the Philippine government.<sup>16</sup>

However, in the southern Islamic region, the security forces faced a host of movements. Though they held somewhat divergent goals and world views, all sought to separate the region—Moroland—from the sovereignty of the Republic of the Philippines. The oldest of these groups was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which mainly sought a separate Moro nation-state. The MNLF had met most of its more moderate goals by 1996 when the Philippine government established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, which included a provision to allow MNLF fighters to enter the Philippine Army and National Police. The inclusion of the “Intergrees,” as they were termed, had obvious precedents from the “Moro Wars” of American rule but did complicate operational security in the south until the Philippine government began rotating units composed of Intergrees to other parts of the nation.

After the MNLF entered into negotiations with the Philippine government in 1975 to achieve its goals through politics, a more radical splinter group formed—the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Its name emphasized the Islamist nature of the movement over its ethnic “Moro” base, and the MILF soon became infamous for kidnapping for ransom and bombing. Apparently triggered by the Philippine Supreme Court's ruling on constitutional grounds against President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's plan to grant more autonomy to the Muslim region, the MILF declared war on the government and non-Muslims of Mindanao, killing about 200 and turning thousands into refugees. Despite the group's violent nature, the Philippine government asked the US State Department not to label the MILF as a terrorist organization to keep open the possibility of a negotiated settlement but had no such aspirations regarding some of the other terrorists groups of the south.<sup>17</sup> While the MNLF and the MILF were a direct threat to the territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines, neither posed much of a strategic threat to the United States or its interests.

Despite negotiations with the MNLF and the potential for negotiations with the MILF, the Muslim populations of the south had never fully accepted the legitimacy of the Manila government over the region. The chronic inability of the Philippine government to project internal sovereignty over the south resulted in the continued existence of essentially ungoverned space in parts of the region.<sup>18</sup> The situation changed in the last decade of the 20th Century as new terrorist groups with a far more radical agenda began to establish a presence in the region and to project power out from there. The Abu Sayyaf (“Bearer of the Sword”) Group (ASG) apparently broke away from the separatist MILF sometime in the early 1990s, before the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The ASG founder, Abdurajak Janjalani, and its early members were apparently all veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s. After Abdurajak Janjalani’s death at the end of 1998 at the hands of Philippine security forces, his brother Khadaffy Janjalani took over as leader.

The ASG first gained notoriety on 11 August 1991, when members threw hand grenades onto the MV *Doulos*, a Christian Missionary ship docked in Zamboanga City. In the attack, two crew members and four local people were killed, and another 18 were injured. While the ASG initially had some pretensions of being a radical Islamist organization, it was originally mainly a criminal group with a penchant for kidnapping. Its links to the Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) certainly gave cause for concern to the Philippine government. Formed in early 1993 but apparently drawing on previous radical movements in Indonesia, JI sought to create Daulah Islamiyah, a regional Caliphate that incorporated the territories comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and parts of Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>19</sup> In the 1990s, the ASG and JI forged ties with each other, and with al Qaeda. Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, brother-in-law of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, moved to Manila and from there provided coordination and financing for Philippine-based Islamist groups.

The ungoverned space in the south provided suitable locations for terrorist training camps and to conduct planning for large operations. The ASG and JI established training bases in the region to

plan and conduct attacks against Americans and others, as well as against Philippine security forces and civilians as part of their efforts to realize their larger goals. While the United States was concerned about the situation in the southern Philippines, American interest remained low because the US and Philippine governments had no specific agreements regarding military cooperation and because there was no perceived direct strategic threat from the southern Philippines against the United States. That situation would change.

Infamous terrorist leaders who came to the region included Ramzi Yousef, one of the chief planners of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York City. Also arriving was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who would later mastermind the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the 2002 murder of American Daniel Pearl, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. Various other schemes to emanate from the region included a plot to hijack and crash 11 airliners, crash an airliner into the US CIA headquarters, and assassinate Pope John Paul II when he paid a visit to the Philippines in 1995.<sup>20</sup> The September 11 attacks in the United States and the Burnhams kidnapping brought into sharp focus the importance of the region to US strategic interests and security. The situation in the region had become a strategic concern, and elements of the US military would not be long in arriving. The renewed relationship between the Philippine and US militaries in 2001 were aimed at the fault line between the United States, the Philippine government, and the Moros.

## Notes

1. Robert A. Fulton, *Moroland: A History of Uncle Sam and the Moros, 1899–1920* (Bend, OR: Tumalo Creek Press, 2007), 54–56.
2. Fred Anderson *Crucible of War: The Seven Years War and the Fate of Empire in British North America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 517.
3. The Treaty of Paris left out a few islands to the west of Tawi Tawi, a situation that was remedied the next year in the *Treaty between Spain and the United States for the Cession of Outlying Islands of the Philippines* (*Treaty of Washington of 1900*), which took effect on 23 March 1901. The treaty clarified that the island of Cagayan Sulu (between Palawan and Tawi Tawi) and the island of Sibutu, as well as their dependencies, belonged to the US. The US paid Spain \$100,000 in the exchange.
4. See Robert D. Ramsey III's *Savage Wars of Peace: Case Studies of Pacification in the Philippines, 1900–1902* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007) and *A Masterpiece of Counter guerrilla Warfare: BG J. Franklin Bell in the Philippines, 1901–1902* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007). See also Brian McCallister Linn, *Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 34.
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19. Ken Conboy, *The Second Front: Inside Asia's Most Dangerous Terrorist Network* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006), 62–65.

20. Conboy, *The Second Front*, 58–62.



## Chapter 2

### **The War on Terror Comes to the Philippines, 2001–2007**

The deteriorating situation in the southern Philippines had gotten the interest of the United States prior to the 9/11 attacks, and US and Philippine governments had made a few tentative steps toward renewing military cooperation in the few months prior to the attacks. In the first six years of what became Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P), the US military assisted the Philippine military to address the crisis in the region and began laying the groundwork for a long-term solution. Even before the start of the Global War on Terror, Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC) identified the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) as a significant threat to the interests of both the Republic of the Philippines and the United States. The ASG, along with the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiya (JI), had become infamous for conducting hostage-for-ransom operations, terrorist bombings, and beheadings. The Philippine government—menaced more directly by the Communist threat from the New People’s Army (NPA) —was starting to be overwhelmed by the collapsing situation in the south. The government requested US assistance in establishing a new Philippine Army unit specifically trained and equipped to deal with the terrorist organizations that were plaguing the region. In response, SOCPAC deployed a Mobile Training Team (MTT) from the 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group to Fort Magsaysay on Luzon in March 2001. For five months, they would help the Philippine Army develop its own counterterrorist capability in the form of a light reaction company.<sup>1</sup> From March to July 2001, the MTT worked on establishing the new company.

The importance of this new American-Philippine partnership soon became apparent. On 27 May 2001, while the US Army Special Forces detachment was providing advice and assistance to the new Philippine Army counterterrorism unit, ASG members raided the Dos Palmas Resort on the Philippine island of Palawan and kidnapped 20 people, including three US citizens. The hostages were taken across the Sulu Sea to the island of Basilan in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. The ASG beheaded one of the

Americans, Guillermo Sobero—apparently as a warning to the other hostages—and demanded a large ransom for the two remaining Americans. The other Americans were a missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham.<sup>2</sup> Upon completing their training in July 2001, the new Philippine Light Reaction Company deployed to Basilan to work with elements of the conventional Philippine army on a plan to end the hostage situation.<sup>3</sup> But before any rescue operation could be mounted, the US strategic situation changed drastically and what could have been seen as a local law enforcement issue in the southern Philippines took on far greater weight.

While the Burnham hostage situation remained unresolved, the al Qaeda terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon served as a catalyst for the US and Philippine governments to redouble their efforts against Islamic terrorists operating in the southern Philippines. The issues in the southern Philippines came to be seen as part of a much larger problem of violent international Islamic terrorism, and ungoverned space in the southern Philippines provided a haven for these groups. Within a month of the al Qaeda attacks in the United States, the Philippine military's Southern Command and the US Pacific Command (PACOM) conducted a combined assessment of insurgent groups operating in the southern Philippines. Colonel David P. Fridovich, the commander of the 1st Special Forces Group, did the actual site assessment with a Terrorism Coordination and Assistance Visit (TCAV). Meanwhile, an American military mission was underway in Afghanistan with the goal to topple the Taliban and root out al Qaeda training camps. The US and Philippine governments drafted a plan to open a second front in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) to track and eliminate al Qaeda-linked terrorist groups operating within the southern region of the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> Thus American operations in the southern Philippines were no longer an isolated event but part of a global strategy against Islamic extremism—a theater of a global war.

After completing the initial assessment of the problem, US Navy Admiral Dennis C. Blair, the PACOM commander, requested and received the authority to deploy a training and advisory package to the island of Basilan in the Sulu Archipelago to assist the Philippine government in its efforts to defeat the terrorists.<sup>5</sup> The plan,

drafted after September 2001, involved around 1,200 Americans and included “the deployment of about 160 American SF [Special Forces] advisers to Basilan to train, advise, and assist AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] units.”<sup>6</sup> It would be the largest joint effort involving the US and Philippine militaries since the 1992 closure of the US military’s two major installations in the Philippines, Clark Air Force Base and Naval Base Subic Bay.

The mission, known as Operation Freedom Eagle, was assigned to US Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC), under the command of US Air Force Brigadier General Donald Wurster. Given Philippine sensitivities over the former colonial relationship between the two countries, the deployment of US forces was publicized in the Philippines as a combined training exercise between the two nations, dubbed *Balikatan 2002–01*. *Balikatan*, which is Tagalog for “shoulder-to-shoulder,” had been the name of a series of annual joint US-Philippine military exercises. The implication for the Philippine public was that the militaries of the two nations would be training side-by-side—sharing knowledge and techniques with each other—rather than the Americans training the Filipinos or fighting alongside them. *Balikatan* was certainly not to be an operation where American Soldiers engaged enemy forces within the Philippines.

The new *Balikatan* exercise was to focus on improving Philippine military abilities as well as making improvements in the lives of the region’s people.<sup>7</sup> The use of the term *Balikatan* provided useful ambiguity but also caused some confusion over the next decade as the Philippine public and the American military had differing understandings of the term’s meaning. For the Americans, the new operation in the southern Philippines would later be known as Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P) while *Balikatan* referred to a series of annual short-term visits by other US military forces, usually in other areas of the Philippines. For most Filipinos, *Balikatan* was the name of a host of American military activities in their country, including what became OEF-P in the south as well as weeks-long annual training exercises by US military forces held in other areas of the Philippines such as Luzon or Palawan. *Balikatan 2002–02*, for example, involved some 2,665 Americans on Luzon conducting Civil-Military Operations (CMO) and Humanitarian As-

sistance exercises, as well as conventional warfare training.<sup>8</sup> For US forces during the next decade, OEF-P in the southern region was something separate from the annual *Balikatan* exercises held in other parts of the country, although sometimes US forces taking part in the annual *Balikatan* exercises did go to the south to support OEF-P.

In January 2002, General Wurster deployed the newly created Joint Task Force-510 and its 1,300 troops to the Philippines, with a cap of 600 allowed into the operational area in the south. They arrived in Zamboanga City for staging before insertion onto the island of Basilan, which was the ASG stronghold and the island PACOM was most concerned with. The heart of Task Force-510 was 160 US Army Special Forces Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), along with a Civil Affairs company, and later, naval construction troops. Zamboanga City is situated at the far end of a long peninsular that extends to the southwest from central Mindanao and sits directly across from the island of Basilan, 12 miles to the south. Camp Navarro—headquarters of the Philippine military's Southern Command—was on the western side of the city, but Zamboanga City was itself in the grip of ASG terrorists. The Special Forces Soldiers came from both Fort Lewis, Washington, and Okinawa, Japan. Task Force-510 arrived at Edwin Andrews Air Base in Zamboanga City aboard US Air Force C-130s and prepared for a smaller element drawn from it to conduct a further movement by helicopter onto Basilan. Most of the American Soldiers in the initial insertion assumed they would be landing in a hostile area and would soon be directly engaging and killing members of ASG and JI. After consolidation and combat-loading the helicopters, the movement to Basilan began.

The actual 1 February night landing of American Special Forces Soldiers on Basilan proved more anti-climactic—with civilian officials and media present in a brightly lit landing zone as the helicopters touched down on Camp Luis Biel II in northwestern Basilan not far from Isabela City. One of the MH-47 helicopters crashed that evening while returning to Andrews Air Base after dropping off US Soldiers; this added to the uncertainty of the situation.<sup>9</sup> The loss of the helicopter with its 10 passengers and crew was later determined to be from mechanical failure, but initial uncertainty over the loss

heightened tensions. Rather than immediately engaging with terrorists, the Special Forces Soldiers traveled the next day from Camp Biel to various small Philippine military posts in convoys of unarmored vehicles.

Over the first six months of the operation, three Army Special Forces company elements known as Advanced Operating Bases (AOBs) and 10 Operational Detachment–Alpha (ODA) teams from the 1st Special Forces Group (SFG) remained on Basilan and provided Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs) with 15 Philippine infantry battalions that were actively fighting the ASG. The use of SMEEs avoided the perception that the Americans were acting as Philippine forces trainers and instead implied that the exercise was a sharing of knowledge and techniques between equals. Additionally, the arrangement avoided legal problems inherent with use of the term “trainers.” The SMEEs focused on building basic infantry skills such as patrolling and reacting to an attack, with the ultimate objective of enabling the Philippine military to deny to the ASG



Figure 1. SO2 Wes Richey teaches Tactical Combat Casualty Care to members of the Philippine military as part of a Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE).  
Photo courtesy of Major (US Air Force) Joshua M. Tobin.

sanctuary and freedom of movement on the island. The Americans worked with their Philippine counterparts to prepare the Philippine Army to control lines of communication, use Civil Affairs (CA) units to engage with the local populace, improve the infrastructure, and conduct Information Operations (IO) to strengthen the legitimacy of and local support for the Philippine government, while discrediting the ASG.<sup>10</sup> During OEF-P, “IO” came to mean ““influencing others in a positive manner.””<sup>11</sup> To assist in the overall Special Operations mission, the US Army’s 96th Civil Affairs Battalion and the 4th Psychological Operations Battalion deployed elements to Basilan as part of the task force.<sup>12</sup> A 500-man Navy-Marine Engineering Task Group arrived to do exercise-related construction on Basilan that helped improve the local infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> The Americans understood that while the immediate problem needed a military response, the larger problem would require a fundamental change in the relationship between the southern Philippine people and Philippine government institutions.

When the Special Forces Soldiers first arrived, conditions on Basilan were Spartan but were what most Special Operators signed on for in the first place. US Special Forces Soldiers lived, ate, and worked alongside their Philippine counterparts. The Americans, after an initial assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Philippine battalions, began advice and assistance programs that would better enable the Philippine soldiers to engage and defeat their common enemies. What was immediately obvious was how far the capabilities of the Philippine army had declined after US forces withdrew a decade before. Some soldiers carried non-functioning M-16s, with parts missing and barrels full of corrosion or other gunk. Soon the Americans established courses focusing on the basics, including marksmanship, weapons maintenance, small-unit tactics, and first aid. Programs were established to provide weapon replacement parts.

Still, most US Soldiers assumed they would soon get permission to directly engage the enemy themselves and longed to do just that.<sup>14</sup> Even CBS news reported that American troops were heading to the Philippines to engage in direct combat, although with substantial political and popular opposition in the Philippines.<sup>15</sup> Over the first few months of OEF-P, Special Forces Soldiers serving in the



southern Philippines heard rumors that the next week or the week after that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was going to authorize US forces to “go operational,” to directly engage ASG forces in the region. In the meantime, the Special Forces Soldiers would have to concentrate on making their Philippine counterparts better. But the Philippine government decided that for political and legal reasons, it could not allow the Americans to directly fight ASG or any other internal threat. Permission to go operational would not come. Still, the very presence of US Soldiers were in the Philippines would remain a controversial topic in the Philippines for years to come.

The US Special Forces Soldiers concentrated on increasing the capacity of the Philippine military through Foreign Internal Defense (FID), CMO, and IO. The results from the Special Forces assistance to the Philippine soldiers soon became apparent. By June 2002, the Philippine Army had driven the ASG fighters away from populated areas of the island, especially from Isabela City in the northwest. Equally important, the Philippine Army showed a willingness to conduct complex and dangerous raids, including the 15th Scout Ranger Company’s 7 June 2002 raided on an ASG site in Zamboanga del Norte in an effort to rescue the Burnhams and other hostages. Unfortunately, while Mrs. Gracia Burnham was wounded but successfully rescued, her husband and a Filipina hostage were killed. Aldam Tilao, who called himself “Abu Sabaya” and was an ASG leader, was also killed in the raid. Tilao’s death destroyed the group’s previous aura of invincibility. The Philippine military’s willingness to actively pursue terrorists showed a shift in the struggle, and the ASG would find itself increasingly on the defensive and facing a more effective Philippine military. By July 2002, most ASG had left Basilan, allowing the Philippine Army to reduce its presence on the island from 15 battalions in 2002 to two by 2006. The ASG and other terrorists were starting to find that they could no longer operate openly and with impunity throughout Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

The enhanced security in the region provided by the improved Philippine military and the improvements in public infrastructure allowed for sustained economic and social stability—diminishing the conditions that had fueled the insurgency. The Philippine Army’s successes in regaining control of Basilan allowed it to pursue

other insurgent groups elsewhere in the country.<sup>16</sup> Very soon the so-called *Basilan Model* for conducting a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) entered the lexicon of US strategic planners as something different from what was going on in Afghanistan and later Iraq, and as something that could perhaps be replicated elsewhere. The *Basilan Model*, really more a framework than a model, implied working through a government that was friendly to the United States, and where the host nation's military rather than the US military did the actual engagement with the enemy.<sup>17</sup> The framework included concurrent use of CMO and IO to discredit the enemy while building support for the friendly government. The US would also provide intelligence to local forces to assist them in identifying and killing or capturing terrorist leaders through precision raids.<sup>18</sup> US military forces, especially Special Forces, would advise and train host nation forces when they were authorized to do so but would not engage the enemy directly unless attacked. Given that working with friendly governments to eliminate ungoverned space was a more likely mission than toppling unfriendly governments, the "Basilan Model" seemed to have widespread applicability.

While the "Basilan Model" became for a few years a buzz term in articles on how to wage successful COIN and FID operations, the rumors of its success were premature. The Americans did in fact help bring about a positive change on Basilan in 2002. Though the framework remains a good one, the initial operations on Basilan were only a first step in a long process that had the goal of enabling the Philippine government and security forces to enhance their legitimacy in the region and to concurrently marginalize terrorists groups such as the ASG and JI. The emphasis on marksmanship, patrolling, first aid, and communication allowed the Philippine military to take a more aggressive approach to JI and ASG on Basilan. The concurrent CA and IO projects helped legitimize the government while delegitimizing the terrorists.

However, the US and Philippine government success on Basilan was only a first step—albeit a successful one—in fixing a complex long-standing problem. The operations on Basilan were a response to a crisis, but achieving larger goals in the region would take a sustained, broad-based approach. Though Basilan had been

brought back from the brink, many ASG members and other terrorists responded to the new pressure simply by moving to other parts of the southern region in what could be described as the “balloon effect.” If you squeeze the middle, pressure moves to other areas. The 2002 US and the Philippine military actions on Basilan were a proper response to a crisis but not a solution to a chronic problem. A successful campaign to bring with long-term stability to the region would take much longer. Basilan was only the beginning.

The Philippine military’s newfound success and its strong backing by US Special Operations Forces strengthened the Philippine government’s bargaining position in Manila—allowing it to negotiate a settlement in June 2003 with one of the relatively moderate Moro groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or MILF. The MILF had split from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a group founded in 1969 geared primarily to separating Moroland from the Republic of the Philippines. The MILF split from the MNLF in 1976 over several issues but primarily over the MNLF’s willingness to negotiate with the government to achieve its ends. In the 2003 settlement, the MILF agreed to disavow the use of terrorism and work through the political system to achieve its goals.<sup>19</sup> Impressed by the new political opportunities resulting from the success on Basilan, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo requested that the US Special Operations Forces not only continue but expand their work with the Philippine Army.<sup>20</sup> While the MILF was outside of the US forces mandate, the ASG and JI were not, and the Philippine government wanted more successes against those groups. The US presence also allowed the Philippine government some relief from the situation in the south to put more emphasis on what it saw as the greater threat—the New People’s Army.

The OEF-P infrastructure was at that time minimal. The Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) headquarters was moved to Camp Aguinaldo in metro Manila, near the Joint US Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) element on the post. Additionally, the SOUTHCOM Liaison Element (SLE) set up with the Philippine military’s SOUTHCOM on Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City. However, the crisis had abated and Joint Task Force 510 began withdrawing from Zamboanga on 1 August 2002. A residual force

consisting of AOB 170 and four ODA teams remained on Basilan. While President Arroyo desired a follow-on mission to Jolo, uncertainty remained about the future of US efforts in the region.

Events soon suggested that while US and Philippine security forces efforts had displaced the terrorists from Basilan, the threat remained in the region. On the evening of 2 October 2002, a cell-phone-connected bomb packed with nails—apparently mounted on a motor-bike—detonated at a small café. The café was just outside of Camp Arturo Enrile, a few miles east of Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City. The café was used by members of ODA 145, a Special Forces team, as a source for hot meals—with the American Soldiers going in shifts to pick up their meals. The team was due to travel via SEAL rib boat to Basilan the next morning. ODA 145 members had been to Basilan four times previously to provide security for Civil Affairs Soldiers. Just three weeks earlier, six team members and the team leader, Captain Michael L. Hummel, had been near a firefight between Philippine security forces and what were assumed to be ASG fighters near the village of Tururan on Basilan. On 2 October, Captain Hummel and the team's new senior noncommissioned officer, Sergeant First Class Mark W. Jackson, were the last members of the team to pick up their meals at the café near Camp Enrile. The Americans had ordered their meals and waited several minutes for them to be prepared. A little after eight o'clock, the café owner called that the orders were ready. As Captain Hummel got up, the explosion ripped through the café, sending him sprawling backward across other tables and severely wounding him. The explosion killed Sergeant Jackson and six other people. Another 40 people, including two Filipino soldiers, were wounded. The attack exposed a serious problem in intelligence sharing and dissemination among the various American and Philippine elements working in the area. Philippine military intelligence had earlier intercepted Arabic communications discussing Americans seen at a café outside of Camp Navarro, but Captain Hummel was unaware of the intelligence at the time of the bombing.<sup>21</sup>

The attack, and especially the death of an American, indicated that the terrorists had simply left Basilan and were now establishing themselves on Mindanao and Jolo. Because of the persistence of the problem, the PACOM commander rescinded the order for rede-

ployment and ended the drawdown.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) was formed. However, JSOTF-P continued drawing down with the goal of 50 personnel in the operational area no later than 30 June 2003, at which time it was to redeploy out of Zamboanga. That plan never came to fruition, as the need for a sustained effort became clearer.

To ensure real success, US and Philippine armed forces efforts would have to be applied over much of the region. In January 2003, a proposed Marine Corps plan called for JTC 555 to send approximately 1,000 Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) troops to Jolo and Tawi-Tawi to conduct direct action missions. However, that plan met political opposition in the Philippines. Instead, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the following 20 February 2003 mission statement for JSOTF-P:

At the request of the Philippine Government, JSOTF-P works together with the Armed Forces of the Philippines to fight terrorism and deliver humanitarian assistance to the people of Mindanao. US forces are temporarily deployed to the Philippines in a strictly non-combat role to advise and assist the AFP, share information, and to conduct joint civil military operations.<sup>23</sup>

The statement clearly outlined what the American forces were to do and what they were not to do. Colonel William J. Coultrup, later a JSOTF-P commander, described his “desired end state” as one in which “leadership and safe havens” for foreign jihadists “have been neutralized and the conditions for their presence no longer exist.”<sup>24</sup> US forces were still not allowed to take unilateral action against the ASG in the Philippines, but teams from 1st Special Forces Group and the Joint Special Operations Task Force cemented their relationship with the Philippine military over the next two years. In 2003, 1st Special Forces Group supported two back-to-back deployments of force packages consisting of one Operational Deployment–Bravo (ODB) and five ODBs to conduct Security Assistance missions followed the next year by the deployment of one ODB and three ODAs. During 2003 and 2004, US forces provided advice and assistance to a total of five Philippine army battalions

and one marine battalion.<sup>25</sup> Again, reports circulated that an agreement had been reached between the administration of US President George W. Bush and the government of Philippine President Arroyo that would allow US forces to “conduct or support combat patrols” against the ASG. However, political opposition in the Philippines quashed any potential of that happening; again the Americans would serve as advisors and perform CMO missions.<sup>26</sup>

As the OEF-P scope expanded and to provide more coordination with the US Embassy in Manila, the JSOTF-P headquarters moved to Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City on 8 January 2004—part of the greater metropolitan Manila area. Camp General Emilio Aguinaldo, located on the site of what had once been the US Camp Murphy, was the main Philippine military post in metro Manila. The post was named after the leader who led the fight against the Americans following the Spanish-American War. The camp contained the War College, Command and General Staff College, Reserve headquarters, and Women’s Army Corps headquarters. It also housed the Joint United States Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG)—the main US organization in the Philippines tasked with providing assistance and coordination with the Philippine military through the US Embassy. Soon a newly fenced compound appeared on the camp next to the JUSMAG building, with tell-tale shipping containers intended to serve as living quarters as well as a portable building that could serve as a support and operations center.

However, with the focus on the southern Philippines, structural changes were perhaps inevitable. In 2005, Camp Navarro became the JSOTF-P base to coordinate American efforts in the southern Philippines, with smaller teams spread across various Philippine military camps in the south. The Americans originally established the coordinating and support center on the main parade field on Camp Navarro, with tents and shipping containers filling the grassy area. As OEF-P began to look more durable, a section on the eastern side of Camp Navarro was assigned to the Americans and a maze of stacked shipping containers and permanent buildings inside a perimeter fence soon took shape. The compound, dubbed with a touch of morbid humor as “Hell’s Half Acre,” would be the main JSOTF-P coordinating and support center in the southern Philippines.

One of the main tasks for the cooperating US and Philippine militaries was to create new specialized forces in the Philippine military that would be organized, trained, and equipped to defeat ASG and similar terrorist groups. The US Special Operations Forces assisted in the creation and fielding of the new Philippine Joint Special Operations Group (JSOG), which included two new light reaction companies as well as air force helicopters. This new unit was created specifically to enhance the Philippine military's ability to capture or kill terrorists without the need for American assistance. To allow for night operations, the Americans provided night vision goggles for members of the Philippine Army's 6th Special Operations Squadron and instructed the Philippine airmen to provide for infiltration and support of the light reaction companies during darkness.

At the same time, the operational environment's inherent maritime nature was recognized—leading SOCPAC to task the US Navy Special Operations Forces (NAVSOF) to send the US Navy's SEAL Team-1 to advise and assist Philippine Navy elements on maritime interdiction operations and maritime patrolling throughout the waters around Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.<sup>27</sup> The Philippine Navy could use the assistance, as its fleet of 62 patrol boats was woefully inadequate to patrol the waters around the islands. In 2005, NAVSOF began a permanent Subject Matter Expert Exchange on Mindanao at Naval Station Romulo Espaldon, which sat adjacent to Camp Navarro. Simultaneously, NAVSOF also established a presence at Naval Station Juan Magluyan on the island of Tawi Tawi near the eastern end of the Sulu archipelago. While Tawi Tawi was the smallest of the main islands in the chain and had little room for insurgents, its location provided an ideal base from which to interdict the flow of dangerous persons and materials from Malaysia and Indonesia. US Navy efforts in the region were also supported by conventional units such as Navy surface vessels and aviation assets such as P-3 maritime patrol aircraft. At the same time, US Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams began working with their Philippine counterparts to help them counter what was becoming one of the most common tactics in the Global War on Terror—use of the Improvised Explosive Device (IED).

From very early on, the US military understood that providing a long-term solution to the problems in the southern Philippines would take more than tactical actions. Moving beyond assisting in basic warfighting skills, SOCPAC deployed intelligence advisors to the Philippines as operations/intelligence fusion teams, or O/IFTs, to enhance the Philippine military's intelligence collection and enable them to better assess terrorist networks. These teams provided advice and assistance on collection priorities and force employment at the division and brigade levels. Beginning in 2004, the 1st Special Forces Group provided two teams continuously to serve in the intelligence centers for both the newly created Philippine Joint Special Operations Group and the Philippine 6th Infantry Division located in Central Mindanao.

Despite the Philippine forces' focus on killing or capturing members of the ASG and especially its leaders, such operations were only a part of the effort to realize US goals for the region. While the US Special Operations Forces used the phrase "by, with, and through" to describe how they interacted with the Philippine military, the "with" element remained largely dormant regarding combat operations, because the Americans were confined to battalion headquarters and higher during combat. In non-kinetic operations, however, accomplishing "with" through CMO was very much part of the campaign's long-term success. Through various CMO programs, including medical, dental, and veterinarian civic action programs (MEDCAPs, DENTCAPs, and VETCAPs), school refurbishing, road improvements, well digging, and other programs, the United States military in concert with Philippine counterparts engaged directly with the local population. While many of the programs were in part held to gather information on local conditions and the presence of ASG or JI, such projects also generated goodwill toward the United States, and more importantly, the Philippine armed forces.<sup>28</sup> JSOTF-P personnel treated illnesses, fixed teeth, and even helped improve the health of domestic animals, especially the ubiquitous carabao. The US military always worked to ensure that the Philippine forces got the credit for such programs, and in this JSOTF-P was largely successful.

Though such programs reached only a small minority of the area's population, the US military's example of providing such ser-



vices influenced the Philippine military to undertake its own Civil-Military programs. While the Philippine military had few resources to conduct such programs, simply conducting such programs in themselves demonstrated a shift in the relationship between the Philippine military and the local population—from outside occupiers or besieged garrisons to a force that made common cause with the local civilians to bring stability and normalcy to the region. In the long-term, Civil Affairs teams and CMOs probably contributed more to the realization of American—and not coincidentally Philippine—goals in the region than any other operation. Additionally, improving the security situation was necessary for CMOs to be effective.

The terrorists did not, however, simply lie low during this period. In one of the most notorious terrorist attacks, at least 116 people were killed and many more injured in a February 2004 bomb attack onboard the 10,000-ton *Superferry 14* before it cleared Manila harbor on its journey to Mindanao. Subsequent investigations de-



Figure 2. Major (US Air Force) Joshua M. Tobin extracts an infected tooth as part of a 2007 Dental Civic Action Program (DENTCAP) effort. Photo courtesy of Major (US Air Force) Joshua M. Tobin.

termed the attack was conducted by the ASG and another terrorist group, the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM).<sup>29</sup> The RSM consisted of Philippine former Christians who converted to Islam—or “reverted” in their own worldview, as they claimed their ancestors had been Muslims before forced conversion by the Spanish. The ASG was also blamed for multiple Valentine’s Day 2005 bomb attacks that struck Manila and Mindanao and which killed 11 people.

The US government sought to encourage the locals in the region to come forward with information on specific terrorists. The Rewards for Justice Program through the US Embassy offered large cash payouts for information leading to the capture or killing of specific individuals. Among them was a \$500,000 bounty for Ahmed Santos, the RSM founder who played a role in the ferry bombing. The payout offer brought in the information that allowed the Philippine police to arrest him in October 2005. He would soon be living in the high-security Taguig prison in Manila. The program helped US and Philippine security forces cross out more faces on their High-Value Individuals wanted posters. In addition to human intelligence, US forces employed some high-tech means of collecting intelligence. In March of 2002, some unarmed drones became another tool in the campaign.<sup>30</sup> The use of drones to collect intelligence visually augmented the larger human and signal intelligence gathering to allow JSOTF-P to build an increasingly detailed understanding of the terrorists.

The Americans imposed strict rules over their own forces in the name of protective posture and in response to Philippine sensitivities over potential sexual interactions between male US personnel and local women. This approach inadvertently kept alive a basic curiosity, ignorance, and suspicion of the American presence. Local civilians in the towns and cities near the bases on which the Americans had their compounds knew that the Americans were there, but they had limited interaction with US troops or even sightings, which kept alive a feeling that something else was going on besides what was reported. The truth was rather dull, but the apparent secrecy of the Americans kept the rumor mills cranking. Aside from the almost constant charges of re-colonization by Far Left and Far Right elements within Philippine society, other rumors had surprisingly long duration. The two most prevalent were that the Americans were

searching for a fabulous cache of gold hidden by the Japanese in the waning days of World War II, or that the Americans were searching for oil that American oil companies would somehow extract without compensation to the Philippines. Locally hired civilians who cooked food, cleaned, and provided maintenance on the American compounds became the unofficial conduit of information to the communities outside of the compounds. From such sources, most local civilians came to accept that the Americans were not there for any hidden or sinister purpose but were there to assist the Philippine security forces in their struggle against the terrorists.

Building on previously successful cooperation between the United States and the Philippines, especially on Basilan and Mindanao, and on the improving capability of the Philippine military, the US and Philippine governments sought to significantly expand American assistance to Philippine counterterrorism efforts in 2005. Effectively driven from Basilan and later Mindanao, ASG and JI leadership relocated to the island of Jolo—sometimes referred to as Sulu—although the leadership planned to return to Basilan after what they assumed would be the imminent US withdrawal.<sup>31</sup> The Philippine military created Task Force *Comet* and deployed the majority of its Special Operations Group to Jolo as part of *Comet* to combat the terrorist organizations. Jolo is the middle of three relatively substantial islands in the Sulu chain, and thus a seemingly logical place for the military to focus after success on Basilan. However, Jolo was the birthplace of Islam in the Philippines and home to the Sultan of Sulu. Additionally, it contained a predominantly Muslim population. Many members of both the US and Philippine governments expressed concern that efforts to reintroduce US military forces on Jolo would be met with intense local resistance.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, based on internal assessments and the previous success on Basilan and Mindanao, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld approved a second OEF-P iteration and allowed for the deployment of American advisors to the island of Jolo.<sup>33</sup>

The new effort on Jolo was supported by an enlarged JSOTF-P presence on Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City. The proposed Jolo operation was largely based on the so-called “Basilan Model.” From Navarro, US Army Special Forces teams and Naval Special

Warfare teams deployed to Jolo in October 2005 to assist Philippine ground units actively searching for key terrorists. A 15 December 2005 Joint Chiefs of Staff Execution Order (EXORD) extended US operations through the end of 2007 and approved the expansion of American forces throughout the Sulu Archipelago, with a specific focus on Jolo.

Similar to operations on the island of Basilan, US Special Forces teams were paired with Philippine battalions to conduct Subject Matter Expert Exchanges. The main US forces on Jolo were based on Camp Bautista, a Philippine base next to the runway for the Jolo City airport. Small teams of US SOF were assigned to small Philippine Army and Marine posts in several parts of the island, with higher concentrations in the more volatile and heavily populated western half. MARSOC forces would replace the Army Special Forces in 2008. The Americans had hoped that unlike on Basilan, they would be allowed to interact with Philippine units down to the company level on Jolo. However, political realities kept them at the battalion and above levels. Americans were authorized to use small arms for self-protection, but policy worked to keep the Americans out of enemy small-arms range and thus working with the battalion level or higher. The thinking was that an American at a company headquarters was too likely to come under direct fire from terrorists and thus be in a position to shoot back. National leaders in both countries feared political fallout if Americans became involved in direct combat with the terrorists.<sup>34</sup> Officially the Americans were still involved in providing SMEE to their Philippine counterparts. Having US military personnel directly engaging the terrorists would make that stance problematic.

While JSOTF-P personnel desired to work at the company level mainly in the interests of providing more effective support, the risk was deemed too great. They would remain at the battalion level. Still, ODAs were able to work with their Philippine counterparts in collective patrolling and other necessary tasks. At the same time, US Naval Special Warfare Task Units (NSWTU) conducted rehearsals with Philippine Navy elements on maritime interdiction, while US Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) troops worked with their Philippine Air Force counterparts. The

Philippine Air Force was in dire straits after a decade of tiny budgets that did not adequately fund maintenance on what aircraft the force had, let alone buy new aircraft. The main combat aircraft in the Philippine Air Force consisted of a few dozen OV-10 Broncos, a Vietnam War-vintage twin propeller aircraft. Much attention—

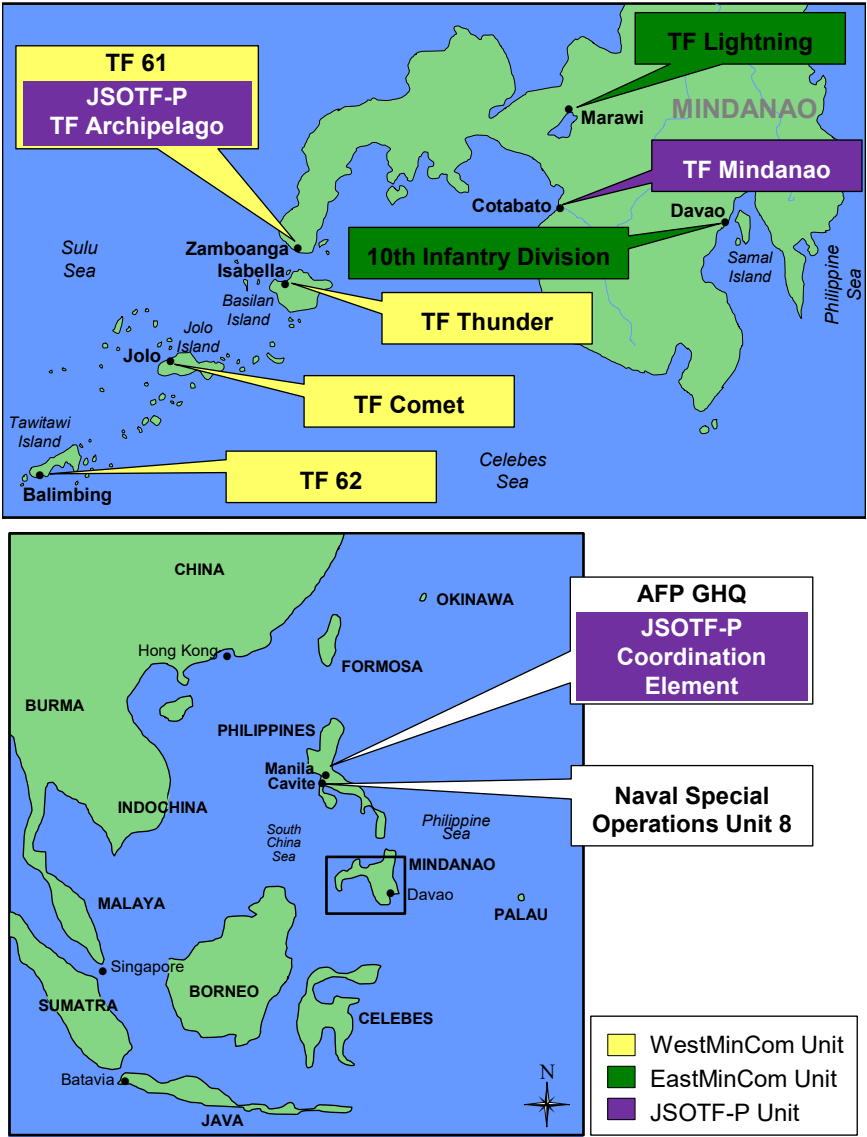


Figure 3. Disposition of US forces in the Philippines in 2007.  
Map created by Army University Press.

and money—was needed. By 2004, the United States began funding a substantial upgrade to the Philippine OV-10s that eventually transformed them into lethal weapons in the war.

With OEF-P becoming an increasingly long-term commitment, JSOTF-P headquarters moved back to Camp Navarro to be closer to the fight. The JSOTF-P facilities on Camp Aguinaldo near Manila continued to function as the Manila Coordinating Element—coordinating with the US Embassy and facilitating the rotation of American personnel into and out of the Philippines.

From August 2006 to April 2007, the Philippine military launched Operation Ultimatum with the stated goal to free the island of Jolo from the insurgents by capturing or killing ASG and JI leaders.<sup>35</sup> The Philippine Army, Marine, and Special Operations units succeeded in synchronized joint operations for more than 90 continuous days, providing their own logistics in the field and constantly pressuring terrorist elements on the island. Although many insurgent forces elements were able evade the ground offensive and naval cordon, the operation succeeded in killing Khadaffy Janjalani, who took over as leader of the group following the 1998 death of his brother as well as his successor, Jainal Antel Sali Jr. (“Abu Solaiman”) in separate firefights. The operation also drove most of the ASG terrorists from their sanctuaries on the island and temporarily disrupted their ability to conduct terrorist attacks. At the same time, Philippine-led humanitarian projects on Jolo began laying the groundwork to sever the islanders’ cycle of dependency on the insurgent groups and improved the national government’s legitimacy. Indeed, during the period from 2005 to 2007, the Philippine military became more focused on CMO rather than on direct action against terrorist groups as the means to defeat the insurgency.<sup>36</sup>

The success of Operation Ultimatum and various CMO projects allowed the Philippine military to reorganize their forces and conduct simultaneous, geographically separated operations against the insurgent organizations. In 2007, JSOTF-P restructured and created the subordinate task forces of *Mindanao*, *Sulu*, and *Archipelago* to mirror and better assist the Philippine forces actively engaged throughout the islands. Each task force was given the responsibility to work with Philippine forces in a given geographic area through-

out the area of operations (AO). The JSOTF-P Forward at Camp Navarro provided support and coordination for all efforts. The expanded structure of the American mission represented the continuing and deepening cooperation between the Philippine military and US Special Operations Forces.<sup>37</sup>

JSOTF-P complemented the SMEEs with a Special Operations Surgical Team (SOS-T), Civil Affairs Teams, Mobile Information Support Teams (MIST), Public Affairs Office (PAO), and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams. The success on Jolo showed that the Basilan framework could be implemented elsewhere—at least in the Philippines—but also reinforced the reality that though the framework could stave off a crisis, a larger and longer campaign would be needed to address underlying problems. Through a partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US task force assisted the Philippine military in sponsoring its own medical, veterinary, and engineer programs as well as Civic Action Programs and other activities to allow the Philippine military to interact with the local people, reduce support for the insurgents, and strengthen the standing of the Philippine government.<sup>38</sup> USAID also took charge of some large projects using Department of Defense money, such as the runway renovations at Zamboanga and Jolo and the construction of a water treatment and storage facility on Jolo. Indeed, throughout OEF-P, USAID contributed the largest amount of aid to the region—mainly through its Growth and Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program, which totaled some \$180.9 million in aid, followed by a \$127.7 million grant in 2012.<sup>39</sup>

These efforts were largely successful in their intended goal of separating the population from the terrorists and enhancing the legitimacy of the Philippine government on the island. After initially being suspicious of the Americans, most of the civilian population on Jolo either came to ignore the Americans, or more commonly, to see the American military as the “honest brokers” in the area. Children especially treated the American military like celebrities, often crowding around them and apparently just wanting to be near them. In general, the population of Jolo came to accept and even appreciate the US presence.<sup>40</sup> As the months turned into years and

none of the more incredible predictions came to pass, most locals simply accepted that the Americans were there. However, a nagging uncertainty remained throughout the duration of OEF-P. And although few suspected it in the first years of OEF-P, that uncertainty would extend for more than a decade. Success in the southern Philippines would require a sustained effort.



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## Chapter 3

### Consolidating Gains, 2007–2012

With the success of operations on Basilan, Jolo, and Mindanao in the first few years of Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P), Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) recognized the need to create more permanent solutions to the area’s security concerns. The next five years saw more emphasis on effecting long-term changes over the region and in the Philippine security forces. Though the transition from providing an immediate response to the crisis in the southern Philippines to building a long-term solution was not sudden, it had roots almost from the start of OEF-P and was the main effort by 2007. Part of the long-term goal was to reduce the threat from groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiya (JI) to the level of a chronic law-enforcement issue rather than a strategic threat. In essence, JSOTF-P was thinking along lines similar to what US General Tasker Bliss considered a century earlier as a long-term plan for the region. However, the Philippine National Police (PNP) were as yet ill-prepared in terms of training and equipment to conduct operations against the still-dangerous ASG.<sup>1</sup> In response, JSOTF-P transitioned from conducting Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs) exclusively with Philippine military units and began to work with the PNP in the region. The transition began in 2004 but really gained momentum by 2007. Along the same vein, the American Special Operations teams redoubled their emphasis on addressing the lingering social and economic conditions that incubated and sustained the insurgency by investing even more heavily in social and economic development as well as encouraging the Philippine military to invest more in similar projects. In 2006 alone, the Philippine military and JSOTF-P built or renovated 19 schools, dug 10 wells, started five road construction projects, and began constructing five community centers and water distribution centers on Jolo.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in 2005, JSOTF-P partnered with various government and civilian organizations and spent more than \$28 million on medical, dental, and veterinarian civic action programs (MEDCAPs, DENTCAPs, and VETCAPs), as well as on building schools

and digging wells in the three task force areas. In the MEDCAPs and DENTCAPs, participating residents had to provide their name and birthdate to officials, which helped the government construct a database for the region. In return, all who came got something—basic medical or dental care if needed, along with any necessary medicine. Those who did not need the basic services at least got a toothbrush, toothpaste, and vitamins—no one left empty-handed. At the same time, infrastructure improvements continued. By the end of 2009, the Americans—in conjunction with the Philippine military—had dug 34 wells and built 40 schools, as well as constructed some 80 miles of roads on Jolo alone.<sup>3</sup> The US Agency for International Development (USAID) pledged some \$130 million for Mindanao, part of which went toward installing computer labs in high schools, as well as retraining former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fighters in agriculture.<sup>4</sup> For schools that were not connected to power grids, which was very common in rural areas, engineers installed solar panels to power their computers and Internet connections. JSOTF-P also tapped into the potential of US military forces that were coming to the Philippines for short periods as part of *Balikatan* exercises or Joint Compound Exchange Training (JCETs) to conduct training that would support OEF-P goals. US Marine and Army units that came to Luzon or Palawan for a few weeks of training alongside Philippine units could focus their efforts on better preparing those Philippine units to fight terrorists. Coupled with Philippine government's defense reforms, as well as nation-to-nation engagement on issues such as budgeting, logistics, and education, the Philippine security forces were increasingly able to address fundamental problems in the south.

In May 2008, the US Navy's hospital ship USNS *Mercy*—with a full complement of doctors, nurses, and veterinarians—deployed to the Philippines and treated more than 14,779 civilians and 2,707 animals.<sup>5</sup> During the same time periods, US Army Special Forces teams, Navy SEALs, and Special Operations units from the Marines and Air Force advised their Philippine counterparts actively engaged in sustained counterterrorism operations on the islands of Mindanao and Jolo, and in the Sea of Sulu. Given the Philippine military's improved capabilities, the US Special Operations Forces

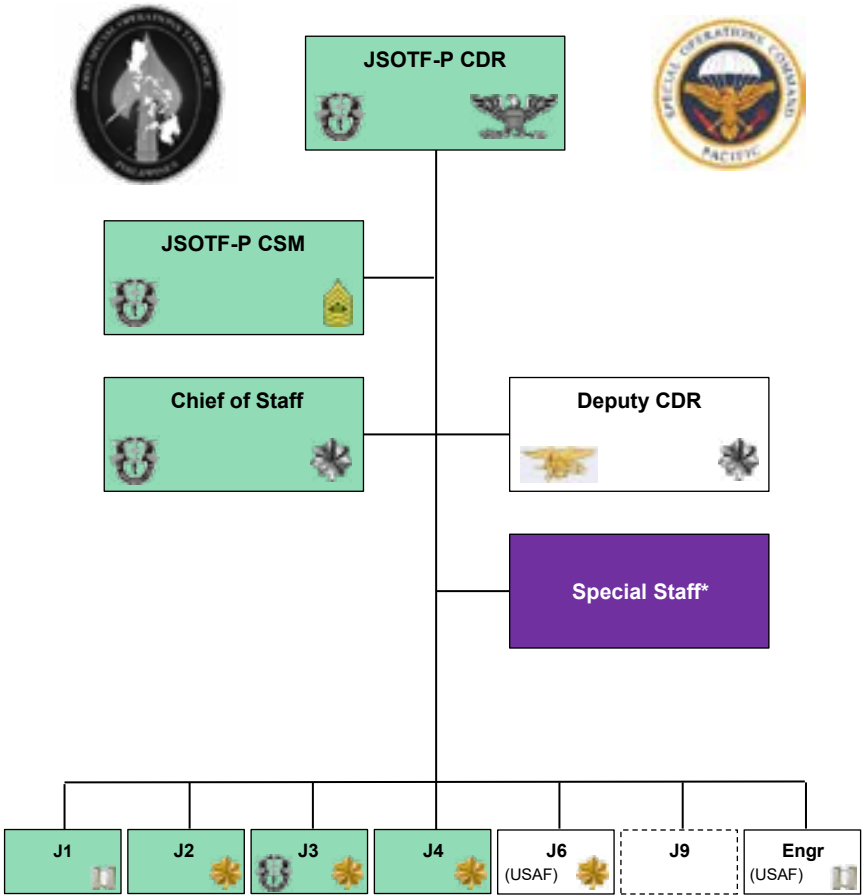
began to focus more on logistics, ethics, communications, advanced war fighting, and operational advisement. Logistics and communications remained areas of concern throughout OEF-P, as Philippine units had little organic infrastructure that enabled extended service in the field and many Philippine military leaders continued to rely on cell telephones for tactical communications. JSOTF-P would strive for much of the remainder of OEF-P to improve the Philippine military's capabilities in those areas.

The Americans noted that one shortcoming in Philippine capabilities was artillery. Philippine intelligence could often locate terrorist training camps and concentrations of fighters, but the Philippine military lacked the means for precise fire. As a result, they tended to launch barrages that wasted ammunition and often caused excessive collateral damage—further fueling anger at the government among local civilians. Colonel William J. Coultrup, who commanded JSOTF-P from 2008 through 2010, arranged for US Marine howitzers to be emplaced on Jolo, and for Philippine forces to be supplied with precision artillery ammunition that they could use against enemy targets.<sup>6</sup> The howitzers were quietly moved to their firing positions on Jolo, and Philippine military personnel conducted the actual strike. The movement of the artillery onto the island and to its firing position was done quietly. Other than those directly involved with the mission, few knew about its very presence until it was used.

The success and improvements by the Philippines armed forces were not lost on the insurgents. In 2008, the relatively more moderate Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) reached a political agreement with the national government that required it to pacify its movement and join the country's political process.<sup>7</sup> That same year, a Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC) Assessment Report to the Commander of US Pacific Command (PACOM) declared that OEF-P had been a success but noted that continued stability in the region would require continued American involvement, with greater interagency involvement.<sup>8</sup> In January 2009, US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates assured the Philippine government that the United States was continuing its commitment to the country.

While cooperation with their US counterparts improved the level of proficiency within the Philippine military and National Po-

lice—making them true partners in the fight against terrorism—it did not completely eliminate the danger that the ASG and other Islamist groups posed to the government and people of the Philippines. OEF-P still had a few years to go to fully complete its mission—more time to solidify gains. The close interaction between US Special Operations Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen and their Philippine partners meant that the Americans shared in both successes and some of the risks associated with the mission. Although US assistance had resulted in the capturing or killing of more than 200 terrorists since 2007, it was also been marred by the deaths



\* Special Staff includes: Group Surgeon, Public Affairs, Information Operations, ORSA, Civil Affairs, Chaplain, and Protocol.

Figure 4. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines organization prior to 2012. Graphic created by Army University Press.

of US Special Operators as a direct result of terrorist actions. On 29 September 2009, Sergeant First Class Christopher D. Shaw and Staff Sergeant Jack Mayfield Martin III were killed by a roadside bomb on Jolo.<sup>9</sup> Despite the risks, OEF-P demonstrated the efficacy of Foreign Internal Defense (FID) and how a relatively small number of US Special Operations Forces could combine with a partner nation's military to defeat terrorism.

The US presence in the Philippines remained relatively small for the duration of OEF-P, with a cap of 600 after the initial years.<sup>10</sup> With small numbers and a minimal support structure, JSOTF-P was able to continue OEF-P for the decade and longer normally required to effect a change in perceptions. The small size of the effort—dwarfed in numbers and in media coverage by the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq—allowed the low-key effort the time it needed. The small size also allowed the American efforts in the Philippines to occasionally slip out of the Philippine national spotlight, although the conflation of OEF-P and the annual *Balikatan* exercises brought a return of the spotlight to the US military presence, especially when American personnel in the country as part of *Balikatan* were accused of failing to conduct themselves properly.

After the initial more Spartan years of OEF-P, the Americans improved compounds, buildings, team houses, and other facilities. These efforts better enabled follow-on JSOTF-P personnel to concentrate on their mission of assisting the Philippine security forces to become better at their tasks and changing the way the local civilian population saw the security forces. Through slow but steady improvements and building projects—usually carried out by JSOTF-P personnel or local hires—JSOTF-P had within a few short years established several adequate facilities that meshed well with construction standards on Philippine military installations. With the largest number of Americans providing support on Camp Navarro, the remainder of the force was distributed in team houses and small groups of buildings. These compounds were co-located mainly on Philippine military posts from the city of Davao to the island of Tawi Tawi. Most teams were combinations of Marine Special Operations Command forces, US Navy SEALs, and US Army Special Forces, with additional civic action or construction personnel. SOF

personnel usually met regularly with their Philippine counterparts to exchange information. The work was quiet, constant, and unsensational but brought profound long-term results.

After the first few years, OEF-P settled into a relatively static effort. US forces worked and lived at several camps throughout the region, where they assisted Philippine forces or headed out daily to conduct MEDCAPS, dig wells, build schools, or conduct myriad other civic action programs and collect information. The main support and coordination was conducted at Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City, with staff and support troops numbering around 75. The site at Camp Aguinaldo in Metro Manila normally held the Manila Coordinating Element (MCE), which coordinated arriving and departing personnel as well as interactions with the embassy, among other functions. The Camp Aguinaldo site contained the facilities for a Joint Operations Center (JOC). The JSOTF-P headquarters rotated between Camp Navarro and Camp Aguinaldo almost annually, usually with the arrival each new JSOTF-P commander. Camp Navarro had the advantage of being co-located with the Philippine Army's Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and also situated in the heart of the area of operations. Camp Aguinaldo was the heart of the Philippine Army and contained the Joint US Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG). It was also within the metropolitan area of the Republic of the Philippines capital and a short drive from the US Embassy. The Philippine National Police headquarters on Camp Crame was across the street from Camp Aguinaldo.

Locating JSOTF-P headquarters in either Camp Aguinaldo or Camp Navarro had both strengths and drawbacks, and thus the locations shifted back and forth regularly. The small American compound at Camp Aguinaldo was envisioned as the headquarters, with a small semi-permanent building housing a Joint Operations Center surrounded by some shipping containers, a mobile latrine facility, and other support structures. A fence surrounded the US compound, and an Entry Control Point provided access—with a metal roof covering most of the area. Originally the shipping containers were intended to provide quarters for personnel, but shortly after being established, personnel assigned to Camp Aguinaldo moved to one of several hotels in the Makati district of Manila. A team of locally



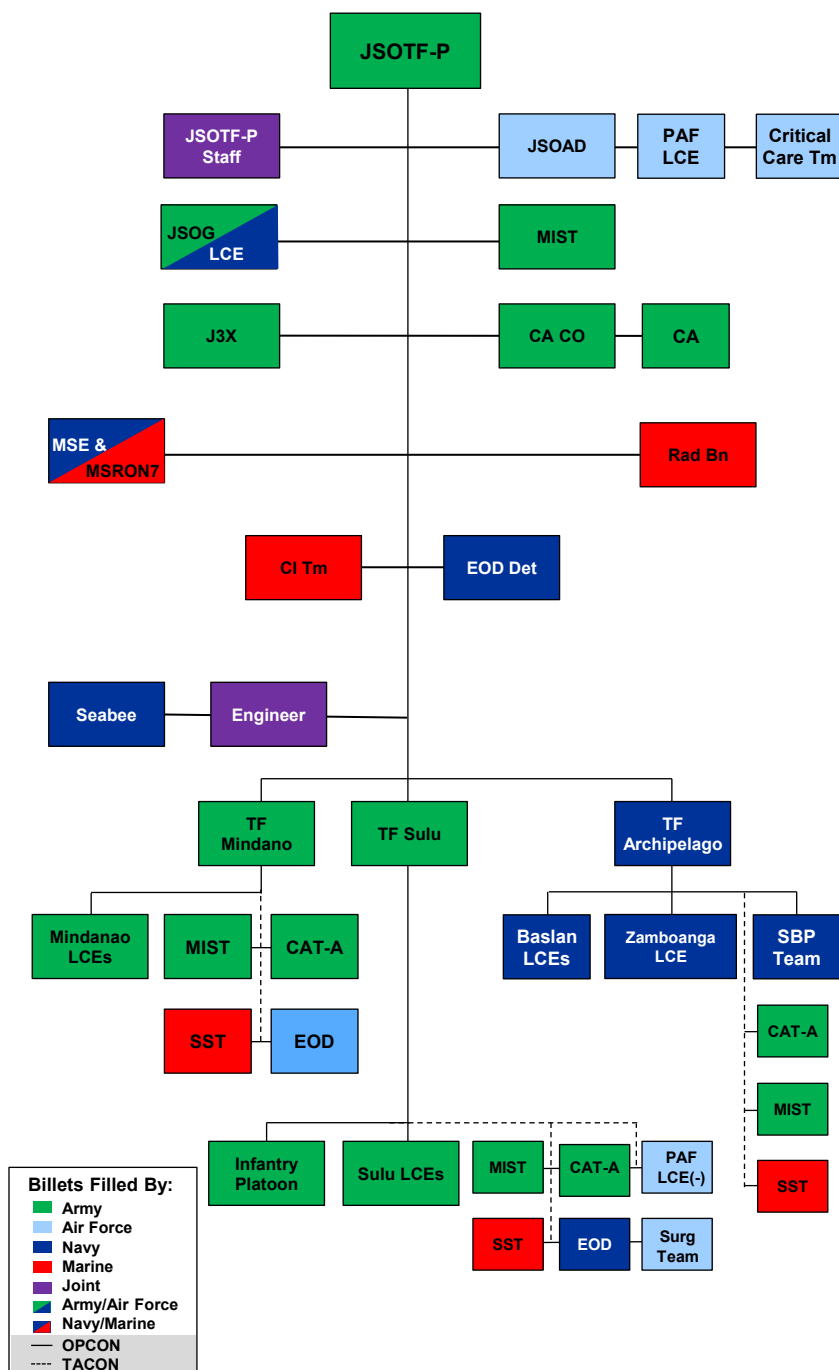


Figure 5. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) organizational chart. Graphic created by Army University Press.

hired civilians drove JSOTF-P personnel between the hotels, Camp Aguinaldo, the US Embassy, and wherever the mission took them.

Camp Navarro, by contrast, was a different sort of post. Situated to the west of downtown Zamboanga City at the end of the Zamboanga Peninsular on Mindano, it was home of the Philippine Army's Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and later to Western Mindanao Command (WESTMINCOM) and Task Force 61. The camp coincidentally sat astride the route that the US Army's 163rd Infantry Regiment took when it came ashore in 1945 to liberate the region during World War II. Bordering Camp Navarro to the south was a naval station. The US compound was on the camp's eastern border, roughly halfway down the length of the camp. Over the years, several buildings had been constructed or refurbished—Joint Operations Center (JOC) and officer and senior noncommissioned officer (NCO) billeting in one, a dining facility and other support in another, plus barracks and other structures.

Just past the Entry Control Point for the main building that contained the JOC, a memorial wall contained photos of the 17 US troops who had died in OEF-P. Ten were the men who died in the helicopter crash during the initial insertion onto Basilan, the remainder in the years since. Much of the billeting and some support functions were housed in shipping containers stacked three-high and connected by a network of metal stairs and catwalks. The whole area covered about a half-acre, leading to the alliterative nickname. It was surrounded by walls, barbed wire, and defensive positions, with entry through an Entry Control Point (ECP). The Military Information Support Team (MIST) was located in a small building outside the US compound. The MIST had been part of the effort that produced a freely distributed comic book, *Barbarga: Blood of the Honorable* aimed at teenage Tausug boys who might be prime recruits for the ASG. The comic book, part of a 10-part series, told the story of a teenager who helps protect his land from terrorists. Hundreds of thousands of free copies, available in several languages, were distributed locally.

Just inside the compound, one small shipping container held a store, *Susan's*, where JSOTF-P personnel could buy souvenirs, cigarettes, DVDs of popular movies, and the like. However, personnel were normally allowed to leave the compound and move about the

rest of Camp Navarro. Around the back of the American compound and down a small hill from the entrance stood a small collection of buildings where merchants sold a greater assortment of souvenirs, tattoos, and similar goods and services that tend to pop up around military installations. On the camp, JSOTF-P personnel who spent most of their time inside the compound could get at least a glimpse of life for Filipinos. At the rear gate of Navarro, which opened into a section of Zamboanga City called Campo Islam, Americans could see the multitude of children who gathered daily to see and wave to the Americans. While many US troops were tempted to throw them some pocket change, the Philippine gate guards strongly discouraged such actions. However, most of the children seemed happy enough to receive a wave and a friendly greeting from an American.

Adjoining Camp Navarro was Naval Station Romulo Espaldon, a small Philippine naval installation on the south coast of the Zamboanga Peninsula. For the JSOTF-P personnel both there and up the hill at the American compound on Navarro, the American compound on the naval station was referred to as the “nippa huts” after the structures that initially housed the Americans, mostly US Navy SEALs, on the station. During the years of OEF-P, the US facilities on the station were improved to a modern team house, plus storage areas and other facilities, but the name “nippa huts” continued to be used for the facilities on the station. On Espaldon, US SEALs worked with their Philippine counterparts on naval interdiction in the strategically important waters of the Sulu Archipelago.

The main southern airhead for JSOTF-P was at Edwin Andrews Air Base, located a short drive to the east from Camp Navarro. Andrews Air Base, like most Philippine air bases, was a dual commercial and military airport that shared the runway with Zamboanga International Airport. The Philippine Air Force installation was north of the runway, while the civilian terminal was on the southern side. The runway was the same one seized and improved by American forces during World War II. As Moret Field, it was used to fly missions in support of liberation, although the runway had been extended to the west in the years since. At Andrews, JSOTF-P maintained overflow billeting in shipping containers as well as a warehouse, and flight line operations. Much of the flying within the southern region was

handled by the contractor Evergreen Air based in Washington State. Evergreen normally maintained a fleet of three civilian-marked helicopters that mainly ferried JSOTF-P personnel and equipment around the region. The US Air Force also maintained a few fixed wing aircraft to support OEF-P, such as a C-212 used to ferry personnel between Manila and Zamboanga, or from Zamboanga to Cotabato or Davao. During the years of OEF-P, non-descript but armored vans driven by young Marines were a common sight as they made what amounted to shuttle runs between Navarro and Andrews.

Camp Navarro and Andrews Air Base served as the hub of the American efforts in OEF-P, but the real work took place mainly on smaller Philippine camps and at other locations throughout the region. Nearest geographically to Camp Navarro was Liaison Coordination Element (LCE) *Monsoon*, located on the Philippine Army's Camp General Arturo Enrile. JSOTF-P personnel normally referred to the site as *Malagutay* from the name of the neighborhood in which it was located. Camp Enrile was a few miles west of Camp Navarro, and north of the main road. It stood on a former World War II air base, with most of the former airstrip long since filled in by homes. On Camp Enrile, JSOTF-P built a relatively large structure for housing and to provide support for teams that worked alongside the Philippine military units on the camp.

However, Camps Enrile and Navarro were far from the only camps for supporting the Philippine military. To the east of Zamboanga across the Moro Gulf and the Illana Bay sits the city of Cotabato. The city is located on a delta between the Rio Grande de Mindanao River and the Tamantaka River, near where the two rivers empty into the bay. It also is at the foot of a large valley that contains immense swamps that provided ideal places for the ASG and other terrorist groups to hole up when pressures became too great. Because of heavy migration from the north, the city itself was almost 30 percent Roman Catholic, with Protestants making up a smaller minority. South of the city and the Tamontaka River is the Awang Airport, which borders Camp General Gonzalo H. Siongco, to the west. On Camp Siongco, home to the Philippine Army's 6th Infantry Division, JSOTF-P maintained an encampment astride the runway for Task Force Mindanao. In a dozen or so refurbished

structures, a few dozen US Soldiers and Marines worked to advise Philippine soldiers on first aid, patrolling, and other skills. Civil Affairs teams—many drawn from the US Army Reserve—left daily to conduct missions geared toward winning over local support while also collecting information about terrorists. The camp provided a relatively safe place from which to stage missions. Locals were convivial enough to allow the Americans to conduct physical training runs outside the post and, in general, interact with many from the local population. It was one of the few sites in the area of operations where the US flag flew over the compound. The flying of the US flag was not sanctioned by JSOTF-P but had been a local initiative.

On the eastern side of the island, across the mountain range that divides the east coast of the island from the rest, sits Davao City. In Davao, the JSOTF-P bought a residential home in a gated community to house the teams assigned to the city. In a case of hiding in plain sight, LCE 1221 Team House was an American presence in the middle of a quiet, upscale development. A handful of Americans patiently worked there to change the environment, mainly by assisting the Philippine Army's East Mindanao Command (EASTMINCOM) and 10th Infantry Division. In many parts of Mindanao, JSOTF-P maintained a network of locations from which to influence the environment. Other smaller sites existed for a time on other parts of Mindanao—all situated to work as part of the larger US strategic effort in the region. JSOTF-P sites were established and maintained for part of OEF-P in the north of the island, with one LCE in the city of Marawi and another in the south near General Santos City. The sites gave JSOTF-P the ability to effect change over a large swath of the island and prevent the ASG and other terrorist organizations from simply relocating when things got too hot in one area.

The island of Mindanao provided some serious challenges with its large size, varied terrain, and heavy population. However, the environment on the islands of the Sulu Archipelago was equally if not more challenging for JSOTF-P. From the shore's edge at Naval Station Espaldon next to Camp Navarro, the mountains on the island of Basilan to the south appeared serene, verdant, and near. The nearness of Basilan is more apparent than real—an illusion enhanced by a low-lying marshy island, Great Santa Cruz Island. A mile or so off the coast of Zamboanga City, Great Santa Cruz

Island appears to be part of Basilan but is actually separated from it by several miles of sea. Still, the helicopter trip from Andrews Air Base to Basilan took only 20 minutes or so, making JSOTF-P sites on Basilan nearer by air from Camp Navarro than many of the sites on Mindanao. The main city on Basilan—indeed the only city wor-

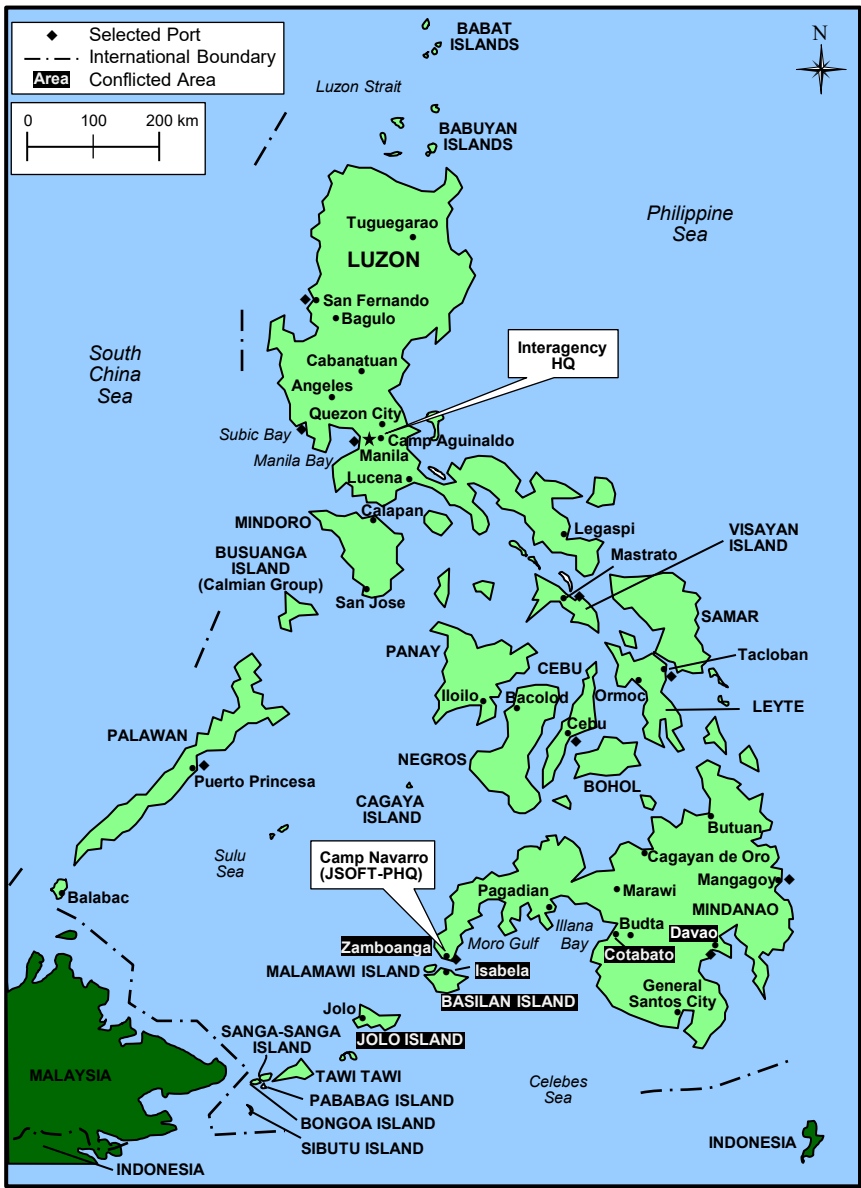


Figure 6. Key locations in 2007.  
Map created by Army University Press.

thy of the designation—is Isabela City on the island’s northwest side along a narrow channel between Basilan and the smaller island of Malamavi. A mile or two north of Isabela—separated by some large fishponds—sits Fuego Beach, which is next to Camp Luis Biel II, where JSOTF-P maintained LCE *Thunder*. Camp Biel was the site of the original insertion of US Green Berets onto Basilan at the beginning of OEF-P and remained the site of the main American presence on the island. On Basilan, the US units worked with their Philippine counterparts assigned to Task Force *Thunder*.

JSOTF-P forces had returned to Basilan following a July 2007 incident in which MILF members killed 14 Philippine marines—10 were decapitated—in Al-Barka in southeastern Basilan. The marines had apparently stumbled into an MILF stronghold without prior coordination, as required by an arrangement between the MILF and Philippine government. In addition to killings and bombings, the ASG apparently remained true to its core competency of kidnapping. In January 2009, ASG gunmen on motorcycles kidnapped three members of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The last of the three was freed after six months. One of the most embarrassing incidents for the Philippine security forces was in December 2009, when attackers breached a wall at the Isabela City jail and at least 31 ASG and MILF prisoners escaped. One of the escapees was Dan Laksaw “Ustaz” Asnawi, a senior MILF leader who had previously commanded the 114th Base Command and was blamed for the 2007 ambush on Philippine Marines in Al-Barka.

Occasionally, bumps occurred in the interactions between the US military and their Philippine counterparts. The ASG had a well-deserved reputation for brutality and a penchant for using decapitation to execute the people they captured. Attacks on civilians also occurred, such as a 2008 incident when 26 people were injured by a hand grenade thrown in front of a Jollibee fast food restaurant in Isabela City. The opening of the Jollibee a few years earlier had been touted as a sign that normalcy had returned to the region. Many Philippine soldiers and marines had friends who died at the hands of the ASG or JI, and they were not always eager to treat captured or suspected terrorists according to the strictest interpretations of international law. In one early 2011 incident, one brother of a suspected ASG member

was taken into custody. His interrogation allegedly involved the use of hot peppers shoved into his anus and threats to light him on fire. After he was released, reports of his treatment became public. As a result, the Americans on Camp Biel were not allowed to interact with their Philippine counterparts—including participation in a planned sporting event. This awkward situation lasted for a few weeks until JSOTF-P—working with the US State Department—sent a US Air Force lawyer to Camp Biel to hold a mass class on what could and could not be done regarding suspected terrorists in custody. Afterward, the US State Department certified the Philippine unit as trained on that matter. The incident caused some bad feelings within the Philippine military unit, who after all were the ones who normally faced the brunt of ASG and JI atrocities. A few days after the retraining session, some Philippine officers confronted a US Army major on Basilan and treated him to a prolonged session of their own showing photographs and personal effects of their friends who had been decapitated by the terrorists—complete with grisly photos of their dead friends as they found them. Such incidents allowed the Filipinos to vent their frustrations at what they sometimes perceived as American arrogance and aloofness to the deadly war they faced.

Not far to the south of Isabel City, and more inland, was Camp Kabumbata, where JSOTF-P maintained LCE *Lightning*. In 2011, a US Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) team under a captain operated there, advising their Philippine counterparts. Life on Kabumbata was less stressful than other sites, because the area around it was generally considered to be non-hostile. Marines on Kabumbata found the time to raise a few turkeys—an animal introduced to the region centuries earlier by the Spanish—to augment their upcoming Thanksgiving dinner. Such pleasantries provided a distraction from daily efforts to improve the capabilities of the Philippine forces. The Marines provided advice and assistance on tactical skills such as long distance marksmanship and the employment of mortars.

While most US military personnel in JSOTF-P—especially the Special Operators—had some foreign language training prior to being sent to the Philippines, very few had formal training in languages of the Philippines. Those who did have some familiarity usually knew Tagalog. However, the local civilian populations in the south-



ern Philippines contained very few Tagalog speakers. On the Zamboanga Peninsula and Basilan, some of the population spoke a language called *Chavacano*, which is basically a Spanish dialect. Many of the local civilians near Kabumbata spoke *Chavacano*, with the result that the large numbers of Americans who were familiar with the Spanish language were able to communicate with the local civilians. Communicating was more difficult in much of the rest of the region

Not all locations were as peaceful as Kabumbata. In the southeast part of the island, a couple of Philippine units, the Joint Engineer Task Force “Kaunlaran,” plus an infantry battalion, maintained a more isolated and hardscrabble encampment. It was there that JSOTF-P maintained LCE *Hurricane*. The site was often referred to by JSOTF-P personnel as *Tipo-Tipo* after a nearby village. The position was more isolated than the other places where JSOTF-P had a semi-permanent presence. The ASG had largely been driven from the island’s populated areas but still maintained camps in the jungles in the eastern side of the island. Too often the Evergreen pilots found bullet holes in their aircraft after flying down the eastern side of the island to LCE *Hurricane*. As a result, only the one helicopter capable of night flying under blackout conditions was allowed to fly to the site. The night flights often went over patches of jungle in which passengers could look down and see the camp fires of probable terrorist encampments and the occasional beams of halogen lamps that terrorists were using to search the night sky for a glimpse of the helicopter they could hear but not see. Visitors to *Hurricane* were rare.

The MARSOC element on *Hurricane* along with a Navy Corpsman were, therefore, more isolated than most JSOTF-P elements. As with most OEF-P sites, the US area of the camp contained more facilities than required for the 2011 occupants, so they had a lot of space. The makeshift gym offered a view of the sea to the south for which hotels in most parts of the world would charge hundreds of dollars. The Marines at *Hurricane* spent a lot of time at the gym, as well as with the various livestock they raised. In 2011, the local Philippine commander, a lieutenant colonel, had little interest in coordinating training activities with the ranking US Marine, who was a mere staff-sergeant—a clash of differing values between the two militaries.

The differing values made the site less than effective, but the situation in 2011 was not permanent. Still, the US Marines and their Navy Corpsman did more than exercise and tend their animals. They conducted what SMEEs they could with each other and with the Filipinos. The local civilians were aware of their presence, and whatever their feelings about the Philippine government or radical Islam, they saw the US troops as problem fixers. This faith in the Americans was graphically demonstrated one night in early 2011. A jeepney pulled up at the US area and—despite the locals shouting, the horn honking, and Philippine soldiers yelling—the Corpsman and Marines were able to understand that several people in the back of the jeepney had been shot. Under the direction of the Corpsman, who performed a quick triage, the US troops began performing life-saving medical procedures that would normally be handled by trauma surgeons in the United States. After stabilizing the patients, the Americans provided some medications to help with infections and pain and strongly urged the people in the jeepney to take their wounded relatives to the hospital in Isabela City for further treatment. The locals gave vague responses. The Filipinos apparently were satisfied that the Americans had saved their family members, and they planned to return to their homes. By communicating with the locals through the Philippine soldiers, the Marines ascertained that the gunshot wounds were not from terrorist activities but through a shootout with a rival clan over a jeepney taxi and delivery route.

About 80 or so miles down the archipelago from the island of Basilan is the island of Jolo, where the Philippine military maintained Task Force *Comet*. As the center of Islam in the southern Philippines, the introduction of the US military there had initially raised a lot of eyebrows. The Philippine military continued to clash with the ASG on the island, and many Philippine soldiers died during the struggle. Aided by American equipment, advice, and intelligence, the Philippine military eventually got the upper hand. Meanwhile, a host of civil-military programs performed either by the Philippine military or by the Americans with the Philippine forces getting much of the credit eroded local support for the terrorists and gained legitimacy for the Philippine government and security forces. As in most areas, the locals came to accept the presence of the Americans. The

terrorists understood that the Americans would not confront them unless attacked first, and so an uneasy peace between the two forces remained largely intact. All the while, the Philippine security forces and the terrorists were engaged in a deadly war against each other.

The main base for US efforts on Jolo was at Camp General Teodulfo S. Bautista, a Philippine military camp in the eastern part of Jolo City. The camp sat on the northern border of the airport runway that accommodated both military and civilian aviation. Only a small handful of aircraft landed on the runway—seldom more than four a week—so the runway served as an open space for hundreds of Jolo City civilians to gather in the late afternoons and socialize. An alarm on the airport building would alert the civilians when an airplane approached. The crowd would part just long enough to allow the plane to land and then quickly reoccupy the runway. JSOTF-P also used the runway to launch and recover unmanned aircraft—efforts that typically would have been low-key but were common knowledge on the island because hundreds of Jolo City residents typically watched the maneuvers. By 2011, JSOTF-P had the capability to launch unmanned aircraft from within Camp Bautista, but recovery still occurred on the runway. The local civilians were familiar with the small size of the unmanned aircraft and knew that the planes came no lower than about 10 feet before reaching the recovery device. Getting locals to clear the runaway when unmanned aircraft approached remained a constant challenge.

The camp itself was essentially a collection of medium and small buildings around a trapezoidal road that was less than a mile long and surrounded by a wall. The US troops arranged to have the road paved to cut down on the mud. They occupied a series of buildings within the eastern point of the road. The US facilities consisted of a JOC, where US Task Force *Sulu* coordinated activities on the island; a vehicle maintenance facility; Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team; a small dining facility with locally hired civilians as cooks; and other activities. The constant roar of the power generators made the site less pleasant than it could have been. As with most sites, the US section of Camp Bautista included a squad of National Guard infantry to provide additional security. The mission to provide infantry in support to OEF-P rotated between the

Hawaii Army National Guard and the Guam Army National Guard. The Guardsmen were proud of their homes, and soon the interiors of the buildings that served as living quarters and day rooms were filled with artwork and verbiage extolling the virtues of their homes in a good-natured rivalry. Many of the Guardsmen were first- or second-generation “Phil-Ams,” or Philippine Americans, and many were conversant in Tagalog and thus able to talk with some local civilians and, more commonly, with Philippine military personnel.

Located a few miles to the west from Camp Bautista was a team house for LCE 1222. The team house was unusual in that it was located on a Philippine National Police camp, Camp Kasim, rather than on a military post. Camp Kasim was the site of an old Spanish fort that once guarded the southern road approach to Jolo City. The city’s growth over the previous century had led to the camp being absorbed by the city. The sprawling neighborhoods that surrounded the camp—and the extremely porous perimeter—made security problematic. JSOTF-P planners who were concerned with security also lost sleep about the risks, but no deadly incidents occurred at the site.

The actual American team house sat on top of the old Spanish stonework, with the old moat around the back of it. Hordes of children would come daily to sit outside the fence around the team house, waiting to surround any US troops who came out. One Military Police officer received a box of stuffed animals from a US church group to distribute to the children. Long after she shared the donations, the children would come to the front of the team house with their stuffed animals and hold them up to show the Americans that they still had them and had memorized the English names for each animal. The Americans allowed the children to come into the US compound for a weekly movie night during which a Muslim cleric would give a blessing. The cleric’s involvement was to allay suspicions that the Americans were trying to convert the children. During movie night, the Americans wore civilian clothes, did not openly carry weapons, and handed out popcorn to the kids.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the popularity of the Americans—or perhaps simply fascination with them—made some tasks more difficult. Any American who ventured outside of the fence around the team house was immediately swarmed by crowds of pressing children. The warning “you are about to know what Brad

Pitt feels like” was often given to newly arrived personnel. Simply opening the gate to let vehicles in and out could require planning. In part because of the issue, the team house maintained a large and fierce-looking but actually quite friendly dog to keep the children wary of rushing in through any opened gate.

Despite the generally peaceful and benevolent air around most American facilities on Jolo, there were visible reminders throughout OEF-P that the region was in the middle of an armed struggle—albeit one during which Philippine security forces took the brunt of terrorist wrath. The US section of Camp Bautista contained a medical facility for US personnel that was probably one of the best equipped in the region. However, the Americans could provide medical assistance to the Philippine forces during an emergency. The facility’s ability to provide critical care to wounded Philippine soldiers, or arrange their medevac to hospitals had some effect on the willingness of the Philippine soldiers to risk being wounded in clashes with the terrorists.<sup>12</sup>

At 0400 on 28 July 2011, two platoons of Philippine marines clashed with around 100 members of the ASG and JI. Under cover



Figure 7. Local children carrying stuffed animals accompanied US Special Forces Soldiers as they checked security on the edge of the old Spanish moat at Camp Kasim, Jolo. Photo by Barry M. Stentiford.

of darkness, the marines attacked into prepared defensive positions around a terrorist camp. Two marines died in the initial clash, and several were wounded, including the two medics. Another five marines forming an outer defense of the main body would later be found decapitated. Two others were killed by gunshots, with 21 wounded in the final tally. After the fight, Philippine helicopters evacuated the survivors the 13 kilometers to Camp Bautista. There JSOTF-P medical personnel, and some non-medical personnel, worked alongside Philippine medical personnel to save the wounded. After being stabilized, the patients were medevacked to the Philippine army hospital on Camp Navarro, about 155 kilometers to the northeast.<sup>13</sup> While all the wounded soldiers survived, one US doctor commented that the delay in evacuating the wounded to Camp Bautista—around four hours—probably meant that the wounded who made it there were more likely to live anyway, whereas more prompt evacuation might have allowed the doctors to save others. Such frustrations graphically demonstrated that the mission to make the Philippine military better needed to continue. Still, US Air Force Dr. (Major) Stephen Fenton was impressed by the quality of the field dressings and tour-



Figure 8. Soldier with friendly but fierce-looking dog at Camp Kasim, Jolo.  
Photo by Barry M. Stentiford.

niquets that the Philippine marines used on the wounded—demonstrating their skill in first aid procedures.<sup>14</sup>

Leaving Jolo City and heading south, the road approaches a flat-topped mountain—really the core of an ancient volcano called Bud Datu. From Bud Datu, Jolo City was plainly visible to the north. In the middle of the Philippine marine camp on the top was the American LCE 122, where US Army Special Forces maintained a compound. Inside the compound were open areas and a collection of mostly wooden buildings around a central yard. It was one of the few sites where an American flag flew—an unofficial memorial to two US Soldiers who were killed on Jolo in September 2009.<sup>15</sup> The US compound was well laid out and constructed, with covered walkways connecting the buildings. In a touch to make the place more familiar, signs had been attached to various buildings that identified the storage area as *Lowe's* and the dining room as *Outback Steakhouse*. Similar names for other commercial enterprises mimicked the main activity of the building. As with most sites, US troops had adopted a few local dogs as pets—pets they would hide when the JSOTF-P commander or sergeant major came for a visit. One of the dogs killed one of the ever-present roosters that the Philippine soldiers kept for cock fighting. In retaliation, a Philippine soldier stuck a knife in the dog's rear thigh. For the Green Berets, the incident was an opportunity to practice their medical skills. After wound cleaning, a few stitches, and some antibiotics, the dog recovered, though it might have been more wary of the Philippine soldiers.

Except for the larger compounds, such as Camp Bautista, most JSOTF-P personnel outside of Camp Navarro were on their own as far as food went. They received Basic Allowance for Sustenance (BAS), but turning money into prepared food was not as simple as it would have been in the United States or Manila. In response, a system evolved at most sites where the Americans would pool their money and hire Philippine civilians to purchase and prepare their food as well as perform general housekeeping. Usually, the people hired were not locals but Tagalogs or Visayans. The Philippine civilian women preferred to avoid the hassle of making the daily trek up Bud Datu and through the Philippine camp to get to the American compound. As a result, the Americans had a small living quarters

constructed that allowed them to stay locally. To give the civilians something fun for their off time, the Americans bought them a Karaoke machine, and in the evening the air filled with the sound of pop songs. Other locations existed at various times on other parts of the islands. For example, on Mount Bayug on the south side of Jolo, JSOTF-P maintained LCE 1225. The camp was relatively unfortified—basically a half dozen small buildings made from local materials along with a makeshift helicopter landing zone—and surrounded by jungles and farmland.

During most of OEF-P, the American compounds on Jolo were low-profile sites at which JSOTF-P personnel conducted SMEE with their Philippine counterparts. They also served as bases from which JSOTF-P could go into the villages and countryside and perform the MEDCAPs, DENTCAPs, VETCAPs, construction, and other projects that benefited the local civilians and drove a wedge between the population and the terrorists. In one such project begun in the late summer of 2011, a company of US Navy Seabees and their construction equipment arrived on Jolo for a reconstruction project. The Seabees arrived at the Jolo City port at night aboard the contracted ferry that JSOTF-P normally used for such missions. A team from Camp Bautista arrived at the landing site to coordinate with the ferry operators and the Seabees. While the Americans hoped such arrivals would be low-key, the actual landing of the ferry seemed more like a public festival, with crowds of residents at the dockside to see the arrival of the Americans and their equipment. The Seabees arrived at their project site the next day, ready to perform their mission alongside Philippine army engineers.

The project was to rebuild a school—a non-descript two-room schoolhouse with a collapsing roof and crumbling walls. Despite the decrepit condition of the building, teachers were still holding classes in the dangerous structure, and students were still walking miles daily to attend the school. The students greeted the Seabees like heroes, cheering their arrival and eagerly watching and waving to them whenever their teachers let them out for recess. The US troops first erected a tent to serve as a temporary school while they rebuilt the permanent one. Because of the desire to use locally produced materials, the Seabees purchased locally manufactured con-



crete blocks and readi-mix concrete. However, the Americans had to deal with different standards of quality control. Many, if not most, of the cement blocks had defects. Likewise, the readi-mix had to be monitored carefully to ensure the proper ratio of cement had been added to the mix. Regardless of the best US efforts, local concrete blocks and readi-mix used beach sand rather than properly screened and cleaned sand—leaving organic matter and other residue in the concrete and blocks. The Americans used techniques to work with the less-than-ideal materials. For example, they would lay three rows of blocks, then insert rebar vertically through the middle and fill the blocks with concrete. Using such techniques, the SeaBees and Philippine forces who worked with them were able to complete the project, the students got a decent school, and Jolo residents witnessed the benefits of peace and government action.

At the far end of the Sulu Archipelago is the island of Tawi Tawi, covering just under 600 square miles. While not quite the last island under Philippine sovereignty, it is the last one of any substantial size and the last with a military installation. Actually, the far west of what appears to be Tawi Tawi is actually the islands of Sanga-Sanga and Bongao—which are linked to Tawi Tawi via short bridges—and Pababag, which is not. Naval Station Juan Magluyan sits on a spit of land next to the largely floating village of Panglima Sugala. Due to its geographic location, Station Magluyan provided an ideal location for maritime interdiction of people and material coming from Malaysia and Indonesia. ASG and JI activities on the island remained low, and thus Philippine army and marine units that rotated to Tawi Tawi as part of Task Force 62—usually after a year or two on Jolo or Basilan—often viewed their time on Tawi Tawi as downtime, much to the chagrin of US Navy SEALs on the station who staged SMEEs. The SEALs found the time to raise a small monkey that one found on the island. Still, the Philippine sailors on the station did benefit from the presence of the Americans, learning new skills that enabled them to better carry out their missions.

Thus after US forces were reintroduced into the region in 2002, JSOTF-P refurbished a collection of buildings into a series of team houses that provided adequate and appropriate infrastructure for conducting OEF-P missions. JSOTF-P improved or built roads, im-

proved or refurbished schools, dug water wells, and treated human and animal illnesses. But more importantly, JSOTF-P improved the capabilities of the Philippine security forces. The Philippine forces might not have been brought up to US standards, but they greatly improved from what they had been and were increasingly able to tactically defeat their enemies in the region. Above the tactical level, JSOTF-P was legitimizing the Philippine government and security forces in the minds of many—probably most—local civilians, while marginalizing and delegitimizing the terrorists that challenged Philippine government in the region.

## Notes

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## Chapter 4

### Completing the Mission, 2012–2015

After the initial years of Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P), the operation settled down to a long-term effort that lasted another decade. From a dozen or so locations, US Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and civilians worked with their Philippine counterparts to improve their ability to combat terrorists and conducted various civic action programs to separate the population from the terrorists. Over the same period, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and other terrorists groups from the southern region continued to conduct attacks that killed both Philippine security personnel and civilians. These attacks occurred inside the region and out, and continued throughout the period of OEF-P. In October 2011, 19 Philippine soldiers were killed in Al-Barka in circumstances similar to the 2007 ambush. That was followed by the killing of a further 19 Philippine soldiers, with nine ASG members also killed, during a July 2012 clash in the mountains of central Basilan.<sup>1</sup> These and other confrontations served notice that while the crisis of the early 2000s had largely abated, the danger remained very real. That said, the circumstances also highlighted a more desperate ASG, with numbers that were estimated to have dropped from more than 1,200 fighters at the start of OEF-P to less than 500 by the end.<sup>2</sup> Some were killed and others simply went home. US efforts were increasingly aimed at enabling the Philippine security forces to deal with the region's chronic problems and bring OEF-P to a successful conclusion.

To deal with the chronic threats, Philippine National Police capabilities were improved to enable the police to take over the mission of enforcing law throughout the southern region. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) efforts bore fruit. Eventually, policymakers in both Manila and Washington realized that most of the problems that had brought the Americans to the region had successfully been addressed. The strategic partnership between the US and the Philippines was reset—the Philippine security forces and US military had become true regional partners in the fight against terrorism. While Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs) and cooperation with

their US counterparts improved proficiency levels within the Philippine military and National Police, the Philippine security forces did not completely eliminate the danger that the ASG and other Islamist groups posed to the government and the people in the southern Philippines. But the danger had not spread, and the terrorist groups were no longer transnational. The danger had been reduced to a chronic law enforcement problem and was no longer a strategic threat to the United States or the Republic of the Philippines.

While US assistance resulted in the capturing or killing of more than 200 terrorists since 2007, it was also marred by the deaths of US Special Operators as a direct result of terrorist actions and from accidents. While hardly the “drumbeat of American dead” that one author claimed, the 17 US servicemen who died in OEF-P reminded strategic leaders that OEF-P was not a bloodless operation.<sup>3</sup> Still, the number paled in comparison with the thousands of Philippine military and civilian casualties during the same period. Nonetheless, OEF-P demonstrated the efficacy of foreign internal defense (FID) and how a relatively small number of US Special Operations Forces and supporting troops can work with a partner nation’s military to marginalize a common enemy.

But the winding down of OEF-P was also heavily influenced by events outside of US or Philippine control, but which advanced the goals of both in the region. While neither nation had much significant influence on Indonesian counterterrorism efforts, the Indonesians were able to hunt down and destroy much of the Jemaah Islamiya (JI) networks in that nation using a civilian police approach. Dulmatin, one of the masterminds of the 2002 Bali bombing, had lived on Mindanao from 2003 to 2007. There he was generally believed to be a link between al Qaeda and jihadist groups in the Philippines. While Philippine security forces tried several times to kill or capture him, Dulmatin remained just out of reach. He was finally killed in 2010 after he returned to Indonesia. His death—and the more significant gutting of much of JI by Indonesia and other South-east Asian nations also threatened by the terrorist group—deprived the ASG and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of much external support. Thus the era had largely passed when groups such as

the ASG could at least claim to be part of some larger terror network and receive some tangible support from the network.

One strategic and political issue unrelated to OEF-P—or the ASG and JI—would have enormous import for future US and Philippine military cooperation: rising tensions in the South China Sea. The claim of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to the entire South China Sea based on the 1947 “Nine-Dash Line” map of the region put China at odds with the Philippines—as well as with Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, all of which had conflicting claims to parts of the area. While Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei tried to play down the controversy, Vietnam and the Philippines were the most threatened by Chinese claims and began to move closer to each other. The Chinese claim not only placed all of the Spratly Islands within China’s territorial waters, but extended the claimed limit of Chinese territorial waters almost to the coasts of Palawan and Luzon. The Philippine claim was based largely on the Palawan’s proximity to the Spratly Islands, which are, after all, far closer to the Philippines than to China.

Still, the islands were not included in the Philippines territory as defined by Spain and the United States in 1898. This set the basis for the internationally recognized sovereign territory of the Republic of the Philippines upon its independence from the United States. In 1971, President Ferdinand Marcos formally claimed the Spratly Islands after a clash between Chinese Nationalists troops from Taiwan and a Philippine fishing boat. The Chinese claim existed for decades—indeed both the PRC and the Republic of China on Taiwan agreed that the South China Sea belonged to China. However, the PRC did not press that claim until the middle of the first decade of the 21st Century. The Philippine government increasingly viewed the Chinese claims—especially to the Spratly Islands—as the most dangerous external threat the nation faced. As a result, by 2012, the Philippine government was eager to disengage its armed forces from internal struggles in the south and refocus them on the external threat. At the same time, the Philippine government and the majority of its people were increasingly keen to keep the American military in the region as a hedge against what they saw as Chinese bullying.

OEF-P successes gave the Philippine government an opportunity to refocus its armed forces.

In October 2012, the Philippine government under President Benito Aquino renewed negotiations toward a new agreement with the MILF to provide a means to develop self-government for the predominantly Muslim area to the south—in effect replacing the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which had been created as a result of negotiations with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996. The negotiations signaled the MILF's renewed willingness to enter the political process to achieve its ends—the very issue over which it broke from the MNLF decades earlier—and the increased marginalization of the MNLF as the main government-recognized voice for Moro aspirations. The Philippine government recognized the MILF as the most potent of the groups in the south and believed that accommodating it would further marginalize the other groups.

The new agreement was in line with the long-established Philippine government principle of increasing local autonomy for the troubled region but stopped short of granting independence. As part of the new agreement, the MILF severed its ties with the ASG and JI, leading to at least one armed clash between the MILF and the ASG. However, as the MILF had originally formed as a breakaway faction of the MNLF when the MNLF decided to talk with the government, the eventual shift of the MILF stance toward accepting negotiated autonomy rather than fighting for full independence resulted in its own splintering. Enraged by MILF leadership's willingness to negotiate, Ameril Umbra Kato formed the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in 2010. The BIFF existed mainly on Mindanao, not far from Cotabato. The BIFF itself would divide when the Justice for Islamic Movements broke away in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

The fractured nature of the terrorist groups opposing the Philippine government in the southern Philippines both assisted the efforts of the Philippine government in the region and, at the same time, made final resolution difficult. The ASG, JI, MILF, MNLF, and other more shadowy groups only occasionally cooperated with each other. At other times, they saw each other as rivals or even direct threats. The rivalry between the MILF and MNLF was often the most bitter. However, US policy was largely to treat the MNLF and eventually



the MILF as political organizations and not within the purview of JSOTF-P's mission in the southern Philippines, whereas the United States and other nations recognized ASG and JI as terrorist organizations. While the various Moro terrorist groups had occasionally worked together and even harbored each other's fighters, the deep divides between the groups usually prevented them from mounting a united front against the Philippine government or the presence of US military forces in the region. At the same time, the Philippine government found itself in something of a deadly "whack-a-mole" game, as when one threat was nullified through force or negotiations, another threat became more active. But with the MILF agreement, the most prominent mole might stay down.

The various pro-independence Moro groups in general maintained a consistent narrative of their history that placed them in the role of a long-suffering and persecuted people. In their world view, the Spanish, Americans, Japanese, and Philippine government had oppressed them for almost five centuries. The 1906 slaughter of Moros, especially the women and children, by US Soldiers and Philippine scouts at Bud Dajo was often brought up in a narrative that presented OEF-P as part of a long US effort to oppress the Moros or even wage a genocidal war against them. That narrative, however, found little resonance among local Muslims. For almost a generation many people of the southern Philippines saw the US JSOTF-P representatives as largely friendly and honest people who helped the sick, built schools, and employed some locals. Again and again, the conduct of these Americans in myriad daily activities was often the most powerful tool in countering relentless enemy information efforts. More than a decade of those positive daily activities by US and Philippine security forces had created the conditions for the Philippine government and the MILF to reach an agreement.

In February 2013, President Aquino came to Mindanao to finalize the agreement with the MILF. The United States saw this as a sign to officially bring OEF-P to a close. The impetus for ending OEF-P came from a host of factors, including the fact that more than a decade of American involvement in the region had enabled the Philippine government to change the situation to the benefit of all, the terrorists excepted. For several years, each new JSOTF-P com-

mander had ordered a “Way Ahead” study, with the goal of finding a way to bring OEF-P to a successful conclusion. By 2013, the conditions in the area of operations made concluding OEF-P possible.

Because OEF-P was not a direct action operation for the Americans, the transition of the US presence on the southern Philippines post-OEF-P was more evolutionary than a sharp break. A US Pacific Command (PACOM) assessment recognized the continued stability in the region due in large part to the work of Special Operations Forces (SOF) but recommended a slow transfer of responsibility from US military assets to Philippine government and US civilian agencies to help ensure long-term stability.<sup>5</sup> The region’s generally progressive outlook was challenged on 8 September 2013, when an MNLF splinter group calling itself the Sulu State Revolutionary Command brought some 400 fighters to Zamboanga City. Ostensibly, the goal was a peaceful march and to raise the Bangsamoro Republic flag over the town hall, but the situation quickly devolved into a bloody urban struggle. By the time it was over 28 days later, more than 180 insurgents were dead, along with many Philippine security forces. At least 100,000 residents were left homeless by the fires that spread during the fighting. However, the Philippine security forces were able to regain control of the city without the involvement of US JSOTF-P personnel at nearby Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City.<sup>6</sup> A month later in November, Colonel Robert McDowell, commander of the 1st Special Forces Group and JSOTF-P, could state in an interview that OEF-P was “one of the most successful FID/CT [counter-terrorism] efforts ever undertaken by the US military.”<sup>7</sup>

The “Zamboanga Crisis,” as the September 2013 fighting was called, did not derail the planned end of OEF-P, which came in a 24 February 2015 ceremony in Zamboanga City. By that point, JSOTF-P had been reduced to around 400 members, mostly US Navy and US Marine Corps personnel. The final transition lasted a few months, with 1 May marking the final end.<sup>8</sup> The conclusion of OEF-P was hardly noticed in the United States. The official end did not include a complete withdrawal of the American military from the region. Instead, the residual force was expected to remain in the southern Philippines for the foreseeable future in an “advise and assist” role.<sup>9</sup>

The ending of OEF-P and JSOTF-P did not completely disengage the US military from the southern region, much less the entire

Philippines. Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC) fore-saw a future with a smaller number of US personnel serving in the region, mainly in an advisory role at higher levels of command. At the same time, the Americans were ready to move beyond OEF-P. In the post-OEF-P southern region, the Philippine military and any residual US military presence would ideally be almost wholly focused on external threats to the republic, while the Philippine National Police would keep the terrorists marginalized. At the same time, the Philippine government worked with moderate Moro groups to effect a

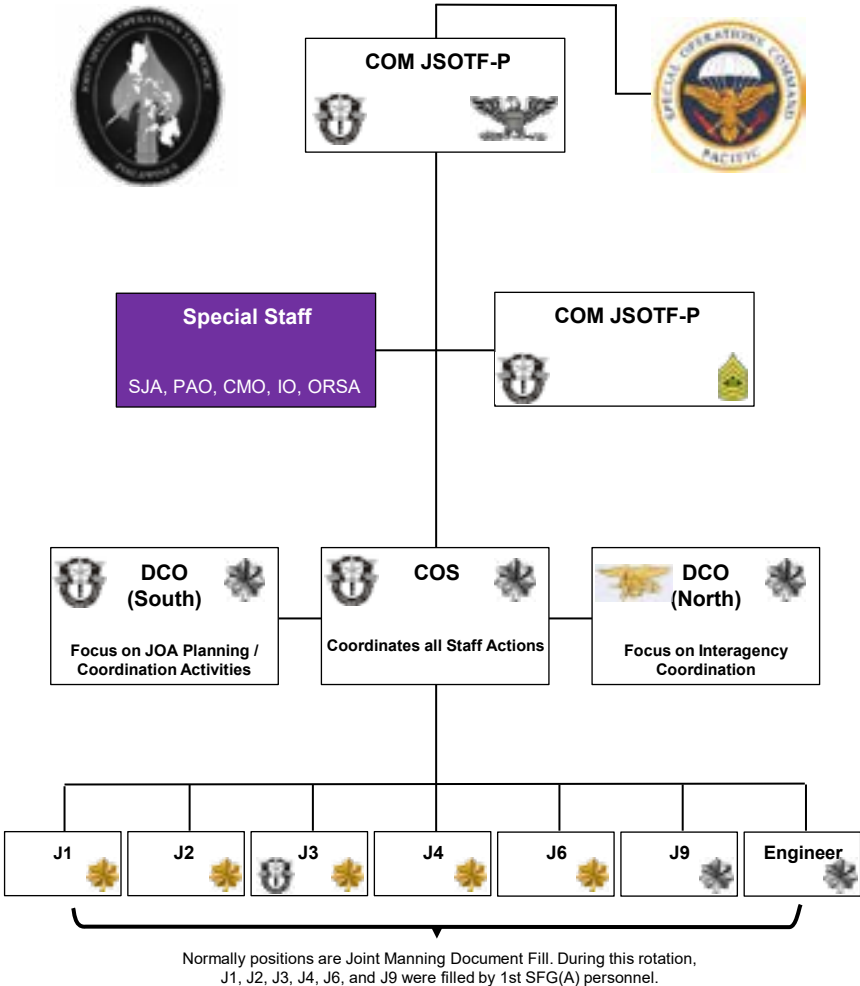


Figure 9. Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines organization after 2012. Graphic created by Army University Press.

long-term political solution to the issue of whether the region should be an integral part of the Republic of the Philippines, an autonomous region under Philippine sovereignty, or a fully independent nation.

Neither the Americans nor the Philippine government were under any illusions that OEF-P completely ended the threat from terrorists in the southern Philippines. The area had been dangerous under Spanish rule, dangerous under US rule, and dangerous following Philippine independence. What the Americans sought to achieve through OEF-P was surprisingly similar to what Americans sought for Moroland in the first decades of the 20th Century—to reduce the violence to the level of a chronic law enforcement issue rather than a serious challenge to legitimacy and sovereignty. Above all, the Americans wanted to end the existence of “ungoverned space” in the region that allowed terrorist groups to operate openly. Both the US and Philippine governments sought to advance the situation to a point where the Philippine military could disengage from the struggle against the terrorists to focus on external threats to the Philippines. To achieve that goal, the terrorists not only needed to be weakened, the civilian National Police needed to increase its capabilities to enable it to keep the terrorists at bay. As a result, JSOTF-P in the later years of OEF-P put more emphasis on the Philippine National Police and increasing its capabilities to conduct operations against the ASG, JI, and other emerging threats such as the BIFF. However, the Philippine security forces in the region continued to face significant dangers. For example, the Special Action Force of the National Police lost 40 members in an early 2015 clash against the BIFF while trying to arrest a Malaysian bomb maker known as Marwan. Despite the death toll, groups like the BIFF were more local, more isolated, and posed little threat to the Republic of the Philippines’ sovereignty over the region.

Throughout the winding down of OEF-P, the Philippine government sought to deepen its military ties to the United States to give it better leverage in dealing with China. In April 2014, Presidents Barack Obama and Aquino signed a new defense agreement, formally known as the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. The agreement included a provision to allow the return of US military forces to Subic Bay and the former Clark Air Force

Base. While the agreement did not envision a resumption of the massive pre-1992 US presence at those installations, it did signal a new willingness—even a desire—by the Philippine government and a large majority of the population to encourage a persistent American military presence in the nation. Still, large numbers of Filipinos remained wary of allowing the United States to maintain a permanent base and continued to oppose any US military presence in the nation. For them, any alleged crime committed by a US serviceman in the Philippines was used as a hammer to beat against the presence of the Americans.

The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), among other issues, covered the legal status and physical control of any US military personnel accused of a crime against Philippine civilians. The blurring of OEF-P and the annual *Balikatan* exercise meant that, for much of the Philippine population, any incident caused by a member of the US armed forces in the Philippines was blamed on JSOTF-P and OEF-P. After US Marine Lance Corporal Daniel Smith was accused of rape following a 1 November 2005 incident near Subic Bay, coverage of the legal wrangling between the US and Philippine governments made headlines and television news broadcasts in the Philippines for much of the next few years. Smith had been in the Philippines as part of the *Balikatan* exercise, and not part of JSOTF-P or OEF-P, but the distinction was lost on many Filipinos. The VFA did not actually shield US service members from prosecution in Philippine courts. It did guarantee that accused Americans would remain in US military custody until the trial, that the trial would be fair, and that any eventual incarceration if they were found guilty would be in a facility agreeable to both countries.

Smith was convicted in 2006 and sentenced to 40 years in jail. However, he remained in US custody pending his appeal. This arrangement enraged anti-US elements in the Philippines. Then in March 2009, his accuser—known only as “Nicole”—recanted and filed an affidavit saying that she doubted her initial version of events and indicated that after reconsidering the events of the evening, she might have given Smith reason to believe she had consented. She had stopped talking with her lawyer a few days earlier and immigrated to the United States a couple of days after filing the affida-

vit.<sup>10</sup> The charges against Smith were dropped, and he was hustled out of the country. Anti-US forces in the Philippines movement had lost its villain and its victim but did not become reconciled to the VFA or the presence of the US military.

Then in October 2014, the murder of a Philippine transgender woman by US Marine Lance Corporal Joseph Scott Pemberton—who was also in the country for a *Balikatan* exercise—became ready fuel for opponents of the US military presence.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, *Balikatan* 2014 was focused on the island of Palawan, closest to the South China Sea, and was not geared toward counterterrorism.<sup>12</sup> The murder of the transgender woman, which occurred near the conclusion of the exercise when Sailors and Marines were given shore leave at Subic Bay, came when Pemberton hired what he thought was a female sex worker and became enraged when he discovered she was transgender. The incident brought back many of the emotions that had been in remission from the November 2005 “Corporal Smith incident.” Anti-US forces indicated the killing showed that US military personnel saw Philippine women simply as sexual targets. The killing and controversy surrounding it helped dampen enthusiasm for the new defense agreement, and again called into question the VFA, which many Filipinos believed shielded US military personnel from being held responsible for crimes they committed against the people of the Philippines.

Corporal Pemberton, like Corporal Smith before him, was held in US custody prior to the trial. He lived in one of the shipping containers within the small US compound on Camp Aguinaldo in metro Manila. He was eventually tried in a Philippine court, found guilty of homicide, sentenced to six to 12 years’ imprisonment, and ordered to pay \$98,000 in damages to the victim’s family.<sup>13</sup> Pemberton was given credit for time served in custody. The Philippine Left made much of the crime and trial—basically saying that such behavior was to be expected of US military personnel in the Philippines. However, the fact that the trial occurred and the accused was found guilty and sentenced helped tamp down some of the anger against the US military and the VFA.

These two incidents caused much debate in the Philippines over the VFA and presence of the US military in general, and became hotly debated topics. However, the Philippine government remained

committed to continuing the annual *Balikatan* exercises, and indeed began looking for ways to enlarge the US military presence. When Typhoon Haiyan struck the central Philippines on 8–9 November 2013, the prompt and generous US Foreign Disaster Assistance effort—conducted largely through the US military with JSOTF-P in the lead—brought the US military a lot of goodwill from the people and government of the Philippines and underscored the advantages of having a US military presence.<sup>14</sup> The Philippine government's support for OEF-P and JSOTF-P was largely aided by the almost complete lack of sexual scandal of any kind related to American presence in the south. JSOTF-P from the start was aware that opponents of the US presence in the Philippines consistently argued that Americans were there in part to treat all Philippine women as prostitutes. In such an environment, all unofficial social contact between a male serviceman and a Filipina—no matter how proper—could become a serious political problem. As a result, JSOTF-P had little tolerance for romances or other unprofessional social interactions between US troops and the local population. JSOTF-P members found in such situations were generally removed from the theater quickly—"Black Chinooked home," as it was called. That Draconian policy prevented the opponents of US involvement from gaining more fodder for their narrative. Though the opposition efforts gained little resonance among the peoples of the south, the potential for further incidents perpetrated by US military personnel against Filipinos remained a challenge for the long-term involvement of US forces in the country.

JSOTF-P completed its mission. The challenges it had overcome were complex, and thus almost any US response—including doing nothing—would have been open to criticism. JSOTF-P had its share of critics from the United States and, more often, from the Philippines. But if the long view is taken regarding the impact of the US military's 2002 to 2015 involvement in the southern Philippines, the critic complaints look rather thin. The goal of strategy is to seek a position of relative advantage rather than achieve some final goal. In that light, OEF-P was a success for both the United States and the Philippines in that it mitigated the spread of al-Qaeda networks within the region and ended the ungoverned space in the region that could serve as staging areas for attacks abroad.

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## Afterword

In the summer of 2011, on the island of Jolo in the center of Islam in the Philippines, I watched a Philippine marine lieutenant demonstrate a rifle to a small group of local civilian men at a Bud Datu rifle range. While I watched the demonstration, one of the civilians approached me and started making small talk. He let me know that he was a former Jolo City mayor and still a very important man on the island. He then asked me the normal questions about whether I had a family and where I was from. When I responded that my home was in Kansas, outside of Kansas City, he casually mentioned that Kansas City contained the headquarters of DeMolay. DeMolay International is a fraternal organization for teenage boys under the sponsorship of the Masonic fraternity. It is named for Jacques de Molay, the last grand master of the Knights Templars, which formed during the Crusades and fought Muslims in the Holy Land. He was put to death by King Phillip IV of France in 1314. I was familiar with DeMolay, and was surprised that he knew the location of its headquarters. The former mayor informed me that all the men with him were Senior DeMolays—adult former members—and then he proceeded to proudly show me his wristwatch, which had the DeMolay crest, as well as his motor bike that prominently displayed the DeMolay crest—actually two crests, one on each mud guard. He told me his father and grandfather had been in DeMolay, and that he was a descendent of the first DeMolay boy on Jolo. His grandfather joined when US Soldiers formed a chapter there more than a century earlier. He also assured me that all important men on Jolo were Senior DeMolays and met weekly in Jolo City. His enthusiasm for DeMolay surprised me, as did its very existence on Jolo. Here at the center of Islam in the Philippines were enthusiastic members of an organization named for the leader of a medieval Crusading order—a chapter of which had been introduced onto Jolo a century before by US Soldiers. To understand this irony is to begin to understand the complexity of southern Philippine society as well as the long and often contradictory history of US military involvement in the region.

Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines (OEF-P) was the third time the US military took a direct role in shaping the region. The others were during the first decades after the United States took

possession of the archipelago, and again during liberation from the Japanese during World War II. In retrospect, the US military has been in the region a long time, even if that involvement has been episodic. Moro nationalist groups and more so Islamist groups have tried to link OEF-P to a sustained US effort since 1898 to oppress the region's people. Taken as a whole, the US has been involved in the Philippines more often than not since 1898. It would be, however, a gross mischaracterization to say that the US military's focus in the Philippines has been mostly on the Moros, and more so to characterize the focus of the US military in the southern region as anti-Moro or anti-Islamic.

One of the persistent saws of US military employment is the purported time limits on operations that are imposed by the impatience or limited attention span of the American public. General George C. Marshall famously stated that a democracy could not fight the Seven Years' War. While the assertion has some historical basis, it ignores the staying power of the United States once it institutionalizes and bureaucratizes a struggle. President Ronald Reagan's quip that nothing was as permanent as a temporary federal program can be applied to military struggles that the United States has faced. The idea of American impatience with long-term commitments reached a crescendo during the latter stages of the US involvement in the Vietnam War—although for a supposedly impatient people, the Americans remained heavily involved in Vietnam for about eight years. Other examples of US military staying power abound: The United States has maintained a substantial military presence in Korea since 1950 and in Germany, Italy, and Japan since the closing days of World War II. Often overlooked is the obvious example of the series of wars with the Native Americans that began in 1636 and did not end until 1915.

To get more specific regarding the Philippines, the US military first went there in 1898 to fight the Spanish, then fought a war or two against the Filipinos—or at least the Christian Filipinos—followed by another series of small wars against various Moro tribes. The US military continued to be involved in the Philippines throughout the colonial era until the Japanese conquest in 1942. That was followed by the campaign to liberate the Philippines, which saw the return of

large US combat formations across the archipelago. The US then maintained a large military presence in the Philippines—directed outward—until the early 1990s. From that perspective, the duration of OEF-P and the involvement of the US military in the southern region is hardly an aberration.

The US presence in the Philippines under OEF-P remained relatively small. Numbers of Americans peaked at 1,302 in the summer of 2002 and declined to 65 by January 2003, where it remained for about a year in preparation for a planned end to the mission. After the rebound in 2004, numbers stabilized at around 600 at any given time, basically a reinforced battalion-sized force.<sup>1</sup> The cap of 600 apparently came from a compromise between US President George W. Bush and Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in the early days of OEF-P. The number was chosen somewhat arbitrarily for political convenience rather than any operational need but it worked. By contrast, the war in Afghanistan involved around 35,000 Americans by the beginning of 2009, while Iraq involved some 140,000. Likewise, compared with other Global War on Terror theaters, OEF-P was inexpensive—amounting to around \$50 million per year to sustain the effort. In contrast, OEF in Afghanistan was costing around \$2 billion per week in 2011. The death toll for the Americans, although not for the Filipinos, also has been comparably light. OEF-P counts 17 US servicemen who died in the conflict. Of these, 10 perished in a 2002 helicopter crash, one died from an enemy explosion near Camp Enrile, two were killed by an enemy explosion on Jolo, and the remaining four died from other causes. While any loss is tragic, only three deaths were directly attributable to enemy action in a campaign that lasted a dozen years.

That longevity was one of the most important Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF-P) operational factors for realizing US goals related to the region. One overlooked aspect of OEF-P—and perhaps its greatest impact—came from the conduct of the US Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen in the area. The impact of their interactions with local civilians should not be underestimated. While force protection measures kept many Americans from frequently interacting with Philippine civilians, most Philippine civilians saw the Americans while they were performing official duties.

The Americans did not act like a hostile or occupying force. In large part, they were friendly and polite. The old offensive terms for Filipinos formerly in common use by US servicemen at Clark or Subic—*Flip* or *LBFM*—were not even known by most JSOTF-P representatives. In disputes with local civilians—most commonly because of traffic accidents—the Americans usually accepted some responsibility and compensated the other person. A decade of these small daily interactions went a long way toward changing local attitudes toward the Americans. Despite the restrictions, the presence of Americans became common enough that few civilians expressed any surprise at seeing them going about their business. The US military personnel, contrary to anti-US propaganda, were on the whole highly disciplined but also friendly and polite. While often weighed down with body armor, weapons, and other gear, they did not conduct themselves in an arrogant manner. They usually waved and smiled at the locals.

The US troops showed that wearing a military uniform and carrying a weapon did not automatically confer the right to act arrogantly among the civilian population. But more importantly for realizing American strategic goals, their conduct influenced the way the Philippine military interacted with the local populous. Most Philippine officers and even many enlisted soldiers came from other areas of the nation. Too often the Philippine military in the region conducted themselves in many ways as an occupying force—further delegitimizing the Philippine military and government in the region. The US military's example improved the way the Philippine military interacted with local civilians. By breaking the cycle of the Philippine military conducting itself like an occupying or besieged force in the region and local civilians seeing them as a foreign occupation force, their improved behavior directly addressed US and Philippine strategic goals for the region.<sup>2</sup>

OEF-P achieved very real progress in the southern Philippines in little over a decade. That progress is hard to quantify, but no less real. The most obvious signs of change between 2002 and 2014 were within the US infrastructure. The theater became more mature, with striking changes in the quality of life for Americans serving in the region built between 2002 and 2006 or so. For US troops who came in the first waves, billeting consisted of a borrowed Philippine nipa

hut with hammocks slung between posts or similar arrangements. Food was eaten alongside Philippine counterparts, and Americans ate what the Filipinos ate. Communication with higher levels of command—and even more so with families at home—was sporadic at best. By the end of OEF-P, JSOTF-P supported more than a dozen sites, with most having a gym, a chow hall of sorts, usually individual billets, air conditioning, bottled water, warm showers, and other pleasantries. Most had wireless Internet connections. These comforts are natural progressions for Americans, who for more than a decade, true to their culture, continually improved their conditions. But adding such comforts moved the JSOTF-P mission beyond the original concept of Special Forces and created something of a barrier between the Americans and the Filipinos, who could only look on the relative material wealth of the US military in wonder.

At the same time, the substantial progress in the theater at large was often not apparent to Americans serving a single tour of a year or less in the region. The changes, however, were obvious to those with multiple tours in the theater—especially to those who returned later after first coming in 2002 or 2003. When US troops first entered the region in 2002, Zamboanga City had the air of a city under siege and much of Basilan was overrun by terrorist groups. Many shops were closed, the streets had less traffic, and violent deaths were an everyday occurrence. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members moved kidnapped victims through Basilan and Zamboanga City with little fear of interference. Little normal commerce existed on the city streets, and few children could be seen going to or from school.

The situation by the end of OEF-P was drastically different. While newly arriving US military personnel were often initially shocked by the relative poverty of the area, those with longer service in the area were struck by how busy the streets had become. The *suri suri* shops—while small and often apparently shoddily constructed—were numerous and open, with items for sale on their shelves. Children in their school uniforms were almost constantly on the streets before and after school, while bicycles, motorbikes, cars, and trucks vied with each other on the roads. For all its backwardness and poverty, Zamboanga City by the end of OEF-P was a bustling city full of people going about their daily lives without

cowering in fear.<sup>3</sup> The same process has been repeated in many of the larger towns in the region, a development that might be hard to quantify but is nevertheless a tangible and overt sign of the success of US and Philippine efforts in the region. Some towns are still held in the grip of violence and fear, but those towns are far fewer in number; and are no longer the norm for the region. Groups like the ASG and Jemaah Islamiya (JI) no longer had freedom of movement over the region, being mostly confined to a few miserable camps in the jungles, swamps, and mountains.<sup>4</sup>

Most Americans were struck by the friendliness of the Filipinos, as apparently the vast majority of Filipinos—even Muslim Filipinos—were glad to see the Americans return to the Philippines.<sup>5</sup> However, the far left and far right of the Filipino political spectrum remained on message in their opposition to the presence of the Americans since 2002. That message was that the Americans were in the Philippines to re-establish a colonial relationship over the Philippines, and to degrade Philippine women.<sup>6</sup> Gross caricatures of US Soldiers appeared on broadsides distributed in several areas where the Americans were stationed. However, the actual conduct and appearance of US military personnel gave lie to the broadsides and rumors. More problematic were Philippine sensitivities over the potential for social relations between US men and Filipina women.<sup>7</sup> Restrictions prevented most Americans from leaving Philippine posts except on official business, and these rules were generally accepted by most US military personnel. They understood that they were on a deployment. The restrictions did, however, limit positive interactions between Philippine civilians and US troops that would have further countered the negative images found in the often nationalistic Philippine press.

The restrictions placed on US Special Operations Forces (SOF) removed them from direct action missions and forced them to revert to “by, with, and through” methods. The restrictions on direct action placed on US military forces in the Philippines had the unintended benefit of helping to reset the culture of US Army Special Forces. The more than 10 years of war had a deep impact on Special Operations culture. Many Special Operators fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq came to see their role largely as one of iden-

tifying, locating, and eliminating High-Value Individuals (HVIs). In the Philippines, US SOF identified and located HVIs but did not directly engage them. The US troops could only send the information to the Philippine forces and wait. The Americans often found the complex overlapping loyalties in Philippine culture to be maddening. Links to family, tribe, ethnicity, clubs, and myriad other loyalties that were not obvious to the Americans often came before duty to the nation, military, or mission. Many Americans suspected targets were informed of pending military movements against them due to these invisible links between people on both sides. Members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) openly carried M-16 rifles, apparently sold by Philippine troops, which added to the frustration. The Philippine military's success rate in these raids was often discouraging to US SOF.

While the charts of HVI faces slowly added more "X"s over the years—with 19 of the original 24 killed or captured by 2013—the Philippine military's relative slowness in eliminating the HVIs led to the growing cynicism among many of the Americans. Special Operators in JSOTF-P repeatedly told themselves, each other, and anyone who would listen that if the US forces received permission to conduct direct operations, then all the HVIs would be captured or killed in three, four, six weeks, or some similar timeframe. While such an event would have been deeply satisfying to the US SOF, it would not have brought OEF-P to a successful conclusion, and could even have been counter-productive.

The larger OEF-P purpose was to strengthen the legitimacy of the Philippine military and government in the southern region, not simply to eliminate HVIs. Also, the Philippine security forces were eventually able to kill or capture most of the 24 named "High Value" targets—mostly ASG senior leaders—by 2014. Their elimination largely gutted the organization's leadership. The elimination of HVIs was only a small part of the overall effort toward the desired endstate, but it was vital that the Philippine security forces were the ones who killed or captured the HVIs. The Philippine military did not have to eliminate foes as quickly or as efficiently as the Americans, but did have to be the force that eliminated them. Still, over time, the number of HVIs killed or captured continued to grow, en-

hancing the reputation of the Philippine security forces in the region while at the same time ending the aura of terrorist invincibility.

OEF-P was one of the least sensational theaters in the Global War on Terror because of the static nature of US efforts there and the lack of drama. Most of the superficially interesting events happened in the first year or two, with the introduction of US troops back into the Philippines being the most dramatic. The raid by Philippine troops on an ASG safe house in an attempt to rescue the Burnhams and the crash of an American helicopter all added to the drama of the initial phase. But soon the war in Iraq pushed OEF-P almost entirely out of the eye of the American public (although not of the Philippine public). In the years that followed, OEF-P settled down to a steady-state application of US power. After the initial success on Basilan, which apparently caused ASG elements to simply move to others areas of the region, US efforts spread to other areas of Mindanao, and down onto the islands of Jolo and Tawi Tawi in the Sulu Archipelago. And there the real work of OEF-P commenced.

Along with Special Operations forces, JSOTF-P brought in a wide variety of skills from across the Department of Defense and civilian agencies. US Agency for International Development (USAID) projects remained a large source for infrastructure improvement in the region throughout the existence of OEF-P. Navy Seabees provided some of the most visible evidence of US assistance by building schools, roads, wells, and other necessary infrastructure. Finding local building materials that met US standards was a chronic problem, but the Seabees used techniques to build quality structures despite sometimes less than ideal building materials. The Seabees themselves noticed the appreciation shown by the locals, who tended to treat the Americans like celebrities. Another highly visible sign of American presence in the region was been through medical, dental, and veterinarian civic action programs (MEDCAPS, DENTCAPS, and VETCAPS). Such efforts provided some immediate relief to the local civilian population but also gave the US and Filipino forces a chance to gain information on the attitude of the local civilians. In all endeavors, the Americans sought to give credit to the Philippine government and military. Though the resources the Americans could draw on



for such programs far exceeded what the Philippine military had available, the Philippine military began holding such events on its own. These civic action programs emphasized the legitimacy of the Philippine government.

And therein lays the crux of why OEF-P succeeded. The underlying problem was that locals did not accept the legitimacy of the Philippine government—and thus the Philippine armed forces and National Police—in the predominantly Muslim areas of the southern Philippines. That lack of perception of legitimacy allowed terrorist groups such as ASG and JI to use the area for their own nefarious purposes. The situation had reached a crisis point by the early 2000s, threatening both the Philippine government and the United States. The Philippine security forces assigned to the southern region—undertrained and poorly equipped—assumed a posture of an occupying or besieged force, which further delegitimized them in the eyes of local residents. The Philippine security forces remained focused on the more dangerous threat to the Philippine state—the Communist New People’s Army—throughout the years of OEF-P, and could spare little of the material or human capital needed to address the problem in the south.

American forces came to the region to break that paradigm. Part of the effort to change the situation involved improving the capacity of the Philippine security forces as well as addressing equipment shortcomings to allow them to be more competent when engaging terrorist forces in the region. But more fundamentally, the US efforts had to change perceptions—both the perceptions of local civilians of the security force, and of the security forces toward local civilians. To change attitudes takes at least a decade—a generation. And for that sort of staying power, OEF-P was well served by remaining small and overlooked. For more than a decade, the US military interacted with the civilian population, and with the security forces.

In many ways, the Americans demonstrated a healthy civil-military relationship. The Philippine military was given a long-term example of how a modern professional military interacts with the civilian population, and slowly modified its own behavior. Likewise as local civilians increasingly accepted the military—both US

and Philippine—as a stabilizing and largely beneficial force in the region, hostility toward the government institutions decreased. In the adjusted environment, terrorist groups found less accommodation and were increasingly a marginalized force, relegated largely to a law enforcement issue.

Still, the struggle was not without its critics in the United States. After 18 Philippine soldiers died and another 50 were wounded in an April 2016 firefight with ASG members, the *Wall Street Journal* quoted Zachary Abuza, a Southeast Asian security expert at the National War College. He said that the incident showed that the United States had wasted its money and efforts directed toward increasing the proficiency of the Philippine security forces for the previous 15 years.<sup>8</sup> However, a 2016 RAND study concluded that between 2001 and 2014, JSOTF-P contributed to a “reduced transnational terrorist threat” and “increased PSF [Philippine Security Forces] capabilities at the tactical, operational, and institutional levels.”<sup>9</sup>

The crisis in the southern Philippines during the 1990s and first years of the 21st Century was largely abated, evolved into, or perhaps one should say, returned to a chronic law enforcement problem.<sup>10</sup> The struggle to build the legitimacy of the Republic of the Philippines government over the region did not end with any obvious moments of victory—no General Lee surrendering his sword to General Grant, no Allied armies meeting over the ruins of Nazi Germany, or even a night where common people began tearing down a wall that divided them. Such a petering out of the war is at odds with US values and desires in a war waged in full public view. Americans can be an impatient people, looking for definitive and lasting victories, but the more subtle, quiet application of power out of the public consciousness was another aspect of US power that was well suited to the struggle in the southern Philippines. The nature of the war in the southern Philippines did not lend itself to an overt and decisive conclusion. Instead, the war ended with a realization that once-powerful terrorist organizations—with generous funding and international links and that once held the region in terror—had been reduced to little more than criminal gangs, albeit still occasionally deadly, occupying a few remote corners of the jungle, swamps, and hills. The Philippine government was more patient than the US gov-

ernment—a trait that allowed it to fight the criminal gangs in its own way, with a seemingly aimless series of campaigns that would keep the gangs from regaining autonomy in the region.<sup>11</sup>

The Philippine security forces have been engaged in the struggle much longer than the United States and preferred to address the problems, at least on the tactical side, in a Philippine manner. Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago belong to the Philippines, and the burden to maintain control there belongs to the Philippine government. The US armed forces greatly helped the Philippine armed forces and Philippine National Police end the crisis of ungoverned space in the south, and gave them some breathing room to deal with the more dangerous New People's Army (NPA). The final step for the United States in the southern region would be to help the Philippine National Police gain the equipment and competencies to be able to provide long-term control over such criminal gangs, allowing the Philippine military to withdraw from essentially internal police functions and concentrate on foreign threats to the Republic.<sup>12</sup> And when the Muslim people of the southern Philippines see themselves as Filipinos—citizens of the republic—who are Muslim, rather than as Moros who are ruled by the foreign Philippine government, then the struggle will be truly over. That development is probably a few generations away, but JSOTF-P and OEF-P made that end more likely and perhaps closer in time. Whether the United States continues to have a role in that process will be up to the Philippines.

## Notes

1. Al Richards, "OEF-P Manning and Equip History," version 2.
2. William Eckert, "Defeating the Idea: Unconventional Warfare in the Southern Philippines," *Special Warfare* 19, November/December 2006, 20.
3. Max Boot and Richard Bennet, "Treading Softly in the Philippines," *Weekly Standard*, 5 January 2009, 28.
4. Eliza Griswold, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Fault Line Between Christianity and Islam*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 253.
5. See, for example, Stella Gonzales, "Rape Case Won't Dent US Military Presence," Inter Press Service, 30 March 2007, accessed 26 October 2011, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2007/03/philippines-rape-case-wont-dent-us-military-presence>.
6. For examples of writings from the Philippine academic Left regarding OEF-P, see Patricio N. Abinales and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, *The US and the War on Terror in the Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Group, 2008). Ironically, some authors cited an article by former JSOTF-P commander Colonel David S. Maxwell, "Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?" as evidence that US troops were engaging in combat in the Philippines, although Colonel Maxwell in his article bemoaned the restrictions on US troops that prevented them from doing just that.
7. See the 7–14 July 2011 issue of *Asian Journal* for an example of the tendency of the Philippine media to sensationalize any hint of sexual contact between US service men and Philippine women. In this case, the issue was the availability of condoms to sailors when American warships made a port call at Puerto Princesa City following the joint naval exercise *CARAT* in June and July 2011.
8. Trefor Moss, "Battle Raises Heat on Manila, US over Counterterrorism Capability," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2016.
9. Linda Robinson, Patricia B. Johnston, and Gilliam S. Oak, *US Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), xvii.
10. 2008 OEF-P Assessment Executive Summary, 5–6.
11. Richard Swain, "Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines," US Army Counterinsurgency Center, October 2010, 2.
12. 2010 OEF-P Assessment Executive Summary, 3.

## About the Author

Dr. Barry M. Stentiford is a Professor of Military History at the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies and the Director of its Advanced Strategic Leadership Studies Program. Dr. Stentiford received a BS in History from the College of Great Falls, an MA in American History from the University of Montana, and a PhD in Military History from the University of Alabama. His books include *The American Home Guard: The State Militia in the Twentieth Century* (Texas A&M Press, 2002); *The Jim Crow Encyclopedia* (co-editor, Greenwood Press, 2008); *The Tuskegee Airmen* (Greenwood, 2012); and *The Richardson Light Guard of Wakefield Massachusetts: A Town Militia in War and Peace, 1851–1975* (McFarland, 2013). An officer in the US Army Reserve, Dr. Stentiford deployed to the Philippines in 2011 for the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).







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