

Chapter 1

To Serve My Country, Sir

Saturday, April 1, 1967 0300H

THE LIGHTS IN OUR APARTMENT at 12C Saint Mary Street, Cubao, Quezon City were on earlier than usual. I hurriedly ate my breakfast. Before I walked out the door, I grabbed the white bag with the sets of underwear that I was instructed to bring. My father, brother, sister, and I boarded a waiting taxi outside.

“*Saan tayo* [Where to]?” the taxi driver asked.

“Camp Aguinaldo,” I replied.

Camp General Emilio Aguinaldo in Quezon City, just nine kilometers south of our apartment, is the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). From Saint Mary Street, our taxi made a right turn to Aurora Boulevard. Few people were around since it was still dark, but I noticed that a few early morning activities had begun. A newspaper van was making a delivery at the stand in front of the Little Quiapo restaurant. Stores were still closed. The glaring neon lights of the normally busy boulevard at night were already turned off.

Despite the cold morning breeze, I could feel the heat inside me. I was anxious, unsure of what would happen to me in a military school. As the taxi wound its way to our destination, I allowed my mind to wander. My life, until that point, couldn't have been more different than the life that was before me.

I received the awaited telegram two days earlier: “Mr. Rolando Malinis, you have been admitted as cadet of the Philippine Military Academy [PMA]. You are to report at Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City on April 1, 1967 ...”

I was 5'6 1/2" tall, slouching and frail. The youngest in a family of four boys and one girl. I lost my mother to cancer barely four weeks before my elementary school graduation in 1961. My father, a salesman, raised and supported the family singlehandedly.

After graduating from the Meycauayan (Bulacan) Institute High School in 1965, I passed the entrance test to the University of the Philippines (UP) in Diliman, Quezon City. I was already in my sophomore year pursuing my dream of becoming a civil engineer when I decided to apply for admission at PMA.

Activism at UP

The generation I belonged to at the university was noted for its activism. It was the mid-'60s and students not only in UP but also in several universities in Manila were starting to get restive. The Philippine Collegian, UP's student paper, advocated for radical changes in society. Student leaders, among them Enrique Voltaire Garcia II, Ruben Torres, Macapanton Abbas and Miriam Defensor emerged in the limelight (although the latter two were not with the activists). The issues were brought to the streets. Demonstrations pitted students against government forces consisting of police and soldiers.

I participated in the first violent student demonstration on October 24, 1966 when then-US President Lyndon Johnson visited Manila. That morning, the UP student government enticed everyone to join the rally. The voices of the organizers through the loud speaker reached up to our third-floor classroom at the Arts and Sciences (AS) Building. "Join the rally to protest US presence in Vietnam! Students joining are excused from classes!" Whether it was an excuse to skip classes or simple curiosity, I went down to join them.

A long line of JD buses were parked in front of the AS building. Minutes later, the convoy roared towards Manila Hotel in Roxas Boulevard where President Johnson was staying. At the Quezon City-Manila boundary, policemen and soldiers stopped us. Defying the authorities, we disembarked from the buses and walked. Hundreds of police with their batons and firearms were standing by. Firetrucks were ready to shoot high-pressured water in anticipation of a crowd dispersal order.

We reached Luneta Park shortly before dusk. Hundreds of students from other schools joined us in front of the Manila Hotel. Banners and placards were raised, slogans were shouted, rally speakers fired up the crowd. Chanting was non-stop: "Hey, hey LBJ how many kids did you kill today? Hey, hey LBJ how many kids did you kill today?" Emotions ran high as we were all tired and hungry. The Vietnam War, already very unpopular in the US, had come to Manila

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via the demonstration.

After a while, the policemen lined up at the front of the hotel started to push us back slowly. To temporarily halt their advance, we sang “Lupang Hinirang,” the Philippine national anthem. As the last note was sung, pandemonium broke loose. The student protesters dispersed in panic and rushed to the exit ramp. I found myself with the rest running away and scaling the temporary barricade set up by the police. Shots were heard, “Pop! Pop! Pop!” We found out later that a student was shot and injured. It was the first bloody student rally in Manila at that time.

Applying to PMA

By entering PMA, I completely jumped over the metaphorical fence. In the military career I elected to pursue, I would be with the government forces battling students.

One Saturday morning in late 1966, the usual Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC) tactics classes in UP were canceled. Instead, the corps was marched off to the University Theater where a group of PMA faculty was inviting applicants for the incoming Class of '71. I applied and took the entrance examination in December 1966. There was a heavy turnout of applicants from UP that year. Elite cadets of the UP Model “Rayadillo” Company like Neon Ebuena, Roberto Navida, and Hercules Cataluña also applied, as did Edgar Aglipay, Vic Batac and Ruben Domingo. Ruben was in his first year taking up electrical engineering and was part of the group of seven who joined the traditional UP Lantern Parade the night before the PMA entrance exam in Mapua. Six of them would make it.

The PMA entrance tests were held simultaneously at various testing centers all over the country. I took mine at the Far Eastern University (FEU) in Manila. Information about the coverage of the two-day tests was provided in advance: reading comprehension; multiple-choice questions for Math, English, and General Information; and essay writing.

At the test center that day, it looked like the first day of school. Hundreds of applicants crowded the hallways, frantically searching for their assigned rooms. I was already sweating when I got to my assigned room on the third floor. A group of about 30 applicants were already in line for processing. Names and identities were verified. Heights were measured.

The minimum height requirement of five feet four inches was

marked on the wall. I felt sorry for a guy in front of me. As he stood with his back against the wall, the ruler placed on top of his head was clearly below the mark. He was disqualified outright.

At least two proctors per room monitored the tests. From my angle, I saw one of the proctors watching intently someone seated near the left window. Unaware that he was being watched, the guy continued to peek at the answer sheet of the person on his right. The proctor approached him, took his paper away and politely told him to leave.

The tests lasted for hours on both days. With my two years of college education, I found the multiple-choice questions easy. The advance mathematics subjects I took up at UP proved helpful. But reading comprehension and essay writing were difficult, especially because those tests went beyond the normal lunch hour. I craved for food. I felt wasted as the proctor said, "This is a twenty-minute test. Raise your pencil up. Begin." At that moment, I felt like I was floating. The ceiling was swaying like a boat sailing in rough seas. But I knew I had to make good. The test was very competitive. I needed to do better than merely pass to land at least among the top 300 applicants.

The hardest part of the process was waiting for the results. Reading the national daily newspaper *The Manila Times* at the UP Library in February 1967, my heart beat faster when I saw the article entitled "307 Pass PMA Entrance Test; 150 Cadets Eyed." It said:

"General Victor M. Osias, Armed Forces Chief of Staff, announced yesterday that 307 candidates passed the Philippine Military Academy entrance examination held last Dec. 22-23 at various test centers throughout the country.

Of the 5,457 candidates who applied to take the test, only 3,537 finished the examination.

PHYSICAL FITNESS

The 307 successful candidates will be scheduled for final physical and medical examination by the Medical Board Number I at V. Luna General Hospital, Quezon City.

After the final physical and medical examination, they will undergo the physical fitness test at the post gymnasium at Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City.

Brig. Gen. Reynaldo Mendoza, PMA superintendent proposed to General Osias that 150 new cadets be appointed. Following is the alphabetical list of the successful candidates:
... "

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I let my shaking index finger slide down the list. Under the third column second paragraph were the following names: “Rosalio D. Magsino, Gabriel L. Mainit, Marcelino Q. Malajacan Jr.” Then there it was, “Rolando C. Malinis” next. I stood up and pumped my fist, eliciting puzzled looks from the other students in the library.

Getting to PMA: The Second Phase

Rigid physical and medical examinations followed. The appointment paper I received in the mail instructed me to report to the AFP’s Victoriano Luna General Hospital in Quezon City. A tall Technical Sergeant in an army khaki uniform met our team of five candidates at the building lobby. Carrying our medical records, the sergeant patiently waited as we were each examined by military doctors.

The medical exams covered practically everything. I felt weird. It was my first time to undergo such an extensive physical exam. A chest x-ray and electrocardiogram (ECG) were done, then came the vision and hearing tests. I was ordered to strip naked. Marks and abnormalities were noted. I was caught by surprise when the military doctor ordered me to stoop. Then he inserted his lubricated white-plastic-gloved finger into my anus. He rotated his fingers around probing for swelling.

My mental state was tested at Psychiatric Ward 24. I was asked to complete sentences after being given a lead such as, “I like to ...” The psychologist asked me to describe what I was seeing on several white cards with splattered inkspots.

Then came the most challenging part which the PMA test proctor was emphatic about: “You need to be physically fit to qualify for cadetship.” The letter directed me to report for the physical fitness test at the Camp Aguinaldo gym. With no prior preparation, I was apprehensive. Inside the gym, stations for pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, and hop-step-and-jump were marked. The 100-meter-run, long jump, and high jump tests were done outside. Minimum standards for passing had been set. I was not athletic, I seldom exercised. The only time I was exposed to those exercises was during my swimming class at UP.

I watched how some applicants did the high jump. The physically fit Gregorio Honasan, the mental exam topnotcher, was performing well as his father, Colonel Romeo Honasan PMA ’43, watched from a distance. Greg had technique. He sprinted diagonally towards the bar, then curved his body and leapt backwards to clear the bar. During my

turn, I just ran, leaped and threw my body forward. Through sheer luck, I cleared the bar.

The fitness test was just too much for me, but I passed it. When I left the gym, my whole body was in pain and my legs were shaking badly. While crossing Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue (EDSA, formerly Highway 54) going to Aurora Boulevard, my knees simply gave way. I fell to the ground knees first. Surprised, some people around me helped me get up. I was embarrassed. I remembered telling them, “I’ve just finished a physical fitness test.”

Why We Really Signed Up

The oral interview was held at a room inside the gym. When asked why I wanted to join PMA, I replied, “To serve my country, Sir!” The interviewer, Army First Lieutenant Filemon S Agustin PMA ’61 smiled sarcastically. I found out later that it was an overused reply; the majority of applicants through the years answered the same way. Deep inside, I knew why I was there. The offer of free college education was irresistible. My father could not support me.

Fernando “Doy” Francisco, who also passed the test, had the same story. While taking up pre-med at FEU, Doy’s father, the sole breadwinner, was laid off from his job. At an age no longer marketable in the labor market, finding another job was almost impossible. Doy was faced with a tough choice: it was him or his younger brother who had to stop school. He felt he should give in, for his brother’s future. While he was sitting on a bench pondering his options, he saw a poster on the ROTC bulletin board: “Join the PMA.” He found a better option.

While I was waiting to be interviewed that day, I saw a group of five talking animatedly about the military assignment of their fathers. Twenty of those who made it to Class ’71 were sons of either military officers or enlisted men. At least eight had brothers who graduated from the Academy. Three of those brothers were current upperclassmen: Ed Batac PMA ’68, Leopoldo Gange PMA ’69, and Romeo Acop PMA ’70.

The guy in a checkered polo, Melchior I. Acosta Jr. of Cubao, Quezon City, was telling his companion in green shirt, “Extending the family’s traditional line of military professionals influenced me to apply for PMA.” Both of them were sons of PMAyers of class ’40. Mel’s father, Colonel Melchior Acosta Sr., was the flyweight boxing

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champion of PMA in 1936-1937. He fought in Bataan, was part of the Death March and was incarcerated in Capas, Tarlac in WWII. The Colonel won a Gold Cross medal for gallantry in action during subsequent military operations. Encouraged by his father, Mel took the PMA entrance exam while he was a first year engineering student at Mapua Institute of Technology in Manila.

The guy in green shirt that Mel was talking to was the short but stocky Ilocano John Francis L. Velasco. A football star from Don Bosco Technical Institute, Johnny was the son of Army General Segundo P. Velasco PMA '40. A few months after his admission to PMA, his father was appointed AFP Chief of Staff, the highest position a military man could aspire for. It was natural to assume that Johnny would have an easier time at PMA because of this relationship. This belief was proven wrong later. Johnny would suffer more punishments and hardships than others. General Velasco avoided setting foot in PMA during Johnny's plebe year, which coincided with his tenure as Chief of Staff from August 1967- May 1968. He was afraid that the cadets' extra hardship in rendering parade and arrival honors for him would anger upperclassmen, who would then take it out on Johnny.

The other two in that group of five were also military "brats," sons of military officers. The shy looking guy was Reynaldo D. Rivera, son of Army Brigadier General Simplicio F. Rivera PMA '37. The other was Reynaldo R. Alcasid, son of Army Colonel Domingo A. Alcasid PMA '44.

The fifth guy was Angelo C. Molato of Quezon City. He did not talk much, preferring to read the pocket book he brought along with him. Born in 1950, he was the youngest in the class. Cadets entering PMA could not be younger than 17 years old. Gel would turn 17 exactly on April 1, 1967, the date the successful applicants would report to PMA. His father, Colonel Ruperto Molato, belonged to PMA '42. Gel still had to graduate from the UP High School. He was allowed to proceed with the assurance from the school that he would be conferred his high school diploma. He was one of the six new cadets who came to PMA straight from high school. Many others were already in their first- or second year in college.

The exceptions in the Class of '71 were Edwin Cuenco, the basketball star player from Feati University, who was a college graduate and already teaching college students in Feati. Rolly Degracia was already in his senior year taking up Bachelor of Science in Industrial Arts minor in Mathematics at the Cebu School of Arts and Trade. Rolly had to take his finals early which he then passed with flying

colors. The school allowed him to graduate magna cum laude while he was a rotting plebe.

A significant number who would be accepted as cadets in 1967 graduated as valedictorians, salutatorians or in the top 10 percent of their high school classes. Reynaldo Velasco was valedictorian of his high school class in Pangasinan. Victor Batac, the son of Brigadier General Gonzalo Batac PMA '43, was also a valedictorian. Cicero Castellano was valedictorian in his Janiuay Iloilo National High School Class of '64. Ricardo de Leon was salutatorian of Class '66 at Binmaley (Pangasinan) Catholic High School. So was Ruben Domingo who finished high school at the age of 15 at the Ilocos Norte School of Arts and Trades in 1965. Romy Dominguez graduated salutatorian of the Olongapo National High School while Ariston Delos Reyes graduated in 1966 as salutatorian of Manila's Florentino Torres High School.

Pursuing A Dream

The guy I had lunch with earlier that day was the son of an enlisted man. When I asked him how he learned about PMA, he turned emotional. As a young boy, Rodolfo Vasquez was obsessed with thoughts of becoming a PMA cadet. He was from Sta. Ignacia in Tarlac, a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of Manila. He and his friend, Napoleon Aquino, became interested in PMA because their fathers were soldiers. They were schoolmates at the Armed Forces of the Philippines School for Enlisted Men, later renamed Camp General Emilio Aguinaldo High School. The school originally catered to the enlisted men who were admitted to the military service without the benefit of a secondary education by reason of war exigency. In the late '50s, military dependents were also admitted.

Rudy Vasquez was privileged to witness the PMA cadets' parades at Camp Aguinaldo. He watched with envy as the cadets marched with precision. As a young kid in 1958, he had watched the movie "Madaling Araw" produced in Eastman color by Sampaguita Pictures. The handsome movie actor, Romeo Vasquez, played a PMA cadet captain and company commander. Also wearing the glamorous cadet uniform with chevrons were famous movie actors Juancho Gutierrez, Tito Galla and Carlos Salazar. The movie showed Rudy the glamor of a cadet uniform. That reinforced his dream of becoming a PMA cadet.

Rudy Vasquez and Nap Aquino took the entrance test. Both

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passed. Both expected to make it to PMA. Nap later went one step higher. After his plebe year, he was selected to attend the United States Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, Colorado as a foreign cadet. [Another classmate Benjamin Lazo went to the US Military Academy at West Point.]

While Rudy and I were talking that day, another guy sat with us in our table. His slim body physique was admirable. His smile with prominent dimples on both cheeks could easily win women's hearts, I thought. At first, he declined to introduce himself but Rudy and I knew he was a cadet applicant. He was carrying the same appointment papers.

The guy was Manuelito Resplandor of San Pedro, Laguna, who soon joined us in a lively conversation. "Why am I here? Is that your question?" Manny laughingly asked. "I can't explain why I want to be a cadet." He was a second year student taking Chemical Engineering at Mapua Institute of Technology. One time, he visited his friend in Mandaluyong so they could both review for a forthcoming exam. He met his friend's father, a major in the Philippine Army. The father practically ordered his son and Manny to take the PMA entrance exam. He handed them a couple of reviewers.

Both applied to take the entrance test but Manny's friend was disqualified because he fell short of the height requirement. Manny passed and he proceeded to take the physical and medical tests out of curiosity, without telling his parents. He passed both.

One day, his mother heard from the famous commentator Rafael Yabut's radio program that Manny's name was included in the list of successful PMA applicants. His mother confronted him. Manny still remembered his denial: "What is PMA? You know that I hate military training." To prove his point, he added, "I joined the Military Police in Preparatory Military Training (PMT) in San Sebastian just to avoid the very short haircut and marching in the sun. I also did not train with the ROTC of Mapua but instead filed records in the administrative office."

His mother believed him. She knew that Manny seldom lied to her. But then she later read in the newspaper that listed a Manuelito Resplandor as among the successful examinees of PMA. Still he denied it. "Ask daddy if there is another guy with the same name," he replied, avoiding his mother's inquisitive eyes.

When the acceptance letter from PMA came, Manny Resplandor ran out of excuses. He wanted to back out, but his brother-in-law told him that he would go to prison for breach of contract. "The government had spent so much for your exam and if you back out