

## The Negrito, the United States Navy, and JEST



The Aeta. The first peoples of the Philippines. Fond friends of American veterans.

This is a story about survival. In war. In peace

The Spanish called them “Negrito”. So, did we. However, they are the “Aeta” or Agta or Ayta, a jungle people whose tribal ancestry traces back over twenty thousand years on the island of Luzon, Republic of the Philippines. When these small dark-skinned people precisely came to the Philippine archipelago is uncertain, just as it is uncertain if they came by canoe like so many of earlier indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia, Australia and the South Pacific, or if they arrived by a long-lost land bridge. Originally seldom exceeding four feet in height, these aboriginal Aeta were the first Filipinos. I know who were the first Americans.



*A U.S. Naval Station was established in 1905 at Olongapo and this photograph of the Aeta with Commander Chester M. Knepper and USMC Maurice E. Shearer was taken in 1910.*

This ancestry did not mean a great deal to the Sailors and Marines who were stationed on the former United States Naval Base on famous Subic Bay; or those in transit going to and from a war in Vietnam; or those who came ashore on liberty from a ship; or the war weary looking for Rest and Relaxation (R&R) and a famous ice-cold San Miguel beer. The Aeta were just there, as they had been for centuries. They were an everyday presence on the Navy’s most important military

base in Asia and the largest outside the United States, a Naval installation that originally became ours thanks to Admiral George Dewey and the Spanish-American War. The Aeta were the original inhabitants of Olongapo.



*The Aeta and Captain Billy Mitchel in 1924. The legacy is long.*

The Aeta were a quiet part of base life. We took them for granted. We did not know how in WW II they helped Bataan Death March survivors slip into the jungle; how they were the eyes for guerillas and fought the Japanese; and how they hid American Jewish civilians in the jungle of Luzon. Sailors and Marines heading into the adjacent liberty city of Olongapo for music, beer and a dance, would pass their bamboo and nipa “Negrito Handicraft Store” where tribal crafts or hand-made jungle knives could be found. They patrolled behind government quarters protecting families against intruders and watched over declining and beautiful rain forests and water shed looking for illegal logging. Some had minor base employment and they were party to an agreement to sort salvage, the benefits of which went more to the scrap dealers than those that labored in the landfill. They performed a unique security role by scanning shipboard refuse looking for papers inadvertently discarded that might contain the words of Confidential, Secret, or Top Secret. Protecting loss of classified information was more important than being able to read English. Not fully understood or appreciated, an early Provost Marshal’s memorandum said Negritos were “not to be seen by the public walking on the roads or on the golf course.” **The humble and simple Aeta lived in the shadows on a military base that had been ancestral lands with a heritage and a culture neither studied nor valued. Hosts or guests? The question lingers.**

Those who remember them the most, and are indebted to them the most, are American airmen going to a jungle war in Vietnam and coming into contact with a countryside totally different from the fields, woods and mountains of North America. Living off the land would no longer be a matter of putting Boy Scout training to work or hunting quail and rabbit. The jungles of Southeast

Asia are not the Ozarks. Survival skills are different. Environments are different. That difference is what created the famous Subic “Jungle Environmental Survival Training School”, or JEST. JEST was established in 1965 following earlier SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) training that began in 1962 under the Navy’s Fleet Training Group, Pacific, with jungle survival training provided as early as 1960. JEST was similar to the U.S. Army’s Jungle Operations Training Center (JOTC) at the former Fort Sherman in Panama. The U.S. Air Force followed in 1967 with its Jungle Survival Training School (JSTS) at the now former Clark Air Force Base.



*In jungle survival training, Snake is pretty tasty with a jungle condiment or two.*

The JEST mission was to train American air crews and other destined for combat in Vietnam. Navy, Marines, Air Force, Search and Rescue (SAR), and even some government civilians benefited from its jungle wisdom. Living and surviving off an unfamiliar and hostile land could be a challenge. For some JEST was fun. Having to use the skills in a hostile environment when it was not clear that those who came to the rescue were friend or foe is not fun.

The Aeta would teach how bamboo is your friend and tool. They would show where to find potable water, where to find cover and sleep, and how to make fire among damp leaves. Plants could become medicines and tree bark become soap. Many a jungle bug was shown to be a solid source of protein. Tasty too. You would not be taught how to shoot squirrel from a tree, but you would learn how to capture monkey from a vine. Both are good eating. So are snakes. We knew that anyway in the American Southwest where rattlesnake bratwurst sausage is also tasty. After all, snake is the other white meat.

But all that is in the past. Today the Aeta need help.

There are over 100 indigenous peoples throughout the Philippines. The Aeta are the poorest. Originally a nomadic people, today they live in small villages with many on ancestral lands protected by the “Philippine Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997”. Veterans who recall the volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991 that destroyed Clark Air Force base may also recall it destroyed Aeta mountainside villages that had been homeland for centuries. **They are a displaced people in their own homeland.**

But there are people who care. Filipinos and Americans who care. Several Americans and Filipinos who were stationed or worked on the former Navy base formed a Philippine charity, the “Subic Indigenous Peoples Assistance Group”, or SIPAG. The “Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority” or SBMA, the legacy presence to the former military base that closed and then created the Subic Free Port and now massive Economic Zone, work with the Aeta. They provide land whose forests the Aeta protect and in return whose earth provides them livelihood. The Aeta want to retain their unique tribal culture, and not unlike other indigenous groups in other countries, a facilitating government helps. But to say it is difficult and that abuse and encroachment is impossible, is an understatement. Policy is easy. Execution is hard.



*A 22-foot python discovered in 1981 behind enlisted family housing and captured by the Aeta. It became famous when the JEST Officer-in-Charge, an eager lieutenant, wanted to see the size of its mouth. He found out. The python bit. Quick sailors made sure he still has ten fingers.*

SBMA, SIPAG, and others want to help the Aeta retain their culture as long as it is their desire. Assimilation may be difficult and countless years away. In the meantime, life must go on, and **modernization must adapt to the people, and not vice versa.**

SIPAG has provided the administration building of the former U.S. Naval Magazine, an area still heavy in dense tropical jungle. The building will become the “Aeta Cultural Skills Training and Livelihood Center”. Activities will include training programs, paralegal, forest management, natural/organic agricultural practices, reforestation, mangrove planting, accounting and financial management, housekeeping, food and beverage, coffee production, etc. There will be a School of Living Traditions and an Indigenous People Research Center.

Livelihood development programs will include chili farming and coffee, coconut, cacao, cashew, mango, and pili nut crop processing. There will be bamboo crafts and ecotourism where the Aeta take and teach tourists about a simpler life through hiking, bird watching, “glamping”, biking, and cultural demonstrations. Emphasis is on the ecosystem with reforestation and maintenance of watershed, planting and maintenance of mango groves. Ours is as fragile planet. The Aeta understand that. They have to.





*In 1988, U.S. Navy Seabees built a hanging bridge across Aeta ancestral lands*

The Aeta need help. In survival.

SIPAG is striving to complete the “Aeta Cultural Skills and training Center” this year and needs a final PhP4mil (\$80,000). The Project Handclasp Foundation (PHF) has launched the “Aeta Handclasp Partnership” with SIPAG and has provided a “Tevelson donation” of PhP2mil (\$40,000). PHF is seeking partners to raise the final \$40,000 and hopefully more. Funds received that are over the goal will be used to pay fees necessary for Aeta children to attend public schools, attendance now experiencing a 50% drop-out rate.



*In WW II the Aeta helped guerrillas, Death March and POW escapees, and fought the Japanese.*

This is the third recent initiative of the Project Handclasp Foundation in the Philippines. The first was a donation to the Philippine Red Cross of treadle sewing machines for use in the rehabilitation of Marawi, and water purifications systems for use in typhon disaster relief. The second was a \$100,000 (PhP5mil) “Tevelson Donation” to create “The Children of Marawi Project” to support the work of the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation (PDRF). This donation made through

the auspices of the US-Philippine Society (USPHS) is providing education and health care to the displaced children from the “Siege of Marawi”. The historic City of Marawi on the island of Mindanao was devastated in the war on terrorism in 2017.

The PHF is the legacy organization of the former U.S. Navy’s “Project Handclasp”, an Eisenhower era “people to people” program that lasted decades. Veterans will remember when Sailors and Marines would go ashore, paint schools, distribute books, and give toys to children and health care products to families. They were first on scene with donated emergency supplies when a natural crisis called for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.



*An Aeta and retired Naval Aviator and Vietnam aerial gunship pilot, Captain Brian Buzzell returning forty years later. The bow and arrow may look simple. Accuracy is legendary.*

In 2018, the PHF Board of Directors decided that the final distribution of its assets would be charitable work in the Philippines, a country arguably America’s greatest friend and ally in Asia. CMC Films, an Asian and worldwide film production company based in Manila has joined us, understands that this is a story untold, and is developing a 30-minute documentary, “A Foreign Friendship, American’s 100 Year Relationship with the Aeta.” We are soliciting “Aeta Story Telling Friends” to find individuals whose families might have benefited from the Aeta, know others, or just care. The “Filipino American National Historical Society”, “Maywood Bataan Day Organization”, “American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Memorial Society”, the “US-Philippine Society”, “Bataan Legacy Historical Society”, etc. are helping.

Individuals and organization who wish to participate in the “Aeta Handclasp Partnership” are encouraged to contact Dan McKinnon at [themckinnons@aol.com](mailto:themckinnons@aol.com).