HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

American Guerrilla in the Philippines 1950

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Lang's War Film. *American Guerilla in the Philippines* was released in 1950; Fritz Lang's last film had been 1947's *Secret Beyond the Door* and the break of nearly three years marked the longest gap in his career. Lang's collaborators for 1946's *Cloak and Dagger* suffered in the communist witch-hunts of the 1950s. Screenwriters Maltz and Lardner Jr., as well as character actors Marc Lawrence and J. Edgar Bromberg, were blacklisted following the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. Lang believed that his period of inactivity was due to his being "grey-listed" (Gunning, 2000: 390). The project that brought him back to directing would be the only full-fledged war film in his career.

Source. The story revolved around a naval officer's exploits in the Philippines during the Second World War and his successful organization of local resistance against the Japanese invaders. Lieutenant Richardson's experiences had previously been the subject of John Ford's *They were Expendable*, starring John Wayne and based on William Lindsey White's 1942 best-seller book with the same title. The source of Lang's film was Ira Wolfert's (another black listee) 1943 Pulitzer-winner book *American Guerilla in the Philippines* (Wolfert, 1945); it was adapted by Lamar Trotti (*Young Mr. Lincoln* [1939], *The Ox-Bow Incident* [1942], *Yellow Sky* [1948]).

International Context. 1947—with its Truman Doctrine—is considered to be the beginning of the Cold War; late 1940s were marked by important events that intensified international tension, namely, the Berlin Blockade, the victory of Mao Zedong's guerilla forces and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and the successful Soviet atomic test that ended US monopoly over nuclear weapons. Shooting of *American Guerilla in the Philippines* began just a few months before the beginning of the Korean War.

Production. *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* starred Tyrone Power (*The Mark of Zorro* [1940], *The Razor's Edge* [1946], *Witness for the Prosecution* [1957]). It was shot entirely in the Philippines (Bogdanovich, 1967: 75)—with difficulty, due to clashes between government troops and communist forces.(McGilligan, 2013, 73). Cinematographer Harry Jackson's (*Way of a Gaucho* [1952, Jacques Tourneur]; *Mother wore Thighs* [1947, Walter Lang], *Halls of Montezuma* [1951, Lewis Milestone]) photography is—atypically for a Lang film—brightly lit with natural light and shot mostly outdoors.

1950s War Films. *Halls of Montezuma* was one of several early 1950s films set in the Second World War. Another film that also starred Richard Widmark was *Destination Gobi* (1953, Robert Wise). Although these films' plots took place in WW2, the Korean War (1950-1953) constituted their context. Other war films of this era were *Flying Leathernecks* (1951, Nicholas Ray), *Hell and High Water* (1954) and *Fixed Bayonets* (1951) by Sam Fuller.

CHARACTERS

Ensign Chuck Palmer. After his motor torpedo boat is sunk by Japanese airplanes, Palmer (Tyrone Power) leads a ragtag group of soldiers to continue the war on Philippine soil as guerillas. Eventually, he organizes an intelligence and resistance network to prepare the ground for General MacArthur's return.

Jeanne Martinez. The France-born Martinez has been in the Philippines for five years and he is married to Juan Martinez, a wealthy plantation owner, who supports the Philippine resistance. She bonds with Palmer and following her husband's death, their relationship becomes intimate.

Juan Martinez. Martinez is a local elite who connects Ensign Palmer with the resistance forces; he gets to be tortured and killed by the Japanese soldiers.

Miguel. A leading member of the Filipino resistance, Miguel becomes a comrade of Palmer.

General Douglas MacArthur. The film ends with General MacArthur's return to the Philippines.

The Speaker. A secondary character that briefly appears as the leader of the American irregulars—who allege to fight the invaders; "phonies" collect donations from the villagers. Played by Jack Elam, from Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* and *Moonfleet*.

SYNOPSIS

During the WW2, an American torpedo boat is strafed by Japanese aircraft and sinks. Survivors swim to the shore and proceed to walk to the closest city, which is in chaos due to the expected arrival of the Japanese invasion force. Ensign Palmer and his underlings eventually seek shelter in an island where Filipinos are fiercely resisting the invaders.

Palmer meets resistance financier Juan Martinez and his wife Jean. Martinez arranges a meeting between Palmer and an American unit hiding in the jungle. The colonel here orders Palmer to go back and estanblish a spy network in anticipation of General MacArthur's return to the Philippines. Palmer and his comrades organize the locals and set up a civil government; they print money, build a telegraph network, construct makeshift weapons, and train the peasants in guerilla warfare. The network develops with the radio equipment supplied by the American submarines. The guerrilla army is soon noticed by Japanese forces, which launch a raid to their stronghold. Palmer's group evades the invaders, but the villagers face severe reprisals. Juan Martinez is interrogated and is killed under torture.

Palmer's guerillas are ordered to penetrate enemy lines and reconnoiter Japanese shipping in the straits. Using radio, they successfully convey the position of a Japanese destroyer for aerial attack. Accomplishing their mission, the guerrillas go back to the village where they are cornered at a church by Japanese soldiers tailing them. The group manages to take shelter just as scores of American warplanes show up and annihilate the Japanese troops. The defeat of the enemy is followed by General MacArthur's long awaited return. Filipinos merrily greet the General; Palmer and Jean rejoice with them and raise a toast of Coca-Cola.

SCENES

Philippines, 1942: Licking Wounds. Japanese warplanes viciously attack and destroy an American motor torpedo boat. The survivors manage to swim to the shore, seek shelter and regroup. Ensign Chuck Palmer volunteers to embark on a long walk to the headquarters in the city of Tacloban. The voiceover recaps that, a month ago, this last remnant of the Motor Torpedo Squadron Three had spirited General Douglas MacArthur out of the Philippines.

Defeat and Retreat. Palmer joins a flood of refugees trying to head out of harm's way. Ultimately he reaches Tacloban; here, the American servicemen—overwhelmed by the influx of refugees—are in disarray in the wake of the impending Japanese invasion. Palmer is joined by a ragtag group of soldiers who have lost contact with their units. The local commander provides them funds to purchase a small boat to venture sailing to Australia. The group quickly sets sail.

Filipino Resistance. Not before long, the crude vessel proves unfit for ocean crossing and capsizes. The survivors are sheltered by Filipino islanders, who staunchly oppose the Japanese invasion. They cunningly dupe a Japanese reconnaissance unit and mercilessly execute a Japanese sympathizer.

Japanese soldiers are portrayed as one-dimensional and spiteful villains; a villager's identity is kept hidden by means of a basket covering her head as she acts as a snitch and identifies local resistance members.



In the Leyte Jungle. Brief contact with roaming American soldiers proves to be disappointing—these men claim to battle the invaders—apparently they pocket the funds they raise from the villagers.

A secondary character is the American soldier of fortune—"The Speaker"—and his cohorts, who raise funds in the villages, supposedly to fight the Japanese, but, are in fact "phonies."



A more productive encounter is made with Juan Martinez, a wealthy plantation owner and a clandestine financier of the resistance. Martinez also turns out to be the husband of Jean Martinez, a French woman that Palmer had acquainted in Tacloban.



Juan Martinez is a Westernized local elite, who supports the resistance from his lavish mansion; his France-born wife Jeanne is able to make the transition from their previously comfortable life and adapt to the daily routines of the villagers.



New Mission. Jean Martinez and Palmer appear to be mutually attracted to each other. Meanwhile, Juan Martinez connects the Americans with a Filipino guerrilla chief, who crafts a plan for Palmer to meet an American Colonel hiding in the jungle. Embarking on a stolen Japanese navy boat, the group begins the journey that eventually takes them to Colonel Philips. The colonel orders Palmer to go back to Leyte, instructing him to establish a spy network and facilitate General MacArthur's return to Philippines.

Guerilla Army. Palmer and his comrades organize the locals and set up a civil government; they print money, build a telegraph network, construct makeshift weapons, and train the peasants in guerilla warfare. The network develops with the radio equipment supplied by the American submarines.



The underground government develops by American support and through means such as printing currency, building crude weapons, and setting up communications infrastructure—all depicted in detail.



Clashes. The guerrilla army is soon noticed by Japanese forces, which launch a raid to their stronghold. Palmer's group evades the invaders, but the villagers face severe reprisals. Juan Martinez is interrogated and is killed under torture.



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Hiding. In the months leading to Christmas, living and hiding in the jungle proves to be taxing for the insurgents. Despite her longing for France, Martinez's widow Jean adapts well to village life. She becomes an asset for the resistance—and gets intimate with Palmer.

The Turn of the Tide. Just as the guerrillas' hopes wear thin, they are revitalized by a new order to penetrate enemy lines and reconnoiter Japanese shipping in the straits. Using radio, they successfully convey the position of a Japanese destroyer for aerial attack.

MacArthur's Return. Accomplishing their mission, the guerrillas go back to the village where they are cornered at a church by Japanese soldiers tailing them. The group manages to take shelter just as scores of American warplanes show up and annihilate the Japanese troops. The defeat of the enemy is followed by General MacArthur's long awaited return. Filipinos merrily greet the General; Palmer and Jean rejoice with them and raise a toast of Coca-Cola.



"I shall return"—the famous phrase from General MacArthur's speech is referred to multiple times; the film ends with his victorious return.





The leading characters join Filipinos to cheer MacArthur—and celebrate by drinking coke; Coca-Cola and other popular products of American industry get to be displayed.





CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ensign Chuck Palmer (Agreeable)

Resourceful and Diligent. After his motor torpedo boat is sunk by Japanese airplanes, Palmer (Tyrone Power) leads a ragtag group of soldiers to continue the war on Philippine soil as guerillas. Eventually, he organizes an intelligence and resistance network to prepare the ground for General MacArthur's return. Interesting early depiction of a guerilla fighter before guerilla warfare came to be better known in the following decades. Particularly interesting is the sequence showing the preparations to resist the Japanese by organizing the villagers and creating an infrastructure with the limited means available.

Jeanne Martinez. (Conscientious)

Determined. The France-born Martinez has been in the Philippines for five years and he is married to Juan Martinez, a wealthy plantation owner, who supports the Philippine resistance. She bonds with Palmer and following her husband's death, their relationship becomes intimate. Even though she was not born in the county, she becomes a patriot. Her support is limited to what may be categorized as domestic chores, so she is seen taking care of the laundry together with the local women at the bank of the river.

Themes *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* could be the least popular Lang film and the director apparently shared the sentiment—"even a director has to make a living" (Bogdonavich, 75) he said, as an explanation for his participation in the project. Nonetheless, as his only true war film, it offers a rich

showcase of his typical themes (e.g. modern communications) within the framework of a different genre. The reorganization of a rural Filipino community by American officers and its transformation into a guerilla force is presented as a process that involves modern technologies and instruments, such as printing currency and a newspaper, building a telegraph line and making crude firearms. Among other interesting themes are patriotism, treason, and xenophobia. A notable scene that is also highly relevant for our times shows scores of desperate refugees fleeing the occupation forces. Last but not least is the film spotlighting the American products—and underscoring the beginning of the American century; General MacArthur's expected and longed for return is celebrated by the leading man and woman—drinking Coca-Cola and surrounded by numerous local extras, who are exhilarated and grateful.

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