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## **We Band of Angels, by Norman**

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'offspring' of the state, born of the Marcos dictatorship when the state reached its most centralized form" (5).

*Making Mindanao* is definitely a ground-breaking scholarly venture. It offers novel insights and challenging interpretations of previously known and recently discovered data about Mindanao society and the Philippine state. As a fellow-Mindanaoan, this reviewer congratulates Abinales for indeed laying the basis for renewed dialogue and debate among those interested in the future of Mindanao, the Philippines, and state theory research.

*Eric Casiño*  
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**We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese.** By Elizabeth M. Norman. New York: Random House, 1999. 268 pages.

Many stories are told of World War II in the Philippines: of Death March survivors, guerilla fighters, comfort women and Japanese collaborators. But since war is usually seen as a soldier's domain, most of the recent contributions to the historical writing on World War II in the Philippines deal with the military, the guerilla movement, and the battles to liberate the country. Elizabeth M. Norman's gripping book is doubly interesting since it tells the story of a sector that is doubly marginal in war: women medical personnel. Norman is an authority on the subject since she is a nurse herself. She is an associate professor of nursing and heads the Doctoral Program at New York University's Division of Nursing. Her particular specialty is nursing history and she has previously written on the experiences of nurses in Vietnam. Her training in the historical method is evident in her skillful use of archival sources interspersed with diary entries and interviews with the surviving nurses and/or their family members. Her skill as a writer is likewise evident in the personal tone and readability of the book. The result is an exhaustive and compelling tale of the first large group of American military women in combat and later, captured and imprisoned by the enemy.

From such diverse backgrounds as the streets of New York City and rural South Dakota, these young women joined the nursing corps of the US Armed Forces. Most of them found their way into the country by purposely seeking an assignment to the then tropical paradise that was the Philippines. For many of them, a tour of duty to the Philippines promised adventure and luxury away from their restricted lives in their hometowns. They were not disappointed. In the Philippines, the nurses were provided with laundry-women, cooks, and chauffeurs. Their daily lives revolved around light hospital duty and the round of socials such as dances, concerts, picnics, and trips into the countryside and occasionally, romances with dashing young officers. It was this blissful and idyllic life which was shattered by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese invasion of the Philippines which followed soon after was a rude awakening for the nurses. They were evacuated to Bataan with the rest of the American forces in the Philippines. Here, under open skies, they set up and manned makeshift hospitals (Jungle Hospitals 1 and 2) where they came face to face with the violence and inhumanity of war. This was where the wounded and dying defenders of Bataan were brought for treatment of gaping wounds and shattered limbs: a far cry from the fevers and sunstroke that the nurses had been used to treating. As the surrender of Bataan loomed, the nurses were moved to Corregidor, despite their unwillingness to leave hundreds of patients without medical care. Here, they found themselves working in the fully equipped hospital in the Malinta Tunnel where they nonetheless faced new problems such as the choking atmosphere and the incessant bombardment. After their experiences on Bataan and Corregidor, the nurses had metamorphosed from dreamy, adventurous women into probably the most experienced and competent group of battle nurses in the US army. They had moved from treating minor illnesses and comforting young soldiers into assisting at continuous amputations on makeshift tables and practicing triage (determining who was too injured to live and withholding treatment from them).

With the fall of Corregidor, the 64 army nurses and 11 navy nurses were imprisoned at the notorious Santo Tomas Internment Camp in Manila together with most of the foreign nationals in the country. Here, they continued their work as medical personnel despite being constantly bedeviled by lack of medicines, supplies and later, even food and water. Some of them had also suffered combat-related injuries on Bataan and Corregidor and most of them were ill with such chronic diseases as tuberculosis and malaria. Despite this, the nurses continued to be "angels" to the internees: curing their ills as best as they could. Soon, some of them began to be active in the resistance, passing on information to the guerilla movement and money to Fort Santiago internees. In 1944, the Japanese Imperial army assumed control of the prison camps and life here deteriorated as starvation, beatings, and summary executions became the norm. When the camp was finally liberated in February 1945, the nurses were whisked back to their safe and comfortable lives in the United States and treated as heroines.

Norman succeeds in making the voices of the "Angels of Bataan and Corregidor" heard through all the noise and fury of war. We are told of their feelings on their brutal initiation into combat as they are confronted with piles of amputated limbs and wounded, bleeding men, women and children in the jungle clearings of Bataan. We witness their shock and numbness at the carnage around them but also their dedication to duty and loyalty to each other as a unit. The concern and respect that they have for their patients is also evident as in the case of the nurse who refused to take cover during air raids because her injured patients could not.

However, the book also shows us the human side of the nurses. Their wartime love affairs, their grief at the loss of friends and loved ones and their desolation at being left behind on the island are revealed to us. We are also given a glimpse into their everyday lives as women: from challenging the orders of male superiors to finding a secluded spot on the river to bathe.

With everything they had to endure, it is remarkable that all of them survived the war and returned home to the United States. However, the war experience was not over for them. Many continued to suffer the physical toll of the years of hardship, starvation and exposure into their old age, not to mention the psychological trauma. This was coupled with the fact that the true worth of their contribution and role in the war was trivialized by the intentional romantization of their experiences by American media and cinema. Norman attributes this to the male code of honor of the day which insisted on seeing women as delicate creatures in need of male guidance and protection. They could not reconcile this mental image with the reality of the emaciated, battle weary nurses who had held their own on enemy territory. Thus the American media's trivialization of the repatriated nurses as "girls" eager to wear lipstick and get into the latest fashions again. In many ways, it seemed that the nurses' homecoming was as traumatizing for them as the experience of war was.

*We Band of Angels* is an extremely well-documented and readable book. Choosing the nurses as its subject matter helps to complete a retelling of the American experience in the Philippines. It is in fact so completely a retelling of the American experience that only token mention is made of the Filipinos who surround them. They seem to affect the protagonists of the book only peripherally and this almost total lack of mention becomes disturbing at times. Were the Americans so isolated from the Filipinos or were they so totally unaware of their presence? What happened to the Filipino nurses that "Mama" Josie Nesbit refused to leave behind? Who were the "native healers" on Bataan who taught the nurses herbal remedies when they were plagued by a lack of medicine? And what would they have done without the nameless Filipinos who supplied the nurses with food and other necessities during their internment? Perhaps other scholars can use the sources mentioned in the book to shed light on this intriguing issue.

All in all, *We Band of Angels* is not only a historically accurate retelling of the US experience from a non-traditional viewpoint, it is also a compelling and moving account of women in a time of war and the sense of mission and the hopes and dreams that sustained them. It is a valuable addition to the unfinished tapestry that is the story of World War II in the Philippines.

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