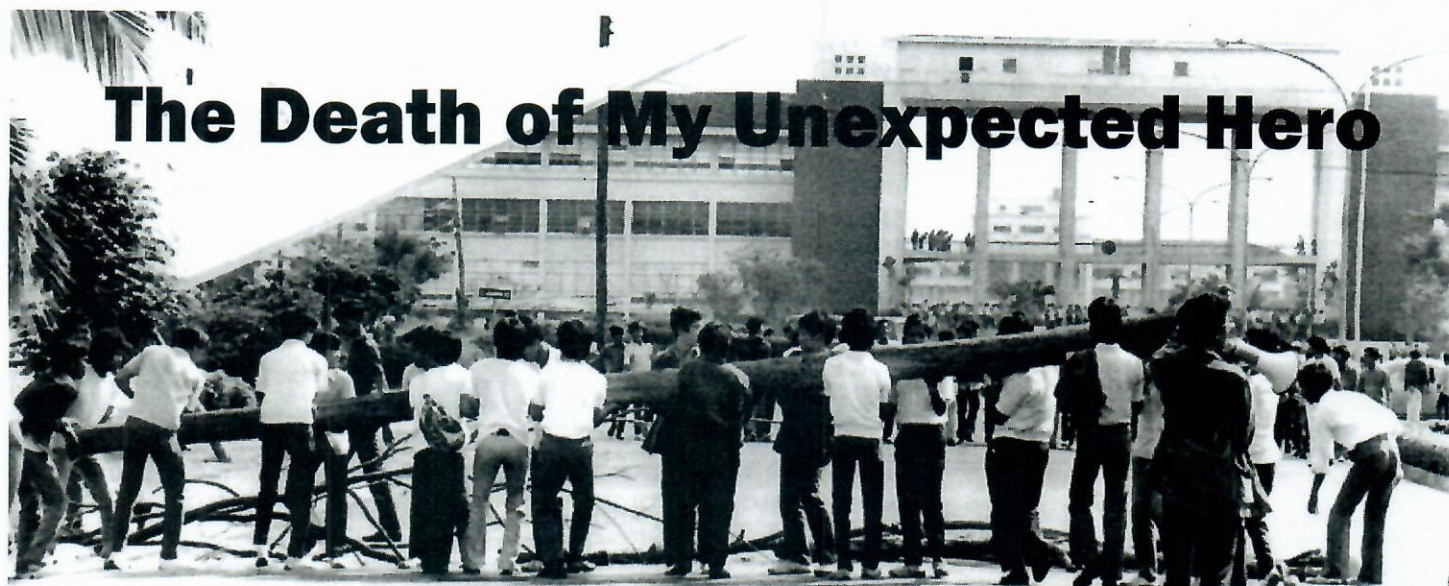


# The Death of My Unexpected Hero



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I am Rolando T. Soncuya with student number 69-00713 and was enrolled as chemical engineering student when the Diliman Commune happened. Concerned but unaffiliated, my life in the UP Diliman campus was uneventful except for the usual cutting of classes, playing billiard games in the billiard hall beside Vinzons Hall, drinking in the Pharmacy near the entrance of Balara, and cramming during exam time with occasional cheating. My studying was just enough not to fail the subject, to avoid queuing in the long line of students who failed to pass 21 or so units in the past year and who were appealing for reconsideration in Room 109 of the Arts and Sciences Building for the privilege to enrol again but under probation.

The apathy and indifference stopped abruptly when the dramatic events started to unfold in what would later be known as the "Diliman Commune." The events of the first week of February 1971 were more than 44 years ago. I was there when it started and was beside Pastor Mesina when he was shot by Professor Campos of the Mathematics Department. I was also one of the students who defended UP Diliman from the incursions of the police and military, and was privy to some important details that happened during this time.

I have successfully evaded recollecting details that surround the events during the Diliman Commune

and essaying my participation, except to my closest friends. I have avoided being in the limelight and have blended well in the background, a trait I developed during Martial Law. I could just imagine what it would be like to attend the annual commemoration of this historic event and to share the camaraderie, its common denominator, in an event as important as this.

The pains and anguish have abated through time but the nightmares still visit me occasionally, often in my dreams. There are certain images that are imprinted in my memory, especially the shock in the face of Pastor Mesina when he was hit by a bullet in his forehead. I am growing old and I might miss my chance to share what I know about this defining event. I have scanned what has been written on the Diliman Commune, for guidance of my memory and would like to contribute what I can still remember. I would now like to share my story.

I remembered that there was a meeting in front of the main steps of Palma Hall about the increase of gasoline prices. As a sign of solidarity with the jeepney and bus drivers, a protest march started from AS going to the University Avenue and the students started to block the avenue. It was not very effective.

A Thames jeep cum bus (colored blue plying the UP – Cubao route) arrived loaded with branches of trees



and wood. We unloaded the load and scattered them along University Avenue, very near the security outpost where two very big monolith blocks located on both sides of the road were placed. The security details at the outpost tried to prevent us from unloading the tree branches. One guard stepped on the branch that I was trying to unload, pinning my hand between the pavement and the branch. I reactively pulled the branch and hit the guard on his face, starting a skirmish (Note: I have a newspaper picture of the skirmish with Clarence Agarao). Being outnumbered, the security disappeared, leaving us protestors along University Avenue.

Other public vehicles, especially the jeepneys plying the Ikot route, supported the mass effort to get materials as reinforcement to the lightly constructed first barricade line. We asked the jeep driver why he was helping us transport assorted materials for our barricade. He replied that it was the least he can do because we, students of UP, were fighting for the oppressed and downtrodden like himself. This message was to be repeated again and again during the duration of the Diliman Commune and would continue during Martial Law.

Generally we were preventing vehicles from entering the campus while permitting vehicles whose owners lived inside or those with official business with the University. We have arrogated upon ourselves the tasks of screening and deciding who would enter and who would not. With this arbitrary power on our hands, Professor Inocentes Campos entered the University Avenue.

His car (a bantam) was politely stopped. Some students recognized him, I included. I remembered him because in the mass actions of January 1971, he was holding classes at Room 104 of AS (or the first room on the ground floor, left wing of AS) and we were outside convincing him to let the students boycott his Math 11 class but he shut the door. He was not permitted to enter the campus and surprisingly left smiling, after dropping some coins to the contribution box. While leaving, there was a roar of approval from the students. We were elated that a well known conservative closely identified with the military (he was allegedly a colonel in the Philippine Army) was thwarted in his attempt to break the barricade. We were now confident that lesser mortals would fail

miserably to smash our barricade and actually believed that it was the end of an episode. We were terribly mistaken.

There were some people along Commonwealth Avenue (opposite the restaurant Butterfly) who advised people not to enter UP because of road blocks. After sometime, an old car (Pagong) entered University Avenue and stopped some distance from the barricade. It was Professor Campos driving an old car. He went out, opened the rear right door, donned his bullet proof vest, put his pistol on his hips and held a shotgun. Terror did not quickly come to my mind because I could not imagine a teacher shooting his students in full view of numerous witnesses.

In the meantime, we were carrying a real roadblock (A frame) walking towards Commonwealth Avenue, the opposite side where Campos was located. We were about 30 meters from Campos and there was a student at my left side. He was the nearest person to Campos and was poised to leave the line because of the sight of Campos arming himself. I told him that Campos is just bluffing and that he will not shoot. I actually believed it myself. Feeling maybe ashamed, he shifted to my right side. I became the nearest person to Campos but still I did not feel threatened. During this time, some had noticed his hostile actions, triggering some cursing. Others started going to him to confront him. It was at this time that he tried to fire his shotgun except that it jammed. I am still not sure today whether he was pointing the gun at us or upwards. He went back to his car which was located a few meters away and got his calibre. 22 rifle.

Some students were already throwing stones and I think now that Campos must have been threatened by the cursing, the stones and the students going towards him. Since my group was the nearest to him, he started firing at us while we continued to walk, carrying the roadblock. I felt something move my left collar. I then realized that Campos had fired his first bullet and that it hit my collar! I did not quite hear anything but apparently the student on my left side did. I would later discover him to be Pastor Mesina. He clearly heard the shot because his face turned to Campos' direction (also my direction, because I was between Campos and Pastor) and I can clearly see his face from a mere two feet away. It was at this point that Campos fired the second shot.





Professor Inocentes Campos taking aim at the students barricading the University Avenue. photo from Its Xiaotime

I clearly remember up to this day the bullet hitting the forehead of Pastor Mesina. First, there was a depression, then blood spurted from the bullet hole. The expression on his face was shock and disbelief. His eyes looked upwards to the sky. He staggered, and was only able to walk three steps before he fell to the asphalt road. I knelt beside Pastor, got my handkerchief and tried to stop the bleeding. I felt oblivious to the dramatic events that were happening around me. I concentrated on my fallen comrade who was lying on the pavement in a pool of his own blood. I would learn later that Campos kept firing his rifle at our direction, targeting me. I think that at this time only the two of us were left around the roadblock. I remembered noticing some movements around my left leg which I later learned were bullets missing me. I also learned later that someone threw a pillbox. The explosion woke me from my stupor because of the deafening sound and felt some numbness on my left leg. I would later discover that they were blunt materials (probably small stones) from the pillbox.

I became aware again of my surroundings and saw Campos running towards Commonwealth Avenue, being chased by students. Campos stopped, turned around and drew his pistol anew, reportedly a .45 calibre pistol. He fired at his chasers which discouraged them. Campos then disappeared from the University Avenue. In its aftermath, the car of Campos was burned by the students in anger for the premeditated and unprovoked shooting of Pastor Mesina. I do not know where the shotgun that jammed or the notorious .22 caliber rifle that killed Pastor went.

In the meantime, a vehicle arrived and Pastor was driven to the campus infirmary. Later, we would

notice an ambulance, with siren wailing and lights blinking, speeding away from the university. It was Pastor Mesina being transferred to the Veteran's Memorial Hospital. He would die 3 days later. We were 17 years old then, one dead and one alive, but very disturbed and traumatized.

I stayed in the Campus during the commune and contributed in my own humble way in defending the campus against military intrusions and academic freedom, and in showing defiance to the prevailing political conditions. Based on the events in UP Diliman that triggered the great Commune, I am still bothered by regrets. Would something different have happened had I not told Pastor that Campos was only bluffing? Did he believe me or was he loathe to admit that he was worried at the threat of Campos so that he went to my right? If he did not go to my right, would I have been killed instead?

The shooting incident woke me up from my indifference and created a hunger to learn and understand what was going on in our society. What kind of society would create a monster that pretended to be a teacher but had the ruthlessness to murder a student and get away with it?

In campus after the Diliman Commune, I joined the Samahan ng Demokratikong Kabataan (SDK), attended teach-ins, and joined mass actions so I can really understand what happened. Because of the anger that I felt with the death of Pastor, I became serious in my studies and for the first time in my life in UP, passed all my subjects for that semester. I came to realize that one must study and learn first before one can really understand the bigger issues. One has to gain knowledge and the capacity to discern and recognize the underlying factors that gave rise to the ills of society. One has to immerse with the masses, live their lives and share their dreams and aspirations, to really understand the greater number. In my small modest way, I know I did.

We are now in the departure area of our lives. Looking back to the early seventies, we have the luxury to reminisce. I have no regrets except for some things that I should have done more for our country, and all this was triggered by the death of my unexpected hero. □