

# Note from the Underground

Friday 25 August 2006, by [NEMENZO Gemma](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2006).

Thirty four years ago this month, martial law was declared in our homeland by then-President Ferdinand Marcos. That was an entire generation and so many upheavals - political and personal - ago, yet for those whose lives were severely affected by that radical change in the social order, it was something like the assassinations of Kennedy and Ninoy Aquino: we remember exactly where we were and how we felt when it happened.

Memories dark and vivid come tumbling back now as one is confronted with a strong sense of déjà vu when reading the almost daily reports of activists or journalists being ambushed or shot to death in the Philippines. Viewed alongside the declaration yet again of an "all out war" against the insurgency, of the president releasing one billion pesos to the military (presumably in real money, not the accounting hocus-pocus that the current administration seems to be called on often) for counter-insurgency, and the elevation of a Gen. Jovito Palparan who pledged that he would wipe out all insurgents within two years, one gets the feeling that history is being re-lived, but this time in more unapologetically lethal terms. How many more lives will be sacrificed on the altar of counter-insurgency or revolution, one wonders.

The recent release of the third incarnation of Ben Pimentel's award-winning book on the revolutionary, Edgar Jopson, this time titled U.G. An Underground Tale: The Journey of Edgar Jopson and the First Quarter Storm Generation, starkly illustrates the painful reality that murder is a convenient weapon that both the right (the government and its military) and the left (the revolutionaries) use with impunity against those who dare defy them.

The book is a page-turner, especially for those who knew or had heard of Jopson, more popularly known as Edjop. He was the Ateneo student leader, scion of an affluent family, who headed the moderate National Union of Students during the First Quarter Storm of 1970 (the initial wave of massive anti-Marcos student demonstrations). Edjop became radicalized eventually and he joined the Left underground when martial law was declared. He was killed in Davao in 1982 when the military raided their safehouse. His widow Joy, herself an underground operative then, writes for the first time in this edition her story of that tragedy: "My own sense was [Edjop] was shot while attempting to escape (as shown by his big wound on the right thigh and the only wound seemed inflicted from afar), he was taken alive, and finally killed at close range...And as if these were not enough, he was also shot on each arm and leg. It was a

brutal death in the hands of the Marcos military."

What sets this edition apart from the previous ones, aside from Joy's heartbreaking personal recollections and the comprehensive foreword by former Senator Jovito Salonga, is the new information that Pimentel reveals. Real names of Edjop's comrades are now used. More significantly, the author boldly includes a discussion of two of the Philippine Left's biggest black marks: the assassination of Rolly Kintanar, former head of the New People's Army and Joy's second husband, and the Plaza Miranda bombing in 1971.

Kintanar was a legendary guerrilla fighter who, after several stints in prison (under Marcos and Cory Aquino) and serious tactical differences with the leadership of the Communist Party, quit and went aboveground and, with Joy, set up a security agency business. Accused of various crimes against the revolution by his former comrades, Kintanar managed to dodge the death sentence meted on him by the Party leadership until his luck ran out. In broad daylight, in a very public place, operatives of the rebel army that he helped train and expand shot him dead. The NPA immediately claimed credit, displaying to outsiders the cruel, vindictive side of a movement that proclaims itself the champion of social justice.

The Plaza Miranda bombing (where grenades were lobbed during a campaign rally of the Liberal Party senatorial candidates in 1971) is a more volatile issue because, despite revelations by some former insiders that the Communist Party did it, no official confirmation was ever issued, not even internally. Thus, the responsibility for it took the character of a rumor among the revolutionaries, a shameful, despicable one that made many question the validity of the cause they were fighting - and dying - for.

I asked Pimentel how these events shaped his book's new version - a version that had the active support of Joy who is unequivocal about her intention to keep the memories of Edjop and Rolly alive - and he explains thus: "Like many others, I was stunned by but remained skeptical about the allegation that the UG (underground) was responsible for the bombing. But through the years, it just became clear that the accusation had to be taken seriously. I wouldn't say that it was the critical reason for rewriting the biography. But certainly a movement that claims to be a democratic force may have carried out such a vicious attack changes the context in which Edjop joined the UG. Then I was surprised to find out that, as a high-ranking UG leader, he actually found out and was troubled by the allegation that the Party ordered the bombing."

With Kintanar's assassination, the proverbial die was cast in Pimentel's and Joy's minds. "It has become clear to me," Pimentel says, "that the history of the UG is actually composed of two stories: one, an inspiring tale of courage and sacrifice, of young idealistic Filipinos who saw a society reeling from poverty and oppression, and who bravely joined the struggle to end the

suffering. The other, an ugly and terrifying story of violence and viciousness, of hardened ideologues who would wage war at all cost, even if it meant killing innocent people and plunging society into a long conflict, senseless and cruel.

"Why did I decide to retell Edjop's story? Because I want to help preserve, highlight and celebrate the first storyline and, in my own little way, help prevent it from being forgotten or overshadowed by the darker, more violent narrative."

U.G., the book, is probably the best and most comprehensive account yet of the heroism and tragedies of a flawed revolutionary movement that became, in the minds of many, a romantic counterfoil to martial law. It is a good reminder that we should never submit to power achieved through the barrel of a gun, no matter which side it is pointing at.

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**P.S.**

\* From Filipinas Magazine, September 2006.