

Cousins of Color

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By

WILLIAM SCHRODER

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This book is dedicated to:

Dr. Willard B. Gatewood
Alumni Distinguished Professor of History (Emeritus)
University of Arkansas

Scholar, Educator, Friend

Preface

I was on the lookout for a good story. You know the kind I mean – big, with all the great themes: love, hate, anger, greed, sacrifice and redemption. Ingredients that properly mixed and baked offered a taste of the pie called the human condition. I was on the lookout and thought I'd found it the day Dr. Willard Gatewood introduced me to Private David Fagen, a black American who, in time of war, traded his future for the chance to help another "colored" people gain freedom. A tremendous story, it contained all the elements, just what I'd been looking for, but it was the wrong war.

"No one knows anything about the Spanish-American War," I complained. There's no sympathy for it, no romance. Where was the sizzle, the sparkle? Easy to envision a good story against the backdrop of World War II and certainly the Civil War, but the Spanish-American War? Dr. Gatewood smiled, regarded me indulgently, and then told me to do my homework. Here's a little of what I discovered:

Influenced by pro-business conservatives eager to take control of Spain's colonies in the Pacific, in 1898 President McKinley asked Congress for a Declaration of War, and then launched America's first adventure in Imperialism. An unprovoked war of conquest and occupation, it was the first time African-American soldiers fought and died overseas.

America destroyed the weakened and spiritless Spanish in six weeks. Later, in the Treaty of Paris, Spain sold her colonies to the United States for twenty million dollars. Under the banner of liberator, America occupied Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines and stayed to rule through a system of military governorships for nearly fifty years. To establish and maintain U.S. control, President McKinley implemented a policy of "Benevolent Assimilation" and sent thousands of soldiers to enforce it. Desirous of self-rule, the Filipinos resisted American occupation. A bloody, eight-year campaign ensued against Filipino guerilla forces. Reports vary, but many suggest more than four hundred thousand Filipino men, women and children lost their lives in the fight for independence during this "splendid little war."

Through this work of fiction, I endeavor to explore this extraordinary and highly significant chapter in our nation's past, which I believe echoes other American campaigns for empire in the twentieth century and beyond.

William Schroder, March 2004.

CHAPTER ONE - LUZON, PHILIPPINES

JUNE 1945

“Can you see anything, sir?” Sergeant Rosa shouted over the roar of the fierce monsoon wind.

Captain Nygaard mopped rain from his binoculars with a grimy sleeve, the dense jungle a blur of green and black darkly blanketed by an angry, lowering sky. “I couldn’t see a division of Japs marching right past us in this mess.”

Rosa studied the captain, saw concern on the patrol leader’s face. He said a prayer to the Holy Mother the man’s anxiety wouldn’t turn to fear. Eight men on a routine reconnaissance patrol, their job to scout the Jap forces in the Mariquina Valley, locate their positions, estimate strength and report back.

Handpicked for the patrol, the men were tough, seasoned veterans of the Pacific campaigns. They’d been on scores of these missions, to Rosa it seemed like hundreds, and this one had begun like all the others, but already things had started to go wrong. Rosa had fought through a dozen Pacific islands, but nothing in his experience had prepared him for the fiendish rain forest jungle of the Luzon highlands. Three days they’d pushed through Satan’s back yard, wading in knee-deep mud, *wait-a-minute* vines slashing their faces, tearing skin. During the day, relentless mosquitoes tormented. At night, invisible fanged insects drank their blood. Nature and the terrain important factors in any battle, in this one, Rosa thought, maybe the most important.

He looked hard into the dense foliage. Lobatto and Delaney hunkered in the shelter of a fallen tree. Rosa couldn’t see Michaels and Flockheart, but knew they were there somewhere, soaked to the bone, their faces covered with slime. Damn this rain!

Captain Nygaard unfolded a muddy compass, tried to get his bearings. “Who reported their movement?”

Rosa worked at a long thorn imbedded between his fingers, “Wilcox, sir, the scout team NCO over at Baker Company. He said two, maybe

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three reinforced companies moved behind us sometime today. He thinks we're completely surrounded by now."

"He thinks that, does he? Then why can't our own S-2 confirm?"

"I don't know, Cap, but Wilcox is a good man. We were together at Salamaua. He wouldn't say something like that if it weren't true."

"Damned decent of him to give us a call."

"Yes, sir. That was my opinion too."

Even though bad news, Captain Nygaard was glad to have the information. This man Wilcox was looking out for them, and it really was damned decent of him, but it didn't change anything. They had a mission to accomplish, and that would only change if Tojo surrendered before sundown, and the entire Jap army laid down their arms and went home. Not likely. "Get the men together," he said. "We'll find a place to make camp tonight, but unless we hear otherwise from our own intelligence people, we proceed at dawn according to plan."

Rosa signaled, and Delaney passed it along. The men pushed up under the weight of the monsoon and moved out into the mist. Rosa signaled again. Close it up. Stay together. He knew exhausted men made mistakes. In those conditions, the slightest misstep could be a death sentence. I've been through worse, Rosa thought. So had the rest of the men. Highly trained and disciplined, they were not prone to panic or breakdown.

Captain Nygaard, a ninety-day wonder just over from the States, was younger than Rosa. Someone said he'd graduated from law school just before he was drafted. A lawyer *and* a ninety-day wonder, a walking cliché. Rosa wondered whether the Holy Mother had heard his prayer over the howl of the monsoon.

Flockheart scurried to the top of a low bluff, the terrain level there, good footing on solid ground, free of the dense underbrush they'd maneuvered through all day. He signaled the captain. Rocks and tree trunks for toeholds, one after the other, the men pushed and pulled their way up and deployed a small defensive perimeter, a semi-circle facing the black jungle, their backs to the edge of the bluff. Below them in the distance, the Mariquina River disappeared into a low valley. While the men set up camp, the monsoon swept suddenly past them, the rain stopped as though turned off with a switch and the wind stilled. They would never get dry, but for now at least, the roar of the storm beyond them, for a while their world had returned to "normal."

Captain Nygaard hunched over an oilskin map, a field phone to his ear. "One man for an LP, Sergeant Rosa."

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“Right away, Cap. Michaels! Set up a listening post at the one o’clock position, but don’t go out more than thirty yards.”

“I’m on it, Sarge.”

Nygaard tried to make contact, but the radio useless, he pounded the back of it against his knee. Purple veins bulging in his neck betrayed his frustration. He pitched it to Rosa. “See if you can do something with this. I’m sick of it.”

No twilight in the jungle, in only a few minutes darkness hung like a mantle over the little squad. Cryder and Lobatto gnawed at the remains of their K rations, while Delaney and Sullivan worked on the radio. Flockheart had replaced Michaels at the listening post. Rosa dug a Dakota hole, started a small fire and watched the captain fold and refold his map, indecision written on his face.

The shriek of the howler monkey, the caw, the growl, the scratching, scraping, yawping noises of the night jungle ceased. The sudden silence sent a shiver up Rosa’s spine, and he looked around.

“Captain Nygaard, Sergeant Rosa! We got us a situation here!” Lobatto’s shrill cry split the stillness in the camp. Rosa turned to see the rifleman crouched at the edge of the perimeter, his carbine pointed in the direction of the listening post. Then, from the inky blackness beyond the firelight, Flockheart appeared, hands on his head, his face frozen in fear. Four tiny men flanked him. One held a knife at Flockheart’s throat. Momentarily stunned by their outlandish appearance, Captain Nygaard thought of the Stone Age tribesmen he’d read about in anthropology class. The intruders wore only loincloths, their bodies elaborately painted and tattooed. Long, rusty-brown hair covered their faces, their noses and ears pierced with shards of bone. One of the men carried Flockheart’s rifle in one hand and a long blowgun in the other. Their only other weapons were crossbows and huge curving knives, but the captain shuddered at the damage they’d do at close range.

Tension filled the night as these strange men escorted their captive into the midst of the heavily armed Americans. Despite his battle experience, Flockheart was scared, and he showed it. “I swear, Captain, you got to believe me. I was awake on my post. I never heard a thing. They came out of nowhere and were on me before I knew it.”

Captain Nygaard got to his feet slowly, buying time, trying to fully comprehend the strange sight before him. His legal training had taught him to assess a situation before taking action, the calm in his voice masked the fear waxing in his chest. “Steady corporal, take it easy.”

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The tiny men stood silently among the Americans. Captain Nygaard willed himself to remain calm, only four of them, he had twice that many and the firepower, but he was apprehensive. He knew his men were unnerved by the sudden, startling appearance of these impossible intruders. Their long knives razor-sharp, the stubby little arrows in their crossbows had metal points coated in something black and sticky – poison?

The captain knew the Americans couldn't subdue the men without some of their own blood being spilled. The knife at Flockheart's throat made that a virtual certainty. He steadied himself. The situation outside his range of understanding and certain every passing second increased the odds of this standoff ending in bloodshed, he wished he had more time to think. Nygaard heard the metallic click of safeties moved into the "fire" position and knew he had to do something fast.

He took two steps toward the man he believed their leader and stared into his eyes. Not intimidated by the bigger, heavily armed American soldier, the diminutive warrior returned the captain's gaze. The patrol leader slowly raised his carbine to the center of the headman's chest. The chief responded by raising his crossbow at exactly the same pace, stopping the deadly arrowhead just inches from the captain's heart. Cautiously, without blinking, Nygaard slowly lowered his rifle, and like a primordial mirror image, the man lowered his weapon.

Sergeant Rosa inched to the captain's side. "These are bolomen, sir, mountain people. They haven't hurt anybody yet, maybe they're just hungry."

Captain Nygaard carefully reached for his field pack. "Food? Tobacco? Cigarettes!"

The tribesman responded with silent disdain.

Suddenly, the headman let go a harsh, guttural bark in a strange dialect, but his meaning clear. "Put down your weapons."

Nygaard didn't like it that one of his men had a knife at his throat and held his ground. He hoped their superior numbers and firepower were enough to convince these people to release Flockheart and go about their business. He didn't want to kill when he didn't even know why the men were there or what they wanted.

The tribesman spoke again, louder, an unmistakable command, "Put down your weapons!"

Sergeant Rosa whispered, "Something tells me we should do what he says, Captain."

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Nygaard stood a little taller. He wasn't about to surrender so soon to a handful of tribal savages. "I disagree," and he raised his carbine again.

Just then, as if on some unseen signal, more of the bizarre little warriors materialized from the jungle blackness, many more. Dozens emerged side-by-side, their primitive but deadly weapons at the ready. In that one moment, the situation had changed completely, and now the Americans were outnumbered, surrounded and suddenly at the mercy of these strange, silent people.

Nygaard watched helplessly while the mountain men quickly formed a circle three-deep around them. Their leader spoke again, and Flockheart was released. Weak with fear, he sat by the fire, head in his hands and quietly wept. He'd been face-to-face with the Japanese many times, but this situation was too surreal, too extraordinary and too far outside his range of experience. Delaney and Michaels slowly dropped their rifles and put their hands on their heads. Captain Nygaard's eyes darted to his men, then locked on the bolo leader. "You men stand fast!" he ordered, but to no avail. His soldiers realized something he wasn't yet ready to admit, their situation was hopeless.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the circle of savage creatures tightened. Sixty crouching mountain tribesmen moved toward them shoulder-to-shoulder, weapons at the ready. The wild, painted faces, feathered headdresses and extravagant, arcane jewelry made from animal parts mesmerized the terrified Americans. The little campfire popped, sparks drifted on the night breeze. Michaels and Delaney squatted by their weapons. Lobatto crossed himself in silent prayer, and Sullivan did the same.

Suddenly, the ever-tightening cordon stopped, and six of the dwarfish tribesmen stepped back, leaving a hole in their circle leading into the jungle. Sergeant Rosa held his breath. What were they doing? Letting them go, offering them a path out? Rosa and the captain exchanged uncertain glances. What was that? A noise outside the perimeter. The Americans strained to listen, to hear anything at all.

Another noise, barely audible. That's when he emerged from the jungle blackness, the ghostly figure of an old black man, a Negro with white hair and mustache. Sergeant Rosa thought the man a retired janitor, or a Pullman porter because he had on some type of uniform. He wore a pressed blue shirt and a red scarf around his neck, brown trousers with leggings and brown leather boots. His freshly brushed campaign hat was square and the brim two fingers above the nose, conforming to military standards. The old man wore a United States Army uniform, but the army

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of another century! He paused for a moment at the edge of the camp, brown eyes, boots and leather glowing in the fire's light. Stillness reigned in the camp, the Americans afraid to speak, afraid to break the spell. Who was this strange man, this Negro, standing before them looking like a photograph in a history book?

The old man came forward slowly, stopped in front of the captain and saluted. "Private David Fagen, 24th Infantry, sir."

Dumbfounded, Captain Nygaard managed to bring himself to attention and return the salute.

The old man spread his arms to indicate the others. "These fine soldiers around us, my soldiers, are people you might call Igorrotes, mountain people. You see them now dressed for battle, but when they're not fighting Japanese, they're a civilized, peace-loving people. They tell me the enemy has surrounded your patrol, and you're in need of assistance."

Captain Nygaard's fear quickly dissolved into dizzying confusion. He felt lost, spellbound by the man's gentle, but wizened gaze. Was this man real? Was he human? Nygaard reminded himself he was an army officer addressed by an enlisted man, pulled himself together and said, "You and your men may stand at ease, Private...?"

"Fagen, sir. 24th Infantry." Fagen turned to his men and issued a gentle command. The Igorrote soldiers lowered their weapons. He spoke once more, and half of the men disappeared into the jungle, the rest settled into little clusters at the edge of the perimeter. The Americans breathed an audible sigh of relief as their captors dispersed.

Captain Nygaard motioned for the old private to sit. Rosa placed more wood on the small fire. "You have information about the Japanese in this area, Private Fagen?"

"Yes, sir, I do. The information you received on your radio is correct. The 11th and 13th Japanese battalions linked up this morning, and they're on the run. Most of the fight's gone out of them, but they're between you and where you want to go. I can get you out of here and back to your people, but we have to wait until just before dawn."

Suspicious, Nygaard took stock of the man sitting across from him. "How do you know so much about enemy troop movements?"

"I know everything that goes on in the mountains, sir." Fagen nodded to indicate his soldiers. "We've fought the Japanese in these hills for years."

"You say the 11th and the 13th are on the run? Where?"

"To the high ground west of the valley. Most are sick with fever, and they're short on ammunition and other supplies. Two days ago, they

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disabled their heavy artillery, but they're carrying their mortars and RPGs with them. I expect that's what you came here to find out, isn't it Captain?"

"How many men total?"

"Eight hundred give or take. As I said, they're mostly sick and hungry, but they're still a force to be reckoned with. The Japs fight hard, sick or well."

"If you know where the Japanese are, why are you still here in this stinking place?"

Fagen peered out into the dark river valley for a moment, and then gazed deep into the captain's eyes. "This stinking place is my home, sir."

The patrol leader stood up, paced around the fire, and then turned and faced the old man. "You say you can get us through, back to our line?"

"Yes, sir, I surely can."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You can trust me because I'm an American, sir."

"You may be an American, but I don't know anything about you except your name and rank. What did you mean when you said these mountains are your home? Where did you get that old uniform?"

Fagen took a small pipe from his blouse and a black leather pouch, "Do you mind if I smoke, sir?"

A different camp then, crowded with Igorrote tribesmen, Delaney and Sullivan went back to work on the radio, a task that intrigued the Filipino mountain men, but Cryder took center stage with his copy of Life magazine and its war-coverage photos of American victories and dead Japanese soldiers. Sergeant Rosa and the captain sat near the fire with the old man.

Fagen's voice, low but strong, blended with the other night sounds. "My regiment, the 24th Infantry, was the first troop of Negro soldiers to fight in the Philippines, sir."

"When was that?" Nygaard asked.

"In the spring of '99."

"1899? What was a regiment of Negro soldiers doing here in 1899?"

Fagen answered patiently, as though he addressed a child. "We came to fight the war, sir."

"The war? What war?"

Sergeant Rosa spoke up. "The Spanish-American war, sir. After the fight for Cuba, when Spain surrendered to the U.S., we got all her colonies in the Pacific; Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Guam

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and Puerto Rico were glad we took over, but here Filipino insurgents had waged war against the Spanish for years. When we showed up, Spain was happy to turn these islands over to us and go home. The trouble was, the Filipinos saw us as just another oppressor. They didn't want foreign masters in their country, Spanish or American."

The old man smiled at Rosa, "You know your history, Sergeant."

"I'm Filipino-American. My grandmother died in that war."

"I'm sorry. How did it happen?"

"Nobody knows. She lived in Santa Cruz, northwest of here. One day, she went out and never came back. My father and mother came to the United States just before I was born, in 1920."

Fagen smiled at Rosa. "Welcome home."

"By the time the Spanish surrendered, the Filipinos had already elected a new President, a man named Aguinaldo."

Fagen gazed deep into the firelight and murmured, "Emilio Aguinaldo."

Rosa continued, "He'd been the leader of the insurrection, and as far as the Filipinos were concerned, the patriot savior of their country. Aguinaldo tried to bargain with Admiral Dewey for U.S. recognition of his Presidency, but America was in an expansionist mood. We wanted these islands, and we weren't willing to turn them over to anybody. Aguinaldo decided to fight. The bloodshed went on for years."

"And took nearly five-hundred-thousand Filipino lives," the old private said.

Rosa nodded, "That too."

Astonished, Captain Nygaard looked sharply at the old man. "Five-hundred-thousand dead? Impossible!"

"I assure you, sir, it was more than possible," Fagen replied.

The captain looked back at Rosa, "What finally happened?"

"Aguinaldo was eventually captured. With him out of the picture, the natives' struggle was hopeless, and the fight for independence petered out. The Americans won. These islands have been under our protection since. I guess that's one reason we're here now."

The old private leaned forward, his black skin tight over his skull, eyes glowing in the firelight. "Those were troubled times, Captain, all throughout this land, but I was young then and proud to wear the uniform of my country."

Out of the jungle blackness a night bird called, and far away the call was answered.