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The Return of the Bells of Balangiga to the Republic of the Philippines, in Context

Background on the Balangiga Massacre

On September 28, 1901, during the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), Filipino guerrillas reportedly rang the bells of the Catholic Church at Balangiga, a small town on the eastern island of Samar, to signal an attack on U.S. troops who were occupying the town. The guerrillas ambushed soldiers of Company C, 9th Infantry Regiment outside the army barracks. An estimated 44-48 American soldiers were killed and dozens more were wounded.

Brigadier General Jacob F. Smith launched a retaliatory campaign, ordering the 11th Infantry Regiment to burn Balangiga, to turn Eastern Samar into a “howling wilderness” and to shoot any Filipino male above 10 years of age. Thousands of Filipinos, including non-combatants, were killed. Smith was court-martialed for his brutality and forced to retire. The 11th Infantry seized all three church bells—some refer to them as “war trophies.” One bell was given to the 9th Infantry. The 11th Infantry took two bells and returned with them to Fort D. A. Russell (now F. E. Warren Air Force Base) in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1904. In 1967, the two bells from Fort D. A. Russell were placed in a curved red brick wall constructed as a memorial at Warren AFB with a bronze plaque between the bells recounting the massacre at Balangiga. See **Figure 1**.

The bells remained at the fort while the 9th Infantry kept its bell and has it on display at the U.S. Army’s Camp Red Cloud, Uijeongbu, South Korea.

Figure 1. Two of the Bells of Balangiga on Display in Wyoming



Source: Wyoming State Historical Society website at <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/bells-balangiga>

Prohibition on the Return of Veterans Memorial Objects

Federal law (10 U.S.C. §2572(e)) prohibits the transfer by the United States of any “veterans memorial object” to a foreign country or entity controlled by a foreign government or to any person or entity for the purpose of an ultimate transfer to a foreign government or entity. The law defines *veterans memorial object* as any object or physical structure that

- is located at a national cemetery, war memorial, or military installation in the United States;
- is dedicated to or otherwise recognizes the death in combat or combat-related duties of members of the armed forces; and
- was brought to the United States from abroad before 1907 as a memorial of combat abroad.

The prohibition on the transfer of veterans memorial objects expires on September 30, 2022.

NDAA Provisions in FY2000, FY2006 and FY2013

The first moratorium on returning the bells was attached to the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (P.L. 106-65, Section 1051) enacted on October 5, 1999. This provision was a response to the Clinton Administration’s willingness to return one of the bells to the Philippines, in cooperation with then President of the Philippines Fidel Ramos’s efforts to obtain the bells during the 1990s. Ramos proposed a compromise for the United States and the Philippines to share the two bells in Wyoming. The bells would be recast and duplicates made with both the United States and the Philippines receiving an original and a duplicate bell. The Philippine government expressed willingness to absorb the costs involved. However, U.S. veterans groups, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Wyoming congressional delegation opposed the bells return. In the 2000s, then governor of Wyoming, Dave Freudenthal, also opposed their return.

Opposition in the United States centered on the “dangerous precedent” of destroying the veterans memorial at Warren Air Force Base if the bells were removed according to members of the Wyoming congressional delegation. Continuing opposition by several veterans groups and politicians in the United States over the years halted any further discussion. Subsequently, Congress passed the FY2006 NDAA (P.L. 109-163, §1061) on January 6, 2006, which extended the moratorium through FY2010. This provision was again extended to September 30, 2017, in the FY2013 NDAA (P.L. 112-239, §355), enacted on January

2, 2013. That was the status until the FY2018 provision was enacted on December 17, 2017.

FY2018 NDAA Authorization of Return of the Bells of Balangiga

While the memorial wall at Warren AFB, including the Bells of Balangiga, meets the definition of *veterans memorial object*, a provision in the NDAA for FY2018 (P.L. 115-91) specifically authorizes the return of all three bells to the Republic of the Philippines if certain conditions are met. Section 2864(c) of the FY2018 NDAA authorizes the transfer of the Bells of Balangiga to the Republic of the Philippines if the Secretary of Defense certifies to Congress that such transfer is in the national security interest of the United States and that

appropriate steps have been taken to preserve the history of the veterans associated with the object, including consultation with associated veterans organizations and government officials in the State of Wyoming, as appropriate.

The actual transfer of the Bells of Balangiga to the Republic of the Philippines could not take place until at least 90 days after this certification to Congress by the Secretary of Defense. On August 9, 2018, Defense Secretary Mattis notified Congress regarding the return of the Bells in a confidential letter to members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. “We are aware that the Bells of Balangiga have deep significance for a number of people, both in the United States and in the Philippines,” Mattis said in a statement.

On November 14, 2018, during a ceremony at F. E. Warren AFB in Cheyenne, Secretary Mattis announced the return of the three Bells to the Philippines. Jose Manuel Romualdez, the Philippine ambassador to the United States, also attended the ceremony. On December 11, 2018, the Bells were officially turned over to the Republic of the Philippines at a ceremony in Manila. At this ceremony Sung Kim, U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, stated that the return of the Bells “underscores the enduring friendship, partnership and alliance between our countries.”

Return of Bells Captured in War

The Balangiga Bells are not the only seized bells displayed by the U.S. military. During times of conflict, some experts say, church and temple bells were taken not only as war souvenirs but also removed strategically to prevent them from being melted down to make weapons. At least three other bells were also considered war relics at the time they were taken and were later displayed at military institutions until they were recently returned to their country of origin.

Gokoku-ji Bell at the U.S. Naval Academy

Commodore Matthew Perry brought this bronze bell dating from 1465 back from Okinawa, Japan, in 1853. Historically, it is unclear whether Perry’s men took the bell, then located at the entrance to the harbor, or whether it was given as a diplomatic gift. Nevertheless, Perry intended for it to be placed inside the Washington Monument, which was being constructed. However, after Perry’s death in 1858, the bell was donated by his widow to the Naval Academy and placed in front of Bancroft Hall, where

officials rang it on special occasions. The Navy returned the 500-year-old bell to Japan in a ceremony attended by then Secretary of the Navy James H. Webb Jr. on July 22, 1987, after years of diplomatic wrangling. The Gokoku-ji Bell was transported to Okinawa at Japanese expense and remains on display in the Okinawa Prefectural Museum. A replica was made of the original bell and is on display at the academy.

Dai Sen Zen-ji Bell at the Virginia Military Institute

During the Battle of Okinawa in June 1945, a 15th-century Buddhist bell, also known as the Daishozen-Ji Bell, was seized by the U.S. Sixth Marine Division and presented as a gift to their commanding officer, Major General Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., on June 21, 1945. Shepherd later donated the bell to his alma mater, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in 1955, where it was displayed next to the college library. In September 1990, Oshiro Shinjun, then a member of the Japanese Parliament, wrote to the superintendent at VMI asking for the bell to be returned. VMI agreed. The bell was returned in June 1991. The cost of the bell’s return was paid by the nongovernmental Shuri Castle Commission, the entity in charge of displaying the bell in front of the ancient Shuri Castle in Naha, Okinawa.

San Pedro Bell at the West Point Catholic Chapel

Similar to the Balangiga Bells, the San Pedro Bell, dating from 1883, was removed by the U.S. Army from the Catholic Church of St. Peter and Paul in Bauang, La Union, Philippines, during the Philippine-American War. In 1915, Thomas H. Berry, then superintendent of West Point, obtained the bell for the Holy Trinity Catholic Chapel on post, but it was stored until 1959.

During the 1980s, the bell was discovered and placed outside of the chapel. In 2015, retired U.S. Navy rear admiral and military historian Dan McKinnon led the effort to return the bell. He had served in the Philippines during the Vietnam War and researched the Philippine-American War when he uncovered the history of the bell while researching the Balangiga Bells. McKinnon worked with Filipino historians, U.S. veterans, and Reverend Ronald Chan of the Church of St. Peter and Paul to advocate for the bell’s return. Chan wrote to then West Point Superintendent Lieutenant General Robert Caslen asking for the San Pedro Bell to be returned like other cultural relics returned from wartime Asia. In January 2016, Caslen agreed as “a gesture of goodwill and recognition of America and the Philippines’ enduring relationship.” The bell was rung for the last time at West Point on April 29, 2016. It was shipped to the Philippines and installed in front of St. Peter and Paul Church on May 23, 2016.

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