

# Filipino Martial Arts in the United States

By Marc Lawrence

*This article was put together originally as a way to share with my sons a way they could be proud of their Filipino-American Heritage. I am sharing this article based upon facts, written and oral history that I have been collecting on this subject for many years. There will be some that wish to dispute facts with me. Being a historian by hobby I am always willing to verbally debate this. I am also a Historic re-actor for US history and belong to the Philippine Scouts Heritage Society Lt. Nilinger Chapter, so I take great pride in sharing History with all of you. So enjoy this article and be willing to dig deep in the History of Filipino Martial Arts.*

Filipino martial arts as we call it today do not just show up in the Americas in the last 50 years but it has been here with the Filipinos that came here since the Spanish occupied United States. Originally the Manongs (older brothers) came here first were not called Filipinos but were called Manila men or Luzon Indios. As the people were under the Spanish Crown the men were pressed into military service. The first Filipinos came to California on October 19, 1587. This also was the first time Filipinos used their fighting art to defend themselves. One of them died while defending the others using sword and shield. (ref.1)



Nipa Hut- St. Malo village from Harper's Weekly 1883

In 1763, Filipinos made their first permanent settlement in the bayous and marshes of Louisiana. As sailors and navigators on board Spanish galleons, Filipinos - also known as "Manilamen" or Spanish - speaking Filipinos - jumped ship to escape the brutality of their Spanish masters. It was noted that 74 jumped ship in New Orleans. They built

houses on stilts along the gulf ports of New Orleans and were the first in the United States to introduce the sun-drying process of shrimp. One of the villages was called Manila Village (ref.2) another village was called St Malo. Which was well documented and sketched by Lafcadio Hearn for his article in Harpers Weekly in 1883 and it was the first article written about Filipinos in the US. Saint Malo was only one of the Filipino settlements in the Southern United States. The other settlements were the Manila Village on Barataria Bay in the Mississippi Delta by the Gulf of Mexico; Alombro Canal and Camp Dewey in Plaquemines Parish; and Leon Rojas, Bayou Cholas, and Bassa Bassa in Jefferson Parish, all in Louisiana. The oldest of these settlements, however was Saint Malo. But Manila Village on Barataria Bay was considered to be the largest and the most popular of them all. Houses on in Manila Village were built on stilts on a fifty-acre marshland. (ref#3)



St. Malo Village sketch from Harper's Weekly 1883

In 1781, Antonio Miranda Rodriguez first a settler (pobladores) then as a soldier, a Filipino, along with 44 other individuals was sent by the Spanish government from Mexico to

establish what is now known as the city of Los Angeles. He was noted as skilled gunsmith and was assigned to Santa Barbara highly paid soldier with the position of Armorer. He was not the only Filipino in Spanish military service in the Spanish service in the Continental US. Sometime the Filipinos were called Chinos or recorded by historians as mixed Indio and chino. The fighting skills were noted and they sought out. (ref.#4)

During the War of 1812, Filipinos from Manila Village (near New Orleans) were among the "Batarians" who fought against the British with Jean Lafitte in the Battle of New Orleans. They were called the Spanish Pirates from the swamps These Filipinos married to local Cajun women and established families. They known for fishing for shrimp and sun drying them for sale, a practice still carried on today by the local Cajun population. (ref.#5)

1860-1864 US Civil War Filipinos are recorded as fighting in the War Between the States. Records indicate that most served in the US Navy. (ref#6)



Philippine Military 1898



Philippine Scouts at World Fair  
1904 in Parade formation

1898 Spanish American war, American force joined with Filipino Freedom fighters against the Spanish



American Philippine Civil War 1899

forces and defeats them. Americans see first-hand the Filipino martial arts skills of Filipino Freedom fighters. This leads to failed promise of independence and the 1899 -1902 Filipino-American Civil War also called the Philippine Insurrection. 1903 the Philippine army surrendered. This war continued in pockets until 1913.

1917-1918 Filipino males who came from the Philippines to work as sakadas (contract workers) in the Hawaiian sugar, pineapple plantations and other industries were nonetheless

required to register in the U.S. military drafts of June 5, 1917, June 5, 1918 and September 12, 1918. While some volunteered, others were drafted, most of them serving in Schofield Barracks, Ft. Shafter and Hawaiian National Guards from the ranks of Privates to 1st Sergeants.

They worked as cooks, musicians, mechanics-occupations that Pilipinos remain skillful to these days. Almost four thousands Pilipino soldiers had served in the Hawaiian Infantry alone. Filipinos residing in other parts of the United States also volunteered or were drafted in the military. (ref.7)



“Poncho Villa” Elorde Pacquiao  
heavy weight boxing practice  
1920s

In the 1900's boxing was one of Victorian areas that were considered by many to keep young men away from gambling and alcohol. Boxing changed when Filipinos and mainland Americans met in Hawaii and on board US Navy ships in the Philippines. The US Armed Forces brought boxing as a martial art to the Philippines in the early 1900s. There US Armed forces changed their style to one similar to what the Filipinos were using.

Boxing was promoted between the soldier and sailor. It was supposedly to keep healthy body and mind and staving vices that would be otherwise learned. Matches became big time and the local Filipinos soon were invited for the challenge. Boxing changed drastically in a cultural exchange during the early 1900s in one of the greatest ethnic melting pots in history - Hawaii. Fights frequently occurred, and one's survival often depended on one's toughness. The 1920's are consider by many as the Golden Years of Filipino Boxing as paid professional Boxing came about giving rise to many famous

boxers like Poncho Villa. This caused an influx of Filipino martial arts skills into American boxing as Western boxing had been brought to the Philippines. (ref#8)

From 1905 into 1920's saw the rise of Pensionados and over 14,000 in 1920 alone (according to census) arrived and attended colleges to become educated leaders of the Common Wealth of the Philippines. This inspired others to come and work while attending school here in the main land US.

The first Filipino martial arts School in the US was established in the 1920's. Grandmaster Ramiro Estalilla, Jr's father, Ramiro A. Estalilla, Sr., taught Kabaroan Eskrima in Minneapolis, MN in the 1920s while studying at the Minnesota College of Law in Minneapolis, and was a special student (1923) of Military Science and Tactics at Saint Thomas College in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

In 1920, Estalilla's father came to the United States to study law at Saint Paul College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He worked as the Minneapolis Athletic Club as a waiter and taught the art of Kabaroan there from 1920 to 1929. (ref.#9)

The Philippine scouts were part of the Armed Forces of the Far East, they were known for the skills as fighters and as professional soldiers. The first Scout organizations were created in 1901 during the early days of the American occupation of the Philippine Islands by the induction of Filipinos into the service of the U. S. Armed Forces. Their mission was to help restore order and peace to a troubled area. In the ensuing two decades, the Philippine Scouts took part in subduing the fierce and warlike Moro tribes on the island of Mindanao and in the Jolo Archipelago and in establishing tranquility throughout the islands.



Macabebe scouts early 1900's

The Philippine Division was composed of two infantry regiments of Philippine Scouts - a term applied both to the Filipino enlisted men and their American officers - and one infantry regiment of American soldiers, a total of about 10,000 men. Philippine Scouts also served in a horse cavalry regiment, manned the coastal artillery and anti-aircraft batteries that defended Luzon Island, and staffed most of the support elements of the U.S. Army in the Philippines. Although the officers were generally Americans, there were a few Filipino officers in the Filipino regiments. In 1910 the U.S. began sending one outstanding Filipino soldier per year to West Point, and by 1941 some of



Philippines Scouts at Bataan 1941

these men had risen to the rank of senior officers. These were General MacArthur's soldiers - the guys who fought America's first battle of World War II. The Philippine Division, probably the best trained and possibly the best prepared U.S. Army division at the outset of that war. (ref#12)

In 1941-1945 The US army recognized their need to have Filipinos in the US Army as fighters. The 1st and 2nd "LAGING UNA" "SULUNG" Filipino Infantry Regiments were units of the Army of the

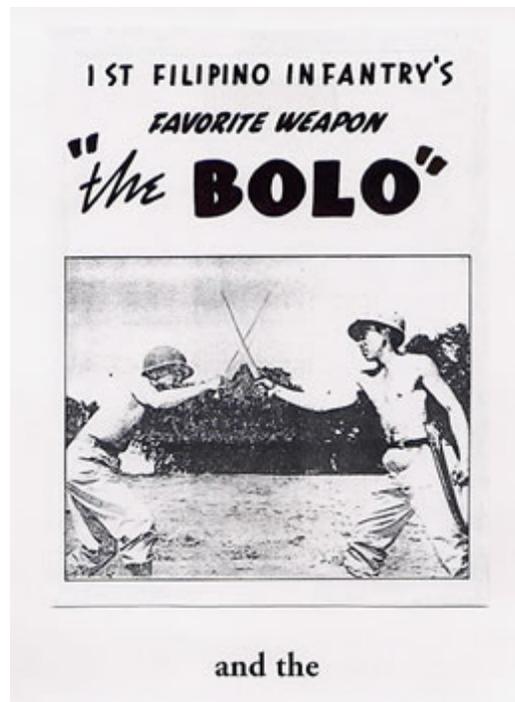


Filipino in US Navy WW-1

United States (AUS) inducted into service during World War II. They were wholly manned by Filipino citizens in US and the Hawaiian Territory and officered by both Filipinos and Americans. The "Bahala-Na Boys" of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion (Special) were known only as "commandos" in the Philippines. (ref#10)



US Army 1st Filipino regiment



1st Filipino Infantry Bolo demonstration



Filipino Americans showing off their Bolos  
US Army 1940's



Philippine scouts Bolo drill early 1900's

In Hawaii the Filipinos that stayed and worked the plantations that volunteered were organized into the Hawaii Riflemen. They served in the in place of the Territorial Guard units that had been called up for war. Hawaii Rifles, A cavalry militia on the Big Island composed primarily of plantation works; the insignia features a lehua flower Hawaii Defense Volunteers One of many local militias formed during World War II to aid regular-duty troops, the HDV were a well-organized group of Chinese and Filipino citizen-soldiers. Maui Volunteers neighbor-island militia, like the Kauai Volunteers. Since these were small organizations, Filipino Battalion This unit was composed of Filipinos living in the U.S. who wished to fight the Japanese. (ref.#11)

In 1947 Master Benjamin Luna Lema was requested by the United States Air Force to relocate to Agana, Guam, to instruct their enlisted men in hand-to-hand combat and arnis. In

1960-1961 Pedoy's School of Derobio Escrima which opened its doors to non-Filipinos in Hawaii. In 1966 Master Angel Cabalas opened his school and taught non-Filipinos the art of Serrada in Stockton California. (ref. #9). In the 1970's and 80s saw the Filipino Martial Arts start to spread across the US. It was the 1970's interest in martial arts that help shine light on the Filipino Fighting arts. Dan Inosanto and Richard Bustillo started teaching the Filipino Martial Arts in Southern California in 1970s. It was Dan's passion that led him to share his art with Bruce Lee, who used it his movies. This increased the public awareness of Filipino Martial Arts. Dan Inosanto also wrote a book on the subject of Filipino Martial Arts that helped increase public awareness as well.

In summary Filipino martial arts have been demonstrated and taught here in the US for several hundred years under a variety of name like fencing, boxing and wrestling. Only in the last 100 years has it been recognized and in its own light in the last 50 years! Filipino martial artists have contributed their fight skills to the defense of their homes here in America for over 400 years. I look forward to what the future holds for Filipino-Americans who practice their art and continue to pass along their knowledge here in the US.

**Ref.#1** The first Philippine Idios by Hector Santos © 1995 &1997

**Ref.#2** MSM Encarta Encyclopedia-Filipino

**Ref.#3** Marina Espina - Filipinos in Louisiana (A. F. Laborde & Sons, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1988, Lafcadio Hearn- St. Malo Harpers Weekly 188

**Ref.#4-** 1781, Antonio Miranda Rodriguez by a Historical lecture by Eloisa Gomez Borah Santa Barbara

**Ref.#5** An excerpt from the book The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans by Jane Lucas de Grummond (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**Ref.#6** FILIPINOS IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR by Nestor Palugod Enriquez,

**Ref.#7** Filipino WW-1 US Military Service-Maria Elizabeth Del Valle Embry

**Ref.#8** Did Filipino Martial Arts Revolutionize Boxing? by Lisa L. How &(see Shadow Boxing and Politics by Nestor P.Enriquez)

**Ref.#9** 20th-Century Arnis The Reemergence of a Warrior's Art By Mark V. Wiley

**Ref.# 10** History of the 1st & 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiments By 1LT David T. Vivit (AUS, Ret)

**Ref.#11** Hawaii War Records Depository (HWRD)

**Ref.#12** The Philippine Scouts by Chris SchaeferCopyright © 2002-2009 Philippine Scouts Heritage Society