

# THE FOREST

A personal record of the Huk guerrilla struggle in the Philippines

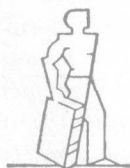
by WILLIAM J. POMEROY



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*A Personal Record of the Huk  
Guerrilla Struggle in the Philippines*

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*To Celia*

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*A Personal Record of the Huk Guerrilla  
Struggle in the Philippines*

## Publisher's Note

*The author of this book, William J. Pomeroy, was born in a small town in upstate New York on November 25, 1916. He reached the Philippines during World War II, when he served in the U.S. Army as an historian attached to the Fifth Air Force. He came in contact then with the Huk movement and learned the meaning of colonialism and of a colonial liberation movement. After the war he returned to the Philippines as a free-lance writer of short stories, essays, and feature articles for the Manila press, and studied at the University of the Philippines. In 1948 he married a Filipina, Celia Mariano, daughter of a former auditor of the University and herself a U.P. graduate. Together they joined the Huk movement in the Sierra Madre mountains in 1950, in the role of teachers and writers. Captured in 1952 during a government military operation, they were both sentenced to life imprisonment for "rebellion complexed with murder, robbery, arson, and kidnapping." They served ten years as political prisoners before being released through pardon. William Pomeroy was deported immediately to the United States. His wife was prevented from accompanying him by American immigration laws and by the refusal of the Philippine government to grant her a passport, which also prevents her from joining him elsewhere. Separated ever since, they have been waging a fight to be together that has won broad support. The Forest is an account of their experiences during the two years they spent with the Huks in the field. It was written originally in prison, scribbled on paper that had to be kept hidden from the prying guards. The finished manuscript finally had to be left behind because of the rigid shakedown that occurred when the Pomeroyes were released. It was later rewritten from memory, retaining the intensity and impact of an immediate experience that was still being endured when it was transcribed.*

July 1963.



THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS. *The heavy oblong indicates the area of the detailed map on the next page.*



ARENA OF THE GUERRILLA WAR. Heavy crosses indicate the main production bases; the light cross shows the raided camp, and the dotted line the wandering after the raid. The dotted line to the North, marked "Long March," shows the escape route described towards the end of the book.

# 1.

April 1950

Whoever enter forest leave behind the open world.

As Celia and I do on this summer Sunday in the month of April, 1950, walking out of our house in Santa Ana, Manila, locking the door and leaving all the furniture standing there behind us, to take the road to forest.

Our courier is a young girl from the provinces, a young round-faced girl with a kerchief over her head. She walks down Herran Street a little distance ahead of us, swinging the *pandan* basket called a *bayong*, and we follow, getting on the same jeepney with her with never a word or a glance at each other. At the terminal on Azcarraga Avenue we get on the bus and take the seat behind her and she sits quietly without turning her head, looking the way a shy provincial girl in the big city ought to look.

The big wide-bodied provincial bus rumbles down the sunny streets southward out of Manila and Celia and I look out upon the city for a final time, at the houses in their foliage, at the corner of Taft and Tennessee where we met when courting. We sit holding each other's hands. Behind us we leave two years of perfect married life, the two happiest years we have ever known or are ever likely to know.

The open world. The salt beds at Parañaque lying open to the sky; the church at Las Piñas where the road bends under shady trees; the young people in their Sunday best standing in the yards by the bamboo fences, the young girls in white dresses, the boys with pomaded hair; the bus station at Calamba where the little vendors swarm below our window calling out their wares of *sorbetes*, *calamay*, sugar cane and roasted corn; the leaden grey sheen of the inland lake, Laguna de Bay, on our left, supine and hazy in the heat; a lone peasant in a dry rice paddie wearing a broad hat and walking barefoot behind a carabao, the level brown sun-struck fields stretching far away to a rim of trees; the market place at Santa Cruz, where we change buses and sit in the other vehicle for a long time, waiting for passengers to fill it, with the



scent of *muscovado*, *bagoong* and dried fish coming in to us from the stalls, our eyes covertly upon the Constabulary troopers roving in the crowd.

They are an indication, those Constabulary men, that all is not open in the open world. A hidden world is here, too, under the murmur in the market place, extending all across this country. For this is a country in revolt, in these days of 1950, and everywhere there are people who talk and organize and work in hidden ways. The passive-faced vendor with eyes lowered upon her wares, the peasant walking in the field, the people on buses, even the young people laughing by a fence, may all be part of the hidden world.

Only a week ago the armed force called the Huks appeared suddenly out of forest and field at a dozen widely-separated places and attacked garrisons of Constabulary and police. Now, along the road, there are many military checkpoints, the bus stopping often and troopers armed with carbines coming into the aisles, hard faced, poking at parcels, walking around the bus and peering into windows as if trying to penetrate a screen. The eyes pass over an American and his Filipina wife, and a young girl in a kerchief. Now we sit in the market place and the eyes touch us and pass again.

At last, with an agonized clashing of gears, we start, swaying down a road lined with palm trees. We are in coconut country now, away from rice fields. Here the land problem is acute, little holdings measured in trees and in the few sacks of copra obtained from them. The poverty strikes one like a blow, little shabby towns, naked children, sagging huts beside a pit where copra smokes. People stand along the road, on Sunday, in faded patched garments, lifting lackluster eyes up at the bus.

We turn left along the Bay. To our right, hills suddenly lift, a steep slope, forested. This is the foot of the Sierra Madre, the long mountain range that runs like a spine along the entire length of the island of Luzon. We look upward at it, rim of the open world.

Cautiously now, we look too along the aisle. Who sits in these seats? Are they all the peasants that they seem, returning from market, or from church, or from a family visit? Nothing is re-

vealed in the impassive features, but what intent lies there? The government, too, has hidden people, the agents, who follow and watch and note. Are they watching where we go?

It is late afternoon. In huts we pass there is a flicker of fire under the *kalan* as the evening meal is prepared; the scent of woodsmoke comes into the bus. The falling sun is a glare across the Bay, covering seats and the faces of passengers with a sad unnatural red. Long poles of shadow lie across the road and we seem to be hurrying toward the dark as we rush along it with a roar and dust.

The courier shifts in her seat. We are nearing our destination. Houses bubble up out of the twilight on either side of the road, and the bus halts abruptly, the dust surging forward. It is the town of Longos, Laguna. We get up and follow the courier out of the bus. Are we imagining things or does everyone stare at us, the driver, the passengers, the bystanders at the dingy *tienda* by the road? Hurriedly we follow after the courier as she walks away between houses.

At a distance from the road she stops under the coconut trees and turns to wait for us, laughing and at ease. This is her town, an organized place of the hidden world, and she feels safe in it. We laugh, too, hesitantly, away from the eyes. She guides us quickly over a path through banana plants and past bamboo fences that have the film of dusk upon them, to a tiny house down near the Bay edge. We stand close to the side of the house while the girl calls softly. Frogs croak from the water and there is the smell of sedge. A woman appears at the door, at the top of the bamboo-runged ladder, and motions us to come in.

We sit in the one-roomed house, changing our clothes at the courier's suggestion, putting on rubber-soled canvas shoes. The night seeps in through a million cracks. Typical of peasant homes, there is no furniture, and we sit upon the floor. The woman in the house is alone and is one of the hidden ones, widow of a man killed in battle by government troops. She is very pleased at our presence and moves about the room preparing a meal between bits of low-toned conversation with Celia about the ways of an American husband. The coconut oil lamp on the floor throws her shadow grotesquely on the sawali wall and roof.

Everyone talks in low tones, as if the hushed illumination demanded a hush of sound.

Do they know we are here? we ask the courier. They know, she says.

When supper is ready it is rice and a small can of sardines, spread on a banana leaf upon the floor. The sardines, in the way that they are handled, are obviously something unusual and special in this house, given as a treat to visitors. We eat with our hands.

A step is on the ladder. We turn. A young man enters the house, clad in a white shirt with its ends tied in a knot in front. A .45 pistol is stuck nakedly in his belt. He is grinning, and nods to the woman and to the courier, and they look at him with affection.

Come, he says. We go.

We pick up our bags and follow him without a further word. Outside it is very dark and still, with here and there a slit of light from a hut. The young man walks swiftly and we stumble keeping up with him, following the faint white blur of his shirt. I have a flashlight but I dare not switch it on.

Our feet jar on a hard surface; we cross a road and dip down behind houses on the other side. Suddenly we are brought to a halt. I am aware of movement about us and hastily I switch on the light. A hand grips my arm. *Patay ang ilaw!* Put out the light! Immediately I kill the light but not before I have had a momentary glimpse of men, baggage, and the sheen of guns.

We are with the Huks.

## 2.

Immediately the ground rises and we are among trees. In the darkness I can see nothing and can follow only the sounds of motion ahead of me. Celia! I call softly. I am here, her voice comes out of the darkness ahead of me. I stumble over roots and blunder into trees. Hands come out of the night to assist me. I feel blind and guided by unknown forces.

For some time we climb in complete silence. Someone has re-

lieved me of my bag and I use my arms to feel the way. From somewhere there is the sound of water running over stones, and then my feet are in the cold flow of it. Damn it, I think, my new shoes.

Far below a car goes by on the road, an insect whirr, antennae of light wavering ahead of it. It is gone then into night silence. A last glimmer of the open world.

I am very tired, my legs heavy and tight from the steep climb. The phosphorescent hands on my watch tell me an hour has passed. When I slow down the man behind me in the single-filed line pushes my back gently and says, Hurry. So for another hour we hurry.

A word comes down the line, spoken, surprisingly, aloud: Halt! Abruptly I run into someone ahead of me. It is Celia. We are stopping to rest, she says. We sit down wearily in that spot, leaning into a bush.

All down the line there is a sudden eruption of sound. I hear baggage being dropped and men scrambling on the slope, calling to one another in Tagalog and in Pampango, then the hacking of bolos on trees. After the long silence it is startling and a bit alarming. What is going on? Do they know what they are doing? There is the sound of branches flung down near me. A match rasps and light flowers out of the dark.

We are on a side of the slope away from the town. Here the trail has broadened and made an alcove in the slope, the rock above projecting out and making of it a shallow cavern. A fireplace has been set up, two forked sticks with a crosspiece from which a pot of rice is suspended. The fire blazes up, transforming the night, and out of it loom our castaway faces.

For the first time we can see clearly our companions. They surround the fire, perhaps twenty of them, with eager, grinning faces, as anxious to get a glimpse of the *Amerikano* as I am to see them. They are all young, and some have long hair that gives them a girlish look. No one wears what could be called a uniform; all are dressed indiscriminately and shabbily, some with shoes and some without.

These are the Huks, the dreaded Filipino guerrilla fighters, whose name has spread a tremor of fear from landlord hearts in

the Philippines all the way to Washington. They have come out of the central plains, from the tenancy regions where the landlords use private armies to terrorize the people, to spread across the country carrying the revolutionary slogan of land and freedom. HMB. *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan*. Army of National Liberation.

They do not at first glance look the role. One would take them for any group of peasants squatting by a roadside, except for one thing—the guns. It is the guns that catch the eye and turn this casual group into one that is somehow more frightening than any body of regular troops. These are not ordinary peasants; these are a people in arms.

Carelessly they hold them, at every angle—Garands, carbines, Browning automatic rifles, pistols, grease guns, the weapons of ambush and of swift movement. Some have bandoliers of ammunition; other carry bullets merely in a piece of sackcloth. Where do the guns come from? Jokingly, with little humor, they say, Washington is our arsenal. There are guerrillas who say that, with irony, around the world.

They are very curious about the American who has come to join them but they do not make their curiosity too apparent. They have pride. After a brief introduction they go about their business, tending the fire, looking to their arms, fixing the straps on their baggage. However, they joke among themselves as they work, with sidelong looks at me: Do not English me, I have not school.

In the town they have had another mission besides meeting Celia and me: they have obtained supplies, rice, sugar, salt, dried fish, *mongo*; each man carries a heavy burden in a burlap sack along with his weapon and his belongings.

The rice is cooked. It is dumped out on a long banana leaf, with pieces of dried fish scattered around the white steaming mounds. We squat beside it in the light of the fire and eat. They are delighted when I use my fingers, like them, but when I burn myself handling the hot rice everybody laughs and voices rise on the night air. I say, *Masyadong mainit*. It is very hot. They look at me in mock amazement. *Ay, Pilipino siya*, they say. Why, he's a Filipino. We are very cheerful. We are beyond the point where

Constabulary patrols usually come at night, so everyone is relaxed. Nevertheless, a guard is stationed down the trail to the rear.

The meal done, we immediately prepare to march. Traces of fire and eating are smoothed over and the remains thrown down a steep slope. It is easier to walk, somehow, when the relationship among us has been established, as if it has stripped away part of the screen of darkness. There is less hurry, and the camaraderie lightens feet.

Finally, at midnight, we come out upon the plateau that lies above Longos. Here are coconut plantations and the large barrio of San Antonio, an organized place. However, we skirt it, mainly to prevent too much notice of an American, about whom reports would spread in spite of caution. We wind through the groves of coconut trees. After the long climb it is pleasurable to walk on level ground and we move swiftly, but keeping utter silence.

The moon is up. We move under silver, the broad fronds and boles of palms burnished and looking as heavy as metal in the stillness. I look behind and ahead at the long file of marchers, moving ghostlike in and out of moonlight without sound, the silver showing on the barrels of guns.

One stop is made. We sit about under the trees, half-nebulous images of silver, while one man rapidly runs up a trunk, running up the outer arc of a bow-bent tree, and throws down coconuts. The husk is chopped away with a bolo and the eyeholes pierced and we tip up the rough nut and drink the tangy liquid thirstily.

I am now fully at home with this group. If one behaves in a strange place as if surprised at nothing, acting as if nothing is unusual or strange to him, he soon merges with the surroundings.

Near dawn we emerge out of coconut groves onto a grassy place beside a stream. We will stop here and have breakfast, says our escort leader, a young man of deliberate movement who is indistinguishable from the others in appearance. I am very tired and I fling myself down beside Celia and lay back in the grass, indifferent to the dew that dampens it. I close my eyes. When I awake it is full dawn.

I turn and see the forest.

Along the far edge of the field it rises abruptly, like an escarp-

ment, the reddish-brown trunks lifting branchless a hundred sheer feet before the massed green of foliage begins. Nothing stirs upon that cliff-face. Above, the green crown towers up and up in stages on the slope until it is hidden in the mist that roils in the early sunlight. The great trunks stand there brutally, the raw and sudden face of wilderness, and nothing can be seen of the interior, only those vast portals to shadow and to silence.

I am stunned by the sight of the forest. I can only tear my eyes away when I hear the men talking of this place where we sit. Here, a few weeks ago, these same men ambushed a Constabulary patrol that dared to come this far. Animatedly they point to where the firing line lay, to where enemies were hit, and to where two Huks were wounded. I am uneasy sitting there in full light in that open space, and I eat my rice and dried fish hurriedly. It is a relief when we rise to leave.

The line assembles and we go across the open space toward the forest wall that looms higher and more formidable as we approach. There is the smell of dampness and of vegetable decay as we enter the startling shadow. I turn for one more look at the open world. Across the open area in the grass we have left a dark trail upon the sunlit whiteness of the dew, a trail that will vanish in the morning as we, too, are vanishing. Far beyond it two men emerge from the coconut grove, our rear guard, and I see them there in the sun, figures of our time, unhurried, carrying their guns. I turn and follow the dim trail, running into depths.

We have lost the sky, and the forest is all around us.

### 3.

Always the mountain forest has sheltered the Philippine urge to liberty. When oppression has lived in the lowlands, the high forest has been the refuge of the hunted and harassed: Diego Silang, Dagohoy, Apolinario de la Cruz, Malvar, Sakay, Asedillo. In Philippine history there have been over 200 recorded revolts, against Spaniard and Englishman, against American and Japanese, and against Filipinos, too, and in most of them there have been flights to forest.

Who knows, therefore, how many camps have stood where this one does today, or how many shadowy elbows brush against ours? Plant and vine have covered all old traces, and new growth has sprung up to hide a new generation.

This camp to which we have come is built on a series of little ridges, five in number, heavily wooded, separated by ravines. On the outer ridges are the security huts, covering approaches. On the inner ridges are the camp households, each hut housing a unit engaged in specific work—military, education, organization, finance, couriers. A school stands on one ridge top. Between two ridges the ravine has a flat bottom and there stands the social hall, a structure larger than the others, with a floor of sawn lumber—a special feature because it is for the use of the whole group. Outside the social hall, a tall sapling has been stripped of its bark and its branches and there, on holidays, fly the Philippine flag and the red banner of the HMB.

This is a headquarters site, location of Huk Regional Committee (Reco) No. 4 and of the movement's National Education Department. Approximately 80 people live here. Literally hundreds of other camps, housing from ten to 150 Huks, are scattered over Luzon and upon other islands of the archipelago, in mountains, in forest, in swamp, in the grasslands areas, giving base and shelter to perhaps 10,000 Huks, armed guerrilla soldiers and political workers of one category or another. These are the people of the Outside, the hidden world that exists beyond the open world, and that gives direction to the large mass base of followers who live in barrios, towns and cities under the noses of the government troops.

This is a hidiers' place and from no point can all of it be seen. Thick trees cut each hut off from other huts and no one moves unnecessarily or makes unnecessary noise. It is a deceptive quiet, however. Under the leaf screen this camp pulses like a dynamo. Couriers continually come and go, and there is much hurrying by armed men and supply units on the trails, trails that branch out through all the forest and to many barrios. All day long the click of the mimeograph machine matches leaf rustle and lizard rush.

Here in these still surroundings is a nerve center of revolution. Revolt is at a high tempo in the Philippines in these early months



of 1950, and in this seemingly remote place its dwellers have their fingertips upon the rapid pulse. In the lowlands, in the towns and barrios embraced by this region, a hundred underground groups and units await the directives, the guidance, and the inspiration that the people in these huts provide. Here recruits come to study and here new units are formed and equipped, sent out to reach new sectors of the country. Over the mountain trails that fan out beneath the trees the couriers come from other Regional Committees (Recos) and from central organs in Manila, bringing reports and orders. Here upon the edge of events one can feel their surge, as a person standing on a shore in surf can sense the power of the ocean from the touch of the waves that reach him.

Here in the timeless immutable forest is the bustle of change. Some of these trees were here when Salcedo passed by in the lowlands, conquering for Spain. Some of them have seen the people who fought that conquest, and, later, those who overcame it. This is the enduring place of renewal, where Filipinos have always come to reinvigorate themselves with that which is enduring in them as a people, their dignity and their desire to be free.

#### 4.

The social hall is lit up like a gigantic firefly in the night. There is a program scheduled to celebrate our arrival today, and everyone in camp is invited.

We climb down through the ravine from our hut, feeling our way by flashlight over root and stone. Figures come from all directions and our hands are gripped in greeting a dozen times in the darkness before we reach the hall. Light sprays out from under the low roof of *anahaw* leaves, from a Coleman lamp. Beyond, green leaf and branch stand waxen, transfixed in the strange light.

Within, it is crowded, and all eyes follow us, the newly arrived. Huks sit on benches along the open sides or simply squat upon the wooden floor. There is much banter and boisterous greeting,