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PHOTOGRAPHER AGNES LOPEZ HONORS FILIPINX WWII VETERANS

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Persistence, Tenacity & Commitment

Photographer **AGNES LOPEZ** honors **FILIPINX WWII VETERANS**

story by MADELEINE PECK WAGNER • photos by AGNES LOPEZ and AMANDA ROSENBLATT

As many as 80,000 American and Filipinx POWs were forced to take a 65-mile trek over five arduous days in penetrating heat, with death and unspeakable abuse raining down from their captors, the Imperial Army of Japan. The Bataan Death March is just one terrible incident in a war replete with atrocities. Alas, World War II memories continue to fade as the few surviving soldiers age into their 80s and 90s. That global conflict feels so very far away, and so wholly the purview of the mid-20th century, it's easy to overlook the sacrifices of the men and women who survived, and the singularity of their stories.

Patricio Ganio was a Filipinx POW who lived through the Death March. After that ordeal, he fought against the Japanese occupation along with the guerilla resistance, hiding in the low-lying mountains on the islands in the Pacific Ocean theater. Later, as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army's 25th Division, he was awarded a Purple Heart. Ganio was one of 260,000 Filipinx soldiers who fought with American armed forces in WWII. Much later, after a 30-year teaching career, he fought for veterans' rights, specifically for the same benefits awarded to American veterans. He had to fight for them because, in 1946, Congress passed the Rescission Act, which denied Filipinx soldiers the benefits they'd been promised. Finally, in 2009, the United States authorized a small, one-time lump sum payment to surviving Filipinx veterans of WWII.



Emilio Teodoro, 99

World War II veteran Jacksonville

The Bataan Death March was a war crime committed by the Imperial Japanese Army against 60,000 to 80,000 Filipinx and American prisoners of war. It began on April 9, 1942 after the three-month-long Battle of Bataan in the Philippines. Living the nightmare, the prisoners saw pregnant women bayoneted, girls raped, friends and relatives executed or starved to death. They suffered physical, emotional and mental abuse, massacres, dismemberments and torture. Even now, the march is a part of history neither taught or talked about in Japan.

Ganio's story—and those of many veterans—takes on form and resonance through photographer Agnes Lopez's lens. She's spent a year photographing and interviewing WWII veterans of Filipino descent for the *Faces to Remember* project.

"This is a really important part of American history," she told Folio Weekly.

Lopez was inspired to create what would become *Faces to Remember, Portraits of World War II & Holocaust Survivors* by longtime client and friend Dana Rogozinski, who launched the J&E Legacy Collection jewelry line in honor of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor. For Lopez, the conversations she and Rogozinski had about the different cultures and familial history sparked a curiosity about her own family and cultural background.

"Growing up, she [Dana] was not that involved in the Jewish community," Lopez explained, "and the same for me. I wasn't that involved in the Filipino community. Then you get older, and then you realize what's important."

Lopez photographed Rogozinski's line of jewelry as well as Rogozinski's grandmother. One photo, captured in a cramped kitchen, sparked something.

"It inspired me to do more," said Lopez, who began photographing other Holocaust

survivors. "What I love about these photos is that you see these people's beauty. This is who they are."

With their velvety shadows and subtle greys, the black-and-white images reveal a depth of lived experiences. A viewer can glimpse who they once were, the deep humanity in their faces, and remember that history is built on individuals. It is humbling. The photographer clearly has a sense of timing, composition and historical reference. Printed larger-than-life, these portraits invite us to closely inspect, to imagine the victories and challenges the subjects faced during and after the war.

"I wanted to create a beautiful, impactful picture with very little. That was my challenge," said the photographer. She explained she usually arrives with only her camera bag, no big light set-ups, backdrops or props. "The thing is, you're going to look at every single detail."

For Jacksonville-based curator Aaron Levi Garvey, whose great-grandmother lost much of her extended family to Hitler's genocide, these portraits have meaning. "They give me the gentle reminder that there's an aging generation of storytellers still willing to share their experiences and have them documented. It particularly sits with me as my bubbie, Sylvia Marx, will be celebrating her centennial this August, and it brings back stories she told me about living in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York as a child."

When asked how she usually finds her subjects, Lopez said that it's mostly word of mouth. She started in Northeast Florida, and her pursuit has taken her across the country. "I saw on the news about how the [Filipinx] veterans were getting the Congressional Medal

of Honor, it was 2015 or 2016. Obama had signed a bill to get them awarded. I was, like, 'How do I not know this?'"

She started finding specifically Filipinx WWII veterans by reaching out to veterans' organizations, including the Bataan Legacy Organization. The photographer found that many veterans were receptive to being photographed. But their families weren't aware of the benefits to which these soldiers and their families were entitled. As she became more involved and informed, trust grew and more and more people were interested in her project.

In 2018, the Bataan Legacy Organization held a ceremony to award Congressional Medals to San Francisco-area vets. Lopez flew out to document it. We look at the photos taken that day, and one man's image stands out. Of that day, Lopez recalled, "When they did the ceremony, Mariano Aquisap started to cry. They [Filipinx veterans] had been battling and fighting to ... get this recognition for decades. It was so emotional in that room ... even now I think about it, how much it meant to them and how proud they were."

Lopez photographed David Tejada (his portrait hangs at Yellow House) at his home in the Bay area. He recalled that "when he was in the Death March, they put them in the concentration camp and then packed them into train cars. A lady was walking by [the train car] asking, 'Do you know my son, do you know my son?' He said, 'I think I might.' She said, 'Please, please, give him this basket of chicken.' He took the food, ate some of it and gave the rest to the other men. To this day, he has nightmares and cries when he thinks about it. He's 92 or 93. This is the one thing he's regretted his entire life." (When Tejada finally received counseling, the psychiatrist told him he had probably saved his own life, which helped him resolve 75 years of guilt.)

Lopez takes her mission quite seriously,

but she's dealing with humans, so it can be unpredictable: heartbreaking and, occasionally, hilarious. She recalls that when she went to photograph one soldier, he popped out, saying, "I'm ready" and he was dressed and ready to go." Ponciano Mauricio, who was about 100 years old, played tennis twice a week and had been married five times, greeted the photographer with a kiss. And since he was taking organ lessons at the time, he gave her a little concert in his home.

One thing that's overwhelmingly clear about this project is the pride. There is a deep sense of commitment to duty and country that still animates these veterans. It is, one senses, no small thing that they served and fought, in many instances continuing to fight for justice and fairness within their own sphere. Acclaimed historian Stephen Ambrose once said of WWII fighters, "I thought the returning veterans were giants who had saved the world from barbarism. I still think so."

Ambrose based much of his research on interviews with veterans about their experiences in combat. That focus on the personal and specific is deeply human, and it is the same thing that informs Lopez's photographs: the idea that these people are the heroes who walk among us. They're not the burnished commanders who sat in big convertibles at the front of parades; they're a neighbor down the street, or a person in the supermarket who understood duty to their country as the highest form of service.

"These are the types of people I'm coming across. These people you would never hear about, you'd never know about," said Lopez.

It's been about a year since she began her project, and it's beginning to build momentum. She's currently featured in the Yellow House show, *(Re)Set the Table*. The

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Patricio Ganio, 97

World War II veteran and Bataan Death March survivor Orange Park



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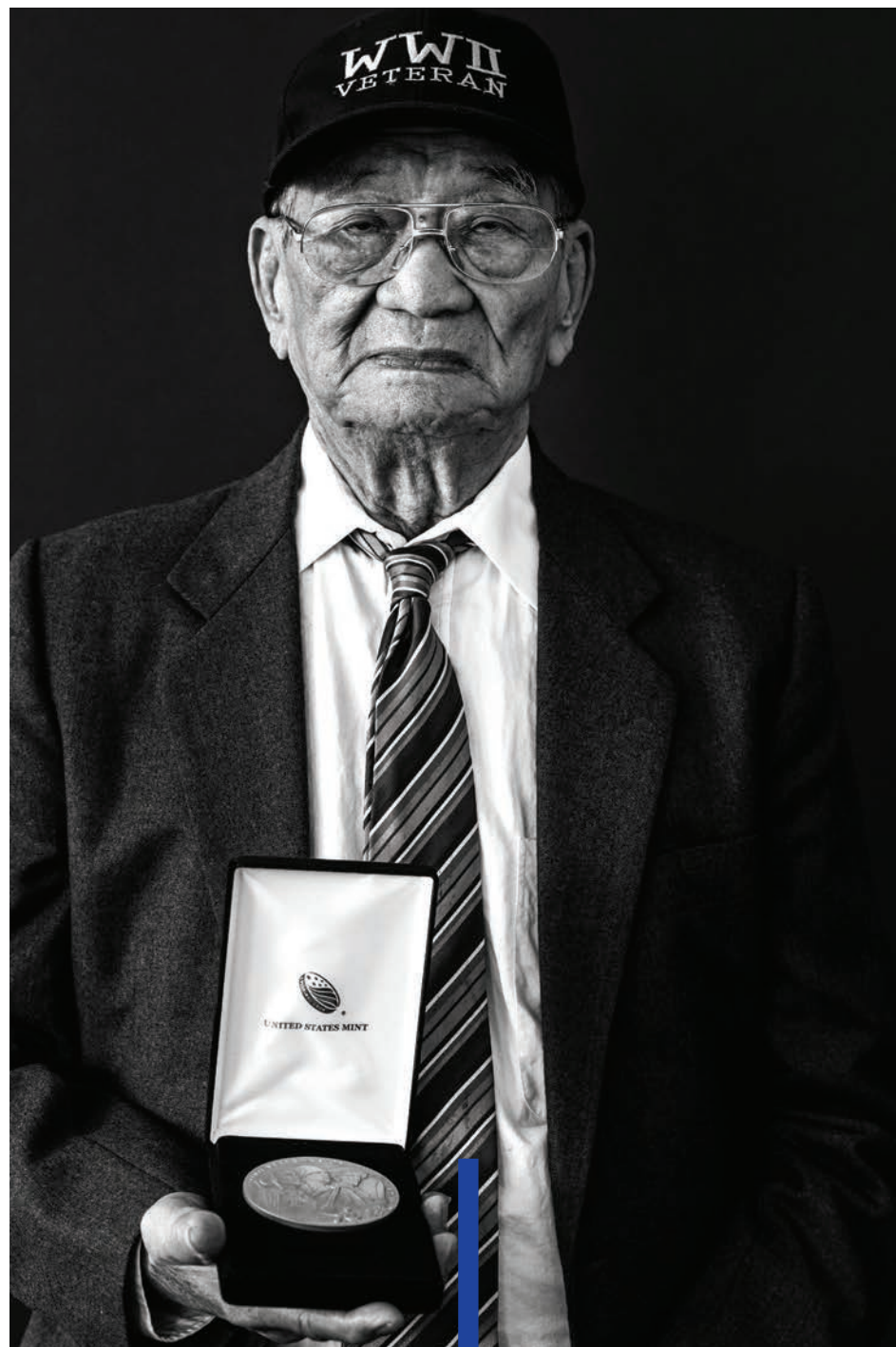
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show starts with the “site” of the table as an ideological place to connect and exchange. It's the second time the show has been mounted; Lopez was featured in last year's inaugural edition as well.

Yellow House director Hope McMath said, “Because the work of creating the change that recognizes the contributions and value of individuals and communities historically marginalized is far from over, Yellow House has committed to addressing the themes of both exclusion, representation and shared power on an annual basis. Although a new group of artists convened for 2019, we wanted to create a thread of connection to last year's experience to provide an update on one of the artists who remained committed to their work in resetting the table.”

Of Lopez, McMath said, “Agnes was an obvious choice, as she has worked tirelessly to further her work of documenting the images and stories of [Filipinx] veterans [...] it is a tangible example of the importance of persistence, tenacity and long-term commitment in doing this work. The portraits are moving, beautiful and important. It is always a privilege to work with Agnes as she

continues her journey as an artist.”

It is worth noting that her WWII-era focus is not strictly defined by soldiers and survivors. Lopez's work also encompasses U.S. veterans stationed in the Philippines during WWII as well as the first African-American teacher in Jacksonville during the desegregation of public schools.

St. Johns River State College is presenting a dedicated *Faces to Remember* show during March and April, comprising 25 images that illustrate the remarkable depth of Lopez's documentary work.

Nationally, Lopez is in dialogue with a San Francisco gallery that is expressing interest in her works. Agnes Lopez says she hopes to ultimately tour the show across the country. “My whole goal is just to create awareness: The more people who see it, the better.”

Madeleine Peck Wagner
mail@folioweekly.com

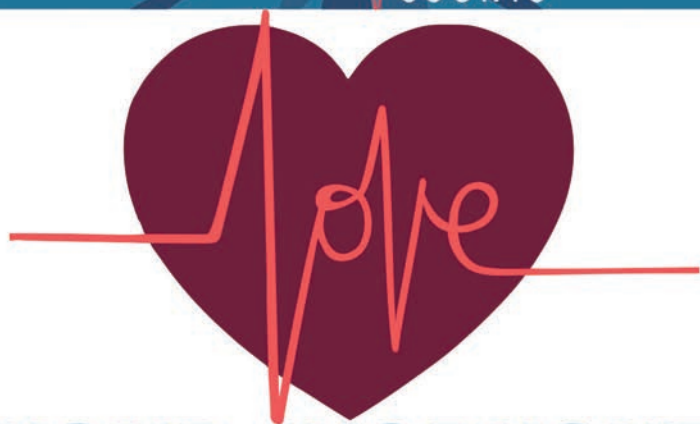
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