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In the Know: Pablo Martinez among 16 soldiers convicted of killing Aquino

Philippine Daily Inquirer

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MANILA, Philippines—M/Sgt. Pablo Martinez was one of the 16 soldiers who were sentenced to double-life imprisonment for the killings of former Sen. Benigno S. Aquino and his alleged assassin, Rolando Galman, on Aug. 21, 1983, at Manila International Airport tarmac on the return of the opposition leader from three years of self-exile in the United States.

Also convicted by the Sandiganbayan on Sept. 27, 1990, for the murders were Constable Rogelio Moreno, Brig. Gen. Luther Custodio, Capt. Romeo Bautista, 2nd Lt. Jesus Castro, Constable 1C Mario Lazaga, former Sergeants Claro Lat, Arnulfo de Mesa, Filomeno Miranda, Rolando de Guzman, Ernesto Mateo, Rodolfo Desolong, Ruben Aquino, Arnulfo Artates, A1C Cordova Estelo and A1C Felizardo Taran.

The Supreme Court affirmed the conviction on July 23, 1991.

Martinez was granted conditional pardon by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on Nov. 7, 2007, on grounds of old age and good behavior. He was then 70 years old.

Custodio, who was afflicted with liver cancer while undergoing trial, died soon after the verdict was handed down in 1991, while Estelo was stabbed to death during a jail fight in 2005. On March 14, 2008, Lazaga died in prison after suffering a stroke.

In February 2009, Taran and De Guzman, whose sentences were commuted by President Fidel V. Ramos and Arroyo, respectively, completed their prison terms and were released.

In March 2009, Arroyo granted pardon to the rest of the convicted soldiers still in prison.

In 1995, Martinez admitted knowing Galman and in participating in the plot to assassinate Aquino. He claimed that former Philippine Constabulary Maj. Gen. Romeo Gatan and businessman Hermilo Gosuico, both of whom were known to be closely identified with business tycoon Eduardo “Danding” Cojuangco, were deeply involved in the conspiracy.

Martinez also tagged Air Force Col. Romeo Ochoco, vice commander of the Aviation Security Command and a known protégé of Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Fabian Ver, as one of the alleged conspirators. Martinez, who later became a born-again Christian and a pastor, also testified that Air Force Capt. Felipe Valerio was directly in touch with the people who had ordered the killing of Aquino.

Ochoco and Valerio, the leader of the team tasked to secure Aquino on his arrival, disappeared in 1986 when the Sandiganbayan began a retrial of the cases. Ochoco was believed to have a farm in Australia. Valerio was later traced in the United States. The Arroyo administration sought Valerio’s extradition in 2009, but he has not been located.

Who the masterminds were remains a mystery to this day.—

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