

Who killed Ninoy? (1)

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5-6 minutes

In 2003, 20 years since Aug. 21, 1983, when Sen. Benigno “Ninoy” S. Aquino Jr. was shot and killed upon arrival from US exile, I interviewed the men who were tried, found guilty for the death of Ninoy and Rolando Galman (the alleged gunman) and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Most of the convicts were then serving their 13th year at the New Bilibid Prison. To get to them several times, I sought permission from the Department of Justice. (Three or four declined to be interviewed.) I interviewed each of those willing to speak, but always in the presence of other convicts involved in the case. I thought then that I might draw out from them something startlingly new.

I came up with a three-part feature plus a sidebar for the Inquirer. Rerunning them here will use up more than eight-column spaces. Let me just share

excerpts good for today and next week, my way of raising again the unsolved mystery about Ninoy's assassination. Who shot him dead and, more importantly, who ordered his killing?

"I had nothing to do with it. I knew nothing." This was the oft-repeated line from convicts in the Aquino-Galman murder case. They mean the elaborate plot that ended in the deaths on Aug. 21, 1983, of two men — homecoming former senator Benigno Aquino Jr. as he was being led down the stairs of the China Airlines aircraft, and Rolando Galman, the man under the stairs, who was immediately tagged as the triggerman.

"Galman did it," the interviewees maintained, and not one of them as the court had ruled.

The 16 convicts in the Aquino-Galman murder case were:

Aviation Security Command (Avsecom) chief, Brig. Gen. Luther Custodio (who died of cancer in prison); Capt. Romeo Bautista, Avsecom intelligence director; Sgt. Pablo Martinez, from special operation squadron;

Second Lt. Jesus Castro, leader of the boarding party composed of Sgt. Claro Lat, Sgt. Filomeno Miranda, Sgt. Arnulfo de Mesa, CIC Mario Lazaga,

CIC Rogelio Moreno that led Ninoy down the plane; one of them, not Galman, shot Ninoy;

Sgt. Rodolfo Desolong leader of the SWAT Team Alpha that included Sgt. Ernesto Mateo, Sgt. Rolando de Guzman, AIC Cordova Estelo, Sgt. Ruben Aquino, Sgt. Arnulfo Artates and Sgt. Felizardo Taran. They gunned down Galman and loaded the fallen Ninoy into the van and brought him to Fort Bonifacio.

Except for Custodio, Bautista and Martinez, all came from the lowest ranks of the Armed Forces. The 20 other accused — high-ranking officials in the Marcos government, the military, private individuals and John Does — walked free.

From each of the Aquino-Galman convicts, one did not hear a blanket declaration of innocence that covered every one. Only, “Ako, walang kinalaman, walang alam. (I had nothing to do with it, I knew nothing.)” Each one spoke for himself only when the conspiracy angle was brought up. It was not all for one, one for all.

The double murder case had been investigated by the Fernando Commission, then the Agrava Commission. The accused had been tried in the Sandiganbayan under Justice Manuel Pamaran and

acquitted in 1985, during the time of President Ferdinand Marcos.

After Marcos was deposed and Ninoy's widow, Corazon Aquino, became president, citizens petitioned the Supreme Court to reopen the case. The case was again tried in a Special Division of the Sandiganbayan.

On Sept. 28, 1990, after a three-year trial, the Sandiganbayan found the 16 men guilty and sentenced them on two counts of life imprisonment. Twenty were acquitted for lack of evidence.

The decision was penned by Associate Justice Regino Hermosisima. Justices Jose S. Balajadia and Cipriano A. del Rosario concurred.

But who were the brains? They could only have been persons with massive power and resources. The convicts were mostly underlings who could only have acted in obedience, in an elaborate plot they knew little about.

In 1995, the Inquirer ran a series by Raymund Burgos on the "soldiers' version." Martinez, the sergeant with Galman under the airplane stairs, revealed what he knew. That, Martinez's fellow convicts thought, was a big lead, but no one wanted to take it up.

When Burgos' series came out, the Aquino-Galman convicts were separated from each other and put in isolation for six months.

Team Alpha's Sgt. Cordova Estelo, one of those who shot Galman, rode in the van that brought Ninoy's body to Fort Bonifacio. He sat beside the bloodied Ninoy. It pained him when reminded of the theory that Ninoy, while inside the van, might have been hit on the head to make sure he was dead.

Estelo asserted he had nothing new to reveal.

"Nothing, until I die. Or even if they have me here for 100 years."

(Estelo was killed while in prison. In 2007, President Gloria Arroyo pardoned Martinez on humanitarian grounds. More convicts were released in 2010. Martinez was killed in a hit-and-run incident in 2014.)

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