

## Force and Valor JUNE 2006 Volume 1 Number 1

### No Turning Back by MARYANNE MOLL

In celebration of SAF's 23rd anniversary, they were leaving on a force march covering 53 kms. from Camp Bagong Diwa through C5 and Marcos Highway to San Roque in Baras, Rizal, where the contingent will bivouac until March 15. Almost 300 SAF Troopers from the SAF School Annex in San Isidro, Rizal, with their Commandant, would also be travelling over 50 kilometers of dense woodland to link up with the Brigade contingent near Boso- Boso, and proceed, almost 1,000 troops strong, to San Roque, Baras, Rizal. Baras itself holds a special significance for the SAF. It is the proposed new site for the brigade headquarters and its training school.

The jungle atmosphere of the area is the perfect training ground for the Commando Course, the foundation course of the SAF that runs for six months. It is also the most ideal training area for jungle warfare and survival, especially for those in the Mountain Platoon and those who conduct Internal Security Operations against Communist dissidents in the regions. Baras could also possibly be the site of the SAF Village, where SAF Troopers can build their permanent homes and live there with their families. It was on this point where the force march had set its sights on the night of May 12. There would be rest stops and control points, and there would be vehicle escorts and an ambulance, but it would be a foot march for everyone all the way to the bivouac. It would be not only a test of equipment – boots, ponchos, packs, weapons, vehicles – but also a test of system – command and control, planning, coordination, supervision, logistics, execution, and the ability to prepare. It would be a test of the endurance of the troops as well, their ability to survive and achieve their goals under extreme punishing conditions. More than ever, it would be a test of the SAF spirit, which believes that by skill and virtue there shall be triumph.



At seven twenty, the Brigade's Administrative Officer ran towards the Brigade Commander with a faxed weather report, which showed that Metro Manila and Rizal would be under typhoon signal number one. The Commander nodded, his face terse and determined in the low light. After prayers and a short pep talk, the Commander gave the order to move. The troops marched out of Bagong Diwa. There was no turning back. Thus began the twenty-third year of the Special Action Force: Armed and camouflaged troops walking in the wind and driving rain, supplies on their backs, their respect for duty and love for country overriding their exhaustion while they slowly but determinedly move onwards. Perhaps the force march can be said to be the perfect metaphor for the SAF. Against all odds, including a metaphorical typhoon, the SAF still remains -- steady, focused, and driven. For over two decades, and all through the

leadership of a long line of charismatic Commanders, the SAF, although it has had its own share of problems and scandals, has nevertheless been proven by time to have remained untouched by corruption and insubordination. Always within the line of reason and obedience, and with the staunchest of loyalties to the Constitution, it has helped topple a dictatorship, defended the government from several coup attempts, helped keep the peace at numerous major and minor disturbances, fought battles against organized crime, kept terrorists and dissidents at bay, secured important diplomatic and bureaucratic personalities, and have generally stood at arms, without rest, ready to be called on in a crisis, all throughout its years in service. And all this in an environment of constant struggle against small budgets and second-hand facilities from a government understandably recovering from long-term plunder, as well as from the trickle-down effects of major politicking in the higher echelon of government. Activated in May 16, 1983 as a unit under the Philippine Constabulary, the SAF began as a single battalion after then President Ferdinand Marcos gave the decree to dissolve eleven battalions under the PC Brigade, which was then under the Command of Brigadier General Fidel Ramos, while the PC itself was a branch of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, which was then being led by Fabian Ver. Outwardly an effort at streamlining the PC, it was also inwardly Marcos' effort to limit the powers of Ramos in the AFP because the PC Commander, since the dark years of Martial Law between 1972 to 1981, showed signs of a desire to break with the dictatorship.

The Armed Forces, a large and unwieldy organization that had under it the PC, had its own administrative problems. The AFP, covering the Army, Air Force and Navy as well as the PC, originally aimed to strengthen its forces, post-martial law, in preparation for yet another Presidential term for Marcos. The PC itself has had a long history that begins from the Spanish-American War, and was taken under the fold of the army after World War II, turning civilian policing into a militarized operation. Under the AFP, the PC grew in size and structure, adding to the AFP's bulk. In an effort to streamline the military, Marcos issued a decree that created elite units in the different sub-units of the Armed Forces. The PC Brigade under Ramos was dissolved and then re-formed into one single battalion, which was nevertheless tasked with duties and responsibilities that were national in scope. Primarily tasked to combat dissidents and terrorism, the battalion, in order to fill the shoes of one brigade, had to be as potent as possible, as highly-skilled as can be, and should be equipped with the best equipment. It was to be an elite unit with headquarters in the capital but always ready to be deployed anywhere in the country. But this would eventually prove to be the undoing of Ver's AFP, and of Marcos' Philippines. Fidel Ramos, the West Point-trained, battlehardened, highly-trained general was no small enemy for the Marcos-Ver tandem. He graduated from West Point in 1950 among the top 10 percent of his class. Returning to the Philippines in 1951, he joined the Philippine Army Officers Corps as a Second Lieutenant. Also a veteran of Asian wars, he was named Chairman of Philippine Army's Unconventional Warfare Committee until 1961, and there formed the Philippine Army Special Forces, the precursor of SAF. He was 46 when he became chief of the PC. He was definitely not in the habit of turning back. Pragmatic, logical, and committed to the Army with a clean-cut philosophy that can only come from a Western military education, he presented a threat to the cluttered, filial Marcos-Ver tandem. Ramos was trained to be apolitical, and focused on definite military goals. It took a lot for him to be distracted from his duties in the military, completely trusting the President as his superior, which is why it took him years before

he began to protest the Marcos-Ver tandem. Marcos and Ver had no idea that Ramos was a force to contend with. And because of that, history happened. The dissolution of the PC Brigade that was supposed to limit Ramos' power had led to the creation of a force that would ironically be the end of the Marcos dictatorship -- a potent, elite battalion like no other, The PC Special Action Force.

It was Ramos and his SAF battalion -- also named Tagaligtas -- that fortified Camp Crame on the night of February 21, 1986, which marked the height of the worldfamous EDSA Revolution that evicted Marcos and Ver from the country and placed into the Presidency the unlikely Corazon Aquino, widow of long-time Marcos enemy Ninoy Aquino. Ramos was the one who invited important and significant defections from the AFP, the Philippine Air Force, and the Philippine Navy. The SAF was the key unit that helped placate the angry, violent mob of laborers at the Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac. More recently, it was the SAF that ended the famous 20-hour standoff at the Bicutan maximum security prison in March 2005 where over two hundred dreaded Abu Sanyaf terrorists, responsible for the deaths of thousands in terrorist activities, instigated a jail break, took their fellow prisoners hostage, and demanded that all cases filed against them be dropped. When negotiations failed, the SAF was called on to assault the building, and in two hours the enemies were vanquished, the hostages taken into custody, and terrorism in the country suffered a big and demoralizing defeat. On top of these famous cases are several others, spread out over the country, in the course of over two decades: famous crime syndicates toppled, criminal gangs captured and dissolved, numerous rebel camps in provinces raided, and rebels captured and brought to justice. When the Philippine Constabulary was retired in 1991 and replaced by the Philippine National Police by virtue of Republic Act 6975, command of the SAF went to the PNP. While other PC units experienced great difficulty in transitioning from the military AFP to the civilian PNP, the SAF, tasked with national security and combatting rebellion and terrorism, remained as the last bastions of the PC discipline. Its tactical approach is very elite military, as evidenced by its operational style -- since the very beginning of the SAF -- of sending only teams of eight men that can fulfill the function of one traditional military company, and by its swift, accurate, and almost invisible way of infiltrating enemy lines and capturing enemies of the state. It is the only counter-terrorism and anti-rebellion unit in the country that has the smallest footprint, and yet with the most significant results. On the other hand, the SAF's principles are also very civilian, believing that a cooperative community is an important factor in combating crime.

The SAF's magic has always been in its aggressive training and in the state of mind of its troops. The SAF has four very difficult definitive basic courses -- The Commando, the Airborne, and the Seaborne, and the Sureshock, all of which comprise the SAF Tagaligtas logo. The tabak or bolo stands for the Commando, the wings for the Airborne, the water for the Seaborne, and the crosshair for Sureshock. The combination of these four training courses plus the indoctrination into a life of faceless valor and sacrifice is what creates a full and complete SAF Trooper. No trainee who quits, surrenders, or turns back in the middle of a course is ever given the honor and esteem given to full-fledged graduates. These trainings, and the SAF Trooper's consistent efforts at maintaining a physical strength that befits an elite trooper that is deployed to dangerous combat areas for months at a time also gives the SAF an aura of rawness, brute

force, and invincibility, but as it is tempered by the individual SAF Trooper's respect for human life and a deep yearning for peace, an image of goodness and lawfulness has balanced this belligerent aura. Brotherhood in the SAF is exceedingly tight, brought about by combat and the various SAF traditions that cannot be found anywhere else. As the SAF never turns back, so shall it never turn its back on the things it holds dear. Only three months ago the SAF was accused of being part of a plan to topple the government, as a pact with oppositionists and leftist groups, including the New People's Army that SAF has been mandated to destroy. The SAF was said to be part of Oplan Hackle, an elaborate plan to capture the major security, media, and government establishments in the country and depose President Gloria Arroyo and her loyalists in power. Hackle indeed had a planned coup, which was stopped short by loyal government forces in February 24 of this year, hours before it began to move to its target destinations, but the SAF remained in its headquarters and its troops remained in the barracks. The SAF Chief of Directorial Staff, who was a full colonel, and two junior officers were relieved of their duties and placed in the custody of Camp Crame while being investigated. The Director, the SAF's thirteenth Commander and holder of a one-star rank, was relieved, days before his retirement honors, for not being able to control his officers. This was the man who acted as ground commander during the SAF assault to end the Bicutan Siege in March 2005. Less than a year later, thus was he retired. His Deputy was moved to another office in Camp Crame. A new Command Group – Director, Deputy Director, and Chief of Directorial Staff -- was installed. Yet through it all, the SAF, in its entirety, remained behind the flag and the Constitution. The very next day, several teams of SAF Troopers were deployed to secure Malacañang Palace, proof of the government's enduring trust in the SAF as a unit. In the chaos of events that surround every coup plot and every destabilization plan, groups and persons often get implicated in a dizzying web of betrayal, and the accusations often ride on the waves of sensationalism without proof or logic. In the Philippines, the hype is given even more magnitude by culture, mass sentiment, and a penchant for drama and the bombastic. The SAF being an elite force, it was only natural, perhaps, that most accusing fingers would point to it as a major mover in Hackle. But even more naturally, the SAF was eventually proven to be clean of any disloyalty. It has never turned its back on its promises. Now, decades after its creation, the SAF has grown into a brigade-sized unit, with six different battalions – including one Rapid Deployment Battalion, the first in the country – an Air Unit, and the SAF Training School. Having had fourteen commanders, three of them having been elevated to the position of Chief of the PNP after their leadership of the SAF, has evolved. Nearly 4,000 troops strong, and now with more of its chiefs of offices and unit commanders from the Philippine National Police Academy easing out the older commanders from the Philippine Military Academy, the SAF continues to move on. Nearing the quarter-century mark, and led by its fourteenth Commander, Police Chief Superintendent Silverio D Alarcio Jr, one of the images that will stay longest in the annals of history is the image of SAF Troopers in the wind, rain, cold, and mud, walking steadily towards its future. More importantly, under the calm, determined look of each SAF Trooper lays a heart that is readying itself for a new era of fighting crime, terrorism, and rebellion in a world where the enemy is changing its face. As with the victory of the force march against the rage of the elements and human frailty, so shall the SAF continue to triumph against any new threat to the country, over the many long years to come. It is not turning back.