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Onward Still The SILG visit by MARYANNE MOLL

The Special Action Force, as a faceless elite striking force that operates noiselessly in the shadows, is nevertheless placed in the public eye everytime major political upheavals take place in the country. With the Philippines having had a history of a nine-year martial-law period, and with the civilian Philippine National Police stemming from the military Philippine Constabulary that itself had also had a history that goes back a hundred years, the SAF is still connected to the military sensibility by a long and sturdy thread. Also, more recently, with the SAF's pivotal role in the 1986 EDSA Revolution, the present SAF bears the faint and rather uncomfortable remains of a police force that had been under constant and painful scrutiny. This was even magnified by the supposed involvement of three SAF Officers and the relief of its then Director in the wee hours of February 24 in an elaborate coup plan involving several oppositionist and rebel groups that the government was able to neutralize in time. The entire force itself, of course remained in the barracks the whole time. The three officers were taken into custody and the Director, who could have been retired with honors just a few days later, was then promptly replaced by Police Chief Superintendent Silverio D. Alarcio Jr. Now, the officers are back in custody without any charges filed against them after they were investigated. Yet in the eyes of many, and especially just a month after the event, a dark cloud hovers over the image of the SAF. It was in this environment of political unrest that the Secretary of Interior and Local Government, Ronaldo V. Puno, visited the SAF on the 24th of March, and in a gesture of goodwill, the SAF rescheduled the graduation of its Sureshock class 55-2005 and SWAT class 03-2005 a few days later than scheduled to coincide with Secretary Puno's visit.



The Cabinet itself just recently had its own minor internal upheaval. The appointment of Secretary Puno came in the wake of a minor reshuffling. Having just taken over from the previous Secretary, and just a month after the aborted coup that purportedly involved the SAF, Secretary Puno was eager to check on the SAF and see it as united as ever. The Command Group, the Directorial Staff, and the troops gave him a warm welcome, and although the entire Camp Bagong Diwa had been experiencing a power outage for a few days already, a highly effective logistics ensured the the visit would be supported by electricity, and would be comfortable and glitch-free.

The Secretary was also welcomed by some of PNP's top brass, who trooped to the Brigade Headquarters with good wishes for the troops. Police Deputy Director Avelino I. Razon and Police Chief Superintendent Servando M. Hizon, both former Commanders of the SAF, socialized with the other visitors, all former SAF Troopers – Police Chief Superintendent Oscar Calderon, and Police Senior Superintendent Leocadio Santiago. When Secretary Puno arrived he was welcomed in front of the Brigade Headquarters by one SAF battalion in full uniform. After trooping the line in a barong tagalog, he changed into the SAF pixelized camouflage uniform and was brought around the brigade to witness several skills demonstrations prepared for him by the graduating students of the Sureshock class. The Secretary was visibly impressed with the knife-fighting demonstrations and the close quarter battles performed in the firing ranges of the Third Battalion. The Internal Security Operation at the open field by the tower was especially dramatic, showing skills used to neutralize rebel camps in the woodlands. Finally, the finale was brought on by three teams of Sureshock students assaulting the tower in a mock hostagerescue situation, with the help of a chopper from the SAF's Air Unit.

The graduation of the Sureshock and SWAT classes was held in the fifth floor of the yet-unfinished Rapid Deployment Battalion building, where Secretary Puno gave a rather emotional speech, without a script, of how he admires the police force – especially the SAF – for sticking to a career that certainly leaves its personnel wanting in terms of monetary comfort, yet rendering this lack irrelevant by an overriding feeling of duty and sense of country.

And quoting the entire second stanza of the SAF Song, Secretary Puno lauded the SAF Troopers for continuing the fight for peace. This is usually how it is when a country is caught in the brink of certain systemic changes. The basic institutions of government, including its police force, should be made to remain stable and reliable, the last pillars against unrest. But with Secretary Puno standing in front of the troops, wearing the SAF camouflage and stressing this point, none of the troops batted an eyelash. Each and every SAF Trooper knew in their hearts that there was no need to stress any point. They were solid behind the flag, regardless of politics. As proven by time, the SAF continues to be one of the staunchest defenders of the country and all that it stands for. For this elite unit, it had been an onward journey all along.