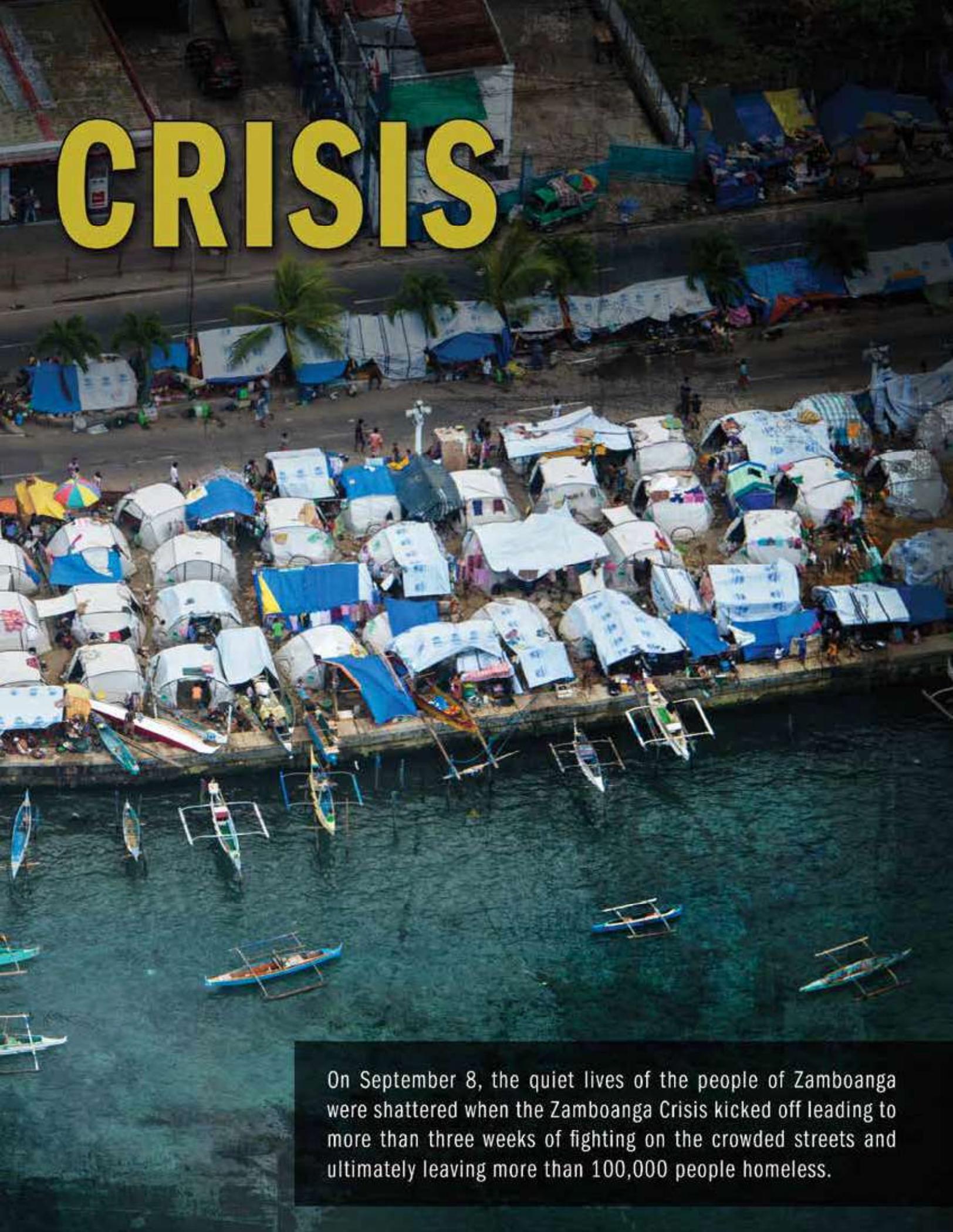


ZAMBOANGA

BY JANICE BURTON



CRISIS

An aerial photograph showing a large, makeshift settlement built on a narrow strip of land along a body of water. The settlement is densely packed with numerous tents and makeshift structures, many of which are covered with white and blue tarps. People are visible moving about the settlement. In the foreground, several traditional outrigger boats are anchored in the water. The background shows a paved road and some buildings, indicating the settlement's proximity to a developed area.

On September 8, the quiet lives of the people of Zamboanga were shattered when the Zamboanga Crisis kicked off leading to more than three weeks of fighting on the crowded streets and ultimately leaving more than 100,000 people homeless.



ZAMBOANGA PHOTO TIMELINE

- » Ariel view of Fort Pilar. The front area of the fort serves a place of worship for Christians and Muslims. The interior buildings are currently under construction to be turned into a museum.
- » A house directly across the street from Fort Pilar is riddled with bullet holes. Remarkably, the Fort remained untouched by the fighting.
- » The canal used by the MNLF to enter the inner city from the ocean. They swam through the waste-filled water to a tunnel where they were able to link up with other insurgents.
- » The bend in the road where the hostages were kept, baking in the sun. The location made it difficult for the military to enter the area due to the multiple angles of approach. Bullets hit propane tanks causing fires throughout the surrounding *barangays*, or *districts*, destroying the entire area.

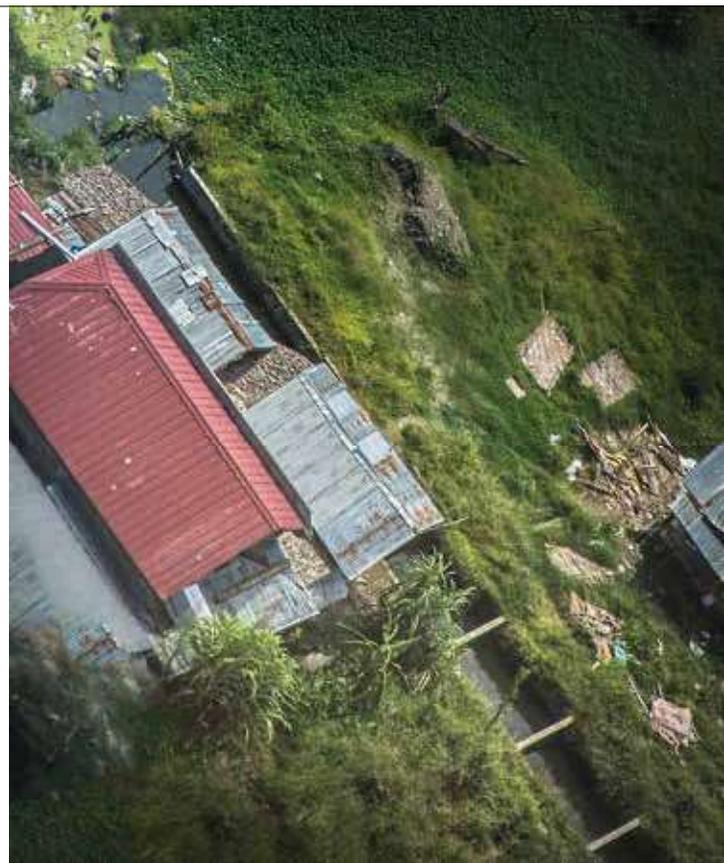
The town square in Zamboanga City is historic. Fort Pilar sits at the mouth of the city, where it has stood sentinel over the town on the tip of Mindanao since the 1600s when the Spanish constructed it. On weekday afternoons, as students leave the seaside schools and colleges and gather outside *sari sari* stores, their parents and grandparents say afternoon prayers and confession at the outdoor chapel attached to the fort.

Known as the City of Flowers, Zamboanga is a friendly town. The people wave to neighbors and bid a warm “Hello!” — even to strangers. On Sept. 8, their quiet lives were shattered when the Zamboanga Crisis kicked off leading to more than three weeks of fighting on the crowded streets and ultimately leaving more than 100,000 people homeless.

The crisis, while devastating to many in the civilian population, is nothing new to the region. The southern area of the Philippines has been in long-standing dispute over the representation of the majority Muslim population in the government. Over the past four decades, much time, ink and effort has been put into creating a peace plan that will allow the resident Muslim population to live in peace with their transplanted Christian neighbors.

To understand the crisis, you must first put it into a historical perspective. The Philippines have been in a state of insurrection since 1896; however, the heart of the problems now plaguing the island nation date back to the U.S. Army Pacification of guerrilla fighters in 1900. The guerrilla fighters had given aid to the U.S. to force Spain from the island with the expectation of a liberated Philippines. Those fighters, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, were disappointed and turned their sights on the U.S., after it laid claim to the islands. President William McKinley ordered the pacification of the islands, which led to years of widespread guerrilla warfare between U.S. forces and the guerrilla bands. The Muslim Moros in the Sulu Archipelago continued to fight long after President Theodore Roosevelt declared the Philippine insurrection over. The U.S. then put its sights on the southern portion of the country, and from 1902 until 1915, jungle campaigns were waged in the area. In 1915, the Sultan of Jolo, Jamalul Kiram II gave up his authority, which led to the integration of Moroland with the Philippine Christian majority.¹

Over the years, many olive branches have been extended between the Government of the Philippines and the insurgents in the south. In the



1960s, the Moro National Liberation Front was founded to fight for Moro autonomy. Its leader, Nur Misuari, turned to large-scale guerrilla warfare to make his point. In 1996, a peace agreement was signed between the MNLF and the Government of the Philippines, which called for the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao; the appointment of Misuari as governor the AARM and integration of his guerrilla fighters into the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Misuari's peace agreement led to dissent within his forces, which formed several splinter organizations, including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which at one time was among the most active terrorist groups in the southern Philippines. In 2001, a second government pact was made; however, the MILF felt again that it had not had a seat at the table. Over the past decade much progress has been made in reaching an agreement between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines, which has resulted in recognition of the Bangsamoro people and inclusion of their voice in government.

Renewed talks were scheduled to begin in October 2013, but were derailed by the Zamboanga Crisis, which was started by a rogue

element of the MNLF known as the Sulu State Revolutionary Command, led by Ustadz Habier Malik and Khaid Ajibon.

At the outset, the group was reportedly planning a peaceful march in Zamboanga, with the hopes of raising the Bangsamoro Republik Flag over the town hall. The peaceful process proved to be a guise. On the evening of Sept. 8, a Philippine Navy patrol boat intercepted a large motorboat and eight other smaller vessels carrying armed men near the coastal *barangay* of Rio Hondo. Gun fire was exchanged, which resulted in the deaths of individuals on both sides of the conflict. Intelligence gathered during the crisis indicates that many members of the Sulu State Revolutionary Command were unaware that they were going to the island to fight. They came to the island peacefully, and once assembled had weapons assigned and were forced into the fight.

Throughout the morning, the fighters occupied four *barangays*: Rio Hondo, Barbara, Catalina and parts of Talon-Talon. The group initially took 20 civilians hostage, with the number growing throughout the day to close to 200. The hostages were to be used as human shields and as a bargaining tool.

**BAJAU – THE WATER PEOPLE**

The Bajau are nomadic, seafaring people commonly called “sea gypsies.” They live over the water by erecting houses on stilts and travel using hand-made boats called *lepa-lepa*. Fishermen by trade, they consider being away from water to be bad luck.

- » A Bajau settlement in the Philippines, similar to what the area in Zamboanga looked like before the crisis.
- » Fires quickly burned through the stick-made Bajau homes, leaving only stilts protruding from the ocean.
- » Inland homes made of concrete were also devastated by the fires. The entire area was left uninhabitable.
- » While more than 60,000 refugees from the *barangays* fill the high school stadium, the Bajau remain close to the sea, packed in make-shift tents along the shore and medians in the roads.

The local government immediately declared a “no classes and no work” day and a citywide curfew was imposed that immediately shut the city down. Insurgents continued to flow into the city, crawling through the canals that lead from the ocean into the inner city, where they were quickly armed and joined up with their band of fighters.

Within 24 hours, the Government of the Philippines began deploying troops from all over the country to the city. A naval blockade was put in place. At dawn on Sept. 10, insurgents began firing on government troops. On Sept. 12, the Government of the Philippines issued an ultimatum to the insurgents through Edwin Lacierda, a presidential spokesman, “While the government is exhausting all avenues for a peaceful resolution of the situation, let it be clear to those defying us that they should not entertain the illusion that the state will hesitate to use its forces to protect our people.”²

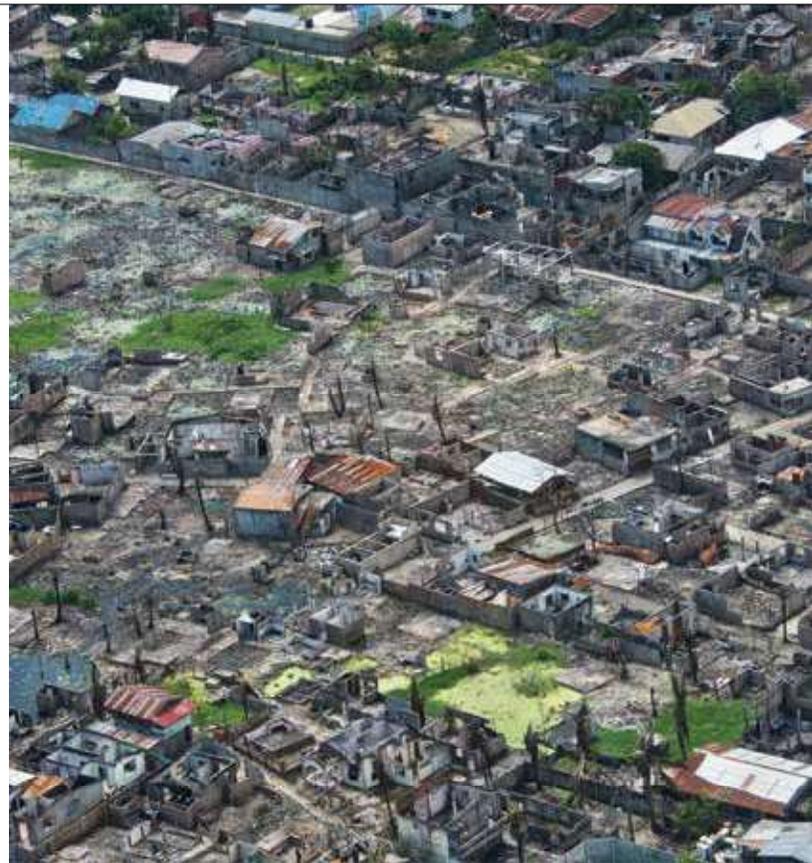
Negotiations with the rogue faction of the MLNF broke down over the next several days, and on Sept. 16, Philippine forces began fighting in earnest, which led to the release of some of the hostages. Over the next several days fighting spread throughout the city, with more than 180 insurgents killed; however, the city

was devastated by the attacks. The coastal residents known as the Bajau, or water people, took the brunt of the fighting. Their homes, built on stilts over the water, quickly went up in flames. Bullets fired into homes hit propane gas tanks, which exploded and spread fire throughout the closely built homes.

As the death toll rose among the insurgents and others gave up their weapons and surrendered, the Philippine Government took control of the city. But there was a cost. Philippine servicemen were killed during the encounter and more than 100,000 of the city’s residents were left homeless. Today, the majority of those people are still living in the seaside stadium and on the median of the roads that line the coast, and along the small beach that surrounds the city center. They live in tents, constructed from tarps. They get their drinking water and food from humanitarian aid brought in from the UN and other non-governmental organizations.

With all that was lost during the 28 day crisis, U.S. military leaders see some important things coming from the crisis.

“The successful response by the Philippine armed forces and national police and the



Government of the Philippines to stand up to this terrorist threat and to restore peace to the city validated what the 1st Special Forces Group has been doing over the past decade,” said Col. Robert McDowell, commander of Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines. “It validated what it means to operate in the Human Domain. It validated what it means to conduct special warfare and what it means to understand the mission of Special Forces.

“We like to use National Training Center and Joint Readiness Training Center as vehicles to test our forces prior to them going into combat. When you go to JRTC/NTC, you have a set enemy force that you will face. You have a particular objective that you have to accomplish. You’ve got a set date for the exercise to start and end. Nobody dies and you all get together at the end and everyone is safe and sound. We do our after action reviews and prepare for the next round of training,” he continued.

“If you look at what happened in Zamboanga through the lens of an NTC rotation, then there is no doubt it was a success for the Philippine forces. They had no idea of the magnitude of the invasion that was coming. They had an unknown enemy

that increased rapidly to more than 400. They had to deal with a hostage situation that encompassed nearly 200 hostages. There were live rounds flying. You had close-quarter combat occurring in an area that is unlike any we have in the United States. There were snipers in towers,” he explained. “The leadership of the entire country, from the President of the Philippines all the way down to every organization from conventional to special operations forces to naval to marine, to air force, police and special action forces all converging on the city. It was the first time they had to go from zero activity to standing up a fully operational TOC that truly was joint and had every facet of national leadership involved. That’s incredible.”

McDowell said that within a three day period, they were able to establish command and control and isolate the enemy. Further, they were able to marshal enough forces to into the city and demonstrate a gauged response in order to not only eliminating threat but also preserving the lives of the hostages and the city.

“They brought all of that together,” he said. “We like to take some pride that we were a part of how that all came together from the soldiers in the streets to the leaders running the operations



LIFE AFTER THE CRISIS

- » A typical street scene near the over-crowded Zamboanga high school stadium. Tents are erected along the sidewalks and families conduct day-to-day activities on traffic-congested roads.
- » Inside the packed stadium tents fill the field and line the bleachers. The refugees will remain living in these conditions for the foreseeable future, until the *barangays* are able to be rebuilt.
- » Names of fallen special operations forces are freshly engraved on a memorial outside the Philippine Army Special Operations Command, including 14 from the Zamboanaga Crisis.

because we had been a part of all of those organizations for the past 11 years. I think yes, Zamboanga was more of the true test mission than any mission we have ever given our own guys.”

“I think it all ties in together,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Brian Johnson, Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines. “All of the forces we have trained over the past 11 years all converged to that one site. Every single one of them coming out of it was thankful to us in the sense that they recognized the value of what we had taught them. They told us it was our training that really helped them to be successful. For us, the biggest mark of success is the capabilities that they now have to execute that complex of an operation.”

Both men noted that it was very difficult for them, as well as their men, to sit in the TOC and watch and listen as the fighting occurred because of the personal relationships they have developed with the forces that were in the battle.

“From the get go, we were unable to assault objectives with our counterparts because of the agreements between our country and the Philippines,” said Johnson “That has always been a frustration of this mission. We train them to the

best of our ability, and because we know we can’t be there with them, we put more heart into it. We have to work within the parameters of their laws, which make it more of a thinking man’s game: How do we motivate them? How do we train them to get after these targets without us being on the ground and being shoulder-to-shoulder with them? That’s a huge challenge for us.”

“What I would say is that even though we couldn’t engage lethally with those elements we have known for so many years, we were with them in spirit,” said McDowell.

He spoke of one unit, the Joint Special Operations Group, which 1st SFG (A) helped stand up, in particular. The JSOG was one of the primary elements in the fight in Zamboanga. It was the lead element that conducted hostage rescues and close-quarter combat. When the JSOG was put on alert, men of the 1st SFG (A) were with them. While the Philippine forces boarded one plane, their American counterparts jumped aboard another and arrived at Camp Navarro a couple of hours before their counterparts. When both forces were in place, they went into mission planning — together. In the midst of the battle, members of the JSOG were texting their



American counterparts and apprising them of the situation or seeking advice.

“There was still a bond that existed between those units, even though they were not side by side. So even after the fighting in Zamboanga ended, there wasn’t this feeling that you deserted me or left me when the fighting started,” said McDowell. “The Philippine forces knew we were there. There was never a loss of connectivity.”

“Throughout the whole crisis, I was in constant contact with the guys I helped train. It really ripped me apart that they were there, and we couldn’t be with them. But we stayed in constant contact. Throughout the situation, there were texts flying back and forth,” said Master Sgt. James Olive, 3rd Bn., 1st SFG(A), who has been training forces in the Philippines for most of the past decade. “We get very close to these guys, to their families. I have watched many of them move through the ranks and they are in important positions now. We watched what happened in Zamboanga, and we took pride in them and we looked at what we needed to work on; how we could make them better.”

As the Philippine forces withdrew from the city, they took with them the men who had

fallen in combat. Some of those men had left training classes with Olive to go into the fight. It was their test mission. One of those soldiers was a recent graduate of jump school. His commander had authorized leave for him to go home and see his new baby, a little girl born while he was in training.

“He wouldn’t go home,” recalled Olive. “He wanted to be with his men, and he was killed. We were very close to this young officer and his family. I had the opportunity to go to his funeral and walked with his family out to the gravesite. These people are family to us. I loved him, like I love my SF brothers.” **SW**

Janice Burton is the editor of Special Warfare.

Notes:

1. Cheryl Walley, “A Century of Turmoil: America’s Relationship With the Philippines,” *Special Warfare*, 17, no. 1 (2004): 68.
2. The Philippine Star, “Government Now Open to Using Force to Resolve Zamboanga Crisis.” Last modified September 12, 2013. Accessed December 12, 2013. <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2013/09/12/1202681/govt-now-open-using-force-resolve-zamboanga-crisis>.