

Fatal Encounter (Philippines): A Transgender Woman Meets the U.S. Marine Corps

Wednesday 9 September 2020, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2014).

The murder of a transgender woman in the Philippines reveals both the transphobia of the U.S. Marine Corps and the dangers of U.S. military presence in the region.

“On the hot and sunny day of October 24, Jennifer Laude was finally laid to rest in Olongapo. Hundreds of people were in attendance, but other than myself [1] and the chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, Philippine national government authorities were markedly absent. In my eulogy, I called Jennifer “a symbol of our suffering motherland” and called for “justice for Jennifer and justice for our country.”. My Oct 2014 article on the murder of Jennifer Laude, republishing it following President Rodrigo Duterte’s pardoning his fellow criminal Pemberton.”

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As I peered at Jennifer Laude’s serene face in the open casket, I saw the wound on her forehead that was barely covered concealed by the mortician’s make up. I did not see the bruises on her neck and shoulders, but I was told that they were severe. “They seemed to have been inflicted by a martial arts move,” said a mourner familiar with the autopsy. “That may have been one of the causes of death, along with drowning.”

A few days earlier, on October 11, Jennifer, a transgender woman, was found dead in a hotel room, her face immersed in a toilet bowl. The murder took place in Olongapo, a city adjoining the former U.S. naval base at Subic Bay. Private First Class Joseph Scott Pemberton of the U.S. Marine Corps was identified as Jennifer’s companion entering the motel room then leaving the crime scene after about 15-20 minutes.

The case has become a cause célèbre. It is destabilizing U.S.-Philippine relations and highlighting the difficulties of the Obama administration’s push to root out the entrenched anti-gay culture of the U.S. Armed Services.

Walking Weapons

Jennifer's violent end, with no guns or knives involved, might be linked to Pemberton's martial arts training, say some who have closely followed the case. Pemberton, it turns out, is scarcely out of the Marines' famous (or infamous) boot camp, where martial arts skills are drilled into recruits. As a letter from one recruit (reproduced in Hamilton Nolan's blog linked to the Huffington Post) notes:

We learn a ton of martial arts, which is technically called MCMAP-Marine Corps Martial Arts Program-but I call it Karate and ninja training, which my DI's [drill instructors] don't like one bit. It started with boring punches and kicks, tiger shulman tae kwon do style, but now we're learning throws, counters, elbows, stomps, bayonet attacks, bayonet defenses, etc. all of which we do at full speed and intensity on each other. (sometimes w pads but often not). If the DI's think we're going easy on each other, they flip a shit.

The MCMAP shit is incorporated into our PT workouts, one of the best workouts we did was the martial arts conditioning course: 2 min of jab straight hook vs. a recruit w a pad throw a recruit over your shoulder, carry them back and forth btwn 2 cones 30 yards apart somersault (sp?) back and forth 30 yards apartment roundhouse kicks drag a recruit back and forth for 30 yards elbow strikes choke counters knee strikes run 1/2 mile punch blocks/throws crawl (low) in sand for 100 yards body squats run 1/4 mile.

Needless to say, the enraged marine that fate brought face to face with Jennifer Laude on the night of October 11 at the Celzon Lodge in Olongapo had been trained to be a walking weapon.

Homophobic Socialization

There is another thing that boot camp drills into raw recruits: homophobia, and plenty of it. With the repeal of the infamous "Don't ask, Don't Tell" policy of the Pentagon, discrimination against gays and lesbians is now supposed to be banned in all U.S. armed services, with heavy penalties for violations. But according to the same anonymous recruit's account:

Don't ask Don't Tell...may have been repealed, but the USMC sure hasn't adapted. We're called faggots 10-50 times a day... 'Yeah, you would think that's a pushup, faggot,' etc. Any time we fuck something up, the DI's tell us 'you stupid fucking thing. That's more wrong than two boys fucking.' One captain, when giving an ethics class, and talking about how one mistake can change your life/identity told the entire company 'you can be a bridge builder your entire life, but you suck one dick and you're a cocksucker till you die.'

With thousands of such walking weapons from the most homophobic of America's armed services prowling Olongapo's streets on R&R after testosterone-raising military exercises, the murder of Jennifer Laude was an event waiting to happen. The volatile mix of training in the lethal arts and aggressive homophobic socialization was likely to be among the factors that led Pemberton to cross the line from anger to murder that fateful night. And violence such as that meted out to Jennifer is likely to occur again and again, as the U.S. stations more and more troops in the Philippines in pursuit of Washington's grand geopolitical design to contain China.

A Dangerous and Useless Presence

The murder of Jennifer has placed the spotlight on two security agreements that the Philippines has

with the United States: the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the so-called Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). One of the key motivations of those who opposed the agreements was to prevent the civilian population from again becoming collateral damage as victims of rape, murder, and hate crimes, as many of them were prior to the withdrawal of the big U.S. bases in 1992.

The rape of a Filipina named “Nicole” by another U.S. Marine, Daniel Smith, in 2005 confirmed the anti-VFA movement’s worst fears. Now an even more brutal crime has taken place. There are people, like President Benigno Aquino III, who say that the Nicole and Jennifer cases are “isolated incidents,” that these are outweighed by the benefits allegedly brought by the presence of U.S. troops. Such assertions are increasingly hollow, especially since Washington is not committed to defending the territories and maritime zones claimed by Manila in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) in the first place. The United States has stated that it won’t intervene in sovereignty disputes in the Spratlys.

To prevent future incidents, some have proposed tighter regulation of shore leave or more intensive instruction of U.S. troops on the “rules of engagement” with the civilian population. But those opposed to the U.S. military presence are not satisfied with these half measures when these troops are not needed in the first place since they do not promote the national security of the country.

After keeping him aboard the USS Peleliu docked at Subic Bay for nearly two weeks after the murder, the United States flew Pemberton by helicopter to Fort Aguinaldo, a Philippine base near Manila where he is presently confined in an air-conditioned van and guarded by U.S. Marines. This anomalous situation has provoked demands for the Philippine government to take genuine and full custody of the suspect. Many are worried that the United States is not serious about turning Pemberton over, even after conviction. They cite the case of Daniel Smith. Instead of turning him over to Philippine authorities, the United States spirited Smith out of the country when the victim inexplicably “recanted” her testimony.

The Philippines’ Department of Foreign Affairs has stated that under the terms of the VFA, the United States could maintain custody of the accused until after prosecution and conviction. The secretary of justice contradicted this, saying that with Pemberton in a Philippine military facility, the government already had custody of the suspect. Meanwhile, President Benigno Aquino III told the media he would not be present at Laude’s burial because “I don’t attend wakes of people I don’t know. I find it ...uncomfortable in trying to condole with people who don’t know me.” All this has created the image of a hapless and insensitive government that appears hesitant to secure justice for one of its slain citizens.

Obama’s Troubled Anti-Discrimination Policy

As the Philippine government flounders, the Obama administration has been confronted with the reality that despite it’s repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, the banning of discrimination against gays and lesbians may be facing rough sailing in the armed services. The brutal slaying of Jennifer and the continued homophobic socialization of recruits indicate how difficult it may be to uproot deep-seated attitudes and institutional practices. It is not surprising that a Marine is in the hot seat. The Marine Corps carried out the fiercest opposition to the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” with Gen James Amos, until recently the Marine Corps commandant, claiming that the change could cost lives because of the impact on “discipline” and “unit cohesiveness.” A few months after the banning of anti-gay discrimination, Amos reversed himself, claiming the Marines had “adapted smoothly and embraced the change.” The Laude murder and the continued employment of anti-gay

slurs as a psychological disciplinary tool in boot camp call this judgment into question.

On the hot and sunny day of October 24, Jennifer Laude was finally laid to rest in Olongapo. Hundreds of people were in attendance, but other than myself and the chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, Philippine national government authorities were markedly absent. In my eulogy, I called Jennifer “a symbol of our suffering motherland” and called for “justice for Jennifer and justice for our country.”

Taking into account the lopsided history of U.S.-Philippine relations, that demand was, in the view of the skeptics, a tall order.

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P.S.

- Foreign Policy in Focus. October 26, 2014:
https://fpif.org/fatal-encounter-transgender-woman-meets-u-s-marine-corps/?fbclid=IwAR03-w7YSX23nJBg9_Ue1t3OjKpb_lDuM6I6V51VCE_TwUjm9Q22GeLX6_I

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- Walden Bello is the author or co-author of 19 books, the latest of which are *Capitalism's Last Stand?* (London: Zed, 2013) and *State of Fragmentation: the Philippines in Transition* (Quezon City: Focus on the Global South and FES, 2014)

Footnotes

[1] Walden Bello in 2014 represented Akbayan (Citizens' Action Party) in the House of Representative of the Philippines.