

Alex Baluyut Photographic Series

Brother Hood (1993)

When Sheila S. Coronel of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism first brought up the idea of a photo documentary on the police, I hesitated for about five seconds. I don't usually make up my mind so easily. The idea was a great one. Only later did I realize that staking out for three months, maybe more, at the Western Police District was not exactly a very appealing prospect. I could not help wondering why I was not assigned to do a nice, safe environmental documentary instead, one that entailed a lot of long, scenic treks in the countryside. But Sheila was bent on a police story and would not hear of anything else.

I have covered most organized armed groups in the Philippines for more than a decade. I took photographs of the attempted coups d'état, but this assignment was very different from those I had done in the past. There was some fear, I admit, but it was of a different, more subtle kind. It was more the kind of fear that a school kid faces when confronted with a bully: you know you cannot lick him, but you also need his cooperation. It was also the fear of sinking into a world where you are not invited, a fear born out of decades of hearing stories of corruption, summary executions and the shadow land of violence that is the world of Manila's Finest.

I thought that the subject matter of this book should be best approached in the documentary tradition of photography, which is to "immerse, then the images unfold before you." So everyday for several months, I was at the Western Police District headquarters at United Nations Avenue, joining the ranks of ambulance-chasers and night stalkers. Every photographer there was, driving past me in high gear, shooting pictures that landed daily on their newspapers. My work required a different mindset: I didn't have to produce photos everyday. Only the thought of a book months in the offing kept me going. Documentary photography can get downright lonely.

I shot most of the photos in this collection with an SLR borrowed from a wire agency and used one 35 millimeter lens. I pushed my 400 ASA film to its limits and got strange looks from police beat photographers who rarely shoot without a flash. Police officers also eyed me curiously when I snapped them in unorthodox moments.

But even the most dedicated documentary photographer can't avoid being hit with the headlines, especially when covering the police. On the night of November 26, 1993, I shifted to high gear, when the Manila City Jail riot took place and a headline event fell on my lap. With all the blood and drama, it was a photojournalist's dream coverage. When it was over, I knew that I had the last strand that made the image complete.

Some people have asked me why I chose the Western Police District. The answers are easy. I grew up in Manila, Paco to be exact, and the WPD was always the center of action, even during my childhood. News photos printed in The Manila Times in the 1960's were always about the Manila police. Blockbuster police

officers like Alfredo Lim, Alex Yanquiling Sr., Romeo Maganto, Joe Pring, etc. all served in that imposing structure on United Nations Avenue.

Lastly, I knew that when things got too tough, I could always run to the comforts of Juanchito's Bibingka to brighten up my day.

Still, after six months of taking photographs of the Western Police District, I feel I have only scratched the surface. Many more stories of the WPD have to be told. This is a start.

Alex Baluyut

The Photographer's Notes from the *Brother Hood* book is published in this website with permission from the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.