

'The Right and Honorable Thing to Do'

The bells were souvenirs recovered by U.S. troops fighting in the Philippines more than 100 years ago

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A trifecta of bells that have been on U.S. soil for more than a century were returned to the Philippines last year — a move the VFW supported — despite opposition from some veterans.

The bells' odyssey began Sept. 28, 1901, during the Philippine-American War, when Filipino villagers attacked U.S. troops in Balangiga in the province of Eastern Samar, killing 48 of the 74 members of C Co., 9th Inf. Regt. A seven-day campaign occurred in the aftermath, as U.S. troops retaliated. More than 200 men of the 11th Infantry Regiment reportedly inflicted heavy casualties on the Filipinos, according to a September 2001 *VFW* magazine article. U.S. troops ultimately brought bells from the rubble of the Church of San Lorenzo de Martir back to the United States.

Since then, the proper location of the bells has been debated. Some believe they should remain in the U.S. as a memorial, while others sought their return to the Philippines. At the 2018 VFW National Convention, VFW delegates approved Res. 301 urging the return of the bells to the Church of San Lorenzo de Martir.

It was not unusual during the Philippine-American War, according to the resolution, for soldiers to return stateside with “souvenirs and artifacts from Catholic churches in the Philippines,” which violated the U.S. Army's order that protected private property.

Until December, two of the bells had been located at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyo., while the third bell was part of C Company's traveling museum. Return of the bells The bells were returned Dec. 11, 2018. Sung Kim, U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, said the return “underscores the enduring friendship, partnership and alliance” between the U.S. and the Philippines, according to the U.S. Embassy in the Philippines.

“In 1901, our two countries were adversaries,” Kim said. “That painful conflict soon ended, and our countries became partners and friends. We fought together for freedom and to

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protect democratic values across the Indo-Pacific region.”

In August, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis notified Congress of the Pentagon’s intent to return the bells. The decision, according to the U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, is the result of a year-long process with veterans organizations and government officials.

“Bells mark time, but courage is timeless,” Mattis said during a briefing at the Air Force base in November. “It does not fade in history’s dimly lit corridors, nor is it forgotten in history’s compost.”

Bells as War Memorials

Pvt. Adolph Gamlin served with the 9th Infantry Regiment during the attack in 1901, and survived. His daughter, Jean Wall, has worked since 1998 to make the significance of the bells known to veterans. She said there has been an “ongoing controversy” regarding their return.

“[The bells] were not taken out of a church, but fell to the ground and were picked up and brought back to the U.S. to keep them from being melted down for gun casings to be used against the U.S.,” Wall said. “They were stored with the 11th Infantry with headquarters in Wyoming at the time. And, for years, when there was no claim for them, it was decided to use them as a memorial, and an edifice was erected on the base to hold them.”

Wall said her goal has been to “challenge and clear the reputation” of the men in C Company against claims that they were attacked because of how they treated native Filipinos.

“Common sense, even without the knowledge I had acquired over the years, would indicate that these men were so outnumbered by native population in and around the area that, without any backup support being closer than 50 some miles, it would be pure suicide to use any such tactics in the short time they were there,” said Wall, a member of the Bell Research Group, which formed to investigate the Balangiga bells.

Kevin Mason, a member of VFW Post 1990 in Greeneville, Tenn., wrote a letter in 1998 to the grandchildren of Sgt. Frank Betron, who fought in the Philippine-American War. He stated that the bells represent and honor the “acts of heroism” of those who served during the Philippine-American War.

“They are symbols of soldiers for soldiers, past and present,” Mason wrote. “They are not given away as an act of goodwill or peace. The only reason these bells are an issue is because the Philippines has made them one.”

Requests for the bells’ return began in 1957, with repeated calls during Bill Clinton’s presidency and as recent as 2017.

Bells are ‘integral’ to Daily Life

Dennis Wright, a Life member of VFW Post 2485 in Angeles City, Philippines, is one of three Navy veterans who felt the bells belonged in the Philippines. He raised awareness of the bells, along with VFW Life members Dan McKinnon, also of Post 2485, and Brian Buzzell, of Post 10173 in Delavan, Wis. Post 2485 initiated the VFW resolution urging the return of the bells that ultimately was approved at the VFW’s National Convention in Kansas City, Mo., last year.

VFW’s Department of Wyoming invited Wright to speak on the subject at its Mid-Winter Conference last year.

“There were 65 in the audience,” said Wright, whose interest in the bells began in 2010. “After the presentation, only a dozen opposed. We found this the same everywhere. It was also validated within our own Post 2485, District VII and Department of Pacific Areas.”

While some veterans believe the bells serve as a memorial to the 9th Infantry, Wright said a memorial exists at Madison Barracks in Sackets Harbor, N.Y.

“That memorial lists each and every soldier [who] died in the encounter on large brass plates embedded in a 40-foot stone tower,” stated Wright, who served in the Navy for 33 years, including on the USS Eversole off of Vietnam from 1972-73 and the USS Abraham Lincoln from 1990-1992 during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The bells, according to Wright, are an “integral” part of daily life in the Philippines.

“Returning the bells to the town was the right and honorable thing to do,” Wright said.

However, Wall questioned whether the bells “served their mission” to honor those who perished in 1901 or if they were viewed as “just a brick edifice.”

“We can only hope in their return they will be cared for in the same reverence that they have been for over 100 years,” Wall said.

This article is featured in the April 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor of VFW magazine.