

North Carolina Senior Games

[From Carteret County]

Silver Arts

Literature -- Life Experience

NEGRITO

WORTHY ALLY; FIERCE ENEMY

Joyce Elder Bayley

The logo for Silver Arts, featuring the words "Silver Arts" in a stylized, cursive script font. The word "Silver" is written in a lighter, thinner script, while "Arts" is written in a bolder, darker script. A horizontal line or underline runs through the middle of the text.

Artist: **Joyce Bayley**
Title: **Negrto - WorthyAlly; Fierce
Enemy**

Sub-Category: Life Experiences

Local Game: Carteret County Senior Games

Life Experience

NEGRITO

WORTHY ALLY; FIERCE ENEMY

During the early 1970s, I lived on the large island of Luzon in the Republic of the Philippines. Negritos, a race of Black pygmies, had free access to Clark Air Base. The Filipinos did not. In jungles and mountains, Negritos still hunted birds, monkeys, and enemies with poison-dipped darts from blow guns. Once a year, they gave demonstrations that we Americans found fascinating. The distance of their accuracy surprised me.

Not about to pass up the opportunity, I visited the Negrito village just outside the base's back gate. This gate was guarded against unauthorized personnel entering the base—but stood open for the convenience of the pygmies.

These people were less than four feet tall. It felt strange to be standing in the middle of a crowd of grown men and looking down at the tops of their heads, covered with tightly-curled, black hair. To sell his crafts, a Negrito had to drop his head backward and face skyward to make eye contact with me. Filipinos

had straight, black hair and were considerably taller than Negritos, yet not nearly as tall as "the Americans," as we were referred to.

Discarded signs and other scavenged Items Negritos considered building materials were used to construct or reinforce their homes, but most had thatched roofs, split cane woven for walls, wedges of thick bamboo flooring, and wood or bamboo frames. They appeared much like the nepa hut we'd had built in our yard for our daughter. Although larger than the playhouse, four Negrito homes would have fit inside our bedroom on base.

The following week, everywhere I went, people were talking about a child's body that had been found in a field near the base. The small body, it was reported, had been cut open and the heart removed. This generated terror base-wide. Parents and maids were imminently more watchful and protective of children. Rumors circulated in waves, the most common one being that it had been a ritualistic killing and the heart used in a ceremony by one of the Negrito head-hunter tribes remaining in the mountains north of the base. To my knowledge, no arrest was ever made, and the crime was never solved. We later learned that it was not an isolated incident.

We had arrived at our new assignment knowing we'd be too far from our family for visits, since an ocean separated us. Indoctrination briefings had warned us not to wander off into barrios where the rebel HUKS took refuge. The handicap of not understanding what the local people said to each other had been

expected. Several different dialects were spoken on that one island, so it would have been useless to learn Pilipino, the national language that is a refined version of the native Tagalog. We had been prepared for the humidity and even the destructive typhoon whose eye passed directly over our house. While living in Puerto Rico, we had learned to do without or improvise when food or Christmas tree shipments from the States were late, and our household goods shipments were misplaced. But neither life back home in Podunk City, USA nor our military experiences had prepared us for headhunters and human sacrifices.

One night our house was broken into. The robbers stole our television set and would have gotten away if a noise had not awakened me. I called the base police who apprehended a fleeing young Filipino man. After sniffing the thief, the Canine Corps dogs headed for a neighbor's shrubbery and found our television set plus two pairs of plastic shower clogs, common footwear there at 15 degrees off the equator. One of the general's Negrito guards caught the second thief hiding and brought him over.

The base's senior officer's quarters, once occupied by General Douglas MacArthur, was guarded around the clock by Negritos. Many individuals hired them to guard their homes against intruders during the dark hours, although theft was not restricted by light. Mostly electronics equipment was stolen. Expensive items not manufactured in that country had a high resale value on the local black market.

The next day, we bought a trained German shepherd for inside

and hired a Negrito night guard. In the dark shadow beneath the house, the guard kept a lounge chair. Our house was on five-foot pillars, giving a foot more head clearance than he needed.

One evening when our guard reported to work, he brought a real bow and arrows with sharpened tips for our son. Afraid our five-year-old might use a pet or another child as a target, we put them away until our son was older. The Negrito's twelve-year-old son was about the same size as our five-year-old.

Yes, living in the Philippines was quite different for us. Almost everyone, regardless of rank, had at least one maid who took care of the housework, cooking, and children. Even the maids had help. Some families had a separate maid just for child care. For three dollars a day, a "yard boy" (a grown man supporting a family) came once or twice a week. He washed mildew off bathroom walls in the monsoon rainy season and weekly wiped down furniture, took grass rugs outside to beat them, and waxed floors. He polished the car and military shoes. He also cut the grass plus used a machete to trim shrubbery and edge walks. During our first eighteen months there, we felt guilty because the maid and houseboy did almost all the domestic chores. During the last eighteen months, we worried about how we would get along without them when we left.

Another service to which we were unaccustomed was performed when we entertained. From a favorite branch in a flowering tree, our Negrito guard made birdcalls to signal the guard next door

that arriving guests had been invited. Their car doors were then opened as if by an unseen ghost.

At the base's Jungle Survival School's zoo, I saw flora and fauna from the mountains and jungles. Among subtropical plants were unfamiliar animals, mostly in cages. The howler monkey was the noisiest. The reptile section had a deadly poisonous snake called a "one-stepper." That's about how far a person got after one bit him. We watched a Negrito handler feed a live chicken to a huge snake. It was not uncommon for constrictors to be allowed access to rural dwelling attics, including the nepa homes on stilts. It was considered pest control.

After receiving orders for an assignment in Thailand, one of our friends was sent for training at the Jungle Survival School in the mountains. Two things the friend later related pertained to the Negritos. The first was when they arrived. The class was led to a huge tree and told to find the three Negritos hiding in it. Studying the bare limbs and branches, the classmates chuckled among themselves. There were no leaves. To their surprise, three Negritos eventually climbed down from that tree.

The other incident was a lesson in evading the enemy. Each man going through the course was given a small piece of paper and told to hand it to the Negrito who found him. The men were then allowed a head start to get away and find a place to hide. The incentive for the Negritos to search for them was the slips of paper, each worth a bag of rice. Our neighbor said that he found

a tree with a tangle of dangling vines. Carefully pushing them aside, he raked a hole in the dried leaves, covered himself with them, then drew the vines back in place.

He saw a pygmy approach, stop, then turn and walk straight to him.

"I know you didn't see me. How did you find me?" our neighbor grumbled while relinquishing his slip.

The Negrito grinned. "I smelled you."

The Negritos had permission to rummage--anytime, day or night--through base dumpsters and personal housing garbage cans in search of items thrown away by wasteful Americans. It was an eerie feeling to hear your garbage cans rattle, peer into the darkness, and see a man's outline in your yard. From this salvage, Negritos made items sold to military people and their families who visited their village. We had bought handmade, decorated spears as souvenirs.

When I asked why Negritos had free run of the U.S. air base, I was told the following story. I cannot swear to its accuracy; I was not there at that time. In the same way that the history of our ancient ancestors was passed down, this story had been passed down by word of mouth for decades.

The tale begins with U.S. pilots who were shot down over the Philippines during World War II. They were rescued by Negritos and kept hidden from the Japanese. As a reward, Negritos were given free access to scavenge on the base.

Known for their hunting skills and stealth, Negritos were later hired to guard the base's perimeter fence. When a Filipino was caught attempting to climb over, cut through, or dig under the fence, he was taken to the base police. Since Filipinos were deathly afraid of the pygmies, word quickly spread.

Soon there were no offenders to take in. Fearing that the Americans would think they were not doing their job, the Negritos began slipping into nearby Angeles City, knocking out unsuspecting victims in alleys, and dragging them to the base to be turned in as perpetrators attempting to penetrate base security.

While General MacArthur was there, the Republic of the Philippines Government lodged a formal complaint against the United States Air Force and Government. Our host country was insulted because the United States felt a need to have a fence around Clark Air Base, much less Negrito guards. A vital part of U.S. defense, Clark was our largest overseas base and strategically located, so the U.S. compromised by agreeing that Negritos would no longer be hired as guards.

Naturally the Negritos were unhappy over their loss of status and income. The head of the fired pygmy guards warned the base police that they could not compare to the security provided by his men.

The first night our GIs took over the duty of guarding the base's perimeter fence, General MacArthur was a little nervous so went out during the night to personally check on the sentries. He found them in place and nothing disturbing the quiet night.

But according to the story, the proud Negrito guard leader

went to see MacArthur the next morning and told him that his men had been present at the fence the night before, and not a one of them had even been seen. At the general's disbelieving look, the Negrito informed him that every U.S. soldier on guard duty at the fence that night had a white mark on his boot heel to prove it.

Indignant, General MacArthur said that it was ridiculous, that he, himself, had been out there that night. When told to check his heel, the general was embarrassed to find a white mark on his own black boot.

After hearing that story, I shivered, remembering what our Negrito guard had said when we'd hired him. He had told us not to worry about thieves breaking into our house, that if they tried, we would not be bothered by or even see them. He had then suggested that we not dig beneath the shrubbery, since he might have ``fertilized'' it during the night.

The End