

Part Three

ACTS OF COURAGE

It was the week of enrollment so the teachers were mostly on campus except for some who were attending seminars elsewhere. On that fateful day, teachers were attending to students at the lobby of Laubach Hall where tables were set for the enrollment process.



Laubach Hall and the lobby where the enrollment took place

At about 2:00 in the afternoon, the teachers began to hear gunfire exchanges and helicopters flying. They did not give much attention having been used to the sound of gunfire. They simply looked up and listened to where the sounds were coming from. Enrollment went on. The staff in the offices continued with their tasks.

At about 4:00 pm, guards began to notice men in black, some heading towards the city jail but most of them walking back and forth outside the gate, watching students get in and out of the campus.



Some of the teachers received calls and text messages from parents and alumni warning them that militant groups were going to attack Dansalan College that night so they should all leave. Editha Andam, the Treasurer, informed Dr Tawagon who was then in the Iligan campus, about the situation. She went up the ICT building, observed two (2) helicopters hovering around the city and noticed the increasing number of men in black. She then instructed the guard to lock the gate and secure the premises.

Parents came to fetch their children. Teachers who lived in the city hurried home while those who lived on campus went to their quarters. Erlinda Saguin, the Principal, suggested that maybe everyone should just stay on campus. Edith then told the kitchen staff to prepare food for those who would stay.

At about 6:00 in the evening, the men in black demanded that the gate be opened. At the count of three, they fired at the lock and after clearing the debris, entered the campus. Using a megaphone, they spoke in Maranao, apparently asking everyone to come out.

The men proceeded to the Green House where Nadja Macarambon and Raisa Macalangcom were waiting downstairs.



Nadja, a science teacher who lived with her sister at the MSU campus, had decided to stay, keenly aware that all those on campus were Christians and did not speak Maranao.

Nadja recognized Omar Maute, a former student, who even nodded his head to her in acknowledgement.



Abdullah and Omar Maute (Photo: PhilStar)



The Maute brothers Abdullah and Omar are descendants of a big Maranao clan in Butig. They studied at Dansalan College in the 1990s. They worked in the Middle East and in between contracts studied Islamic theology in Syria and in the United Arab Emirates. They founded *Dawlah Islamiya*, but later became known as the Maute group, feared because of their hatred of non-believers and their ruthless sense of justice. (Philippine Star) The group has links with the ISIS.

Also with the group was a young boy who was about 10 or 11 years old. He was the most aggressive among the men, waving his gun as he spoke. It was known among the Maranaos that the Mautes have been training boy soldiers for years.

The men asked Nadja if there were any *kafir* (“unbeliever”) around and where everyone was. She told them everyone had left hurriedly and that only a few Maranao students were there.

Again, the men used the megaphone to call on people to come out because they would soon start to burn the buildings. The five teachers upstairs came down, among them John Rey Bugacia who was with Virgil Mutia earlier, but could not run as fast as him so he proceeded to the Green House instead. The men talked to them and knew immediately that they were Christians. At the Yellow House, Mrs Saguin who was watching TV for news about what was happening and her sister Noelita Cusap who was resting were already taken.

The men were visibly disappointed that there were only seven (7) hostages. Someone said there should be more as there were supposed to be almost a hundred faculty and staff at Dansalan. They were right as Dansalan College actually had a total of ninety two (92) personnel.

The hostages were led to a vehicle to be taken away. Nadja and Raisa joined them but the men drove them away and told them to leave. Nadia was gripped with fear as she walked away, thinking that they would shoot her, having told a lie that only Maranao students were left on campus... ..

Nadja noticed that the men had already hoisted the ISIS flag at the Van Vactor Hall. She proceeded to the house of a student where she spent the night, which was filled with the sounds of explosion and gunfire.



Meanwhile, Virgil Mutia, the guard who everyone called Biboy, sometimes "Parker" because students had likened him to NBA player Tony Parker of the San Antonio Spurs for his skill in basketball, was at the Van Vactor Hall, working in an area for a flagpole for senior students, when the gunfire started.

At first, Virgil did not pay attention to the gunfire and the helicopters, but when he saw the street filling up with men in black, he told the students to go inside the campus. Just before the men fired at the gate, he ran towards that side of the fence where the others had escaped, behind the Yellow House. He hid there the whole night. From where he was, he saw the men throw bottles filled with gasoline to the buildings.

The sound of gunfire in the whole city had intensified, hours before the Maute group invaded the campus. With warnings from parents and alumni that the campus would be attacked, everyone headed to where they could be safe.

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Those in the offices hurried towards Hamm Hall as well as those in the cafeteria and the guards by the gate. Randy Booc, the driver, who lived near the gate with his family, went home, fetched his wife Ludy, a former teacher who had a stroke and now bedridden, propped her on his shoulders and ran towards Hamm Hall. Hamm Hall was quite a distance from the gate, being the third building on the right from Laubach Hall.



Hamm Hall

They huddled in a room at the end of the second floor and kept still. Ludy could not understand what was happening so she kept on mumbling as she could not speak. Randy would cover her mouth to keep her quiet. At some point they heard the men moving downstairs but only for a short while, probably because they were already told by Nadja that everyone had left.

No one had supper that evening but they were more concerned about their safety, filled with a great sense of fear and uncertainty.

Early morning on the next day, they heard voices of women calling out for anyone in the building and offering help as the Maute group apparently were gone for breakfast. Everyone went out. The women brought *jihab* and put them on the teachers.



Maranao women assisting Edith Andam with the *jihab* as Elsie Materna awaits her turn

The women led them to their homes and served them breakfast.



Randy Booc carrying Ludy and with his family in the van to Iligan

Soon transport was arranged and they all headed to Iligan City. There were three vehicles. The L 300 was driven by an alumni, the son of a health worker. They were accosted up to a safe point outside of Marawi.

It was 6:00 in the morning. They reached Iligan at 11:00 along with many other families, some of them just walking. They had taken advantage of the peace window for those who wanted to leave.

They reached the DC campus in Lambaguhon at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon.

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Meanwhile, the teachers in the Green and Yellow Houses began to move towards the fence at the back. A Maranao family who lived on the other side of the fence had lowered a ladder to assist them. The women were given a *hijab* each to cover their heads. Everyone was taught what to say if approached by any of the militant groups. They intended to go to Heffington Hall, a residential unit of Dansalan College outside the campus. Instead, they were led to the mosque to mingle with the men and women there.

The teachers stayed at different houses that night, mostly houses of students whose parents showed genuine concern. They were kind and caring. Jane Rose Sedrome was hugged by the mother who bade her seven-year old son to watch her. The father even told her, "They would kill me first before they kill you." Then all night, students, parents and alumni were texting the teachers, concerned about their safety, even offering money if so needed.

In the morning, Teodoro Dando, came to fetch them. Known as Loloy, he is the husband of Gracia, a faculty member at Dansalan College. He was the driver of a lawyer who had already left with his family to Iligan City. Loloy brought them to their house. In all, there were thirty (30) teachers, seven (7) children, a baby, and four (4) others.

Among the children were the two sons of Joy Lucero who was in Iligan City. When she heard about what was happening in Marawi, she sent a text message to Ariel Ellare and asked him to pick up the boys at Van Vactor Hall. Having heard of stories of the Maute group abducting and recruiting young boys to be trained as soldiers, Joy was anxious that the boys might suffer the same fate.



Loloy led the group to the basement of the three-storey house. The first thing the men did was to secure the place. The door to the basement was half glass so anything down there would be visible. The men propped up a cabinet against the door and gathered stuff to barricade every exit.

Well enough, as one morning, the Maute group came, shouting in Tagalog, asking if there was anyone in the house, that they should come out, giving assurance that no one would be hurt. They could hear every sound - heavy footsteps, doors opening, furnitures falling... Soon, the footsteps became closer, going down to the basement. They heard men's voices. They kept still, praying, thinking this could be the end. The baby was making some noise and so someone stuck her finger into the baby's mouth. Silence. And then, they heard the footsteps going further away...

The basement had rooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen but they were empty. They tried to settle down, each one anxious and tense. In the beginning, there were conversations that were not friendly, but later they calmed down and began to work together.

As it was a period of preparation for the Ramadhan, Maranao families usually stock up food. They found a sack of rice in the kitchen. They did not know how long they would be there and so to ensure that there would be enough food, they ate only once a day, and rice only. After a few days, they would make jokes as they ate, for example, one would say she was having beef *chao fan*, another, pork *chao fan*...

They slept together on the cement floor with no pillows, blankets, mattresses nor *banig*.

There was no water either. To avoid dehydration, they would scoop the early morning mist on the cement wall with their fingers to wet their lips, at least. They had to depend on rain. There was a water tank at the rooftop and to access water, Jane Rose, the smallest and lightest of the teachers, was tasked to climb up the roof.



On the seventh day, they found a chicken, which they boiled in a big pot of water whole, as there was no knife. They made the chicken last for three (3) days, the first two (2) days with just the soup on their rice. On the third day, the chicken meat had naturally fallen off in tiny pieces, so they were happy to finally taste chicken meat with their rice.

On the 10th day, someone ventured upstairs and found dried fish and tiny dried shrimps/anchovy in a cupboard. The food in the refrigerator were already rotten as there was no electricity since day one. They steamed the dried fish on rice and ate the dried shrimps raw.

It must be mentioned here that all the time they were in the basement, they maintained communication with the outside world. There was no electricity, but someone had brought a power bank. They agreed that only one phone should be used. It so happened that someone had an uncle in the military based elsewhere, who then made contact with a personnel in Marawi. This guy gave warnings like “Do not go out, there are snipers in the area” or that “the peace window was cancelled.” They were also able to connect with some alumni who updated them with what was happening outside.

On the 12th day, they all decided to take the risk and escape. They went out one by one, in a single file, almost crawling, along the hedges and the bushes. There were snipers and so they had to go low to avoid the bullets being fired. They saw dead bodies along the way, some already in a state of decomposition.



Loloy was running with Gracia and their son Bryan. When he looked back, they were no longer behind him. He ran back and found Bryan hurt and who could no longer walk. Bryan told his parents to just leave him, run away and save themselves. But Loloy and Gracia would not hear of it. They could not bear the thought of leaving him there. So Loloy carried him, and struggled all the way to safety.

At some point, a helicopter guided the group towards the bridge. Soon, they all reached the military station where they were offered biscuits and water. They were met by DC vehicles.

After the interview with the rescue team of the city government of Iligan, they went directly to the DC campus in Lambaguhon where they were welcomed by family, friends and well-wishers.



At the government shelter, feeling relieved and safe





At the DC campus in Lambaguhon



Finally, food and water, a good bath, and mattresses to sleep on



109 rescued

DC TEACHERS AND STAFF

1. JANE ROSE R SEDROME
2. JERONA R. SEDROME
3. APAO T REGENE
4. KAREN MUNASQUE
5. MARIBETH C MAYORDO
6. GRACE DANDO
7. TEODORO DANDO
8. JOHNNY RELION
9. AMOR HABAGAT
10. MARIE LOUISE KILEM
11. RECEDA ANDITOR
12. FELMA JOY SILLA
13. SHEENA MAY JEMENEZ
14. DARWIN CACDAC
15. ROCKY JOHNS RELLIETA
16. CYRIL POBLADOR
17. LEO OROBALA
18. ARIEL ELLARE
19. LORYLYN GANUHAY
20. JULIO LASOLA (FAMILY) AND 6 MEMBERS HIS FAMILY
21. ELISA MISAL – DC APPLICANT
22. STEPHANIE VILLAROSA - DC APPLICANT
23. MOH'DS EDRIS ALAMADA
24. ANUAR ALAMADA
25. ALJO CATEDRAL
26. PEARL APILAN
27. APRIL RAPISTA
28. BRYAN DANDO
29. LEONIDES TUBIO
30. VANESSA ALAS-AS
31. ARJIE CALAGO
32. JASMINE LUMAGNANG
33. RONALD BOLO

The Hostages

On 23 May 2017, the first day of the Marawi siege, seven (7) teachers from Dansalan College were taken as hostages.



Archilly Abao
Lordvin Acopio
Dyna Bernaldez
Robie Brizal
John Rey Bugacia
Noelita Cusap
Erlinda Saguin



Archilly Abao, sisters Erlinda Saguin and Noelita Cusap, Robie Brizal

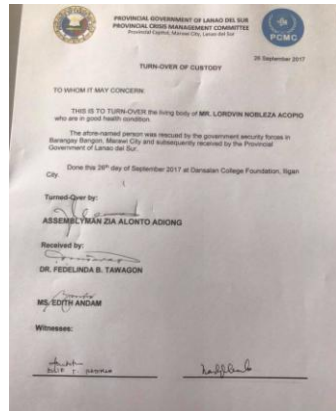


Fr Chito Soganub, Dyna Bernaldez, Lordvin Acopio, John Rey Bugacia, Noelita Cusap

For four months, their whereabouts were unknown.

Then, on September 16, after 116 days in captivity, Lordvin Acopio along with Fr Chito Soganub (Roman Catholic priest taken at St Mary’s Cathedral on the same day with many other churchgoers) were able to escape from their captors who were engaged in heavy fighting with government military troops in the vicinity of Masjid Bato Ali in Marawi, the command center of the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute groups. While fleeing, they were recognized and eventually rescued by troops of the AFP.

Lordvin was officially turned over to Dansalan College Iligan campus by Hon Zia Alonto Adiong, Majority Floor Leader at the Regional Legislative Assembly of the ARMM. He was received by Dr Fedelinda Tawagon, the President of Dansalan College Foundation Inc. The faculty and staff were happy to see the safe return of their colleague.



Lordvin Acopio with Assemblyman Zia Alonto Adiong and Dr Fedelinda Tawagon

While in captivity, Lordvin served as a medic and attended to many wounded captors. He shared concern about trained child soldiers who seemed more aggressive in wielding their guns than their elders.

Lordvin is now in Iloilo City with his family.

On October 4, after 134 days in captivity, nine (9) hostages were rescued by government military forces, after intense fighting in Barangay Lumbac, Marinaut in Marawi City. The fighting distracted the ISIS-Maute group, which gave the hostages the opportunity to escape. Among the rescued were the five (5) women teachers from Dansalan College.

Dr Tawagon and colleagues are awaiting the turnover of the teachers to Dansalan College, and their eventual reunion with their respective families.

Still unaccounted for is one other male teacher.



John Rey Bugacia