

Tear gas and handcuffs

By CES ORENA DRILON

Brigadier General Danilo Lim was to testify at the Makati RTC in the hearing of the coup d'état charges against the Magdalo soldiers involved in the Oakwood mutiny. This was my assignment on that fateful Thursday, November 29, 2007.

Since I will be there, anyway, I decided to schedule an interview too with Judge Benjamin Pozon for an anniversary story of the Subic Rape Case. Judge Pozon convicted Corporal Daniel Smith on December 4, 2006 on the rape charges filed by Nicole. The meeting with Judge Pozon was not to happen.

At the time I was supposed to be interviewing him, I was holed up with other members of the media at The Pen and became a subplot in the main story that was called by many names--- siege, mutiny, standoff, rebellion.

Let's backtrack to why I was there.

On and off for the last two years, I covered the hearings of the Magdalo soldiers. It became more regular after I made a personal commitment to follow the story, especially of the cases against Lim and 25 other officers for their involvement in the failed coup of February 2006. This after I broke the story on Oplan Hackle, an alleged plot to topple down the Arroyo administration.

Lim had served as government negotiator when then Lt Senior Grade Antonio Trillanes took over the Oakwood Premier Hotel. He was highly respected by the junior officers and succeeded in convincing the rebels to peacefully surrender. Lim had, as a member of the Young Officers Union (YOU), been involved in the coup attempts against President Corazon Aquino in 1989. He and fellow rebel soldiers were able to rejoin the Armed Forces after two years in detention when they were granted amnesty by President Ramos. Under the Arroyo administration, Lim, a PMAer who graduated from West Point, was the first in his batch of 1978 to be promoted to the rank of brigadier general.

It was then a surprise to many that, as Commanding General of the elite Scout Rangers, Lim was again linked to the failed mutiny of February 2006. Lim has not said much to media or during the court martial hearings since July last year, when Bandila aired his taped withdrawal of support from President Arroyo for the first time.

His testimony that Thursday, therefore, was deemed a significant news event. I was hoping to catch a few words from him after his testimony on the witness stand. But things turned out differently.

Marching on three-inch heels

To prepare for the coverage, I called up Senator Trillanes the night before to ask what he was up to. He wasn't even sure, he said, if he was going to the hearing.

The crew came ahead of me. The ride from Quezon City took more than two hours in the steady rain. Then the long waiting time to get an elevator at the ground floor of the Makati City Hall delayed me.

The elevator opened to a commotion in the 14th floor. Senator Trillanes was speaking to the media but he looked like he was being restrained. It was as I grabbed a microphone from the crew that I caught him saying, "Nananawagan kami sa taumbayan na naniniwala sa pagbabago. Ngayon na ang panahon. Join us, sumama kayo sa amin dito sa Makati (We call on the people who believe in change. Now is the time. Join us here in Makati)."

Navy Lt. Senior Grade James Layug was less eloquent, cursing as he called on the other soldiers, "Mga kasama naming sundalo, sumama kayo, putang ina, huwag na kayong magpakatuta!"

There seems to be a struggle between Trillanes' men and his guards. "Pare hindi tayo magkalaban, were fighting the same cause."

I went next for General Lim who was also being surrounded. It was not clear at the time if they were men sympathetic to him or restraining him from leaving, But he said, "We're calling in the people, decent and idealistic members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, join us in this move."

I tried to make sense of what was going on. I was completely caught by surprise, even if a source had told me to look out for Trillanes. Still, I had no inkling it would come to this, an actual walkout from a court hearing.

As the two men were pushed into the elevator, I rushed in, making sure I was at the far corner so I would not be pulled out. There was a mad struggle to join the group. At that point, I was not sure on whose side the men inside were. Were the guards whisking away Trillanes back to detention or was he escaping?

When my cameraman, Jimmy Encarnacion, tried to follow me to the elevator, other uniformed men yanked him away. Amid the noise, I heard a voice cried out: "Mabubulilyaso tayo. Isara na yan, (We will be late, Close that)." I instructed Jimmy not to go in and instead just follow downstairs.

At the ground floor, Trillanes and Lim waited for some men to catch up by the glass door which seemed to me to automatically shut. I thought they will be trapped there. But the doors opened and the pair walked out.

I still cannot get over it. How could this happen? Where are the guards?

Trillanes said the guards are now with them. I tried to ask the military police personnel who were there but they refused to say anything. I asked General Lim, "You're walking free?!" but someone else responded, "Yes we are!" Their walkout was so extraordinary

for me. In Tanay, the media is kept several meters from the accused. General Lim and his co-accused were heavily guarded.

The general later told us more units were following to join them from Mindanao and Northern Luzon.

After granting quick interviews, the group proceeded to walk out of the parking lot and onto J.P. Rizal Street. I followed the group not knowing where we were going, silently cursing myself for wearing three inch heels.

No mad rush to The Pen

It was DZMM who got first to report live and I recall telling Winnie Cordero who was on air at that time, "Isa itong pambihirang pangyayari, naglalakad sila ng libre sa kahabaan ng JP Rizal!" (This is extraordinary, They are freely walking along JP Rizal Avenue).

I looked around and watched them call out to curious onlookers, who waved back. I saw men in fatigue uniforms with long firearms walking alongside Trillanes and Lim.

We were walking in the middle of the street! After we crossed Buendia Avenue, I looked back and saw a black Starex van blocking the traffic.

We still had no idea where we were going. Senator Trillanes would not tell us, only saying they would hold a press conference when we get to our destination. I struggled to keep up, tottering on my heels. Thankfully, an ABS-CBN pickup van came and I rode in so I could report by phone without panting. At this point, I also managed to retrieve a pair of flip-flops I always bring along in our vehicle.

I rushed to catch up with the group and saw the Senator make a left and climb the steps to Nielsen's. "We are going to the Peninsula!" I barked to my telephone as I reported on phone patch to the TV studio. The glass door broke as more people tried to follow the soldiers.

Stunned hotel staff could only watch as the group of the Senator made its way to the lobby of the hotel. There were guests having their coffee and meals in several tables in the lobby, seemingly oblivious to the new "guests." Surprisingly there was no panic and no mad rush to the door.

I rejoined the group as Lim was about to make his statement. Pinky Webb, a colleague in ABS-CBN caught up with the march somewhere in the corner of Buendia and Makati Avenue and was already in position. Our breaking news producer Bert Apostol was frantically urging me to activate the 3G capability of my phone as the competition was definitely going to feed live pictures through their mobile phones. I asked him to get in touch with my segment producer as I wanted to pay attention to what Lim would say. It was tough to focus on his statement, the members of the media were jostling each other for the best position, and I was frustrated at not being able to activate my 3G. At the end

of the statement, media shouted questions at Lim and Trillanes but they would not elaborate beyond what they read.

The group then made their way to the second floor to establish a command post. The hotel crewmembers were assisting them to the function rooms as media scrambled to follow.

By this time, we were arranging for our live broadcast from the hotel. I tasked members of my staff to coordinate with the public relations office. Pinky was awaiting the start of the press conference on the third floor while another colleague, Charo Logarta, was on the first floor. Cameraman Jimmy and his assistant, Angel Valderrama were outside the function room where Trillanes was. This gave me some time to attend to the nitty gritty of being able to report live from the hotel. Rupert Ambil and his crew sought hotel security permission to open a window by the first floor rooftop to allow our cables in.

At about 12:30, I was told that Chief Superintendent Geary Barias was at the lobby. I went down to seek interview but was careful not to linger too long. I didn't want to spend much time there as I wanted to be close to the group closeted in the second floor function room, in case any announcement would be made to the press. Barias was prevented by Trillanes' men to go up to the second floor. He protested the media coming and going while his movements were limited. I told him, "Sir, I've been here for a while now. '

During the early hours of that afternoon, I spoke to at least two government agents on the second floor, one a member of the Marines who had indicated to me that he was reporting to the authorities; the other an intelligence officer of the police, posing as a media man. I left both to do their jobs, while I strove to do mine.

I was doing a live report when Barias appealed to media to leave the hotel. I did not hear his call except when I viewed our tapes later on in doing my story for Correspondents.

Close to the 3:00 pm deadline, Trillanes went down to the lobby. It was there where I learned that the hotel general manager, David Batchelor asked Trillanes to ask his men to allow the guests to evacuate. Apparently, the instructions of Trillanes were not reaching his men.

Trillanes went back to the room where, we were told later, they were busy coordinating on the phone with troops.

Before 4:00 pm, the newsroom was warning us teargas may be used. They said we must consider leaving if it was too dangerous. My instinct was to go to the bathroom to get paper towels and to wet them. I also grabbed two table napkins and wet them as well. I informed all our staff and technical crew to do the same

Pinky and I discussed a back up plan in case we had to leave and we agreed to book a room. My segment producer, Melanie Masecampo had gone to the front desk but they were aghast, telling Melanie they were already evacuating the hotel.

We decided to stay on to continue our coverage. I stayed in the entrance to the corridor of the function rooms in the left wing of the hotel, while Pinky stayed on the right side.

I received a call from Philippine National Police chief Director General Avelino Razon Jr. urging me to leave. I told him politely but firmly that I was staying.

I based my judgment to stay on my experience covering events like the Oakwood mutiny in 2003 and other military uprisings like the 1989 coup, where deadlines would come and go but no assault would take place. Also, the group of Trillanes did not look like they would make any effective resistance. At that point, staying there was still a safe option. When the tear gas fumes reached our area, we retreated into the corridor close to the function room where the group was holed up. When the fumes were getting too thick, Trillanes's men allowed us in.

I don't remember the time but Trillanes had finally said, "We are coming out."

We had not yet brought enough cable to the function room area and so were unable to carry the announcement live. It took some time before we made the announcement on live TV. This eased the tension and fear among the media covering the group. At this point, I saw some of the followers of the Senator take off their military uniform which they wore over their civilian clothes. Jimmy caught the scene on camera.

At the function room, we began interviewing Trillanes, Bishop Labayen, Lim and the others. They said a prayer and in a few minutes, the door opened to reveal SAF men in gas masks, urging us to go out. The air was still thick with tear gas and we waited awhile before streaming out of the room.

The police's Special Action Force (SAF) went for the main personalities. Members of the press were made to line up with arms raised. At the steps of the hotel, we were made to sit. It was a chance for us to catch our breaths and relax. All around me were members of the media I recognized from our coverage. There were no supporters or Magdalo soldiers posing as reporters. The civilian members of the group were made to sit on the chairs in the lobby. The police intelligence officer, who was behind me as we made our way to the steps, was no longer in sight. When it seemed like we were waiting too long, I stood up and asked the guards for their commander.

Criminal Investigation and Detection Group's Chief Superintendent Asher Dolina came a few minutes later and told us we will be brought to Bicutan "for processing, as witnesses and suspects."

I bristled at the word "suspects". I just couldn't believe it.

Then news reached us that some of our colleagues had already been arrested. I went down and had a heated exchange with Dolina, especially when I saw a thick bunch of

plastic handcuffs being readied for our group. I protested that we were journalists and we were only doing our jobs.

The teargas was something we were willing to bear in our coverage and knew it was meant for the group of Trillanes. Inhaling it and feeling the pain was the price we paid for choosing to stay, but the handcuffs were another matter. It was to me, unthinkable! I even opposed having to go to Bicutan. But since my other colleagues in media were already in the bus, I relented.

We all moved out of the hotel to make way for the bus, only for a few of us to return because there was no more room. We waited for about fifteen minutes for another bus, which turned out to be the mobile office of Metropolitan Manila Development Authority Chair Bayani Fernando.

In Bicutan, we were made to present our identification papers and made to sign release documents. It took just five minutes to complete. All of us were puzzled that we had to go all the way there, wasting precious time which we could have used to complete and file our stories.

It was almost nine in the evening, when all thirteen of us in ABS-CBN were able to leave the police camp to return to the studio. As we left the Bicutan gate, I could only think that in our profession, going to the infamous detention center of Martial Law was a badge of honor.

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