

From Tarlac to Iraq

US Air Force Captain Cristina Miranda comes a long way

by CYNTHIA DE CASTRO / AJPress

It was two days before Thanksgiving in 2007 and United States Air Force Captain Cristina Miranda was busy preparing for the coming holidays. Christmas is always the happiest time of the year ever since she was a little girl among her family in Tarlac. Though she has immigrated to the US in 1992 where the Yuletide season is not celebrated as long and as festive as in the Philippines, still it is the best time in the year for the young Air Force captain and her husband, Richard, and two sons, Derek and Joshua.

Then, the unexpected came. Cristina received a notice that day that she is being deployed to the war-torn country of Iraq.

"I was notified two days before Thanksgiving that I was being deployed to leave on December 13. I never envisioned myself going to Iraq. I was sad," Miranda recalled. "But I made friends with many people who were also serving. It was a good career move," she admitted.

Though her family and friends feared for her safety, Cristina was able to finish her deployment with-

out any problems. "I went to Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, where I got to visit Saddam Hussein's palace as often as I want. I stayed in Iraq for a year and got to travel to different sites through helicopters and C130s. I've heard mortar attacks but was not harmed," said Miranda.

The brave and courageous Pinoy has truly come a long way from her native province of Tarlac. Born on May 3, 1971 in Tarlac, Tarlac, Cristina attended elementary and high school in the College of the Holy Spirit in Tarlac. She then moved to

Manila for her college education, taking up BS Mathematics, Major in Actuarial Science at the University of Santo Tomas, graduating cum laude.

In April 1992, Cristina immigrated to California with her mother and brother. "My mother was sponsored by her sister, my aunt. We waited 13 years before the petition was approved. I arrived in California with my mother and younger brother, just two months before my 21st birthday. The next year, I came back to the Philippines to marry Richard," said Cristina



who shuttled back and forth from California to the Philippines over the next few years. She had a son named Derek, now 16 years old. "I could not take my husband and son with me right away, so they had to stay behind in the Philippines. I did different kinds of jobs in California, from working two days in Sbarro, to other agency-supplied temporary work," she added.

It was love for her family that challenged Miranda to join the Air Force. She told her story to *Asian Journal*. "While I was on vacation in the Philippines, my husband's uncle suggested that I apply in the US military so I can get my husband and son faster than just waiting for me to become a citizen. So, the main reason why I joined the Air Force in 1994 was the hope of getting my husband to the US in the quickest possible time. However, it took the same amount of time to petition him—5 years.

You see, I've been here in the US two years before I joined the Air Force. To apply for citizenship, you need to be active 3 years. So, it's not true that joining the Air Force would be quicker. Recruiters will tell you whatever you want to hear. It wasn't true, but everything was all a blessing. I was fooled that being in the service, you have special preferences. But, it was a good decision to join the military anyway," shared Cristina.

One of the many benefits of her military career is education. The military encourages its personnel to further their education—for free. "I got paid going to school," Miranda said happily. She got a BS Human Resource Management degree in 1999 from Troy State University and her Master's in Business Administration (MBA) from the Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California in 2002. "I did night and weekend school to finish my degree. And I went to school full time for 18 months to get my MBA," Cristina said.

Cristina spoke very positively about her military career. "I enlisted in 1994 but I've been in the Air Force for almost 8 years before I

crossed over to officership through the Officer Training School. I've been a captain since 2006. There were many challenges such as moving bases and locations every two to three years. I would say the biggest challenge is the stress that I put on my husband and my two children, Derek and Joshua. My husband had to quit his job and not establish a career because we want to keep the family together. When Derek was younger, he was not affected as much as when he became a teenager. Then, he began to complain about not having steady friends and school," she admitted.

While there are still far fewer women serving in the military, Cristina said that the population of women who have joined is currently 63,633. They make up around 33 percent with the 67 percent being males. "I can't tell you how many Filipino women there are now in the Air Force but it's a good number," said Miranda.

Asked if she endured discrimination in the air force, Cristina said, "Race and sex discrimination are inevitable anywhere you go." Cristina is six years away to retirement if she desires. It has been a good career and she encourages men and women, especially fellow *Pinoy*s, to "join the Air Force or any service for that matter. There are numerous benefits and if you're hardworking, it's easy to go up the ranks."

The main reason for Cristina's joining the military is also the major reason why she has stayed—love for family. "There are many benefits, but the most important for me and my family is the medical benefit. I have a son, Joshua, who has all sorts of medical needs due to a genetic disorder, known as EEC—Electrodactyly Ectodermal Dysplasia with Clefting Syndrome. He was born with a cleft palate, he got blind in the right eye and almost lost sight from his left eye as well. He had a tube inserted in him so he can eat. Since birth, he has had over 20 surgeries. But, the military insurance has never asked me to pay anything for all



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit—the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, **Galing Pinoy** literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



his care and surgeries," said Captain Miranda.

During her deployment in Iraq, Captain Cristina was given great news, which more than compensated from the difficulty of being away from her family. She narrated, "A few weeks into deployment, my husband gave me the news that The Make-A-Wish Foundation (America's largest wish-granting organization which grants wishes of children undergoing difficult medical treatments) was considering Joshua. They interviewed him at our home, where he wished for only one thing—a Disney cruise. We thank God for this unexpected blessing. My husband and I were overwhelmed with joy because Josh has been through so much physical hardship. I went back home for an R&R in time for Joshua's dream to come true. On May 10, 2008, the day before Mother's Day, a white limousine parked in front of our unit in Moffett Field military housing. When Derek, my older child, was younger, he wanted a limo ride. In a way, his wish also came true in this vacation package. Everything was set up by Make-A-Wish. All we had to do was enjoy the family time we were deprived of (during her deployment to Iraq). Because it's Disney, the song *When you wish upon a Star* was consistently played at every show. That song has more meaning to me now more than ever."

Yes, Captain Cristina Miranda may have had her share of trials, but she has also seen God's loving hand in granting her wishes. Though there is a strong possibility that she will be deployed again soon, she is able to face life courageously with the positive attitude that "this too shall pass."

Your *kababayans* salute you, Captain Cristina Miranda. You are truly *Galing Pinoy!* ■

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PACCAL celebrates Women's...

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times ahead. "I believe that as a woman and a community leader, there are many challenges that we must tackle head-on. There are many times that we may feel discouraged because of the pressure, but with the strength that God gives us, we can overcome them all," she explained.

This year's women achievers awardees are Ledy Almadin (community service), Analisa Balares (young professional), Zorayda Baluyot de Leon, M.D. (medical profession), Araceli Mendoza, R.N. (nursing profession), Juliet Payabyab (humanitarian), Corazon Rivera (business), Rhodora Ursua (health and human service) and Maureen Javier Varco (performing arts).

Analisa Balares, CEO and founder of Womensphere, honored her grandmothers as she delivered the response on behalf of the eight other awardees.

"My perspective now on the role of women in the society and everything I do now is shaped in large part by the legacy of my parents, and my grandmothers," she shared.

Balares explained that her parents were both raised by women who got widowed early in life, and eventually became responsible in raising their respective families as single mothers.

"My grandmothers were strong and powerful women. They did everything—from washing other people's clothes to planting rice to planting and selling vegetables and fish to growing copra—to raise their families. Not only did they raise my parents with dignity and values, they raised them with a love for life, a deep sense of faith and generosity of spirit

that defy the fact that they were in an impoverished situation," Balares added.

Every year for the past ten years, PACCAL has been celebrating the courage, vision and determination of women, through the organization's Women Achiever Awards.

"I reminisce 10 years ago when PACCAL first started celebrating the achievements of Filipino-American women," Linda Mayo, PACCAL's executive director wrote on her message. "I look back at the wonderful contributions of women around the world, fighting for the right of suffrage, for education, for battered women, for equal rights," she added.

This year's awardees come from diverse fields.

Rosemarie Parreno received her award for her efforts in the field of education, specifically for her efforts in teaching English as a second language. Last month, *New York Times* honored Parreno at the *New York Times* ESOL Teacher of the Year awards.

Parreno currently teaches ESL (English as Second Language) at Hostos Community College in the Bronx and at P.S. 75. She arrived in the US as an exchange teacher scholar at the Northern Illinois University. Prior to this post, she was an ESL teacher/supervisor at the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), a US-funded organization for refugees bound for America.

Ledy Almadin is the awardee in the field of community service. She is currently the president of the Catholic Action of Mary, a lay organization at the Resurrection Parish in Jersey City. The organization sponsors many religious activities in the community such

as the Pabasa, Salubong, Simbang Gabi, pilgrimages and the Santacruznan.

Dr. Zorayda de Leon is the current president of the Hudson County Medical Society and as such, she has been very active in raising funds for the organization's various medical missions. Araceli Mendoza, the current associate director in the Renal Division of the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City and the Vice President of the Philippine Nurses Association of New York, is this year's awardee in the field of nursing.

Juliet Payabyab is no stranger to community service as well and this year, her humanitarian efforts are being recognized by PACCAL. Payabyab is the first woman president of the Philam Lions Club, the first Filipino Lions Club in the East Coast. She was also a two-term president of the Philippine American Communities Executive Council (PACEC), an umbrella organization of Filipino American civic organizations.

In the field of business, this year's awardee is Corazon Rivera, the indefatigable woman behind Bona Tierra Realty, which she established with her family back in 1988. Rhodora Ursua, on the other hand, is the honoree in the field of health and human service. Ursua is the director of Project Aspire, a community-based research project aimed at improving health access and cardiovascular health status of Filipinos in NYC and Jersey City.

Maureen Varco is the lead female vocalist for Opera 3000 and has performed in numerous shows and theatre productions. She is this year's honoree in the field of performing arts. ■