

**A Tribute to Grand Master Emeritus
LEO M. GIRON
By Antonio E. Somera**

On May 22, 2002, one of the last of the bladed World War II heroes passed away. Grand Master Emeritus Leovigildo “Leo” Miguel Giron passed away at the age of 90 years. His story is simple. He did not want too much, just happiness for all. However, his *life* would prove to be anything but simple. Instead, his life would be a great one, full of adventure and full of the respect from thousands.

Leo Miguel Giron was born in Bayambang, a little barrio in the province of Pangasinan, Philippines, on August 20, 1911. He began his formal training in the martial arts because of neighborhood children and bullies who tried to take advantage of him and others. Giron soon learned that if he stood up to them, and made one of them cry, the rest would run away and leave him alone.

In 1920, young Giron started his education in arnis escrima at the age of 9 years. Many of his teachers were family members, and were experts in both the cabaroan (new style) or cadaanan (old style). They would practice under a mango tree late at night. The payment to practice was a bundle of rice. During their late night training, they would use the light of the moon, and there came a time when this would help Giron to accomplish dangerous missions deep in the jungles of the Philippines during World War II. Most often, the word “play” was used instead of practice, because if asked by others, “What are you doing?” the answer would be, “We are just playing.” This was because not everyone was asked to join in the “playing.” For the most part, young Giron would play without the knowledge of his mother, but after persuasion from young Giron and his father, he was allowed to practice this deadly art. Giron continued to play with his teachers until the time came to leave his homeland.

1906 to 1930 produced the biggest wave of Filipinos arriving in America. On October 20, 1926, at the age of 15 years, Giron boarded the USS President Lincoln and set sail for America. He arrived in Stockton, California with a bag of fruit and 25 cents in his pocket. His first night in Stockton was at the Star Hotel, right off of El Dorado Street in downtown Stockton. At that time, this area had the largest population of Filipinos in the United States, which earned Stockton the nickname, “Little Manila.”

The following day of Giron's arrival to Stockton, he was offered a job at Terminus Island harvesting celery for 17.5 cents an hour. The regular rate was 35 cents an hour, but due to Giron's being under the age of 18, he was paid half the regular amount. Giron was also unaware of the cold November weather, and all he had were his island clothes, brought from the Philippines, but he quickly adapted to the weather and social conditions of his new home in America.

In 1929, Giron met a man by the name of Flaviano Vergara. Vergara was from the town of Santa Cruz in Llocos Sur Luzon, Philippines. He was the top student of Dalmacio Bergonia, who defeated the great stick-fighting champion of the Philippines, Santiago Toledo. Vergara and Giron started their training deep in the prune orchards of Meridian, California, continuing from 1929 to 1932. Vergara and Giron would meet again directly after the outbreak of World War II. Their lives would cross for the last time on October 1942, when Giron was shipped out to Fort Ord, California. Every spare minute, Vergara and Giron trained, until Giron was shipped out in January 1943. Vergara was a master in the Bergonia style, and was very proficient in the estilo elastico (rubber band style). Out of all his teachers, he influenced Giron the most, and Vergara's understanding of the relationships between the cadaanan (old style) and cabaroan (new style) of arnis escrima would prove to be a life saver to Giron later on in his life during World War II. Vergara was also the teacher who gave Giron the Abanico del Maestro (The Fan of the Master).

On June 28, 1937, Leo M. Giron joined one of the largest and most powerful Filipino fraternal orders in America when he was initiated into the Lesionarios Del Trabajo. He started in the Acacia Lodge #637 and later transferred to General Luna Lodge #602 where he was an active member for the rest of his life. The Legionarios Del Trabajo started its first lodge in United States in 1924, in San Francisco, California. Its membership topped the three thousand mark. In all states (including Alaska and Hawaii) there were 86 lodges, including a dozen for women. The Legionarios Del Trabajo was known for saving money, buying property, and offering benefits to their members, along with social activities for the families and friends of members that shielded them from the social and economic prejudices all Filipinos had to endure during those times.

During the outbreak of World War II, Giron was assigned to General Douglas MacArthur's group of secret commandos. On July 13, 1942, the First Filipino Infantry was formed in Salinas, California, and on November 21, 1942, the Second Filipino Infantry was formed. Giron was a part of the Second

Filipino Infantry. Together, the First and Second Filipino Infantries grew to the strength of 12,000 men. Around 1,000 of these men were selected for special and secret missions. Giron was one of 12,000 men selected, and on November 20, 1944, the first Reconnaissance Battalion was activated. This included the famous 978th Signal Service Company to which Giron was assigned. These men were called commandos, and “Bahala Na” (come what may) was their slogan. Trained in jungle warfare, Giron and the commandos landed in U.S. submarines at strategic locations throughout the Philippines nearly one year before any other American U.S. soldiers landed in the Philippines. Giron and his company contacted underground organizations, gathered information, and relayed it to MacArthur’s Australian headquarters. They were the secret force and the secret operatives – the eyes and ears of MacArthur. For nearly a year, Sergeant Giron roamed the countryside of the Philippines and encountered the enemy in hand-to-hand combat, using the expertise that he learned while growing up in the Philippines and America.

Sergeant Giron returned to America as a World War II hero, decorated with many awards and citations. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal, the Philippine Liberation Ribbon with Bronze Stars, the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, the American Campaign Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, and a letter of commendation ordered by the President of the United States. It reads:

By direction of the President of the United States of America, under the provisions of Executive Order 9419, 4 February 1944 (Sec. ii, Bulletin 3, WD, 1944) a Bronze Star Medal is awarded by the Commander-in-Chief, United States Army Forces, specific to the following named officer and enlisted men for heroic achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy in Luzon, Philippine Islands, during the period indicated with citation for each as shown herein below:

Technical Sergeant Leovigildo M. Giron, 39536996, Signal Corps, United States Army, 27 August 1944 to 11 June 1945. Address: Bayambang, Pangasinan, Philippine Islands. Citation for each of the above named officers and enlisted men is as follows: volunteering for a secret and dangerous military intelligence mission, he was landed by submarine in Luzon, Philippine island, where he assisted in successfully extending lines of communication, securing vital weather data and obtaining military information, which proved of the greatest assistance to impending military operations. By his loyalty, daring

and skillful performance of duty under the most hazardous conditions, he readied a campaign for the recapture of the Philippine islands.

- * *By command of General MacArthur.*
- * *R.K. Sutherland, Lieutenant General, United States Army, Chief of Staff*
- * *Official: B.M. Fitch Brigadier General, U.S. Army, Adjutant General.*

Sergeant Leo M. Giron was truly a World War II hero, and a proven member of the United States of America's greatest generation.

World-renowned martial arts and Stockton born Guro, Dan Inosanto has said, "Manong Leo brings to his students a rare combination of teacher and fighter. Grand Master Giron is rare; he has a progression he understands. He can teach it, and he can fight with it, because he has survived it through World War II. I think what separates Grand Master Giron from others is that he can teach, he can fight, and he's technical. These three traits are a rare combination in any martial art."

After World War II, life for Leo Giron returned to normal. He became deeply involved with the lodge, and held every position. He excelled in his ways of communication so greatly, he became the Grand Lodge Instructor and Lecturer for many years. He had a family with his wife Sally and their children, Christina, Michael, Regina and Thomas.

In 1968, Leo Giron opened his first licensed Bahala Na Club in Tracy, California, where he and his second wife, Alberta, resided. In 1970, he and his wife moved to Stockton, along with his Bahala Na Club.

One of the most famous students to graduate from Grand Master Giron's class is Guro Dan Inosanto. In early 1970, during the wedding of the daughter of a local Filipino family, Mrs. Mary Inosanto (Dan's mother) approached Leo Giron to inquire about him teaching escrima. Giron, being a quiet and humble man, listened to Mary about how Daniel was looking for someone to teach him "the real escrima," meaning the combative style or *estilo matador*.

Giron's first reply was that he knew of no one. Mary would not take no for an answer, and replied, "Leo, because of your service in the military during World War II, and the jungle warfare you had to endure, I know you must have the real escrima." Mrs. Inosanto was very persistent, and finally, Giron gave in and said, "I think I may know of someone who can help you." He was thinking of someone else at the time – another escrimador from Santa Catalina Ilocos Sur, Philippines named Joe Pacpaco.

That night after the wedding, Mary Inosanto called Dan to inform him of her discovery. That same night, Dan called Manong Leo and informed him that he would be driving up the next day to talk, and hopefully train with him. The next day, Dan showed up with a magazine writer and photographer. They talked, and Giron performed a few techniques with Dan. Dan had found what he was looking for. After that meeting, Dan and Manong Leo became very close friends, and as Dan has said many times, “Manong Leo was like a second father to me.”

Following their meeting in the summer of 1970, Dan travelled to Stockton many times, and during the Giron vacations, he travelled to Los Angeles to visit the family. During their visits, Dan, along with Richard Bustillo and Ted Lucay Lucay would pick Manong Leo up and bring him to their academy in Carson to train. Several years later in December of 1973, Dan became the first student to graduate from the Giron system. Guro Dan and wife, Paula, and Manong Leo remained very close and communicated regularly.

One dream of Grand Master, Giron was to form an association. After many years of preparation, his dream came true. In 1979, the first official meeting of the Bahala Na Martial Arts Association was called to order. The Association is governed by a set of bylaws and a constitution. Its rule is by the majority; its belief is in the practice of social or economic equality for all the members of the Association. The Association is also dedicated to perpetuating and promoting the art of arnis escrima along with the culture and history of the Philippines, as taught by Grand Master Giron.

Leo M. Giron lived a great life – from his young years growing up in the Philippines to his early days in America, his training as an escrimador and his life in the Grand Lodge, his duty in the 978th Signal and the 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiment Battalion, and returning to raise a family, his opening of the first Bahala Na Club, and later organizing the Bahala Na Martial Arts Association.

Along with his life accomplishments and the many military awards he received, Grand Master Emeritus Giron also received many civilian awards, numerous awards from the Grand Lodge and the Legionarios Del Trabajo in America, including being awarded 33rd degree on August 27, 1941 (this being the highest level in the Grand Lodge) along with the Worshipful Master Certificate on October 26, 1968. There were also many awards recognizing his achievements in the martial arts field from many different martial arts organizations and groups.

On September 4, 1975, Toastmasters International Highest Honors awarded Giron. His church, and the President of the Trinity United

Presbyterian Mens' Group also recognized Giron by giving him the award of Father of the Year on June 5, 1997. On August 11, 1998, Giron was named to the Supreme Honor Roll awarded by the Filipino American Historical National Society. He also received outstanding recognition for services performed in his community by Mayor Gary Podesta of the city of Stockton, California, Tom Bradley, Mayor of Los Angeles, California, and former Governor of the state of California, Pete Wilson. Leo Giron was given so many awards, the list seems endless.

The following statements are those of our Bahala Na Martial Arts Association members. We would like to share these with you, so that those of you who never met Grand Master Giron will know him through us. For those who did know him, you will remember your special times with him.

Everyone who knew him knew of this great man in many different ways. He was our uncle, our brother, teacher, mentor, adviser, World War II hero, husband, soul mate, leader, warrior, grandpa, and a living history of knowledge. He was caring and gentle, honest and loyal with the greatest of dignity. He taught us to understand our own fathers' generation. He was humble and loving, and he was my very best friend. Even so, he was so much more to many more people.

We will remember Grand Master Emeritus Leo through his great teachings, and through the system he created. We will remember the wonderful times playing in the backyard during the hot summer and in the basement during the cool winter months. We will remember the times when Grand Master Emeritus would pick up the stick and clear the playing floor with his combat *larga mano*.

We will remember the wonderful smell of Alberta's cooking of *abodo* and *sinigong*. We will remember the times of close conversations about history, culture, and especially life. We will remember the priceless times of going to the store, riding to the pharmacy. We will remember the dearest times of going to lunch and ordering bitter melon or chicken with black mushrooms. We will remember going on Bahala Na road trips to demonstrations, workshops and seminars and seeing Manong Leo work the floor, teaching another generation of *escrimadors*. We will remember the smile and joy he would bring to all of us. We will remember the jokes and the stories. We will remember after a seminar, how he would take off his shirt and pose like a body builder and say, "You know, in the army they used to call me Little Atlas," and there were the scars from a car wreck, open heart surgeries and combat wounds. We will remember running around in our hotel room in our under clothes acting like teenagers. We will

remember all the special gifts he gave us. We will remember that Manong Leo never advocated a style of superiority, but he knew what was useful in battle and lived to tell it. We will remember the practicality of Manong Leo's technique, and how it paralleled his perspective on life by keeping it simple, right to the point, to do what it takes to get you through. We will remember how he would keep things simple; this is what made his system so powerful and effective. We will remember his smile. We will remember how he made us feel so welcome in his Bahala Na family. We will remember his sayings like, "You will be lucky if you hit him at all," or "Peace is not without conflict. It's the ability to cope with conflict and learn to conserve your energy. You have a lot of people to fight today." We will remember how he always made it fun as you learned. We will remember the phone call and e-mail informing us of his death.

It is the wish of all Bahala Na Martial Arts Association members to continue to carry on with the spirit of Grand Master Emeritus Leo M. Giron. We will share our art, culture and rich Filipino history with all who would like to learn. The structure and teaching curriculum of the Giron Arnis Escrima System will continue to live and grow through all of us. Because of Grand Master Giron's ability to structure the art, and the association he founded, his master plan was to have his art continue, so the art would live on through all of us forever.

On October 3, 1992, Grand Master Leo M. Giron promoted Tony Somera to the rank of Master. Tony Somera is the only practitioner of the Giron Arnis Escrima System to ever have been awarded the title of Master. Once again, at the time, Grand Master Giron was looking at the future of his Giron Arnis Escrima System, and the Bahala Na Martial Arts Association to ensure that his art would continue to exist, and that his work would live on and grow.

On December 1, 1999, given his health and condition, he used his ability once again to structure the art he founded that would assure the Association had little or no transition upon his passing, and to ensure that the Association would endure the growth of direction he began during his tenure, Master Giron promoted Master Tony Somera to the rank and responsibility of Grand Master of the Bahala Na Martial Arts Association.

"If God made man in his image, God had an outstanding day on August 20, 1911 when he created Leo M. Giron."

FAREWELL BY GURO DAN INOSANTO

I love this man. Manong Leo was like a second father to Paula and me; Grandpa Leo, to our daughter Danielle. He has been my advisor, counsellor and Guro. He was a problem-solver for me. I could call him anytime and ask for advice and guidance on any problem. He was always there for me, with his wisdom, strength and humor, and he never failed to help or guide me.

He instilled in me great pride in being an American Filipino, and helped me to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for my Filipino culture and heritage by teaching me the Filipino martial art. Manong Leo was instrumental in giving me the incentive to further research, promote and teach the Filipino martial arts to others. Manong Leo was truly a HERO, not only to the Filipino people and the American born Filipinos such as myself, but for all Americans. His distinguished and courageous service to our country during time of war has always inspired me. Manong Leo influenced for the better, so many people. His legacy will live on. His art, in the capable and strong hands of Tony Somera, will thrive and continue to grow and educate the martial arts community, and all those who study and train in the arts. Many generations to come will benefit from the time Manong Leo spent with us. And while I wish he could have stayed with us awhile longer, I thank God that He allowed me the honor and privilege to spend as many years as I did with one of the kindest, wisest, and humblest human beings it was my privilege to know. God bless you, Monong Leo.

*Sincerely
With Love,
Dan Inosanto*

Grand Master, Tony Somera, is currently teaching Giron Arnis Escrima in Stockton, California, and also conducts seminars throughout the United States and Europe. If you are interested in hosting seminars, or becoming a Giron Arnis Escrima Certified Affiliate, please visit our website at www.gironarniseskrima.com or write to us at: **Giron Arnis Escrima PO Box 8584, Stockton, CA 95208. Phone: 209-478-0371**