

# Balangiga massacre

From Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balangiga\\_massacre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balangiga_massacre)



Gen. Jacob Smith and his staff inspect the ruins of Balangiga in October 1901, a few weeks after the US retaliation

The **Balangiga massacre** was an incident in 1901 during the [Philippine-American War](#) where more than forty American soldiers were killed in a surprise attack by several hundred townspeople allegedly augmented by [guerrillas](#) in the town of [Balangiga](#) on [Samar](#) island. This incident was described as the [United States Army](#)'s worst defeat since the [Battle of the Little Bighorn](#) in 1876. Filipinos regard the attack as one of their bravest acts in the war.

The subsequent retaliation by American troops resulted in the killing of 2000–3000 Filipinos on Samar. The heavy-handed reprisal earned a [court-martial](#) for Gen. [Jacob H. Smith](#), who had ordered the killing of everyone ten years old and over. Reprimanded but not formally punished, Smith was forced into retirement from the service because of his conduct.

The attack and the subsequent retaliation remains one of the longest-running and most controversial issues between the Philippines and the United States. Conflicting records from both American and Filipino historians have confused the issue. Demands for the return of the bells of the church at Balangiga, taken by the Americans as [war booty](#) and collectively known as the [Balangiga bells](#), remain an outstanding issue of contention related to the war. One church bell remains in the possession of the [9th Infantry Regiment](#) at their base in [Camp Red Cloud, South Korea](#), while two others are on a former base of the [11th Infantry Regiment](#) at [F.E. Warren Air Force Base](#) in [Cheyenne, Wyoming](#).

According to some nationalist Filipino historians, the true "Balangiga massacre" was the subsequent American retaliation against the Samar population.

Interpretations and retelling of the Balangiga incidents, the Samar pacification campaign and the Philippine-American War have been heavily influenced by the writing of left-wing polemicist [Renato Constantino](#) and Marxist historian [Teodoro Agoncillo](#).

## Prelude to attack

In the summer of 1901 Brigadier General Robert P. Hughes, who commanded the Department of the Visayas and was responsible for Samar, instigated an aggressive policy of food deprivation and property destruction on the island. The objective was to force the end of Filipino resistance. Part of his strategy was to close three key ports on the southern coast, Basey, Balangiga and Guiuan.

Samar was a major centre for the production of [Manila hemp](#), the trade of which was financing Filipino forces on the island. At the same time United States interests were eager to secure control of the hemp trade, which was a vital material both for the United States Navy and American agro-industries such as cotton.

On August 11, 1901, [Company C of the 9th U.S. Infantry Regiment](#), arrived in Balangiga—the third largest town on the southern coast of Samar island—to close its port and prevent supplies reaching Filipino forces in the interior, which at that time were under the command of General [Vicente Lukban](#). Lukban had been sent there in December 1898 to govern the island on behalf of the [First Philippine Republic](#) under [Emilio Aguinaldo](#).



Photo of Company C, 9th US Infantry Regiment with Valeriano Abanador (standing, sixth from right) taken in Balangiga. The provenance of the photograph is uncertain.

Relations between the soldiers and the townspeople were amicable for the first month of the American presence in the town; indeed it was marked by extensive [fraternization](#) between the two parties. This took the form of [tuba](#) drinking among the soldiers and male villagers, [baseball](#) games and [arnis](#) demonstrations. However, tensions rose due to several reasons: Captain Thomas W. Connell, commanding officer of the American unit in Balangiga, ordered the town cleaned up in preparation for a visit by the U.S. Army's inspector-general. However, in complying with his directive, the townspeople inadvertently cut down vegetation with food value, in violation of Lukban's policies regarding [food security](#). As a consequence, on September 18, 1901, around 400 guerrillas sent by Lukban appeared in the vicinity of Balangiga. They were to mete sanctions upon the town officials and local residents for violating Lukban's orders regarding food security and for fraternizing with the Americans. The threat was probably defused by Captain Eugenio Daza, a staff member of Lukban's and the parish priest, Father Donato Guimbaolibot.

A few days later, Connel had the town's male residents rounded up and detained for the purpose of hastening his clean-up operations. Around 80 men were kept in two [Sibley tents](#) unfed overnight. In addition, Connel had the men's [bolos](#) and the stored [rice](#) for their tables confiscated. These events would have sufficiently insulted and angered the townspeople; and without the sympathy of Lukban's guerrillas, the civilians were left to their own devices to plan their course of action against the Americans.

A few days before the attack, Valeriano Abanador, the town's police chief and Captain Eugenio Daza met to plan the attack on the American unit. To address the issue of sufficient manpower to offset the Americans' advantage in firepower, Abanador and Daza disguised the congregation of men as a work force aimed at preparing the town for a local [fiesta](#), which incidentally, also served to address Connell's preparations for his superior's visit. Abanador also brought in a group of "[tax evaders](#)" to bolster their numbers. Much [palm wine](#), locally called *tuba*, was brought in to ensure that the American soldiers would be drunk the day after the *fiesta*. Hours before the attack, women and children were sent away to safety. To mask the disappearance of the women from the dawn service in the church, 34 men from [Barrio Lawaan](#) [cross-dressed](#) as women worshippers. These "women", carrying small [coffins](#), were challenged by Sergeant Scharer of the sentry post about the town plaza near the church. Opening one of the coffins with his bayonet, he saw the body of a dead child, whom he was told, was a victim of a [cholera](#) epidemic. Abashed, he let the women pass on. Unbeknownst to the sentries, the other coffins hid the *bolos* and other weapons of the attackers.

The issue of children's bodies merits further attention since there is much conflict between accounts by members of Company C. That day, the 27th, was the 52nd anniversary of the founding of the parish, an occasion on which an image of a recumbent Christ known as a Santo Intierra would have been carried around the parish. In modern times these Santo Intierras are enclosed in a glass case but at the time were commonly enclosed in a wooden box.

## The attack



The US 9th Infantry Regiment in the Philippines, 1899

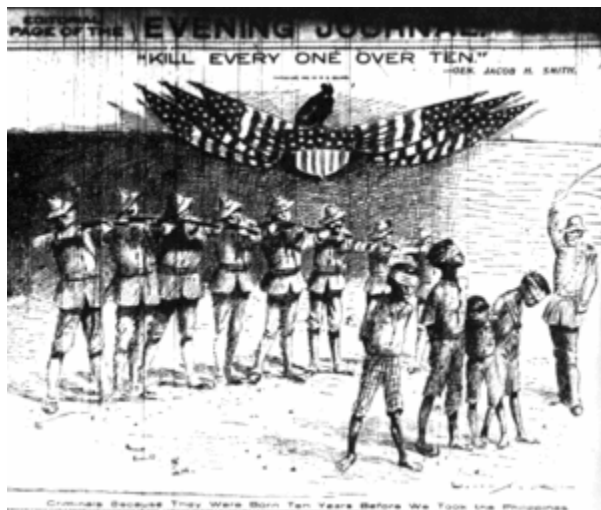
Between 6:20 and 6:45 in the morning of September 28, 1901, the villagers made their move. Abanador, who had been supervising the prisoners' communal labor in the town plaza, grabbed the rifle of Private Adolph Gamlin, one of the American sentries and stunned him with a blow to the head. This served as the signal for the rest of the communal laborers in the plaza to rush the other sentries and soldiers of Company C, who were mostly having breakfast in the [mess](#) area. Abanador then gave a shout, signaling the other Filipino men to the attack and fired Gamlin's

rifle at the mess tent, hitting one of the soldiers. The pealing of the church bells and the sounds from [conch](#) shells being blown followed seconds later. Some of the Company C troopers were attacked and hacked to death before they could grab their rifles; the few who survived the initial onslaught fought almost bare-handed, using kitchen utensils, steak knives, and chairs. One private used a [baseball bat](#) to fend off the attackers before being overwhelmed.

The men seemingly detained in the Sibley tents broke out and made their way to the municipal hall. Simultaneously, the attackers hidden in the church broke through to the convent and killed the officers there. An unarmed Company C soldier was ignored, as was Captain Connell's Filipino houseboy. The attackers initially occupied the convent and the municipal hall; however, the attack at the mess tents and the barracks failed, with Pvt. Gamlin recovering consciousness and managing to secure another rifle, causing considerable casualties among the Filipinos. With the initial surprise wearing off and the attack degrading, Abanador called for the attackers to break off and retreat. The surviving Company C soldiers, led by Sergeant Frank Betron, escaped by sea to [Basey](#) and [Tanauan, Leyte](#). The townspeople buried their dead and abandoned the town.

Of the 74 men in Company C, 36 were [killed in action](#), including all its commissioned officers; Captain Thomas W. Connell, First Lieutenant Edward A. Bumpus and Major Richard S. Griswold. Twenty-two were [wounded in action](#) and four were [missing in action](#). Eight died later of wounds received in combat; only four escaped unscathed. The villagers captured about 100 rifles and 25,000 rounds of ammunition and suffered 28 dead and 22 wounded.

## Retaliation



General [Jacob H. Smith](#)'s infamous order "Kill Everyone Over Ten" was the caption in the [New York Journal](#) cartoon on May 5, 1902. The Old Glory draped an American shield on which a vulture replaced the bald eagle. The caption at the bottom proclaimed, *"Criminals Because They Were Born Ten Years Before We Took the Philippines"*

The next day, Captain Edwin Victor Bookmiller, the commander in Basey, sailed with Company G, 9th Infantry Regiment for Balangiga aboard a commandeered coastal steamer, the SS *Pittsburgh*. Finding the town abandoned, they buried the American dead and set fire to the town.

Coming at a time when it was believed Filipino resistance to American rule had collapsed, the Balangiga attack had a powerful impact on Americans living in Manila. Men started to wear sidearms openly and Helen Herron Taft, wife of William Howard Taft, was so distraught she required evacuation to Hong Kong.

The Balangiga incident provoked shock in the US public, too, with newspapers equating the massacre to [George Armstrong Custer's](#) last stand at the [Battle of the Little Bighorn](#) in 1876. Major General [Adna R. Chaffee](#), military governor of the Philippines, received orders from US President [Theodore Roosevelt](#) to pacify Samar. To this end, Chaffee appointed Brigadier General [Jacob H. Smith](#) to Samar to accomplish the task.

General Smith instructed Major [Littleton Waller](#), commanding officer of a battalion of 315 [US Marines](#) assigned to bolster his forces in Samar, regarding the conduct of pacification:

I...want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you kill and burn, the better it will please me... The interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness.

— Gen. Jacob H. Smith

As a consequence of this order, Smith became known as "Howling Wilderness Smith." He further ordered Waller to have all persons killed who were capable of bearing arms and in actual hostilities against the United States. When queried by Waller regarding the age limit of these persons, Smith replied that the limit was ten years of age.

However, it was known that Smith earned his [sobriquet](#), "Hell-Roaring Jake" not due to his violence in war, but because of his penchant for making outrageous oaths and the extravagance of his language. Waller therefore, did not execute Smith's orders. Instead, Waller applied the rules of civilized warfare and the rules provided under [General Orders No. 100](#) of 1863 dealing with irregular warfare, which stated that if enemy units gave no quarter and became treacherous upon capture, it was lawful to shoot anyone belonging to that captured unit.

Food and trade to Samar were cut off, intended to starve the revolutionaries into submission. Smith's strategy on Samar involved widespread destruction to force the inhabitants to stop supporting the guerrillas and turn to the Americans from fear and starvation. He used his troops in sweeps of the interior in search for guerrilla bands and in attempts to capture Philippine General [Vicente Lukban](#), but he did nothing to prevent contact between the guerrillas and the townspeople. American columns marched across the island, destroying homes and shooting people and draft animals. Littleton Waller, in a report, stated that over an eleven-day period his men burned 255 dwellings, shot 13 [carabaos](#) and killed 39 people.

The [Judge Advocate General](#) of the Army observed that only the good sense and restraint of the majority of Smith's subordinates prevented a complete reign of terror in Samar. However, the

abuses were still sufficient to outrage [anti-Imperialist](#) groups in the United States when these became known in March 1902.

The exact number of Filipinos killed by US troops will never be known, A population shortfall of about 15,000 is apparent between the Spanish census of 1887 and the American census of 1903 but how much of the shortfall is due to a disease epidemic and known natural disasters and how many due to combat is difficult to determine. Population growth in 19th century Samar was amplified by an influx of workers for the booming hemp industry, an influx which certainly ceased during the Samar campaign.

Exhaustive research in the 1990s made by British writer Bob Couttie as part of a ten year study of the Balangiga Massacre tentatively put the figure at about 2,500; David Fritz used population ageing techniques and suggested a figure of a little more than 2,000 losses in males of combat age but nothing to support widespread killing of women and children. Some Filipino historians believe it to be around 50,000, for which there is no evidence. The rate of Samar's population growth slowed as refugees fled from Samar to Leyte, yet still the population of Samar increased by 21,456 during the war.

The earliest reference to a 50,000 plus death toll is American historian Kenneth Ray Young. Young, however, confused Batangas with Samar.

American military historians' opinions on the Samar campaign are echoed in the February 2011 edition of the US Army's official historical magazine, Army History Bulletin: "...the indiscriminate violence and punishment that U.S. Army and Marine forces under Brig. Gen. Jacob Smith are alleged to have unleashed on Samar have long stained the memory of the United States' pacification of the Philippine Islands."

## **Commanding officers' courts-martial**

Events in Samar resulted in prompt investigations. On April 15, 1902 the Secretary of War sent orders to relieve officers of duty and to court-martial General Smith. "The President (Theodore Roosevelt) desires to know and in the most circumstantial manner all facts, nothing being concealed, and no man being for any reason favored or shielded. For the very reason that the President intends to back up the Army in the heartiest fashion in every lawful and legitimate method of doing its work, he also intends to see that the most rigorous care is exercised to detect and prevent any cruelty or brutality, and that men who are guilty thereof are punished."

Both Jacob H. Smith and Littleton Waller faced [courts martial](#) their heavy-handed treatment of Filipinos; Waller specifically for the execution of twelve Filipino bearers and guides. Waller was found not guilty, a finding that senior military officials did not accept. Smith was found guilty, admonished and forced to retire.

A third officer, Captain Edwin Glenn, was court-martialled for torturing Filipinos and was found guilty.



## Further reading

- Borrinaga, Rolando O. (2003). *The Balangiga Conflict Revisited*. New Day Publishers.
- Couttie, Bob (2004). *Hang the Dogs, The True and Tragic History of the Balangiga Massacre*. New Day Publishers.
- Schott, Joseph L. (1965). *The Ordeal of Samar*. Bobbs-Merrill. ISBN B0006BLRF0.
- Taylor, James O. (1931). *The Massacre of Balangiga: Being an Authentic Account By Several of the Few Survivors*. McCarn Printing Co. ISBN B00085UHX2.
- *US Senate Committee Hearings on "Affairs in the Philippine Islands", February 2, 1902 to October 13, 1903, three volumes.*