

Lost in Translation

How the death of an interpreter shed light on US military operations in the Philippines

On February 1, 2010, 33-year-old Gregan Cardeño, a rickshaw driver from a tiny town in the Southern Philippines, embarked on a new career: as an interpreter to US troops in Mindanao. Two days later, he was found hanged inside of a military camp in the “Islamic city” of Marawi.

Mindanao has, for the past decade, been a basecamp for US special forces engaged in secretive counterterrorism efforts. The region is infamous for its warlords, two ongoing insurgencies and the shadowy omnipresence of two Al-Qaeda linked terrorist groups: Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah. In 2002, Mindanao was called the “Second Front of the War on Terror.” Now, it’s a strategic anchor in the Obama Administration’s “Pivot to Asia.”

Here, public sentiment towards US military is fraught even on a good day. So Cardeño’s untimely death caused a stir, setting off rumors of murder, torture and a US conspiracy. It didn’t help that many of the residents of Marawi, where Cardeño died, had no idea that American troops were even stationed in their city, tucked out of sight behind the barbed wire of a Philippine military camp.

Stateside, Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines is roundly hailed as a rare, if overlooked, success in the Global War on Terrorism. The effort engages a relatively tiny number of US forces (around 600 at any given time) at a comparatively little annual cost of \$50 million. It has effectively crippled the Abu Sayyaf insurgency, with minimal loss of American lives.

But the Cardeño case illustrates that this effort, like America’s broader anti-terrorism crusade, flounders when it comes to public diplomacy. Gossip, misunderstandings and a flimsy police investigation turned Cardeño’s death into a local murder mystery. But it was the US military’s long silence on the issue, the opaqueness with which it conducted its activities on the island, and the lack of support and deference it offered the grieving family that enabled leftist activists to so successfully paint Cardeño as a symbol of all that was wrong with US military presence in the region. This is the story of how an individual act profoundly impacted the public consciousness of a region already struggling to accept an unpopular and expanding US military presence.

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Gregan Cardeño grew up in a small town about four hours from Marawi, by car. Most of the town's residents are at least part-time agricultural workers for coconut, corn or pineapple plantations. Mindanao is called "the breadbasket of the Philippines," because it produces so much of the country's food, but it's also the poorest region in the country, with poverty most concentrated in Muslim communities, who make up about 30 percent of the population. Cardeño's town was a mix of Muslim and Christian families. The two groups have coexisted here peacefully for generations, though their communities are frequently rocked by civil war between the national government and secessionist groups. The unrest is fueled by the region's extreme poverty and the lack of local control over Mindanao's abundant natural resources.

Cardeño was reared by his older sister, Carivel, and since childhood had called her "Mi," short for "Mami." He always deferred to her judgment, treating her as a mother. He married young and had three children, though he always struggled to support his family. He often worked as a rickshaw driver, but he also sought out other opportunities, even moving to Malaysia for two years to work in his brother's import/export business. He built his family's two-room home himself. It's made simply, of concrete cinder blocks and, a decade later, remains unpainted, with makeshift doors and windows.

His family knew him as a reserved and gentle man, who served as an assistant pastor at their church and who sometimes wept while he prayed. He decorated the concrete walls of his home with plain white paper, upon which he had written bible verses and sayings he liked. Next to the front door is a paper that reads: "God forgive me, Save my soul."

Cardeño never went to college, and didn't have much technical training — but he was good with languages. In addition to his native Bisayan, English (which he learned in school) and Pilipino (the national language), he knew Tausug (a Mindanaoan dialect also spoken in Indonesia) and Bahasa, which he had picked up during two years spent working in Malaysia.

His language skills earned him his first decent job. His sister Carivel had a boyfriend, Javier Ignacio, an officer in the Philippine National Police (PNP). He told her that a local security company was looking for a Tausug/Bahasa interpreter to work with U.S. troops. She asked him to put in a good word for her brother. He did, and, after several interviews, Cardeño was hired on a three-month contract. He was told he would be working at a military camp in Cotabato city.

The night before he was scheduled to leave, the family stayed up late, celebrating. He told them he hoped the position would lead to other opportunities with the Americans,

referring to the job as “his chance.” Over drinks and karaoke, he began to make plans for the future. He would expand and paint his house. He would help Carivel open up a little boutique, a lifelong dream of hers. Before he left, he gave his wife, Myrna, most of the \$120 advance he had received from the company, but she insisted he take some money with him, in case he needed to buy food or sundries. His sister Carivel gave him a set of bed sheets, printed with pale pink and yellow flowers, so that he would feel at home at the army camp.

He reported for duty on February 1, 2010. Two days later, he was dead, apparently of suicide.

Three distinct narratives — the family’s, the army’s, and the security company’s — detail the final days of Cardeño’s life, but the three never quite align. Collectively, they paint a portrait of a troubled individual whose fears and death may never be fully understood. But the inconsistencies and oddities in the story of Cardeño’s death would later fuel speculation of murder and conspiracy.

This is the family’s version: On the morning that Cardeño reported for duty, Carivel received a call from her boyfriend Ignacio, who said that he had just spoken with her brother, who seemed cheerful. Gregan had met a few of the Americans at Edwin Andrews Airbase in nearby Zamboanga city, and was excited about being airlifted to Cotabato City. He had never flown in a helicopter before.

Carivel didn’t hear from her brother until 7:48 the next morning, when she says she received a text. It said: *I’m here in Marawi?*, which she understood to mean that he was confused by the change of plans. He was supposed to be in Cotabato city. She was confused, too. She had never heard of a U.S. military facility in Marawi, And she knew Gregan didn’t speak the region’s dialect — what use would he be there?

Are you ok?, she texted back. *Oo, Mi*, he responded. *Yes, Mi*.

Carivel went about her day after that, but later that afternoon, she received a call from her brother. Worried that he would exhaust the minutes on his prepaid phone, she said she would call him right back. When she did, she realized he was crying. Apart from the occasional tear during prayer, Carivel had never heard her brother cry. Now, she said he sounded like he was in physical pain.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“This is not my job,” he sobbed. “This is so hard. I can’t take it anymore. I don’t like it here.”

He didn't explain any more and, disturbed by Cardeño's emotional state, she didn't ask. She assumed he was lonely or having a hard time acclimating to the new environment. Not sure what else to do, she said, "Maybe you just need to adjust to it."

Cardeño hung up the phone.

Stunned, Carivel called Gregan's wife. Myrna said Gregan had phoned her, too, sounding upset and speaking cryptically. She said he was crying, which scared her. She told him to quit the job and come home to her. Cardeño responded, "If I am able to come home, would you have me?"

Myrna was taken aback. She assured him that she would but demanded to know what had happened to provoke the question. "Did you do something?" she asked. He didn't reply. She realized that the line had gone dead.

Carivel called him again, but he didn't pick up.

Finally, at 6pm, he called back. Everything was ok now, he said. He told her he had spoken with Thomas Rivera, the owner of Skylink Security, who said that he could go home as long as he returned the advance he'd been given. He said he was scheduled to meet with the Americans later that night to explain the situation. Carivel was disappointed about the job, but relieved that her brother was no longer in distress.

Her relief didn't last long. The next day, her boyfriend Ignacio showed up at her house unexpectedly. He was visibly distraught. He told her he had terrible news. Ignacio worked at Edwin Andrews Airbase and had heard through the grapevine that an interpreter had died in Marawi. He found out it was Cardeño, and rushed to Carivel to let her know. He didn't have any details about how Cardeño had died, but told Carivel he felt responsible, since he had gotten Cardeño the job. Carivel didn't believe him. She had just talked to her brother the night before. He was fine then, and planning to come home. What could have happened in that short span of time? Just then her phone rang. Cardeño's number blinked on the screen. "See," she told Ignacio, "he's calling now." She answered the phone. A strange man came on the other end, introducing himself as Ali Guibon Rangiris, a senior police officer with the Marawi police force. Using Cardeño's cellphone, he told her that her brother had hanged himself with a bed sheet inside of his room in the military camp.

Investigation files obtained from U.S. Pacific Command through Freedom of Information Act requests paint a more detailed — but no less puzzling — picture of Cardeño's last days. The files contain sworn statements from 13 American soldiers and three Filipino workers inside the camp, as well as those of the embalmers who prepared Cardeño's body for burial. They do not include any interviews with Cardeño's family or friends.

Cardeño had interacted with most of the Americans present in the camp. In sworn statements, they characterized Cardeño as “scared,” “shy” and “a bit weird.” His behavior seemed to boil down to three insecurities: 1) He didn’t understand why he had been sent to Marawi, and was nervous about being there. 2) He didn’t speak the regional dialect, Maranao, and was afraid that he would be fired for it. 3) He had never been around American soldiers before, and didn’t understand his place with them.

Cardeño didn’t realize he was heading to Marawi until he had landed at Camp Siangco in Cotabato city, where he met the LCE commander (whose name was redacted by US Pacific Command). The commander told Gregan they would be leaving shortly for Marawi, a city 100 miles north of Cotabato, known to be the home base of the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front. “He looked very surprised when I mentioned Marawi,” the commander says in his statement. “He asked me why we were going there and I explained that Marawi was where we lived and where he would be working. He expressed surprise and concern about the level of danger in Marawi.” The commander assured him he would be safe with them.

Cardeño was also concerned that he didn’t speak the regional dialect of Marawi, and wouldn’t be useful to the unit. The commander says he reassured Gregan that his current language proficiencies were “more than adequate,” to which Gregan reportedly responded that he would try to learn Maranao if it was necessary.

On the way to Marawi, they stopped at McDonalds. Gregan ordered a #7 meal. They arrived at Camp Ranao in Marawi City at 5pm. Gregan was shown to a small house that everyone called “the pagoda,” which then housed two American Seabees. The room was small and sparse, with two cots and clothesline strung across the room. At around this time, the two Seabees returned from a “logistics run” in Iligan and were surprised and apparently disturbed to find a “Filipino national” in their sleeping quarters. Several soldiers, upon seeing Cardeño in the camp, treated him with initial suspicion, which may have unsettled Cardeño. He also seemed confused that there were no tasks assigned to him. The atmosphere within the camp was leisurely; American soldiers spent days napping, playing basketball, and watching television. Cardeño spent a lot of time cleaning, assisting the kitchen staff, who were Filipino, or asking others what he could do to help. One of the cooks described him as reserved as serious, “kind of like a priest.”

By that evening, his mood had gone south. Several people saw him crying after dinner that evening, and though several people reportedly tried to comfort him, he seemed convinced that he would be fired and would not be able to pay back \$120 advance he had received. One American (whose name was redacted) said in a statement that Cardeño was “visibly afraid” of his employer, Skylink.

The next day, Cardeño seemed much calmer. The two Seabees he had bunked with were scheduled to move into the Army barracks that morning, leaving Cardeño alone in the pagoda. He was seen continually cleaning up around the house and gym. He was informed that he would be going on his first mission the following morning. He was to assist in the inspection of an ongoing water distribution project in Munai Valley. Around lunch, he visited the room of a Filipino maintenance worker named Cristopher, who he had met the previous day. Cristopher says Cardeño, without prompting, showed him a red mark on the front of his neck, and said it was from a previous suicide attempt. He said he assumed it was a joke.

By 5pm that evening, he was upset again. No one seems to know what upset him, but he began talking once again about losing his job and getting into trouble for not speaking Maranao.

He declined to eat dinner that evening, but he made a point of thanking the LCE commander for dinner the previous night. According to the commander, Cardeño said he was “no longer afraid of being here [in Marawi]. Everything’s going to be fine. I’m okay now.” The commander said he was visibly calm. He told another soldier that he was “excited to get to work.”

The last people to interact with him were the cooks, who left him at around 7pm, and who later said he was upset.

Gregan Cardeño was found dead in his room on the morning of February 3. A soldier had gone to his room to fetch him for their mission that day, and found him hanging from a rafter. He called out to another man, who cut him down. They said they thought he might still be alive, and were also worried that other Filipinos in the camp would be frightened by the sight of his hanging body. That they disturbed the crime scene would later contribute to rumors of foul play.

They said there were footprints on the walls, and assumed that Cardeño had used a bit of moulding on the wall to hoist himself up and tie the sheet around the rafter. Oddly, there were wet clothes drying on the clothesline in the room. Cardeño’s family never learned of this detail, but if they had, it might have reinforced their belief that he hadn’t killed himself. After all, why would someone do their laundry just before committing suicide?

It was puzzling to everyone in the camp, as well. Though they had all characterized him as a bit weird, they were nevertheless shocked that he had taken his own life. All of the American soldiers had taken suicide prevention training, one-third of them reported knowing someone who had committed suicide, and yet none of them recognized any of the signs. (Four of the soldiers said that, in retrospect, they should have known something was amiss.)

The family would never learn any of this — not the details of what happened in the camp, nor the names of the last people to see Cardeño alive. The Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines was stunningly opaque about what seemed to be little more than a personal tragedy. The family learned the rest of the story from the local police.

Back at the camp, Captain Mike Kay ran to the local police station to report the death. When police arrived on the scene, the lead investigator declared, with no apparent basis, that Cardeño had committed suicide “for personal reasons.” They found a blue notebook in which Cardeño had written several bible verses, the last of which read: “PLEASE GOD 4GIVE ME SAVE MY SOUL.” Later, his family would argue that this was not a suicide note, but a favorite saying of Cardeño.

The officers did not stay long. They documented the crime scene by taking photos with their mobile phones, and then returned to the police station to file their report. Military personnel tried to take possession of Cardeño’s effects — which included his clothing and cell phone — in an effort to preserve chain of custody and return the items to the family, but the police officers declined to turn over the items. At the request of the police, the soldiers saw to the packaging and transport of the body.

Based on the military’s investigation and the sworn statements of those at the camp, it seems unlikely that Cardeño’s death was anything other than a suicide. He was evidently troubled during his days in the camp and later autopsies would confirm that he had died from asphyxiation by ligature.

There is just one discrepancy in the overlapping narratives of his final days that might cast doubt on this finding. Cardeño had told his sister before he died that he had spoken with someone from Skylink, had received permission to return home, and was scheduled to meet with the officers in the camp to explain the situation. But the investigation files make no mention of Cardeño or anyone else in the camp calling Thomas Rivera or Skylink Security that night, nor do they mention that Cardeño had met with any of the officers that evening. The version of events presented by Skylink Security complicates the narrative even further. In an affidavit, Skylink owner Thomas Rivera claimed that personnel from the camp had contacted him on February 2, asking that Cardeño be recalled from his post, because of his inability to speak Maranao. But sworn statements from camp personnel indicate that his language proficiency was never a problem for them, and that they were happy to work with him. None of the investigation files released indicate that anyone from the camp conferred with Skylink about Cardeño prior to his death. None of this proves that Cardeño’s death was the product of foul play, as his family continues to claim. But it does suggest that Cardeño’s story is still far from complete — especially in the eyes of his family.

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Filipinos vacillate between welcoming the American troops and eying them with a wariness derived from decades of U.S. military occupation. Since the turn of the 20th century, the reputation of the US armed forces in the Philippines has been marred by allegations of rape and the high-profile killings of Filipino citizens — some of them are true, some are just stories. But there's no doubt that they fostered a broad resentment of American militarization on the part of Filipinos. When the US-sponsored dictator Ferdinand Marcos was ousted from office by peaceful revolution in 1986, anti-American sentiment escalated to a fever pitch. Ultimately, it resulted in the closure of all American bases in the Philippines, the expulsion of American troops, and new laws limiting the presence and activities of foreign soldiers on Philippine soil. American forces have nevertheless maintained a limited and continuous presence in the country. Apart from the activities of the JSOTF-P, the military conducts regular joint training exercises with the Philippine military.

Over the past two decades, anti-American sentiment has faded away, though recent scandals involving American troops have rekindled a general wariness of US soldiers. The most notorious involved Marine Lance Corporal Daniel Smith, who was convicted in 2006 of raping a young woman in Subic Bay only to be acquitted in 2009. The incident became a rallying point for anti-military and women's rights groups, and even incited a Philippine Congressional review of the Visiting Force Agreement, (VFA) a binational treaty that allows limited U.S. military presence in the country. That agreement under most circumstances shields American troops from prosecution by Philippine courts.

To the surprise of many, the Philippine senate called for the termination of the VFA. That the recommendation has gone ignored by Malacañang Palace has only fueled protests in the country. The issue at hand is not that American soldiers commit crimes, but rather that they appear to be immune from prosecution when they do so. In recent years, existing activist groups have grown in size and new coalitions have formed, mobilizing around incidents of perceived U.S. military brutality. And for a small but simmering movement that seems unable to forget the past, the presence of US troops on Philippine soil — no matter how small or limited — is tantamount to neocolonialism.

When I fly into the Zamboanga airport in Mindanao for the first time in the spring of 2012, the American military presence is immediately apparent. Black helicopters rest near the single, short runway and a concrete wall topped with barbed wire separates the tiny airport from newly erected military facilities. I'm all too aware of the scope of militarization here; ten years earlier, my brother was among the first US Marines deployed to the Philippines after 9/11. In 2002, he flew reconnaissance missions over this very island, though he never set foot on the ground.

I met Cardeño's sister, Carivel, at a shopping mall not far from the airport. She had just finished leading a sales seminar for a company that produces health supplements. She

didn't introduce herself, but instead took my hand, kissed my cheek, and placed me in the seat next to her while she finished up with some prospective sales associates. She was remarkably warm and charismatic, brightly smiling, laughing and joking with everyone around her. She has lightly freckled skin and light hair. She looks like a former beauty queen and, as I later learn, has no shortage of suitors. She takes me to her home, where everyone is celebrating the kindergarten graduation of her granddaughter. There's a ton of food, and a cake. She doesn't mention her brother until a few hours later, as we're sitting on one of three mattresses on the floor of her bedroom. We sit with Cardeño's wife, Myrna, a woman who looks younger than her years, with a long, sad face and long dark hair. Abruptly, Carivel says to me, "Do you think you can help my brother?" She begins to cry. "They said he committed suicide," she said. "but he wouldn't do that."

As if to prove it, Myrna produces a twin-sized bed sheet with pale pink and yellow flowers printed on it. She says it's identical to the one with which Cardeño had apparently hung himself. She twists the sheet in her hands and, with a calmness that belies the gruesomeness of what she's about to do, loops it around her neck, and tugs one end of it towards the ceiling. *It's too short*, she and Carivel argue. *It's too short to hang oneself with*. The fact that there are no crime scene photos of him hanging seems to reinforce their conviction. No one had told them that footprints were found on the wall next to Cardeño's cot, and that one could have easily hoisted himself from the cot and off the wall. The military, in fact, had never told them anything about Cardeño's death. In the weeks following the death Carivel wasn't inclined to ask many questions. It was her boyfriend, Javier Ignacio, who first suggested that Cardeño's death might not have been a suicide. He was immediately suspicious, and pressed Carivel to order an autopsy. But Carivel didn't want to prolong the family's suffering by allowing somebody to cut her brother open. Instead, she made arrangements for Gregan's wake.

Carivel's family set up the casket in the front room of their family home in Ipil. Following Filipino custom, the body would be on display for a week, with friends and relatives watching over him 24 hours a day, to make sure his spirit didn't up and walk away from his body. It's not unusual for visitors at a Filipino wake to report supernatural events. In my own family, I've heard of coffins shaking, visitors being touched, and apparitions of the deceased showing up in different parts of the house. Filipinos are superstitious, and wakes are emotional affairs marked by excessive drinking and sleep deprivation.

Carivel says that everything changed at her brother's wake. On the first evening, a black bat flew into the house, rousing the women from their seats. They knew it was a bad omen for a bat to visit a wake, a portent of evil. They tried to chase the bat out of the house, but the bat settled atop an illuminated wall sconce instead, where it remained, they say, for three days. Nothing they could do would budge it. "Why would a bat be attracted to light?"

Carivel wondered. After three days, she decided it must have been a sign from God: He was trying to tell her something, she said, something ominous, about her brother's death.

Before the wake was through, relatives contacted a lawyer in Zamboanga City who then contacted the National Bureau of Investigation, a federal law enforcement agency, and requested that an autopsy be performed on Cardeño.

In the weeks that followed, Carivel and her siblings reached to everyone they knew for help in finding out what had happened to their brother. Neither the personnel at Camp Marawi nor the officials at Edwin Andrews were providing them with any information. Their appeals to the local chapter of the Commission on Human Rights were awash in a mess of bureaucratic red tape. The manager of the security company gave the family about \$500 to help cover funeral costs but had little to say about what had happened to Cardeño.

The apparent unwillingness of both the security company and the military to answer the family's questions about Cardeño's death reinforced their belief that the authorities were hiding something. They couldn't understand why their brother, an assistant pastor with three children, would choose to end his life — and just three days into a new job. *Why had he made those disturbing phone calls? What was going on in the camp?* And, as grieving people are wont to do, they began to assume the worst.

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Mindanaoans have a complicated relationship with the Filipino national government and, by extension, the US military. Several insurgent groups — The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Bangsamoro Freedom Fighters, among others — have taken up arms against the government in a decades long struggle for autonomy. Some want a distinct Islamic state. Others want more economic control of the abundant natural resources of the region. Still others are demonstrating their frustration with the extreme poverty and lack of government investment in Muslim communities.

Sentiment towards the US military is secondary to this struggle for autonomy. The editors of *The Long War Journal* contend that bad feelings towards American soldiers are “an echo” of a past wrong. “At the time that the US ceased to consider the Philippines a colony,” they write, “the people of Mindanao wanted to become an independent republic, or else to continue as a colony of the United States. The US did not honor their wishes. Against their will, the US forced them to accept government from Manila.” They argue that this legacy is the US military's greatest impediment in fostering public diplomacy in Mindanao.

Sharief Khan embodies many of the convoluted and contradictory notions that define the secessionist movement in Mindanao. When I first met him in 2010, he was a spokesperson for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and bent on spreading Gregan Cardeño's story far

and wide. We met in the playroom of a small preschool he runs in Marawi. One wall is painted with a mural of life-sized Disney princesses. Khan is short and round, with a long and bushy grey beard that earned him the nickname “Osama.” His speech is peppered with Arabic expressions. He notes that, despite his fraught nickname, he doesn’t hate all Americans. The Disney princess wall is apparently proof of that.

But he is wary of American soldiers. He tells me that, until Cardeño’s death, he had no idea that Americans were stationed in the nearby military camp — but that they had been spotted occasionally in the nearby jungle. Most people assumed they were surveying the area — looking for natural resources that might be of interest to the US. The notion, however baseless, that yet another group was vying for Mindanao’s gold, copper, oil, gas or flora doesn’t sit well with Khan. He reasons that it’s more proof that the Americans aren’t in Mindanao to support the people. He also believes that Cardeño was murdered by American soldiers. It’s easy enough for people to believe. In Mindanao, murders are committed with impunity. There is little rule of law. Private armies outnumber local police forces. Harder to believe, is that someone close to Cardeño would also be killed under mysterious circumstances, just a month after his own death.

Carivel’s boyfriend of one year, Javier Ignacio, was devastated by Cardeño’s death. He began using his position within Philippine National Police to make his own inquiries. Those close to him said he felt some responsibility over what had happened, having helped Gregan to secure the interpreter job. His romantic relationship with Carivel further fueled his preoccupation with the case. But his past may have played an even bigger role.

As a young man, Ignacio had been a rebel — a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a militant Muslim secessionist group that frequently engaged in violent civil conflict with the national government during the 1990s. In 1996, the government and the MNLF finally reached a peace agreement, and as part of this, Ignacio and other MNLF members were “integrated” into the Philippine National Police forces — a successful effort on the part of the government to neutralize rebel fighters. Before Gregan died, Ignacio seemed content with his new identity. He had recruited his three younger brothers into the PNP, had risen to the rank of captain and, by March of 2010, was set to receive another promotion: to major.

But Cardeño’s death seems to have caused Ignacio to question this identity, re-igniting the deep distrust of the government that he had cultivated as a young rebel.

His inquiries into Gregan’s death and his constant association with the Cardeño family drew the attention of his superiors. He told Carivel that on several occasions, officers from Western Mindanao Command, where the JSOTF-P are headquartered with the Armed

Forces of the Philippines, had questioned him about his involvement with the Cardeño family's investigation. His loyalty came into question. One had allegedly asked him if he was meeting with members of the MILF or the insurgent National People's Army. On another occasion he was reportedly reprimanded for associating with members of Karapatan, a human rights group well known for bringing torture cases against the PNP and the AFP and for supporting a campaign to oust US forces from the Philippines.

In the weeks following Gregan's death, Ignacio said he began receiving threatening text messages from unknown parties, warning him to stop the investigation and even promising him money if he did so. He showed the messages to Carivel, reassuring her that only death would stop him from finding out what had happened to her brother.

At the family's urging, investigators from the Philippine Commission on Human Rights came to Ipil to conduct the second autopsy of Cardeño's body. After the autopsy, the investigators, the family, and members of Karapatan sat down together for dinner. Ignacio had a long conversation with Maria Hilao-Enriquez, the then chair of Karapatan, about next steps. He wanted to know if her organization would be able to prove that something bad had happened to Cardeño. Hilao-Enriquez told him that the best thing would be to somehow link Cardeño's death to their campaign against US troops. From a distance, it seems a strange solution. But human rights groups in the Philippines are among the most politicized in Asia, colored by decades of extrajudicial killings against their own kind.

Hilao-Enriquez cared about the Cardeño family, but she also saw an opportunity. So she told Ignacio that she needed proof that the JSOTF-P was violating the visiting forces agreement. She asked him if he knew of any such proof. Some might say that she was manipulating Ignacio — taking advantage of his grief to compel him to gather evidence that supported her political cause. Perhaps she was just talking. In any case, he was on board.

He headed back to work, but hours later called Carivel saying he was headed over. He told her that he had something for Karapatan, something that would help the campaign.

On his way to the house, he was shot nine times by unidentified men on motorcycles.

The police investigation concluded that Ignacio was killed because of a love triangle; both he and Carivel were technically married, though long separated from their spouses. No one was ever charged with the murder. Carivel and her family believe that he was silenced, because he had learned something about Cardeño's death. There's another possibility: that he was murdered because of his perceived disloyalty to the PNP — his backslide into rebel tendencies.

More powerful men are routinely killed for less in Mindanao. During my second visit, two years later, I read in the newspaper that the head of the Zamboanga police force, and the

man responsible for the investigation of Ignacio's death, had been fired for failing to investigate numerous high profile murders carried out by masked gunmen on motorcycles.

Though none of this changes the sober reality that Carivel now has two graves to visit.

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Within two weeks of Cardeño's death, the LCE commander at Marawi was getting calls from the press about the supposed murder of Gregan Cardeño. First it was a journalist from the GMA network, then one from ABS-CBN, and then a reporter from the Philippine Star. The VFA commission, which reviews foreign military activities in the Philippines, began to ask questions, too. A news report aired in Mindanao alleging that Cardeño had been sodomized. In response to this, public affairs officer Theresa Donnelly drafted a press release, hoping this would quash the speculation. It was around this time that a fact finding mission — consisting of Carivel, her sisters, and some human rights activist — showed up at the camp.

Captain Mike Kay, the officer who fetched the police after Cardeño's body was found, saw the group sitting outside of the camp, and invited them in. Captain Kay happened to be with Donnelly, the person responsible for handling media inquiries about Cardeño's death..

The women who showed up at the camp that day had no idea that Captain Kay had been in the room with Cardeño's body, and he didn't tell them. He also didn't tell them that he spent some time with Cardeño, talked to him about his family, tried to find distractions for him when he seemed upset. He had given Cardeño books to read hoping it would lift his spirits. He didn't mention any of this. Instead, he recited the facts of the case as they were laid out in Donnelly's press release. The women pressed him for more details — they wanted to see the room that Cardeño had died in, they wanted to know about his job, who he had worked with, and who had cut him down. Kay suggested they direct their questions to the US embassy. After a short while, Donnelly ended the interview. The team left feeling demoralized and angry. They thought Captain Kay was "mayabang" — conceited. And they believed that he was hiding something.

Meanwhile, Cardeño's brothers had ventured to the police station down the road, where they discovered that Gregan's cellphone, which Officer Rangiris had used to inform Carivel of her brother's death, had been wiped of text messages, photos and call history. Rangiris confirmed that the cell phone had once contained several text messages, and that a Philippine Army captain, whom he could not identify, had been the last to handle the phone. No one could explain why it had been cleared out.

The results of the autopsies confused matters even more. Both autopsies performed by the National Bureau of Investigation and the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) confirmed that Cardeño had died from asphyxiation by ligature. But when the CHR

investigators saw Cardeño's body, they were distraught to find visible puncture wounds on his arms, legs and feet. They took photos, which later convinced the family that he had been tortured. Nobody, including the doctor who performed the autopsy, bothered to explain that the puncture wounds were made by trochar and arterial needles during the embalming process.

The CHR investigation concluded that Cardeño's death was a suicide, albeit one complicated by the negligence of the Marawi police, who broke chain of custody with regard to Cardeño's effects, and who clearly tampered with his phone. The CHR investigators didn't read much into the evidence tampering. They didn't assume foul play or a cover-up. They assumed, perhaps correctly, that the police simply weren't very good at doing their jobs.

It's been three years since Cardeño died, and there have been no new leads. But his family, along with small group of Mindanaoan activists, has continued to diligently pursue the cause — filing court cases that don't go anywhere, carrying his photo at anti-military rallies, pressing the CHR again and again to reinvestigate. They have not found the answers, or the outcome, they hoped for. Beyond their small circle, Cardeño has ceased to be a cause, and has instead become a myth — one more sad story in the long history of sad stories that make up Mindanao. One more reason to think twice about trusting a soldier.

When I initially filed a Freedom of Information Act request with US Pacific Command for documents relating to the death of Gregan Cardeño, a FOIA officer in Honolulu discouraged me from pursuing the matter, saying my request "sounds like a symphony of red flags."

Nevertheless, eight months later, I received 51 redacted documents comprising the command investigation of Cardeño's death. In a letter accompanying the documents, Colonel James P. Lowe explained that he was releasing the documents because of "extenuating circumstances surrounding Mr. Cardeño's death — notably news reports "alluding to a U.S. conspiracy."

After being silent for 3 years, the military was releasing confidential documents because rumors of a US conspiracy don't bode well for public diplomacy. But I can't help but wonder what would have happened if they had released these sooner, or had embraced the family the same way the activists had. Would the family still be locked in a state of grief? Would the cooperation and support of the military have curbed their imaginations? Would things have been different, and better, for everyone?

Since Cardeño's death, the family has struggled to cope with the loss. The children suffered the most: Cardeño's 14-year-old son, Dave, dropped out of school, a decision his mother Myrna grudgingly accepted. He says that when gets older, he's going to find the

men who murdered his father, and kill them. Cardeño's 5-year-old daughter, Kizzie, suffers from night terrors; in her sleep, she repeatedly watches large, shadowy figures choke her father to death. Only 13-year-old Clarivel seemed to remain whole.

Cardeño's brother Gregory developed a deep prejudice against Americans, especially soldiers. He likes to wear an oversized t-shirt that depicts the silhouette of a soldier next to the words, "U.S. Troops Out Now!" He told me that shortly after Cardeño died, he happened to cross paths with an American soldier in Zamboanga City. They had a brief, polite conversation, after which the American reached out to shake his hand, saying, "You're a good man, Greg." When they touched hands, he said he felt his blood boil, pounding within his head. He believes that Americans murdered his brother.

Clarivel isn't as adamant as her brother, but she does express surprise at her former naivete. "Before this happened, we didn't know anything bad about the Americans," she said. "Now we know." She believes her brother was murdered, and frequently invokes the case of Philip Pestaño, a Filipino Navy ensign who allegedly committed suicide aboard a Navy ship in 1995. The Pestaño family refused to accept the police's finding and 16 years later, 10 Navy officers and personnel were charged with the young man's murder. Evidently, Pestaño had threatened to report officers for using a Navy vessel to traffic stolen lumber. The officers shot him in the head and staged a suicide. Clarivel says that she won't rest until the authorities change the record of Cardeño's death from suicide to murder. It doesn't matter anymore who did it, she says, because they will never be able to pinpoint the killers. But she can't live, believing that her brother chose not to.

In my packet of documents from JSOTF-P is a memo dated one month after Cardeño's death, from one of the investigating officers to the commander of JSOTF-P. "The family is as expected distraught by the loss of a loved one," the officer wrote. "They are locked in the anger phase of grieving." The officer had never met anyone in Cardeño's family but, three years later, his conclusion still holds true.

Since I first looked into Cardeño's death, so much more his story has materialized, but some questions remain, even for me. If Cardeño was suicidal, why did no one recognize the signs, including those trained to do so? If his death was simply an inexplicable, individual act, why wasn't JSOTF-P more transparent about it? Was Cardeño recalled from his post, as Skylink claims? Did he meet with the officers in the camp the night before he died, as he told his sister? And what evidence was Ignacio purportedly bringing to Karapatan the day he was killed?

Ultimately, it may not matter. For many in Mindanao, Cardeño has become a kind of a fable — a cautionary tale about getting too close to outsiders. He embodies the deep cultural and, perhaps ideological, disconnect between US armed forces and Mindanaoans on the ground. As an interpreter, it was Cardeño's job was to bridge this gap — to bring

US forces closer to the people, using his broad language abilities and insider knowledge of his own community. Interpretation is more than just literal translation; one must use cultural knowledge to negotiate meaning — to illuminate by emphasizing certain words and ideas while diluting others. Cardeño, who appears to have been misunderstood from the moment he set foot in the military camp, greatly feared that he would fail at this task. Indeed, his death seems to have deepened misunderstandings, created false impressions, darkened the veil between two greatly misunderstood groups. Efforts to understand the role of the US military in Cardeño's death have emphasized details that reinforce existing prejudices, while the US military ceased to communicate at all.

While continued projection of U.S. military force in Southeast Asia seems certain, the hearts and minds of Filipinos are not. The US military does itself a disservice by failing to recognize the profound significance of every Filipino death to popular consciousness of Mindanao — a region long marginalized by the actions and agendas of outside actors. The future of US strategy against transnational terrorism is increasingly focused on public diplomacy — “winning the hearts and minds,” as we so often hear, of our potential aggressors. Perhaps it was inevitable that Cardeño's death would provoke a murder mystery and enflame entrenched fears about US military occupation. But the opaqueness with which the US military handled the investigation, and the perceived callousness with which it met the family's grief, played a role in transforming a funeral procession into a protest.