

## In memoriam: envoy, a general, a newsman

Written by bert pelayo  
Friday, 09 March 2012 20:16

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THREE recent deaths diminished the professions of diplomacy, military and journalism.

We refer to the passing of former Philippine ambassador to the U.S. Benjamin "Kokoy" Romualdez, four-star General Ernesto S. Mata and *Philippine Daily Inquirer* publisher Isagani M. Yambot.

All three were true pillars in their respective careers, which they enhanced with professionalism, unerring devotion to duty and country.

Kokoy Romualdez, better known as the younger brother of former First Lady and Ilocos Norte Rep. Imelda R. Marcos, opened the door to then emerging economic power, China, serving as Philippine ambassador to Beijing.

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A troubleshooter for the defunct and junta-like Marcos government, Kokoy also cemented relations with oil-rich Saudi Arabia, in his capacity as ambassador to Riyadh.

Gen. Mata's unblemished career spanned both the military (former chief of staff and Army commanding general) and the civilian sector (first as acting and later secretary of the Department of National Defense).

He did not collect his pay as DND secretary, subsisting on his meager military pension, when he could have double-dipped in his position.

A true penny-pinching Ilocano indeed.

This reporter and other colleagues who covered Mata both at Camp Bonifacio and Camp Aguinaldo visited him five years ago in his modest residence in Quezon City.

At 91 (he died at 96), he was still ram-rod straight like a cadet fresh out of the Constabulary academy, and all together with his quick quip.

"Boys, I have a scoop for you for the morning papers," we recall him telling his callers, like the old days when reporters vied for exclusive stories.

"But you did not hear it from me," the bemedalled general whispered conspiratorially.

"How could you not like the guy, so open to the press," former Press Secretary Ignacio "Toting" Bunye said afterwards.

Bunye covered the military beat for a *Manila Times* radio station.

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Also among the callers was Bert “Bitoy” Clemena, who reported for the *Philippine Herald* and now runs an eclectic resto in Legaspi City, in his native Albay.

Yambot was a fellow Timesman before ultimately becoming publisher of the *Inquirer*, coming from a most recent stint as managing editor at *Malaya*, a free-wheeling daily published by Jake Macasaet, another *Times* alumnus.

At the *Times*, he served in various slots, first as a rewriter, then as editor of *Vis-Min*, a short-lived *Times* section.

He then pounded the beat, first in the Senate, and later in Malacañang, then and now a prime assignment for senior reporters.

Printer’s ink run in his veins.

Early on, he wrote for the Torres High School paper, and much later for the *Collegian*, the weekly organ of the University of the Philippines.

Another sterling Torres High graduate was former *Manila Times* star reporter Rodolfo T. Reyes, who later served as press secretary to former President Joseph Estrada.

A third Timesman, now *Bulletin* editor in chief Crispulo “Icban” Jr., served briefly as press secretary to former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Goodbye, Godspeed and eternal rest to Kokoy, Ernie and Gani.

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