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## SPECIAL ISSUE: INAUGURATION 2009

## A LIFE LINGUISTIC

*A Volunteer finds his life's calling in Peace Corps*

by R. David (Paul) Zorc

**B**ack in June 1965, newly graduated from college, I was really floundering about what to do with my life. I had spent my four high school years and the first year of college in a seminary, studying to be a priest before graduating from Georgetown University with a degree in Philosophy. I knew I wanted to help people in some way and thought that psychiatry might be an option. However, a series of aptitude and career placement tests suggested three professions: osteopath, musician and linguist. I didn't even know what an osteopath was. I had been composing some music, but doubted I could earn a living at it. And although I had studied Latin, German, and Classic Greek, and done pretty well in those courses, I did not really know what a linguist did for a living either. Hence, I deferred my decision by applying to the Peace Corps.

I was sent to the Philippines. Although our summer-long training taught us the basics of Tagalog (or Pilipino, the national language), I was assigned to teach English in Kalibo, Aklan Province on Panay, from September 1965 through August 1967. There Tagalog was either unknown or disliked, so I set about learning Aklanon. In order to master the vocabulary, I made flash cards with Aklanon on one side and English on the other. Eventually, my collection grew to over 4,000 entries, and one of my co-teachers suggested that I work on an Aklanon-English dictionary since there was no such resource available. As my second year was nearing its end, I asked the Peace Corps office in Manila if I could work on a grammar and dictionary of Aklanon. At that time,

Peace Corps/Philippines only had programs in three areas: teaching English, Math or Science in primary schools. "Dictionary author" was not an option. The Peace Corps Director suggested that I become a "language coordinator." I would learn the other dialects of the West Visayas in order to administer Foreign Service Institute fluency tests to Volunteers stationed throughout that region. So I set about visiting those other areas and gathering as much data on each as I could. The first book I ever published in my life came out in 1967, *Peace Corps Primer for the Western Visayas Philippines*.

I extended my service for another two-year term and met my future wife, Maria-Nellie Reyes Prado Zorc. The primer was revised and reissued in 1968 as the *Peace Corps Western Visayas Dialect Field Book*. But the bulk of my work was on *A Study of the Aklanon Dialect: Volume One—Grammar* and an *Aklanon-English Dictionary* with Vicente Salas-Reyes, which had about 8,000 entries.

Linguistics finally made sense to me, and I returned to the U.S. in 1969 to begin formal studies at Cornell University. I got my Ph.D. in Linguistics in 1975, writing my dissertation on *The Bisayan Dialects of the Philippines: Subgrouping and Reconstruction*. I took a research position in Austronesian at Yale University, and from there became a Senior Lecturer with the School of Australian Linguistics (SAL) in Batchelor, Northern Territory.

That position was very much like my experience in the Peace Corps. I worked with Aboriginal students on sixty different languages, including an Aboriginal Kriol, teaching them to read and write their languages, and in

some cases actually developing a writing system. Just prior to my departure I printed a *Yolngu-Matha Dictionary*.

Again, the Peace Corps came into the fore. It was October 1986 and Peace Corps was celebrating its 25th anniversary on the Mall in Washington, DC. I went on a Sunday armed with CV's and good spirits and met Pam Moguet, who was working for the Language Research Center (LRC) in Hyattsville, Maryland. I was interviewed on Monday, and started work on Tuesday. I have been at the LRC for the last 22 years. It turned out that my Peace Corps and SAL experiences in researching and publishing materials on less-commonly taught languages were right down this company's alley.

*R. David P. Zorc, Ph.D (Philippines 65-69) has published 22 books, 7 monographs, 39 journal articles and 12 data papers in the field of linguistics.*

Dear Editor(s):

I suggest you get in touch with R. David Zorc, a PCV in Kalibo, Aklan, Philippines from 1965 to 1969, about his story....

Dave was not trained as a linguist but has a great facility with languages. In perhaps his finest moment, he was invited to address the entire province over the radio on Good Friday, giving a talk in Aklanon on one of the Seven Last Words of Christ—the first and probably the only foreigner, maybe even first and only non-Aklanon, ever to do so. The Congressman from Aklan even offered to sponsor a bill to make Dave a Filipino citizen. And of course he married a local lass.