



Roel Orteza

Badge #1565, retired

Researched & written by John Burchill with Roel Orteza

The Philippines is a country of about 7,640 islands in Southeast Asia. It is situated in the western Pacific Ocean, sharing maritime borders with Taiwan to the north, Japan to the northeast, Indonesia to the south, Malaysia and Brunei to the southwest, Vietnam to the west, and China to the northwest. With a population of nearly 110 million people, it is the world's twelfth most populous country.

For more than 300 years the Philippines was a Spanish colonial possession, which was ceded to the United States in 1898 as a result of the Spanish–American War. An ensuing Philippine–American War for independence (1899–1902) ended with the United States establishing control over the Philippines, which they maintained until the Japanese invasion during World War II. Following liberation, the Philippines became one of the founding members of the United Nations and was recognized as an independent nation in 1946.

On February 1, 1988, Roel Orteza started his 32-year career with the Winnipeg Police. He was the first Filipino officer to don the uniform (which was a light blue at the time).

To understand the significance of Roel's appointment, one must realize that there were only a few hundred Filipinos in Manitoba by the mid-1960s. The first wave of Filipino migration to Manitoba did not begin until the 1950s when a number of Filipino nurses arrived in Winnipeg from Minneapolis to work at the Misericordia General Hospital. While they could speak English as a result of their colonial relationship with the United States, many still experienced discrimination based on the colour of their skin and other physical traits due to the federal immigration system then in place.

Indeed, there were only about 770 Filipinos in all of Canada by 1965, four of them were Roel and his family – who were then living in Montreal (a fifth member was on the way, born in 1966). It was not until after 1967, when the immigration classification system that favoured European immigration was abolished, that there was a steady increase in the number of Filipinos that immigrated to Canada.¹

Prior to 1965, Roel was living in Caloocan, Rizal, Philippines. His mother was a Registered Nurse and his father was an Anesthesiologist. Roel's father had left the Philippines to pursue work in Seattle, Washington and later in Springfield, Massachusetts. His mother followed later to advance her career in Massachusetts and then to Montreal. Roel and his older brother Felidon

¹ Manitoba, which had a large textile industry, attracted many Filipino immigrants in the early 1970s. By 1991 there were 21,085 Filipinos in Winnipeg, 25,395 in 1996, and 31,170 in 2001. By 2016 there were 73,875 Filipinos living in Winnipeg, or 9.49% of the population, making it one of the largest per capita Filipino-Canadian communities.

remained in the Philippines with extended family until 1965 when they were reunited with their parents in Montreal.

From 1966 to 1971 Roel went to primary school in Montreal before their family moved to Jersey City, New Jersey, where his parents continued to work in various hospitals. With conscription still in force in the United States, drafting young men to fight in Vietnam, Roel's parents moved him and his brother Felidon back to Montreal in 1973 to stay with relatives, while they remained in New Jersey.

In the Philippines, police officers were viewed with distrust and as corrupt. However, Roel had two positive experiences with the police – the first was when a member of the Montreal police visited his elementary school, the other was a “field contact” with a member of the New Jersey Port Authority when he was setting off firecrackers behind a hospital. In both situations, the officers displayed their authority in a non-aggressive or threatening manner that led him to have great respect for them and their profession.

In 1976 Roel's family was reunited once more at which time they moved to the Maples area of Winnipeg, due to affordable housing and an area well known for its Filipino community. His mother worked at the Misericordia Hospital, while he attended grade 10 at Garden City Collegiate. Unable to get work or pass his Canadian medical license his father returned to the Philippines to practice. In 1977 Roel and his family moved to Fort Richmond so Felidon could be closer to the University of Manitoba. Roel finished high school at Fort Richmond Collegiate.

In 1984 Roel's father returned to Winnipeg and retired. His mother continued to work as a nurse at the Victoria Hospital until 1994.

After high school, Roel worked as a shipper/receiver for the Hudson Bay Co at St Vital mall before enrolling in a government-sponsored program at Red River College as an Automotive Mechanic in 1984. After graduation, he was employed as an auto mechanic with Eastern Sales Chrysler on north Main. However, he viewed his work more as a hobby, not as a lifelong profession.

All that changed in 1987 when Roel saw an advertisement for the Winnipeg Police. He recalled his experiences in Montreal and New Jersey and knew that he wanted to be a police officer. He felt in his heart that policing was a “noble” profession and with the support of his parents and future wife, Kelly, the drive to become a police officer became his ultimate priority.

In his culture, Roel tells me, family means everything – who you are and what you do revolve around your family. He learnt at an early age that it was always better to give than receive and that no matter what, the family would always stick together during good times and bad times. It as important to him to have the support of his family as there is a Filipino tradition, whereby e children follow in their parents' footsteps. However, his mother said that no matter what you do in life, as long as you work hard, then happiness and success will follow.



Six police constables assessed the patrols throughout the year judging them on their ability, professionalism and technique. (From left) Const. Jim Rogala, Const. Roel Orteza, Const. Monica Stothers, Const. Gaby Irving, Const. Denis Courteau and Const. Claude Labossierre.

Winnipeg Free Press, May 23, 2004 – Cst Orteza evaluating school patrols

Roel began his basic training at the old Fort Garry (District 6) police station at 1350 Pembina Highway, with assignments downtown and the North End in both uniform patrol and detectives. He moved to the Traffic Division where he was involved in impaired driving and accident investigations. He then moved to Community Relations as a School Resource Officer and did two rotations through Human Resources as a background investigator for police candidates.

Putting the mechanical skills to work that he learned as an automotive mechanic, Roel became involved in the Firearms Unit as a “trainee” instructor. By 2009 he was appointed a full-time instructor and in 2010 he was appointed the Service’s Armourer (an officer who maintains and repairs small arms and weapons systems). Roel held that position until he retired on April 24, 2020.

Roel tells me that “I enjoyed every aspect of my career and in particular, my favourite stint was with the Firearms Unit as an armourer and instructor. I found working in this capacity to be interesting, as each day brought new and unique challenges and a variety of different people and professions. Situations such as these made me look forward to going to work each and every day.”



The Firearms Unit, he says “was more than fixing guns and instructing. It involved networking with suppliers, local/provincial/federal/international agencies, internal specialty units and general membership; networking at its finest. It involved applying all your knowledge pertaining to how a pistol works, perfecting the art of shooting, adjusting to wearing gear/equipment and investigating unintentional discharges and accidents”.

Roel continued “I humbly learnt in my career, that as you navigate through life and your profession, you’re always interacting with different types of people and personalities. I learnt to be patient, honest, and respectful in all my interactions with staff and the public, because I believed that I could make a difference in that individual’s life, or their families, ultimately

creating a positive outcome. In my heart, I believed this to be an honour. In my daily practice, it was always important to me to project myself to my fellow police officers who were in various capacities/roles and with civilian staff in a positive, honest, respectful, and professional manner at all times”.



Cst Orteza at City Hall with Mayor Norrie & Chief Stephen, 1991

Asking if he had any advice for future generations, Roel offers these thoughts: *“don’t limit yourself, respect all people, including yourself, and find your passion and purpose in life. The rewards/benefits will follow. And, most importantly, you must create balance in your life. Because when you retire, your job is done, and someone else continues in your role. What’s ultimately left is family and friends. Thus, it is very important I feel to have one’s priorities straight. Family first and career second. And at the “end of the day,” you can honestly say that you did your best and that you have no regrets”.*

Since the 1950’s the Filipino community has grown to become an integral part of Manitoba’s social, economic, political and cultural fabric. Indeed the Filipino language has become one of the most commonly spoken languages in Manitoba after English. To recognize the Filipino community’s contribution in Manitoba Bill 233 was introduced earlier this week by Jon Reyes, MLA for Waverley, to set aside June as Filipino Heritage Month in Manitoba.

I hope that when the Bill passes, Roel and his family will be invited to stand proud with Jon Reyes and the rest of the Filipino community on the steps of the Legislature.