

**THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS.
CEFERINO-MEDRANA Y TORRES, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.***G.R. No. L-31871. December 14, 1981*

Ponente: AQUINO, J.

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This is a murder case. The prosecution's evidence discloses that at around ten o'clock in the evening of September 5, 1967, Arturo Fernandez (Oying), 24, was seated at a table in the restaurant of the Muni Golf Links near In-tramuros, Manila. With him at the table were Napoleon Medalla, Tommy Dizon and Teodulfo D. Belarmino. They were drinking whiskey and were engaged in a friendly conversation. Fernandez invited Medalla to attend his birthday party at the Nile Restaurant on Friday, September 8.

Paulino Gelidon, Melvin Yabut and Eladio Yabut arrived at the restaurant. Gelidon and Eladio seated themselves beside Ceferino Medrana and Ching Santos at a table which was opposite the table occupied by Fernandez. Melvin, who was the president of a customs brokerage firm known as Cargoes Unlimited, Inc., seated himself beside Fernandez who was a vice-president of the firm.

Fernandez introduced Melvin to Medalla, telling the latter that Melvin is a nephew of Nemesio Yabut. Medalla uttered derogatory remarks against Nemesio Yabut, branding him as a squealer who caused the apprehension of two trucks of Medalla and whom he (Medalla) would kick and spit on. Fernandez countered that Medalla should not do that because Nemesio Yabut was his (Oying's) compadre. Medalla remarked that Gelidon, the bodyguard of Fernandez, was "stale" (panis). Medalla then pointed to his bodyguards, Medrana and Belarmino, who were armed with caliber .45 guns.

Shortly thereafter, Medalla directed Medrana to get from his car a Thompson submachine gun so that he could fire it. Fernandez advised Medrana not to get the gun because trouble and scandal might ensue. Medalla said that he assumed responsibility for the consequences. Medrana, in compliance with Medalla's directive, stood up and walked towards the parking lot near the restaurant and the corner of Palacio and P. Burgos Streets. Medalla also stood up and went to the parking lot. Fernandez followed Medalla. Belarmino and Dizon also went to the parking lot.

Maria Resma, 36, a cigarette vendor who was near the parking lot at the time, testified that, at a distance of around fifteen paces, she saw Medalla and Fernandez grappling for the possession of a long gun. Medalla, who was able to wrest the gun from Fernandez, placed it inside his car. Then, Fernandez, with hands raised, moved backward, saying: "Huang, pare, hindi ako lalaban". He was unarmed.

Benjamin Lopez, 19, a third-year high school student who worked as a caddy and knows Medalla and Fernandez, testified that at around ten o'clock on that night of September 5, 1967, he was at the Muni Golf Links, leaning against a parked car while waiting for some golfers.

He saw Medalla, Fernandez and Dizon in the parking lot. He heard a gunshot. On looking sidewise to his left,

where the sound of the gunshot originated, he perceived Medalla, Medrana and Belarmino aiming their firearms at Fernandez, who was backing away with raised hands in a posture of surrender. Belarmino and Medrana were armed with .45 caliber pistols (Exh. I).

After Belarmino had fired at Fernandez, the latter fell and then he stood up with raised hands, saying: "Don't kill me. I'll not fight." As Fernandez walked towards his car, which was a few meters away, Medrana fired at him. The victim continued walking in a zigzag manner towards his car. Belarmino again fired at him. Fernandez buckled down on one knee and then he rose and moved towards the driving range in a wobbly manner. Medrana followed him and fired at him repeatedly.

Fernandez collapsed inside the restaurant near the counter for glasses and plates. A bystander, who was hiding behind the counter and who knew the victim, said: "Oying, Oying, huag dito, doon ka." Fernandez stood up and staggered towards the fairway, still pursued by Medrana. At that juncture, Dizon shouted to Medalla: "Napo, si Oying." Reacting to Dizon's words, Medalla shouted the order: "Tama na yan". Heeding that injunction, Medrana desisted and returned to the parking lot.

Medalla tucked his firearm in his waist and walked towards the driving range, following the route taken by Fernandez. Upon overtaking Fernandez, Medalla stooped, raised the hands of Fernandez and shouted insolently: "Ano, puede ka pa ba?" Fernandez did not answer. His head was drooping. Medalla released him and ordered Medrana to place Fernandez in his (Medalla's) car and take him to the hospital. The car was driven by Leopoldo Hermo, Medalla's driver.

Fernandez was already dead upon arrival at the Philippine General Hospital. The postmortem examination showed that he had a fatal gunshot wound in his abdomen which lacerated his diaphragm, heart and liver. A .32 caliber slug was lodged in the pericardial sac of his heart. He had also gun-shot wounds in the buttocks, forearm and left thigh. A .45 caliber bullet had entered his buttocks (gluteal region), exited on the right iliac region of his abdomen and reentered his right forearm (Exh. EE).

Belarmino, 50, an employee of Medalla, voluntarily surrendered to the police and gave a statement on the following day, September 6, wherein he admitted his participation in the shooting of Fernandez (Exh. I). He reenacted his role in the killing (Exh. L to L-4). It is significant that in his statement he repeatedly stated that Medrana was with him at the scene of the crime (Exh. L).

Hermo 51, was arrested two days later or on September 7 (Exh. N). He also demonstrated how he shot Fernandez with his .32 caliber revolver, a Colt Cobra (Exhs. P and P-1). The booking sheet and arrest report regarding Hermo proves that Medrana was implicated in the killing of Fernandez, as may be seen from the following entry therein signed by Hermo, Patrolman S. Alonzo and by Sergeant Mallari for Colonel Enrique V. Morales, the chief of the detective bureau:

"Herein accused (Hermo) was arrested at the above-stated time (6:30 p.m., 9-7-67), date and place for the crime of MURDER committed as follows:

"That on or about 10:15 p.m., Sept. 5, 1967, herein accused (Hermo) together with Teodulfo Belarmino y Decena, also under arrest and one Ceferino Medrana alias Ninoy still at large, shot victim, Arturo Fernandez y Camello with a .32 cal. revolver with serial number 71087 (recovered) inside the parking space in front of the Muni Golf Links, located at the corner of Palacio and P. Burgos Sts., Intramuros, Manila, hitting victim, causing victim's death upon arrival at the PGH.

"Accused (Hermo) further stated that he shot victim while waiting for his employer Mr. Napoleon Medalla at the mentioned place, when all of a sudden he heard gunshot bursts and believing that his employer was injured, he drew his revolver tucked on his right waistline and aimed and shot point blank at the person who he said

was in an act of attacking his employer.

"The revolver was found to be covered with a certification signed by the provincial commander of Laguna.

"Accused surrendered to Col. James Barbers, Deputy Chief of Police and verbally admitted having shot victim once but refused to give a written statement as per advice of his lawyer." (Exh. N).

Belarmino was charged with murder on September 7 in an information filed in the Court of First Instance of Manila (Criminal Case No. 87276). The next day the information was amended by including Hermo as a co-accused. Medalla was included as a co-accused in the amended information filed on October 19. It was alleged therein that the three accused conspired with one whose identity and whereabouts were still unknown.

Medrana, 25, had gone into hiding. He was arrested by Calamba, Laguna policemen in a nightclub in that town on August 31, 1968 or nearly one year after the killing (Exh. GG). Prosecution witness Gelidon identified Medrana in a police lineup as one of the assailants of Fernandez (Exh. GG and GG-1).

The case against Medrana was succinctly capsulized by Patrolman Alonso in his booking sheet and arrest report where under the heading "Facts known to arresting officer" Alonso said (Exh. GG):

"Herein accused was arrested x x x for the crime of murder wherein the victim is Arturo Fernandez y Camello, committed as follows:

"That on or about 10:15 p. m., September 5, 1967, herein accused together with other accused, already under arrest, shot victim with a .45 caliber pistol, not recovered, inside the parking space in front of the Muni Golf Links, located at the corner of Palacio and P. Burgos Streets, Intramuros, Manila, hitting victim in different parts of the body and causing victim's death on arrival at the Philippine General Hospital, where he was conveyed for treatment."

Medrana was charged with murder in a separate information filed on September 2, 1968 in the Court of First Instance. It was alleged therein that he conspired with Belarmino, Hermo and Medalla to kill Fernandez (Criminal Case No. 90870). The case was eventually assigned to the Circuit Criminal Court (Case No. 30). Thus, Medrana was tried separately.

After trial, the lower court convicted him of murder qualified by abuse of superiority and aggravated by cuadrilla, sentenced him to death and ordered him to pay an indemnity of P390, 400. He appealed to this Court.

Appellant Medrana, a high school graduate and a jeepney operator, relied on an alibi. He testified that he was with Medalla at around two o'clock in the afternoon of September 5, 1967 and that at about six o'clock he left the Muni Golf Links, after telling Belarmino to inform Medalla of his departure, and rode in a bus bound for his native barrio, Mayapa, Calamba.

Medrana's alibi is belied by Belarmino who declared in his statement, taken about fourteen hours after the killing, that between nine and ten o'clock in the evening of September 5, 1967 Medrana (Ninoy) as with Belarmino and Medalla at the scene of the crime and that Medrana helped Medalla in placing the mortally wounded victim in Medalla's car (Nos. 10, 11, 18, 28, 29 and 59, Exh. I).

While Medrana in his testimony conveys the impression that his meeting with Medalla in the afternoon of September 5, 1967 was an isolated instance, it can be deduced from Belarmino's statement that Medrana was a bodyguard of Medalla. Belarmino, an employee of Medalla, said that he saw Medrana daily (araw-araw) armed with a .45 caliber revolver (No. 52, Exh. I).

As already mentioned in the recital of the prosecution's version, Hermo, Medalla's driver, signed Patrolman

Alonso's booking sheet and arrest report implicating Medrana in the killing (Exh. N).

The statement of Eladio Yabut, taken about ten hours after the shooting, also belies the alibi of Medrana. Eladio recounted in his statement that Medalla asked Medrana to get the Thompson submachine gun from Medalla's car (Nos. 17 and 18, Exh. 28). This matter was also brought out in Eladio's testimony.

So, appellant's contention that he was not mentioned by Yabut in his statement nor implicated by him in the killing of Fernandez (pp. 73-75, Brief) is not correct. Yabut repeatedly referred to a certain Ninoy as being present at the scene of the crime and as the person whom Medalla instructed to get from his car his Thompson submachine gun (Exh. 28). As previously noted, Ninoy is appellant Medrana. Yabut knows appellant by that nickname and not by his surname Medrana.

Appellant's able counsel meticulously and painstakingly exposed the alleged discrepancies, contradictions, bias, improbability and lack of credibility in the testimonies of prosecution witnesses Gelidon, Eladio Yabut, Resma and Lopez.

Counsel faulted the trial court for not giving probative value to the facts elicited by him during the cross-examination of the said witnesses, for not reading his Memorandum, for basing the judgment of conviction on its observation of the demeanor of the witnesses and for giving credence to the testimonies of Lopez and Resma in spite of the fact that they gave their statements eleven days after the shooting and that they were given protection, assistance and shelter by the victim's father, Senator Estanislao Fernandez (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th Assignments of Error).

In resolving these contentions, it is well to bear in mind that there is no doubt whatsoever that Medrana was at the scene of the crime, that he participated in the shooting and that he was a fugitive from justice for nearly a year, a circumstance indicative of guilt.

The only issue is as to what was Medrana's role in the killing where four armed persons, acting like a firing squad, conducted a fusillade and peppered with bullets a defenseless victim whose life was not spared notwithstanding his repeated conciliatory declaration (amounting to a plea for mercy) that he would not fight his assailants.

Gelidon and Eladio Yabut testified that they saw Medrana, with his drawn .45 caliber automatic pistol (naka-omang), following Fernandez who was walking on the putting green toward the driving range in a zigzag manner (pasoray-soray) (31 and 85 tsn, February 25, 1970).

Resma testified that after Medalla had wrested the Thompson submachine gun from Fernandez and placed it inside his car, Medalla, Belarmino and Medrana, who was on Medalla's right and who was wearing a shirt with its long sleeves rolled up to the elbow, aimed their firearms at Fernandez. Later, Medrana helped Medalla in placing Fernandez inside Medalla's car (113-114, 119 tsn February 25, 1970).

Lopez corroborated Resma's testimony by declaring that he saw Medalla (who was wearing a white polo barong) and two persons on his right and left aiming their guns at Fernandez who was moving backward. The man on Medalla's right, who was wearing a shirt with its sleeves rolled up, was Medrana. He shot Fernandez after Belarmino, the man on Medalla's left, had fired at Fernandez.

According to Lopez, Fernandez walked towards his car and was shot by Belarmino. Fernandez fell on his knees and then ran towards the driving range. Medrana chased him and shot him three times. Fernandez fell near the place where the drinking glasses were kept. He stood up and ran to the practice green. At that juncture, Medalla said "Tama na yan". Medrana returned to the parking lot. Later, he and another person placed Fernandez in Medalla's car (195-204 tsn February 26, 1970).

Those testimonies of Gelidon, Yabut, Resma and Lopez, all eyewitnesses, regarding Medrana's culpability, taken in conjunction with the declarations of his co-accused, Belarmino and Hermo, as to Medrana's presence at the scene of the crime, are conclusive as to his guilt and militate against the theory of self-defense and defense of a stranger which Medrana's counsel sought to establish in his cross-examination of Doctor Angelo Singian, the medico-legal officer who conducted the autopsy.

Appellant's counsel argues that the fact that Resma and Lopez gave their statements to the police eleven days after the killing and only after having received assurances of protection from Senator Fernandez and having been given board and lodging in his house impairs their credibility.

The two witnesses candidly declared during the trial that they were afraid to testify because they feared Medalla and they did not want to be involved in the case (179-180 tsn February 25, 1970; 211-212 tsn February 26, 1970).

But because Senator Fernandez gave them security guards and they lived in his residence, they decided to testify on what they knew about the incident. Lopez said that during his first conference with Senator Fernandez the latter told him that he (Senator Fernandez) did not want a witness who had not actually seen what had happened. Lopez informed Senator Fernandez that he had witnessed the incident (216 tsn February 26, 1970).

The fact that Resma and Lopez did not volunteer to give their statements to the police immediately after the incident and the fact that their statements were taken after Senator Fernandez had given them protection, board and lodging might give the impression that their testimonies were mere inventions to help the prosecution. That is appellant's basic contention in this appeal.

We find that an unprejudiced and dispassionate appraisal of their testimonies and detailed statements to the police (Exhs. 5 and 36) and a consideration of their personal circumstances and the fact that they were undeniably present at the scene of the crime lead to the conclusion that their testimonies have the earmarks of veracity and would be difficult to fabricate.

Resma, a squatter in the ruins of Intramuros who finished grade four, and Lopez, a teenager struggling to earn a living as a caddy, appear to be guileless individuals without any rascality in their Makeup. Belonging to a humble station in life and not accustomed to the mischievousness of more sophisticated and educated persons, the two eyewitnesses are not of the stuff of which perjurers are made.

They were intensively cross-examined before two judges by skilled advocates: If their declarations as to Medrana's role in the assassination of Fernandez were fabrications, as repeatedly asseverated by appellant in his reply brief, then the competent defense lawyers would have easily unmasked them as liars. But Resma and Lopez withstood the gruelling cross-examination. They did not abandon their version that Medrana was one of the gunwielders who shot Fernandez.

Appellant's assumption that Resma and Lopez should have volunteered to apprise the police immediately that they had witnessed the shooting is contrary to human experience. It is well-known that eyewitnesses to killings usually do not want to undergo the trouble and inconvenience of an investigation and of appearing in court, being grilled by lawyers and being exposed to reprisal from the accused.

It is not surprising that in this case the victim's father had to take Resma and Lopez into custody. Their failure to testify might have prevented the prosecution from proving its case against the accused. A miscarriage of justice would have been the result.

If Resma and Lopez were not telling the truth as to the participation of Medrana in the killing of Fernandez, then Medrana should have presented eyewitnesses to refute their testimonies. There were several persons in the driving

range and parking lot at the time the incident occurred (156-157 tsn February 25, 1970).

But Medrana presented only one witness, a fifty-eight-year-old caddy named Pedro Ofredo, who testified that when he heard the gunshots he noticed that Maring Resma, like himself, left the golf course. He said that he did not see Lopez on the night of September 5, 1967 because Lopez did not render any service at that time.

The truth is that Lopez resided at the caddy house where he slept. So, night and day he was in the golf course. Resma's testimony that she witnessed the shooting with her companions Joe Solomon and Pedro Mata cannot be nullified by Ofredo's testimony that he allegedly saw her leaving the golf course immediately after the gunshots were heard.

Appellant regards the failure of Resma and Lopez to recognize Medrana in the newspaper photographs shown to them by the police (No. 45, Exh. 5; No. 43, Exh. 36) as an instance showing their lack of credibility. It should be noted that even Medrana, when shown on the witness stand his photo-graph with the caption "Ceferino Medrana" published in the Manila Times of September 16, 1967, said frankly: "I am not sure if that is my picture." (18 tsn March 2, 1970.)

Resma and Lopez saw Medrana only once on the night of September 5, 1967 at the scene of the crime. What they saw was the entire person of Medrana. They did not see him at close range or face to face. What remained in the archives of their memory was the whole figure of Medrana's person, not merely his head. Hence, it was difficult for them to recognize Medrana when only the photograph of his face was shown to them (See 176 tsn, February 25, 1970).

As to the inconsistencies and contradictions, it was inevitable that the testimonies of Gelidon, Eladio Yabut, Resma and Lopez before Judge Alikpala would not jibe perfectly with their testimonies about two years later before Judge Pamaran. The absence of discrepancies would confirm appellant's assertion that they "gave perjured, fabricated and incredible testimony" (p. 43, Reply Brief).

The contradictions and errors dealt with minor details and did not nullify their declaration as to the participation of Medrana in the shooting of Fernandez. That is the point that matters and on that point the testimonies of the four witnesses are worthy of belief.

Appellant contends that Judge Manuel R. Pamaran erred in not awaiting the completion of the testimonies of Belarmino and Hermo in Criminal Case No. 87276 before Judge Federico C. Alikpala and thus prevented Medrana from proving self-defense or defense of another person by means of their testimonies or that the shooting was justified. (6th assignment of error).

We hold that no error was committed by the trial court on that score. Medrana was given a separate trial. His defense was alibi or, according to his counsel, denial of any participation in the shooting. We have already noted that Belarmino in his confession declared that Medrana was present at the scene of the crime (Exh. I). Hermo in the booking sheet and arrest report implicated Medrana (Exh. N).

In the face of those statements, the testimonies of Hermo and Belarmino would be of no help to Medrana. The medico-legal officer testified in this case and in the case against Hermo, Belarmino and Medalla before Judge Alikpala. The theory of self-defense and defense of another person is partly based on the medico-legal officer's testimony.

As will be shown presently, that theory cannot be sustained in this case. The prosecution's evidence (particularly the re-enactment made by Hermo and Belarmino) proves that the ruthless liquidation of Fernandez was not justified. There was no reason why Fernandez would perpetrate unlawful aggression against Medalla and his

bodyguards.

Medrana's learned counsel, in his fourth assignment of error and in his summation (filed after the submission of his brief), harps on the plea of self-defense which was intimated in Belarmino's statement. Belarmino said that he shot Fernandez when the latter made a motion to draw his weapon ("akmang bubunot") (No. 28, Exh. I).

Counsel adverted to the testimony of the medico-legal expert on cross-examination that the bullet which most probably first struck Fernandez was the .45 caliber slug (Exh. R) fired by Belarmino. That bullet entered the left side of the victim's waist, travelled more or less horizontally across his body, exited at the right side of his waist and then re-entered and lodged on the victim's right forearm above the right wrist. The testimony allegedly belied the claim of the prosecution witnesses that the first shot was fired when the hands of Fernandez were raised in a gesture of surrender to Medalla and his companions.

Counsel's argument is highly controversial. We find that the testimony of the medico-legal officer, like expert testimony in general, is a hodgepodge of conjectures. It should be emphasized that on redirect examination, he admitted that it was also possible that the .32 caliber bullet (Exh. S) fired by Hermo was the first slug that hit Fernandez (291 tsn).

While the conspiracy among the four accused was not proven directly, it could be implied from their concerted attack and their relationship to each other (Belarmino and Medrana were bodyguards of Medalla and Hermo was Medalla's driver) that they had an agreement or community of design to kill Fernandez because of some deep-seated grudge harbored by Medalla against Fernandez and Nemesio Yabut whose exact business relationship to Fernandez is not definitely shown in the record.

The motive may be gleaned from the following declaration of Belarmino in his statement (No. 27, Exh. I):

"Ang naging paksa ng usapan ni Oyeng (Fernandez) at ni Mr. Medalla ay iyon paggogolf nila ni Mr. Nemesio Yabut at nasabi nga ni Mr. Medalla ang tungkol doon sa barilan sa Custom, at sinabi pa ni Medalla na mabait na tao iyan si Mr. Yabut pero kung minsan somosobra iyon(g) mga taohan niya.

"Iyon ay kinagalit ni Oyeng at katwiran niya ay hindi dapat siraan si Mr. Yabut dahil sa malaki ang pakinabang niya ki Mr. Yabut.

"Ang sagot naman ni Mr. Medalla ay wala naman akong (siyang) sinasabing masama tungkol ki Mr. Yabut. Ang katu-nayan ay mabuting tao si Mr. Yabut, kaya lamang ay bakit ang dala-dala na armas ng mga taohan niya ay high-powered at mga armalite. Iyon lamang at nagalit naman si Oyeng, kayat nagbayad si Mr. Medalla ng lahat ng nainom at nagyaya ng umuwi."

Appellant Medrana was a co-conspirator. His complicity in the killing of Fernandez was proven beyond reasonable doubt.

Appellant's contention in his seventh assignment of error that the trial court erred in holding that the killing was qualified by abuse of superiority is not well-taken. It is incontestable that the four accused, all armed, ganged up against Fernandez and took advantage of their numerical superiority in liquidating him with impunity. What happened in this case is known in colloquial parlance as "overkill".

On the other hand, the Solicitor General contends that because deadly, high-powered weapons were utilized against the helpless victim to insure his liquidation and that it is evident that the four assailants had made some preparation for the assault, treachery should be considered aggravating.

We disagree with that contention. The victim had been alerted that he would be liquidated. It was his misfortune that he was not able to stop the assault. The element of surprise, a characteristic feature of *alevosia*, was absent.

Anyway, the point has only academic significance because when treachery and abuse of superior strength coexist, they are treated as one aggravating circumstance (U. S. vs. Jamino, 3 Phil. 102, 109; People vs. Bustos, 45 Phil. 9, 54-55).

Appellant's contention in his eighth assignment of error that abuse of superiority absorbed cuadrilla is correct. Band cannot be appreciated in this case as an aggravating circumstance independently of abuse of superior strength. If treachery absorbs abuse of superiority and band (U. S. vs. Abeline, 1 Phil. 568), then it is reasonable to hold that band should not be treated as an aggravating circumstance separate and distinct from abuse of superior strength. The two circumstances have the same essence which is the utilization of the combined strength of the assailants to overpower the victim and consummate the killing.

There being no generic aggravating circumstances nor mitigating circumstances in this case, the penalty for murder, which is reclusion temporal maximum to death, should be imposed in its medium period. Hence, appellant Medrana should be sentenced to reclusion perpetua.

Appellant's last assignment of error refers to the trial court's computation of the civil liability. It estimated the victim's life expectancy at sixty years. Since he was almost twenty-five years old when he was killed and his salary and allowances amounted to P9,600 a year, the trial court computed his lost earnings or income for 35 years at P336,000. That amount plus his salary of P2,400 for the rest of 1967, moral and exemplary damages of P40,000 and the usual indemnity of P12,000 totalled P390,400.

Appellant contends that the allowance should not have been included in the income and that the victim's life expectancy should be based on actuarial tables.

We hold that the indemnity of P390,400 payable to the heirs of the victim is not excessive nor unwarranted.

"There can be no exact or uniform rule for measuring the value of a human life and the measure of damages cannot be arrived at by precise mathematical calculation but the amount recoverable depends on the particular facts and circumstances of each case" (25 C.J.S. 1241).

WHEREFORE, the trial court's judgment is affirmed with the modification that the penalty is reduced to reclusion perpetua. Costs de officio.

SO ORDERED.

Makasiar, Concepcion, Jr., Fernandez, Guerrero, Abad Santos, De Castro, Melencio-Herrera, Ericta, Plana, and Escolin, JJ., concur.

Fernando, C.J., and Teehankee, J., no part.

Barredo, J., on leave.

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