

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. CARLOS FLORIDA Y CEPEDA, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. No. 90254. September 24, 1992

Ponente: DAVIDE, JR., J.

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DAVIDE, JR., J.:

Paquito S. Ravelo, a Technical Sergeant in the Philippine Constabulary, was shot in the evening of 13 February 1988 at the corner of Gumamela and Ilang-Ilang Streets in Lower Bicutan, Taguig, Metro Manila. He sustained four (4) gunshot wounds in the head and trunk and was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital in Camp Bagong Diwa. Witnesses claimed that his assailants were Bernardino Galvante and Carlos Florida.

On 16 March 1988, an Information[1] was filed in the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Pasig, Metro Manila, charging accused Carlos Florida y Cepeda with the crime of murder committed as follows:

x x x

"That on or about the 13th day of February, 1988, in the Municipality of Tagig, Metro Manila, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, conspiring and confederating together with Bernardino Galvante and one John Doe whose true identity and present whereabouts is (sic) still unknown and mutually helping and aiding one another, armed with firearms and with intent to kill, evident premeditation and treachery, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously shoot with the said firearms one Paquito S. Ravelo, thereby inflicting upon the latter gunshot wounds on (sic) the head and trunk which directly caused his death.

Contrary to law."

The case was docketed as Criminal Case No. 72515 and was raffled off to Branch 156 of the said court.

Galvante was separately charged with the crime of murder before the Judge Advocate General's Office because he was a military officer at the time the crime was committed.

Upon arraignment on 29 March 1988, accused Carlos Florida, assisted by counsel de oficio, entered a plea of not guilty.[2]

At the trial on the merits, the prosecution presented as its witnesses Tito Villanueva, Luzviminda Ravelo, Wilfredo Caambay, Dr. Desiderio Moraleta, Franklin Tating, Jeffrey Torres and Vicente Deyro. Accused took the witness stand and interposed alibi as his defense; he also presented as his witnesses Dawnmarie Genovea (or Genovia) and Isauro Floriano.

On 26 July 1989, the trial court promulgated its decision[3] finding the accused guilty, beyond reasonable doubt, of the crime of murder. The dispositive portion thereof reads as follows:

"WHEREFORE, premises considered, the Court finds the accused CARLOS FLORIDA y CEPEDA guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of MURDER, qualified by treachery, defined and penalized under

Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code, with the attendant generic aggravating circumstance of evident premeditation and hereby sentences said accused to suffer the penalty of reclusion perpetua with all its accessory penalties, to indemnify the heirs of victim Paquito S. Ravelo, in the amount of THIRTY THOUSAND PESOS (P30,000.00), to pay the sum of P37,020.00 as expenses incident to the burial and the further sum of P20,000.00 as moral damages, all without subsidiary imprisonment in case of insolvency and to pay the costs.

In the service of his sentence, the accused shall be credited in full with the period of his preventive imprisonment.

SO ORDERED."

Consequently, the accused filed a motion for reconsideration or new trial[4] which the trial court denied in its Order of 21 August 1989.[5] He then filed a notice of appeal on 23 August 1989.[6]

The evidence for the prosecution, which the trial court gave full faith and credit, is summarized by said court as follows:

"x x x On February 13, 1988 at around 9:20 o'clock in the evening, while prosecution witness Tito Villanueva was drinking cold 'sago' at a mini store where he proceeded after watching a dance gathering held at PYC basketball court along Gumamela St., Lower Bicutan, Tagig, Metro Manila, he saw T/Sgt. Paquito S. Ravelo walking towards his house accompanied by Wilfredo Cambay (sic) at the corner of Gumamela and Ilang-Ilang Streets and then Bernardino Galvante let them passed (sic) by and thereafter Galvante shot Ravelo hitting the latter in the head. In just a while, accused Carlos Florida came running and frontally shot Paquito Ravelo several times in his body. When Wilfredo Cambay (sic) extended help to the victim who was sprawled to (sic) the ground, he was also shot in the left thigh by accused Carlos Florida. After witnessing all these, Tito Villanueva left the place and immediately informed the wife of the victim's brother, a certain Jun Ravelo, about the shooting incident.

With the help of Jeffrey M. Torres who likewise witnessed the same incident, the victim was brought to the hospital at Camp Bagong Diwa but he was pronounced dead on arrival, by the attending doctor. His body was subsequently brought to the PC Crime Laboratory Services at Camp Crame, Quezon City for autopsy through a letter-request dated February 13, 1988 (Exhibit "E"). Upon the other hand, Wilfredo Cambay (sic) was able to run away despite the bullet wound he sustained in the upper thigh. His father together with some neighbors brought him to the Philippine General Hospital. He was treated there and was later discharged on February 19, 1988.

Dr. Desiderio A. Moraleda, the medico-legal officer who conducted a post-mortem examination upon the body of the victim with the consent of the wife (Exhibit "F"), found a total of eight (8) gunshot wounds and one (1) abrasion injury in the body of the victim (Exhibits "G", "G-1" to "G-6", "H", "H-1", "H-2", "I" & "I-1"). In his Medico-Legal Report No. M-0319-88 (Exhibits "I", "I-1"), he concluded that the death of the victim was due to hemorrhagic shock as a result of gunshot wounds of the head and trunk.

Luzviminda Ravelo, 30 years old and the wife of the victim when summoned to testify in Court alleged that on February 13, 1988 at around 8:00 o'clock in the evening, she went to the pre-valentine's dance session held at PYC basketball court together with her husband, two (2) children and a sister as she was assigned at the entrance gate to pin ribbons to (sic) guests, participants and visitors in said activity. At around 9:15 p.m., while the dance was in progress, the sound system suddenly broke down prompting her husband to go out of the dancing hall in order to get a replacement for the turntable from Mrs. Sylvia Lostiva. After five (5) minutes, she heard a gunshot so she immediately asked her brother-in-law to follow her husband. Later, Tito Villanueva came and informed her that her husband was shot by Bernardino Galvante and Carlos Florida so she went to the place where the incident occurred. With the help of her compadre, she brought her husband to a hospital at Camp Bagong Diwa but he was already dead on arrival. Her husband's remains was (sic) brought to the PC

Crime Laboratory at Camp Crame, Quezon City where it was subjected to autopsy examination. Thereafter, it was brought to the Oro Funeral Parlor where it was embalmed costing her P16,000.00 (Exhibit "B").

She further testified that prior to the death of her husband, a misunderstanding allegedly ensued between her husband and Bernardino Galvante (alias Dodong) regarding the apprehension by the former of two (2) persons suspected as robbers, namely: Alfredo Cano, 14 years old and Sebastian de Guzman, both of Purok 4, Lower Bicutan, Tagig, Metro Manila. Galvante supposedly requested the victim to release the said persons from custody in recognition of their being military officers but the victim ignored said request and even asked Galvante: 'Why? Are they your men?' As a result, her husband later on received an unsigned letter stating: 'Nakakaloko ka pare, magsabi ka lang' (Exhibit "C"). The letter came from Galvante and was personally handed to the victim by Sgt. Balatan. She just kept the letter and had it blotted in (sic) the police.

As regards the expenses she incurred for the death of her husband, she declared that aside from the P16,000.00 she paid to the funeral parlor she also spent a considerable amount for the 12-day wake and burial of her husband as follows: P2,000.00 per day for four (4) meals, P9,000.00 for the nine (9) days and forty (40) days death occasions (sic), P9,000.00 for the transportation expenses of her relatives in the province who attended the wake, P650.00 for the cross, P270.00 for the marker and P100.00 for the officiating priest during burial.

On February 17, 1988, after the suspects were apprehended by the elements of the Regional Special Action Force (RSAF) based in Camp Bagong Diwa, witnesses Tito Villanueva and Jeffrey Torres proceeded to said camp and made their respective statements (Exhibits "A", "A-1" and "O" to "O--2", respectively) regarding the killing of the victim. Both pointed to Bernardino Galvante and accused Carlos Florida as the very culprits in the actual slaying of T/Sgt. Paquito S. Ravelo. Likewise, the statement of Wilfredo Cambay (sic) who at that time was still recuperating from a bullet wound in the thigh at the Philippine General Hospital was taken by the military investigators (Exhibit "2") which statement he later amended on March 28, 1988 identifying both Bernardino Galvante and accused Carlos Florida as the perpetrators in the shooting of the victim and himself (Exhibit "E").

At the house of Bernardino Galvante where he and accused Carlos Florida were arrested, a number of high-powered weapons, ammunitions and documents were discovered and confiscated by RSAF officers (Exhibits "K", "L" and "M"). Both were formally charged with murder: Bernardino Galvante before the JAGO since he was still a military officer when the crime was committed and Carlos Florida before this Court because he was already separated from the military service during its commission. Meanwhile, the arresting military officers executed an Affidavit (Exhibit "N") regarding the arrest and apprehension of the suspects including accused Carlos Florida."^[7]

Upon the other hand, the trial court summarized the evidence for the accused as follows:

X X X

"In his testimony, accused Carlos Florida disavowed any participation in the killing of the victim and interposed alibi as a defense. He categorically averred that on February 13, 1988 at around 9:00 o'clock p.m., he went to the house of a certain Isauro Floriano to watch television and left the place at around 10:30 o'clock p.m. He never left the house during the intervening period. On the following day, he was just in their house fixing the plants and the fence. On February 17, 1988 at around 6:00 o'clock p.m., he and his wife went to the market to buy food and while on their way hitherto, they happened to pass by the house of Bernardino Galvante who invited him to come in. Galvante informed him that he was on pass for three (3) days because of a telegram he received from a relative in Malabon that one of his relatives died.

While they were conversing, a CAPCOM vehicle arrived with some military officers aboard. Then one of them alighted from the vehicle and shouted: 'NPA kayo, huwag kayong kikilos at may masamang mangyayari.' At that point, three (3) military officers led them towards the vehicle and brought them to the RSAF headquarters. There, they were subjected to investigation after which they were incarcerated and charged.

Accused further testified that he was once a resident at the house of Bernardino Galvante and he knew that to be the only reason why he was implicated in the murder charge. He learned from the people within the vicinity that a (sic) bad blood had transpired between the victim and Bernardino Galvante but he did not bother to know how it started. On cross-examination, accused added that during his two-year stint with the Philippine Navy, he was never trained on how to handle or fire a handgun. They were exposed only to using armalites.

Dawn Marie Genovia (sic), 16 years old and half (sic) sister of Tito Villanueva alleged that on February 13, 1988 at around 9:30 p.m., she was on her way to the dance hall being held near the vicinity when she spotted three (3) male persons whom she failed to recognize just standing at the corner of Gumamela Street waiting for somebody else. A (sic) few moments, she saw the victim walking and then he was (sic) shot by one of the men whom she later saw at the Tagig Municipal Jail during one of her visits. She became frightened of the incident she witnessed that she hurriedly ran towards their house. She categorically stated that she never saw her half brother Tito Villanueva and Jeffrey Torres at the place where the shooting incident occurred. In connection therewith, she executed a sworn written statement on March 17, 1988 (Exhibit "S") regarding said incident at the instance of Galvante's wife named Feliza Galvante.

Isauro Floriano, 68 years old and residing at ERC Sto. Niño, Western Bicutan partly corroborated the testimony of accused Carlos Florida in that the latter and his wife were at their house between 9:00 o'clock to 10:30 o'clock in the evening of February 13, 1988 watching television. On cross-examination however, he failed to fully explain to the Court why he very well remember (sic) the aforesaid date."^[8]

Evaluating the conflicting evidence, the trial court concluded that the accused was positively identified by the prosecution witnesses as one of the assailants. Their detailed narrations of the killing correspond exactly with the reported circumstances surrounding the incident as well as the findings of the medico-legal officer who conducted an autopsy examination on the body of the victim. Witnesses Tito Villanueva and Jeffrey Torres declared that after the victim was shot once in the head by Galvante, the accused continued shooting the former in the front part of the body; these declarations are sustained by the medico-legal's findings.

The trial court further ruled that conspiracy attended the commission of the crime because "[t]he manner in which the attack upon the victim was perpetrated clearly showed that the accused and his cohorts were animated by one and the same criminal purpose -- that is, to liquidate the victim."

It appreciated the qualifying circumstance of treachery because it concluded that ways and means were resorted to by the malefactors in order to facilitate the killing of the victim without risk to themselves arising from the defense which the victim might put up since he, by virtue of his being a military officer, was also armed. It further considered the misunderstanding between the victim and Bernardino Galvante in 1985 as sufficient basis to support the finding that evident premeditation, which it considered as a generic aggravating circumstance although it is also alleged in the information as a qualifying circumstance, existed.

In the Brief he filed on 15 January 1990,^[9] accused argues that the trial court erred:

"I

x x x IN DISREGARDING AND ENTIRELY IGNORING THE TESTIMONY OF DAWNMARIE GENOVEA WHO WAS IN THE BEST POSITION TO GIVE THE ACCOUNT OF THE INCIDENT OF FEBRUARY 13, 1988.

II

x x x IN NOT GIVING CREDENCE TO THE TESTIMONY OF THE ACCUSED WHICH WAS CORROBORATED BY DISINTERESTED WITNESSES.

III

x x x IN DECLARING THAT THE EVIDENCE PRESENTED THE (sic) ACCUSED WAS PROVEN GUILTY OF THE OFFENSE CHARGED BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT."[10]

In support of the first assigned error, the accused insists that the trial court should have given full credit to the testimony of Dawnmarie Genovea because she was an eyewitness to the incident in question; she was able to give a clear account of what transpired and who the perpetrators were. In the Appellee's Brief, the Solicitor General counters that the testimonies of Tito Villanueva and two (2) other witnesses, including Wilfredo Caambay who was with the victim and who was himself shot by the accused, positively point out to the accused as the assailant. Caambay, who was one arm's length away from the victim, was in the best position to give an accurate account of the incident.

As regards his second assigned error, accused asserts that his alibi has been satisfactorily proven. He claims that he was in the house of witness Isauro Floriano, which is five (5) kilometers away from the scene of the shooting, at the time the incident occurred.

The third assigned error stresses the fact that no gun was confiscated from him as no ballistics examination was conducted.

The core issue raised is factual, and involves the credibility of the testimonies of the witnesses. Such an issue of credibility is to be resolved primarily by the trial court[11] because it is in a better position to decide the question, having heard the witnesses and observed their deportment and manner of testifying during the trial.[12] Accordingly, the trial court's findings on the matter of credibility of witnesses are entitled to the highest degree of respect[13] and will not be disturbed on appeal in the absence of any showing that the trial court overlooked, misunderstood or misapplied some facts or circumstances of weight and substance which would have affected the result of the case.[14]

We have carefully reviewed the appealed decision, examined the records of the case, painstakingly pored over the transcripts of the stenographic notes of the testimonies of the witnesses and evaluated the evidence adduced by the parties and find no compelling or cogent reason to disturb the findings of fact of the trial court -- except as to the number of gunshot wounds the victim sustained. It is clear that the victim suffered only four (4) instead of the eight (8) gunshot wounds as stated in the decision. The trial court inadvertently considered the exit wounds.

This appeal must then be rejected for, as the succeeding exposition would show, the assigned errors are baseless.

1. The trial court committed no error in disregarding the testimony of Dawnmarie Genovea for, as the Solicitor General noted:

"x x x her account of the murder appears disappointingly very sketchy, leaving the circumstances surrounding the crime more to one's imagination. Dawnmarie failed to state how many shots were fired and where the victim was hit. She even failed to acknowledge the presence of Wilfredo Caambay, the victim's companion. Her testimony that prosecution witnesses Jeffrey Torres and Tito Villanueva were not at the scene of the crime is a mere denial, as against the positive statements of said witnesses as to their presence at the crime scene."[15]

Moreover, her claim that she saw the killer at the Taguig Municipal Jail makes her testimony "nothing more than a tall story." [16] This declaration is simply incredible as it is handily belied by the accused's deliberate failure to confirm the claim of Dawnmarie that she had immediately told him that she saw the killer in jail. During cross-examination, Dawnmarie testified as follows:

"PUBLIC PROSECUTOR:

x x x

Q Awhile ago, I heard that you saw the man who shot Sgt. Ravelo inside the jail, do you confirm that?

A Yes, sir.

Q And how long is (sic) that man inside (sic) that Jail?

DEFENSE COUNSEL:

Incompetent, your Honor.

PUBLIC PROSECUTOR:

Since you visited Carlos Florida, how many times have you seen that man in jail since you have been visiting him, from (sic) no less than ten times since February 1988?

A Only just recently, the last time I visited Carlos Florida, sir.

Q When was that?

A I think that was last wednesday, sir.

Q What did you do when you saw that man?

A I just kept quiet, sir.

Q You did not report that to the police?

A No, sir.

Q You did not tell that to Carlos Florida who is your neighbor?

A I told him, sir."[17]

If indeed she told the accused that the actual killer was then his co-inmate, counsel for the accused should have utilized this information to full advantage by requiring the accused to testify on it. Unfortunately, no such move was undertaken. Moreover, although the second ground raised in his motion for reconsideration or new trial[18] that:

"x x x new and material evidence has been discovered which the accused could not with reasonable diligence have discovered and produced at the trial and which if introduced and admitted would probably change the judgment."

the accused does not even allude to the "discovery" of the real killer. The motion could have provided him the best opportunity for that.

The records further disclose that the defense took no extra effort to immediately get the name of the alleged killer and call to the witness stand any of the jail officers to shed more light on his confinement. It was only on 2 May 1989, or one and a half (1½) months after Dawnmarie testified that a certain Patrolman Gracio Cangco took her sworn statement, in the presence of accused's counsel, wherein she allegedly, in a police lineup, pointed to the supposed killer who was later identified as Haron Mama y Abubakar.[19] Yet, said Patrolman Cangco was not even presented as a witness for the defense; in fact, nothing was done by the counsel for the accused to pursue this vital piece of information. The foregoing omissions by the defense counsel invalidate Dawnmarie's claim for they strongly manifest a lack of faith in her and highlight the story's untrustworthiness.

2. The accused was positively identified by prosecution witnesses Wilfredo Caambay, the victim's companion,

Tito Villanueva and Jeffrey Torres. Accused's defense of alibi has, therefore, no exculpatory value. We have time and again ruled that alibi is the weakest of all defenses for it is easy to fabricate and difficult to disprove;^[20] it cannot prevail over the positive identification of the accused by the witnesses.^[21] Moreover, for the defense of alibi to prosper, it is not sufficient that the accused prove that he was somewhere else when the crime was committed but that it was also physically impossible for him to have been at the scene of the crime at the time the victim was shot.^[22] That physical impossibility was not shown to have existed in this case. The distance between the house of Isauro Floriano, where the accused claims to have been at the time of the shooting, and the scene of the crime is, in accused's own estimate, only five (5) kilometers. Such distance is not so great as to preclude his having been at the scene of the crime when the shooting occurred.

3. Finally, the theory proposed in the third assigned error is ridiculous.

There is no law or rule of procedure and evidence which requires that the prosecution present the firearms used in the commission of crimes against persons or that a ballistics examination be conducted to determine the source and trajectory of the bullets. For purposes of conviction, it is enough that the prosecution establishes by proof beyond reasonable doubt that a crime was committed and the accused is the author thereof. The production of the weapon used in the commission of the crime is not a condition sine qua non for the discharge of such burden, for the same may not have been recovered at all from the assailant. In the instant case, the assailants were not caught in flagrante delicto; furthermore, they did not voluntarily surrender their weapons. The law enforcement authorities did not likewise recover these weapons. However, by overwhelming evidence, the prosecution was able to establish that the accused had a firearm and shot the victim in the body. Such a conclusion is bolstered by the medico-legal officer's findings that the location of the gunshot wounds support the testimony of the witnesses against the accused.

If this Court has to yield to the theory of the accused, many criminals would go scot-free because in many cases, for obvious reasons, these malefactors hide, tamper with or destroy the weapons used in the commission of the crime. The efforts of our law enforcement authorities to rid our society of criminals and maintain peace and order would then be seriously hamstrung and impeded if We were to uphold such a position.

All the assigned errors must be rejected.

We are, however, unable to agree with the trial court's conclusion that evident premeditation existed. The accused was not a party to the misunderstanding in 1985 between the victim and T/Sgt. Bernardino Galvante. That he was then living in the latter's house does not logically support a reasonable and fair inference that a resolution to kill the victim at a later time was then hatched.

Evident premeditation must be clearly proven,^[23] established beyond reasonable doubt^[24] and must be based on external acts which are evident, not merely suspected, and which indicate deliberate planning.^[25] The lack of proof of evident premeditation does not, however, change the penalty imposed by the trial court in this case. The other qualifying aggravating circumstance of treachery was duly proved. No other modifying circumstances were established. The penalty for murder under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code is reclusion temporal in its maximum period to death. Accordingly, the proper penalty imposable, in the light of the rule laid down in *People vs. Muñoz*,^[26] would be reclusion perpetua.

The indemnity awarded by the trial court should be increased from P30,000.00 to P50,000.00 pursuant to the present policy of this Court enunciated in many cases.^[27]

WHEREFORE, the challenged decision of Branch 156 of the Regional Trial Court of Pasig in Criminal Case No. 72515 is hereby **AFFIRMED**, subject to the modification of the indemnity which is hereby increased to

P50,000.00.

Costs against accused CARLOS FLORIDA y CEPEDA.

SO ORDERED.

Bidin, Romero, and Melo, JJ., concur.

Gutierrez, Jr., J., (Chairman), on official leave.

[1] Original Records, 1.

[2] Original Records, 8.

[3] Per Judge Martin S. Villarama, Jr.; Original Records, 286-297.

[4] Id., 299-304.

[5] Id., 308-309.

[6] Id., 310.

[7] Original Records, 287-291.

[8] Original Records, 291-293.

[9] Rollo, 29-50.

[10] Id., 45.

[11] People vs. Verzo, 65 SCRA 324 [1975].

[12] People vs. Garcia, 89 SCRA 440 [1979]; People vs. Bautista, 92 SCRA 465 [1979]; People vs. Abejuela, 92 SCRA 503 [1979]; People vs. Pido, 200 SCRA 45 [1991].

[13] People vs. Estenzo, 72 SCRA 428 [1976]; People vs. Cabiling, 74 SCRA 285 [1976]; People vs. Marcina, 77 SCRA 238 [1977]; People vs. Villamala, 78 SCRA 145 [1977]; People vs. Sanchez, 199 SCRA 414 [1991].

[14] People vs. Gonzaga, 77 SCRA 140 [1977]; People vs. Oñate, 78 SCRA 43 [1977]; People vs. Ramos, 167 SCRA 476 [1988]; People vs. Payumo, 187 SCRA 64 [1990]; People vs. Vocente, 188 SCRA 100 [1990].

[15] Brief for the Appellee, 11-12; Rollo, 54, et seq.

[16] Id., 12.

[17] TSN, 16 March 1989, 5.

[18] Original Records, 299-304.

[19] Exhibit "G"; Id., 261.

[20] People vs. Dereje, 56 SCRA 554 [1974]; People vs. Santito, Jr., 201 SCRA 87 [1991]; People vs. Bugho, 202 SCRA 164 [1991].

[21] People vs. Esmael, 37 SCRA 601 [1971]; People vs. Mercado, 38 SCRA 168 [1971]; People vs. Genoguin, 56 SCRA 181 [1974]; People vs. Cardenas, 56 SCRA 631 [1974]; People vs. Gonzaga, supra.; People vs. Barba, 203 SCRA 436 [1991].

[22] *People vs. Brios*, 37 SCRA 336 [1971]; *People vs. Tamani*, 55 SCRA 153 [1974]; *People vs. Diaz*, 55 SCRA 178 [1974]; *People vs. Cortez*, 57 SCRA 308 [1974]; *People vs. Dueño*, 90 SCRA 23 [1979]; *People vs. Mercado*, 97 SCRA 232 [1980].

[23] *People vs. Mil*, 92 SCRA 89 [1979].

[24] *People vs. Bautista*, *supra*.

[25] *People vs. Narit*, 197 SCRA 334 [1991].

[26] 170 SCRA 107 [1989].

[27] *People vs. Sison*, 189 SCRA 643 [1990]; *People vs. Sazon*, 189 SCRA 700 [1990]; *People vs. Narit*, *supra*.; *People vs. Barba*, *supra*., among others.

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