

## Historic church of Balangiga in Eastern Samar

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At first look, the structure looks like the other thousands of churches that dot this predominantly Catholic country. With one big difference: it is missing its original three bells.

The loss of the church's three bells is just a chapter in a story that started in 1901 with what is now known in Philippine history as the Balangiga massacre—an incident that triggered a response so overwhelming it turned this place in Eastern Samar into a “howling wilderness”.

It was a Sunday morning when we visited Balangiga and the church was closed so we were not able to come inside. A marker on the wall of the church explained its role in the massacre. The structure is a replacement to the old church that was burned down by American soldiers in retaliation for the death of their comrades. **(Click on photos to view larger images)**

In the town plaza, a monument immortalizes the Balangiga massacre of 1901 that started when native Filipinos, reportedly forced to do labor for American soldiers staying at a garrison in Balangiga, plotted against US troops belonging to Company C of Ninth US Infantry who sailed into the Eastern Samar town on August 11, 1901. The natives were among guerilla leader General Vicente Lukban's best bolomen.



While the Philippine-American war, which started on February 4, 1899, was officially proclaimed to have ended on July 4, 1902, fighting went on in some parts of the country like Batangas, Pampanga, Tarlac, Ilocos, and the Visayas.

The attack on the soldiers in Balangiga by bolo-wielding natives—who hid in the church near the American garrison in the Balangiga plaza the night before the attack—happened on the early morning of September 28, 1901. The night before, women carried small coffins to church and hid inside them the cane cutting bolo knives that were used in the attack.



The ringing of one of the Balangiga bells was the signal for the natives to attack the unprepared and clueless American soldiers who were having breakfast in the plaza where they set up their garrison. At the end of the day, 48 US troops were killed, 22 were wounded, and only four unharmed.

Retribution from the Americans came soon and swift. US General “Jake” Smith ordered the transformation of Balangiga into a “howling wilderness,” directing his men to kill anyone old enough to carry arms and to him they are old enough if they are over 10 years old.

The Americans took with them as war booty the three Balangiga church bells, including the smaller one that was used to signal the attack, when they left the Philippines.

Currently, there is an ongoing campaign led by Balangiga Mayor Catalina Camenforte for the return of the 104-year-old bells to the Balangiga church. She believes the return of the bells would complete the healing and end the conflict that has strained US-Philippine relations.

Two of the bells are kept at the Francis E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming while the third one, the smaller bell, can be found in an American Army camp in South Korea.

Our visit to Balangiga was a side trip to our Calicoan Island sojourn. For details on how to get to Balangiga and Calicoan, [click here](#). Balangiga is three towns before Guiuan, where Calicoan Island is located. Any of the vans for hire or other modes of public transport bound for Guiuan pass by Balingaga.

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