

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. No. 241012, August 28, 2019]

**PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS.
CROMWELL TORRES Y PALIS, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.**

DECISION

REYES, J. JR., J.:

This is an appeal from the Decision^[1] dated February 12, 2018 of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-G.R. CR-HC No. 07659 which affirmed the Decision^[2] dated April 13, 2015 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) Branch 74 of Antipolo City in Criminal Case No. 09-38829, finding Cromwell Torres y Palis (appellant) guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Murder under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code (RPC).

On August 18, 2009, appellant was charged with murder in an Information^[3] which states:

That on or about the 15th day of August, 2009, in the City of Antipolo, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, armed with an unlicensed improvised shotgun, with intent to kill, and with the qualifying circumstance of treachery and evident premeditation, did, then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack, assault and shoot one KIM KENNETH PULUMBARIT^[4] y SANTOS while he was starting the engine of his motorcycle, thereby inflicting upon the latter multiple gunshot wounds on the trunk which directly caused his death.

CONTRARY TO LAW.

Upon arraignment on February 2, 2010, appellant, duly assisted by counsel *de officio*, pleaded not guilty to the crime.

During the trial, the prosecution presented witnesses Richard Gemao, Lalaine De Vera, Police Chief Inspector Dean Cabrera, medico-legal officer of the Philippine National Police (PNP), and Karen S. Palumbarit. On the other hand, the defense presented appellant as its sole witness.

Evidence for the Prosecution

Prosecution witness Richard Gemao (Gemao) testified that on August 15, 2009, at around 10:15 P.M., he was in front of his house in Purok II, Zone 8, Cupang, Antipolo City when he saw the victim Kim Kenneth S. Palumbarit (Palumbarit) in

front of a store about ten steps away from him. Palumbarit was about to start the engine of his motorcycle when appellant, who was standing near a *guyabano* tree, walked towards the store. Appellant shifted to Palumbarit's direction, remarked "*tarantado ka!*" and thereafter shot him from behind using an improvised shotgun commonly known as "*sumpak*" loaded with ammunition. Gemao saw Palumbarit who was thrown off his motorcycle and fell to the ground. He was about to extend help to Palumbarit when he sensed that appellant was observing him. He then backed off and returned inside his house.^[5]

Two unidentified men tried to stop appellant from further attacking Palumbarit. They uttered the words, "*tama na 'tol, patay na 'yan* " and left the scene. When Gemao went outside, he saw appellant walked away followed by a woman. Upon realizing that Palumbarit was still bleeding from the gunshot wound, he rushed to his aid and carried and boarded him in a tricycle going to the hospital where he eventually died.^[6]

Lalaine De Vera (De Vera), meanwhile, alleged that she saw appellant shoot Palumbarit with a *sumpak* when the latter was about to board his motorcycle. She said appellant bought a cigarette from the store where Palumbarit was standing and suddenly shot him from behind. Palumbarit was even able to start the engine of his motorcycle as if nothing happened but the motorcycle eventually rolled forward causing him to fall on the ground. She was in a nipa hut which was few steps away from the store, when she saw the shooting incident.^[7]

Police Chief Inspector Dean Cabrera (P/CI Cabrera) prepared Medico-Legal Report No. A09601 dated August 20, 2009 where he confirmed that the cause of death of Palumbarit was multiple gunshot wounds on the trunk. He verified that the point of entry of the wounds was at the right posterior axillary region or around the area behind the armpit towards the back and that there was no exit wound. P/CI Cabrera was able to recover two (2) pellets on the left and right lungs and five (5) pellets on the dorsal portion of the chest plate along the anterior abdominal wall or the front portion of the abdomen. He testified that the weapon used could be a shotgun or an improvised weapon using a shotgun shell as ammunition. He pointed out the possibility that only one gunshot was fired by the assailant considering the mechanism of the shotgun shell and the proximity of the entries.^[8]

Karen S. Palumbarit testified as to the actual expenses incurred by her family as a result of the death of her brother: (1) P1,065.00 for the victim's hospitalization at Amang Rodriguez Memorial Medical Center; (2) P56,000.00 for the funeral; and (3) P21,547.50 for the burial.^[9]

Evidence for the Defense

Appellant denied all the allegations hurled against him. He averred that on August 15, 2009, he heard a gunshot when he was passing by the Dimsun Compound in Purok II, Barangay Cupang, Antipolo City. He was supposed to go to his father's house in Malanday, Marikina when he heard the blast.

He recalled that on August 16, 2009, he was picked up by the police officers at his father's house. They boarded him on a white van and was brought to Rodriguez Hospital for medical examination. Inside the van, he was allegedly punched on the

eye and was forced to admit involvement on the shooting incident. When he told the police officers that he did not know anything about Palumbarit, he was locked up in jail in Mayamot, Antipolo City.^[10]

Ruling of the RTC

On April 13, 2015, the RTC found appellant guilty beyond reasonable doubt of murder. The dispositive portion of the Decision reads:

WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered finding accused CROMWELL TORRES y PALIS **GUILTY** beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of murder, defined and penalized under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code. In view of Republic Act No. 9346, accused Cromwell Torres y Palis is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of *reclusion perpetua*. Further, he is hereby ordered to indemnify and pay the heirs of victim Kim Kenneth Palumbarit y Santos the following:

1. Php 75,000.00 as and by way of civil indemnity;
2. Php 75,000.00 as and by way of moral damages;
3. Php 30,000.00 as and by way of exemplary damages;
4. Php 78,612.50 as and by way of actual damages.
5. 6% legal interest on the above damages from finality of this judgment until full payment.

No pronouncement as to cost.

SO ORDERED.^[11]

The RTC convicted appellant with murder after finding that treachery attended the commission of the crime. It held that the prosecution clearly showed that Palumbarit was deprived of any means to ward off appellant's sudden and unexpected attack. It emphasized that despite the lack of provocation on the part of Palumbarit, appellant executed an attack that was so sudden as to ensure his safety from any defense or retaliatory act from the victim. It disregarded appellant's defense of denial and alibi as it was not properly corroborated or substantiated by clear and convincing evidence.

On June 16, 2015, appellant filed a notice of appeal.^[12]

In his Brief, appellant assigned the following errors:

I

THE TRIAL COURT GRAVELY ERRED IN NOT FINDING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT'S WARRANTLESS ARREST AS ILLEGAL.

II

THE TRIAL COURT GRAVELY ERRED IN FINDING THE ACCUSED-

APPELLANT GUILTY OF THE CRIME CHARGED DESPITE THE PROSECUTION'S FAILURE TO PROVE HIS GUILT BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT.

III

THE TRIAL COURT GRAVELY ERRED IN NOT FINDING THAT THE TESTIMONIES OF THE PROSECUTION WITNESSES ARE FLAWED AND INCONSISTENT.

IV

THE TRIAL COURT GRAVELY ERRED IN TOTALLY DISREGARDING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT'S DEFENSE OF DENIAL AND ALIBI.

V

THE TRIAL COURT GRAVELY ERRED IN APPRECIATING TREACHERY AS QUALIFYING CIRCUMSTANCE.^[13]

Ruling of the CA

On February 12, 2018, the CA denied the appeal and affirmed appellant's conviction.

The CA declared that appellant was estopped from questioning the legality of his arrest since when he was arrested and a case was filed against him, he pleaded not guilty during the arraignment, participated in the trial and presented his evidence. It noted that appellant was deemed to have waived his right to question any irregularity in his arrest when he entered his plea. Further, the CA declared that there were inconsistencies in the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses and that the alleged lapses claimed by the defense were not vital enough to cast doubt as to the identity of appellant. It concluded that the totality of evidence for the prosecution established with moral certainty all the essential elements of the crime of murder qualified by treachery. It pointed out that the killing was made in a sudden and deliberate manner such that the victim was in a helpless position and had no opportunity to defend himself or to retaliate.

The case is now before the Court in view of the Notice of Appeal^[14] interposed by the appellant from the CA Decision.

On October 3, 2018, the Court notified the parties that they may file their respective supplemental briefs if they so desire, within thirty (30) days from notice.^[15]

On December 11, 2018, appellant filed a Manifestation (In lieu of a Supplemental Brief)^[16] stating that he is adopting his Appellant's Brief dated February 11, 2016 as his supplemental brief since it had adequately discussed all the matters pertinent to his defense. On December 13, 2018, the Office of the Solicitor General filed its Manifestation praying that it be excused from filing a supplemental brief and reserving its right to file one in case appellant raises new matters and issues in his own supplemental brief. It added that all the matters and issues raised in its

Appellee's Brief dated June 14, 2016 have already been extensively discussed and judiciously considered by the CA.

Ruling of the Court

The appeal is bereft of merit.

Procedurally, appellant assails the legality of his arrest and insists that the manner by which he was apprehended does not fall under any of the permissible warrantless arrests pursuant to Section 5, Rule 113 of the Rules of Court.

Both the prosecution and the defense did not narrate with particularity the details of appellant's arrest. Nonetheless, the issue on the validity of the arrest has been put to rest when appellant appeared at his arraignment and, with the assistance of his counsel *de officio* Atty. Brend Virgilio S. Vergara of the Public Attorney's Office and in the presence of Public Prosecutor Gerardo Barot, entered a not guilty plea.^[17] The Court's pronouncement in *People v. Alunday*^[18] echoed in *Lapi v. People*^[19] is illuminating:

The Court has consistently ruled that any objection involving a warrant of arrest or the procedure for the acquisition by the court of jurisdiction over the person of the accused must be made before he enters his plea; otherwise, the objection is deemed waived. We have also ruled that an accused may be estopped from assailing the illegality of his arrest if he fails to move for the quashing of the information against him before his arraignment. And since the legality of an arrest affects only the jurisdiction of the court over the person of the accused, any defect in the arrest of the accused may be deemed cured when he voluntarily submits to the jurisdiction of the trial court. We have also held in a number of cases that the illegal arrest of an accused is not a sufficient cause for setting aside a valid judgment rendered upon a sufficient complaint after a trial free from error; such arrest does not negate the validity of the conviction of the accused.

x x x x

Appellant admitted the court's jurisdiction over his person during the pre-trial conference. He pleaded not guilty to the charge *sans* any objection surrounding his arrest. He did not move to quash the information on the ground of lack of jurisdiction before he entered his plea. In fact, he actively participated during the trial, presented his evidence before the court and challenged the validity of his arrest only for the first time on appeal. All these taken together clearly allude that appellant has waived any irregularity, if any, attendant to his arrest. Hence, appellant is now precluded from questioning the legality of his arrest following his voluntary and unconditional submission to the jurisdiction of the court.

Substantively, appellant maintains that the prosecution failed to prove his guilt beyond reasonable doubt and anchors his plea for acquittal on the trial court's alleged erroneous appreciation of the qualifying circumstance of treachery.