

Project Logs 700th Archive Subject

Milestone highlights 10 years of dedication from staffers, volunteers and subjects

Months after celebrating its 10-year anniversary, the Project has hit yet another landmark: adding the 700th person to its subject archives.

The 700th file was for the interview of Luis Pineda, who fought in both the Korean and Vietnam wars. It was donated by Rea Ann Trotter, who conducted the interview in 1996 as a part of her college work, even before the Project began. This interview was her 17th for the Project.

Trotter, a retired Colorado schoolteacher, is among the many people who have devoted time and energy to documenting the legacy of Latino wartime veterans and civilians for the Project.

“Rea and I met in New York in 2000, when we were both taking a two-week oral history class at Columbia University,” said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. “We hit it off right away, as we were both deeply committed to interviewing Latino World War II veterans. She has become a dear long-distance friend, and Rea continues to work with us.” *Continued on page 2*



Photo by Marc Hamel

David Muto looks over the 700th subject file in the archives. Muto, a senior studying journalism and Spanish, is a staff member.

Touching and Motivating Others: A note from the Project director

Among those attending the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project’s 10th anniversary dinner last October were several law school students. They recently described to me how deeply touched they were by the video (now available on our Web site) and the speakers.

It helped them to know that others have gone before them and sacrificed so much to open doors. The students sensed that if those World War II folks could do it, they could too. They felt immense pride that those Latinos were so dignified and determined.

Also at that dinner were Cynthia Haynes Ramirez and her husband, Pancho Ramirez. Cynthia, a former schoolteacher, lobbied to bring our interview team to Laredo. We did, in early March.

One never knows whose lives we touch. And it’s no secret that these interviews also inspire us daily. We feel privileged for the opportunity to record the stories of men and women who have given so freely of themselves.



Photo by Marc Hamel

Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez

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November Events to Honor Subjects, Celebrate Project

Save the dates for the Project's 2010 event schedule, which will feature a breakfast for interview subjects, a symposium and a fundraising dinner.

The Project breakfast will honor interview subjects on Veterans Day. It will take place on Thursday, Nov. 11, at the San José Catholic Church Parish Hall in South Austin.

"It's a small way for us to have a more intimate time with our interview subjects," said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. "We'll give them our undivided attention and hear what's going on with them."

The following day, Friday, Nov. 12, there will be a symposium in the Santa Rita Suite of the Student Union at the University of Texas, Austin. Symposium speakers will report on the progress of the book currently being edited by Rivas-Rodriguez with

Ben Olguin of the University of Texas, San Antonio.

"The manuscripts are coming in now, and we're very excited about how well they're fitting together," Olguin said. "It's cutting-edge research, looking at some issues that have never been considered and interpreting other issues in new and innovative ways."

Presenters will report on the Project's Korean- and Vietnam-era work.

A fund-raising dinner will take place that evening, Friday, Nov. 12, location to be announced.

"We promise our sponsors, and all of those attending, a great show. Because, as we learned last year, you never know who is watching and how it will touch their lives." Rivas-Rodriguez said.

SAVE THE DATE:

**Thursday and Friday,
Nov. 11 & 12, 2010**

**Project Events:
Breakfast,
Symposium and
Fundraising Dinner**

**For details or to sponsor
the events, call the Project
office at 512-471-1924.**

Project Logs 700th Archive Subject

Continued from page 1

Trotter has interviewed men in Colorado, South Dakota and Texas. The World War II interviews were donated to the Project several years ago, but with the Project's expansion, Trotter made her Korean- and Vietnam War-era interviews available.

The Project files include not only interviews, but tributes as well. Fred A. Flores of Houston was largely responsible for the documentation of the men and women who passed away before being interviewed.

Flores was only 7 years old when his uncle, Johnnie Flores, part of Company B, 36th Infantry Regiment, was killed in the Battle of the Bulge, in December 1944. That event marked the nephew. In 2000, when the Project was conducting a training session for volunteer interviewers, Flores insisted the Project include accounts like his uncle's. A few days later, the Project received a large cardboard box from Flores: photos, telegrams and letters.

"My generation is the last to have seen or known Johnnie, though only through short, fleeting, youthful memories," Flores wrote to the Project. "It is for this reason that I have gathered all that I could of Johnnie's life, to provide it for the next generations of this family."

It was a glimpse of a family's grief at the loss of this remarkable young man. Since then, we continue to add

tributes, and they are an important part of our archives.

One other major contributor has been San Diego State University, where college administrator Gus Chavez hired students to interview area residents. Chavez's program was intended to form links to the community.

"The intimacy and personal accounts of the war related to me by the veterans reinforced my belief that our community made tremendous sacrifices, such that our country is what it is today because of the Mexican-American men and women who served in the military during this time," he told the Project in 2005.

Looking to add to its holdings, the Project has also relied on the Multiple Individual Interview Session (or MIIS, as it's known to those familiar with the Project), in which staffers and volunteers travel across the country to conduct interviews with multiple subjects in one location. These sessions are often held at veteran centers. Staffers and volunteers recently made such a trip to Laredo Community College (*See p. 19*), where they recorded 11 interviews in one day.

Looking back on other landmarks — including the development of a Web site by the Libraries at UT-Austin and the publication of three books — Project staffers say it's about more than the sheer numbers, it's about people and their lasting contributions.

UT Students Inventory Other Oral Histories

As the Project continues to find research themes within the World War II, Korean and Vietnam wars, staff members are searching for outside oral history archives that might complement the Project's endeavors — at least to let researchers know where else they might turn.

Journalism undergraduates Brenda Menchaca and David Muto have been creating an inventory by mining other archives to identify and determine the extent to which other oral history projects have documented the Latino wartime experience.

In the Project's latest book, "Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation" (UT Press, 2009), scholar Dionicio Valdes used interviews from the Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton, for his chapter, "Now Get Back to Work: Mexican Americans and the Agricultural 'Migrant Stream.'"

"Right now the only way that researchers are able to know where these gems are is because you've read about them in another writer's work, found them in a footnote somewhere or because a knowledgeable archivist or librarian tips you off," said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. "But we know that's just the tip of the iceberg — that there are little pots of gold in archives throughout the country."

The search has left Menchaca and Muto impressed.

"We know how much work is involved in our project," Muto said. "And we have to believe that everyone who does work like ours goes through all the same painstaking steps to record the stories, create some type of finding aid, and make them accessible to users."

Menchaca said she stumbled across many small towns looking to preserve their history by building oral history archives online.

"It's interesting, seeing these people in small cities and their experiences," she said.

Other projects operate on a larger scale. Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center and Archive houses hundreds of interviews collected since its inception 20 years ago.

The Project will be working on its inventory throughout the summer and will be reaching out to other projects to let them know about the inventory and to explore possible cooperation.

As the inventory grows, it will be posted on the Project's Web site, www.lib.utexas.edu/ww2latinos/. Stay tuned.

Collecting Interviews on the Road



Photo by Neftali Diaz

Marc Hamel, visual media coordinator for the Project, takes a portrait of John Valls, with help from volunteer Liliana Rodriguez. Valls was one of 11 people interviewed for the Project at Laredo Community College library in Laredo, Texas on March 6, 2010.

With a successful Laredo Multiple Individual Interview Session behind it, The U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project is busy working with residents in several other communities to organize similar events for this spring and summer.

Among the sites under consideration are a "double-header" in Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz., which is expected to take place in August; a trip in early June to Southern California, perhaps to San Diego and one other city; and a mid-June excursion to Kansas.

As with previous trips, logistics are always the biggest challenge. The work of enthusiastic volunteers helps the Project immensely.

"We've already got folks in those cities helping us nail down dates and find interview subjects, locations and help with food," said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. "We already have Kansas groups raising money to defray our costs."

With the extensive preparation work, past experience has shown that they produce many valuable interviews and documentation. And it helps the Project make new contacts around the country.

"At the end of the day, with one morning and one afternoon session, we can have 10 great interviews, plus the forms filled out and great photos," Rivas-Rodriguez said. "Ours is a national project, and we can't claim that unless we get on the road."

VETERANS HELP FOCUS KOREAN WAR EXPANSION

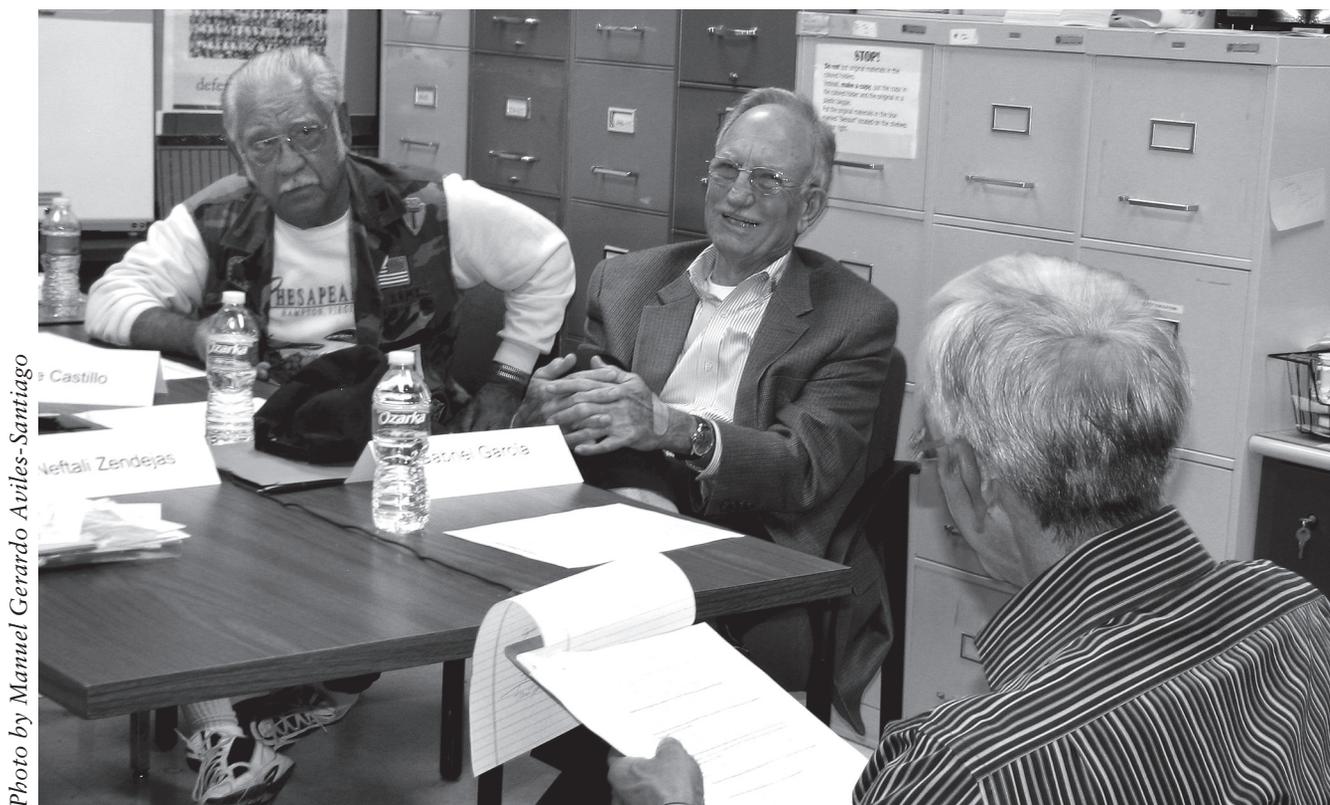


Photo by Manuel Gerardo Aviles-Santiago

Moderator Frank Trejo (head of the table), talks with Gabriel Garcia (center) and Pete Castillo during a Korean War-era focus group for the Project at the University of Texas, Austin on Saturday, Dec. 12, 2009.

Some consider it the “forgotten war,” but four Korean War-era veterans who gathered in the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project office said the Korean War remains a vivid, if still not completely explained, part of their lives.

The Austin-area men — Pete Castillo, Gabriel Garcia, Neftali Zendejas and Geronimo Castillejas — came to the University of Texas at Austin campus on a Saturday afternoon last December to take part in a focus group.

Information from the group helped the Project refine its focus as it expanded to include interviews from the Korean War era.

Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez stressed to the participants how important it is for them to share their thoughts and memories, so the Project can develop better questions and themes to address the issues specific to the Korean War in its interviews.

“We very much value everything that you’re doing here today, and for your efforts in helping us accomplish this,” Rivas-Rodriguez said.

Among the topics discussed that day, one issue was the general public’s response to the Korean War in 1950, just five years after World War II ended. The support at home was very different. There wasn’t massive expressions of support, such as the scrap metal drives and war bond rallies that were so visible during World War II.

The men recalled participating in many of those

activities as teenagers during World War II. But things had changed by the Korean War, including a major demilitarization by the U.S. government.

“I think the country was probably tired, after the Second World War,” Garcia said.

Zendejas described it as a “Congress war, not a military war,” referring to the Cold War aspect of the Korean War. United Nations forces, primarily from the United States and South Korea, entered the conflict in an effort to contain the spread of communism after North Korean troops invaded South Korea. The war eventually included the intervention of hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops on the side of North Korea.

While actual hostilities took place from 1950 until 1953 and cost the lives of close to 34,000 Americans, the war has never officially ended. A ceasefire was signed in 1953, by the United Nations command, supported by the United States, the North Korean People’s Army and the Chinese People’s Volunteers, but there has been no peace treaty. Tensions remain between the North and South on the divided Korean Peninsula.

Castillejas, who served as a U.S. Army infantryman in Korea, said feelings about the war can be summed up by the way people have depicted it.

“It was called a ‘police action,’ and then the ‘Korean conflict,’” and then the “Korean War,” Castillejas said. “And the Korean War still hasn’t ended.”

VETERANS, NURSES HELP FOCUS VIETNAM WAR EXPANSION

Photos this page by Marc Hamel



The Project conducted a focus group featuring Vietnam-era nurses at the San Antonio Central Library on Saturday, Feb. 13, 2010. The hour-long session was one of several that will help the Project determine the key issues facing Latinos and Latinas during the Vietnam era.

Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez talks with Maria Galaviz after the focus group at the San Antonio Central Library. Galaviz and seven other Vietnam-era nurses shared their life experiences during the session.

When Federico Castañeda strode into the offices of the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project wearing a full combat uniform and an armful of equipment and documents, staff members knew that the next two hours would produce a treasure of information and stories about the Vietnam War experience.

Castañeda was among seven Austin-area Latino veterans who took part in the first of two focus groups that helped the Project develop and refine its work as it expands into the Vietnam War era. A subsequent group, made up of nurses from that era, was held in San Antonio.

In addition to Castañeda, the Austin focus group included: Arnold Garcia, Dan Arellano, Joe Ramos, Louis Gonzalez, Manuel Moreno and Richard Brito. Stories about their experiences and thoughts on the war have helped the Project as it expands to include not only the Vietnam War but also the Korean War. The veterans openly discussed topics such as the draft, basic training, race relations, drug use and the anti-war movement.

When asked about their knowledge about the reasons for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, most of the men agreed that, at the time, they had been too young to fully understand the politics of the situation.

“We were victims of the propaganda,” said Arellano, an Army veteran.

Castañeda, who also served in the Army, said that for him, it was all about service.

“I got a California state scholarship fully paid to go to college, so when I got the draft notice I knew it was my

way of paying the bill,” he said.

Another topic was the issue of discipline. Moreno, who was in the Air Force, said Latinos seemed more willing to follow orders. Garcia agreed with him, adding “in basic training, [for] Chicanos, and particularly the Texans . . . the motto was ‘*Nosotros podemos aguantar*’ [we can tolerate anything], and that was 90 percent of the deal.”

In the San Antonio focus group, the women pointed out that, at the time of the Vietnam War, job opportunities for Latinas were limited. Women were expected to become secretaries, teachers or, like them, nurses.

In some cases, nursing allowed them to experience the physical and emotional burdens of the war. Included in the focus group at the San Antonio Public Library were: Aurora Garcia, Elva Rodríguez, María Caballero, Evelyn García, Herlinda Gutierrez, Maria Galaviz, Terri Lomas Sweet and Rosario Gustamente.

Focus group topics included racism, patriotism, religion and the anti-war movement. Even though the women admitted no active involvement in politics, two recalled being anti-war protesters.

And the women spoke about the importance of telling the veterans’ stories.

“If you want to understand their stories, you have to know how it feels to come back to a country that criticizes them for their feelings, for their beliefs, for what they did, for what they thought,” said Lomas Sweet, who served in Vietnam.

PHOTOGRAPHIC TREASURES

The U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project may be an oral history project, but photographs and documents have played a crucial role since it began its work. As the Project enters its second decade and expands into the Korean- and Vietnam War- eras, its visual dimension continues to grow as well.

Photographs not only help identify the subjects of the Project's interviews; just as importantly, they help tell the story of that time and place — the clothing and hairstyles, buildings and vehicles and people involved in the nation's crucial conflicts.

The Project's reproductions of photographs are in great demand and have appeared in various publications, museums and exhibits. Among those who have requested photographs from our collection are: the National World War II Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, several books, television documentaries and a variety of news media outlets. The Project is fast developing a reputation as a repository of these photographic reproductions.

Here is a small sample of our riches.



Raymond Sanchez (standing, right) and friends in China, 1945.



Miguel Encinias, 20, at an airfield in Palermo, Sicily, September 1943.



Valentino Cervantes and his wife, Rosemary, at Camp Hood in Killeen, Texas, 1944.



Joe Uriegas (in Jeep on right, with Catarino Salas sitting next to him, others unknown) takes a small break with fellow 188th Field Artillery troops in basic training. The soldiers traveled from Georgia to Washington and to Oklahoma before departing for Northern Europe.



Norberto Gonzalez, center, with his two sisters and his parents in Cuba in 1931.

PROJECT PHOTOS IN GREAT DEMAND



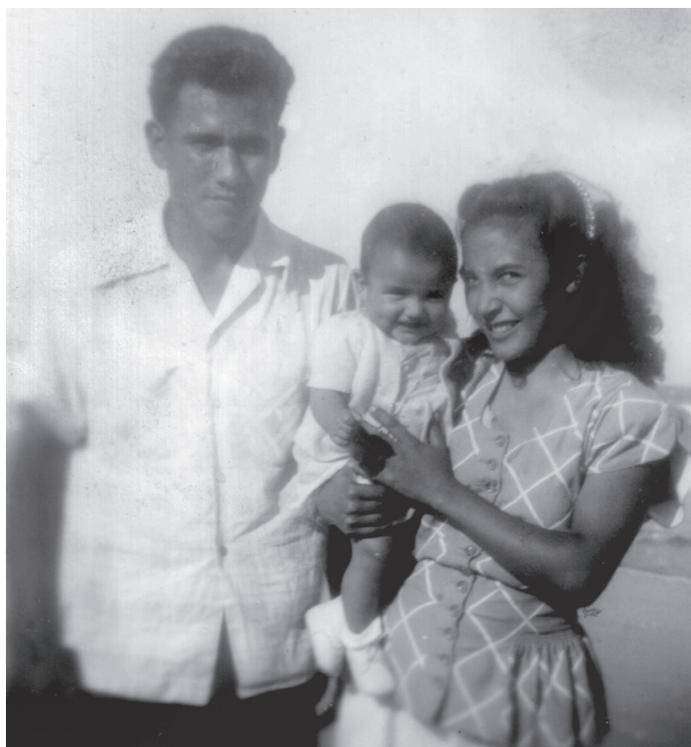
Graduation day, May 22, 1942 at Oak Park Methodist Church, Corpus Christi, Texas. Front Row: Left, Jeanie McPherson, Elenor LaComb, Theresa Green, Mary Thomas, Bernice Hunter, Supervisor Mrs. Elizabeth Moller. Back Row: Left, Margaret Moore, Apolonia Muñoz Abarca, Pat Bartholomeu, Betty Jorgenson, Dorothy Lewis.



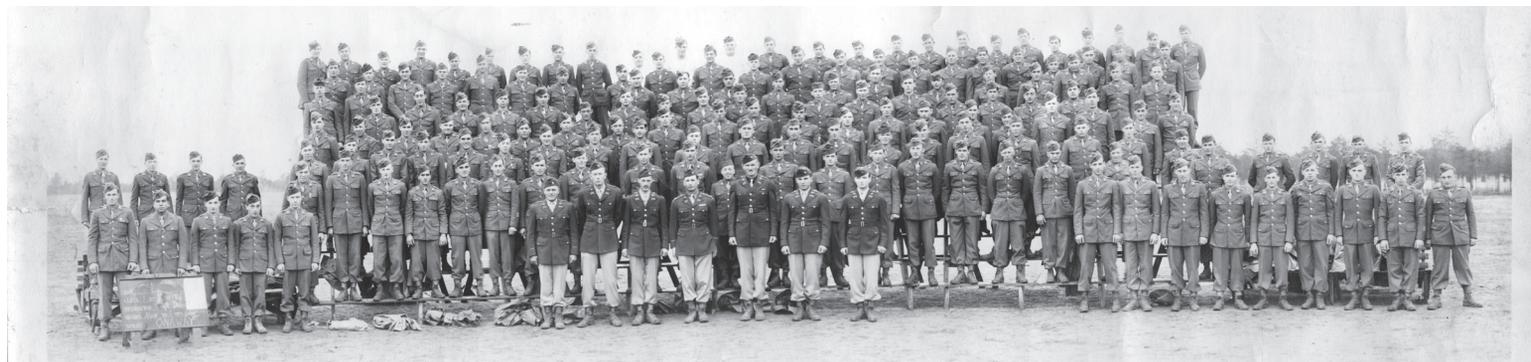
As a member of the U.S. Navy, Gilberto Ornelas was assigned to several ships including the USS *Volans* and the USS *Bottineau*.



In early 1941, Armando Gonzales visited his nephews, Tony and Bobby, in Los Angeles.



Virginia Nuñez with husband, Rodolfo "Rudy," and daughter, Mary Alice, at Bocachica Beach, near Brownsville, Texas, in 1948.



Concepción Moron served in the U.S. Army, Company L, 304th Infantry from February of 1945 to March of 1946. Moron and his company fought in the Ardennes region of Belgium and in central Germany.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Juan Antonio Báez

Interviewed: May 9, 2008, by Robert Rivas
in El Paso, Texas

Juan Antonio Báez remembered sitting with two fellow soldiers on a European hillside, singing their favorite Puerto Rican songs.

World War II had taken them far from home, which had been for Báez a place of poverty and hardship. But the war, which Báez volunteered to fight, eventually changed that.

Báez was born in Ciales, Puerto Rico, on March 7, 1924. His father, Juan Báez, a laborer, and his mother, Eusebia Ramos Báez, a homemaker, struggled to support their four children. The younger Báez remembered his own struggle to stay afloat in high school.

He tried to join the military at the age of 16, but he was too young to enlist. He was ultimately inducted into the Army on June 22, 1942, when he was 18.

Báez attended basic training and later joined Puerto Rico's 65th Infantry Regiment. The war took him to Germany and other parts of Central Europe.

Báez credited WWII and what he witnessed overseas with transforming his life.

"[I went] from boy to man," he said.

The war ended while Báez was stationed in France. He returned to Puerto Rico, where he was discharged at Fort Buchanan on Nov. 23, 1945, at the rank of private 1st class.

Báez stayed in Puerto Rico for two years before reenlisting in the Army. The war, he said, had changed Latinos' place in America for the better, and he yearned to continue serving his country.

Báez later served in Panama, where he married Susana Barría in 1950. The couple had four children. Raising a family, Báez said, helped him prove he was a capable person.

In addition to his Army career of 24 years, Sgt. Báez served as a Pentecostal minister for 25 years.



Ramiro Cortez

Interviewed: May 3, 2008, by Jessica El-Khoury
in San Antonio, Texas

On Aug. 6, 1944, Air Force gunner Ramiro Cortez was about to board a plane on a mission to Germany's capital.

The San Antonian had agreed to fly the mission in place of a friend named Kenneth Law. At the last minute, however, Law changed his mind and took on the assignment.

Through the anti-aircraft fire, the crew of the Hubba Hubba, a B-17 Bomber, had to bail out in broad daylight over Berlin. Law apparently passed-out from lack of oxygen and fell to his death, while the rest of the crew members became prisoners of war.

"I felt like an orphan," said Cortez, a member of the 351st Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, 1st Air Division.

"I was the spare gunner on the ground, and I waited for my crew to come back, and they never came back."

Cortez had escaped death, but he said he felt sure that, if he stayed in the war, he would die soon. While on late-night duty guarding the planes on his base in Germany, Cortez made a promise.

"I knelt on the cold pavement and I prayed to God," he recalled. "I said, 'God, I'll make a pact with you. If I make it home, I will live a better life.'"

After the Hubba Hubba went down, Cortez was sent back to the States to be retrained on B29 planes in Avon Park, Fla. While he was there, the war ended.

"If it wasn't for the atomic bomb, I know I would have gone back and died in the war," said Cortez, who was honorably discharged in November 1945 at the rank of sergeant.

He returned home to San Antonio, and resumed his old job as a Post Office clerk. He and his wife, Bertha Magdalena Cortez, went on to have 14 children.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Alfred De La Cruz

Interviewed: May, 3 2008, by Kris Edward Rodriguez
in San Antonio, Texas

San Antonio native Alfred De La Cruz, a signalman who trained in amphibious warfare with the Marines, first saw action on Nov. 8, 1942, on the coast of French Morocco.

“[W]e went over the [ship’s] side into assault boats, which circled around until all were ready for the landing at Safi, French Morocco,” wrote De La Cruz after his interview.

Once on shore, he recalled setting up his radio equipment and operating communications alongside fighting troops.

On July 10, 1943, De La Cruz’s 23rd birthday, his company was involved in an assault in Gela, Sicily.

He had trained extensively before being shipped out.

After the Sicilian assault, De La Cruz trained in Italy for a year, until July 1944, when he was in a hospital in Naples, Italy, with a possible case of tonsillitis. He recalled being informed at the hospital that he had earned enough points to go home.

De La Cruz returned to the States in September 1944 and was assigned to an Army training unit at Camp Crowder in Missouri, until he was transferred back to Fort Sam Houston and discharged at the rank of staff sergeant on July 8, 1945.

De La Cruz was eventually awarded, among other honors, a Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa-Middle Eastern Medal with one Silver Campaign Star and, for the Gela assault, a Bronze Arrowhead.

De La Cruz said he believed the military was an opportunity for Hispanics to get the kind of education they could not have previously obtained.

“A big percentage of Latinos took advantage of the education aspect of joining the Army,” he said. “Plus, we got to see a lot of the world and the way they live in comparison to the way we live. It opened up our eyes and made us look at things a little differently.”



Juana Flores

Interviewed: Sept. 1, 2007, by Armando Segouia
in El Paso, Texas

While being interviewed, Juana [Dueñez] Flores held a photograph that her husband sent to her while at war in Europe more than 60 years ago.

“For my dear wife, Juana,” script on the back of the picture reads. “The love I have for you is unforgettable.”

The black-and-white photo showing Espiridion Contreras Flores and his wife as a young couple during World War II is one of the memories she held onto of her late husband.

She remembered him, above all, as a decent man who was deeply proud of his national service.

Flores was about 20 when she met her husband, a Kansas native, through a friend of her father in her hometown of El Paso, Texas. Espiridion, or “Piri,” as she called him, worked in a bowling alley to help support his family.

The two became fast friends. But after she discovered she was pregnant, he was sent to basic training. The couple married in 1941.

Flores said she received a letter from him every day while he was away; he would check up on her and describe his travels and Europe.

As much as she loved her husband, she said, his time away from her was a hardship.

“I cried,” she said.

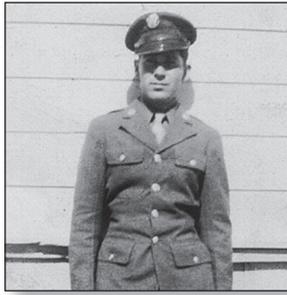
Still, Flores would respond to the letters, at times sending her husband a lipstick kiss on stationery, which she recalled him very much enjoying. She also took up knitting to pass the time.

Reuniting with his wife and what would be the first of nine children, Espiridion returned from the war with a Bronze Star Medal for Valor.

Flores said, as a Spanish-speaking Mexican American, her husband looked back on his service as having granted him a place in American society.

“He was very proud of having served his country,” she said.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Alejandro P. Garza

Interviewed: Jan. 10, 2009, by Martin Montez
in Beeville, Texas

When he was discharged from the Army Air Forces at the rank of sergeant on Sept. 10, 1947, Alejandro P. Garza returned to his hometown of Beeville, Texas, a different person.

“When we got back, we had gotten a taste of what the outside world was like, and how others lived,” said Garza of being a World War II veteran of Mexican-American descent.

As a result, the status quo wouldn’t do: Garza and countless other Chicano veterans in South Texas wanted to be treated as the equals of Anglos, as they had largely been treated in the military. So, in addition to working in the house-moving business with his father, Garza got involved in the Chicano civil rights movement. He said he was significantly influenced by Dr. Hector P. Garcia, who, among other civil rights-related accomplishments, started the American GI Forum.

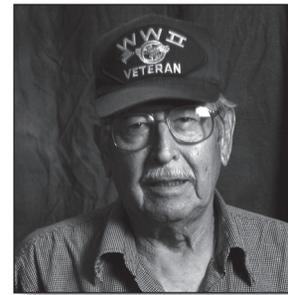
Garza joined other recruiters in growing the GI Forum and making its motto widely known: “Education is Our Freedom and Freedom Should Be Everybody’s Business.” Their effort eventually paid off.

“Things began to change and being more advantageous for the Mexican American than it was before,” said Garza, whose career progressed over the years from house-moving to owning a grocery store, to running an insurance agency and real estate service.

Before WWII ended, “local businesses would not hire Hispanics as store clerks; gas service stations would not have a Hispanic attendant. Oil field companies, [Southwestern] Bell Telephone, and Central Power and Light Co., would not hire Hispanics. Jobs for Hispanics were restricted mostly to farm labors,” wrote Garza after his interview.

He saw a direct relation between the increased opportunities after the war and his family’s standard of living.

“I had better income than what we had when I was growing up,” said Garza, who, with his wife, Estefana Rodriguez Garza, raised a daughter and a son in the Beeville area.



Benigno “Tony” Gaytan

Interviewed: Aug. 4, 2007, by Amanda Peña
in San Antonio, Texas

For Benigno “Tony” Gaytan, the decision to enlist in the Armed Forces during World War II was easy.

“Most of my friends, they say, ‘Let’s join the Navy,’” he recalled. “I said, ‘OK.’”

At the time, 17-year-old Gaytan was working as a stock boy at a five-and-dime store in Laredo, Texas, and the United States had been in the war for more than a year.

By the time he joined the service in 1943, U.S. troops had recovered the key stronghold Guadalcanal from the Japanese; however, the war in the Pacific was far from over.

Gaytan recalled training in Corpus Christi, Texas, which he referred to as his “first mission,” and then to Coronado Island Marine Base in San Diego, Calif.

“We learned everything over there. How to go with a target,” among other skills, he said, making soft artillery sounds.

From the Marine base, Gaytan recalled he was sent to Camp Shoemaker, also in California. He was assigned to the USS *Telfair*, a Haskell-class attack transport stationed in Okinawa.

Those on the ship were a mix of backgrounds, including French, English, Greek and Italian. Also on the ship were two other Mexican Americans.

On April 2, 1945, at approximately 5 a.m., a Japanese plane rammed into the starboard side of the *Telfair*; then flipped over and hit the ship’s port side. Gaytan was 50 to 100 feet away when the airplane hit.

“I could have got killed right there,” he said.

The 19-year-old seaman 2nd class was discharged Jan. 11, 1946, at Camp Wallace in Texas. Among the honors he earned were the World War II Victory Ribbon, Naval Occupation Medal and Korean Service Ribbon with three stars.

After his service, Gaytan trained as an auto mechanic, working for various car dealerships in San Antonio.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Rafaela Navarro Juarez

Interviewed: Nov. 6, 2004, by Julio Ovando
in San Antonio, Texas

At 18, Rafaela Navarro Juarez's faith was tested when her intended husband, Anastacio Juarez, was called to fight in World War II.

Both of them grew up in San Marcos, Texas. Their families knew each other, and the two youngsters attended the Sacred Heart of Mary Catholic Church.

They were finally married when he returned from the war four years later in 1946.

Mrs. Juarez said she got through her four years of worry and waiting by praying.

"I prayed everyday so nothing would happen to him and for him to return fine, so we could get married," she said. "His mother, father and I all prayed. We would go to church and pray together," sometimes all through the night, she added.

At one point, when Mr. Juarez was in France, he sent her a bracelet. But it was his letters that gave her peace of mind.

"Sometimes his parents would ask me if I had received any letters from him, because they wouldn't receive any," she said.

"They would ask if he was fine, and I would tell them, 'Yes, he is fine.'"

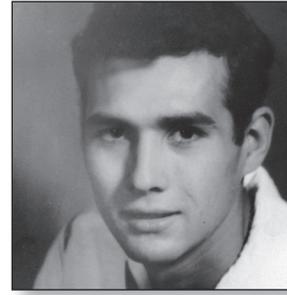
At the time of her interview, the couple had been married 51 years and had eight children.

"I thank God that all my children wanted to go to college and have a career," she said.

She attended school until the fifth grade, while her husband attended until sixth grade.

After the war, he got a job at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, which she viewed as one of the conflict's upsides, since they had both suffered through the Great Depression.

A lifelong commitment to her faith allowed her and her family to have a successful life postwar, Mrs. Juarez said.



Joe Henry Lazarine

Interviewed: Jan. 10, 2009, by Eloy Rodriguez
in Beeville, Texas

When South Texas native Joe Henry Lazarine joined the Navy in 1944 and was sent to San Diego, Calif., for basic training, he learned an essential survival skill, especially for sailors.

"They showed me how to swim," Lazarine recalled.

For the next two years, he was a gunner in the Pacific on aircraft carrier CVE 77, known as the *USS Marcus Island*. Among other sea missions, he participated in the invasion at Leyte, an island in the Philippines.

"I only stayed in the Navy 26 months," he said matter-of-factly.

Lazarine was discharged May 21, 1946, at the rank of seaman 1st class, at which point he returned to his hometown of Beeville, where his proud parents were excited to see their only child.

"They looked for some medals but they couldn't find them," said Lazarine with a self-deprecating chuckle.

Actually, he earned an Asia Pacific Campaign Medal with four Bronze Service Stars and a Philippine Liberation Ribbon with two Bronze Service Stars.

He later worked in the tire department at a Montgomery Ward department store, and, on July 6, 1947, married Frances Garza Lazarine, whom he met in 1945, when she was a 16-year-old guest at a watermelon party his parents threw for him while on leave from the service.

At the time of Lazarine's interview, he and his wife had been married 61 years. They had three daughters and a son.

Since coming back from the war, Lazarine had also run a liquor store, as well as sold cars, appliances, furniture and insurance.

He had also been a member since then of the American GI Forum.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Derlin Loya

Interviewed: Jan. 10, 2009, by Adolfo Dominguez
in Beeville, Texas

Beeville, Texas, native Derlin Loya set sail for Germany on May 18, 1946, four days after his 18th birthday.

Loya, a truck driver with the 1st Infantry Division, was stationed in Munich and Nuremberg. He also served guard duty in Dachau, a former Nazi concentration camp.

Loya said the military at that time did not officially recognize Hispanics as a distinct ethnic group, making it difficult to determine how many U.S. Latinos fought in World War II.

“When I joined the Army, there were only two races — black and white. We were classified as white,” Loya said.

But things were different in South Texas. He recalled the public schools were segregated into black, white and “Mexicano.” And, if he wanted to eat in certain restaurants, he had to dine in the kitchen.

Loya enlisted in the Army on Dec. 7, 1945, when he was in the ninth grade. He did so because his mother needed financial help.

His father had died the previous year, leaving his mother as the family’s sole breadwinner. He recalled she could not afford to buy shoes for him, his two sisters and five brothers.

Loya was honorably discharged at the rank of corporal on Nov. 19, 1948. For his service, he earned the World War II Victory Medal and the Army Occupation Medal.

At 26, Loya married Ofilia Olvera. They had three children: Mike, Joe and Patricia.

After holding several jobs, Loya started in 1968 as a busboy at Chase Field Naval Air Station in Beeville and later was promoted to cook. He prepared meals for as many as 2,500 people, at a starting hourly salary of \$2.22. The base closed in 1993, and Loya retired at age 65, earning \$15 an hour.

Loya’s advice to younger generations? “Stay on the right track. Education is number one.”



Henry McDonnell

Tribute compiled from information provided by
the McDonnell family

In 1945, Mexico native Henry McDonnell battled through Germany as a part of the 17th Airborne Division; 60 years later, he returned to Europe.

McDonnell and his three sons, Bernard, Henry Jr. and Mark, traveled in 2005 from McDonnell’s San Antonio home to visit the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial. Among the 8,301 graves was one for Bernard McDonnell, Henry’s McDonnell’s youngest brother.

Bernard McDonnell, a private in the 291st Infantry, 75th Division, was killed April 6, 1945. He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart.

“When Dad approached the grave site of his brother, the whole world pretty much stopped. I was so proud, but it involved some sad memories for my father,” Mark McDonnell recalled.

During its 45 days of combat, the 17th Airborne lost more than 560 men, and 129 were listed as “missing.”

McDonnell’s older brother, Edward, also served in World War II. He was a member of the National Guard, and later joined the 15th Army Air Force and attended gunnery school, said their sister, Eleanor McDonnell Hebert.

Their brother, Bernard McDonnell was later drafted, a fact Henry McDonnell learned about in mail from home.

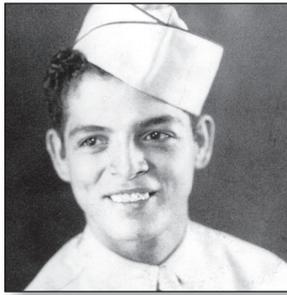
“Bernard was a foot soldier, not a paratrooper. Henry and Bernard never saw each other in Germany,” Hebert said.

Henry McDonnell’s 17th Airborne Division arrived in England on Aug. 30, 1944. On Christmas Eve 1944, they arrived at Camp Mourmelon in France, and in March 1945, marched into Germany, taking part in the Rhineland, Ardennes and Central Europe campaigns.

Unit members earned four Distinguished Service Crosses, eight Legion of Merit awards and 177 Silver Stars, among other honors.

Henry McDonnell was discharged June 7, 1946, at the rank of technician 5th grade. He returned to the United States and later married Consuelo Salazar. They had six children. McDonnell passed away on May 11, 2007.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



José Medina-Negrón

Interviewed: July 23, 2007, by Yazmin Lazcano
in Boynton Beach, Florida

As a technical sergeant with the 101st Airborne Division stationed at South Carolina's Fort Jackson in 1955, Puerto Rican José Medina-Negrón took an intelligence cryptology aptitude test with 25 other soldiers. Along with five other test-takers, Medina-Negrón was sent to Fort Devens in Massachusetts in 1956 for three months of interception training with the Army Security Agency. That led to a linguist and crypto-technician post in the Panama Canal Zone in 1957.

In 1959, Medina-Negrón returned to Fort Devens for Cryptologic School, finishing fourth in his class.

His supervisor assigned him to the National Security Agency in Maryland, because there wasn't "one single bilingual in cryptanalysis," Medina-Negrón recalled.

Over the years, Medina-Negrón had many top secret NSA assignments. Even now, he said he can't talk specifics about events like the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis or President Kennedy's assassination.

His greatest professional honor was receiving the Legion of Merit, which he earned for a discovery he made shortly before retiring from the Army.

His supervisor had asked him to take a look at some American military messages from the early 1900s, from Fort Huachuca, southeast of Tucson, Ariz. As he systematically studied the codes, he found one word that occurred again and again: *Geronimo*. With that clue, he was able to decode more words, some of which were in Spanish. He deciphered more names, including Gen. John J. Pershing and Mexican Revolution leader Pancho Villa.

In the end, Medina-Negrón was able to decipher all but two of 42 communiqués. The decoded messages are now displayed in the military museum at Fort Huachuca.

On Sept. 30, 1963, Medina-Negrón retired from the Army as a sergeant 1st class after 20 years of service. He would stay at the NSA as a civilian cryptanalyst for the rest of his career.



Arthur Muñoz

Interviewed: May 3, 2008, by Kris Edward Rodriguez
in San Antonio, Texas

Arthur Muñoz was only 17 when he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps, in Corpus Christi, Texas.

After training, Muñoz and the rest of the 1st Marine Division was sent to the Pacific for three years, where Muñoz served as a wireman.

"My job was to land with the initial assault wave, carrying a telephone and a reel of wire beside my regular battle gear," wrote Muñoz after his interview. "As a wireman, we called ourself 'sniper bait' because it was necessary to string the wire high off the ground so the incoming trucks and tanks would not shred the telephone wire. And what was there to climb? Coconut trees — tall coconut trees — making us very visible to Japanese snipers."

Muñoz was discharged in 1946 at the rank of sergeant. For his service, he earned five battle stars and two presidential citations.

Upon his return to the States, Muñoz said he joined the reserves, and, through the G.I. Bill, wanted to begin his college career. That was before GED programs existed, but a high school in Corpus Christi let veterans finish their education so they could attend college.

He then enrolled at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, and became involved with the American GI Forum, helping Gus Garcia, a Chicano civil rights attorney, fight the poll tax so more Latinos could vote.

During his senior year of college, Muñoz was called back into the Marines and was sent to Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, Calif., where he conducted infantry training for units going to Korea.

Muñoz later worked as a police officer for the San Antonio Police Department for 22 years. Then he went to New Mexico to manage security contracts for San Antonio-based Stanley Smith Security Co.

Muñoz became a writer, his work having appeared in "Hit List: The Best of Latino Mystery," among other places.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Placido Peña

Interviewed: By Cristina Salinas
in Los Arrieros, Texas

As a combat engineer, South Texas native Placido Peña's job consisted of building bridges, cleaning and installing land mines, fixing roads and locating and clearing mines. The work was usually done at night or under cover of smoke to avoid enemy confrontations. Most of the time, the highly dangerous operations took place between United States and German lines.

Peña's first assignment had been to help build the Alaskan highway, a two-year task. Peña said his only significant worries during his stay in Alaska were the possibility of bear attacks and surviving extreme weather.

When the 35th Engineer Regiment was reorganized into the 35th and 145th Engineer Combat Battalions on Sept. 25, 1943, Peña became a member of the 145th. Each battalion had more than 800 men. Peña's squad within the battalion consisted of 12 men, all Latino with the exceptions of one Italian American and one German American.

"When you're in battle, each soldier becomes your brother," Peña said.

In 1944, Peña and his squad traveled by sea to Scotland on the *New Amsterdam*. From Scotland, the 145th landed in Chester, England, and trained. And, on June 8, 1944, also known as D-Day plus 2, Peña and his squad landed in France. They made their way up to Belgium, Luxembourg and, finally, Frankfurt, Germany.

Peña, who grew up in the small town of Los Arrieros, recalled being very scared, especially at the beginning of his deployment in Europe. He said the first time he saw combat in France, he couldn't sleep for a whole week and ate very little.

Peña was discharged Oct. 24, 1945, at the rank of private. He earned five campaign stars for his involvement in the war.

What meant the most to Peña, however, was living a peaceful life in Los Arrieros with his wife, Amanda Gonzalez Peña, to whom he had been married for 67 years at the time of his interview. They had five children.



Manuel Sierra Pérez

Interviewed: July 28, 2007, by Marcel Rodríguez
in San Antonio, Texas

Manuel Sierra Pérez tried to join the Armed Forces before turning 18, but his father wouldn't sign the permission papers. A Mexican Revolution veteran who'd been shot, Ignacio Yañez Perez didn't want his son in danger.

It wasn't long, however, before Pérez, a native of the small West Texas town of Mingus, received a draft letter and joined the Army in July 1943.

He went through basic training at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, where he was assigned to the 755th Field Artillery Battalion as a Corp Artillery Battalion. Approximately 15 other Mexican Americans were in his unit, he said.

After training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, Pérez was deployed to Glasgow, Scotland, where he received more artillery training.

During the Battle of the Bulge, Pérez's group was surrounded by Germans. It was cut off from other United States units for three weeks or longer and ran low on ammunition and food.

As gunshots got closer, Pérez recalled running into his foxhole. Once the firing stopped, he attempted to get up, but his body wouldn't cooperate. He remembered reaching down to his leg and feeling warmth, confirming his suspicion that he had been hit.

Pérez was sent to a hospital in France for three months, and then returned to his unit.

He was discharged Jan. 1, 1946, at the rank of private. For his service, he earned the Purple Heart, an American Theater Campaign Medal, a European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with three Bronze Stars and a Good Conduct Medal, among other honors.

WWII helped the Latino community in many ways, he said.

"If it wouldn't have been for the GI Bill, I would have never gone to school," said Pérez, who attended junior college in Arlington, Texas.

At the time of his interview, Pérez was living in San Antonio with his wife, Mary Louise Teniente.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Henry Rodriguez

Interviewed: April 18, 2007, by Ronald Galindo
in San Fernando, California

In March 1944, Los Angeles native Henry Rodriguez became the third of four brothers to get drafted. He remembered feeling like getting called up was normal.

“We knew it was our duty, so we went,” said Rodriguez, a private in the 395th Battalion, 99th Infantry Division.

They began basic training at Fort Hood, in Texas, but due to an urgent need for more soldiers in Europe, the standard 17 weeks was cut to 12. His unit, a new one, was nicknamed the “Battle Babies.”

Rodriguez arrived in Plymouth, England, in October 1944.

A few weeks later, Rodriguez headed to Belgium. A rifleman, Rodriguez turned 19 in a foxhole in the forested Ardennes region of Belgium. Ten days later, the Battle of the Bulge began.

On May 1, 1949, Pvt. Rodriguez was discharged at Fort Bliss, in Texas.

He earned a Good Conduct Medal, Distinguished Unit Badge, Victory Medal and an Army of Occupation Medal.

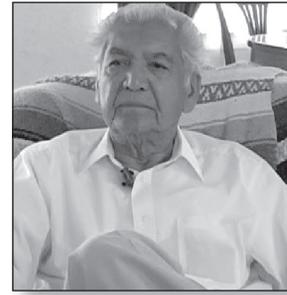
Rodriguez returned to the Los Angeles area and began looking for a job, but for a Latino with an incomplete education, work was scarce. After his first job, he decided to go back to school.

After trade school, Rodriguez had a few different jobs, at which he said he encountered discrimination.

“I didn’t let it hinder me,” Rodriguez said. “I wasn’t accepted for promotion, even though I was just as smart. But I went back to school, learned a lot and, in due time, things changed.”

Rodriguez was eventually hired by Lockheed, where he worked on airplanes for 38 years. His starting salary was \$1.10 per hour, which was a lot of money at the time.

Rodriguez met his wife, Elvira (Rodriguez) Rodriguez, in 1951. They had three children.



Ángel Romero

Interviewed: May 10, 2008, by Cheryl Smith Kemp
in El Paso, Texas

After being drafted June 2, 1943, El Paso, Texas, native Ángel Romero completed Army basic training, qualified as a parachutist and was schooled in advanced demolition and infantry. He ultimately joined the 82nd Airborne Division.

Romero said that, including the Battle of the Bulge, he was in four major fights that have been the subject of books or movies. But no single battle stands out in his mind more than the others.

“None [of the fights] are different, because it only takes one bullet to end your war or end your life,” Romero said.

During his more than two years in the Army, he traveled to Ireland, England, Holland, France, Belgium and Germany.

Although he was hurt three times, he didn’t hold a grudge about his injuries, calling them “million-dollar wounds.”

“They were bad enough to evacuate me, and not bad because I’m still here,” Romero said.

Romero, who was discharged in December 1945 at the rank of private 1st class, said it was difficult to adjust to civilian life back in Texas. However, he was able to get a job in a furniture shop.

“I didn’t have to talk to anybody, which was a good thing,” Romero said.

He recalled being bitter for about five years about how he and other Latino veterans were treated when they got back from the war.

He recalled going with friends to a bar in Waco, Texas, and the bartender only serving the two Anglos in the group.

His feelings about Latino veterans being made to feel unwelcome finally changed when he was asked to coach a Little League Baseball team.

“It changed my outlook, because people did trust me with their kids,” said Romero, adding that coaching the children made him happy again.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Abel Vela

Interviewed: May 3, 2008, by Nora Frost
in San Antonio, Texas

Beeville, Texas, native Abel Vela enlisted in the Army in January 1944 and, after eight weeks of training, was sent to Germany.

As a member of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion, the 18-year-old was assigned to reconnaissance up front, meaning he was the “eyes and ears” of the tanks following behind.

After the war in Europe ended, Vela, then a sergeant, was stationed in Wels, Austria. There, he met Austrian Angela Haager. They were married May 28, 1948.

Vela was discharged the following month and returned with Angela to the United States. He studied finance and accounting at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, where he was in ROTC.

After graduating with honors, Vela returned to the Army and asked for parachute training and to be assigned to an airborne division.

Vela remained in the Army until he retired at the rank of major in 1970, after serving in the Vietnam War.

His military success had earned him the Purple Heart; a Bronze Arrowhead, a small emblem worn on a campaign ribbon indicating the wearer participated in an amphibious or airborne assault; a Good Conduct Medal and a Vietnamese Medal of Honor, among other decorations.

Vela’s military background helped him succeed in business as well. He was the first Latino to own a McDonald’s in San Antonio and eventually owned more than 10 other McDonald’s before retiring in 2003. He said he may never have had his business success without the Army.

“They [McDonald’s] didn’t want any Hispanics or blacks,” Vela said. “But since I was a veteran . . . an officer, I fought it. . . . I was able to get an interview.”



Angela Vela

Interviewed: May 3, 2008, by Elvia O. Perez
in San Antonio, Texas

Angela (Haager) Vela was only 8 when Hitler took over Austria in 1938. From food being rationed to Americans bombing her hometown, Vela said this was the period when everything changed.

But, in a time when fear and turmoil plagued the country, Vela was fortunate enough to find something very different — love.

Vela said her mother often washed the uniforms of one of the American soldiers stationed in her town. Vela quickly became friends with him.

Because the GI was about to be transferred, the two devised a plan to stay in touch: He would write a letter to a sergeant who was staying in town and have that sergeant leave the letter for Vela in a library.

But, before the soldier left, he wanted to introduce Vela to the sergeant.

“We were sitting there, right outside the library, and up comes this sergeant . . . I said, ‘Whoa!’” Vela recalled. “And, well, it happened to be Abel Vela.”

One day the sergeant told her there was a letter for her to pick up that evening.

“Well, I got there and Abel was there, but there was no letter there,” she said. “Long story short, I never got a letter. Well, I didn’t know if I got a letter or not, but Abel started talking to my family . . . and well, eventually we were married. I was 18.”

The couple left Austria for America. And Mrs. Vela, who already knew English, began learning Spanish.

At the time of her interview, the Velas had been married for 60 years and had five children, 15 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren.

Once her children grew up, she said they asked her husband a question, to which even she didn’t know the answer:

“OK Dad, can we please know — was there a letter or was there not a letter?”

He simply replied, “No.”

Boricuas Part of Project's Expansion



Photo courtesy of CICOM

University of Puerto Rico's Centro de Investigaciones en Comunicación

Dr. Silvia Alvarez-Curbelo (middle seated), director of Centro de Investigaciones en Comunicación, with CICOM research assistants Juan Alvarez, Carlos Lugo, Wendolyn Ortega, and Aida Pagán.

The stories of Puerto Rican veterans from the Korean and Vietnam generations will have a place in the archives of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, thanks to a collaboration between the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project and the University of Puerto Rico's Centro de Investigaciones en Comunicación (CICOM).

CICOM, a research center attached to the University of Puerto Rico's School of Communication, is directed by Silvia Alvarez-Curbelo. It has worked with the Project during the past eight years, interviewing World War II Puerto Rican veterans. Now, its scope is expanding to include interviews from Korean and Vietnam War veterans from Puerto Rican municipalities.

The expansion is a natural fit for CICOM, since Alvarez-Curbelo has spent more than 20 years researching the Korean War participation of the Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment. She has published more than 10 articles on the subject.

And Alvarez-Curbelo and her team are already working on the next phase.

"So far we have done 10 interviews," Alvarez-Curbelo said. "The students are also preparing essays on Vietnam War-period music, university protests in the 1965-1972

period, veteran hospital experiences and other related topics." Her research team includes graduate students Carlos Lugo, Giselle Maldonado, Juan Alvarez and Wendolyn Ortega.

Alvarez-Curbelo said there are several common themes in the experiences of Puerto Rican World War II veterans and those from the Korean and Vietnam wars. She said that, although Puerto Rican soldiers served bravely and performed well in combat situations, they also routinely suffered extreme homesickness and encountered language barriers. But, she said, some differences have surfaced among these generations of veterans.

"World War II veterans are proud of their accomplishments; many of the Korean War, too," she said. "But Vietnam War veterans do not feel proud. They are bewildered and sometimes ashamed of their participation in an unjust war."

Alvarez-Curbelo said her team faces several challenges as they enter into this new phase of research. Among them is that age is catching up with so many of the Korean War veterans, and many Vietnam War veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other medical conditions.

In addition to their collaboration with the Project, CICOM researchers plan to publish their findings.

Cynthia Haynes Ramirez

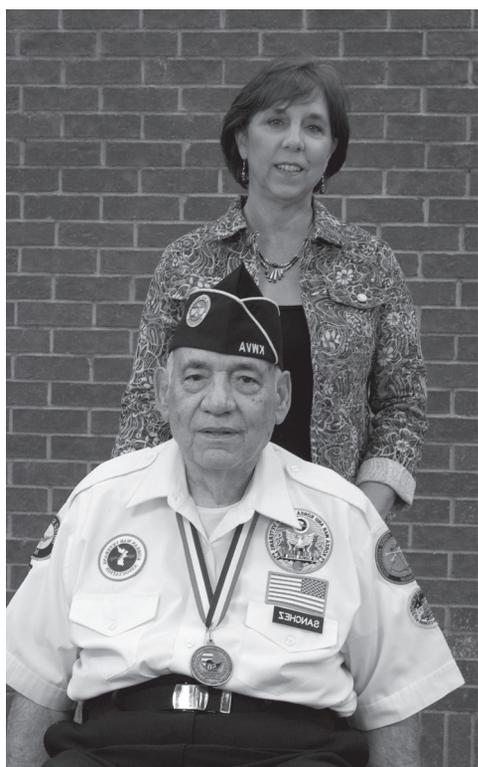


Photo by Marc Hamel

Cynthia Haynes Ramirez recently interviewed Korean War veteran Eduardo Sanchez in Laredo, Texas. Haynes Ramirez helped the project during the recent visit to Laredo Community College (*see p. 3*).

Cynthia Haynes Ramirez, a retired Laredo schoolteacher, learned of the Project in 2009 when two of her brothers, Jorge and J.J. Haynes, volunteered for the Fundraising Committee.

After the Project's 10th anniversary dinner, Haynes Ramirez, whose father and three brothers served in the U.S. Air Force, was inspired to help plan an interview session in Laredo (*see p. 19*). Her dedication ensured that 11 interviews were conducted.

She not only worked hard on the trip's logistics, she also conducted an interview during the session.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your participation in the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project.

Cynthia Haynes Ramirez:
My participation was minimal this

time. I spoke to Dr. Juan Maldonado [Laredo Community College president] to make sure we had a location for the interviews and provided snacks and lunch.

My intention was to observe and learn what I could about the Project and get more involved later. But, thanks to Dr. Maggie [Rivas-Rodriguez, this Project's director], I got thrown into the river — and it was sink or swim. I have been interviewed but have never interviewed anyone. Anyway, I thank Maggie for doing it, because I can't tell you how much I enjoyed doing that interview:

First, because I did not have time to think about it or get nervous

Second, I got to interview my cousin, Eduardo Sanchez. He is a very good interviewee, so my job was made easier.

Q: How did you first hear about the Project?

CHR: My brothers Jorge and J.J., who are both veterans, as well as my other brother, Roberto, invited me to the October [celebration of the Project's 10th anniversary], since they bought a table.

Although I could not attend the conference, I did attend the banquet. I was so moved, honored and excited to be among some very courageous veterans that I kept thinking: "How can I get involved?"

I contacted Maggie in January, we started communicating, and now I have one interview session under my belt.

I can't tell you how much I enjoyed [the interview session in Laredo] Saturday.

I knew most of the interviewees, so that made it special. I love listening to their stories and, since I am a Political Science/History major, I do enjoy history.

Q: What made you decide to volunteer with the Project?

CHR: Since I am retired, I have some time — not too much since I care for my grandchildren, and I am also involved with the Latin American Sports Hall of Fame and the Webb County Retired Teachers Association. But I was so moved at the banquet that I knew I had to get involved.

Q: Why do you think it's important for people to be involved in projects like this one?

CHR: There is so much we can learn from these veterans, and Maggie's vision is so important: to make sure that everyone knows that Latinos/Latinas have always been patriotic and proud, and how important they have been in every conflict our country has been involved in. We cannot let these stories die.

Q: What advice do you have for future volunteers?

CHR: Go full speed. Once you get bitten, that's it. You are hooked. I can't wait for the next session in Laredo. I will continue to stay in contact with the veterans groups in Laredo to make sure that we get as many interviews as we possibly can.

Q: Anything else you would like to add?

CHR: The entire crew that came to Laredo was outstanding. Each person was so focused and gave 100%. I commend the Project for the great work that they do. I will do my best to give 150% to this Project to honor my father, who served during WWII and was the person who taught my brothers and me to be patriotic, loyal and proud of our country and our heritage.

Team Effort Leads to Laredo Success

Photos this page by Marc Hamel



Tom LaFleur, Laredo Community College Library director; Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, director of the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project, and Juan Maldonado, president of Laredo Community College.



Volunteers Liliana and Juan Carlos Rodriguez helped interview subjects and scan images at the Laredo Community College library in Laredo, Texas on March 6, 2010.

The Project team received outstanding support from Laredo veterans, officials and other residents during its springtime trip to the U.S.-Mexico border to conduct interviews.

The Laredo session was so successful that a total of 11 interviews were recorded on Saturday, March 6, in the library at Laredo Community College. It was a Multiple Individual Interview Session, or MIIS, which is a labor- and time-intensive, single-day event where several staff members and volunteers conduct individual interviews, and collect data and valuable photos for the Project's archives.

The day after the Laredo interviews, the Project and MIIS were featured in a front-page article in the Sunday Laredo Morning Times.

"All in all, it was a great team effort," said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, who noted the Laredo trip was sparked by a dinner given last Oct. 2 at the University of Texas at Austin campus to celebrate the Project's 10th anniversary.

One of those attending was Laredo resident Cynthia Haynes Ramirez, who was so inspired that she decided to look into what it would take to bring the Project to her hometown. One of the first people she enlisted was Laredo Community College President Juan Maldonado, who was also at the dinner.

Haynes Ramirez set about securing the interview space, helping to identify interview subjects and even obtaining food and beverages for the staff, volunteers and subjects.

The day began with the half-dozen staff members who made the trip arriving early at the library to set up lights,

backdrops and cameras in interview rooms.

Holding the interviews in the Laredo Community College library proved to be a major advantage. Tom LaFleur, director of the library, was gracious and accommodating, allowing the Project staff to move furniture and take over as much space as needed.

"It was a wonderful place to hold the interviews," Rivas-Rodriguez said.

But, as in all MIIS sessions, the stars were the interview subjects from the World War II, Korean- and Vietnam-war eras.

"Our interview subjects are very generous with their time and allowing us to scan their photos and documentation," Rivas-Rodriguez said. Some even allowed the Project to take photo albums back to Austin because there was not enough time to scan all the photos they took to the session.

Rivas-Rodriguez said one major benefit of the MIIS is the opportunity to make new friends "who understand the importance of this work and are willing to roll up their sleeves to make it happen." While in Laredo, several staff members were able to catch up with three veterans who had been interviewed years ago.

Staff member Laura Barberena, who participated in her first MIIS in Laredo, said listening to the veterans' stories was like reading a best-selling novel.

"They tell tales of adventure, courage, love and loss. And, more importantly, their stories speak to what it was like to be a Latino in the Armed Forces at times of war and conflict," Barberena said. "Their stories are revealing and inspirational."



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