

WWII Latinos in the Spotlight

Video Shorts Reveal Riches of Project

By Frank Trejo

Combine the powerful experiences of Latino veterans with the visual impact of video, and you've got an exciting new way to tell the stories of VOCES Oral History Project.

The project's newest venture Share Their Voices, a video-editing contest in which University of Texas at Austin students produce five-minute documentaries that bring to life the project's archival interviews.

"These short documentary treatments of these interviews reach an audience and reach people in a real, visceral, emotional way that we can't reach in any other way," said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez.

Contest judges have included director and filmmaker Jesus Treviño of Los Angeles; writer and producer Nancy De Los Santos of Los Angeles; and producer Roland Hartzog of Houston.

First place in the 2011 inaugural contest was Vincent Desgrippes, whose video featured Julian Gonzalez, a World War II veteran who still prays for those who died around him at Normandy.

"This story had a gentleness you usually don't see in war story memories," De Los Santos said. Hartzog added "I didn't want it to end."

Second place went to Chithra Jeyaram, her film on John Valls; third place was Stephanie Meza, for her documentary on the five Gil brothers.

The 2012 first place winner was Rosa Pruneda, for her film on Carmen Contreras Bozak; second

place was Jordan Kerfeld, for his documentary on Leonard Fuentes; and third place was Sonia Melendez, for her story on Enrique Cervantes. (*More information on p. 3*)



Photo by Michelle Lojewski

2012 Video Editing Contest judges look on, watching the winning documentary.

A Note from the Project Director

When the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project became the VOCES Oral History Project last year —to accommodate our expanded focus to the Korean and Vietnam war periods —it required more than new letterhead. In fact, we were so caught up in the transition that we simply didn't have time to produce a newsletter in 2011. This publication is intended to catch you up with our expansion.

Our first step was to understand the differences between the three war periods. We did our background research (homework, as we call it in journalism), before conducting group interviews with men and women of the Korean and Vietnam war periods. Then we revised our interview protocols so that we could elicit information that would reflect the interviewees' times.

Many months later, we are pleased to report that we have made the transition and now have a good body of Korean and Vietnam war-era interviews. We were a little bit ahead of the curve, as we had several WWII veterans who had served in all three wars (!!!), and several more who served in both WWII and Korea.

In the pages that follow, you'll learn about men and women who have served our country in military service and in civilian life. We hope you enjoy.

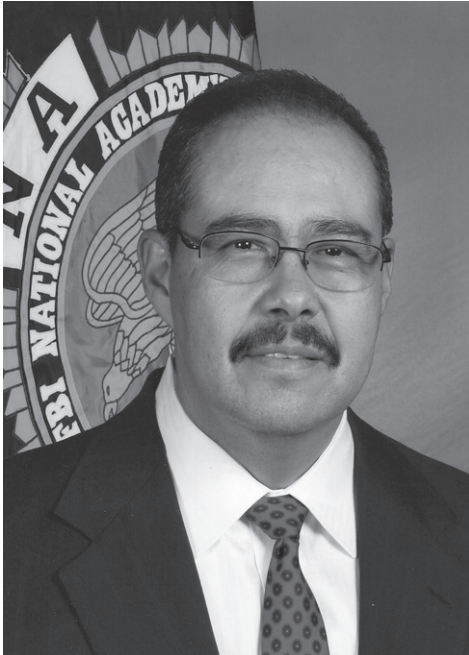


Photo by Marc Hamel

Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez

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

Joseph Padilla:

First of all I'd like to thank Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez for allowing me the opportunity to participate in such a wonderful program. I am a captain with the Denver Police Department, and my family background is from New Mexico. At this time I've completed 11 interviews of WWII veterans for the Project, with more planned in the future. My family's WWII history includes losing a great-uncle at New Guinea in the South Pacific. I had another great-uncle who fought with the 45th Infantry from North Africa to Germany; he died shortly after the war. Neither of these men left a family, and I always wish their service could have been recognized. Before discovering the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. I obtained an access code for the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. I have been contacting many WWII vets or their survivors to enter the vets' names in the national memorial. So far I have

Joseph Padilla: Denver Police Officer

entered close to 100 and will continue to add the name of any WWII vet I learn of.

Q: How did you first hear about the Project?

JP: I learned of the program from a member of the Denver Police Latino Officers Association. I received a copy of the VOCES Oral History Project flier and immediately contacted the project. As stated above, I have always had an interest in WWII, and after I learned of the project I contacted the Latino vets I knew. Once I found out that the Project didn't have funding to visit Denver, I decided to conduct the interviews myself.

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

JP: Well, after I informed the vets of the project, they seemed excited to share. The fact that the history project couldn't travel to Denver shouldn't keep these veterans from telling their stories. The contribution they've made for our country is significant. Unfortunately, they are getting older and having the ability to speak about their lives is important. Many have never shared their stories. Of the vets I've interviewed, one served with the 82nd Airborne and made combat jumps in Sicily, Salerno, D-Day and Holland. He received three Purple Hearts and still lives in pain. Another was a combat medic who was part of the 99th Infantry and survived the Battle of the Bulge only to lose his leg at the Siegfried Line a couple of months later. The third was a Marine at Saipan. The last vet I interviewed survived combat and wounds from the European Theater to later become the chief justice of the Colorado Supreme Court. I don't believe that a veteran has to be a combat vet to participate

in the program. The fact that they were involved in the war is significant enough. Those that served on the home front or in other theaters should also be recognized for their contributions.

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

JP: It's important to recognize that there is a need. We all have busy lives. I have a great wife, three children, and four grandchildren, and I am able to devote time to the Project while spending time with family and manage a busy career. I've read several books on WWII and consider it an honor to sit and interview people who actually lived through the incidents I've read about. I think the Project is an excellent endeavor that gives us the opportunity to contribute to a very worthwhile cause, and documenting it from the Latino perspective adds additional meaning.

Q: Anything else you would like to add?

JP: Every interview I've conducted has been emotional for the vets. It is also a family event. Many times they have their children or grandchildren present, and the family members always tell me they learned many things about their father's or grandfather's life they had never heard before. It's a sense of accomplishment when the interviews are finished, to know their service and sacrifices are documented. I am also planning on expanding to Korean and Vietnam Latino vets. Prior to concluding the interview, I ask the vets to leave words they would like their descendants to know. The ability to pass information to the grandchildren they may never meet is a benefit they appreciate.

VIDEO CONTEST 2011 AND 2012

Voces Oral History Project



The second annual Share Their Voices Video Editing Contest Screening and Critique in CMB Studio 6A on April 27, 2012. l-r, top row: Jim Estrada, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Nancy de los Santos, Jesús Treviño and Roland Hartzog. Bottom row, contest participants and winners.

Photo by Michelle Lojewski



The second annual Share Their Voices Video Editing Contest Screening and Critique event moderator Jim Estrada.

Photo by Michelle Lojewski



The inaugural Share Their Voices Video Editing Contest Screening and Critique in CMB Studio 6A on April 15, 2011. l-r: Jesús Treviño, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Nancy de los Santos, Vincent Desgrippes, Stephanie Meza, Elizabeth Blancas, Chithra Jeyaram, Roland Hartzog and Hector Galán.

Photo by Michelle Lojewski



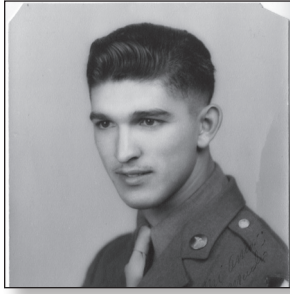
Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez announces the prizes for the 2012 event, including a fully loaded MacBook Pro laptop computer for first prize.



The inaugural Share Their Voices Video Editing Contest Screening and Critique event moderator Hector Galán pointing out the new logo, 2011.

Learn more about the contest: ShareTheirVoices.org
Watch past videos: YouTube.com/vocesvideocontest

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Anthony Acevedo

Interviewed by Eliud Martinez

Anthony Acevedo wasn't just enduring temperatures of 50 degrees below zero, several feet of snow, and a warm weather uniform that was useless against the cold. He was also one of 40 members of the 275th Infantry Regiment, an American unit captured by Nazi forces in early 1945.

They were taken to Stalag 9B, a prison camp in Bad Orb, Germany. After torturing him, the Germans moved Sanchez, 350 Jewish soldiers, and other "undesirables" to a slave labor camp in Berga.

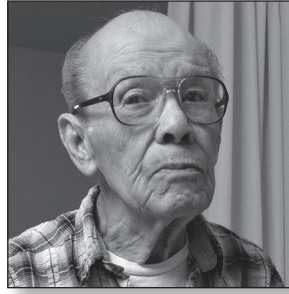
The survivors were forced on a 217-mile death march south from Berga to a camp near Rötz. Only 165 survived the march and eventually were liberated.

Acevedo was born on July 31, 1924, in San Bernardino, Calif. He remembered facing racism throughout his childhood: "We could not mix with Americans until we went to junior high." In 1937, his parents were deported to Mexico, and Acevedo and his four siblings went with them.

In 1943, he joined the Army and trained as a medic. In France, he was assigned to the Company B, 275th Infantry Regiment.

By July 1945, Acevedo was discharged. He married Maria Dolores Espinoza. His decorations include two Purple Hearts and two Bronze Stars.

Interviewed on May 11, 2009, in Yucaipa, Calif.



Manuel Calderon

Interviewed by Cheryl Smith Kemp

Manuel Calderon was born in Sherman, N.M. His parents were farmers, and Calderon and his four siblings would help them with planting, plowing and other tasks after school and on weekends.

"We worked hard," he said. . . . "Many a time we didn't have much to eat."

Calderon went to school through the sixth grade. After his mother died when he was 11, he stopped going to school. Calderon's father lived until 1985.

Calderon was drafted into the U.S. Army in October 1941, going through basic training at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas and serving a total of four years.

He was assigned to an artillery unit. He said he saw a considerable amount of combat. The loss of his friends still haunts him. "Many of them killed, all around us," he said.

Calderon was discharged from the Army in October 1945 at the rank of private first class. His decorations include the Asian-Pacific Theater and European-African-Middle Eastern Theater medals, as well as a Good Conduct Medal.

After he returned to the United States, he was a nursing assistant at an El Paso veterans' hospital, until it closed in 1964. He had worked in Dallas nursing homes before returning to El Paso.

Interviewed on May 9, 2008, in El Paso, Texas.



Robert Cardenas

Interviewed by Marc Hamel

In 1939, National Guard Pvt. Robert Cardenas was ordered to the Philippines. He was about to secure a scholarship to the California Institute of Technology after a few years in a smaller college but, as he recalled, "military orders must be followed."

It worked out well for him because an officer helped him become an Aviation School cadet.

Cardenas had no idea how those first few steps would lead to a 34-year Air Force career through World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and eventually earn him the Distinguished Flying Cross and a general's star.

"There's no such thing as free lunches or luck, but there are [opportunities], and they'll come at you a million times," Cardenas said.

During World War II, Cardenas directed development of invasion gliders in Ohio. In 1944, as part of the 506th Bombardment Squadron, he flew his first mission on the B-24 Liberator. During the Korean War, Cardenas commanded the Air Force Special Operations Force. During the Vietnam War, he flew F-105s over North Vietnam.

Cardenas retired from the Air Force in 1973. He also earned a degree from the University of New Mexico. He and Gladys Gisewite Cardenas married and had seven children.

Interviewed on July 14, 2008, in San Diego, Calif.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Meregildo Carrillo

Interviewed by Lawrence J. Polon

Despite the racial prejudice he faced, Meregildo Carrillo never regretted his World War II service with the U.S. Army's 79th Infantry Division.

He was born in San Angelo, Texas, on April 13, 1924, and for years he was shuttled back and forth between families in different Texas cities.

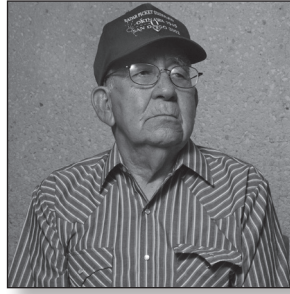
When his father tried to enroll him in school, other families objected to their children sharing a bus with a Latino. After two days, he was taken out of school.

He had held odd jobs before joining the military. He said the Army taught him how to read and write in six weeks, and he began basic training at Camp Wheeler in Georgia. He encountered restaurants that refused to serve him and soldiers that called him "a Mex."

He fought in Normandy on D-Day, and in Le Mans, and Haguenau, all in France. He was discharged on Nov. 22, 1945, as a staff sergeant. Carrillo enjoyed the Army and immediately re-enlisted. He was discharged again on May 21, 1947, as a platoon sergeant. His decorations and honors include two Silver Stars, one Bronze Star, a French Croix de Guerre and a thank-you note from President Harry Truman.

Carrillo married Josephine Juarez, an old friend. He said he led a good life.

Interviewed on July 15, 2009, in Albany, Calif.



Odilon De Leon

Interviewed by Raquel C. Garza

Odilon De Leon suffered serious burns on May 3, 1945, when a Japanese plane dove into the port side of his ship, the USS LSMR-195, approximately 100 miles from Okinawa.

The ship carried more than 460 rockets, which were ignited by the plane's gasoline, creating a "hellacious explosion," he said.

The ship's mission was to sail to the Philippines for supplies and then return to the United States. And as the battle for the Japanese island raged around them, De Leon at first thought his ship was going to make it through.

But then the kamikaze struck. De Leon remembered that the impact was so intense that it blew his shoes off.

The captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. De Leon and other survivors huddled in a circle, and he used a flashlight to signal to a rescue ship.

De Leon had enlisted in San Antonio less than a year earlier, in September 1944.

He was born in Van Ormy, Texas, where his parents, who worked as sharecroppers, lived after his father's service in World War I.

After WWII, he had trouble adjusting to civilian life, and he never married. "[T]he war will never end for me," he said.

Interviewed on June 8, 2009, in Austin, Texas.



Ricardo Garcia

Interviewed by Cheryl Smith Kemp

"It was the worst thing to happen." That's how Ricardo Garcia described his time in the 5th Marine Division in Okinawa, which included 10 days of night-time fighting on the front lines.

It was on his 10th night, May 16, 1945, that Japanese bombs found their mark. He was hit.

Garcia's unit thought he was dead until they noticed his hand move. He said it still feels like it happened yesterday.

Garcia, born and raised in El Paso, Texas, was one of Pablo and Maria Garcia's eight children.

Garcia was drafted into the U.S. Marine Corps in 1943. For boot camp, Garcia was sent to San Diego, where his English improved, and he came face-to-face with racism.

He then went to Pearl Harbor, where he learned to use anti-aircraft guns and later took part in the Iwo Jima invasion, where Japanese counterattacks were relentless. "They didn't get me," he said. "I guess I was lucky." But in Okinawa he was wounded in the eye and had to use an eye patch.

Almost three years and two Purple Hearts later, Garcia was honorably discharged on Oct. 10, 1945.

After the war, he married and had four children with his wife, Jessie. He worked as an upholsterer and mechanic.

Interviewed in El Paso, Texas, on May 9, 2008.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Rodolfo Hernandez

Interviewed by Peter C. Haney

Although Rodolfo Hernandez never saw battle, World War II was an exciting time for him. He performed with his family as a singer nicknamed Charro Azul, for the blue suit he wore on stage.

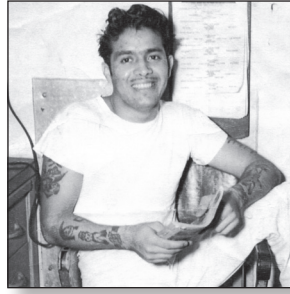
Hernandez was born in San Antonio on June 21, 1929. His father, Francisco Hernandez, was a trampoline artist, dancer, and clown. His grandfather, Marcos Hernandez, was a circus ringmaster in Mexico, and his grandmother was a contralto singer. Hernandez and his six siblings were all trained to dance, sing, and act by the age of nine.

But they also did their part to help during WWII. His father was an air-raid warden, and he taught first aid to his son. His mother cooked for warden meetings. The kids collected aluminum. They also contributed as entertainers. Hernandez and his father traveled throughout Texas to entertain military audiences, usually starting every performance with "The Star-Spangled Banner."

In 1948, Hernandez entered the Army. He was assigned to the 4th Infantry Regiment in Alaska and was trained as a ski trooper.

After he left the Army, Hernandez married Merehilda Hernandez. He also began a 36-year career with the federal government, retiring in 1985 from a quality-control position with the Air Force.

Interviewed on Oct. 6, 2009, in San Antonio.



Antonio Jasso

Interviewed by John Jasso

Antonio Jasso never wanted to be considered a war hero.

"I didn't see no war ... I was, thanks to God, a cook in the Navy. I had it made in the Navy," Jasso said.

The native of El Paso, Texas, was born on April 7, 1928. He was one of 10 children. Jasso dropped out of the 6th grade to help support his family.

Jasso said that one of the reasons he wanted to enlist in the Navy was because he believed girls liked a man in uniform.

He spoke highly of his ship, the USS *Princeton*, and said that it had everything but a swimming pool. It was his longest assignment. He also served on the USS *Mindanao* and USS *Gates*.

During his tour, he visited China, Guam, Panama, Japan, and Hawaii.

When Jasso was in Shanghai, he remembered, the sailors were instructed to go out in groups because it was a dangerous city to tour alone. One man did not follow this rule. He went out alone and was found dead the next day.

Jasso served from September 1945 to April 1949 and was discharged as a seaman first class.

Jasso believed that he lived an ordinary life, and his stories of the time in the war are not "heroic." When his wife died in March 2011, Jasso moved to a smaller home, where he grew chilies and tomatoes in his garden.

Interviewed on June 16, 2010, in Topeka, Kansas.



Tony Lopez

Interviewed by Henry Velez

Anthony D. Lopez fought World War II with the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division.

He saw action at New Guinea and the Philippines, including Leyte, Mindoro, Corregidor, where he was wounded, and Negros. The tropical heat was nothing like his boyhood home in Denver.

He graduated from high school in 1943. He was sent to basic training at Fort Roberts in California, and he later volunteered for the parachute infantry.

By September 1943, he was in Australia with his unit, Co. F, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment.

In July 1944, the 503rd went to New Guinea. They landed on Noemfoor Island. As he and his platoon crawled through coral caves, Lopez never forgot the crunching sound as he stepped on it.

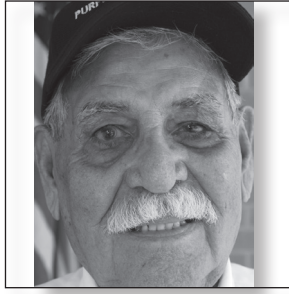
On Corregidor, Lopez was shot in the abdomen. But he recovered, and two weeks later he was back in the fight.

Once the war ended, he was back in the United States by Dec. 22, 1945. His decorations include the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, and the Good Conduct Medal.

After the war, he married Mary Louise Jimenez, and they had three children. He eventually opened his own auto transmissions shop and worked there until he retired.

Interviewed on Aug. 9, 2010, in Denver.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Rafael Medrano

Interviewed by Rafael A. Medrano

Rafael Cantu Medrano left his hometown on Fannin, Texas, to join the military in 1940.

He landed on the Normandy beaches on June 10, 1944. He was part of the 83rd Division, which fought in France and Germany, and all he remembered from combat was “that it was hell.”

He said that he spent most of his days in Europe either in foxholes or on the move. “It would rain, snow, and all that crap,” Medrano said.

Medrano didn’t remember much about the day he was shot in the left arm. “The only thing I felt was something warm running down my arm, and I looked and saw my hands filled with blood.”

Medrano was born on May 23, 1920. His home life revolved around the economic struggles his family faced after his father left the family. Medrano’s mother worked odd jobs to make ends meet.

He was discharged on July 3, 1945, as a private first class. His decorations include the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

After the war, he worked for the Texas Highway Department and earned a GED.

He married Sonia Vidaurri in 1946, and they had five children. She died in 1970.

He later married Francisca “Mary” Trevino.

Interviewed on July 20, 2010, in Goliad, Texas.



Concepción Morón

Interviewed by David Silva

Morón was the youngest of four children born to José Morón, a farmer and sharecropper, and Petra García Morón.

Concepción García Morón vividly remembered a certain day, about two years after his mother died. It was Dec. 7, 1941. It was Sunday, and his family had just returned from church. The kids were shooting marbles and listening to the radio. “All of a sudden — Pow! ‘We interrupt this program’ — it was in English — and [the broadcaster] announced that the Japanese just attacked Pearl Harbor.”

He spent the next few years helping the war effort by collecting tin cans and aluminum foil. He was inducted into the Army in 1944, completed basic training at Fort Hood, and was assigned to Company L of the 304th Infantry Regiment. He took part in the Ardennes, Rhineland and Central European campaigns.

His decorations include the World War II Victory Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Ribbon and three Bronze Service Stars, and a Bronze Star.

Morón was honorably discharged March 18, 1946, as a private first class. He returned to Beeville and worked as a farm laborer.

In 1949, Morón married Margarita Weisheimer Cano, and they had seven children.

Interviewed on Jan. 10, 2009, in Beeville, Texas.



Berta Parra

Interviewed by Cheryl Smith Kemp

Berta Parra served in the Navy during World War II as a nurse’s assistant stationed in Corpus Christi, Texas.

She endured the stresses of her job, fear for her brother fighting in the Army, and the daily barrage of war news.

She was born in El Paso, Texas, one of four children to a homemaker mother and a film projectionist father. Her family struggled to survive during the Great Depression, and discrimination was a fact of life.

She planned on becoming a beautician but then decided to become a nurse’s assistant.

When war broke out, she enlisted in the Navy and was assigned to the Women’s Auxiliary Corps in Corpus Christi.

There, she saw death for the first time as she tended to elderly World War I veterans.

Female service in the military was at one of its earliest points during WWII, and Latinas were largely underrepresented.

“The men were OK with me being a woman,” Parra said.

When Parra was discharged on disability, she left Corpus Christi and headed back to El Paso, but the vestiges of war stayed with her.

After the war, she continued her career as a nurse’s assistant and never married.

Interviewed on May 9, 2008, in El Paso, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Albino Pineda

Interviewed by Laura Barberena

After several failed attempts to teach his peers the correct pronunciation of his name during basic training, Albino R. Pineda settled for being called “Pineeda.” It wasn’t ideal, but he thought it was better than “Pinda.”

Years later, however, Pineda looked back fondly on his days in the Army’s 261st Field Artillery Battalion.

Pineda was born on Dec. 22, 1923, and grew up taking care of himself. His father, Emilio, died in 1931. As the Great Depression deepened and pressure grew on people of Mexican descent to leave the United States, Dolores Pineda and her seven children moved to Nogales, Mexico.

In 1943, Pineda moved back to the United States and joined the Army to earn a steady wage and teach himself English.

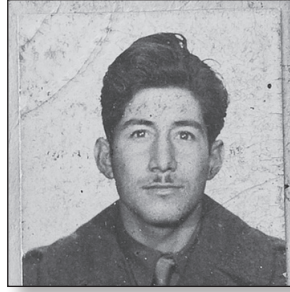
Pineda served in France and Germany. In November 1945, Pineda was discharged as a private first class.

He moved to California, where he worked as a trench digger for the Bachtel Pipeline Co. in Santa Paula, a longshoreman and a driller.

He married Naomi Solace, and they had three children.

In 2006, after Pineda retired, he wrote “Among the Repatriated” to share his experiences as a Mexican American. It was published in 2008.

Interviewed on July 13, 2010, in San Antonio.



Ramiro Ramos

Interviewed by Raquel C. Garza

Ramiro Ramos, born on Sept. 12, 1924, was one of seven children born to Rita and Esteban Ramos.

Growing up on the Texas-Mexico border, Ramos and his siblings often helped their father, a laborer, and he said the hard work fortified him for what lay ahead.

By 28, Ramos was in the U.S. Army, trained as a medic, and prepared to participate in the Allied Invasion of Normandy in June 1944. He was part of the 2nd Medical Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division.

On June 6, Ramos struggled to help fatally wounded soldiers strewn across the beach. “You have to help them until their last breath,” Ramos remembered.

Ramos later saw action in the Ardennes and the Rhineland. After the war, he returned to the United States, and he was discharged on Oct. 8, 1945 as a private first class. His decorations include the Bronze Star.

After the war, Ramos married Edna Salazar, and they had three children. He worked at the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and the U.S. Boundary Commission.

Despite his post-traumatic stress disorder, he remained optimistic. “You pass through dark moments ... and very illuminating moments,” he said, “and that’s what makes life.”

Interviewed on May 3, 2008, in San Antonio.



Mary Rangel

Interviewed by Valerie A. Martinez

Mary Patricia Torrez Rangel knew there were places in Topeka, Kan., where Latinos were not allowed to go — swimming pools, movie theaters, and restaurants. She simply refused to obey the restrictions.

Rangel was one of eight children born to Marcario Torrez and Guadalupe Thomasa Gutierrez de Torrez, both from Guanajuato, Mexico.

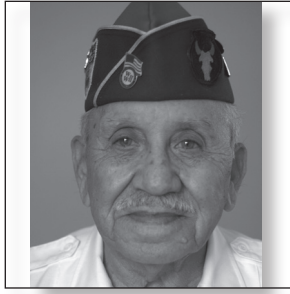
Rangel remembered how her mother shielded her children from discrimination by limiting what they could do and where they could go in town. Her earliest recollection of prejudice against her family was when her brothers wanted to go swimming. They were not allowed into the pools around town so they would just swim in a creek near their house.

She anxiously followed the news from the Korean War because her boyfriend, Felipe “Pipes” Rangel, had been drafted into the Marines and was fighting there. When he was wounded and returned home, he asked Rangel to marry him. She agreed, and they married on Oct. 23, 1954. They had five children.

Rangel said her husband struggled with his combat memories. She remembered many of his “episodes” that would last up to 20 minutes at night. To comfort him, she would hold his hand or stroke his arm until he calmed down.

Interviewed on June 16, 2010, in Topeka, Kan.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Roque Riojas

Interviewed by Valerie A. Martinez

Roque Riojas fought during World War II with the 135th Regiment, 34th Infantry Division, seeing combat in Africa and Italy.

Riojas was drafted into the U.S. Army in November 1942. After basic training he learned to operate radio equipment. He would often have to run through combat zones to string telephone wire.

Riojas said discrimination may have been a factor in why he never gained rank above private first class, even being passed over to replace his fallen sergeant.

Riojas was honorably discharged in October 1945. His decorations include the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, and the Combat Infantryman Badge.

Returning home to Kansas City, Kan., Riojas remembered his homecoming consisted of one man welcoming him back. "The next person I saw was my dad at the house, and the only thing he said was, 'Your mother's inside.' That was my welcoming."

Riojas used the G.I. Bill to pay for trade school to learn radio and appliance repair. He married, started a family, and eventually worked with the Santa Fe Railroad for 19 years.

In 2004, Riojas was invited as a guest of then-President George W. Bush to attend the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington D.C.

Interviewed on June 17, 2010, in Kansas City, Kan.



José S. Sanchez

Interviewed by Adolfo Dominguez

Raised in a Spanish-speaking home in Sinton, Texas, José Sanchez quit school after the sixth grade in order to help his father, Santiago Sanchez. As a migrant tomato picker, Sanchez was able to learn English from his father and white farmers. His English became so good that throughout his mid-teens Sanchez translated English work orders to Spanish-speaking workers.

On Nov. 29, 1943, Sanchez turned 18 and enlisted in the U.S. Army.

At basic training at Fort Sam Houston, Sanchez was warned that Spanish speakers would have to run laps while wearing their backpack.

After basic training, Sanchez lost any opportunity to speak Spanish. He never met any other Latinos in the Army.

Sanchez was assigned to the 871st Field Artillery Battalion. On Jan. 1, 1945, the unit departed London for western France, between two German submarine bases. "Sometimes you got scared," he admitted. But Sanchez developed bravery from his friendships.

After the war, Sanchez was sent to an Army depot in Austria, and later he guarded German prisoners.

He was discharged on May 22, 1946, as a private first class. His decorations included the Bronze Star.

He returned to Beeville, Texas, married Ernestina Zambrano, and started a plumbing business.

Interviewed on Jan. 10, 2009, in Beeville, Texas.



Martin Sanchez

Interviewed by Alcario Alvarado

Martin Sanchez was born on Aug. 10, 1920, in Beeville, Texas. He attended school before becoming a laborer during the Great Depression. He later joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public-works relief program, and then enlisted in the Army in 1940. He was assigned to the 12th Field Artillery.

When the United States entered World War II, he was sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to manage wire communications. On July 7, 1945, he and the 101st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion fought in the Philippines and helped defeat occupying Japanese forces. Sanchez was discharged on Jan. 7, 1946, as a private.

He attended barber school on the G.I. Bill and later opened a barber shop. He married Petrisa Alaniz and had three children.

But the nation he fought for showed him a darker side. At an Oklahoma bar, a waiter wouldn't serve him until Sanchez could confirm he wasn't Native American.

In Texas, Sanchez couldn't enter a store because he was Latino, even if in uniform.

"There was a lot of discrimination," said Sanchez. But nowadays, he worries for younger Latinos, who he believes are losing their culture and language.

Interviewed on Jan. 10, 2009, in Beeville, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Ben Santillan

Interviewed by Mary Gonzales

Ben Santillan was born on Feb. 13, 1925, near Kansas City, Kan. When he was about 7 years old, his family moved to Argentine, a segregated suburb.

Latinos were not allowed on school buses, so Santillan and his siblings had to walk four miles to school.

After ninth grade he dropped out to help his family and worked at an ice plant.

On Dec. 7, 1941, Santillan was at a pool hall with his friends. Someone asked him if he had heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Santillan remembered asking, "What is Pearl Harbor?"

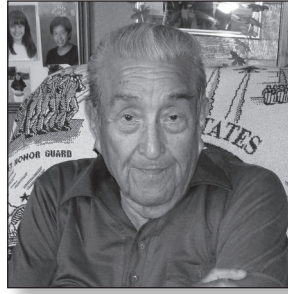
He was on active duty in the Navy about a year later. He was made a gunner's mate and assigned to the USS *Thorn*, which helped to protect the resupply convoys crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He later served on the USS *Sarasota* in the Pacific and saw action off the coast of New Guinea.

Santillan was discharged on Jan. 16, 1946, as a gunner's mate third class. His decorations include the Philippine Liberation Medal and the Good Conduct Medal.

When he returned home, he took college courses in typing, math and English.

In 1947, he married Rachel, and they had four children.

Interviewed on June 17, 2010, in Kansas City, Kan.



Jesus Soto

Interviewed by Nancy De Los Santos

World War II provided many frightening memories for Jesus "Joe" Soto, but it also gave him a sense of pride for his achievements as a U.S. Marine.

Soto was 20 years old in 1940 when he enlisted in the Marine Corps and was assigned to the USS *New Orleans*.

One of his most frightening recollections was the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. "I was shining my shoes that morning before breakfast, and the loudspeakers sounded," Soto said. Five minutes later, Japanese aircraft zoomed overhead.

Soto fought in several other Pacific battles, including the 1942 Battle of Tassafaronga, where a torpedo struck his ship, killing 135 men. He suffered a head injury.

Soto was born in El Paso, Texas. He was an only child, and he grew up with his Spanish-speaking grandmother, mother, and stepfather. When Soto was 7, his family moved to Los Angeles to look for work.

One day, Soto walked past a Marines recruiting station. He loved the uniform, so he signed up.

He was discharged from the Marine Corps as a sergeant in 1946 and attended Woodbury University in Burbank, Calif., for two and a half years.

Soto had married Otilia Macias in 1943, and after the war he worked at an advertising agency.

Interviewed on June 8, 2009, in Alhambra, Calif.



John Valls

Interviewed by Liliana Rodriguez

Dec. 8, 1941, forever changed John Valls.

The Laredo, Texas, native was 16 when he heard President Franklin D. Roosevelt ask the U.S. Congress for a declaration of war against Japan. He marched straight to the Army recruiting post. They said he was too young to sign up, but two years later Valls was drafted and assigned to the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion.

But war wasn't what he thought it would be. The first time he faced a German soldier, "I froze. I couldn't kill him." The German surrendered, and Valls later told his sergeant that he couldn't bring himself to shoot. "All he told me was, 'Don't worry, son, next time you won't ...'" Valls said. "And he was right. From then on, it was hell."

The memories haunted him. Valls dug holes to sleep in, and he survived on a few packets of food every day. He robbed German soldiers of their knives and watches. "I knew it was wrong, and I'm ashamed."

Valls was discharged on Feb. 26, 1946, at Fort Dix, N.J., as a private first class. That November, he married Gladys Valls, and they had five children. In 1950, Valls graduated from Baylor University with a business degree.

Interviewed on March 6, 2010, in Laredo, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: WWII



Roland Vela

Interviewed by Raquel C. Garza

G. Roland Vela was delivering newspapers on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

He enlisted in the U.S. Navy in June 1945 and was stationed at the U.S. Naval Ammunition and Submarine Net Depot in Seal Beach, Calif., where he served on the USS *Makinsaw*, a tug boat. Seaman 1st Class Vela was discharged in July 1946. He was 18.

Vela was born in 1927, in Eagle Pass, Texas. His parents, Marcial Vela Bermea and María de Guadalupe Múzquiz de la Garza Vela, taught him and his brother, Cesar, to value what they had and to work for what they didn't have.

They lived in San Antonio, where his father worked as a clerk and his mother was a homemaker.

Vela remembered that in elementary school students had to speak only English. "If you spoke Spanish, you would be punished," he said.

After his honorable discharge, Vela returned to San Antonio. By 1963, he earned a doctorate in microbiology and biochemistry and married Emma Lamar Codina Longoria. They had four children. He later became a professor of microbiology at the University of North Texas in Denton and served on the Denton City Council. He also wrote historical biographies of Latino leaders.

Interviewed on Sept. 15, 2007, in Austin, Texas.



Joe Villa

Interviewed by Amanda Abrigo

Joe Villa was born in Yorktown, Texas. His mother died when he was a baby, and his father did his best to care for him and his three other children.

Villa was drafted into the Army on Dec. 6, 1945, a few months after the end of World War II. He was assigned to Company B of the 397th Military Police Battalion and worked as a railroad security guard, protecting supplies and food for the soldiers and the poor in Nuremburg, Germany.

Villa says he was one of the few Latinos in his division, and he says he never felt discriminated against.

After a year in the military, soldiers were allowed a three-day weekend. Villa and his friend chose the "Eagle's Nest," Adolf Hitler's mountaintop hideaway.

As Villa and his friend explored the home, they got lost, and they didn't make it back to the truck that was to take them back. Villa and his friend hitchhiked their way back home.

In February 1947, Villa was discharged from the Army as a private first class. He returned to his home in Yorktown, Texas, and returned to school. He also married Jamie Rodriguez, and they had four children.

Interviewed on July 24, 2010, in Yoakum, Texas.



Ramón Villa Sr.

Interviewed by Amanda Abrigo

Having grown up in rural South Texas during the Great Depression and having lost his mother when he was only 10, Ramón Villa Sr. knew hardship.

But he was unprepared for the struggles he faced in World War II as part of the U.S. Army's 200th Coast Artillery Regiment, being captured by the Japanese and forced on the Bataan Death March. Villa endured more than three years as a prisoner of war.

Born on Jan. 9, 1920, in Donna, Texas, Villa joined the Army in April 1941. After training, Villa was assigned to Clark Army Air Field in the Philippines. That base was attacked by Japanese forces on Dec. 8, 1941. After several weeks, American and Filipino troops were forced to retreat to the Bataan Peninsula, where they held on for three months.

"We had no more rations, and the equipment we had was going bad. The artillery jammed. We were waiting for reinforcements," he said.

The troops surrendered in April 1942 and were forced to march from Bataan to Camp O'Donnell. Thousands died from brutal treatment, hunger and disease. Villa was a prisoner of war in Japan when the war ended more than three years later; he had lost about 70 pounds.

He was honorably discharged at the rank of corporal on Feb. 23, 1946, and returned to Texas. His advice to young people: "I would say, don't give up."

Interviewed on July 20, 2010, in Hallettsville, Texas.



Manuel Avilés-Santiago, M.A.

Upon completion a Ph.D., Manu has accepted a position of Assistant Professor, Communication & Technology, School of Letters & Sciences, Arizona State University Polytechnic Campus

My entrance in the program was very peculiar. I received a rejection letter from a famous journal accompanied with a job offer from the special editor of the Journal, Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez.* After that I had one of the most incredible experiences a graduate student, research assistant, and future scholar could've had.

Being part of the VOCES Oral History Project allowed me to understand the importance of intervening in history and channeling the voices of those who have been ignored by hegemonic (mainstream) narratives of war. In spite of the discourse that speaks of a war as a universal experience, after interviewing more than two dozen Latino veterans from WWII, Korea and Vietnam, the war experience should be considered —and understood —in a very individual and subjective way.

I learned that war is more than empirical data; war is the song that triggers memories, the letters that never got home, the friend who was lost, the brother who never returned home, the orders in English, the prayers in Spanish. Those are the details I am honored to rescue and share with those who are willing to re-write history.

*Rivas-Rodriguez was the editor for a special Latinos and Media issue of the Latino Studies journal, published in 2011.

Manuel Aviles Santiago has served as a research assistant from 2009 until the present.



Angel Zavala

Interviewed by Daniel Reyes

Angel Zavala was drafted on Jan. 20, 1943, and went to Keesler Army Airfield in Biloxi, Miss., for basic training in South Dakota. In 1944, Zavala reported to the European Theater of Operations.

As part of the Army Air Corps, he was assigned to the 845th Bombardment Squadron of the 489th Bomb Group and served as a radio operator. He learned to use Morse code and cryptography.

Zavala's squadron helped bomb Normandy before the D-Day invasion, and he was granted 30-day leave after the successful operation. While in the United States, he married Guadalupe Rincon, an old friend.

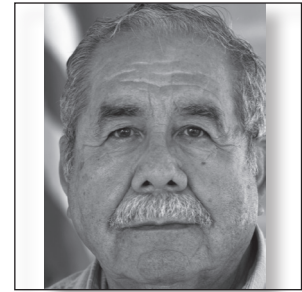
Zavala was then sent to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese.

In August 1945, Zavala was on the USS *Pondera* en route to Okinawa when the war ended. He was discharged on Dec. 3, 1945, as technician fifth class. His decorations include a European Theater of Operations Medal with four Bronze Stars. Zavala and his wife started a family in Taylor, Texas. They had nine children.

Zavala was born on May 20, 1922, to Zeferino Zavala and Monica Almendarez Zavala.

After the war, Zavala worked at a furniture store for 45 years until his retirement.

Interviewed on June 6, 2008, in Taylor, Texas.



William Zermeno

Interviewed Elizabeth Blancas

A sense of duty inspired William Zermeno to leave his beloved family and his hometown of Houston. The Zermeno family shared a very close bond, but he felt military service was expected of him because his cousins and his brothers had served in World War II. "I never gave it a second thought," he recalled.

"My parents didn't think too much about it since the war was already over," Zermeno said. "I [was] not going to get killed."

Zermeno was born on Dec. 2, 1927. His father always worked at a railroad, even throughout the Great Depression, so the family didn't worry about eating.

He served in Georgia and North Carolina in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. His duties included caring for soldiers injured in the war. When the draft was ended, he decided to re-enlist in the regular Army. When his time of service ended, he was discharged in Augusta, Ga.

He returned home in 1947 and married Estella Martinez Zermeno, in 1948. They used the G.I. Bill to buy a house, and he worked as a clerk at the U.S. Postal Service.

To Zermeno, military service was a great experience.

Interviewed on July 20, 2010, in Goliad, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: KOREA



Pete Castillo

Interviewed by Raquel C. Garza

Pedro “Pete” Castillo was born in Austin, Texas, on Feb. 23, 1931, and he felt he was pretty seasoned in the art of surviving adversity by the time he entered the U.S. Army in 1952.

Castillo lived in what he called “the shack,” a small home with a tin roof that his father built with pieces of wood and scrap metal. The boys picked cotton to help with expenses, and Castillo often missed school.

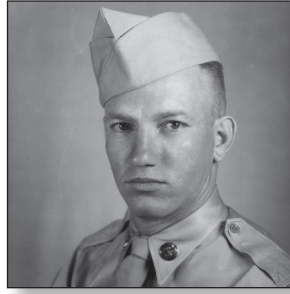
When he was in school, he faced prejudice from his teachers. Some would not permit him to speak Spanish or he would be spanked. He also saw other Latinos harassed just because they were eating tacos.

In high school he was recruited into the Texas National Guard, and he left after an attack of appendicitis. On his 21st birthday, he was drafted into the Army. He was assigned to the 424th Ordnance Company at Fort Sill from 1951 to 1953, learning about different types of ammunition and which kinds were most effective in different scenarios.

In 1953, Castillo transferred to the Army Reserve until 1957. He was discharged as a private first class.

After his service, he married Maria de Jesus Herrera in 1953, and they had 11 children.

Interviewed on Jan. 19, 2010, in Austin, Texas.



Gabriel Garcia

Interviewed by Cheryl Smith Kemp

Gabriel Garcia left Mercedes, Texas, for U.S. Army basic training in 1952. It was the first time he had ever left his hometown but he was excited to see the world. A book about World War II paratroopers helped inspire him to enlist.

Garcia served in both the Korean and Vietnam wars, but he never saw combat. He was assigned to the 504th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, and performed many administrative duties. He also served in the Air Force. From 1953 to 1960, he was stationed in bases throughout the United States, and in Italy, Vietnam, Germany and Spain.

He was discharged from the Air Force on Sept. 1, 1979, as a chief master sergeant. His decorations included a Vietnam Service Medal, a Bronze Star, and a Joint Services Commendation Medal, and two Meritorious Service Medals.

He returned to Texas, earned an associate’s degree, and he bought a home. He married Amelia Flores, and they had four children.

His advice to younger Latinos: “One thing we can do is continue to strive to acquire formal learning to the extent that we’re able to, because it’s certainly not going to hurt.”

Interviewed on Jan. 15, 2010, in Austin, Texas.



Arnolando Gutierrez

Interviewed by Brenda Menchaca

The Korean War proved to be a turning point for Arnolando D. Gutierrez. He believed the U.S. Army gave him the best education possible.

He was born in 1932. When he turned 20, he received his draft letter. It was Dec. 19, 1952. Gutierrez said the year and nine months he spent in the Army brought a lot of changes in his life.

After basic training at Camp Chaffee, Ark., he went to Wheeled Vehicle Mechanic School, where he learned how to modify and assemble military vehicles.

The Army offered him clothes, enough food and a place to sleep. He acquired mental maturity as well as physical skills. He said he learned about life through the process of harmonizing with 12 soldiers from different backgrounds and building a team.

But he also had bad Army memories. He recalled how the war devastated South Korean lives. He saw civilians dying of hunger, suffering in the cold weather, and dying of disease. He remembered Koreans hanging onto the Army’s tanks and begging for chocolate and food.

In 1954, Gutierrez was discharged as a staff sergeant. He eventually became a teacher and worked for 21 years, motivating his students and trying to guide them onto paths better than his own.

Interviewed on March 6, 2010 in Laredo, Texas.



Yazmin Lazcano, M.A.

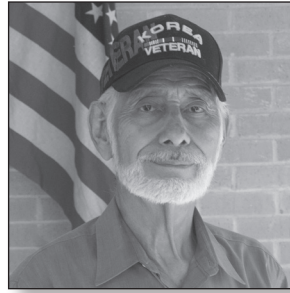
Ph.D. candidate in Rhetoric, Arizona State University

My political awareness began in 2000, in Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez's J335 course, Community Journalism. As an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, I learned about life during World War II through Mexican-Americans' firsthand accounts. I had not heard these stories while in high school in El Paso, Texas. The experience of hearing the stories of these men and women, and especially the manner in which they told their stories — with grace, humility, and humor — still moves me today.

Years later, as staff member for the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project, I mentioned my interest in the role memory played in the stories we documented. Dr. Rivas-Rodriguez responded, "Sounds like a dissertation topic." Today, as I work through my Ph.D. program at Arizona State University, I still cultivate the seeds planted by both the oral histories and Dr. Rivas-Rodriguez's passion.

Chicano anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's argument that ethnographers are "positioned subjects who have a distinctive mix of insight and blindness" truly became meaningful to me because of the Project. In my case, cultural insight began to replace cultural blindness when I heard the oral histories we gathered. I'm grateful I was involved with the Project. I'll continue to fight against cultural blindness with my work.

Yazmin Lazcano was the project manager from 2004 until 2005



Benny Martinez

Interviewed by Tina Hughes

Benny Martinez, who was born on Jan. 4, 1934, in Goliad, Texas, was one of 11 children of Placido L. and Paula C. Martinez, also natives of Goliad.

Martinez decided to join the Army to escape the racial prejudice he saw all around him. He was assigned to the 564th Quartermaster Company, 55th Quartermaster Battalion, in the 8th Army, and served in Korea.

Martinez said he experienced only one skirmish in Korea before being discharged on June 23, 1958. He transferred to the Army Reserves Medical Corps, where he served until 1962. His decorations include the Good Conduct Medal, the Far East Campaign Medal, and the Marksman Award.

When he returned home, he married Helen Orzabel and they had two children.

He also became a nurse. His knowledge enabled him to care for his wife, mother, and mother-in-law.

Later he earned an education degree from the University of Houston. After nursing, he became a Houston school teacher of math, social studies, and music. His efforts to help others were recognized when Houston declared Aug. 27, 1997, and Harris County declared Feb. 17, 1998, to be Benny C. Martinez Day.

He moved back to Goliad in 2001 and practiced nursing three years before retiring.

Interviewed on July 20, 2010, in Goliad, Texas.



Neftali Zendejas

Interviewed by Raquel C. Garza

Neftali L. Zendejas had always wanted to work with aircraft. When he was a child, he saw a Lockheed P-38 Lightning parked at an airfield, and it inspired him to join the Air Force.

Zendejas enlisted on Feb. 11, 1948. In 1951, Zendejas went to Japan to serve in the Korean War, which began in June 1950. He was assigned to the 27th Fighter-Escort Wing.

After his time in Korea, he was promoted to staff sergeant and sent back to Texas to serve on bases in Austin and El Paso. He also served at Castle Air Force Base in California. He was trained in aircraft welding and jet mechanics.

In 1966, he was sent to Vietnam to help repair damaged aircraft. Sometimes, he recalled, the planes would return with the bodies of dead military personnel still inside. Zendejas remembered turning over their dog tags. "I'd go and flip the names, and [there were] a lot of Mexicans," he said.

He was discharged on Jan. 31, 1969, as a master sergeant. His decorations included the Good Conduct Medal.

He moved his family to Austin, worked at the U.S. Postal Service, and helped veterans with paperwork, job searches, and education benefits.

Interviewed on Jan. 15, 2010, in Austin, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: VIETNAM



Eugenia Alemán

Interviewed by Joshua Barajas

As a “trailing spouse,” whose husband was stationed in the Philippines during the Vietnam War, Eugenia “Jennie” Gonzalez Alemán did what she could. She wrote letters for wounded American servicemen.

Alemán was born on Aug. 21, 1940, in Rosebud, Texas, and always tried to make herself useful. She often helped fill out immigration applications for the migrant workers looking for work.

She and John Alemán married in 1966, as he prepared to serve as an Air Force officer, and as war raged in Vietnam.

When he was sent to the Philippines, she decided to follow him. She tried to get a job at Clark Air Base. When that didn't work, she joined the Catholic Women of Clark Club, and began comforting wounded soldiers.

She lived there for two years until the couple reunited and returned to Texas in 1968. They lived in Waco and later in Houston, looking for work and a home.

“It was sad,” she said. “It was very hard [adjusting].”

Despite the obstacles they faced, the Alemáns were not inspired to join the Chicano civil rights movement.

“I've pushed to get ahead, but I don't believe in threatening people,” she said. “I just believe in asking for what rights I have.”

Interviewed on April 8, 2011, in Houston, Texas.



Richard Brito

Interviewed by Manuel Avilés-Santiago

In 1966, Richard Brito saw his chance to help defend his nation through U.S. Army service in Vietnam.

Racial discrimination was pervasive when he was growing up in Brownsville but it was an unspoken topic, Brito said. He recalled his family, however, didn't suffer much because his father was a prominent businessman.

Brito completed basic training at Fort Ord in California and advanced training at Fort Eustis in Virginia. He graduated from Officer Candidate School in 1967. Soon after finishing, he joined the 8th Special Forces Group in the Panama Canal Zone. After a year he was sent to Vietnam and was assigned the position of Chief, Military Operations Division for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in Nha Trang, Vietnam.

Brito was discharged from the Army on July 23, 1970, as a captain. His decorations include a Bronze Star, an Army Commendation Medal, Master Parachutist Badge, Vietnam Service Medal with one Bronze Service Star and a Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal.

Brito returned to the University of Houston and earned an economics degree. He later earned an MBA. He also served in the Texas Army National Guard until 1994, when he retired as a colonel.

Interviewed on Jan. 21, 2010, in Austin, Texas.



Fred Castañeda

Interviewed by Manuel Avilés-Santiago

Fred Castañeda served in the U.S. Army for four years and fought with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam. When he returned to an angry American society who rejected him as a soldier, he rejected his nation's offer to make him an American citizen.

“I thought about that and said, ‘If this is the way you're going to be treated, I'll go back to Mexico,’” Castañeda said.

In 1970, he had been a Mexican citizen attending a prestigious university on a scholarship. When the award ran out, he was drafted into the Army, where he trained as a paratrooper. He and other paratroopers were reassigned to replenish the battle-weakened 23rd Infantry Division, and he served in the 196th Light Infantry Brigade as a machine-gunner.

He served as an Army recruiter from 1972 to 1974 and was discharged in 1974 as a sergeant. He moved to California, earned a bachelor's degree from Loyola University, and then returned to Mexico, where he earned an MBA. He later studied for a doctorate in international business.

He also worked for IBM for 31 years. But the war never left him, and he said the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder strained many of his relationships.

Interviewed on Jan. 18, 2010, in Austin, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: VIETNAM



Armando Garcia

Interviewed by Frank L. Hernandez

In August 1945, Armando O. Garcia and his family gathered around the radio and listened to the news: The United States had just dropped an atomic bomb on Japan.

Although the destruction took place far away, it was a significant event for the 8-year-old boy in Marfa, Texas.

He came from a poor family with no access to college funds. He knew he had two options after high school: Enter the workforce or join the military.

Garcia enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves in March 1955. He was called to active duty in September 1956, and he served in Germany in 1956 and Hawaii in 1960. In 1964, Garcia was shipped to Southeast Asia. But he was never stationed in Vietnam. He served in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos with several units, including the 2nd Armored Division and the 25th Infantry Division.

Garcia was an aerial observer on a helicopter, helping plot enemy positions in the three countries neighboring Vietnam. He also served as a translator after taking a crash course in the Thai language before his deployment.

Garcia was discharged in 1985 as a staff sergeant. After his discharge, he worked in the insurance industry and got married.

Interviewed on Aug. 3, 2010, in Alpine, Texas.



Richard Geissler

Interviewed by Frank Trejo

Passion for community activism shaped the life of Richard Geissler Jr.

Born in White Plains, N.Y., Geissler moved with his father to Venezuela when he was just six months old. The elder Geissler, a World War II veteran who served under Gen. George S. Patton in North Africa, was an engineer and helped build high-rises in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas.

Geissler's father died when Geissler was 15 years old, and he never knew his biological mother, so he moved in with relatives in Scarsdale, N.Y.

Geissler joined Volunteers in Service to America. Geissler said VISTA members were sent wherever their skills were needed. Geissler went to Laredo, Texas, because he could speak Spanish.

He helped organize a strike by Laredo waitresses who were demanding a fair wage from their employers. He also helped stage blockades at a border-crossing to prevent Mexican laborers from crossing into Texas and breaking strikes.

When he was drafted during the Vietnam War, he filed to be a conscientious objector.

He was assigned to be a cook and was eventually honorably discharged as a specialist.

He had one child with Donna McKelroy and six children with Jacqueline Frank.

Interviewed on March 6, 2010, in Laredo, Texas.



Juan Carlos Gonzales

Interviewed by Valerie Martinez

As a child, Juan Carlos Gonzales felt destined to fight for his country. He grew up in a home where his father and four uncles were World War II veterans, and he felt that patriotism and strategic instinct ran in his blood.

Gonzales, who grew up in Sonora, Texas, enlisted in the Army in 1965 and fought for two years in Vietnam. He was first assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade. When he arrived in Saigon, he was reassigned to the 1st Cavalry Division. "I was in the rear," he wrote later, "and I hated it."

He convinced an officer to reassign him to the Pathfinders. He was sent to the 11th Pathfinder Company, 11th Aviation Group, 1st Cavalry Division.

In 1968, everything changed for Gonzales. The year began with the Tet Offensive, a surprise North Vietnamese attack on U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. During one battle, he distinguished himself by rescuing some wounded soldiers.

Gonzales returned to the U.S. on May 5, 1968, and taught at the Pathfinder school. He was discharged a few months later. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with V for Valor, a Purple Heart and the Air Medal.

In 1969, Gonzales married Lilia Perez and had two children.

Interviewed on July 30, 2010, in Austin, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: VIETNAM



Alex Hernandez

Interviewed by Rudy Padilla

“Baby killer!” were the words Alex Hernandez heard when he returned to the United States after 19 months in Vietnam, and he remembered it was a small boy, about 4 or 5 years old, who yelled them.

Hernandez was born on April 6, 1952, in Kansas City, Kan. Hernandez said he always felt he was a leader. He was the oldest of nine children.

After high school graduation in 1970, he decided to follow in the family tradition and join the Army.

Hernandez was sent to Vietnam, where he worked on helicopters all day and sometimes at night.

Hernandez was assigned to Battery A, 2/20 Aerial Rocket Artillery Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. He was later moved to the 238th Aerial Weapons Company. From there he went to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, an air cavalry unit. Finally, he was assigned to F Troop, 8th Cavalry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

Hernandez was discharged in 1973. His decorations included the Vietnam Campaign Medal, Army Commendation Medal with oak leaf, and the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry.

Back in the United States, Hernandez joined the Missouri National Guard and became an officer. He retired from Army Reserves in 2000 as a major.

He married and had two children.
Interviewed on June 17, 2010, in Kansas City, Kan.



Hernan Jaso

Interviewed by Tina Hughes

Hernan Jaso was born in Refugio, Texas, on Aug. 29, 1944, to Apolonio and Odilia Jaso. He had four siblings. His father was a World War II veteran who served under Gen. George S. Patton in France and Germany. His mother was a homemaker and seamstress.

Jaso finished Refugio High School at 17 and attended Victoria Junior College for two years before he was drafted into the Army in 1965 and served in Vietnam.

After basic training, he married Julie Hernandez, and then was sent to Fort Eustis in Virginia to learn how to repair aircraft. He was assigned to the 604th Transportation Company, 14th Transportation Battalion, which was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division.

He left Vietnam in 1967 and returned to Texas to finish his Army service.

After the war, he worked at DuPont as a lab analyst and as a special investigator for the Texas attorney general. He later earned a degree in criminal justice.

He also entered public service. After Jaso's friends helped him register all the eligible Latino voters in town, he served as mayor of Goliad three times, from 1977 to 1982.

He also served on educational advisory boards and persuaded the Texas Legislature to make the University of Houston-Victoria a four-year institution.

Interviewed on July 20, 2010, in Goliad, Texas.



Mercurio Martinez

Interviewed by Frank Trejo

Although Mercurio Martinez Jr. never served in the armed forces, both he and his hometown of Laredo, Texas, always respected and admired the veterans from World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

Martinez was a child during World War II and a teenager when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950.

In 1959, he graduated from St. Mary's University with an accounting degree. In 1960, shortly after his first child was born, Martinez was ordered to report for a physical in San Antonio. But he was excused because of President John F. Kennedy's executive order exempting married men with children from service.

He later became a business instructor, and he said he could tell who was a veteran and who wasn't because of the dedication and importance the GI Bill recipients placed on education. His students eventually included veterans from the Vietnam War.

Martinez continued to live most of his life in Laredo and in San Ygnacio, Texas, where his family had lived since the 1700s. He had six children.

He continued his family's legacy of public service by serving on the Laredo Community College Board of Trustees and as a regional director of the Small Business Administration during the Carter Administration.

Interviewed on March 6, 2010, in Laredo, Texas.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT: VIETNAM



Eddie Morín

Interviewed by Henry Mendoza

In 1965, after two weeks at sea aboard the USS *Gordon*, Eddie Morín heard the captain declare over the loudspeaker that he and his fellow soldiers were headed to Vietnam.

Morín was a part of the 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, and he was among the first group of U.S. combat troops to set foot in Vietnam.

Morín emulated his father, Raul Morín, who was a World War II veteran who later used his wartime experiences as a point of reference for activism.

The East Los Angeles native had been drafted in 1964.

In Vietnam, Morín worked as a rifleman and guard, and he helped to clear land so that some of the first bases could be built near Cam Ranh Bay. His unit also patrolled. Less than two years into his service, he was injured in a Viet Cong ambush. He spent 13 months in hospitals in the Philippines, Hawaii and the United States. His decorations include the Purple Heart and the Combat Infantry Badge.

Anti-war protests caused Morín to internalize his anger over the situation because he felt that he could not change it. He also struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder.

He was married twice and had two children.

Interviewed on June 9, 2010, in Los Angeles.



James Rendon

Interviewed by David Muto

James R. Rendon, who was born and raised in Laredo, Texas, gave up his last semester of high school to enlist in the Marine Corps.

Rendon enlisted on April 15, 1967, because he felt there were no other options for Latinos. He looked to the military for guidance and opportunity.

After basic training, Rendon was sent to Vietnam in December 1967. He was assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division.

Rendon faced a major scare on Feb. 22, 1968, when during street fighting, a B40 rocket came in through the window of a house he and two other Marines had entered. Rendon was wounded and was sent to Cam Ranh Bay, in South Vietnam.

Rendon was discharged on Dec. 26, 1972, as a corporal. His decorations include the Purple Heart and the Navy Achievement Medal.

He returned to Laredo and spent years struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In 1976, he married Rosalinda Garza Rendon, and they had two children.

He assisted Latinos as a way of fighting the prejudice he faced throughout his lifetime. He assisted with fundraisers to help send Laredo veterans to Washington, D.C., to view the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

Interviewed on March 6, 2010, in Laredo, Texas.



Juan Sanchez-Acevedo

Interviewed by Manuel Avilés-Santiago

For more than 45 years, Juan Modesto Sanchez-Acevedo carried a vivid memory of the Vietnam War. It happened moments before boarding the ship that would transport him to war and change his life forever.

"President Lyndon B. Johnson passed by to check on the troops and he asked me [where I was from]," Sanchez-Acevedo said. "Meeting the president is one of the greatest things I could have experienced in the war."

Sanchez-Acevedo was born into a large Puerto Rican family.

After school, he worked as a mechanic and a welder in Aguada, Puerto Rico.

On Nov. 3, 1965, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, and by the end of the year he was in training in North Carolina, where he first experienced cold weather, snow, and racial discrimination. "The white Americans thought they were superior just because we were Latino and didn't speak their language," he recalled.

He was assigned to the 512th Transportation Company and sent to Vietnam.

He said Sept. 2, 1967, was his unit's bloodiest day. His convoy was attacked, and at least three people were killed.

But the end of his tour was in sight. Three weeks later, he returned to Puerto Rico.

Interviewed on Dec. 31, 2009, in Aguada, Puerto Rico.

Project Testimonials

Brenda Sendejo, Ph.D.
Asst. Professor of Anthropology
Southwestern University
Georgetown, Texas



Working with the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project helped me to develop as an educator-scholar in numerous ways. Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez and Dr. Emilio Zamora gave me an opportunity to be a contributor to "Beyond the Latino War Hero." This was so very important in terms of giving me experience in writing and publishing a scholarly piece. I was also able to present research based on oral history interviews at scholarly conferences.

One of the most important things I took away from my work with the Project was how to effectively connect what we do as scholars with our commitment to working in our communities. Bridging the academy and community took the form of integrating oral histories into educational curriculum for local elementary schools, connecting young people with men and women of the WWII generation through school visits, public exhibits and symposiums and much more.

I learned of the importance of intergenerational projects through my involvement in the Project. I learned a great deal from my interactions with men and women of the WWII generation and established connections with such amazing people. These are the kinds of learning and life experiences I hope to pass down to my own students.

Brenda Sendejo coordinated educational outreach and exhibits in 2003-2004.

Valerie Martínez, M.A.
Doctoral Student in History
University of Texas at Austin

"You made me feel important." The late Mike Morado wrote these kind words to me after our interview for the VOCES Oral History Project during the summer of 2010 in Kansas City, Mo. Mr. Morado was a decorated World War II Army veteran who served in the European Theater in 1944. He and the many other Latino veterans and women who bravely served their country both overseas and on the home front made an incredible impact on me as a young scholar and as a Latina. I can confidently attest to the importance that my Project internship had on my intellectual and personal development.

Even though we were able to interview a few courageous women, either wives, relatives, or those working on the home front in wartime industry, unfortunately during my time with the project, we could not find women veterans to interview. As these unspeakably brave women form a vital part in the Latino/a World War II narrative, I felt a duty to them and to write about their specific experiences.

I thank Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez for the opportunity to intern with the Project. Most importantly, I thank all the men and women who honored me with their life stories.

Valerie Martinez was a summer intern in the summer of 2010.



Valerie Martínez with Mr. Morado, taken during interview, 2010.

High School Students Helping Keep History

VOCES Oral History Project not only chronicles the history and lives of U.S. Latinos and Latinas, but now also is helping shape the future.

In the summer of 2011, and 2012, VOCES has hosted high school interns taking part in the Work-Based Learning Program/Summer Youth Employment, a joint venture of the City of Austin and Travis County Health & Human Services and Veterans Services Department.

The student interns have been a boon for the Project. This summer,

the students are again finishing their chores quickly, keeping staff on its toes.

The summer internship program provides young people the opportunity to work in real-world work environments and develop not only work skills, but also confidence.

Among the diligent and hard-working young people who spent six weeks last summer at VOCES was Paul Saldaña, who now is a sophomore at Austin High School.

Saldaña, who also plays football and

is on his school's debate team, helped transcribe veteran interviews and organized database information for the project.

But he had a favorite task during his internship.

"I had the opportunity to speak with real life Latino vets," Saldaña said. "For example, I spoke to a vet who fought in World War II, Korea and Vietnam."

He said he would like to continue working on historical projects.



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