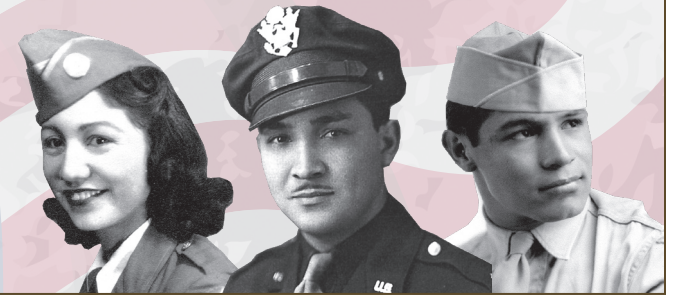


Insider NARRATIVES



U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project ★ University of Texas at Austin

Honor y Valor

A Decade of Chronicling a Legacy

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR: ONE-DAY NATIONAL CONFERENCE
OCTOBER 3, 2009, AUSTIN TEXAS**

Please join us as we celebrate a milestone—the Project's 10th anniversary—and look toward the future, expanding to include interviews from the Korea and Vietnam era.

The U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project is proud to host our 10-year-anniversary celebratory dinner and One-Day National Conference on October 2-3, 2009 at the AT&T Executive Conference Center on The University of Texas at Austin campus.

The one-day conference will focus on the Korean

War and Vietnam conflict as we explore how to proceed into the next phase of the Project. The Korean War will be discussed by Silvia Alvarez Curbelo of the University of Puerto Rico, Allan R. Millett of the University of New Orleans and Carlos Vélez-Ibañez of Arizona State University. The Vietnam conflict will be discussed by Mark Lawrence of The University of Texas, Kyle Longley of Arizona State University and Jorge Mariscal of the University of California at San Diego.



Silvia Alvarez
Curbelo



Allan Millett



Carlos Vélez-
Ibañez



Mark Lawrence



Kyle Longley



Jorge Mariscal

RESERVE YOUR SPACE TODAY FOR THIS HISTORIC EVENT



Tickets are \$50 per person. To reserve seats at the dinner, please call the Project Office at 512-471-1924.

Please be sure to tell us how many people will attend with you. Please note that space is limited, so reservations must be made as soon as possible.

To make hotel reservations, please call the AT&T Executive Conference Center Hotel, 512-404-3600, or Toll Free 1-877-744-8822.

Please mention you are attending our event when making reservations to receive a special rate. Hotel space is also limited, so reservations must be made as soon as possible.

THE PROJECT MAKES A BEELINE TO BEEVILLE

Beeville, located about 60 miles northwest of Corpus Christi, Texas has been getting a lot of attention from the Project lately.

Thanks to the Beeville Historical Society and Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9170, who sponsored the Project's trips, we've added 12 more WWII-era veterans to our ranks. The first trip to Beeville was made in January and the second was made in March.

Volunteers Frank Moron, Rudy Garcia and Richard Rodriguez were responsible for organizing the many volunteers, coordinating the interviews, and providing breakfast and lunch on the day of the interviews.

The Project is always appreciative of such enthusiastic support.

"Organizing a trip takes a lot of effort, so we're very grateful for all the work that they did," said Raquel Garza, project manager. "Having volunteers who were so enthusiastic and so aware of all the details really made it very easy for us."

Staff members Cheryl Smith Kemp, Marc Hamel and Garza made a trip in January, when 8 veterans were interviewed; Hamel and Garza made another trip in March when, 4 veterans were interviewed.

The Beeville volunteers helped the veterans and their families fill out all the forms and paperwork required by the Project—which, anyone who has had to fill out our pre-interview form will tell you, can be a daunting job!

"It is a long, detailed process that requires a lot of man

hours to accomplish," said Frank Moron in an email to the Project. "The cooperation and participation of other individuals and organizations is critical to the ultimate

success of such a project."

Moron added that his father, Concepción Moron, one of the veterans interviewed in January, inspired him to do the work.

Their family photos were among the more than 150 photos, medals and other memorabilia the Project was able to preserve during the trips, thanks to the veterans and their families who brought them to the sessions.

"It's great when we get so many historical photos and documents because they provide another window into the memories of the veterans," Hamel said.

Chris Garcia, field representative for Congressman

Ruben Hinojosa, was also present at each interview session to recognize the veterans' service to their country. Garcia presented each veteran with a flag that was flown over the United States capitol and a certificate of congressional recognition.

"It was something special to us," said Garcia of being able to participate in the interview sessions. "It's good that their story is told and that there's a longstanding record of that, so future generations who don't have access to it firsthand have access to it later."

To learn more about Frank Moron, who organized the Project's trips, please turn to page 4.



(from left to right): Ysaac Elizalde, Juan Baggio, Elias Chapa, Abelardo Garcia. U.S. Latino and Latina World War II Oral History Project at A.C. Jones High School in Beeville, TX on Saturday, March 21, 2009. (Photo by Marc Hamel)

For more information about organizing a trip to your area, please contact the Project office at 512-471-1924. We are still accepting interviews and tributes. The more support we have from the community, the more we can do to preserve the history of Latinos and Latinas of the WWII generation.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: GUILLERMO NICOLAS

(Courtesy of Guillermo Nicolás)



NAME: Guillermo Nicolas
BIRTHDATE: December 25, 1963
BIRTH PLACE: San Antonio, Texas
RESIDENCE: San Antonio, Texas

Richard Graw, development director for the College of Communication, introduced us to our newest volunteer, Guillermo Nicolás. As always, the Project needs funding to continue its work, and as we look to expand our scope, this becomes a more and more important component.

We're glad to have Guillermo's enthusiastic help as we continue in our mission to honor our Latino veterans by making their history available to all.

How did you begin your fundraising and volunteer efforts?

I think parents are key in instilling a "give back" mentality. I learned to give back because I watched my parents always give back and offer of themselves, their wallets and their hearts. My grandparents all did the same and set a wonderful example. All of us owe many, many debts of gratitude to many, many people and institutions. No one is self made—all of us had help from someone.

What have you learned from the volunteering process?

I learned the word "FOCUS." If I have learned anything from my 20 years volunteering in my community on over 12 boards and countless events and having served on all of them except one as vice president, president, vice chairman and chairman, is that in order to maximize my effect on the organization and mak[e] the most of my efforts and dollars is to focus on one or two organizations at a time and on one or two initiatives.

What has volunteering inspired you to do?

It has inspired me to always help, help, help as best I can. There is always a need and there must always be people to help.

What do you think about the work that the WWII Project does?

I think the project is crucial to bringing attention to the fact that we as Latinos in general participated in WWII and have not received the acknowledgement we deserve.

Why did you want to help raise funds for the Project?

I think it is a worthy cause and I want to put a stop to our people being ignored!

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

Because if we do not stand up and demand to be counted, no one will do it for us.

What do you think people will gain from volunteering?

A sense of accomplishment, of participating and of pride in having helped someone else.

What would you say to those who think they don't have the time, or anything to contribute?

I say that everyone has time and money to give. It's a matter of priorities. I believe either it's in you to give back or it's not. I strongly believe in "you reap what you sow!"

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: FRANCISCO “FRANK” C. MORON

(Photo by Marc Hamel)



NAME: Francisco “Frank” C. Moron

BIRTHDATE: July 1, 1950

BIRTHPLACE: Beeville, Texas

RESIDENCE: Beeville, Texas

Why did you decide to volunteer?

When I was growing up I would read all I could about WWII, and always with the same anticipation of coming across a Latino name, and it never happened. I would watch WWII movies with the same expectation and it never happened. I knew we had been there because of some of the stories I would sometimes pry from my dad and as I grew older I figured that if my dad had stories there were bound to be other dads with stories. These stories needed to be documented because it is part of the history of our community. We too have made contributions, and too many times the stories of these contributions are never told or documented outside the family, if at all.

Tell us a little bit about your volunteering experience.

After my initial meeting with the VFW post commander, we put together an excellent team that helped in the planning and coordination of this event. Each of us had specific duties assigned that played to our strengths, and this made it relatively easy to put all the pieces together when the time came. The cooperation between the individuals and organizations was great. I attribute our success to our ability to share the information, duties, planning and goals with each other.

What advice do you have for future volunteers?

Plan, Plan, Plan, Plan. Get your Historical Society, VFW, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans Association, U. S. Congressman, local newspaper and individual sponsors involved. The more planning that goes into such an endeavor the better organized it will be and the easier it will be on everybody involved.

Anything else?

DAD, this is for you!

In the fall of 2008, the Project office received a call from Frank Moron. He wanted the Project to come to Beeville for interviews and he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

We originally planned to go to Beeville as part of another trip to Edinburg, Texas. When the Edinburg funding fell through, we didn't think we would make it; however, Frank went to work to make sure the stories from his hometown would be preserved.

We're thankful for all of his hard work and we hope he'll have the energy to continue when it comes to documenting the stories of later generations of veterans.

How did you first hear about the Project?

I believe I was watching a program on Latino WWII veterans on PBS, and as the credits were scrolling by, I noticed the Latino/Latina WWII Oral History Project credit and immediately wrote it down and went to my computer and Googled it.

What came up on the website really caught my attention. The more I explored the Web site, the faster my wheels turned. I had always wanted to record my dad's war experiences, and here I was looking at exactly what I wanted.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: HELEN JO G RAMIREZ, CAPT., RET.

(photo by Marcel Rodriguez)



NAME: Helen Jo G Ramirez, Capt., Ret.

BIRTHDATE: November 26, 1948

BIRTHPLACE: San Antonio, Texas

RESIDENCE: San Antonio, Texas

the Gulf War and other conflicts] and some of them were considered for the Project; I wanted to honor them.

Tell us a little bit about your volunteer experiences.

Seeing these elder veterans was an emotional and moving experience. Their personal histories of their war experiences presented a visual picture of their “theaters of operations” that cannot be captured by the History Channel; I heard it first-hand from them, and their historical perspectives were comprehensive and real.

Seeing some of them wearing their uniform was inspiring and patriotism swelled within me. Their sharing of photos and exchange of information was more than interesting, and being accompanied by their spouses, children and grandchildren or by a neighbor made it family.

Last year was the last year I provided counseling to our WWII veterans. I think about them. I miss them. I pray for them.

What do you think about being involved?

Being a small part of the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project has been inspirational, and it’s a warm experience as our WWII veterans are honored as they share their first-hand experiences and leave their historical documentaries to their children’s children. I appreciate being a volunteer for this project.

Do you have any advice for volunteers?

Anyone who has served in the military knows better than to volunteer! However, that is not the case here. Should you hear of the WWII World History Project, jump in and volunteer—you’ll be blessed!

In the last 10 years, the Project has made many trips to San Antonio to interview veterans. The staff at the Vet Center on Cypress Street has been more than helpful when we’ve called them looking for people to interview, as well as a place to set up.

These past few years that we’ve gone to San Antonio, Helen Ramirez—who served as a unit commander with the 217th Evacuation Hospital during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm—has always been the first to arrive, and always with a smile on her face.

We’re glad to have friends like Helen, who show up early, stay late and work hard to preserve these stories.

How did you learn about the Project?

I learned about the Project as an employee. [I’m a counselor] at the Vet Center, [and] we have “hosted” the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project.

Why did you decide to volunteer?

I chose to volunteer for a couple of reasons: I counseled WWII veterans [as well as veterans from Korea, Vietnam,

BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY



“We took away their sadness; we danced, we laughed, we talked. It’s good for them, if someone from their family sees that, they’ll say, ‘Hey, they’re remembered.’ ”

—Mrs. Maria Isabel Solis Thomas (above on right) about the Smithsonian exhibit



“I think it’s the most wonderful thing I’ve heard. I’ve been bragging about it and it made me feel very good. ”

—Mr. Sam Casarez, who served in the Merchant Marine, (above on the left)

Explore the exhibit online!
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater>

More than 4 million people visit the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History a year. And now, the Project share its images and video with them.

A new exhibit, “On the Water: Stories from Maritime America” will feature photos and quotes from two of the Project’s participants, Sam Casarez, who was in the Merchant Marine, and María Isabel Solís Thomas, who along with her sister, Elvia Solís, worked as a welder for the war effort.

“This is a great honor, it’s wonderful,” Solís Thomas said. “They’re good memories, beautiful memories. ... It’s a great honor to me, to my family, to my husband and all those boys who suffered so much. Especially those who never came back.”

The permanent exhibit opened on National Maritime Day, May 22, 2009, said Paula Johnson, a project director and curator at the museum.

“It is considered a ‘permanent’ exhibition, which means it will be on view for about 20 years here at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History,” said Johnson in an email to the Project. “The exhibition has been in the works for about 10 years.”

Solís Thomas and Casarez will be featured in a section of the exhibit titled “Answering the Call,” which focuses on emergency shipbuilding efforts and the role of the Merchant Marine in the world wars of the 20th century.

“One of our interpretive strategies has been to feature stories of real people throughout the exhibition—in this case people who worked in the shipyards where Liberty ships were built and others who served in the Merchant Marine during World War II,” Johnson said. “We want to be sure there are many voices in the exhibition, and when we searched online for oral history resources relating to World War II, we were thrilled to find your site.”

In the past, the Project has provided images to The Museo Alameda in San Antonio for an installation on Día de los Muertos. The Museo Alameda is the first formal affiliate of The Smithsonian Institution.

Of course, the Project’s images have also been viewed around the state as part of the “Images of Valor” exhibit that travels through Humanities Texas.

The Project is more than happy to provide the Smithsonian, as well as other institutions, with the photos and information.

“This is an important way for our Latino WWII-era stories to become better known,” said Project Director Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. “We were delighted to help the Smithsonian develop this exhibit in any way we could. The people there have treated our images with the utmost respect and enthusiasm.”

STAFF SPOTLIGHTS



Raquel Garza—PROJECT MANAGER

Raquel manages the Project, which means that no day is ever the same. She oversees our archives and digitization, manages payroll as well as special projects, such as the newsletter. Raquel graduated from The University of Texas at Austin in 2003, with degrees in Journalism and Spanish. Before joining the Project, she worked as a journalist. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Mexican American Studies.



Marc Hamel—VISUAL MEDIA COORDINATOR

Marc manages our extensive image archive, scans historic images and takes present-day portraits of the veterans. He earned his MA in Photojournalism at The University of Texas at Austin. Before joining us, Marc served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua, worked in the high tech industry and received his BS in Marketing and Advertising from Marquette University. Marc also works as a freelance photographer and multimedia producer. (Photos on this page courtesy of Marc Hamel, except of DiPiero-D'Sa)



Vernon Ip—WORK-STUDY ASSISTANT

Vernon is currently a junior at UT, majoring in Speech/Language Pathology. He joined the Project around September 2008. His duties include duplicating our archive files for transfer to the Benson Latin American Collection. He also assists with the digitization of our video interviews, adds contact information to our ever-growing database and occasionally mooches boxes from Jenn's Copies.



Melissa DiPiero-D'Sa—GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Melissa first began with the project by stepping in for last-minute newspaper design edits when the semester ended, and all the student workers disappeared. She also designed and co-authored the Project's book: *A Legacy Greater Than Words*. Melissa currently designs pieces such as this newsletter, as well as working freelance. She received an MA in Advertising from the University of Texas at Austin, and BA in Advertising from Michigan State University in East Lansing.



Cheryl Smith Kemp—STORY EDITOR

Cheryl Smith Kemp is the Project's Web editor. She has worked with us intermittently since 1999. Previously, she worked in journalism as an associate news editor at *The Austin Chronicle*; a staff writer for *County Magazine* and as a freelance writer in Dallas and Monterrey, Mexico, as well as interned at *The Wall Street Journal*. Before returning to school for a MA in Latin American Studies, she worked as a reporter at *The (McAllen) Monitor*.



INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Jessie Acuña

Interviewed: September 15, 2008, by Paul Brown
in Brownwood, Texas

A member of the 101st Infantry Regiment's Company B, Jessie Acuña's initial orders were relatively uneventful—after crossing the English Channel, he spent his days unloading rations in France.

That would soon change, as Acuña was sent to the frontlines of Berlin as part of the 2nd Division of the 3rd Army.

"You know what you were going to do, but the trouble is, you're not just going straight to the front lines," Acuña said. "You go by steps. The first place, you're just waiting."

The wait was made longer by the brutal cold and snow. "We weren't trying to push forward then, we were just standing still," Acuña said. "With the snow and the rain, the tanks couldn't move."

But as spring approached, the 2nd Division was on the move again, and Acuña still hadn't encountered the Germans. Now, much of his time was spent in foxholes.

However, Acuña's routine changed dramatically when he and about a half-dozen other men were sent on a scouting mission. On their return trip, Nazi soldiers appeared and Acuña and the other Americans were taken prisoner. They were sent to the German prison camp known as Stalag 2-A, where he was held for less than six months, he said.

Acuña's days helping his dad in the cotton fields of West Texas turned out to be his chance to leave Stalag 2-A, if only for hours at a time, as he worked in the nearby fields.

After about a month, word spread to those guarding the prisoners that the Russians were coming.

At night, Acuña and the others could see flashes of lights from canon fire as the Allies took Berlin.

"By the time we crossed to the American side, the war was over," said Acuña, who was officially discharged Dec. 3, 1945, having earned the rank of Private First Class.



Richard M. Bustos Sr.

Interviewed: February 14, 2006, by Paul
Zepeda in Bay City, Texas

As an adolescent in rural southeastern Texas, Richard M. Bustos Sr. endured a different kind of battle.

"On signs, you'd see 'No Mexicans' and 'No Blacks.' ... You couldn't drink water from the fountains. ... At restaurants, you had to go to the kitchen to get something to eat," said Bustos, who was born July 15, 1922, in Gulf, also known as Old Gulf, Texas.

Bustos cleaned and repaired Singer Sewing Machines before deciding to enlist in the Army at 18.

Bustos was sent to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to train, and was eventually assigned to the 38th Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division.

Bustos and his unit were shipped to Northern Ireland in October of 1943, to prepare for the Normandy invasion.

"I told my folks not to worry about me – just to pray for me," he said, adding that he didn't even write his family because he didn't want them to worry.

The 2nd Infantry landed on the beaches of Normandy June 7, 1944.

"All [you] could hear were guns," he said. "You could see a lot of soldiers on that beach. It was really bad."

On May 8, 1945, when the Allies formally celebrated the defeat of German Nazi forces, Private First Class Bustos was in Leipzig, Germany. He left Europe later that summer.

Back on Texas soil, the discrimination Bustos recalled from his childhood had not yet disappeared—he asked a taxi driver to take him to his parents' house in Bay City. The driver would not.

Bustos began trekking home, later catching a ride in the back of a milk truck.

He remained in Bay City, where in June of 1946 he married Cruz Morales. The couple had four children.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Natividad Campos

Interviewed: September 1, 2007, by Beatriz Guerrero
in El Paso, Texas

A restless Natividad Campos decided to volunteer for the Army at age 19.

"There was not much to do in [West Texas' Fort Davis,] the town I grew in," Campos told the Project in writing after his interview. "Besides[,] I was at the age when you look for adventure."

He even lied about his birthday, "saying I was one year older, so my father did not have to sign for me," he said.

Campos initially thought he'd be discharged within a short period of time. But then Pearl Harbor was attacked.

"It was a Sunday. I went to the barracks to smoke a cigarette. Everyone was around the radio and they tell me the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I said, 'Where is Pear Harbor?' I didn't even know where it was. They said, 'That's in Hawaii — that means we're at war.'"

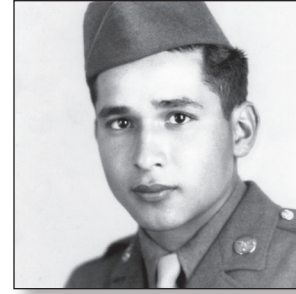
By 1942, Campos was shipped overseas to New Caledonia, as a member of the 112th Cavalry Regiment for nine months, spending a lot of time riding horseback on the island due to the rough terrain.

Campos was discharged August 18, 1945, having earned the rank of Private First Class. Upon his return to the U.S., he plowed right into the workforce, working for the El Paso, Texas-based Asarco, Campos said.

"They offered me a job at the lab and I took it. I told them, 'I don't know anything about chemistry. They said, 'Well you don't have to know, we'll teach you,' he said. "I thought, well I'm not a chemist but I'll make myself one."

Since the war, Campos has married twice and fathered six children. He offered these words for younger Latinos who may encounter prejudice:

"Don't let them discriminate you," Campos said. "Tell them I am just as good as you are or better."



Luis Garza

Interviewed: May 5, 2007, by Raquel C. Garza
in San Antonio, Texas

For Luis Garza, the worst thing that could have happened to him during World War II occurred before he even got overseas.

"I was playing ping pong, and my mom called and said my brother was missing. He was reported killed in action later that day," Garza said.

Garza, who'd been drafted with Pablo on Oct. 16, 1943, said they had taken a series of tests to decide their placement in the Army. After a change in requirements, Pablo was placed in the infantry and Garza went to officers' training school in California, where he found some lingering discrimination.

"Out of about 60 of us, I'd say maybe 20 of us passed the tests, and everyone there would be saying, 'How did that Mexican pass the test?'" he said.

After a little training, the government decided it had too many cadets, and eliminated all of the new ones.

As a result, Garza became a ball-turret gunner. He went to Mississippi for crew training, where he met the crew he would work with until after the war, as part of the 8th Air Force's 527th bomber squadron. When the training was done, they all went to Georgia to meet the plane that would fly them overseas. While they were waiting, Garza was informed of Pablo's death.

"It was really sad. We wrote each other every day," he said. "In fact, I still have the letter my brother sent me, the last letter that he ever wrote to me."

After missions in England and Belgium, Garza's overseas service ended in April of 1945. He was discharged in January of 1946. His only regret about the war as a whole is that it cost his older brother his life.

"He never had time to enjoy life. He worked right when he got out of high school, married, went into the service and died in the service," Garza said.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Jack Greenberg

Interviewed: April 26, 2004, by Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez
in New York, N.Y.

Jack Greenberg, director-counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, sparked in 1966 the creation of an organization that would fight for Latino civil rights.

Through his work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, it became apparent to Greenberg that the Mexican American legal community should be equipped to mount its own legal defenses.

“[T]here were very few Chicano lawyers who had been trained in Constitutional law ... or had any experience with civil rights,” Greenberg said. “Not a single one of them had a Federal Legal Report in their library, and were deprived and disadvantaged in different ways.”

In 1966, Greenberg contacted Pete Tijerina, a lawyer and one of the leaders of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in San Antonio, Texas. They soon spoke by phone, and Greenberg offered to help Tijerina and others to organize their own legal defense fund.

Greenberg set up a meeting with the Ford Foundation in New York to discuss the idea. The foundation was receptive, but required a detailed proposal. The Field Foundation agreed to fund its writing and research, Greenberg said.

Mike Finkelstein, hired by Greenberg to do fieldwork and write the report, proposed creating a five-lawyer office in San Antonio, which would work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund for five years, with Greenberg as a member of the lawyers’ board.

In 1968, the Ford Foundation granted the new Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund \$2.2 million to spend over the next five years on civil rights legal work for Mexican Americans. Decades later, MALDEF has tackled everything from school segregation to police brutality to the denial of due process.

“I wasn’t an empire builder. I just wanted to see that something was done,” Greenberg said.

Alberto Millan

Interviewed: July 15, 2004, by Robert Rivas
in Arenas, Valley, N.M.

During WWII, Alberto Millan tried to enlist in the Army at age 18, but was rejected for medical reasons. As a result, he stuck with mining, which wasn’t easy.

Born in August of 1930, Millan started laboring at the open-pit Kennecott mine in Santa Rita, N.M., near his hometown of San Lorenzo, when he was only 14. The second oldest of four children, he completed only eight years of school before going to work with his father to help support the family.

Millan was raised as a Catholic and a Democrat, and his mother was very involved in their local parish, San Lorenzo Catholic Church. He grew up speaking Spanish in his home, but learned English at school.

He was no stranger to hard work—while still attending school, he worked in the fields plowing hay, driving horses and weeding vegetables for 75 cents an hour. Once he started at the mine, he got \$5.10 an hour.

In addition to driving 275-ton trucks for the local Kennecott Copper Corporation mine, Millan was a union leader for the Mine and Smelter Workers of the AFL/CIO, eventually rising to the position of chairman of the union’s grievance committee. He says he negotiated several concessions for workers, including higher wages, better working conditions and insurance benefits.

He also says he fought for the workers to be able to listen during their lunch break to Spanish-language music, which radio stations were starting to play at the time.

Millan married Concha Gonzales in 1952. Together they had six children: four sons and two daughters.

Having lived the tough life of a miner, Alberto Millan didn’t want his oldest son Robert to follow in his footsteps. So when Robert informed him he wanted to be a miner and a union leader, Millan told him no.

Perhaps his decision to dissuade his son stemmed from a memory shared during his interview. Millan recalled receiving a terrible call from one of the mines, informing him that his father was sick. By the time he got to the mine, his dad was already dead from a heart attack. It was right as the whistle announced the beginning of the workday: 7:30 a.m.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT

Raymond Muñiz

Interviewed: June 25, 2006, by Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez
in Corpus Christi, Texas

When Pearl Harbor was hit on Dec. 7, 1941, Raymond Muñiz was still in high school. His three older brothers, Rudy, Reynaldo and Robert, were already in the service. At 17, he persuaded his mother to allow him to join, too.

Muñiz, who enlisted in 1942, attended basic training in San Antonio, Texas, and then went to Gulf Port, Miss., for aviation mechanic training. He served as a flight engineer, and ensured that plane engines didn't overheat and that fuel transfers between fuel tanks were successful. He also helped fly cargo planes from Dakar, Africa, to Calcutta, India.

Even though Latinos sometimes faced obstacles in the military, the war opened doors for them as well.

"World War II was the best thing to happen to Mexicanos because once they got back, they had the GI [Bill]," he said. "They could go to any school for free, GI rights."

Muñiz served almost four years in the war. He was discharged Feb. 18, 1946, seven days before his 23rd birthday, earning the rank of Master Sergeant.

When Muñiz returned to Corpus Christi, Texas, he expected to see greater equality for Mexican Americans. Unfortunately, he didn't find this to be the case.

It wouldn't be until the 1970s, when, among other things, his nephew Ramsey Muñiz ran twice for governor of Texas as a candidate of the Raza Unida party, that he would witness Latinos make serious challenges to the Anglo-dominant political power structure. Muñiz was a strong supporter of the Chicano movement.

"The Chicano movement should have been stronger," said Muñiz, who noted that his politics aren't conservative because, "I've seen too many things."

Muñiz was a member of the Air Force Reserves and served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He left the Reserves in 1972 at the urging of his wife, Elida Garza Muñiz.

Sixty years after his WWII service, Muñiz said life for his children and grandchildren is much better.

"I think they are going to be better off," he said. "For one thing, you make sure they start and stay in school. Education is a must."



Ismael Nevarez

Interviewed: July 21, 2008, by Paul Brown
in San Antonio, Texas

At 19, Ismael Nevarez left his tiny village in Puerto Rico and soon found himself aboard a ship, heading out to take part in the invasion of Japan.

"It was going to be tough because we were going to go to all corners of Japan," he remembered. "And that was going to be a massacre."

Five days into the journey, however, everyone assembled on the ship's deck for news that changed not only their mission, but the course of the war—atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Nevarez recalled.

In an instant, anxiety turned to exhilaration for him and the thousands of men aboard all those ships in the middle of the ocean.

But Nevarez's service wasn't over yet. Two days later, he was on Okinawa.

"Okinawa was all destroyed," he remembered. "Not a single tree was left standing."

In fact, the island was so destroyed their ship couldn't dock at the port and had to make an amphibious landing. Once on land, the troops collected supplies, establishing a supply depot for the entire Pacific area.

"Clothing, food, anything you could think of, we had it," Nevarez said. Six months later, he was headed back home to Puerto Rico.

"The agreement was the length of the war, plus six months," said Nevarez of the terms of enlistment back in September of 1944.

Nevarez's service in Okinawa was only the beginning of a distinguished, 21-year Army career.

Today, he and his wife, Olga Nieves Nevarez, live in San Antonio, Texas. Given the choice, Nevarez said he'd do it all again.

"Everybody has to realize that we live in a country that needs to protect itself," Nevarez said. "And you should honor your country no matter where you are."

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



Adolfo Roberto "Rusty" Ramirez

Interviewed: In 1984, by his son, David M. Ramirez
in Camarillo, California

Staff Sergeant Adolfo Roberto "Rusty" Ramirez remembers the sentiment he had while working his way up Omaha beach under machine gun and mortar fire.

"Oh, it was a terrible feeling. You are out there by yourself. It is almost a feeling of utter frustration because you know people are dropping right and left of you and you don't realize that maybe the next bullet might hit you. Here's buddies that you've trained with for over two and a half years, and I saw some, that on that attack, their lives were swept up in the span of a few seconds."

In spite of the murderous fire from Germany's 352nd Infantry Division, the survivors reorganized and captured the cliffs overlooking the beach, securing the road to Isigny, which enabled them to secure the beachhead.

More than 50 percent of the soldiers of Ramirez's 116th Regimental Combat Team were casualties that day.

Ramirez says every day of his life after June 6, 1944, was a blessing.

For his service, he earned multiple awards, including France's Croix De Guerre with Palm and three Bronze Battle Stars (for Normandy, the Falaise Gap and the Crossing of the Siegfried Line).

Also, Ramirez and the rest of the 121st Combat Engineers Battalion were awarded Four Presidential Unit Citations, a senior unit award granted to military units performing meritorious or heroic acts in the face of an armed enemy.

As the Army Chaplain said at Ramirez's funeral, "To those who fought, he was among the best loved of soldiers, an engineer, because they are the first in and the last out."



Isidro Ramos

Interviewed: July 13, 2007, by Jesse Herrera
in Austin, Texas

As his unit hit the beaches of Guadalcanal, 18-year-old Isidro Ramos witnessed the bloody price of war: dump trucks full of Marines' bodies "stacked up like wood," and Japanese soldiers littering the ground.

"War was terrible," Ramos said. "It's not like you see in the movies. It's a lot different."

When Ramos was drafted, he didn't know enough to be afraid, he said, adding that there was nothing for him at home and he was ready to see the world. He reported to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, and was then sent to train at Camp Roberts in San Miguel, Calif., where he received training as a rifleman.

Ramos recalled being issued winter clothes, which made him think he was going to Europe.

"Then all of the sudden, they told us to turn in all our winter clothes and they gave us a pair of khakis, a shirt and a bag with towels; not much," he recalled. "We got on the ship and we still didn't know where we were going."

The boat landed at New Caledonia, and soon shipped out to Bougainville, and after that, Manila. Ramos said he and his fellow soldiers weren't too scared while in the Philippines, maybe because they didn't really think about what was going on, he said.

Just when his unit was getting ready to head toward Japan, atomic bombs were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending the war.

Ramos was honorably discharged from the Army on Dec. 24, 1945, having earned the rank of Private First Class. He earned a Bronze Star and other awards for his service.

"It was an experience, but I don't think I'd like to go back," Ramos said. "It's rough. You live from one day to the next, and you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or even today. I'm still kind of sad thinking about those other guys, but what can I say? It happened to a lot of people."

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT

Ruben Ramos

Interviewed: August 4, 2007, by José Figueroa
in La Puente, California

At 5 o'clock on the morning on July 4, 1944, Ruben Ramos stood on the deck of the USS Denver and watched three squadrons of Navy Hellcat fighters take off from a nearby aircraft carrier to attack the airfields on the heavily fortified island of Iwo Jima.

This would mark the Americans' first attack on the island that would come to forever symbolize death, sacrifice, uncommon valor and the spirit of the Marines.

Ramos, who'd been serving as an electrician on the cruiser for about six months, recalls a strange incident occurring before the Hellcats' attacks.

"When we came up topside, we were extremely close to the island. ... As we were looking out towards the shore, we saw a Japanese man riding a bicycle across the air strip, [right before the aircraft started bombing] ... I've always wondered what the hell happened to that Japanese man riding across the damned air strip."

Ramos, a native of Indio, Calif., spent World War II in the South Pacific working as an electrician on two Navy ships. He would spend a week as part of the occupation force at Naval Base Yokosuka, which still remains a U.S. Naval headquarters in the Pacific.

In 1946, like thousands of other World War II soldiers, Ramos and his four brothers returned home safely to Indio. He returned to high school, graduated and attended junior college. He worked for the railroad as an electrician, and later married and had a daughter.

After the experience of war, death and hardship, Ramos began to think more about racial discrimination.

He noticed discrimination for the first time when he saw the treatment of African American sailors in the Navy.

"Blacks were segregated into their own units, and you never saw them," Ramos said. On ships like the USS Amsterdam, where Ramos served, African Americans worked only as cooks, or "mess men," and rarely interacted with white soldiers.

When he returned home after the war, he learned of the imprisonment of his Japanese neighbors in concentration camps while he served in the South Pacific. These experiences inspired him to think about the issue of racism.

He called the roundup and imprisonment of Japanese American citizens by their United States government, "the biggest mistake we ever made ... I had friends that lost everything, or they gave everything away or sold [their possessions] for a nickel on the dollar," he said.



Reynaldo Benavides Rendon

Interviewed: February 14, 2004, by Juan Martinez
in Lansing, Michigan

Reynaldo Benavides Rendon's military service began after being detained in Corpus Christi, Texas.

In 1942, Rendon had been picking cotton in Mississippi with his father and was headed back to Robstown to recruit workers when an immigration officer stopped and boarded the bus, asking its passengers for their documentation. Rendon, a Mexican citizen, did not have his.

Rendon said he was taken into custody, charged with not having legal papers and was incarcerated for more than a week.

While under arrest, he said he made friends with some Jehovah's Witnesses, who'd been detained because their faith prohibited their participation. They told Rendon that he could be released if he was willing to enlist.

Rendon said he was pretty sure military service would beat imprisonment.

Rendon enlisted in the Army and attended basic training at Camp Robinson in Little Rock, Ark.; then went to a series of other camps, including Camp Elis in Illinois where he received engineering training.

Rendon was sent to the European Theater, where he served as a truck driver in the Army's Company E, 1309 Engineer Regiment, also known as the Eager Beaver Regiment. He later served in the Philippines for a short time after the atomic bombs were dropped.

Rendon was honorably discharged at Texas' Camp Fannin on Oct. 22, 1945, having earned the rank of Technician Fifth Grade. He was sworn in as a U.S. citizen earlier that year, on May 10, in Paris, France, upon Germany's surrender.

After the war, Rendon worked briefly with his father on a farm, but then became a self-employed truck driver.

He married María de la Luz Lozano on August 7, 1949. The couple had one child, a son named Ricardo, who served in the Vietnam War.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT



José Rosales

Interviewed: August 4, 2007, by Markel Rojas
in San Antonio, Texas

José Rosales' family may not be from this country, but Rosales has always been an American.

Growing up in Campbellton, Texas, nearly an hour away from San Antonio, he was one of eight children in his family. He left school to help his father after completing the eighth grade.

"I was the oldest one in class, so I didn't enjoy that," he said.

After the eighth grade, Rosales "did field work, then [worked] at a gas company getting ready for the war."

Rosales was pumping gas when he heard a local WWI veteran, Morgan Burson, announce the attack on Pearl Harbor. Rosales, who didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, recalled that Burson said Rosales would soon have a lot to remember.

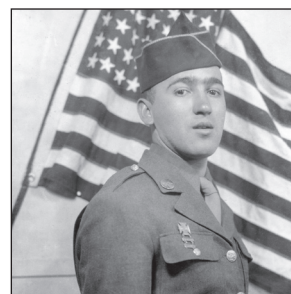
"He told me, 'You're going to learn to remember, if you come back, and I hope you do. The number, they're going to give you your own number and it's going to stick to you.'"

Rosales, who was drafted into the Army on March 19, 1943 at age 18, can still recite his serial number.

He began basic training at Texas' Fort Hood and was later sent to the European Theater as part of a support unit, working as a motor-vehicle parts clerk with the 836th Ordnance Depot Company in France, Belgium, Germany and Czechoslovakia. Rosales said that while he was in southern France working on tanks, he even managed to find some time to enjoy himself.

He wasn't having fun toward the end of the war, however, when he had to spend two weeks in the cold snow in Belgium—he caught pneumonia and was taken to a hospital.

Technician Fifth Grade Rosales was discharged from the Army on April 3, 1946. For his service, he was awarded a WWII Victory Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, American Theater Ribbon and EAME Theater Ribbon.



Noé Sandoval, Jr.

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

Just two short months after his high school graduation, Noé Sandoval, Jr. enlisted in the Army Enlisted Reserved Corps on July 26, 1944. He was only 17 when he signed up, and was called to active duty four days after his 18th birthday. His 37-year career with the United States military was beginning.

"I'll never regret it," Sandoval said. "I thought it was an obligation to join the service in World War II."

Sandoval was discharged from the Army on Feb. 6, 1946, at the rank of Private First Class. After returning home, he joined the El Paso Border Patrol. The people working there didn't want to hire him initially because he was Latino, but Washington forced the El Paso Border Patrol to accept him, says Sandoval, noting this was one of the few times he ever experienced discrimination.

He also remembers a time with his father-in-law when they were trying to launch a boat at a ramp. A man told them sorry, but he couldn't allow their boat in the water there. The man explained that it wasn't his decision; the people who owned the ramp wouldn't allow it because he was Mexican American. Sandoval didn't understand how he could have fought for this country in WWII and still be seen as somehow un-American.

Once again, Sandoval showed his devotion to his country when he requested active duty in 1962. He left his children and pregnant wife, Frances C. Sandoval, in November of that year to serve his country.

"I thought we were going to have war with Cuba," said Sandoval, who ended up on the other side of the world instead. After spending thirteen months in Korea, he returned home and remained active in the military until his retirement in early 1981. He says he was very proud to be a Latino officer in the Army.

"I've always loved military life," Sandoval said. "I wasn't happy until I was in uniform."

INTERVIEWS FROM THE PROJECT

Wilhelmina Cooremans Vasquez and Delfina Cooremans Baladez

Interviewed: July 9, 2005, by Brenda Sendejo
in the home of Mrs. Vasquez

In early 1942, when the United States was mobilizing to join World War II in Europe and the Pacific, sisters Wilhelmina Cooremans Vasquez and Delfina Cooremans Baladez were eager to help.

When Baladez applied to join the civil service, her typing test score was in the top three in her area and she was selected to work for the federal government in Washington, D.C. Fearing for his daughter's safety alone in a new city, however, her father wouldn't let her go.

So out of obedience, the two, then ages 16 and 18, turned down the Washington jobs. They did, however, drop out of San Antonio Technical and Vocational High School and take jobs at Kelly Air Force Base in their hometown of San Antonio. The guys there viewed them as a nuisance.

"The men were more resistant because it was something so new. It'd never happened before," said Vasquez, who noted that later, it got easier to get along.

Baladez was recruited by Boeing in 1945 to work at its Seattle plant. Vasquez wasn't allowed to go initially because of her age; however, she cried and cried when her older sister left, until her mother, Ofilia Cruz Cooremans, let her move to Seattle, too.

"By the time we got to Boeing, they [men] were more used to it; the war was really going," Vasquez said "They gave us work that was too delicate for their hands. It was more grown-up work."

The sisters sent home all of their earnings, keeping only enough for rent and groceries. Then the war ended in Europe, and the two were sent home. Although they'd taken the train to Washington State, getting back home proved more difficult: Train reservations were necessary, but didn't guarantee travel, as military men were given preference. They ended up taking a bus home.

Although it was a joyous time because the men were returning, the transition to post-war life was difficult.

"They expected women to go back to their rightful place —go back to the kitchen, go back to whatever," Vasquez said.

They returned to the old ways, but they had changed. The experience "made me more independent," Baladez said. "When we got back, we didn't expect anything from our parents. I mean, we helped our parents, not expected them to help us."



Francisco Vega

Interviewed: July 2, 2007, by Juan Martinez
in Grand Rapids, Mich.

San Antonio native Francisco Vega had been serving in the ROTC for three years when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and he wanted to serve his country.

"We are not taking Mexicans at this time," was the response he received.

Ten months later, however, the San Antonio Light ran an article about the military wanting people with ROTC knowledge to help train troops.

"On Oct. 22, 1942, I was sworn into the service at Fort Sam Houston, Texas," Vega wrote to the Project.

Vega served as a drill instructor and typist before he was sent to the European Theater. He participated in the landing on Omaha Beach in Normandy on June 6, 1944.

"Many men didn't make it to the beach. They would [fall] off the nets and be smashed between the ships and the landing craft," he said.

Vega, a private with the 392d Signal Company, was later redesignated to the 1709th Service Battalion, when he landed on Omaha Beach. He fought his way from Omaha Beach to Cherbourg, France, his unit marching around Paris to Chantilly.

During the Battle of the Bulge, he drove a mechanics jeep into the German offensive, "to get one of our soldiers out who was alone and operating a mobile communications unit," he wrote.

Vega was discharged Dec. 9, 1945, having earned the rank of Staff Sergeant. He had also been awarded several citations and other awards and medals for his service.

Vega said he isn't pro-military today, but that he believes philosophies must be defended.

"I am not a militarist," Vega wrote, "but within borders are represented different philosophies, traditions, customs, beliefs, and when these are threatened and we want to keep them, we need to defend them."



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