

SAVING PRIVATE JOSE: MIDWESTERN MEXICAN AMERICAN MEN DURING WORLD WAR II¹

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Over the years, several movies have been produced highlighting the contributions of American servicemen during World War II. With rare exceptions, most of these films ignore the major contributions of Mexican Americans². Mexican Americans have clearly distinguished themselves during combat, erasing any lingering doubts about their loyalty to the United States. It is estimated that nearly 500,000 Mexican Americans served during World War II. Mexican American women also played a major role both on the homefront and in the military.³ Wartime has been a mixture of both unmeasurable pain and unforeseen opportunities for the Mexican American community. Many Mexican American men have either been killed or seriously wounded on foreign battlefields, and families have suffered physical separation from their loved ones too many times. Yet, wartime has provided Mexican Americans the opportunity to become U.S. citizens, purchase new homes, attend college, acquire new voting rights, and learn leadership skills. The G.I. Bill, for example, allowed Mexican Americans to attend college and learn skilled jobs, as well as break the cycle of housing discrimination by purchasing federally-owned homes outside their segregated community. All of these opportunities triggered a new wave of political activism beginning in 1946.

Mexican Americans from throughout the United States served in World War II, enlisted in all branches of the military and fought with relentless tenacity in major campaigns around the globe.⁴ For the Midwest Mexican American community, wartime has especially been a mingled time of intense family love, ranging from military moments of glory, to deepest loss of love ones. Over the years, the Midwest Mexican American community has paid tribute to the women and men who served their nation both in peacetime and wartime. This article is an attempt to portray, in part at least, the indomitable fighting spirit of the Mexican American soldier and the numerous ways in which the Mexican American community has remembered its heroes.

Introduction

World War II provided an opportunity for a second generation of Midwest Mexican men to fight in the defense of their country. These young Mexican American servicemen distinguished themselves by their grace and courage in World War II and brought increased respect and pride to their communities. These men were not martyrs but ordinary mortal beings responding to a noble cause. For patriotic Mexican American men living in isolated rural communities during World War II, there were no local recruiting stations, so they collected money from their family and friends for the bus or train fare to get to the nearest big city to enlist. They enlisted in Detroit, Chicago, Des Moines, St. Louis, Toledo, Gary, Milwaukee, Bethlehem, Kansas City, Omaha, St. Paul, and East Chicago. Thousands of young men of Mexican-descent and a handful of women enlisted or were drafted into all the branches of the military. Most Midwest Mexican communities saw nearly all of their young men serving overseas during the war years. Many families also had nearly all their older daughters working in defense plants. Almost all the homes in the Mexican American communities had stars posted on their windows, indicating the number of men and women from that particular household who were serving in the armed forces. Military enlistment became socially contagious as young Mexican

American men saw their close friends joining the Army, Navy, and Marines; so they too wanted to be part of the national military effort. A few of them even lied about their age because they wanted a chance to defend the United States. As an added inducement, the United States government offered U.S. citizenship to all legal residents serving in the military, and some Mexican-born men wanted to take advantage of this policy.

Language diversity was obvious among Mexican American service personnel in the camps. There were Mexican Americans who were monolingual in English, monolingual in Spanish, and bilingual. There were regional dialects, including Calo, southwestern Mexican American slang. Moreover, Mexican Americans shared similar stories about discrimination. They were surprised that discrimination was so widespread against them no matter where they lived, and they vowed with all their heart that they would return and positively change their community for themselves and for the next generation. This contact between Mexican Americans from throughout the nation was very significant in the history of the Midwest community because it instilled the notion that the Mexican people were a national ethnic group, transcending their local neighborhoods. For the majority of Midwest Mexican Americans, their world became bigger as they did their basic training in such states as Texas, California, New Jersey, Washington, Maine, Florida, Utah, Mississippi, Alabama, and North Carolina. Longtime friendships between Mexican Americans from various geographical regions would continue after the war and have immense political implications on the post-World War II civil rights movement.

Most Mexican American servicemen, having finished basic training, returned home briefly to visit their families and friends before being shipped overseas for combat duty. After an emotional farewell in the morning to family members and friends, young, war-bound servicemen and servicewomen would be driven typically to the bus or train depot, where another tearful scene would take place between family members and close friends. Some Mexican American couples also decided to marry before the men left. It was simply a case of love triumphing over the harsh reality that some of these brides could quickly find themselves widowed.⁵ After a final good-bye, the young men would leave by bus or train to the west or east coasts, where a ship or airplane would be waiting to take them to battle. These men saw themselves as honorbound to prove their courage and loyalty on the fiercest battlegrounds. On the ships, they attended church services, wrote letters to their loved ones, and played Mexican music with their guitars. Most of them had never been on a ship before, let alone in a foreign country. Invariably, some Mexican Americans became very homesick or seasick or both. It took weeks for them to arrive at their final destinations.

The Battlefield

Between 1941 and 1945, Midwest Mexican American servicemen upheld the rich tradition of defending the nation as they spanned the globe and fought in North Africa, the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Philippines, Sicily and Italy, Normandy, Burma, the Ardennes, and Central Europe—the toughest of the tough battles. They served as Seabees, combat engineers, anti-aircraft gunners, artillery men, Coast Guard sailors, infantry, military policemen, medics, cooks, bakers, signal corpsmen, pilots, navigators, and special services personnel. Paul Monzon from North Platte, Nebraska, for instance, was a Navy guard in Brazil protecting the U.S. Embassy.

Louis Sanchez of Dodge City, Kansas joined the Army Corps of Engineers. In June of 1943, Louis was 20 years old when the war called him. He learned to build bridges, and found out very quickly that the Marines don't land first—the engineers do. He noted that due to their bilingual abilities and their Hispanic surnames, several of the Mexican American soldiers were treated very well by the local European villagers.⁶ His wife's two brothers were killed in the war.

Augustine Rocha from Kansas City, Missouri stated that many Mexican American men saw action very quickly. During World War II, he saw action on D-Day and at the Battle of the Bulge:

I left Camp Shanks, New York as an infantry replacement on Friday, May 13, 1944 and landed in Liverpool, England in time for the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Crossing the short distance between England and France took all night and part of the next day. We were on an English ship and faced murderous fire from the German Air Force.⁷

Many Midwest Mexican Americans fought at the D-Day invasion. Robert Vasquez from Kansas City fought with the Second Infantry Division from Normandy to central Europe and earned five battle stars.⁸ Paul Ybarra of Wellington, Kansas landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day as part of a reinforcement unit for the first waves that had taken heavy losses. He said that as they landed, they saw countless bodies either floating in the water or covering the entire beach. Mr. Ybarra said there was no time to stop because of the intense firepower by the Germans. A few days later, they met deadly fire from the enemy and, in the confusion, American planes accidentally killed most of the men in his unit.

Because his unit was almost depleted, Mr. Ybarra served as the head scout, a position designed to draw fire from the enemy in order to pinpoint their location. Mr. Ybarra was seriously wounded and spent nearly a month in the hospital. For his actions, Mr. Ybarra won the Purple Heart with cluster, the Bronze Star with cluster, and the Gallantry in Battle Medal. After his recovery, he went back to the front lines and was wounded again while coming to the aid of a wounded comrade. He was sent back to the hospital for 30 more days. Mr. Ybarra also had two brothers who served in World War II, and he noted that his parents were extremely proud to have three silver stars posted on their window. In 1994, France presented Mr. Ybarra and other American veterans a medal commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Normandy invasion.⁹

Mexican American soldiers also fought in the Pacific campaign. Leonard Mejia was born in Kansas City, Kansas in 1920. He was a switchboard operator in the South Pacific and served with the First Marine Division that successfully assaulted Japanese strongholds in Tulagi, Gavutu, Tanamlogo, Florida, Guadacanal, and the British Solomon Islands. In one critical battle, he volunteered to aid another man in laying out two telephone lines across nearly 300 yards of open terrain where enemy 75mm and 105mm shells were landing. Mr. Mejia later helped in the evacuation of several wounded men. Because of his brave deeds, he won several medals, including the Bronze Star.

Cirilio Artega, who was born in Wichita, Kansas in 1924, was assigned as a scout in Okinawa. His main duty was also to draw fire from Japanese snipers in order to pinpoint their locations. He said that he survived only because the Japanese snipers, instead of killing him, waited until the main units were in place before firing. Mr. Artega had two brothers who served in the Pacific—Louis who fought in New Guinea and Luzon and Robert who was wounded on his birthday on September 10, 1942.¹⁰ Several Mexican American servicemen also served in the Navy. Russ Cuellar's brother Jay, for example, served in the Navy along with 10 other Mexican American boys from Newton, Kansas.¹¹

Many Mexican Americans served in the air war during World War II. Joseph L. Belman, who was born in Lockport, Illinois in 1924, was drafted into the Army in 1943 and was trained as a gunner. He completed 35 combat missions on a B-17 Flying Fortress. Mr. Belman's job was to make sure the bombs were secured and dropped in good order. He added that there were many close calls as several of his planes were seriously damaged during the bombings over Germany. Mr. Belman noted that his bombing missions included most of

Germany. As a result of his military record, he received 5 oak leaf clusters to the Air Medal and three battle stars to the European Ribbon. His crew won two Distinguished Unit Citations. Mr. Belman returned to the United States in April of 1945 and was discharged in October of the same year.¹²

There is also the story of Charles "Chuck" Garcia from Omaha, Nebraska. Mr. Garcia was born in Jackson City, Nebraska in 1921. After graduating from high school in 1940, he married and moved to East Chicago, Indiana, looking for work at Inland Steel Company. In 1943, he reported to the military and trained as an aircraft engine mechanic. He was assigned to the 839th Bomb Squadron, 487th Bomb Group, 3rd Bomb Division, 8th Air Force, and sent to England. During his overseas tour, he flew 35 missions and was awarded several medals, including the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters, four Bronze Battle Stars, and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Mr. Garcia returned to the U.S. with rank of Staff Sgt., and helped train new pilots and combat crews. He later had five sons who served in Vietnam with one being killed in action.¹³

There is also the unparalleled story of Santor "Smiling Sandy" Sanchez, born in Joliet, Illinois, and raised by his grandmother. During the Depression he worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps after high school. At the age of 18, Mr. Sanchez enlisted in the Army Air Force and was trained as a gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber. He flew many bombing missions, sometimes two on the same day, between the fall of 1943 and the spring of 1944. He was entitled to stop after flying 25 missions but volunteered to fly until he had flown 44 missions. He flew more combat missions than any other American flyer.

During his missions, he shot down half a dozen Nazi fighter planes and received a chest full of ribbons and medals, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, Silver Star, Soldier's Medal, and Air Medal with 10 oak leaf clusters. The Soldier's Medal was won for his bravery when he jumped inside a runaway airplane and saved it from crashing into a hanger. The 8th Air Force had even named a flying fortress the "Smilin Sandy Sanchez" with the hero's caricature painted on the fuselage. He was the first American flyer to be honored with such a tribute. After his combat tour of duty, he was stationed in the United States and then decided to return to the front lines and flew an additional 22 missions for a grand total of 66. Mr. Sanchez's last letter home to his grandmother arrived on March 13, 1945. Two days later, his plane was lost over Germany. Four of the crew bailed out and became prisoners of war. In October of 1945, Mr. Sanchez was officially declared dead. His body was never recovered.¹⁴

Mexican American served with the Tank Corps as well. Alfred Serrato of Chanute, Kansas, served under General George Patton with the 3rd Army Tank Corps. Mr. Serrato was in constant combat for nearly 37 days as a tank rifleman-scout before he was seriously wounded. In 1993, he received his belated Purple Heart-fifty years after being shot.¹⁵ Pete Zamorano of Wichita, Kansas also served with the 3rd Army Tank Corps under the command of General George Patton. Mr. Zamorano landed on Omaha Beach one month after D-Day, his unit driving deeper and deeper into Europe against intensified German resistance. In one fierce battle, his tank was hit. As Mr. Zamorano climbed out of the tank he was wounded. In another bloody battle, he saved the life of another soldier whose tank had been seriously damaged. For his wartime deeds, Mr. Zamorano received several medals, including one bronze star with cluster and the Purple Heart with cluster. In 1996, the mayor of Saint Lo, France presented medals to the American men who had liberated his town, including Mr. Zamorano.¹⁶

As a result of their railroad background in civilian life, many Mexican American men worked on the railroads during their war years. Carlos Saenz of Peabody, Kansas, was

assigned to the 729th Railroad Battalion, Company A. He landed on Omaha Beach, two weeks after D-Day, to build railroad lines to continue the fight deeper and faster into Europe.¹⁷

Overseas, Mexican American sometimes ran into friends or met soldiers from other units and asked how their friends from back home were doing. Pete Zamorano of Wichita, Kansas, remembered seeing his friend Paul Flores in France, who was coming back from the front lines with his unit. When they met, they gave each other an *abrazo*, an embrace. Mr. Zamorano said they talked a while and then stared at each other one more time, not knowing whether they might see each other alive again. Sometimes, Mexican American soldiers gave handwritten messages to other soldiers to personally deliver to their friends. Needless to say, it was devastating when Mexican American soldiers learned second-hand that a hometown friend had been killed or taken prisoner.¹⁸

Mexican Americans Killed in Action

The Midwest Mexican American community suffered terrible casualties and heartwrenching deaths. The savagery of war took its heartbroken toll on families, especially mothers and wives. Tragedy so overpowering, shocking, and deeply painful. Several Mexican American men lost their lives in World War II, both on the battlefield and in military accidents at home. As the war dragged on, many of the silver stars on the windows of grief-stricken residences were replaced by gold ones—indicating family members killed in action. Black wreaths were placed on the doors of Mexican homes. Nearly every Mexican community in the Midwest lost sons in World War II. Ironically, when they brought home the bodies, the caskets, which were draped with both the Mexican and American flags, sometimes had to be carried to the church because the streets in the segregated Mexican communities were not paved and the rain-soaked mud prevented the hearse from driving to the church.¹⁹

Several Fort Madison, Iowa, Mexican Americans were decorated with honor. Two of them killed in the South Pacific Theater. Twenty-four Mexican American soldiers from the greater Kansas City area were killed in action between 1941 and 1945. The city of St. Louis, Missouri was home to five Mexican American men who died in battle, while the town of Chanute, Kansas had four of its young Mexican men killed in World War II. Teresa Moreno of Kansas City, Kansas sadly recalled that:

My father was killed in World War II. He had four brothers in the service with him. I was only four years old when he died. His brothers took his loss very hard and never fully recovered emotionally from his death.²⁰

To be a five-star family during World War II was considered an American honor. But it also meant that the chances of having a son killed was extremely high according to several people who lost brothers. Some of the people who suffered losses were Guadalupe Sandoval and Lucy (Manzano) Moreno of Sterling, Illinois, and Mike Valente of Rock Falls, Illinois.²¹ Mr. Sandoval had two brothers who served in World War II and one was lost in action. Mrs. Moreno was born in Arizona in 1930. Her brother Tom was killed in action in 1944. She recalled the gold star that was posted on the house indicating her brother had been killed in action. Her two sisters worked in war-related industries. Mr. Valiente was born in Sterling in 1922. He and his brother Louis served in World War II. His brother was killed at the Battle of the Bulge. Mr. Valente's sisters Alice and Helen worked in a munitions plant while his wife JoAnn worked at a local steel mill.

The Mexican communities in East Chicago and Gary, Indiana, together lost 14 young Mexican Americans while Milwaukee lost four, and St. Joseph, Missouri, lost two. And many others were lost from Mexican American communities throughout the Midwest.

A handful of Mexican families in the Midwest tragically lost more than one son in the war. Ray Rangel of Topeka, Kansas recalled that:

The Rangel family of Topeka included six brothers who served in World War II and Korea. John was killed in Luzon in the Philippines while his brother Jose was killed only six days later. Needless to say, the grief was unbearable. All of us had grown up together, gone to the same schools, hanged [*sic*] around as teenagers. We were one big extended family.²²

Other Mexican American brothers made the supreme sacrifice. Petra Rodriguez of Dodge City, Kansas discussed the sacrifices of her brothers during the war:

Robert, a member of the 10th Army Infantry, was killed in France on July 21, 1944....he was cut down in fierce fighting that followed the invasion of Normandy. Rudy, a member of the 9th Engineers, was wounded on July 4, 1944, recovered, and was sent back to the front lines. He died on December 31, 1944, in the Battle of the Bulge. Mike, another brother, served as a member of the 3rd Armored Division. He was injured, but survived shrapnel injuries to his legs.²³

Ila Plasencia of Des Moines, Iowa lost two brothers during the war and said:

One of my brothers died in the Philippines. He survived the Death March but died in a prison camp. Another brother was killed during pilot training here in the states. Their deaths stunned the entire Mexican community of Des Moines. We also lost Ray Martinez from nearby Newton, Iowa.²⁴

The Mexican community in Davenport, Iowa, lost two brothers, Ralph Vasquez of the U.S. Army infantry and his brother Albert, U.S. Army airborne. Silvis, Illinois lost brothers Frank and Joseph Sandoval, ten months apart; Frank was killed on the Burma Road, while his brother Joseph died in Germany. Their brother, Tony Sandoval, observed that his brothers' deaths were not in vain and, instead, opened the doors of opportunity after the war.²⁵ He noted, for example, the positive changes for the community because of both the G.I. Bill and Mexican Americans becoming part of the union ranks. He said that there were citizenship and voter registration campaigns during the late 1940's and early 1950's in the Mexican community. In addition to the Sandoval brothers, four other Mexican American men from tiny Silvis, Illinois, lost their lives.²⁶

Besides those killed in action, there were many stories of fate and luck. One such person is Alfredo R. Lopez of Wichita, Kansas. Mr. Lopez graduated from bombardier school as a 2nd Lt. and was assigned to a light bomber group, the only Mexican American among a B-17 crew of ten. He said he prayed a lot and carried the Medal of Our Lady of Guadalupe around his neck. His first bombing run was over France hitting German installations. His plane also dropped supplies over Russia to aid the Polish underground's war of resistance against the Nazis. One day, Mr. Lopez substituted for another bombardier who could not join his crew during a bombing operation. In return, the substitute took Mr. Lopez's place the next day on Mr. Lopez's plane. As fate would have it, Mr. Lopez plane was shot down and several crew members were killed including the substitute bombardier. Mr. Lopez eventually made 31 combat flights, the last one bombing oil refineries deep in Germany. Mr. Lopez retired from the Air Force as a major in 1979.²⁷

Mexican American Prisoners of War

Other unsung heroes included a small group of courageous Mexican American men held as prisoners of war. These included Rupert Lona of Kansas City, Missouri; Joseph Artega, Benny Rodriguez, and Salvador Chavez of Topeka, Kansas; Luis Paredes and Joe Gomez of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Eddie Graham of Hutchinson, Kansas, Antonio "Tony" Gonzales of Deerfield, Kansas; Manuel Robles of Garden City, Kansas; and Joe Lopez of Davenport, Iowa.²⁸ Gonzales died in a POW camp. Other POW's from Kansas and Missouri included Ted Pantoja, Moses Lopez, Gene Martinez, Tony Espinoza, Augustin Mora, and Tony Rivera.

John Sanchez was taken prisoner when Corregidor fell to the Japanese. He remained a prisoner of war for two years after which the War Department reported him as missing in action and presumably killed.²⁹ Lt. Trinidad O. Rios, a former resident of North Platte and Scottsbluff, Nebraska was also captured by the enemy. He was held as a POW from March of 1944 until May of 1945. He was awarded the Air Medal.³⁰ Nick Hernandez of Wichita, Kansas, was a prisoner of war for nearly three years after he was captured in Italy.³¹

Another Death March POW was David Chapa of St. Paul, Minnesota. Simon Velasquez, also from St. Paul, was a German POW and was interned in the infamous Stalag 17.³² A Mexican American POW from Topeka, Kansas, vividly remembered his time as a German prisoner:

We were found by the Germans and taken prisoners. We traveled first by truck and later by train to a prison camp in Germany. This camp held 3,500 military prisoners from many nations. Our living conditions were terrible, with no heat, poor clothing, and little to eat. We had to sleep three abreast on wooden bunks. We were liberated on April 15, 1945, by the English after five months of detainment. We had a feeling of great joy as we ran toward the gates to meet our liberators.³³

World War II Honors

Mexican Americans distinguished themselves as brave defenders of democracy on the battlefield during World War II. Nationwide, 250,000 Mexican Americans suffered casualties while demonstrating their sheer bravery and fortitude.³⁴ These battle wounds included bullet and shrapnel wounds, blown-off limbs, malaria, burns, frostbite, and the emotional and psychological horrors of war including shellshock. The vast majority of wounded Mexican American servicemen returned to the states on hospital ships. Hospital wards in the United States were filled with Mexican American soldiers waiting for the long period of convalescence.

Mike Morado of Kansas City spent barely two months in France but still suffers from nightmares, trapped by the horrors of war. He was a scout behind German lines in eastern France. His job was to draw fire from the Germans and, thus, expose their positions. He also gathered intelligence from French citizens regarding German positions. Mr. Morado was wounded. He earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge, and the Bronze Star. Forty years later, he returned to France to visit the site where he had been shot so long ago.³⁵

Many Mexican men were wounded more than once. On April 16, 1942, Nick Castillo from St. Paul, Minnesota, was drafted into the army at Gibbong, Minnesota. Mr. Castillo was assigned to the Second Division which later participated in the D-Day invasion in Normandy on June 6, 1944. Shortly after the landing, Mr. Castillo was wounded. Several weeks later, he was wounded again. The second time was much more serious and he was returned to his parents in St. Paul.³⁶

Midwestern Mexican Americans, as a group of servicemen, were highly decorated during the war. The heroic group of young Mexican Americans from Depue, Illinois, was typical of most Mexican American communities, earning such medals and decorations as the Purple Heart, the Asiatic-Pacific ribbon, the Philippine Liberation Medal, the Victory Medal, the American Campaign ribbon, the European-African Theater ribbon, the European-African-Middle Eastern ribbon, the Combat Infantry Badge, the Distinguished Unit medal, the Meritorious Unit Award, and the American Defense ribbon. The tiny Mexican American community of Hershey, Nebraska sent over 40 men to war. This group alone won 9 Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars (Raymond Reyes and Andrew Contreras) and one Silver Star (Sisto Briseno). Rick Arrellano had been recommended for the Silver Star for bravery, but his captain died before full confirmation of his fearless actions. Instead, Mr. Arrellano received the Bronze Star.³⁷ In Garden City, Kansas, Ezequiel Ledesma and Manuel Robles came home highly decorated. Nick Ortiz earned five Bronze Star decorations for combat in Italy and North Africa.³⁸ Sgt. Albert Barreiro of East Chicago, Indiana, was killed coming to the aid of a fallen buddy on December 15, 1944 at Leyte Island. He was awarded the Silver Star for his heroic act.³⁹

Overall, Midwest Mexican Americans have won at least five Congressional Medals of Honor in various wars. Pvt. Manuel Perez, who was born in Oklahoma City and lived in Chicago before the war, was one of the soldiers who won the Medal of Honor. He volunteered for the airborne infantry and was assigned to Company A, 511 Parachute Infantry of the 11th Airborne. Pvt. Perez distinguished himself twice in combat, on February 13 and March 14, 1945. Perez killed 18 Japanese single handily during these assaults, and perhaps more than 75 counting those who had been killed by his grenades:

It was on March 14 while on patrol in enemy territory that he was killed. Facing heavy rifle and machine-gun fire, Perez immediately volunteered to protect the withdrawal of the other men in his patrol. He was mortally wounded while exchanging fire with the enemy.⁴⁰

Every year, the Mexican American G.I. Forum of Oklahoma City places a wreath at the grave site of Manuel Perez Jr.

Sgt. Veto R. Bertolero of Decatur, Illinois, also won the Congressional Medal of Honor during World War II. He killed 40 Germans in Hatten, France on January 9 and 10, 1945 while serving with the 42nd Division.⁴¹ In addition to the Congressional Medal of Honor, several Mexican Americans earned the Silver Star or the Bronze Star, given for valor. According to Lando Valendez of Des Moines, Iowa:

On July 1, 1944, in Shubert, France, three other G.I.'s and myself captured a German bunker and took 47 prisoners. On July 12, 1944, I was wounded. I was also part of the American forces that liberated the concentration camp of Dachau, and I couldn't believe the horrors we discovered. I later received the Silver and Bronze Stars and the Purple Heart.⁴²

All of the Mexican American men and women interviewed for this article vividly remembered where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news that the long ordeal of war had finally ended. Needless to say, there were many tears of bittersweet joy. Charles Garcia of Omaha, Nebraska distinctly recalled that:

I was serving in Europe when we learned that the United States had dropped the atomic bomb on the Japanese. We knew that the war was finally over. I prayed about coming home and seeing my family. I was both happy and sad, because I was alive but at the same time so many young men had given their lives for our country.⁴³

Mr. Garcia was born in Jackson, Nebraska in 1921. He served in England during the war as a flight engineer for both B-17s and B-24s. He became active with the post-war civil rights movement. Also, Sam Moreno remembered when the war ended because he was preparing for the invasion of Japan.⁴⁴ Mr. Moreno's family had three brothers in the service. He served in the navy off Africa. He was preparing to invade Japan by land when the war ended. After the war, he retired from a steel company after 41 years of service.

Summary

The year 2000 marked the 55th anniversary of the end of World War II which has rekindled renewed appreciation from the Mexican American community for the women and men who safeguarded our nation during this troublesome time. As a result, several Midwest Mexican American communities have held celebrations and other special tributes to the people who defended this country so gallantly over a half century ago. For example, a banquet was held in Kansas City, Missouri honoring World War II veterans. The 1994 fiesta in Newton, Kansas was also dedicated to the contributions of Mexican American women and men during World War II.⁴⁵ The local museum in Newton hosted a photo exhibit highlighting the impressive war record of Mexican American servicemen as well as Mexican American defense workers. North Platte, Nebraska saluted its veterans in 1990 with the theme "From the Beet Fields to the Battlefields."

World War II was a bittersweet experience for Mexican American men in the Midwest. Mexican American soldiers returning from overseas were discriminated against in education, employment, housing, the legal system, voting rights and public accommodations. The war caused great physical and emotional trauma for thousands of Mexican men and their families. Yet, World War II marked a political and social turning point, as returning Mexican American servicemen were now determined to win, once and for all, their civil rights. Thus, after all their sacrifices, they would assert, along with Mexican American women, their right to full American citizenship at home. In 1945, the entire Mexican community was rejoicing and looking forward to a brighter future.

¹This article is an excerpt from an unpublished manuscript titled, "*Cuentos y Encuentros: An Oral History of Mexicans in the Midwestern United States, 1900-1979.*" Many of the individuals cited are now deceased. This article is dedicated to their memory and wartime contributions.

²World War II movies which have generally ignored Mexican Americans include *The Longest Day*, *Back to Bataan*, *Steel Helmet*, *To Hell and Back*, *The Flying Tigers*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Iwo Jima*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Halls of Montezuma*, *The Guns of Navaro*, and the *Thin Red Line*. Rare exceptions after the 1940's included *Giant*, *The Guy Galderban Story*, and *The Dirty Dozen*. As a result of the Good Neighbor Policy in the 1940's, Hollywood did make a handful of films depicting Mexican American Servicemen including: *Air Force*, *The Human Comedy*, *Battle Ground*, *Objective Burma*, *Medal for Benny*, *Bataan*, and *Guadalcanal Diary*. In recent years, independent Chicano filmmakers have released a handful of movies depicting the role of the Mexican American servicemen during World War II, including *Memories of Hell*, *The Men of Company E*, and *Hero Street*.

³Santillan, Richard (1989 and 1995) "Rosita the Riveter: Midwest Mexican American Women During World War II, 1941-1945," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, Mexicans In The Midwest, Vol. 2, and "Midwestern Mexican American Women and the Struggle for Gender Equality: A Historical Overview, 1920s-1960s," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies: Mexican American Women, Changing Images*, Vol. 5, Mexican American Studies and Research Center, The University of Arizona, Tucson.

- ⁴Lopez, David A, (1998). Saving Private Aztlan: Preserving The History of Latino Service In Wartime. Unpublished paper, 1998, p. 1, author's files.
- ⁵Gomez, Hazel (personal communication, September 11, 1994), Topeka, Kansas.
- ⁶Rhoads, Paula (1998) "Former Mayor A Walking History Book," *Dodge City Daily Globe*, 1992. Back home from the war, Louie Sanchez followed in his father's footsteps by working for the railroad because he figured it would be a lifetime job. But as diesel engines replaced steam locomotives, which required less people for service between stops, the railroad companies began dismissing workers. Two months short of 10 years and a pension, the railroad terminated Louie from a job he had worked "ten days a week" as a result of double shifts every other day.
- ⁷Rocha, Augustine (Augie) (personal communication, February 19, 1987) Kansas City, Missouri.
- ⁸Martinez, Ricardo L. (written communication January 2, 1999) Kansas City, Missouri.
- ⁹Ybarra, Paul (personal communication September 4, 1998) Wellington, Kansas.
- ¹⁰Artega, Cirilo (personal communication September 15, 1998) Wichita, Kansas.
- ¹¹Cuellar, Russ (personal communication September 16, 1998) Newton, Kansas.
- ¹²Belman, Joseph L. (written communication April 2, 1998) Lockport, Illinois.
- ¹³Garcia, Charles (personal communication, author's files) Omaha, Nebraska. Also see the G.I. Forumeer, March/April, 1995, p. 9.
- ¹⁴Whiteside, John 1992, February 13 and 1994, August 30) *Joliet Herald-News* entitled "Sandy Sanchez was a real hero and he was one of our own," and "Sandy Sanchez—tough times couldn't stop him," . Also Feldman, March (1993, November 4) "Honors sought for Hispanic war hero Sanchez," *Joliet Herald News*.
- ¹⁵Butcher, Stu (1993, November 27) "Local Vet Surprised With Medal," *The Chanute Tribute*.
- ¹⁶Zamorano, Pete (personal communication September 15, 1998), Wichita, Kansas.
- ¹⁷(1994, June 1) "D-Day: Marion County was Represented: Veterans Share Stories of Campaign," *Marion County Record*, author's files.
- ¹⁸Zamorano, Pete (personal communication September 15, 1998) Wichita, Kansas.
- ¹⁹ Terronez, Joe (personal communication June 21 and 25, 1986), Silvis, Illinois. Mr. Terronez noted that Vicente Ximenes, who served as Executive Director of the Mexican American Affairs Office during the Johnson Administration, led the federal effort to support the renaming of 2nd Street to Hero Street in Silvis, Illinois. On October 31, 1971 Hero Street was dedicated with the help of both major political parties. The two Sandoval families of Silvis, Illinois, for example, sent thirteen boys to both World War II and Korea. Three of the young men were killed in combat.
- ²⁰Moreno, Teresa (personal communication February 28, 1987) Kansas City, Kansas.
- ²¹Sandoval, Guadalupe (personal communication May 27, 1987), Sterling, Illinois; Valiente, Mike (personal communication March 24, 1987) Rock Falls, Illinois; and Moreno, Lucy (Manzano) (personal communication May 27, 1987) Sterling, Illinois.
- ²²Rangel, Ray (personal communication February 13, 1987) Topeka, Kansas.
- ²³Rodriguez, Petra (personal communication June 24, 1988) Dodge City, Kansas. Ms. Rodriguez was born in 1904. The small city of Chanute, Kansas, lost four men including Phillip Gutierrez, an outstanding baseball player.
- ²⁴Plasencia, Ila (personal communication June 17, 1987) Des Moines, Iowa. Also Rodriguez Cipriana (personal communication January 13, 1987) Garden City, Kansas. Njila, Manuel (personal communication April 25, 1987) Aurora, Illinois. His brother Jesse was killed in the South Pacific while another brother Porfilio was wounded. A younger brother, Robert, was wounded in Vietnam. Also killed during the war was Joe Hernandez of Davenport, Iowa. Pete Macias (written communication April 4, 1998) Davenport, Iowa.

- ²⁵Sandoval, Tanilo (Tony) (personal correspondence June 21, 1986) East Moline, Illinois.
- ²⁶Terronez, Joe (personal communication June 25, 1986) Silvis, Illinois. Also Martinez, Vallentin (personal communication May 18, 1987) East Chicago, Indiana, and Garcia, Manuel (personal communication March 23, 1987) Sterling, Illinois.
- ²⁷Lopez, Alfredo R. (personal communication September 15, 1998) Wichita, Kansas.
- ²⁸Lona Jr., Wesley H. (personal communication June 5, 1987), Kansas City, Missouri. Also Rodriguez, Cipriana (personal communication January 13, 1987) Garden City, Kansas.
- ²⁹Rocha, Augustine (Augie) (written communication February 7, 1996) Kansas City, Missouri.
- ³⁰Laguna, Albert (written communication January 11, 1999) San Jose, California.
- ³¹Zamorano, Pete (personal communication September 16, 1998) Wichita, Kansas.
- ³²Coates, Nicha (personal communication 1998) St. Paul, Minnesota. Two other Mexican American soldiers from St. Paul, Nick Castillo and Conrad Vega, fought at the Battle of the Bulge.
- ³³*Topeka's 55th Anniversary* issue, author's files. The Mexican community of Topeka lost several men in World War II.
- ³⁴Limbirt, Claudia (1978, June 15) Invisible People: The Mexican Community In Newton, Kansas, A Research Paper Presented to the Department of History, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, p. 43. Martinez, Robert (personal communication, April 4, 1998) Davenport, Iowa.
- ³⁵*Dos Mundos*, (1989, October 15-18), p. 14, author's files.
- ³⁶Ramirez, Joan E. (1998, March), "Nicolas Castillo 'El Rey Del Corrido' The Life and Times Of A Man And His Music," *La Voz*, , p. 9.
- ³⁷*North Platte Telegraph*, (1993, April 3) author's files.
- ³⁸Avila, Henry (1997) "The Mexican American Community In Garden City, 1900-1950," Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, Vol. 20, No. 1.
- ³⁹Vasquez, Robert (written communication 1998), East Chicago, Indiana, author's files.
- ⁴⁰Morin, Raul (1966) *Among the Valiant: Mexican Americans in World War and Korea*, Borden Publishing Company, Alhambra, California, p. 216. See Torres, Ruben (1991, February), "The Legion Remembers Manuel Perez," *American Legion Magazine*. Other publications focusing on the contributions of Mexicans during World War II include Allsup, Carl (1982), *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution*, The University of Texas Press; Austin, Ramos, Henry A.J. (1982), *A People Forgotten, A Dream Pursued: The History of the G.I. Forum 1948-1972*, American G.I. Forum, Washington, D.C.; and U.S. Defense Department (1984), *Hispanics In American Defense*, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense, Pentagon.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 167. Also, Amaro, Candelario (personal communication January 21, 1987) Dodge City, Kansas. Mr. Amaro served in the Pacific during the war and became very active with the post-war civil rights movement. Dominguez, Linda (written communication July 29, 1994) Gary, Indiana.
- ⁴²Valendez, Lando (personal communication) Des Moines, Iowa. Also Boyos, John G. (personal communication March 7, 1987) Chanute, Kansas. Mr. Boyos won the Bronze Star in the Pacific.
- ⁴³Garcia, Charles (Chuck) (personal communication June 2, 1987) Omaha, Nebraska. Also, Zuniga, Manuel (personal communication June 5, 1987) Kansas City, Kansas. Mr. Zuniga was born in Mexico in 1913 and fought in World War II between 1942-1945.
- ⁴⁴Moreno, Sam (personal communication May 27, 1987) Sterling, Illinois.
- ⁴⁵Olais, Ray (telephone communication) Newton, Kansas, author's files.

