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Preserving the legacy of Hispanics in WWII

By Ramon Renteria
El Paso Times

Alberto C. Flores is an old soldier exploding with memories.

Flores, 78, proudly displays the collection of Army medals he earned fighting in the Pacific during World War II.

He remembers the month-long journey by ship to the front lines in the Philippines, the constant sneak attacks by Japanese troops at night, the fear of pulling guard duty, of sniper fire ripping through the jungle.

Flores, a retired East El Paso custodian, returned home after the war as a proud staff sergeant. Altogether, he and four brothers served in World War II and made it back home.

His family's experiences are among those being collected for a national project trying to capture and preserve the stories of Latinos and Latinas of the World War II generation.

The "U.S. Latino and **Latina** WWII **Oral History** Project," organized out of the University of Texas at Austin, is recruiting volunteers to videotape the men and women who played any kind of role in the war.

Even though various military historical sources suggest that 250,000 to 500,000 Hispanics served in the armed forces during World War II, many of their stories never have been documented.

World War II was a major turning point for Hispanics in the United States, according to project organizers. The military experience resulted in many Hispanics attending college for the first time.

Part of the effort also is geared toward gathering memorabilia - photographs, letters, diaries, citations - that will be archived in the Mexican American Library Program of the Benson Latin America Collection at UT-Austin.

The project is sponsoring a major conference May 26-27 at UT-Austin to encourage academic research about U.S. Latinos and Latinas and World War II. People outside of academia are also encouraged to participate.

An assistant professor in the communications department at the University of Texas at Austin, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez is leading the **oral history** project with a sense of urgency.

"These people are getting older, and we're really worried we may not have a chance to interview them," Rivas-Rodriguez said.

Rivas-Rodriguez recently recruited partners in El Paso for the project and trained volunteers how to properly document the stories of World War II veterans.

Organizers consider El Paso an important hunting ground for World War II stories because it has the third-largest group of Hispanics in that age group, behind Southern California and San Antonio.

"The project is a way to include more stories about Latinos in the mainstream press and general interest history books," Rivas-Rodriguez said. "The World War II generation of Latinos and Latinas was the generation that made a lot of changes for civil rights."

Precise statistics on Hispanics in World War II were not maintained except for 53,000 Puerto Ricans who served during 1940-46, according to Hispanic America USA, a Phoenix online database.

Mexican-Americans were highly represented in National Guard units from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Connie Flores, a social worker, is documenting the war stories of her father and uncles.

"I'm doing this for the generations to come," she said.

The brothers

El Paso's Alberto Flores often wondered about his brothers, Jose and Ramon Flores. They served in the Philippines in different units stationed within 90 miles of each other, although they never came into contact.

Two other brothers, Espiridion and Jesus Flores, fought in Europe during the war. Arturo and Tomas Flores were in the National Guard during the war years.

Alberto Flores also remembers the four bouts of malaria he endured during the war, for which the government compensated him with a \$12.50 monthly check, a stipend that he regarded as an insult.

"I'd give the check to my mother and tell her to throw it away," Flores said.

Painful memories of discrimination still linger. One time, Flores said, Anglo soldiers under his command were ordered to do hard labor for refusing to take orders from a "Mexican."

Disappointments

Jose C. Flores, 76, still takes medication and still gets psychiatric counseling for the anxiety that will not go away, more than 50 years after the war. He served in the Army as a private first class.

"I never thought I would make it back," Jose Flores said. "The Japanese wouldn't give up when they started saying the war with Germany was over."

Though soldiers returning from World War II were welcomed as triumphant heroes, Jose Flores returned home disenchanted, feeling that he was never fully compensated for injuries and disabilities that he sustained fighting the war.

"I came out of the Army and couldn't find a job for nine months. A lot of us did not finish high school on account of the war," Jose Flores said. "They promised us so much and never delivered."

Jose Flores also talks of discrimination, getting into fights with Anglo GIs for calling him "Pancho." He ran into friends after the war who said restaurants in Lubbock denied them service, even in military uniform.

After the war, Jose Flores secluded himself at home, afraid to leave the house because he had so much anger in him. The sound of a commercial airplane overhead would send him scampering for cover.

"All the war movies are phony," Jose Flores said. "When you know that you can get killed, you have fear, anxiety and anger."

Military legacy

One brother, Ramon Flores, 74, wound up being drafted for military service in World War II even though he could not read or write in English or Spanish. He came back as an Army private first class.

After the war, Flores worked as a baker and often took a second job to help feed a family of six, never asking for government assistance.

For years, Flores tried to convince the government that some of his physical ailments might be related to nuclear fallout from the bombing of Hiroshima.

"I was in Japan, but they always told me that I needed more proof," Flores said.

The Flores military legacy stretched into Korea, where two more brothers, Ruben and Isidro, served. One of the Flores sons served in Vietnam.

Dennis Bixler-Marquez, director of Chicano studies at UTEP, credits World War II with helping influence the civil-rights movement that led many Hispanics to demand first-class status in the United States.

"It's of vital importance to document the contribution that Hispanics have made to this nation and in a sense that becomes part of the Chicano-Hispanic heritage," Bixler-Marquez said. "If these histories are not gathered now, they may be forever lost."

To donate memorabilia

The Mexican-American Library Program of the Benson Latin America Collection at UT Austin is soliciting donations of photographs, diaries, letters, newspaper clippings, memoirs, printed certificates and citations for its archive on U.S. Latinos and World War II.

The library is also interested in documentation relating to post-war participation in groups such as the American GI Forum, LULAC, Viva Kennedy Clubs.

Information: (512) 495-4589, e-mail: mgutierrez@mail.utexas.edu

How you can participate

·By lending the project your skills, if you are a journalist, experienced interviewer or someone willing to try to learn how to interview WWII-era men and women in English or Spanish. (A training video and manual are available).

·By arranging to digitize photographs of the men and women interviewed.

·By transcribing interviews.

·By helping the project identify men and women who might want their stories to be included.

·By donating money for project costs such as high-quality audiotapes, training notebooks and training sessions.

·By alerting the project if you have access to someone who can donate equipment or supplies.

Make plans

·What: U.S. Latinos and Latinas World War II Conference: "Changes Seen, Changes Wrought."

·When: Friday and Saturday, May 26-27.

·Where: University of Texas at Austin, Alumni Center.

·Cost: \$65 a participant postmarked by May 12, or \$75 a participant after May 12.

·Information: (512) 471-1924 or www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives/conference.

To make tax-deductible donation

·Make checks payable to UT Austin with a note specifying the money is for the World War II Project.

·Mail donations to U.S. Latino and **Latina** WWII **Oral History** Project, Journalism Department, UT Austin, Mail Code A1000, Austin, TX 78712.

·Information: (512) 471-1924 or e-mail: latinoarchive@www.utexas.edu
