

Latinos in World War II: Fighting on Two Fronts

By Lorena Oropeza, for the National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.05.17

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Soldiers of the 65th Infantry training in Salinas, Puerto Rico, August 1941. Photo from the U.S. military.

Throughout U.S. history, Latino-Americans have struggled to prove they are just as much citizens of this country as any white American. Military service has been one way for Latinos to prove they belong and love their country. Indeed, Latinos have fought in every U.S. conflict since the American Revolution.

A huge number of Mexican-Americans participated in World War II. Altogether, around 500,000 served during the war. For many, participation in the war effort brought a new sensation of belonging.

Called out for being ... American

Private Armando Flores of Corpus Christi, Texas, for example, fondly recalled being told to take his hands out of his pockets on a cold day during basic training. "American soldiers stand at attention," a lieutenant told him. "They never keep their hands in their pockets." Years later, Flores still marveled at the significance of the occasion: "Nobody had ever called me an American before!"

Along with those who fought on foreign battlefields, many Mexican- Americans participated in the wartime in other ways. Countless Latinas joined the Army's WACS (Women's Army Corps), the Navy's WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), or similar all-female units associated with the U.S. Army Air Corps. In addition, thousands of Mexican-American men and women found jobs in the defense industry. Their labor helped to turn out tanks, bombs, guns and other things vital to the war.

Many Mexican-Americans honored

Sometimes whole families joined the military. The Sanchez family from Southern California is one example. Three sisters worked in defense jobs, while all five brothers served: two as Army soldiers, one as an Army medic, one as a member of U.S. Navy Construction Battalion and the eldest as a civil defense air-raid warden. One of the brothers died in combat in the Philippines.

Mexican-Americans took tremendous pride in their combat record during World War II, and with good reason. A tiny two-block lane in Silvis, Illinois, earned the nickname "Hero Street" for sending an amazing 45 Mexican- American sons off to war. At least 11 Mexican-Americans received the Medal of Honor during the conflict.

The Medal of Honor is the nation's highest medal for valor in combat that can be awarded to members of the U.S. armed forces.

Among them was Joseph P. Martínez, the child of immigrants and a Colorado beet harvester before the war. Martinez led a dangerous but critical charge up a snow-covered mountain on Attu Island off the coast of Alaska to fight Japanese soldiers.

Silvestre Herrera, who also received the Medal of Honor, entered a minefield and single-handedly attacked an enemy stronghold in France. His courage cost him both feet in an explosion.

Inequality back home

Sadly, after the war, Mexican-American veterans often returned home to inequality and prejudice. For example, many businesses in Herrera's hometown of Phoenix, Arizona, still put up signs that read: "No Mexican Trade Wanted." Similarly, when Macario Garcia, another Medal of Honor recipient, stopped at the Oasis Café in Richmond, Texas, its owner told him he did not serve Latinos. Garcia refused to leave and got into a fight with the café owner. Though he was charged with assault, Garcia received support from around the country. More Americans than ever had come to believe that anyone who was willing to fight for the United States deserved equal rights.

The case of Private Felix Longoria was the most famous instance of racist, ill-treatment. Four years after his combat death in the Philippines in 1945, Longoria's remains were finally shipped to Three Rivers, Texas. His widow, Beatrice, then asked the local funeral home if she could use their chapel for a wake in his honor. The funeral home refused and its director said he had never let Mexican-Americans use the chapel and "we don't want to start now."

A Corpus Christi doctor, Hector P. Garcia, led the charge to right this injustice. Garcia sent notes of protest to newspapers and government officials. In response, Texas Senator and future U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson stepped in and arranged for Longoria to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Arlington is the final resting place of many U.S. military heroes.

65th Regiment heads to the front lines

During World War II, some Puerto Ricans also made great contributions to the war effort. For example, the "Fighting Medinas" were seven brothers who all served in combat. Puerto Ricans participated in D-Day and were at the Battle of the Bulge. This was one of the last major battles of World War II. It was fought in the winter, mostly in northern France, and was the largest battle ever fought by the U.S. Army.

However, it was not until the Korean War that significant numbers of Puerto Ricans had the chance to prove themselves in battle. Following the surprise outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula in 1950, the all-Puerto Rican 65th Regiment sped to the front lines. It then engaged in some of the heaviest fighting of the entire war.



By the end of 1951, the 65th Regiment had been in battle for 460 days. It had suffered 1,535 deaths or injuries and had taken 2,133 enemy prisoners. The 65th had fought more days, lost fewer men and taken more prisoners than any other similar regiment on the front line. General Douglas MacArthur, who led military operations in Korea until April 1951, took note of the regiment's accomplishments. The 65th, he declared, had shown "magnificent ability and courage."

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Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST supports the idea that many Mexican-Americans were exceptional soldiers during World War II?
- (A) A huge number of Mexican-Americans participated in World War II.
 - (B) Mexican-Americans took tremendous pride in their combat record during World War II, and with good reason.
 - (C) A tiny two-block lane in Silvis, Illinois, earned the nickname "Hero Street" for sending an amazing 45 Mexican-American sons off to war.
 - (D) At least 11 Mexican-Americans received the Medal of Honor during the conflict.
- 2 Which section of the article BEST explains why many Mexican-Americans left their homes to fight in World War II?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-2]
 - (B) "Called out for being ... American"
 - (C) "Many Mexican-Americans honored"
 - (D) "Inequality back home"
- 3 How was Private Flores affected when an officer told him to take his hands out of his pockets even though it was a cold day?
- (A) He was full of anger toward the officer.
 - (B) The officer's words gave him a sense of belonging.
 - (C) He was surprised that the officer cared about what he did.
 - (D) The officer's words made him feel embarrassed.

- 4 Which of the following MOST influenced Senator Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to have Private Felix Longoria buried at Arlington National Cemetery?
- (A) Longoria's widow asked the senator if her husband could be buried at Arlington National Cemetery.
 - (B) The senator wanted Latino soldiers such as Longoria to have their own cemetery.
 - (C) Longoria had been a war hero during the time he spent fighting in the Philippines.
 - (D) Notes of protest were sent to newspapers and government officials about how Longoria's remains were being treated.