

# VOCES

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Oral History Project Unveils New Name to Reflect its Expanded Mission

An off-hand comment by the founder of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund sparked an oral history project that has, as of today, videotaped over 900 interviews and scanned over 6,000 historic photos, mostly of Latino World War II veterans.

## Maggie Rivas-Rodriquez

Armando Flores, whose family had been one of the original land grant families in the 1800s (he shared his certificates as evidence) stood in a frigid, stiff breeze on a tarmac at Sheppard Field, Texas in 1942. Flores and the other trainees huddled together, hands jammed in their pockets when suddenly a impatient lieutenant barked at them: American soldiers stand at attention, on a cold day or a hot day, they never keep their hands in their pockets. The men snapped to attention.

"The funny thing about it, and the reason that I remember that was because nobody had ever called me an American until that time. I had been called a lot of things...wetback and spic, and greaser," he said. "That was the first time in my life that I had been called an American." Flores was not the only Mexican

American of his generation to see himself in a new light because of his World War II experiences. It was the World War II generation that began to make substantial inroads in the struggle for equality.

"All us old civil rights guys were World War II vets," said Pete Tijerina, the lawyer who laid the groundwork for the country's foremost Latino civil rights organization. Tijerina was detailing the early days, in the late 1960s, when Mexican American attorneys decided their independent, scattered efforts to combat the institutional racism aimed against Latinos were yielding paltry results.

With the guidance of Jack Greenberg, then counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and a substantial grant from the Ford Foundation, Tijerina and his

cohorts created MALDEF, which thrives today. Those lawyers had all been World War veterans, men who chafed under the rampant and raw discrimination that people of color faced throughout the U.S. Most of these men had not even finished high school. But then came World War II, the draft, and enlistment into the military. Mexican Americans entered the service in droves – around 500,000 according to a recent study by demographer Karl Eschbach. And they began to see themselves in a new light.

When Tijerina made his off-hand remark, I was a reporter with *The Dallas Morning News*, writing an in-depth story about MALDEF. But Tijerina's observation intrigued me and led me to write a longer magazine piece about the Mexican American civil rights efforts of the WWII generation.

In the course of that magazine story, I became aware of the serious gap in the literature about Mexican Americans and how World War II veterans had spearheaded remarkable civil rights advancements.

I could find a few paragraphs in a book about this, but not even an entire chapter. Only two books – *Are We Good Neighbors*, by Alonso Perales and *Among the Valiant* by Raúl Morín—even dealt with the Latino WWII experience. I was a fan of Studs Terkel, the radio journalist who had popularized oral history interviews and had read every book he published. My only disappointment with Terkel was that he time and again gave short shrift to Latinos. Despite that, he did inspire me to propose an oral history project to other journalist friends and two academics I had interviewed for the magazine article.

The U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project has interviewed 628 Latino World War II-era veterans. In 2010, through a major grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, this project expanded to include the Korean and Vietnam-war eras. Interviews with World War II era subjects have continued as has ongoing research centered on World War II. To reflect this new and broader focus, the project was re-named the VOCES Oral History Project.

Since the start, interviewees have included civilians as well as veterans. Along with women who “held down the fort” while



Armando Flores,

Courtesy of VOCES

husbands and family members were away, women who worked in defense related industries have been interviewed.

Altogether, the project has interviewed 808 men and women and has written journalistic treatments of each of those stories, fact-checked by two volunteer amateur historians (both Vietnam vets), as well as by the interview subject him or herself. These stories can be accessed on VOCES website. The project has also inspired a two-act play, *Voices of Valor*. VOCES has created educational materials, a traveling photo exhibit (on tour by Humanities Texas) and has produced four edited volumes which include excerpts from the interviews; the latest one is currently under consideration by the University of Texas Press. UT Press has published two other books, and distributes a self-

published encyclopedia-type book.

VOCES has also collected 52 “tributes” to individuals who either died during a war or later. Fred Flores, who sat through an interview training session in Houston early on, was especially insistent about developing a Tribute program.

"On New Year's eve afternoon, December 31, 1944, a telegram arrived at my grandparents' home on the farm, advising them that [my uncle] Johnnie was missing in action in Germany," Fred Flores wrote. "Everyone took the news that he had been killed...I recall all of us going to grandmother's house. I remember her crying pretty much non-stop. This was not a place I wanted to be at that age of seven. Our Aunt Teresa was keeping us busy outside, by playing ring around the rosy by

the dim light of a kerosene lamp which was coming thru the door. There was no electricity...."

Later, their worst fears were confirmed: Johnnie Flores had been killed in action. His remains were buried first in Belgium and later, in 1947, reinterred in Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas.

"My generation is the last to have seen or known Johnnie, though only through short fleeting youthful memories," Fred Flores wrote the Project. "It is for this reason that I have gathered all that I could of Johnnie's life, to provide it for the next generations of this family." Flore gathered and provided VOCES with telegrams, original photos and letters from his uncle.

For those of us who have worked on the oral history project for this many years--- the students who have written the stories, the volunteers who have conducted interviews and fact-checked, the rotating staff, the scholars who have written chapters in our books, and our supporters---that is also our hope: that these interviews may be available for many generations to come, so that our great grandchildren's great grandchildren will know of the contributions by Latinos of the World War II, Korean and Vietnam war generations.

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Texas, Austin. She has over 17 years of experience as a reporter for the Boston Globe, WFAA-TV in Dallas and the Dallas Morning News. Her research interests include the intersection of oral history and journalism, U.S. Latinos and the news media, both as producers of news and as consumers. Since 1999, Rivas-Rodriguez has spearheaded the [U.S. Latino and Latina World War II Oral History Project](#).

Johnnie Flores, killed in action, 1944

Pedro Tijerina, Images Courtesy of VOCES

