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# Latinos in the Military

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Austin, "Latinos in the Military" (2018). *2018 Symposium*. 20.  
[https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw\\_2018/20](https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw_2018/20)

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Latinos in the Military

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Author's Note

Austin Johnson is an Eastern Washington University Student.

This paper was submitted for consideration to the 21st Annual EWU Research and Creative Works Symposium on March, 2018 in Cheney, WA and submitted as an assignment for Introduction to Chicana/Latina Culture (CHST 101/ANTH 161)

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## Abstract

What roles have the Latino American community had in the United States military historically and how did they impact it? How are Latinos shaping the military today? Through historical records, personal accounts, and reputable journals this study leads to the conclusion that Latino Americans regardless of the racial tensions of the past have always been ready and willing to serve for a multitude of reasons including, patriotism, educational benefits, economic advancement, and most importantly equality. There is a trend of increasing numbers of Latinos enlisting in the military. Since the 1980s the number of Hispanic active-duty troops has risen from barely 3% to 13.4% in 2015 according to study by the Population Reference Bureau (Mady Weschler Segal). These findings conclude that the military has benefited greatly and been greatly shaped by not just the long list of heroic award winning Latinos who have served but also the impact that their service had on public opinion.

Keywords: Latino/a, patriotism, military, equality, advancement

- The Early Years

To understand the role of Latinos in the military one must first have an understanding of the history of how Latinos became a part of the United States and the historical role they have played in military. From the earliest days of the American Revolution to the current war in Afghanistan Latinos have a long and proud warrior tradition. Regardless of the civil issues on the home front Latinos have always selflessly sacrificed for the United States even when they knew things would be no different for them when they returned than when they left.

One of the earliest examples of this proud history is that of Spanish Governor of Louisiana Don Bernardo de Galvez y Madrid. While not a Latino himself he did raise an army of troops from the then Spanish controlled regions of Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico in 1779 to fight against the British in the British Florida and to sabotage British supply lines up and down the Mississippi River. His army made up of some of the finest Latino soldiers the colonies had to offer helped keep supplies coming into the United States from the Caribbean while crippling British trade in the region and pulling British soldiers from the front against the U.S. The actions of Galvez and his men helped bleed the British dry and support the young United States in their fight for independence. So influential were his actions, as he was the only Spanish Governor to do take up arms against the British, that the King of Spain emblazoned his coat of arms with the Words “Yo Solo” or I Alone (Oropreza, 2012).

While not a distinctly American conflict the war for Texan Independence from Mexico did play a direct role in the later events of the Mexican American War. The War for Texan Independence started as rebellion by both Anglo-Texans and Tejanos (Mexican-Texans). This

was an age of Heroes for the people and one those people was a man name Juan Seguin. Juan was a brave man and one the 189 defenders of the Alamo against Santa Anna. It had been Seguin who had been sent several days into the siege to ride to Sam Houston and ask for reinforcements. Sadly however he didn't make it back in time as when he returned his fellow defenders lay dead in the ruins of El Alamo. However later at the Battle of San Jacinto it would be Seguin that would lead the charge against Santa Anna and win Texas its Independence. He became a Texan hero and later a Texas Senator. However it is also here that we see the inequality that Latino Veterans would face for more than a century after this. While their Anglo counterparts received pensions and veteran benefits the Latinos who had fought for independent were not only refused these but treated as second class citizens (Oropreza, 2012).

In 1848 the Mexican-American War was concluded with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which saw what is now New Mexico, Arizona, And California ceded to the United States and with it came a massive influx of Latinos. In 1860 the U.S. Census reported roughly 27,500 Mexican-Americans lived in the United States, however due to most Latinos being labeled as white these numbers can be misleading (Fernandez, 2005). When the Civil War broke out in 1861 both the United States and the Confederate States saw Latinos join their ranks. In the opening days of the war the C.S.A saw 2,500 Latinos join its rank with another 1,000 joining the Union, yet by the end of the War over 9,900 Latinos would have served on either side (Thompson, 1976). Not only did Latino join the war but also Latino women one notable example is that of Loretta J. Velasquez who used the pseudonym Harry Buford, and dressed as a man to fight for the Confederacy. This Young Cuban woman fought in the Battle of Bull Run, Balls' Bluff, and Fort Donnellson. After being ousted as a female in 1863 she then re-enlisted two more times after being found out again. She challenged the boundaries of equality and gender roles

against both her male and Anglo counterparts (Oropreza, 2012). To further show how much the Latino population has done for the United States 2 Medals of Honor which had recently been created by Lincoln were awarded to Americans of Latino descent, Chilean immigrant Philip Bazaar, and Mexican-American John Ortega both of which served in the U.S. Navy (Honor Roll of U.S. Latino Medal of Honor Recipients, 2018).

33 years after the Civil War the United States once again found itself at war, this time with the Kingdom of Spain over the liberation of Cuba. This war would prove to the world that the United States was no longer an agricultural back water but rather a world power. Instrumental in this war and the invasion of Cuba were Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Riders". These "Rough Riders" were rough men, frontiersmen, hunters, and vaqueros. With many of their ranks being Latinos from Arizona, California, and New Mexico not only would their battle prowess be crucial to the war effort but also their ability to interact and speak with the native population of Cuba. One of the most distinguished Latinos was Captain Maximiliano Luna, who after dutifully serving his country would later return to Valencia County, New Mexico become sheriff and later have a military training camp named after him (Fernandez, 2005).

- World Wars

With the defeat of the Spanish the islands of Puerto Rico and the Philippines would become United States Territories. With these territories would come the influx of more Latinos into the United States Military and as World War 1 crept ever closer these new Latinos would prove vital. In 1917 as the United States entered World War 1 the U.S. Army only stood at 200,000 an incredibly small figure compared to the million plus sized armies of Europe. Also at this time almost 1/3 of the population were either immigrants or the children of immigrants and a majority of these were Latinos. To overcome the Language barriers presented the Camp Gordon

plan was initiated to where Spanish speaking officer would lead Spanish speaking units to both teach them English as well as bridge the language gap for receiving orders. However due to the language barriers many Latino units did not see combat however out of those who did they became heroes. Two such people are Privates Nicolas Lucero and Marcelino Serna while serving in France they both received the French Croix de Guerre, the French equivalent of the Medal of Honor, for destroying two German machine gun posts, capturing 24 soldiers, sustaining devastating wounds and refusing to seek treatment until the battle was won (Fernandez, 2005).

After the war however the Latino-Americans faced a large amount of discrimination. The fight for equality had begun. Although it would take time to gain traction, 30 years almost, Latino veterans began to see that due to the color of their skin they would never get the same benefits from the government as their Anglo counterparts. Regardless of the sacrifices they had made and the lives lost the American people still did not see them as equals, even if Latinos considered themselves proud Americans. But as World War 2 came along this would begin to change. The United States officially entered World War 2 after the horrific surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the air and naval forces of the Empire of Japan. After suffering 2,403 casualties from this attack alone including Sgt. Felipe Trejo and Seamen Empimedio Rubi. The attack was dealt a devastating blow to the U.S. as well as simultaneous invasions of the Philippines and several other U.S. held Pacific territories.

Not only were there Latinos among the casualties of Pearl Harbor but many of the soldiers stationed in the Philippines were Latino and had been stationed there due to their ability to speak the commonly spoken Spanish. Many of these men would not survive the war as they would be subject to the horrors of the Bataan Death March, a brutal 85 mile march that would result in the death of 6,000 of the 16,000 soldier captured, and the ensuing years of living in

Japanese prisoner of war camps (Fernandez, 2005). For those back at home the call to war, the call to repay the Japanese for their treachery reached far and wide breaking through every barrier of race and class. Over the next four years over 12,364,000 men and women would join the United States armed forces (Lutz, 2008). Of those men over 500,000 of them would be Latino over 53,000 Puerto Ricans (Fernandez, 2005). During the war 464 Medal of Honors would be awarded and 12 of them would be awarded to U.S. born Latinos (Oropreza, 2012). Among these American patriots were heroes like Guy Gabaldon. Guy Gabaldon was young Latino from California. He grew up in a neighborhood with a high Japanese-American and Mexican American population and learned to speak Japanese. Due to this he was assigned an intelligence position in the Pacific theatre of World War 2 (Oropreza, 2012). His actions while on the island of Okinawa would become the thing of legend. While on the Japanese held island of Saipan Gabaldon would over the course of his time there be responsible of the singlehanded capture of over 1000 Japanese soldiers. As well as gathering extremely valuable intelligence (Fernandez, 2005).

In the European theatre many Latinos would show incredible bravery while fighting the German and Italian Axis powers. One unit which gained notoriety was the 141st Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Army. The 141st had started as the 2nd Texas Volunteers and many of the soldiers could trace their roots to the early Anglos and Tejanos who had fought for Texan Independence in 1836. What sets this unit apart is its incredibly lengthy amount of time it was in combat with over 361 in combat it had almost 3 times the average combat time of any other unit. Further they were one of the most highly decorated units of World War 2. While suffering 6,000 casualties including 1,126 killed and nearly 5,000 wounded they also received 3 Medal of



Honors, 31 Distinguished Service Crosses, 12 Legions of Merit, 492 Silver Stars, 11 Soldiers Medals and 1,685 Bronze Stars and other medals (Fernandez, 2005)(Medal of Honor Society.)

However it wasn't just Latinos that displayed such display of gallantry. Latinas also answered their nations call. With programs like the Army WAC or Women's Air Corps or the Navy's WAVES, Women Actively Volunteering for Enlisted Service, Women could now serve in an official capacity in Armed Forces. Many Latinas saw this as an opportunity to advance themselves both economically and educationally. Latinas were so eager to serve their country that some such as 19 year old Maria Sally Salazar lied about their age to meet the 21 year old age requirement for women (Oropreza, 2012). After her basic training she spent most of the war tending the wounded in the Pacific theatre. Further on the home front many Latina women were taking to the munitions factories to take the jobs of the men that were now on the front. The Sanchez family of New Mexico for example had three adult daughters all of which became defense industry factory workers or "Rosita the Riveters" (Fernandez, 2005).

After the war many interviews, books and movies were made about the exploits of these heroes. In one interview with Silvestre Herrera a Latino Medal of Honor winner when asked why he singlehandedly crossed a minefield and attack a German machinegun while fighting in France, he replied simply "Because in a Mexican-American we are men not sissies". (Medal of Honor Society). Many young men had gone off to war and had proven themselves equal in every way to their Anglo counterparts and now that they were back they were determined to end discrimination on the home front.

Dr. Hector P. Garcia was a veteran of World War 2 and a renowned physician and he would use his status as a soldier and a veteran to help change stereotypes and public opinion of Latinos. After the war he saw the discrimination that Mexican-Americans faced in that they were

denied the very benefits they had been promised and found decimation and racism waiting for them at home instead of a hero's welcome. (Fernandez, 2005). He would go on to create the American G.I. Forum and would use it as a political platform to gain equal status for all Latino/a-American veterans.

- Cold War

But the peace of the post war world would not last long. In 1950, Communist North Korea would invade the Democratic South Korea and the two nations being allies of the USSR and the U.S. respectively conflict would again ensue. Once again Latino-Americans would proudly join to fight and stop the spread of Communism. In this war it would be an entirely Puerto Rican unit known as the Boriqueneers that would earn its spot in history. By late 1951 the unit had seen combat for 460 days. They had suffered 1,653 casualties and taken over 2,300 prisoners. Comparably to other units they had fought longer, lost fewer, and taken more prisoners than any other unit in the war. Further Puerto Ricans suffered a vastly disproportionate number of casualties than any other group in the war. Finally it was Douglas MacArthur, the commanding officer of all U.S. forces in Korea who said "The 65th are showing magnificent ability and courage in battlefield operations." (Oropreza, 2012).

Further with the advent of the jet fighter at the end of World War 2 many more Latinos were now becoming pilots. One such pilot was Captain Manuel J. Fernandez who became an "ace" in his first year in the war meaning he shot down at least 5 enemy planes. By the end of the war he would have 15 kills placing at 60th overall in the number of confirmed kills for fighter pilots. He would later set a jet speed record of 666.661 MPH in an f-100 Super Sabre. He would later retire as a Colonel in the U.S. Air Force. (Fernandez, 2005).

Following the Korean War the United States would enter a short lived era of peace. Not too long after Korea the United States would once again be fighting Communism this time in a place called Vietnam. However this time there would be a divide in the Latino community. Some Latinos would once again see this as their chance to fight for their country and prove their worth while others saw it only as another chance for Latinos to die in the Anglo's war. Many would even go as far as burning their draft cards and refusing to serve (Oropreza, 2012). For those who did however they would face a new enemy, the Vietcong, who would become responsible for Latinos making up 19.4% of all casualties during the war (Oropreza, 2012).

As warfare changes and develops overtime so do the ways we fight it and as the Vietnam War escalated the training and deployment of Special Forces became more commonplace. Among these new elite soldiers were many Latino volunteers. One such volunteer was Sergeant First Class Issac Camacho. When attacked by the forces of North Vietnam the rest of his unit was pinned down by enemy fire but he ran to a nearby mortar position and began to lay down covering fire for his men. However the enemy eventually breached their defenses and amongst all the chaos he was taken prisoner. He would be held by the Vietcong for 20 months before escaping from the enemy and crossing through miles of enemy territory to reach freedom. He would later be awarded the Silver Star and Bronze Star for his bravery (Fernandez, 2005).

Another fine example of Latino courage under fire comes from Medal of Honor recipient Specialist Fourth Class, U.S. Army, Alfred V. Rascon. While attempting to aid a fellow platoon that was under heavy enemy fire he was ordered to fall back to a safer position to regroup. However his devotion to duty and his role as a combat medic pushed him onwards despite his orders to go on and run through enemy rifle and grenade fire to save his comrades. He was eventually wounded by enemy shrapnel but kept going. All in all he sustained multiple life

threatening wounds and save the lives of many of his fellow soldiers who would have otherwise died (Fernandez, 2005).

One of the most well know Latino heroes of all time is Master Sargent (then Staff Sergeant) Roy P. Benavidez, who was attached to detachment B-56, 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions in Vietnam. (Fernandez, 2005) On May 2, 1968 SSgt Roy P. Benavidez joined a helicopter rescue team to help rescue a 12 man reconnaissance team that was overrun by a larger Communist force. SSgt Benavidez sustained many life threatening wounds while continuing to carry wounded troops the medical evacuation helicopter. Unfortunately that very chopper was destroyed by enemy fire. However undeterred he pushed on loading more wounded soldiers on a second chopper. He saved the lives of eight Green Berets despite being wounded 6 times in his left leg, 2 times in his right leg, 3 times in the right arm, 1 time in the left arm, and even 2 head wounds (Oropreza, 2012)

### Modern Times

After the horrors of Vietnam the United States would not enter another for several decades but as time wore on many Latinos and Latinas saw the military as a way to either gain citizenship, equality or educational benefits. While still a small percentage of the overall military, roughly 3% (Parker, 2007) Latinos were growing in numbers and changing the demographics of the military.

From the 1980s to 2015 Latino numbers in the United States Armed Forces has risen from just barely over 3% to over 13% and continues to rise (Parker, 2017). With the increase in migration from Latin America following the Vietnam War many of the military's new recruits were Latino/a. According to the Population Reference Bureau in 2004 Latinos made up 16% of

the civilian labor force and 13% of active duty military personnel. (Segal, 2007). With rising numbers of Latinos in the populace many military branches targeted them for recruitment. With 15% of Marine Corps, 13.4% of the Navy, 11.8% of the Army and 6% of the Air Force being Latino. However not only were Latinos joining but also Latinas.(Parker, 2017) According to the Population Reference Bureau as of 2006 Latinas outnumbered Latinos in every branch and every rank of the Military.(Segal, 2007) Many Latinas claiming that they saw the military as a way to compete economically with men and to get a free college education (Lutz, 2008). Due to the rapid increase in the U.S. Latino population further increases are expected. A Department of Defense outlook on Demographics of the U.S. military claims they expect 20% of the military to be of Latino Heritage by 2025 and over half to of those 20% to be Latina(D.O.D., 2015).

Following the tragic events of 9/11 the U.S. military has experienced a steady influx of personnel from all backgrounds. However minorities seem to making up larger and larger numbers of new recruits. In 2015 over 38% of U.S. military personnel were minorities with the African Americans being the largest minority at 16.8% followed by Latinos at 13.6% (D.O.D., 2015). Further the ranks of the Officer Corps of all branches have also seen a higher number of Latinos added to their ranks with just 0.2% Latino officers overall in 1980 to 10.2% in 2015 (D.O.D., 2015). Since a degree is required to become an officer in the military this also demonstrates that a Latinos are also reaching higher levels of education than in the past or at least are being acknowledged for it.

Latinos continue to serve our beloved nation dutifully regardless of the racial tension or political rhetoric of the time. With the war in Iraq and Afghanistan fresh in everyone's mind we can see that its Latinos like Juan Sebastian Restrepo who died combating terrorist in Afghanistan who are willing to sacrifice everything for a nation that may not be willing to do the

same in return. His exploits can be found in the Documentary “Restrepo” which was made from footage from his personal camera he had with him. It’s also heroics acts of such men that inspire countless other Latino/a’s to join the Armed Forces (Lutz, 2008). Other reasons Latinos seek to join the military is to honor their family who have fallen in defense of America. One such Latino was Sgt. Ricardo Peralta who joined the Marine Corps shortly after his brother had died in Fallujah in 2004 and was awarded the Navy Cross for his bravery (Oropreza, 2012).

Yet still more Latino/a’s join the military to advance themselves economically. With the steady pay and ability to learn new skills with the guaranteed educational benefits of the G.I. bill (DOD, 2015) many Latinos see it as an easy way to improve both their economic and educational standpoint to be more successful in the civilian world after their service(Lutz, 2008). The military offers many advantages over the civilian labor force in that you guaranteed steady pay, a place to live, food to eat, and an education in a trade of your choice. However some even choose to serve until retirement and retire from military service with full benefits then begin a new civilian career with a financial cushion (Lutz, 2008). Whatever the reason may be for joining Latinos are shaping the U.S. military for the better.

### Conclusion

With a long and honorable history of Latino military heroes the U.S. military has recognized the contributions of these warriors by honoring them with some of the nation’s highest military awards (Oropreza, 2012). Further the diversifying of the military has allowed for more sharing of knowledge, skills, and language to further advance military capabilities (Kim Parker, 2017). Finally as the long history of heroic Latinos has shown our nation would not be where it is today were it not for these brave men and women sacrificing everything in the face of danger, racism, and discrimination.

Looking through the military history of the United States I shown the many contributions and sacrifices Latinos have made on the battlefield. Further I have shown that the numbers of Latinos in the military is on the rise and expected to continue. I have shown that besides patriotism and honor some of the most common reasons for enlisting are those of economic and educational advancement. With the rise of the Latino population both in the Armed Forces and the United States the trend of ever increasing numbers of Latino servicemen seems here to stay. Further a final look at the long history of Latino patriots, their heroism and their contributions to the nation and its military can be seen in the freedoms and liberties we all enjoy due to their sacrifice.

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