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Brianna R. Lasso

Eastern Washington University, lassobrianna@yahoo.com

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Latinos in the United States Military: World War II

Brianna R. Lasso

Eastern Washington University

Faculty Mentor: Martin Meraz Garcia, Ph.D.

Author's Note

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Brianna Lasso.

Contact: lassobrianna@yahoo.com

Abstract

The reason for writing this research paper is to inform the audience and present them with a new understanding of Latinos in the United States military, during World War II. This research project brings to light the positive and negative experiences for Latinos who served their country during this period in history. It also recognizes the achievements and heroic acts of several Latinos during World War II, and explores the various roles that they played, and contributions that they made for the war effort. The method of research used for this study primarily consists of scholarly journals, books, and documentaries. The research presented in this paper will give better insight into the lives of Latinos as they served in the United States military during the Second World War. It will shine a light on the struggles that Latinos faced, and it will give the reader a new perspective of who Latinos are, and what they have done for America.

Keywords: military, Latinos, history, Hispanics, World War II

Throughout American military history, people of all ethnicities and backgrounds have stepped up to answer the call to serve their country. Latinos in particular have been faithfully serving in the United States military since the beginning. Over 12,000,000 Americans served in World War II, among those were 500,000 Latinos (Lopez, 2009). To put this into simpler terms, Latinos made up about 2.3 to 4.7 percent of the total population of people who served during this war. Right away, we realize that there is only a small percent of Latinos being represented in World War II. However, through much research, I found that Latinos were actually the largest minority group to serve in this war. Throughout my paper, these statistics will tie into three main areas of study. I will uncover several Latinos who went above and beyond their call of duty to save lives and achieve greatness. I will dig into these heroes' specific roles and jobs to give people a better understanding of the details of their work. I will also bring an awareness to the many struggles that Latinos faced while serving in this war and how they had to fight for their own freedom even after returning home from serving their country.

I want to begin this research paper by highlighting the fact that 12 Latinos (out of 464 recipients) earned the Medal of Honor for their heroic actions during World War II, this is the most prestigious award given in the military. Among those, was the first Hispanic recipient of this award, he was a young man named Macario Garcia. This man deserves to be recognized for his bravery and selfless actions. After landing in Normandy with his 22nd Infantry Regiment, B Company, Garcia eliminated not one, but two mounted German machine guns. As bullets sprayed his fellow soldiers, Garcia ran out into the chaos and took down one enemy machine gun, but during the process, he was shot in the shoulder. Despite being injured, Garcia fearlessly ventured out into the war zone yet again, searching for the second machine gun, which was raining down bullets on his men. After taking cover and scoping out the area, he found the

second machine gun and its shooter. He took off after his target and snuck up close to the enemy. Without being detected, he eliminated his target by throwing a grenade inside the bunker where the enemy soldier was shooting. This act alone saved hundreds of lives that day (Glenn, 2016).

Garcia became an Army Staff Sergeant (the 7th rank in the U.S. Army) because of his knowledge and amazing skills portrayed during the war. An Army Staff Sergeant is a non-commissioned officer whose primary objective is to command their particular unit (about 9-12 soldiers). Staff Sergeants have many years of active duty experience and usually have two sergeants under their command (Lipscomb, 2018). Being a Staff Sergeant, Garcia was able to interact closely with the men in his squad. He was always communicating with them and training them, he learned how to lead his unit effectively which helped in his success during World War II.

After returning home from the war in 1945, Garcia decided to stop into the Oasis Café in Richmond, but was refused service because of his Mexican ancestry. After this incident, Garcia reportedly told the owner, "I've been fighting for people like you, and now you mistreat me" (Glenn, 2016). This is not the only time that Latinos were refused service after returning home from the war, in fact, many of the struggles and discrimination that Latinos faced overseas followed them back to their home in America. Before going into detail about the problems that Latinos faced, I want to recognize a few more Latinos who made great contributions during World War II as well as continue to take a harder look into the specific jobs that they performed.

Jose M. Lopez was another Medal of Honor recipient during World War II. Lopez was a Sergeant in the 2nd Infantry Regiment and was fighting in Belgium during the time of his heroic act. This young man showed his selfless attitude and courageous spirit by protecting his company from being overtaken by German soldiers. Lopez knelt down during the vicious battle

and fixed his machine gun into position. He scoped out 10 German soldiers and shot them all down before they could find his men. He noticed enemy tanks approaching his area and instead of running, he zoned in on 25 more German soldiers and shot them down before they could advance any farther. Even though enemy fire rained down on him, Lopez continued to singlehandedly hold off over 100 enemy soldiers so that his company could make it to safety.

Lopez was an Army Sergeant and his responsibility was to train and supervise junior enlisted personnel. Sergeants, similar to Staff Sergeants, are also Non-Commissioned Officers and their tasks consist of mentoring privates and specialists to develop their skills (Lipscomb, 2018). Sergeants have the greatest impact on lower-ranking soldiers; privates look to them for a good example of how to lead individuals. Army Sergeant was a high-ranking position in the military and after the war; Lopez remained in the Army and actually served two combat tours in Korea. After retiring from the military, he got a job working for the Veterans Administration (Oliver, 2005).

An interesting part of World War II was the work and contributions that many Latinas made. An organization called the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was not well known but should be recognized for the contributions and heroic efforts offered during the war. One young Latina named Elsie Martinez was part of this organization. Martinez worked at a high security base in Colorado, where she dealt with top-secret information (Rosales, 2009). Her job was to develop aerial photos taken by Army pilots and turn them into maps for the U.S. Army.

The organization that Martinez worked for was known as WAAC. About 150,000 American women served in this organization during World War II, and when three WAAC recruiters went to Puerto Rico to organize a unit, they received over 1,500 applications from Latinas in that area. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps had several different jobs that women did within the

organization. The Army was looking for bilingual Hispanic women to help in departments such as cryptology, communications, and interpretation (Bellafaire, 2017). Latinas also were recruited and trained as nurses, mechanics, intelligence analysts, and much more. The women were placed in different roles depending on how high they scored on their written and physical fitness tests.

Another Hispanic woman named Josephine Kelly Ledesma Walker was trained as an airline mechanic during World War II. She was sent to work at the Randolph Air Force Base where she was the only Mexican-American woman working in that field. She was one of the best mechanics and worked to repair damaged aircraft as well as help build new airplanes. After serving for two years Walker was sent back home where she faced much discrimination, she felt that the way people treated her had not improved at all since she left. In fact, when she tried applying for a job as a sales clerk at a local store, she was confronted with great backlash. The owner told her that he would only hire her if she changed her name to Kelly. This similar situation happened to several Latinas after returning from their duties with the Women's Auxiliary Corps.

Although World War II brought many new opportunities for Latinos, there was still an overwhelming amount of negative experiences that occurred during and after the war. These negative experiences consisted of racial discrimination, inequality, underrepresentation, and also poor attitudes and offensive language towards Latinos during the war. One area of discrimination came from the segregated units. Hispanic and Latino soldiers were mostly categorized as "white," however; Puerto Rican soldiers were segregated into their own units. In addition, there were several firsthand accounts of soldiers facing horrible treatment because of their Hispanic background. One soldier named Raul Rios Rodriguez recalled how his drill instructor would be harsher and use offensive language towards Latinos. Another Latino serving in World War II

spoke about how he experienced name calling in his all-white battalion, and once other soldiers learned of his Hispanic background, he was treated even worse. This sadly became more and more frequent as Corporal Alfonso Rodriguez; a Mexican-American describes his struggles with racial discrimination. He explained how white soldiers would tell him and other Latinos to stop speaking Spanish and instead speak English like an American. He was also involved in several physical altercations that began with someone degrading his ethnicity. Along with the poor treatment that Latinos endured, they also had to pass a literacy test, which put them at a distinct disadvantage, and placed them in more labor-oriented jobs.

Another big challenge for Latinos came after the GI bill was introduced. Latinos thought that this bill would help them tremendously, but they soon found out that they were not getting equal quality of medical treatment as well as equal opportunities to pursue a college degree (Cole, 1995). After hearing about this problem, a young physician named Hector Garcia decided he was going to do something about this. He ended up creating the American GI Forum whose primary goal was to organize veterans to fight for equal rights in education and medical treatment. This organization grew with over 100,000 members and became so influential that many of the issues they presented were taken into consideration by congress and were changed or improved (Escalante).

Hispanics made up about 2.6 percent of World War II veterans (not counting Latinos). Today the number of veterans both Hispanics and Latinos from all wars throughout history has grown to about 12.2 percent. Even though this number has increased, there is still not equal representation of Latinos in the military. Since Latinos make about 15 percent of the U.S. population, they definitely have unequal representation in the armed forces. Latinos were among the first soldiers to see combat in World War II, they fought with courage and pride for their

country, even though that country did not always recognize their achievements or give them the credit that they deserved.

To conclude this research paper, I would like to once again point out all the Latino war heroes and Latinas who fought and contributed their skills and talents to World War II. Without them, the United States military would not have been as successful as they were. Many Latinos won the most prestigious award given in the military, the Medal of Honor, for their heroic actions and bravery in the face of immense danger. Many of the Latinos who fought were Sergeants, medical doctors, and performed many other jobs as well. The Latinas who served in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, performed jobs such as mechanics, intelligence analysts, interpreters, nurses, and many other professions. They became highly skilled in their work and were able to complete tasks that average citizens could not. Along with Latinos' great success came a wave of discrimination and racism. They began to realize that despite their heroic efforts, they were not being treated fairly. Even after arriving home from serving their country, many of them were refused service at restaurants and other public places, simply because they were Hispanic. As time passes, the discrimination has decreased, or maybe it is just that we are not hearing about it as much as before. Either way, there is always room to improve our treatment of others throughout our daily lives.

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