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FROM DEATH VALLEY TO THE RÍO GRANDE VALLEY:  
WORLD WAR II AND KOREAN WAR  
PRISONERS OF WAR

A Thesis

by

JUAN DAVID CORONADO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER of ARTS

August 2006

Major Subject: History

FROM DEATH VALLEY TO THE RÍO GRANDE VALLEY:

WORLD WAR II AND KOREAN WAR

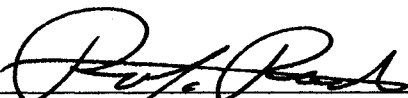
PRISONERS OF WAR


A Thesis

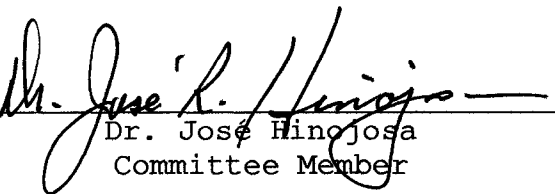
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The purpose of this study is to fill the void in scholarly literature on Mexican American Prisoners of War (POWs) from World War II and Korea from the Río Grande Valley in South Texas. This thesis focuses on POWs' experiences while in captivity and their experiences readjusting back home. Former Mexican American POWs have not received the recognition they deserved.

Mexican American POWs survived their captivity as they had the will and drive to exit alive. Their humble upbringing in the Río Grande Valley instilled in them a sense of toughness. They showed that toughness and will to survive in POW camps in the Philippines, Japan, Germany, Italy, Africa, and Korea. This project will preserve their patriotic endeavors.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history the contributions of Mexican Americans to the American heritage have been minimized to the extent of being ignored. Their efforts and services have been overshadowed by a negative perception and/ or racist view towards the Mexican American. Today is no different as a wave of anti-immigrant hysteria dominates the same country in which a large number of Mexican and Mexican American risk their lives and make the ultimate sacrifice in fighting for their country. Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been active participants in every major United States military conflict, from the American War for Independence to the present conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Studies of Mexican American participation in the United States military, especially for Mexican Americans from South Texas have been limited. Even though the Río Grande Valley, in the southernmost part of Texas has been overwhelmingly patriotic, few studies have been conducted on the contributions of its soldiers from the last three

major wars (i.e., World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War.) The Río Grande Valley is home to around 40,000 veterans, of those 25,000 reside in Hidalgo County.<sup>1</sup> The other 15,000 live in Cameron, Willacy and Starr counties. Valley veterans traditionally have been among the first to answer the call to duty and amongst the most valiant on the battlefield. Yet, their stories for the most part end in local newspapers and very few reach the pages of scholarly works.

One of two Congressional Medal of Honor recipients from the Río Grande Valley is included in several scholarly works. José M. López, World War II veteran and recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor is mentioned in Carey McWilliams' North from México: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States.<sup>2</sup> He is also mentioned in the U.S. Department of Defense's Hispanics in America's Defense.<sup>3</sup> This publication was produced by the United States Department of Defense (DoD) in 1983, commemorating the contributions of Hispanics to the military in the United States. The DoD wanted to honor the Hispanic community which were long overdue a celebration for their contributions to the growth of the United States.

There are few studies on the experiences of Mexican Americans who fell into enemy hands and became Prisoners of

War (POWs). Eva Jane Matson's book, It Told for New Mexico: New Mexicans Captured by the Japanese 1941-1945, is one of the few works that includes Mexican American POWs.<sup>4</sup> Matson aims to include all New Mexicans who were taken prisoner by the Japanese in World War II. She argues that New Mexico was the state with the most POWs in Japan proportionately speaking.<sup>5</sup> Raúl Morin's Among the Valiant: Mexican Americans in World War II and Korea remains a classic work on Mexican Americans in the military.<sup>6</sup> He also, mentions Mexican American POWs in World War II and briefly describes their experiences as POWs of the Japanese.

An important work also focusing on former Prisoners of War from New Mexico is a documentary entitled "Memories from Hell."<sup>7</sup> The documentary shows footage of former POWs recounting their experiences. Included in their commentary are many of the atrocities they experienced as POWs.

"Heróes Hispanos" is another documentary focusing on the contributions of Hispanic soldiers.<sup>8</sup> It encompasses Hispanic heroes in American military efforts from the American Revolution to the present conflict. It also briefly includes the stories of several surviving Mexican American former POWs from World War II. The interviewees were emotional as they recounted their catastrophic experience. The POWs in the documentary were from New

Mexico, there were not any former POWs from the Río Grande Valley included in this documentary produced by the History Channel.

Blessed are the Soldiers: Oral Histories of This Century's American War Veterans by Angie S. López is a work that is dedicated to recounting the experiences of veterans from World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> López includes the stories of many Mexican American former POWs from New Mexico who were captive in World War II and Korea. López's work preserves the stories and experiences of many former Prisoners of War, adding pages to history.

There is a similar work produced in the Río Grande Valley by Professor William Adams from The University of Texas-Brownsville (UTB.) His study entitled Valley Vets: An Oral History of World War II Veterans of the Río Grande Valley is a collection of oral interviews recorded by students at UTB.<sup>10</sup> The book includes transcriptions of the interviews with World War II veterans. There was not a single former Prisoner of War included in the project.

There is a void in scholarly literature citing Mexican American former Prisoners of War from South Texas. There are several works focusing on Mexican American former POWs from New Mexico particularly because the New Mexican National Guard's 200<sup>th</sup> and 515<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery units were

stationed in the Philippines before the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941.<sup>11</sup> Thus, there were many Mexican Americans from New Mexico taken prisoners by the Japanese.

There was a significant number of Mexican Americans from the Río Grande Valley that were also taken captive in every theatre of World War II. There was also a number that were taken during the Korean War. This work suggests there were over thirty Mexican Americans from Hidalgo County, Texas, taken captive in World War II. The number of Mexican American POWs from Hidalgo County captive in the Korean War is much less in comparison to World War II. The same is true at a national level as well. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs there were 130,201 American POWs in World War II and 7,140 American POWs in the Korean War.<sup>12</sup> There were 123,000 more Americans taken POWs in World War II than in Korea. Respectively there were six Mexican Americans which have been accounted for in this study from Hidalgo County captive in the Korean War. Yet, there still remains a void in history when it comes to Mexican American former POWs from the Río Grande Valley.

The World War II and Korean War generations are fading away rapidly. According to data published on former American Prisoners of War in April of 2005 by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the death rate among

former World War II Prisoners of War is 10% and the death rate among former Korean War Prisoners of War is 5%.<sup>13</sup> It is with great importance that the history of Mexican American former Prisoners of War be recorded while it is still possible to learn from these veterans. It is a story that must be told.

Literature on Mexican American POWs from the Valley is nonexistent. During World War II and the Korean War local newspapers reported frequently on POWs and their status. Since the literature on Mexican American POWs is extremely limited and even more limited on Mexican American POWs from the Río Grande Valley, the ideal sources for this project have been: oral interviews with former Mexican American POWs from the Río Grande Valley, primarily from Hidalgo County, local newspaper accounts from the World War II and Korean War eras, literature on Mexican Americans in the military and literature on POWs.

This project includes accounts from eight surviving former POWs from World War II and the Korean War who were interviewed. Surviving Mexican American former POWs are a rarity as many have passed. With the exception of two interviewees, all are from Hidalgo County. Included is a former POW from Willacy County, who has been added because he escaped from captivity.<sup>14</sup> His story is rather unusual so

he is included in the study. Also included in the research is a POW from Starr County, a Bataan Death March survivor.<sup>15</sup> POWs from Bataan were among the most ill-treated POWs during World War II.

Newspaper accounts of Mexican American POWs from the World War II and Korean War era in local newspapers such as the Edinburg Valley Review, Mission Times, Hidalgo County News, Valley Evening Monitor, Pharr Press, Brownsville Herald and La Prensa de San Antonio are the only monograph for history of Valley soldiers. The only resource on the experiences of a Valley POW is James N. Rowe's autobiography, Five Years to Freedom: The True Story of a Vietnam POW.<sup>16</sup> Rowe describes his experiences as POW during the Vietnam Conflict, thus nothing is written on POWs from World War II and Korea.

Other information or recognition of Valley POWs is scant. On October 14, 2000, Congressman Ruben Hinojosa, along with Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Hershel Gober, presented the South Texas POW/MIA Recognition Ceremony in PSJA North High School in Pharr, Texas. That same year on November 5, 2000, the City of Edinburg, Texas, had a ceremony at Memorial Park where they unveiled and dedicated the Edinburg Commemorative POW/MIA Monument. The

celebrations were long overdue as former Valley POWs awaited in the shadows their much deserved recognition.

Four years after the ceremonies former Mexican American POWs from the Valley were harder to find as several had passed away. After researching and investigating on the whereabouts of former POWs, a list of over thirty potential interviewees was collected. Further investigation revealed that the list was down to about a handful since the majority of the former POWs were deceased or had relocated and could not be contacted. Nonetheless, contact with local veterans and with local veteran organizers resulted in finding a few Mexican American former POWs.

Eventually six potential interviewees were located. After a few interviews the list of potential interviewees grew as the men interviewed gave more names of Mexican American former POWs. The list was comprised to fifteen potential interviewees, nine which were interviewed, two who refused to participate, two who passed away and two were not located.

A survey was formatted and given to the interviewees during the interview. The survey consisted of questions focusing on their background, military service, experience as POWs, post war experiences and general information

regarding their service.<sup>17</sup> Several former POWs recounted their story with ease and great detail from the start, while others had trouble disclosing and sharing their experiences. For several former POWs it was difficult to recount their stories as painful memories resurfaced. It was difficult as well since many former POWs were discrete about their experiences and were not willing to talk about their past experiences. They were reluctant to relive some traumatizing experiences. In several instances these ex-POWs would rather have not remembered certain details that they have tried to block out.

This project will preserve the experiences of Mexican American former POWs from the Valley by providing excerpts from oral history interviews. It brings to life the words and experiences of Mexican American ex-POWs of the World War II and Korea generation. It will fill the void of scholarly literature on Mexican American POWs from the Río Grande Valley. This project will also evaluate their civilian lives after their experiences as POWs. It was a challenge was to have the veterans discuss information they considered to be irrelevant, but is truly important.

The study on former Mexican American POWs will show how the men survived the POW camps and what they experienced. The study will focus on the environment POWs

lived in and the daily situations they had to deal with. It will describe their thoughts while in captivity. This study will also focus on their post-war experiences and their return to civilian life. The Prisoner of War treatment experienced by World War II POWs and Korean War POWs had lingering effects, which affected them as they tried to integrate themselves in to civilian life.

Most importantly, this study will highlight the contribution of former Mexican American POWs from the Rio Grande Valley towards the American heritage. Their contributions towards the defense of democracy and the defense of American ideals should be held in great esteem. Former POWs merit should be recognized not only by the locals in the area, but by the entire nation. The Río Grande Valley former POWs should be valued for their patriotism and honored for their valiance. They should not be forgotten like they have been for many years. They had to fight first for survival and liberation, second for recognition and for a place in society and third for their deserving benefits which were for sometime denied to them.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Emilio de los Santos, interview by author, Note taking, Edinburg, Texas, 1 March 2004. Mr. de los Santos is the Veterans Service Administrator for Hidalgo County.

<sup>2</sup> Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States. (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Department of Defense. Hispanic's in America's Defense. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Equal Opportunity and Safety Policy. Washington D.C. August 1983. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Eva Jane Matson, It Told For New Mexico: New Mexicans Captured by the Japanese, 1941-1945. (Las Cruces, New Mexico: Yuccan Tree Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Eva Jane Matson, It Told For New Mexico: New Mexicans Captured by the Japanese, 1941-1945. (Las Cruces, New Mexico: Yuccan Tree Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Raul Morin, Among the Valiant: Mexican Americans in World War II and Korea. (Alhambra: Borden Publishing Co, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Sonnenberg, D. "Memories of Hell." Albuquerque: KNME-TV. 1982.

<sup>8</sup> History Channel. "Heroes Hispanos." New York: History Channel. 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Angie Lopez, Blessed Are the Soldiers: Oral Histories of This Century's American War Veterans. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Sandia Publishing, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> William Adams, Valley Vets: An Oral History of World War II Veterans of the Río Grande Valley. (Austin: Eakin Press, 1999.)

<sup>11</sup> Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States. (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968), 259.

<sup>12</sup> U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Former American Prisoners of War." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning, and Preparedness. Washington D.C. April 2005. 2.

<sup>13</sup> U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Former American Prisoners of War." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning, and Preparedness. Washington D.C. April 2005. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Jose Vazquez from Raymondville is a former World War II POW of the Germans. Vazquez managed to escape from the Germans.

<sup>15</sup> Gregorio Barrera from Rio Grande City is a former World War II POW survivor of Bataan.

<sup>16</sup> James N. Rowe, Five Years to Freedom: The True Story of a Vietnam POW. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971).

## Chapter II

### World War II POWs: Journey Back To Greatest Generation

During World War II, Mexican Americans served in every theatre of war. Since Mexican Americans and other Latino groups were not segregated it is difficult to give an accurate figure of their participation. Most scholars would agree that anywhere from 375,000 to 500,000 Chicanos served in World War II.<sup>1</sup> Chicanos fought valiantly to show they were as American as anyone else. There were 2,376 Hispanics taken Prisoners of War during World War II.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the first to see action in the Philippines was Corporal (Cpl.) Gregorio Barrera from Rio Grande City, Texas.

"They were the first to fire and the last to lay down their arms and only reluctantly doing so after being given a direct order."<sup>3</sup> Gregorio Barrera was amongst the group referred to by Lt. Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright, he was in New Mexico's 200<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft unit. Barrera was originally going to be sent to Alaska, but instead of spending time in cold weather he opted to be transferred to the Philippines where the weather would be warm.<sup>4</sup> Cpl.

Barrera's decision to be transferred to the Philippines had severe consequences.

Other than encountering ideal weather, Barrera during his several months in the Philippines encountered a determined, well-equipped and staggering enemy. After realizing that death was almost certain Barrera's commanding officer decided it was best to surrender. Barrera was taken prisoner of war in the Philippines on April 9, 1942. Of the estimated 20,000 American military personnel that surrendered at Bataan 25% were Spanish surnamed.<sup>5</sup> After surrendering Barrera felt somewhat relieved due to the fact that he had just been ordered to take the lead position and would have been the first to die if they had encountered the enemy.<sup>6</sup> Soon Barrera would discover how wrong he was as he took part in the infamous Bataan Death March.

The POWs in Bataan suffered the indignation of human torture. They should have been properly treated humanely as per the Geneva Convention agreement. Under the Geneva Convention, POWs guaranteed minimal life sustaining efforts and comforts. The Geneva Convention protects POWs from abusive treatment. General Edward King, the Commanding General of the Philippine-American forces on Bataan, who surrendered to Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma, was

assured his troops would be treated humanely.<sup>7</sup> However, Homma did not stay true to his word and treated the POWs miserably. "Homma said we were not POWs. He said we were criminals and they treated us as such. Homma felt we were dishonorable since we surrendered instead of dying with honor."<sup>8</sup> Since the Japanese did not consider the Americans and Filipinos they captured POWs they did not abide by the guidelines of treating Prisoners of War under the Geneva Convention. POWs were therefore severely beaten by Japanese guards and the living conditions were inadequate and inhumane.

After surrendering, for the next twelve days Barrera and the rest of the POWs marched day and night until they reached San Fernando, eighty-five miles later.

We were beaten and bayoneted. Those who had Japanese currency were killed. We marched barefooted on scorching grounds. We were hungry, thirsty and tired. We ate whatever we found. We ate horse and monkey. We ate bananas and roots. If someone fell the Japanese would come and if they did not get up they would hit them with the bayonet or shoot them. They treated us like they worked for the devil. They were worse than the devil.<sup>9</sup>

After twelve days of hell the situation only worsened as Barrera arrived at *San Fernando* and was then sent by train to Camp O'Donnell in the Philippines. Camp O'Donnell was an unfinished American airfield near the Manila

Railroad in Capas.<sup>10</sup> When they arrived at Camp O'Donnell the POWs were lectured by Japanese officers whose mission was to deteriorate their spirits and their morale. "You Americans are nothing but cowards! Japanese soldiers would never surrender to America, they would die first. You have dishonored your country, your parents and yourselves."<sup>11</sup> The Japanese had much contempt for their new captives and Camp O'Donnell was an illustration of their disregard towards the humanity of their POWs.

Camp O'Donnell was a cesspool as it lacked sanitation, space and adequate water supply. Dysentery and malaria plagued the POWs in Camp O'Donnell. Since there was no medical treatment many men died from these diseases. Barrera suffered from dysentery a few times.<sup>12</sup> POWs were put on a "starvation" diet, thus were fed just enough to stay alive.

Camp O'Donnell was worse than the march. There were men lying on the ground just barely living. Their eyes and their mouths were wide open. We had to jump over them to move around because there were so many of them dying. There were flies everywhere and the smell was unbearable, so we asked the Japanese permission to build a trench to bury the dead.<sup>13</sup>

Camp O'Donnell was divided into three sections. There was a camp for the POWs that were ill and those who were sent there rarely ever got out. There was the work station,

where the POWs worked. Then there was the area where the rest of the POWs stayed. Cpl. Barrera fell ill of malaria, beriberi and diarrhea and was placed with the sick. Fortunately for Cpl. Barrera a group of his friends took him back to the barracks because they realized he would only weaken more if he stayed with the other POWs that were ill. Barrera received medical attention from a Red Cross medic and miraculously survived.

I walked around and I heard a voice call me 'Indio, you want this cup of rice.' I said yes of course. I had not eaten in a long time. I noticed he had a clean American uniform I stayed with him for two days and no one noticed him. Then he disappeared and I never saw him again.<sup>14</sup>

During the first year of captivity 30% of the American POWs died in the Philippines.<sup>15</sup> What weakened POWs the most was malnutrition. At Camp O'Donnell POWs were fed a cup of rice a day. Many prisoners would steal whatever food they could find. The Filipinos often gave them food as well. POWs were allowed to harvest tomatoes and those who were fortunate enough, like Cpl. Barrera, to work in the kitchen, ate the rice stuck on the pots they cleaned. Barrera hustled his way at Camp O'Donnell by scavenging. He was not particular about what he ate. Some POWs refused to eat the miserable and often contaminated rice that was given to them on a daily basis.

I had an advantage against the Americans that were with me over there. Back in Río Grande City sometimes I ate sometimes I did not eat. I was accustomed to not eating. So when they fed me over there I ate what they gave me. I did not reject anything.<sup>16</sup>

In the summer of 1942 Cpl. Barrera was moved to Osaka, Japan.<sup>17</sup> The Japanese asked 500 POWs to volunteer, Cpl. Barrera volunteered and was shipped to Osaka. The 500 men were cramped in a cargo ship infested with rats as they journeyed to their new destination. Once in Osaka, Cpl. Barrera worked in a steel mill and did what he could to stay alive. "When I arrived at Osaka a Japanese guard, who knew Spanish told me, 'Lo siento mucho Americanos.' He was a compassionate guard who knew what we were in for."<sup>18</sup>

Along with fighting hunger in Osaka, Cpl. Barrera had to endure physical abuse unleashed by Japanese guards. Barrera was punished twice at Osaka, once for sleeping naked and another for being caught chewing on a fish bone he was not supposed to have. "One night I slept naked because there were many lice. The Japanese guard knocked my teeth out because of that."<sup>19</sup> The other incident involved Barrera and a friend stealing a fish bone and another POW informed on them. "We had a piece of fish bone and we would chew on it because we were hungry. Someone told on us and the Japanese made us stand naked outside on a hot day."<sup>20</sup>

The medic told the camp commander that Barrera was a good worker. The Japanese decided to relieve Barrera of his torture. There were numerous informants amongst POWs and mostly everyone had a problem with them, but at the same time understood that the informants were desperate for food. "I hated people like that but I understood that they were trying to get extra food."<sup>21</sup>

Another form of Japanese torture was to psychologically abuse POWs. For a long time Barrera was not allowed to communicate with his family. When they did hear from him, the Japanese sent an altered message. The message stated that Barrera was doing fine and that he was being treated justly, which was not the case. "Later I had communication on short wave radio. The interpreter would change my messages. It was propaganda from the Japanese."<sup>22</sup>

On one occasion a POW was caught stealing food and the Japanese made one of his mates whip him. "He started whipping him light and then the Japanese guard told him to hit harder or else he would also get whipped. So he started whipping him harder until the guy past out."<sup>23</sup>

Along with using the method of divide and conquer in dealing with the POWs, the Japanese would play different mind games with the POWs to demoralize them on a daily basis. "They would tell us that Japan was controlling San

Francisco, to scare us. We did not believe that a small nation like Japan could control a great nation like the United States."<sup>24</sup>

To keep moral high POWs celebrated birthdays and holidays. On birthdays POWs would form their rice into cakes and celebrate. The POWs had Christmas celebrations and routinely had musical shows to keep entertained.<sup>25</sup> POWs stayed busy as much as they could to keep their spirits high. "I would work and forget I was hungry."<sup>26</sup>

Cpl. Barrera never lost hope and managed to survive with the rice system he and a group of other POWs practiced. On occasion Barrera and five other POWs would pass up their cup of rice for the day to the designated person of the day, that person would eat six cups of rice that day. They would take turns so each of them could have plenty to eat on occasion.<sup>27</sup> Once a month, POWs received cigarettes and a bar of soap from the Red Cross. Barrera was not a smoker so he would trade his cigarettes for rice. "That is how I survived," explained Barrera who was also saddened how some prisoners would rather smoke than eat.<sup>28</sup> But in order for him to survive he ignored the situation of others.

Few weeks before they liberated Barrera the Japanese started to treat their POWs better. They no longer made the POWs work.

In September 1945 we were lined up on the flag pole. We were a smaller group, many had died. I thought it was roll call because we had roll call twice a day. Later the American and Japanese Commander came out and lowered the Japanese and raised the American flag. I was Stunned, like a zombie. The commander said men you are free. We jumped and cried. We thanked God for everything.<sup>29</sup>

Cpl. Barrera weighed eighty-nine pounds when he was liberated, fifty pounds less than his original weight. The POWs were immediately fed. They had a variety of foods to choose from. Of course they over-ate. Consequently, many fell ill because their bodies had been accustomed for the past three years to a rice diet. Barrera was then sent home.

Laureano Peña and Fidencio Vela, Rio Grande City natives were also POWs in Bataan. Vela died in captivity and Peña died several years after being liberated.<sup>30</sup> Plutarco Garza from *La Jara* Ranch near Hargil, Texas, also survived the Bataan Death March and was liberated in August 1945.<sup>31</sup>

The situation for American POWs captured by the Germans was different. Apparently they received a less torturous form of treatment. The death rate among American

POWs captured by the Germans was from 2-4%, while it was 40% for American POWs captured by the Japanese.<sup>32</sup>

Private first class (PFC.) Gabriel Serda from Pharr, Texas, was a mortar gunner for the 81<sup>st</sup> Armored Reconnaissance Division in Africa.<sup>33</sup> Serda and his company were surrounded by the enemy. After breaking through enemy lines Serda roamed the desert for several days before being taken prisoner of war in Tunisia.

From Tunisia, Serda was flown to Naples, then he was taken to POW camp *Munich IIIA* where he stayed briefly. He was then moved to *Fosterburg IIIB* then to *Site Camp IIIB* then to *Oflag 64*. Finally he was liberated in Luckwalder, Germany, on April 21, 1945, by the Russian Army.<sup>34</sup> He was never at the same camp for more than thirteen months.

Serda struggled mentally and physically. In order to keep his mind clear Serda kept busy. Serda, who had training as a barber, cut hair during his captivity. "In the POW camps I got much training as a barber as I would cut other POWs' hair. I stayed busy. I never tried to escape. I was fearful I would get killed or beat up"<sup>35</sup>.

Serda survived with what he had. The Germans fed their POWs better than the Japanese. For breakfast, Serda was given a cup of coffee and a piece of brown bread. For lunch, Serda was given a bowl of soup that was mostly

water. For dinner he was given a cup of coffee, a slice of bread and a piece of butter.<sup>36</sup> Once the Red Cross was allowed to aid the POWs the situation improved. The Red Cross brought food and supplies to Serda towards the end of the war.

José Vásquez from Raymondville, Texas, was a prisoner of war of the Germans for fourteen months. Pfc. José Vásquez was in Company "E", First Battalion, Second Regiment, Third Infantry Division in the European Theater of Operations.<sup>37</sup> PFC. Vásquez was taken POW by the Germans in February 1944 in Italy. "When I was taken POW I faked an injury when I got captured so I would not have to carry the Germans that were injured." Immediately after his capture Pfc. Vásquez unveiled his struggle for survival by taking care of himself and always being practical in his time as POW.

"A British POW told me when we were near Thla, Germany, to stay busy and to work because I would be a prisoner for a while."<sup>38</sup> Pfc. Vásquez was reared in an agricultural and ranching setting in *Los Potreros* Ranch near Sebastian, Texas. He was predominantly knowledgeable in farm work, so he volunteered to work with an old German couple who had a farm and animals.

Working with the old couple was good for me.

I knew how to do the work. Back home I was not high class. I was used to eating beans and corn and tortillas. I would hunt rabbits. We raised pigs and chicken. I was used to life as an agricultural.<sup>39</sup>

This decision would turn out to be exceptional as Vásquez's situation improved. He went from a limited *sauerkraut* and clover leaf tea diet to a diet of three meals of *sauerkraut* a day.<sup>40</sup> The couple who Vásquez worked for took care of him and fed him well.

They fed me and I worked all day. I had breakfast then at 10 in the morning they would take me a snack, at noon I would have lunch then a snack in the afternoon then supper. I ate well. I ate at the table with them. The couple was really nice to me. We were good to each other.<sup>41</sup>

Vásquez worked in the fields and took care of the couple's animals. The couple feared that when American troops arrived they would steal their animals.<sup>42</sup> Vásquez comforted and assured them the troops were not going to go after their livestock.

Another advantage PFC. Vásquez had was that the German couple allowed him to communicate with his family back in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Vásquez received letters and packages from home. His mother often sent him homemade treats such as cookies and snacks.<sup>43</sup> The packages kept Vasquez's morale high and gave him hope of eventually getting back home.

In April 1945, when the allies were closing in on Vásquez's location, the Germans pulled the POWs out of the area. Consequently, the last package of cookies his mother sent to Vásquez at the couple's farm was rejected.<sup>44</sup> As the POWs were pulled back Vásquez, who was aware of his surroundings, planned his escape. The POWs were incarcerated in a building made of block several miles from where Vásquez had been placed with the couple. Vásquez and another POW carved an opening through the wall and removed three concrete blocks. In April 1945 at four o'clock in the morning Vásquez and his friend escaped.<sup>45</sup>

We walked for a couple of hours then heard a convoy. I knew it was Americans, but my partner got scared and hid. I approached the convoy and I identified myself. I gave them my name, rank, tag number, company, battalion and division and they recognized me. I then told my partner to come out and identify himself. Then we identified where the ten other POWs were located.<sup>46</sup>

PFC. Vásquez was debriefed, fed and flown to France. He was later flown to San Antonio. He finally made his way to the Valley. Vásquez made it home after the fourteen month experience. He acknowledges he survived because of his determination and will to live.<sup>47</sup>

Staff Sergeant Simón Velazquez was a ball turret gunner in the Army Air Force. He served in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force and was in the 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 57<sup>th</sup> Squadron.<sup>48</sup> Velazquez

needed to complete thirty missions in order to go home. After completing twenty-six, he was eager to finish. However, Velazquez was shot down on his twenty-seventh mission, in which he had volunteered so he could go home early.<sup>49</sup> The day Velazquez was shot down his group was flying over a ball bearing factory in Frankfurt, Germany. The plane in which he traveled exploded and Velazquez parachuted out. He and a companion were the only two crew members out of ten members that survived the explosion.

I was lucky I was only wounded once, my crew members got hit several times. I was in the plane when it blew up. I am alive today because I was a ball turret gunner and I was out of Ammo. I went to reload and when I went to the waist we were on fire. As soon as I saw we were on fire I got a parachute. I went to the front and the pilot and co-pilot and bombardier and mediator and the upper ball turret gunner were all dead. When I was getting out the door the plane blew up. I got knocked out. I was knocked out momentarily because when I woke up I was 25,000 feet in the air. I was in the middle of a dog fight. I got caught in a jet stream and the jet stream blew me sixty to seventy miles from where the plane blew up. I was free for about six to seven days and I was trying to get close to the France, so I could get to the underground. I was on the Rhine River and I stole a canoe. The current was so strong that it blew me to the German side where I was caught by Germans on April 13, 1943.<sup>50</sup>

Velazquez was then taken to Frankfurt to a castle for interrogation. The Germans questioned the POWs intensely. They wanted information on the military bases in England and in the United States. The Germans wanted to know what

targets the U.S. were going to attack next. The flyers did not know any information, since they received their orders right before flying out.<sup>51</sup>

They would beat you up like a son-of-a-gun all you could say was your rank, name and serial number and then they would put you in solitary confinement for twenty-one days. But, we were taught never to speak of yourself or where you came from, never confide in anyone but the people on your plane."<sup>52</sup> Solitary confinement was a dungeon about four or five stories underground and POWs were only given bread and water. After twenty-one days they were interrogated again. If they did not cooperate they were sent to solitary confinement for 21 more days.<sup>53</sup>

Velazquez was only kept twelve days in solitary confinement then he was moved to *Stalag 17* in Austria. Velazquez and hundreds of POWs were about to be shipped on a train from Frankfurt to *Stalag 17* when Americans bombed their train. Subsequently the prisoners were marched through towns in order to board another train. POWs hated marching through the towns as the German civilians had nothing but contempt towards them.

They would march us up the towns and the women and young kids would spit on us and throw rocks at us. That was strictly against the Geneva Convention. They did that about four or five different times. It was pretty rough.<sup>54</sup>

*Stalag 17* was located in Krems, Austria, near the Bavarian Alps. Due to the harsh terrain and central location of the camp escape was almost impossible.

A friend of mine escaped and was caught a month later. The German farmers turned him in. He was luckily not killed. We were so far into Austria that it was impossible to escape. We would have to go into the mountains to escape and that was suicide.<sup>55</sup>

The barracks at *Stalag 17* were built to accommodate 240 people. There were over 4,000 men imprisoned at the camp.<sup>56</sup> The overpopulation led to inadequate facilities. There was a shortage of beds, blankets and food.

Having been reared during the Great Depression, Velazquez had seen hard times. As a flyer in the Army Air Force Velazquez's situation completely changed. "Being flyers we were treated like kings. We ate anything we wanted. They fed us really good in the Air Force we had good quarters."<sup>57</sup> When taken POW Velazquez had already been accustomed to eating well, thus the starvation diet set on him by the Germans deeply affected him. When Velazquez became a POW his life changed and he struggled to adjust to the new surroundings that were inhumane.

In the morning we had a hot cup of water. At two or three o'clock we had barley soup that was full of worms. At first I would not eat it, but then I had to or I would starve. We had half a slice of German bread dark brown bread that was really hard. To me it tasted like saw dust. We would dunk it in the soup. Sometimes we would get a slice of potato. It was a starvation diet. We had very little to eat.<sup>58</sup>

Other than dealing with hunger, Staff Sgt. Velazquez had to deal with racism. The Germans harassed him for being

Mexican and told him he should not have been fighting for the United States since he was Mexican. Some German guards would even ram the butt of their rifles into Velazquez's kidneys.

The Germans also used nature against the POWs. Being near Bavaria it was very cold during winter. The POWs did not have blankets or jackets. Velazquez almost died of pneumonia one winter.<sup>59</sup> They wore the uniforms they were captured with, so during winter they were freezing.

The Red Cross would show up a few times a year, but they would tell the Germans when they would show up. So the Germans would issue us new uniforms and issue blankets right before the Red Cross showed up to fool the inspectors and make them believe they were following the Geneva Convention. As soon as the inspectors left the Germans would take them away.<sup>60</sup>

Once every other month, the Red Cross came to the camp and distributed food and cigarettes to the POWs. Velazquez did not smoke so his cigarettes were valuable. The Red Cross brought spam, margarine, chocolate bars, heath bars, canned milk soap, cheese, and Lucky Strike cigarettes. The German guards had a taste for American cigarettes. Velazquez evaluated which guards were bribable and he would trade his cigarettes for *strudel*.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, there were POWs who traded their food to other POWs for cigarettes. "It was kind of sad because we had nothing to eat and some guys would rather smoke. They would trade

their rations for cigarettes. But I did not let it get me down"<sup>62</sup>

It was overly important the POWs kept a high morale.

The best cure against idleness, homesickness, and mental and spiritual depression is to occupy oneself with something useful and worthwhile. This is true in all circumstances, not least for Prisoners of War.<sup>63</sup>

There was plenty of entertainment at *Stalag 17*. The POWs had cards, chess, sporting equipment, reading material and musical instruments. Musical concerts were popular amongst POWs as they entertained each other manifesting their musical talents. Besides passing time reading and playing POWs at *Stalag 17* built a radio.<sup>64</sup> POWs were well informed on what was occurring in the war. Thus POWs never lost hope because they knew the Allies were winning and the war would soon be over.<sup>65</sup>

Not having communication with his family in the United States brought Velazquez's and other captives' morale down. "I never got to write home nor did I receive a letter. For seven months my mom did not know of me. She then received a telegram from the War Department announcing I was a POW."<sup>66</sup>

Towards the end of the war the Russians got near *Stalag 17*. German guards took precaution by marching POWs out of the camp and up and down the Bavarian Alps for forty-seven days.

It would sleet, it would rain it would snow at night we had no barracks, wherever it got dark we stayed out in the open. After forty-seven days we were a mess. I could not walk anymore some of my friends carried me sometimes, so I could make it. After forty-seven days we stopped at a forest next to the river. We rested there for a couple of days. General Patton came along on the opposite side of the river and he was ready to shell us because he saw there was commotion on our side of the river. His lieutenants said not to do it that there were POWs in that area.<sup>67</sup>

The night of May 2, 1945, General George S. Patton sent out reconnaissance and found out that the group on the other side of the river were POWs. The following morning, May 3, 1945, they crossed the river and liberated Velazquez and the group of POWs.<sup>68</sup> General George S. Patton, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and General Omar Bradley met with Velazquez and the all POWs and thanked them for their sacrifice, and shook everyone's hand.<sup>69</sup> Gen. Eisenhower told the POWs, "You have been POWs for a long time, but we are going to treat you right. As soon as you get back home you all are going to get it. (One more Stripe.)"<sup>70</sup>

The Red Cross was called to feed the POWs. Instead of gradually feeding the POWs who had been malnourished the Red Cross brought coffee and doughnuts.

Some men made pigs of themselves and three or four guys died from eating doughnuts. We were put on strict diets. We were taken to Camp Lucky Strike in France. We were put through delousing because we were a sorry mess. They deloused us. They gave us showers and we shaved gave us clean uniforms. I was in such poor shape. I weight 148 pounds the day I got

shot down and the day I was liberated I weighed 98 pounds. I was one of the few POWs that was that big.<sup>71</sup>

Each World War II POWs experiences were unique.

Obviously some POWs suffered more than others, but they all suffered. What kept them alive was their will to live and their character. These men were reared in humble upbringings during the Great Depression. The Depression and their humble upbringing instilled in them a sense of keen survival. Each POW shared the commonality that knowing what they went through in the various POW camps, if asked to serve their country all over again, they would undoubtedly serve once again.

There were over thirty Mexican Americans from the Río Grande Valley taken Prisoners of War during World War II. This would not be the last time local newspapers would report on POWs. Within several years after World War II ended the Korean War started and once again Mexican Americans from the Valley would fall captive in the hands of the enemy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> U. S. Department of Defense. Hispanic's in America's Defense. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Equal Opportunity and Safety Policy. Washington D.C. August 1983. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Latino Advocates for Education, Inc. Undaunted Courage Mexican American Patriots of World War II. (Orange County, California: Latino Advocacy, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Lt. Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright, commander of the North Luzon Corps, praised the 200th and the 515th Coastal Artillery units in New Mexico in December 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Figueroa, "G.I. José," *Hispanic Magazine* 8, no.10 (November 1, 1995), 20-28.

<sup>6</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Brian MacArthur, Surviving the Sword: Prisoners of the Japanese In the Far East, 1942-45. (New York: Random House, 2005), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Knox, Death March: The Survivors of Bataan. (New York: A Harvest Book, 1981), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Gene Jacobsen, We Refused to Die: My Times as Prisoner of War in Bataan and Japan, 1942-1945. (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>15</sup> U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Former American Prisoners of War." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning, and Preparedness. April 2005. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Rio Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>31</sup> "Former POW Gets Discharge," Hidalgo County News, 13 December 1945, Vol. 34, P. 1.

<sup>32</sup> U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Former American Prisoners of War." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning, and Preparedness. April 2005. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Javier Serda, interview by author, note taking, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Javier Serda, interview by author, note taking, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Gabriel Serda, interview by author, tape recording, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>36</sup> "Unpublished Summary of Gabriel Serda's Military Experiences," Javier Serda, son of Gabriel Serda gave me this short summary of his father's experiences.

<sup>37</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>38</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>39</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>40</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>41</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>42</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>43</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>44</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>45</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>46</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>47</sup> José Vásquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Angie Lopez, Blessed are the Soldiers: Oral Histories of This Century's American War Veterans. (Albuquerque: Sandia Publishing Corp. 1990), 203.

<sup>52</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

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<sup>56</sup> U. S. Military Intelligence Service War Department. "American Prisoners of War in Germany." Compiled and presented by Greg Hatton. 1 November 1945.

<sup>57</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

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<sup>60</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>62</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Chris Christiansen, Seven Years Among Prisoners of War. (Athens: Ohio University Press. 1994), 37.

<sup>64</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Simón Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Simón Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>71</sup> Simón Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

### CHAPTER III

#### KOREAN WAR POWS: JOURNEY BACK TO FORGOTTEN WAR

As World War II ended, with the submission of the Japanese, a new war started. Once war allies, the United States and the Soviet Union became harsh enemies as both countries were firm in their ideologies. The United States became involved in Korea in June of 1950 after the North Koreans crossed the thirty-eight parallel into South Korea. The United States' mission was to stop the advancement of communism and cement a stable democratic ally in South Korea.

During the Korean War, 398 of the 7,140 U.S. combatants that were taken captive by the enemy were Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> There have been six Korean War POWs identified from Hidalgo County, Texas.<sup>2</sup> Valley native Cpl. Ricardo Cortez was amongst the first to see combat as well as one of the first to fall into captivity.

Initially the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division provided the ground forces in Korea. It had been occupying Kyushu, Japan, so the 24<sup>th</sup> was easily transported to Korea. Río

Grande Valley native Corporal Ricardo Cortez quickly saw combat by July of 1950. He was a member of the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.<sup>3</sup>

The 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's role was to engage the North Korean forces until massive U.S. forces arrived in Korea. Cpl. Ricardo Cortez participation in the Korean War quickly took an abrupt transformation when he was taken prisoner of war on July 11, 1950.<sup>4</sup>

We were surrounded. An officer had been captured near where I was. The people who were retreating were being killed. I did not know if they were South Koreans or North Koreans. I did not know what to do when I asked if they were North or South Koreans a gun was put to my head. So I found out they were North Korean.<sup>5</sup>

After being captured, Cortez was forced to march North to Seoul. Cortez and the other POWs captured were marched through the streets of South Korea to intimidate the South Koreans. Cpl. Cortez was then taken to Pyongyang where the POWs were placed in a school outside the city limits. He was held in Pyongyang for a few months before being moved north up to the Yalu River on the border with Manchuria. At this point the Chinese became involved in the Korean War and set up POW Camps along the Yalu River.

Cpl. Cortez was marched for nine days in detrimental weather in which several people froze.<sup>6</sup> The North Koreans intimidated POWs by killing those marching slowly.

During the march, according to the North Korean we were moving slow. As consequence Lieutenant Tordon was blamed by the North Koreans for not having us move at their chosen speed. He was killed on the spot. It was a warning to everyone. Everyone moved faster after that. Lt. Tordon was not the only one killed. There were 150 of us that were killed or died during the nine day death march, including civilians and a group of French nuns who could no longer walk. We were told to drop them because we were carrying them and then we just heard the gun shot as we walked away.<sup>7</sup>

After the torturous march POWs were placed in a compact room in which there was only room to sit. POWs were given one bowl of rice in the morning and another in the afternoon. "The first day I took other POWs' rice because they did not like it, but the second day everyone ate it."<sup>8</sup> Having been raised in poverty, hunger was nothing new to Cortez. Cortez had a rough upbringing in the Río Grande Valley of South Texas and had become accustomed to hunger. "At home we sometimes ate rice and sometimes ate beans. I was born in 1929, during the Depression. We were used to not having enough to eat. I guess that is what helped me."<sup>9</sup>

Cpl. Cortez hustled his way to survival as he maneuvered his way to be somewhat well fed. Cortez scavenged for extra food on a daily basis. On trips to the mountains, Cortez picked fruits and vegetables that were available. Cpl. Cortez worked at the hospital in the POW camp, where his sergeant told him to eat the food that was

not consumed by the patients. "There were always leftovers so I usually had an extra ration of rice each day."<sup>10</sup> Since Cortez was merely a Corporal, those who had a higher rank than him wanted to take his ration of rice: he was getting extra food. "The Sergeant reprimanded those who wanted to take my food and told them if they wanted extra food to hustle like I did."<sup>11</sup>

Cortez also secured food from the supply warehouse in the POW camp. A friend of Cortez worked in the kitchen and had access to the supply warehouse, he would leave the room unlocked and Cortez would take food.

I tied my pants on the bottom and I would put my jacket over my back and I would walk real slow in front of the guard and I would take some potatoes and corn and then lock the warehouse and get out. Since it was cold I would put the potatoes to cook then I would roast the corn I would share with two or three of my buddies. Then we would eat the rice. This was maybe once a week.<sup>12</sup>

The key element that propelled Cpl. Cortez to survival was his clear positive attitude. While many POWs were depressed (which they had every right to be), Cortez kept his mind clear and kept a positive attitude making the best of his situation. Unlike other POWs Cortez did not dwell on the uncertainties that the future held for him as a POW. He rather focused his energies on surviving and occupying himself with work and entertainment.

Most of the Anglos had no hope, their conversations would be 'What is today? Today is Sunday. Back home we would be having hotcakes for breakfast.' That was all they would talk about. Us Mexican American we would be singing and joking. A captain asked me one time why we were singing and joking. I told him what were we supposed to do? Sit around and mope all day. I told him the best thing to do is stay busy and try to make the best out of it. He then agreed with me.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile the North Koreans denied POWs, including Cpl. Cortez, protections granted under the Geneva Convention. "The North Koreans told us they were not part of the Geneva Convention, so they refused to abide by the rules."<sup>14</sup> Under Part One, Articles III and IV of the Geneva Convention POWs are to be treated humanely by their captives.<sup>15</sup> For the first eighteen months of his captivity Cpl. Cortez was considered by the American government and also by his family to be missing in action. The North Koreans did not list him as a POW. His family had no contact with him for one year and a half.<sup>16</sup>

After eighteen months of being captive, the Chinese thereby took charge of the POW camps. The United States learned more about the POWs once the Chinese took over. Families who had not heard from their sons in a year and a half found their sons to be alive. Unfortunately some families learned their sons had died while being held in North Korea. POWs were now allowed to write home, three times a month. "We could write three letters a month, but

the letters were checked. They did not want us writing anything detrimental to their cause. Often letters were edited or never sent." The Chinese treated the POWs more humanly than the North Koreans had. The POWs living conditions improved as they were fed better and not beaten to the extent they were by the North Koreans.

The Chinese cooked what seemed like French bread and gave us one piece per day besides our bowl of rice. The Chinese guards treated us okay. They kept their distance, unlike the Koreans who stayed in the same building with us.<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese spent their energies in indoctrinating the POWs with communist ideologies. For several hours of the day the Chinese lectured the POWs on communism.

The Chinese tried to make us sign a paper in which we said we were treated well. They even had a gun to intimidate us, but I refused to sign. They tried to brainwash us. Those who were not educated bought into communism. A guy from the hills in Kentucky believed them.<sup>18</sup>

During the Korean War the term "brainwashing" became popular. The Chinese used the tactic to influence POWs.<sup>19</sup> "I realized communism was wrong. The government owned everything and the lazy person benefited as they had the same as the hard worker."<sup>20</sup>

To make the Chinese believe he and other Mexican Americans were discussing communism, Cortez and other fellow Mexican American POWs spoke in Spanish and

occasionally speak a sentence in English about communism. Therefore, the Chinese, thought they were discussing communism all along.

Cortez had to deal with extremely cold winters and the implications brought by the extreme cold. "The first winter we were using our summer fatigues. Then we got a coat and pant. I had boots I would put paper around my feet then my boots because I had frostbite."<sup>21</sup> POWs overcame winters in which the temperatures were ten below zero. Cortez struggled to stay warm with the body heat of other POWs.<sup>22</sup>

After thirty-eight months of captivity, twenty under the Chinese and eighteen under the Koreans, Cpl. Cortez was turned over to American hands. On August 28, 1953, after thirty-eight months of captivity Cpl. Cortez was released. Cortez had been amongst the first captured in the conflict. Consequently, he was also amongst the POWs to be released at the final stages of the conflict.<sup>23</sup> "It was great to be free and go wherever you wanted. We had to go easy on the food. A couple of guys died from excess eating. Little by little they gave us more food."<sup>24</sup>

Corporal Gregorio González's experience as a POW during the Korean War is similar to Cortez's. González was in the Army 7<sup>th</sup> Division, which, along with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines, formed the X Corps. This Unit had been stationed in Japan

after World War II. When the Korean conflict arose the X Corp was mobilized to Korea. González landed in P'och'on in the fall of 1950, where they had Thanksgiving dinner on November 25, 1950.

By November 27, 1950, the Chinese military forces were deep into the war and defeated González's division. "We were surrounded at Chosin Reservoir. We tried to break the circle, but we got bunked down."<sup>25</sup> González's duty was to eliminate the enemy machine gunners. His training was effective, so his first reaction was to climb a hill and eliminate the machine gunner. As he made his way up the hill, González was wounded in the head. "The bullet went through near my temple. The medic took care of me and then I kept on going."<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile American troops were overwhelmed as they ran out of supplies. Cpl. González's bazooka was out of rounds and he had to rely on his gun, which left him short handed. "The Air Force was dropping supply, but we were not getting them. The North Koreans got our supplies."<sup>27</sup> Captivity or death was inevitable at this point.

On December 1, 1950, as González and his partner, Carey, were going over the hills they were met by Chinese soldiers.

My gun got stuck and I thought Carey had my back

since he had a machinegun. I turned around and Carey was on the floor. I shot two or three rounds. The Chinese had a Tommy machinegun and pointed it at me but as he pulled the trigger he was out of bullets. He hit me in the face. They were hitting me and then I see Carey kick one of the guys from the floor and knocked the gun out. He was playing dead because they had poked him with the bayonet. We both got captured.<sup>28</sup>

After having been taken prisoner, the Chinese made González dig a trench and pretended they were going to kill him and his partner. At this point is where the Chinese started playing mind games with González and other POWs.

The Chinese were afraid of the American Air Force, so they only marched the POWs at night. González marched several nights until they reached a train station. From there they were sent to north. González was not fed from the time he was taken POW until he reached Changsong.<sup>29</sup> "I was at Camp Number One (Changsong). We told them that under the Geneva Convention we had to eat. Two hours later they brought two dogs. We had no choice we had to eat them."<sup>30</sup> González did not have much of a choice. He had to eat. Usually the North Koreans fed the POWs at Camp Number One sorghum and bread made of sorghum.

When the Chinese took over Camp Number One POWs were fed better. The Chinese fed the POWs chicken and pork. Rice was only served on special communist holidays. Along with

the better food and better treatment the Chinese also brought the indoctrination process. "They were indoctrinating us in the communist system. They made us read the Manifesto. They argued communism was better than capitalism."<sup>31</sup> The Chinese used well trained individuals with an abundance of tactics to indoctrinate POWs. A popular tactic used by the Chinese was preaching about the racial inequalities found in the United State. "They said that in the South the Negro was exploited by the whites. In their system everyone was equal. It would eventually be a workers paradise."<sup>32</sup>

Cpl. González had a friend named McMillan, who believed in communism. He praised the communist system and Joseph Stalin as well.

We were shown a magazine with Stalin on the cover. Stalin had a nice suit. I pointed out that there was a substantial disparity between Stalin's uniform and the soldiers' uniforms. There was no equality in communism. I told McMillan his suits were probably made in London out of cashmere. McMillan would argue that Stalin's suit was given to him by the people and that they were all equal.<sup>33</sup>

McMillan would cooperate with the enemy and inform on other POWs. He would meet with Koreans and Chinese and would talk to them about other POWs. He never informed on Cpl. González; however, he must have informed on other POWs, since many POWs hated him.<sup>34</sup> "McMillan was my friend

and I never wanted to do anything to him. Others wanted to hit him. They called him a Turncoat."<sup>35</sup> McMillan did not care how he was treated by his companions. He was more concerned with following communism.

McMillan like other POWs believed communism was superior to democracy. Raymond Lech, author of Broken Soldier would identify McMillan as a progressive POW.<sup>36</sup> A progressive was a POW that accepted indoctrination. González who totally rejected indoctrination was considered a reactionary POW.<sup>37</sup>

I could not figure it out how their system would be better than ours. They were well trained, but what they were saying did not seem realistic. I asked why their people had to depend on the government to live. In the U.S. we did not have to depend on the government. We were free. There was a Lieutenant who was trained in the U.S. and he said "American you are right. Our system is not what they say."<sup>38</sup>

McMillan was not the only POW that collaborated with the enemy. There were many POWs that helped the enemy. Eventually twenty-one POWs stayed behind after the war and waived right to repatriation. The POWs that collaborated received beneficial treatment over other POWs. POWs that resisted such as Cpl. González had to survive with what they had or find other forms to survive.

Marijuana grew in the hills of North Korea. POWs from urban areas like San Antonio, Houston, El Paso and Los

Angeles knew what marijuana was, so they picked it and smoked it. Cpl. González did not know what marijuana was. "Pachucos from Houston would say it was good. That was the first time I knew about marijuana. I never tried it. Eighty percent of the POWs did not know of it or did not try it."<sup>39</sup> The guards did not have a problem with the POWs smoking unless they caused problems. If the POWs behaved inappropriately they would be restricted from smoking marijuana.

Marijuana helped POWs pass the time and survive. POWs that smoked marijuana ate whatever was in front of them. Hence, they did not complain if their food had rocks or dirt. During winter time marijuana warmed POWs and helped them sleep. POWs were also allowed to gather wood from the mountains in the winter to keep warm.<sup>40</sup> Korea has harsh winters so POWs had to maintain themselves well fed and had to stay warm in order to survive.

Cpl. González ate all his meals. "We (Mexican Americans) ate everything. We were poor back home and we did not have enough to eat, so we ate what we had. The Americans did not eat much and many fell ill."<sup>41</sup> Unlike many POWs, González never lost hope and most importantly never lost the will to live.

After almost three years in captivity, Cpl. González was released. In September 1953 at Panmunjom, Gregorio González was released in a prisoner exchange. "It was a great feeling. General Mark Clark was there to meet us. I cannot describe the feeling. It was like heaven and hell."<sup>42</sup> González was fortunate to survive captivity and get back to life.

Corporal Reymundo Almendarez from Edinburg actually spent time in a POW camp in Korea with Cpl. Gregorio González. The two became close friends as they struggled to survive together. Cpl. Almendarez was in the Army stationed in Japan from 1948-1950. When conflict in Korea escalated in June of 1950 he was sent to Korea. Cpl. Almendarez was in the 25th Infantry Division, 35th Regiment, Company B.<sup>43</sup>

During his second week of combat, Cpl. Almendarez was shot in the neck and in the back. "I thought I was dead. When I got hit I hollered at the medic and he gave me a shot of morphine and I ran down the hill for about a mile."<sup>44</sup> Almendarez was sent to Japan for medical treatment. After a two month recovery he was sent back to Korea for more combat.

In November 1950, Almendarez and his group were ambushed behind enemy lines by North Koreans. After wandering in the mountains while starving, Almendarez was

captured. "I did not want to surrender, but I was out of bullets. The Chinese came down and we had to surrender."<sup>45</sup>

Almendarez was marched north to Changsong and was placed in Camp One. They were only marched at night, because the Koreans did not want to get spotted. "The guys who fell down during the march got shot. I used to tell the guys you wanted to join the Army, know you take it. I used to joke around with them and that is how we survived."<sup>46</sup> When Almendarez got to the camp, he and the rest of the POWs were tired and hungry. The Koreans killed a dog and gave it the POWs. Almendarez had no choice but to eat. "It was good. We accompanied it with some corn that was thrown on the floor. To calm our thirst we had ice from the river."<sup>47</sup>

At Changsong, Almendarez was put to work in the mountains cutting wood. POWs were put on a rice diet as they were given a bowl of rice in morning and another in the afternoon. "Everyone was losing weight. I went from 158 pounds down to 118 pounds. There were many fights over food. I got in three fights."<sup>48</sup> Many POWs died of starvation and malnutrition. Almendarez had to bury several bodies, since he maintained strength.

I had trained well in Japan and I was in great shape. I survived because I ate everything. Some POWs did not want to eat dirty rice that had rocks

and worms. I ate everything. Some got sick of dysentery and had tapeworms. I had dysentery and tapeworms, some guys from NY did not want to eat rice and seaweed. Seaweed was good it was like spinach turnips. I ate everything during my 30 months of captivity.<sup>49</sup>

Although marijuana helped time go by as POWs kept their minds clear of negativity it also brought on problems. POWs were often excessively rowdy because of the marijuana.<sup>50</sup>

"I did not know it was marijuana. The guys from San Antonio and El Paso knew it was Marijuana. We use to smoke not cigarettes but cigars of marijuana. We laughed a lot then we would eat whatever there was. We were going crazy so they took our marijuana away."<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, interrogation and indoctrination slowed down time. Cpl. Almendarez was interrogated once a week by the Chinese. The Chinese wanted information about the U.S. military. They wanted to know how many divisions the U.S. had and what were their strategies. "They would hold a gun to my head and I would tell them 'I am a private I do not know anything.' I would only tell them my name, my rank and my serial number."<sup>52</sup>

The Chinese offered POWs food in exchange for military secrets and for pro-communist declarations. "The Chinese were manipulative. They took pictures of a POW with a cow's leg and sent the pictures to the U.S. After the pictures were taken they took the cow's leg from the poor guy."<sup>53</sup> The Chinese manipulated pictures and letters. In January 1952

Almendarez's family received a letter which wished the family a "Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year and all the love in the world."<sup>54</sup> These statements according to Mr. Almendarez were manipulated. Those POWs who followed communism also received extra food.

Mexicans did not sell out for food. We Chicanos had more will power. We wanted to get back home to our people. While many POWs had weak minds they were thinking of their families. Their families were eating well. We were the ones in bad shape. We needed help.<sup>55</sup>

Almendarez made it clear that his priority was to survive. Everything else and everyone else was secondary. Almendarez was determined to survive. He felt the circumstances he was in limited him from helping others. The only thing he could do was make sure he survived his POW experience.

Almendarez made the best of his situation by keeping busy. He would run at the Communist Olympics held in his POW camp. Almendarez finished second in the 220-yards sprint in an Olympic held in June 1952.<sup>56</sup> Almendarez participated during special events such as the Olympics and Communist holidays, so he could take advantage of what they considered extravagant meals.<sup>57</sup>

After being a POW in North Korea for almost three years Reymundo Almendarez was released in September 1953.<sup>58</sup> "They put us in trucks. We thought we were going to Russia. We were taken to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. We could not believe it.

We were going crazy. We kissed the South Korean ground."<sup>59</sup> POWs took showers and were sprayed with DDT to rid themselves of lice. After they cleaned up they were issued clean uniforms and were fed. "They had everything. Pork chops and steaks. We ate. Some POWs got sick."<sup>60</sup> Almendarez was then sent home.

Sergeant Joel (Joe A.) Hinojosa was platoon leader of the Chemical Corps which reported to the Second Infantry Division. The Chemical Corp's duty was to defend the military from nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons due to the Cold War anxieties. In late November 1950, as the military made a spearhead attack to be back home for Christmas. Sgt. Hinojosa and seventeen other soldiers were captured by the Chinese.<sup>61</sup>

From November 1950 to August 1953 Sgt. Hinojosa was a Prisoner of War in Korea. After he was captured, Hinojosa was taken to a location in the northern part of North Korea. The Koreans deliberately marched the POWs at night to avoid being detected by the American Air Force. "This is where we lost many men. We had to march in freezing temperatures. If we fell, we got hit with the butt of the rifle. The odds of survival were slim."<sup>62</sup>

After the long march, Sgt. Hinojosa was housed in Camp Number Five in Pyoktong, North Korea. The first few months were the roughest as fifteen to thirty POWs died daily.

We were physically broken after the march. And the Koreans forced us to bury the dead. But we had to conserve our bodies, so we acted like we were about to die. Thus we did not have to bury the dead in the frozen ground.<sup>63</sup>

Hinojosa overcame many challenges struggles in his new situation and maintained his strength.

POWs kept their strength by eating the food given to them, no matter how grotesque or minimal it was. Hinojosa was fed sorghum and millet, a type of cereal. Every three days Hinojosa received rice and every one-hundred days POWs received a pig.<sup>64</sup> If POWs wanted to survive they had to eat their food, yet many POWS refused to eat and consequently weakened and died. Hinojosa's friend, Fred Tindal who came from an upper social class family lost complete hope and gave up on life as a POW. Tindal could not adjust to life as a POW, since he had been accustomed to a privileged life. Tindal gave up completely as he stopped eating and started defecating on himself.<sup>65</sup>

Fortunately Hinojosa never had such problem. Having been reared in the Río Grande Valley during the Great Depression, Hinojosa developed a tough character. "We were poor growing up and we did not have enough to eat. Eating

meagerly in the POW camps was not as bad to me as it was to others. I got by."<sup>66</sup>

Extra food in Camp Number Five was a fine commodity. POWs were satisfied with the slightest of foods. The POW camp had a roof made of shingles. POWs exchanged a shingle with the POWs running the kitchen in exchange for the baked rice crusts that remained stuck around the inside of the pots.<sup>67</sup> "It tasted like something else. I cannot describe it. It was like eating filet-mignon when you are starving."<sup>68</sup>

Shingles eased the start of the fire for cooking, thus they were a great help for the cooks especially during winter when it was harder to start a fire. Hinojosa worked in the kitchen and was caught three times starting a fire with a shingle. Hinojosa was punished accordingly. "They made me hold the shingle straight out in the air in twenty below zero weather for hours and hours. Then the guard hit me in the ribs with butt of the rifle."<sup>69</sup>

The Korean guards were extremely abusive towards POWs. POWs who tried to escape the camp received the worst treatment. It was almost impossible to escape, since the terrain was rough and because of obvious characteristics POWs could not blend with the Koreans without being detected. "It was not like World War II, when we had the

French underground and POWs could escape.<sup>70</sup> For the most part POWs that were not caught by the North Korean military were killed by civilians.

In the Fall of 1951 Hinojosa's situation improved as the Chinese took a more direct role in tending to POWs. The Chinese were less abusive than the Koreans. Hinojosa was allowed to write letters to his family. However, not all letters reached Hinojosa's family as they were inspected by the Koreans. Letters that included information that the Koreans and Chinese believed was detrimental to their cause were not sent out.<sup>71</sup> On October 27, 1951, Hinojosa remembers receiving a letter from a sister living in Río Grande City. Communication was important to POWs as morale raised when they received notifications from home.

Morale was maintained in Hinojosa's squad. The squad was referred to as the United Nation's (U.N.) squad, since it was integrated by Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Blacks, Whites, Japanese Americans, and Filipino. The U.N. squad did not lose a single man as they built a brotherhood amongst each other that continues strong today.<sup>72</sup> The squad even dealt positively with Chinese indoctrination. Hinojosa and his partner Aguirre met indoctrination with total resistance.

Between April 20 and May 3, 1953, Operation Little Switch took place.<sup>73</sup> This program allowed American POWs in Korea that were severely ill to be returned to the United Nations. There were several POWs from Hinojosa's camp released during Operation Little Switch.

Soon after Operation Little Switch the U.S. started to bomb what we thought was an ammo dump. They took it out on us. They knew the POWs that had been released had squealed on them. They cut down our rations and they made life miserable until we got released.<sup>74</sup>

On July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed ending conflict in Korea. Exchange of POWs started at a rate of 150 GIs per day. Joel Hinojosa was released on the August 29, 1953. "I celebrate every 29<sup>th</sup> of August, my freedom day."<sup>75</sup> Upon his release at the age of twenty-six, Hinojosa remained in the military and became a career military enlistment.

Each POWs experiences are slightly different, but for the most part they have many similarities. Their impoverished upbringing in the Río Grande Valley during the Great Depression shaped rugged survival skills in them. Skills which helped them survive the POW camps. "It was an experience worth ten million dollars, but I would not pay ten cents for it," added Joel Hinojosa about his experience.<sup>76</sup> POWs carried their experiences with them for

years to come. They were deeply affected by their POW experience.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Latino Advocates for Education, Inc. Undaunted Courage Mexican American Patriots of World War II. (Orange County, California: Latino Advocacy, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Ricardo Cortez, Reymundo Almendarez, Joel Hinojosa, Fred Garza, Leonel Trevino, and Gregorio Gonzalez were POWs during the Korean War.

<sup>3</sup> "Otro Soldado fue Libertado," El Herald de Brownsville, 28 August 1953, Vol. 14, P. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>15</sup> "Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War," Geneva Convention. Geneva, Switzerland. 21 April-12 August 1949.

<sup>16</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond B. Lech, Broken Soldiers. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 81.

<sup>18</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond B. Lech, Broken Soldiers. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond B. Lech, Broken Soldiers. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Gregorio Gonzalez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>51</sup> "Edinburg POW Writes Parents," Daily Review, 12 January 1952, P. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>53</sup> "Finish," The San Antonio Light, 27 June 1952, Vol. LXXII, P. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>55</sup> "Edinburg POW To Arrive Home Today," Hidalgo County News, 10 September 1953, P. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>62</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>64</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Raymond B. Lech, Broken Soldiers. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 184.

<sup>71</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

## Chapter IV

### POWS BACK HOME: STRUGGLES AFTER THE CAMPS

Prisoners of War from World War II and the Korean War were affected differently by their captivity. While several former POWs came back home and took advantage of the G.I. Bill, many came home out of sync with civilian life. As POWs made the transition from life in captivity to civilian life they were not adequately desensitized or prepared to function properly. While a few Mexican American POWs from the Valley continued to serve in the military for years after their captivity, most opted to be discharged. Those who stayed in the military like Joel Hinojosa made it a career and retired as senior non-commissioned officer.

All former POWs interviewed suffered psychological and or physical lingering effects from their time in captivity. Several former POWs lived difficult situations after their liberation. Their situations were rough and complicated as they had to readjust to civilian life. Most former POWs had trouble holding down a job as they could not relate with coworkers who constantly bickered them about their POW

experience. After coming home, former POWs loathed recounting their POW experiences.

Gregorio Barrera came back to Río Grande City, Texas, after being released. "I was out of my mind. I could not sleep. All I could do was get drunk. I felt sorry for what happened to me. I was lost and I could not relate to anyone."<sup>1</sup> Barrera was bitter over his POW experience and turned to alcohol to absolve him of his problems. He would leave home for several days and slept wherever he passed out. "Finally I was going to lose my car and about to lose my wife. I decided it was enough and I started to get my life together."<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, Barrera took control of his life before ending up dead like his friend and surviving POW Laureano Pena. Pena's story is reminiscent of Ira Hayes', the Pima Marine who stood in Iwo Jima. After being liberated Pena came back to Río Grande City, Texas, and let himself be consumed by alcohol. One day while drinking in Camargo, Mexico, Pena was so drunk he put a glass on top of his head betting a man could shoot it off. The man instead shot him in the head and he died.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Pena, Barrera started working as a custodian at the Río Grande City Post Office. "I was a hero cleaning toilets. But I needed the job. I thought I deserved

better."<sup>4</sup> Barrera's situation improved as he started being an alternate mailman. He soon became a regular mailman and slowly regained the self-confidence he had as a young soldier.

Lack of recognition also contributed to Barrera's bitterness. "It was pathetic! After all I had done for my country I could not even get a loan."<sup>5</sup> After fifty years not many people knew Gregorio Barrera had been a Prisoner of War in Bataan during World War II. During the conflict in Kosovo the topic of POWs regained popularity as several POWs were taken captive. Barrera instantly became a celebrity in Río Grande City. The mayor of Río Grande City dedicated a *plaza* to Gregorio Barrera. "It was too late. My mother and father that suffered so much because of me had passed away already. They did not get to see me, in my fifteen minutes of fame."<sup>6</sup>

Today Gregorio Barrera spends more days under the spotlight as he has been recognized several times for his POW experience. He is retired and living in Río Grande City where he is frequented by his family. Barrera remains gloomy about his POW experience. "All I have are those plaques that do not buy me a cup of coffee anywhere. You have to understand that you do not come out the same as you went in."<sup>7</sup>

When released from captivity Gabriel Serda suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However at the time PTSD was not considered a serious condition. Veterans Affairs were not ready or willing to aid Serda. "I fought for the government. Now I find myself fighting the government for what is mine."<sup>8</sup> After a long battle Serda finally was awarded disability.

Gabriel Serda spent his days as a POW cutting hair. When he came home, he took advantage of the G.I. Bill and went to Barber College.<sup>9</sup> Serda became a barber and opened his own shop, Serda's Barber Shop in Pharr, Texas, in 1948.<sup>10</sup> Serda is now retired and is dealing with PTSD and Alzheimer's disease.<sup>11</sup> Due to his condition Mr. Serda could not reveal much about his experiences.

After his escape José Vásquez was sent home. The bus that brought Vásquez only went as far as Sebastian, Texas. His family lived in *Los Potreros* Ranch, which was a half-hour drive from Sebastian. Francisco Villarreal, a friend of Vásquez took him to his family's ranch. When Vásquez arrived at his ranch his family was in mourning. They were grieving the death of Vásquez's mother, who had been buried three days earlier. Francisco Villarreal did not have the heart to tell Vásquez his mother had passed away.

My mother would send me packages. The last package she sent were some cookies that were rejected because I had been moved. She worried something had happened to me. Consequently, she had a heart attack. In that instance, I wanted to go back to Germany instead I went to the cemetery and cried.<sup>12</sup>

José Vásquez remained silent for many years about his experiences in war and as a POW. He felt depressed he had volunteered to fight, knowing he would be away from home and his mother. He blamed himself for the death of his mother. "No one knew my POW experiences until one day at a family reunion all my family started asking about my experiences."<sup>13</sup> This was the first time Vásquez shared his POW experience.

José Vásquez worked at a tire company for twenty-five years. Currently he owns VJ's Bar in Raymondville where he lives a good life. After years of neglect, Vásquez currently receives military benefits.<sup>14</sup> He also is open about his experiences and shares his stories with his family.

Simon Velazquez was liberated by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who promised him and all POWs liberated a promotion.

He [Gen. Eisenhower] made a point to meet all of us, he was quite a pup. Gen. Eisenhower told us, 'You have been POWs for a long time but we are going to treat you right. As soon as you get back home you all are going to get it. One more Stripe.' I have never seen that stripe. Some guys claim they did receive

advancement in rank. But I stayed the same until the day I was discharged. I was Staff Sergeant for almost three years. When I was discharged I was still a Staff Sergeant.<sup>15</sup>

After being released, Velazquez was sent to Fitzsimons Hospital in Denver where he was discharged. "According to the Army we were supposed to have pep talks that would help incorporate us back to society. However, that never happened."<sup>16</sup> In fact when Vásquez was discharged from the service, the only aid he received from the government was a 40% disability which totaled \$57 a month.<sup>17</sup> Luckily he found a high paying job at Southview Chevrolet in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Since he was earning a high salary, he did not bother going to the VA Clinic. Slowly the government reduced his disability. In a span of six years his disability was completely gone.<sup>18</sup> In 1979, the VA sent him a letter ordering him to have a protocol examination. "They told me, 'You must be in perfect shape, we have not seen you in four years.' That made me mad. The reason I had not been back was because they taken my disability away."<sup>19</sup>

Simon Velazquez has had various medical conditions that developed because of his time as a POW. While in captivity Velazquez suffered three fractured vertebrae in his neck. He had dislocations in both of his elbows. He

also had damaged kidneys as the Germans would hit him with the butt of a rifle.<sup>20</sup> Velazquez learned to live with aches and pains and did not complain. However, as he aged his body has broken down.

Simon Velazquez's also experienced immense psychological problems. "I could be asleep and if someone walked in I woke up in alert. Firecrackers scared me. I could not share with anyone my experience not even with my wife."<sup>21</sup> Velazquez now realizes he should have shared his thoughts and experiences shortly after being liberated and should have sought help then. He also believes the government should have offered help to all POWs. "The VA should have provided psychiatrists that would help us with our problems. Instead of keeping our feelings to ourselves we should have set them out in the open."<sup>22</sup>

Currently, Simon Velazquez spends the winter months in the Río Grande Valley and the summers in Minnesota. He and his wife travel as Winter Texans, enjoying South Texas and their home in Mission, Texas, from October to April. During his stay in the Valley, Velazquez is an active member of the Río Grande Valley POW group which is comprised of former World War II POWs and former Korean War POWs.

Richard Cortez is also a member of the Río Grande Valley POW group. The group meets every third Sunday of the

month to bond in Pharr, Texas, at the American Legion Post 101. Most POWs involved in the group are Winter Texans or white, for the most part former Mexican American POWs are not involved.<sup>23</sup>

Richard Cortez was discharged from the military on November 18, 1953.<sup>24</sup> A month later he married his girlfriend Helen and started his struggles in civilian life. Cortez went through about twelve jobs after he exited the military.

I would go to job interviews and the only experience I had was the military. All they would ask about was my POW experience. They would forget about giving me information about the job, so I would get frustrated and leave. I did not want to discuss my experience.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Cortez got a break from an old teacher of his who was working as a mechanic for Pan American Airlines. Unfortunately, Pan American Airlines relocated and Cortez was out of a job. After going through a series of jobs, Cortez landed a job in McAllen, Texas, working for Sherwin-Williams where he worked eighteen years and finally retired.

Richard Cortez currently lives in McAllen, Texas. Every October he awaits the arrival of his friend Simon Velazquez. When asked if he had any regrets of the time he spent as POW, Cortez replied "I went to defend my country so I do not have any regrets of what happened to me."<sup>26</sup>

Gregorio González also currently resides in McAllen, Texas. After being released González attended night school in Weslaco, Texas, and received his GED. He then went to a business college and studied Junior Accounting for eighteen months.<sup>27</sup> González worked as a salesman at Ken's Shop in McAllen.<sup>28</sup> He then managed a carpet cleaning shop for five years. González took another job selling dry cleaning products.<sup>29</sup>

González is retired and living in McAllen, Texas. Despite suffering from headaches and minor ailments, he does not regret his military and POW experiences. "I felt I was lucky because I was fighting with the greatest army. I would do it all over again I would want to be better trained to get a higher rank."<sup>30</sup>

Ray Almendarez and Gregorio González have been friends since they were POWs in Korea. Almendarez had a difficult time returning to civilian life.

I was crazy. I stayed drunk for about thirty years. It took me a long time to calm down. It was rough. I still am a nervous wreck. I hear a noise and I jump out of bed. I take pills for it. It was bad, but many men do not like to talk about it. Sometimes when I wash my face in the morning with cold water my mind goes back to Korea reminding me of the cold water of the Yalu River.<sup>31</sup>

When Almendarez came home to Edinburg, Texas a parade awaited him as he was the only POW in Korea from Edinburg.<sup>32</sup>

At age twenty-two, Almendarez could not overcome the emotional and mental anguish. He was fired several times from different work sites. Almendarez turned to alcohol to absolve him from his problematic reality. He lost two homes he was financing and wrecked three cars. Almendarez had hit rock bottom. "Even my mom gave me hell. She told me, she wished I would have stayed a POW in Korea rather than see me drunk everyday."<sup>33</sup> At that point, Almendarez decided to turn his life around and went to barber college on the G.I. Bill. Almendarez was a barber in McAllen, Texas, for thirty-seven years.<sup>34</sup>

Ray Almendarez presently lives a comfortable, retired life in Edinburg, Texas. He continues to serve his fellow veterans. He actively participates in the Honor Guard for funeral services of veterans. As a POW he buried many fallen POWs in Korea and today he honors the fallen veterans in the Río Grande Valley. When Almendarez was called a hero, he humbly turned around and said, "I am not a hero. Heroes are the ones who never made it back."<sup>35</sup>

Joel Hinojosa continued military service after his captivity. In 1967 he retired as Master Sergeant. Hinojosa at forty-one years of age attended Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland, on the G.I. Bill.<sup>36</sup> In 1971, he received a Bachelor's of Arts in Business Administration.

He then worked for the state of Maryland from 1971 to 1986 when he retired.

Financially, Hinojosa had no worries, however health-wise he was a wreck. Hinojosa developed a perforated colon from cases of diarrhea and dysentery he suffered as a POW.<sup>37</sup> His condition required surgery. Eventually he lost thirteen inches of his colon. Fortunately, Hinojosa's condition improved as he overcame his medical conditions. "I count my blessings. I have been lucky."<sup>38</sup>

Hinojosa is grateful to the military for all it gave him. "I am a product of the military. I did not know what a ham sandwich was before. I grew up in poverty eating beans and *tortillas*. All I have is due to the military."<sup>39</sup> Hinojosa's military career was worthwhile as he served for twenty-two years and experienced different parts of the world.

Today he speaks of his POW experiences more openly and is willing to go to POW reunions. It is quite a change from years back when he refused to attend reunions and mention his experiences. Hinojosa's POW experience remains vivid in his life as he celebrates his freedom day on August 29<sup>th</sup>.<sup>40</sup> Joel Hinojosa is retired and living in Mission, Texas.

When former POWs came back to their homes it seemed like they were in a different place. However, it was not

that the world had changed, but they were different themselves. Former POWs overcame the challenge of adjusting to a change in their persona. They had harsh moments, yet they endured and live peaceful lives today. Former POWs remain positive of their experiences and hold no remorse over their captivity. They all feel it was their duty to defend their country and they do not regret serving.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Gregorio Barrera, interview by author, Tape recording, Río Grande City, Texas, 15 March 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Serda, interview by author, tape recording, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Serda, interview by author, tape recording, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Javier Serda, interview by author, tape recording, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Javier Serda, interview by author, tape recording, Pharr, Texas, 22 March 2005.

<sup>12</sup> José Vásquez Vazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Jose Vazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>14</sup> José Vásquez Vazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Raymondville, Texas, 15 December 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Velazquez, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 25 October 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Ricardo Cortez, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 12 October 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Gregorio González, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Gregorio González, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Gregorio González, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Gregorio González, interview by author, tape recording, McAllen, Texas, 17 December 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, Edinburg, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>32</sup> "Edinburg POW To Arrive Home Today," Hidalgo County News, 10 September 1953, P. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, Edinburg, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, Edinburg, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Reymundo Almendarez, interview by author, tape recording, Edinburg, Texas, 1 December 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Joel Hinojosa, interview by author, tape recording, Mission, Texas, 17 October 2005.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Former Mexican American POWs were affected differently by their captivity. This study focused on how each former POW coped with the situation at hand. Some POWs had better experiences than others while captive. POWs interviewed were held captive in North Africa, Italy, Germany, Japan, Philippines and Korea. The study also focuses on how former POWs adjusted to life after the war. While some former POWs found they could survive in the civilian world in a nervousness shamble, indulging in alcoholism, others took advantage of the G.I. Bill and received an education.

Mexican American World War II and Korean War POWs included in the project shared many commonalities that were shaped by their environments in the Río Grande Valley. All had humble upbringings during the Great Depression, which molded a tough character within them. Mexican American former POWs from the Río Grande Valley were not reared in luxuries. When they became POWs they were not shocked once there was not enough to eat. They did not daydream of

hotcakes on Sunday mornings. Unlike other POWs, POWs from the Valley did not refuse to eat the meager portions given to them. They had an instinct will to survive. Most importantly, former Mexican American POWs from the Valley never lost hope.

Former Mexican American POWs maintained a positive attitude as they occupied themselves with tasks and various forms of entertainment. They understood that their stint in captivity would be more tolerable if they kept busy. They did not spend their days in captivity complaining and feeling sorry for themselves. They made the best of their situation.

During their captivity, several POWs suffered the physical abuse unleashed by their captors. They continued to suffer from those injuries for years to come. Many also suffered psychologically and emotionally. After their release, they were not adequately counseled about their experience.

Mexican American POWs returned home with little time to acclimize. They found themselves unemployed or moving from one job to another. After their sacrifice for their country, former POWs could not find a decent life in the country they had defended. Some POWs attended vocational

schools. Joel Hinojosa after retiring from the military attended the university.

Many veterans of the interviewees included in this work have had to fight for their disability from the V.A. Clinic. Hidalgo County which serves over 25,000 veterans does not have a V.A. Hospital. It has a clinic which does not provide veteran's with all their needs.

Unfortunately for a long time, former Mexican American POWs have not been properly recognized. They lacked proper recognition for two reasons: 1) lack of support from local and state governments (until recently), and 2) lack of self-involvement. In October 2000, former Mexican American POWs were honored by Congressman Ruben Hinojosa in a ceremony in Pharr, Texas. Most POWs would have appreciated these accolades immediately after they returned from captivity.

For a long time, former Mexican American POWs were hesitant to speak of their experiences. Not many people knew that they had been Prisoners of War. Even today, several former POWs would rather not participate in ceremonies, celebrations, reunions or in projects like this one.

What remains true is that former Mexican American Prisoners of War from South Texas are fighters and

survivors. They overcame overwhelming situations as POWs. They readjusted to a difficult society, while dealing with their tribulations.

This thesis highlights the sacrifices of Mexican American Prisoners of War from the Río Grande Valley to the American heritage. Even today Mexican American in the military continue their love for their country. Specialist Edgar Hernández was briefly held captive during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. History should include the stories of Río Grande Valley patriots, who have fought to preserve America and continue defending America around the world.

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## VITA

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