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Local veteran recalls hard times he saw during 3 wars

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As his ballcap shows, 90-year-old Marcos A. Melendez of Lawton is a veteran of three wars. Here he's playing guitar just as he did for a PBS film crew shooting footage for the three-part series *The Latino Americans* airing on Tuesday evenings. Photo: JEFF DIXON/STAFF.

Marcos A. Melendez strums the guitar, a 10-string Puerto Rican cuatro and a Cuban tres with equal dexterity in the living room of his northwest Lawton home.

Between numbers, he speaks softly of the hard times he faced in three wars: Reduced to a diet of cheese and crackers aboard a ship in waters so infested by submarines that supply ships couldn't bring them food. Cutting up blankets to keep his thinly clad younger brother Ramon warm while they were on the front lines in Korea. Being strafed by a German Junker who considered the soldier musicians walking over to play for their officers fair game.

No wonder PBS wanted to get him on film. But how did they find out about him? His wife, Irma, said PBS was doing a nationwide search for veterans of the 65th Infantry Regiment, which is nicknamed "The Borinqueneers."
"Borinqueneños means someone from Puerto Rico," she explained.

Her cousin in New York submitted Melendez's name, and he was selected. He was interviewed first for a dual-language newspaper called "The Borinqueneers." The same name was adopted by a group of soldier musicians from Melendez's outfit who performed for other soldiers. He was naturally one of them.

A native of Orocovis, Puerto Rico, he enlisted in the Puerto Rican National Guard's 253rd Artillery in 1940. He decided to get out after one year. That meant having to stay in the Reserve and being subject to recall if the Army needed him. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, all Reservists were ordered to report to Fort Buchanan, pronto.

"So I went over there. I had to take the training again. Basic. Then after the training they moved me to Europe," Melendez said.

He went over in 1942 with the all-Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment, the only Hispanic-segregated unit in Army history, which is why PBS was interested in him for its six-hour, three-part series called *The Latino Americans*. The series started this past Tuesday evening and will continue over the next two Tuesdays.

Melendez was assigned to headquarters of the regimental combat team. He recalled the effort to take control of first the sea and then the trains, then finding which car held the rice so they could feed the troops. Headquarters of Gen. George S. Patton's Seventh Army was there, and so were its communications. The push was on to break through the Siegfried Line.

They went about it through the Frankreich, in the days when France was enemy territory. "PTSD" was not a word then, and they would be there for the duration. Irma Melendez found out when she married Marcos that he is haunted by horrible nightmares even today.

"We had to clean house by house. Sometimes snipers come out. We had to creep and crawl," he recalls.

He remembers being in the Monte Cassino mountains during the Battle of the Bulge, having to supply replacements for the many who died. Night moves, a cold shower, a new set of fatigues to keep going. Sacrifice.

Things dragged on very slowly until the day engineers put the pontoon bridges over the Rhine, and then the war began to move much faster.

On V-E Day they were close to Italy for replacements. They stayed overnight in Naples and moved somewhere else the next day. Anyone who didn't show up on time would get left behind.

"You had to follow the leaders. I was always patient, plenty of faith, always," Melendez said. He learned that "no matter what the pressure is, some relief comes. And try to stay strong, career-minded and obey the commands. And that's what I did."

During his brief experience in field artillery he had done service as an MP when planes were being flown in to Puerto Rico for repairs. When he came back from the war, he was told he could stay in the hospital if he drove the ambulance, so he did that for a while.

When North Korea invaded South Korea, he was sent over for what he was told would be "a 50-day police action." Instead, the war dragged on for years. His battalion was there for 14 months.

His album includes a certificate of graduation from Lawton Barber College dated May 11, 1973. Irma said that was something he did for the troops while in the service — cut hair.

"When he got wounded in Korea and he was at a field hospital, his commander came by and noticed that he was cutting hair. Even though he had a head wound and his head was bandaged, (the commander) said, 'If you're good enough to stand and cut hair, you're good enough to go back to the lines,'" Irma said.

"I had to go back to the foxhole," Marcos said ruefully.

Once while he was in Korea, the enemy riddled his Jeep with bullets. God was with him that day: The bullets went all around but not through him. An officer who saw the bullet holes in the Jeep said there was no way anyone in it could have survived. When told Sgt. Melendez was riding in the vehicle the officer mourned his loss. A few hours later, he was stunned to see Melendez walking around uninjured.

The needs of his family were why Marcos stayed in the Army for 31 years. His paycheck was only \$20 when he started, but it grew over the years, and so did his family. He was married to his first wife, Leila, for 52½ years, and they had 10 children, six of whom still survive. If something happened to him, he figured the government would take good care of them.

Melendez retired from the Army with the rank of sergeant first class on June 30, 1972. He then worked for civil service 14 years as a bus driver. He drove students to Sheridan Road Elementary School, flag teams to military funerals within a 100-mile radius and even soldiers to Fort Chaffee, Ark., during the Cuban refugee crisis of the early 1980s. On Oct. 26, 1988, Maj. Gen. Raphael Hallada, then commanding general of Fort Sill, recognized Melendez for 45 years of service to his country.

He has also been involved in religious activities at Holy Family Catholic Church, Irma said.

"I have a son who's in his 30s, and he (Marcos) met me when my little boy was 2 years old. I sat behind him in the choir loft for over 20 years while he played his instrument and I sang as part of the choir. Two and a half years after he was widowed, it was amazing. It was like the Lord just put us together. We just celebrated 12 years of marriage and renewed our vows at church," she said.

She has always been impressed by his humility and the deep faith that got him through the loss of his wife and four children.

For his 90th birthday, she put together a catered reception for him at Holy Family Catholic Church. More than 200 people came, and "The Voice of Fort Sill," John Beemer, served as their announcer. "I went all out. He's my hero," said Irma.



Sgt. Marcos Melendez of Lawton, third from the left on the front row, is shown here as he looked when he was serving in the all-Hispanic 65th Infantry Regiment based in Puerto Rico.

Noemi Figueroa Soulet, executive producer of the award-winning documentary *The Borinqueneers* seen on PBS, the Armed Forces Network and now the Pentagon Channel, said Melendez recently wrote to U.S. Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., and was successful in getting Cole's co-sponsorship support of House Resolution 1726, which proposes to honor the service of the veterans of 65th Infantry Regiment by awarding them the highest civilian award, the Congressional Gold Medal. The Senate has a companion piece of legislation but each resolution needs co-sponsorship by two-thirds of the membership of each house for the measure to carry.

The Congressional Gold Medal has been bestowed on other minority veterans who served in segregated units, including Navajo Code Talkers, Tuskegee Airmen, Japanese American Nisei veterans and African American Montford Point Marines.