

Heroic Contradictions: Religion, Machismo and PTS Among Mexican, Mexican  
American and Chicano Vietnam Veterans

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mexican American Vietnam veterans were often sent to war with high expectations for heroism and chances to prove their machismo. When they arrived, their Catholic upbringing clashed violently with their orders to kill the enemy. As soldiers returned home from the war, the transition from killing, violence and heroism to American society caused contradictions for these men. This lack of a peaceful transition led to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress and moral injury that went untreated for decades in most cases. Overall, the Mexican American Vietnam veteran suffered from contradictions between their upbringing and the war they found themselves in which led to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress and moral injury as they returned home. At the same time, the Chicano Movement exemplified the Mexican American soldier's struggle as they both fought to find their unique place in American society.

As these veterans returned from the war in the 1960s and 1970s, their contributions were largely ignored by academic scholarship. This problem multiplied as psychologists and veterans' organizations ignored the mental trouble most veterans faced that would later be labeled Post-Traumatic Stress and moral injury. In some cases, veterans turned to their faith as a coping mechanism by talking to God about their experiences or finding a community within the church that would listen to their struggles with guilt and loneliness. Some veterans found a group within the VA that helped them share their experiences with other veterans. However, this usually occurred after two to three decades of struggling as the VA neglected to recognize PTS until many years after the war. In the same way, the results of moral injury contributed to their abilities to function in society and form relationships. Unfortunately for veterans of the Vietnam

War, moral injury has just recently been defined and understood as separate from PTS within the last decade.

## INTRODUCTION

In August 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed in the United States that allowed President Johnson the powers to escalate American participation in Vietnam as he saw fit. Those soldiers who entered Vietnam at the beginning of the escalation in 1964-1965 had an entirely different experience than those who served in the early 1970s as President Nixon began to decrease American troop numbers. In the same manner, the veterans who returned home in 1965 usually had a different experience than those who returned in 1973. For example, the anti-war movement had become more prominent in American society by 1973 and was more active in protesting against the war in public areas by the end of the war. In contrast, soldiers who returned home in 1965 likely experienced less hostile attitudes because the war had not infiltrated American society through negative media reports yet. As John Prados argues, “The Gulf of Tonkin incident put Vietnam on the map for Americans.”<sup>1</sup> Also, Prados mentions that the anti-war movement “lacked the cohesion, numbers, or political power to prevent escalation at this time.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, those who participated in the American advisor stage prior during and prior to 1964 would have a different experience before the escalation of troops in 1965 both during their service and as they returned home.

From 1965-1968, the Vietnam War escalated gradually as General Westmoreland called for thousands of troops from President Johnsons and partially received the numbers he requested. During this time, bombing campaigns such as Operation Rolling

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<sup>1</sup> John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, 125.

Thunder initiated by President Johnson barraged the North Vietnamese territory where American soldiers never infiltrated. Although General Westmoreland claimed he had achieved great success in the war of attrition against the North Vietnamese troops and the Vietcong, both groups continued to reinforce their units with troops after experiencing high losses. For example, Prados argues that American forces “inflicted many losses on the Liberation Front and the increasing numbers of North Vietnamese who had taken the field, but Westmoreland never succeeded in wiping away his adversary.”<sup>3</sup> Because of Westmoreland’s lack of total success by 1968, he was replaced by General Creighton Abrams who is most responsible for the Vietnamization efforts beginning in 1968 until 1973 and the end of official American involvement.

By 1970, President Nixon and the American military’s goal began to change towards Vietnamization of the war through the training of the ARVN (South Vietnamese) troops rather than the continued escalation of American troops.<sup>4</sup> President Nixon’s desire to remove the majority of American soldiers in Vietnam arose partially in reaction to the anti-war movement. Official reports from the government and military concluded that this method seemed a useful way to withdraw slowly from South Vietnam without the country collapsing immediately. Although General Westmoreland’s leadership from 1964-1968 continues to be viewed in a negative light, General Abrams’s leadership post-1968 is discussed in a more positive manner by authors. For example, Prados argues, “Abrams displayed superb leadership skill” and he “did the impossible during those years.”<sup>5</sup> Abrams’s service includes the change from a focus on search and destroy

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<sup>3</sup> Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, 177.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 387.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 353.



missions and professional American battles to a gradual reliance on South Vietnamese forces to take over their own war.

Even though the media and the American government had painted a positive and successful picture of the Vietnamization campaign, South Vietnam fell to the North Vietnamese forces in April 1975. In 1975, the United States had already formally pulled away from South Vietnam in 1973 and had left minimal representative troops to help hold the area. After the South fell to the North, one group of veterans questioned the worthiness of their service because of the failure of the total operation. A number of the veterans mentioned in this thesis are part of that group.

“I’m going to see if you’re a real man now.”<sup>6</sup> Mexican American Vietnam veterans were often sent to war with high expectations for heroism and chances to prove their machismo. When they arrived, their Catholic upbringing clashed violently with their orders to kill the enemy. If these men questioned their commanders, they were given various excuses that would eradicate their guilt for killing the enemy. For example, one commander responded, “So it really shouldn’t phase you. It should phase you only if you were the one who had gotten killed.”<sup>7</sup> As soldiers returned home from the war, the transition from killing, violence and heroism to American society caused contradictions for these men. This lack of a peaceful transition led to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) and moral injury that went untreated for decades in most cases. While PTS

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<sup>6</sup> Alonzo Robert Rivera, interview with Olivia Puentes-Reynolds, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, June 7, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/alonzo-robert-rivera>. The citations throughout this paper will not include page numbers for the Voces Oral History Project interviews because there are no page numbers provided on the webpage.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Alfred Alvarez. Vietnam Center and Archive. OH0614 3 June 2008. Alfred Alvarez Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 21. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0614/OH0614.pdf>.

describes symptoms that occur from experiences that happened to the soldier (such as a surprise attack that caused the veteran to become paranoid of those around him after the war), moral injury describes the guilt associated with the compromise of a person's moral compass. Overall, the Mexican American Vietnam veteran suffered from contradictions between their upbringing and the war they found themselves in which led to symptoms of PTS and moral injury as they returned home. Their Catholic faith combined with the uniquely Mexican American "struggle for self-identification" of the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Movement compounded to result in their experience with PTS and moral injury.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis does not seek to conflate every Mexican American's experience with those in these specific case studies. In fact, every veteran's experience in the Vietnam War varies depending on time of service, branch, job title and place of service. Instead of attempting to describe every veteran's service experience, the goal of this thesis is to initiate the conversation of the individual Mexican American Vietnam experience. Because there are few resources on this topic readily available, more research would have to be conducted in the future to create a larger sample size. In order to discuss the importance of PTS and moral injury to the veteran experience, the soldiers discussed within this thesis are combat veterans (with the exception of one soldier who was a member of the Army's Grave Registration units and saw the bodies of both Vietnamese and Americans killed). Therefore, this thesis does not seek to represent those Mexican American veterans who served in the military in other capacities during the war who may

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<sup>8</sup> Ignacio M. Garcia, *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos among Mexican Americans* Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 6.

not have experienced PTS and moral injury in the same capacity as those who physically encountered the enemy.

As these veterans returned from the war in the 1960s and 1970s, their experiences were largely ignored by academic scholarship. This problem multiplied as psychologists and veterans' organizations ignored the mental trouble most veterans faced that would later be labeled PTS and moral injury. Other issues also contributed to this confusion such as all Latino (not just Mexican American) soldiers' orders to identify as 'white' on their military paperwork. Their racial identity became lost in the shuffle of military statistics and led to further contradictions within their wartime experience. For these reasons, scholarship on Hispanic Vietnam veterans occurred for the first time two decades after the first soldiers came home from the war. In this work, I will only utilize the term 'Hispanic' in reference to the historiography, where other authors have used it, and in cases where the veterans utilize the term themselves.

In 1985, two journalists, Tom Mangold and John Penycate, published *The Tunnels of Cu Chi: A Harrowing Account of America's "Tunnel Rats" in the Underground Battlefields of the Vietnam War*. This work only passively mentions the contributions of the Hispanic soldier during the war by discussing the experiences of the tunnel rats utilized by the United States to combat the North Vietnamese underground army. The authors mention that the tunnel rats included Hispanics because they were smaller in stature like the Vietnamese who dug the tunnels for their own use. In addition, one Hispanic tunnel rat, Staff Sergeant Pedro Rejo-Ruiz, gives his experiences with wildlife in one chapter. This includes details of the various creatures he encountered and killed but provides no other personal experiences. Because of this, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*

largely neglects to consider the importance of Hispanics to the war effort and utilizes minimal experiences from the tunnel rats themselves. Therefore, the first work focusing on the experiences of the Hispanic soldier during the Vietnam War was published five years later.

Two and a half decades after the first soldiers returned home from Vietnam, Charley Trujillo published *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam* in 1990. Trujillo created his own publishing company in response to the lack of interest in his pursuit to include the Hispanic voice in the discussion of the Vietnam war.<sup>9</sup> This book includes the personal opinions and experiences of nineteen Chicano veterans (including the author) from Corcoran, California. For this reason, Trujillo's purpose remained to tell the individual soldier's story without analyzing their words or experiences in a greater context. The men included here mention the importance of being macho and their religious upbringing in passing, but no analysis or explanation of those comments was attempted. Although this remains the first published work of the Hispanic Vietnam experience, historians continued to neglect the importance of analyzing these experiences through published scholarship.

In 1995, M. Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez and John R. Craig published a memoir of Benavidez's life and contributions to the war effort as a Medal of Honor recipient. *Medal of Honor: One Man's Journey from Poverty and Prejudice* includes a discussion of the importance of his childhood to his experiences in Vietnam. After both his parents died, his uncle raised him in the Catholic faith and taught him to always honor their family

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<sup>9</sup> Charley Trujillo, *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam* (San José, CA: Chusma House Publishing, 1990), IX.

name. His childhood hero, Audie Murphy, inspired him to join the military to live out his macho aspirations of heroism. Again, Benavidez mentions both his faith and his commitment to the macho life but provides no further analysis of those subjects. Three decades after the first American soldiers returned from Vietnam, historians had not published any scholarly works on Mexican Americans and their war experiences. Instead, Mexican American veterans began publishing their experiences themselves in hopes that their forgotten voices would be heard.

In 1997 and 2007, two works were published discussing the importance of race and identity within the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Both *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (first published in 1989 with a revised edition in 2007) by Carlos Muñoz, Jr. and *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos among Mexican Americans* by Ignacio M. Garcia discuss the importance of forming a national identity for the Chicanos of the 1960s and 1970s. However, they both neglect to include the veterans who returned from the war and joined the anti-war movement as a result of their experiences. While Garcia never mentions the war in his book, Muñoz mentions the war in the context of unbalanced killed in action (KIA) numbers amongst Hispanics. In one short paragraph, Muñoz mentions the Chicano Moratorium against the War before moving back to discussing La Raza Unida.<sup>10</sup> Even though both authors include the importance of religion and machismo to the Chicano national identity, they neglect to tie these elements together with the Vietnam War and Chicano veterans who returned and became part of this movement.

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<sup>10</sup> Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2007), 147.

Finally, some sense of analysis of veterans' comments came when George Mariscal published *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* in 1999. Although the majority of the book contains poems, letters and general experiences of the Chicano and Chicana veterans, Mariscal includes a sizable introduction on the lack of scholarship on Hispanics who served in the war. He discusses those who have published their own personal experiences, including Roy Benavidez, but also mentions that "To date, no history of Chicano participation in the Viet Nam War has been published."<sup>11</sup> Throughout the introduction, he touches on the controversies surrounding Hispanics being killed in larger numbers than their fellow Caucasian soldiers and the reasons for this belief. Even though some of the documents included in the rest of the book mention the importance of religion and machismo to their wartime experience, the author never mentions or analyzes this further.

In the same manner, Lea Ybarra published *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War* in 2004 which provides multiple veterans' views on various subjects and concludes with a short analysis from the author. Throughout the book, multiple veterans mention religious values and machismo ideas they were taught as children which became vital to their Vietnam experiences. Also, they discuss how these values contradicted with the reality of warfare and contributed to their mental anguish upon returning from the war. However, Ybarra focuses on racial tensions and cultural identity in her conclusion of these veterans' experiences. Although she touches on the mental and physical side effects

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<sup>11</sup> George Mariscal, *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

of the war, she neglects to mention the values of faith and macho heroism that most of these men held in high regard.

In contrast to the previous works on the Chicano Movement, Lorena Oropeza successfully ties the movements of the 1960s and the 1970s with the Vietnam War and veterans who participated in both with *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era* (2005). She mentions the relevant Catholic organizations that impacted the anti-war movement and provides evidence for the importance of faith to the Chicano national identity. Overall, Oropeza coherently ties the importance of patriotism to the Chicano soldier and anti-war movement participant but does not discuss the mental results of the war on Chicano soldiers because that was not her purpose in writing.

In 2006 and 2015, two vital works on the experiences of two separate Mexican American Vietnam veterans were written by someone besides themselves. John W. Flores wrote *When the River Dreams: The Life of Marine Sgt. Freddy Gonzalez* (2006) utilizing his letters to his mother as well as interviews with his family members. Although the author mentions the importance of religion to Gonzalez, the soldier himself writes of his faith in nearly every letter included in the book. Since Gonzalez died in 1968 during the Tet Offensive in Hue and before returning from the war, the discussion of mental anguish in the form of PTS are not relevant here. In Eric Blehm's *Legend: The Incredible Story of Green Beret Sergeant Roy Benavidez's Heroic Mission to Rescue a Special Forces Team Caught Behind Enemy Lines* (2015), the author focuses on experience that led to the medal of honor rather than Benavidez's entire life in contrast to his autobiography. Blehm mentions the importance of both faith and machismo to

Benavidez's experiences in Vietnam as well as the contradictions he faced upon his return to the United States.

In contrast to all the previous works mentioned, Juan David Coronado's *"I'm Not Gonna Die in This Damn Place": Manliness, Identity and Survival of the Mexican American Prisoners of War* (2018) provides a more effective balance of both personal veterans' experiences as well as analysis by the author. Coronado focuses on the importance of machismo to the Mexican American POWs during Vietnam but never includes the rest of the soldiers in his discussion. Also, he mentions religion in passing as it applied to one religiously devout POW but does not analyze its importance to the Mexican American soldier. In the first chapter, I will show how the veterans in these case studies utilize or neglect their religious upbringing during wartime and to what extent they continue their religious practices after the war. Coronado devotes the last chapter to the results of their wartime experiences as they arrived home. Just like Mexican American soldiers across the board, some POWs acclimated better than others.

For most Mexican American Vietnam veterans, machismo and the Catholic faith were engrained into their understanding of warfare and spirituality from birth. For example, in comparison to the other case studies here, M. Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez epitomized the average Mexican American soldier by pursuing the macho heroic experience as well as relying on his faith during and after the war. In most interviews or oral histories with Mexican American veterans utilized here, they mention their faith or their dream to become a military hero as part of their macho cultural identity. In the same way, the majority of Mexican Americans in these case studies enlisted in the military as part of their need to prove their machismo through patriotism to the United States or to



provide for their families. These values of faith and machismo are mentioned throughout both secondary literature and interviews with veterans, but have been glossed over or ignored by historians just as Mexican American soldiers as a group had been until decades after the war ended. Coronado remains the only author who touches the issues surrounding manliness and Post-Traumatic Stress as it pertains to the POWs specifically. Instead, I intend to discuss the importance of both religion and machismo to the Mexican American Vietnam soldier and how these values led to Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) when they arrived home.

Although soldiers discuss their struggles with PTS and their inability to cope with their experiences, authors who include these experiences in their works neglect to analyze why this occurred for the Mexican American soldier specifically. Based on my research, it appears that most were raised in a religious environment where parents taught their children not to kill and to treat their neighbors as they wanted to be treated. When some Mexican Americans saw the Vietnamese farmers, they realized they could relate because of their migrant worker experiences. Most Mexican American soldiers had worked as a migrant laborer themselves or had family members who had in the past. Therefore, some found killing a Vietnamese farmer who supposedly worked for the Vietcong more difficult than their fellow soldiers. These Vietnamese farmers looked incredibly similar to their neighbors at home. Because killing of the Vietcong (or those who were not professional NVA soldiers) inevitably occurred, these soldiers returned home with the guilt of having turned their backs on the basic religious principles of their childhood. Some were able to dehumanize the enemy as their commanders suggested in an effort to bypass 'thou shall not kill' while others continually questioned their chaplains

and commanders about their killing concerns.<sup>12</sup> This contradiction led to all the symptoms of PTS along with another major contradiction concerning their desire to be macho.

As children, these soldiers learned to honor their families and become heroes like their fathers, uncles and grandfathers had in World War II or Korea. Many of these soldiers felt heroic while in Vietnam and accomplished amazing feats that saved numerous American lives. However, the majority of these soldiers came home to find their families and friends unreceptive to their need to tell others about their experiences. Unfortunately, the American society neglected to welcome these veterans home, so these soldiers felt unwelcome in their own country they had fought to protect. Their childhood longing to become heroes and be celebrated by society had never come to fruition. Also, some veterans mention that veterans' organizations would not allow their membership until decades later while the United States government often forgot about them financially. For this reason, some Mexican American veterans were forced to struggle to feed their families after attempting to prove their patriotism to the United States by becoming a Vietnam War hero. This further escalated the PTS symptoms these men experienced.

To begin, the first chapter will cover the importance of Catholicism to the Mexican American soldier in the Vietnam War. Their belief that killing is a sin directly contradicts their involvement in the war unless they learn to dehumanize the enemy and neglect to recognize them as equals. In some cases, commanders, priests and chaplains

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Alfred Alvarez, 21.

helped the soldiers think of the situation differently so they could be successful at killing during the war. According to Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who studies Vietnam veterans, “Vietnam-era military training reflexively imparted the image of a demonized adversary”.<sup>13</sup> However, their guilt resurfaced as they returned home and their own lives were no longer in danger. This setting allowed the time needed for processing their experiences rather than worrying about staying alive another day in Vietnam. Their religious experiences informed how these soldiers digested their war experiences and how they responded to them.

Because Catholics and Protestants interpreted the same biblical concepts differently, such as the definition of just war, they also interpreted the Vietnam War differently. Although some Mexican and Mexican Americans joined the war effort by becoming medics and chaplains or applied for conscientious objector status, these are in the minority. The contradictions resulting from the gap between their religious beliefs and their actions in the war led to long-term moral injury. Although machismo entices males of Mexican descent to join the war effort to provide for and protect their families in the United States by fighting to protect their country, their Catholic upbringing ironically pushed back against their actions once they reached the combat zone.

The second chapter will discuss the importance of machismo to the Mexican American man during this era and the struggle to identify their place in American society. Aspects of this struggle that the Chicano Movement addresses can be seen throughout these case studies mentioned here. One veteran amongst these case studies identifies only

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 103.

as Mexican prior to deploying to Vietnam because he had not yet gained American citizenship. The largest group of veterans discussed here identified themselves as Mexican American because they were born in the United States to parents of Mexican descent or had become naturalized citizens at some point after their arrival to the United States. Only one Vietnam veteran of Mexican descent (within these case studies) identified himself as Chicano because of his cultural pride and involvement in the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The term 'Chicano' in the 1960s and 1970s held different connotations as it related to the larger Chicano movement fight for equal rights for the Mexican American community. However, the term 'Chicano' in the last couple of decades has been used interchangeably with the term 'Mexican American'. In this work, I will only utilize the term 'Chicano' if the veteran has identified himself utilizing that specific term and in relation to the Chicano movement. 'Chicano' will not be used interchangeably with 'Mexican American' in this case. The individual veterans are only discussed here utilizing terms they used to describe themselves.

Even though manliness has been discussed by Juan Coronado as it relates to Mexican American POWs, I will apply this same concept to the rest of the veterans. Machismo is a multifaceted concept that can be defined as a sense of patriotism and pride in his country and heritage as well as a man's need to provide for and protect his family. Multiple soldiers of Mexican descent enlisted in the military prior to being drafted because of the economic security a paycheck provided for themselves and their families. Because children of Mexican descent often look up to heroes who are treated well by society, they expected a warm hero's welcome on their return to the United States from

their families as well as society. When society, family and friends neglected to recognize their attempts to prove their machismo as well as patriotism, this escalated their sense of loneliness and confusion. If not to prove their patriotism, become a war hero and provide and protect their families, what was the point in their horrific wartime experiences? When South Vietnam collapsed, these veterans felt a further sense of hopelessness and loss as it seemed their efforts amounted to nothing. Some veterans also neglected to receive the financial aid they were promised when they volunteered and could not provide for their families as they expected to when they returned or could not find jobs as easily as they expected.

In the third chapter, I discuss the results of these two major contradictions for the Mexican, Mexican American and Chicano Vietnam veteran upon their return home. Their first experiences when seeing their families for the first time are as important as the manner in which society as a whole reacted to their return. For example, these soldiers of Mexican descent and Catholic faith came home to a predominantly white and Protestant society and government that seemed both anti-war and anti-veteran to the veterans in these case studies. In some cases, this white government neglected to provide financially for their Mexican American veterans after the Vietnam War. Veterans in these case studies mention they expected to find careers after the military much easier because of the skills they had acquired, but this was not the case for some. Instead, some felt discriminated against by employers because of their status as Vietnam veterans and expected the government to act against this discrimination or provide jobs for them. Therefore, these veterans felt unable to provide for their families after joining the military in an effort to do so. For some, their reactions to this treatment included alcoholism,

partying and drugs while others struggled to communicate with their spouses. For most of these Mexicans and Mexican Americans, their inability to communicate with their significant others led to failed marriages, divorces and strained relationships with their children. Although other groups of Vietnam veterans also experience PTS in similar manners, this specific group of Mexican American Vietnam veterans' experiences with PTS are discussed in the third chapter. This thesis does not argue that one group's experience with PTS is less horrific or more important.

In some cases, veterans turned to their faith as a coping mechanism by talking to God about their experiences or finding a community within the church that would listen to their struggles with guilt and loneliness. Some veterans found a group within the VA that helped them share their experiences with other veterans. However, this usually occurred after two to three decades of struggling as the VA neglected to recognize PTS until many years after the war. In the same way, the results of moral injury contributed to their abilities to function in society and form relationships.

Unfortunately for veterans of the Vietnam War, moral injury has just recently been defined and understood as separate from PTS. As defined by Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, "Moral injury results when soldiers violate their core moral beliefs, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings."<sup>14</sup> The vital aspect of the Vietnam War that led to feelings of guilt, or moral injury, for the soldiers mentioned here specifically was their inability to determine who was the enemy. While

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<sup>14</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), xv.

some soldiers participated in search and destroy missions where the identity of the enemy often remained uncertain, others only experienced more conventional warfare against the professional NVA forces in a more obvious uniform. This remains another issue that depends on the soldier's placement and time of service.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **RELIGIOUS CONTRADICTIONS**

#### **Protestant and Catholic Clergy and Laity on War**

During the Vietnam War, both Protestant and Catholic churches found themselves stuck between the political turmoil of the 1960s and their theological convictions. For centuries prior to the Vietnam War, Christianity had utilized the Augustinian concept of just war theory when discussing or participating in conflict. Both Catholic and Protestant clergy invoked the just war theory during the Vietnam conflict, but defined what a just war encompassed differently. Furthermore, Protestant and Catholic leadership interpreted scripture in different manners which enforced their support for or opposition towards the war. Even though small pockets of opposition emerged from all denominations in the United States, the majority of clergy and laity supported the war (at least at the beginning) based on their interpretation of scripture and just war theory. As the war progressed, opposition from the laity increased while the clergy continued to formally support the war, even though the Catholic church leadership acknowledged that some methods the United States government utilized were increasing injustice rather than solving the injustice against the South Vietnamese people. Weapons such as napalm and the killing of South Vietnamese civilians caused a division in the Catholic church that led to some laity leaving the denomination.

Furthermore, chaplains overrepresented the Protestant denominations while Catholic chaplains were in short supply in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of their religious affiliations, chaplains were trained to represent a generic American morality which

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<sup>15</sup> Jaqueline E. Whitt, *Bringing God to Men: American Military Chaplains and the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 78.



naturally evoked Protestant values. Chaplains were often torn between supporting the soldiers and performing their funerals. They were still expected to represent God and faith while supporting a war they often disagreed with. This confusion began with the chaplain and trickled down to the soldiers he was supposed to minister to. One way chaplains tried to relieve this tension was through interpreting the scriptures within a wartime context that would resonate with soldiers experiencing combat.<sup>16</sup> Soldiers of Mexican descent received interpretations of scripture and messages on faith from chaplains that contradicted what they had learned in childhood. Therefore, soldiers who were raised with a Catholic background experienced tension between the official stance of the church, their personal convictions and their experiences with chaplains during the war.

In the rear, members of the military enjoyed better access to chaplains on bases in comparison to soldiers in the field. Because this thesis focuses on combat veterans who experienced PTS and moral injury from their experiences in the field, the men in these case studies would be least likely to have the most convenient access to Catholic priests in the field. Moral injury, or guilt resulting from the breaking of one's own moral code, occurred for most soldiers as a result of their inability to compartmentalize the killing of other human beings who seemed equal to them (although military leaders and some chaplains tried to make them seem inhuman to create a more effective killing atmosphere). These veterans of Mexican descent had been taught as children that killing

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<sup>16</sup> Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 125.

any other human being was a sin, but were forced to perform their duties that the majority of them had volunteered for.

Based on my research, all veterans of Mexican descent within these case studies grew up in the 1950s and 1960s with a heavy Catholic influence passed down from prior Mexican generations. Even those in these case studies presented in this chapter who never attended a Catholic mass believed in God or spirituality in general prior to experiencing the horrors of the Vietnam War. While most veterans of Mexican descent held to their faith during and after the war, some lost their belief in God as they watched their fellow soldiers die horrific deaths in a war they never found a purpose for. In the same manner, some veterans lost hope when they returned to their families and a country who neglected them in their greatest time of need and vulnerability. During war, their faith could be both useful and confusing for these soldiers as it manifested in both positive and negative manners.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam War created tensions between clergy of both Protestant and Catholic denominations as well as tensions between the clergy and laity. These tensions emerged in debates over the just war theory, scripture interpretation and patriotism which led to the majority of denominations taking a publicly neutral or supportive stance. For Catholic clergy specifically, the just war concept neatly applied to the Vietnam War because the United States needed to act as an international police force against the injustice of the civil war in Vietnam. This idea of an international police force only developed during the early years of the Cold War in response to World War II.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Vesselin Popovski, ed., *World Religions and Norms of War* (New York: United Nations University Press, 2009), 153.

Although the Catholic Church defined the war as a ‘just war’, the Church also publicly expressed concern over the methods used and the damaged morality of American soldiers. In the same way, the Catholic laity supported the need for humanitarian action in Vietnam but often protested the means utilized.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Catholic soldiers serving in Vietnam could exercise patriotism and support for a war against evil and injustice while disagreeing with the manner in which the war was waged. However, by the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, the Catholic Church began to move towards formal opposition as pacifism and conscientious objector status increased. Also, the anti-war movement was prevalent among Catholic laity even though clergy continued to formally support the idea of the war even if they neglected to support the methods utilized and specific policies.

For conservative Protestants (in the majority within all Protestant denominations), just war theory focused on the importance of fighting the evils of anti-Communism across the world and does not view war as a tool for humanitarian means. In contrast to the Catholic clergy, Protestant leadership utilized the crusade, or religious war, concept in describing Vietnam. For conservative Protestants, the Vietnam War was a holy war between Christianity and the evil, godless Communists of Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> For Protestants, ‘love thy neighbor’ meant to come to the aid of your anti-Communist neighbor militarily.<sup>20</sup> However, soldiers of Mexican descent often interpreted this verse

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<sup>18</sup> Popovski, *World Religions*, 159.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 246-247.

<sup>20</sup> George Bogaski, *American Protestants and the Debate over the Vietnam War: Evil was Loose in the World* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2014), 7.

more literally and felt guilt when killing Vietnamese farmers who resembled themselves or family members.

The most notorious and outspoken group of conservative Protestants were the members of the Southern Baptist convention, or fundamentalists, who publicly supported the Vietnam War as a holy war against the evils of Communism. Not only did they supply the highest percentage of chaplains over their denominational quota, but they demonized pacifism and the anti-war movement while passing peace resolutions to the contrary.<sup>21</sup> Historically, Catholics utilized patriotism as a defense mechanism against an anti-Catholic American society.<sup>22</sup> They attempted to prove their loyalty to the United States by volunteering in wartime just as some of the Mexican American soldiers did during Vietnam. This need to prove patriotic loyalty as a Catholic compounded with their need to prove their patriotic loyalty as someone of Mexican descent who deserved equal treatment in American society.

Another way to understand a soldier's views on morality is discussed by Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. For example, society and the military have historically taught soldiers "that anything goes—any kind of deceit in war. We can neither praise nor blame; there is nothing to say. And yet we are rarely silent."<sup>23</sup> Although Vietnam veterans had merely performed the duty they had been given by their superiors, American society demonized their efforts to defend their country. Some soldiers were responsible for crossing the moral line of

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<sup>21</sup> Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Haberski Jr., *God and War: American Civil Religion Since 1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 136-137.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: BasicBooks, 1977), 3.

action, such as the case with My Lai, but these were the exception rather than the rule. According to Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, this was a severe case of soldiers seeing “the rules flouted with impunity. The invisibility of codes that derived from the Western liberal tradition left a vacuum that was filled with behavior springing from other impulses.”<sup>24</sup> The military’s attempt at training the soldier during Vietnam caused the accepted Western moral norms to become blurred and confusing. Therefore, soldiers experienced guilt which led to moral injury for killing civilians who could have potentially been the enemy. Because experiences varied based on your location and time of service, some encountered leaders who ordered ruthless killings of civilians in order to kill potential Viet Cong while others were more careful to spare civilians whenever possible. In the same way, some soldiers witnessed postmortem mutilations of their own friends while others participated in mutilating and torturing supposed Viet Cong and members of the North Vietnamese Army before executing them.<sup>25</sup> Instead of following policy that required the taking of prisoners alive, some leaders ordered execution for any enemy who was captured, surrendered or deserted their side. Although the military had created regulations for all members to follow, “They simply never became part of the soldiers’ reality because they were never seriously enforced, and without emphatic enforcement they corresponded as much to the “common grunt” as road maps of Mars.”<sup>26</sup> These were the results of a war full of moral contradictions.

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 376.

<sup>25</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 376.

## Religious Experiences in Vietnam

One example of a veteran whose family raised him in the Catholic faith was Roy Benavidez. Although Benavidez admits that he is of Mexican and Yaqui heritage, he adamantly denies that he should be labeled Mexican American, Chicano, Mexican or Hispanic. Instead, he would prefer to be labeled an American.<sup>27</sup> However, Benavidez was raised by his uncle and grandfather on his father's side who were of Mexican descent. For this reason, the Catholic faith was an integral part of his early life. His uncle required that the family attend Catholic mass once a week no matter the amount of work that needed to be finished or their financial situation. His Grandfather Salvador described the Benavidez family as "a hardworking, cultured family of God-fearing vaqueros and sharecroppers who first sank roots in Texas in the early 1800s and fought for their independence from Mexico as Texans and Americans."<sup>28</sup> Not only did his uncles serve in World War II, but his ancestors fought in the war for Mexican Independence (or so Grandfather Salvador claims). Throughout his experience in the Vietnam War, Benavidez worked to continue the legend of his family's faith and patriotism.

Other veterans who had a Catholic background prior to their war experiences were Daniel Archuleta, Eliseo Perez and Roman Martinez. All three of these men mention in their interviews that they attended Catholic school as children. For a few, like David Archuleta, the Vietnam War negatively affected their faith. However, most of these soldiers of Mexican descent, like Eliseo Perez and Roman Martinez, attempted to

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<sup>27</sup> Roy P. Benavidez and John R. Craig, *Medal of Honor: One Man's Journey from Poverty and Prejudice* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2005), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Blehm, *Legend: The Incredible Story of Green Beret Sergeant Roy Benavidez's Heroic Mission to Rescue a Special Forces Team Caught Behind Enemy Lines* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 14.

apply their faith to their experiences in war. Although the majority of the soldiers in these case studies kept their faith throughout the war, their experiences changed how they understood their Catholic upbringing.

For example, Eliseo Perez was going through a period of Agnosticism when he joined the Air Force even though he had been raised in the Catholic faith. As rocket attacks bombarded his air base in Da Nang during the Tet Offensive, he prayed every time just in case there was a God and He was listening. Perez tells the story of the Tet Offensive as he experienced it which included a truck explosion a few feet away from him and bullet holes in a wall that missed his head by centimeters. After those moments in the first few days of his Vietnam career, he bolted to the nearest chapel and prayed to thank God for sparing him twice in one day.<sup>29</sup> This and other close calls during his time in Vietnam caused Perez to rethink his Agnosticism and reject organized religion (such as his previous Catholic faith) while believing in God, or a supreme being.<sup>30</sup> Because he survived after praying in every difficult situation, he decided God must exist and must have protected him.

In the same way, Roman Martinez allowed the war to reshape his faith temporarily while in Vietnam. Although he applied for conscientious objector status and volunteered to be a chaplain, he lost that case and was placed in a recon unit. Because of this, Martinez was forced to temporarily abandon the morals he had grown up with so that he could perform his duty. For example, he explains how he dealt with killing by

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Eliseo Perez-Montalvo. Vietnam Center and Archive. OH0314 15 July 2003 Stacks. Eliseo Perez-Montalvo Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 27. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0314/OH0314.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Eliseo Perez-Montalvo, 33.

saying, “If the people you were killing had souls it would hurt you too bad so they had to be subhuman and it didn’t hurt so bad.”<sup>31</sup> Numerous other soldiers within my research expressed the same sentiment when explaining how they could kill other human beings. Even though military policy was to take prisoners amongst the enemy who wanted to surrender when offered that deal, Martinez’s unit neglected to follow this policy. Instead, he was told “to kill them all and let God sort it out.”<sup>32</sup> This experience of Martinez’s first contact with enemy Vietnamese and set the tone for the rest of his tour in Vietnam. From this point, he realized he needed to abandon his morals to keep his sanity, perform his duty and stay alive. Throughout this experience and afterwards, Martinez successfully kept his faith and found his morals again when he returned to the United States.

Also, Alfred Alvarez explains that his faith grew stronger in response to what he encountered in Vietnam. When Alvarez first arrived in country, he was assigned to protect an air base and was worried about having to kill the enemy if they attacked the base. Because he was raised Catholic, he initially could not forget that killing was a sin no matter how he attempted to make sense of the situation. When he voiced his concerns to a sergeant, the commander said he needed to kill to defend himself and worry about his family losing him. According to this sergeant, Alvarez had to think of the enemy as faceless and without a family to mourn for the enemy soldier’s death.<sup>33</sup> Because he had a family who would mourn his death, Alvarez’s life was more important than the enemy’s

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Roman Martinez. Vietnam Center and Archive. OH0113D 02 October 1999 Cold Storage. Roman Martinez Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 3. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0113/OH0113.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Alfred Alvarez. Vietnam Center and Archive. OH0614 3 June 2008. Alfred Alvarez Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 21. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0614/OH0614.pdf>



and he needed to focus on defending himself over everything else. Although he neglected to take his faith seriously in his childhood and teenage years, Alvarez asserts that he became more religious and took his faith more seriously starting at basic training and throughout the war. He began praying in helicopters that the mission would be successful and he would live to see the end of his tour.<sup>34</sup> Not only did he become more religious, but he also learned from seeing his dead and injured comrades that he was not indestructible just because he was young. Overall, Alvarez's Vietnam experiences allowed him to learn to accept the realities of life and death.

Although most soldiers mentioned here neglect to discuss their experience with Catholicism and faith at length, most mention God or faith in some capacity at least once in their interviews or war stories. For example, veterans like Roger Gomez mentioned at the end of their interviews that they were thankful to God for protecting him and providing him with his experiences in Vietnam. Gomez volunteered and never expected to be killed during his service because he trusted God to take care of him.<sup>35</sup> Instead of mentioning negative aspects of his tour, this soldier focuses on the positive aspects and the lessons he learned from serving in a war. Another veteran who makes similar comments is Frank Delgado. In *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*, Delgado explains that he had a feeling he would outlive his tour in Vietnam because he "had confidence that God was going to see me through it."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Alfred Alvarez, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Roger Gomez. Vietnam Center and Archive. OHD0022 No Date. Donated Oral Histories Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/463015](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/463015).

<sup>36</sup> Trujillo, *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*, 10.

An anonymous veteran in *Soldados*, Ernest, mentions his “mom and grandmother made a promise to the Virgin of Guadalupe that they would make a trip to Mexico City” if he returned from the war alive.<sup>37</sup> Although Ernest himself never references his religious beliefs during wartime, Catholic practices remained important to his family members who held the Virgin of Guadalupe responsible for keeping their son and grandson alive. In contrast to his family’s emphasis on the Virgin, Ernest says, “I don’t believe in things like that.”<sup>38</sup> Beyond that comment that seems to address the Virgin specifically, he never mentions what his religious beliefs are and how they were relevant to his service in Vietnam.

Another example in *Soldados* of a veteran who expresses similar sentiments is Miguel Lemus. During his tour, Lemus prayed for God to spare his life just as his mother did and had told him to daily. He believed his prayers allowed for his survival and God had decided to keep him alive because of his faithfulness.<sup>39</sup> Although Lemus mentions that some experiences, like seeing his fellow soldiers die and hearing their last words, caused hatred in his heart, he retained his faith in God to allow him to go home. During and after his Vietnam experience, Lemus was part of La Raza and was able to connect with other Chicano members while in Vietnam. Mexican American veterans often mention they volunteered for the military because one or more members of their friend group had or were drafted. Lemus remembers that members of La Raza worked to protect their fellow Chicanos and created brotherly relationships that outlasted the war. In this extremely unusual case, Lemus mentions that his entire platoon consisted entirely of

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<sup>37</sup> Trujillo, *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*, 163.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

Chicano Marines at one point and they did not treat the outsiders, such as Native Americans, well.<sup>40</sup> He believes these friendships also contributed to his survival while in Vietnam. Based on my research, it appears that these veterans of Mexican descent look backwards in confidence that God's plan for their lives never included death in Vietnam.

Furthermore, Marine Sgt. Freddy Gonzalez provides hints within his letters to his family that his faith remained important to him while in Vietnam. Unfortunately, Gonzalez was killed in action in early 1968 in Hue during the Tet Offensive just a few days before he would have left Vietnam for his turn at R&R (Rest & Relaxation) in Hong Kong. In his letters, he had promised his mother he would make it home alive because he had been praying and attending mass and confession whenever that was available to their unit.<sup>41</sup> Just like most of the other soldiers mentioned here, Gonzalez volunteered for the Marines and did so with a group of friends while on their senior trip celebrating their graduation from high school. Based on his letters, it seems he promised his mother he would attend mass and confession and pray constantly like she planned to while he was gone. When mentioning something positive that occurred to him while in training or in Vietnam, Gonzalez said, "Thanks to God."<sup>42</sup> He repeats this phrase numerous times throughout his letters to his mother and continually works to convince her that he is faithfully attending church services whenever possible. Throughout all his letters, Gonzalez rarely mentions negative aspects of the war and rarely complains about the

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<sup>40</sup> Trujillo, *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> John W. Flores, *When the River Dreams: The Life of Marine Sgt. Freddy Gonzalez* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006), 250.

<sup>42</sup> Flores, *When the River Dreams*, 150-151.

conditions. Instead, he focuses on the positives in an effort to convince his mother that everything was going well and he would return home safely.

In an interview with Ricardo Leon Martinez for the Voces Oral History Project, he discusses how his religious background affected his wartime experiences. For example, his faith never wavered throughout the war and he continued to practice Catholicism after as well. Martinez's faith has most directly affected his struggle with PTS since the war ended. When he returned home, he became involved in a Catholic church on a regular basis which allowed him to mentally digest his struggles in a healthier manner. Furthermore, Martinez mentions that he would not have been able to come to terms with his experiences without his faith that became a healthy outlet to funnel his anger and confusion through.<sup>43</sup>

Another veteran interviewed for the Voces Project at the University of Texas who also mentioned the importance of religion was Eduardo C. Garza. He grew up in a Catholic home and carried his faith throughout the war, but redefined his faith based on his struggle with PTS after the war. For example, he chose to leave the Catholic church after the war and joined a nondenominational church group instead. Garza felt the Catholic church neglected to cater to his needs to discuss his experiences openly and honestly without judgement whereas the nondenominational church allowed for more open discussion.<sup>44</sup> Also, Garza directly identified with the Vietnamese civilians, or suspected Vietcong, he was often responsible for killing. He believed the situation the

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<sup>43</sup> Ricardo Leon Martinez, interview with Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, June 17, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/ricardo-leon-martinez>.

<sup>44</sup> Eduardo C. Garza, interview with Emily Macrander, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, April 20, 2011. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/eduardo-c-garza>.

South Vietnamese civilians found themselves in was similar to the Mexican American situation in the United States. For example, he compared migrant ethnic Mexican workers on farms to the South Vietnamese farmers who seemed hopelessly attached to similar lifestyles of poverty.<sup>45</sup> These Vietnamese civilians were under the oppression of the North Vietnamese invaders in the same way that ethnic Mexicans were oppressed in the United States by a primarily Anglo and Protestant society. Although Garza never mentions any anti-war attitudes, he does mention becoming part of the Chicano movement and advocating for equal education opportunities for Mexican Americans.<sup>46</sup>

Even though few of the veterans mentioned here express specific concerns over religious and racial oppression in the United States, they often allude to issues within the military. For example, Garza felt he had never been treated fairly by his superiors from the time he joined the military although he neglects to provide specific details on how this occurred. In the same way, some veterans mention that there were no Catholic priests available for them to speak to while in Vietnam. Instead, other religions and denominations were overrepresented in the group of chaplains. Therefore, Catholics were given less opportunities to consult with a leader from their religion whereas Protestants were more likely to have better access. The percentage of Catholic priests to Protestant chaplains in Vietnam directly paralleled the United States culture in the 1960s. The United States was viewed as historically Protestant and Catholics were often in the minority and sometimes discriminated against in society. Overall, both Catholics and Mexican Americans were discriminated against in the United States and this carried over

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<sup>45</sup> Eduardo C. Garza, interview with Emily Macrander.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

into the military in Vietnam. This result is comparable to the Chicano Movement and Civil Rights Movement that carried over into Vietnam as well. African Americans were discriminated against at home and in the military even though most soldiers testify that racial altercations usually occurred in the rear on bases rather than the battlefields and the jungles when life and death were more important.

In *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War*, another veteran of Mexican descent named Tony (no surname provided) discusses his traumatic experiences that led to his reliance on God. Tony was a Microwave Radio Equipment Operator but experienced an almost constant barrage of rockets directed at their base. He believed that being in the infantry would have been easier because he could have defended himself against the enemy rather than being a sitting duck for their rocket attacks on the top of a mountain.<sup>47</sup> During one of the worst enemy attacks he experienced, he began to bargain with God for his life even though he was never sure how to pray effectively and whether to use Hail Mary or Our Father. He promised God he would be a better person and make something worthwhile out of his life rather than continuing his pre-Vietnam life as part of a gang. After this meaningful moment for Tony, he “felt pretty confident that I was going to go home.”<sup>48</sup> After the war ended, he kept his promise and worked to help others rather than committing crimes as a gang member. Although Tony was unable to recall the exact method of prayer he had learned as a child, he relied on elements of his Catholic faith from childhood to bargain for his survival. Since the war ended, Tony has been unable to speak about the specifics of his actions related to killing. He continues to understand

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<sup>47</sup> Lea Ybarra, *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 55.

<sup>48</sup> Ybarra, *Vietnam Veterans*, 56-57.

killing as a sin, as most Catholics would, and wishes to keep the sins he committed in Vietnam private.<sup>49</sup> Although Tony never mentions joining the anti-war movement during or after his service, he mentions that he no longer believes war should be a viable option and would have deserted if he had known the consequences beforehand.

Another veteran who mentions his faith and his Catholic upbringing is Leonardo Guzman. In his interview with Veterans History Project, he mentions multiple experiences that he describes as miracles. Between the miracles and prayers he prayed daily, he knew he would survive his tour in Vietnam. He mentioned that he never feared for his life after praying and noticing that his life continued to be spared and knew he would make it home alive. Guzman's confidence in his survival matches the confidence of numerous other veterans mentioned here. Some relied on prayer to fuel this confidence while others pointed to specific experiences that proved their lives would be spared. When Guzman returned to the United States, he joined various veterans' organizations including Catholic War Veterans.<sup>50</sup> This exemplifies his continued reliance on the faith of his childhood after the war. However, he never mentions any relation to the anti-war movement or the Chicano movement.

Moreover, a Vietnam veteran of Mexican descent named Jay (no surname provided) mentions both his faith and his feelings of the anti-war movement in the same interview. He mentions that he has lost all faith in priests even though he retains his Catholic faith. As previously mentioned, soldiers often questioned how chaplains and

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<sup>49</sup> Ybarra, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Leonardo Guzman, interview with Owen Rogers, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, April 18, 2011. <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.79653/transcript?ID=mv0001>.

priests could pray over them and send them out to battle wishing them the best with the hope that they would kill the enemy. Jay argues that priests in Vietnam were cowards because they prayed over the men and were evacuated by helicopter before the battle began. He remembers them saying, “God says that it’s all right to fight for your country.”<sup>51</sup> However, he could never resolve the issue of killing with his Catholic upbringing. Instead, this created mental anguish and led to moral injury during and after the war.

In the same manner, most other soldiers could not agree with the reasonings the chaplains and priests provided for their need to kill the enemy. In some cases, these excuses provided by the chaplains could have allowed them to kill effectively while in combat, but neglected to provide long-term healing. Fortunately for Jay, he was able to separate the actions of the priests from his religious beliefs and retain his faith after the war. Those who neglected their religious upbringing as a result of their experiences in war or had negative religious experiences during their service were unable to separate what they saw and what they believed. Although Whitt mentions that Catholic priests were in the shortest supply amongst chaplains during Vietnam, at least two of the veterans mentioned here were able to speak to and be prayed over by a priest on a regular basis. Others never mention a chaplain or a priest which could be explained by their location and lack of access to a chaplain of any kind or access to a chaplain that did not align with their belief system. However, those who never had access to a Catholic priest

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<sup>51</sup> Ybarra, *Vietnam Veterans*, 183.



could have experienced less contradiction and confusion since those who discuss priests only do so in a negative manner.

According to Whitt, the Roman Catholic Church was given one-third of the overall number of chaplain positions even though they never met this number at any point during the war. The reasons for this small number of Catholic chaplains available to soldiers included the lack of Catholic priests in general and the reluctance of bishops to allow priests to serve as chaplains in war.<sup>52</sup> Rather than a reluctance from priests to serve, they were often discouraged and sometimes prohibited from serving in Vietnam. Even though the chief of chaplains conversed with Catholic leadership throughout the war, the Roman Catholic Church continued to discourage service for the United States military.

In 1966, “the Army had stationed 219 chaplains in Vietnam: 47 Roman Catholic, 170 Protestants, and 2 Jewish.”<sup>53</sup> As numbers of chaplains rose steadily for the rest of the decade, the percentage of Catholic chaplains compared to Protestant remained the same. Since Catholic priests were chronically in short supply, some military regulations were relaxed to allow the number of Catholic and Jewish chaplains to rise. These regulations were the same age and physical requirements as military service in every branch.<sup>54</sup> However, this neglected to cause an increase in the percentage of Catholic chaplains.

In contrast to these positive religious experiences, Antonio (surname not provided) turned his back on all religion while in Vietnam even though he had been raised Catholic. He describes this decision as “the worst thing that happened in Vietnam”

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<sup>52</sup> Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

while he was there.<sup>55</sup> The contradiction between his Catholic faith and his orders to kill ultimately led to his abandonment of faith. Antonio often questioned the priest assigned to his unit about his choice to bless the weapons and pray that the infantrymen would kill the enemy in copious amounts. How could Catholic priests in Vietnam abandon their basic principles against killing and actively support killing through prayer and blessings? This is a primary example of the contradictions and confusion that began with Catholic priests and trickled down to negatively affect the soldiers who experienced combat firsthand.

In the same way, Daniel Archuleta's story is one where the war negatively and permanently affected his faith. He joined the military as a medic and enjoyed helping people. However, he also saw some of the most atrocious sights in war and experienced loss constantly. Many of Archuleta's friends died in his arms which contributed to his loss of faith in God. He experienced extreme feelings of hate and revenge against the enemy as he lost his friends and saw the damage the enemy caused. Not only did he lose his faith in God, he also lost his faith in human beings and his country.<sup>56</sup> On his return to the United States, he became involved in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in response to his hatred for his country's actions and the enemy's actions. Archuleta also mentions he was diagnosed with PTS decades after the war just like the other soldiers mentioned here whose faith was impacted in a more positive way.

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<sup>55</sup> Ybarra, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 70.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Archuleta, interview with Henry Velez, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, August 9, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/daniel-thomas-archuleta>

## Conclusion

According to Whitt's *Bringing God to Men*, chaplains and priests serving the military often reinterpreted scripture to fit the needs of the Vietnam War.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately for Antonio, the priest he confided in could never form a response to his questions which directly led to his decision to abandon the faith of his childhood. Also, Whitt argues that conversion was the norm rather than cases of seriously diminished faith among chaplains and soldiers they encountered.<sup>58</sup> Cases of complete apostasy, such as Antonio's experience, were rare. The group of oral histories and veteran experiences shown here seem to agree with Whitt's argument as well. Based on my research, it appears that nearly all of the veterans discussed here either redefined their faith or strengthened their faith through the spiritual testing ground of the Vietnam War. However, strengthened faith does not mean these veterans never experienced the effects of moral injury. In most cases, these veterans continued to experience mental anguish from their actions in war that defied their internal moral codes. Though most discuss experiences that positively affected their religious beliefs long-term, the negative affects of killing other human beings remained. Even if some soldiers attempted to define the enemy as animals in the moment so that they could effectively perform their duties, they still experienced guilt after the battle was over and after the war ended.

Throughout the Vietnam War, members of the United States military from all religious backgrounds faced contradictions between their religious beliefs and the actions the government required of them. For Catholics specifically, the act of killing the enemy

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<sup>57</sup> Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 125.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 190-191.

(whether men, women or children) seems bothersome to the veterans mentioned here the most. Although defined differently by Catholics and Protestants at this time, the just war theory allowed for Catholic institutions to initially support the war theologically. Even though none of the veterans in this sample mention the Vietnam War as a just war, the majority discuss their support or indifference to the war when they volunteered or were willingly drafted.

For most, their opposition to the war and disappointment in government leaders grew and evolved over the course of their tours in Vietnam as they experienced hypocrisy and contradictions. Therefore, they had justified the war in their own minds and on their own religious terms before entering, but these justifications were worn down by their daily experiences. As this controversial war continued, the Catholic Church and its institutions began to waver in their support of every aspect of the war. Instead of total support, Catholic leaders began to explain that the cause was just, but the methods of war were not. The United States was creating more injustice in the world rather than bringing the injustice in Southeast Asia to a halt as promised. At the end of the Vietnam War, Catholic leaders still officially supported the war but continued their severe reservations about the methods utilized such as the killing of innocent civilians and weapons such as napalm.

Overall, the Mexican American soldier interpreted or neglected their faith in various ways based on their different experiences in Vietnam. The majority held to the Catholic beliefs of their childhood throughout the war and afterwards while others changed their denomination or chose to turn their backs on religion completely. Each individual was affected by their mental ability to compartmentalize their actions in the

war as necessary in a wartime context. If the soldier could never explain his actions in a healthy manner, their levels of moral injury and guilt over killing seemed to rise dramatically. For example, Jay believed the priests incapable of explaining his duties as a soldier in a religious context and were useless to him for the rest of his life. Because he never received a viable explanation for his actions, he turned his back on the priesthood and Catholic leadership entirely. Based on my research, it appears that even though most of the veterans discussed here held to their faith after the war, they experienced moral injury, or the guilt that results from the breaking of one's moral code, at the same level of those who turned away from religion completely. As mentioned prior, Whitt argues that those who turned against their faith completely were the exception rather than the rule.

For veterans of Mexican descent, their Catholic upbringing also informed their understanding of machismo and masculinity. Males were taught by their fathers, grandfathers and uncles the importance of protecting their families physically and financially. Catholic teachings generally include a form of patriarchy passed down to each generation where the man is head and protector of the family unit. In many cases, protecting their families meant defending their country (or country where their family resided for non-citizens) and translated into patriotism. Based on my research, young men and children of Mexican descent, like Roy Benavidez, strived to become war heroes and felt the Vietnam War provided them with that once-in-a-lifetime chance.

## CHAPTER 2

### MASCULINITY AND MACHISMO

#### **Machismo and Masculinity in Vietnam War Era Society**

During the Vietnam War, multiple factors led to volunteerism among young men of Mexican descent. Most voluntarily enlisted for the military during the Vietnam War as a result of their comrades being drafted or because they wanted the ability to choose the Marines over the Army. Based on my research, it appears that motivations given by the veterans mentioned throughout this thesis for joining the military during this time can be linked to masculine ideas. For example, veterans of Mexican descent mention their need to provide for their families after graduating high school and the military provided a guaranteed income. Others mention the need to protect their families by volunteering to serve and protect their country. Another motivation for these veterans was their need to prove their patriotism, or their loyalty to their country. From childhood, some mention the stories of their ancestors fighting valiantly in past wars to protect their livelihoods. The majority mention their fathers, grandfathers and uncles who fought in World War II and Korea while one veteran mentions their ancestors who fought for Mexican Independence in the early 1800s. Also, some veterans mention that a desire to run from their duty was the opposite of machismo and volunteered or willingly fought after being drafted because someone else would have to fight and die in their place if they ran to Canada or Mexico. Although some family members attempted to convince a couple of veterans to run to extended family members in Mexico, they refused to allow someone else to fight for their country and potentially die in their places.

According to Juan Coronado, for the Mexican American POWs, “*machismo* or the conceptualization of manly ideals played roles at various levels” and “Various forms

of manliness/*machismo* propelled and motivated the group.”<sup>59</sup> Although he never explicitly gives his own definition of machismo, he provides historical context and definitions from other authors and from the POWs themselves. Prior to Spanish conquest in areas of present-day Mexico, Native cultures “defined the warrior and the hunter as solely masculine roles.”<sup>60</sup> Fighting and hunting became the rites of passage for young indigenous men. After World War II, the Mexican American identity was misunderstood by an Anglo-American audience and focused on elements such as tying “the alleged criminal nature of Mexican American youth to their Native ancestry.”<sup>61</sup> However, in the rural borderlands of the U.S.-Mexico divide, “honor, stoicism, and courage remained the cornerstone of masculinity.”<sup>62</sup> Even though times had changed from pre-Spanish conquest, provision and protection remained vital to the Mexican American understanding of masculinity.<sup>63</sup> This idea of being strong enough to protect and feed one’s family can be seen in the warrior and hunter culture of the pre-Columbian societies mentioned previous.

In the same way, machismo is discussed and defined differently by each veteran but can be defined loosely in the case studies mentioned in this chapter as provision, protection, pride and patriotism. All of these concepts are interrelated and also inform each other. To illustrate, patriotism is a sense of pride, but these men also took pride in their family’s involvement in past United States conflicts. In the past, machismo has been defined by the Anglo-Saxon world as a dangerous male chauvinism, or male

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<sup>59</sup> Coronado, “*I’m Not Gonna Die*”, 40, 55.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

dominance.<sup>64</sup> However, families of Mexican descent focus on teaching their male children the importance of protecting and providing for their families. Because Mexican Americans felt distanced from mainstream Anglo America in the 1960s, young males of Mexican descent felt they could prove their worthiness to be equal by volunteering to protect their country. In the same way, the Chicano Movement fought to secure equality and a unique place for the Mexican American community within American society. As Coronado argues, “Military service opened the door for many Mexican Americans as their sacrifice “legitimized” their aspirations for a first-class citizenship that historically had been denied.”<sup>65</sup> This can be seen in the interviews and stories of the veterans mentioned throughout this chapter as they describe their motivations for serving their country during the Vietnam War.

For Mexican American young men who lacked a stable career prior to their enlistments, the military’s advertisements spoke directly to machismo tendencies of providing for family when they offered young men signing bonuses and a stable income. Those who had jobs as migrant workers often worked season to season, hoping they would be able to provide for their families each year while the military answered all doubts of stability for at least the next couple of years. For others, financial means were less important and their desire for personal adventure overcame all other concerns. For example, Everett Álvarez Jr. worked and competed to become a fighter pilot to experience adventure across the world.<sup>66</sup> However, his experience is rare among the

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<sup>64</sup> Coronado, *“I’m Not Gonna Die”*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 53.



veterans of Mexican descent in these case studies. Instead, those who joined for other reasons often found themselves in the infantry on the frontlines of battles in Vietnam.

Based on my research, it appears that these men intended to prove their machismo through becoming military heroes in the Vietnam War and bringing honor to their families without realizing the consequences of war on themselves and their families. They expected to come home to a hero's welcome just as the World War II veterans and members of their families had. Instead, they came home to an Anglo and Protestant society who misunderstood their need to be recognized and their need to support their families. Some never received medals they thought they deserved while others never received future job security they expected from service in the military. According to the veterans in these case studies, one of the basic tenants of machismo is the ability for the man to provide for his family, but multiple veterans report they struggled to do so after exiting the military.<sup>67</sup> In some of these cases discussed in the next two chapters, their war experiences caused instability rather than the stability they expected. While some veterans mention hostility towards the government and military, others only mention negative attitudes towards American society and their communities. Not only did society effectively turn their backs on these veterans, but the military and government they fought under did as well.

### **The Chicano Movement and Mexican American Identity**

As Ignacio Garcia argues, an “emphasis on “dignity, self-worth, pride, uniqueness, feeling of cultural rebirth, and equal economic opportunity” became

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<sup>67</sup> Ricardo Leon Martinez, interview with Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez.

attractive to Mexican Americans across class, regional, and generational lines.”<sup>68</sup> This struggle for a unique self-identification within American society set them apart from other movements and groups during the 1960s and 1970s. This sentiment of a search for pride, self-worth and dignity can be seen throughout these case studies both when these veterans discuss their motivations for serving and when they mention the negatives and positives of their homecomings. While some veterans were able to come home with a sense of pride and worthiness as an American citizen, others remained disappointed for years because they viewed American society as anti-veteran. Each of these veterans understand what it means to be a Mexican American man during this era in his own unique way.

Not only did the Chicano Movement address the need to define the unique place in American society for the Mexican American, but numerous members also spoke on the controversy of the draft during Vietnam. One argument that began in the Chicano Movement was that the draft targeted the poor. Because Mexican Americans lived primarily in barrios and rural areas with little access to higher education, the draft targeted them which led to higher casualty percentages for Mexican American communities.<sup>69</sup> In Coronado’s *I’m Not Gonna Die in This Damn Place*, he also argues that specific examples of Latino communities support this argument, but there are no statistics to prove that they were targeted as a group across the entire nation. For example, Hidalgo County on the U.S.-Mexico border “had a death rate almost double the national rate in 1968...figures showed that one American soldier had died per 9,170

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<sup>68</sup> Garcia, *Chicanismo*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> *On Two Fronts: Latinos and Vietnam*, PBS, 2015.<http://www.pbs.org/veterans/stories-of-service/stream-tv/a-to-z/two-fronts-latinos-vietnam/>.

people living in the United States; however, the deaths among soldiers from Hidalgo County equaled one per 4,739 Americans.”<sup>70</sup> This controversy spread quickly and led to Latina women in military families, such as Delia Alvarez and her mother, turning to the Chicano Movement and the anti-war movement in an effort to protect their male family members from the draft and protest the deaths of fallen Mexican American soldiers.<sup>71</sup>

Based on my research, those veterans, such as Frank Gutierrez, joined the military or were voluntarily drafted in an effort to prove their worthiness as American citizens to a seemingly hostile society and felt they deserved equal treatment for their service. Some were determined to prove their worth as a Mexican American man to American society while others, such as Albert Alonso Rivera, were determined to prove their worth as a Mexican American man to themselves and their families. As can be seen in the third chapter, these veterans’ negative or positive homecoming experiences correlate to their struggle with self-identification, self-worth and pride. As can be seen in Ernesto Torres’s experience in the third chapter, at least one veteran felt he had to hide his pride in his service because American society felt hostile towards veterans when he returned.

### **Machismo as Understood by the Veterans**

Unlike every other veteran in this group, Frank Gutierrez mentions machismo specifically when discussing his decision to volunteer for service in the military with his group of friends. Like many others, he was raised with the understanding that Latino culture had certain expectations for men. For example, he illustrates in detail what other veterans allude to when he says, “I know you understand that within the Latino culture

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<sup>70</sup> Coronado, “*I’m Not Gonna Die*”, 14-15.

<sup>71</sup> *On Two Fronts: Latinos and Vietnam*.

there's a certain machismo, you have to be a part of this military service and it's part of being a Latino, a Mexican American, you have this macho attitude about weapons, about being in a war situation. It was already part of my attitude to be like that. So, it wasn't difficult at all to get in there and do what I was supposed to do."<sup>72</sup> From childhood, Gutierrez was conditioned to believe it was his duty to serve in the military during wartime. Also, he mentions the importance of his uncle who served in the Army and served as a role model to him. Without his uncle, Gutierrez admits that joining the military with his friends would never have occurred to him.<sup>73</sup> Since childhood, he had desired to be a soldier like his uncle who brought honor to the family by serving his country.

However, Gutierrez also mentions that he was naïve about the conditions and atrocities of war when he so eagerly volunteered. He believes he would have been much less eager if he had known the long-term consequences of his decision even though he would have been drafted eventually. Also, he mentions the lack of programs to help seasoned veterans overcome the long-term stresses of war before returning to the United States. The military neglected to perform the necessary counseling to help the soldiers with moral injury and the effects of PTS. At this time, neither of these concepts were on the radar of military leaders or psychologists. Instead, they continued to ignore the lasting impacts of war and what they termed at the time as 'shell shock'. In contrast to many of his friends and the veterans in this study, Gutierrez volunteered for the Army rather than the Marines because his uncle had joined the Army. A number of veterans of Mexican

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Frank Gutierrez. Vietnam Center and Archive. OH0078 24 January 2001 Cold Storage. Frank Gutierrez Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 1. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0078/OH0078.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

descent within these case studies note that the Marines were seen as the most elite military group to join which further helped to prove their machismo to society.

Because of his military service, Gutierrez believes he should have equal status with the rest of the white United States society. He argues that the Vietnam War and other conflicts have given the Latino community the opportunity to prove that they are equals and they have proven themselves worthy through their participation in high numbers.<sup>74</sup> Not only did men of Mexican descent participate heavily, they also died for their country and their equality in mass amounts.<sup>75</sup> For Gutierrez, fulfilling his ideas of machismo from his childhood meant volunteering to perform his duties to protect his country just as his uncle did, who was a war hero in his nephew's eyes. Also, performing his duties also meant continuing the honor and pride brought to his family that his uncle began with his service.

Moreover, multiple veterans mention the importance of their fathers and other male family members to their experiences in the military during Vietnam. For example, Edward Daniel Morin's father was a World War II veteran and activist who became his role model from a young age. Morin desired to follow in his father's footsteps and work to change the world for the better. However, he never enlisted in the military and was oblivious to the war occurring in Southeast Asia until he was drafted in 1964 before the Gulf of Tonkin incident that gave President Johnson the leverage he needed to draft

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Frank Gutierrez, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power*, 147; Mariscal, *Aztlán and Vietnam*, 3; Coronado, "I'm Not Gonna Die", 14-15. These authors discuss the controversy that existed during and after the war that Mexican Americans were killed in higher percentages to the total United State population than other groups. However, there are no statistics available due to Mexican Americans being identified as Caucasian on their Department of Defense paperwork.

thousands more soldiers. Morin's father was an activist who supported veterans' affairs and had worked to bring local posts of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars to the Los Angeles area.<sup>76</sup> Not only had Raul Morin fought in World War II and survived, he also successfully advocated for the veterans living in Los Angeles after the war. Unlike his father's experience, Morin felt betrayed by American society and the anti-war protestors when he returned home. Because they neglected to take part in the war and protested it instead, he describes them as cowards in relation to those, like him, who willingly fought for their country regardless of their political views. Morin was part of one of the first units sent to Vietnam and was one of the first soldiers to return home where he experienced no support from the country he fought to protect. While in Vietnam, he was severely injured in a truck explosion and spent thirteen months in hospitals in Southeast Asia and the United States recovering.<sup>77</sup> As a result, Morin believes his symptoms of PTS are worsened by the lack of appreciation for his sacrifice and the way he was treated when he returned home. For this veteran, his father had exemplified the ultimate goal of machismo while the war and its consequences had confused his understanding of his job as a man to sacrifice to protect his country and his family.

While some veterans joined the anti-war movement when they returned from the war, others directly opposed it during and after the war. During the war, soldiers were aware of the movement against the war in the United States and their specific experiences led them to form the same sentiments with the movement or oppose them because they

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<sup>76</sup> Edward Daniel Morin, interview with Henry Mendoza, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, June 9, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/edward-daniel-morin>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

never served. For example, Jay, a former Marine Sergeant, felt those participating in the anti-war movement were cowards and “they would find any way out” of serving their country and fighting for their rights.<sup>78</sup> Based on my research, it appears that this was a common misconception that many soldiers held. However, as the war progressed in the early 1970s, a few veterans who had served in Vietnam began to join the anti-war movement to oppose the tragedy that the war was creating for both sides. Jay is another veteran who joined the military because he “thought that was the right thing to do.”<sup>79</sup> He sees everyone who backed away from their duties as cowards and people who refused to fight for their rights as American citizens. Jay believed those who willingly fought truly showed their pride in their country.<sup>80</sup>

For some, like Jay, the anti-war movement and those who participated were a threat to their machismo. Protestors took their ultimate masculine sacrifice of fighting for their country and destroyed it in the public view of the entire world. When the soldiers returned home and were neglected by society, veterans automatically blamed the anti-war movement that had poisoned Americans against them. For example, Edward Morin states that upon his return he, ““had more problems in adjusting to a society that was hostile to returning veterans.””<sup>81</sup> Because of this, Morin neglected to discuss his experiences and ““always felt that returning veterans were not accorded the respect that we deserved.””<sup>82</sup> Another misconception is that the anti-war movement opposed soldiers and the war collectively. This was not always the case because some veterans had joined the cause to

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<sup>78</sup> Ybarra, *Vietnam Veterans*, 182.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 179.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

<sup>81</sup> Edward Daniel Morin, interview with Henry Mendoza.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

oppose the war and support the soldier who was involuntarily caught in the chaos. Other non-veteran members supported the soldier while protesting the government and war in Vietnam. For these reasons, many members of the anti-war movement understood the soldiers as involuntary pawns in the government's deadly game of foreign policy.

Another example of a veteran who mentions their father as someone who exemplified machismo was Alonso Robert Rivera. Growing up as a migrant worker, Rivera's father expected his son to work hard to provide for his family. When Rivera's parents left him at the train station, his father said, "I'm going to see if you're a real man now."<sup>83</sup> Therefore, he felt he was required to meet expectations of masculinity laid out in his childhood and going to war was the best scenario for accomplishing this. Rivera's role models from childhood included his older cousins who had fought in the Korean War and pen pals from high school who were POWs in Korea. These experiences led him to volunteer for the Marines in 1961 and be active in the military until 1981. He describes himself as a proud American and would have fought in Vietnam again if he had to for his country.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, his experiences in Vietnam led to his struggles with PTS and caused a strain on both of his marriages. Rivera's attempts at portraying his father's definition of machismo can be seen in his patriotism and pride in country as well as his desire to protect and provide for his family by joining the Marines immediately after getting married. As a result of the war and his PTS, his ability to provide and protect his family came into question because he was unable to communicate his struggles and keep his family together.

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<sup>83</sup> Alonzo Robert Rivera, interview with Olivia Puentes-Reynolds.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



For Gonzalo Baltazar, his family legacy of military service directly led to his service in the Vietnam War. Although he notes that he realized a war was occurring when he volunteered in 1968, he focused on his duty to protect and provide honor for his family name.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Baltazar joined out of a sense of familial duty with no concern for the controversial war he would have to participate in. By 1968, seven of his siblings (all of his older brothers) had served in some capacity in the United States military. Baltazar was the youngest of fourteen children and felt the need to carry on his family's legacy of service. Because his oldest brother was twenty years older than him, his brothers had served in Germany, Japan and Korea while Baltazar was the only member to serve in Vietnam or in a combat position.<sup>86</sup> This led to his miscalculations about what serving in the military looked like and never realized he would have long-term damage from the traumatic experiences of combat. Even though Baltazar's father had taught them to provide for and protect their family, he begged his youngest son not to volunteer because he understood the difference his other son's experiences and the controversies surrounding the Vietnam War. Overall, Baltazar had behavioral concerns in high school and had desired to join the military as a form of discipline to become a more responsible man who would bring honor to his family rather than shame.<sup>87</sup>

Much like Baltazar, Ralph Colin had five siblings who had served in the military prior to him being drafted in 1968. Although Colin neglected to volunteer, he knew he would be drafted at some point and planned to serve his country willingly to continue the

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar. Vietnam Center and Archive. OH0152 23 March 2001 Cold Storage. Gonzalo Baltazar Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 2-3. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0152/OH0152.pdf&from=website>.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

legacy of his family's military service. In considering his options to willingly fight or become a conscientious objector, he decided he could only honor his family name by fighting.<sup>88</sup> During a combat mission in Vietnam, Colin's communication line with his superiors had been compromised so he thought of a way to improvise to protect the men in his squad. He took control of the radio and called in artillery in Spanish to keep the Vietnamese from understanding. Colin had spoken with a Latino man at that base before and knew to ask for him to come translate.<sup>89</sup> This kept the men in his squad from being overrun by the North Vietnamese troops and was the moment he remembers most vividly. Colin's superiors congratulated him on his improvisation and treated him like a hero when he returned to base. Unlike most of the other veterans mentioned here, Colin had a much more positive homecoming experience. For example, he was never bothered by anti-war protestors or anyone in public because of his service. However, he never mentions anyone thanking him for his service or acknowledging his sacrifice in public either. Instead, he received a warm welcome from his family and immediate community in Orange, CA.<sup>90</sup> Colin's family was proud of him, so he felt that he successfully honored his family's name by becoming a war hero.

Because the majority of soldiers of Mexican descent were raised in a Catholic atmosphere, they learned the importance of machismo within a patriarchal context. The man was to be the head of the household. As such, men were taught to provide for and protect their families. One manner in which they could accomplish both of these was to volunteer for the military which would provide an income for their family and allow the

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<sup>88</sup> Ralph Colin, interview with Mark Madden, United Mexican-American Veterans Association, November 7, 2013. <http://www.umava.org/oralhistoriesvideos.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

man to fight to protect their families' way of life in the United States. The men mentioned in this study discuss family members who exhibited machismo and patriotism as war heroes in World War II and Korea. Others mention a family history of patriotism during times of war which sets the expectation for every male member of the family to follow the previous example. Although nearly every veteran in this group of case studies neglects to mention machismo and masculinity specifically, their experiences allude to their importance in these men's lives. When these men returned from Vietnam, they expected a hero's welcome, like the veterans of World War II received, to publicly legitimize their masculinity. This lack of legitimization resulted in confusion for the soldier who felt his sacrifice had proved his machismo and his worth as a citizen of the United States who deserved equal treatment with those of Anglo ancestry.

For example, Hector Sanchez experienced multiple contradictions against what he had been taught in childhood while in Vietnam and when he returned. Although Sanchez was drafted, he believed it was a man's duty to serve his country, especially a successful country like the United States.<sup>91</sup> Also, he believed in required service for all male citizens. However, Sanchez witnessed multiple situations where his fellow infantrymen found ways to remove themselves from danger and force others to fight in their places. For example, one of his fellow soldiers ran into the jungle and deserted in the midst of a heated battle and was never found.<sup>92</sup> These experiences confused his understanding of masculinity and the duty of a man to sacrifice for his family and country. It seemed numerous American soldiers were not willing or prepared to give the ultimate sacrifice

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<sup>91</sup> Hector Sanchez, interview with Liliana Rodriguez, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, August 1, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/hector-sanchez>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

and fled the situation instead. Also, Sanchez is another example of the soldier who felt disappointed by their experience when returning home. He expected his masculine sacrifices for his country to be recognized by society, but the negative stigma of the war removed that possibility. Just like the other veterans expressed, Sanchez expected a hero's welcome as the World War II and Korean War veterans did. When society neglected to recognize his sacrifice, he began to question the worthiness of his actions.<sup>93</sup>

For Sanchez, he sacrificed mentally, rather than physically. Nearly four decades after returning home, he found helpful resources through the VA and has utilized those ever since. Unlike some other veterans mentioned here, Sanchez has had nothing but pleasant experiences with the military, VA and the government since his return.<sup>94</sup> While some veterans neglected to receive their benefits or medals they felt they had earned, Sanchez felt the government took great care of him and provided plentiful benefits for the provision of his family.

Not only were veterans traumatized by their experiences in Vietnam, but their experiences when they returned home could have been equally as damaging. These veterans were often rejected by their own society and the country they had sacrificed to protect. For example, Ben Saenz survived the war but describes himself as an emotional casualty from seeing so many of his fellow soldiers die around him. At one point in his tour, he suggested that their captain move the men to a safer area for the night. However, the captain neglected to listen to Saenz and all but ten men from their company were killed that night. Saenz was forced to listen to their screams as NVA rockets rained down

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<sup>93</sup> Hector Sanchez, interview with Lilianna Rodriguez.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

all around them in the dark killing some of his best friends.<sup>95</sup> Not only did he witness the death of his best friends, he was forced to endure the rest of the mission with his friends' blood all over his own body.

Even though these experiences permanently damaged Saenz emotionally, his return home escalated these issues further. Just like many other veterans who had sacrificed their mental and physical health for their country, he believed he deserved a hero's welcome and considered himself a war hero. In his opinion, Saenz had successfully fulfilled his masculine duty to provide and protect. Unfortunately, he remembers being greeted by anti-war protestors at the airport rather than a group of people welcoming him. In describing his reaction to his homecoming, Saenz states, "I couldn't understand that...I considered myself a hero. I mean, how dare they?"<sup>96</sup> When combined, his wartime experiences and his return home resulted in extreme symptoms of PTS which pushed his parents, siblings and wife away from him. Not only did Saenz feel betrayed by society, he felt neglected by his own family members who lacked the understanding to deal with someone exhibiting symptoms of PTS. When he returned home, Saenz "lashed out against his family...made his younger brothers pull guard duty at night" and "threatened to cut their throats if they fell asleep."<sup>97</sup> His detailed journey with PTS will be further explored in the third chapter.

On the other hand, Eliseo Perez, who was discussed in the previous chapter for his religious experiences, had a unique motivation for joining the military. Prior to and

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<sup>95</sup> Ben Saenz, interview with Gilbert Song, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, April 9, 2011. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/ben-saenz>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

during the war, Perez was not a United States citizen. After the war, he was able to complete the process when he returned and could be sworn in as a citizen in person. Therefore, his motivation for joining the Air Force in 1965 was to prove to the United States and American society that he deserved to become a citizen and be treated equally because he had completed his duty.<sup>98</sup> Even though he had started the naturalization process prior to being shipped to Vietnam, they summoned him to be sworn in while he was in Vietnam and had to start the process over when he returned. Also, Perez mentions a cousin who joined the Navy and was dishonorably discharged for behavioral issues which had put a stain on the family name. For this reason, he felt he needed to redeem the Perez name even though his father was concerned he would have an experience similar to his cousin's. To partially quell these fears, Perez joined the Air Force instead of the Navy. Once Perez arrived in Vietnam, he witnessed the rampant drug and alcohol use and began to take part when not on duty. He describes his group of friends and their ability to hold their liquor as "macho".<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately, this life of drug and alcohol abuse continued into his life after the war and contributed to his problems with family and other relationships. For Perez, machismo meant performing his patriotic duty to his country, honoring his family name and being able to drink as much as possible to drown the horrific memories of the war.

When Perez returned from Vietnam, he discovered that another one of his male cousins had run to Mexico to avoid the draft when he was called. When his number was drawn, he took his girlfriend and fled to Mexico and remained there until President Ford

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Eliseo Perez, 9-10.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

pardoned him nearly a decade later. This caused Perez to question this cousin's machismo as well as the one who had been dishonorably discharged. He viewed these cousins as cowards and embarrassments to the family name. Also, Perez refuses to communicate with the cousin who fled or his family because they will never understand the sacrifice he gave while his cousin hid from his duties.<sup>100</sup> Based on my research, it appears that these experiences worked to reinforce Perez's own masculinity because he had been the only cousin to successfully complete his duties to the United States and his family.

Another veteran who mentions the negative view of Vietnam veterans which affected his ability to communicate his experiences and outwardly show his pride in serving his country is Ernesto Torres. When Torres willingly responded to his draft notice in 1970, he felt proud to serve his country and expected to prove his worth to his family by serving.<sup>101</sup> After graduating high school, Torres "had trouble finding steady work" because "the draft affected his job search."<sup>102</sup> During the Vietnam War, employers avoided hiring those with lower draft numbers to decrease their turnover. Therefore, Torres "opted to enlist in the Army to gain benefits he would otherwise not have received as a draftee."<sup>103</sup> Instead of just showing up when his number was called, he willingly enlisted in the Army because an officer had told him he would have more opportunities to be promoted that way.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Eliseo Perez, 24.

<sup>101</sup> Ernesto Torres, interview with Ricardo LaFore, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, August 9, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/ernesto-torres>.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

When Torres returned from completing his service in 1972, he felt embarrassed about his status as a Vietnam veteran because American society seemed turned against them as a group. Therefore, he kept his experiences inside for decades until he felt society had changed their attitudes towards veterans and had begun to see them and their service in a more positive light.<sup>105</sup> Because Torres never understood the politics of the war, he never formed an opinion on the validity of the war itself. Instead, he focused on performing his duties and felt he did this successfully.<sup>106</sup> Also, Torres mentions that he felt pride for serving his country when he enlisted in the Army, during his service and when he returned. However, he felt he had to hide the pride he felt in his service until the controversy surrounding the war had ended and American society felt more accepting of their service.<sup>107</sup>

In Coronado's work "*I'm Not Gonna Die in This Damn Place*", Everett Alvarez discusses the importance of manliness and machismo to the POW experience. Throughout his nine years in captivity, North Vietnamese guards gave Alvarez the choice to participate in anti-war propaganda in exchange for his release numerous times. However, he believed taking the deal for early release would have compromised his machismo. By resisting the torture and propaganda ploys through nine years, "his manliness or *machismo* was preserved through his resistance."<sup>108</sup> This would have been the easiest way out while leaving his friends behind to continue their suffering. Also, Alvarez admits that taking the easy way out would have left him unable to look his own

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<sup>105</sup> Ernesto Torres, interview with Ricardo LaFore.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Coronado, "*I'm Not Gonna Die*", 122.



father in the eye when he returned.<sup>109</sup> The POWs who took the deal and made propaganda for the North Vietnamese to use against the American war effort were released early and perceived as cowards by the remaining POWs. When all the POWs had been released, the ones who had stayed for the duration of the war refused to speak to those who had given in and neglected to acknowledge their former POW status.

Another POW and self-identified Chicano, Juan Jacquez, discusses his understanding of masculinity and patriotism as it related to his service in Vietnam. For example, he was drafted, “accepted his induction and served proudly despite not knowing much about the conflict in Vietnam.”<sup>110</sup> For Jacquez, serving was part of his masculine duty to his country and running to Canada or Mexico when he was drafted would have compromised his machismo. For example, he says, “there was quite a few who took off to Canada and places like that just to stay out of it, but after it was all over they come back. I think that is chicken-shit. Patriotic? I was proud of it and I am still proud of it.”<sup>111</sup> When captured, he viewed those who gave into North Vietnamese propaganda and created a Peace Committee as cowards because they neglected to conform to his definition of manliness. In contrast to other veterans of Mexican descent, the POW defined his masculinity, or machismo, based on his ability to resist his North Vietnamese captors, the torture and the propaganda executed against them. According to Coronado, he “observed his manly obligation to serve after being called upon by his country and remains proud of having fulfilled his duty.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Coronado, *“I’m Not Gonna Die”*, 122.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

## **Roy Benavidez: The Audie Murphy of Vietnam**

The story of Roy Benavidez's heroism in the Vietnam War provides a unique and awe-inspiring example of his understanding of machismo in a wartime context. From an early age, Benavidez read in the local Texas newspaper about Audie Murphy's heroic acts in World War II and wanted to become a hero like him one day. After some experience in Korea and training in the Airborne, his search for heroism led him to compete to become a member of the Army Special Forces during Vietnam. Benavidez passed the challenge and became a member of the Special Forces stationed in Vietnam for his second tour. He had injured his back in previous tours but was able to push through his injuries to serve as a Green Beret.<sup>113</sup>

Although the American public had been told that no operations were being conducted in Cambodia, Special Forces men from his base had been inserted over the border near a large force of NVA troops. When Benavidez heard the men were in trouble, he acted on instinct and boarded a helicopter to help them against his orders. He remembers that he jumped on that helicopter because of his grandfather's words: "When someone needs help, you help them."<sup>114</sup> Trained as a medic, Benavidez believed it part of his duty to at least provide medical support and protection until his comrades could be extracted from the battlefield. Unfortunately, no one, including Benavidez, at the base had realized how horrific and desperate the situation had become by the time of his arrival.

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<sup>113</sup> Benavidez and Craig, *Medal of Honor*, 116.

<sup>114</sup> Blehm, *Legend*, 192.

In his hurry to help his fellow soldiers, Benavidez left his survival gear and weapons behind on base and had no means of defending himself until he could gather weapons from the dead on the ground.<sup>115</sup> Witnesses to Benavidez's jump from the helicopter could never make sense of someone who was willing jumping into the middle of the chaos rather than escaping. As he started to run towards the men across the field, the same men remember him falling to enemy fire twice and immediately getting back up and running again.<sup>116</sup> At this point, Benavidez had been shot at least twice but continued to help the men on the ground move towards an area where they could be extracted. Even though this was his day off and he was not of the rank to take charge, he began to shout orders over the radio and demanded extraction from the area while ordering the two groups of men to converge on one area. At one point in the chaos, Benavidez realized his best friend, Leroy Wright, had been killed and began to cry for his loss while continuing to help the other men who remained alive.<sup>117</sup> As another helicopter crashed in an attempt to load the wounded, Benavidez received another bullet wound in the back and continued to help the wounded move away from the wreckage before it exploded. One witness, O'Conner, "felt the fight that had been lost in him coming back. It was Roy's "courage, actions, words, and coolness" that did it."<sup>118</sup> His presence and actions helped inspire the remaining men to fight for their lives until help finally came.

When the extraction helicopter finally arrived successfully without being shot down, Benavidez began to help load the wounded on the helicopter. Before he reached the helicopter, he was shot once more in the leg and was attacked by an NVA soldier who

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<sup>115</sup> Blehm, *Legend*, 192.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 195.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

clubbed him in the head and then stabbed him. As Benavidez continued to run towards the helicopter and load the wounded, the helicopter pilot, Darling, saw the extents of his wounds and remembered thinking that this man would never make it back to base alive because his intestines were hanging outside his body.<sup>119</sup> Contrary to Darling's observations, Benavidez lived through this horrific event and had sustained more than thirty wounds. During his numerous surgeries that required months in the hospital, he was awarded four Purple Hearts and a Distinguished Service Cross by General Westmoreland.<sup>120</sup> Not only had Benavidez successfully saved the lives of eight of his fellow Special Forces men, he also fulfilled his dream to become the next Audie Murphy. Although still mourning the loss of those he could never save, such as his friend Leroy Wright whose body he was forced to leave on the battlefield, he still felt pride in his accomplishments, the honor he had brought to the Benavidez name and the successful performance of his duties as a Special Forces soldier. In his mind, he had successfully achieved the goals of his childhood to become a military hero by defending his country and bringing honor to his family's name just as his uncle and grandfather had taught him.

Unfortunately, his pride was curtailed by those who neglected to treat him with respect after being discharged from the hospital in May of 1969. As Benavidez remembers, the only people who thanked him for his acts of heroism were the family members of those he had attempted, but neglected, to save. For example, he was thanked by the McKibben family whom Benavidez visited to tell them the story of their son's bravery in combat.<sup>121</sup> Even though his physical limitations caused him great pain on a

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<sup>119</sup> Blehm, *Legend*, 217.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

daily basis, he refused to retire from the Army and became a walking legend in Special Forces history. As his story circulated, some began to question why Benavidez had never received the Medal of Honor rather than the Distinguished Service Cross. When speculations were formally submitted, the Army Decorations Board declared insufficient evidence surrounding the event meant that they could not corroborate the story.<sup>122</sup> After twenty years of service, Benavidez was forced to retire in 1976 without the Medal of Honor most believed he deserved. After years of speculation, one group believed the politics behind their presence in Cambodia caused the military to deny his award while others believed his Mexican heritage caused the delay.

Finally, after the reemergence of O'Conner as a witness to Benavidez's actions and the passing of an Act of Congress, his Distinguished Service Cross was upgraded to the Medal of Honor by the Decorations Board. In 1981, President Reagan formally presented him with the medal in a ceremony. Since 1969, Benavidez had been denied the recognition he deserved from the military, the government and society. In 1981, the government and military came together to publicly recognize and thank him for his actions. Both Grandfather Salvador and Uncle Nicholas had passed away before 1981 and did not see Benavidez bring pride and honor to the family's name. Just as he was taught as a child, one of the basic tenants of machismo for men of Mexican descent was to bring honor to the family and protect them. Because Benavidez's male ancestors had done so by fighting in World War II and the War of Mexican Independence, he successfully continued the Benavidez legend and fulfilled his childhood goals.

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<sup>122</sup> Blehm, *Legend*, 234.

Even though Benavidez experienced contradictions in the way he was treated by society when he returned, he still felt gratified by the final ceremony to thank him for his actions and, in essence, publicly prove his machismo. His experience seems a success story compared with those who continue to struggle with the lack of recognition for their sacrifices. Although other veterans either neglect to tell stories of this magnitude or never witnessed such an event, they have more subtle experiences that caused confusion between their understandings of machismo and the Vietnam War's effects.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, these Mexican American veterans define masculinity and machismo differently based on their upbringing and their experiences in Vietnam. They also have differing and unique motivations for volunteering for the military or willingly participating when drafted. As can be seen from this group of veterans, a number of soldiers of Mexican descent volunteered for the military because of their understanding of machismo. A significant number of the veterans mentioned in this chapter, like Benavidez, had admired a war hero as a role model their entire lives and desired to become a role model for the next generation of soldiers. In the same way, others desired to continue their family's legacy of military service because their fathers, uncles, brothers and cousins had joined the military in prior decades.

Furthermore, a number of the Mexican American veterans in this group of case studies felt a masculine duty to protect and provide for their families by joining the military which provided a stable income for their families. Veterans who had worked as seasonal migrant workers desired to provide for their families in a more stable manner while gaining skills to more easily obtain a permanent job on their return from the war.

However, most veterans felt neglected by the military and the government because some promised benefits were never received, or they could not find permanent jobs after exiting the military. On their return from the war, some realized they had been trained to kill the enemy and fire a weapon. The job and life skills they had hoped to gain through joining the military had never been acquired. For these reasons, they began to question their own masculinity when they could not find a stable job after the war and could not provide for their families. In addition, those who suffered severely from PTSD and moral injury symptoms had difficulty finding a permanent job that would understand their situation and work with them. Because PTSD and moral injury were not diagnosed and fully understood for decades after the war, veterans continued to struggle with no help from the medical and military communities. For some, their families were able to support them successfully and attempt to understand their behavior while others were alienated from their families. For those who had joined to perform their masculine duties of providing for and protecting their families, they felt helpless when their relationships with parents, wives and children crumbled soon after the war.

Although these men felt they had paid the ultimate sacrifice in risking their lives and being mentally and physically damaged, American society's actions led them to question the worthiness of their experiences. If society neglected to recognize their status as heroes, were they really heroes? In some extreme cases, veterans were treated as criminals even though they only performed their duties as commanded. The contradictions between their own understandings of their masculine sacrifices and what society told them led to an increased intensity of PTSD. If risking their lives to protect their country and their families was not enough to bring recognition from American society for

their masculine or macho behavior, then what would be enough? If I successfully fought in and survived a horrendous war, why can I not provide for my family and communicate successfully with them? These questions that arose for the veteran of Mexican descent caused further mental anguish beyond just the memories of their experiences in Vietnam. In a domino effect, this led to the crumbling of relationships and entire family units as communication and understanding broke down. However, this breakdown of relationships did not occur in every situation. As a rare example of success, Roy Benavidez, a Medal of Honor recipient, was able to successfully hold his family unit together until his death in 1998.



## CHAPTER 3

### PTS, MORAL INJURY AND THE EFFECTS

#### Understanding PTS and Moral Injury

The basic definition of PTS as given by psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who studied Vietnam combat veterans, is as follows: “the persistence of past traumatic experience in the present physiology, psychology and social relatedness of the survivor.”<sup>123</sup> In addition, he also argues “that fighting for one’s country can render one unfit to be its citizen.”<sup>124</sup> As described in the second chapter, veterans of Mexican descent often experienced the inability to function in relationships and society after returning home from the war. PTS is a psychological issue that occurs when someone experiences a traumatic event as someone acted towards or against them. For example, a veteran could experience symptoms of PTS after being trapped in a foxhole for hours under a constant rocket barrage from the enemy or under constant fear that a sniper can seek him out no matter his location. However, post-war experiences among veterans of differing groups various based on numerous factors: job title, branch, time and place. For example, combat soldiers had a wartime experience in stark contrast to the experiences of those who never left American bases. In the same manner, those who participated in search and destroy missions fought against an enemy that looked different from NVA soldiers that other combat veterans encountered during traditional battles. Veteran homecoming experiences could vary based on time, place and circumstances. For example, one group of veterans experienced extended hospital stays abroad or in the United States before returning home

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<sup>123</sup> Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, xx.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, xx.

permanently. Others were home with their families quickly, but landed in busy airports with the potential presence of anti-war protestors.

Within the last decade, the military has worked to drop the ‘D’ in PTSD when discussing the traumatic experiences of veterans. The purpose is to “reduce the stigma associated with mental-health ills, and one way to do that is to not term the problem a *disorder*.”<sup>125</sup> However, not every veteran from every American conflict agrees with this change in terminology. One group of American veterans believes this is an attempt at minimizing their traumatic experiences while the opposing group appreciates the attempt to reduce the stigma of having a mental health disorder.<sup>126</sup> Recently, psychiatrists have realized that ‘disorder’ seems to describe something that was pre-existing while PTS describes “a predictable reaction to combat stress.”<sup>127</sup> Although all of the veterans who mention PTS refer to it as ‘PTSD’ as a result of the year the interview took place, I utilize ‘PTS’ in an effort to further reduce the stigma of mental illness as well.

Some symptoms of PTS include reexperiencing the traumatic event, avoiding stimuli that is associated with the event, and symptoms of increased arousal (i.e. insomnia, hypervigilance, startle response, irritability, concentration problems).<sup>128</sup> If an incredible support system does not exist for the veteran, this causes him to shrink away from relationships where healthy communication is lacking and causes families to fall apart. As one can see in the following oral histories, veterans of Mexican descent often

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<sup>125</sup> Mark Thompson, “The Disappearing “Disorder”: Why PTSD is becoming PTS”, *Time Magazine*, June 5, 2011. <http://nation.time.com/2011/06/05/the-disappearing-disorder-why-ptsd-is-becoming-pts/>.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 166-167.

dealt with varying symptoms of PTS and moral injury which led to the dissolution of families and other relationships. The common misconception is that moral injury is part of PTS or vice versa. Instead, moral injury and PTS are defined as two separate issues that combat veterans can deal with on a daily basis.

As was shown in the first chapter, these veterans also suffered from the effects of moral injury. As defined by Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, “Moral injury results when soldiers violate their core moral beliefs, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings.”<sup>129</sup> This does not only occur in veterans who were drafted, but also in those who volunteered to fight for their country. Actual war conditions caused this because military leadership encouraged the blurring of the line between enemy combatants and civilians during the Vietnam War. As Shay mentions, “The Vietnamese enemy defeated the soldier’s perception by concealment and his ability to understand what he saw by camouflage.”<sup>130</sup> The soldier’s initial perception was that women and children were noncombatants until their perception was undermined by Viet Cong members hiding amongst them. Soldiers were often ordered to kill Vietnamese who looked like civilians but were accused of being Viet Cong or had to defend themselves against armed women and children. Because women and children were historically considered non-combatants, American soldiers were forced to contradict their understanding of moral law during war in order to survive and protect their men from the enemy.

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<sup>129</sup> Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, xv.

<sup>130</sup> Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 170.

Based on my research, for veterans of Mexican descent, their Catholic upbringing enforced a patriarchal understanding of the family unit that reinforced their masculine duties to provide for their families as well as protect them. This emphasis on patriarchy led to their confusion when ordered to kill women and children or when their lives depended on them killing the woman or child who was holding a weapon. As some veterans testify, they compared their migrant worker families to the Vietnamese families working in the fields. Therefore, they experienced further confusion and moral injury from having to kill family members who seemed similar to their own. For example, as discussed in the first chapter, Eduardo Garza mentions he identified with the poor Vietnamese farmers because they could have easily been his family members.<sup>131</sup> In researching his own group of Vietnam veterans, Shay discovered an “apparently self-evident truth—that men cannot kill an enemy understood to be honorable and like oneself.”<sup>132</sup> Also, their Catholic upbringing enforced the idea that killing is wrong regardless of the situation. As discussed in the first chapter, both clergy and laity had to define the Vietnam War as a just war to bypass that commandment. When soldiers began to question the war’s just causes, contradictions began to emerge between their moral compasses and their actions against those the military defined as the ‘enemy’. Rather than reacting to the memories of actions performed against them or towards them, the veterans who experience moral injury are reacting to actions they performed against others that contradicted their personal moral values. For this reason, moral injury cannot be confused with PTS.

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<sup>131</sup> Eduardo C. Garza, interview with Emily Macrander.

<sup>132</sup> Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 103.

In *Soul Repair*, Brock and Lettini offer suggestions for addressing the effects of moral injury and PTS prior to the soldier returning home. As a result of their first round of training that taught them how to kill effectively, the soldiers then experience a contradiction within their moral identities. To address the results of their training, Brock and Lettini suggest the military should also provide training or a boot camp that attempts to prepare the soldier to enter society again. These authors also mention that even the most well-intentioned civilian neglects to welcome home the veterans properly because they need to confess their actions after a period of contemplation.<sup>133</sup> Most family members and others they meet in public want information too quickly or never ask the right questions at the correct time that each individual veteran requires. Overall, this led to confusion and mental anguish for the Vietnam veteran who experienced moral injury as a result of his actions during the war and PTS as a result of his other experiences in combat. Even though most veterans never mention the words ‘PTS’ or ‘moral injury’, they allude to symptoms and results of those symptoms within the stories they tell about coming home from Vietnam. In the same way, the Mexican American veterans in the case studies utilized here discuss symptoms and results of PTS far more often than aspects of moral injury.

As mentioned in the second chapter, the ideas of the Chicano Movement add a unique element to the Mexican American Vietnam experience. As Garcia argues, this struggle for self-identification and self-worth spread across all classes and regions in the United States.<sup>134</sup> As can be seen in some of the examples in this chapter, the Mexican

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<sup>133</sup> Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 42-43.

<sup>134</sup> Garcia, *Chicanismo*, 6.

American veteran often questioned the worthiness of or pride in his service. If a veteran volunteered or was voluntarily drafted with the determination to prove their worthiness as a Mexican American man or an American citizen, they experienced disappointment at the state of American society upon their return. For example, Ernesto Torres felt it necessary to hide his pride and feelings towards his service until decades later while Everett Alvarez expressed disappointment in the anti-war movement and those within the Chicano Movement who expressed anti-war sentiments such as his sister and mother. When these veterans joined the military, they expected to be treated like the heroes of World War II, but were often met with disappointment. These men, such as Frank Gutierrez and Edward Morin, questioned their self-identification as Mexican American war heroes in response to their homecoming experiences, the perceived hostility of American society and the fall of South Vietnam to the North in 1975. This self-identification crisis compounded with the effects of war experiences and moral injury led to difficult decades until most were able to join religious groups or discussion groups at the Veterans Administration (VA) as their struggles were recognized by psychologists and doctors.

### **Experiences with PTS and Homecoming**

Even though a number of veterans neglect to discuss their religious experiences and machismo as they relate to the war, every veteran of Mexican descent in the group of case studies presented in this thesis mentions their homecoming experience or their struggles with PTS or guilt. To begin, Frank Gutierrez mentions that he landed in Oakland after his time in the war in the middle of the night so he was able to avoid any disturbances at the airport. When he returned to his community, no one seemed to want to

talk about his experiences even though they asked politely. After some time, Gutierrez withdrew from his former community of friends and mainly discussed his experiences with those in a group of veterans at the VA who were more willing to listen to his stories.<sup>135</sup> Although he neglects to mention specifics of his struggle with PTS or guilt that could lead to moral injury, he discusses PTS in veterans and includes himself within that group that struggles with PTS. Even though Gutierrez did not experience the worst homecoming among the veterans in the case studies in this paper, “there was a lot of us having difficulties in trying to get a grasp on our role in Vietnam...and technically it was a loss.”<sup>136</sup> For Gutierrez and other Mexican American veterans, their PTS worsened when South Vietnam fell to the North Vietnamese troops in 1975. This led to heightened feelings of worthlessness and loss of friends and family for what seemed to them a lost cause. After a couple of decades, Gutierrez was able to form a group at the VA to help him digest his experiences and the loss of South Vietnam. However, not every veteran was able to benefit from groups like this depending on their location and ability to communicate with others after decades of being ignored.

In contrast to Gutierrez’s homecoming experience, Edward Morin was one of the first soldiers to come home from Vietnam in 1966 after thirteen months in various hospitals around the world and felt he had come home to hostile territory run by the anti-war movement.<sup>137</sup> Not only did his experiences cause him to have symptoms of PTS, but the feeling of having to defend oneself against his own society worsened those symptoms. Throughout the decades since his return, Morin has chosen to contain his

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with Frank Gutierrez, 33-34.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 33-34.

<sup>137</sup> Edward Daniel Morin, interview with Henry Mendoza.

experiences within and has rarely discussed the war with anyone. This resulted from his feelings of disrespect from the anti-war movement and the apathy from those around him. For example, Morin states, “After going through so much, I had more problems in adjusting to a society that was hostile to returning veterans.”<sup>138</sup> After decades of inner turmoil, Morin sought the help of a psychologist after PTS had become an accepted term. During those decades when he had held his emotions inside, he experienced one failed marriage, nights of insomnia and explosions of anger as a result of his experiences and lack of communication.<sup>139</sup> Also, Morin wrote his experiences down which allowed him to come to terms with his emotions and lay them out for others to read.

Overall, Morin wants future generations “to remember that G.I.’s job is to fight the war—he doesn’t establish policy.”<sup>140</sup> For Morin and many other veterans of Mexican descent, the outright disrespect from the members of the anti-war movement directly challenged their notions of machismo and heroism. Although some had heard of the actions of the anti-war movement prior to their return home, the earliest returning soldiers usually experienced shock at the state of the society they had left a year prior. Even if soldiers had heard of the anti-war movement, they never expected society as a whole to ignore their experiences and accomplishments for decades.

As mentioned in the introduction and earlier in this chapter with Eduardo Garza’s experience, veterans of Mexican descent sometimes saw the Vietnamese people as similar to their own families because they were farmers. However, at least one veteran mentions that his feelings about the Vietnamese fell on the opposite end of that spectrum.

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<sup>138</sup> Daniel Edward Morin, interview with Henry Mendoza.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*



For Alonzo Robert Rivera, the military training he received prior to and during the war caused him to permanently view the Vietnamese as the enemy. For most soldiers, the military blurred the lines of enemy combatant and civilian which resulted in confusion during and after combat. Instead of being taught to kill the Viet Cong and NVA only, Rivera erroneously learned that all Vietnamese were the enemy and carried that belief with him after the war. His suspicions of Vietnamese people continue even now to the point that he cannot speak to a Vietnamese person and is uncomfortable around them. Rivera realizes that his behavior is a result of his training rather than the fault of the Vietnamese people.<sup>141</sup> Along with his fear of Vietnamese people, he has had one wife pass away and another failed marriage decades later. Rivera mentions that his struggle with PTS has affected his ability to be a husband to his wives and a father to his children.<sup>142</sup> Also, Agent Orange has affected him through cancer and could have affected his children which led to tensions between himself and both wives. Rivera is another example of PTS affecting his ability to function in a seemingly hostile society while fighting the effects of Agent Orange. Unlike Gutierrez, Rivera never mentions being able to discuss his experiences with other veterans or members of his family. This could have led to the more severe symptoms of PTS he experienced such as paranoia of all Vietnamese people after the war.

Another veteran who experienced a shocking homecoming that permanently affected him is Hector Sanchez. He remembered that the tone of American society had turned anti-veteran at the time he returned to the United States.<sup>143</sup> This contributed to

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<sup>141</sup> Alonzo Robert Rivera, interview with Olivia Puentes-Reynolds.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Hector Sanchez, interview with Liliana Rodriguez.

Sanchez's struggle with PTS even though he seems to have less severe symptoms than some of the other veterans mentioned here. Another veteran explained that the VA could help Sanchez with his PTS and other disabilities from the war, so he now works to inform every veteran of their benefits. Because numerous veterans lack the funds to travel to the VA hospital in San Antonio, Sanchez has been working on a project to help the disabled veterans in his small town of Sonora, Texas.<sup>144</sup> Although he mentions that he struggles with PTS on a daily basis, the only symptom he discusses is his inability to control his emotions when he sees an injured person in film or in person.

In contrast to the majority of other veterans mentioned here, Sanchez married his only wife immediately after his service, had children and stayed successfully married throughout the rest of his life. Also, he worked for one company for thirty years until they moved their operations to Mexico and retired from a second company a few years later.<sup>145</sup> Unlike some other veterans, Sanchez found stability through a long-term career and a long-term partner who acted as his support system for decades after the war. While other veterans mention they feel slighted by the government's lack of support after the war, Sanchez felt complete support from the government and praises their actions towards himself and his family over the decades. This attitude towards the government is similar to Everett Alvarez's positive review of the government during and after the war.

Others, such as Gonzalo Baltazar, mention their inability to find a stable job because of the societal stigma against Vietnam veterans. They believe the government should have acted in their favor quickly and more effectively. Because Sanchez never

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<sup>144</sup> Hector Sanchez, interview with Liliana Rodriguez.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

mentions an impact of Agent Orange on his family, this could have led to his more positive review of the government's actions in supporting his family. Other veterans who experienced serious health concerns in themselves and their children would be more likely to have a negative opinion of the government's actions in Vietnam and for veterans once they returned. Over time, the VA began to understand more about Agent Orange and its effects on soldiers as veterans began to die and contract various forms of cancer while their children were born with abnormalities or miscarried.

Although Sanchez was able to find stability in marriage and a life-long career with a retirement plan, Saenz had the opposite experience when he returned from Vietnam. For example, he married his high school sweetheart who soon divorced him because of his inability to control his addiction to alcohol and his temper. These two problems led to numerous trips to jail after being pulled over for erratic driving.<sup>146</sup> Saenz's first and second wives could not handle his behavior and eventually left him. After the first two wives, he never remarried and became estranged from his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. At the time of the interview in 2011, Saenz had reunited with his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and started to form healthier relationships with them. Without the help of the therapy sessions provided by the VA, Saenz would never have learned to control certain symptoms of his PTS in order to reunite with his family.<sup>147</sup> However, he had married and divorced twice before seeking help from the VA and before the military and psychologists fully understood what had caused such suffering in Vietnam veterans. By the time the VA could begin to help

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<sup>146</sup> Ben Saenz, interview with Gilbert Song.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

Saenz, his family unit had crumbled numerous times and he had lived with the consequences of alcoholism for decades.

For a number of Mexican American veterans, the full understanding of PTS and moral injury came too late for themselves and their families. Society lacked the ability to communicate with veterans who exhibited the symptoms of PTS and psychologists lacked the ability to treat the symptoms effectively. In most cases, these veterans needed a group of veterans to provide the communication routes they lacked within the rest of society and their families. Most needed someone to communicate with who understood their experience rather than medication. Unfortunately, some veterans neglect to take advantage of the resources that are now available to them through the VA and continue to live isolated lives.

Another veteran who experienced severe effects of PTS is Ricardo Martinez. Not only did Martinez encounter alcoholism and the police prior to the war, but he continued these habits in reaction to his war experiences as well. He joined the military to help support his family and keep him out of jail and away from his addiction, but his inability to support his family and his addictions continued. For example, Martinez divorced three times before settling with his last wife of twenty years at the time of the interview in 2010.<sup>148</sup> This is another example of a veteran who was able to find a stable relationship and a stable career after decades of failed relationships and dead-end jobs. Eventually, Martinez was able to work for the Department of Labor and dealt with veterans who needed help finding employment. After thirty-four years, he retired with a positive

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<sup>148</sup> Ricardo Leon Martinez, interview with Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez.

feeling towards the government who had supported him and worked to support other veterans.<sup>149</sup>

Even though Gonzalo Baltazar never mentions the terms ‘PTS’ or ‘moral injury’, he discusses various aspects of his homecoming that contributed to his struggles after the war. For example, Baltazar mentions that veterans needed time to process their experiences rather than immediately discussing them. Because veterans viewed American society as hostile, Baltazar says, “most of us just went underground and kept to ourselves, kept quiet because you were already embarrassed by being a Vietnam vet.”<sup>150</sup> This bitterness he harbored towards American society resulted in veterans, like Baltazar, who kept their experiences to themselves in an unhealthy manner. Not only did he feel hostile to American society, but he also felt as if he could no longer define himself or other veterans as heroes as a result of society’s response to the war.<sup>151</sup> These veterans were unable to receive emotional support from the military, the government or their families because they neglected to inform anyone of their struggles. Initially, Baltazar struggled to find long-term employment and continued to work with his family as a migrant worker. After a decade of short-term employment after the war, he was able to work for the U.S. Postal Service from 1981 until the time of the interview in 2001.<sup>152</sup> Unlike other veterans, Baltazar never mentions anger or resentment towards the government for not helping him find employment until years later. Instead, he focuses on the hostility of society and the neglect of those immediately around him.

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<sup>149</sup> Ricardo Leon Martinez, interview with Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, 37.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

While some veterans blame society, anti-war movement members and the government for their struggles, others focus on the anti-war movement that poisoned society's support for veterans during a time when they needed it most. The perception by the Mexican American veterans in these case studies was that American society was hostile to veterans because the anti-war movement seemed so prevalent. For example, nearly every family in the United States was affected by the Vietnam War in some way, so family members were likely to support veterans within their families. Based on the case studies mentioned here, Everett Alvarez and Ben Saenz were the only two Mexican American veterans who mentioned a negative response from specific members of their families. Regardless of the veteran's political leanings, the anti-war movement affected every person who served because it advocated against their very existence.

While groups of soldiers advocated against the anti-war movement, others, such as David Valladolid, joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) movement when they returned home. Those who joined the Chicano Movement often participated in the VVAW and believed the war took far too many young men of Mexican descent away from their families. Although David Valladolid never mentions any struggles with PTS in his interview, he does mention the impact of Agent Orange on veterans and the hostile environment they returned to. From the time he returned to the United States, he decided he and other veterans would never tolerate the open hostility from society and would fight against it.<sup>153</sup> Valladolid's attitude towards American society is in contrast to the

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<sup>153</sup> David Valladolid, interview with Henry Mendoza, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas, June 7, 2010. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/david-valladolid>.

majority of other veterans of Mexican descent mentioned here who approach society's hostility in defensive mode rather than on the offensive.

By joining the Chicano movement and the VVAW, Valladolid planned to combat the negative American attitude towards Vietnam veterans. Also, he participated in local politics in San Diego in an effort to bring attention to the need for quality education for those of Mexican descent in the San Diego area.<sup>154</sup> As some authors of Mexican descent argue, the Hispanic populations of the Southwest were targeted for military service during Vietnam because of their lack of education opportunities. Some Hispanic authors and veterans believe their population was targeted by the government while others believe the high numbers of Mexican American KIA in Vietnam were a product of education opportunities for the Anglo population. If one could afford college and get into a university, one could avoid the draft for at least four years while hoping the war would end within that time. While some veterans of Mexican descent volunteered for monetary reasons, others volunteered out of patriotism, duty and protection of their families.

In contrast to Valladolid's homecoming and post-war experience, Ernesto Torres never understood the politics surrounding the war and does not enjoy discussing them. Instead, he believes it was his turn to serve when he was drafted and he fulfilled his duty for his country.<sup>155</sup> Nothing else matters for Torres including the validity of the war itself. When he returned from Vietnam, he married, had two children and divorced. Torres's friends who opposed the war often ridiculed him for serving when he returned. During the first few years, he acted as if he was embarrassed about his service for friends and

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<sup>154</sup> David Valladolid, interview with Henry Mendoza.

<sup>155</sup> Ernesto Torres, interview with Ricardo LaFore.

family.<sup>156</sup> Decades later, society became more accepting and appreciative of Vietnam veterans and their service even if they never supported the war itself. When this shift began to occur in society, Torres began to share his experiences and showed the true pride in his service he had been hiding for decades.

In Charley Trujillo's *Soldados*, an anonymous soldier who the author names Ernest discusses his experience with society and his family when he returned from Vietnam. For example, his experiences in the war caused his physical demeanor, behavior and personality to evolve over one year. When Ernest saw his family for the first time, his mother mentioned that she no longer recognized her own son because of these changes.<sup>157</sup> One vital change for Ernest occurred when he brought his drug addiction home from the war and neglected to hide his habits from his family. He prolonged his use of drugs from the war in an effort to cope with his war experiences. Ernest experienced extreme nightmares which led him to rely on drugs to calm him down and forget his memories. Because he had saved money during the war, he decided not to work and draw unemployment for at least a year until he could cope without his drug addiction.<sup>158</sup> Ernest believed the government owed him at least a year of unemployment funds while he attempted to come to terms with his experiences and his addiction.

While some veterans of Mexican descent lamented their lack of steady employment when they returned from the war, this veteran enjoyed his unemployment and took this break from the world in an effort to digest his Vietnam experiences. Some veterans could have benefitted from a short time to cope before worrying about

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<sup>156</sup> Ernesto Torres, interview with Ricardo LaFore.

<sup>157</sup> Trujillo, *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*, 163.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 163.



supporting their families, but they often had no time to contemplate before being forced back into the world. Ernest had no wife or children to provide for which could have led to his ability to choose a more flexible lifestyle immediately following his deployment.

As discussed in the first chapter, some veterans of Mexican descent were able to find peace or cope with their PTS struggles through a religious organization of some type after the war. For example, Ricardo Martinez describes himself as a deeply religious person before, during and after the war. When Martinez moved to Kansas City after his service, he joined St. Patrick's Catholic Church and became heavily involved in their services every week.<sup>159</sup> Being a part of this religious organization gave him an outlet for discussing his frustrations and provided activities for distraction from the trap of having an idle mind. For Martinez, faith provided a way to have a more positive attitude about life.<sup>160</sup>

Another veteran who embraced his faith post-war is Eduardo Garza. Although he grew up in the Catholic Church, he joined a nondenominational worship group called Celebration Circle in San Antonio, TX.<sup>161</sup> Garza joined the group because they promoted peace and inclusion which he deeply believed in. After experiencing hate and death in Vietnam, his life goal was to promote peace in every way possible. When Garza experienced insomnia and nightmares, he learned to meditate during the night until his fear passed.<sup>162</sup> Another way he distracted himself from his experiences and hoped to change the world for the better was through the arts scene in San Antonio. Garza wrote

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<sup>159</sup> Ricardo Martinez, interview with Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Eduardo C. Garza, interview with Emily Macrander.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

poetry that he presented all over San Antonio while also participating in theatre and art shows.<sup>163</sup> These allowed him to funnel his frustrations into healthier forms of activities compared to other addictions most other veterans dealt with daily. Overall, it seems few veterans of Mexican descent were able to find healthy coping mechanisms immediately following their service. Instead, they turned to unhealthy addictions and kept their experiences to themselves for decades until the VA began to provide healthy channels of communication.

### **Everett Alvarez, Jr. and His Homecoming**

One unique example of the anti-war movement at work was Everett Alvarez's family. Everett Alvarez was a POW of Mexican descent taken in 1964 at the beginning of the war in Vietnam whose sister, Delia Alvarez, was an active speaker and participant in the anti-war movement and the Chicano Movement across the country. When Alvarez was released from Vietnam in 1973, his sister feared him coming home to the American society that had drastically changed from the one he had left nine years prior.<sup>164</sup> Instead of a society who supported veterans and the government's decisions, there was a society who had become anti-government and anti-veteran. Instead of a hero's welcome for outlasting the war in a North Vietnamese prison, his sister feared he would experience culture shock from the lack of a welcoming society. After years of communication from the government that told the Alvarez family that Everett would be released soon, his sister and parents lost their faith in the United States government and the cause their son

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<sup>163</sup> Eduardo C. Garza, interview with Emily Macrander.

<sup>164</sup> Steven V. Roberts, "Sister of P.O.W. Thinks He Will Face a Shock", *The New York Times*, February 8, 1973. <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/02/08/archives/sister-of-po-w-thinks-he-will-face-a-shock-a-cultural-shock-insult.html>.

and brother had fought and been captured for.<sup>165</sup> By 1973, the Alvarez family had become famous for their participation in the anti-war movement and their son's imprisonment in Vietnam. Everett Alvarez was the first American POW captured in North Vietnamese territory. Because of this, his capture and status of release maintained national media coverage throughout his imprisonment.

When Everett Alvarez returned to the United States, he was forced to deal with the consequences of a family who no longer supported the war and the government he had fought for and an ex-wife that had left him while he was in prison. The combination of his experiences as a POW and his family situation when he returned led to his struggle of PTS that Alvarez discusses in numerous interviews and within his own book. In *Chained Eagle*, Alvarez mentions his lack of emotions when he met with his family for the first time in nine years. Throughout those years, he had taught himself to bury all emotion and memories of his family just in case he never made it out of North Vietnam alive.<sup>166</sup> Because of this defense mechanism, Alvarez neglected to show emotion during his homecoming experience and rarely did so for the rest of his life. Based on Alvarez's description of his post-war life, he struggled with various symptoms of PTS including confused emotions, nervousness and a heightened awareness of his surroundings. When meeting with his family for the first time, "His alert eyes scanned people and objects in short, penetrating bird-like movements."<sup>167</sup> Unlike some other veterans mentioned here, Alvarez began telling stories of his captivity during the first meeting with his family and

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<sup>165</sup> Roberts, "Sister of P.O.W. Thinks He Will Face a Shock".

<sup>166</sup> Everett Alvarez, Jr. and Anthony S. Pitch, *Chained Eagle* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1989), 286.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

seemed to enjoy talking about his friends, the houses he had built and the books he had written in his head while in captivity.<sup>168</sup>

When Alvarez stepped off the plane at Travis Air Force Base in Solano County, California, he gave a speech that served to represent the attitudes of all surviving POWs who were returning from Vietnam:

“For years and years we dreamed of this day and we kept the faith. Faith in God, in our president and our country. It was this faith that maintained our hope that someday our dreams would come true and today they have. We have come home. God bless the president and God bless you Mr. and Mrs. America. You did not forget us.”<sup>169</sup>

Throughout Alvarez’s speeches and interviews, the same attitude of gratitude for his release is mentioned. He gives thanks to God, President Nixon and those across the country who worked to ensure his release. Even though Alvarez blames the anti-war movement for prolonging his stay in North Vietnam, he agrees to disagree with his sister, Delia, on the pros and cons of the movement. Unlike other veterans mentioned here, Alvarez never felt abandoned by the government and was grateful for the increased bombing campaigns in 1968 because he believes they led to better food rations for himself and the other POWs.<sup>170</sup> Although Alvarez hated everything the anti-war movement stood for, he recognized that American society as a whole was not against him and other veterans. He seemed to understand that the members of the anti-war movement were the exception rather than the rule. As Coronado argues, Alvarez “expressed admiration for Nixon and thanked him, as most prisoners did, for bringing them

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<sup>168</sup> Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 279.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, 280.

home.”<sup>171</sup> Because Alvarez was a POW that was released by the government and celebrated by the majority of American society, he naturally held the president in high regard whereas non-POW veterans often felt neglected by both society and the United States government.

### **Experiences with Moral Injury**

In contrast to PTS, moral injury describes a long-term feeling of guilt after one compromises their moral code or conscience. In the Vietnam War specifically, soldiers of Mexican descent often experienced moral injury during and after the war as they became responsible for killing both civilians and enemy soldiers. This confusion between identifying the enemy Viet Cong and the harmless citizen intensified the soldier’s experience with moral injury. Those veterans mentioned in the first chapter who had been taught a specific moral code based in the Catholic faith found their duty to serve their country contradicted with their moral compass. Because some of these men had worked as migrant farmers before the war or had ancestors who had for generations, they often felt guilty when forced to kill civilians in rural areas suspected of being Viet Cong members. Vietnamese in rural areas of Vietnam often lived a life that resembled what these soldiers had grown up hearing stories about or participating in themselves. Some soldiers allowed this comparison to affect their judgement in life or death situations while others acted on impulse and digested their actions later. However, soldiers who mainly encountered the official enemy soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army in combat experienced less confusion because these battles were professional soldiers against

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<sup>171</sup> Coronado, “*I’m Not Gonna Die*”, 119.

professional soldiers. Battles between the North Vietnamese Army and the United States Army often looked similar to the standard battlefield of the time whereas guerilla warfare confused American soldiers because they could no longer identify the enemy. Those who participated in search and destroy missions and traveled from hamlet to hamlet looking for Viet Cong dealt with the confusion between enemy and civilian. Not only were male Vietnamese civilians labeled as potential Viet Cong, but so were the women and children. While some commanders ordered more civilians killed than saved or taken prisoner, others took care in deciphering those who participated in the Viet Cong and those who had not. Therefore, an individual soldier was often at the mercy of their commander and experienced a level of moral injury based on their specific orders and their mission in Vietnam.

For example, Alfred Alvarez rationalized the killing of supposed Viet Cong with a kill or be killed mindset after his commanders suggested this method to him. Alvarez had been struggling with his Catholic faith and his duty to kill other human beings before his commander explained that he had to kill if he wanted to return home alive.<sup>172</sup> To protect his family from mourning his death, Alvarez was forced to fight for his life regardless of his moral beliefs on killing. After beginning to rationalize his duty to kill, he began to understand the lives of his fellow soldiers were at stake as well. When one member of a unit was killed by the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese forces, the other members of the unit would enact revenge by killing as many of the perceived enemy as possible. Once Alvarez began to experience the deaths of his friends, he no longer questioned his orders to kill in the moment. Instead, he worked to kill as many of the

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<sup>172</sup> Interview with Alfred Alvarez, 21.

enemy as possible so there would be less to kill him or other American soldiers in the future.<sup>173</sup> Those who became objects of revenge were any professional NVA soldiers, obvious Viet Cong members and civilians who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Although the military's official policy was to take prisoners who surrendered, each unit followed their own policies. For example, Roman Martinez remembered his first mission with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division where he learned that official policy meant nothing to those who had seen combat for months and lost friends to the enemy. Those who had seen combat for extended periods, or 'seasoned' veterans, often became hardened to the official rules of combat and anything was viable after losing numerous friends. Martinez and the first unit he joined often yelled, "Chieu Hoi!" in an effort to obtain surrender from the enemy soldiers.<sup>174</sup> However, when the enemy soldiers surrendered, this particular unit killed those who came forward with their hands raised rather than taking them prisoner. Martinez mentions that his commanders in the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry "trained me to kill them all and let God sort it out."<sup>175</sup> This practice evolved from a lack of trust between enemy and American soldiers and a need for revenge for the deaths of friends. For example, Martinez's commander "had 25 men behind him wiped out in an ambush and he lived through this so he had this great vendetta to live through."<sup>176</sup> Although these acts seemed just at the time, soldiers like Martinez became permanently damaged as a result of their compromised moral compass. When soldiers had time to digest their experiences and actions after the war, they began to experience

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with Alfred Alvarez, 22.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Roman Martinez, 6.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 7.

the effects of moral injury which often manifests itself in extreme guilt. Veterans of Mexican descent experienced moral injury as a result of their Catholic upbringings and their reluctance to kill other human beings who seemed eerily similar to themselves and their family members.

Another issue that contributed to the need for revenge was the use of mines that killed American soldiers when there was no enemy presence. Soldiers who watched their friends get killed by mines would often retaliate against any Vietnamese they could find immediately following the incident because the person who set the mine could never be found. This frustration combined with commanders who had blurred the lines of enemy and civilian non-combatants led to episodes of indiscriminate killing, torture and mutilation of enemy bodies. While some soldiers were reprimanded or officially punished by the military, most were left to continue these practices unmolested. Some commanders openly allowed mutilation of enemy bodies while others acted as if they never saw their men acting against military policy. Because these men had experienced so much loss in a short period, these acts of revenge were seen as necessary by some. After returning from the war, veterans began to question the morality of these indiscriminate revenge practices that had contributed to the murder of the Vietnamese civilian population.

## **Conclusion**

Combat veterans of the Vietnam War experienced varying levels and symptoms of both PTSD and moral injury. This partially occurred as a result of their varying homecoming experiences based on their place, time and circumstances of return. However, veterans of Mexican descent discuss how their understandings of masculinity and religion affected their experiences during and after the war. Some veterans have less



symptoms of PTS than others or are better able to hide or cope with their symptoms. The majority of veterans only discuss their struggles with symptoms of PTS and never mention moral injury because of the newness of the concept to the psychological study of veterans. In the past decade, this study expanded and began to define the feeling of guilt one experiences from compromising one's morals as moral injury. Even though the veterans mentioned in this chapter never say 'moral injury', they discuss their feelings of guilt from having to kill another human being or having to kill civilians because their commander required it or they felt their lives or their fellow soldiers' lives were in danger.

While veterans like Ricardo Martinez and the anonymous veteran named Ernest mention their symptoms of PTS as destroyed familial relationships from the abuse of drugs and alcohol, others mention an inability to hold a long-term job because of anxiety attacks and nervousness. Experiences such as loss of friends, continual fear of snipers and sustained rocket barrages caused these men to live the rest of their lives in states of fear and nervousness. Each combat veteran dealt with his PTS in healthy or unhealthy ways that led to the destruction or renewal of families. When men like Eduardo Garza and Ricardo Martinez returned, they committed their efforts to serving in a religious organization that offered healthy communication lines. In the same way, men like Ben Saenz and Hector Sanchez found a group with the VA that allowed them to communicate with other veterans. However, these groups were often not formed until decades after the war when psychologists began to understand these veterans' experiences and behavior more completely. Unfortunately, this group of veterans lacked psychological support for decades after their service had ended which left their families and communities to help

them digest their experiences. In some cases, communities and families were helpful for these veterans. In other cases, families and communities lacked the tools to help veterans reacclimate to civilian life.

For veterans, like Everett Alvarez, the anti-war movement deeply affected their struggle with PTS and their ability to function in a society that seemed anti-veteran at every level. Although still able to communicate with his sister about other topics, he publicly denounced the anti-war movement. Based on my research, it appears that they volunteered or responded to the draft willingly to become heroes like previous generations had. As mentioned previously, the Chicano Movement called for Mexican Americans to reevaluate their history in an effort to create their unique place in society.<sup>177</sup> Even though these Mexican American veterans who saw themselves as heroes felt they had created a unique place for themselves in American society, this came into question as some experienced negative homecomings and saw South Vietnam fall in 1975.

When they returned, veterans like Edward Morin felt American society as a whole neglected to support them even though their families and small communities sometimes supported them well. In contrast, veterans like Everett Alvarez had family members who disagreed with their opinions on the government's actions during the Vietnam War. Some mentioned the lack of emotional and monetary support from the military and the government which contributed to their feelings of worthlessness. In cases such as Gonzalo Baltazar's, veterans lacked a steady job for decades after their service and they felt discriminated against by employers and American society. When South Vietnam fell

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<sup>177</sup> Garcia, *Chicanismo*, 11.

in April of 1975, veterans questioned the purpose of their service because they had been ignored when they returned and the war to protect the freedom of the South from the communists of the North had been lost.

In the past, authors have focused on the Anglo Vietnam veteran's struggle with PTS or have published first-hand accounts of veterans of Mexican descent who experience PTS. However, minimal analysis has been done on these accounts of PTS from a Mexican American perspective. In addition, veterans' accounts need to be reevaluated with the lens of the new concept of moral injury. The closest attempt is Juan Coronado's *"I'm Not Gonna Die in This Damn Place"*. He analyzes the homecoming processes of the Mexican American POWs and how they dealt with their varying experiences of PTS. However, Coronado never mentions moral injury. This could be a result of his POW study group who rarely experienced hand-to-hand combat or the lack of scholarship on moral injury until the last decade. Instead, these men experienced PTS as a result of their traumatic experiences in captivity. Also, the majority of these men were pilots who never saw the enemy and the civilians they were responsible for killing face-to-face until they were captured. Therefore, the study of moral injury remains more relevant to those who experienced combat at close range and were given the opportunity to act against their conscious.

As can be seen here, few veterans of Mexican descent have made comments in their interviews that prove they suffer from moral injury. Based on my research, it appears that the only comments made that could point to moral injury include their concern over the killing of civilians who could have been innocent. Instead, they are more likely to mention the effects of PTS on their lives and give examples of what caused

their PTS. This could have resulted from their desire to talk about the actions against them rather than the actions they took that violated their morals and could cause someone to judge them. These veterans had already experienced severe judgement by society when they returned decades ago and seem to shy away from discussing any action that could be perceived as immoral. Also, interviewers neglect to ask these men about situations they regretted participating in. Instead, they ask veterans to tell stories about their most memorable battles and what their homecoming was like.

As discussed in the introduction, this chapter attempts to describe the experiences of a group of Mexican American veterans within this case study and does not attempt to describe the experiences of all Mexican American veterans who served in the Vietnam War. Because the combat veteran is more likely to experience symptoms of PTS and moral injury, this thesis only includes combat veterans and one example of a soldier who processed the bodies of both Vietnamese and American civilians and soldiers. Therefore, combat veterans and those within the Army's grave registration units experience the horrors of war directly and are deeply affected.

Even though all of the veterans mentioned in this case study fall into this category, they each experienced the war differently and reacted to and digested these experiences in varying ways. As is the case in all wars, each soldier encounters unique circumstances during their service that inform the rest of their life differently. Not only were their war experiences different based on place and time of service, but their coming home experiences varied as well. While some encountered hostile groups of anti-war supporters, others never felt anti-veteran sentiment from society. These encounters (or

lack thereof) led to the varying experiences with PTS and moral injury seen within this chapter.

## CONCLUSION

As can be seen throughout this thesis, a lack of statistical information from the Department of Defense on Mexican Americans in the Vietnam War means that historical scholarship remains reliant on the limited number of oral histories available in conjunction with secondary sources. Prior to the preparation of this project, few historians had attempted analysis on Mexican American veteran experiences. Instead, Hispanic authors, like Charley Trujillo, have published their own experiences in a collection of oral histories from other veterans or have published monographs on the Chicano Movement that barely touch the Vietnam War. In 2018, Juan Coronado published the first analysis of the Mexican American Vietnam POW experience and discussed the importance of machismo and identity to the survival of those men.

In this thesis, I have shown that the unique Mexican American Vietnam experience is derived from a combination of their upbringing and the rise of the ideas promoted by the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Although most of the men in the case studies mentioned here never participated in the movement, they mention the same ideas such as the concern for the high percentage of Mexican Americans being drafted and killed and their struggle for self-identification. Individually, these veterans struggled to identify their worth within society while the Chicano Movement fought to identify the Mexican American's unique place in American society.

In the future, further research and analysis is necessary for American society to fully understand and appreciate the Mexican American Vietnam experience before the veterans become lost to history. More oral histories need to be collected across the

country to create a more diverse database from which to gather information about their unique experiences. In addition, oral histories from the families of Mexican American veterans would be useful in understanding the families' experiences across the country and the impact of the anti-war and Chicano Movements on them. Also, a study on Mexican American women and the effect of Vietnam could further show the results of the war on the home front. Chicana women have been discussed in monographs that focus on the Chicano Movement, but those who never participated in political movements have been neglected from the narrative of the 1960s and 1970s. Why did some female family members of Mexican American soldiers in Vietnam join the anti-war and Chicano Movements when others neglected to become involved? What kind of emotional trauma did Mexican American family members of those killed or missing in action experience?

In reading the oral histories of Mexican American Vietnam veterans, I had hoped to find evidence of men joining the military in an effort to gain American citizenship. Unfortunately, I never found evidence of this except for one veteran who was in the process of becoming a citizen when he volunteered. As more Mexican American veterans across the country are found and interviewed, a new line of research could focus on the motivation of citizenship in serving if evidence for that was found. Based on my research, the motivation for gaining citizenship was absent while the motivation for establishing one's place in American society seemed more prevalent. Another branch of research that could be explored is religion in Vietnam amongst various groups utilizing oral histories. Although Jacqueline Whitt has already researched the war from the chaplain's view, the

individual religious experiences of Protestant, Atheist and Jewish soldiers (amongst other religious beliefs) has yet to be explored.

In American wars before Vietnam, soldiers often traveled in ships for weeks to reach their destination and to return home from their service. However, the majority of soldiers in Vietnam flew mere hours to their destinations and took the same short flight home (a much smaller percentage were transported on ships). Medical situations sometimes required a stop at hospitals in the Philippines or Okinawa for a period of days, but then soldiers quickly returned home by flight rather than ship. For these reasons, the soldier had far less time to digest his traumatic experiences and communicate with his fellow soldiers before being expected to return to life as normal in American society. As discussed in the third chapter, PTS became a diagnosis more than a decade after soldiers returned and were expected to behave and conform as normal with no emotional support from the military or the government.

As veterans, authors and psychiatrists have suggested, a form of readjustment training is necessary for veterans returning from intense combat situations. Because “Veterans need each other, and they may never share with the rest of us what they share with each other”, discussion groups at the VA were vital to the emotional healing of the Mexican American veterans mentioned in the third chapter.<sup>178</sup> However, these groups were never established for Vietnam veterans until decades later after mental and emotional turmoil had already occurred. For those who lived in rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s, minimal access to communication with other veterans would have been

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<sup>178</sup> Nakashima and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 128.



possible. As the Mexican Americans discuss throughout their oral histories, they felt American society had become anti-veteran upon their return which compounded with their lack of healing through communication with other veterans.

The controversy that the Chicano Movement and anti-war supporters within that movement brought to the surface was that Mexican Americans were killed in higher percentages than Caucasian American soldiers. According to the documentary *On Two Fronts*, this resulted from the higher number of Mexican Americans drafted in Vietnam or coerced with a steady income because they lacked the funds to attend college and avoid the draft for four years.<sup>179</sup> However, the case studies utilized in this paper only include young men who voluntarily enlisted prior to being drafted or were willingly drafted. Not one of them attempted to run from the draft or unwillingly reported when their number was called.

Although documentaries and authors of the Chicano Movement mention this controversy, no documents or statistics exist that corroborate this claim. This results from the Department of Defense's neglect to separate Mexican American soldiers from Caucasian soldiers on paperwork. As Coronado mentions, there are examples of specific counties where Mexican Americans were killed in Vietnam in higher proportions to the overall population, but these are only specific examples that are unable to provide evidence for the Mexican American experience across the country.<sup>180</sup> This means that historians and family members of those Mexican American soldiers killed in Vietnam will never know exact proportions or numbers.

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<sup>179</sup> *On Two Fronts*.

<sup>180</sup> Coronado, "*I'm Not Gonna Die*", 14-15.

Overall, both the Chicano Movement and the Mexican American Vietnam veteran fought to self-identify and find their unique place in American society during the 1960s and 1970s. Although every soldier, nurse and military employee who experienced trauma in Vietnam also experienced varying forms of PTS and moral injury, Mexican Americans experienced the same because of their Catholic faith and machismo-oriented upbringings. From this point forward, further interviews must be collected from veterans before the Mexican American Vietnam experience becomes a lost piece of American history.

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