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## Interview no. 290.3

Cleto L. Rodríguez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Cleto L. Rodríguez (1923- )  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez  
PROJECT: Bicentennial  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 12, 1976  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
  
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born April 26, 1923 in San Marcos, Texas; joined the Army at the age of 19; has worked with the VA, Operation SER (Service Employment Redevelopment); resident of San Antonio, Texas.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Thoughts on the Bicentennial; his work with SER, biographical information; educational experiences; discrimination; experiences in the military; events that led to his receiving the Medal of Honor; World War II as a turning point for Mexican Americans.

1 hour, 28 pages

(This is an oral history interview with Mr. Cleto L. Rodríguez, Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient of San Antonio, held in El Paso on June 12, 1976. Interviewing is Oscar Martínez from the University of Texas at El Paso.)

M: Mr. Rodríguez, I wonder if we can begin the interview by talking a little bit about the Bicentennial. After all, the Bicentennial is one reason why LULAC decided to bring together this group of Mexican American Congressional Medal of Honor winners. Do you have any comments about that?

R: Well, the Bicentennial is to me, and to thousands of people, a time when you have something to reflect on, because these 200 years have meant a lot to us. It reminds me of the days when I was a cotton picker and used to work in the fields in Michigan and pick tomatoes in Indiana; and of such stories of during the Depression when we used to go out in the dumps and pick up as many pieces of bread as we could find, whether they were dirty or not. We would clean them up.

M: When was this, sir?

R: That was back in 1938, 1939. Especially in San Antonio where I was, there were thousands of people that used to go out every morning to the dumps to see what they could pick up. Bringing all these memories back and seeing the way it is now in 1976, it's a big change. Of course in those days as I can recall, I used to sleep under the Express office, under the bunks where I could find a place, and get up early in the morning to sell some newspapers and have enough money--a dime or two--to give to my family, and at the same time try to educate myself by going to school. In those days they used to work all day from sunup to sundown for about 80 cents a day. There was no such animal like you have now: I have a 15 minute

break for coffee in the morning, a 15 minute break in the afternoon, and one hour for lunch at noon and what not. In those days it was continuous work from sunup to sundown. Then was the time that I realized that the only way there was for advancement for any of us was through education. We did everything we could to advance, but there was no possibility in those days for advancement, especially for a Mexican American or Spanish speaker. Most of the people used to speak Spanish and they never thought of using the English language as much as possible, so anytime they went to school they would confront the teachers with the Spanish language. Of course, they'd remind you right off that it was the American way of life to speak English and not Spanish. A lot of my people in those days didn't realize that thing. That was the hardship up to 1941, when the war started. When the war started, why, every American of Mexican descent was so happy to go to war, because they knew (and we knew) that if we had to fight a war, it was something great; it would change the whole history of this world. We knew that when we fought this war and we came back, we would be treated as American as anyone else would be treated as American.

M: You knew this in advance?

R: Oh, certainly. Mostly all of the people knew that. When we came back we would all be equally accepted as American. So when we came back from the war we all felt like shouting and howling and raising all kinds of fuss and saying, "Boy, we made it! We are Americans!" That is when we all felt more proud, especially the ones that got the Medal of Honor. Of course, we didn't know what it meant. Then things started happening. Right off they found me a job as a repre-

sentative of the Veterans Administration, and I made it my goal that I would train every man or woman that had a Spanish surname, train him and motivate him in a form that they would continue their education; because without an education you will never do anything. As a matter of fact, I have a lot of lawyers in San Antonio, district attorneys, judges, electricians, civil service commissioners, that I personally put through college when the check was not there. They came and said, "I don't have a check, I don't have any money." I did everything I could to get their checks so they would not drop out of college. And they're great people now. I continued all of this for years and years; as a matter of fact, I'm still at it. I retired from the U.S. Army and I started working with minority groups. We started working with the SER programs. We started working on education and skill development. We found out that there are many Spanish-surnamed dropouts and a lot of young ladies that had gotten married and dropped out of school; they didn't have any skills and there was no way in the world that the employment office could help them out. Of course, it would amount to getting a job at low pay, and so we tried to have the federal government give us money to train these people. Several times we went to Washington and we were turned down, because they could not understand our program. What we did was, we organized again and we got people involved in our program. We got involved in Corpus Christi getting volunteers to give us some of their time. Like if you were a clerical, you volunteered so many hours of your time and trained some of the girls. If you

were a mechanic, we asked you to furnish some of your time free. But people don't like to give time free, they like to charge for it. So this was in 1966. We went back to Washington and we showed that what we had in mind was something good, and we called it Jobs for Progress, Incorporated; and then we called it SER, Service Employment Redevelopment. In Spanish it's "ser", "me". We focused on this whole thing and we did convince Washington. We told them that Jobs for Progress, Incorporated was a national vehicle for the delivery of manpower service to the Spanish speaking minority group in the United States of America. We pursued this and we got several millions of dollars, and through that we trained every lady that is divorced or separated, anybody that is a minority group. We trained them as clericals and we found them a job at the end of several months. At the same time we paid them \$83 a week so they could continue the training. If you wanted to become a mechanic, we trained you in that skill as a mechanic. I wrote back saying, "Jobs for Progress, Incorporated proudly announces the beginning of a new cycle. Operation SER is now located in the heart of the barrios, where it can better offer its service to the Spanish speaking people of San Antonio. For the first time in its four year history, Operation SER this year is offering a course in English as a Second Language, specifically intended to teach the English Language to all non-English speaking persons that need to know English in order to compete in the local job market. As it has been done up to now, Operation SER is again offering classes in auto mechanics, welding, electronics, electronic appliance service

and repair, radio and TV work, LVN (Licensed Vocational Nursing), clerical services, including all types of work for general office (receptionist, secretary, stenography, medical receptionist, laboratory assistants, medical assistant), specialist in mechanics, transmission specialist, and combinations for all types of skill training. Enrollment will begin on courses on job-connected skill training. All the prospective applicant has to do is come to SER and he is entitled to all this." That's what we have done, and we have trained a tremendous amount of people in these fields. Had it not been for us, they would have been on the stamp line.

M: Mr. Rodríguez, I'd like to get some background information on you.

When and where were you born?

R: I was born in San Marcos, Texas on April 26, 1923.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents and grandparents?

R: Well, my grandparents came from México, all of them. My mother and father were raised in Texas, but their parents came from México.

M: Could you tell me what your father did for a living?

R: Well, my father was a laborer, which I never did like. That's why I kept up my education, because I didn't want to be a laborer.

M: What did he do?

R: He used to work out in the fields, plowing, shoeing horses. But our way of life in those days was...they believed in labor work. They never had the opportunity to go to school though.

M: What do you remember about growing up as a little boy in that part of Texas?

R: In those days, I remember we had some slaves in San Marcos. I

remember they used to wake them up (my uncle and Dad were in charge of them) at five o'clock in the morning and then march them all the way to the fields. Those black people were singing all day and night. The people would say, "Why do you always sing? Are you always happy?" They would say, "It's not that we're happy, it's that we have to continue this so we will not go crazy." Because they didn't have any rights whatsoever in those days.

M: You use the word "slaves."

R: To me they were slaves. Anytime someone is on top of you and ordering you around, that's not the military, that's a slave. There's a difference between the military and a slave.

M: They weren't "legal slaves" but they were "de facto slaves."

R: They were worse than us. They were still slaves. They had no rights whatsoever. They couldn't leave, they couldn't do anything. I found out several years ago as I have been through history... do you know who funded the independence of Texas against Mexico?

M: I really don't know. That's not my specialty.

R: I've gotten involved in all of this. I found out that it was a Negro from Texas. He was the one that funded the revolution. Yet there is no monument in the State of Texas about him. But I noticed the other day that there was a little story about him, that he was the one that funded it. But I knew a long time ago.

M: They're finally catching up to you. When you were a little boy, Mr. Rodríguez, what did you want to be when you grew up?

R: I always wanted to work in an office. As a matter of fact, my uncle and aunt used to get perturbed because they said, "We want you to work



on the farm." I said, "I'm not a burro. If I would have been a burro I would have had a tail." And of course I got a good spanking. I said "Only burros work in the fields. I'm going to work in an office." They said, "That will never happen. That's only for Anglos." I said, "No, it's not." And I proved that it was not.

M: Where did you get the idea that it was not, that you could do it?

R: I had a teacher, her name was Mrs. Byer. Now this is funny. She was a wonderful teacher and she believed in me when I was very young. I must have been about twelve years old. I still can recall just like if it was today. That's what really made me go at it. The teacher knew that I was very much interested in English and mathematics, and there were some problems I could not work out. So she told me, "After school, stay and I will show you how those problems are worked. And about the English, I'll be glad to help you out." And at this particular time the principal came in the room and was very perturbed, and he used a lot of adjectives against her. He said, "I want to know, what are you doing with this man here?" The teacher said, "He's not a man, he's a little boy." He said, "What are you doing with him?" She said, "I'm trying to work some problems with him." "Well, it's time you should have been home already and doing something else instead of being with this Mexican kid here." She said, "Well, I'm trying to help him." He said, "Well, I don't want you to help this Mexican kid. All I want you to do is one thing: I want you to teach them how to write their name and work little problems. I'll tell you one thing: if these Mexican kids have a brain just as good as

you, it has not been developed; but if you insist on doing all of this, the time is going to come when you're going to be working for them instead of them working for you." And do you know he was right? I have a lot of those people working for me . So I made my goal.

M: You still remember that he said that to her in front of you?

R: Yes, in front of me. He told me, "You get out of here, you Mexican."

M: How old were you?

R: About 12 years old.

M: Could you tell me about incidents that stand out during your elementary school years?

R: Well, that was one. From then on I was transferred to School. Mrs. Monihan was the principal; she was a wonderful principal. She was entirely different from this other principal, Mr. Wood. I still remember his name. Mrs. Monihan was a wonderful person , and that is where I really got my education, through them; and I kept going. As a matter of fact, when I came back from the war, Mrs. Monihan was the first one there to greet me, which was very, very nice.

M: Where did you go to high school?

R: I went to high school but I quit in the third year. That's another thing; I quit and then I met my wife, you see. Of course, I had all my education in the Service. They had all the facilities, but it has to be in you to educate yourself. I spent 20-some years going to every type of school there is. As a matter of fact, I was going to enroll in Texas University this year, but I was involved in so

many things that I just gave it up.

M: Could you tell me of some incidents that stand out when you were in high school?

R: I've had none of this...discrimination? I have never been discriminated against in my life, except that time. But as a matter of fact, I was an investigator and I used to investigate a lot of discrimination things that they talked about. But I found out in a lot of times

that I investigated these things, that it was not the Anglo that was doing the discriminating; it was our own people. There was one incident that I investigated. At this particular place it said, "No dogs, cats, or Mexicans allowed in this restaurant. "Of course, they had already discriminated against a couple of persons that had made the complaint. So I went over there to investigate this case, and while I was there, I didn't feel that I should go into the restaurant. I said, "They're going to kick me out. Well, I have to find out 'from the horses mouth' what happened." So I went in there in the morning to have breakfast, and there were two beautiful young ladies there, and there was a gentleman sitting way in the corner. So I came in and said, "Good morning, sir." He said, "Good morning," in a gruff tone of voice. I talked to the young ladies, "Good morning young ladies." They answered, "Good morning," in the same tone of voice. I thought, "Which window am I going to go out of? This one, that one, or through the door?" So I sat down, and one of them says, "Can I help you?" "Yes, ma'am. I'd like to have two eggs over easy with bacon. Do you have biscuits?" "Yes." "Oh, great." In the meantime I was observing the gentleman back there, and I said, "Good morning. Would you like to join me for a cup of coffee?"

He said, "Don't mind if I do." I said, "Come right up, sir." He sat down there and we talked, and I didn't say anything. After I finished I said, "Excuse me, I'm leaving." He said, "Are you coming back?" I said, "Yes, sir, I think I'll come back." So I came back the next night, and then the next day, and then of course, the third day I was going to leave. By then we were very good friends, and I said, "You know, the first time I came into the restaurant I was very perturbed. I thought you were going to kick me out or kill me." He said, "What for?" I said, "I understand you're having troubles with Mexicans here, and on the sign it says, 'No Mexicans, dogs or cats allowed.' Did you know I'm a Mexican?" He said, "Yes! I knew you were a Mexican. I saw you the first time you came in. But your way of acting, the way you dressed, you're just beautiful. I like that. Now let me tell you about the other ones. Those two people got me into a lot of trouble. They came here, they sat down; and the first thing, they started making love to my daughters, and one started going beyond that. So I finally told them to get out. No sooner did I tell them to get out that they filed a complaint of discrimination. What would you do if you were in my shoes? You know how much money I spend in this restaurant to get the best clientele?" "Yes."

"Suppose I was you, and I was a gringo and I came in, and some of my little gringos came in and peed on the floor. What would you do?" I said, "I'd kick you out." He says, "Then you have discriminated against me ." I said, "No." He said, " But I would complain that you had discriminated against me." See, he was right.

M: Was there really a sign there?

R: Definitely. There used to be signs all over.

M: But in that particular restaurant?

R: Yes, that's right.

M: Isn't that a sign of discrimination?

R: I would say it would be. What he was trying to do there, he was not trying to get the Spanish speaking business.

M: Well, that's discrimination, isn't it?

R: Well, it could have been, it could have been.

M: He had a point with those two individuals.

R: But I'll tell you one thing: I look at his point of view. Had it been me in his shoes, I would have done the same thing; so I don't call that discrimination. I call discrimination when you are not wanted and kicked out. But when he accepted me the way I was dressed, to me that is not discrimination. He said that he would accept anybody that was well-dressed. Of course, when I made my report (and my report was made to our organization), the first thing the organization said was, "What are you expecting? He eats with gringos, he lives with gringos, he's paid by the gringos." Then when I went all around and investigated the other cases and I told my supervisor how these people were discriminated against, he said, "What do you expect? He is a Mexican." I was caught between the two. I never won; I always lost.

M: When and where was this?

R: I'm not going to tell you.

M: Just tell me when.

R: In 1949. There were several ones that I investigated.

M: Now, you were in the Service at that time.

R: No, I was a representative for the Veterans Administration. A number of times I investigated a lot of cases, but I came to find out in the end that it was not the way the individuals had pictured it. I have never seen in my entire life one person that has been discriminated against. I have heard of them, but I have never been discriminated against myself, so how could I say? And I used to go to Lubbock, Brady, New Braunfels, Hondo, Gonzalez, Sugarland--all the worst places in the world where there's discrimination, and I have never up to this day been discriminated against. Yet I knew a lot of people that were, my brother-in-law for one. But not me because I was always well dressed.

M: And you spoke English well.

R: I don't know about that. I always thought it was the way I was dressed; I was always well dressed. And of course, I'm a friendly type. That is why they love me in the whole state of Texas: Negroes, whites, blacks and blues, and in Arizona and New Mexico, too. I have more friends white than I have Mexican, because I integrate with all of them, and they're all my friends. I associate with Anglo people seven days a week, all big shots. And we talk about discrimination and they say, "You come to our place and we'll throw you out, you Mexican! " It's all a joke, because it's something that happened a long time ago. The way it did happen, I could see their point, definitely; because a lot of our families would have nine to 10 kids, and they'd use a restroom. One would pee on the floor, one would "do-do" on the floor, the other one would throw the milk;

and some people didn't have enough discipline to say, "Don't do that, don't do this." I would say If I had a restaurant, I would throw them out.

M: Mr. Rodríguez, could you tell us how you came to join the Service?

R: Well, I joined the Service voluntarily in 1943, during the war. I knew I had to go in, and so I volunteered. I was in Michigan when volunteered, and they said, "When you get back to San Antonio, we'll call you." When I came back, they called me, and that's when I went to the Service.

M: How old were you?

R: I was about 18 or 19.

M: You were single at that time.

R: Oh, yes, We were engaged. It took her about eight years to get me, and she got me!

M: How did she, your family and your friends feel about your leaving?

R: Oh, I left her so many times; I left her so many years! I left in World War II for four years and came back. Then I left her for another year and a half or two. Then I reenlisted and left her again. She got used to it but she felt bad about it. I said, "Wait, I'll be coming back." I was sure I would come back.

M: What was your experience in basic training? Did you have any thoughts on what to expect when you went into the military?

R: No, I was safer in the military than I was in my hometown.

M: Safer? Why do you say that?

- R: In my hometown in those days they had all types of gangs. I used to belong to the Black Shirt Gang, and if you went from one block to another, you had to fight everybody from there. As a matter of fact, (my wife) recalled one time, in her neighborhood, I didn't get along well with those people. She and I were at a carnival that was there, and about 90 of them came after me so I ran; I had to move. So I got away from them. Then I had to fight the Community Gang, the Eastside Gang, and the Riverside Gang. So, see, I was safer over there because I knew where the enemy was; and in San Antonio I didn't know which way they were coming at me.
- M: So when you went in you already had some fighting experience.
- R: I had more experiences than I could handle!
- M: What do you remember about basic training?
- R: I remember that I tangled with the First Sergeant and about six other sergeants. I tangled with every one of them. I didn't believe in their way of tactics, their way of handling people. Later on I learned they were trying to break me in, and they could never break me in. I was smoking a cigarette, I remember, and I knew all the laws regulating that; but I was pretty smart at it. I had read the regulations that said they anytime you were in formation, or at ease or rest, no one had the authority to smoke unless they'd been told to smoke. But if at anytime any of the non-commissioned officers were smoking in front of you, you had the privilege to smoke. So I noticed that one of the sergeants and the other sergeants were smoking. So I borrowed a cigarette from somebody and lit it and started smoking. This



sergeant came up and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm smoking." He smacked me right in the mouth with the cigarette; so I clobbered him right back. Then another one came and I tangled with him. I used to be a boxer. By then I had seven of them there and they beat me up. After they did they said, "Dig a hole." I said, "I ain't diggin' no damn hole." So they made me dig a hole about five feet. They said, "Throw the cigarette in." So I threw the cigarette in. Then they said, "Cover it up." So I did cover it up. And then he said, "What's in there?" I said, "The damn cigarette. Didn't you see it?" He said, "What type of cigarette?" I answered, "I don't know what type of cigarette." He says, "You don't just bury people because you bury them; you have to find out what you buried. Dig it out, and find what you buried." I think it was a Camel cigarette. And when I dug it out I tangled with them again. So I was sent to the hospital; and when I came out, the first one I saw I went after him. And he sent me back to the hospital again. The third time I came back, I saw the first sergeant and jumped at him, and he says, "Wait a minute, wait, wait, wait! Let me talk to you. I need your type of people. I'm going to make you a PFC." See, the Mexican had no rank there. If he was a sergeant, that was a lot of rank for the Mexican. And me, making PFC? So he made me a PFC. The first sergeant and I went downtown, and he was caught by the MP's. They arrested him, so they arrested me too! So they took my stripe away. That didn't last very long!

M: You say that the Mexicans there didn't have any rank. Were there

a lot of Mexicans in your unit?

R: Oh, definitely there were a lot of Mexicans. There were thousands of us. In my unit there was about 20 of us, and the doors were not open. Of course, a lot of them were not educated then. That's the difference between now and then. Now we have Mexican generals, we have colonels by the thousands, majors, captains, first lieutenants, first sergeants--everything. We've gone a long ways since 1945.

M: What was the general attitude toward Mexicans when you went into the Service?

R: None. They used to love you. Once they knew you were a Mexican they used to love you. They used to like you a lot.

M: Why?

R: 'Cause you were always fighting, and they wanted someone who could fight.

M: The Mexicans had a reputation for being fighters.

R: Yes, fighters; and they were. You could see that 90% of the Medal of Honor winners were Mexicans. I remember one time that we were fighting in Guadalcanal. There were nine of of us, and we were singing and laughing and smoking, and the enemy was looking at us. Of course we were not supposed to make noise, and this captain major came up and said, "What are you all doing? Don't you see you're making noise?" I said, "Don't you think the enemy know<sup>d</sup> where in the hell we're at?" Because the enemy was looking at us. I said, "The enemy knows. Can't you see them smoking?" While our boys were singing the songs, the Japs would listen to some; they were smoking

on top of the mountain. They loved Spanish songs. General Kruger came over and said, "You give me nine Mexicans and they will fight all the Japs." That was a beautiful statement, because later on General Kruger and I became very good friends. Remember, too, that they have never had a turncoat; not one Mexican has been a turncoat, against any enemy: The Germans or the Japanese. Never have they had any. That is a pretty good percentage, 100%.

M: Would you trace your career in the military from the time that you went in until you retired? Briefly tell me where you were and what positions you held, and so forth.

R: In 1945 I was in Guadalcanal, the invasion of the Philippine Islands, and other places. Then coming back after the war, I became the representative of the Veterans Administration for nine years. After that I resigned during the Korean conflict and went back into the service again. Then from there I was in the Cuban Revolution, Panama Revolution, Puerto Rican Revolution. Then I went back to Korea, and I flew from Korea to Saigon in Vietnam. I was in an inspection team. Then I became the first Mexican American to be Army adviser for the Army National Guard. As an Army adviser for the National Guard for seven years, as a Unit adviser for the 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry Brigade, Texas Army National Guard located in San Antonio, Texas, my mission was to train and organize the National Guard. I was fully responsible for all the training of officers and enlisted men. My duties were to plan and organize the entire training program, also set all inspections for the Fourth Army Commander, as to when he was to inspect the units. I also directed all operations of all training exercises, performed

all military duties, including personnel functions, administration and supply. I was also responsible for keeping paying cards on all officers and enlisted men in the National Guard in order to approve all payrolls submitted and forwarded to the finance office for payment. Following are some of the administrative records I maintained and supervised the maintenance of: enlisted personnel records, military pay vouchers, Texas Holding records, welfare fund, unit orders, special orders, classification files, mobilization plans, lettered plans, and SOP Property books.

M: Quite a few duties.

R: I was in charge of all of this. I had only one colonel with me, and he and I did all the job.

M: What was your rank in the military?

R: I was Master Sergeant, E 8.

M: Would you like to comment on the events that led you to winning the Congressional Medal of Honor?

R: To win the Medal of Honor is something hard to explain. Finally now I know about it; before I didn't know anything about it. See, we were in this position and the whole batallion attacked, and they were mowed down by the enemy. There were two of us--we had lost the whole platoon--Johnny Ruiz, who was an Indian, and myself. We were in the position where we could run back with the rest of them. That is why when they give you the Medal of Honor, it says it is "beyond the call of duty." So that's what we did. We fought 600 Japs single handed. When we attacked the station, I was with 340 Infantry, 37th

Division, stationed in Manila, Philippine Islands, 9 February, 1945. Of course, I entered the Service in San Antonio, Texas, and I was born in San Marcos, Texas. The citation reads:

"He was an automatic rifleman with a unit that attacked the strongly defended station during the battle for Manila, Philippine Islands. While making a formal assault across an open field, his platoon was halted at 100 yards from the station. On his own initiative, he left the platoon accompanied by a comrad and continued forward to 60 yards from the objective. Although under constant enemy observation, the two men remained in this position for an hour, killing more than 35 hostile soldiers and wounding many more. Moving close to the station they encountered a group of Japanese replacements, opened heavy fire and killed more than 40, and stopped all subsequent attempts to man the emplacement. Enemy fire became more intense as they advanced to within 20 yards of the station. Then covered by his companion, private Rodríguez and he both moved up to the building and threw five grenades through a door, where they killed seven Japanese, wrecking a heavy machine gun. With their ammunition running low, the two men started to return to the American line providing cover for each other's withdrawal. During this movement, Private Rodríguez's companion was killed. In two and a half hours of fierce fighting the enemy, the two killed more than 82 Japanese, completely disorganized their defense, and paved the way for the subsequent defeat of the enemy at this front point. Two days later, Private Rodríguez

again enabled his company to advance when he single handedly killed six Japanese, and destroyed a 200 mm. gun. By his outstanding skill with his weapon, galantry and determination to destroy the enemy, heroism, and courage in the face of tremendous odds, Private Rodríguez on two occasions maturely aided the advancement of our troops in Manila. For the whole citation, Private Rodríguez is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor."

Along with the Congressional Medal of Honor, I have recieved the Silver Star, two Bronze Medals for valor, six Purple Hearts for wounds received in action, the American Campaign Medal, the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, the Philippine Presidential Citation, Philippine Liberation Citation, The Distinguished Unit Emblem, The World War II Victory Medal, the National Defense Service Medal (the Oak Cluster) the Good Conduct Medal, The Merit Service Medal, The Army Combination Medal, and an Honorable Discharge from the U.S. Army. Of course the Merit Medal was given to me by Mr. Nixon. México so recognized me and I was given the highest award that the Mexican government can give to anyone of Mexican descent, due to the fact that my family came from México. So that ends all the career.

M; Well you were certainly a decorated soldier. I want to ask you if you recall what you were thinking as you were doing all this in the face of heavy enemy fire. Do you remember what went through your mind about your own personal safety?

R: Yeah, it never bothered me; when it comes to fighting, it doesn't bother me at all. The only way I looked at it was this: You never

know whether you're dead, you don't know whether you're going to be killed. Think of that. You don't know when you're going to be killed; there is no way in the world. You get wounded and you just get the feeling that you're hurt, but then you don't know when you're dead. Because the only time that you know anything is when you get back and you say, "I made it. I didn't get killed."

M: What motivated you to go beyond the call of duty?

R: Well, I didn't know anything about "beyond the call of duty." All I knew was there was the enemy in front of me, that they were going to try to shoot me, and we were going to kill them or be killed. Of course, now if you put a BB gun in front of me, I think I would run in the other direction. I know more about it now.

M: Do you recall having any fear at all?

R: No, I never had fear. I have never known fear. The only fear I've got is for my wife to catch me with another woman. Now that's fear!  
(Laughter)

M: How do you explain that? Would you say that's a part of being a mexicano?

R: No. I would say, I had more fear of my grandmother and of my great-grandmother. My great grandmother was a revolutionary of Francisco Villa, and my grandmother was with Porfirio Díaz. So the mother and daughter were fighting against each other. Everytime I went to see my grandmother she would say, "Well, I'm going to put you in the army and make a man out of you. You're supposed to be a man. You've got the blood we have, and you don't like to fight, you don't want to be in the Service. Why don't you join the Service?" I answered, "I don't

want to join the Service." She says, "Tiene miedo?" I said, "I don't care." Maybe that's why; it was always in the blood, because all the family were fighters, from revolution to revolution. I never thought there were going to be so many revolutions, either. But you know the funny thing about it is this: Every time I have a dream it always comes true. My wife and I were in Laredo in 1950 and I told her, "You know, I had a funny dream. I dreamed I was a long ways from here, fighting, and there was this big river, and the river was so full of water that people were drowning; and I was trying to cross it. I had a dream that Junior was there and I was trying to help him out, to get him out, to bring him back home. I was a long ways from home." My son was only three years old. 17 years later I was in Korea, and my son Junior was in the front lines and I was behind. So I went over there because they were attacking, and I went over to see him, to help him out. And at the same time that I was there, when all the fighting was going on, this river (it's the biggest river in the Pacific) was full of water and it was flooded. I was coming back across the river and it was shaking. I had already seen Junior and I was trying to get him back. Then it came to me that it was the same river I had dreamed 17 years before. Then I crossed the river three times, exactly the same three times that I had dreamed, and I dreamed that I would make it. It was impossible, but I made it, in a canoe.

M: How do you explain that?

R: I don't know. I had talked to my wife about it and 17 years later it



came true.

M: That's interesting.

R: So far, right now, I have not dreamed of going back and fighting another war, so it's all right.

M: I think you've done your share.

R: I don't know. In 24 hours, I've got two more years to go, and after that they can't touch me. I was just born like that. I just loved to go and tangle with those guys. Now I'm too fat, but it wouldn't take me very long to reduce. But I guess I have to take care of mama now. She doesn't have anybody to stay home with her. Before I had all my children.

M: How do you explain the fact that Mexican Americans, in proportion to other ethnic groups, have won the Congressional Medal of Honor at a higher rate? In your case, you say that your family was a fighting family from way back, but it seems to be a pattern with the Mexican people.

R: We were born fighters, I guess. If you read about the Alamo, of course it has been brought out that the battle of the Alamo was won by the Anglos, which is a darn lie. It was not. It took 100 years to prove that it was won by Mexicans against Mexicans. And if people don't believe it, go look at the Texas Cultures in San Antonio, Texas. We fought, and books can be changed. We are changing all the names that are on the monuments and putting Mexican names, the ones like Seguin and Navarro; they are the ones that started the revolution. There were thousands of Mexicans fighting against Mexicans, and only

just a few Anglos. So they took all the bragging of what they did, which was a bunch of lies. Now we proved to them, and history is changing. Now all the books are going to be changed, and have the real story. For 100 years they made the people believe that the Anglos did it, and it was really the Mexicans that did it. The first governor of Texas...Who signed the constitution of Texas into the United States? Seguin and Navarro.

M: There was another famous mexicano, Zavala.

R: It was the three of them, and it took two months to get to Washington. So there were no Anglos signing it, because there were none; just a few of them. And Davy Crockett was there because he was married to the daughter of the governor of Monterrey. That's why he got stuck there.

M: How do you feel about a place like the Alamo and San Antonio, and so many people who go visit that place as a tourist attraction? I've never been there, and I'm hoping to be there next week.

R: I hope you get to see the Texas Cultures, and you will see my picture there.

M: I'm looking forward to going there. But I have heard from people who have gone there that they have Anglo guides who take the traditional line of glorifying the Anglo defenders and putting down the Mexicans. You, who live in San Antonio, how do you feel about that?

R: They do not do that anymore. They bring out Davy Crockett and the rest of them, but we are still fighting so that they can integrate the guides and tell them what is done. When you go inside and see

the Texas Cultures, then you find out that somebody is lying, because all the pictures are there. Let me say something else. They always brag about the Texas Rangers, about the sheriffs departments, or they're always bragging about these people who used to be gunfighters. But they never told anybody about Gregorio Cortez. Who was Gregorio Cortez?

M: I can tell you just very briefly that he was a champion among the Mexican people.

R: He was the one that killed more Texas Rangers, more sheriffs, than anybody. I think it was 38, single-handed. In the Texas Cultures his name is there, and they have the amount of people that he had killed. Finally they captured him. Colonel Chapa was the one that saved his life. He was the only Mexican colonel in the U.S. Army. He turned him loose and he went back to México, and of course he was killed in the Revolution. But they never told the people that there was one Mexican that killed that many. It took 200 of them to capture him, after he was caught sleeping. We have got our history.

M: It hasn't made the history books.

R: It hasn't made the history books, but they're changing it now. It took us 100 years.

M: Do you think Mexican Americans have enjoyed equal opportunity in the Service? You have implied that they haven't.

R: Certainly.

M: After a certain date; you seem to think that World War II was the turning point.

R: It was a turning point; definitely it was a turning point. It was a turning point for you and your friend here, and everybody that is in college right now. Because had it been back in the old days, both of you would have been cotton pickers or maybe dishwashers.

M: How was it that it was a turning point? Could you elaborate on it?

R: It was the turning point because the Mexican Americans proved to the world that they were just as good Americans as any other American. Second, when they came back, a lot of doors were open. If there was an Anglo that hated a Mexican, say he went over there and his mother and father and brothers didn't want him to associate with you 'cause you were a Mexican. When he went to war, there was a Mexican right next to him. And when that man was wounded, that Mexican went for his rescue and fought the enemy and killed the enemy and saved his life. Maybe in saving his life, he was killed. When he came back home, the first thing Mom and Dad said was, "We're very happy you are here." The soldier would say, "Well, let me go see Mr. Hernández. I want to go there and tell them about their son." "The parents would ask, "What the hell are you going to do with those Mexicans?" The son would answer, "Wait a minute, Dad. Those Mexicans are good. I fought with them and I'm here on account of them. If it had not been for them, I would not have been here." Then mama comes and says, "If he's here because they saved his life, let him go." So they went and talked to the families. "Well, I was with Hernández and he was killed in the war, and he saved my life. I want to thank you." There were thousands upon thousands that did that, so that changed all

this talk about discrimination. Then came the Korean conflict; the same thing happened. Then Vietnam, and the same thing happened. Now my daughters married Anglos. Everyone, their daughters married Anglos, our sons married Anglo girls. The whole thing has changed. Then came something else. The government started giving us money to educate ourselves, and everybody took advantage of that. From there we went up. Back then you never had state representatives, you never had congressmen, you never had a chief of police, you didn't have anything. Now we've got everything. So that was the turning point right there.

M: You used the word "prove", that the Mexicans went to war and "proved" that they were Americans. Was this a necessary thing?

R: It had to be. You had to prove that you had as much gut as anybody else and that you had as much right fighting for the American flag as anybody else. You didn't care about the Mexican flag, you didn't care about the Japanese or German flags. You didn't care about those flags, they didn't mean a thing to you. But the American flag was your flag.

M: Why was it necessary to prove to this country that Mexican Americans were from here.

R: For centuries they were here before, but remember that during the war between México and the United States, they took Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, all those states. So you were not a Mexican, you were an intruder. You had to change your way of life. You were not speaking Spanish anymore, you had to learn the American way of life,

the English language. So that's why we had to prove. Of course, our new generation doesn't have to prove anything.