


6-13-1976

Interview no. 290.4

Alejandro Ruiz

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Alejandro Ruiz (1924-)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martinez
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 13, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 290 D
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TRANSCRIBER: Teresa Muniz
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Loving, New Mexico in 1924; was drafted into the Army in 1943; was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1946; retired from active service in 1964.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical comments; his joining the military and experiences he had while in the Service; discrimination; events that led to his being awarded the Medal of Honor; thoughts on the Chicano Movement and the word "Chicano."

30 minutes; 10 pages

This is an oral history interview with Mr. Alejandro Ruiz of Visalia, California on June 13, 1976 in El Paso, Texas. Interviewing is Oscar J. Martinez from the University of Texas at El Paso.

M: First, Mr. Ruiz, can you tell me where and when you were born?

R: I was born in Loving, New Mexico, in 1924.

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

Where were they from?

R: My mother was born in Pecos, Texas, and my father came from México.

They met in New Mexico and got married. My grandparents came from México.

M: What did your father do for a living?

R: He was a farmworker.

M: Where did he work in the United States?

R: In Loving, New Mexico. He died there.

M: When you were a little boy, Mr. Ruiz, do you remember what you wanted to do when you grew up?

R: I remember I wanted to be like my father, but as I grew up I changed my opinions.

M: What experiences stand out in your mind from when you were a boy?

R: I certainly don't remember. I guess I just wanted to be like my father.

M: How was it growing up in your town?

R: It was kind of dull because we lived on a farm, in the country. But it was normal.

M: Did you go to elementary school there?

R: No, I had no schooling. I did go to elementary school up to 3rd grade, then my father died when I was eight.

M: Do you remember anything about when you were in school?

- R: A little bit, not too much. The teachers gave me a hard time.
- M: The teachers gave you a hard time?
- R: I was sick, I had some kind of sickness. The teacher said that I needed some treatment, but we were too poor. It was during the Depression. I had no father, he had died. They were supposed to give me good food and other things. But I guess it was normal for those days.
- M: Were you very poor when you were a boy?
- R: People were poor; it was during the Depression.
- M: Did you start working early when you were a boy?
- R: Yeah. People of this time were poor people. They would take you out of school and put you to work. It was a hardship, it was hard to make a living.
- M: Where did you work?
- R: I worked in the fields, on the farms.
- M: What kind of work did you do?
- R: Picking cotton and chopping cotton. They were growing New Mexican cotton and alfalfa.
- M: You started working when you were about eight years old?
- R: I was somewhere around 10. I was working irrigating; field work.
- M: Did you experience any ethnic discrimination when you were a boy? In school or out of school?
- R: I don't recall. Like I said, I'm from New Mexico and we have a lot of Mexican politicians.
- M: How did you come to join the military?
- R: I didn't join, I was drafted.

M: When was this?

R: In 1943.

M: How did you feel about being drafted?

R: I was a little afraid, but I knew I had to go. I knew it was a job I had to do. I didn't feel bad about it.

M: Do you remember anything that stands out in your mind about basic training, boot camp?

R: Yes, I didn't like it! I was hard to get adjusted, but I finally did and after that I made a career of it.

M: What made you change your mind and make it a career?

R: At one point I hit it lucky, I guess. I had a good grade and I was getting good pay. If I got out I'd have to work in the fields again, so I had in my mind to stay in the service.

M: Where were you in basic training?

R: Camp Roberts, California.

M: Were there other Mexican Americans there at the same time?

R: Yes, there was a bunch of us. In fact, most of the people that were with me went to training together over here at Fort Bliss, Texas. They put us in school because we had no schooling. After three weeks of schooling they sent us to Camp Roberts, California for basic training, then to Fort Ord where we finished our advanced training. From there we went overseas.

M: How was Fort Bliss?

R: The first time?

M: Were you here several times?

R: I was stationed here two times. When I first came I was here about two months. The second time, after I came back from World War II, I got stationed here in Fort Bliss and I was here from '46 to '50. Then I got shipped out to Korea and after Korea in '52 I came back to Fort Bliss again, and I spent two years over here. I've lived in El Paso about six years.

M: How did you like it when you first came down here?

R: I loved it! I like this town.

M: What did you like about it?

R: I like the people. Actually when I came out of the service I was coming to El Paso but my folks had moved to California from New Mexico. So I stopped to see my folks over there. I met my wife over there and settled down there, I never did make it to El Paso. But me and my wife were talking about it last night and we might move to El Paso yet.

M: When you first came to El Paso during the war, it was a time when there were a lot of troops here. Fort Bliss really grew during that time and Juárez was very popular with the troops. Do you remember that time?

R: The first time I came to El Paso I didn't get to see too much because it was hard to get passes. I did go to Juárez one time, and to El Paso about four times with a pass, because they were pretty strict. It was too hard to get out. Like I told you, I didn't have any schooling and I had to go to the service school. Before you could get a pass you had to know the general orders, and it took me quite a little bit

of time to memorize it before they gave me a pass.

M: I remember a little bit when I was a kid in the '40s, and then reading about it in doing my historical research. In the minds of the soldiers Juárez was a wild place during those days because they were going off to war and it was the last chance to have a good time before leaving.

R: I did go to Juárez I think once and I drank over there. I was young, I was 18. Also in El Paso, on El Paso Street they had bars and I got my pass and had a good time. But like I said, that's all I remember.

M: Mr. Ruiz, what was your job in the military?

R: In my 20 years I've had all kinds of jobs. First, I came in as an infantry man, a rifle man. Then I got assigned to heavy weapons. I was a sergeant. I was in artillery--tanks, armor. My last assignment was Quartermaster. I was a First Sergeant and I was with the training units.

M: When you were in the service, did you ever experience or witness any ethnic discrimination against Mexicans?

R: Well, I had one experience at Fort Benning, Georgia. I came in and this Captain interviewed me. I was assigned to a First Sergeant that came from overseas. He was checking my records, my report for duty to him, and he looked at me and he asked me what I was, if I was an Indian or a Mexican. I told him, "I'm a Mexican, but I don't see what it has to do with anything. I'm assigned over to Ammo Mess and to fulfill my assignment. You either accept me or reject me." He said [something about the] Mexican people. I had about two occasions where I met people that were like that.

M: Can you remember the others?

R: Well, this was a Lieutenant and he actually told me that after many years of service that I should resign, that I should get out because I wasn't going to make it. I asked him why and I told him that I was doing as good a job as I could do. I didn't re-enlist and the batallion commander wanted to know why I wanted to get out. He couldn't see it because I had too much time in the Service. I never did say why, but I think he had the know-how or something. He told me that if within 10 days I still wanted to go he would approve my release. He told me to come back in a week. When I came back he already knew what the score was and that me and the CO couldn't get along too good. He promised he would put in another Captain.

M: Was this the same Captain that you mentioned before?

R: No, this was another one. Those were the only two experiences that I had.

M: Did you have a hard time with him because of ethnic differences?

R: I think so, because it was at the time that I was a Platoon Sergeant, and even people that were under me put in a complaint. They wanted to know why their platoon was always restricted, because we had done the same as everybody else and they kept us down.

M: Did you ever see any other Mexicans treated that way or discriminated against?

R: No, that happended to me, and the rest I don't know.

M: Now, was this after you had won the Congressional Medal of Honor?

R: Oh, yes.

M: And they were aware of it?

R: Oh, yes, they were aware of it.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about the events that led to your winning the medal?

R: It happened so fast that actually I don't know what happened. I know that I was pinned down, I was cut off, and I thought I was going to get killed that day. I made up my mind that if I was going to get killed, I wasn't going to go by myself, I was going to take as many as I could with me. I threw a grenade into a field box, and it exploded; it happened so fast that I don't remember.

M: Do you remember being afraid?

R: No, I don't remember being afraid, but afterwards I was afraid!

M: When you had time to think about it?

R: Yes! Like I said, it happened so fast that I didn't realize what was happening.

M: Mr. Ruiz, why do you think that so many Mexican Americans have won the Congressional Medal of Honor?

R: I don't know, I can't answer that. I guess it was just a duty we had to do. So the heck with, we had to go through with it.

M: Why are so many Mexican Americans more willing to expose their lives that way, more than other groups?

R: Well, maybe we saw blood, I guess. I don't know. Valor, maybe. We all have fear. There is no person, I don't care who, that tells you that he isn't afraid. Everybody had fear, because it is something that happens, I guess.

M: Did winning the Congressional Medal of Honor make a difference in your career after you had won it?

R: Yes, it did make a difference. I got a lot of breaks from that. Also every time I made a mistake the commanders would tell me that people were looking at me all the time and that I was supposed to walk a straight line and be an example. So every time I made a mistake they told me that.

M: Where were you awarded the medal?

R: In Washington, D.C.

M: And by whom?

R: President Truman.

M: Do you remember that occasion?

R: Oh, yes.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about your feeling at that time?

R: Well, I was feeling proud, and I was afraid to see the President. I was excited. I took my mother, my grandmother, and my family over there. I was happy, and it was nice.

M: How long did it take for the President to present you the medal?

R: It took a year. The commendation took place in 1945 and I didn't report to Washington till 1946.

M: The actual meeting with the President, how long was that?

R: About three hours, I think. Well, there were five of us there.

M: What else did you do when you were in Washington, D.C.?

R: They made us a banquet, we went to dances. We went to look all over the city, a tour.

M: Were the other people who were being awarded the medal, did it also include other Mexican Americans?

R: No, I was the only one in that group.

M: How long have you been retired from the military?

R: Since 1964.

M: Has winning the Congressional Medal of Honor made a difference in your civilian life after 1964?

R: I think so, because I didn't know too much. Like I said, I was 18 when I went in, and I was in for 20 years. I guess it had made a difference.

M: Have you held jobs in civilian life since you left the military?

R: Yes, I worked a little while at the county, but not too much. Actually, when I retired from the service I was disabled, then I went to the VA.

M: Do you think mexicanos were given equal opportunity in the service when you were in?

R: Well, like I said, I don't know too much about that. In my own opinion, my education held me down. I guess there was equal opportunity in civilian life. I don't know. I didn't have too much to do with civilian life. In my own part, I think I've been treated fair.

M: Do you have any thoughts on the Chicano movement?

R: Well, I think the Chicano Movement is coming up.

M: Do you think it is a good thing?

R: Oh yes, it's good. I know that Chicanos are coming up pretty good. Even myself, ever since World War II we Chicanos have come up a lot. I know myself in Texas there was a lot of discrimination before World War II. I think we came out pretty good.

M: What do you think about the word "Chicano" yourself?

R: I don't know, I don't even know what Chicano is. Chicano I guess is a nationality, I don't know.

M: When was the first time that you heard the word Chicano?

R: When I came out of the service in 1964, I heard Chicano. I don't know the meaning of it.

M: When you were a boy did you hear the word Chicano used?

R: No. I heard mexicanos. I think Chicano is a new thing. What do you think Chicano is?

M: Well, it has political, cultural, and ethnic meanings. Everybody has different opinions about it.

R: I thought Chicano meant a short name for mexicano.

M: Yeah. To me a Chicano is a person who has origins in México and who lives in the United States.

R: To me, this is the way I get it.

M: What are your future plans now?

R: Nothing, really; just live the rest of my life and take it easy.

M: One other question I wanted to ask you related to this LULAC event, is: Do you have any thoughts on the Bicentennial?

R: I don't know too much about it. I think LULAC is doing a good job, but I actually don't know too much about it.

M: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time to grant us this interview. This will help students, especially kids, to know a little more about what outstanding Mexican Americans have done in our society. I appreciate your taking the time to make it.

R: You're welcome.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

No. 2900

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