

Heroes of the Greatest Generation: Bill Munoz

by

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"I'm not a hero!" emphatically states 85-year-old Bill Munoz. But those who know the 5th Ranger Battalion World War II veteran disagree.

Of the 16 million American men and women who served in the military during WW II, only 7,000 were Rangers. Known as "spearheaders" for leading invasions, Rangers also infiltrated through enemy lines and tackled dangerous missions. Today, Rangers are best remembered through movies like *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Great Raid* and *The Longest Day*. The latter movie tells the story of the Normandy D-Day invasion, led by 2nd and 5th Battalion Rangers, but Americans often forget the hard, bloody invasions and fighting that occurred both before and after D-Day on June 6, 1944.

As a skinny, 17-year-old Topeka youth, Munoz pleaded with his mother to sign papers allowing him to join the military. Afraid for his safety, she refused, but he managed to enlist in the army shortly before he turned 18. He was shipped to England where the Rangers were recruiting. Munoz quickly volunteered, only to be asked by the recruiting officer why he thought he could be a Ranger. Munoz cited his proficiency with a knife. Testing him, the officer pasted up a target and, before he could turn around, Munoz threw the knife, missing the officer by inches while hitting the bullseye. He was in!

Munoz's best war stories are not for publication. He took an oath of secrecy for many of his missions and he keeps it. He says that Rangers were told not to expect glory, medals or promotions and that when they were not in combat, they were training. Although he never jumped in combat, training included parachuting from airplanes. He tells of carrying a wounded

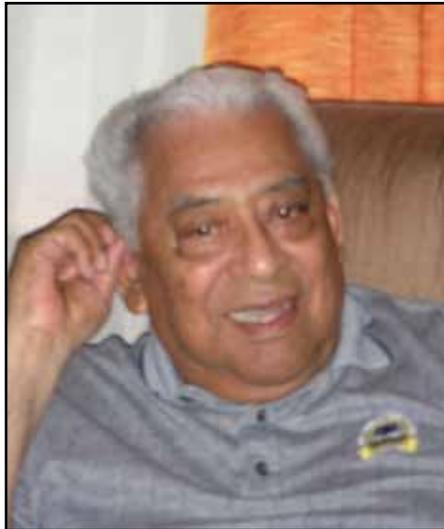
soldier around his shoulders for a long time only to discover that he was carrying a dead man. "I wouldn't have left him anyway," he asserts.

Munoz served as a radioman and was wounded in action, but refused a Purple Heart, saying he did not want his mother to know he had been hurt. His favorite story is of a poker game at war's end where he, a novice player, was deliberately allowed by his friends to win their money — "Well, your two pair beats my three of a kind!" — so he could accompany them to Paris. His buddies knew that he kept only \$11.32 of his monthly pay and sent the rest to his parents.

After the war ended in Europe, he volunteered to join the 6th Ranger Battalion, still fighting in the Pacific. He made it as far as California where he was hospitalized for two years for debilitating headaches, the result of his head wound in Europe.

Munoz returned to Topeka, went to college on the GI Bill and spent his working life in club management. He and his wife, Lupe, have four sons and recently celebrated their 60th anniversary.

He says he is not a hero. You be the judge.



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