

Bushmasters

Two generations of Arizona fighters on the front lines



Col. Gonzalez and Staff Sgt. Zamora of the 158th enjoy conversation with former Bushmaster Steve Zozaya as he shares stories of serving in their battalion during World War II.

Modern Bushmasters are linked to a battalion's storied past

By Angela Rabago-Mussi

In his office at the Arizona Army National Guard headquarters in Phoenix, Col. Alberto C. Gonzalez pulls a worn document from his desk drawer. The old papers show the history of his late grandfather's service from 1920 to 1923 as a member of the Arizona National Guard unit known as the Bushmasters.

Other bits of Bushmasters history decorate the room. On the wall hangs a World War II Bushmasters shoulder patch with its insignia of the namesake, deadly jungle snake coiled around a machete. A large Bushmasters sign from a 1988 dedication ceremony greets visitors when they enter.

For Gonzalez, the relics are more than just mementos and souvenirs of military history. Gonzalez turned to the storied and proud past of the Bushmasters for inspiration as he helped 'stand up' the unit when it was once again called into active duty in 2006.

Gonzalez, 42, served as commander of the latest incarnation of the Bushmasters during a 12-month tour of duty in Afghanistan. The unit returned in late March.

With over 600 Arizona soldiers represented in the 1st Battalion, 158th Infantry Regiment, this was the largest single-unit deployment of the Arizona National Guard since World War II. When the Bushmasters were last deployed in 1941, they were one of the most ethnically diverse regiments of the war. Its many Arizona Latino and Native American members earned fame as a hard-scrabble group whose training in jungle warfare coupled with their courage proved formidable against Japanese tactics.

Other than military history buffs, civilians rarely know much about the history of the Bushmasters, says Maj. Paul Aguirre, a spokesman for the Arizona National Guard. And too few know what an important role the Bushmasters played in the history of Latinos in the military.

Pete Dimas, who included interviews with former Bushmasters from Phoenix in his 2004 documentary *Los Veteranos*, argues that the Arizona Latinos who served during World War II and earned many awards and decorations for their heroism demanded social change and fought against discrimination when they returned home.

"They had confidence. They had already faced death so why would they be afraid? They came back and put that confidence to use," Dimas explains.

How they earned their fame

The history of the Bushmasters begins before statehood. The volunteer military group was organized and mustered into federal service in 1865 as the 1st Arizona Volunteer Infantry. Since then, the Bushmasters have gone through several different names and reconfigurations. In the late 1800s, the Arizona National Guard, 1st Infantry Regiment were part of the National Guard troops to respond after

the 158th got its nickname when it was deployed to Panama for training in jungle warfare. Perez remembers the poisonous bushmaster snake from which the group took its name as being "very aggressive. It doesn't give you too much time to pray before you're gone," he recounts.

A year of intense training in the jungles of Panama led to three years of combat until the return home at the end of the war in January 1946.

During that service, the Bushmasters were well-known for earning praise from Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who commented, "No greater fighting combat team has ever deployed for battle."

When soldiers saluted with a hearty "Bushmasters!" Gonzalez's response was the Bushmaster motto: "Cuidado!"

Pancho Villa's raid of Columbus, N.M. in 1916. In World War I, it was reorganized as 158th Infantry, 40th Infantry Division.

It was during World War II that the 158th Infantry Regiment earned recognition and respect as one of the most diverse regiments to serve. About 30 percent of the soldiers who fought with the 158th during World War II were of Mexican heritage and 22 Native American tribes were represented in the group.

Anthony Arthur delves into the World War II history of the group in his 1987 book, *Bushmasters – America's Jungle Warriors of World War II*. He writes that the "Indians and Mexican-Americans who had survived the Depression for the last 10 years on their reservations and in their barrios hadn't known an iguana from a mango six months earlier. But they knew about staying alive, and they transferred their skills to the jungle easily – or at least without apparent strain."

In Dimas' DVD, the late Phoenix resident and World War II veteran David Perez, who enlisted in the Guard in 1939, recalled how

The pride of those who served before

That defining endorsement and the history of Latinos such as his grandfather who served as Bushmasters before him was ever-present in the thoughts of Alberto Gonzalez as he led the modern-day 1-158th in Afghanistan.

"It absolutely inspires pride," Gonzalez says, now back in Arizona. He has been a full-time Arizona National Guard employee since 2000 and, with his recent promotion to colonel, is now the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. Though his stint with the Bushmasters is over and the civilian soldiers he served with have returned to their regular lives and jobs, that year-long deployment won't soon leave his memory.

When the battalion was officially activated in September 2006 and it became clear that they would be heading to Afghanistan, Gonzalez drew on the history of the first battalion to help build the new group's identity.

They quickly re-adopted the Bushmaster World War II motto. When soldiers saluted him

“No greater fighting combat team has ever deployed for battle.”

- Gen. Douglas MacArthur

with a hearty “Bushmasters!” Gonzalez would respond with the one-word motto: “Cuidado!”

“Believe me, I talked up the Bushmasters as we were deploying,” Gonzalez says. “I said, ‘We’re going into a great unknown, but at least we know when we’re going to start this mission and when we’re going to end this mission. The Bushmasters that served during World War II did not know when they were coming home. And they didn’t get home until January 1946. My hat is off to those veterans from WWII. There’s a lot of pride in that.’”

Of the many Latino soldiers who were part of this deployment, Fidel Zamora of Litchfield Park is one who clearly remembers the effect of revisiting the history of the Bushmasters. “Personally, I didn’t know about the history but Colonel Gonzalez, he was very adamant about getting the word out to the leadership so that all the soldiers understood the history and for us to continue to uphold that tradition.”

Throughout their deployment, Zamora says Gonzalez and CSM John Bauer, who was also part of the command team, often shared bits of that history at ceremonies and gatherings. “It definitely builds pride,” Zamora says. “We had a standard that we had to maintain or exceed for all those who fought wearing this patch in the past.”

Deadly modern mission

The Bushmasters tour in Operation Enduring Freedom in the mountainous land of Afghanistan was very different from the intensive jungle combat seen by Bushmasters in World War II, but offered similar dangers.

The unit suffered two soldiers killed in action: Staff Sgt. Charles Browning of Florence was killed when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device on June 1, 2007, and Pfc. Mykel Miller of Phoenix was killed on Sept. 6. Another 24 soldiers were wounded in action.

Soldiers of the unit earned awards including 26 Purple Heart medals, 10 Bronze Star medals with valor devices; 33 Army Commendation medals with valor devices; 60

Bronze Stars; 23 Meritorious Service medals and 410 Army Commendation medals.

During their tour, the group of 700 (of those, 580 were Arizona Guard members and an additional 100 soldiers from the Hawaii National Guard and Individual Ready Reservists rounded out the battalion), operated at 13 locations across Afghanistan. “They came from all walks of life,” Gonzalez says, “we had physician’s assistants, nurses, police officers, firefighters, construction workers, business owners, guys who worked for Department of Corrections, students. You name it.”

The battalion’s primary mission was to provide 42-person platoons to serve as security for provincial reconstruction teams. Day to day, this meant patrols, protecting military bases and providing personal security.

“We spent most of our time training the Afghan police and army to be self-sufficient,” Gonzalez explains. “We mentored them and taught them basics in planning and conducting operations, basic soldier skills. At the beginning they wouldn’t respond to an IED or an attack unless we went with them. But by the end they were responding and reporting back to us if they needed additional support. We definitely saw an improvement.”

Many soldiers worked closely with local elders in Afghan villages, assessing the needs of villages. Gonzalez was allotted about \$25,000 a month to fund quick projects such as building wells, repairing schools and mosques, and constructing roads.

He was surprised to find that even though they were an infantry unit, much of their work was interacting with local elders and government officials. “It was like a civics class,” he explains, with much of it teaching locals “how to work the process.” For villages that in the past were far removed from any governance, this meant the very basics of teaching the “government how to work for the people and teach people how to mandate that the government work for them.”

The overarching idea was to build goodwill and lessen the opportunity for terrorist groups

to recruit or take hold in the remote villages.

Just before their return home, a group rescued three U.S. senators whose helicopter was forced to make an emergency landing high in the mountains during a blizzard in late February. The D Company platoon and other service members responded from Bagram Airfield. At the time, the platoon had been in more than 100 enemy engagements since arriving in Afghanistan.

Lt. David Martinez, who served as a civil military operations officer in Afghanistan, says he figures they visited about 100 different villages during their time there. A real estate agent in his civilian life back in Casa Grande, Martinez says he learned a lot about construction skills while working in Afghanistan.

Martinez and his fellow Bushmasters have transitioned from war back to their civilian lives. Some took several weeks off after their tour ended to reconnect with their families. Many, like both Zamora and Martinez, had a year of catching up to do with their kids.

As for the unit, it’s in a rebuilding stage, Gonzalez says, and is under new command. Many who had been pulled in from various units will go back to their home units in the National Guard. But those who remain with the 158th will report this month for the first mandatory drill since their return with their respective companies in Mesa, Tucson, Gilbert, Prescott and Yuma. He says the Bushmasters “probably won’t be on tap to deploy again for a good 36 months, I would think.”

As Gonzalez resumes his post in Phoenix, he keeps his Bushmasters memories close with photos from “in-country” on his computer – photos that include those from a memorial service the group held for Sgt. Browning and snapshots of the Afghani interpreter who he worked closely with and for whom he is now trying to help secure a visa. On his bookshelf sits a framed thank-you certificate written by an Afghani official.

But perhaps one of the most memorable moments was the support the group received from former Bushmasters. “There’s a lot of Bushmasters around, even though they’re getting older than hell,” says Gonzalez with a smile.

He says one former Bushmaster who is now in his 90s was there to see the group off when they left for their deployment to Afghanistan and he was there again to welcome them back when they returned.

Arizona’s Bushmaster history and pride connects generations and nations, and Latinos with their long tradition of selflessly serving in