

# HEROES ON THE HOMEFRONT

A film tracks World War II's impact on Latino social activism

By Anita Mabante Leach

What started out as an effort to save a local church led one Phoenix native to document the story of how Mexican American World War II veterans united to create social change in the area.

The Sacred Heart Church stands as the lone survivor of the Phoenix government's efforts to wipe out the Golden Gate barrio and make room for the city's airport expansion.

Phoenix College professor Pete R. Dimas is part of a group of former Golden Gate residents who have held off the church's destruction thanks to a nearly 20-year-old proposal to turn the church into a veterans' museum and memorial.

"We submitted a proposal to the city in 1987," Dimas says. "That's where our negotiation has been stalled."

It was those efforts to preserve Golden Gate's history, said Dimas, that led to his labor of love, *Los Veteranos of World War II: A Mission for Social Change in Central Arizona*, a documentary film that he wrote and produced. Dimas said *Los Veteranos* was filmed using a hand-held camera and edited on a laptop.



Founding members of American Legion Post No. 41 gather in an archival photo from *Los Veteranos of World War II*.

"We decided to go for a 20-minute video, but the story kept on getting better and better," Dimas says.

## EAGER STORYTELLERS

In the film, nine founding members of American Legion Post No. 41 in Central Phoenix – the post's members are known as the Thunderbirds – recount the changes they experienced as a result of serving World War II.

"I had Joe Torres (a Post 41 member) call them before I called them, and I think that was a large part of (them agreeing to appear). Many of them feel it's time to tell their story," Dimas says.

The film sets the stage with an overview of Phoenix's origins and the part Mexican Americans had in its growth and development. Discrimination against minorities would become the norm. Yet Dimas says Mexican Americans responded eagerly to the military call to service in World War II.

*Los Veteranos* describes the formation of the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry and Regimental Combat Team, a predominantly Hispanic outfit much admired by Gen. MacArthur.

Sgt. Pete Dimas, the professor's father, discusses the 105<sup>th</sup> Infantry's fight at the Battle of the Bulge, and how he spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp. Pfc. Silvestre Herrera of the 142<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, would win the Medal of Honor in March 1945

for exceptional courage in the fields of France.

In chilling detail, Pvt. Joe Torres, recalls the horror of the crematory at a concentration camp near the end of the war.

"The first oven that I opened, I saw a whole bunch of skeletons of little children. They were cremated, burned there. So then I closed that one and I went to another one. It seemed like in that town, they burned all the little kids."

## BATTLES AT HOME

Coming home Latino war heroes still faced discrimination. But their war experience had changed them, inspiring many of them to challenge the status quo. One result: the formation of Post 41.

"When we got out of the service, some of us knew we had a mission," says former USS Makassar Straits radioman Ray Martinez.

In the years following the war, Post 41 championed the right for Mexican Americans to buy housing by applying legal pressure. Thunderbird members also established a medical clinic for needy families. Former state Sen. Manuel "Lito" Pena recalls Post 41's help in forming Community Service Organization (CSO), which mentored leaders across the Southwest, including Cesar Chavez.

Dimas says *Los Veteranos* is what he hopes will be a series of three documentaries on Latino war veterans, the next two focusing on the Korean and Vietnam wars.

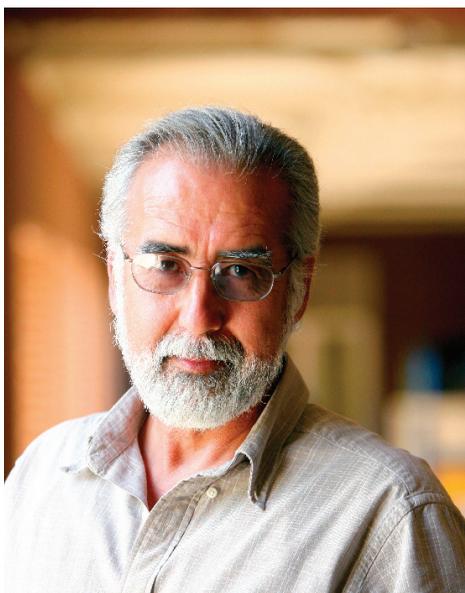


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Producer and historian Pete R. Dimas:  
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