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Company E families meet at book signing



Dave “Nachito” Gutierrez, author of Patriots from the Barrio, signs a book for Priscilla Leon of El Paso, niece of Company E member Manuel Rivera, during a book signing at Capt. John L. Chapin High School Saturday. Photo by Wendy Brown, Fort Bliss Bugle Staff.

By Wendy Brown, Fort Bliss Bugle Staff:

A family reunion of sorts took place in the rotunda of Capt. John L. Chapin High School Saturday.

Surrounded by the names of men who served in the 36th Division, 141st Combat Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Company E, which are painted on the rotunda’s wall, nearly 75 people gathered to meet the author of *Patriots from the Barrio*, a book about the Mexican-American unit the rotunda memorializes. The high school is named after the unit’s commander, who died with many of his men during the ill-fated Rapido River crossing in Italy on Jan. 22, 1944.

Dave “Nachito” Gutierrez, the book’s author, had invited family members of men who served in the unit to the special book-signing event, largely because he wanted to thank them for providing documents, photographs and interviews for the book.



Dave “Nachito” Gutierrez, author of Patriots from the Barrio, introduces and shakes the hand of Apolonio Reyes, a surviving member of 36th Division, 141st Combat Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Company E, at a book signing at Capt. John L. Chapin High School Saturday. Photos by Wendy Brown, Fort Bliss Bugle Staff.

Gutierrez’s cousin, Sgt. Ramon Garza Gutierrez, served in the unit, and many people, Gutierrez included, met family members at the event – some for the first time. It soon became clear, however, that Co. E, and the book, had created a larger family borne of the unit that had more to do with shared experience than blood relations.

“We’re all bonded by the heroes and the names on these walls and we will forever be,” said Gutierrez to the crowd. “Forever. And I don’t want that to end with us. Now we have a very important tool that we can hand our children and their children so that they will continue the tradition and keep learning about the men and women of Company E.”

Two members of Co. E, Alex P. Rivas and Apolonio Reyes, attended the event. When asked his name, Reyes, 94, simply pointed to the portion of wall where his name was adorned.

Reyes said he remembers firing his weapon and taking part in the river crossing, where he was not injured or captured.

After the war, members of Co. E regularly got together in El Paso for social events, and their wives would come with them, Reyes said.

It is about time someone wrote a book that focuses on the unit, Reyes said.

Alex P. Rivas, also 94, said he did not go overseas because, at the last minute, as the unit was about to ship out, his bosses pulled him out of line and sent him to Washington, D.C., to be an instructor.

Nonetheless, since he had spent a lot of time with the men in his unit and formed close friendships, he and his wife Alicia attended the Co. E events after the war, Rivas said.

Martin Luna of El Paso, son of Co. E 1st Sgt. Lorenzo M. Luna, said he believes there are fewer than a dozen members of the company alive today.

Dr. Carla B. Gonzales, principal of Chapin High School, said she and other educators do their best to preserve the memory of those who served in Co. E.

Every freshman who enters the school sees an 11-minute video that tells the story of all the men of Co. E, Gonzales said.

“For our kids to sit there and to actually see the video and the story and what they were up against in the Battle of the Rapido River, where Capt. Chapin was killed, is very powerful,” Gonzales said. “You can hear a pin drop by the time we’re done, and it helps set that tone for what we do here at Chapin High School.”

The rotunda, which includes a large sculpted memorial, is roped off so when students do enter the area, they are aware it is hallowed ground, Gonzales said.

“Everything we do is to instill the legacy of these men and what Capt. Chapin did and the inspiration he was to them,” Gonzales said.

Martin Castro of El Paso, nephew of Co. E member Ricardo Palacios, said his uncle, 92 years old, lives in Austin, Texas, and is a survivor of the Rapido River crossing.

Castro said he has not had a chance to read Patriots from the Barrio yet, but he is glad Gutierrez wrote it.

“I’m looking forward to reading it,” Castro said. “I think it’s great. It’s well overdue that they receive the attention they deserve.”

Priscilla Leon of El Paso proudly opened her newly purchased book to page 130 and said that was where people could find information about her uncle, Manuel Rivera.

Leon’s mother and Rivera’s sister, Lily Molina of El Paso, remembers when her brother was sent overseas to fight in the war, and it was an extremely difficult time for the family.

Molina said her mother wore black for the entire five years Rivera fought in the war, and she took Molina and two of her nine siblings, the youngest three, with her every morning to Catholic Mass, and back to church again at night to pray the Rosary.

“It felt like we went to war too,” Molina said.

During that time period, the family received not one, but two, notices informing them Rivera had died, but both were incorrect, Molina said.

Rivera took part in the Rapido River crossing, where the unit came upon heavy German fire from the other side of the river, Molina said.

A bullet hit Rivera in the arm, and he could have taken a boat to safety, but he saw someone who had sustained a worse injury than his own, so he told the other man to get in the boat instead, Molina said.

Rivera got out of the boat and swam.

Leon said she researched her uncle because he would never tell his story.

“I had to Google him to find out stories,” Leon said. “I would go to his house and see his medals, but he would never talk about it.”

Leon said she is glad to have the book to shed more light on her uncle’s story, as well as the other men of Co. E.

Talking to the Co. E family members, Gutierrez said his research for the book started from a simple curiosity about his cousin, but soon he realized he had to tell the story of the entire unit.

“I wanted to make sure that their sacrifice would live on, and never be forgotten,” Gutierrez said. “That’s why I wrote the book. That’s why. I wanted to make sure these men continued, long after I’m gone, someone could pick up that book and read about the men of Co. E, the all Mexican American combat unit.”

The book is available in hardcover, paperback and eBook at Xlibris.com, Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com and the University of Texas at El Paso bookstore.