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**Joe Olvera: 'Patriots from the Barrio' puts glory on soldiers, but not on their commanders**

*By Joe Olvera / Special to the Times*

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Gabriel Navarrete, Gabriel Salazar, Simon C. Jimenez, Roque Segura and Marcelino Valadez Sr. are among El Paso's heroes who served honorably and courageously during World War II.

They became known as the Men of Company E. More than 140 soldiers from this unit perished in a frightful battle in southern Italy. Ordered to cross a river known as Rio Rapido, they didn't hesitate and were decimated by the German Army entrenched on the other side.

Author David Gutierrez spent four years researching the subject and came up with "Patriots from the Barrio," an excellent self-published account of a battle that has been called the greatest fiasco in World War II.

In this suicide mission, Navarrete threatened to shoot the officer who had sent the men into battle despite his warnings that not even a battalion could successfully cross the river. Navarrete, beloved by his men, was never allowed to carry out his threat.

The story was hidden for decades because the Army had sacrificed more than 140 men in a fruitless and futile crossing.

These men were mostly from El Paso; the El Pasoans were mainly from Bowie High School. They were National Guard members who had been sent to battle, where they proved their courage in fighting an overwhelming force.

 I first wrote of their exploits in 1982 after meeting their company commander, Gabriel Navarrete. I was a voice in the wilderness, writing about the Rio Rapido fiasco in the hope that others would continue telling the story of these boys turned men who gave their lives to preserve our freedom but whose heroics were relegated to the back pages of history.

My uncle Simon C. Jimenez, known as "Si" by his friends, was "the tallest and strongest man in the unit," according to accounts. How he died goes like this in the book:

"Jimenez, Jesse Daly, and Guadalupe Martinez were pinned down by machine gun fire. The bullets from the machine gun were getting closer to their position and they knew it was time to move. The three got up and ran forward, Jimenez charged the machine gun nest, firing his rifle. He was closing in on the machine gun when he stepped on a mine. The mine detonated and wounded all three men. Jimenez immediately lost a hand and a foot. He fell close to a barbed wire entanglement. Daly, who was closest to Jimenez, lost his right arm in the blast. Martinez had one of his legs badly mangled.

"PFC Jimenez was still alive and saw the three soldiers and waved for them to come forward. The stunned soldiers watched in disbelief as PFC Jimenez crawled, then pulled himself up and draped his body over the barbed wire. In his last act on this earth PFC 'Si' Jimenez was still thinking of the mission given Company E. Ramon and Willie ran forward and used Simon's dead body to catapult them over the wire."

My uncle received the Bronze Star, as did Salazar. Navarrete received two Silver Stars and seven Purple Hearts.

Some soldiers survived, but the majority of the Men from Company E died in that fiasco. There were other heroes, too many to list in this review.

The book is available through XLibris, a self-publishing venue. It may be contacted at 1-888-795-4274 or xlibris.com.

I recommend you buy this book and read a true account of a suicide mission that never should have happened — yet did, thanks to the stupidity of the high command who ordered the men to their deaths, with the Army denying that it ever happened.

Sin fin.

Joe Olvera is a veteran journalist who has written extensively about El Paso and the border.