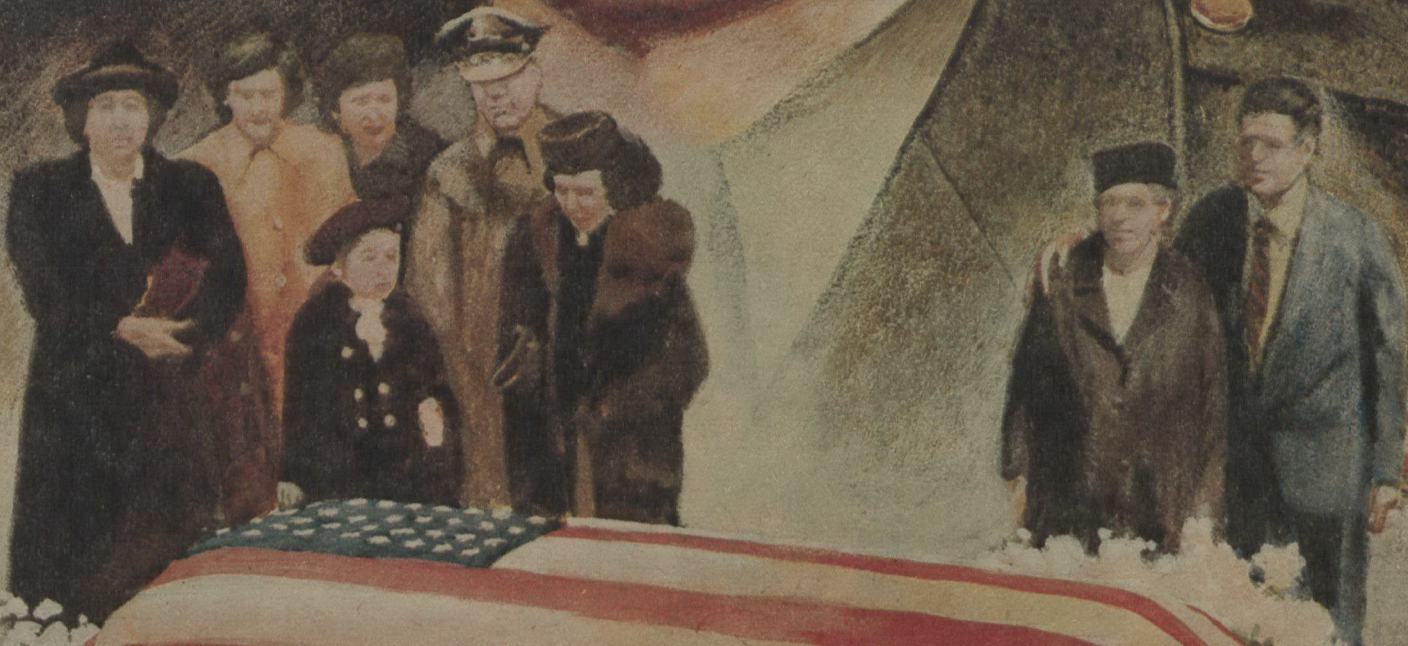


APRIL 6, 1975

SCENE

The Dallas Morning News' SUNDAY MAGAZINE

THE LEGACY OF
PVT. LONGORIA



Roy L. Wood

By **SI DUNN**
Scene Staff Writer

By June 1945, the war in the Philippines had settled into a pattern: American infantrymen and Filipino guerrillas, advancing across the steep, green mountains of Luzon, were tightening their encirclement of the Japanese and driving them into the Cagayan Valley, near the center of the island. There, cut off from reinforcements and supplies, the Japanese would be forced to surrender—or die. The liberation of the Philippines was just days away.

Units of the American 27th Infantry Division at first had had trouble gaining momentum against the enemy. On some days, dozens of men had been killed or wounded and only a few hundred yards gained across the rugged terrain. Many Japanese soldiers, honoring the ancient customs of samurai warriors, were choosing death over dishonorable surrender. Fighting fiercely in suicidal counterattacks and sniping from the trees and dense underbrush covering the hills, they were keeping the Allied advance slow and high-priced.

Felix Longoria, 38702692, Private, United States Army, had been in the Philippines three months when the final thrust towards victory began. He was a short, stocky, muscular rifleman, and the tropical climate did not bother him as much as it did some men in the 27th. Luzon's humidity and heat seemed to him little worse than summers he had known growing up in Three Rivers, between San Antonio and Corpus Christi. He had gotten just as hot and sweaty working in the oil fields of Live Oak County and driving a truck. And as a youth he had helped his father, Guadalupe Longoria, the best fencemaker in the county, put down posts and string up barbed wire for South Texas ranchers. That, too, in summers, had been hot, hard work.

But sharp, wooded mountains were not familiar surroundings to Pvt. Longoria. Three Rivers sits in a shallow valley. The land around the town of 1,700 rises gently from the confluence of the Atascosa, Frio and Nueces rivers and rolls away in smooth waves too small to be called hills. The few trees mainly are low, stubby mesquites and the open countryside evokes a sense of spaciousness not felt in Central Luzon.

Felix Longoria, at age 25, had been drafted into World War II on Nov. 11, 1944, the 26th anniversary of the armistice ending World War I. Like any sud-



FELIX Z. LONGORIA
TEXAS
PVT 27 INF
WORLD WAR II
APRIL 18, 1919
JUNE 16, 1945

The fallen Mexican-American GI could not have imagined the role he would play in spurring progress for his people

The Legacy Of Pvt. Longoria

A small, quiet ceremony was held recently near a headstone in Arlington National Cemetery. Members and friends of the American G.I. Forum, a Mexican-American veterans' group formed 26 years ago in Texas, gathered at the grave of Pvt. Felix Longoria, a Three Rivers, Texas, infantryman killed on a patrol in World War II. Pvt. Longo-

ria had been buried in Arlington in 1949, amid international headlines accusing his tiny hometown of refusing to let him be buried in Three Rivers because of his origin. Now he was being honored as "a symbol of victims of racial discrimination."

Leon Sanchez, national director of the American Veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, looked

at Longoria's headstone, then told his audience: "We can give him or his buddies very little. We can only rededicate ourselves to see that love, understanding, respect and dignity are given to our fellow man, regardless of his beginnings. That is the only way this visit can have any meaning. Rest in peace, our buddy, Felix Longoria."

soldier he had had mixed emotions about going. He had a young wife, Beatrice, and a daughter, Adelita, barely four years old, that he would have to leave. He knew he would not have to leave alone. The Longoria families of Three Rivers, tightknit in the Mexican tradition, took good care of their kin. Felix's parents, uncles and brothers lived in the only two-story house in impoverished "Mexican Town," on the west side of Three Rivers between the railroad tracks and the thin Cosca River. His father and an uncle helped found and settle the town in 1833, and for years Longorias had worked at the local glass factory, a major industry until oil was discovered in Live Oak County in 1931.

Early in 1945, Felix Longoria was sent across the Pacific with other replacement soldiers. He had never been far from home and now he was on his way to the other side of the world to fight for his country. He had no doubts that he would fight. He was a Longoria, and in South Texas his name was one of the oldest and most respected among Mexican-Americans and Anglos alike. He would do nothing to dishonor his heritage. He turned 26 on the 1st of April, 1945, on Luzon, a good soldier who did what had to be done.

A breakthrough had occurred into the Iloilo Valley and the trapped Japanese were falling back toward the Cagayan Valley. Somewhere in the gathering American assault, a sergeant called for some volunteers. A patrol was needed to locate a pocket of the retreating enemy. Felix Longoria was as weary of battle as others in his company. But he had never turned back on work, and somebody, he

knew, would have to go. He picked up his rifle.

The patrol eased into the woods and brush and headed toward suspected Japanese positions. The day was the 16th of June, and the rainy season had returned to the Philippines. In the past few days, booming monsoon showers had been forming against the western slopes of the mountains they were crossing. Suddenly, there were loud, short pops: Small arms fire. The patrol took what cover it could find and fought the ambush, but enemy bullets struck and Felix Longoria was among those killed.

He may have had a few moments to think before he died. To think of home perhaps. His wife and child and family. The narrow rivers and wide sky. The oil fields. Mexican Town. And the tiny cemetery where he had imagined he might one day be buried.

The cemetery. At first, Catholic Mexicans and Protestant Anglos had shared Three Rivers' cemetery, just as they had shared the founding of the town. Then, one day in 1924—Felix was five then and too young to understand what such things meant—a delegation of Anglos approached his father, whom they looked upon as a spokesman for Mexican Town. The cemetery was getting "too crowded," they told Guadalupe Longoria, and would the "Mexican people" please set up a cemetery of their own?

The new "Mexican" cemetery adjoined the "crowded" one, which Anglos continued to use. Somebody erected a

crude fence between the two burial grounds.

Felix Longoria was not buried at Three Rivers, as he might have wanted to be, but temporarily in a military cemetery in the Philippines. Then, in 1949, Pvt. Longoria was laid to rest in a hero's grave in Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C., amid a storm of international headlines and radio broadcasts charging his hometown with racial discrimination. Three Rivers' funeral director had refused Longoria's widow use of his funeral chapel because "whites would object."

When Felix Longoria fell that hot June day on Luzon he could not have known that 29 years later he would be honored as "a symbol of victims of racial discrimination." Or that in 1975 thousands of Mexican-Americans would remember him as a martyr who brought unity and momentum to civil rights movements in Texas and the United States.

"The Longoria-Three Rivers affair," wrote Tony Castro in his recent book, "Chicano Power: The Emergence of Mexican America," "aroused the anger of Mexican-Americans in the state, and the next year a group met in Corpus Christi to bring together their protests of the Longoria incident and of other discriminatory treatment suffered by U.S. servicemen.

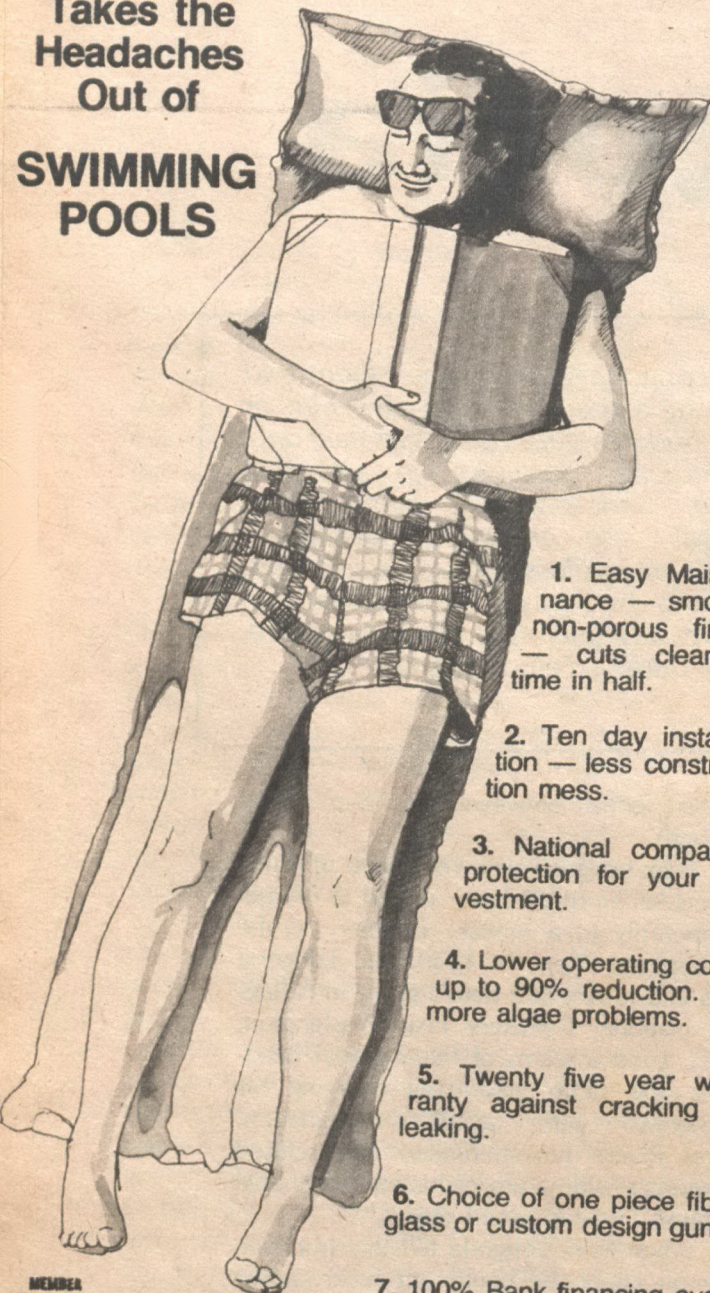
"Dr. Hector Garcia, a World War II combat surgeon who later served as an alternate delegate to the United Nations under President Johnson, organized the American G.I. Forum, which eventually became the largest Mexican-American organization in the country.

"Together with LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), organized

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◀ The Legacy of Pvt. Longoria



Relatives of Pvt. Felix Longoria and a military aide stood in a cold rain as the Three Rivers, Texas, soldier finally was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on Feb. 16, 1949.

in 1929 also in Corpus Christi, the G.I. Forum set up as goals the social, economic and political rights of Mexican-Americans . . . (and) both organizations became active in seeking changes through the courts and some of this litigation served as precedents in later school desegregation actions."

* * *

Dr. Garcia, 61, continues to practice medicine in Corpus Christi and to work with the G.I. Forum, which now has chapters in 28 states and the District of Columbia. Twenty-six years ago, when he learned through a patient that Beatrice Longoria had been denied use of Three Rivers' funeral chapel for Felix's services, Dr. Garcia sent 17 angry telegrams to the outside world. He sent them to senators, congressmen, military leaders, state officials and journalists. One reached the then-junior senator from Texas, Lyndon Baines Johnson, who quickly arranged for Longoria's burial in Arlington National Cemetery while the body still was aboard an Army transport ship en route from the Philippines to San Francisco. Johnson also responded with a telegram to Dr. Garcia

stating that he "deeply regretted to learn that the prejudice of some individuals extends even beyond this life."

Two of Garcia's 17 telegrams went to radio news commentators Drew Pearson and Walter Winchell. Winchell reportedly went on the air the following night with these words: "Mr. and Mrs. North America and all the ships at sea, this story is on the front page of every newspaper in the United States, and that's where it should be!"

Pvt. Longoria was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on Feb. 16, 1949, during a drizzling winter rain. Eighteen other soldiers killed in World War II also were reburied nearby during the mass ceremony. But the attention of the gathered press was focused on those standing near Felix's flag-draped casket. Mexican-American groups and Anglo friends in Three Rivers and Corpus Christi had raised more than \$2,000 to fly the Longoria family to Washington. Gen. Harry H. Vaughan, President Truman's blunt-spoken military aide, arrived early and told reporters he was there for the reburial of "that Longoria boy from Texas, which got all that unfavorable publicity because of the stupidity of that undertaker." Mexican diplomats

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and officers arrived bearing floral tributes. And Sen. Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, U.S. Rep. John Lyle of Corpus Christi and a Mexican affairs specialist from the U.S. State Department, stood by as the flag was removed from Felix's coffin and presented to the tearful widow while "Taps" was played and rifle salutes were fired.

Pvt. Longoria's funeral was suitably covered that year by *The New York Times*.

Dr. Garcia now views the 1949 Longoria incident as "a turning point for many things." He says, "It was a turning point for the American G.I. Forum; it was a turning point for Lyndon Johnson—I think it pushed Johnson into national prominence; it was a turning point for the thinking of some Anglo Texans. It was a catalyst for the cause of Mexican-American civil rights.

"People say Johnson followed President Kennedy's civil rights ideals. I can't argue that away, but I say Johnson would have pushed civil rights from the very beginning if he could have. He was like this. But of course, if you were like this in '48 or '49 and you espoused it before the Texas establishment, you were a dead duck politically.

"As it was," Dr. Garcia contends, "they started calling Johnson many bad names (as a result of his involvement in the Longoria incident). I think they insulted the man pretty much."

Garcia adds: "You've also heard it said that the Mexican-Americans are following in the black people's civil rights trail. I have only admiration and respect for the black civil rights movement. But for it to be said that we followed in the tracks, no, I think it was the other way around. We established points in law, precedents that they followed through.

"The Felix Longoria case helped us very much," he concludes. "But I don't think anybody was victorious. It was a tragedy."

* * *

Tom Sutherland, now an English professor at The University of Texas at Arlington, was working in Austin as executive secretary of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission at the time of the Longoria incident. He received one of Dr. Garcia's telegrams. The Good Neighbor Commission had been established during World War II and sought to improve relations between Texas and Mexico and other re-

publics in Central and South America. Sutherland recalls his initial response to the Longoria affair: "Newspapers called me and asked what I thought: 'Is this discrimination?' I said, 'Yes, it is.' I didn't bother to ask Gov. (Beauford H.) Jester what to think or say, because I considered that if I had been hired for the job (with the commission) not because of any political reasons but on account of my knowledge of Texas, Mexico, Mexicans and Spanish, then I knew what to say. I said, 'Yes, it was discrimination.'"

Angered by Sutherland's candor, Rep. J.F. Gray of Three Rivers urged the Texas Legislature to abolish the Good Neighbor Commission and called for an investigation into the reburial controversy. Five members of the Texas House were appointed to the committee which conducted hearings in Three Rivers.

Newspaper accounts of the hearings do not mention the tense atmosphere outside the Rotary Club building as Garcia, Sutherland, members of the Longoria family and others arrived to testify before the committee. Sutherland: "It was a dangerous atmosphere. It was like high noon in a Western movie. That's how ugly the attitude of the hangers-around was. One man showed a long Bowie knife. And other men said in loud voices so they could be overheard: 'You know, really, this Longoria bunch, they're just a bunch of lowdown greasers.'" Both Sutherland and Garcia recall that a South Texas sheriff with a reputation as a "killer of Mexicans" also was present—"just standing around with his gun on," Sutherland says, "and long and lean and looking just as mean as his .45."

The Longorias, Garcia and Sutherland all received threatening letters or telephone calls, and the wheels of one witness' car were loosened. But the act was discovered before it caused an "accident."

During the five days of hearings, funeral director T.W. Kennedy admitted he had said "whites would not like it" when Beatrice Longoria asked to use the funeral chapel, but denied he was prejudiced toward Mexican-Americans. Kennedy contended that there was considerable evidence "to the effect that there has been trouble" between the wife of Felix Longoria and the rest of Longoria's family, and that he was "referring to the fact that the 'whites' would not like the disgrace of a public disturbance at a funeral in the chapel." He said that he had suggested Bea-

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Ponce recalled that the barber glared at him and said, "I'm sorry, but we don't serve Latin Americans"

trix use her home for the service, as Mexican-Americans in Three Rivers usually did. Kennedy later publicly apologized for his use of the word "whites." Felix's widow told the committee she had been "mortified and hurt" by Kennedy's refusal of the chapel. And the Longoria family's lawyer, Gus Garcia, charged the committee with having made up its mind in advance "that denying the use of a funeral chapel because Longoria was of Mexican descent is not discrimination."


Amid the investigation, a new barber-shop opened for business next door to the Rotary Club building. Juventino Ponce, then 29 and a veteran of World War II, walked into the barbershop and asked for a haircut. The barber, Ponce later recalled,

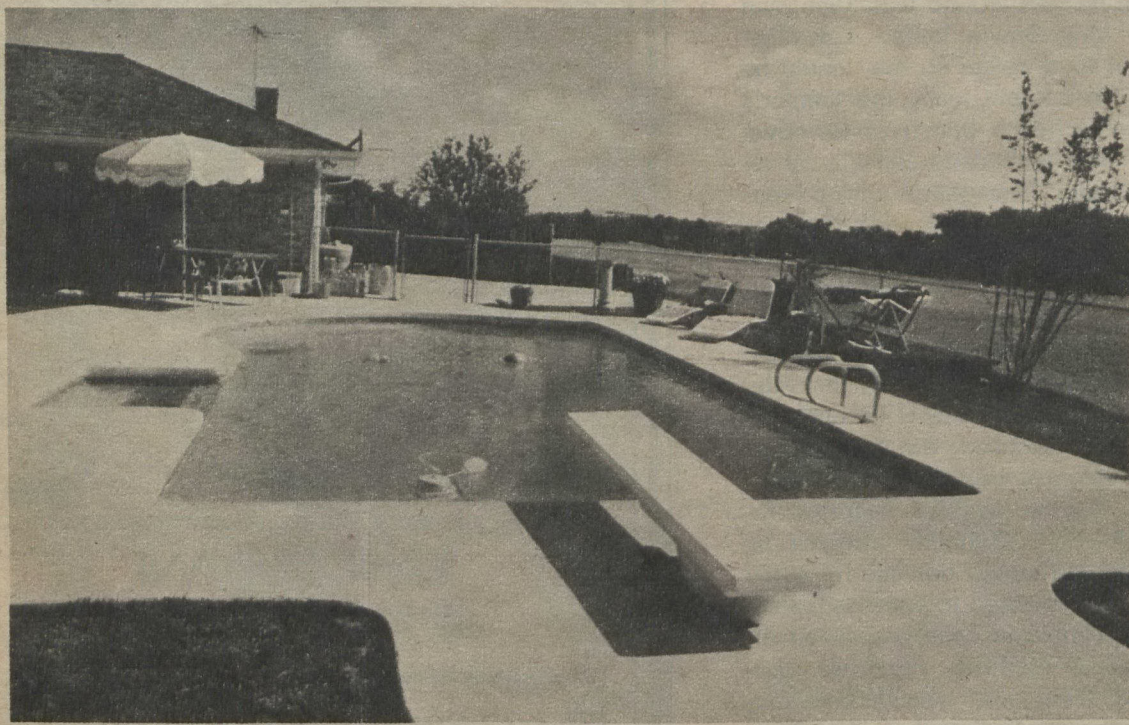
glared at him and said, "I'm sorry, but we don't serve Latin Americans."

On April 7, 1949, four of the five members of the committee filed a majority report with the House absolving Three Rivers and the funeral director of all charges of discrimination. State Rep. Frank C. Oltorf of Marlin filed a minority report disputing the majority's findings, and one day later Rep. Byron Tinsley of Greenville requested that his name be stricken from the majority report. Tinsley stated in a telegram to House Speaker Durwood Manford, "It was my feeling that there was haste in making a majority report into the Longoria incident."

Also on April 8, State Sen. Rogers Kelley of Edinburg charged the majority report was "a slap in the face of the more than one million Latin American citizens of the

state of Texas . . . (and) a tragic blot on the democracy of Texas and the United States."

But the most eloquent and moving statement already had been made. Four days after Felix's funeral, a man who was now too old to build fences and who had lost a beloved son in a war, filed a notarized statement in Live Oak County. "If any embarrassment has been caused by this case to anyone," Guadalupe Longoria had written, "I'm sorry. But after all, I did not create a feeling of prejudice which seems to exist in many places in Texas against people of my national origin. Other people are responsible for that. I think that we would only be fooling ourselves to try to leave the impression that people of Mexican descent are treated the same as anyone else throughout the State of Texas." 



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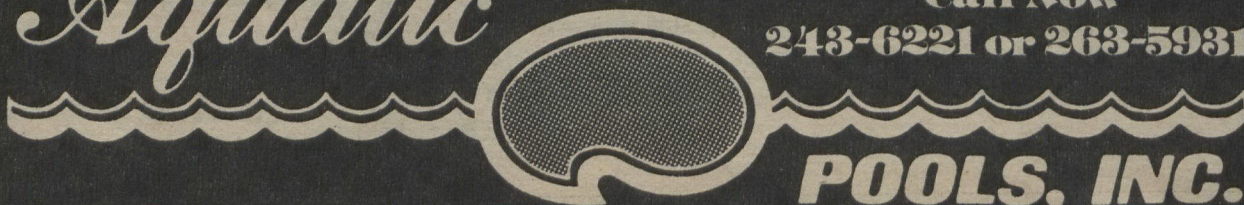
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