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[Battling Ken Burns' War Story](#)

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by [Lisa Pierce](#)

In a weird way I have Ken Burns to thank for motivating me to learn more about my grandfather's World War II experience. In the wake of Burns' omission, then cursory inclusion, of Latinos in his documentary on World War II, "[The War](#)," my uncle and I have been swapping my late grandfather's war stories. I knew part of the story, the humor and the heroics, but it turns out my grandfather had shielded me from the most horrific aspects of his experience.

Here's what I knew: In 1941, Tom Flores was a junior in high school, a first-wave Nuyorican whose family had come to New York almost immediately after the [Jones Act](#) made all Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens. After the U.S. declared war with Japan, he spent six months working through a year and half of studies with the local Jesuit priest, a father figure to a fatherless boy. He graduated a year early and enlisted in the Army. Like so many Spanish-speaking teenagers he ended up in the Philippines, where he earned a Bronze Star and a field commission.

Here's what my uncle knew: My grandfather and his unit were taken captive. They nearly starved and they were subjected to torture. At 18 he watched as one of his closest friends was intentionally shot and killed in front of him, so that he would disclose information that, as a private, he did not even have. Eventually, he managed to escape. He spent much of the rest of his life in battle, in two other wars and countless military actions, eventually reaching the rank of Major in the U.S. Army. My uncle plans to share all he knows of my grandfather's story with the [U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project](#), a venture launched in 1999 by University of Texas Professor Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, an early critic of "The War."

Initially, Burns defended his omission and maintained that "The War" was never designed to be comprehensive but simply aimed to examine the home front and battlefield from the point of view of four "quintessentially American towns." Unfortunately, PBS and its corporate partners weren't backing Burns's

“slice of life” cover story. In a November 2006 press release it had been touted as “possibly the most complete rendering of war ever captured by a documentary.” Not World War II, mind you, but war itself.

And therein lies part of the problem for PBS. Though the U.S. government did not keep records for Hispanics in the 1940s, then as now, military experts believe, Hispanics were over-represented on the battlefield and on the casualty lists in comparison to their concentration in the U.S. population. Between 250,000 and 500,000 Hispanics likely served in World War II and, because they were more likely to be shipped to the Spanish-speaking Philippines, where some of the bloodiest fighting of the war took place, they were more likely to be wounded or killed. These details don't come from Hispanic veterans' groups like [Defend the Honor](#) or the [American G.I. Forum](#), but from the U.S. Defense Department.

Now as then, despite facing increasing racism at home, including the deportation of family members, Latinos continue to pull more than their fair share of the load on the battlefield. Latinos make up 15 percent of the U.S. population but 17.7 percent of the front-line soldiers serving in Iraq, and a full 24.7 percent of Army infantry and gun crews, according to the Department of Defense; and according to a [study](#) conducted by [Samuel H. Preston and Emily Buzzell](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, Hispanics are 20 percent more likely to be killed in action than non-Hispanics. Now as then, Hispanics tend to be more likely than their non-Hispanic comrades to volunteer for the most hazardous assignments and to display extraordinary valor in carrying them out.

But Latinos don't just make up a larger concentration on the battlefield. According to Nielsen Media Research, those of Hispanic origin make up a higher concentration of PBS viewers than their considerable and growing concentration in the overall U.S. population. PBS can't afford to alienate Latinos – we're some of the network's most loyal viewers. Incredible in view of the fact that the network has had to defend its history by referencing Hector Galan's 1996 documentary “[Chicano: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement](#)” as proof that they support ambitious programming for Latinos.

Perhaps the need to reach back across eleven years of programming to defend themselves caused PBS to take the protests of Latino veterans and their families more seriously. In recent weeks, Burns and PBS executives seemed almost chagrined about the omission and about their past programming neglect. Ignoring cries to resist the pressure of “minority special interest groups” by critics on both the left and the right, Burns was humbled enough to tap Galan to help him add footage from interviews with two Latinos to the 14-plus-hour film. (Burns has also added back an interview he'd cut with a Native American veteran.) And, in the lead-up and aftermath of “The War's” Sept. 23rd premiere, Latino filmmakers will be getting some long-overdue airtime for their projects.

Though many Latino veterans and their families are far from satisfied by Burns' compromise (he's repeatedly called it “taking the high ground”), Galan and other Latino documentarians are hoping PBS's contrite overtures toward a long-neglected, substantial, and growing segment of its audience will translate to increased funding and air time for Latino programming. “Now is the time,” Galan recently told the Associated Press. “I think we should seize the moment when it is there.”

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