

## Mario Estrada: Two wars, five awards for valor



Rimrock resident Mario Estrada fought in World War II and Korea. He was awarded four bronze stars and a silver star for valor. Yet when he retired after 10 years of service he left without a scratch.  
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By Steve Ayers

**CAMP VERDE** – Born in El Paso, Texas, to a Mexican immigrant father and half-white Mountain Apache mother, Mario Estrada would, over the course of his military career, set a standard for bravery, intelligence, and if you believe everything he says, gold bricking.

Estrada joined the Army in July 1943, as soon as he turned 18 years old. A skinny gangly kid with a big nose, his buddies called him “Moose.”

His war began on D-Day plus 21, when his unit, the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion, was posted near the Norman crossroads town of St. Lo.

He would participate in the Normandy breakout and steam roll across France before finding himself at another crossroads town, this in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium, on the morning of Dec. 16, 1944.

The 526th would play a critical role turning back the German offensive in the Battle of the Bulge, before making a run for the Rhine River and crossing at the famous Ramagen Bridge.

When his unit wasn’t engaged in battle, or laying about on the sidelines liberating wine cellars and enjoying the spoils of war, it provided personal protection for Gen. Omar Bradley.

“It was a good life. We hardly ever had anyone around telling us what to do,” Estrada claims.

By the time the war ended, the 526th occupied the German city of Wiesbaden, and Estrada had two bronze stars, one for “exemplary conduct in ground combat with the enemy” on March 6, 1944, the other lost somewhere in the military records of World War II, along with Estrada’s own memory.

An attempt to enter civilian life following the war lasted barely a year.

During his first stint, he went in and came out a private first class. When he came back in 1947, he

joined the 82nd Airborne Division. They sent him to officer's candidate school. He re-entered active duty as a 2nd lieutenant on Nov. 4, 1949.

Less than a year later he found himself leading a platoon as it came ashore immediately following the invasion at Incheon, Korea.

On the night of Feb. 4, 1951, outside the Korean town of Chip'yong-ni, he was ordered to secure a landmark known only by the designation of Hill 30. During the fight he led from the front, routed the enemy, fell back briefly during a counterattack, and then led his men back.

A witness to the fight stated that when the smoke cleared, Estrada's unit was atop the hill and 80 enemy bodies lay about their position.

For his bravery he received a Silver Star, the Army's third highest award. His unit commander had requested a Medal of Honor for him.

Less than two weeks later, the Army changed its tactics and began to stand its ground and slug it out with the Chinese and North Koreans. At the battle of Chip'yong-ni, they proved they could go toe-to-toe with the best the enemy had to offer.

During the battle, described by military historians as one of the most bitterly contested engagements of the war, Estrada served as this unit's S-2 intelligence officer, directing the hundreds of air strikes that proved crucial to the battle's outcome.

By the time he shipped home he also had two more bronze stars and a pair of captain's bars.

His ability to direct units under the most chaotic of situations gained him a job as an Army Ranger instructor, teaching the military's best soldiers the ways and means of combat.

Among his graduate students were Col. David Hackworth, creator and commander of Tiger Force, a unit of American guerrilla fighters in Vietnam, and Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons, a Special Forces commander best known for his daring raid on a North Vietnamese prison camp.

Estrada met his wife while teaching combat tactics. She never much cared for his job. He was discharged in 1954, leaving his 10-year military career and two wars with not so much as a scratch.

Today he lives with his son Rob in Rimrock and wonders why anyone would be interested in hearing his stories.

"It's funny," he says, "I don't remember a lot of the bad things I saw, but I remember most of the good stuff."