

Stockton man spent years trying to forget his war experiences

Vida en el Valle

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As he sat recently at the kitchen table in his Stockton home, Perfecto P. Flores opened a gallon-size Ziploc bag and emptied its contents. Out tumbled the blue boxes containing the medals he earned while serving in World War II.

A couple of others - the Purple Heart and Bronze Star - already lay on the table.

Unlike many veterans whose medals rest in display cases, Flores keeps his along with some black-and-white photos and other mementos in a box in his garage.

He acknowledges that for a long time he tried to forget the nearly three years he spent in the U.S. Army.

"He never really talked about the war," said Flores' nephew Perfecto Munoz. "I knew he had a Purple Heart because our mother told us."

Flores didn't even share his war experiences with his wife, Carmen.

"He never wanted to talk about the war," she said.

Flores' perspective began to change this year after he was interviewed for a book about his unit, Company B, 526th Armored Infantry Battalion. The unit was eventually attached to the 30th Infantry Division, which comprised mostly Mexican-Americans from Texas.

A few weeks ago, Munoz spent a couple of days talking with his uncle and taping his reminiscences.

"One thing he said was that when he came back, he was very different," Munoz said. "It was really hard for him to think about the people he lost. He saw some things that were just terrible."

Born and raised in Stockton, Flores, 83, entered the Army when he was 19 or 20. He can't remember his age, but he does recall his enlistment date - March 19, 1943.

While he could have received a deferment as the sole provider for his mother and siblings, Flores said, "I asked to go up right away."

All his friends were enlisting, he said, and he didn't want to be left behind. Prior to joining, the farthest he had traveled from home was San Francisco.

"When I crossed the California line, I cried like a baby," Flores said.

He went to Fort Knox, Ky., for training and became a member of the Special Troops, or T Force. Members had to have an IQ of 110 or more, he said. Flores' was 118.

Flores had the choice of going to officer candidates school or noncommissioned officer school. He chose the latter.

After 13 weeks at Fort Knox, Flores spent another six months in the Arizona desert training on the General Grant tank. Although three battalions trained on the Grant, Flores' was picked to go to Europe. The other two were sent to the Pacific.

The battalion arrived in Wales three months before the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944. They set up camp in an apple orchard and began re-training.

In his European campaign, Flores survived many ferocious battles, chief among them the assault on Malmedy, Belgium, in the winter of 1944-45. "We were the first troops in Malmedy," Flores said.

According to a photocopy of an article he keeps, "dozens of GIs were gunned down in cold blood by soldiers of the 1st SS Panzer Division on Dec. 17" in Malmedy.

Flores witnessed other atrocities. He recounted how the Germans would line up prisoners and shoot them, then stack the bodies like firewood and use them as cover.

Then came Jan. 3, 1945, when Flores and his unit were advancing up a hill in Malmedy. The men had been told there weren't many Germans on the other side. The information proved wrong. Two divisions - 28,000 soldiers - waited for them, he said.

As they climbed the hill, a young soldier from the South, Gordon Blaisdell, was to Flores' left. "He said, 'Hey, let's go get them,' " Flores recalled.

Flores told Blaisdell there were too many soldiers.

"He raised his head and got hit by a sniper's bullet" and was killed instantly, Flores said.

Instinctively, Flores went to his fallen comrade. In doing so, he was hit in the back by shrapnel. The troops regrouped, reinforcements arrived and the Allies eventually won the battle. By then, Flores was in a hospital receiving treatment for his wound.

Luck was with him when he arrived at the combat hospital. The medic was an acquaintance from high school.

"He wiped my face and recognized me. He said, 'Doctor, doctor, he's from my hometown.' And the doctor said, 'Bring him over,' " Flores said.

Flores later found himself at a hospital in Le Havre, France.

"The doctors told me I had a million-dollar wound," he said.

In other words, Flores would be going home. He, however, wasn't ready to go.

Flores managed to steal a Jeep from the hospital. He made his way through Paris and into Belgium.

"I wanted to see who was left from my battalion," he said.

Flores was picked up by counterintelligence officers. After being taken to headquarters, he called his company commander.

"That's when I said I should have gone home," Flores said. "They didn't do anything to me. I guess they said I was loyal, or maybe crazy."

Munoz can understand why his uncle went back.

"That's my Uncle Perfecto - he always went back to family," Munoz said. "He had been with these men for (two) years and felt like they were his brothers.

"He felt he had to go back to them."

Flores would go on to travel through the major cities in the area, such as Cologne, picking up the "generals and other big shots" of the German military. Flores was then put in charge of a prison camp at Wiesbaden, Germany.

Flores was discharged on Dec. 7, 1945, as a staff sergeant. He returned to Stockton and later enrolled at California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo.

He spent his career as a foreman at Albert Paper. He married Carmen, and the couple had two daughters, Paula and Laura. In February, the Floreses will celebrate 50 years of marriage.

For now, his World War II mementoes remain tucked away in the white box with the exception of a few medals that were placed on his Army jacket for a photo.

"They look good like that," Flores said. "I'm going to have my daughters put the others on there."

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