

DEFEND THE HONOR

Dear Defender of the Honor,

On this Memorial Day, we salute fallen military men and women. And we draw your attention to one Polish American veteran's 65-year search for the family of his dear Mexican American friend from San Antonio, who died in 1944 in France. Joseph Bonzek has a photo he'd like to return to the family of Jesus Gallardo. And he wants to tell them about his buddy, what an honorable man he was. If you know anything about Jesus Gallardo, please contact defendthehonor@gmail.com and we'll forward it to Mr. Bonzek and to Elaine Ayala of the San Antonio Express-News who wrote the story that ran in today's paper.

See the entire story, with photo at

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/military/45958042.html>

WWII vet, photo in hand, still searching for his buddy

Jesus Gallardo of San Antonio died in combat Sept. 16, 1944, in southern France.

By Elaine Ayala- Express-News

The aging photograph shows a handsome young man looking debonair, even in bulky military garb. Standing before a field of tents in southern France, the soldier tucks his left hand into his pants pocket and smiles into the camera - no hint in his gaze that he knows this might be one of the last images taken of him.

Jesus M. Gallardo of San Antonio died about a year later, Sept. 16, 1944, on a hillside in southern France. Joseph "Joe" Bonzek, the soldier on the other side of the camera, was there.

"I carried him down the mountain, but he was already gone," Bonzek said. Mortar fire, an artillery shot or shrapnel killed him.

Nearly 65 years later - on Memorial Day, when the nation remembers its war dead - the Bonzek family is still trying to find Gallardo's relatives.

They'd like them to have the photo, to know that he was a good soldier and that he fought hard and admirably, first in the Army Rangers, then in the 1st Special Service Force, an elite group of U.S. and Canadian commandos nicknamed the Devil's Brigade or Black Devils because they blackened their faces for night combat.

For as long as Kraig Bonzek, who lives in Austin, can remember, his grandfather Joe and grandmother Thelma have been trying to find Gallardo's family.

"Jesse, as they call him, wasn't married, so he doesn't have any kids or grandkids," Kraig Bonzek said. "The hope was out there that a niece or nephew, or maybe even a sibling, might be around that Joe and Thelma could connect with."

The Bonzeks, including daughter and son-in-law Stan and Terry Harris of Austin, have combed phone books, the Internet and veterans sources, to no avail.

Undeterred, Joe Bonzek and his wife reached out to Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, director of the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project at the University of Texas, after reading a San Antonio Express-News story about it in their local paper. Still, they reached a dead end.

Finding a relative has become a "personal mission for Joe," Kraig Bonzek said. His grandfather's biggest fear wasn't dying. It was "that he would die over there, only to be forgotten forever, like so many soldiers."

Thelma Bonzek said that when her husband went to a Special Forces reunion and no one remembered Gallardo, "this upset Joe,"

"Even if we never find anyone, at least within my family, we will always remember Jesus Gallardo and what he meant to my grandfather," Kraig Bonzek added.

The elder Bonzek, now 88 and living in Syracuse, N.Y., remembers his buddy as "very quiet."

"All he ever told me was that he was from San Antonio." Of course, all every soldier talked about was home, he said, "only because everyone wanted to get back." They joined the Rangers around the same time, serving in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Corsica and southern France. When the Rangers were all but wiped out at Anzio beach, both joined the 1st Special Service Force.

"For Joe and Jesus to be together as long as they were is almost unheard of," the younger Bonzek said. "There were so many deaths, casualties and separations, but somehow these two stuck together through the worst part of Africa, Sicily and Italy."

Rivas-Rodriguez recognizes the connection between what were then referred to as "ethnics." Bonzek, a Polish American, and Gallardo, a Mexican American, likely found much in common.

"It really underscores the fellowship these men found on the battlefield, regardless of their backgrounds," Rivas-Rodriguez said. "It's about loyalty and a deeper love for a friend than most of us will ever know."

"Being a Hispanic in the Special Forces, at that time, I'm sure, created some waves," Kraig Bonzek said. "This is just speculation, but knowing my grandfather the way I do, (Gallardo) and my grandfather were both fighters for the underdog, and that might have been the spark that formed an eternal bond."

Two years ago, Kraig Bonzek visited Gallardo's grave in Draguignan, "an absolutely beautiful place sitting in some gentle hills not too far from the southern French coast."

The white marble cross says Jesus M. Gallardo was a corporal in the 2nd Regiment of the 1st Special Service Force, a forerunner of the Green Berets.

Thelma Bonzek is hopeful they'll find a family member. She says a group of Special Service Force veterans has expressed interest in flying Gallardo's relatives to visit his

burial site. A spokesman did not return calls.

Rivas-Rodriguez hopes to hear from a relative, too. She suspects someone is out there somewhere and that someone still grieves for the handsome man in the photograph.

"I'm expecting that your readers will be detectives for Mr. and Mrs. Bonzek," she said, "so that they can tell Jesus Gallardo's family what a great young man he was and that one of his Army buddies loved him deeply and will never forget him."