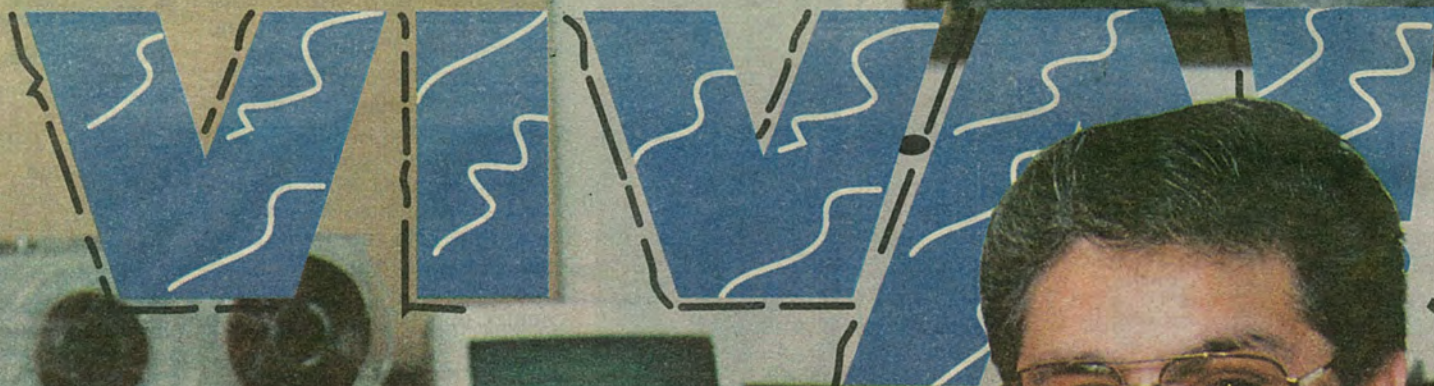


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RECALLING HEROES OF VIETNAM

**Navy veteran
writing first-
person book
about the
war F-12**

MEMORIES OF WAR

Moved by buddy's death, ex-sailor writes book on Vietnam experience

BY JULIA MERCEDES CASTILLA
VIVA! MAGAZINE STAFF

Vietnam Veterans have finally been accepted by their countrymen, but recognition for their efforts still falls short of the recognition given to veterans of World War II and other wars, according to Raul Herrera, a Navy Vietnam veteran who lives in Sugarland, and is writing a first-person book on his experiences in the Vietnam war.

As an Hispanic sailor, and one who fought a controversial war, Herrera encountered discrimination and difficulties.

"It did not happen to me often but it did happen. I remember one specific time when I was at the Enlisted Men's Club. There was a racial disturbance and I was singled out by some sailors to be the target of their anger. I had to be rescued by one of my fellow crew members," said Herrera.

As a veteran of an unwanted war Herrera also experienced discrimination — a very dramatic happening for him since he thought he had done his duty the best way he knew how. When he came back from the war, he was denied service at a California res-

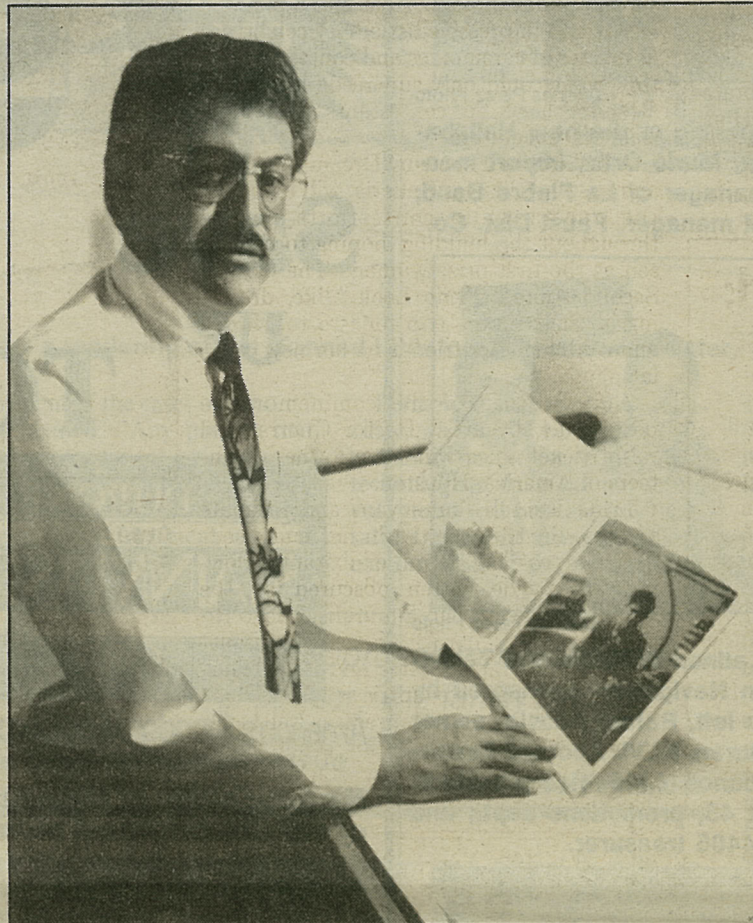
taurant because he had fought in Vietnam.

Herrera joined the Navy in 1965 at the age of 20. He wanted a career in drafting and the Navy offered to enroll him in drafting school, which did not happen. He was not told that this particular program had already been phased out.

As a barrio kid in San Antonio he could not afford to go to college. His best option was the military. When he joined the Navy for a four-year tour, he was not quite aware of the seriousness of the Vietnam involvement.

Herrera, now a design technician at Dannenbaum Engineering Corp., has been researching more than 12 years for the book he is writing on his experiences in Vietnam.

"Two reasons prompted me to write *Skunk Alpha* — which means the first unidentified contact of the day. The first was a spiritual, supernatural experience. A crew member in my swift boat who had become a good friend was killed in the war. I felt his presence when he was killed and kept on feeling it for a long time afterward. It was as if he was telling me something, as though he



Raul Herrera's book deals primarily with the capture of a trawler loaded with 12 tons of weapons, ammunition and supplies. He and 53 others were decorated with Vietnam's Cross of Gallantry, personally pinned on by Premier Nguyen Cao Ky.

wanted me to write about the war. It seemed to me a very important call. Once I started writing the book the supernatural episodes stopped," said Herrera.

THE NAVY does not have its share of the literary accounts of the war in Vietnam. Out of 550 books that pertain to the Vietnam War, only ten are about the Navy and none is a first-person narrative, according to Herrera. This is the second thing that compelled him to write the book.

In 1967 — a crucial year in the war — Herrera, who was stationed in Chulai, South Vietnam, was assigned to the swift boat PFC-79, a 50-foot vessel, as part of Operation Market Time. The purpose of this operation was to protect the coast from enemy infiltration and delivery of supplies.

"The book deals primarily with the capture of a 155-foot steel-hulled trawler loaded with 12 tons of weapons, ammunition and supplies. As a result of this capture many lives were saved," said Herrera.

Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky personally pinned the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry on Herrera's chest, and that of 53 others involved in the capture.

Skunk Alpha is written from

the point of view of a young Hispanic sailor and covers his one-year tour of Vietnam and his life in the swift boat with six crew members.

"We became a family — like brothers — we had to stick together to survive," said Herrera.

Herrera would like to contact any Hispanic servicemen who were involved in the Vietnam war so he can recognize them in his book. He can be contacted by writing to P.O. Box 22292, Houston, Texas 77227.

Another Hispanic veteran, Roy Benavidez, a Green Beret sergeant, was the subject of a book published in 1990 and written by Pete Billac. Benavidez received 57 wounds in one long battle in 1968. He was decorated with the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award for heroism. Benavidez was paralyzed for ten months after stepping on a mine during a tour in Vietnam.

Herrera and Benavidez, along with many other Hispanic veteran heroes who had fought for their country, will be honored on Memorial Day.

EN BREVE:

LOS VETERANOS de Vietnam han sido finalmente aceptados por sus conciudadanos, pero no han sido plenamente reconocidos por su esfuerzo. Este reconoci-

miento no se puede comparar con el que se les dá a los veteranos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y otras guerras. Raul Herrera es un veterano de Vietnam quién actualmente está escribiendo un libro sobre sus experiencias en esta guerra.

Herrera experimentó discriminación como Hispano y como soldado —marino en este caso — de una guerra controversial.

En una ocasión fue el blanco de un disturbio racial y tuvo que ser rescatado por un compañero. En un restaurante en California le negaron el servicio por haber estado en Vietnam.

Herrera entró a la marina como voluntario en 1965 porque quería estudiar. El joven de veinte años, nativo de San Antonio, no tenía la forma de pagarse la universidad.

Herrera trabaja para Dannenbaum Engineering Corp. como Design Technician. Durante los últimos 12 años ha estado investigando para el libro que está escribiendo sobre sus experiencias en Vietnam.

Dos razones llevaron a Herrera a escribir este libro que él titula *Skunk Alpha*. La primera fue de carácter espiritual y sobrenatural. Uno de los miembros de su tripulación — con quien tenía una buena amistad — murió en la guerra. La presencia del compañero muerto era constante, como si quisiera decirle algo. "Yo creí que me estaba pidiendo que escribiera el libro. Una vez que empecé a escribirlo desaparecieron estos episodios sobrenaturales," dijo Herrera.

La marina no ha tenido su parte en el mundo literario en cuanto a la guerra de Vietnam. De 550 libros pertinentes a esta guerra solo diez son sobre la marina, según Herrera, quién considera ésta la segunda razón.

En 1967 Herrera participó en Operation Market Time. El propósito de esta operación era la de proteger la costa del enemigo y de la entrada de suministros.

EL LIBRO cubre dicha operación en detalle, describiendo la captura de un Trawler cargado con 12 toneladas de armas, municiones y suministros. A consecuencia de esta captura se salvaron muchas vidas.

Skunk Alpha está escrito desde el punto de vista de un Hispano durante el año y medio de servicio en Vietnam. Su vida en el "swift boat", y su amistad con sus compañeros. Vietnam Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, puso personalmente la "Vietnam Cross of Gallantry" sobre el pecho de Herrera y de otros 53 soldados participantes en esta operación.

Herrera quisiera hacer contacto con otros Hispanos, veteranos de Vietnam, para darles reconocimiento en su libro. Los veteranos interesados le pueden escribir a P.O. Box 22292, Houston, Texas 77227.

Otro veterano Hispano, Roy Benavidez, Green Beret Sgt. fue también el objeto de un libro, escrito por Pete Billac y publicado en 1990. Benavidez recibió 57 heridas en una batalla en 1968. Recibió la "Medal of Honor", la más alta condecoración militar por heroísmo.

Estos hispanos, con otros muchos veteranos de la guerra, quienes han ido a pelear por sus país, serán honrados en Memorial Day.

Por Julia Mercedes Castilla.

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