

Opinion: I participated in the Chicano Moratorium. It was a terrifying experience even for a veteran in combat.



David Valladolid stands for a portrait at Chicano Park.

(Ana Ramirez/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By David Valladolid

Oct. 9, 2022 6 AM PT

Valladolid is a U.S. Army combat veteran and retired CEO of the Parent Institute for Quality Education. He lives in Bonita.

I am honored to have shared my story with fellow San Diegans, especially students, over five decades. I do it because I don't want our younger generations to forget what Chicanos accomplished under terrible circumstances that included racism and discrimination.

How I got to Vietnam is a story that impacted my life.

I graduated from St. Augustine High School in North Park in 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War. A college deferment, however, could get one out of being drafted, which was the norm for most Chicanos, people of color and low-income people in the 1960s.

So I enrolled at Mesa Community College. But in protest over a grade dispute with an English professor, I stopped attending her class and dropped out.

I was drafted into the Army six months later in September 1968. I was sent to basic, infantry and special weapons training, and then shipped off to Vietnam. I was assigned to the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, which was involved in helicopter airlifts into combat hot spots, but we mostly walked into the jungles around us to reinforce other U.S. troops.

Every night, six of us soldiers were assigned to ambush duty. We were assigned the location, and each of us had to stand guard two hours every night. Jungle warfare was more than difficult. We were taking enemy fire, being ambushed and exposed to a number of enemy land mines. I witnessed atrocities and vowed that I never again would be in a situation where somebody could control me, tell me what to do, when to do it and how to do it.

Unfortunately, less than six months later, I was seriously wounded for a second time: My eyes were blown out of my face and my eardrums were damaged, leaving me blind and deaf. I was told that I would never see again. I became depressed, thinking I would go home blind. I was offered three surgeries with no guarantees. Since I was already blind, I welcomed them and fortunately regained both my eyesight and hearing.

I came home in 1970 with a new outlook and determination. I continued my education, enrolling at San Diego Community College, and began to get involved in civic and political activities.

On Aug. 29, 1970, two of my brothers, Vietnam combat veteran Jerry Valladolid and attorney Anthony Valladolid, urged me to drive with them to the National Chicano Moratorium in East Los Angeles. It was the first demonstration by the Latino community against the Vietnam War. It was also the first time I heard the words “Chicano” and “moratorium.” They spent our two-hour trip to L.A. explaining the meaning of both words.

Arriving in Los Angeles, we began to see an increased law enforcement and National Guard presence. My brothers and I feared that something terrible was about to happen. By the time we got to Laguna Park, the moratorium had taken a bad turn. Police officers were beating people and firing their weapons. They arrested 150 moratorium participants, and four people, including Los Angeles Times reporter Ruben Salazar, were killed.

It was a terrifying experience, even for me, a veteran who had returned from a combat zone. To find such violence occurring in my country was frightening. Yet it was also enlightening to realize what it meant to be a Chicano standing up against the Vietnam War.

I count my blessings every day. Having survived Vietnam, I returned to college; met my future wife, Teresa Pascual, at San Diego State University; and following graduation in 1975, began working for the San Diego County government as a job developer at the Department of Manpower Services.

I later served as chief of staff for the first Latino California Assembly member from San Diego, Peter Chacon, and my last job was as president and CEO of the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), which helps low-income families learn how to ensure children's success in academic endeavors. The PIQE classes were taught in 18 languages, and I opened nine additional offices in California, and expanded the PIQE best practice model to 17 states and to Mexico City. I retired after 55 years of service to my community.

My story is part of the Latino Legacy Foundation's [online project](#).

It's critical and extremely important that we document and record our history and share all our experiences so each generation will continue the struggle to make a better world. It was the great leader Cesar Chavez who said, "The ultimate purpose of an education is service to others."