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Keywords

Military service, Vietnam War, Latino, Chicano, Veterans Legacy Program

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Biography of Frank Trujillo

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Abstract

The following article is a product of the Veteran's Legacy Program, a collaboration between the Veteran's Association and undergraduate history departments. Undergraduate history students at the University of Denver began writing biographies about the veterans buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado.

1 BIOGRAPHY

Frank Trujillo was born August 20, 1948 in La Junta, Colorado. His family worked as farmers and grew fruit¹. He was born into a large family with ten siblings — being the 7th boy of eight¹. He attended Swink High School in Swink, Colorado and graduated in 1967². Military service had been a part of the Trujillo family since Frank was young. In fact, six of Frank's brothers would eventually join the military. On his 18th birthday, Frank enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in the Vietnam War. Four of Frank's brothers had already enlisted in the military by this time, including his older brother Roque Trujillo who also served in the military during the Vietnam War³. While it may have been expected of Frank to follow in his brother's footsteps, there were other reasons for his enlistment. Frank wanted to get away from his family environment, writing "I enlisted to run away from my abusive father... and learn responsibility"¹.

Frank started out with the 101st Airborne Division and was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky¹. In December of 1967, Frank was shipped out to Vietnam where he worked in the kitchens and in waste disposal which mainly consisted of burning garbage¹. Frank was on leave in his home town of Swink, Colorado in November, but was a few days late in reporting back to his C.O.¹ As a punishment, Frank was reassigned to Charlie Company which was located on the front lines. When Frank's rotation began and he was about to be called to the front lines, a clerk named Patrick J. Graham pleaded with Frank to swap places¹. Patrick was from Minnesota and, according to his sister, had always wanted to see combat⁴. He was frustrated with his role in the Army because he felt as if he was not contributing enough as the Headquarters Company Clerk. Frank initially refused Patrick's request to switch positions, but eventually he agreed¹. Frank then began clerking while Patrick went to the front lines. Unfortunately, two

weeks after Patrick and Frank traded positions Patrick Graham was killed in action. This had a deep impact on Frank as he felt responsible for his death. Later, when Frank began writing poetry he wrote about Patrick and the remorseful feelings he had. Initially, Frank did not acknowledge Patrick's death and tried to avoid thinking about it altogether. Frank accepted what had happened 18 years later and said that he was "pissed off and angry at myself for not acknowledging him and what he did. I keep asking myself... why him and not me?"¹

On February 20th, 1969 Frank was honorably discharged from the Army, however, the day before he was due to leave, he got into an altercation with a high-ranking officer. Frank and his friends were relaxing off-duty when the officer started to accost them without reason. The conflict became heated and physical between Frank and the officer. Frank then left the base believing that he could be in serious trouble. He stayed the night at a Vietnamese compound where he knew one of the tenants. However, one of Frank's friends informed him that their Sergeant found out the officer had been harassing Frank and chose not to punish him. Frank returned to his hometown of La Junta and worked at the David Owan Airport where he helped to assemble and build campers, he then moved onto the Colorado Fuel & Iron Corporation⁵. Initially, Frank's time in Vietnam continued to affect him as he felt responsible for Patrick's death as well as taking part in a war he did not agree with. According to his wife Darlene, Frank "likely suffered from PTSD... and he did start to drink more heavily"¹. He destroyed the Bronze Medal that he was awarded in protest and wrote more poetry to express his feelings. In a poem titled *The American Dream*, Frank says "A vision of life that has sent me to the rice paddies of Vietnam. To destroy life. And lives. My life. My lives"⁶. Frank's identity as a Chicano and a farmer conflicted with his involvement in Vietnam. As he spent

more and more time in country, he began to identify more with the farmers in Vietnam who were simply trying to live their lives just like his family in Colorado. Eventually, Frank worked to resolve his guilt and remorse for his time in Vietnam in a very constructive and healthy way. He accomplished this by immersing himself in community projects in Colorado; it was during this time that he met his wife. Frank also stopped drinking and remained sober for 30 years.

Frank met Darlene Trujillo in 1987 at a community organization in Denver called Servicios De La Raza which is focused on “culturally relevant human services”⁷. They were married in 1988⁸ and had one daughter together whom they named Yvette. Darlene and Frank were very active in the Denver community, especially at Su Teatro, a theatre and organization that focuses on Latino cultural arts. Frank was an active board member of the theater and eventually worked with others in the community to buy the theatre from the city of Denver. Tony Garcia, the director of Su Teatro and a close friend of Frank, claimed that Frank was always logistically minded which helped him work in real estate. He kept the board members on track and knew how to realistically tackle goals that the program had⁸. Tony Garcia recalled a story that showed how devoted Frank was to his community and to the Su Teatro project when the board was trying to purchase the theatre from the city of Denver. Three of the board members including Frank and Tony “were sitting around the table” deciding if they would put up their homes in order to purchase the theatre. “All three of us said we would... Frank was that determined to make it happen”⁸. Thankfully, the board members never had to go to that extreme to buy the theatre because they received a \$400,000 grant from the Gates foundation. When Tony found out that they had the funding to purchase the theatre, he immediately called Frank. Upon hearing the news, “Frank started to cry”⁸.

Frank was also known to bring in people from around the community to work on Su Teatro. According to Tony Garcia, he would include members based on their talent, but also because they were often troubled. Frank believed that their involvement in Su Teatro would help them with some of their worries and provide them with a positive outlet in life. The theatre undoubtedly aided Frank in his past as well. Frank’s time in the Vietnam War, especially his experience with Patrick Graham, eventually overlapped with his work at Su Teatro. When a performance was held that centered around the Vietnam War, Frank opened the performance with a poem he had written about Patrick Graham and the guilt he still held. Tony Garcia and Darlene Trujillo both remember this as a cathartic moment for Frank.

Unfortunately, soon after the theater was purchased, Frank’s health began to decline. He was talking to his wife Darlene about what would come of his life insur-

ance policy and Frank made sure that a portion of the money would go to Su Teatro when he passed. Frank Trujillo passed away on July 15th, 2010, and the board members all agreed that the black box performance area in Su Teatro would be renamed to the Frank Trujillo Salon De Arte. It is difficult to sum up a person’s personality in any short span of time; however, Tony Garcia comes close when he described who Frank was. “Frank was a real smart, analytical person, but he was a softy. He had an incredibly big heart and he cared very passionately about the well-being of the community”⁸. Frank is survived by his wife Darlene and their daughter Yvette. He is buried at the Fort Logan Cemetery in Colorado.

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