No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed

Relief! Ecstasy! Unbelievable Joy! These and more were the emotions that were running through every American G.I.’s mind as World War II finally had come to an end. The Japanese and Germans had finally surrendered. It took incredible suffering on both the Axis Powers’ and the Allies’ sides, but it was finally over.

Bob Torres had put in his time in the U.S. Army, stationed first at Camp Roberts, in Central California, and then, had it not been for an altercation with an overbearing corporal, a long stint in the Pacific Theater, in the Philippine Islands.

And finally, after a weekend furlough to El Modena, CA a couple of weeks before, he was being discharged back to civilian life. Checkout time was Midnight and it was none too soon for the large assembly of servicemen. And, there in the long line of G.I.’s about to be discharged was his cousin from Corona, CA, Eduardo “Lalo” Serrato.

Bob – “Ay Lalo, I can’t believe you’re getting out at the same time as me! Vamonos, Primo!”

Lalo – “Ay Primo, I can’t wait to get back to Corona, but it’s going to be a long hitchhike.”

Bob – “Hitchhike, my ass! After my last furlough, my dad let me borrow his car to drive home in. We’re going back in style, Primo!”

The processing-out took what seemed like an eternity, but finally they drove out the east gate of Camp Roberts at about 1:00 A.M. and headed south on Highway 101.

Bob – “OK Lalo, here’s what we’ll do. We’ll go past San Miguel and when we get to Paso Robles, we’ll head east on Highway 46 to Highway 99, then south to Bakersfield. From there we’ll continue south and go over the Grapevine and down through San Fernando and L.A. Then, I’ll drop you off in Corona and I’ll head back to Modena.”

Lalo – “Sounds good to me, Primo.”

Bob – “It’s going to be great to see our folks again. I can’t begin to tell you how much I missed my Lucha and little Bobby. We’ll have a lot of catching-up to do. A lot must have happened while we’ve been away.”

Lalo – “You better believe it, Primo. I’m going to settle down with my Sally (Uribe) and start a family. It will be great to see everyone. We’ll have a big party over at La Zorra.”

Bob – “Good God, Lalo, we went into the service together, then I didn’t see you again until now. Where did you do your tour?”
Lalo – “I was over in the Pacific and eventually wound up on Iwo Jima, Bobby. I got shot up pretty bad, but I’m pretty well healed now. I’ll tell you what, it was Hell over in Iwo. We lost a lot of guys there. Where were you, Bobby?”

Bob – “I was over in the Philippines. I was in Mindanao and Luzon, doing a lot of clean-up work. When I first got in, I was training the infantrymen at Roberts and I think I might have stayed at Roberts for most of the war, because the brass liked my work as a trainer, but I got in trouble with a lieutenant and wound up getting my ass shipped overseas.”

Corporal Lacy – “I don’t care if you do have a weekend pass, Torres, I’m going to ask the brass to pull it back, I need your ass here this weekend.”

Bob – “Bullshit, Lacy, my baby son is being baptized this weekend and I wouldn’t miss that for the world.”

Lacy – “Yeah, well my heart bleeds, Torres. I’m putting you in for extra duty this weekend.”

Bob – “You can’t do that to me, Lacy!”

Lacy – “Says who?”

Just then, Lieutenant Jones, who was passing by, tried to intervene.

Jones - “Hey, hey, hey! What’s going on here?”

Bob – “This is between the corporal and me, Lieutenant. This is no concern of yours, sir.”

Jones – “Like hell it isn’t!”

Then Jones slapped me in the face and I gave him a left to the gut and a right to the chops, knocking him out cold. Next thing I know, I’m in the brig and thinking, “There goes my weekend pass.”

Luckily, this colonel that liked me pretty well heard about what happened and he was able to get me out of lock-up, but not before he took me aside and told me, “Torres, you should not have hit the lieutenant.”

I said, “But Colonel, he hit me first!”

Colonel – Yes, it would have been alright if you hit him once, but no, you had to hit him twice.”
I said – “It was the old ‘one-two’ Colonel. That’s the way we’ve been trained to fight.”

Colonel – Well, Torres, I’ve been able to get your pass reinstated, so just be sure to get back on time or you’ll really be in deep shit!

I responded – “Yes sir! Much obliged, Sir!”

Bob – “And, I got my duffel bag, hit Highway 101 and hitchhiked to my kid’s baptism. We had a couple of my parents’ compadres, Andres and Raquel Zamudio sponsor Bobby and they were going crazy with happiness over being picked for the occasion. Andres and Raquel are no spring chickens but they were acting like new teenaged parents during the ceremony and party afterwards.

Anyway, when I got back to Roberts I learned that I was going to the Philippines, which hit me like a load of bricks at first, but I got over it and did my time over in the P.I. I hate to think where they would have shipped me if I hadn’t been back on time!

A lot of memories over in the Philippines, Primo: One day we were marching back from a long operation and the battalion that was relieving us was heading in the opposite direction. All of a sudden, I hear this G.I. yell, ‘Órale Bobby!’ I looked up at him and it was Danny Demara from Modena. You might remember him. He lived on the south side of town over by my grandma Josefa.”

Lalo – “Yeah, I remember Danny! A pretty good dancer as I recall.”

Bob – “Danny couldn’t hold a candle to me, but he was alright. Anyway, we had to keep marching and we didn’t even have time to visit. I never saw Danny again. Man, I hope he makes it back OK.

Then, another time, I went to Sunday Mass at a small church in one of the villages near our encampment and something really amazing happened as I was leaving the church.”

The priest that had celebrated the Mass was greeting the people as they left the church and then my turn in line came…..

Priest – “And where are you from soldier?”

Bob – “I’m from California, Father. Thank you for the nice service.”

Priest – “You’re welcome, son. What part of California are you from?”

Bob – “I’m from the south, Father.”
Priest – “Where in the south?”

Bob – “Orange County, Father. Not too far from Los Angeles.”

Priest – “Where in Orange County?”

Bob – “A small citrus-growing community, east of Orange, Father. It’s called El Modena.”

Priest – “Of course! That’s where I know you from, son. I served at La Purisima church and I remember that your grandmother, Josefa Luna, used to bring you to Mass when you were very young. You’ve grown into a fine looking young man.”

Well, with that, we both bawled like a couple of babies, wondering how fate had brought us back together halfway around the world. It must have been 15 years since he had seen me but his memory was razor-sharp. What an experience that was! He was Father Escanez and he gave me a blessing and that was the last time I saw him. I’ll never forget that moment.

Bob – “A short time later I got malaria and I thought maybe that blessing had worn off, but I recovered OK and here I am. So, I guess that blessing is still working. How about you, Lalo? Any good memories you care to talk about?”

Lalo – “No, Bobby, like I told you, Iwo Jima was Hell and it ruined any good memories I might have had. From what I’ve heard, that was probably the worst battle we’ve ever been in. The Japs were picking us off like sitting ducks as we came ashore and we couldn’t find the bastards because they were hiding in tunnels and caves throughout the island. But, as that battle was coming to a close, we found out that the Japs were like us. They were just following orders and most of them didn’t even want to be there. A lot of them were just happy to surrender. None of that hara kiri stuff for them.

Right now, I just want to get back home, find a job and settle down with Sally and start a family. Hey, it’ll be like the old days, you guys come out to Corona to visit and we’ll visit you out in Modena!”

Bob – “Sure thing, Primo! Oh, look, we’re in Paso Robles already. We’ll turn east just up ahead”

So, we continued east, veering slightly north at Shandon and passing through a small blip in the road called Choláme, where the road veered back in a southeasterly direction. In the distance, we could see a few lights here and there. The San Joaquin Valley lay before us and it brought back memories of the harvests we used to work during the summers. Dad would work the citrus, walnut and yam crops around Orange County during the fall, winter and spring and then we’d spend a couple of months during the summer following the crops and get back to Modena in time to get back to school. Dad wanted us all to get an education. There were my sisters,
Connie, Eloise, Sally and Carol and me. We’d all pitch in and make a bundle of money that would help us get through the rest of the year. This was during the depression and we had to compete with the Okies for work. And the farmers would give the jobs to the ones that would take the lowest wage, stingy bastards that they were. One summer Dad decided to stay in Modena and Salvador Gamez, one of Mom’s cousins, came to visit. He was on his way to the harvests up north and he asked me if I’d like to come along.

Bob – “Sure Tío, I’d love to go with you.”

Mom – “Oh no you don’t. You’re too young to be going alone!”

Salvador – “¡Ay Esperanza! He won’t be alone. You don’t need to worry. Bobby will be fine. I’ll take good care of him. He’ll be fine!”

Well, after much cajoling and assurances, Mom gave in and I went and packed some clothes and other things I’d need. As I was getting set to leave, she gave me a blessing, Dad shook my hand and told me to behave and we were off.

We wound up at the Garabedian farm in Selma, about halfway up the valley and settled in that first evening, downing a quick meal of beans and tortillas. The next morning, we were up before dawn and got ready to go into the orchards for the peach harvest. As with most of the farmers in the area, there were also plums, apricots and grapes being grown by the Garabedians. They were an elderly couple, with no kids, and they had been in California since they had left their native Armenia during the Turkish genocide in the early 1900’s. Kind of like our families leaving Mexico during the Revolution.

That first morning the Garabedian’s foreman, Ernesto Polanco, gave us our assignments and we headed out into the orchards.

Salvador – “¡Andale Bobby, de prisa! Hurry! At 5 cents a bucket, we’ll have to pick a lot of duraznos to make any good money. And, be careful that you don’t bruise the fruit. I’ve worked for Polanco before and he’s a cabron who watches everything like a hawk.”

Bob – “Ay Tío, these peaches are tasty!”

Salvador – “Cuidado, Bobby! Polanco will see you and then he’ll probably weigh you in the morning and at the end of the day and figure that the gain in weight is from the fruit you eat and take it out of your pay.”

Bob – “You’re right, Tío, he must be a real cabron to even think of doing that.”

The Garabedians paid weekly and we were up early and picked fruit until dusk, with a short lunch break. It wasn’t always beans and tortillas. I found that there was a small grocery store a
short distance from the farm and I stocked up on bologna, mayonnaise, cheese and bread, to break the boredom of beans and tortillas and tortillas and beans. And, I found that the irrigation canal running across the Garabedian’s farm had a lot of crawdads, so I went to Mr. Garabedian and he let me have some chicken wire and a few feet of baling wire from which I made a crawdad trap. I used bits of tortillas as bait and I had a crawdad feast at least once a week. I would boil a bucket of water over an open fire, dump in the crawdads and cook them until they were bright red.

I ate pretty well!

At the end of the first week, we all got paid and my uncle Salvador told me he was going into town to take care of some business. That was the last I saw of him. It was like he disappeared into thin air. It wasn’t until several years later, just before I went into the service, that I saw him again when he was passing through Modena. I felt like knocking him out, but figured, what the heck, it was a good experience being on my own. I set up a big raisin crate with some straw, laid some gunny sacks on top and used that for a bed. The nights were mild and it was fun sleeping under the stars. I used to see a lot of shooting stars and you could hear the dogs, coyotes and owls all night long.

One day, near the end of summer, I went to get some groceries and I ran into Maura and Luisa Chico. They were sisters who lived around the corner from us over in Modena and they were working at another farm nearby with their mom, Eusebia and their brothers, Adolfo and Jose.

Luisa – “Bobby, what are you doing here? What farm is your family working at?”

Bob – “My family is in Modena, Luisa. I came up here with my mom’s cousin, Salvador Gamez and after the first payday, he disappeared and I’ve been taking care of myself over at the Garabedian farm.”

Maura – “Salvador is a sinverguenza! He should be ashamed of himself, leaving you stranded like this.”

Bob – “No, it’s OK, I’m alright. I come here for my bread, baloney and cheese and I have all the peaches, plums, apricots and grapes I can eat over at the farm. I’m fine.”

Luisa – “Well, summer’s almost over and you have to get back to school, so you’re coming with us. We’re leaving in 2 days. We’ll get you home to your parents.”

A couple of days later, the Chicos came by the Garabedian farm and announced to Mr. Garabedian that they were going to take me back to Modena.

Mr. Garabedian – “If Bobby doesn’t have a family, he’s welcome to stay with us. My wife and I would love for him to stay with us. We got no kids, you know.”
Luisa – “No sir, he has his mother and father back in Modena waiting for him. He has to go with us.”

I shook Mr. Garabedian’s hand and Mrs. Garabedian gave me a big hug. They were swell people, but I finally realized, it was time to go home. I got my bag and piled into the Chico’s car. Every couple of hours, we would stop, relieve ourselves and stretch before getting back into the cramped car. At one of the stops, we decided to camp out under a big oak tree by the roadside. Eusebia, the matriarch, made us unload the car, saying that it needed to rest also! The next morning, we started a fire and heated some of the tacos that Maura and Luisa had made for the trip, ate, loaded up the car again and headed home.

Mom was really angry when she found out that her cousin had left me alone. She used some choice words I didn’t even know that she knew, describing Salvador. No wonder she didn’t want me going along in the first place.

Still heading east, we drove through Lost Hills and Wasco and finally made it to Highway 99. Turning south, we continued through Shafter and arrived in Bakersfield around 4:00 in the morning.

Bob – “I’m starved, Primo. What do you say we stop and get a bite to eat somewhere?”

Lalo – “Sure, Bobby, I thought you would never ask.”

We drove a little farther and found an all-night diner on the south edge of Bakersfield. It was about 4:30 A.M. by then. The place looked deserted, but the lights were on inside, so, we figured this was as good a place as any. We drove up to the front of the place and as we were going in, Lalo pointed at a sign on the door.

Lalo – “Maybe we better go someplace else, Primo.”

The sign read, “No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed”

Bob – “That’s bullshit, Lalo. Maybe it’s some kind of joke. Come on, we’re going in!”

As we walked in, there was a middle-aged Mexican couple waiting for service and it didn’t look like there was anybody else in the place except the cook. We greeted the couple, “Buenos días.” And they responded, “Buenos días, señores.” I stepped up to the counter and said,

“Can we get some service, please?”

Cook – “You see the sign on the door? I’m not supposed to serve you, but I’ll make an exception, since you guys are soldiers. You just get back from the War?”
Bob – “That’s right and I don’t like you making an exception just for us. You need to serve these folks that are waiting too!”

Cook – “I can’t do that, soldier. Orders are orders. You know about following orders. I could lose my job if I serve those folks.”

Bob – “Hey, you don’t have to worry about us, we won’t tell anybody.”

Cook – “Sorry guys, I ain’t gonna do it.”

Bob – “What? Their money ain’t good enough for you? I’ll tell you what, I’ll pay for them. Now you take their order and serve them their food. As a matter of fact, make it 4 orders of ham and eggs!”

At this point the old gentleman was getting nervous and he said, “Por favor jovenes, no se pongan en dificultades por nuestra causa. Nos vamos a otro lugar.”

Bob – “No señor, aqui se quedan. Este cocinero nos va a servir.”

Cook – “You boys are out of line. You’d better leave before I call the cops.”

He started for the phone on the wall by the waiting area. I beat him to it and yanked it out of the wall, saying, “Let’s see you call anybody now.”

Cook – “Now come on boys, you’re making a big mistake here.”

Finally, Lalo spoke up – “Listen, mister, just because you have orders doesn’t make what you’re doing right. We just got back from the worst goddamn war ever, fighting for everybody’s freedom and we get back to this? Just do the right thing; serve us and we’ll be on our way.”

The cook’s jaw dropped and he said, “OK, but you fellas are gonna have to pay for the phone, otherwise it’ll come out of my pay.”

I said, “Don’t worry, we’ll pay for everything. Now please get us our food. We’re starving!”

We asked the old couple to join us and a few minutes later, we had 4 big orders of ham, eggs and potatoes with a big stack of hot buttered toast and big cups of steaming hot coffee. It wasn’t as good as Mom’s cooking but it was definitely better than the usual Army grub we were used to.

After we ate, Lalo and I pooled our money and paid for the 4 of us and threw in a Twenty for the phone, bid the old couple “Adios” and hit Highway 99 again, headed for our homecoming celebrations.
Places of interest:

La Zorra - Lower Foothill Ranch, in Corona.

Corona – A citrus-growing community on the western edge of Riverside County, CA, at the eastern end of the Santa Ana Canyon.

Modena – Original name of the community before the U.S. Post Office officially changed it to El Modena, because of the mail delivery confusion with Madera, in Northern California.

Choláme – A small community in Central California, where Highways 41 and 46 intersect. Years later, it would become the location of the horrific auto crash that took actor James Dean’s life.

San Miguel – A small farming town along Highway 101. One of the famous California Missions is located here.

Paso Robles – Originally “El Paso de Robles” (Oak Pass). Farming community at the intersection of Highways 101 and 46. Known for almond and grape growing. One of the 3 major passes separating Northern and Southern California, the other 2 being Cajon Pass on Highway I-15 and Tejon Pass on Highway I-5.

Bakersfield – After Fresno, the second largest city in California’s San Joaquin Valley, known for its fruit and cotton growing as well as its oil fields.

Camp Roberts – U.S. Army base in Central California that saw its heyday during WWII. Presently, it is utilized by the California National Guard.

Selma – Located less than 20 miles southeast of Fresno, Selma became a thriving agricenter during the late 1800’s and through the 1900’s, first with wheat as the principle crop, then later various stone fruits and grapes. Selma’s population fluctuated depending on the time of year, according to what harvests were in progress.

Bob Torres
Orange, CA
rwtorres@sbcglobal.net