

My Name

It has been difficult growing up with my name. My first name is Amilcar. I was born in Mexico and even in Mexico Amilcar is a rare name. In the United States, the name Amilcar is not heard of. My great-grandfather gave me my name. I wonder if he knew about the General named Hamilcar that gave the Romans hell in Sicily in 247 BC threw 241 BC.

Every time I introduce myself to someone new, I end up having to repeat my name several times, spell it out, and answer questions. My name has been pronounced in every possible way and I grew tired of hearing my name butchered.

When I joined the military at age twenty-one I wanted a job that required a Top Security Clearance, but I had to be a U.S. citizen. When I applied for citizenship, I had the opportunity to change my name. I thought it was a great opportunity to once and for all get rid of my unusual name. It had never occurred to me what name I would want. It turned out more challenging than I thought. Several names crossed my mind, but I decided to keep my name when I remembered a story my great-grandfather told me.

My great-grandfather had a close friend. They grew up together, and they experienced many things together. They had good times, and they had bad times. They laughed, and they cried together. They grew up and married girls from their village according to Mayan tradition.

Times were not good in Mexico a storm was brewing. A couple of years later my great-grandfather and his lifelong friend found themselves in middle, of a revolution. They became revolutionaries and joined a group of fighting men led by Emiliano Zapata, a Mayan Indian, who later became their general. The year was 1910. Mexican Federal Forces had acquired the reputation of being brutal and unmerciful. Wives and children accompanied many of Emiliano Zapata's men. Emiliano's soldiers were peasants and poor. They had no land or homes and their wives and children had nowhere to stay. The women stayed with their husbands and fathers and followed them where ever they went. Many of the women fought, with the men. They called the women Las Soldaderas meaning women soldiers. These brave women fought alongside the men and many died with their husbands, their brothers, their fathers, and their sons. Emiliano Zapata's forces engaged the enemy in many battles, but there was one battle that hunted my great-grandparents soul until the day they died.

One day, Mexican Federal forces caught Emiliano Zapata's main force by surprise. Zapata and his army had walked into an ambush. The battle that raged was fierce and intense. A much greater army had managed to surprise and ambush Zapata's forces. Zapata and his captains desperately began to organize their men to put up a fight. The fighting was horrid and bloody. They fought with every ounce of strength within their being. Zapata's forces managed to hold their ground and were able to prevent the enemy's army from cutting off their retreat.

My young frightened great-grandfather fought as he had never fought before. Not only was he fighting to stay alive, but he also fought to keep his wife and infant child alive. He yelled and screamed, with fear and anger, as he emptied his rifle at the enemy. As soon as his rifle was empty, my great-grandmother would hand him another. She lay at his feet reloading rifles as fast as she could with her baby at her side. During the battle, he heard the blood-curdling screams, men, women, and children. The older children, the ones strong enough to carry ammunition boxes helped pass the ammunition, to their fathers and mothers. Other children took the guns, from their dead parents, and continued the fight. At times, the fighting was hand-to-hand. They hacked at each other with axes, machetes, and sabers. If hell could be described that battle would have been it. Zapata's army began to retreat into the mountains. They had to retreat or they would have been slaughtered. Bodies from both sides littered the battlefield. Men, women, and children laid dead or dying. The Revolutionaries had to leave them. For them, there would not be a proper burial.

Many lost their brothers, fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and child. Entire families perished that day. As they retreated, they could hear the agony of the wounded and the dying. The air was filled with the stench of burnt gunpowder and blood. Some men and women picked up orphaned children as retreated. Sometime during the battle, my great-grandparent's baby son died.

Sickness, starvation, disease, or battle wounds, I was never told how the baby died. The child was still a baby and great-grandmother did not have the heart to leave her dead child behind. They retreated into the mountains and my great-grandmother carried her dead son, in her arms.

For two days, Zapata's army retreated, and finally, they came to a place where they could set up a camp rest and attend to their wounded. My great-grandmother still carried her dead son in her arms. At camp, my great-grandfather looked for his best friend. The last time he had seen him was the night before the battle. He wondered if his friend had been one of the hundreds, of dead or wounded, left behind two days ago. As he walked searching, for his friend, he began to realize how costly the battle had been. He would never see many faces again. His heart sank even lower when he walked by a large group of orphaned children sitting in the dirt staring at the sky with a glazed look. He found his friend lying near a tree and around him were his wife and two sons. The oldest barely ten held his father's rifle. At first, my great-grandfather was overwhelmed with joy, to see his best friend alive. As he approached him, he saw his friend's horrific wounds and in critical condition.

He knelt by his side. His friend noticed him, tried to focus his eyes, and strained to see who had knelt by him.

"Soy yo, tu cuate", "It is me, your pal," my great-grandfather told him.

The dying man cracked a smile. He asked my great-grandfather for a favor. My great-grandfather told him all he had to do was to ask. His friend reached out with his trembling hand and took hold of this wife's hand. She was crying because she knew her man would soon die.

He said in Spanish, “My friend, this is a good woman; find her a good man. I will leave this life soon. Please take care of my wife and my boys because I cannot do it anymore.” The dying man said.

My great-grandfather understood and told his friend that as long as God gave him strength and health he would. Then my great-grandfather asked his dying friend for a favor.

“What can I do? I am a dead man. I have nothing to offer you, not even my life.”

“My friend, I lost my boy two days ago. I don’t want him to be alone. I know you will soon leave this life and journey, to face God. Will you keep my boy company? Will you take him by the hand when you go, to face God?”

His friend smiled told him he would. Sometime during the night, his friend died. The following morning before they buried him my great-grandmother walked up to the grave and handed her dead son to my great-grandfather. He stepped into the grave and gently placed his baby son in the arms of his best friend. He covered them with a blanket and buried them together.

Years later, I came to be. I was a young boy when I heard about my great-grandfather’s best friend. I asked him.

“Who was he?”

“In the eyes of the enemy, he was a giant, but in the eyes, of his friends, he was even greater. He was a man, of valor, as I have never known. He was not a simple man; he was a real man. He was my friend.”

I pondered my great-grandfather’s words for a few seconds.

“Grandpa... what was his name?”

He looked at me and smiled, “Amilcar”.

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