

SOTERO
SOTO



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HIS CAP TELLS A STORY

When Sotero Soto was young he looked like Desi Arnaz and Ritchie Valens rolled into one, except he had a pencil-thin mustache his bride liked because “kissing a man without a mustache is like eating an egg without salt!”

Soto’s bright 12-year-old granddaughter, Izavel Ortiz, couldn’t contain her laughter when her grandma told that story. She is intensely interested in her family’s history.

Sotero Soto’s name, which sounds Japanese, confuses people. So does his handsome, brown 89-year-old face. He wears his “Korea Veteran” ballcap practically every day. Otherwise people ask, “What part of Mexico are you from?”

He’s a proud, fifth-generation Texan, the great-grandson of an Apache from a band that roamed Oklahoma and Texas for eons. That census records label some of Soto’s ancestors “white” when they were also significantly black underscores that race in America has always been more fluid than the bigots will admit. Soto’s grandmother, Manuela Tambunga, is listed in the 1910 census as “octoroon,” an awful, concocted word that meant one-eighth Negro.

When Soto opened the DNA test-results envelope from Ancestry.com, he was gratified to see that science had confirmed family lore: He is 55.5 percent East Asian/Native American; 31.9 percent European; 6.2 percent sub-Saharan African and 2.4 percent Middle Eastern and North African.

What combat confirmed for him is that “all blood looks the same.”

Soto’s big brother, Antonio, was badly wounded in the South Pacific during World War II. Two of their cousins died in



John Hughes photo

Germany. Soto enlisted in the U.S. Army at the outbreak of the Korean War. Though he had only nine years of formal schooling, Soto tested off the charts. As a combat engineer, he advanced from private to sergeant first class in the space of 14 months.

Often forgotten in the history of “the forgotten war” is that an estimated 10,000 Native Americans served in Korea, from the frozen Chosin Reservoir that first terrible winter to the brutal hill fighting in the heat of summer. Twenty died in combat in the opening months of the war. Six years earlier, Navajo code-talkers had befuddled the Japanese in the Pacific. Now the adversaries were once again tenacious Asians. The Indians called them “Short Wolf Men.”

Soto isn’t offended to be confused for a Mexican. Far from it. His family tree has roots that criss-cross the border. But he’s proud to be an Indian: “We were warriors.” That said, he can’t resist telling a “Mexican” war story:

“A Mexican soldier was having a pretty tough time. The fighting was fierce. So there he was on his knees in his foxhole praying to Our Lady of Guadalupe. A white guy was sitting there watching him. When the Mexican soldier got done he made the sign of the cross. And the white guy goes, ‘Me too, Lupe!’ ”

Izavel loves that one too. Her grandpa smiles mischievously, eyes twinkling, mustache now gray and bushy.

Here’s another thing you need to know about Sotero Soto: He is surrounded by adoring women—including Esther, his lively wife, eight daughters and seven granddaughters. He arrived in Olympia from Eagle Pass, Texas, in 1972 with eight females and a cat named Fluffy in a road-worn Oldsmobile sedan. After 2,124 miles, the wonder is they were all still talking. “Sotero is a very calm person,” Esther says. “*He is,*” Izavel agrees. In all, there are 14 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

SOTERO SOTO was born in 1928, at Eagle Pass, the first American settlement on the Rio Grande. Bordering the Mexican state of Coahuila, Eagle Pass today is a city of some 28,000, 145 miles southwest of San Antonio. When Soto was born the population was barely



Sotero with a fellow combat engineer in Korea.
Soto collection

5,500. It was lot less Latino than today's 97 percent. Sotero grew up bilingual. "Everyone got along."

His parents, Benigno and Victoria Gonzalez Soto, had 13 children and meager income. Benigno Soto practically grew up on a horse. He was a cowboy as a youth, working the cattle drives. He took a bad fall the year Sotero turned 5, suffering a head injury that triggered a stroke. "The doctor told him no more horse riding," Soto remembers. "So he began working in farming around Quemado, a little town out of Eagle Pass. As a kid, I worked for 10 cents an hour. I'd ride the horse to and from school, then work in the fields. The whole family worked. Our home consisted of huts that we built ourselves—adobe over timbers, with mud for mortar. They were nice and warm in the winter and cool in the summer. The boys in the family had a separate hut. I used to do my schoolwork by oil lamp."

Esther Soto chimes in: "I tell my grandkids, 'Hey, you are millionaires compared to the way we were raised!' " Her spouse nods. "We had to work very hard, but family mattered a lot. Church mattered a lot. It was very close-knit. My parents were not educated, but they were smart. They always told us, 'Keep going to school!' My mother was a nice lady, but she was the disciplinarian. My father was one of the best fathers ever. He never belted his children. If you acted up he would say, 'Sit down. We've got to talk.' " Esther affirms this is so: "My father-in law, may God have him in Heaven, was so calm. When my mother-in-law started yelling, he would say, 'I'm going outside.' " Everyone around the Sotos' breakfast nook cracks up. Sotero clearly inherited his calm from his father.

Early on, Sotero also learned how to fish and shoot. "You'd catch catfish anyplace you dropped your line, so that part was easy. And when I could afford the ammunition for my .22, we'd go hunting for rabbits and squirrels."

His father was a good shot. He hunted predators by night and sold the skins. "When you were making \$30 a month with 15 mouths to feed you had to do something" to help make ends meet, Sotero says. Come harvest time, everyone worked the fields.

U.S. border restrictions were lenient when Soto was a boy. "People could come and go just about any time they wanted." Together with families from the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, the Sotos traveled widely when crops were ripe, working their way from Texas to the Great Lakes. "When I was 8-9-10 years old, we'd migrate all the way to Ohio and Michigan—Wisconsin, too. When people tell me, 'Oh we had to work really hard in the fields!' I say, 'Don't tell me. I know. In Ohio we picked a lot of sugar beets, tomatoes



Sotero's great-grandfather, right, was a Texas cowboy. Soto collection



Sotero around 15 at Eagle Pass, Texas.
Soto collection

and potatoes, just about anything. When we drove to Ohio the first time we traveled there in a '35 Chevy four-door. We were packed in! My brother Jesus had a '31 Chevy with mechanical breaks. So we drove together in two cars, and that's how I learned to drive."

Soto dropped out of high school in the 9th grade to help his father. "I liked school, but I saw my dad struggling. My two older brothers had left home, so he needed me." For a while, Soto flirted with becoming a jockey. "I was tall, about 5-7, maybe even 5-8 by then, but I only weighed about 110 pounds. So I was light enough. I ran one race. Didn't win but it was close. My dad said, 'That's it for you. You're done.' He had told me things I needed to know, and watched me closely during the race, so I couldn't understand why he said I had to quit. 'All of those jockeys have experience over you,' he said.

'You're going to have an accident

and get hurt. It can be done with just a stirrup' while the riders are maneuvering for position. It was good advice, Soto says. "He was looking out for me."

Soto was 13 when America entered World War II. "At first, I couldn't imagine that it was true—that the Japanese really had attacked us. Then we saw the newsreels. That was the way we saw the news throughout the war. The beaches red with blood; those battles in Germany and the South Pacific. My brother and cousins and the majority of Mexicans—*Texans*—around that little farm place went in the service. Anybody who was old enough for miles around."

As a teenager, Soto drove trucks in the farm fields of Wisconsin. Then he landed a job as a school bus driver before graduating to charter buses. "I wanted to continue school, but it didn't seem possible since I had dropped out. If I could have gone to college I would have wanted to study history more than anything else. History teaches us



With his M1 at Fort Riley, Kansas.
Soto collection

important things. I wish I'd had enough education to write a story about my brother and all other Hispanics from Texas who went to war."

They're all part of the story he's telling you right now. Soto is too modest. This remarkably self-educated man who devours the newspaper every morning is a natural-born storyteller. It's part of his Native American/Hispanic DNA.

WHEN THE North Koreans stormed across the 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950, it was Soto's turn to go to war. He was 21 years old and headed nowhere in particular in a hurry, other than the long and winding roads between the Midwest and Texas. In Milwaukee, he volunteered for the Air Force and passed all the physical and written tests, unaware that a draft notice had arrived at Eagle Pass. He was in the Army now. After basic training in Kansas, Soto was selected for combat engineers' school at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. It was an intense, 16-week course on all manner of military engineering techniques—"mines, explosives and demolitions, fixed and floating bridges, camouflage and concealment, and map and aerial photo reading." Early on, the training instructor—a tough old platoon sergeant from World War II—spotted Soto's natural leadership skills. Soto tells how it happened:

One day the sergeant was called to a meeting in the orderly room. "I'll be right back," he said. "Just stand at ease." That got tiresome. Somebody hollered, "Is there anyone who can march us?" I said, "OK, I can do it," because I had paid close attention to the way we drilled. I got us in formation and started giving orders: Hup, hup, back and forth. Unbeknownst to me, our sergeant came up behind me. When I turned



Soto, right, drills the platoon at Combat Engineer School. *Soto collection*

around, I thought, “Uh-oh! I’m gonna get it now!” and jumped back in line. “You come back here!” the sergeant shouted. “From now on every time I leave, you take over the platoon. You march ’em to eat every day.”

At the end of eight weeks of combat engineer training, he picked me out as a cadre to train other soldiers. Then we had another eight weeks of engineer training. In the final test, I placed No. 2. There were 26 of us in all. The others all had at least a year of college; most had two or three years. I hadn’t seen the door of a college. I hadn’t even graduated high school. I felt good at what I’d accomplished.

Private Sotero Soto arrived at Pusan on the heel of the Korean peninsula in June of 1951 and immediately headed north to hook up with the 3rd Battalion of the 35th Infantry Regiment. The “Cacti” regiment—originally formed in Arizona in 1916—had been in savage combat for a year, winning a Presidential Unit Citation early on. In that first brutal winter it was embroiled in “hard, dirty battles to push the Reds northward, only to have gains lost with the Chinese spring offensive.”

“To understand the role of the Army engineers in the Korean War is to understand the perverse nature of combat; the engineers built, fought, destroyed and built again,” T.A. Kaminski wrote in a history of combat engineers in Korea. “During that spring offensive, the 3rd Engineers adopted the slogan ‘Where danger goes dynamite makes the way.’ ”

In the months to come, Soto would earn his stripes and combat infantryman badge in situations where danger was ever-present. When it came to explosives, he proved to be particularly resourceful at making the way. Soto puts it even better: “Whatever it took.” They bulldozed roads; used logs and sandbags to construct bunkers; planted land mines in barbed-wire barriers; blended napalm with gasoline in 55-gallon drums that created curtains of flaming terror when detonated remotely.

One day, Soto saw a scrap heap of the cardboard tubes 60mm mortar rounds arrived in. Imagine a giant Pringles can, with a tin top and bottom. Soto had a bright idea: He recycled the tubes into napalm grenades, with time-delay fuses. The first time his guys rolled one into an enemy bunker, it was instantaneous adiós. He also jury-rigged land mines from the containers for artillery rounds. The



A mortar and its cardboard tube.
U.S. Army photo

higher-ups were impressed. *Stars & Stripes*, the American military newspaper, took note later in the war when the Army produced a batch at a base in Japan. Soto is galled to this day that his inventions were credited to “some officer or enlisted man whose name has been forgotten.”

IN THE RUGGED HILLS north of the 38th Parallel, Soto had his first close call in the fall of 1951:

We were sent to bridge a gully with buried fuel drums so tanks could advance. All of a sudden we started getting mortar fire. They shouted for us to take cover behind a tank. When the driver began trying to move backward or forward I ran out to find a place to hide. I spotted a hole where one of the mortar shells had landed. It was three or four feet deep, and I dove in. When the shelling stopped, I took off my helmet, which was full of mud between the liner and the steel. “Boy, that was close!” I said to myself. Just then a round landed right on the hood of a Jeep. Have you ever run your whole life through your mind in seconds? That’s what it’s like in combat.



Combat engineers try to dislodge a burned out tank. *Department of Defense photo*



With his First Sergeant in Korea. *Soto collection*

Fighting in towns and villages was especially frightening, Soto remembers, “because you never know who’s around the corner.” He learned to shoot with either hand to limit his exposure. The enemy had no scruples about using civilians as shields or decoys. They even hid machine-gunners in the columns of refugees, who were mostly young and old, the men under 40 having been conscripted for the army. “They had all their belongings on their backs or in carts,” Soto says. “We tried to help them whenever we could. The little kids broke your heart.”

The promotions came quickly as Soto showed his mettle. He was a sergeant before the end of summer, a staff sergeant by winter and a sergeant first

class by the spring of 1952. At that rate, a battlefield commission to lieutenant seemed likely. “With casualties, promotions and transfers, the company would get orders to fill ranks,” Soto explains. “The officers made the decisions on who got promoted. ‘Here’s your papers,’ they’d say. ‘You’re now a sergeant!’ And that was that. By the end, I was functioning as the second lieutenant of my platoon because we didn’t have an officer.” One day when his platoon was absorbing heavy fire, Soto called the artillery to say he needed some rounds in a hurry:

“Who are you?”

“Sergeant Soto!”

“I’m sorry, sergeant. Can’t do it. We need an officer.”

“Look, I don’t have a platoon lieutenant. I’m the commander. And I need help *now—not tomorrow!*”

He got it.

There’s an old saying in the service: “RHIP,” which stands for Rank Has Its Privileges. Sergeant Soto soon acquired a Jeep, with a Greek kid from Utah as his driver. When the fighting lulled, they’d make supply runs to the Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals, trading ammo for whatever the doctors and nurses had stockpiled. “I watch M*A*S*H on TV practically every day,” Soto says with a grin. “It brings back such memories because I used to deal and wheel with the medical people whenever I could. My colonel would say, ‘Sergeant Soto, take whatever we’ve got to trade and don’t forget to get me a fifth of whiskey!’ I never forgot.”

What Soto missed most was his mother's home cooking:

One day as we passed a column of refugees I said to my driver, "I wonder what they're carrying in all those baskets? Pull in close." He drove alongside. I stood up and, man, what do I see but a whole mess of hot peppers! I grabbed a handful, gave them something in exchange and took 'em back to where we were camped. I gathered the Mexicans around me. We had peppers that night! I knew they made hot stuff in Korea but I found out for myself what kimchee was all about. I think that's what the North Koreans had as rations. When we were on patrols, going slow through a canyon I'd get a sniff of garlic. I would tell the guys, "Better be careful. Go slow! Always stop every so often and see what you can smell!" We found the enemy every time when they were having their lunch. At first the other guys didn't believe I could detect 'em that way. Then they learned I was right.

Dealing with prisoners was tricky business. Sometimes they were docile, especially when wounded. It was well known that the Americans gave POWs the best medical care possible. Sometimes, however, they were dangerously defiant. "That's where Mexicans had an advantage," Soto says, smiling. "The North Koreans and Chinese knew the Mexicans have a reputation as knifers! We always carry a knife for defending ourselves. One day, as two or us were advancing up a hill where some of our guys were in trouble, an officer says, "Hey you! Take these wounded prisoners down to regional headquarters." It was getting dark, so Soto told the prisoners they had to run. After he granted them a break, they refused to get going again. His buddy suggested shooting at their feet. Soto had another idea:

There was a big rock there. I sat on it, pulled out my bayonet and started sharpening it. I got a blade of grass, sliced it in half—whish—and kept honing my blade. Those prisoners were just staring at me. I took my helmet off so they could see I was Hispanic. All of a sudden I stood up and made like I was going to lunge at one of them. Let me tell you, he got right up! I told my friend, "Put your bayonet on your rifle. Let's go!" And off we went. No more trouble.

THE ARMISTICE talks that began in July of 1951 came in the wake of a successful U.N. offensive. The battle for control of Korea became a war of outposts and hilltop by hilltop defensive battles, smaller in scale but no less lethal.

"As early spring temperatures rose and the ground thawed, roads became axle deep," 35th Infantry Regiment historians wrote of the stalemate. "Yet a day did not go by

in which some American soldier did not risk his life for his comrades on some nameless Korean hillside.” To Sotero Soto, Korea became “one hill after another” along the U.N.’s front lines. The regiment’s historians put it this way: “The typical outpost consisted of a number of bunkers and interconnecting trenches ringed with barbed wire and mines perched precariously on the top of a barren, rocky hill. ...With upwards of 6,000 rounds of incoming artillery a day, the Allied troops could not get much rest.”

The combat engineers were always in the thick of it. Some of those battles have famous names. Soto has three campaign stars on his Korean Service ribbon. He was at the Punchbowl and the Iron Triangle, though the names invented by the headline writers never registered with him.

Maybe I was the only one back then who didn’t know the names of battles and whether a hill was Number 682 or whatever. I worried about staying alive and keeping my guys alive. That was my main thing. I would ask the members of my platoon when I talked with them to get to know them better, “OK, in your way of thinking who is number one? Your family? Your girlfriend? Your wife?” And they would say, “My wife” or “My mother.” Then I would say, “You’re wrong. *You’re number one!* Because without number one, number two has a problem to survive, especially a wife. Make sense?” And they would say, “You know what, sergeant—you’re right.”

As 1952 was winding down, Soto received orders to rotate back to the States. It was the night before his outfit was set to take a strategic hill. “I had been taught how to read aerial maps, so I knew exactly what was happening.” He said he’d stay another month. A lieutenant who spoke Spanish told him he was nuts in two languages: “¿estás loco?”—“You got orders. You’re going home!”

With mixed emotions about who should be number one, Soto went home to teach soldiers how to survive. “And when my replacement went up that hill he got wounded.”



Sotero, right, with four pals at combat engineer school.
Soto collection



The Sotos on their wedding day in 1956.
Sotero collection

AFTER A BRIEF STAY at Fort Lewis, Soto was sent to Fort Worden at Port Townsend, where the Strait of Juan de Fuca flows into Puget Sound. The 2nd Engineer Special Brigade, stationed there when the Korean War erupted, was one of the first Army units mobilized. Soto was now assigned to train replacements.

He was discharged from the Army in September of 1953, a few weeks after the bloody, frustrating war in Korea ended in a stalemate right where it started. Fort Worden's days as a military outpost were over, too.

Soto's mother had prayed ceaselessly that he would not be one of the nearly 37,000 soldiers who never came home from Korea. She begged him to leave the Army. He was reluctant at first. He was up for master sergeant, which paid \$206 per month, the equivalent of around \$1,900 today. It seemed like even more back then, especially compared to wages in Eagle

Pass. There was also the promise of a pension. But riding a desk wasn't his idea of a career advancement. "I later thanked her," Soto says, "because I maybe wouldn't have made it out of Vietnam alive. She lived to be 102."

He went home to Texas, met Esther, fell in love, got married and started having daughters. "For a long time, all the things I saw in Korea were stuck in my mind and I would wake up yelling. A friend of mine right there in Eagle Pass killed himself because he had seen too much. It was stuck in his head and he never tried to work it out. I worked it out. We need to do more for our veterans."

Soto landed a government job during construction of the dams across the Rio Grande at Del Rio about an hour north of Eagle Pass. Laid off, he picked up a job driving truck. He was living payday to payday in 1972 when a friend who owned Moreno's restaurant in Olympia called. "He said he needed help, and sent me a ticket. I flew up here on Labor Day, stayed three days and then flew back to talk it over with my family. I told them we could come up here and maybe work a few months or a year and save some money. 'Then if most of you want to go back to Texas, we'll go back.' At Thanksgiving I looked around the table and said, 'Raise your hand who wants to go back.' *Nobody.* 'And who wants to stay here?' *Everyone raised their hand!* So we had a new home." The Sotos' eighth daughter was born Washington.



Sotero and Esther with their daughter Becky Soto-Ortiz, left, and granddaughters Izavel Ortiz and Ofelia Hernandez, right. *John Hughes photo*

Maria “Becky” Soto-Ortiz, the Sotos’ Number Four daughter and Izavel’s mom, is the Bilingual Family Liaison at Shelton High School. When the Sotos arrived in Olympia 45 years ago, there were under a thousand people of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity in Thurston County. Today there are 17,787, roughly the same number as in the entire state in 1970. “It was really different from Eagle Pass. The weather, the community, the language. We’d come from a community that was all Spanish—the stores, the music, your neighbors. *Everything*. You knew where the English-speaking people lived and where they hung out; they had their own world and we had ours,” Becky remembers. But the Sotos soon settled in, made friends and reveled in the beauty of the Northwest. The racism they encountered was mostly subtle. One vivid exception sticks in Becky’s mind. At the supermarket one day she encountered a dolt who declared, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from?” She tells what happened next:

The manager, to his credit, ended up kicking him out. At first I started feeling down. I was upset. I was crying! Then something in me just came out. That man had gone into the men’s bathroom. I swung open the door and stood back. I wagged my finger and said, “Let me tell you something: I can’t believe that my dad went to war for people like you! He fought in the Korean War and we are more Americans than your granddaddy!” He was so ignorant. “Get out! Get out!” He just kept

jabbering. Luckily, he is in the minority.

Soto went on to work at the landmark Oyster House, a popular lunch spot for administrators from the Olympia School District. Impressed by his efficiency and demeanor, they asked if he'd ever thought about working for the district. "When do I start?" Soto said. Within weeks he had a new job. He loved being a custodian. The best part was being around the kids.

He's retired now, living with Esther in a cozy home along the bucolic Little Rock Road outside Tumwater, with grandchildren nearby. He goes outside to smoke the "Indian-brand" cigarettes Esther buys him at the reservation smoke shop. "It's a bad habit," Soto acknowledges, "but I've been smoking since I was 15, and the doctor said that if they haven't killed me by now quitting won't do much good." He lets out a what-the-hell laugh as a Calico cat, his carport companion, meows.

When Soto goes to town he always wears his Korea Veteran cap. He wants you to remember the forgotten war.

John C. Hughes