

# *Borinqueneers* Awarded Congressional Gold Medal

The 65th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the *Borinqueneers*, made history June 10 when President Barack Obama signed the bill to award it the Congressional Gold Medal. The legislation was introduced by Rep. Bill Posey (R-FL) and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT). The Congressional Gold Medal recognition parallels that of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, but it is awarded less frequently and is arguably more rigorous due to its stringent legislative requirements. AUSA endorsed the initiative.

The 65th Infantry Regiment was the only Hispanic-segregated, active duty military unit in the armed forces. It was established after Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory in 1898 and was deactivated in 1956. It was predominately composed of soldiers from Puerto Rico with minor elements of other ethnicities, including Anglo, African-American, Virgin Islander, Filipino and Mexican-American. A remnant battalion from the regiment—1st Battalion, 65th Infantry—remains in the Puerto Rican National Guard, where it still serves in the nation's ongoing military campaigns.

The leading movement behind this gold-medal cause originated with a grass-roots volunteer group called the *Borinqueneers* Congressional Gold Medal Alliance, founded by

this writer, who is a former Army captain, West Point graduate and Iraq War veteran. It was sponsored by the You Are Strong! Center for Veterans Health and Human Services.

**By Frank Medina**

The unit participated in World War I, World War II and, most notably, the Korean War. On their journey by ship to fight in the Korean War, soldiers of the 65th Infantry Regiment drew their nickname from a lottery of other proposed nicknames. The anglicized moniker originates after the island of Puerto Rico's indigenous name, Borinquen, meaning "Land of the Brave Lord."

It was during the Korean War that the *Borinqueneers* performed their pinnacle military achievements and demonstrated much valor and heroism amid the adversities of segregation, institutional prejudice, language barriers and other obstacles. It was the first time the unit was assigned to a combat role, departing from established policies in which segregated units were not allowed to fight on the front lines.

When the *Borinqueneers* entered the Korean War, they were among the best-equipped and best-manned units. Two examples of their accomplishments include executing the last recorded battalion-sized bayonet assault against the enemy and defending the evacuation corridor for one of the greatest military withdrawals in U.S. history.



*President Barack Obama awards a Congressional Gold Medal to the 65th Infantry Regiment, the only Hispanic-segregated, active duty military unit.*

White House/ Amanda Lucidon



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Clockwise from above: Gen. Richard E. Cavazos was the first Hispanic in the Army to achieve four-star rank; Borinqueneers aboard the USS Marine Lynx head for Korea; a 65th Infantry casualty is medevaced in Korea.

For the latter feat, the *Borinqueneers* were among the last units, if not the last, to board ships on Christmas Eve 1950 after they provided the rear guard for elements of the 1st Marine Division that were encircled by Chinese forces during the evacuation of the Chosin Reservoir. A few weeks later, they were the first unit to cross the Han River and arrive at Seoul to successfully fight in Operation Killer. Later on, the 65th Infantry encountered some of the fiercest fighting in the early and dynamic stages of the Korean War. In 1951, the unit participated in the Uijonbu Corridor drives and seized key terrain in the Chorwon Valley, which in turn was instrumental in breaking the Iron Triangle.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur lauded the 65th Infantry: "They are writing a brilliant record of heroism in battle and I am indeed proud to have them under my command. I wish that we could count on many more like them."

The first Hispanic ever to rise to the rank of four-star general in the Army, retired Gen. Richard E. Cavazos, started with the 65th Infantry Regiment. Then-1st Lt. Cavazos fought with the 65th Infantry as a racially integrated unit in 1953, although an executive order desegregating military units was issued by President Harry Truman in 1948. Cavazos earned the Army's highest decoration, the Distinguished



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Service Cross, for his heroic actions with the 65th Infantry Regiment in the battle for Outpost Harry in 1953.

Overall, individual members of the 65th Infantry Regiment earned a Medal of Honor, 10 Distinguished Service Crosses, over 250 Silver Stars, over 600 Bronze Stars and approximately 3,000 Purple Hearts.

In March, Master Sgt. Juan E. Negron was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor along with 23 other recipients, making him the first Medal of Honor recipient from the 65th Infantry.

Out of more than 160 Congressional Gold Medal recipients since 1776, only one other Hispanic American has earned the prestigious distinction. Roberto Clemente, baseball Hall-of-Famer and humanitarian, also from Puerto Rico, received the honor in 1973 after passing away in an airplane crash while delivering food and other supplies to survivors of an earthquake in Nicaragua.

The 65th Infantry Regiment exceeded the expectations of military leadership, who had previously harbored ill-conceived notions about the soldiers of the unit and their capabilities.



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