



Puerto Rico National Guard Museum

From Glory To Disaster

A member of the 65th Infantry Regiment of the Puerto Rico National Guard receives an award in Korea. Note the symbol of the regiment, the white Maltese cross on a shield of black, on the officer's helmet.

And Back

By Lt. Col.(P) Gilberto Villahermosa

A review of the performance of the U.S. Army's Hispanic 65th Infantry Regiment in the Korean War provides important insights not only into the regiment's unique problems, but also into the status of the U.S. Army at one of the most critical junctures in its history. It underscores the importance of NCOs and the impact of integration on combat readiness and battlefield successes. What has been called "The Forgotten War" remains rich in lessons that the Army of today can never afford to forget if it is to succeed on the battlefields of tomorrow.

Between September 1950 and December 1951, the 65th Infantry Regiment established a reputation as one of the 3rd Infantry Division's most dependable formations in Korea. Manned by Puerto Rican troops and commanded by predominantly white officers, the regiment was a well-led, well-trained and disciplined formation. "The Puerto Ricans forming the ranks of the gallant 65th ... are writing a brilliant record of heroism in battle," wrote Gen. Douglas

Soldiers of the 65th Infantry Regiment aboard the Liberty Ship USS Freeman after being evacuated from Hungnam, North Korea, in December 1950.



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MacArthur, "and I am indeed proud to have them under my command." By the end of 1951, the officers and men of the regiment had garnered four Distinguished Service Crosses and more than 125 Silver Stars. "Its performance was superb. We were very proud of our regiment's action," recalled Capt. Fernandez-Duran, a Puerto Rican officer of the 1st Battalion. "There was never any fear or cowardice displayed by anyone in our unit. Leadership was superb, and most of the soldiers were veterans and Regular Army. As to discipline, nothing was left to be desired."

The regiment's combat effectiveness, however, deteriorated rapidly in 1952. The 65th experienced its first major failures at Outpost Kelly and Jackson Heights in the Ch'orwon Valley of North Korea during September and October 1952. Losing both outposts to sustained Chinese attacks and failing to regain them, the regiment suffered more than 500 battle casualties in one month. Afterward, 95 men of the regiment were court-martialed and convicted of desertion, misbehavior before the enemy and disobeying the orders of a superior officer. Blaming the failure on the inability of the regiment's soldiers to understand English, Secretary of the Army Robert Stevens moved quickly to remit the sentences and granted clemency and pardons to all those involved.

The problem, however, was far more complicated than that. A number of interrelated factors had caused the deterioration of the 65th. Across the Eighth Army, these factors included a shortage of officers and NCOs, a rotation policy that gutted infantry units of combat-experienced leaders and soldiers and made sustained training impossible, tactical doctrine that resulted in high casualties, an artillery ammunition shortage and declining morale. Other infantry regiments in Korea experienced deterioration analogous to that of the 65th, and some displayed similar shortcomings on the battlefield as well. At the division level, factors at play included feeble leadership, an unreliable artillery brigade and a command environment guilty of ethnic and organizational prejudice. (The division commander was in fact relieved after the battle for Outpost Kelly.)

Factors within the 65th contributing to the failure included a catastrophic shortage of NCOs, language problems and inept leadership in a few key positions (the regimental commander being relieved after the battle for Outpost Kelly). That the Chinese communist forces had un-

dergone a massive quantitative and qualitative buildup in 1952 made these matters worse.

One cannot overstate the damage done by the large-scale diversion to other units of the bilingual NCOs originally intended for assignment to the 65th. The reliable link between an English-speaking Army and the regiment's Spanish-speaking soldiers simply disappeared. The shortage of NCOs was exacerbated in the 65th by other personnel assignment policies. Although only Puerto Rican soldiers and sergeants could serve in the regiment, those who spoke English could serve in any unit in Eighth Army. As a result, English-speaking Puerto Rican NCOs were frequently diverted to other infantry units.

Prior to October 1951, Puerto Ricans had been limited to service in Puerto Rico and Panama's Canal Zone except during time of war, when they had been ordered to active theaters of operation.

A new policy went into effect in October 1951, making all English-speaking insular Puerto Rican enlisted personnel immediately available for assignment to any U.S. Army unit. The policy was attributed to the "outstanding record of the 65th Infantry Regiment in Korea" and to "the excellent impression the troops made on high ranking officers of the Army during Operation PORTREX [Puerto Rican exercises] on Vieques Island in early 1950." Soldiers unable to meet the English-language requirements continued to serve in Puerto Rican units.

The policy of assigning Hispanics to units other than the 65th in Korea preceded the official announcement by a good margin. It probably had as much to do with personnel shortages as with the 65th's reputation prior to and during the first year of the Korean War. In January 1951, Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, the new Eighth Army Commander, directed Maj. Gen. Robert H. Soule, the 3rd Infantry Division Commander, to integrate Puerto Rican replacements throughout the division rather than specifically assign them to the all-Puerto Rican regiment. Soule attempted, unsuccessfully, to get the new policy overturned.

There appear to have been two major factors behind Ridgway's order. The first was related to the integration of the Eighth Army in Korea, and the second, to the growing surplus of Puerto Rican soldiers arriving in Korea in 1951.

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U.S. Army

Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, Eighth Army commander, inspects a soldier of the 65th Infantry Regiment in January 1951. On Gen. Ridgway's left is Col. William W. Harris, commander of the 65th Infantry Regiment.

Confronted with battle losses and a growing surplus of African-American replacements arriving in Japan, the Eighth Army had been assigning them to all-white units since August 1950. The practice accelerated during early 1951. Ridgway was a staunch supporter of integration in the Army, believing racial segregation to be a highly inefficient use of manpower. He aggressively sought authorization to integrate African-Americans in the Far Eastern Command after he replaced MacArthur. On July 1, 1951, the Department of the Army approved the policy.

The growing surplus of Puerto Rican soldiers arriving in Korea in 1951 was because of the large number of military-age Hispanic males available for service on the island, their desire to serve in the Army and an expansion of the training base on Puerto Rico. More than 7,000 Puerto Ricans underwent military training at the island's Replacement Training Center between September 1950 and April 1951. The 65th, which deployed to Korea with a 10 percent overage of personnel, was over strength for the first four months of 1951. Although authorized 3,614 enlisted personnel, 3,910 were assigned in February and 3,732 in March. Furthermore, of the 4,047 replacements received by the 3rd Division in April, 2,400 were Puerto Rican. This resulted in an excess of 1,400 personnel in the 65th by the end of the month. Another 2,300 Hispanic soldiers were en route to Korea and were scheduled to arrive in the near future.

In response, Gen. Soule assigned Puerto Rican personnel to other units in the division. According to Brig. Gen. O. P.

Newman, the assistant commander of the 3rd Infantry Division, this was part of an experiment aimed at assigning 1,000 Hispanic soldiers to combat and support throughout the division in order to assess the impact of integration on the Army. Although unit commanders initially complained, the withdrawal of these men six months later was accomplished only with great difficulty. In a contemporary study that examined the use of Puerto Rican troops in the Korean War, Col. William W. Culp wrote, "The fact that so many men were so readily absorbed and that both commanders and men resisted this transfer indicated that integration would present no difficult problems."

The 3rd Infantry Division's regimental commanders agreed with this assessment. A former commander of the 15th Infantry Regiment remembered receiving Hispanic replacements in April. "They were integrated into the units of the 15th Infantry as any normal replacements," recalled Col. T.R. Yancey. "I remember that certain individuals who had previous experience in civilian life as mechanics became particularly adept as members of maintenance crews of the heavy tank company. They were placed in slots where it was estimated that they could best perform their duty. Some, of course, were sent to squads where they became proficient as riflemen. They worked well with the American soldier, and I believe, although there is no definite proof, that the normal Puerto Rican soldier replacement probably performs better with the 15th Regiment than if he had been assigned to a unit of his own nationality. I am of the opinion that the Puerto Rican soldier can be integrated through[out] our continental units."

Yancey's notion that the Hispanic soldiers were not Americans was widespread at the time. In fact, Puerto Ricans had been granted U.S. citizenship in 1917. Col. James O. Boswell, commander of the 7th Infantry Regiment, also supported the integration of Hispanic troops. "These soldiers," he wrote, "rapidly became first-class fighters, ... [and] except for political reasons ... I feel that Puerto Ricans can be used to the best advantage for themselves, for the Army and for the United States to have them integrated into continental units." In his study, Col. Culp pointed out another advantage of integration: "This method would also install a buffer against excessive losses by Puerto Rico. Being a small island, should a Puerto Rican unit be annihilated in combat or suffer excessive losses, it would have an adverse effect on the Puerto Rican people."

Col. Juan Cesar Cordero, the regiment's Puerto Rican commander in the fall of 1952, recognized that the policy of assigning English-speaking Puerto Rican NCOs to any unit in Eighth Army worked against the regiment. Since the definition of *English-speaking* could be liberally interpreted, few Puerto Rican NCOs arriving in Korea found their way to the regiment. This policy thus deprived the 65th of not only an essential element of leadership, but also of badly needed bilingual sergeants to act as the link between English-speaking officers and their Spanish-speaking troops. Complaints of NCO shortages in the regiment surfaced as early as September 1951, when Col. Erwin O. Gibson wrote:

Gen. James A. Van Fleet (center), Eighth Army commander, with Maj. Gen. Thomas J. Cross (left), 3rd Infantry Division commander, and Col. Juan C. Cordero (second from right), 65th Infantry Regiment commander. Col. Cordero was subsequently relieved of command as a result of the regiment's failure.



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"It is recommended that more experienced Puerto Rican Non-Commissioned Officers be assigned to the 65th Infantry Regiment. This [unit] is limited to Puerto Rican enlisted personnel, and although enlisted replacements have been fairly adequate, there have been practically no NCO replacements. This has placed a terrific strain on this regiment in attempting to maintain a proper or even minimum level of experienced NCOs."

The NCO shortage reached critical proportions prior to the battle for Outpost Kelly. Col. Cordero attempted to remedy the situation afterward by recommending that additional all-Puerto Rican units be formed to absorb the excess personnel not serving in the 65th. His reasoning was that, because Spanish would be the predominant language of such units and that those units, like the 65th, would receive a modified ration, morale would be higher and Puerto Rican soldiers would perform better. Cordero believed that such units, if formed, would come under his command and would provide a trained reserve for the 65th Infantry. By the time the recommendation was made, however, the process of assigning Hispanic troops to units throughout the Far Eastern Command was too far along to be reversed.

The assignment of English-speaking Puerto Rican NCOs to Eighth Army units other than the 65th and the individual rotation policy stripped the Puerto Rican regiment of its sergeants. From January to September 1952, the regiment rotated 8,700 men, more than twice its authorized strength, of whom almost 1,500 were experienced NCOs in the upper three grades. In return, only 435 sergeants arrived to replace the losses, and by September some of these had become casualties. As a result, company commanders were forced to assign inexperienced privates and privates first class to key positions throughout their platoons. These men commanded squads and acted as platoon sergeants, positions normally reserved for sergeants and sergeants first class. The 65th had only 381 NCOs out of an authorized strength of 811 in the upper three grades when the battle for Outpost Kelly took place. Many of these had been developed from recent replacements. At the same time, some 1,500 to 2,000 Puerto Rican sergeants and soldiers were serving in other Eighth Army units.

The lack of experienced platoon sergeants and corporals seriously undermined the combat efficiency of the regiment. Cordero believed that this deficiency was counterbalanced by the high esprit de corps of the regiment, "which is motivated by the pride the Puerto Rican soldiers feel for

this unit." In many cases, however, as soon as company commanders and platoon leaders became casualties, the inexperience of squad and platoon level NCOs became all too apparent. There were more and more failures to sustain the momentum of attacks and an increasing tendency on the part of the men to become confused and disorganized after their officers had become casualties. Cordero recommended that the 65th receive a monthly quota of 400 sergeants, including a fair proportion of the upper three grades, so that he could remedy this basic weakness. He further recommended that Puerto Rican sergeants assigned to other units in the Far Eastern Command be transferred to the 65th "insomuch as no continental NCOs are being assigned to this organization." The 3rd Infantry Division, however, was unable to remedy the problem prior to the regiment's defeat at Jackson Heights.

The collapse of the 65th, the courts-martial and the ensuing public outcry prompted the Army to integrate the regiment. In the spring of 1953, the 65th was reconstituted as a fully integrated unit by transferring thousands of Hispanic soldiers to units throughout Eighth Army and bringing in thousands of white and black personnel. Only a small core of 250 Puerto Ricans remained. The 65th thus ceased to be a true Puerto Rican unit. In June, the regiment redeemed itself, winning 14 Silver Stars, 23 Bronze Stars for valor and 67 Purple Hearts at the battle for Outpost Harry. The 65th's colors remained in Korea until November 1954, when the regiment returned to Puerto Rico. The unit had been decorated with the Presidential Unit Citation, a Meritorious Unit Commendation, two Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citations and the Gold Bravery Medal of Greece. In all, some 61,000 Puerto Ricans served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War. Some 750 were killed and more than 2,300 wounded, losses that might have been reduced had the regiment been integrated earlier in the war. Today, only the 1st Battalion remains as part of the Puerto Rico National Guard, a testimony to a unique regiment that has served the United States for a hundred years.