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- Prejudice and the 65th Infantry

Leonard R. Sussman

This summer, PBS telecast nationally "The Borinqueneers," a documentary on the 65th Infantry Regiment of Puerto Rican troops. "Their toughest fight," the promotion said, "was not on the battlefield." I, not a Puerto Rican, can attest to that.

In 1944, I was a sergeant caught between the stymied career of a brilliant brigadier general and the demand of a 4-star general--Douglas MacArthur, commanding U.S. forces in the Pacific in World War II. MacArthur wanted the Pentagon to move the 65th Regiment into his command. He had admired the skills and heroism of another ethnic fighting team, Filipino troops who accompanied him into defeat and then victory in WWII. But he was denied the 65th, its defenders claimed, because of prejudice. And I was deemed, somehow, to have had a part in the denigration of Puerto Rican military prowess. I had no knowledge at the time of MacArthur's request for the 65th Infantry or of the negative appraisal of Puerto Rican fighting qualities, by a general in San Juan. But my name appeared on the highly classified report that doomed the MacArthur request.

Some years later, in the 1950s, the 65th served under MacArthur during the Korean war. After observing the heroism of Puerto Rican troops MacArthur said he welcomed "many more like them."

But, in October 1947, I was told by the Governor's office in Puerto Rico that I should take the next plane to San Juan to defend charges against me. The formal complaint held that I had been the author of the highly negative appraisal of Puerto Ricans and their fighting men. And that, therefore, I should be summarily fired from my post as director of Puerto Rico's information office in the U.S.---the position for which I had been recommended by Luis Munoz Marin, soon to be governor and creator of Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status.

The charge against me had highly emotional overtones. The 65th Infantry for a hundred years had been the pride of Puerto Ricans everywhere. Since 1898, they had volunteered for the U.S. National Guard and served in the first World War. The "continental" colonel who commanded the 65th in Korea wrote that "no ethnic group had greater pride in itself and its history than the Puerto Rican people." W. W. Harris, later a brigadier general, revealed that when assigned to lead the 65th he was "outraged" at being "sent out to pasture for two years to command what the Pentagon brass referred to as a 'rum and Coca Cola outfit.'"

He may not have known that, in 1944, such perceived prejudice against Puerto Ricans was attributed to the author of the formal negative appraisal of Puerto Rican troops.

The author was Brigadier General Thomas R. Phillips, assigned before WWII as chief of staff of the Antilles Department which commanded all forces in the Caribbean. Phillips had a distinguished career in the pre-war army as a tactician and military historian. But he espoused a position on the use of Army air power that did not conform to the established view. He was---in Harris' term years later---"sent out to pasture in Puerto Rico." When WWII began, Phillips was denied service on a European fighting front.

When the call came from General MacArthur to transfer the 65th Infantry to the Pacific, General Phillips would prepare the highly classified estimate of Puerto Rican capabilities. He assigned three colonels---all "continentals," no Puerto Ricans---to collaborate on the analysis. The colonel who was asked to write the history of local fortifications from Spanish days gave me the assignment. I produced the paper but when I discovered that it was part of a negative appraisal I urged that it be killed. But my name had been placed on the report and it had already been sent to Washington.

It should have been clear that I, a journalist in uniform, was not likely to have had the ability or the experience to write the highly technical analysis in the report.

That did not sway my accusers in 1947. Yet they refused to face me or an investigator assigned by the governor. The investigator secured appraisals of me from the retired colonel for intelligence (G-2), under whom I served (he was a distinguished Puerto Rican); a major in G-2 (also Puerto Rican); and a good friend, Manuel Navas. He and I had served together on a newspaper in Puerto Rico, on the Federal Communications Commission, and in the army. Mano in 1947 was public relations director of the Veterans Administration. Mano said that "Sussman's attitude is practically that of a Puerto Rican." He knew that I had created the army's only Spanish-language daily news report for Puerto Ricans serving worldwide.

The charges against me were dropped and I returned to my post in New York for two more years.

But the heroic history of the 65th Infantry in the Korean War underscores the cruelty of institutional prejudice, particularly when bolstered by personal vendettas. Four Borinqeneers were awarded the

Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism. More than 100 received the Silver Star for battlefield valor. The 65th was among the most decorated in the U.S. Army in Korea.

Yet, when several-score Puerto Rican troops refused an order to mount a rocky hill, devoid of cover--- leaderless, their lieutenant had already been killed facing overwhelmingly large enemy forces---many were court-martialed. They received long prison sentences. Critics said the judgment was harsher than non-Puerto Ricans received. Years later, the penalty was reduced.

General Douglas MacArthur, who was denied the 65th in World War II, wrote in February 1951 from his embattled post in Korea, "[The 65th] is writing a brilliant record of achievement in battle and I am proud indeed to have them in this command. I wish that we might have many more like them."

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