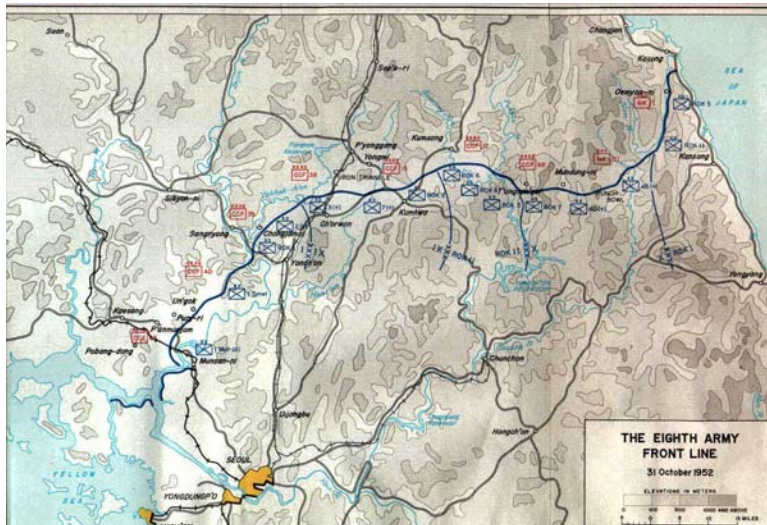


Puerto Rico's 65th Infantry Regiment in the Korean War

The Battles of Outpost Kelly and Jackson Heights

Colonel Gilberto Villahermosa

Between September 1950 and the Spring of 1951, the Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment had established a reputation as one of the 3rd Infantry Division's best and most dependable formations. It was well led, well trained, and highly motivated. The quality of the regiment in combat, however, began to deteriorate rapidly through the Fall of 1952, when major failures occurred at Outpost Kelly and Jackson Heights in the Chorwon Valley of North Korea. By then the Chinese had completed a major quantitative and qualitative buildup and were becoming increasingly aggressive in the contest for control of the high ground forward of Eighth Army's main defensive line.



Intent upon gaining a better position prior to the onset of winter and concerned with gaining leverage in the peace talks through victories on the battlefield, the Communists made the western and central sectors of the UN Command's main line of resistance the focus of fierce and bitter fighting.

On the night of 18 September two reinforced Chinese infantry companies slammed into Outpost Kelly from three directions, overwhelming the Puerto Rican defenders of Company B and quickly seizing their positions. The regimental commander, Colonel Cordero-Davila, the only Puerto Rican to command a regular Army regiment in the Korean War, was reluctant to call in artillery fires or to commit the regimental reserve battalion lest they kill those of his own soldiers still remaining on the hill. He was also concerned that the relief force might come under friendly fire in the confusion. Two nights later, the 65th launched a battalion against the outpost in an attempt to regain it. The unit came under extremely heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire from the very beginning of its assault, followed by a Chinese counterattack, which threw back the Puerto Ricans, ending the attempt to retake the position. On 24 September the regiment launched a second counterattack. It too failed. By the end of the month, Outpost Kelly remained in enemy Chinese hands. The regiment suffered 408 battle casualties during the month, the highest in any engagement since its arrival in Korea two years earlier.

During October, Chinese forces launched another series of strong local attacks, including one on Jackson Heights, located on the eastern edge of the Chorwon Valley. A mountain of solid rock located more than a mile forward of the front line positions, the

heights were defended by a company of the 65th Infantry. On the night of 25 October two Chinese companies slammed into the Puerto Rican positions, again overpowering the defenders and quickly seizing the heights. Two counterattacks by soldiers of the regiment failed to regain it. By the end of the month the 65th had suffered another 259 casualties.



Altogether, the 65th suffered over 800 casualties (including 500 battle casualties and 306 non-battle casualties) defending and attempting to retake Outpost Kelly and Jackson Heights. The

reputation of the regiment and its Puerto Rican soldiers, which had suffered a heavy blow after the battle of Outpost Kelly, was shattered irreparably after Jackson Heights. A total of 123 Puerto Rican soldiers, including one officer, were ordered court-martialed for refusing to attack the enemy as ordered and misbehavior before the enemy.

A number of factors influenced the failure of the 65th in the Fall of 1952, many of them related to conditions prevalent within Eighth Army and the 3rd Infantry Division. At the army level, these included a shortage of officers and NCOs, a rotation policy that gutted 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. At the division level, they included poor leadership, a weak artillery brigade, and a command environment guilty of ethnic and organizational prejudice. Factors within the 65th contributed as well. They included a catastrophic shortage of NCOs, language problems, and inept leadership.

That Chinese forces were by then at their best only made matters worse. By October 1952 the Chinese and North Koreans enjoyed a rough parity in artillery with United Nations force at the front, while having the advantage of ample reserves. Furthermore, the Communists also displayed a growing tactical competence and a greater willingness to take the war to the enemy. Unlike the U.S. Army in Korea, few Chinese officers and soldiers rotated home, ensuring a large cadre of battle-hardened veterans. The capture of Outpost Kelly and Jackson Heights can be considered model operations by reinforced Chinese battalions and highlights the disparity in leadership, training, and morale of the two opposing forces.

In the end, the heavy cumulative effect of all these influences was simply too great a burden for the 65th to bear. The regiment, which suffered from these problems at least as much, if not more, than any other U.S. infantry regiment in Korea, simply could not overcome the combination of all these factors. It is a tribute to the dedication and perseverance of the men of the 65th that, in light of all this, they attacked as many times as they did and were able to advance as far as they did. As happens too often in war, they were let down by their leaders at all levels.

