

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

## Trial by Courts-Martial

Colonel Gilberto Villahermosa

Between December 1952 and January 1953, one hundred and four soldiers of the 65th Infantry were charged with offenses committed following the battle of Jackson Heights on 28 and 29 October and 3 November 1952. The charges ranged from desertion to avoid hazardous duty, to willfully disobeying the lawful orders of a superior officer, and misbehavior before the enemy. Ninety-six, including one officer, were court-martialed in fifteen common trials. Of these, four were acquitted, while eight had had the charges against them thrown out.



The majority of the soldiers court-martialed were privates and privates first class. Only two were corporals. Most were 22 to 23 years old, with the youngest being 19 and the oldest being 31. The preponderance had nine or ten years of education, although a significant proportion had twelve years, with several having completed one or two years of college. The greater part had tested "Inferior" (Class IV) or "Very Inferior" (Class V) on the post-induction intelligence test, the Army General Classification Test. Only one soldier tested "Average" (Class III),

with none scoring "Very Superior" (Class I) or "Superior" (Class II). However, lack of fluency in English may have resulted in low scores for the Hispanic soldiers. Most of the men court-martialed were draftees. A handful were from the Puerto Rican National Guard. About half had a character of service of "Excellent." The others had been rated as either "Good" or "Satisfactory." Only one had previously been court-martialed. Finally, the vast majority had served about a year in the Army, although one was a World War II veteran, during which he was decorated with two Bronze Star medals and a Purple Heart.

By late January 1953 newspapers in the United States and Puerto Rico had begun running stories announcing the court-



martials of the men of the 65th Infantry, mostly as the result of letters written by the Puerto Rican soldiers to their friends and families back home. The Army had tried to keep the court-martials quiet, downplaying both the number of men tried and the severity of their sentences. On 25 January, for example, *The New York Times* ran an article stating that, according to Army sources, one officer and 87 men had been tried and received sentences ranging from six months to ten years confinement at hard labor. According to Army officials quoted in the article, only a single individual received a ten-year term. In a second article, published the following day, however, 3rd Infantry Division officers were quoted as saying that 92 soldiers of the regiment, not 88 as had been initially reported, had been court-martialed and that the convicted men had received sentences of six to ten years confinement and dishonorable discharges. And on 27 January, *The New York Times* ran a third article stating that the Governor of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican press had asked the Army for an official inquiry into events at Jackson Heights and the court-martials of the Puerto Rican soldiers.

As a result of the storm of publicity the case received, Congress, the government of Puerto Rico, and the press demanded an explanation and investigation. On 3 February 1953, General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff, testified before the House Armed Services Committee. When asked about the 65th Infantry Regiment and the courts-martial, Collins answered that the 65th had been “a very well trained” and “very ably led unit” when it first arrived in Korea, “where it distinguished itself in action.”

Photo # 80-G-422492 GenA. MacArthur with Gen. Collins & Adm. Sherman, Aug. 1950



He blamed the failure of the regiment on rotation, the inability of the men to speak English, and the lack of battlefield experience of its officers. “The Puerto Ricans have proven in action in earlier fighting in Korea that they are gallant people and that they will fight just as well as anyone else if they are properly trained and properly led,” he said. The Army Chief of Staff concluded his testimony on the 65th Infantry by pointing out that its failures were not due to either a lack of artillery or equipment, as some members of Congress had alleged.

The inability of the men of the 65th to speak English became the Army’s official reason for the failure of the regiment at Jackson Heights. With Congressional and public pressure growing to do something about the Hispanic soldiers serving their time in various disciplinary barracks, Secretary of the Army Robert Stevens, who had earlier approved the sentences handed out to the men of the regiment, now moved quickly to overturn them. By 14 July he had granted clemency to 53 of the regiment’s soldiers. By 1954 all the sentences had been remitted.

The last Puerto Rican soldier pardoned was Lieutenant Juan E. Guzman, the first individual and only officer to have been court-martialed. The majority of the Puerto Rican soldiers court-martialed returned to serve the U.S. Army in Panama and Puerto Rico. The stigma of the court-martials, however, followed many for the rest of their lives. Many never told their friends or families, who remain unaware to this day, of their tribulations. To this day, many remain reluctant to revisit the regiment's darkest hour in Korea.

