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Land of the Brave

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By Susan Van Dongen - Packetonline.com



A new documentary chronicles the **Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment**, nicknamed The Borinqueneers.

It was during a screening of *Saving Private Ryan* that actress Noemi Figueroa Soulet was inspired to try her hand at producing and directing a documentary film. The Steven Spielberg blockbuster was filled with many wonderful characters, but not one, she noticed, was

Latino.

"I'm Latina and when I go to a film I look to see what Latino faces are there and there were none in 'Saving Private Ryan,'" Ms. Figueroa Soulet says. "There have been films and documentaries about the Tuskegee Airmen, Japanese-Americans and other minorities who served our country in that time period, but none about Latinos."

She became particularly interested in telling the story of the Borinqueneers, the Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment, the only all-Hispanic unit in U.S. Army history.

"My purpose was to add another chapter to our American military history," Ms. Figueroa Soulet says. "The bottom line is that they were American soldiers, even though they looked different and spoke a different language."

Nine years in the making, *The Borinqueneers* is the first major documentary to chronicle the story of the 65th Infantry Regiment. Narrated by Hector Elizondo, the film explores stories of courage, triumph and struggle, blending rare archival footage with compelling interviews with historians, commanding officers and some 250 veterans themselves, who are dwindling in numbers.

Ms. Figueroa Soulet will give a special lecture, following a screening of *The Borinqueneers* at the Mount Burke Theater at the Peddie School in Hightstown May 18. A reception and question-and-answer session will follow.

The screening and related events are the initiative of Betsy Shevey, director of Community Arts Partnership and Cultural Events at the Peddie School, with a goal to reach out to a diversity of audiences in the Mercer County community.

"We partnered with the Latina Women's Council to open the doors of the CAPPS theater and the Peddie campus, to constituencies which enrich the life and culture of our

community," Ms. Shevey says. "This cross-cultural communication is essential to sharing our lives, our spaces and our concerns."

Founded in 1899, the Borinqueneers were bound by a common language and strong cultural identity, and were determined to prove their mettle against circumstances of discrimination within the Army. They also had to cope with curtailed rights in their own land, where, even now, they cannot vote in U.S. elections.

Finally given the chance to be full-fledged participants in a military conflict, they excelled during the first years of the Korean War and earned praise from Gen. Douglas MacArthur. They performed a critical role containing the Chinese advance and supporting the U.S. Marines in the aftermath of the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. But in the fall of 1952, they were in the middle of what was a kind of suicide mission, in the battle for "Jackson Heights," a hill made of solid rock which made it nearly impossible for them to dig in and defend themselves.

"It was more complicated than that — it was a combination of the conditions, plus the fact that they were sent to Korea without enough training, plus a lack of artillery," Ms. Figueroa Soulet says. A recently appointed commanding officer's prejudice didn't help the situation or the morale.

After watching their brothers in arms suffer heavy casualties, dozens of men in the regiment refused to go back into the fray and were subsequently tried in one of the largest courts-martial in the war. Some of the men were sentenced to 10 or more years in prison, and the trials drew worldwide attention.

The reputation of this elite group had been tarnished and shrouded in mystery for 50 years — another reason why Ms. Figueroa Soulet wanted to tell their story.

"I want people to come away knowing these were heroes," she says. "Up to that point, they were serving very well and had been recognized by the brass. Also, those incidents that did occur didn't involve the whole regiment, in fact it was a relatively small number. When you have a sensational story it can overshadow the other accomplishments of the group. I wanted to talk about their successes."

Ms. Figueroa Soulet calls the making of *The Borinqueneers* her "mid-life crisis project," and worked on the film for nine years with no salary.

"I felt like this was an important story and needed to be told," she says. "There is very little written about the 65th or the court martial, although both of the historians you see in the film are writing books. Neither has been published, though, so my film is really it as far as what's out there."

Growing up in New York City, the filmmaker had never heard of the regiment and when she queried other Latinos, found that they were unaware of the Borinqueneers too.

"Even Puerto Ricans living on the island didn't know we had heroes of our own," Ms. Figueroa Soulet says. "It was only after I began to research the Puerto Rican experience in the different wars that I learned about the 65th Infantry Regiment."

In addition to their valour, Ms. Figueroa Soulet became enamoured with the men and their singular personalities.

"It's obvious that these are Puerto Rican soldiers," she says. "Some of them took their guitars wherever they went and sang. I also thought it was (necessary) to talk about their mustaches because to a Latino, a mustache is very important. You'll see a shot of Anglo officers with handlebar mustaches. When I interviewed them, they told me as young lieutenants in order to gain the respect of the (Latino) men, they had to grow mustaches. If they wanted the men to listen to them, they had to show their manhood by growing a mustache."

The unit was nicknamed after "Borinquen," the word given to Puerto Rico by its original inhabitants, the Taino Indians, meaning "land of the brave lord."

Gathering the funding for the film was a labor of love for Ms. Figueroa Soulet, who was particularly touched when she would receive a \$10 check from one of the veterans.

"The veterans of the 65th and their families were eager to share their stories and bring recognition to the regiment," she says. "Some of them were talking about it for the first time in 50 years. No one had asked them about their experience before. Unfortunately, many of the veterans passed away before the film was completed."

PBS stations nationwide have been airing the award-winning documentary, the Armed Forces Network has been broadcasting the program to U.S. troops overseas and there have been numerous screenings around the United States.

"We've been busy since last August," Ms. Figueroa Soulet says. "The New Jersey Network has given us so much support, in fact the state of New Jersey has been our strongest supporter. We had our world premiere at the Newark Museum and the residents of New Jersey have been just great."

The 65th ceased to exist as a segregated unit and is now a battalion of about 800 men which has been permanently transferred to the Puerto Rican National Guard. The unit continues to be active in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the event on May 18, there will be a historical photo exhibit of the 65th and Ms. Figueroa Soulet hopes some of the veterans themselves will be on hand for the question-and-answer session.

"Come out and meet a real Borinqueneer," she says. "They're the stars, not me."

The Making of a Documentary: The Borinqueneers, will be held at the Mount-Burke Theater, the Peddie School, South Main Street, Hightstown, May 18, 2 p.m. Free. (609) 480-7550; www.peddie.org/capps. The Borinqueneers online: www.theborinqueneers.com