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Korean War valor of Puerto Rican regiment recalled

by JUSTO BAUTISTA

Staff Writer -
PATERSON — They called themselves the "Borinqueneers." They were the men of the 65th Infantry Regiment from Puerto Rico, who were hastily shipped to the frigid battlefields of South Korea in 1950 to stop the North Korean aggression.

Most were poor, from hill country, and didn't even speak English. They had to battle prejudice as well as the enemy. They distin-

guished themselves on the battlefield and won over the hearts and minds of those who fought alongside them.

As a youngster growing up in Puerto Rico, Angel Cordero had heard of the 65th but knew very little about it. Few people outside of Puerto Rico have ever heard of the Borinqueneers.

However, when he was chosen as one of the coordinators for the Salute to Puerto Rican Veterans celebration, Cordero, 43, a retired

army sergeant who teaches Junior ROTC classes at Eastside High School, decided he'd better read up on the 65th.

The more he read, the more his chest swelled with pride.

"You talk about the forgotten war, you should talk about these people," said Cordero. "They were the only Hispanic homogeneous outfit to go over there." The Puerto Rican soldiers didn't speak English and "came from all parts of the island," he said. "Mostly

peasants from the hills. Their commanders were American.

"They had so many obstacles to overcome," said Cordero. "Imagine people living in a tropical island, where it's warm all your life, no winters. Then being shipped to Korea." The hardship the Borinqueneers experienced, "it was unreal," he said, referring to Korea's bitterly cold winters.

Even retired Gen. W.W. Harris initially felt his posting as commander of the 65th was an at-

tempt to put him out to pasture. In his book, "Puerto Rico's Fighting 65th," Harris said the Pentagon referred to the 65th as a "rum and Coca-Cola outfit." He changed his mind after leading the 65th in battle.

Shipped to Korea in September 1950, the 65th would eventually lose 732 men in 10 battles. One hundred twenty-five would earn Silver Stars. Four would earn Dis-

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PETER MONSEES/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Sgt. 1st Class Angel Cordero teaches ROTC classes at Paterson's Eastside High School.

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tinguished Service Crosses. The 65th also earned Presidential Unit and Meritorious Service commendations.

On Thursday, Cordero showed his Eastside class a video about the Borinqueneers made by independent filmmaker Noemi Figueroa Soulet.

In the video, 65th survivors talk about their battle experience. More than one, after recounting the devastation and dying he had seen, chokes up and has to stop to compose himself. At that point, Cordero, tears in his eyes, turned away from his class to compose



Men of the Army's 65th Infantry Regiment attacking with fixed bayonets in an artist's representation of a Korean War battle. One hundred twenty-five members of the regiment earned Silver Stars.

himself, too.

"I'm so awed by it all," said Cordero, referring to the 65th's experience. "It's a great story."

The salute to Puerto Rican veterans is sponsored by the Puerto Rican Parade of Paterson 2000. The Memorial Day celebration

will wind up Friday night at the Wayne Manor on Route 23 when surviving soldiers of the 65th will be honored at a banquet. The honorees will be from other wars, too, including Vietnam and the Persian Gulf war. Some will travel from New York, Philadelphia, Vir-

ginia, and Puerto Rico.

"We decided we wanted to salute the Korean veterans, at the same time as all other veterans," said Cordero. "It's important to remember Memorial Day, to pay homage to the ones that went into battle and never returned."