

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

The Glory Days

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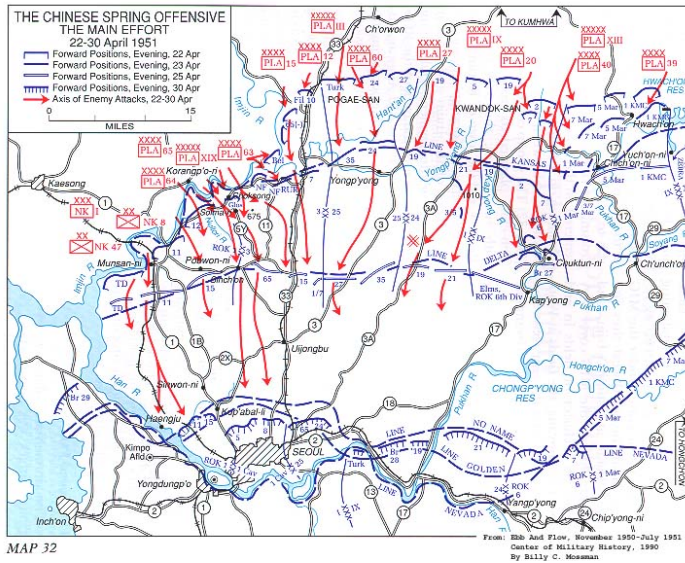
The 65th Infantry Regiment arrived in Korea on 23 September 1950 with more than 3,900 men in its ranks. Spirits were high. Major General Edward Almond's X Corps had landed at Inchon, while Lieutenant General Walton Walker's Eighth Army had broken out of the Pusan Perimeter the previous week. The regiment's first mission took place on 28 September, when it seized a hill defended by a strong enemy force at a cost of six men. Responding to a query from Puerto Rico on the state and performance of the 65th Infantry in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur, the United Nations Commander, observed that the unit's men were "showing magnificent ability and courage in field operations. They are a credit to Puerto Rico and I am proud to have them in my command."

On 4 November the 65th moved to Pusan and then to Wonsan, North Korea by ship, arriving there as the lead element of the 3rd Infantry Division. At the end of November, Chinese forces attacked U.S. troops in the vicinity of the Chosin Reservoir, and the 65th played a critical role in assisting Task Force Dog with covering the withdrawal of the 1st Marine Division. The 65th's Task Force Childs held the high ground that the Marines had to pass through against sustained Chinese attacks. Soon afterward, the 65th was again tasked with holding a key objective: a sector of the Hungnam beachhead, the exit point through which all X Corps forces were evacuated from northeastern Korea. The 65th Infantry's 2nd Battalion was the last unit to come off the beach when the evacuation was completed on 24 December, 1950. The X Corps and 3rd Infantry Division commanders commended the regiment for its outstanding performance.

In January 1951 the 65th Infantry participated in Operations Thunderbolt and Exploitation. By the end of the month, the regiment had advanced to just south of Seoul, where it was ordered to seize three



hills held by the Chinese 149th Division. On the morning of 2 February 1951, two Puerto Rican battalions fixed bayonets and charged, forcing the Chinese soldiers to flee. The regiment's performance prompted General MacArthur to write: "The Puerto Ricans forming the ranks of the gallant 65th Infantry give daily proof on the battlefields of Korea of their courage, determination, and resolute will to victory... They are writing a brilliant record of heroism in battle and I am indeed proud to have them under my command."



In February and March, the 65th participated in Operations Killer and Ripper, aimed at the destruction of Communist forces. Patrols of the 65th were among the first U.S. troops to reenter the South Korean capital. In March, the 65th destroyed an entire North Korean regiment that had slipped through the front lines and attacked the 3rd Infantry Division's rear. In April the 65th participated in Operation Dauntless, leading the 3rd Infantry Division's attack and defeating elements of the Chinese 26th Army. On 19 April, Sergeant

Modesto Cartagena and Corporal Nieves-Laguer, both of Company C, won the Distinguished Service Cross during attacks on Chinese defensive positions near Yonchon. Sergeant Cartagena knocked out five strongpoints with hand grenades until seriously wounded. Corporal Nieves-Laguer repeatedly charged Communist dugouts, killing the defenders and freeing the remainder of his squad to advance. Nieves-Laguer also made three separate trips across fire-swept terrain, evacuating three badly wounded comrades to safety.

The 65th defended its sector tenaciously during the Communist Spring offensive of May 1951, punishing the Chinese with blistering air and artillery strikes and forcing them to break off their attacks. The regiment held its ground resolutely until ordered to break contact, then withdrew in an organized fashion. Finally, it was the unit selected to lead the relief of the beleaguered British Gloster Battalion, reflecting General Soule's confidence in the fighting abilities of his Puerto Rican soldiers. "At division it was considered to be a most dependable force," remembers Lieutenant Colonel Bill Friedman, the 3rd Infantry Division's Assistant Operations Officer. "Their withdrawal was orderly and controlled and the resistance it offered was still first class."



When asked by officers of the 65th why the regiment had spent so much time on



the front lines, Brigadier General Armistead D. Mead, the Assistant Division Commander of the 3rd Infantry Division, replied that the 65th was the strongest regiment in the division. It had arrived in Korea overstrength at a time when the other regiments were understrength. In addition, the 65th had arrived two months before the remainder of the division and thus had more combat experience than the other infantry regiments. Finally, Mead said that the Puerto Ricans tended to occupy the best and most defensible terrain.

By the Spring of 1951, the 65th Infantry had established a reputation as a well-led, well-trained, and highly motivated unit. "Its performance was superb," recalled a Puerto Rican officer in the 1st Battalion, Captain Fernandez-Duran. "We were very proud of our regiment's action. There was never any fear or cowardice displayed by anyone in our unit. Leadership was superb and most of the soldiers were veterans and regular army. As to discipline, nothing was left to be desired."