

Film celebrates achievements of only all-Hispanic military unit



U.S. Army Col. Edwin Marrero (left) honors Igrail Morales and other members of the 65th Infantry Regiment, the only all-Hispanic unit in Army history, during a tribute by Asociacion Borinquena de Florida Central Inc. in Orlando. (JACOB LANGSTON, ORLANDO SENTINEL / November 12, 2007)

Jeannette Rivera-Lyles | Sentinel Staff Writer

The horror of sleeping among 17 dead men is still ingrained in retired Sgt. Raul Reyes Castañeira's memory more than a half-century later.

One night in 1952, as a young soldier in Korea, he arrived to camp from the battlefield too exhausted to pitch his own tent. He sneaked into a large tent and, in the dark, searched for a spot on the ground amid several men he thought were asleep.

The next morning, he woke up to a scene Alfred Hitchcock couldn't have imagined.

"Some of the bodies were missing the head, others had no legs," Castañeira, 76, said Sunday. "It was a terrible experience."

Castañeira and the dead soldiers in a makeshift morgue were members of the 65th Infantry Regiment, the only all-Hispanic unit in military history. The Army organized the regiment in 1899, a year after Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States. Later it was nicknamed the "Borinqueneers," after the Indian name of the island.

On Sunday, Asociacion Borinquena, a Central Florida Puerto Rican group, honored Castañeira and 100 other veterans -- 20 of whom belonged to the 65th -- by showing the theatrical premiere of *The Borinqueneers*, a documentary about the regiment. The event took place at the group's headquarters on north Econolockhatchee Trail. The film's director, Noemi Figueroa Soulet, introduced her work and later moderated a panel discussion with the 65th Infantry's veterans.

Figueroa, a Puerto Rican-born actress who grew up in New York, said the 65th Infantry has been absent from films and history books. She felt compelled to change that.

"I guess it was naiveté," Figueroa said. "I pretty much woke up one day and said, 'I'm going to do a documentary about them.'"

What she thought would be a two-year project turned into a nine-year odyssey. Money was scarce and many of the subjects had died.

Figueroa's research brought her to Orlando, where a few of the men who figure prominently in the film now live.

Retired Col. Tomás Guffain, 91, is one of them. A 65th Infantry veteran of World War II and Korea, Guffain joined the Army as a volunteer at 16 and served for 25 years. He was awarded silver and bronze medals.

On Sunday, he showed the audience an old canteen that he credited with saving his life.

"I was crawling on the ground during battle and did not notice I had been hit until I reached for my canteen to take a drink and it spilled," Guffain said, referring to the bullet that pierced the canteen.

The men of the 65th were among the first to meet the enemy on the battlefields of Korea. The regiment also was part of a task force that enabled the Marines to withdraw from the Chosin Reservoir in Korea in December 1950. When the Marines were encircled by Chinese communist troops close to the Manchurian border, the 65th rushed to their defense. The Marines got back safely to their ships.

In 1951, Gen. Douglas MacArthur said of the regiment: "The Puerto Ricans forming the ranks of the gallant 65th Infantry on the battlefields of Korea . . . are writing a brilliant record of achievement in battle and I am proud indeed to have them in this command. I wish that we might have many more like them."

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