

Home of the Brave

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A new documentary, *The Borinqueneers*, sheds light on the isle's unsung military heroes.

By Celia San Miguel

It's difficult to watch PBS's new documentary *The Borinqueneers* without feeling conflicted. Though it celebrates the bravery of Puerto Rico's 65th Infantry, Puerto Rico's first professional Army unit and the only all-Latino unit in Army history, the film illuminates the tumultuous relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, and the pervasive racism to which the troops were subjected.

Narrated by actor **Hector Elizondo**, *The Borinqueneers* features footage from the Korean War, World War II, and even the Spanish American War, as well as interviews with over a dozen surviving members of the 65th Infantry, whose nickname is a pun on the word "Buccaneer" and a nod to Puerto Rico's original Taino name, Borinquen. The infantry dates back to 1917 when, as the U.S. entered World War I, the **Jones Act**, which created a new island government and gave Puerto Ricans American citizenship, was passed. The act gave the U.S. more control and opportunity to exploit Boricuas — Puerto Rico's governor was named by the U.S. President, not elected by the population, the Commonwealth was given a "voice," not a vote in Congress, and Puerto Ricans weren't allowed to vote for president. But they were conveniently eligible and, moreover, required to serve in the armed forces. Though liberals like me see this arrangement as more a curse than a blessing, a shocking number of Puerto Ricans in that era flocked to enlist. With the island going through a massive economic depression, the army provided a way out of poverty.

By the 1930s, Puerto Rico was critical to the U.S.'s military dominance over the Caribbean and became a pivotal part of their military efforts in Europe and Asia. On the eve of World War II, thousands of Puerto Ricans enlisted in the Army. In 1944, the Borinqueneers were shipped to South France to protect fellow soldiers. After an exemplary, three-year-long performance, the troops returned home. In 1950, the 65th was deployed to Korea where they fought tirelessly. In fact, by mid-1951, they had 60 days more combat time than the rest of the 3rd Infantry Division.

Despite their bravery, members of the 65th were never appropriately commended. No soldier was ever awarded a Medal of Honor; Modesto Cartagena received a Service Cross, the second highest honor, but he remains their most decorated soldier. Racism is the only fathomable reason their contributions would be overlooked.

Such bigoted practices were common though. SSG Gabriel Soto Rivera of the G Company recounted how, one day, Army officials ordered the Boricua soldiers, who were standing in formation, to remove their shirts so they could separate so-called white soldiers from their black counterparts and assign them to units accordingly. The U.S. officials believed many soldiers might appear lighter or darker-skinned because of their exposure to the sun. By having them remove their shirts, they hoped to separate the "black" Ricans from the "white" ones. Certain "white" units were created and assigned to larger segregated U.S. divisions.

In 1954, a new commanding officer quickly stripped all Puerto Ricans of any officer rankings, handing these coveted roles to white officers. He also ordered them to stop referring to themselves as Borinqueneers, stop eating rice and beans, stop singing songs and playing guitar, and shave their mustaches and beards until they'd "proven themselves to be men." By blaming the previous military defeats on the troops, undermining their intelligence, questioning their manhood, and forbidding them to celebrate their heritage, their spirits were systematically broken.

The Borinqueneers, is both informative and heartbreaking. The film is a necessary step in revealing the complex history of these Puerto Rican soldiers —brave, proud men—and their contributions should be celebrated, especially given how they're glaringly absent from history books. Though it's slow-moving at times, the film is dense and well-researched, and it does its best to remain objective, instead largely allowing viewers to interpret these historical events according to their own belief systems.

While I commend these soldiers for their valor, I still can't watch this film without being overwhelmed by anger towards a country that, to this day, continues to exploit people of color. Just look at the undocumented Latino youngsters who are recruited to fight in Iraq with the carrot that they will eventually be granted citizenship — instead, many of them come home in body bags. Part of me wants to pin a medal on each Borinqueneer interviewed. The other part wants to shake them and say, "Abre los ojos!" because, in the end, they fought for a country that keeps them in a colonial state and mentality, that failed to embrace them and that practically handed them guns along with citizenship.