

Unknown soldiers

Film vindicates forgotten World War II Boricua fighters

BY ELISSA STRAUSS

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During the summer of 1998, filmmaker Noemí Figueroa went to visit an uncle of her husband's who was a World War II veteran.

She had recently seen Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" and, after noticing the absence of Latinos in the popular film, decided to ask him a few questions about Latinos in the military.

Figueroa's curiosity was sparked and she quickly realized she had found a story that had to be told.

Eight years later, Figueroa's documentary, "The Borinqueneers," airs locally tomorrow at 8 p.m. on Ch. 13 (WNET) and Sunday on Ch. 21 (WLIW) also at 8 p.m. The film tells the little-known story of the Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment, the only all-Hispanic unit in the history of the U.S. Army.



Created in 1899 by the U.S. Congress, the 65th was a segregated unit made up of mostly Puerto Rican officers, and served in World War I, World War II and the Korean War. Due to Puerto Rico's unique status as a U.S. commonwealth, the soldiers could serve and be drafted although the island is not a state of the union. "I was born in Puerto Rico, raised in New York, and I had never heard of the 65th," Figueroa, 50, said.

"Latinos are absent in war films," she said. "So I figured, if they are not going to tell our stories we have to step up to the plate."

Relying on testimony from vets and rare archival footage, the film covers the history of the 65th with a focus on their dramatic experience during the Korean War.

After two years of outstanding conduct in Korea, the Borinqueneers — as the members of the 65th were nicknamed — were caught up in a military scandal when approximately 150 soldiers abandoned their

posts and were eventually arrested and tried in the largest court-martial of the war. The movie explores how discrimination played a role in this case, as well as others.

Figuroa said that many soldiers she interviewed on camera were speaking about these events for the first time in more than 50 years.

“They got so emotional,” she said. “But they all had such a great sense of pride for having represented not only the United States, but also Puerto Rico.” Many of the vets would even send in checks to help her finish the film.

Eugenio Quevedo, 81, a member of the 65th, believes the film is a saving grace for the legacy of the Borinqueneers.

“The new generation of Puerto Ricans doesn’t know anything about it. They don’t know about the sacrifice we made,” said Quevedo, who lives in Manhattan. “It was about time someone did something about that.”

The film (www.borinqueneers.com), which is narrated by New York actor Héctor Elizondo, will be shown on PBS stations throughout the country this month and released on DVD Aug. 15. There will also be a screening at Hostos Community College on Friday, Aug. 24, at 7 p.m.

But the film has already had an impact on one man in Florida.

Figuroa said she got a call recently from a vet in Orlando. He had been out to dinner at a Red Lobster with his family and happened to be wearing his 65th Regiment baseball cap. When he went to pay for the meal he was told that one of the employees had recently seen the documentary and everything would be on the house. “They are finally getting the recognition they deserve,” Figuroa said. “They are heroes.”

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