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Once Trapped in Korea, Puerto Rican Vets Now Face Battle at Home

Side Street

By DAVID GONZALEZ, SEPT. 28, 2017



From left, Victor Santiago Latimer, Luis Rivera-Pérez and Elpidio Jiménez, veterans of the 65th Infantry Regiment, a Puerto Rican unit known as the Borinqueneers, that fought in Korea. The men are angry with President Trump's response in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Credit: David Gonzalez/The New York Times

Luis Rivera-Pérez was a baby-faced 18-year-old recruit when he left his home in San Juan in 1951 to fight in Korea with the 65th Infantry Regiment, a storied Puerto Rican unit known as the Borinqueneers. He aged quickly in combat, venturing out on night patrols where they used flamethrowers to incinerate enemy troops hidden in caves. In one battle, they slogged up a hillside for a bayonet assault, only to be pinned down by relentless gunfire.

"It was a massacre," said Mr. Rivera-Pérez, 84. "There were so many wounded and dead."

He and 15 other Borinqueneers — a name rooted in the island's past — were pinned down again this week, this time in a hotel in a drab industrial corner near Kennedy International Airport in Queens. They were en route to Puerto Rico from South Korea, where they had been honored by its government for their wartime service, when Hurricane Maria devastated their island home, leaving them stranded with little word from relatives and friends.

Just as scarce was encouragement from President Donald J. Trump, their commander-in-chief, who has been faulted by many for spending more time attacking football players exercising their constitutional right to peaceful protest than addressing the mounting humanitarian crisis. They were flabbergasted when the president's first substantive remarks about the tragedy was how the island "sadly" had to deal with the \$73 billion debt it owes hedge funds and banks. They felt it was an insult to them — American citizens by act of Congress and birth — who felt they had already paid a steep price in blood and youth decades ago.

Indeed, this fighting force — lauded by no less than Gen. Douglas MacArthur — has seen action from World War I through Korea, and was the last segregated military unit to be disbanded. Their bravery and sacrifice is chronicled in citations, medals and etched on headstones and remembered in street names and on postage stamps. On their recent South Korea trip, strangers stopped them on the street to offer thanks and gratitude.

“The Koreans respect and love us more than our own people in the United States,” lamented Victor Santiago Latimer, 87, another Borinqueneer still living with emotional and physical wounds from the conflict. “The president should be a man with a bigger heart and take care of things. Right now he says we have to pay the debt. What does he mean? That we owe and get nothing in return? Every day the U.S. takes away from what we have. We’re not a state, but we’re part of the U.S., but he is not interested in that. When we went to war, the Puerto Ricans were hand in hand with the U.S. We defended the nation. We were with you. Why are we not treated well?”

That last question has been asked by generations of Puerto Ricans, from those living on an island whose fate rests with Congress, to those who came to New York and endured prejudice and indifference from their fellow citizens as they worked hard at blue-collar jobs. More recently, the island’s fiscal crisis has sparked a new exodus, including many professionals, to outposts like Orlando, Fla.

More will head north. The cataclysm that befell the island is, by all accounts, horrific: scores of communities with roads and telephones cut off; hospitals with dwindling fuel for generators; once verdant vistas reduced to acres of spindly trees stripped of leaves; tens of thousands of homes blasted into splintered piles of timber; and people left rationing crackers and whatever water they can scavenge. Loíza, the cradle of Afro-Puerto Rican culture, devastated and flooded. In other towns, people wade chest deep in filthy water. The extent of the damage, and the death toll, remain unknown.

While these tropical Mad Max scenes were playing out, and millions of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora wondered about the fate of their loved ones, Mr. Trump’s Twitter rants were focused on anything but Puerto Rico. While the administration on Thursday issued a 10-day waiver of a maritime law that was delaying desperately-needed shipments of relief supplies, it still leaves open the question of how long-term recovery efforts will be hindered when the law — which favors shipping companies and increases the cost of everything imported to the island — goes back into effect.

“He’s not talking about supporting us or the veterans who defended the country,” said Mr. Rivera-Pérez, whose combat experiences led to a debilitating nervous breakdown when he returned to civilian life. “He needs to speak the truth. To be more of a humanitarian to Puerto Rico.”

Mr. Rivera-Pérez and his comrades were not about to wait. While stuck at the airport hotel, they went to several stores nearby to stock up on supplies to haul back home: from vienna sausages and elbow macaroni and cheese to toiletries, pre-mixed baby formula and hundreds of batteries.

Several veterans had gathered in Elpidio Jiménez’s room, where his daughter Sonia had packed two bulging suitcases and a duffel bag with provisions. On the bed was a medal each of the vets had received from the Korean government, the latest honor. They have also received the Congressional Gold Medal.

Noemi Figueroa Soulet, who produced “The Borinqueneers,” a documentary about the unit, said emotions had been running high even before they learned Puerto Rico was in the cross hairs of Hurricane Maria. It was the first time most of the veterans had returned to the country where they left their youth — and some of their comrades. They were feted at receptions, visited a war memorial, placed tiny flags at a cemetery and trekked up to the Demilitarized Zone. Some of their South Korean counterparts still remembered some of them by name.

“They got very emotional,” Ms. Figueroa Soulet said. “They were in an area where they saw a lot of combat. You can tell they were emotional when they started telling their anecdotes. And it was nerve-racking because of all the nuclear missile threats now coming from North Korea. But it was important for them to go back and see how the country has changed.”

By Wednesday, they ended their extended layover and returned to Puerto Rico. Compared with what they had endured in Korea’s frozen killing fields in the 1950s, this delay was easy duty. Now back on an island that looks like a bomb has hit, these old soldiers will face another battle, this time on the home front. They are nothing, if not resourceful, and display a trait that the president says is — unlike former prisoner of war Senator John McCain — the mark of a true war hero.

“I was almost captured by the North Koreans,” Mr. Rivera-Pérez said. “But I escaped them.”

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