

Film Fights to Preserve Memory of Fighting 65th

By Robert A. Hamilton

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New London, CT — The 65th Infantry earned more than 1,000 Purple Hearts, 134 Silver Stars, 562 Bronze Stars, eight Distinguished Service Crosses and a Presidential Unit Citation for action in Korea, but few people have ever heard about the unit.

But Noemi Figueroa Soulet, a New York filmmaker, is trying to change that with a documentary she produced, directed and wrote about the 65th titled "[The Puerto Rican Soldier](#)," which she previewed last week at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. She said she continues to raise money to turn it into a full-length documentary that could air on public television and be used as a learning experience in schools.

The program at the academy was in observance of Hispanic Heritage Month, which runs through next Saturday.

Soulet noted that most Americans are also unaware that Hispanics fought with Davey Crockett at the Alamo or that 10,000 Mexican-Americans fought in the Civil War. Hispanics have fought for the United States in every war since the Revolution, she said.

"Unfortunately, this is a part of U.S. history that's not taught to us, or our children," she said.

An advertising consultant for many years, Soulet said she had never even heard of the 65th until a few years ago.

Antonio Farias, director of diversity affairs at the academy who introduced Soulet, said until recently few people had ever heard of a heroic unit of black World War II fighter pilots, either.

"Now we talk about the Tuskegee Airmen as though they have always been in the history books, but of course that is not the case," Farias said.

Soulet brought two veterans of the 65th who earned a standing ovation from a capacity crowd at the Officer's Club. Eugenio Quevedo observed that when he was drafted in 1950, he didn't have the right to vote for the U.S. president, but he never questioned his orders.

"Being an American citizen carries a duty to our country," Quevedo said. "I never hesitated ... but I never volunteered, either," he added with a smile.

But he said it was discouraging to learn, after he returned home, that members of the 65th were referred to as "rum-and-Coke soldiers."

Jaime Lopez spoke no English when he was drafted in 1951, and after basic training he was harangued



Jaime Lopez (l) and Eugenio Quevedo, veterans of the 65th Infantry Regiment of Puerto Rico, at a luncheon at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy last week.

for speaking Spanish to people in Panama when he did a short stint there.

But Ens. Oscar Galvez, assigned to the safety and fire prevention department at the academy, thanked the two men for the work they did to open doors for Hispanics.

“You have given me the opportunity to serve this country,” Galvez said.

The 65th Infantry, known as the Borinqueneers (a name adopted from a Native American tribe on Puerto Rico) saw service in World War I and World War II, but Korea was considered its finest hour.

Brought in to rescue Marine and Army forces near the Chosin Reservoir in 1951, the unit engaged in nine major campaigns over three years. In its first assignment, the regiment was outnumbered more than 20 to 1, but kept open a retreat route for units that had been overrun.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur once wrote that the men of the 65th “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.”

The regiment experienced serious losses in 1952. It lost many of its bilingual liaisons to a largely English-speaking Army, which reduced its combat effectiveness, but it still went on to a major campaign in the winter of 1952-53.

Without the 65th, Soulet said, the Army and Marine losses at Chosin would have been far worse.

“This was an outstanding military unit. They were heroes, and — this is the best part — they were Puerto Ricans. But we haven't heard of them,” Soulet said.

Hispanics continue that record of service today, she said — nearly 50 Hispanics have died in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001.

State Rep. Ernest Hewitt, D-New London, presented Quevedo, Lopez and Soulet with a citation from the General Assembly following the program, and abandoned his prepared remarks to give a more heartfelt acknowledgement of their service.

“You have actually brought me to tears,” Hewitt said. “I take my hat off to you.”

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