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## Bloodied in Battle, Now Getting Their Due



Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Virginia Quevedo adjusts the cap her husband, Eugenio, 81, wore in Korea. Mr. Quevedo served in the 65th Infantry Regiment, a mostly Puerto Rican unit.

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Among the lamps, the religious cards and the knickknacks in Eugenio Quevedo's Upper West Side apartment is a worn and creased Banco Popular envelope. Tucked neatly inside, tiny black-and-white photos taken more than half a century ago show a rifle-toting soldier against a backdrop of hills and mountains.

"Korea was an ocean of mountains," Mr. Quevedo said. "We'd push forward and the enemy pushed us back. It was that kind of war."

He sounded tranquil, which in many ways he is at 81, though his eyes betrayed his emotions. In one corner of his living room, a poster shows the Puerto Rican flag, a nod to where he was born.

"We lost so many," he said. "The American people don't know the sacrifices of so many Puerto Ricans who died in Korea. It was the bloodiest war for Puerto Rico."

It is also a forgotten war for many Americans. Yet in recent months, veterans of a once-storied Puerto Rican regiment, the 65th Infantry Regiment — including Mr. Quevedo — have gotten their due in a documentary called "The Borinqueneers," which was first televised in New York over the summer and continues to be broadcast on public television nationally.

In a way, it is a passionate rejoinder to [Ken Burns](#), whose World War II documentary drew sharp criticism from Latino and American Indian groups for initially ignoring their contributions during that war.

Noemi Figueroa Soulet, a New York actress who produced “The Borinqueneers,” understands why people were upset with Mr. Burns. But she set her sights on a different battle, in more ways than one.

“Why should we be begging Ken Burns for a few minutes in his series?” she said. “We have other guys we can cover ourselves. I really felt there was enough there to tell our story in a full program.”

The idea came to Ms. Figueroa Soulet in the late 1990s, after she saw the film “Saving Private Ryan” and around the time she learned that her husband’s uncle had been wounded in Korea.



United States Army  
Weary soldiers from the mostly Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment in Korea, north of the Han River, in June 1951.

“I started thinking, what about the Puerto Rican experience?” she said. “I would see a war movie or documentary and I would look for the Latino faces. I always want to see how we are represented. Historically, I knew we served in the military, but you wouldn’t know it.”

Though she had never made a documentary before, she set out to chronicle the Puerto Rican military experience. In time, she zeroed in on the 65th Infantry’s campaigns in Korea.

The regiment, she said, was founded in 1899 as an essentially Puerto Rican unit, including a fair share of island-born officers, led by mainland, or “continental,” officers. The group also served in both world wars, though it was in Korea where it was hardest hit.

The regiment’s bravery earned the admiration of no less than Gen. Douglas MacArthur, as well as a disproportionate share of casualties when compared with mainland regiments.

One of its continental officers said the unit “got every dirty job that came up,” while another said it was so feared by the enemy that “I was very glad the Puerto Ricans were on my side.”

But in 1952, scores of soldiers in the regiment were arrested and court-martialed after refusing to fight in battles where untested and poorly led replacement troops were sent to take hills without artillery or medical support. The refusals came after a battle that left hundreds wounded or dead. In another case, they would not follow an officer they knew had no clue where he was trying to lead them.

Some of the men were sentenced to 10 or more years in prison. Outcry over the trials eventually resulted in the Army pardoning them and commuting sentences.

Ms. Figueroa Soulet set out to tell a story that placed the regiment’s history in context, rather than let it either be forgotten or reduced to the ignominy of the trials. She said that some Latino organizations that she had thought would be natural allies in her quest to finance and make the film were turned off by the inclusion of the trials and did not support her, while some veterans groups declined to back a project about Puerto Ricans.

She persisted, and was joined by Raquel Ortiz, a producer with many years working in public broadcasting who had produced “Mi Puerto Rico,” a well-received documentary on Puerto Rican cultural and political identity.

“Not very many people would have given a first-time producer the amount of time I gave her,” Ms. Ortiz said. “I did it because the subject was important to me. She was so committed, too. When I saw the interviews, stock footage and photos, I said ‘Wow!’”

The film took nine years to complete and involved interviewing 275 veterans. Ms. Figueroa Soulet has had special showings in various cities, often sponsored by local Puerto Rican and veterans organizations, which have helped spread the word despite the lack of an advertising budget.

It has struck a deep chord in men like Jose Cintron, a retired longshoreman and a Vietnam veteran, who was moved to tears when saw it.

“I was so proud,” he said. “For the first time, I did not have to hear about [John Wayne](#). My people took part in this. For once, we get recognized.”

Members of the regiment hold on to vivid memories of those who served with them on freezing hillsides, dodging bullets and mortars. Mr. Quevedo still talks about Master Sgt. Angel Ocasio. At the start of an enemy offensive, the sergeant was killed after he had gone around distributing ammunition to Mr. Quevedo and his comrades. Another sergeant — Iglesias was all he could recall — was shot dead when he went searching for Sergeant Ocasio.

“Those two were sent by God,” Mr. Quevedo said. “You think of him and the others. They died young. They never had the chance to get married. To be grandfathers. To get to my age. We are the ones who are left.”



Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Jaime Lopez, 77, left, and Eugenio Quevedo at Mr. Quevedo’s Upper West Side apartment. “Korea was not easy,” Mr. Lopez said.

His friend, Jaime Lopez, sat with him in the living room. He, too, served in the regiment, though they became friends stateside. Mr. Lopez is trim at 77, with a swagger to his step and an unfiltered cigarette in his hand. Mr. Quevedo jokingly calls him “[Lee Marvin](#),” which only fuels Mr. Lopez’s eagerness to banter.

Mr. Lopez enlisted after high school, saying the military was one of the few options he had as a small-town boy with no money. In Korea, he earned two Bronze Stars, including one for risking his life to wade into a river and rescue wounded comrades while under fire.

He recalled one fierce encounter, when they took a hill, only to find themselves under attack for 12 hours.

“There were dead and wounded everywhere,” he said. “Everything was destroyed. Everything. Boy.”

He bolted up from his chair, turned away and sobbed. He steadied himself against the dinner table. The only other sound was a clock chiming “Twinkle, Twinkle” at the hour.

“Korea was not easy,” was all he said, slowly composing himself.

Since the documentary’s completion, the two men have made public appearances together, talking to audiences about their experiences. After years of being footnotes to a forgotten war, they are glad to let others know they were there when they were needed.

“This documentary is something historic,” Mr. Lopez said. “You see it from beginning to end and learn that Puerto Ricans fought in World War I, World War II and Korea. The truth is there.”

The support of the old veterans, men who came home and settled into uneventful, but blessed, lives is what helped Ms. Figueroa Soulet stick with her project when others would not even return her calls.

“Those guys are my troops,” she said. “I look at the long list of organizations who protested the Ken Burns thing and say, ‘Gee, none of them contributed to my project.’ Some of them would not give me the time of day.”

She paused. Being an actress, she knows a thing or two about timing.

“Now,” she said, “they’re all calling.”