

## **Saviors of the Cause**

### **The Role of the Puerto Rican Soldier in One Man's Crusade**

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**For my brother Josué, the family historian**



**Governor Luis Muñoz Marín welcomes the Borinqueneer colors from Korea.  
November 1954 (Archivo General)**

***The gallant contribution that the soldiers of the 65<sup>th</sup> and 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiments have made alongside their fellow citizens of the United States, defending our common ideals against those who try to subvert the freedom of the human race, make the transfer of their regimental colors an occasion of profound meaning to all of us.***

**GOVERNOR LUIS MUÑOZ MARÍN  
During ceremony transferring the colors of  
the 65<sup>th</sup> and the 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiments  
to the PRNGUS, Fort Brooke, Puerto Rico  
November 19, 1954**

***The following article is written from an objective point of view. The expressions are solely the author's responsibility, and in no way represent the ideologies of Danny Nieves or valerosos.com.***

## **Introduction**

No other person in the history of Puerto Rico has embodied the paradox of this nation like “*El Vate*” (The Poet) Don Luis Muñoz Marín. His policies and programs transformed not only the face of a country but as well the idiosyncrasy of its people. He has been called “one of the most influential politicians in recent times, whose works will be remembered for years to come” (*Time Magazine*), and “the guiding force behind this time of sweeping change” (The *Puerto Rico Herald*); and has been recognized with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor in peacetime, for his role in the future of Latin America. While his main goal was the economic development of the island, he was comfortable with both the rich and the poor. As a politician and intellectual, he was the most dominating figure in Puerto Rican politics in the twentieth century. As an orator, he was unparalleled.

This combination of factors endowed Luis Muñoz Marín with the tools to exploit in order to secure a stable future for his Borinquen. He found in the strategic location of Puerto Rico – with regards to the brackets of two wars – the base for an instrument that would postpone the coveted independence for the island in favor of a contradictory measure of autonomy subordinate to the United States. In his *Populism*, it was the Puerto Rican soldier his ultimate weapon against the rampant armed Nationalism that threatened progress under this new free association with the United States and further denomination of a nation en route to its own Constitution and symbolism.

The performance of these saviors of the cause could not be better extolled than in the testimony of a once-reluctant West Pointer whose tenure of regimental commander found him writing the most brilliant pages in Puerto Rican military history:

***“No ethnic group has greater pride in itself and its heritage than the Puerto Rican people. Nor have I encountered any that can be more dedicated and more zealous in support of the democratic principles for which the United States stands. Many Puerto Ricans have fought to the death to uphold them.”*** (Brig. Gen. William W. Harris, 1980)

## **A Poet's Quest for Identity**

José Luis Alberto Muñoz Marín was born in San Juan in 1898 – a turbulent and pivotal year in American history. The son of one of the most influential advocates for the independence of Puerto Rico (Don Luis Muñoz Rivera), he was raised mostly in the United States, where his father represented Puerto Rican interests as Resident Commissioner in Washington. Hence Muñoz Marín was more comfortable on the Mainland than on the Island. His father's illness forced young Muñoz Marín to interrupt his Law studies at Georgetown University (Washington, 1915), and to return to Puerto Rico. Muñoz Rivera died in November 1916, four months shy of seeing the fulfillment of his *secured* U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans.<sup>1</sup>

Muñoz Marín returned to the United States to complete his education. Along the way, he established close ties and contacts that would shape his public life in the future. After living in New York, where he worked as a freelance journalist, poet, and translator for ten years, he returned to Puerto Rico and joined the Socialist Party, which advocated for Puerto Rican independence from the United States. It was the lure of his father's unfulfilled dream, not to mention Puerto Rico's struggle for autonomy and identity, which led him to return permanently to the Island in 1931. In a personal sense, Muñoz Marín likened his return to a quest for identity. He joined the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party), and led the party's official newspaper, *La Democracia*, (The Democracy), before being nominated and elected Senator for the 1933–37 term.<sup>2</sup>

Political disagreements in 1937 led to his expulsion from the Liberal Party, and to his founding an *independentista* group in opposition of his former allies. A year later he helped create the *Partido Popular Democrático* (Popular Democratic Party), a.k.a. PPD, dedicated to improving the lives of the *jíbaro* worker, who, in his view, was being neglected by the political forces of the time. The PPD also intended to build a closer relationship with the United States. Muñoz Marín concentrated his political campaigning in the rural areas of Puerto Rico. Before long, he was named President of the Senate.

There he became “the guiding force behind a time of sweeping change.” He understood the needs and desires of the people of Puerto Rico, and worked closely with officials in Washington to satisfy those requirements. His charisma enabled him to criticize U.S. policies without appearing anti-American. Working closely with the U.S.-

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Muñoz Rivera was an instrumental figure in obtaining a measure of autonomy from Spain in 1897. As the island became an American possession in 1898, Muñoz Rivera envisioned a course that included “a brief military occupation; the declaration of Puerto Rico as a territory, but with the full powers of self-government; and, soon thereafter, statehood.” Despite aspirations for independence, Puerto Ricans went from one subordinate status to another. (See Arturo Morales Carrión, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1983.) Citizenship arrived through the enactment of the Jones Act, a.k.a. the Organic Act for Puerto Rico, of March 2, 1917. (Special note: Muñoz Rivera founded the newspaper *The Puerto Rico Herald*.)

<sup>2</sup> His campaign mate was Antonio Rafael Barceló, founder of the party, and grandfather of future two-time Governor and later Resident Commissioner Carlos Antonio Romero Barceló. (Special note: Muñoz Rivera also founded *La Democracia*.)

appointed governor of the time, Rexford Tugwell, he helped legislate toward an agrarian reform aimed at the sugar industry, economic recovery, and industrialization of the island.<sup>3</sup>

The latter part comprehended an ambitious and ample development program called *Operación Manos a la Obra* (Operation Bootstrap), which induced U.S. investors to transfer their industries to the Island or to create new ones there by granting them tax concessions and other subsidies. The program brought along with it roads and schools to neglected areas. (While such investments brought some prosperity for certain sectors – namely the emergent middle class – in the long run it would overwhelm the native industries by draining resources from the island; depriving Puerto Rico of tax revenues; preventing the development of more native industries; and limiting the growth of a more highly trained and educated labor force.)<sup>4</sup>

Service in the U.S. military, by virtue of an amendment to the Jones Act, emerged as a congenial option to help alleviate the first signs of the side effects of Operation Bootstrap.<sup>5</sup> In order to offset the growing Nationalism – some of which bordered blatant chauvinism – it was necessary to recur to aggressive recruiting campaigns around the most needed sectors: precisely the same rural areas Senator Muñoz Marín had once campaigned in. “We used to go in trucks with speakers and pork chops,” reminisces one veteran about the year 1940. “They were times of hunger; hence we attracted recruits by delivering meat to their families. Poverty was the main reason for enlisting. [Three thousand] men enlisted this way. Then we didn’t know what to do with them.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rexford Guy (“Red Rex”) Tugwell was a promoter of government economic planning, regulation of industry and social welfare, and a former member of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal “brain trust” (1933–36) who worked to improve the island’s economic structure and advocated that his position be filled by popular election. He held the governorship (appointed to by Roosevelt in 1941) until 1946. His book *The Stricken Land* (1946) relates his struggle for the Puerto Rican self-determination.

<sup>4</sup> In the first forty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Puerto Rican economy was dominated by its role as a source of low-priced sugar for the U.S. market. Operation Bootstrap accelerated the shift from agricultural to industrial production. The 1950s saw the development of labor-intensive light industries, such as textiles; while the 1960s and 1970s saw the manufacturing give way to heavy industry, such as petrochemicals and oil refining. Ultimately, many of these industries simply moved elsewhere, creating what appeared to be a pessimistic and permanent unemployment on the island.

<sup>5</sup> The Jones Act, at the time the United States declared war against the Central Powers in April 1917, excluded Puerto Ricans from compulsory military service. A much-sought and fought-for amendment to the Act in June enabled thousands of high-spirited Puerto Rican youngsters to sign up for the Selective Service. Author Carmelo Rosario Natal, in his *La juventud de Luis Muñoz Marín* [Spanish: The younger years of Luis Muñoz Marín] (San Juan: Editorial Edil, 1989), relates an anecdote of a young Luis Muñoz Marín meeting a *jibaro* standing in line at a U.S. Army recruiting station. When asked about his place of birth, the *jibaro* responded with a passionate, “Jayuya, sir, but I’m going to die in France.” Such enthusiasm was not unheard of. The general perception was that the war was aimed to save France, and that to die in the attempt amounted to die in glory.

<sup>6</sup> Master Sgt. Nicolás Chiclana, Interview, February 1990. (See Silvia Álvarez Curbelo, “Batallas de Identidad: Guerra, Nacionalidad y Ciudadanía en Puerto Rico (Siglo XX).” University of Puerto Rico.)

In July 1941, seemingly foreseeing a U.S. involvement in World War II, Muñoz Marín made a special call to the people's cooperation in the national defense of the United States, claiming that "to defend the United States is a necessary part in the defense of democracy – the people's rights."<sup>7</sup> His call paid off with a thriving participation of Puerto Ricans longing to share the sacrifices and glories of the very nation which had denied them a voice and a vote in Congress. As opposed to World War I, where more than 236,000 Puerto Ricans registered for service and only 18,000 were called to serve, World War II saw the register of 350,000 and service of 65,000 (171 women included). In spite of a menial role and a limited participation in combat, the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (the only Puerto Rican formation to see combat as a unit) garnered one Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, and 90 Purple Hearts in testimony of the Puerto Rican commitment to the United States. Yet the war constituted the only opportunity Puerto Rican servicemen and -women afforded to serve worldwide.<sup>8</sup>



President Truman (*center*) during his "goodwill" visit to Puerto Rico. He is flanked by former governor Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy; Governor Jesús T. Piñero; Secretary of the Interior Julius A. Krug; and Senator Luis Muñoz Marín. Aguas Buenas, February 1948 (Truman Library)

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<sup>7</sup> "El pueblo debe cooperar con la defensa nacional" [Spanish: The people must cooperate with national defense]. *El Batey* (The Front Yard, the PPD's official newspaper), July 23, 1941. The Luis Muñoz Marín Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> Namely along the following theaters: Atlantic (Aruba, Cuba, Curaçao, Ecuador, Jamaica, Panama, Surinam, Trinidad, Venezuela); Mediterranean and European (Algeria, France, Germany, Italy, Oran); and Pacific (Burma, Hawaii). The status of "second-class" citizens prevented Puerto Ricans from serving abroad under "normal" peacetime conditions. Regular Army Puerto Rican formations, like the 33<sup>rd</sup>, 42<sup>nd</sup>, and 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiments, were restricted to domestic assignments within the Canal Zone and Antilles Command.

The end of one war and the dawn of another subtly dubbed “Cold War” found many veterans unemployed, stripped of their benefits, and swamped in debts. Many returned to the sugar cane fields or factories they had once sworn never to return to. Of those able to save some money, not few migrated to the Mainland in search of a better future. Harry Truman’s timely appointment of then-Resident Commissioner Jesús T. Piñero Jiménez to the governorship in 1946 presented Senator Muñoz Marín the opportunity to strive for progress during the Cold War and its drawbacks. *El Vate* enjoyed the friendship of Truman, hitherto the only U.S. President who favored the Puerto Rican autonomy. Both worked very closely to maintain the relationship of the two nations during those times of hardship. Their combined efforts found Puerto Ricans *voting* for the first time to elect their governor during the 1948 elections.<sup>9</sup> Muñoz Marín was the clear choice – campaigning for the post and repeating his winning formula of targeting the rural areas – and wasted no time redefining the position from that of a tool of Washington to one which reflected the people’s will: the *populismo* (Populism).

### Between a Rock and a Hard Place

“A simple glance at the map of the area of the Caribbean will explain, even to a mind with no formal military training, why, in older times, Spain bestowed so much importance on the relatively small possession of Puerto Rico.”<sup>10</sup> These words by the first Puerto Rican to graduate from the prestigious United States Military Academy at West Point fittingly reflected the strategic thinking of enterprisers like Sir Francis Drake, George Clifford Earl of Cumberland, and General Nelson Miles. They also reflected the thinking of those *lareños* who launched their revolt against Spain in 1868, and of Luis Muñoz Marín’s own father’s.

The influx of Continental companies under the auspice of Operation Bootstrap grew from the initial nine of 1947 to sixteen in 1948. (By 1957, the Island’s gross domestic

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<sup>9</sup> The appointment of a Puerto Rican to the governorship was the first in a series of steps in Truman’s long struggle for the sovereignty of Puerto Rico. “I remember Mr. Truman went down to Puerto Rico [in 1948],” Judge William Hastie recalled during a 1972 interview. “When he came out [of the plane] and he saw the arrangements [a platform with amplifiers and with the audience restrained by ropes and police], to the horror of his guards, instead of walking to his platform, he walked all the way over to where the people were restrained, and started walking along and shaking hands. And don’t think the Puerto Ricans didn’t recognize the gesture, and in the papers and so on, ‘The President knows that the people of Puerto Rico are his friends; he has no fear of the people in Puerto Rico.’” (See “Oral History Interview with Judge William H. Hastie, January 5, 1972, by Jerry N. Hess. The Harry S. Truman Library.) Truman called such visit a “goodwill” one, during which he expressed his strong feelings towards the importance of sovereignty for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. (See “Log of President Truman’s Trip to Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Key West, Florida, February 20 – March 5, 1948.” The Harry S. Truman Library.)

<sup>10</sup> Maj. Gen. Luis Raúl Esteves, *¿Qué Cosas!* [Spanish: *What do you know!*] (1953).

product would have doubled that of 1947.) In April 1949, the Puerto Rican legislature passed a series of bills totaling \$94 million, of which forty-six percent was allocated for health and education. The legislature had also allocated more than \$12 million for capital improvements that included highways and hospitals; and another \$11 million for capital contributions for sewers, aqueducts, housing, and irrigation. Muñoz Marín liked most of the new bills, and, particularly, the new budget.<sup>11</sup>

With poverty and hardship receding, the question of political status emerged as a priority. *El Vate* was faced with a new dilemma: While his own preference was for an independent Puerto Rico, pursuing it would mean the withdrawal of the much needed and hitherto welcomed U.S. support. His long-term solution was a new option between Statehood and Independence, whereby Puerto Rico would secure autonomy while continuing to receive tax incentives and other assistance from the Mainland.

By default, this included compliance with the continued use of the island-municipalities of Vieques and Culebra as training ranges for the U.S. Navy. (Construction of military bases on these islands had begun in 1941, with exercises being conducted yearly, except during Jesús Piñeiro's governorship (1946–48).)

War, as Muñoz Marín had already learned, provided an excellent opportunity to foment Populism by propitiating the establishment of warfare industries, which, hand-in-hand with the active recruiting of thousands of Puerto Ricans to serve in the armed forces, counterbalanced unemployment. The yearly maneuvers on those islands (resumed immediately after Muñoz Marín's election as governor), particularly the Vieques-bound PORTREX operation of 1950, at a cost of \$1.1 million, had boosted the economy of Puerto Rico. From another aspect, the victory of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment over the famed 3<sup>rd</sup> Division during PORTREX presented the Governor a new item in his Populist foundational inventory. Enter the Puerto Rican soldier as the ultimate true savior of the cause.

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<sup>11</sup> "Man of the People." *Time*, May 2, 1949. Vol. LIII, No. 18. (Special note: This edition featured Muñoz Marín on the cover. A 1958 edition would feature the governor for the second time around.)



**Elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division's 504<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment invade the skies of Vieques under the watchful eyes of the "Aggressor" forces (built around the core of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment) during the PORTREX maneuvers. March 1950 (George Tames – *The New York Times*)**

Dividends paid off on July 4, when Harry Truman signed Public Law 600, providing that existing laws which defined the political, economic, and fiscal relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States remain in full force. The law also authorized Puerto Rico to draft and approve its own Constitution – to be effected on July 25, 1952 – under what would be referred to as a “commonwealth” status.

### **Storm Clouds of War**

The new crisis in Korea exposed Puerto Rico to a new state of commitment in the eyes of Muñoz Marín, who once again seemed to foresee an escalation to the little “police action” Truman had declared in the Far East. In a letter to Secretary of the Interior Oscar Littleton Chapman, dated July 18, the Governor compromised himself with the creation of an 18,000-strong Puerto Rican division consisting of the 65<sup>th</sup> and the National Guard 295<sup>th</sup> and 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiments. (Chapman would reject the offer, deeming it unnecessary.)



Days later, the Resident Commissioner to Washington, Antonio Fernós Isern, made a most outrageous claim that Puerto Rico could promise 75,000 soldiers without recurring to recruitment. Not only did this number dwarf any other offered by those countries of the United Nations committing troops to Korea, but looked preposterous in the eyes of the more conservative. The native newspaper *El Mundo* was among the first to call for prudence, supporting that in order to demonstrate the Puerto Rican solidarity for the cause being fought for in Korea it was not necessary to “make offers outside the margins of reality or that pretend to present Puerto Rico as the most fervent defender of the democratic prestige ... over the forty-eight states of the Union.”<sup>12</sup>

Truman’s Executive Order 37842, dated August 11, 1950, ordered the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment to war strength with a departure date slated for August 22.<sup>13</sup> A number of factors contributed to the inclusion of the regiment in an active role in the war effort this time around:

- 1) Its demonstrated superior performance of combat skills and highest numerical score in the Canal Zone and Antilles Command;
- 2) Its unprecedented victory at the PORTREX maneuvers;
- 3) The critical shortage of manpower in the U.S. armed forces; and
- 4) The express request for the utilization of Puerto Rican troops in Korea made by Deputy Army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Matthew Bunker Ridgway.

Even with the attachment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Panama-based 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment as the 65<sup>th</sup>’s third battalion, Col. William Warner Harris managed to obtain authorization from the Pentagon to bring his regiment up to ten percent over strength.

From his side of the house, the eloquent Muñoz Marín found not a more privileged moment for coaxing his fellow citizens to volunteer for service. In a message delivered during the first half of the month he justified his plead with a lightly sugarcoated reminder of the enduring nature of the Puerto Rican spirit, which, while coping with slow but increasing success with the difficulties of life, had the strength and the hope to solve them because of the privilege of not only being part of a great democracy, “but also because in its own merit our people have developed one of the best democracies in the world. That is why we are ready to defend it against all threats.”<sup>14</sup>

Recruitment for the 65<sup>th</sup> fared well. The only special qualification was six months or more prior service. While Bill Harris’ goal was to recruit 1,800, he found the streets and sidewalks leading up to Fort Buchanan jammed with men waiting to get in. “We could have

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<sup>12</sup> “Nuestro esfuerzo bélico” [Spanish: “Our war effort”]. August 3, 1950.

<sup>13</sup> The passing of the tropical storm Baker would move the departure date to August 26.

<sup>14</sup> *El Mundo*, August 15, 1950.

recruited fifty thousand, if we had needed that many.” Obviously, Harris’ statement was hyperbolic; yet he knew that he would have met his goal had he sought a larger quota.<sup>15</sup>

For the next two weeks, the environment along the docks of the Fort Buchanan Military Terminal was one of busyness while the regiment carried out the packing of the imposing *Liberty*-class ship USNS *Marine Lynx*, in compliance with the “secret” movement orders. The afternoon of Saturday, August 26, revealed another aspect of the secretiveness of the operation as hundreds of spectators flanked the roads to and blocked the gates to the docks. Rafael Hernández’s and Daniel Santos’ songs of “precious islands” and “goodbye to the boys” drowned the sobs of mothers, fiancées and wives that poured their blessings on the men that their Governor had likened to his crusaders, his saviors of the cause. Aware of the uncertainties awaiting them in faraway Korea, the men of the 65<sup>th</sup> lived up to each and every lyric of their Official March (“*Nuestro Regimiento*”) as they assembled at the Terminal in preparation for boarding.

The impressive ceremony offered Bill Harris the most favorable forum to declare publicly his satisfaction and privilege of commanding “such men of such a good disposition, so eager and enthusiastic in doing a good job.” Years later he would reminisce: “While I did not know what the 65<sup>th</sup> would be called upon to do in the coming months, I felt quite sure that the regiment would give a good account of itself.”

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<sup>15</sup> The regiment recruited some 600, and recalled another 1,200 members of the Enlisted Reserve Corps. Regardless of the Governor’s call, enthusiasm for the military ran high. There were instances of fathers and sons volunteering and being recruited to serve in the same company. Harris ended up turning away droves of volunteers after having reached his quota.



Col. William Harris (*foreground*) and Governor Luis Muñoz Marín (*center*) render honors to the National Anthem during the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment farewell ceremony held at Fort Buchanan in August 1950. (US Army Photo)

Brig. Gen. Edwin Luther Sibert, Jr., commanding general of the Fort Brooke-based U.S. Army Antilles Command, addressed the troops in Spanish, giving them the first “official” confirmation of their destination. He stated in his message that the men “had been selected on the basis of their record of service to do something never before offered to Puerto Rican troops.” After foretelling the glory the men would bring “this beautiful island of ours,” the general presented the next speaker as “a man who needs no introduction: our Governor, Mr. Luis Muñoz Marín.” Such an introduction attested the level of kindred spirits between the top representative and the highest-ranking military official in Puerto Rico at the time.

Muñoz Marín, with his proverbial articulacy, elaborated on the privilege of democracy – not the word infinitely repeated, but “the real substance of freedom and life.” Under the shadow of the *Marine Lynx*, he spoke from “soldier to soldier” of man’s three penuries since his creation (economic means, knowledge, and wisdom), categorically assuring that when man had “conquered these three penuries, these three privations, he will be in power of his true and deep freedom, of the meaning that God intended giving him during his passing over this earth. Democracy is the means man has to carry on this fight.”

Thus The Poet Don José Luis Alberto Muñoz Marín knighted his crusaders, and appropriated himself a war, the ultimate item in his Populist inventory.

By companies, the regiment gave an about face and proceeded to board the *Lynx*. “By the time the men squeezed and tugged ... in the lower decks and everyone was aboard, it was 0300 hours [27] August 1950 before we were under way,” Harris reminisced thirty years later. “The men had filled the decks, the railings, the lifeboats, and even the superstructure of the ship, including the ladder to the crow’s nest, in order to get a last glimpse of their beloved island.”<sup>16</sup>

He goes on to note that for the most part, the men were silent as the ship sailed out of the San Juan Harbor, and that he could not help wondering how well they would perform in actual combat. Hitherto, the men had been tested and had delivered; but going against an actual enemy, unrestrained by umpires or “*get-arounds*,” posed the grave and ever present danger of casualties through attrition. At least he had one satisfaction: the approval for the creation of a personnel replacement center for the 65<sup>th</sup>. The regiment would not be relieved by another, but it would be replenished in an individual basis.

Both the right site for the replacement center and the ideal man to lead it seemed to be predestined. The site was the modest but well known installation of Camp Tortuguero, perched on the northern coastal town of Vega Baja; and the man to run it was none other than Col. Juan César Cordero Dávila, an old acquaintance of the 65<sup>th</sup> and now commanding officer of the Puerto Rico National Guard, United States (PRNGUS) 296<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team. Above and beyond the point, César Cordero enjoyed the close friendship of Muñoz Marín’s. The mission of the Replacement Training Center was to organize and train troops to be combat ready at a moment’s notice. Cordero was activated on September 8, two days before the 296<sup>th</sup> RCT.<sup>17</sup>

### ***“¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!” – The Battle for No-Man’s Land***

The Governor’s reversal on not pursuing the independence, together with his new open condescendence to the militarization of the island, angered some sectors, namely the Nationalists *a clavo pasa’o* (through-and-through) under the leadership of the revered and charismatic Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The official confirmation of the departure of the USNS *Marine Lynx* remained a “secret” for two months under the nonsensical excuse of ensuring “security.” *El Mundo* and *El Imparcial* disclosed the news in their respective editions for October 13.

<sup>17</sup> The 296<sup>th</sup> RCT, comprised by the 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, the 482<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, and the 225<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Company, had been a participant of the first joint maneuvers (Army-Navy) held in January 1938, when the regiment, along with elements from its sister PRNGUS regiment 295<sup>th</sup> and the 65<sup>th</sup> had had the mission of “defending” the island from the Navy “invaders.”

<sup>18</sup> A former ROTC cadet (Harvard) and volunteer in the U.S. Infantry at the outbreak of World War I, Albizu Campos had been a compliant individual trained for the French military mission to serve in a “colored” unit under Gen. Frank McIntyre. By the time of his discharge as a first lieutenant, he had become a victim of the unbridled

The disgruntled Harvard-educated lawyer who had organized the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in 1922 based his open criticism of his onetime ally Muñoz Marín on the fundamental belief that Puerto Rico should be an independent nation by all means, at whatever costs. If it called for an armed confrontation, *his Puerto Ricans* would be ready for it.

(And ready they had been for years, beginning with former U.S.-appointed governor Blanton Winship's and Insular Police Col. Elisha Riggs' declaration of war against the Nationalist Party in 1935; followed by the assassination of Riggs, for which Albizu Campos was sentenced to ten years in a Federal prison (1936); and the "illegal" Nationalist parade in Ponce (1937) during which the Insular Police opened fire on the crowd, killing 17 people. The infamous Ponce Massacre of Palm Sunday ended with two police dead, and hundreds of people wounded.)

In the first days of October, the Nationalist Party was alerted to a secret plan of the government to prosecute the *independentista* movement and incarcerate its top militants. On October 30, the central town of Jayuya, a Nationalist bulwark, staged an uprising that reverberated throughout the island.<sup>19</sup> Sided by the people of Jayuya, the Nationalists attacked the police station, killing one officer and wounding three others before the rest of the officers dropped their weapons and surrendered. In simultaneous attacks, the insurgents cut the telephone lines and burned the Post Office and the Selective Service building while another group took over the town square and raised the Puerto Rican flag, which was illegal then. The takeover culminated with a stirring, "*¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!*" declaring Puerto Rico a free Republic.

The U.S. Congress reacted with a swift declaration of martial law in Puerto Rico, and with the express authorization to send the National Guard to defuse the situation. Committed in battalion strength, the *milicianos* of the PRNGUS 295<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment employed bazookas and mortars, in addition to rifles and machine guns, to counter the Nationalists. All ground operations counted on the superb support of the Puerto Rico Air Guard (PRAGUS). Eyewitness accounts claim that the PRAGUS, more than flying reconnaissance missions over the town and moving police and PRNGUS reinforcements, sent in fighters to bomb and strafe the area as the ground troops moved in under the cover of darkness.

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racism of the day. Such experience had left a dogmatic mark in his beliefs towards the relationship of Puerto Rico and the United States. He recognized the United States as the land of the free, but the oppressor of Puerto Rico as well.

<sup>19</sup> This attack was coordinated with an uprising of prisoners at the Insular Penitentiary in Río Piedras that culminated with the escape of 112 men. Other cities, towns or municipalities staging uprisings included: Arecibo, Mayagüez, Naranjito, Peñuelas, Ponce, and Utuado,

Even though seventy percent of both Jayuya and neighboring Utuado was destroyed, news of this approach was prevented from spreading outside of the island.<sup>20</sup> The first day of November marked the climax of the revolt, when five Nationalists entered La Fortaleza, trying to access the Santa Catalina Palace and assassinate Muñoz Marín there.<sup>21</sup> Their attempt ended with four of them dead. A similar event took place in Washington, where two Nationalists attacked the Blair House with the intent of assassinating Harry Truman. In the process, one of the attackers and one security guard lost their lives, while the second attacker was arrested and sentenced to death (to then have his sentence commuted to life imprisonment in 1952, and ultimately pardoned by President Jimmy Carter in 1979).



National Guardsmen from Charlie/295<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment patrol the streets of downtown Jayuya during the Nationalist uprising between October 30 and November 1, 1950. (Wide World Photo)

When asked to comment on the failed attempts the following day, a serene Truman replied that a President “should expect these things.”<sup>22</sup> The attempt struck many as a

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<sup>20</sup> According to eyewitnesses interviewed by Ms. Miñi Seijo Bruno in 1973, there was much incongruence that went undisclosed in the official reports. One case, for instance, as Mr. Ángel Colón Feliciano, from Utuado, stated: “The National Guard hit us with everything they had [:] rifles, carbines and a machine gun. The National Guard officer and the police chief killed one sergeant and one policeman and wounded, I believe, three National Guardsmen. They never mentioned this at the trial.” The only National Guardsman reported dead is Sgt. Carlos Rodríguez Alicea. (See Miñi Seijo Bruno, *La Insurrección Nacionalista en Puerto Rico 1950* [Spanish: The Nationalist Uprising in Puerto Rico 1950]. San Juan: Editorial Edil, 1997.)

<sup>21</sup> Mr. Gregorio Hernández Rivera, only surviving perpetrator of this attack, explained the following during an interview in 1976: “The purpose was to take action directly with the supreme chief of Fortaleza, not killing him; make him see that the struggle for independence was a fight of representation of our country and that, holding the leader of the United States government in Puerto Rico, who was Luis Muñoz Marín at the time, showed the United Nations and other countries intervened by the United States that we Nationalists fought for a just and noble cause.” (Ibid.)

<sup>22</sup> The President is not so polite in his diary entry for November 5, nevertheless. “Because,” he wrote, “two crackpots or crazy men tried to shoot me a few days ago my good and efficient guards are nervous. So I’m trying to be as helpful as I can. Would like very much to take a walk this morning but the S[ecret] S[ervice] [sic] ... and the ‘Boss’

deplorable affront, given that no other U.S. President had favored the autonomy for Puerto Rico the way Harry Truman had.

The end of the revolt on November 3 found 39 people killed. The PRNGUS incurred casualties that included “one” dead and another 12 wounded. Two days later, Muñoz Marín visited the wounded National Guardsmen and policemen in the hospital to express his gratitude and that of the Government of Puerto Rico to these men for their quick and committed defense of public order.

In the end, the Nationalists’ “incident” turned out to be a well-plotted yet temporized attempt to deter the ratification of the “colonial farce” of Muñoz Marín’s *Estado Libre Asociado* (Associated Free State) for Puerto Rico.<sup>23</sup> Albeit indirectly involved, Albizu assumed responsibility for the attacks, and was arrested by Federal agents.<sup>24</sup>



**Governor Muñoz Marín visits the wounded National Guardsmen and policemen at the Rodríguez General Hospital. Here he converses with Pvt. Ramón Valentín Álvarez as former CO of the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf Regt and then Police Chief and Superintendent Col. Salvador T. Roig (*with cap*), and PRNGUS Cols. Wilson P. Colberg (CO 295<sup>th</sup> Infantry)**

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and Maggie are worried about me – so I won’t take my usual walk. It’s hell to be President.” (See David McCullough, *Truman*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.)

<sup>23</sup> White House Correspondent Robert Nixon (International News Service) reminisced during a 1970 interview: “No one knew the identity of these people. There was not even a hint that they were Puerto Ricans. There was a natural assumption that these must be agents of a foreign Communist power, but they turned out to be Puerto Ricans. Their idea of trying to kill the President was in the mistaken hope that this would bring autonomy to Puerto Rico.” (See “Oral History Interview with Robert G. Nixon, Bethesda, Maryland, November 5, 1970, by Jerry N. Hess.” The Harry S. Truman Library.) Nixon’s observation reflected the surprise of many Americans hitherto unaware of the independence struggle in Puerto Rico.

<sup>24</sup> The truth is that Albizu’s followers had begun planning and preparing for an armed revolution since 1949, albeit the new political status was to take place in 1952. (Sentenced to life imprisonment, Albizu Campos would be released in 1953 due to health problems. A second attack in Washington, in 1954 would send him back to prison until 1965, year in which he would succumb to the alleged inhuman experiments with radiation he had been subjected to for years. Followers and worshippers defend this version “based on irrefutable proof,” while others adjudge the revolutionary leader a paranoid and delusional individual.)

and Alfonso Palmer look on. November 1950 (Insular Police Photo)

Despite the intended secrecy, the revolt reached immediate worldwide notoriety.<sup>25</sup> Native newspapers *El Mundo* and *El Imparcial*, among others, documented the events in detail. The Borinqueneers fighting in Korea learned the news by proxy: either through outdated editions or by secondhand word of mouth. The periodical *Pacific Stars and Stripes* in its edition of December 9, 1950, gave the men of Puerto Rico's Fighting 65<sup>th</sup> one of the first glimpses from an "international" point of view of what went down back home. The article entitled "Puerto Ricans in Korea," oddly enough, dedicated most of its efforts to extol the Puerto Rican contribution to the war effort. It opened with a nearly captious, "One United States dependency, little heard about from a publicity standpoint, is the largest and most vastly populated of all – Puerto Rico ...

But things started happening a couple of weeks ago that changed all that. First, Communist groups in the capital city of San Juan, led an uprising against the duly elected Government. Then to show they meant business in their hostility toward the U.S., this same group directed sympathizers in America to assassinate President Truman. The plot failed as did their revolt. These were all headline items that brought the West Indian island into focus. But the Puerto Ricans did something else previous to this same hectic time that didn't receive much publicity. The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army, made up largely of native Puerto Ricans, landed in Korea to join forces with other UN troops. This well-trained regiment is not new to the Army, however, and their unit history indicates that their presence in the [snow-covered] hills of North Korea sounds another ominous note for Communist aggressors. . . .<sup>26</sup>

With *El Maestro* (The Teacher) Don Pedro out of the way, *El Vate* was one step closer to come full circle with his dreamt-of platform. The failed assassination attempts had a dramatic, if not opportune, impact in his plans. Firstly, it presented a legitimate reason for prosecuting those suspected of practicing "subversive" Nationalism; and secondly, it presented the Puerto Rican soldier, especially that one fighting for democracy in Korea, as unquestionable proof of the sense of duty and commitment that Puerto Rico professed toward the United States.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The name of Pedro Albizu Campos will forever be pegged to the infamous Truman assassination attempt despite the leader's significant contributions (the drafting of the Irish Constitution), honors (several simultaneous doctorates), and attributes (a first-class orator with command of seven languages).

<sup>26</sup> A transcription of this article can be found at [www.valerosos.com](http://www.valerosos.com).

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Muñoz Marín himself had once been labeled a "subversive" by the FBI. Many factors in his past (his beginnings as an independence advocate; his former alliance with Albizu Campos; an acerbic yet false claim in 1940 calling him a ranking Communist Party official in the Caribbean; and his close association with the politically liberal Rex Tugwell) had raised a few eyebrows in the agency. A bold report dated April 1, 1943 spared no expenses in



## Saviors of the Cause: Martyrdom Pays Off

The Borinqueneers' record of service in Korea spoke for itself. "There was a saying that claimed that an inch of terrain conquered by the 65<sup>th</sup> was an inch of terrain the enemy never took back."<sup>28</sup> No sooner had the regiment set foot in Korea in September 1950 than it became one of the most effective units in the theater. Regardless of the motives behind such *reliability* – be it exceptional reputation, racial discrimination, or perhaps both – the men of the 65<sup>th</sup> spearheaded virtually every dangerous operation, giving an extraordinary account of Puerto Rican spirit. They proved they could inflict 200 casualties on the enemy while suffering less than ten percent. And most of that percentage was wounded in action rather than killed in action. They proved that their partaking in the evacuation of the X Corps made possible the highly praised withdrawal from the Hŭngnam beachhead. While having not garnered a single Presidential Unit Citation yet, the 65<sup>th</sup> gave reporters everywhere good stuff to write about.



The day's highlight of any soldier serving abroad: mail call.

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accusing him of allegedly having used "Communist Party principles and leaders to gain political power." While the FBI did not consider the then-Senator "dangerous to the point of acts against the United States," the agency composed a psychological profile diagnosing him as a "completely irresponsible" individual with a "bad case of 'Puerto Rican inferiority complex,' which results in anti-American tendencies." (See "Jose Luis Munoz Marin; el al," Federal Bureau of Investigation File No. 100-302. Report made by Nixon Butt, Jr. Unclassified March 9, 2000.) Muñoz Marín's image found redemption in the 1960s, when FBI director John Edgar Hoover, by petition of President Kennedy, shifted the efforts of the agency to the governor's security, producing reports on suspected plots against him. (See Matthew Hay Brown, "FBI Tracked Every Move of Many in Puerto Rico," *The Hartford Courant*, November 6, 2003; and Mireya Navarro, "New Light on Old F.B.I. Fight; Decades of Surveillance of Puerto Rican Groups," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2003.)

<sup>28</sup> Author's notes from an informal, unrecorded interview with Outpost KELLY Battle veteran Staff Sgt. (Ret.) Ramón Ruiz, Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, circa August 2000.

**Members of Baker/65 rejoice at “morale” call near Ch’angni-ni,  
North Korea. November 1950 (Signal Corps Photo)**

One combat correspondent with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division captured one of the many efforts the Government of Puerto Rico exerted to make its favorite sons feel closer to their beloved *terruño* (homeland). “To bring the UN fighters the touch of home that they’ve been missing, the Puerto Rican government sent a new Magnecord recorder and eight 20-minute tapes jammed with specially transcribed Spanish tunes, an address from Governor Luis Muñoz Marín, and the latest news of sports highlights on the island.” Both the recorder and the tapes served a twofold purpose, for once all the units had heard the tapes, the soldiers could record their own messages, which would be sent back and played over the Puerto Rican radio.<sup>29</sup>

The implementation of the rotation program in May 1951 spelled the realization of a dream to many families in Puerto Rico. The first group of sons, husbands, uncles, nephews, cousins, and friends to return met one grateful island decreeing festive days in their honor, dedicating patron saint festivities in the regiment’s name, and going out of its way in procuring a better quality of life for those adjudged heroes needing houses or prosthetic replacements for limbs. Many danced to the rhythms of *guarachas* and *boleros* with the First Lady Doña Inés Mendoza de Muñoz and the San Juan Administrator Doña Felisa Rincón de Gautier. Many saw the fulfillment of dreams once put in hiatus by the unpleasant little “police action” of Harry Truman’s. Avenues, parks and buildings commemorated the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment virtually all over the island.

### **Born for the Grave**

The visit of Army Chief of Staff Joseph Lawton Collins to the Camp Tortuguero Replacement Training Center on December 26, 1951, propitiated a one-in-a-million opportunity for the installation commander, Juan César Cordero, to voice his desire to serve in Korea – specifically, as commander of the 65<sup>th</sup>. After all, he was no stranger to the regiment, for he had served with it for three and a half years during World War II in the functions of S-4, Battalion Executive Officer, Battalion Commander, Regimental Executive Officer, and Acting Regimental Commander.

“Lightning Joe” praised the efforts and achievements of Cordero, and fed him in on the brilliant performance of the 65<sup>th</sup> in the Far East, which in a direct way reflected the degree of commitment the replacement center had put into it. Mind that nearly half of the strength of the 65<sup>th</sup> had come from the 296<sup>th</sup> RCT.

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<sup>29</sup> Mellblom, Cpl. Neil. “PR Reg’t Gets News by Proxy.” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, February 8, 1951.

Three days later, Collins issued a public statement in which he praised the readiness of the Puerto Rican troops; but said nil about the colonel's request. Nevertheless, in a letter to the CINCUNC Matthew Ridgway, dated January 4, 1952, the Chief of Staff vouched for the consideration of Cordero to serve in Korea. Collins believed that, in the long run, the PRNGUS and Puerto Rican soldiers everywhere would benefit greatly from Cordero's assignment to the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

January 1952 found both the UNC and CCF occupying static positions along the general area of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. At the time, the 65<sup>th</sup> defended a stretch along JAMESTOWN Line, near the Yokkockon River in the Ch'örwön Valley. On the first day of February, César Cordero assumed command of the regiment vice Julian B. Lindsey.<sup>30</sup> Somewhere along the line, Ridgway had concurred with Collins' recommendation, leaving EUSAK's commanding general James Van Fleet little choice but to sack the likable Lindsey, who was perceived as a "soft" commander by both the respective I Corps and 3<sup>rd</sup> Division commanding generals, Lt. Gen. John W. O'Daniel and Maj. Gen. Thomas J. Cross.<sup>31</sup>

The assignment of Cordero was without a doubt a smart move. He was a familiar face around the regiment because, by then, sixty percent of the troops fighting under the colors of the 65<sup>th</sup> were from the 296<sup>th</sup>; and because of his prior service. Cordero had another point to his favor: He was clearly one of the highest-ranking ethnic officers in Korea. His assignment as commanding officer of the 65<sup>th</sup> reflected an encouraging change of attitude in the U.S. Army that had initiated with the desegregation of the black 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in October of the previous year.

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<sup>30</sup> Lindsey had been in command of the 65<sup>th</sup> since November 1951. He, in turn, had assumed command of the 65<sup>th</sup> vice Erwin O. Gibson, who had assumed command from Harris in June but had lost credibility, reliability and ultimately his job after his lack of aggressiveness during Operations CLEANUP I and II (September-October 1951).

<sup>31</sup> Lindsey (West Point Class of 1929) went on to become Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Allegedly, despite said plump assignment, Lindsey's military career never recovered from the relief.



Col. Juan César Cordero (*seated*) with part of his 296<sup>th</sup> RCT staff prior to the regiment's federalization.  
San Juan, circa mid-1950 (US Army Photo)

The regiment's mission along JAMESTOWN Line consisted of heavy patrolling and raids against the entrenched Communists. Periods of reserve found the regiment training and conducting security missions in preparation for any enemy incursion into EUSAK lines. After months of action on and off, the 65<sup>th</sup> returned to JAMESTOWN Line. There, among more patrolling and raids, the men received the news of Puerto Rico's new political status as a self-governing *commonwealth* of the United States.

The Borinqueneers now had something new to fight for – their Constitution, which Cordero had ensured that the regimental newsletter "*La Cruz de Malta*" (The Maltese Cross) publish by installments so all had the opportunity to read it. The news, no doubt, had an impact on the soldiers. Reactions ranged from utter joy and sense of accomplishment to disbelief and skepticism. Some believed that their duty as soldiers precluded them from indulging in politics.

The Constitution was but the first half of a surprise Cordero was helping prepare for his men. Rumors around the regiment had it that the colonel had requested the Governor of Puerto Rico to send a Puerto Rican flag to Korea. It seemed that Juan César Cordero was determined to revive, after the Gibson and Lindsey standstills, the magic of the Harris era. While he was not considered knowledgeable about tactics and weapons as Bill Harris was, Cordero was very likable, good at getting along with higher ranking commanders and getting the love of his junior enlisted troops, hence the label of a "political" commander. Unlike Harris, who had had an entire year to build a rapport with his regiment prior to sailing for Korea, Cordero had come on board to gather the few soldiers he knew and the ones he did not know into an effective one-of-a-kind fighting force.

Among the many changes, now the troops enjoyed a special diet consisting of rice and beans and, whenever feasible, other Puerto Rican delicacies. (Diets had been a

delicate issue before with the diversity of cultures comprising the United Nations Command. Some because of their faith, like the Turks, true to their Islamic beliefs; and others because of their culture, like the British, the Thai, the French or the Greek.) Cordero understood the old aphorism that an army “marches on its belly,” so he went “out of his way to bring us our food,” one veteran reminisces. “Our hot chow might have arrived late in the evening, but always arrived. Rice and beans. The Chinese would be expecting our Jeep like every day, and as soon as they saw it coming down the narrow road, they would start sending in their mortars. This was the same every day. The driver, used to it, and very skilled, would start pushing forward, and then reverse, then forward again until the Chinese gave up. Their intention was perhaps not to destroy the Jeep, but to make its driver abandon it so they could get the food.”<sup>32</sup>

The flag arrived in Korea shortly after Puerto Rico itself saw it wave for the first time on July 25 at San Juan.<sup>33</sup> An unprecedented act in the history of the Borinqueneers took place on August 13, as that day’s edition of “*La Cruz de Malta*” was being gleaned. Mortar shells clobbered the area of Hill 346, but that did not deter the proud soldiers from rendering honors to their national flag. The touching ceremony included a benediction of the flag by Regimental Chaplain (Major) Daniel Wilson. “Grant us Thy Peace and Power,” the chaplain prayed for, “in this conflict against aggression and tyranny. Show us in Thy purpose Peace for all the men in the world. We dedicate this flag of the Associated Free State of Puerto Rico in Thy name.”

The message carried an explicit political connotation, which Cordero did not let pass by without launching a defiant and inspiring, “How beautiful is our flag, how it looks next to the stars and the stripes! Let the communists on the other side of the Yokkok [*sic*] River see it and listen to me those who understand Spanish if these words reach your trenches.”

The flag had an immediate effect on the Borinqueneers, as the publicist Cordero expressed two weeks later in letter to Brig. Gen. Robert Bathurst, commanding general of the Antilles Command:

I was amazed the last time we went to the lines. With a thousand replacements recently received we were committed into combat and, while moving in approach march towards the front line positions under an enemy artillery concentration, all

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<sup>32</sup> Author’s notes from interview with Staff Sgt. (Ret.) Ramón Ruiz.

<sup>33</sup> The Day of the Constitution coincides with the anniversary of the U.S. Occupation of Puerto Rico. While the Flag Ceremony of 1952 celebrated the 54<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Occupation, nowadays July 25 holds a threefold celebration: for the Statehood (PNP) supporters it is the Occupation; for the PPD it is the day their hero Muñoz Marín raised the flag; and for the *Independentista* movement (PIP) it is the day two police agents brutally gunned down two *independentistas* at the infamous Cerro Maravilla in 1978, allegedly to deter the two “terrorists” from vandalizing an antenna.

the new men advanced with the least excitement and an outstanding discipline and courage in spite of being their first experience in combat. Their movement forward under artillery shelling was so well controlled and organized that it looked like a field exercise instead of an actual operation. Apparently the men were not afraid of the artillery, and while advancing did not show any indication of fear. When we started to receive artillery fire I was somewhat concerned and was afraid that some of the new men might get excited, nervous, and confused, but on the contrary I was surprised of their calm, discipline and courage. I attribute this commendable attitude to the Battle Indoctrination given at Salinas with overhead fire in which you required the RTC and the 296<sup>th</sup> RCT to hold the artillery concentration as close as possible to the advancing elements.<sup>34</sup>

## **The Road to Shame and Downfall**

Ignorance is bliss. Despite his best intentions of leading by taking care of his soldiers, César Cordero failed in preparing his soldiers for “actual” combat; and this did not become apparent until the second half of September, when the regiment received the assignment of recapturing the Outpost KELLY, a key piece of land that had been changing hands since July. The road to shame was paved not only at the expense of the colonel’s leadership weaknesses, exacerbated by other hitherto latent elements like a shortage of experienced noncommissioned officers; an excess of poorly trained enlisted men; and a grave language barrier between the soldiers and their Continental officers.

The overly confident Borinqueneers vowed to plant their flag on KELLY just as they had planted it on Hill 346, and rename the bled-over height “*Los Jibaros*” in honor of their fellow compatriots. The spirit was willing, as Cordero proved on September 24 (one day after the regiment’s second anniversary in Korea), when he told his battered outfit that EUSAK was depending on *the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment* “to tell the Reds we are on KELLY to stay on KELLY.” He added, for the record, “May the Almighty God help us and guide us in what we believe is a just cause to redeem the right of a free mankind which we wish to pass on to our sons in a better world.”

Well into the rainy season, heavy rain bedeviled the offensive. In the misery of muddy and crumbling bunkers, the men cleaned their weapons and sharpened their bayonets in the gut-tightening expectative of an enemy attack yet to come.

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<sup>34</sup> See “Letter Col. Juan C. Cordero to Brig. Gen. Robert M. Bathurst, September 5, 1952.” A transcription of said document is currently available at [www.valerosos.com](http://www.valerosos.com).

The Sons of Borinquen never expected to face off a determined enemy who would recur to suicide in order to retain their conquered ground.<sup>35</sup> The assault unit carrying the flag smashed to the crest of KELLY, but was soon driven from the hill by fanatical CCF commanders calling artillery in on their own troops. Ambulances and helicopters worked strenuous hours in evacuating the wounded, moribund or dead Borinqueneers. After having his initial request for withdrawal denied by Cordero, Lt. Col. Lloyd Willis of 3/65 bypassed Cordero and sought authorization from Maj. Gen. Robert Dulaney, the new commanding general of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Dulaney granted it.

The Borinqueneers' retreat was not a "retreat," in Cordero's point of view. "We cannot label as a retreat the withdrawal of a handful of valorous soldiers who made our lines only through a supreme effort despite their pain and loss of blood."

The loss of Outpost KELLY had an immediate domino effect that began at divisional level, when the I Corps commanding general, Paul W. Kendall, recommended the swift relief of Dulaney. Dulaney had already lost reliability as divisional commander – even prior to the events of KELLY – when Kendall adjudged the onetime mighty 3<sup>rd</sup> to be the weakest of his divisions, not to mention its artillery as the weakest in I Corps.

Kendall also recommended the relief of Cordero, whom the general adjudged "incapable of properly commanding a regiment of infantry in combat." Kendall described a colonel who was nervous and incoherent, and utterly futile in judgment. Van Fleet stepped in quickly, agreeing with Kendall's assessment that the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had retrogressed in combat fitness under Cordero's leadership. The new CINCUNC, Max Wayne Clark, agreed with Van Fleet's assessment as well, and had both commanders replaced by newcomers George W. Smythe and Chester B. DeGavre, respectively.<sup>36</sup>

Opinions on César Cordero varied according to the approach. Dulaney's after action review for the battle of Outpost KELLY described the colonel as an officer who was "not a disciplinarian." That was an assessment shared by a considerable number of officers in the 65<sup>th</sup>. One, for instance, described him as "a totally inadequate officer" who "lacked basic knowledge of infantry weapons and tactics" and "displayed inadequate

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<sup>35</sup> Six days earlier, a CCF battalion infiltrated and virtually annihilated Baker/65 on the very outpost. The gallant defenders, who had been ordered "to hold the hill to the last man," had succumbed to the enemy artillery and mortar counterattack.

<sup>36</sup> Maj. Gen. Smythe assumed command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division on October 8; whereas Col. DeGavre took over the 65<sup>th</sup> on October 11. Cordero was still so popular that his sacking was "disguised" as an early rotation out of Korea. This brazen display of condescendence toward a man whose obsession with taking a hill, unprepared for, simply to please his superiors and demonstrate what the Puerto Rican soldier could do accentuated the surviving veterans' dislike for their former commander. Cordero earned a new nickname: "Cordero the Butcher." (The last piece of the domino would be the capable Lt. Col. Carlos Betances Ramírez, a Regular Army officer caught in the middle of the witch hunt. Betances' unjustifiable "removal from grace" took place a month later, during the regiment's battle for a piece of land dubbed Jackson Heights. The demoralizing outcome at Jackson Heights, a.k.a. Hill 391, included the court-martial of 95 Borinqueneers.)

leadership skills.” In many veterans’ point of view, Cordero was a “polarizing commander” either loved, hated or both by his soldiers.

He tried too hard to be loved by all, and in the end was hated by all. While he led by taking care of his soldiers, he failed in training and preparing them for battle. He had encouraged them to breach their respective chains of command and noncommissioned officer channels, and had often sided with the soldiers, undermining the authority of his subordinate officers. He had also enraptured the soldiers with the *Muñocista* doctrine of “saviors of the cause.” No-nonsense Puerto Rican officers, noncommissioned officers and soldiers likened him to another silver-tongued politician like Muñoz Marín, one who was out to win the favor of the intended audience without regards to whomever or whatever stood in his way.

Whether he was the sole responsible for such an abased display of unmilitary bearing, the truth was that many interrelated factors had been plaguing the regiment for some time. Between January and September alone, the 65<sup>th</sup> had rotated over 5,000 men, while receiving almost 2,200, and suffering over 1,600 casualties. All three figures are disproportionate when compared with the rest of the U.S. units.

During a Pentagon conference, Cordero told reporters that in addition to the personnel of the 65<sup>th</sup>, there were from 1,500 to 2,000 Puerto Ricans attached to other U.S. divisions. In the eleven months he commanded the regiment he was constantly besieged by Puerto Ricans in those other units for permission to join the 65<sup>th</sup>. In his personal opinion, at least two additional Puerto Rican battalions could have been formed and attached to the 65<sup>th</sup>. Morale would have reached sky-high proportions.

How different it would have been had Secretary Chapman bought Muñoz Marín’s idea about an 18,000-strong Puerto Rican division. Or had they allowed Muñoz Marín to replace the 65<sup>th</sup> with another regiment, as opposed as doing it individually.

Retired Lt. Col. (USAR) Baltazar Soto, who has written extensively about the Outpost KELLY and Jackson Heights battles, reflects on the selection of Chester DeGavre to command the Borinqueneers:

Unfortunately the new Continental Commander, DeGavre, actually made the situation worse. While Cordero failed in his leadership so did DeGavre! You don’t see much discussion on DeGavre’s failure! [...] DeGavre was a spit and polish martinet that showed little compassion or understanding of his PR troops. [He] saw the poor discipline, but made the situation worse by going too far in his attempts to correct it. He ignored the wise advice of his only PR subordinate commander, LTC Betances, and his PR Chaplains, while the racist Regimental XO had his ear. DeGavre more or less decided to punish the regiment and whip [it] into shape.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to the Author, April 28, 2005.



Among his countermeasures, the newcomer ordered the removal of the “BORINQUENEERS” name from all their vehicles. He further ordered that all mustaches be shaved off until a time when “the men could prove they were men.” Such apathy surprised many an old-time veteran who remembered DeGavre’s beginnings in the regiment as a lieutenant and later as commander of the Service Company (1937–39). DeGavre also ordered that the special rice-and-beans diet be replaced with “Continental” foods. These attitudes convinced many of his soldiers that he was a racist. Eventually, it led to mutiny at Jackson Heights and to the ensuing court-martial of over ninety Borinqueneers, one officer included. (On November 3, a patrol returned to its lines without orders and without having met enemy opposition.)

Two weeks later, Van Fleet requested the Department of the Army (DA) deactivate the 65<sup>th</sup> and restore the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry as the third regiment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. DA responded with a measure which resolved desegregating the 65<sup>th</sup>. Hereafter, Puerto Rican soldiers were assigned to other units in EUSAK, and non-Puerto Rican personnel were brought in in approximately the same proportion. The regiment was permitted to retain its numerical designation, but it was no longer regarded as “the Puerto Rican Regiment.” The plans included the return of the regiment to Puerto Rico and its reconstitution as a *Puerto Rican* regiment upon completion of its service in Korea. The adjustment would, theoretically, reduce the effect of the heavy rotation loss of trained leaders from the 65<sup>th</sup> and would enable EUSAK to achieve greater standardization in the methods and the speed with which its units were trained.

## The Road to Pride and Redemption

César Cordero returned to the Island in December, while the first trials of the largest mass court-martial of the Korean War were taking place in the Far East. He received a hero’s welcome from his personal friend, the Governor, and was rewarded with the command of the PRNGUS 296<sup>th</sup> RCT again (January 3, 1953). Both men had silenced in complicity that what the rest of the country ignored. The Army kept the process relatively low profile, downplaying both the number of men tried and the severity of their sentences – confinement at hard labor, dishonorable discharges and total forfeiture of pay and allowances – until the first letters from those involved and accused of cowardice and desertion reached home. The Press reacted with appalling incredulity and pain. One national icon had been desecrated. Enemies of Muñoz Marín jumped in to demand that he pull the 65<sup>th</sup> out of Korea, and blamed him and his “puppet” colonel of arrogance and

chauvinism for leading hundreds of soldiers to their deaths for the whim of raising the symbol of the *Estado Libre Asociado* on some godforsaken hill.

The ensuing investigation involving the Army Chief of Staff “Lightning Joe” Collins found at fault the flawed rotation policy, the inability of the men to speak English, and the lack of battlefield experience of the regimental leaders. Nowhere in his statement Collins mentioned his blunder in recommending Cordero or his having knowledge of DeGavre’s racist approach.

Of the 95 men tried, 91 were found guilty and four acquitted. In the end, the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was neither the first U.S. unit in Korea to suffer setbacks nor the last. It was, however, the only one prosecuted. Secretary of the Army Robert Stevens moved in to overturn the sentences, justifying his decision on his awareness of a “language problem.” (By 1954, all those sentenced received clemency or pardons. The majority returned to service in the Army, but remained scarred.)

Yet the specter of the courts-martials was far from destroying the Puerto Rican spirit. On June 10, the regiment supported a successful defense of Outpost HARRY in the vicinity of Kūmwha (the Iron Triangle) and launched several decisive raids against the Communists. These actions by Fox/65<sup>th</sup>, the unit tasked in the combined effort, earned the regiment its long overdue Presidential Unit Citation.<sup>38</sup>

The Borinqueneers found redemption, and the reliability on the regiment grew by the day until the last day of the war, July 27, 1954, as the armistice signing caught Baker/65<sup>th</sup> in the middle of a call for fire on CCF positions. The 65<sup>th</sup> remained in Korea through the fall, conducting training, border security, and reserve missions. It returned to Borinquen in November, days before the celebration of the 461<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of the Discovery (19<sup>th</sup>), date in which it transferred its colors to the PRNGUS, taking the place of the 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The emotive ceremony took place on a grassy field, where a small audience that included many dignitaries, their families and public in general witnessed the parade and the change of colors. The main speech of the event was the eloquent Luis Muñoz Marín’s.

“The flag of the United States,” he extolled at one moment, “which they followed with devotion into battle represents their great democratic faith as citizens of the United States; the flag of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, under which they proudly fought, represents in their hearts what those ideals mean to Puerto Rico, for their homes in the hills and villages of Puerto Rico, their pride in their traditions, and their hope that their Island will assume each day a greater role as an exponent of goodwill and understanding among free people everywhere.

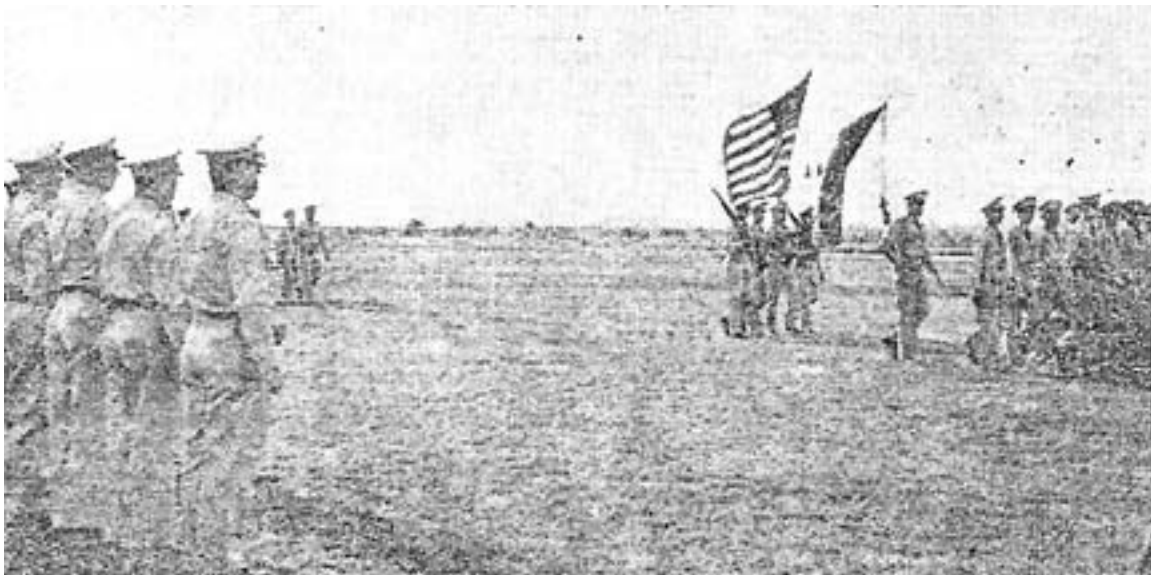
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<sup>38</sup> See “General Orders 620, Headquarters Eighth United States Army, 16 September 1954.”

**“I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a few distinguished Puerto Rican soldiers who led the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment – Colonel Salvador Roig, who commanded it in Europe during World War II, and Colonel César Cordero Dávila, who led it during the fight in Korea.”**

**The speech ended with a moving, “In saluting you today I’m conveying you the message of admiration and appreciation of all Puerto Ricans.”**

**As far as The Poet was concerned, his Saviors of the Cause had much more than delivered.**



**The colors of the glorious 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment parade for the last time along the fields of Camp Losey, 1956 (US Army Photo)**

**The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment inactivated in 1956, but was reorganized in 1959 and allotted to the PRNGUS under the Combat Arms Regimental System (CARS), thus becoming the first Regular Army outfit ever to deactivate and later revert to National Guard status. Such doing was none other than the combined efforts of the now Adjutant General of Puerto Rico, Maj. Gen. Juan César Cordero, and Luis Muñoz Marín, two men with unwavering faith in the Puerto Rican soldier. Reduced in force and nowadays known as 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Air Assault), the Borinqueneers are headquartered in Cayey (Henry Barracks). It still lives up to its motto “*Honor et Fidelitas*.”**

### **Postscript**

**On December 6 1963, Lyndon Johnson bestowed upon Luis Muñoz Marín the highest honor in peacetime, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in recognition of the Governor’s role in the future of Latin America. The assassination of Kennedy,**

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nevertheless, fouled *El Vate's* aspirations for Puerto Rico. Don José Luis Alberto Muñoz Marín, four-term Governor and architect and father of modern Puerto Rico, died in 1980.

To some, he never fulfilled his promise of Puerto Rican independence; but instead cemented Puerto Rico's colonial status quo. Others see him as the person who heralded a new era in Puerto Rico, helping to industrialize the island and bring with it social change. Despite these contradictions, his charismatic personal leadership endures.

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***Inasmuch as the story told in this article draws from the sources listed below, it does not represent the official version of the Department of Defense or the United States Army. The contents of the article and the history it relates are solely the author's opinion. Furthermore, he assumes total responsibility for mistakes and/or inaccuracies incurred.***

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