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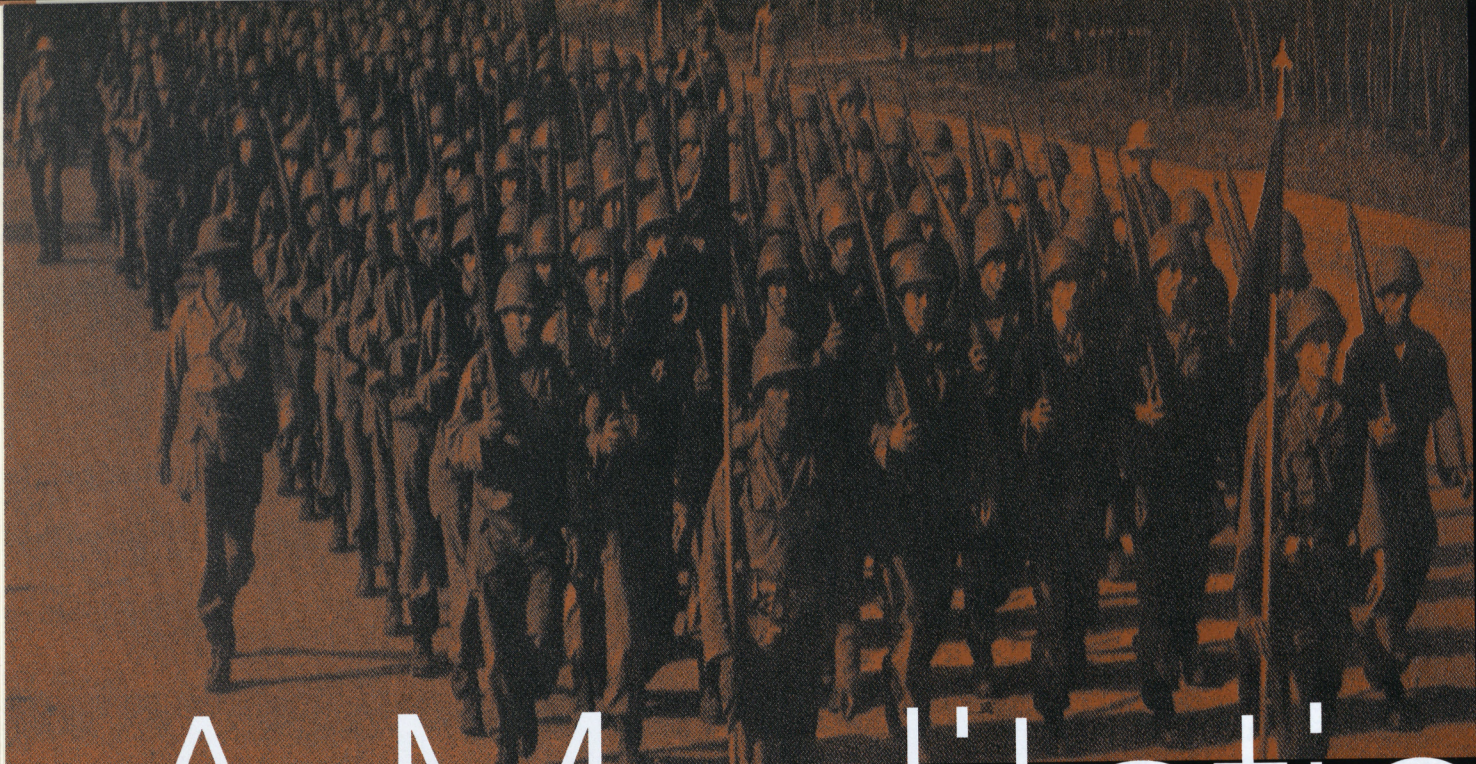


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A Meditation

on the

65th

Infantry

Silvia Alvarez Curbelo
The article was translated from
Spanish by Blanca Vizquez.

What first comes to mind is asphalt. The 65th Infantry is the "65th," that inhospitable, choked thoroughfare that runs from Río Piedras to Carolina. Not far from Río Piedras, though, you do become aware of the hidden reference point behind the smog, store signs and countless fast food joints. A simple memorial dedicates the avenue to the Puerto Rican regiment, and off to one side in the San Agustín community the names of the streets are dedicated to the dead and the decorated.

Despite its fallen heroes, the historical heritage of the 65th is faint in the national memory. The veterans of the regiment are practically the only ones who preserve the memory. Today, men in their sixties maintain the war, chronicle strikingly alive. These are the men Pedro Flores said goodbye to as they left for war, leaving behind their childhood sweethearts and resigned mothers. Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, one of the earlier inhabitants of the "65th" ("...the 65th, still pretty desolate when I was 11, was the incomplete promise of social mobility") associates the street (in *Puertorriqueños*) with the "studs" and the "peacocks"; they are the tough guys a la Daniel Santos. They are the boys of Korea.

The distant history of the 65th begins with the period of military rule after the U.S. invasion. Founded by congressional legislation in 1899, it was known as the Puerto Rican Volunteer Regiment, and fit with the anomalous situation regarding citizenship created by the citizenship clause of the Foraker Law (1900). With the First World War and the concession of U.S. citizenship in 1917, the regiment was renamed the Puerto Rican Infantry Regiment of the United States, and saw service in the Panama Canal zone. In 1920 it was renamed the 65th U.S. Infantry.

During the Second World War, the regiment took part in the African, Italian and French campaigns and in the occupation of Germany. However, in spite of its dead and wounded, the 65th still wasn't considered a combat unit in the conflict. Its battalions were used principally as support troops for other units. In the Seventh Army, the Puerto Ricans were spoken of in a derogatory way as "palace guards."

Isolated, considered generically unfit for combat, the Puerto Rican soldiers were seen through the same prism as the Black American troops. In a racially

organized army such as that of the U.S., abilities and duties were determined beforehand. After the Allied victory in 1945, the 65th returned to Puerto Rico and was stationed in Losey Field in Juana Díaz and Henry Barracks in Cayey. When William Harris took charge in 1949, the image had changed little: the 65th was viewed as an ethnic unit destined for secondary tasks.

That is how Harris remembers it in his book *Puerto Rico's Fighting 65th U.S. Infantry*. Sentimental and simplistic at times, Harris's book gradually develops into a powerful story. He covers two critical years (1949-1951) in which the regiment defined itself as a unit, giving itself its emblematic name: the Borinqueneers. Actively deployed during the war, it became, without a doubt, the best fighting unit in the Korean War. Since his book is autobiographical, one might expect Harris to make himself the focal point of that change. But he does not, even though being in charge of the 65th Infantry during those two years was obviously Harris's moment of military glory. Yet the colonel's role is mediated by his perspicacious account of a process which superseded him even while decisively elevating his command.

Harris could not have imagined that the 65th would thus come into its own when he apprehensively directed the 65th's most important maneuvers in February 1950. Against all his expectations, the 65th, in a simulated invasion of Vieques during the so-called Portrex Maneuvers, beat the "enemy": the 3rd Infantry Division, the most decorated U.S. Army division in the two world wars. That surprise victory intrigued the division "top brass" (How could the "rum and coke" brigade beat the Army's most decorated division?), but not enough to make any real difference in its image. The 65th remained a marginalized unit ("humiliated" in Harris's words), relegated to maintenance tasks.

The fact is that something complex had happened in Vieques, a combination of forces and motivations that can't really be understood in terms of military diagnosis, things having to do with machismo, dignity, self love- were all definitive in forging a powerful identity.

Four months after the maneuvers, the Korean conflict began. On August 23rd the regiment left San Juan. While on

the high seas, it received instructions to go directly to Korea, skipping the customary stopover in Japan. Korea was no longer an "incident," as President Truman had insisted, but a war in the full sense of the word and every man was needed.

The landing in Pusan coincided with the beginning of the U.S. counter-offensive against the spectacular advance of the North Koreans and the guerrillas in the South. The 65th would soon win the nickname of the "fire brigade" for its ubiquitous role in the war's extensive terrain. Its fame would spread above all when General Douglas MacArthur's desperate campaign failed against the renewed resistance of the North Koreans, and Chinese volunteers entered the conflict.

U.S. units, prematurely convinced of their invulnerability, fell into one of the oldest military traps, overextending their lines almost to the Manchurian border. When the North Koreans-Chinese counterattacked, the front lines were in pandemonium. It was in the midst of this chaos that the 65th acted with maximum effectiveness.

While unit after unit of the Eighth Army along with the regular forces of South Korea were disorganized, and were suffering astonishing rates of desertions as their casualties mounted, the 65th displayed incredible coherence. Cemented by a sense of solidarity, they were sustained by a support system fueled by letters from home, foodstuffs sent by hundreds of mothers, girlfriends and wives, and songs dedicated to the combatants. As they struggled against the cold in the hills, they dreamt of festivals and folk songs, nostalgic for their distant homeland.

Further reinforced by the group of Puerto Rican non-commissioned officers (NCO's) who "translated" the war for the vulnerable privates, the soldiers of the 65th displayed a distinct identity.

On Christmas Eve 1950, U.S. troops, in full retreat, were being pushed to the sea, which MacArthur's press corps tried to reconcile with the triumphant predictions of prior weeks. Among them were the elite troops of the First Marine Infantry Division. It was the 65th that protected the rear guard of those Marines, the Puerto Ricans being the last to leave the "Dunkirk" of Humhang. The Puerto Ricans celebrated Christmas alongside the transports

fleeing south. The Third Division received a presidential citation for their actions in saving the bulk of the U.S. forces on the Korean front. Inexplicably, according to Harris, the 65th was not singled out and none of its members received the Medal of Honor in spite of their proven acts of valor.

The following months of war were significantly different from the first phase of the fighting. On the one hand, differences between General MacArthur's anti-Chinese and "gungho" rhetoric and the Truman administration's fears of a Third World War if the Soviets intervened, resulted in the summary removal of MacArthur in April of 1951. On the other hand, the U.S. offensive, which succeeded in gaining back a great part of the territory lost in December, did not alter the balance of forces, and established instead a demarcation line at the 38th parallel. The war took on other exigencies: territory had to be won and maintained against the constant threat of invading "hordes" of Chinese. It was the most violent phase of the war and the 65th would again prove to be the most mobile unit in a confused theater of war, with its changing orders and ferocious resistance. As "fire extinguishers" the 65th undertook an intricate web of maneuvers that sent them from one end of the peninsula to another without significant rest periods. Only its considerable collective inner strength can explain how the regiment succeeded in surviving the turn of events.

The start of the peace talks in June of 1951 marked the last stage of the war. The Korean conflict became a war of static positionings, of trench warfare over minuscule modifications. But as documented so clearly in the First World War, under such circumstances the degree of irrationality rises and psychological fatigue sets in, as casualties mount over insignificant gains that could only be momentarily retained. As the nature of the war was changing, the Pentagon accelerated the rotation of troops. While shortening the time troops stayed at the front, this tactic also undermined the stability of fighting units.

As the irrationality of the war grew, and the networks of solidarity and mediations between the front and the U.S. high command dissolved, the 65th became totally destabilized and exposed.

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The dramatic events of September and October of 1952, involving members of the 65th were directly related to the loss of identity suffered by the regiment, eroded as it was by an incomprehensible war that could not be won but was measured by the taking of one or another hill mere pawns at the negotiating table. Facing superior forces which dominated the terrain, various Puerto Rican fighters sent on suicide missions refused to fight, taking the position that orders which were impossible to follow should not be obeyed. Paradoxically, the decisions made in the hills at Kelly and Jackson can be also read as collective affirmations, as a positioning of identity in the face of that irrationality. Puerto Rican identity was thus affirmed by both participation and by absence in these two sterile North Korean hills.

Two minor military operations, today no more than casual references in the books about the Korean war, illuminate all the complexities and antagonisms surrounding the 65th. Everything would change for the regiment after the fateful events at Jackson Heights on

October 28th, 1952. At the end of that day the lieutenant in charge of Company A, on temporary assignment to the Second Battalion of the Regiment, and dozens of Puerto Rican soldiers were arrested. They were accused of knowingly evading battle with the enemy and of disobeying the orders of their superiors. The response of the U.S. high command was implacable: more than 90 soldiers were tried and court marshalled. The trials were quick; the defense was hastily assembled. With one exception all those accused were found guilty. The sentences varied, but in general they were disproportionately severe (some received 16-year sentences), in spite of inconclusive proof and the confused testimony of witnesses.

The press of the time tells of a nation reacting with disbelief and pain at the accusations of cowardice and desertion, and feeling diminished and overwhelmed. A nation moving inconclusively between two cultures experienced one of its icons as fallen. The press also records the discomfort of a government having to manage an affair that inevitably had racial overtones and smacked of old colonial relations at a time when a new state apparatus the Commonwealth—was being inaugurated. The Puerto Rican cases also provided the newly installed second party the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP)—the opportunity to open its first political debate. From the senatorial chambers, the leader of the PIP, Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, would force the government of Luis Muñoz Marín to intervene and request clemency for the convicted soldiers. Concepción de Gracia personally defended more than 30 soldiers in their appeals process.

A reading of the 65th and its role calls for predictable categories racism, colonial troops in imperial armed forces, wars of attrition that are valid, useful and necessary. Notwithstanding, I think it also imperative to recover and reclaim the memory of the 65th as an illuminating cultural space in which "in some way" as Antonio Benítez Rojo would say, nationality was highlighted. Even in a zone that is totally "anti-national" the Army of the United States national affirmation operates in unforeseen and profound ways.

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