



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery  
H.R. 1726, to Award the Congressional Gold Medal to the 65th Infantry Regiment, known as the  
Borinqueneers  
*May 19, 2014*

Thank you.

I rise in strong support of H.R. 1726, a bill that would award the Congressional Gold Medal to the United States Army's 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in recognition of its pioneering military service, devotion to duty, and many acts of valor in the face of adversity. The Regiment was composed largely of soldiers from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, and members of the unit are called "Borinqueneers"—which is derived from the Taíno word for Puerto Rico, meaning "land of the brave lord." Since the term was first used over 60 years ago, coined by members of the Regiment on their way to Korea, it has become synonymous with honor, courage, redemption and pride.

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to Mr. Posey of Florida. Working with him on a bipartisan basis to move this bill forward has been a pleasure. I know that Congressman Posey, like me, feels a profound sense of responsibility to these veterans and their families. The surviving members of the Regiment are in the twilight of their lives, and so we hope our colleagues in the House and in the Senate, acting on behalf of a grateful nation, will see fit to honor the Borinqueneers while these humble heroes still walk among us.

Congressman Posey and I are not on this mission alone. We are working shoulder-to-shoulder with an army of individuals and organizations from Puerto Rico and the states. These advocates have been inspired by the legacy of the Regiment and are mindful of its special contribution to the tapestry of American life. Their campaign on behalf of the Borinqueneers has been exceptional. I want to publicly thank each and every one of them, because they are the heart and soul of this movement. I must highlight in particular the tireless efforts of the Borinqueneer Congressional Gold Medal Alliance, led by national chairman Frank Medina.

To place the achievements of the Regiment in context, it is important to understand that, for generations, from World War I almost a century ago to Afghanistan today, American citizens from Puerto Rico have built and maintained a rich record of military service. If you visit any U.S. military installation, you will see men and women from Puerto Rico, fighting to keep this nation safe, strong and free. They may speak English with an accent, but they are just as devoted to this country as their fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines from the states. If you need proof, there is a frame on my office wall containing photographs of service members from Puerto Rico that have fallen since 9-11—row after row of young faces, sometimes smiling and sometimes stern, usually posing in their dress uniforms against the backdrop of the American flag.

In a book he wrote about Puerto Rico, former Attorney General Dick Thornburgh observed that: “Historically, Puerto Rico has ranked alongside the top five states in terms of per capita military service.” In the foreword to that book, former President George H.W. Bush noted: “This patriotic service and sacrifice of Americans from Puerto Rico touched me all the more deeply for

the very fact they have served with such devotion even while denied a vote for the president and members of Congress who determine when, where, and how they are asked to defend our freedoms.”

No unit better epitomizes Puerto Rico’s distinguished tradition of military service than the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, which was constituted just after World War I, participated in honorable—albeit limited—fashion during World War II, and came into its own during the Korean War, earning admiration for its outstanding combat performance.

Like society more generally, the U.S. military in the 1950s was different than it is today, and attitudes towards ethnic minorities could be harsh. The men of the Regiment not only had to fight the enemy on the battlefield, which they did with bravery and skill, but they also had to overcome negative stereotypes held by some of their commanders and comrades.

For example, then-Colonel William Harris, who commanded the Regiment during the early stages of the Korean War, later recalled that he had been reluctant to assume command of the unit because of prejudice within the military, but that his experience eventually led him to regard the Borinqueneers as “the best damn soldiers that I had ever seen.” Such sentiments would be expressed by many others who witnessed the Regiment in action, including General Douglas MacArthur, who wrote the following in 1951: “The Puerto Ricans forming the ranks of the gallant 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry on the battlefields of Korea . . . give daily testament to their invincible loyalty to the United States . . . . They are writing a brilliant record of achievement in battle and I am proud indeed to have them in this command. I wish that we might have many more like them.”

The experience of the Borinqueneers during the Korean War was perhaps best encapsulated in September 2000, at a ceremony held at Arlington National Cemetery in honor of the Regiment, by Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera, who observed that the Borinqueneers “fought with rare courage even as [they] endured misfortune and injustice.”

The Borinqueneers earned many unit level awards for their service in Korea, including two Presidential Unit Citations. Soldiers in the Regiment earned many individual awards, including nine Distinguished Services Crosses, about 250 Silver Stars, over 600 Bronze Stars, and more than 2,700 Purple Hearts. In March of this year, President Obama awarded the Medal of Honor—the military’s highest individual award for bravery—to four deceased American soldiers from Puerto Rico, including Master Sergeant Juan Negrón, who became the first Borinqueneer to be accorded this honor. Moreover, in recent years, the achievements of the Regiment have been recognized in many ways. A multitude of state legislatures have approved resolutions in their honor, while numerous parks, streets, and monuments bear the Regiment’s name. I hope Congress will pay tribute to the Borinqueneers by conferring upon them the Congressional Gold Medal. I urge my colleagues to support this bill.