

## **PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2**

### **PUERTO RICAN TROOPS**

The association of Puerto Rico with the US preceded that of Panama by only a few years, as it became a US possession following the Spanish-American War 1898, being ceded to the US under the Treaty of Paris in 1899. Now an unincorporated territory of the US, its population having been US citizens since 1917<sup>1</sup>, it comprises an archipelago and main island, both called Puerto Rico, part of the Greater Antilles in the West Indies.

Even before the Treaty of Paris Puerto Rican volunteers were serving in the 1<sup>st</sup> Puerto Rican Infantry Battalion, authorised by Congress on 2 March 1899, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Puerto Rican Mounted Battalion. There were subsequently reformed to become the Puerto Rican Regiment of Infantry in 1908 as a Regular Army unit.<sup>2</sup>

After the US entered World War 1 in April 1917, the US Government extend the draft law to Puerto Rico, and on 3 May the Puerto Rican Regiment of Infantry assumed its wartime strength. 4,000 men were sent later in May to defend the Panama Canal, being based at Camp Empire. The Regiment would return home in March 1919.<sup>3</sup>

Following World War 1, the Puerto Rican Regiment of Infantry was re-designated the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Regular US Army in 1920, as a full-time, professional force.

Puerto Ricans also served in Panama with the 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment from 1920.<sup>4</sup> These were recruits and enlisted personnel transferred from the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry while in

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<sup>1</sup> Although its population cannot vote in presidential elections.

<sup>2</sup> US Citizenship had been imposed upon Puerto Ricans as a result of the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act (the Puerto Rican House of Delegates had rejected US citizenship) and were expected to serve in the military: [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Puerto\\_Ricans\\_in\\_World\\_War\\_II](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Puerto_Ricans_in_World_War_II)  
*The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea 1950 -1954 Korean War* by SGM Jose R Perez (2005).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

<sup>4</sup> *The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea 1950 -1954 Korean War* by SGM Jose R Perez (2005).

Puerto Rico. The unit redeployed to Camp Gaillard in the Canal Zone on 10 December 1920, being assigned to the Panama Canal Division from the following 3 July. Until 1927, personnel of the 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment were rotated on 4-year tours with personnel of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry in Puerto Rico. Then, in 1927, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment was deactivated, with its 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion transferred to Puerto Rico and its personnel transferred to the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry.<sup>5</sup>

The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment would become known as the “*Borinqueneers*”, a combination of the original name of Puerto Rico (*Borinquen*) and the word buccaneers.<sup>6</sup>

During World War 1, two further National Guard regiments had been raised in April 1917, the 295<sup>th</sup> and 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments. These would also see service in the Canal Zone during World War 2.

In the 1930s, as international tensions rose, the US Congress approved the voluntary enlistment of 375,000 men and the conscription of another 128,000. Puerto Rico’s conscription quota would be 3,600 white and 1,200 black Puerto Ricans. However, volunteers would not be accepted beyond those required to bring the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment up to war strength.

Subsequently, a 1940 law<sup>7</sup> providing for peacetime conscription for the first time in US history, with 50 million men to be registered and 10 million called up into the armed forces. In Puerto Rico, the Selective Service, with 122 local boards, led and staffed mostly by Puerto Ricans, registered roughly 535,000 men between the ages of 18 and 64. Of these, 224,559 underwent examination but only 47,000 were accepted – a 91% rejection rate.

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<sup>5</sup> Although then classified as an “inactive” unit, the 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment’s wartime mission at the time, on mobilisation, would have been the reinforcement of the Canal Zone.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.latinbusinesstoday.com/honor-and-fidelity-the-65th-infantry-regiment/>

<sup>7</sup> The Selective Training and Service Act 1940, which required all men aged between 21 and 45 to register. Those selected by means of a lottery were required to serve at least one year in the armed forces (extended once war broke out, to the duration of the conflict).

US Army military exercises conducted between 1939 and 1940 showed that the National Guard units were in disarray, except for the Puerto Rican National Guard which was rated as “superior”. Despite this, the War Department was reluctant to utilise the Puerto Rican units.

In June 1940, with hostilities underway in Europe, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was reactivated and an anti-tank company formed. The Regiment then underwent intensive training at the Salinas Training Area in Puerto Rico until December 1942,<sup>8</sup> and took up its accustomed role of home defence of Puerto Rico.



*Soldiers of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment take a break from training in Salinas, Puerto Rico, in 1941. (National Archives)*

While in Panama, the Regiment received intensive training, especially in jungle warfare, as a result, the regiment attained a high degree of efficiency and was praised for its performance.<sup>9</sup> Of course, neither this jungle warfare training, nor the later training in North Africa, was ideal for fighting in Western Europe, which would be where the Regiment would eventually see combat.

Despite concerns and resistance on the part of the Panamanian Government, from 7 January 1943, the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment deployed to the Canal Zone. The essential idea was for the unit to replace other regular (white) units for service in combat theatres. The lack of threat to the Canal, allied to the need for men elsewhere, had also seen a reduction in troop numbers there, with US enlisted men with two years or more service in the Panama Canal Department<sup>10</sup> in units being shipped back for reassignment.

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<sup>8</sup> *The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea 1950 -1954 Korean War* by SGM Jose R Perez (2005).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The name for the Army command in the Canal Zone, established in 1917, it would be disestablished in 1947.

*Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

At the start of 1943 there were approximately 17,000 Puerto Ricans in the US Army, including the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and all of them were stationed either in Puerto Rico itself or in the US Virgin Islands<sup>11</sup>.

Meanwhile, two federalised National Guard units raised in Panama in 1940, that initially substituted for the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment at home, were themselves deployed to Panama, or other places in the Caribbean Defense Command, in 1944, taking over from the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.<sup>12</sup>

Puerto Rican troops were being used throughout the Caribbean Defense Command, but their increased use exposed attitudes common at the time. Despite being accepted as being US citizens, it was felt that they were lacking in “*mental, tactical and technical ability*” as well as in proficiency in English. Puerto Rican troops had to be at least 8<sup>th</sup> Grade graduates, speak English, and to be above the minimum weight and height levels. They also have had to achieve a rating of Class 3 or higher in the Army General Classification Test (the AGCT was an early means for attempting the assessment of intelligence or other abilities).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in 1917 the US had hurriedly acquired the Danish Virgin Islands, to counter a possible flaw in the canal's defences, by ensuring they were not obtained by Imperial Germany. The US paid \$25 million in gold. President Woodrow Wilson and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing had feared that Germany might annex Denmark and then be launch attacks the islands.

During World War 2, it has been estimated by the Department of Defense that 65,034 Puerto Ricans served in the US military; and as the induction of Puerto Ricans into the armed forces increased many were assigned to units in the Canal Zone and the British West Indies to replace the Continental US troops serving in regular Army units. The military did not keep statistics with regard to the total number of Hispanics who served in the regular units of the Armed Forces, only of those who served in Puerto Rican units.

<sup>12</sup> The 295<sup>th</sup> saw service in Curacao, Aruba, Surinam, Trinidad, Cuba, and Jamaica, and the Army used a platoon of volunteers from the regiment for live mustard gas tests while in Panama. The 296<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team also served in Hawaii from 8 May 1945 to 7 March 1946 and was preparing for deployment against the Japanese when the war ended. Puerto Rican support units, such as the 245<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Company also served in the European and Burma theatres.

<sup>13</sup> The AGCT was an early means for attempting the assessment of intelligence or other abilities. For further information, see: *Psychology, Society, and Ability Testing (1859-2002)* by Paul F Ballantyne. In fact, the Puerto Rico National Guard had been rated “*superior*” during the exercises and evaluations conducted 1939-1940.

<https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/pr-military/mobilizing-puerto-ricans# ftn8>

In March 1943, the Command's Deputy Chief of Staff and the Commanding General, General Brett, had discussed the possibility of using Puerto Rican troops. A study was commissioned that proved prescient, as the War Department soon set the 90,000 troop ceiling for the Command, with the stipulation it utilise 30,000 Puerto Ricans. This There raised concerns as it meant that one in three of all troops in the Command would eventually be Puerto Rican. One report attributed some of their claimed deficiencies as being due to their "...being of Latin temperament, [making it] safe to say that most Puerto Ricans are in general temperamentally unstable".<sup>14</sup>

In another example of inherent prejudice they faced, a Bureau of the Budget's report on the inductee program in Puerto Rico declared that: "*Puerto Ricans obviously are not as valuable as [Continental US soldiers] for Army service because of lower educational and physical standards, racial and historical traditions and background, aptitude, etc...*".

Despite many thousands having served by then, in 1945, the Puerto Rican Induction Report still said that Puerto Rican inductee "*admittedly, was not generally suited for front line duty*" but would valuable for other duties and "*thousands of potential actual combat US Continental personnel would thereby be released from secondary services*".<sup>15</sup>

Despite these official views, some 65,000 men and women from Puerto Rico or of Puerto Rican descent served in World War 2.<sup>16</sup>

The men of the Puerto Rican regiments would also have to deal with the discrimination and segregation common the Canal Zone at the time. It should also be noted that, at the time, even Puerto Rican army units were segregated, and had white officers.

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<sup>14</sup> *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016):

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

<sup>15</sup> [https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/pr-military/mobilizing-puerto-ricans#\\_ftn8](https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/pr-military/mobilizing-puerto-ricans#_ftn8)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thenmusa.org/articles/the-65th-infantry-regiment/>

During the 1930s, the Governor had ruled out bringing Puerto Ricans into the Canal Zone to meet its labour shortage, saying that they were not desirable because they could not be easily categorised as either black or white. Governor Ridley preferred the “generally quiet and docile” West Indians.<sup>17</sup>

Among the various objections to using Puerto Ricans in the Caribbean Defense Command, there was perhaps one legitimate reason - reasons of diplomacy with other Caribbean nations (e.g. “*the use of Puerto Rican troops in Cuba is entirely out of the question*” due to possible racial animosities between the peoples of Cuba and Puerto Rico). This aspect did arise when deployment of Puerto Rican troops to Panama was proposed.

The Panamanian Government insisted on a careful screening of the unit brought into Panama - despite it being a Regular Army regiment, was to be stationed within the Canal Zone, and that the same unit had defended the Canal during World War I.<sup>18</sup> As it transpired, the performance of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment led the US War Department to decide upon a general replacement of Continental US troops not only in Panama, but in the bases on British islands in the Caribbean as well, insofar as available numbers allowed. Eventually, it was hoped, 20,000 Puerto Rican troops could be made available.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of 1943, nearly 5,000 Puerto Rican soldiers were based in Panama. In an early example of the type of training that was to become an important role for US forces in Panama, the Regiment also provided training for officers and enlisted men of Latin American armies who were sent to Panama to learn the tactics of the US Army.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *The Role of North American Women in US Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone 1904-1945* by Paul W Morgan Jr (Dissertation submitted to Department of History, Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2000): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013679/00001/images/10> Governor Ridley had ruled out bringing US blacks into the Canal Zone, for fear of introducing “*subversive and troublesome elements*”.

<sup>18</sup> One has to remember that the short-lived Arias Madrid administration in Panama 1940-41 had been particularly nationalistic and had adopted racist and antisemitic overtones and policies – most of which continued to be adopted by the successor administration.

<sup>19</sup> <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch16.htm>

<sup>20</sup> [https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/pr-military/mobilizing-puerto-ricans#\\_ftn8](https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/pr-military/mobilizing-puerto-ricans#_ftn8)



*Puerto Rican officers training Latin American officers in Panama*

The 295<sup>th</sup> and 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments followed the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment to Panama in 1944.<sup>21</sup> The 296<sup>th</sup> would return to Puerto Rico in 1945, and the 295<sup>th</sup> in February 1946, with both deactivated later in 1946.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the misgivings of the Army and the Panamanian Government, by the end of 1943, a great portion of the defences in Panama was made up of Puerto Rican troops who served with distinction.

When in Panama, perhaps in another example of racial attitudes of the time, it was decided that Puerto Rican servicemen required their own menu. The Commanding General ruled that a modified ration was required, to provide proper nourishment, so as to permit them to perform the physical exertions required in the performance of duty. The main modifications consisted in the substitution of additional rice for part of the potato component, a small increase in sugar in place of part of the flour component, and additional issue of beans and modifications of the meat component.<sup>23</sup>

The arrival of numbers of Puerto Rican troops led to greater Panamanian involvement in the USO and other organisations (although the USO also brought Puerto Rican

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

<sup>23</sup> *Prevention of disease in the United States Army during World War II : the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945* edited by Wesley C Cox (Department of the Army, Office of the Surgeon General, Historical Division, 1946):  
<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/ext/dw/101705278X1/PDF/101705278X1.pdf>



hostesses, carefully screened, to Panama). However, the USO failed to do for West Indians what it did for Panamanians. While even before Puerto Ricans had arrived Panamanians had been involved with the USO, racial discrimination prevented cultural exchanges, with Zonians unwilling to look beyond the colour of someone's skin. Even black Puerto Ricans felt uncomfortable attending USO clubs, and those at the Pacific end of the Canal requested their own club instead – the request being refused. The Canal Zone Red Cross recruited black women as dance partners for black (Puerto Rican) troops.<sup>24</sup>

Another thing thought to be a problem was schistosomiasis, also known as bilharzia or “river blindness”, and was described as being endemic in Puerto Rico at the time. A disease caused by parasitic worms that lives in fresh water in subtropical and tropical regions. The parasite can remain in the body for many years and cause damage to organs such as the bladder, kidneys and liver. Despite the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment having served in the Canal Zone during World War 1, without any consequent infections, there remained concerns.

In August 1944, a test was undertaken which revealed an infestation rate among Puerto Rican troops of approximately 40%. Consequently, snails, which were a vector for the disease, were collected throughout the area occupied by the Panama Canal Department and sent to the School of Tropical Medicine in San Juan, Costa Rica, but all samples were found to be negative for infection.

In 1945, a report concluded that, unless the molluscan hosts were themselves to be introduced into Panama, the disease would not be introduced by reason of the presence of Puerto Rican troops.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *The Role of North American Women in US Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone 1904-1945* by Paul W Morgan Jr (Dissertation submitted to Department of History, Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2000): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013679/00001/images/10>

<sup>25</sup> *Prevention of Disease in the United States Army during World War II: the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945 (Volume 1)* via the US National Library of Medicine.



Another indignity imposed on the Puerto Rican troops was that they were deemed suitable for the chemical warfare tests carried out on San José Island – numbers of African-American troops not being available for the race-influenced tests.<sup>26</sup> The men taking part in the tests are said to have been volunteers. In August 1944, scientists wanted to determine if different races would react differently to mustard gas. For some reason, military officials believed the skin of non-whites might be tougher than that of Caucasians and better able to resist the effects of mustard gas. As a result, between 9 and 15 August, several tests were done to "*determine if any difference existed in the sensitivity of Puerto Rican and continental US troops to H [mustard] gas*".<sup>27</sup>

In February 1944, the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was ordered to North Africa, to prepare for the invasion of Occupied Europe. This was preceded by a 2-month combat infiltration course at Fort Eustis in Virginia.<sup>28</sup>

In March/April 1944, the Regiment actually redeployed to North Africa, and there it conducted amphibious training and security operations. They also saw a Puerto Rican take over command of the unit. Colonel Antullo Segarra was the first Puerto Rican officer to command a regiment in the Regular US Army.

In October 1944, the Regiment was assigned to the Seventh Army, landing near Nice in Southern France. One battalion went into the front line, in the cold of the Maritime Alps, a far cry from the hot and dusty environment that it had trained in while in North Africa.

In December 1944, while the main German attacks were in the north in what became known as the Battle of the Bulge, the Regiment faced probes against its part of the

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/02/panama-mustard-gas-and-chemical-defences/>

<sup>27</sup> Mustard gas was applied to the forearms of the soldiers, who were then observed for three days. The tests showed no difference. Unsurprisingly, both groups suffered equally, and their skin was burned.

*Canada and Chemical Warfare 1939-1945* a thesis by Christopher Robin Paige (University of Saskatchewan, April 2009): <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226122899.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> *The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea 1950 -1954 Korean War* by SGM Jose R Perez (2005).

line. On 15 December, two men became the unit's first killed in action. However, by the end of December, five more men had been killed and another ten wounded. The Regiment would lose a total of 47 casualties before the end of the war.

In early 1945, with the Regiment redeployed near Lorraine it joined the attack towards Germany itself, crossing the Rhine in March.<sup>29</sup>

In October 1945, the Regiment was ordered to Calais for the return home. When it returned from Europe, the Regiment was received by thousands of people crowding the streets and waving Puerto Rican and US flags.

Postwar, the 1950s would see Puerto Rican troops make up to 30% of US service personnel in the Canal Zone. It is said that these men often served as mediators and translators for white troops, although there continued to be tension between the two groups. Speaking Spanish and appreciating the Caribbean culture of Panama, one white serviceman is quoted as saying that, *"A Puerto Rican soldier was the best friend you could have in Panama. They spoke the lingo, could show you the ropes, introduce you to the girls, and teach you the dances, the whole nine yards"*.<sup>30</sup>

On 26 July 1948, President Truman signed an Executive Order mandating the desegregation of the US military. However, the Order received pushback from politicians, generals, and friends, who opposed an integrated military.<sup>31</sup> While the new

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.thenmusa.org/articles/the-65th-infantry-regiment/>

The Army's attitude to Puerto Rican units can be gauged by a report on this period which said that: *"Although the Regiment had performed well, the high command still viewed the regiment as a "Rum and Coca-Cola outfit", with most of its time was devoted to occupation duty, anti-sabotage, and security missions - duties performed behind the lines. It is said that the men of the Regiment had to content with being what General William W Harris called "the palace guard"*.

<sup>30</sup> *Decentering America* by Jessica CE Gienow-Hecht (Berghahn Books, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> W Stuart Symington, the first Secretary of the Air Force, supported the initiative, which resulted in the new USAF being the first fully integrated branch of the military. By December 1949, it reported that the number of integrated units had doubled between June and August 1949. The USAF desegregation measures represented the "swiftest and most amazing upset of racial policy in the history of the US military", according to *Ebony* magazine. At many bases in the *Jim Crow* South, the USAF ignored local segregation laws, operating integrated housing, schools, stores, and recreation facilities for the airmen and their families.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/executive-order-9981.htm>

USAF swiftly implemented the Order, and the implementation in the Navy was mixed,<sup>32</sup> although the Army had agreed to integration across the entire service by March 1950, the last segregated army units were not dissolved until 1954.<sup>33</sup>



65th Infantry Congressional Gold Medal. U.S. Mint.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

9 March 2025

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<sup>32</sup> That of the US Marines was worse, and slower to act, but in 1952 it gradually integrated units to offset losses in the Korean War.

<sup>33</sup> The enlistment quota on African-Americans that originally capped Black enlistment at 10% was abolished in 1950, when the Army also agreed that all jobs within would be opened based on qualifications and not race.