

REMARKS OF  
MAJOR GENERAL ORLANDO LLENZA, USAF (RET)  
DELIVERED TO THE  
PUERTO RICO BAR ASSOCIATION OF FLORIDA  
6<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL GALA  
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA  
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Nydia Menendez, President, members of the Puerto Rico Bar Association of Florida, Honorable Chief Justice Anstead:

Thank you for your invitation to address such a distinguished group, it is indeed an honor.

To talk about the Puerto Rican contribution in the military service of the United States I would first like to give you a background as to how Puerto Ricans became such great soldiers.

During the Spanish domination of Puerto Rico, from the time of Columbus' arrival in 1493, regular Spanish troops stationed in Puerto Rico were limited in number which required that civilian militia were incorporated into the defense of the island.

Puerto Rico and its strategic location; considered the "Key to the Antilles" was a way station and port for Spanish vessels transporting gold from the New World en route to Spain. This strategic location resulted in invasions from the British, French and Dutch which were subsequently repelled by the Spanish soldiers augmented in great numbers by the civilian militia.

The reliance on the civilian population created in the native population a proud heritage of brave and honorable military service that survives to the present.

Amongst Puerto Rican heroes of that era, Capt Antonio de los Reyes Correa, who defended Arecibo from the British invaders, giving the name to Arecibo of "La Villa del Capitan Correa".

Puerto Rican troops serving in the Spanish army captured the cities of Baton Rouge, Mobile, Pensacola and St Louis and also provided the Continental Army of

George Washington with guns, ammunition and supplies shipped from Cuba to the Mississippi River.

General Antonio de Valero, known as ‘the liberator from Puerto Rico’, joined the Spanish army and helped defeat Napoleon’s army at the siege of Saragossa.

General Valero later joined Simon Bolivar in the fight against Spain, and was later named by Bolivar as the Military Chief of the Department of Panama, Governor of Puerto Cabello, Chief of Staff of Colombia and Minister of War and Maritime in Venezuela.

Juan Ruis Rivera and Francisco Gonzalo Marin, also known as “Pachin Marin”, joined with the Cuban Liberation Army in its fight against Spain alongside General Maximo Gomez in Cuba’s Ten Years’ War. Juan Ruis Rivera fought alongside General Antonio Maceo and upon Maceo’s death was named Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban Liberation Army.

On June 1915, Major General Luis Raul Esteves, from Aguadilla became the first Puerto Rican to graduate from the US Military Academy at West Point.

While attending the academy he helped a fellow cadet graduate by tutoring him in Spanish; a requirement for graduation. His fellow classmate was Dwight D. Eisenhower, who became General of the Army as commander of the Allied Forces that invaded France and continued to defeat the German armies in Europe, and later on, President of the United States.

General Esteves served in the Mexican War, the Defense of the Panama Canal, and upon his return to Puerto Rico organized the Puerto Rico National Guard. When I joined the National Guard back in 1955, General Esteves was the Adjutant General, a position that I was honored to accept many years later.

The service of Puerto Ricans in both World Wars was a distinguished one. Actually, the first shot by the United States military during the First World War was fired by a US Army Lieutenant from El Morro Fortress at a German submarine supply ship attempting to escape from San Juan Bay, on the first day (of the war), when the US declared war against Germany.

Lieutenant Federick Lois Riefkhol, the first Puerto Rican to graduate from the Naval Academy at Annapolis was awarded the Navy Cross for combat actions against an enemy submarine. Riefkhol attained the rank of Rear Admiral during the Second World War and saw action in the Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal in the Pacific.

The 396<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from New York, composed of African-Americans and Hispanics from the Bronx, was famous in combat in the Western Front and became known as the “Harlem Hell Fighters”. Amongst its members was Rafael Hernandez, the famous Puerto Rican composer of Latin music. This regiment was later transferred to Puerto Rico after the war and its name changed to the (now) famous 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

During the Second World War, many Puerto Ricans rose to high ranks in the US Navy, Army, and Army Air Corps; four admirals, and one Major General in the USMC.

Captain Mihiel Gilormini from Yauco, volunteered for flight school in Canada to serve in the Royal Air Force; he was a member of the Eagle Squadron, and when the US entered the war was transferred to the US Army Air Corps where he served in combat in North Africa, Sicily, Italy and France. Amongst his many decorations was the Silver Star.

Upon Captain Gilormini’s return to Puerto Rico after the war he helped organize the Puerto Rico Air National Guard together with Brigadier General Alberto Nido who also saw combat in the Royal Canadian Air Force and later in the US Army Air Corps. I had the honor of flying with both of these Puerto Rican heroes.

During the Korean War, 61,000 thousand Puerto Ricans served, including 18,000 that enlisted or were drafted on the US mainland. The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment boarded two troop ships and went non-stop via the Panama Canal directly to combat action upon landing at Pusan, South Korea, where UN troops were encircled and almost driven off the peninsula.

General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the UN armies, commented that he “wished he had more troops like the Puerto Ricans in the 65<sup>th</sup> Regiment” due to their fierceness in combat.

When the Chinese Army entered the war from the North, a USMC Division was almost encircled, the 65<sup>th</sup> Regiment forced the Chinese army back allowing the US Marines to escape capture and retreat to the ships awaiting their withdrawal.

The Chinese learned quickly to respect the Puerto Rican soldiers in combat. The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was the most decorated unit in the Korean War, being awarded 10 Distinguished Service Crosses; the second highest decoration after the (Congressional) Medal of Honor, 256 Silver Star Medals for bravery in combat, and 595 Bronze Star medals. Two of those awards are being reviewed for upgrade to the Congressional Medal of Honor.

One Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously to PFC Fernando Luis Garcia of the USMC for saving the lives of his comrades by sacrificing his own. A US Navy destroyer was named after him, the USS Garcia.

During the Vietnam War, 48,000 Puerto Ricans served, 345 died in combat and 17 were missing in action of which only one remains unaccounted for. Four Puerto Ricans were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, SPC4 Hector Santiago Colon; Capt. Euripides Rubio; PFC Carlos Lozada and Capt Humberto Roque. SGT Angel Mendez, USMC, was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

The most decorated soldier of the Korean War was Sergeant First Class Jorge Otero Barreto from Vega Baja, who was awarded 38 decorations, amongst them 3 Silver Stars, 5 Bronze Star Medals for valor, 5 Purple Hearts for wounds received in action and 5 Air Medals.

In Operation "El Dorado Canyon", an air attack against Libya in response to the bombings of a Berlin disco that killed several US servicemen, the only aircraft shot down was the F-111 piloted by Captain Fernando Ribas Dominicci of Utuado. He was killed by anti-aircraft fire that downed his airplane.

In the 1990 Gulf War, 1,700 Puerto Rico National Guardsmen and Reservists were activated amongst the 20,000 Hispanics deployed to the Persian Gulf in Operation "Desert Shield" and "Desert Storm".

In the military campaign in Afghanistan, the first woman to die as a result of combat operations was a Puerto Rican. Record numbers of Puerto Rican guardsmen and reservists have been mobilized, the most of any war and are now serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. My own son, a LTCDR in the US Navy, has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan as a member of an Electronic Warfare Squadron. He has deployed three times and will again return next March.

As you can see, Puerto Rican men and women have served honorably and with distinction in the US Armed Forces, only to return home without having the basic democratic right to vote for their Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States, who sends them into harm's way. This is a civil rights issue in our relationship with the United States.

A Supreme Court decision of the early 1900's decided that Puerto Rico belonged to, but was not part of the United States. Only slaves are owned, clearly this is in direct conflict with using Puerto Ricans in the armed conflicts of the nation of which we are proud citizens. What greater proof of loyalty than giving our lives

and blood in combat while denied becoming a state of the union or an independent country?

It is ironic that resolutions in Congress to allow Puerto Ricans to decide, with their vote, whether to be a State of the Union or an independent republic have been blocked by two Puerto Rican congressmen, one from Chicago (Luis Gutierrez), and one from New York (Nydia Velazquez). The latest, H.R. 900 was approved unanimously in the full committee, but has been shelved by the President (sic. Speaker) of the House at the request of both Puerto Ricans.

I hope that the new administration acts decisively to correct this grave injustice, not only to Puerto Rico but also to the US Virgin Islands and Guam in the Pacific. They should also be allowed to become States. Your actions as members of the Bar should demand that this be resolved. There are more Puerto Ricans residing in the fifty states than those in the island. Congress only reacts to voters, and we have that power, in our hands, to press for a prompt resolution of this being the oldest colony in the world.

Thank you for your attention.