



By: *Alejandro J. Rodríguez*

Hispanic Heritage Month Commemorates Military Contributions of Hispanic Soldiers

Hispanic-Americans have a long history in the United States, bringing significant impact to U.S. history, from colonization to the current millennium. To commemorate the traditions and cultural contributions that Hispanics have contributed, the Hispanic Heritage week was established and signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1968. In 1988, the commemorative week was expanded to a month from September 15 to October 15 by legislation signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. September 15 was chosen as the starting point for the commemoration because it is the anniversary of the Cry of Dolores on September 16, 1810, which marked the start of the Mexican War of Independence and resulted in the 1821 independence for the New Spain Colony, now the countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Mexico, Chile and Belize honor their independence from Spain on September 16, September 18, and September 21, respectively.

Most people can see the cultural contributions that Hispanic-Americans have made to modern American life—food, music, film, etc. Even in Louisiana, Spanish influence endures from when Spain governed Louisiana from 1762 to 1802, including street tiles on the many French Quarter buildings.

The Borinqueneers “pray like
Angels and fight like Demons.”

--Anonymous

However, National Hispanic Heritage Month is also viewed as a time for the United States Military to honor both fallen and active-duty Hispanic Americans who served in the armed forces.

The lasting impact of Hispanic-Americans serving in the U.S. military can be traced to the Jones–Shafroth Act of 1917, which granted United States citizenship to Puerto Ricans living in the island territory under U.S. military rule following the end of the Spanish-American War. With the United States about to enter World War I, this provided the U.S. Army more soldiers and it also gave United States a strategic stronghold.

During World War I, nearly 20,000 Puerto Rican men fought on behalf of the United States, many charged with guarding the important Panama Canal. The 65th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed "The Borinqueneers," was an infantry regiment that participated in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. During the Korean War, The Borinqueneers (named after Borinquen, which was the Taíno name for Puerto Rico) were among the first infantrymen to meet the enemy on the battlefields and received 10 Distinguished Service Crosses, 256 Silver Stars, 606 Bronze Stars, and 2,771 Purple Hearts. On June 10, 2014, the 65th Infantry was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President Barack Obama.



The Borinqueneers by Dominic D'Andrea

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor drawing the U.S. into World War II. More than 500,000 Mexican-Americans served in the American military during that conflict, with 13 Medals of Honor awarded to Latinos. In this regard, the 158th Regimental Combat Team, largely composed of Latino and Native American soldiers who fought in the Philippines and New Guinea, is called “the greatest fighting combat team ever deployed in battle” by General Douglas MacArthur.

To date, sixty-one people of Hispanic heritage have been awarded the Medal of Honor: two were presented to members of the Navy, thirteen to members of the U.S. Marine Corps, and forty-six to members of the U.S. Army. During Hispanic Heritage Month, the U.S. Army memorializes the longstanding and remarkable contributions that Hispanics have made in building and defending the nation. As of September 2018, 136,000 Hispanic soldiers serve in the United States Army, composing 13.8 percent of the Army.

While the cultural contributions of Hispanic-Americans permeate all aspects of American culture, the perseverance of Hispanic soldiers serving the United States is less commonly celebrated. Clearly, Hispanic Americans have made significant contributions to United States military service and are a strong fragment of this country’s armed forces. As our country continues to become more ethnically diverse, Hispanics will continue to have a lasting impact on this great nation’s future on and off the battlefield.



The Borinqueneers Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery