

Puerto Rican women in the military

By Tony Santiago

One of the least known roles played by Puerto Rican women has been that of revolutionists and soldiers. This is a brief account of some the Puerto Rican women who have participated in military actions either as members of a political revolutionary movement or the Armed Forces of the United States.

Background

When Puerto Rico was a Spanish Colony, Puerto Rican women were commonly known for their roles as mothers and housekeepers. Women's rights were unheard of and their contributions to the islands' society were limited. However, women in Puerto Rico began to express themselves with their literary work during the 19th century. Among these women was **Maria Bibiana Benitez** who was Puerto Rico's first poetess and playwright. In 1832, she published her first poem "La Ninfa de Puerto Rico" and her niece, **Alejandrina Benitez de Gautier**, whose "Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño" was published in 1843, gave her the recognition of being one of the island's great poets.

During the 20th century, some of the women in the island became active as union organizers, such as in the case of **Luisa Capetillo** and involved in politics, as was the case of **Felisa Rincón de Gautier**.

Even though women in the past had actively participated in the revolt against Spain, it wouldn't be until the United States entered World War II that the military would open its doors to Puerto Rican women.

La Rogativa



Statue of La Rogativa

According to a popular Puerto Rican legend, British troops were besieging San Juan, Puerto Rico on the night of April 30, 1797. The townswomen, led by a bishop, formed a rogativa (prayer procession) and marched throughout the streets of the city singing hymns and carrying torches while at the same time praying for the deliverance of the City. Outside the walls, the invaders mistook the torch-lit movement for the arrival of Spanish reinforcements. When morning came, they were gone from the island and the city was saved from a possible invasion. Four statues, sculptured by Lindsay Daen in the Plazuela de la Rogativa (Rogativa Plaza) in Old San Juan, pay tribute to the bishop and townswomen who participated in La Rogativa.

Revolt against Spain



Mariana Bracetti

Puerto Rico had witnessed various slave revolts and minor calls for independence from Spain during its history, but none compared to what was to become known as El Grito de Lares. This call for independence was organized by a group of prominent Puerto Ricans led by **Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances** and **Segundo Ruiz Belvis**. Hundreds of men, slaves and women participated in the short-lived revolution. Of all the women who participated in the revolt, two have become part of Puerto Rican legend and lore:

Lola Rodríguez de Tío was a believer in women's rights, the abolition of slavery, and in the independence of Puerto Rico. Inspired by Ramon Emeterio Betances's quest for Puerto Rico's independence and by the attempted revolution called the Grito de Lares, she wrote the patriotic lyrics to the existing tune of La Borinqueña.

Mariana Bracetti, "Brazo de Oro" (Golden Arm), was the wife of revolution leader Manuel Rojas. Bracetti knitted the Lares Revolutionary Flag, taking into consideration suggestions made by Betances. Upon the failure of the revolution, Bracetti was imprisoned in Arecibo along with the other survivors and later released.

World War I

Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States in accordance to the agreement reached in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the Spanish-American War. In 1917, with the advent of World War I, the United States approved the Jones-Shafroth Act, which conferred U.S. citizenship on Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans, with the exception of the women, were eligible for the draft.

When the United States entered World War I, the U.S. Army Medical Corps believed that they had enough male physicians to cover their needs. By 1918, the Army realized that there was a shortage of physicians specializing in anesthesia, a low-salary specialty required in the military operating rooms. Therefore, the Army reluctantly began hiring women physicians as civilian contract employees. One of the first civilian doctors contracted by the Army was a Puerto Rican woman, who despite the fact that she was not an active member of the military, contributed with her professional skills to the war effort.

Dr. Dolores Piñero, born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was first Puerto Rican woman doctor to serve in the Army under contract.

In 1913, Dr. Piñero had earned her medical degree from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Boston, Massachusetts. She set up her medicine and anesthesia practice in what was then the town of Rio Piedras (it is now a section of San Juan). Upon the outbreak of World War I, she applied for a position as a contract surgeon only to be turned down. After writing a letter to the Army Surgeon General in Washington, D.C. explaining her intentions, she received a telegram ordering her to report to Camp Las Casas at Santurce, Puerto Rico. On October 1918, She signed her contract with the Army.

She was assigned to the San Juan base hospital where she worked as an anesthesiologist during the mornings and in the laboratory during the afternoons. Dr. Piñero and four male colleagues received orders to open a 400-bed hospital in Ponce, Puerto Rico, to care for the patients who had been infected with the influenza or as it was also known "the Swine Flu". The Swine Flu had swept through Army camps and training posts around the world, infecting one quarter of all soldiers and killing more than 55,000 American troops. After the flu epidemic ended, Dr. Piñero was ordered back to the Army base hospital at

San Juan. Dr. Dolores Piñero returned to her private practice in Rio Piedras after her contract was terminated at the end of the war.

World War II

When the United States entered World War II, the military was in need of nurses. Puerto Rican nurses wanted to volunteer for service, however they were not accepted into the Army or Navy Nurse Corps. As a result, many of the island's women work force migrated to the mainland U.S. to work in the factories, which produced military equipment.



Puerto Rican nurses in Camp Tortuguero

In 1944, the Army sent recruiters to the island to recruit no more than 200 women for the Women's Army Corps (WAC). Over 1,000 applications were received for the unit, which was to be composed of only 200 women. The Puerto Rican WAC unit was assigned to the Port of Embarkation of New York City, after their basic training at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. They were assigned to work in military offices, which planned the shipment of troops around the world.

That same year the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) decided to accept Puerto Rican nurses. Thirteen women submitted applications, were interviewed, underwent physical examinations, and were accepted into the ANC. Eight of these nurses were assigned to the Army Post at San Juan, where they were valued for their bilingual abilities. Five nurses were assigned to work at the hospital at Camp Tortuguero, Puerto Rico.

The Navy also recruited a small number of Puerto Rican women as members of the Navy Women's Reserve known as WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) during World War II. Among the women who served in the military and distinguished themselves were:

Tech4 Carmen Contreras-Bozak (born December 31, 1919 in Cayey, Puerto Rico), was the first Hispanic to serve in the U.S. Women's Army Corps as an interpreter and in numerous administrative positions.

She arrived in Northern Africa on January 27, 1943 and rendered overseas duties in Algiers within General Dwight D. Eisenhower's theatre headquarters. Her responsibilities included the transmission of encoded messages to the battlefield.



Second Lieutenant Carmen Dumler

Second Lieutenant Carmen Lozano Dumler (born 1924 in San Juan, Puerto Rico), was one of the first Puerto Rican women to become a United States Army officer.

In 1945, Dumler was assigned to the 359th Station Hospital of Ft. Read, Trinidad & Tobago, British West Indies, where she attended wounded soldiers who had returned from Normandy, France.

Lieutenant Maria Rodriguez Denton (U.S. Navy), born June 14, 1909 in the town of Guanica, Puerto Rico, was the first known woman of Puerto Rican descent who became an officer in the United States Navy as member of the WAVES.

The Navy assigned LTJG Denton as a library assistant at the Cable and Censorship Office in New York City. It was Lt. Denton who forwarded the news (through channels) to President Harry S. Truman that the war had ended.

Revolt against the United States

The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, organized on September 17, 1922, became the largest independence group in Puerto Rico by the 1930s. The party under the leadership of **Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos**, a former Army Lieutenant, opted against electoral participation and advocated violent revolution.



Ponce Massacre

The women's branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party was called the Daughters of Freedom. Some of the militants of this organization included **Julia de Burgos**, considered by many as the greatest poet to have been born in Puerto Rico, **Dr. Margot Arce de Vázquez**, a writer, essayist and educator who founded the Puerto Rican Academy of the Spanish Language, and **Dr. Olga Viscal Garriga**, who became a student leader and spokesperson of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party's branch in Rio Piedras.

Certain dramatic and violent confrontations during the 1930s in which the Nationalist Party partisans were

involved led to the call for an uprising against the United States and the eventual attack of the United States House of Representatives of the 1950's. One of the worst incidents was the Ponce massacre on March 21, 1937, when police officers fired upon Nationalists who were participating in a peaceful demonstration. About 100 were wounded and nineteen were killed, among the dead was one woman Maria Hernandez del Rosario and a seven-year-old child, Georgina Maldonado. On October 30, 1950 the Nationalist Party called for a revolt against the United States and uprisings were held in the towns of Ponce, Mayagüez, Naranjito, Arecibo, Utuado, San Juan, and most notably in Jayuya which became known as the Jayuya Uprising. The military intervened and the revolts came to an end after three days on September 2. Two of the most notable women who bore arms against the United States were:



Blanca Canales

Blanca Canales who is best known for leading the Jayuya Revolt. Canales led her group to the town's plaza where she raised the Puerto Rican flag and declared Puerto Rico to be a Republic. She was arrested and accused of killing a police officer and wounding three others. She was also accused of burning down the local post office. She was sentenced to life imprisonment plus sixty years of jail. In 1967, Canales was given a full pardon by Puerto Rican Governor Roberto Sanchez Vilella.

Lolita Lebron who was the leader of a group of nationalists who attacked the United States House of Representatives in 1954. Lebrón's mission was to bring world attention to Puerto Rico's independence cause. When Lebrón's group reached the visitor's gallery above the chamber in the House, she stood up and shouted "¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!" ("Long live a Free Puerto Rico!") and unfurled a Puerto Rican flag. Then the group opened fire with automatic pistols. Lebrón fired her shots at the ceiling. In 1979, under international pressure, President Jimmy Carter pardoned Lolita Lebrón and two members of her group, Irving Flores and Rafael Cancel Miranda.

Post World War II

After World War II, the Armed Forces of the United States reduced their military personnel. This reduction also applied to the women's military auxiliary units such as the Women's Army Corps, The Navy's WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and the WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots). However, several conflicts such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War produced a demand for the services of these women. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Puerto Rican women continued to volunteer for military service.



CWO3 Rose Franco

CWO3 Rose Franco, born January 22, 1934 in Guánica, Puerto Rico, was the first Puerto Rican woman to become a Chief Warrant Officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. With the outbreak of the Korean War, Rose surprised her family by announcing that she was leaving college to join the United States Marine Corps. In 1965, Rose was named Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy Paul Henry Nitze by the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

1st Lieutenant Gloria Esparra Petersen, born May 1, 1927 in the town Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, was an Army nurse at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC, during the Korean War.

Captain Julia Benitez Aviles, (January 28, 1912-January 15, 1978) born in Orocovis, Puerto Rico, was the first Puerto Rican servicewoman to obtain the rank of captain. She joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1950 and served in Occupation Germany; Washington, DC; Texas; and Puerto Rico as a nurse anesthetist, retiring in 1964.

Nilda Carrulas Cedero Fuertes born in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1953, serving on active duty until 1964. She then joined the Reserves, where she served until 1990. Among her assignments in the military was teaching the latest modern nursing techniques to Nicaraguan Army nurses while TDY (on temporary duty) in Nicaragua for six months.

The WAC was disestablished in 1978. Since then, women in the U.S. Army and other branches of the military have served in the same units as men but do not have combat duties.

Currently

Certain events helped expand the participation and roles for women in the military,, among these the establishment of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s. Puerto Rican women have continued to join the Armed Forces and some have even made the military a career.

Major Sonia Roca born December 4, 1955 in San Juan, is the first Hispanic female officer to attend the Command and General Staff Officer Course at the Army's School of the Americas.

Captain Haydee Javier Kimmich (U.S. Navy) from Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, was assigned as the Chief of Orthopedics at the Navy Medical Center in Bethesda and reorganized their Reservist Department during Operation Desert Storm. In 1998, she was selected as the woman of the year in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rican servicewomen have served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. They were among the 41,000 women who participated in both military operations. They have also served in the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. So far three Puerto Rican Army women have died in Iraq. They were:

SPC Frances M. Vega (June 1983 - November 2, 2003), also known as "That Girl Benitez", born in San Francisco, California, was the first female soldier of Puerto Rican descent to die in a combat zone. She was deployed to Iraq in what is known as the War on Terrorism. On November 2, 2003, a surface-to-air missile was fired by insurgents in Al Fallujah and it hit the U.S. transport helicopter (Chinook), which Vega

was in. She was one of 16 soldiers who lost their lives in the crash that followed.

SPC Lizbeth Robles (1974 - March 1, 2005), born in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico, was the first female soldier born in Puerto Rico to die in the War on Terrorism. On March 1, 2005, SPC Lizbeth Robles and Sgt. Julio Negron were riding in a Humvee by the town of Bayji, when they had an accident and the vehicle flipped over. They were rushed to the 228th Command Support Hospital in Tikrit where both of them later died of the injuries sustained from the accident.

SPC Aleina Ramirez Gonzalez (1972 - April 15, 2005) born in the town of Hormigueros, Puerto Rico died in Tikrit, Iraq, when a mortar struck her forward operating base.

The names of these three women along with the other Puerto Ricans who have perished in Afghanistan and Iraq, will be engraved in "El Monumento de la Recordacion" (Monument of Remembrance), dedicated to Puerto Rico's fallen soldiers and situated in front of the Capitol Building in San Juan, Puerto Rico.