

Puerto Rican recipients of the Navy Cross

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Navy Cross

Puerto Ricans have served as members of the United States Armed Forces and have fought in every major conflict in which the United States has been involved from World War I onward. Many Puerto Ricans, including those of Puerto Rican descent, have distinguished themselves during combat as members of the five branches of the U.S. Military, the Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force and the Coast Guard.

Five Puerto Ricans have been awarded the United States' highest military decoration — the Medal of Honor, five have been awarded the Navy Cross and fourteen have been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.[1].

The Navy Cross is the second highest medal that can be awarded by the U.S. Navy and are awarded to members of the U.S. Navy or U.S. Marine Corps for heroism or distinguished service. The following is a list of the five Puerto Ricans awarded the Navy Cross with their citations. On August 2, 1917 Lieutenant Frederick L. Riefkohl of the US Navy became the first known Puerto Rican to be awarded the Navy Cross.

World War I

Rear Admiral Frederick Lois Riefkohl (U.S. Navy) (February 27, 1889 – September 1969), a native of Maunabo, Puerto Rico was the first Puerto Rican to graduate from the United States Naval Academy. During World War I, Riefkohl was a lieutenant aboard the U.S.S. Philadelphia, when he became engaged in action against an enemy submarine. Riefkohl became the first known Puerto Rican to be awarded the Navy Cross.

Navy Cross Citation:

Riefkohl, Frederick L.

Lieutenant, U.S. Navy

Armed Guard, U.S.S. Philadelphia

Date of Action: August 2, 1917

Citation:

“The Navy Cross is awarded to Lieutenant Frederick L. Riefkohl, U.S. Navy, for distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commander of the Armed Guard of the U.S.S. Philadelphia, and in an engagement with an enemy submarine. On August 2, 1917, a periscope was sighted, and then a torpedo passed under the stern of the ship. A shot was fired, which struck close to the submarine, which then disappeared.”[2]
2nd Nicaraguan Campaign

Private Rafel Toro* (d. July 25, 1927), born in Humacao, Puerto Rico, was a member of the United States Marine Corps who served in the 2nd Nicaraguan Campaign during the Banana Wars and was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

Navy Cross Citation:

TORO, RAFEL
Private, U.S. Marine Corps
Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua
Date of Action: July 25, 1927

Citation:

“The Navy Cross is presented to Rafel Toro, Private, U.S. Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism in battle when on the occasion of an engagement at San Fernando, Nicaragua, 25 July 1927, during an insurrection in that country, while performing advance guard duty in an important expedition into Nueva Segovia, Private Toro, accompanying his commanding officer, rode ahead into the town and on being attacked, fearlessly proceeded against tremendous odds, returning the fire, and at the risk of his own life materially assisted in holding the enemy in check until the arrival of reinforcements. Although receiving wounds at this time, which later resulted in his death, Private Toro continued in the fight to the last displaying that type of grit, determination and courage which characterizes conduct above and beyond the call of duty.

Authority - USMC Communiqué: 205227 ACE-jfb (21 December 1927) Born: at Humacao, Puerto Rico Home Town: Humacao, Puerto Rico”[3]

Korean War

PFC. Ramon Nuñez-Juarez* (October 6, 1932-September 8, 1952), born in San Sebastian, Puerto Rico was a member of the United States Marine Corps listed as Missing in Action during the Korean War who was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

Navy Cross Citation:

NUNEZ-JUAREZ, RAMON (MIA)

Citation:

“The Navy Cross is presented to Ramon Nunez-Juarez (1240152), Private First Class, U.S. Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy of the United Nations while serving as an Automatic Rifleman of Company E, Second Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division (Reinforced), in action against enemy aggressor forces in the Republic of Korea on 9 August 1952. With his squad's position on a vitally important hill encircled and attacked from three sides by a numerically superior enemy force following an intense hostile artillery and mortar barrage, Private First Class Nunez- Juarez fearlessly remained in his forward position and delivered effective rifle fire which greatly aided in halting the attackers. When his supply of ammunition was expended, he unhesitatingly left his fighting position and crawled down the slope to acquire a re-supply from one of his comrades. Unable to return to his original position, he quickly set up his weapon at an alternate point near the crest of the hill and continued to deliver devastating fire upon the enemy. Aware that his squad was unable to evacuate its casualties without covering fire, he gallantly held his commanding ground when the order to withdraw was given and poured accurate fire on the hostile force to enable his unit to withdraw to a safe position. By his indomitable fighting spirit, courageous initiative and resolute determination in the face of overwhelming odds, Private First Class Nunez-Juarez served to inspire all who observed him and contributed in large measure to the successful withdrawal of his entire squad. His great personal valor reflects the highest credit upon himself and enhances the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Authority: Board Serial 1022 (December 1, 1953) Born: 5/25/1931 at San Sebastian, Puerto Rico Home Town: San Sebastian, Puerto Rico”[4]

The body of PFC. Ramon Nuñez-Juarez was recovered and buried with full military honors on October 25, 1970 in the Puerto Rico National Cemetery, located in Bayamon, Puerto Rico.[5]

PFC Enrique Romero-Nieves (d. October 26, 1952) born in Ferderiksted, Culebra, Puerto Rico, was a member of the United States Marine Corps who served in Korea.

Navy Cross Citation:

ROMERO-NIEVES, ENRIQUE

Citation:

“The Navy Cross is presented to Enrique Romero-Nieves (1240226), Private First Class, U.S. Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy of the United Nations while serving as a Squad Leader of Company A, First Battalion, Seventh Marines, First Marine Division (Reinforced), in action against enemy aggressor forces in the Republic of Korea on 26 October 1952. When both the platoon commander and sergeant were wounded and evacuated during his platoon's night counterattack against a bitterly defended hill mass which had been overrun by the enemy a few hours before, Private First Class Romero-Nieves

unhesitatingly continued the attack in the face of intense artillery, mortar, automatic-weapons and grenade fire and skillfully directed the emplacement of a machine gun within seventy-five yards of the hostile position to increase the volume of covering and supporting fire fore the final assault on an enemy bunker. Armed only with hand grenades, he single-handedly charged the bunker and, although knocked down and painfully wounded by an enemy grenade, which rendered his left arm useless, quickly regained his feet and again stormed the bunker. Unable to pull the bin of a grenade with his wounded left hand, he coolly extracted the pin by hooking it in his belt buckle and hurled the deadly missile into the bunker, killing six of the enemy and enabling his comrades to continue in the assault. His intrepid fighting spirit, resolute determination and courageous initiative were contributing factors in the recapture of the platoon's objective and reflect the highest credit upon Private First Class Romero-Nieves and the United States Naval Service.

Authority: Board Serial 423 (June 1, 1953) Born: at Culebra, Puerto Rico Home Town: Ferderiksted, Puerto Rico"[6]

Vietnam War

Sergeant Angel Mendez* (d. March 16, 1967) born in New York City from Puerto Rican parents was a United States Marine that belonged to Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division]. Despite being mortally wounded, Sgt. Mendez, covered his platoon commander with his body and carried him to safety.

Navy Cross Citation:

MENDEZ, ANGEL

Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps

Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division (Rein.) FMF

Citation:

“The Navy Cross is presented to Angel Mendez, Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism while serving as the Platoon Guide of the Third Platoon, Company F, Second Battalion, Seventh Marines, First Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, in the Republic of Vietnam on 16 March 1967. During Operation DE SOTO in Quang Ngai Province, Company F was conducting a search and destroy mission when the rear elements of the company were taken under intense 50-caliber machine gun and automatic weapons fire from an estimated hard-core Viet Cong battalion. One half of the Second Platoon was pinned-down in an open rice paddy and all attempts to relieve the pressure on the beleaguered Marines had proven futile. Sergeant (then Corporal) Mendez, unhesitatingly volunteered to lead a squad into the face of the devastating and extremely accurate machine gun fire to assist the pinned-down Marines in returning to friendly lines with their two dead and two seriously wounded. The Viet Cong fire increased to a fever pitch as Sergeant Mendez calmly and courageously moved out onto a paddy dike, completely exposed to the intense fire, and commenced firing his M-79 at the enemy positions with deadly accuracy. He fired round after round as he stood, bravely defying

the enemy, to give covering fire to his comrades. Sixty meters across the rice paddy from Sergeant Mendez, his Platoon Commander was seriously wounded and he fell, unable to move. Immediately Sergeant Mendez raced through the hail of bullets to his Platoon Commander's side. Shielding him with his body as he applied a dressing to the wound, he picked up the Lieutenant and started to carry him to friendly lines, which were more than seventy-five meters away. Exhibiting exceptional courage he moved toward the lines as the Viet Cong attempted to hit this double target. Twenty meters short of his goal, he was hit in the shoulder and two of his comrades ran out to assist him. Even though painfully wounded, Sergeant Mendez chose to be the rear man, refusing to relinquish his hold on his Lieutenant's legs as they carried him toward the hedgerow. He was shielding his Lieutenant with his own body when he was mortally wounded. By his dauntless courage, initiative and selfless efforts in behalf of another, Sergeant Mendez saved his platoon commander's life and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

Authority: Navy Department Board of Decorations and Medals Home Town: New York, New York"[7]