

Modesto Cartagena
Hero of the Korean War dies
By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago
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On March 2, 2010, Modesto Cartagena, the most decorated Hispanic soldier of the Korean War died. Cartagena, was a humble man born to a poor family who lived in a small town located in the mountains of Puerto Rico. This humble man was among the first in the island to volunteer for military service when the United States entered World War II. He served in the 65th Infantry Regiment, an all-Puerto Rican regiment also known as "The Borinqueneers", during that war and later in the Korean War. It was in the Korean War that Cartagena would rightfully earn the nickname "One Man Army". Under attack, he destroyed four enemy emplacements before he was wounded, thus saving the lives of the men in his unit. Cartagena was not awarded the Medal of Honor, which he truly deserved, he was however, awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, second to the Medal of Honor, and among his many other military



Sergeant First Class Modesto Cartagena

decorations are the Silver Star Medal, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star Medal and Purple Heart Medal. He was also awarded the Military Medal of Honor of the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico. According to Cartagena, his only regret was that he was too old to serve in Afghanistan.

Here is his story.

Early years

Cartagena, born July 21, 1921, was raised in the mountains of Cayey, Puerto Rico to a poor family during the Great Depression. Cartagena enlisted in the U. S. Army in San Juan and was assigned to the 65th Infantry, which was also known as the Borinqueneers, because it was made up entirely of Puerto Rican enlisted men. During World War II he served in units guarding military installations in the Caribbean and later in the Allied occupation of Germany. Cartagena was discharged after the 65th Infantry Regiment returned to Puerto Rico.

Korean War

Upon the outbreak of the Korean War in 1951, Cartagena reenlisted and entered the Army with the rank of Buck Sergeant. He was assigned to Company C, 65 Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division. Cartagena, "with no regard for his own safety", as the official record states, left his position, and charged directly into devastating enemy fire, single-handedly destroying two enemy emplacements on Hill 206, near "Yonch'on", North Korea. After taking out the emplacements, he was knocked to the ground twice by exploding enemy grenades, nevertheless, he got up and attacked three more times, each time destroying an enemy emplacement until he was wounded. On October 19, 2002, during a ceremony honoring the 65th Infantry, when he was asked about the battle, Cartagena responded that he just hurled back at the Chinese the grenades thrown at him. He thought that the rest of the squad was behind him, and didn't realize most of them had been wounded and forced to take cover. According to 1st Lt. Reinaldo Deliz-Santiago:

"Sgt. Cartagena's actions prevented much heavier casualties within my platoon and I feel that his courage and superior leadership and own initiative were decisive factors for the accomplishment of the mission of the unit"

Cartagena was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) which is the second highest military decoration of the United States Army (second to the Medal of Honor), awarded for extreme gallantry and risk of life in actual combat with an armed enemy force.

Distinguished Service Cross Citation



CARTAGENA, MODESTO

Citation:

"The Distinguished Service Cross is presented to Modesto Cartagena (RA10404100), Sergeant, U.S. Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy of the United Nations while serving with Company C, 1st Battalion, 65th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division. Sergeant Cartagena distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism in action against enemy aggressor forces in the vicinity of Yonch'on, Korea, on April 19, 1951. On that date, Company C was assigned the mission of capturing

Hill 206, a terrain feature dominating a critical road junction. When the company assaulted the summit, it encountered stubborn resistance from a well-entrenched and fanatically determined hostile force. Sergeant Cartagena, directed to move his squad forward in order to approach the enemy positions from another ridgeline, led his men toward the objective, but, almost immediately, the group was forced to seek cover from an intense and accurate volume of small-arms and automatic-weapons fire. Locating the hostile emplacements that posed the greatest obstacle to the advance of the friendly forces, Sergeant Cartagena left his position and, charging directly into the devastating enemy fire he hurled a grenade at the first emplacement, totally destroying it. Ordering his squad to remain under cover, he successfully and single-handedly assaulted the second enemy position. Although knocked to the ground by exploding enemy grenades, Sergeant Cartagena repeated this daring action three more times. Finally, an increased volume of fire from the remaining hostile emplacements was concentrated on him and he was wounded. The extraordinary heroism and completely selfless devotion, to duty displayed by Sergeant Cartagena throughout this action enabled the company to secure its objective successfully with a minimum of casualties, reflect great credit on himself and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service.

Headquarters, Eighth U.S. Army, Korea: General Orders No. 698 (September 16, 1951)
Home Town: , Puerto Rico"

Later years

Cartagena spent 20 years in the Army before retiring as a Sergeant First Class, in 1971. As of 2004, he lived in his native Cayey. Although long retired, he continued to be an active figure around the 65th Infantry Headquarters in Puerto Rico. He also had family in El Paso, Texas. His family, upon learning of Modesto's actions, had taken it upon themselves to make a request to Congress, that he be awarded the Medal of Honor. They have received support on this quest from the Republican Veterans Committee. His supporters argued that the segregation policy of the army, at the time, and the limited English capacity of his company members when filling out the forms for the application, resulted in the awarding of the nations' second highest decoration, "The Distinguished Service Cross".

On March 2, 2010, the day that Puerto Rico commemorated the 93rd anniversary of American citizenship, Cartagena died in his hometown, following a long battle with stomach cancer. He is survived by his sisters María and Virginia and his



**Cartagena in a Korean War
memorial service in 2000**

Children: Modesto Jr., Luis Antonio, Fernando, Sara, Wilma and Víctor. Cartagena was buried with full military honors in the Puerto Rico National Cemetery located in the city of Bayamon, Puerto Rico.

Legacy

January 4, 2007, was officially declared as "SFC Modesto Cartagena Day" in the City of Hartford, Connecticut. The proclamation by Mayor Eddie A. Perez can be viewed here: "SFC Modesto Cartagena Day" Proclamation. An avenue in his native town of Cayey is named after him.

Military awards and decorations

Among Cartagena's numerous decorations are the following:

Distinguished Service Cross
Silver Star Medal
Legion of Merit
Bronze Star Medal
Purple Heart Medal
Army Good Conduct Medal
American Defense Service Medal
American Campaign Medal
World War II Victory Medal
Army of Occupation Medal
National Defense Service Medal
Korean Service Medal
United Nations Service Medal
Army Service Ribbon
Army Overseas Service Ribbon
Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation
Meritorious Unit Commendation

Presidential Unit Citation



Military Medal of Honor of the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico

Foreign decoration

The Greek Gold Medal of Bravery (Bravery Gold Medal of Greece)

Badges:

Combat Infantryman Badge
Rifle Marksmanship Badge