

Hispanic Heritage Month

During Hispanic Heritage Month NCA highlights the long tradition of military service by the Hispanic community. Hispanics have contributed to military successes from the earliest days following settlement of the Southwest Territories to today. Moreover, Hispanic service members have received the nation's highest military honor – the [Medal of Honor](#) – since its inception in the Civil War.



Top: Early Army and Navy Medals of Honor. Courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park (left) and Navy History and Heritage Command (right).

Left: Flags at half-mast in Puerto Rico National Cemetery.

U.S. military service brought the promise of equal treatment for minorities and by World War II many Hispanic soldiers joined the push for civil rights. Recognized achievements of Hispanic service members include: the 158th Infantry or “Bushmasters” mustered in from Arizona in World War II who cleared the Visayan Passages in the Philippines in April 1945, which allowed shipping to the Pacific in the final crucial weeks of war; and the Puerto Rican *Borinqueneers*, or 65th Infantry Regiment, in Korea in 1950-1951. This all-Puerto Rican unit received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2014. The honorary medal was presented in 2016. One of the most decorated Borinqueneers is World War II and Korean War veteran [SGT FC Modesto Cartagena](#), who is buried in Puerto Rico National Cemetery. So, too, are Sgt. Maj. Juan Enrique Negron-Martinez and his father. The younger [Negron-Martinez](#) was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously in 2014.

The Medal of Honor presentation in 2014 was the result of a congressional mandate calling for the review of Medal of Honor designations. The review ensured no soldier would be passed over because of prejudice, and past contributions would be recognized. Two dozen soldiers were acknowledged that day. All had received the Distinguished Service Cross. The Medal of Honor ceremony was held at the White House, officiated by President Barack Obama.



Photographs of Sgt. 1st Class Modesto Cartagena, ca. 1950 (left) and in 2000 (center); and Sgt. Maj. Juan E. Negron-Martinez (right). Courtesy of Wikipedia (left), the U.S. Department of Defense (center), and U.S. Army (right).

World War I soldier Pvt. [David Barkley](#) (1899-1918) received his Medal of Honor posthumously in 1919. He volunteered to reconnoiter the enemy position and drowned in the Meuse River after obtaining the information. His remains were returned to San Antonio, Texas, where they were held at the Alamo before burial in San Antonio National Cemetery. Because of inconsistent spellings of his surname and its Anglo character, it took decades before his Hispanic ancestry was as widely recognized as his heroism.



Left to Right: Pvt. David Barkley, Sgt. Candelario Garcia, PFC Jose Valdez, and Congressman Frank Tejeda. Courtesy Wikipedia images, U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/congress/tejeda.html>)

Controversy around the Vietnam War likely contributed to a delay in acknowledging the actions of soldiers such as Sgt. [Candelario Garcia, Jr.](#) (1944-2013). Garcia followed his father into military service and joined the army in 1963. Sgt. Garcia received his Medal of Honor posthumously from President Obama in 2014. Garcia is buried in Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery.

Others with Hispanic heritage, such as PFC [Jose Valdez](#) in World War II or Vietnam veteran and Congressman Maj. [Frank Tejeda](#), influenced American history through their military deeds and continued public service.

To learn more about Hispanic-American soldiers buried in VA cemeteries, visit <http://www.diversity.va.gov>.