

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-5401**

August 23, 2011

The Honorable John M. McHugh  
Secretary of the Army  
101 Army Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Secretary McHugh:

Sergeant Modesto Cartagena, who was a resident of Puerto Rico, served in the U.S. Army's 65th Infantry Regiment in World War II and Korea. By all accounts, he was a soldier of uncommon valor. In addition to earning the Silver Star and the Bronze Star, in September 1951 Sergeant Cartagena was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross—the Army's highest award after the Medal of Honor—for battlefield actions taken near Yonchon, South Korea on April 19, 1951. Sergeant Cartagena passed away at age 87 on March 2, 2010—which, fittingly, was 93 years to the day after President Woodrow Wilson signed legislation conferring U.S. citizenship on residents of Puerto Rico. Over the years, Sergeant Cartagena's family, friends and fellow soldiers have tirelessly petitioned for him to be awarded the Medal of Honor. I have reviewed accounts of the actions that formed the basis for Sergeant Cartagena's Distinguished Service Cross, and my own view is that they appear to meet the stringent criteria for the Medal of Honor. Pursuant to P.L. 104-106, § 526 (Feb. 10, 1996), I write to respectfully request that you review Sergeant Cartagena's case to determine whether an upgrade is appropriate. I also ask that Army officials brief me on the status of Sergeant Cartagena's case at their earliest convenience.

The 65th Infantry Regiment, commonly known as the Borinqueneers, was composed almost entirely of soldiers from Puerto Rico, who faced significant discrimination and other obstacles. An obituary for Sergeant Cartagena that appeared in *The New York Times* describes how the regiment's commander was initially reluctant to take the post because "the Puerto Rican troops were disparaged in the military." The obituary recounts how the commander's views evolved in light of his experience. He came to regard the regiment—which suffered over 3,800 casualties in the course of at least nine major battles in Korea—as "the best damn soldiers in that war." It is disquieting that, notwithstanding the Borinqueneers' hard-earned reputation for bravery in combat, no soldier in the regiment has ever been awarded the Medal of Honor.

Even in a unit of exceptional warriors, Sergeant Cartagena stands out. To read his Distinguished Service Cross citation, along with other accounts of his actions taken on April 19, 1951, is to marvel at the caliber of the man. The citation notes that, on the day in question, Sergeant

Cartagena's company was given the mission of capturing a hill of considerable tactical importance. When the company approached the summit, it "encountered stubborn resistance from a well-entrenched and fanatically determined hostile force." Upon being directed to move his squad forward to approach the enemy positions from another ridgeline, Sergeant Cartagena led his men toward the objective. Almost immediately, however, the group was forced to seek cover from an "intense and accurate volume of small-arms and automatic-weapons fire." Once he had identified 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." Then, after 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—remarkably—"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 Distinguished Service Cross citation states that Sergeant Cartagena's "extraordinary heroism" and "completely selfless devotion to duty" enabled the company to "secure its objective successfully with a minimum of casualties." Sergeant Cartagena's actions, the citation continues, "reflect great credit on himself and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service."

I recognize and respect the military's interest in ensuring that the Medal of Honor is awarded to the truly deserving and in preserving the integrity of the award process. The Medal of Honor is—as it should be—awarded only to service members whose conduct in combat demonstrates "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life above and beyond the call of duty." It is my personal opinion that Sergeant Cartagena's actions are deserving of the greatest honor that the United States can bestow upon its soldiers. I would note that one of Sergeant Cartagena's sons has stated that: "When the investigations began to award my dad a medal, it was difficult to get written testimony because all of the unit were Puerto Ricans and many of them had limited English proficiency. The officer in charge wrote one account and passed it around for all the troops to read and sign, instead of getting more individual witnesses."

For all the foregoing reasons, I respectfully request that you conduct a careful and comprehensive review of Sergeant Cartagena's actions to determine whether they meet the exacting criteria for the Medal of Honor. I thank you for your attention to this matter and look forward to receiving a briefing on the status of Sergeant Cartagena's case.

Sincerely,



Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Member of Congress