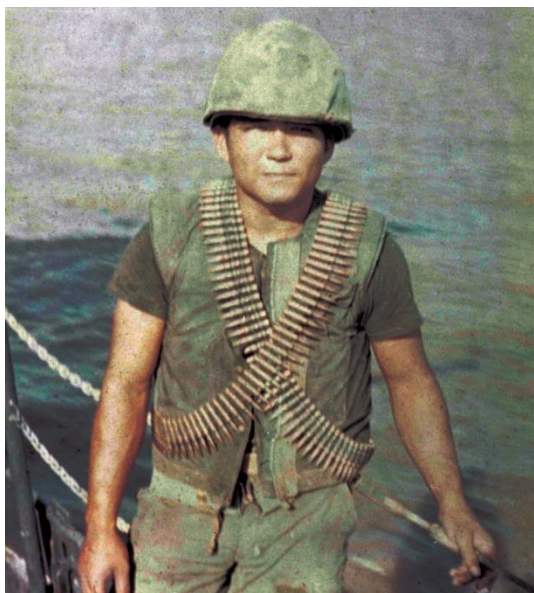


Fireman Heriberto Segovia
“Eddie” Hernandez
“The Boxer”

Heriberto Segovia Hernandez was born in Laredo, Texas, on July 23, 1948, the son of Heriberto Hernandez and Juanita Segovia Hernandez. The family moved to San Antonio when Heriberto was a child, and it was there in Bexar County, the home of the Alamo, where young Heriberto—called “Eddie” by his family and friends—grew up.¹ Young Eddie probably listened to the songs of Ricardo Valenzuela—better known as Ritchie Valens—a teenager of similar heritage who, in the late 1950s, climbed the Top-40 popular music charts until his untimely death in a plane crash in February 1959. Ten years later in early 1969—in the midst of the Vietnam War—*Rolling Stone Magazine* reflected on Ritchie’s premature demise: “Valens was a hero to the Mexican-American community . . . and they cheered him on with the same kind of support they gave when one of their boys faced a black welterweight in the annual Golden Gloves Tournament. . . . Ritchie was the first Chicano singer, a hero, just a kid, but a hero.”² By the time this article appeared in *Rolling Stone*, Hispanic communities across the nation would have a generation of new “kid heroes”: young men who had made the ultimate sacrifice in the Vietnam War. One of them was the Eddie Hernandez, the first Coast Guard enlisted man to be killed in action during that conflict. Although a line in Valens’s “La Bamba,”—his most famous song—claimed, “*Yo no soy mariner*”—“I’m not a sailor”—Eddie Hernandez would prove to be a very brave sailor indeed.



Coast Guard historian William Theisen has reflected on Eddie’s family and the blue-collar, working-class environment in which the young man grew up: “His parents, Heriberto and Juanita Hernandez, came to the United States as migrant workers harvesting produce in the farm fields of West Texas. A second son, Hector Segovia Hernandez, was born two years later and the two siblings grew very close over the course of their childhood. The family settled down in San Antonio, where a younger sister

¹ Hernandez File, USCG Historian’s Office.

² Greil Marcus, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, June 28, 1969. (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/ritchie-valens-j-p-the-big-bopper-richardson-and-buddy-holly-19690628> [accessed April 20, 2018]).

Margaret was born, and Heriberto senior began a long career with San Antonio's famous Pearl Brewing Company. A hallmark of the Hernandez family was service to others. Pearl Brewing singled out Mr. Hernandez as a model employee and he and his sons were known to stop and assist stranded motorists along the roads of San Antonio."³

On November 18, 1963, when Eddie was a high school freshman in Bexar County's Edgewood School District, President Kennedy visited San Antonio and vowed to return to dedicate the new "John F. Kennedy High School" that had been named in his honor. At that time, Eddie was a freshman at the same school. Sadly, President Kennedy was assassinated the very next day as his motorcade drove through Dallas. By the time that Eddie began his sophomore year at Kennedy High School in September 1964, he was known as an outstanding boxer. His friend Daniel Abrego recalled, "Eddie was darn good and after few bouts, in which I took numerous beatings, I began to limit the number of times I went to visit." Tenth Grade proved to be Eddie's last year at Kennedy High. He dropped out and enlisted in the Coast Guard in July 1965. (Eddie received his GED while serving with the Coast Guard.)⁴

After completing basic training at Alameda, California, Hernandez was assigned to the cutter *Bering Strait*, then Loran Station Saipan and Coast Guard Base Galveston before finally being sent to Vietnam in 1968 aboard the 82-foot cutter *Point Cypress*. By then FN Hernandez had three years of service under his belt, both afloat and ashore.⁵ Once on board the *Point Cypress*, Eddie became friends with fellow crewmember Alan Dillenbeck, who much later recalled, "There was no one who I would have felt more comfortable with watching my back. I really don't know why Ed chose to join the Coast Guard. . . . [which] in the 60s had little minority representation, but I doubt that was a factor. I think he just wanted to be part of our nation's struggle at that time."⁶ Eddie and shipmates would find themselves at the maritime vortex of that struggle, in the aftermath of the strategically important Viet Cong-led Tet Offensive, which caused the deaths of more than 7,000 American servicemen during the first six months of 1968 alone.⁷

The Coast Guard's involvement in the Vietnam War actually predated Eddie's entrance on active duty. By 1964, the United States military's advisory and assistance roles to the South Vietnamese government had given way to active combat operations. With small, offshore vessels, particularly fishing boats and junks (sail boats) actively supplying Viet Cong guerillas along South Vietnam's coastal areas, the U.S. Navy began interdiction operations against suspected enemy vessels. "Operation Market Time," as it was called, commenced March 12, 1965. According to the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, "Market Time was established . . . as a coastal surveillance operation

³ William H. Theisen, "'Skill, courage under enemy fire, and devotion to duty': Bronze Star Medal Recipient Heriberto 'Eddie' Hernandez and Coast Guard Smallboat Operations in Vietnam." *The Quarterdeck Log*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2013). Despite having a natural role model such as Ritchie Valens, Thiesen wrote that Eddie's "favorite song was "Tighten Up," performed by the Houston rhythm and blues band, 'Archie Bell & the Drells'."

⁴ Mario Longoria, "Heriberto S. Hernandez, Neighborhood Friend, U.S. Coast Guard Vietnam Hero, and Ship's Name" (<https://www.eisd.net/Page/17978> [accessed April 22, 2018]); Hernandez obituary, *San Antonio Express*, Dec. 12, 1968.

⁵ Hernandez File, USCG Historian's Office.

⁶ Diana Sherbs, "Honoring Coast Guard's Past and Present: Heriberto Hernandez," *Coast Guard Compass: Official Blog of the U.S. Coast Guard* (<http://coastguard.dodlive.mil/2016/09/honoring-coast-guards-past-and-present-heriberto-hernandez/> [accessed April 26, 2018]).

⁷ Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 319.

to prevent seaborne infiltration of supplies from North Vietnam (NVN) into South Vietnam (SVN). The objectives of the operation were soon expanded to include prevention of coastal transshipment of enemy supplies within SVN.”⁸ Initially employing destroyer escorts and minesweepers, naval officers soon discovered that these vessels drew too much water to effectively operate inshore, so shallow-draft, aluminum hull “swift boats” were requisitioned for deployment to South Vietnam. In addition, Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze asked Secretary of the Treasury Henry H. Fowler for the Coast Guard’s assistance. In response, Admiral Edwin J. Roland, USCG commandant, sent seventeen 82-foot patrol boats (cutters, or “WPBs), including the *Point Cypress*, to assist with the Market Time operation.⁹

The *Point Cypress* and the other Coast Guard vessels were assigned to “Coast Guard Squadron One” under the control of the U.S. Navy’s Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT). Commander Eugene N. Tulich, USCG (ret.), who served two tours in Vietnam when he was a young officer, later wrote, “When the cutters were underway they reported to a minesweeper or destroyer escort that . . . provided the WPBs with radar and navigational information. In turn, the WPBs provided similar service to Vietnamese Navy [VNN] Junk Force units that were close inshore. Although the water was too shallow for the cutters to be in close with the VNN junks, they could provide gunfire support if necessary.”¹⁰ To solve this problem, the cutters employed their 17-foot, fiberglass hull “Boston Whalers” with twin 45 HP motors that could carry a crew of three to seven personnel.¹¹ On December 5, 1968, Eddie, his executive officer, and a visiting Coast Guard officer from another vessel shoved off from the *Point Cypress* in one of these Boston Whalers on a routine inland patrol on the Cau Mau Peninsula at the southern-most point of South Vietnam.¹²

Motoring up the Rach Nang River, the river-reconnaissance mission was searching for Viet Cong patrols known to be operating in the area. Their fiberglass boat provided no protection from enemy fire, which they soon encountered as they approached an enemy bunker. The Viet Cong pummeled Hernandez and the officers with automatic weapons fire, riddling the Boston Whaler. The crew escaped the deadly ambush, but not before Eddie and the two officers were severely wounded. Although the vessel was able to limp back to the *Point Cypress*, Hernandez’s wounds proved to be mortal and he died once on board the cutter. For his bravery under fire, Eddie was posthumously awarded both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star Medal with the Combat “V” (for valor)

⁸ Judith C. Erdheim, “Market Time.” Naval History and Heritage Command (<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/m/market-time-u-crc280.html> [accessed April 22, 2018]).

⁹ Robert E. Johnson, *Guardians of the Sea: History of the United States Coast Guard, 1915-Present* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 331.

¹⁰ Eugene Tulich, “The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia during the Vietnam Conflict.” (US Coast Guard History Program. <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Jan/11/2001864980/-1/-1/0/VTN-TULICH-USCG-OFFICIAL-HISTORY.PDF> [accessed April 27, 2018]).

¹¹ “Vietnam Era Patrol Boats.” (“Warboats.org.” <http://www.warboats.org/skimmer.htm> [accessed April 27, 2018]).

¹² Connie Braesch and Ryan White, “Coast Guard Heroes: Heriberto Hernandez.” (*Coast Guard Compass: Official Blog of the U.S. Coast Guard*. <http://coastguard.dodlive.mil/2010/11/coast-guard-heroes-heriberto-hernandez/> [accessed April 28, 2018]).

device.¹³ His friend and shipmate Alan Dillenbeck remembered Eddie as “a formidable presence. There was no one who I would have felt more comfortable with watching my back. Eddie was perhaps the toughest and most fearless person I’ve ever met.”¹⁴

Eddie’s remains were brought home to San Antonio for burial in San Fernando Cemetery #2.¹⁵ As a tribute to Hernandez’s heroism and devotion to duty, the Coast Guard dedicated its new Fast Response Cutter, *Heriberto Hernandez*, in Eddie’s memory. Hernandez thus became the first Hispanic-American Coast Guardsman to be so recognized for his combat service. Christened by Eddie’s mother, Juanita, on Oct. 16, 2015, the vessel is part of the Seventh Coast Guard District, Sector San Juan, Puerto Rico. At the ship’s commissioning ceremony, Mrs. Hernandez remarked, “I am very thankful to the Coast Guard for remembering my son and what he did when he served. However, I miss him dearly and know that nothing on this earth can bring him back to me. I am glad his memory is still alive after all these years.”¹⁶

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Author’s Note: The most comprehensive sketch of Hernandez’s life and Coast Guard service is by Dr. William H. Theisen, Atlantic Area Historian, titled ““Skill, courage under enemy fire, and devotion to duty:” Bronze Star Medal Recipient Heriberto “Eddie” Hernandez and Coast Guard Smallboat Operations in Vietnam.” The essay can be found here: https://media.defense.gov/2018/Jan/17/2001866232/-1/1/0/THIESEN_QDLOGHERNANDEZARTICLE2014.PDF



¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Quoted in Braesch and White, “Coast Guard Heroes: Heriberto Hernandez.”

¹⁵ “SMN Heriberto Segovia ‘Eddie’ Hernandez.” (“Find-A-Grave” <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/121017483/heriberto-segovia-hernandez#source> [accessed April 28, 2018]).

¹⁶ Katie Braynard, “Welcome back to the fleet, Heriberto Hernandez!” (*Coast Guard Compass: Official Blog of the U.S. Coast Guard*. <http://coastguard.dodlive.mil/2015/10/welcome-back-to-the-fleet-heriberto-hernandez/> [accessed April 28, 2018]).