



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Hispanic-Americans in Coast Guard History

Historical Chronology

The history of Hispanic-Americans in the U.S. Coast Guard may be traced as far back as the early 1800s. Hispanic Americans performed duties at light house stations as keepers and assistant keepers, such as Keeper Juan Andreu who served as the Keeper of the St. Augustine Light from 1824-1845 and Keeper José A. Ramirez, who served as the Head Keeper of the Windward Point Light Station in Cuba, prior to World War II. Others served on board Revenue Service cutters and as surfmen at Life-Saving Service stations along the coast. Many gave their lives in the performance of their duties and others were decorated for their heroism.

In 1914, Hispanic-Americans sailed on the Revenue Cutter *Algonquin*. The cutter was stationed in the Caribbean and assisted the city of San Juan twice. In 1920, after the formation of the Coast Guard, two Hispanic-American crewman of the cutter *Acushnet*, Mess Attendant First Class Arthur J. Flores and SN John E. Gomez, volunteered to save survivors of the schooner *Isaiah K. Stetsen*, which sank off the coast of Massachusetts during a storm. The Treasury Department awarded both of them the Silver Lifesaving Medal for their heroism.

1824

- From 1824 to 1845 Juan Andreu served as the Keeper of the St. Augustine Lighthouse in Florida. Of Minorcan ancestry, he is the first Hispanic-American to serve in the Coast Guard and the first to oversee a federal installation of any kind. Andreu likely served as keeper before 1824; however there are no surviving federal records prior to 1824 to verify this fact.

1843

- In 1843 Joseph Ximenez took command of the Carysfort Reef Lightship in Florida, making him the first Hispanic-American to command a Coast Guard vessel.

1859

- From 1859 to 1862 Maria Andreu (a.k.a. Maria Mestre de los Dolores) served as the Keeper of the St. Augustine Lighthouse in Florida, becoming the first Hispanic-American woman to serve in the Coast guard and the first Hispanic-American woman to command a federal shore installation.



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1897

- In 1897 Surfmen Telesford Pena and Ramon Delgado began serving at the Brazos Life-Saving Station in Texas. They were the first known Hispanic-Americans to serve with the U.S. Life-Saving Service.

1908

- On 5 February 1908 Surfman Francisco Silva, a surfman from the Woodend Life-Saving Station, died from a disease contracted in the line of duty.

1915

- In 1915 the City of San Juan, Puerto Rico, an "*Official Resolution of Thanks*" to the crew of the USRC *Algonquin* for battling fires that threatened to destroy parts of that city. The crew included fifteen Hispanic-American enlisted, or twenty-five percent of the cutter's complement.

1916

- Boatswain's Mate Third Class Pedro Albino, USCG, retired from the Coast Guard after 32 years of military and civilian government service in 1944 after joining the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1916. He was stationed at six different lighthouses throughout Puerto Rico and the Caribbean during his distinguished career. He was a champion for working and salary improvements for lighthouse keepers throughout Puerto Rico during his career. His dedicated service contributed greatly to the success of the lighthouse service in Puerto Rico in the years prior to World War II. He was commended for his assistance to the crew of the grounded sloop *Continente* in 1929. He was born in 1886, served in the U.S. Army for three years, and joined the Lighthouse Service in 1916 and he retired from the Coast Guard in 1944.

1918

- In 1918 Seaman Richard E. Cordova gave his life when his cutter, the CGC *Tampa*, was torpedoed and sunk with all hands by a German U-Boat during World War I.

1919

- BM 1/c Pablo Valent and Surfman Indalecio Lopez assist in the rescue of the crew of the schooner CAPE HORN on 16 September 1919 as members of the Brazos (Texas) Life-Saving Station crew. For their bravery and heroic effort, Valent and Lopez receive the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal and The Grand Cross Medal from the American Cross of Honor Society.

1925

- On 28 September 1925, Chief Gunner's Mate Joseph B. Aviles, USCG, transferred from the U.S. Navy to the Coast Guard. Born in Puerto Rico, Aviles became the first known Hispanic-American



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chief petty officer in the Coast Guard. During World War II he received a war-time promotion to chief warrant officer, becoming the first Hispanic American to reach that level as well.

1935

- BMC Pablo Valent took command of the Port Isabel (Texas) Boat Station in 1935, becoming the first Hispanic-American to command a boat station.

1942

- Juan del Castillo enlisted in the Coast Guard in June 1942 after graduating from Manhattan College and, by mid-year, he had received appointment to Officer's Candidate School at the Coast Guard Academy. He was commissioned an ensign in December of 1942, becoming the first Hispanic American to receive an officer's commission. Castillo served on convoys in the Caribbean before receiving training at the Naval Communications School at Harvard University. The rest of the war saw him serving on board cutters in the North Pacific. Castillo was released from active duty in 1946 and served in the Reserves for nearly forty years. During this time, he had a distinguished career with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and became famous for developing "CSM," a high-protein food substance used in disaster relief, famines and mass feeding operations.

1944

- In 1944 Gunner's Mate Joseph Tezanos received assignment to OCS, becoming the second Hispanic American to complete officers' training.
- Valentin R. Fernandez, the coxswain of a landing craft, was awarded a Silver Lifesaving Medal for "...maneuvering a Marine landing party ashore under constant Japanese attack" during the invasion of Saipan, which began on 15 June 1944.
- Louis Rua was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for "...meritorious achievement at sea December 5-6, 1944, while serving aboard a U.S. Army large tug en route to the Philippines. He craft went to the rescue of another ship which had been torpedoed by enemy action and saved 277 survivors from the abandoned ship." Rua was the first known Hispanic-American Coast Guardsman to be awarded with a Bronze Star Medal.
- Gunner's Mate Second Class Joseph Tezanos was awarded a Navy & Marine Corps Medal during World War II for "...distinguished heroism while serving as a volunteer member of a boat crew engaged in rescue operations during a fire in Pearl Harbor, Oahu, T.H. on 21 May 1944. Under conditions of great personal danger from fire and explosions and with disregard of his own safety he assisted in the rescuing of approximately 42 survivors some of whom were injured and exhausted from the water and from burning ships." He was also the second known Hispanic-American to complete OCS training at the Coast Guard Academy.



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1945

- Gilbert Cardenas was awarded with a Commandant's Letter of Commendation for service during World War II.

1968

- In Vietnam in 1968, Heriberto S. Hernandez, a crewman aboard the USCGC *Point Cypress* which was assigned to Operation Market Time, was awarded the Bronze Star with a combat "V" for valor and a Purple Heart medal after sustaining a mortal wound while in combat with the Viet Cong.

1969

- Larry Villareal received the Silver Star Medal for combat action in Vietnam on 21 January 1969, becoming the first Hispanic-American service member to receive the medal.

1970

- Boatswain's Mate First Class Carlos Valdivia Molina was awarded the Coast Guard Medal (Extraordinary Heroism citation) for "...heroism on the night of 21 October 1970 while serving as a crew member in USCGC *ACUSHNET*, [WMEC-167] engaged in the perilous rescue of a fellow shipmate who had been washed overboard into the Pacific Ocean off the coast of California. Though darkness, high winds and 12-foot seas severely affected the search, the victim was sighted only minutes after the accident with the ship's searchlight. Petty Officer MOLINA donned his wet suit while enroute to the boat lowering detail and volunteered as coxswain of the recovery boat. While the boat was almost lost in launching because of adverse weather conditions, Petty Officer MOLINA, realizing the plight of his shipmate, vaulted over the ship's railing into the boat. Although suffering a serious fracture to his right leg, he started the motor and skillfully maneuvered the boat within 15 feet of his shipmate. A large wave then crested over the boat and disabled the motor. Disregarding his injuries, Petty Officer MOLINA began using the boat's paddles in his continuing efforts to reach the man who was trying to swim toward him. Moments later another boat from the *ACUSHNET* arrived on scene and rescued both men. Petty Officer MOLINA, by his rescue efforts, demonstrated unusual initiative, exceptional fortitude, and heroic daring in spite of imminent personal danger throughout the operation. His unselfish actions and unwavering devotion to duty reflect the highest credit upon himself and the United States Coast Guard."

1975

- Alberto J. Gastón received his naval aviator wings on 27 May 1975, becoming the first Cuban-American to become a pilot in the Coast Guard.



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1977

- On 29 August 1977 Ileana Ortiz became the first known Puerto Rican woman to join the Coast Guard. She enlisted at Recruiting Office San Juan, Puerto Rico.

1980

- Seaman Apprentice William Ray "Billy" Flores (photo, above) died in the line of duty while saving the lives of many of his shipmates when his cutter, the *Blackthorn*, collided with the tanker *Capricorn*, on January 28, 1980. The *Blackthorn* and the tanker *Capricorn* collided near the entrance to Tampa Bay, Florida. The *Blackthorn* capsized before all the cutter's crew could abandon ship. Twenty-seven of Flores' shipmates did escape the sinking ship. After the ships collided Flores and another crewmember threw lifejackets to their shipmates who had jumped into the water. Later, when his companion abandoned ship as the *Blackthorn* began to submerge, Flores -- who was less than a year out of boot camp -- remained behind and used his own belt to strap open the lifejacket locker door, allowing additional lifejackets to float to the surface. Even after most crewmembers abandoned ship, the 19-year-old Flores remained aboard to assist trapped shipmates and to comfort those who were injured and disoriented. He was posthumously awarded the Coast Guard Medal.

1980

- Pablo Alejandro Vivas graduated from basic training in May, 1980, becoming the first known Nicaraguan-American to join the Coast Guard. He retired in 2008 with the rank of CWO-4, perhaps the first Nicaraguan-American to do so.

1983

- Jacqueline A. Ball and Deborah R. Winnie were the first Hispanic females to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy.

1991

- The first Hispanic-American female advanced to E-7 was YNC Grisel Hollis, who was promoted on 1 May 1991. The second was Sonia Colon, who was promoted in 1992. Hollis was later promoted to CWO(PERS) on 1 June 1995 while assigned to USCGC *Hamilton* as the YNC.
- Marilyn Melendez Dykman became the first Hispanic-American female Coast Guard aviator when she earned her wings of gold on 24 May 1991.
- In 1991 LTJG Katherine Tiongson (nee Faverey) took command of USCGC *Bainbridge Island*, becoming the first Hispanic-American female to command an afloat unit. She was also the first Hispanic-American female intelligence officer in the Coast Guard.



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1996

- In 1996, Chief Boatswains Mate Jose M. Bolanos became the Officer-in-Charge of Station Charleston, SC. He was the first Cuban American to command a Coast Guard station. He also commanded Station Port Canaveral, FL as a CWO in 2002 and CGC *Matagorda* as a LT in 2005.
- Then-Lieutenant Jose L. Rodriguez was the first Hispanic to command a TACLET when he took command of TACLET South, 1996-1998. He was also the first Coast Guardsman to command a U.S. Marine Corps unit when took command of the Riverine Training Center, Special Operations Training Group, II MEF at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina in July 1999. He was also the first Hispanic-American Coast Guardsman to earn his Gold Navy/Marine Corps jump wings while in the Coast Guard and assigned to a Jump Billet (USMC Majors Billet at Special Operations Training Group II MEF). He earned his wings that same year. He also became the first commanding officer of one of the two MSSTs commissioned in the Coast Guard [see the next entry]

1999

- The first Cuban-born Coast Guardsman promoted to Chief Warrant Officer (Aviation) was Angel L. Martinez, who was promoted in 1999.

2001

- The first MSSTs ever commissioned in Coast Guard history, MSSTs 91101 and 91102 (East and West Coast), were commissioned by two Hispanic officers: Lieutenant Commander Quique Ramon Ortiz and Lieutenant Commander Jose Rodriguez.

2002

- Cadet 1/c Sarah Salazar became the first Hispanic female Regimental Commander at the Coast Guard Academy.
- In 2002, Lieutenant Junior Grade Angelina Hidalgo became the second Hispanic-American female to command an afloat unit and was the second Hispanic female intelligence officer.

2003

- Lieutenant Jorge Martinez assumed command of the USCGC *Maui* on 5 June 2003, becoming the first Cuban-American to command a Coast Guard cutter.

2005

- Captain Charley L. Diaz assumed command of USCGC *Sherman*, becoming the first Hispanic-American to command a 378-foot cutter.



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2006

- The first Hispanic-American to be promoted to flag rank was Rear Admiral Ronald J. Rábago, who earned his first star in 2006.
- In May of 2006 Senior Chief Boatswains Mate Emmanuel Zambrana became the Officer-in-Charge of Station San Juan, Puerto Rico. He was the first Puerto Rican to command the Puerto Rican-based Coast Guard Small Boat Station. He transferred in June 2007 after his promotion to CWO.
- In 2006, LT Isabel Papp became the first female medical officer to be assigned to a PSU. She was also the first Hispanic-American female MD to be assigned to a PSU. She had also been the first Hispanic-American female Physician's Assistant in the Coast Guard Reserve.

2006

- BMC Juan J. Rivera served for two tours as the OIC of the CGC *Line*. He had also commanded ANT Potomac in St. Inigoes, Maryland as a First Class Boatswain's Mate.

2007

- In March, 2007, CGC *Sherman* seized the M/V *Gatun* in the Pacific Ocean off Panama after a boarding team discovered the merchant vessel's illicit cargo of 21 metric tons of cocaine, the largest maritime seizure of cocaine to date. *Sherman* was commanded by CAPT Charley L. Diaz and the boarding team that located the cocaine was led by BMC Michael D. Aguilera.

2008

- On 1 January 2008 CDR Jose "Tony" Saliceti became the Coast Guard's first qualified Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) pilot and was designated CG UAS Pilot No. 1.
- In July 2008 Captain Eduardo Pino took command of Sector San Juan, thereby becoming the first Hispanic-American Coast Guardsman to become a Sector commander.

2009

- In July, 2009 RADM Joseph R. Castillo was appointed Commander of District 11, becoming the first Hispanic-American District commander in the Coast Guard. In August, 2012 he was promoted to position of Deputy Commander, Coast Guard Pacific Area, becoming the first Hispanic-American Area Deputy Commander in the Coast Guard.

2010

- ISC Harland Espinoza became the first Nicaraguan-born Coast Guardsman to be promoted to Chief Intelligence Specialist.





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