



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 back to the early 1800s. Hispanic Americans performed duties at lighthouses and lifesaving stations, while others served on board revenue cutters. Many gave their lives in the performance of their duties and others were decorated for heroism.

1824

- From 1824 to 1845, Juan Andreu served as the Keeper of the St. Augustine Lighthouse in Florida. Of Minorcan ancestry, he was 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 charge 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 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.

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.

1915

- In 1915, the city of San Juan, Puerto Rico, issued an "*Official Resolution of Thanks*" to the crew of the Cutter *Algonquin* for battling fires that threatened to destroy parts of that city. The crew included 15 Hispanic-American enlisted, or 25 percent of the cutter's complement.

1916



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- Boatswain's Mate 3/class Pedro Albino 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, Cuban-American Seaman Richard E. Cordova died in the line of duty when his cutter, CGC *Tampa*, was torpedoed and sunk with all hands by a German U-Boat. He was the service's first Hispanic-American recipient of the Purple Heart Medal.

1919

- BM 1/c Pablo Valent and Surfman Indalecio Lopez assisted 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 received the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal and The Grand Cross Medal from the American Cross of Honor Society. They are the first known Hispanic-American recipients of either medal.

1920

- In 1920, two Hispanic-American crewman of Cutter *Acushnet*, Mess Attendant 1/class Arthur J. Flores and SN John E. Gomez, volunteered to save survivors of the schooner *Isaiah K. Stetsen*, which sank in a storm off the coast of Massachusetts. The Treasury Department awarded both of them the Silver Lifesaving Medal for their heroism.

1925

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



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Coast Guard Academy. He was commissioned an ensign in December of 1942, becoming the first Hispanic American to graduate from OCS and the second to receive an officer's commission. Del 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. He was released from active duty in 1946 and served in the Reserves for nearly 40 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 programs.

1944

- 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.
- Gunner's Mate 2/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, Hawaii, 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 later received assignment to OCS, becoming the second Hispanic American to complete officers' training.

1947

- Gilbert Cardenas received the Coast Guard commandant's Letter of Commendation for a heavy weather rescue on board the CGC *Cherokee*.

1968

- Serving in Vietnam, Heriberto S. Hernandez, a crew member on board the CGC *Point Cypress* assigned to Operation Market Time, was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star Medal with a combat "V" for valor and a Purple Heart medal after sustaining a mortal wounds in combat with the Viet Cong. He was the first Hispanic American to receive the award.

1969

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

1970

- Boatswain's Mate 1/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*



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donned his wet suit while en route 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

- On 27 May 1975, Cuban-American Alberto J. Gastón received his Coast Guard wings becoming the first Hispanic-American pilot in the Coast Guard.

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 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, the first known Nicaraguan American to do so.

1983



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- In 1983, Jacqueline A. Ball and Deborah R. Winnie became the first Hispanic females to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy.

1991

- On 1 May 1991, YNC Grisel Hollis became the first Hispanic-American female advanced to E-7. On 1 June 1995, she was promoted to CWO(PERS) while assigned to CGC *Hamilton*.
- On 24 May 1991, Marilyn Melendez Dykman became the first Hispanic-American female Coast Guard aviator when she earned her Coast Guard wings. She had transferred from the US Army.
- In 1991, LTJG Katherine Tiongson (nee Faverey) took command of CGC *Bainbridge Island*, becoming the first Hispanic-American female to command an afloat unit. She later became the first Hispanic-American female intelligence officer in the Coast Guard.

1992

- In 1992, Sonia Colon became the second Hispanic-American female advanced to E-7.

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.
- LT Jose L. Rodriguez became the first Hispanic American to command a TACLET when he took command of TACLET South from 1996 to 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.

1999

- In 1999, Angel L. Martinez became the first Cuban-born Coast Guardsman promoted to Chief Warrant Officer (Aviation).

2001

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

2002

- Cadet 1/c Sarah Salazar became the first Hispanic female Regimental Commander at the Coast Guard Academy.



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- In 2002, LTJG Angelina Hidalgo became the second Hispanic-American female to command an afloat unit and was the second Hispanic female intelligence officer.

2003

- On 5 June 2003, LT Jorge Martinez assumed command of the USCGC *Maui* 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.

2006

- In 2006, Ronald J. Rábago became the first Hispanic American Coast Guardsman to be promoted to flag rank. He later became the first promoted to rear admiral upper half.
- In May 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 Hispanic-American female medical officer to be assigned to a PSU. She was also the first Hispanic-American female MD to be assigned to a PSU and the first Hispanic-American female physician's assistant in the Coast Guard Reserve.

2006

- BMC Juan J. Rivera served for two tours as the Officer-in-Charge of the CGC *Line*. He had also commanded ANT Potomac in St. Inigoes, Maryland, as a BM1.

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 Hispanic-American captain, 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, becoming the service's first Hispanic-American sector commander.

2009



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- 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 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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