



**Paul Powers Perez**

**Hispanic American Pioneer of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy**

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The United States Coast Guard and its predecessor services have historically pioneered ethnic and gender diversity in the federal government. For example, in the early 1840s, the U.S. Lighthouse Service became the first federal agency to assign Hispanic Americans to command shore installations. Since that time, many other Hispanic Americans have served with distinction in the Coast Guard and its predecessor services. The first known Hispanic-American service members to receive training at the Coast Guard Academy arrived during World War II. These individuals included a number of extraordinary men, such as Paul Powers Perez, an individual who later proved to be an excellent mentor, leader and teacher.

Born in 1920 in New York City, Paul Perez had a unique childhood. The son of successful screenwriter at Hollywood's RKO Pictures, Perez spent most of his early life in Southern California. While there, he attended military schools and, from 1931 to 1936, he attended preparatory schools in England. In 1936, he shipped out on board an eighty-foot ketch on a three-year cruise around the world. He returned to California with an English accent, a love for the sea and a strong desire to attend the Coast Guard Academy. For a time, he continued serving on board ocean-going yachts, including the yacht of "Wizard of Oz" movie star Frank Morgan, before receiving an appointment in 1941 for the class of 1945.

Despite entering the Academy at the ripe age of twenty-one, Perez (or "Rusty" as classmates called him) took to his studies and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in engineering. With the accelerated three-year program enforced during World War II, Perez graduated in June of 1944 and by August, he found himself serving in the Southwest Pacific theatre of operations on board the patrol frigate USS San Pedro (PF-37). The next year proved very eventful as the San Pedro escorted ships to and from the Philippines. As



gunnery officer, Perez directed gunfire against some of World War II's worst enemy air attacks and "splashed" a number of Japanese aircraft in the process. In July 1945, the navy ordered the San Pedro to Alaska, where the crew turned it over the Soviet Navy for use against the Japanese. In August of 1945, Perez received orders to the troop transport General William Mitchell (AP-114) and he served on board that vessel during Operation Magic Carpet, which shipped troops home from the front after the Japanese surrender.

Perez's later assignments included nearly two years in Le Havre, France, as part of the Coast Guard's Merchant Marine Inspection Detail and, in 1948, assignment as gunnery officer on the cutter Duane (WPG-33) while it served on weather station duty. This proved to be Perez's last active duty assignment as he decided to pursue a civilian career in psychology while maintaining the rank of lieutenant junior grade in the Coast Guard Reserve. From 1948 to 1949, Perez attended Columbia University taking undergraduate courses in psychology and, in 1949, he transferred to New York University, where he received a doctorate in psychology in 1955. During his years at graduate school, he taught courses in psychology at Upsala College in East Orange, New Jersey. After graduation, Perez received an appointment with the Veteran's Administration and went on to become a distinguished clinical psychologist at a Veteran's Administration Center in Maine. In 1960, Paul Perez decided to return to teaching and became a professor of psychology at Maine's Colby College, where he taught for twenty-five years.

At the time he began his career with the Coast Guard, Perez did not realize he was pioneering ethnic diversity at the Coast Guard Academy and the service. Many men and women would follow in his path, but Perez was the first known Hispanic-American to graduate from the Academy and he proved a great credit to the service and to his country.