

## PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2

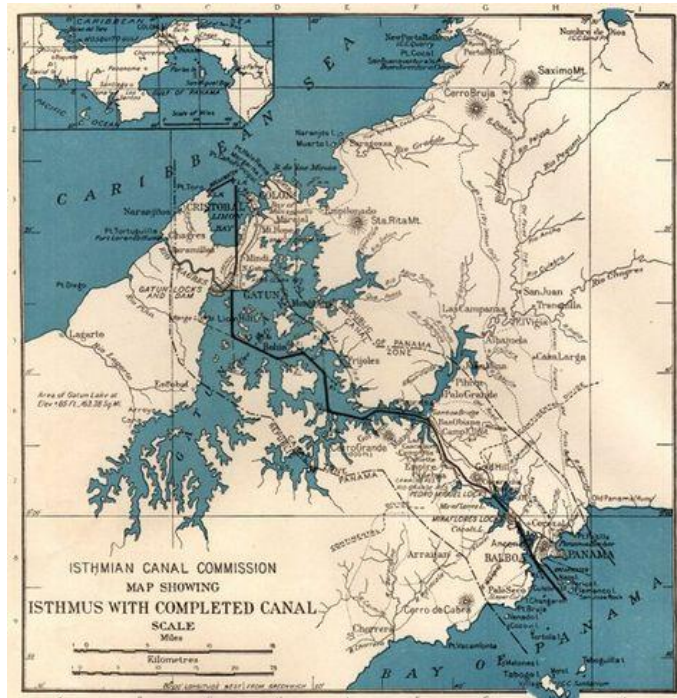
### THE JAPANESE – THREAT, ESPIONAGE AND INTERNMENT

#### JAPAN BECOMES THE THREAT

By the time the Panama Canal opened in August 1914 Japan had become one of the potential attackers that the considerable defences being constructed to defend the Canal were intended to deter or defeat.

As early as 1890, the US military had contemplated war with Japan. They had both had claims over Hawaii (annexed by the US in 1898), and the possibilities of confrontation had only increased after the US acquired the Philippines and Guam following the 1898 Spanish-American War.<sup>1</sup>

When the Joint Army/Navy Board was created in 1903<sup>2</sup> it concerned itself with a possible war with Japan, especially after Japan defeated Russia in 1904-05.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/war-plan-orange.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Established by joint order of the Secretaries of War and the Navy to serve as an advisory body for interservice coordination and cooperation.

After World War 1, the only realistic potential enemy, and the only one capable of threatening the Canal, appeared to be Japan.<sup>3</sup> This was despite Japan having been on the same side as the US during the war. Russia was preoccupied with its own internal struggles, Germany was (for the time) defeated and disarmed, and France and Italy did not have the naval power capable of mounting a challenge.

The only other theoretical foe was Great Britain. Certainly, during the previous century the US and Britain had seen rivalry, tensions, and even conflict. However, the treaty that had helped pave the way for the US to construct the Canal had also signalled a change in attitude on the part of the British Government.<sup>4</sup> In any event, following World War 1, one saw the British Government adopt from 1922 a policy of alignment with the US.<sup>5</sup>

Only well into the 1930s would Germany and Italy appear as potential threats – though neither would be seen as posing such an obvious direct threat to the US as Japan. Meanwhile, Japan had acquired territory in the Pacific during World War 1 – the former German colonies of the Marianas, Carolines, and Marshall Islands - controlled from 1920 under a League of Nations mandate. These were seen as providing excellent anchorages and the capability for Japan to project power.

The US Navy, which would bear the brunt of any fighting with Japan saw its position worsen after the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty<sup>6</sup>, with the US starting to fall behind Japan in the construction of new warships. Article XIX also forbade Britain, Japan and the US from constructing any new fortifications or naval bases in the Pacific, which

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<sup>3</sup> <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/japanese-relations>

<sup>4</sup> The Hay-Pauncefote Treaty of 1901 amounted to amount to a waiver on the part of the British of the terms of previous understandings, and it also it allowed the US to protect any canal from “lawlessness” (though it made no mention of any fortification).

<sup>5</sup> Rather than any renewal of the former Anglo-Japanese alliance which had existed from 1902. The decision not to renew was taken at the Imperial Conference in London in 1921. In the US, it is said that the Naval War College would give only “nominal” attention to a conflict with Britain in the Atlantic and Caribbean, despite lingering rivalries.

*The US Navy and War Plan Orange 1933-1940: Making Necessity a Virtue* by Michael K Doyle (Naval War College Review, Vol 33 No 3, 1980): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44642633>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Washington-Conference-1921-1922>  
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/naval-conference>

could be seen as removing any potential new obstacles to any Japanese aggression.<sup>7</sup> In 1927, the War Department opposed Japanese proposals to extend the non-fortification provisions to take in Panama.<sup>8</sup>



*Washington Naval Conference in Washington DC, 1921<sup>9</sup>*

Despite the isolationist stance of the US in the years between the wars, tensions with Japan rose during the 1930s. This followed the growth of imperial militarism in Japan, and its aggression in and around China, after Japan seized Manchuria and then, in 1937, attacked China. Japan barring access to the mandate islands in the Pacific caused concern, and both the 1922 and 1930 naval limitation treaties expired in 1936, thereby ending any theoretical limit on its naval expansion.

Various colour-coded plans existed which addressed threats presented by various foreign countries, or combinations of countries. Of these, War Plan Orange was concerned with war with Japan, with or without allies and, in fact, its predecessor had been created in 1890. Developed by the Joint Army and Navy Board, it evolved from 1907, was formally adopted by the Board in 1924, and revised nine times between 1919 and 1938. All iterations foresaw a long war.<sup>10</sup>

During the years between the wars, War Plan Orange came to have the highest priority of development.<sup>11</sup> In all the revisions to War Plan Orange the role of the Canal

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<sup>7</sup> Existing fortification in Singapore, the Philippines and Hawaii were unaffected, and those of the Canal were outside scope of the agreement. As mentioned, the US resisted Japanese attempts to later include Panama within the scope.

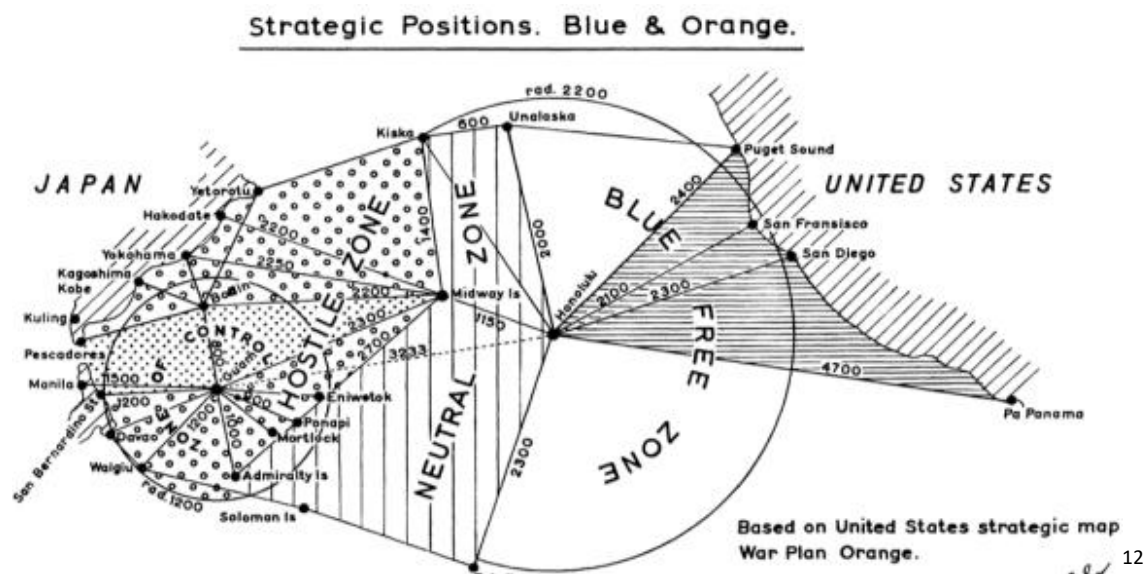
<sup>8</sup> *'Pro mundi beneficio'? The Panama Canal as an international issue, 1943-48* by John Major (Review of International Studies, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pacificatrocities.org/blog/nine-power-treaty-its-outline-and-failure>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/prelude.html>

<sup>11</sup> *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)  
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

remained vital, as did its protection. Without the “two-ocean navy” (proposed during World War 1 but which would not come about until into World War 2), an attack rendering the Canal inoperative was seen as a likely, or even probable, prelude to war with Japan.



Any war involving the US and Japan would, given the distances involved, would primarily be a naval one. For the US, this involved the threat of attacks on the Philippines and Hawaii, the Panama Canal and the US West Coast and Alaska.<sup>13</sup> The loss of the Philippines and other distant islands had to be contemplated – although the plans saw no real prospect of Japan being able to seize and hold the Canal or Hawaii. Ultimately, the defeat of Japan was to be brought about by naval blockade (which, of course, was largely the case in World War 2).

By the late 1930s, the Army was said to favour a more defensible “strategic triangle” running from Alaska to the Canal via Hawaii.<sup>14</sup> During the 1930s, in view of Japan's growing power and the low state of US armaments, and with the independence of the Philippines scheduled for 1946, the General Staff concluded that the US should not attempt to hold the western Pacific. In 1940, in recognition of the potential threat

<sup>12</sup> <https://warhistory.org/es/@msw/article/working-war-plan-orange>

<sup>13</sup> In its revisions, War Plan Orange included potential surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor.

<sup>14</sup> *Institutional Politics and the US Military's War Plan Orange* by Steven J Pedler (a thesis, 2007).



wished, or had, to leave the country.<sup>19</sup> The last Japanese ship departed the canal on 22 July.



*Japanese ships were a common sight in the Canal until July 1941. This one is the Katsuragi Maru in September 1937<sup>20</sup>*

Despite only being formally approved by President Roosevelt later, immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the War Department instructed its commanders to put the Rainbow 5 plan into effect.<sup>21</sup>

One factor mitigating against any direct naval assault on the Canal was the distance any would-be attacker would need to travel, and after the end of World War 1 the likely attacker would come to appear to be Japan, located on the far side of the wide Pacific. One should bear in mind that even the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was a risky operation, with a long and potentially hazardous voyage from the home islands. During the war, not even Japanese submarines reached the Canal approaches (though they did reach the West Coast of the Continental US). This was the reason why, both before and during World War 2, sabotage of some sort was viewed as a more likely danger.

In fact, as war began the US Navy initially regarded protection of the Canal from the Pacific side as being primarily an Army role (chiefly as it lacked suitable naval bases in the region), and to be too far from Japan to be at risk. Consequently, the Navy initially used its patrol aircraft over the Caribbean, not the Pacific. On the other hand, General

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<sup>19</sup> *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016):

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

The Legation in Panama felt that Japanese residents would therefore have to travel to another country, even if only to find passage home to Japan – but noted that this would be difficult as Central and South American countries refused to grant travel permits to Japanese residents from Panama.

<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/16118167@N04/51375760661>

<sup>21</sup> <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>



Andrews, as commander of the Caribbean Defense Command<sup>22</sup>, took the threat from the Pacific side more seriously, and organised air patrols on that side as well.<sup>23</sup> As it transpired, the Navy was right, and the Pacific approaches never suffered any attempted approaches by Japanese warships or submarines (although there was a plan to do so – see below).

Nevertheless, in February 1942, a memorandum drafted for the Caribbean Defense Command outlined a theoretical attack by a Japanese task force consisting of aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. The final assessment of the exercise was simply that the Canal and its waterways were susceptible to attack, and that it was necessary to bring in both additional heavy bombers and experienced personnel to operate them.<sup>24</sup> However, without the conclusive defeat of all US naval resources in the Pacific, which Japan was never to achieve, any such attack would be highly risky – and many in Japan had thought that the Pearl Harbor had been a great risk, and that had been a much closer target.

In her book about Panama in 1942<sup>25</sup>, Patricia Pizzurno said that –

*"...in reality 1942 was the only year of the war in which Panama ran a real danger of suffering a Japanese aerial bombardment or being the victim of a landing of Nazi submarines across the Atlantic".*

## **FEARS AND REALITY OF JAPANESE ESPIONAGE**

Fears of spying and sabotage by Japan in the Canal Zone was greater than those in the US, and there did seem to be a more concerted targeting of the Canal, its defences and traffic by Japanese intelligence.

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<sup>22</sup> The US forces theatre command, with its headquarters in the Canal Zone.

<sup>23</sup> *December 7, 1941: The Day No One Bombed Panama* by Karl G Larew (*The Historian*, Summer 2004, Vol. 66, No. 2. Published by Taylor & Francis Ltd).

<sup>24</sup> <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

<sup>25</sup> *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

For example, in the 1930s, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) reported on the activities of Japanese Panamanians and their connections to the US, including reports of such fisherman visiting San Pedro, California; and it maintained registers of all Japanese Panamanians from as early as 1933 although ONI reports on the Japanese community of Panama went back further to 1919.

As with the general defence of the Canal Zone, the Army was also responsible for counterintelligence and, by November 1941, all but the most important counter-espionage cases of the Army's Counter Intelligence Corp (CIC) had been dropped, and all agents received so-called priority "A" assignments to instead ascertain the location of the Japanese population in the Canal Zone and in Panama.<sup>26</sup> Their targets were mostly young men, and the majority of them seemed to be operating or working in the many barber shops found in Panama City and Colón.<sup>27</sup>

There was a more general fear of all the Axis-linked communities in Latin America<sup>28</sup>, but the presence of many Japanese – estimated by the Japanese Minister in 1941 at around 400 - in Panama<sup>29</sup>, and the threats Japan presented to US interests (as identified in War Plan Orange) meant that the perceived threat of hostile acts by them in the Canal Zone was more acute.

Whilst the Japanese were said to dominate the fishing industry in Panama in the 1930s<sup>30</sup>, the *Chicago Tribune* stated in 1940 that Japanese also made up a visible part

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<sup>26</sup> *History and Mission of the Counter Intelligence Corps in World War II* (CIC School, Counter Intelligence Corps Center): <https://irp.fas.org/agency/army/cic-wwii.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://irp.fas.org/agency/army/cic-wwii.pdf>

During 1938–39, a magazine in the US published sensational accounts (which may have been inspired by leaked intelligence reports) of spies frequenting Japanese-owned barber shops in Panama. The Japanese government protested to Panama, arguing that the articles were sensationalist propaganda.

<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2019/8/27/ken-magazine/>

<sup>28</sup> While many countries only had modest numbers of people of Japanese birth or origin, in contrast Brazil had around 345,000, and Chile had a large Japanese community – one that would be targeted by the Chilean government during the war (using the war as an excuse), with many interned and deported to Panama (and hence to the US).

*Danger over Panama* by Jules Dubois (The Boobs-Merrill C Inc, 1964).

<sup>29</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> In 1934 Japan had been pressing to have a refrigeration and processing plant on the island of Taboga, close to the Canals' Pacific entrance. Counter-pressure to this proposal came from the US military, and the then-President of Panama resisted the Japanese pressure.



of the population of Colón on the Atlantic coast and some individuals even resided inside the Canal Zone.<sup>31</sup> Japanese-owned businesses were common in Panama – for example, there were 47 Japanese-owned barber shops in Panama City and Colón alone. One of these barber shops in Panama City was, in fact, owned by a Japanese who was, in reality, a Commander in the Imperial Japanese Navy.<sup>32</sup>

The Japanese-owned fishing vessels included longer-range tuna boats, one of which was owned by a Japanese who it transpired was chief of Japanese intelligence for



Central and South America.<sup>33</sup> There were reports of Japanese reconnaissance using fishing boats along the Pacific coast of Mexico and Central America. The reconnaissance carried out by fishing boats along the Panamanian coast was apparently given credence by reports of boats returning from all-day trips with no catch.<sup>34</sup> Eventually US pressure would see a ban on Japanese fishing vessels in Panamanian waters.

Japanese fishermen in Panama

From 1935, Japanese espionage activity in Panama increased<sup>35</sup>, and again later as part of the heightened Japanese espionage activity during the 18 months leading up to the

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

<sup>32</sup> Mixu Watanabe.

<sup>33</sup> The *Amano Maru*, owned by Yoshitaro Amano. He was later arrested and deported to Japan. The same individual also owned a large store in Panama City, and encouraged amateur photography with a photography club and offered attractive cash or camera prizes for the best pictures each month of subjects in the Canal Zone – seemingly a fairly blatant intelligence-gathering ruse. Photography was eventually to be prohibited in the Canal Zone from June 1941.

In June 2022, the Canal Museum in Panama City hosted a performance of Amano's story, "*Indomitable Live: Prisoner 203*", which had been awarded a National Prize for Radio Journalism, he being described as a "merchant" who was confined to a detention camp in Balboa for months as a "prisoner of war". With English subtitles, it is available on You Tube: <https://www.indomables.org/episodios/el-prisionero-203>

<sup>34</sup> Whereas, it was said that California-based tuna boats, also manned by Japanese crews, returned home with their hauls: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>35</sup> Not just in Panama, the first US citizen tried in peacetime under the Espionage Act of World War 1 was a naval yeoman caught spying for Japan in San Diego in 1936. He sold engineering, gunnery, and tactical information about the Pacific Fleet that was mainly based in San Diego: <https://ncisahistory.org>

attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Postwar, evidence emerged that prior to this latter period only relatively limited operations had been undertaken. Of course, following the Pearl Harbor attack, it was widely assumed that it could only be due to coordinated effort by a network of spies and collaborators.

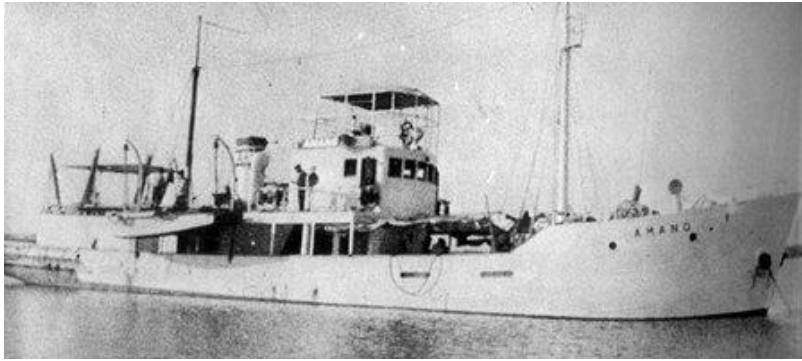


Photo of the Amano Maru, circa 1935. Owned by Panama resident Yoshitaro Amano, a sensationalist book by a journalist in the US and called *Secret Agents Against America* contained lurid claims about Amano -

including speculating how this boat could be used to transport mines. Another book that year, *Secret Armies: The New Technique of Nazi Warfare*, also featured the boat, claiming that carried a powerful radio and “an extremely secret Japanese invention enabling it to detect and locate mines”, which was clearly fiction and absurd.

While there would seem that there was an increase in espionage activities from 1940, and there were Japanese intelligence operatives in Panama, it seems much of the information on the Canal and its defences would likely have come from the same sources as for Hawaii – commercial and diplomatic sources, and from simple observation by ships’ crews and civilians. It has also been said that, apart from immediate tactical intelligence, until 1940 there is evidence that Japanese civilian and military intelligence agents were often badly trained, unprofessional and often ineffectual, with limited resources and skills.<sup>36</sup>

In September 1940, a Japanese citizen sailing on the *Argentina Maru* was arrested by a US military guard for violating an order forbidding possession of cameras in the Canal Zone. In January 1941, two officers on the Japanese liner *Tokai Maru* were arrested for that same offence and fined.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *The Pre-War Fear of Japanese Espionage: Its Impact and Legacy* by Max Everest-Phillips (Sage Publications: Journal of Contemporary History, Vol 42 No 2, April 2007)

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30036444>

<sup>37</sup> [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Panama\\_Canal\\_Zone/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Panama_Canal_Zone/)

In 1940, Japanese espionage agents were directed to ascertain the relations between the US and Latin American countries. It was also said to be desirable to establish closer contacts with German and Italian agents. In addition, contact with Japanese residents, including those in the US, should be established<sup>38</sup>, who were to be cautioned not to create any suspicion in the minds of US authorities regarding their espionage activities.<sup>39</sup>

In 1940, Katalino Kobiyama, a Japanese national who had lived in Panama for 20 years, and who provided a link between Japanese intelligence and the local Japanese community, was arrested after he was found to have recorded details of a British ship in Balboa port carrying US bombers being transported to the UK. He admitted that he had planned to pass the information to a German employed by a shipping company in Panama (which was also the agent for the Japanese Line shipping company), described as an “ardent Nazi”. The arrested man worked as a Chandler, and hence had free access to the ports’ piers and quays.

Insofar as US-Panama relations were concerned, in October 1940, Mr Akiyama, Minister at the Japanese Legation in Panama, told Tokyo that the new Arias Madrid administration in Panama (which took power that month) would cooperate with the US over use of the Canal Zone and other areas in Panama, on the registration of merchant ships, and over additional air bases in the country – despite Arias Madrid himself being seen as pro-German and a Panamanian nationalist. In this he was proved right.

Mr Akiyama also said that newspaper reports in Panama had indicated that the ship registry would allow its vessels to enter waters of combat zones (despite Panama’s neutrality). His opinion was that Panama would defend the other countries of the Americas “hand in hand” with the US – and would have to adopt a similar attitude in

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<sup>38</sup> In 1941, a Foreign Office telegram referred to utilising “second Generation” and “resident nationals” but cautioned of the risk that “our people in the US will be subjected to considerable persecution, and the utmost caution must be exercised”. Such residents were to be told not to create any suspicion in the minds of US authorities regarding their espionage activities. In the light of subsequent events, the Foreign Office prediction is almost prophetic:

[https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch2\\_a.htm#japns](https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch2_a.htm#japns)

<sup>39</sup> [https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch2\\_a.htm#japns](https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch2_a.htm#japns)

respect of Japan and take the requisite countermeasures against Japan should US-Japanese relations break down.<sup>40</sup>

In September 1941, Akiyama said that he had made a special study of the attitude of the US, of the nature of the Panamanian people, and of the topography of Panama. He also asked for funds, amounting to just \$730 a month, a sum that seems very modest given that this was for propaganda and intelligence purposes – including bonuses for those observing the movements of shipping, to maintain contact with newspaper reports and others, and for activities in the other countries for which he was accredited.<sup>41</sup>

Until the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack, Tokyo continued to receive such dispatches from its diplomats, including Mr Akiyama in Panama.<sup>42</sup> For example, it is said that there were “numerous” reports from him on shipping movements in the Canal Zone for 17 October to 7 December 1941.<sup>43</sup> On 18 October, for instance, Minister Akiyama reported on the movement of four US freighters, a British freighter and two US tankers heading for the Pacific between 14 and 18 October, with four US freighters, two British freighters, a Dutch freighter, a US tanker and a US steamer travelling in the other direction. He reported that ships were passing through the Canal at night (and this might have been regarded as unusual, as regular 24-hour movements did not commence until 1963).

Akiyama also noted military construction progressing rapidly, which could hardly be ignored, and he made specific mention of Albrook Field air base and its facilities, as well as new barracks and a new 500-patient hospital.<sup>44</sup> Other intelligence reports

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<sup>40</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> [https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch2\\_a.htm#japns](https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch2_a.htm#japns)

<sup>42</sup> And the US Army would be able to read them, as its Signals Intelligence Service (SIS) had cracked the PURPLE Type B diplomatic cipher machine in September 1940, despite it only having been introduced in 1939.

<https://www.nsa.gov/History/National-Cryptologic-Museum/Exhibits-Artifacts/Exhibit-View/Article/2718925/the-magic-of-purple/>

<sup>43</sup> Note that, by now, Japanese vessels had been barred from use of the Canal.

<sup>44</sup> *The 'Magic' Background of Pearl Harbor. Volume 4: October 17, 1941 - December 7, 1941*, for DoD (Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office), 1977: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

detailed the military and naval defence developments and mentioned there being three cruisers, eight new-type destroyers, 18 submarines, a gunboat and seaplane tender in the Canal Zone.<sup>45</sup>

He highlighted the heightened security of Canal facilities, and even mentioned “airplane detector” bases which were, he said, “*able to discover a plane 200 miles away*”. The latter, of course, were the first radar stations, in fact the US Army’s first operational radar stations – with that in place at Fort Sherman, on the Atlantic coast, in October 1940 the very first.<sup>46</sup>

Akiyama was also able to speak of “coercion” of Panama to provide additional defence sites, outside the Canal Zone and in apparent contravention of the recently ratified 1939 treaty between the US and Panama.<sup>47</sup> He also told of the first trans-isthmus highway being begun, and plans for the Inter-American Highway (which starts in Mexico and is part of the larger Pan-American Highway) to be completed and which he expected to eventually reach the border with Colombia.<sup>48</sup>

Despite all the activity before and during the war, it was only in 1945 that military intelligence arrested a Japanese man who had lived in Panama for 15 years, and resided in the Darién Province which bordered Colombia. There he had both a large family and a thriving lumber business. He also had a flotilla of shrimp boats. He was found to not only be connected to the Japanese royal family, but was also a colonel in

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<sup>45</sup> This seems in excess of the actual naval forces available to defend the Canal at the time, and presumably includes vessels on transit through the Canal or simply calling in at Balboa, the port adjacent to Panama City. Akiyama would be based in Panama City, outside the Canal Zone, but close to both the Canal entrance and Balboa.

<sup>46</sup> Using the SCR-271A fixed-site radar set produced by Westinghouse (serial number 1!). For more on the introduction of radar in the Canal Zone, see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-the-introduction-of-radar/>

<sup>47</sup> This had made significant amendments to the original 1903 treaty that had allowed for the construction of the Canal, and introducing the concept of a partnership between the two countries.

<sup>48</sup> Well informed, he was right on both of these, although the latter never did quite reach to Panama-Colombia border, and does not even do so now – simply coming to a stop before the notorious Darién Gap.

Japanese military intelligence. He was found to have operated a radio station on the top of a hill called Cerro Pirre, passing on details of US activity in Panama.<sup>49</sup>

## **DISCRIMINATION AND RESTRICTIONS ON JAPANESE BUSINESSES, SHIPPING AND PEOPLE**

It can hardly be a surprise that, after Pearl Harbor, among other measures adopted, the individual rights of Japanese subjects and their allies were suspended for the entire time that the war lasted.

However, even before war with Japan actually began, restrictions on Japanese persons and businesses had begun to be applied. In part, this was due to the general crackdown on businesses in Panama not owned by Panama citizens – which the Arias Madrid administration had introduced. However, on 20 October 1941, Japanese businesses in the Republic were told that they had to close after 28 October – with a total boycott of Japanese goods being expected in due course. In addition, during 1941, the Panamanian Government had agreed that following any action by the US to intern Japanese residents, it would also arrest Japanese on Panamanian territory and intern them on the island of Taboga.

In reality, measures affecting the Japanese community in Panama long predated the war. Japanese migration to Panama had begun in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when about a hundred arrived in the country, taking up main occupations such as hairdressers or fishermen. In 1918, Japan established a consulate in Panama City.<sup>50</sup> However, the Panamanian Government passed racist immigration legislation in 1926, as an attempt to ban further West Indians immigration to Panama – large numbers having arrived to construct the Canal. This then led to a series of similar legislative attempts to exclude other foreigners as well – “Hindus” (i.e Indians), Turks, Syrians, Chinese, and Japanese (In 1928, the government excluded the Japanese from the application of the law, so

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<sup>49</sup> *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>50</sup> In 1904, Japan became the first Asian country to establish diplomatic relations with Panama.



that the number of immigrants continued to increase gradually, and by 1931 there were around 300 Japanese residents).<sup>51</sup> This came on the back of a growing nationalist movement, with many opposed to both the presence and dominance of the US (and which saw a coup led by nationalists in 1931), and the large numbers of foreign workers from taking jobs which Panamanians should be theirs.

In 1934, a new Law<sup>52</sup> imposed restrictions on non-Panamanian involvement in domestic trade with the Chinese, Japanese, and East Indians amongst those targeted. Challenged and ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, it had nevertheless already forced many businesses to close.

The administration under Arias Madrid, who was elected on a nationalist platform in 1940, introduced a new Constitution which barred entry into Panama of *“persons of the Negro race whose original language is not Spanish; persons of the yellow race; and the original inhabitants of India, Asia Minor, and northern Africa”*. This was followed by a Law in 1941<sup>53</sup> which introduced a four-tier licensing system (first class, second class, general and professional). This was again aimed at squeezing out non-Panamanians and/or “undesirables”. Within a year or so, nearly 90% of retail establishments with a capital of less than \$500, and more than 75% of larger businesses, were being operated by Panamanians, and large numbers of Chinese, Japanese and others were forced to liquidate their business, and many to leave the country.<sup>54</sup> Later amendments sought to toughen the restrictions even further.

## HOLLYWOOD AND POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT

Given the believed threat to the Canal, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Japanese should be the baddies in prewar movies and novels. This obviously continued during the war.

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<sup>51</sup> <https://espanol.buddhistdoor.net/el-budismo-en-panama-primera-parte/>

<sup>52</sup> Law No 70 of 1935.

<sup>53</sup> Law No 24 of 1941.

<sup>54</sup> Where this was possible. As we shall see, the Japanese in particular by this time found it near impossible to leave.



The movies included “*Across the Pacific*” in 1942 (adapted from its theme being a plot against Pearl Harbor but made after that base was actually attacked). Starring Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor and Sydney Greenstreet, filming began in December 1941, retaining the original title despite the fact that, being now set in Panama,

no-one did get “across the Pacific”.<sup>55</sup>

The 1945 movie “*Betrayal from the East*” saw Japanese spies seeking the secret of the Canal, as part of a scheme which involved the takeover of the US West Coast by Japanese spies and Japanese-Americans.<sup>56</sup>

Japanese were even more likely to be the villains in comic books during the war, which also gave scope for the racist caricatures common at the time. In 1940, Marvel had a Mr Muro who stole plans for secret fortifications in Panama, as part of a plot to take over the region. He was pursued by his old foe, Monako the Magician (!).

## THE JULY 1941 ALERT

The one seemingly definite threat against the Canal that the US authorities were aware of (the plan for the attack using submarines carrying attack aircraft, of which more below, was unknown to the US until after the war had ended) occurred in July 1941.

In July, the Department of the Navy in the US warned President Roosevelt of the *probability* of a Japanese move against the Soviet Union (their forces had faced one another and fought a series of border wars 1932-39). It also said that and that the

<sup>55</sup> <https://escholarship.org/content/qt4sf3p53v/qt4sf3p53v.pdf?t=nxe5ta>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02684520600620732>

<sup>56</sup> [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037538/reviews?ref=tt\\_ov\\_rt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037538/reviews?ref=tt_ov_rt)

Japanese Government had begun to divert its shipping from the Atlantic – with one company having told its ships to be west of the Panama Canal by 25 July, regardless of passengers or cargo.

A supposedly “reliable source” had warned of a torpedo attack against the Canal, presumably against one or more of the locks, and meant to take place sometime in the first half of July. The information was forwarded to the Commanding General in the Canal Zone, and security heightened further, although the Commanding General did not himself place much credence in the warning. Nevertheless, there was increased surveillance of ships in transit, with Japanese ships were to be stopped, ostensibly for searches, until further notice. As a result, Japanese vessels were forced to reroute via Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope.

However, by the end of July, Japanese forces had moved into French Indo-China (initially by arrangement with the local Vichy authorities). By now, in any case, Japanese funds in the US were frozen, and trade with the US thus effectively ended

### **THE SUBMARINE THREAT – THAT DID NOT THREATEN**

Unaware to the US, the Canal authorities or Panama, there was one definite plan to attack the Canal during World War 2. This plan, proposed by the Imperial Japanese Navy commander, Admiral Yamamoto, would have involved very large submarines carrying aircraft which would be launched to attack vital parts of the Canal. We shall return to this plan later.

By the time any such attack might have taken place, the intense vigilance of the US Navy and Army Air Force on the Pacific approaches to the Canal had lessened somewhat. After 1943, with the greatest danger to the Canal seemingly passed, and

with the theatres of war even further away than in 1941, troop levels began to be reduced, and other defence activity scaled back.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Japanese submarines never threatened the Pacific approaches – and never replicated the severe, though short-term, threat that German U-boats (and more distant Italian submarines) presented in the Caribbean and Atlantic approaches to the Canal, chiefly during 1942. A US Air Force review in 1994 pointed out that the Japanese submarine fleet never presented much of a threat to shipping in any case; as Japanese strategic policy limited submarines primarily to attacks on enemy naval forces, with merchant shipping being a purely secondary target.<sup>58</sup>

In any case, even if its policy had been different, in December 1941 Japan had only 20 submarines capable of traveling from Japan to the US West Coast – and the voyage time to Panama would have been even greater. While there was limited submarine activity off the US West Coast in 1941-42, and again briefly in late 1944, this did not affect Canal traffic directly.

## INTERNMENT AND DEPORTATION

In the book *Japan and Panama: the Role of the Panama Canal* (1993), it was said that Panama was the first part of Latin America to be visited by Japanese after their forced re-entry into contact with the outside world in 1853. In fact, the trans-isthmus railroad was the route chosen to cross the Americas by the official Japanese mission to the US in 1860 (and this was also said to also be their first encounter with a railway).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> In February 1943, the US Army Air Force ceased flying anti-submarine patrols off the US West Coast, as Japanese submarines had not appeared there since October 1942, and US Navy aircraft and surface vessel strength had grown sufficiently strong to handle any new threats. *The Battle Against the U-Boat in the American Theater December 7, 1941-September 2, 1945* by Timothy Warnock (Air Force History Support Office, 1994):

<https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/24/2001329771/-1/-1/0/AFD-100924-006.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> *The Battle Against the U-Boat in the American Theater December 7, 1941-September 2, 1945* by Timothy Warnock (Air Force History Support Office, 1994):

<https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/24/2001329771/-1/-1/0/AFD-100924-006.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-13128-0\\_9](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-13128-0_9)

The opening of the Canal stimulated an expansion of the already important shipping sector in Japan, making the Canal of strategic importance for Japan.<sup>60</sup> Given its importance as a route (though not as a market, the value of trade between the two countries being negligible), perhaps it was not surprising that Panama saw a sizeable Japanese presence.



*Japanese interned in the Canal Zone (presumably in late 1941/early 1942 at Camp Empire, judging from the tents and early-war Brodie helmets of the US troops)*

In October 1941, Edwin Wilson, US Ambassador, began a set of discussions with the Foreign Minister Octavio Fabrega over the detention of enemy aliens; and in November, the US Attorney General hinted that the US Government was considering mass arrests of ethnic Japanese in Panama.<sup>61</sup>

Panama agreed that it would arrest any Japanese on its territory and turn them over to the US authorities. The US would then intern them. All expenses and costs of internment would be paid by the US Government, which would also indemnify Panama for any claims for reparations or damages that might result.<sup>62</sup>

A memorandum from the US Ambassador to the Secretary of State in October 1941 described Panama's willingness to cooperate and to intern any Japanese on

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<sup>60</sup> There had been at least one previous, unsuccessful attempt to interest Japan in investing in a canal project, in 1908, but this had failed due to Japan's agreement with Britain over favouring a Nicaraguan route (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Vol 14, No. 1, February 1972).

<sup>61</sup> [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Panama\\_Canal\\_Zone/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Panama_Canal_Zone/)

<sup>62</sup> <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Panama%20Canal%20Zone>

Panamanian territory and see them interned on Taboga Island; once the US had taken action to intern Japanese in the US.<sup>63</sup>



*Japanese civilians for internment*

In November 1941, Japan lodged an official complaint to Panama about the treatment of its nationals and interests, seeking compensation and asking that Panama arrange travel of those affected to other South American countries, which had prevented their escape.<sup>64</sup> The Panamanian cabinet rejected the complaints.

A Japanese ship, the *Tatsuta Maru*, was scheduled to dock at Balboa in late November 1941 and take away those Japanese who wished to leave the country. However, the schedule was that it would leave Balboa on 26 December and arrive in Yokohama in January 1942 – but this plan obviously fell through, given the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December

Within 20 minutes of the announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack, Panamanian authorities began rounding up Japanese and German aliens in the country and, once rounded up, they were turned over to US authorities, and transported into the Canal Zone for internment.<sup>65</sup> Eventually, around 250 Japanese from Panama would be

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<sup>63</sup> *Justice Held Hostage: US Disregard for International Law in the World War II Internment of Japanese Peruvians - A Case Study* by Natsu Taylor Saito (Boston College Third World Law Journal, Vol.19, September 1998): <https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=twlj>

<sup>64</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> Figures quoted are 57 from Colon and 114 from Panama City. Added to these were around 300 Japanese detained in the Canal Zone itself.

By 11 December, Panama had detained a total of 861 enemy aliens into custody, turning them over to the US Army.

*Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).



deported to the US to be held in internment camps run by the INS<sup>66</sup>, a small part of the more than 2,200 Japanese from Latin America to be so incarcerated.

The first internment camp in the Canal Zone was at a site known as Camp Empire. Some distance inland from Balboa, with Japanese internees later moved to the island of Taboga, some 12 miles (19.3 km) offshore.

On Taboga, there was a makeshift camp of unassembled tents, with boxes of canned goods piled in an open field, and no latrines. Barbed wire surrounded the area, and soldiers patrolled with machine guns. US soldiers had the prisoners set up 20 tents and place eight cots in each tent. Within a few days, Italian and German prisoners also arrived.

In the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack, when wounded soldiers from Pearl Harbor arrived at Gorgas Hospital in Panama City, it is reported that some US troops took revenge against Japanese internees, many of whom were mature or older men from the white-collar professions, unaccustomed to hard physical labour, but who were nevertheless ordered to clear thick brush with machetes in the intense midday heat. It is also said that the first arrivals were said to have gone two weeks without bathing and saw their Red Cross care packages plundered. Sickness, exhaustion, and ringworm were common.

One internee suffered a heart attack; another lost 50 lb (22.7 kg). Roaming police dogs are said to have attacked one internee and forced him up against the barbed-wire fence, lacerating him so badly he spent a week in the hospital.

In January 1942, a reporter for the *Chicago Daily News* reported on the civilian internment camp where he said 185 Japanese were being held, within a larger camp with separate facilities for Germans and Italians. He reported that outside the camp, in a former private club, a further 34 women and 47 children were being confined. A

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<sup>66</sup> Immigration and Naturalization Service, then part of the Department of Justice.

seemingly unlikely quote claimed that *“Most of them never have had such good food and such good quarters before. In the daytime they lounge in the shade or do light work about the camp. In the evening they indulge in wrestling in an earthen ring or just sit expressionless studying their guards”*.



*Japanese and German women, and their children, being transferred from the port of Balboa to internment in the US in 1942*

This somewhat idyllic view was contradicted by evidence from one of the internees, who spoke of the demanding physical labour they were forced to undertake.<sup>67</sup>

The historian C Harvey Gardiner later reported -

*“Denied communication with their families, unaccustomed to hard labour, resenting the unsavoury food and their inadequate shelter under intolerable weather conditions, the men understandably put forth no special effort. In return guards occasionally kicked, beat, or nicked with their bayonets some passive worker”*.<sup>68</sup>

After the evacuation to the US of Panama’s Japanese internees in April 1942, the same camp would be reused for others deported from Peru.<sup>69</sup> They too spoke of their ill-

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<sup>67</sup> <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

A successful businessman, with two *Casa Japonesa* department stores in Panama amongst his many interests, Yoshitaro Amano wrote a book about his experiences in 1943, as he languished in a US internment camp. He had been one of those arrested on 7 December 1941.

*Waga Toraware No Ki* (“The Journal of my Incarceration”):

<http://www.discovernikkei.org/es/journal/2010/7/7/yoshitaro-amano>

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

<sup>69</sup> A country where there had been Japanese immigrants since 1899, welcomed as labour in the expanding cotton and sugar plantations. There is still a sizeable Japanese community in Peru today. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31295270>

treatment and being forced to undertake heavy physical labour, including digging pits to dispose of the guards' latrine waste.<sup>70</sup>

Decree 100 on 13 December 1941 ordered the expulsion from Panama of the consuls and vice-consuls of Japan, Germany and Italy.<sup>71</sup>

The Panamanian Government also prohibited the export of gold or other funds belonging to Japan or to its citizens living in Panama; and it imposed censorship on radiographic and cable communications and intensified surveillance "*of all elements that constitute or may constitute a threat against the common interests of Panama and the US in the security of the Panama Canal*".<sup>72</sup>

In October 1943, a restricted War Department communication laid down strict rules for any Japanese permitted to remain in Panama. While this acknowledged the need to utilise all available manpower in the war effort, it said, that "*No person of Japanese ancestry will be employed in a plant or facility important to the war effort*" without approval from either the Japanese-American Joint Board<sup>73</sup> or the Provost Marshall General (responsible for military policing). Likewise, it also said that no person of Japanese descent would be "*permitted to attend or be employed by an educational institution important to the war effort*" without similar approval.<sup>74</sup>

In the Spring of 1944, after the US lodged a formal protest against Japan for its treatment of US captives, Japan responded in a letter to the Swiss Legation in Tokyo denying ill-treatment of prisoners, and complaining of the treatment of Japanese nationals in US custody, citing the treatment of detainees in Panama in particular.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

<sup>71</sup> Both Germany and Italy had declared war on the US on 11 December.

<sup>72</sup> Chapter IX of *Panamá durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (1941-1945)

<sup>73</sup> A panel of representatives from various US federal agencies that made judgments about the loyalty or disloyalty, established in the light of the US Army wanting to recruit soldiers for a segregated combat team from within the internment camps.

[https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese\\_American\\_Joint\\_Board/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese_American_Joint_Board/)

<sup>74</sup> <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

## THE PERUVIAN JAPANESE



*Canal Zone: Japanese Peruvians en route to US internment camps. 2 April 1942. (US Army Signal Corps Photo. National Archives)<sup>76</sup>*

As noted above, the internment camp in the Canal Zone would also be

used for Japanese expelled from Peru, where there was a sizeable Japanese community. The Peruvian government sought to use the war as an excuse to rid the country of many or all of the community, having already banned further Japanese immigration in 1936.<sup>77</sup>

After calls to “Peruvianise” the country in the wake of the Depression of the 1930s, and imposition of restrictions (such as requiring 80% of any workforce to be native Peruvians), in May 1940, there had been a three-day race riot which had targeted Japanese Peruvian homes and businesses.<sup>78</sup> Peruvian President Prado proceeded to freeze all assets held by those with Japanese citizenship and prohibited the assembly of more than three people of Japanese descent.

Peru arranged a deal whereby it was able to deport some 1,800 Japanese, who were sent firstly to the Canal Zone, before being sent on to a camp in the US. Not all were able to return after the war – for example, only around 80 of the more than 900 individuals detained in Texas would be allowed back to Peru.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> <https://jlacampaignforjustice.org/photo-library/>

<sup>77</sup> Such immigration to Latin America had increased following the US having prohibited Japanese immigrants in 1924.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31295270>

<sup>79</sup> Many more relocated to war torn Japan, where many had to restart their lives in a land and speaking a language that was foreign to them. However, lawyers won a court order blocking the removal of 364 Japanese Peruvians, then secured temporary permission for them to remain as labourers in Texas. Peru would only countenance the return of those with Peruvian citizenship:

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-10-01/us-imprisoned-japanese-peruvians-texas-then-said-they-entered-illegally>



*The Crystal City internment camp in Texas*

## THE REAL PLAN TO ATTACK THE CANAL

While the fear of an attack on the Canal diminished as the tide of war swung against Japan<sup>80</sup>, there was in fact a definite Japanese plan to attack the Canal using aircraft, but not using aircraft carriers.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, even by 1942, after the losses incurred in the Battle of Midway in June, the Imperial Japanese Navy lacked the capability to launch a major attack on the Canal using its aircraft carriers, which had been the main feared external threat.

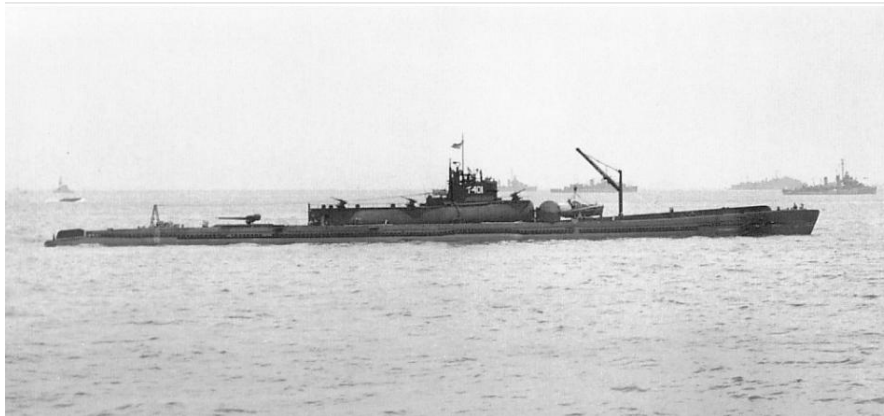
However, in 1942, the Navy's commander, Admiral Yamamoto, came up with a daring plan to carry out an attack using aircraft carried by submarine, and this was approved

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<sup>80</sup> In fact, the only (relatively) successful attack on the Americas by Japan involved balloons laden with high-explosive and incendiary bombs aimed at US territory, in an effort to bolster morale following the Doolittle air raid on Japan in April 1942. The Fu-Go project called for sending bomb-carrying balloons from Japan to set fire to the vast forests of the US. These were released from Japan – with some 9,000 eventually launched, but with only a small percentage of them ever reaching the North American continent, the first being reported in November 1944: <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/01/20/375820191/beware-of-japanese-balloon-bombs> and [https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch1\\_b.htm#ciops](https://fas.org/irp/ops/ci/docs/ci2/2ch1_b.htm#ciops)

<sup>81</sup> <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/project-fugo-the-japanese-balloon-bombs/>  
<https://www.historynet.com/japans-panama-canal-buster.htm>

by the War Ministry in December. 18 very large submarines would be ordered, known as the I-400 Class.<sup>82</sup>



*The I-400*

The I-400 would be the largest submarine built by any country until the nuclear-powered boats of postwar.<sup>83</sup> It was to carry three of a new type of floatplane, in addition to its gun and torpedo armament. The first was laid down in January 1943, with five more subsequently begun in 1943-44, but only four were completed.

A large-scale model of the Gatun Locks was built to practice use of torpedoes, but training conditions proved extremely difficult, as well there by now being a lack of experienced pilots, due to the heavy losses the Navy's air arm have incurred. Two of the new aircraft were lost during training. Eventually it was decided not to use torpedoes, but that each aircraft should carry a single large bomb. The attack would have been at dawn, using aircraft in USAAF markings. After the mission, the plan was for the aircraft to ditch near their parent submarine.<sup>84</sup>

However, by mid-1943 circumstances had changed (and Yamamoto had been killed), and added to the shortage of suitable aircrew there was a growing shortage of fuel.

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<sup>82</sup> The idea of using aircraft in this way was not new. Both the French and British had built aircraft-carrying vessels, and Japan had already used a smaller type of aircraft-carrying submarine to make an attack on the US West Coast in 1942, having by 1942 a fleet of 11 such vessels. One of these, the I-25 used a E15K floatplane which dropped bombs on two occasions, setting fire to forests in Oregon. Such aircraft were also used for reconnaissance flights over Australia, New Zealand and the Aleutian Islands. For more, see <https://vintageaviationnews.com/warbird-articles/japanese-bombing-west-coast.html>

<sup>83</sup> 400-feet (122 meters) long, 5,220 tons (4,735 tonnes) displacement. It could travel 37,500 nautical miles (69,450 km) at 14 knots while surfaced, equivalent to going 1½ times around the world without refuelling. See also: <https://www.stripes.com/news/researchers-unravel-the-mystery-of-japan-s-400-foot-aircraft-launching-submarine-1.258067>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.critica.com.pa/nacional/cuando-japon-preparo-ataque-al-canal-de-panama-617766>



The Navy decided that no more I-400 Class would be built, with one existing example to become a supply/tanker submarine, and only two to be completed in the original planned form – I-400 and I-401, being completed in December 1944 and January 1945 respectively.

The eventual plan called for the two large submarines to be accompanied by two smaller vessels (of the type that had made the earlier attacks on the US, but adapted to carry two, rather than one, aircraft). It appears that the plan had been to use a total of 10 aircraft were to be used, six with torpedoes and four with bombs.

The aircraft to be used in the attack was to have been the Aichi M6A1 Seiran<sup>85</sup>, a two-seat, twin-float, single-engine monoplane, which made its first flight in November



1943, and entered production a year later. Three of these could be carried by an I-400 in a 115-foot (35 metres) hangar on the boat's deck, with floats removed, wings folded back alongside the

fuselage, and its fin and horizontal stabilisers folded. Once the huge hangar door was opened, a crew of four men would winch the aircraft out onto a launching dolly, it taking between 30 to 45 minutes to set up, prepare and launch all three floatplanes, using the 120-foot (36.6 metres) long pneumatic catapult mounted on the inclined deck. When on floats, the Seiran could carry only a single 551 lb (250 kg) bomb.<sup>86</sup>

In January 1945, the two I-400 Class boats began their shakedown cruises and catapult-launch training, and operational training was scheduled to begin in the following April.

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<sup>85</sup> "Seiran" translates literally as "Blizzard attacking the summit of a mountain when seen against an indigo blue sky": <https://original-ufdc.ufliib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>86</sup> Aichi completed the first prototype in 1943, and the Navy ordered production to start immediately. The original production 44 aircraft was eventually reduced to 28 (including two M6A1-K trainers with wheels) due to the cost and war-driven material shortages, not to mention two major earthquakes and relentless bombing by B-29 bombers of Japan: <https://www.historynet.com/japans-panama-canal-buster.htm>

When Germany surrendered in May 1945, the need to block the Canal, and prevent the anticipated flow of men and materials being transferred to the Pacific theatre, would have seemed to be more important. However, in July 1945, the plan was cancelled, with the submarines and aircraft involved to be diverted to defence of the home islands. The fleet then set sail in July 1945 for a planned attack on US aircraft carriers, but their mission was cancelled as they were *en route*, and the vessels were ordered to return to Japan.

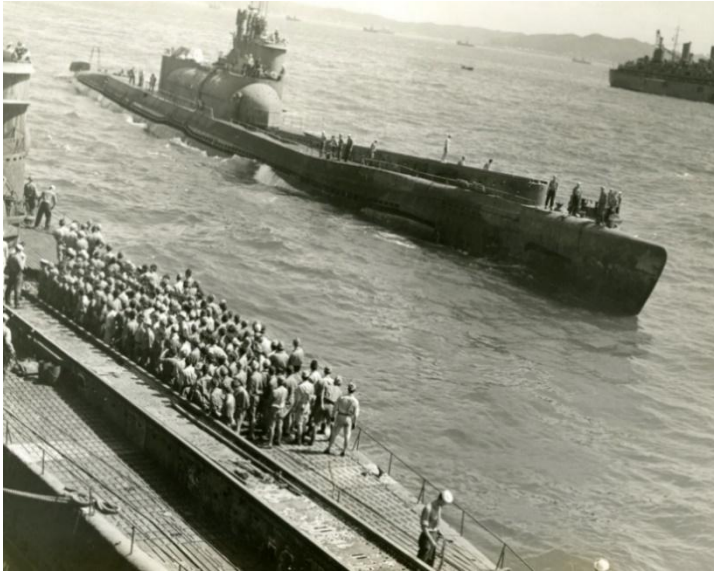
One can speculate how successful an attack could have been. It seems likely that, had the submarines reached their objective undetected, surprise may have been total, given the reduced defence levels in the Canal Zone.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, postwar planners determined that, in fact, a successful attack on the Canal would have actually required a force being equivalent of four of the large *Midway*-class aircraft carriers, with their usual escorting fleet, and some 250 aircraft.

The two completed I-400 earmarked for the attack were examined by the US Navy after the war before being scuttled (purportedly to prevent the Soviets having an opportunity to inspect them – or claim them as war booty). The sites of the sinkings was deliberately unrecorded, but that of I-401 was discovered near Oahu in 2005, and that of I-400 in 2013.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In December 1944, a senior USAAF officer flew a P-51 fighter at low-level from one end of the Canal to the other, without being challenged or shot at.

<sup>88</sup> As the submarines were legally US Navy property, the Naval History and Heritage Command granted a permit to the Japanese TV network NHK to make a documentary that included bringing up bell from I-400, to be displayed at the submarine museum in Pearl Harbor.



*US Navy sailors watch the I-400 pass by in Japanese waters at the end of the war*

### **THE FIRST JAPANESE TRANSIT POSTWAR**

In December 1950, the New York Times marked the first passage of a Japanese ship through the Canal since July 1941, when a vessel loaded with scrap metal made a transit on 10 December.

### **DID JAPAN HAVE PLANS FOR PANAMA AFTER WINNING A WAR?**

While Japan did not anticipate *conquering* the US, at least on its own, but rather appeared to want to keep the US out of its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (a term coined by the foreign minister in June 1940 as referring to Japan and its mainland Asia territories, but later expanded to take in the area of its South-east Asia and Pacific gains). Thus, it would have retained and be able to protect its possessions in China, and the sources of oil and raw materials that it had obtained through conquest.

However, in May 1942, Prime Minister Tojo approved a set of "non-negotiable" demands to be presented once the Allies had sued for a peace that would allow Japan to keep all that it had already conquered and to take possession of considerably more. As well as parts of the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific, Hawaii, Alaska (and the State of Washington), the list included most of Latin America, including Panama.

It was also planned that, in the event of an Axis victory and in collaboration with Germany and Italy, it was proposed to organise a "General-Government of Central America", again this including Panama.<sup>89</sup>

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

20 September 2025

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<sup>89</sup> *A World In Arms A Global History of World War II* by Gerhard Weinberg (Cambridge University Press, 2005).  
<https://archive.org/details/a-world-at-arms-a-global-history-of-world-war-ii-gerhard-l.-weinberg-z-library>