

WHY THE WARTIME HISTORY SHOULD BE OF INTEREST TO PANAMANIAN

I was a child of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, brought up on war films, war comics and references in everyday life to World War 2, and with reminders of the war still around – air raid shelters, pill boxes and two former RAF airfields nearby. I built plastic models of ships, aircraft and tanks – nearly all portraying wartime subjects.

Despite this, when I moved to Panama, I knew little of its wartime story. It soon became apparent that I was not alone in this, and that most Panamanians were equally unaware. In addition, unlike Europe, there was little in obvious reminders in and around Panama City. There also seemed to be a lack of interest among locals – and there was only one model shop, and children and collectors seemed to prefer fast cars and large trucks.

Apart from an annual commemoration of the death of several students in 1964, there even seemed to be an absence of interest in anything to do with the US occupation of the Canal Zone – despite this having been arguably the most important factor in the country's history - and almost certainly the reason for it achieving independence from Colombia, at least when it did in 1903.

So I started to look for information and resources about the wartime period. It soon transpired that Panama and the Canal Zone had been what I referred to as a vital backwater. In the immediate lead up to the war, and in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack, there was something bordering on panic on the part of the US forces. However, by 1943, it had become apparent that no attack from any enemy was likely, and the US military began mothballing the big guns of the coastal artillery, and withdrawing troops for use in other theatres of war. This was somewhat ironic, in that the one concrete plan to attack the Canal was then in preparation, but by the time the submarines and aircraft intended for use were ready the tide of the war against Japan had turned, and they would be needed to defend the home islands.

Despite World War 2 turning out to be something of a non-event – except for the relatively brief, though intensive, U-boat campaign in the Caribbean, I still found much that was of interest, and which should also interest Panamanians. There were amusing stories, tragic stories and important stories.

One could not look at the war in isolation, of course. You needed to go further back – to see why Panama had no army after 1904, the effects of rising nationalism after the 1931 coup and how this affected the relationship with the US military during the war. During the war years there were stories, not necessarily directly connected to the conflict – explaining why one drove on the right-hand side of the road, what happened to the city's trams, and the few days that the country had paper banknotes. The turmoil of the immediate postwar years were also relevant, with nationalism and anti-Americanism a major factor. The period was also vital in understanding how the National Police became the kingmakers of the country, evolving into the National Guard, and leading to it providing the dictator rulers from the 1960s until the US invasion in 1989.

There was also the colourful history of Arnulfo Arias Madrid, a hero in the 1931 coup, President briefly in 1940 (the first of several brief stints in the post, being soon deposed in every case), his postwar (temporary) comeback, when chosen by the chief of the National Police despite having apparently lost the election. His short wartime Presidency had some very dark overtones.

There were also difficult stories – such as the use of an island later owned by the Tupperware millionaire as a chemical warfare test site during the war, with Puerto Rican troops being used, due

to some bizarre theory that they might be less susceptible to the effects of the likes of mustard gas – the theory really was that black troops would be least effective, but neither the US military nor the Panamanian Government were keen on having black US servicemen in the country – very few would serve there during the war. The disposal of the substances used in the tests, and the storage and use of other, even more problematical products postwar, would give cause for concern.

Then, of course, there was the whole question of racial discrimination, with the Canal Zone having its own form of Jim Crow, with Panamanians equally reduced to second class through the system of payment called the Gold and Silver Rolls (which, like segregation in the US, also extended to things like separate waiting rooms at train stations). There were even problems between Hispanic Panamanians and those of Caribbean origin, not helped by a Canal Zone Governor admitting before the war that the authorities preferred the black Caribbean-origin people for employment.

All in all, therefore, the country's wartime story is one worth telling, and should be of interest to local Panamanians, as well as the descendants of the thousands of US servicemen who served here. It is also a story almost unknown to those of us in Europe.

Ray Todd

Panama City

3 July 2023