

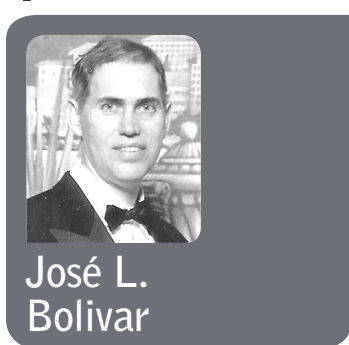
My experience in Aruba during World War II

The number of veterans that participated in the Second World War is rapidly diminishing. Efforts have been made in the United States and elsewhere to safeguard their memories and experiences. I know of no such effort in Puerto Rico, despite the fact that 65 thousand Puerto Ricans enlisted, or were drafted, in the conflict. It is our hope that the stories of these brave young Puerto Rican men (and some women) will be documented for future generations. This is the story of one of them: Carlos González.

The submarine war in the Caribbean began in early 1942. As a result, Puerto Rican troops were stationed at multiple bases in the Caribbean. Carlos González was one of these soldiers. He was recruited in June of 1942. Then only 18, he had just completed his third year of high school in Arecibo. After a thirteen week training program in Tortugueros, he was sent to Aruba on a military transport. Just what made Aruba worth protecting?

On February 16, 1942 German U-boat U-156 attacked the oil refinery in Aruba. The German plan was to wipe out the refinery, since it was making aviation grade fuel for the British and was gearing up to increase its capacity to accommodate the American fleets. In order to protect its neutrality, the United States had pressured Standard Oil, a New Jersey based company, to supply the British fleet from their offshore refinery in Aruba. Thereafter, the British became dependent on these refineries. The U-Boat attack sunk some shallow-draft lake tankers, but did not damage the refinery itself. However, in 1942, there were no assurances that a U-Boat attack would not be repeated.

Carlos González was placed in charge of one of the reflectors stationed near the beach and close to the refinery. It was hoped that the American based troops would help to spot enemy submarines that would venture close to the refinery. There were a total of five synchronized reflectors and two observation



José L. Bolívar

towers.

"We had binoculars in order to observe enemy movements, and would tell the reflector operator where to shine his light," commented González. "When there was an alarm, we were instructed to quickly climb the ladder to the observation tower, so that we could track what we had observed," added González. During the daytime, the reflectors were camouflaged and hidden in the old houses surrounding the base. In addition to the reflectors, there were machine guns and six-inch cannons placed close to a small hill. Wireless telephones were located at strategic locations so they could order when and where to fire the cannons.

All of the officers were from the mainland. According to González, they enforced compliance of the orders that no lights be turned on at night. This applied to both the military and civilian populations. Since much of the electricity was powered by smaller electrical generators brought in by the military, and since González had quite a bit of time on his hands, he decided to take a test in order to become a certified power plant technician. He passed with a score of 99, and as a result, was promoted to the rank of corporal.

Guards rotated every four hours in order to protect the reflectors. They could sleep the other four hours, but would have to exercise each afternoon. In spite of the war, the assignment was comfortable; they had frequent barbecues and held many ping-pong tournaments.

At the time, Aruba was very poor. There was no tourism. What they had was plenty of goats. Unfortun-



Military aircraft over San Juan circa 1942

nately, the goats could not be eaten, as they belonged to the Queen of Holland. She was, however, grateful for the troops' presence in Aruba. González received a monthly stipend of \$112 from Holland, in addition to his U.S. Army salary, which by this time had increased, as he had been promoted to Sergeant. According to González, "When the Queen visited Aruba, all we were required to do for our \$112 stipend was to march behind her alongside a group of Dutch and local soldiers. We thought it was a great deal!"

"One night, we detected a German U-Boat in the harbor. It fired at the refinery. Luckily, the gunners aimed too high. The bullets ended up falling next to a school. Fortunately, at the time of the assault, the school was empty and nobody was hurt. We used 'tracer bullets' that illuminated

the area where the submarine was spotted so that our guns would not damage the refinery while trying to sink the submarine. The sub left and nothing else happened. After it was over, we had a party.

"After the Normandy invasion of France in June, 1944, most of the troops stationed in Aruba were relocated to other theaters of the war. I stayed behind and was put in charge of a Company. We crated up the cannons and shipped them. Shortly thereafter, we were given orders to report to Puerto Rico and were given a two week vacation. I was then told to report to the Army Beach Club in Old San Juan - where the old Escambron Beach Club used to be. We were responsible for the operation of a shore cannon, which remained hidden at the neighboring Muñoz Rivera Park during the day.

"At the end of the war I received my discharge papers. I returned to Mayagüez, where I studied and passed my high school accreditation test. With the benefits of the G.I. Bill, I was able to pay for my schooling at the University of Puerto Rico's Mayagüez campus, where I graduated with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. I spent the next decades of my life working with the Eastern Sugar Associates and with Caterpillar, until my retirement."

José L. Bolívar holds a doctorate in history and is completing a book on the economic impact of World War II on Puerto Rico, which is scheduled to be published this year by the University of Florida. He may be reached at jbolivarpr@prtc.net.

VOICES

On referendums

How about a referendum to approve a Constitutional amendment barring those who lie, cheat and steal from public office? And another one to drop the tax-evading legislator "per diem"? And to discontinue the "special laws," by which specific corporations and individuals get exempted - for a pretty penny - from oppressive laws the rest of us are compelled to obey? Constitutional Due Process and Equal Protection notwithstanding.

Yes, it's a fantasy of mine, of all of us who have eyes to see, on this wicked island of ours. Where a self-pam-

pered despotic few afford themselves the legality to oppress and exploit dispossessed masses kept ignorant and indebted. Where criminality is thus cooked up like popcorn, the middle class being the bullet-riddled buffer. Me, and you.

*Joaquín Serrano
from Condado on September 11*

Another farcical referendum?

A Constitutional provision making health care a right opposable to government is the sort of thing you expect

from a concerned and progressive leadership. Which contrasts sharply with characteristically petty Puerto Rican politicians. This is particularly so of the NPP, whose slavishness to moneyed interests, presumably including the villains in question here - doctors, hospitals, insurers - is conspicuous. Is this all simply a cruel charade, a shameless sequel to the unicamerality farce?

*Jennifer Contreras
from Condado on September 11*

These remarks do not necessarily represent the views of the PR Daily Sun.