

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2



PART 12 – THE JAPANESE

THE JAPANESE THREAT – SPIES AND FISHING BOATS

A potentially greater threat than Germany in World War 2, notwithstanding U-boat activity, was presented by Japan, despite the far greater distance any attacking forces would have to travel.

By 1941, the Japanese community in Panama numbered an estimated 400¹. The *Chicago Tribune* had stated in 1940 that Japanese made up a visible part of the population of Colón on the Atlantic coast and some individuals even resided inside the Canal Zone itself². Japanese-owned businesses were common in Panama – for example, there were 47 Japanese-owned barber shops in Panama City and Colon (the cities at either end of the Canal) alone.

¹ In the book *Japan and Panama: the Role of the Panama Canal* (1993), it is 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. The trans-isthmus railroad was the route chosen to cross the continent by the official Japanese mission to the US in 1860 (this being said to also be their first encounter with a railway):

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-13128-0_9

² <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

The opening of the Canal had stimulated an expansion of the already important shipping sector in Japan, and making the Canal of strategic importance for Japan³. Given its importance as a route (though not as a market, the value of trade between the two countries being negligible), it might not be seen as surprising that Panama saw a sizeable Japanese presence.

In the lead up to World War 2 there were reports of Japanese reconnaissance using fishing boats along the Pacific coast of Mexico and Central America. The fishing industry in Panama was, in the 1930s, almost entirely in Japanese control, and in 1934 Japan was 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.

From 1935, Japanese espionage activity in Panama increased⁴. One of the many barber shops in Panama City was, in fact, owned by a Japanese who was, in reality, a Commander in the Imperial Japanese Navy.⁵ 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.

The Japanese-owned fishing vessels included longer-range tuna boats, one of which was owned by a Japanese who was chief of Japanese intelligence for Central and South America⁶. He 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 to be prohibited in the Canal Zone from June 1941.

³ 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).

⁴ Not just in Panama, the first American 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>

⁵ Mixu Watanabe.

⁶ The *Amano Maru*, owned by Yoshitaro Amano. He was later arrested and deported to Japan.

The aforementioned tuna boat owned by the intelligence officer made numerous “fishing” trips from which it returned empty-handed, and was noted to have travelled along the Central American coast and even as far as the Galapagos Islands.

US concern at the risk presented by the Japanese fishing vessels led to pressure on the Panamanian Government, especially as Japanese activity increased in 1938, and in due course the Panama Government imposed a ban on Japanese boats fishing in Panamanian waters.

As an indication of heightened tension and suspicion, when the Japanese freighter *Sagami Maru* passed through the Panama Canal in late 1940, the ship’s crew reported that some 20 US Army officers boarded the ship for inspection⁷.

In 1940, a Japanese national who had lived in Panama for 20 years, and was 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 (and agent for the Japanese Line shipping company). The arrested man worked as a chandler, and hence had free access to the ports’ piers and quays.

After President Roosevelt declared a national emergency in May 1941, the commander of the Army’s Panama Canal Department issued an order prohibiting Japanese shipping from using the Canal. 5 Japanese ships in Balboa and Cristobal ports at the Atlantic end of the Canal at the time were therefore (despite diplomatic protests) forced to travel to Japan via Cape Horn.

On 20 October 1941, Japanese businesses in the Republic of Panama were told that they had to close after 28 October, the Japanese Legation being told that the necessary licences would not be renewed, and an application for a 90-day delay was refused by the

⁷ <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

Panamanian cabinet. A total boycott of Japanese goods was also expected⁸. The Legation considered that Japanese residents would 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 Panama⁹.

A memo dated 27 November 1941 from the Commandant of the 15th Naval District, Balboa on which types of person should be detained upon the outbreak of hostilities was accompanied by lists of –

- dangerous Axis sympathisers;
- dangerous Germans;
- dangerous Italian aliens; and
- Japanese in the city of Colon,

and also recommending that all Japanese should be interned immediately, but the detention of others should be limited to those considered most dangerous¹⁰.

In November, 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 countries¹¹. The Panamanian cabinet rejected the complaints.

A Japanese ship, the *Tatsuta Maru*, was scheduled to dock at Balboa in late November, to take away those Japanese who wished to leave. However, the schedule was that it would leave Balboa on 26 December and arrive in Yokohama in January 1942 – but this plan fell through for the obvious reason that the war began on 7 December.

In 1941, the Panamanian Government had agreed that, following any action by the US to intern Japanese residents, it would arrest Japanese on Panamanian territory and intern them on Taboga. All expenses and costs of internment and guarding would be paid by the

⁸ The Roosevelt Administration having drawn up a boycott list of Axis businesses.

⁹ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://ncisahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Priority-List-of-Dangerous-Aliens-in-the-Canal-Zone-Nov-27-1941.pdf>

¹¹ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

US Government, which would indemnify Panama against any claims that might arise as a result¹². While, in November 1941, mass arrests of Japanese in the Continental USA had been ruled out in the tense pre-war period, the Canal Zone and Hawaii were considered different, and “temporary” mass arrests were likely¹³. In any event, 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 internment¹⁴.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, enemy aliens in the Canal Zone, and potential Axis sympathisers¹⁵, were rounded up. In fact, as already mentioned, within 20 minutes of the announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack, Panamanian authorities had also begun rounding up Japanese and German aliens throughout the rest of the country. As in the case of Germans in the country, those Japanese detained by the Panamanian authorities were also turned over to the US authorities in the Canal Zone for internment at Balboa, with a committee then deciding which should be permanently detained¹⁶.

Panama’s La Guardia Administration having moved to intern Japanese subjects residing in Panama, prohibited the export of gold or other funds belonging to Japan or to its citizens living in Panama; 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 Canal¹⁷.

THE JULY 1941 ALERT

In July 1941, 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), and that the Japanese Government had begun

¹² <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. Figures quoted are 57 from Colon and 114 from Panama City. Added to these were around 300 Japanese detained in the Canal Zone itself.

¹⁵ German, Italian and Japanese.

¹⁶ See also <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

¹⁷ Chapter IX of *Panamá durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (1941-1945)

to divert its shipping from the Atlantic – with one company being said to have told its ships to be west of the Panama Canal by 25 July, regardless of passengers or cargo.

One of the threats identified was a *possible* torpedo attack against the Canal between the 1 and 15 July (said to be according to a “reliable source”). The message from the Navy Department was relayed to the War Department and hence to the commanding general in the Canal Zone.

More significance was attached by those in Washington to the risk of sabotage, and protection was to be stepped up, with increased surveillance of ships in transit. Japanese ships were to be delayed, ostensibly for searches, until further notice. However, the commanding general did not give much credence to either the sabotage or torpedo attack rumours, but nevertheless put increased defensive measures in place.

Canal traffic was restricted for a time, after reports of concentrations of small craft (probably fishing vessels) on the Pacific coast and of one or more Japanese vessels being scheduled to pass through the Canal daily between 16 and 22 July. What, in effect, happened was that Japanese shipping was excluded, with other vessels allowed to pass through the Canal. The Japanese vessels were forced to reroute via Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope.

Before the end of July 1941, the Japanese had moved into French Indo-China, and as a result Japanese funds in the US had been frozen, this effectively ending trade between the two countries and making any ban on Japanese vessels transiting the Canal largely irrelevant.

CONDITIONS IN INTERNMENT

The US Army administered Camp Empire at Balboa in the Canal Zone, but conditions there were said to be poor.

The first arrivals were said to have gone 2 weeks without bathing and saw their Red Cross care packages plundered by US soldiers. Many of the internees were mature or were older men from the white-collar professions, unaccustomed to hard physical labour, but were

nevertheless ordered to clear thick brush with machetes in the intense midday heat. Working in their underwear, they swallowed salt tablets every half hour under the gaze of occasionally brutal guards. Sickness, exhaustion, and ringworm were common.



One internee suffered a heart attack; another lost 50 lb in weight. Roaming police dogs attacked one internee and forced him up against the barbed-wire fence, causing lacerations so bad that he spent a week in the hospital.

Swiss diplomats representing German interests told the US State Department that each successive wave of German internees reported similar complaints, as did their letters to family members in Germany. In addition, the removal of male internees to the US (being seen as the greatest risk to the Canal Zone), leaving behind the “non-dangerous” women and children, became a focus of anti-American propaganda and unrest – with allegations that the US was splitting up families and leaving women and children to starve. As a result, from 1943, some volunteer women and children were permitted to join their men in family internment in the US¹⁸.

As already mentioned, the Panamanian Government had previously agreed that, following any action by the US to intern Japanese residents, Panama would arrest Japanese on Panamanian territory and see them interned on Taboga Island. All expenses and costs of internment and guarding would be paid by the US, which would indemnify Panama against any claims that might arise as a result¹⁹. 250 of the Japanese detained in Panama were transferred to be interned in the US²⁰.

¹⁸ <https://www.unive.it/media/allegato/dep/n9-2008/Saggi/Friedman-saggio.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

²⁰ http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese_Latin_Americans/



Japanese civilians for internment

A restricted US War Department communication dated

14 October 1943 had sought to deal with the issue of Japanese remaining in Panama by establishing clearly defined parameters on how to deal with Japanese in the region.

Although acknowledging the need for maximum use of all available manpower for 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 or the Provost Marshall General. 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 approval²¹.

As late as 1945 US intelligence arrested a Japanese man who had lived for 15 years in the Darien province that bordered Colombia, and where he had a large family and a thriving lumber business. He was connected to the Japanese royal family as well as being a colonel in Japanese military intelligence, and was found to have operated a mountain-top radio station for passing on details of US activity in Panama.

ALSO INTERNED IN PANAMA WERE JAPANESE FROM PERU²².

Following Pearl Harbor, Peru saw a continuing anti-Japanese crackdown that had begun in the 1930s depression as a movement to “Peruvianize” the country. The 1930s had seen measures which had included the establishment of quotas requiring that 80% of any work force be native Peruvian; the suspension of naturalisations and the annulment of late birth

²¹ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

²² Immigration from Japan had risen throughout Latin America after the US prohibited Japanese immigration in 1924. However, in 1936, Peru had prohibited Japanese immigration (the US had banned Japanese immigration in 1924). Ill feeling resulted in a 3-day race riot targeting Japanese Peruvian individuals, homes and businesses in May 1940: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31295270>

registrations of Japanese Peruvians²³. With the outbreak of war, the Peruvian President Prado froze all assets held by those with Japanese citizenship and prohibited the assembly of more than 3 people of Japanese descent. When they were subsequently deported from Peru they were first sent to Panama, and thence from there to a camp in Texas²⁴. After the war, only around 80 of the more than 900 individuals detained in Texas (of the estimated 1,800 Japanese from Peru who were interned in the US) were allowed back to Peru²⁵.

YOSHITARO AMANO, CANAL ZONE RESIDENT AND PRISONER #203²⁶

Yoshitaro Amano, was one of the more than 2,000 Japanese Latin Americans who were detained, shipped to the US, and interned without charge during World War 2. He was arrested in Panama on 7 December 1941. He was to write a book about his experiences in 1943²⁷

He had been born in 1898 in Ojika, Akita, Japan. He graduated from Akita Industrial High School's division of mechanics, and attended Kurumae College of Industry, leaving shortly before graduation. He then worked as a ship engineer, and was said to have honed the entrepreneurial skills that would later finance his Latin American business ventures.

By 1930, he had established the Amano Trading Company, an import/export venture located in Panama City. He also helped organise the Ikawa Trading Company based in Japan, expressly for the shipment of manufactured goods to Panama and Peru, and travelled regularly between Panama and Peru. Amano's businesses flourished, and he built

²³ <https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1186&context=twlj>

²⁴ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-10-01/us-imprisoned-japanese-peruvians-texas-then-said-they-entered-illegally>

²⁵ 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>

²⁶ <http://www.discovernikkei.org/es/journal/2010/7/7/yoshitaro-amano/?fbclid=IwAR3LPqimW160GZrdsqmrRwnza1yvWC78w4ctgYfyCuGnAF107Fep1CpAhl#.WKTKNak9DLE.facebook>

²⁷ *Waga Toraware No Ki* ("The Journal of my Incarceration"): <http://www.discovernikkei.org/es/journal/2010/7/7/yoshitaro-amano/?fbclid=IwAR3LPqimW160GZrdsqmrRwnza1yvWC78w4ctgYfyCuGnAF107Fep1CpAhl#.WKTKNak9DLE.facebook>

a small empire that included a ranch in Chile, lumber businesses in Bolivia, a quinine farm in Ecuador and 2 department stores called *Casa Japonesa* in Panama. He also established the Pacific Fishing Company based in Puente Arenas, Costa Rica and had a tuna clipper, the *Amano Maru*, commissioned from a shipbuilder in Japan in 1933.

In 1941, when the US Government banned trade with approximately 1,800 individuals and businesses on the Proclaimed List of Certain Blocked Nationals²⁸, Amano's name and that of his fishing company appeared on a Costa Rican list. However, it was Amano's fishing boat, the *Amano Maru*, that attracted the most suspicion.

In 1939, a book by an American journalist called *Secret Agents Against America* alleged that Amano was a secret agent "whose real profession seems to be a secret to no one". It claimed that he had been arrested in Colombia and imprisoned in Nicaragua following an espionage charge by an unspecified country but he "was enough of a Chilean millionaire to talk his way out of a Nicaraguan jail". The book also speculated how the *Amano Maru* could be used to transport mines.

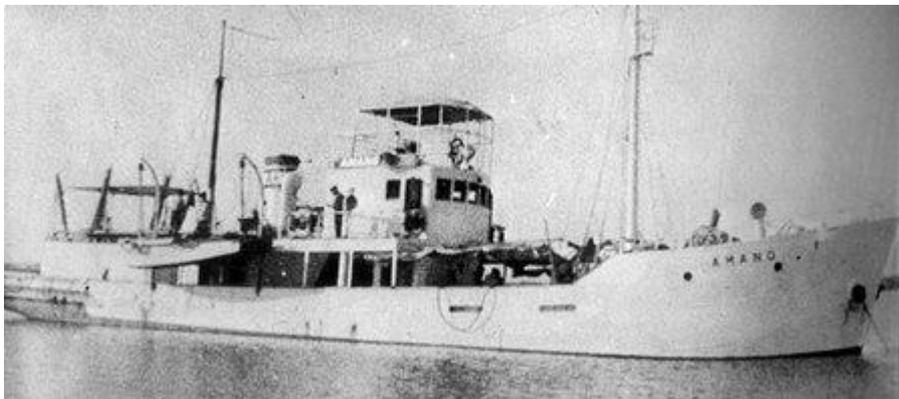


Photo of the Amano Maru, circa 1935

Another book in 1939, Richard Spivey's *Secret Armies: The New*

Technique of Nazi Warfare, also featured the *Amano Maru*, saying it had a powerful radio and "an extremely secret Japanese invention enabling it to detect and locate mines".

On 7 December 1941, 15 armed policemen burst into one of his properties, which served as a dormitory for the department store employees. 2 of the several dozen workers were women: the manager's wife and a governess/housekeeper. The police loaded everyone,

²⁸ <https://digitalcollections.smu.edu/digital/collection/hgp/id/651/>

some wearing only their underwear, into “paddy wagons” and thoroughly searched the house for Amano. However, he later turned himself in to Police Headquarters, and then walked with the police chief to Chorrios Jail, one block away.

He was one of about 100 men taken to Balboa Harbour and hence to the island of Taboga. However, they would not know where the women were detained until April 1942. On Taboga there was a makeshift camp of unassembled tents, 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 to set up 20 tents and place 8 cots in each tent. Within a few days, Italian and German prisoners also arrived.

The arrival of wounded soldiers from Pearl Harbor at Gorgas Hospital in Panama triggered a change of attitude among the Americans, Amano noted. He reported months of physically demanding manual labour such as digging latrines and picking up rocks, and even instances when soldiers hit and kicked detainees. Many of the Panamanian Japanese were middle-aged, and the harsh conditions took their toll on the weakest. They were also, like Amano, interrogated. He even questioned once by the FBI (by an agent who he described as young, refined and polite).

While, after several months, numbers of the Italians were released, all the Japanese stayed in the camp, and were joined by other Japanese transported from other Latin American countries.

The Panamanian prisoners became part of the first shipment of hostages sent to internment camps in the US. The captives, primarily from Peru, and other Axis prisoners arrived in New Orleans on 8 April 1942.

Amano embarked on the *Florida*, Germans and Italians already being on board. After a number of prisoners fell ill from a carbon monoxide-filled hold, they were allowed on deck to revive under the surveillance of soldiers with bayonets stationed at 10-foot intervals. The ship left Cristóbal Harbor, travelling to Limón Bay where it picked up another 50 Germans,

who had been detained by the Costa Rican government. It then picked up 20 more Germans in Guatemala before reaching New Orleans.

