

The Tragedy Of El Polvorin

I. Introduction

It was customary for my family to take Sunday afternoon trips through Panama and parts of the Canal Zone either by streetcar or walking. As a child, not only did I enjoy these outings, but I always learned something new from the information my parents would pass on to my sister and I. One such trip included visiting Plaza 5 De Mayo across from the impressive Trans-Isthmian Train Station. Already aware of the reverence given to the Bomberos (firefighters) of Panama, I was in awe when my father explained the significance of this beautiful monument. It was, he said, to perpetuate the memory of those valiant Bomberos who had lost their lives fighting the fire at “El Polvorin” (the explosives magazine). He went on to explain that the impressive “Paseo De Antorchas” (Torchlight Parade) held every November 27 at night was also a part of this recognition to the sacrifice of these Bomberos as well as a celebration of the founding of the “Cuerpo de Bomberos” (Firefighter’s Corps).

At that early age I remember that several times, as we rode the streetcar by El Casino, my father would point out that El Polvorin had been located behind this venerable landmark. Unfortunately, I was never taken to the exact spot and, as I grew older, other things became more important while El Polvorin faded from my mind. At the time, I did not even know if the site had any markings. It was only recently I found out there had been a plaque identifying the site and that in 2012 the government had replaced it with a more impressive monument.



II. Founding Of The Firefighters Corps (Cuerpo de Bomberos)

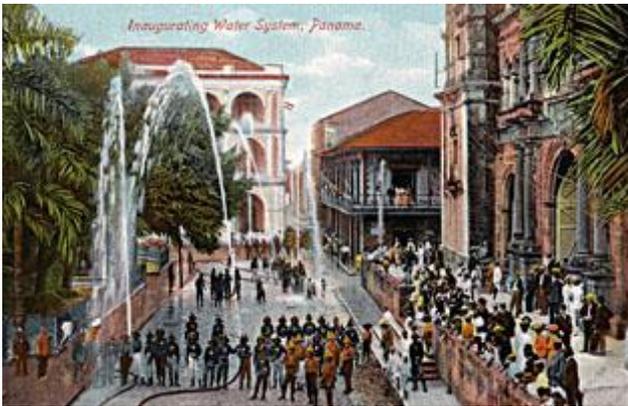
The frequency of fires in the city of Panama, and the large amount of damage caused for lack of a coordinated entity to fight these calamities, led Tomas Herrera, Prefect of the Province of Panama, to propose the creation of a Cuerpo de Bomberos Voluntarios (Volunteer Fire Department) for the city in 1887 (Panama was still a part of Colombia). The proposal was greeted with great enthusiasm by the city council, the citizens and the business community. The latter group willingly donated the funds necessary to get the department going in an expeditious manner. Fortunately there were two men available who had acquired firefighting experience while living in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and Prefect Herrera wasted no time in asking for their service. Their names were Ricardo Arango and Rodolfo Halstead.

On November 28, 1887, Fire Department of the city of Panama was officially established under the direction of Ricardo Arias as its first commander. Locally known as El Cuerpo de Bomberos, its first tasks were to train the volunteers and purchase two pumpers from the famous British manufacturer Merryweather and Sons. These pumpers carried their own water supply and were hand-powered by Bomberos pumping on each side (this explains why firefighters in Panama are called “bomberos”, meaning “pumpers”). The two wagons were promptly christened as International No. 1 and China No. 2. They were, consequently, assigned to International Company No. 1 and China Company No. 2. Meanwhile, the acquisition of additional equipment, such as hoses, ladders, hooks, and axes, as well as uniforms, continued. It was at this time that the now famous Red Shirt was introduced as the uniform was specified to consist of white pants, black boots, red shirt with a large white number on the chest and a white helmet of the style used by Colonial Frenchmen. The ranks were easily filled by willing young men and training was begun immediately.



Commander Arango remained in charge for only one year, resigning late in 1888 for reasons unknown to me. Don Florencio Arosemena took over command and remained in charge until his untimely death in 1903. David H. Brandon, named as his replacement, set as his sights on solving of the problem of the non-existing water supply and distribution system to fight the fires. One must remember that this is still before the United States became involved in the construction of the Canal and the city did not have a water or sewer system.

The solution Commander Brandon considered was that of constructing large concrete reservoirs by the sea shore which would fill when the tide was high. These tanks would be equipped with powerful steam powered pumps capable of creating water pressure very quickly. By a system of hoses assembled temporarily, the water would be available to all neighborhoods within a short distance from the water supply. However, this plan provided no solution for those unfortunate enough to live out of the range of the available hoses. It is said that Commander Brandon spent so much time outside in the weather, rain or shine, pursuing this goal that he contracted pneumonia and died a few months after taking office. Apparently, only one of his tanks was ever built.



On left, Bomberos celebrate the inauguration of the new water system in Panama City around 1906. On right, they parade in front of their new headquarters building around 1930.



Aerial view of Panama City in 1940 showing the abandoned location Of the only reservoir built.

He was replaced at the end of 1903 by Jose Gabriel Duque who remained Commander of the Bomberos until retirement in 1912. Juan Antonio Guizado then assumed command. Little did he know that within two years he would fight the biggest battle in the history of El Cuerpo de Bomberos de Panama . . . El Polvorin!

The Original Staff of Cuerpo de Bomberos de Panama – November 28, 1887

Ricardo Arango, Chief
Rodolfo Halstead, Commander International Company No. 1
Rene Echarte, Commander China Company No. 2
Antonio Linares L., Secretary
Ricardo M. Arango, Rodolfo Perez ad Jose Arango, Assistants to the Chief
Antonio Pedreschi, Commander Hatchet Company

III. The Explosion

It had been a usual quiet night in the city of Panama when, suddenly, at 2:55 on the morning of Tuesday, May 5, 1914, an alarm went out that fire had broken out at a building behind El Casino. “FIRE!” This was not a warning to be taken lightly in the neighborhood of San Miguel, in the Calidonia District, where a labyrinth of wooden buildings housed mostly West Indians who labored in the Canal Zone.

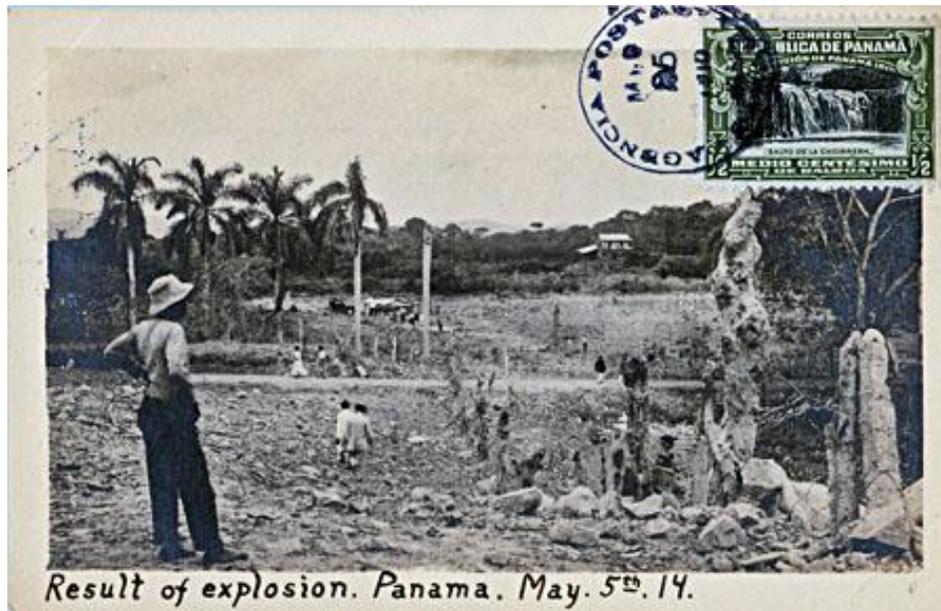
There are conflicting stories as to exactly where the fire began, but it appears that it was in a building on 3rd Street (today Avenida Nacional) near where the Santa Fe Hospital now stands. The “Bomberos” of the Calidonia District were the first to respond, working diligently to contain the flames that spread quickly in all directions, but mostly downwind. The firefighters were overwhelmed and a second alarm went out.

Soon, the building known as “El Polvorin” was engulfed in flames. This was a two-story wooden structure of two floors surrounded by a stone wall. This structure was the official government warehouse for explosives and it contained powder, nitroglycerin, dynamite and other explosive material belonging to the Government of Panama as well as to The American Development Company, Fidanque & Castro, Brandon & Brothers, Chiari y Khopcke, The Isthmian Canal Commission and Pinel y Hermanos. Not long after, a tremendous explosion rocked the district causing panic among the civilians watching the holocaust. The blast took the lives of six “Bomberos” and two civilians. Several firefighters suffered serious injuries and many received cuts and bruises.

The dead Bomberos were Felix Antonio Alvarez, Luis De Basach, Juan Bautista Beltran, Luis Buitrago, Faustino Ruedas, and Alonzo Teleche. The civilians were Alan del Rio and his wife.

The seriously injured included the Commander of the Calidonia Station Dario Vallarino, who lost his leg, Major Florencio Icaza, Captains Domingo Vasquez and Ernesto Arosemena, Sergeants Zenon Ramirez and Francisco Diez, Corporal James Thompson, who also lost a leg, firefighters Antonio Jimenez and Juan A. Porras as well as Cornet Sergio Perez. Corporal Thompson, a native of Jamaica, would live on to become a legend at his fire station as one of the few survivors of El Polvorin until his death on September 26, 1938.

In all, it took four hours to contain the fire which, to this day, remains the worst in the modern history of Panama for the number of lives it took and the serious injuries it caused. In appreciation for the heroism of the six fallen and the many injured, the people of Panama dedicated a monument on the small park in front of the Train Station and named it Plaza 5 de Mayo.



Result of explosion. Panama. May. 5th. 14.

Canal Zone Policeman Coveleski took this photo of the explosion crater on May 25, 1915, to mail to a friend. Note the little figures towards the bottom of the hole.



Funeral of the six fallen Bomberos as it winds around Cathedral Plaza, 1914.

IV. Plaza 5 De Mayo

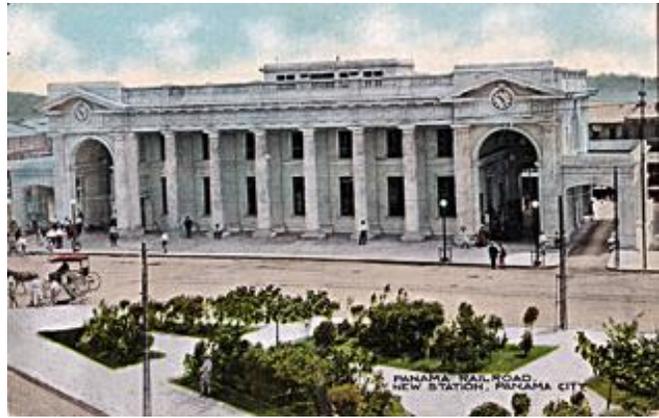
On May 5, 1916, the second anniversary of the explosion of El Polvorin, the President of Panama, Belisario Porras, dedicated a marble monument in memory to those “Camisas Rojas” heroes who had sacrificed their lives in their attempt to save others. The monument was located on the small park across the impressive building that housed the new trans-isthmian Train Station serving the city.

This area in the city had always been a center of activity because of the railroad terminal. In the late 1840s it saw the constant traffic of prospectors heading for the gold fields of California. Then the wars saw movement of military traffic as well as the visitation of thousands of

military personnel attracted by the nightclubs, bars and retail shops in the square. It also became the location of choice for many political and patriotic demonstrations.

The more famous bars around the area included The Milwaukee and The Louisiana while the most popular nightclubs were The Rialto, The Happyland and Kelley's Ritz. At one time or another, the Excelsior Theater was located in this area as were the Hotel New York, the Hotel Internacional, the Almacen de 25 Centavos, the Lewis Magazines store and the Chase Manhattan Bank.

However, as time went by, the increase of traffic through the city and the need for more parking for the many businesses around the Plaza dictated that progress supersede history. The park was converted into a parking lot leaving only the monument in the center. And so went the years of the 1950s through recent times. Now, however, the Plaza has been restored and rebuilt with water fountains and flowering bushes to regain its glory for the memory of the Bomberos to whom the country pays homage.



On the left is the area before the train station was built and before a park was made. On the right is the finished train station with the park in front around 1913.



View of the newly built Plaza 5 d Mayo and a close-up of the monument, 1916.



Plaza 5 de Mayo as it looks today.

V. El Paseo De Antorchas - The Torchlight Parade

On the evening of the 27th of November, every year since the founding of the Cuerpo de Bomberos in 1887, the firefighters of the Republic of Panama have staged a “Paseo De Antorchas”, a torchlight parade, originating at Plaza 5 De Mayo and marching through Central Avenue to a selected termination point. Beginning at 8:00 PM, when it is dark, the event is a beautiful and impressive spectacle. As a child I always looked forward to this event while not quite understanding its significance. The parade is both to honor the fallen heroes of the El Polvorin tragedy as well as to celebrate the founding of the Cuerpo de Bomberos.

Because Panama celebrates its independence from Spain on November 28, the parade is held the night before.



El Paseo de Antorchas, the Torchlight Parade, the evening of November 27.

VI. Discipline, Honor, Self-Denial

The Bombero’s creed is “*Disciplina, Honor, Abnegacion*”. It is a creed forged and immortalized by the heroes of El Polvorin tragedy.

On May 5, 2012, a new monument was dedicated at the actual site of the El Polvorin explosion in 1914. The small plaque that had marked the site for so long was removed and replaced with

the larger memorial. The new plaque displays the creed of the Bomberos and points out the “special qualities demanded of those who would run into a burning building” to rescue others. It takes discipline, honor and self-denial to live up to the standards of those who gave their lives on May 5, 1914, at “El Polvorin”.



The new monument at the site of El Polvorin.

VII. The Chief At El Polvorin

Commander Juan Antonio Guizado was one of the first respondents at the El Polvorin fire. His dedication was not surprising. While he had been chief of the Bomberos for only two years at the time, he was a veteran of the department since its founding days. He joined the Bomberos on November 28, 1887, as a private using the number 1 in white on his red shirt and stayed with the department until his retirement in 1950 with the rank of Director General of all the fire departments in Panama.



Commander Juan Antonio Guizado is congratulated by President Juan Demostenes Arosemena on the 50th Anniversary of the Cuerpo de Bomberos, 1937.

His service to the Bomberos and his country was an invaluable array of duties and accomplishments. Among them we can list his help in developing the Bomberos into the highly efficient organization it is today; his work with the Canal Zone government helping to organize the Civil Defense for which was named Chief of Civil Defense in Panama as well as in the Canal Zone during WW II; and his organization of fire departments in countries throughout Central America.

During his time with the Bomberos, he fought many fires including the enormous fire in Colon in 1940. The fire grew so intense that fire engines and firefighters from Panama had to be shipped over by train, there being no other means of going from Panama to Colon by land in those days. But while that was a devastating fire, he always thought of his fallen comrades at El Polvorin.

VII. Other Photos Of Interest



Funeral of Bombero Corporal James Thompson, September 1938.



Bomberos on parade, May 5, 2013.



Bomberos, May 5, 2013, Panama.



*On the left, Bomberos fight a real fire in the old section of the city.
On the right, Bomberos on a training exercise.*

VIII. A Little Bombero



When my son Glenn was five years old, already living in Longview, Texas, a deaf-mute retired Black Bombero in Panama made him a firefighter's hat with the number 7. My mother made him a red shirt to match and, with a pair of white trousers and Wellington boots, we had a Little Bombero right at home. The photo was taken in 1963.

IX. Addendum

More information on El Polvorin

Through the efforts of Barbara Baldwin and Bob Karrer, we have more information on the tragic event called The Explosion of El Polvorin. A short article appearing in *The Canal Record* of that period describes the event and locates more exactly where the magazine was located. Most importantly, it describes in detail the building called El Polvorin. I found this information to be of great interest to me and wish I had had it before publishing my article on the subject. I will include it as an Addenda, especially the description of the building.

Note that the information pertaining to the number of dead does not match the actual number as registered later. We must take into account that the Canal Record issue is dated May 6, 1914, just one day after the explosion, but we don't know when it actually came out. The article covers the funeral the following Tuesday, so it is possible that the issue actually went to print AFTER May 13. There may have been a bit of confusion as to the casualties. Final records list 6 Bomberos killed and 2 civilians.

The Canal Record

Volume VII, Number 37, Wednesday, May 6, 1914, Page 350

"Explosion Of Panama Powder Magazine"

"Eight persons were killed and about 15 injured by the blowing up of the powder magazine located in an old stone building on the Corozal road, a short distance from its intersection with the Sabanas highway (now Calle 36 and Via España, right across from where El Casino stood), at about 3:15 a.m., on Tuesday, May 5 (1914). One of the injured died Wednesday, making the number of fatalities nine."

"The building is a relic of the early history of the city, and served during that period as a fortified outpost; it was a mamposteria (brick, stone and cement) built structure, surrounded by a wall, and was provided with watch towers, or turrets, and loopholes for firing at an enemy. For some time past, it had been used as a storehouse for explosives and was known as "El Polvorin". The explosives, consisting for the greater part of black powder and dynamite, were set off by a fire, the origin of which has not yet been clearly established. . . ."

"The concussion produced by the explosion was felt over a very wide area. It awoke the greater part of the inhabitants of Panama City, Ancon and environs, and appears to have had almost as startling effect in Culebra, Empire and other towns in the Pacific slope in the Canal Zone. The shock was nearly as pronounced at Naos Island. The explosion completely destroyed the powder magazine, tore a great hole in the ground upon which it stood, and sent large pieces of rock several hundred yards away. It did considerable damage in shattering windows and twisting doors in Panama and Ancon, and the soap factory, butter factory, Plaza de Toros, and other buildings in the vicinity of the magazine suffered severely. Windows were broken in the Administration Building at Ancon, and nearly every house in the settlement, articles were shaken off the shelves, and in some cases the sleeping inmates were thrown from their beds."

"The killed, with the exception of two, were members of the Panama paid fire department, who were endeavoring to extinguish the fire when the explosion occurred. The two others were a man, who was employed as caretaker at the Plaza de Toros, and his wife, who lived on the premises. They had left their room and three children, and had gone into one of the boxes evidently for the purpose of witnessing the fire. They were killed by masses of flying rock, but the children escaped injury."

"All the killed were given a public funeral Tuesday afternoon and the procession was one of the largest ever seen in Panama. President Porras issued a decree proclaiming it a day of mourning in the Federal District, and calling upon businessmen to close their stores during the afternoon, a suggestion which was carried out to the letter. Flags were displayed at half-mast on the public buildings and at the offices of the foreign diplomat representatives."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank those who helped me with this article: Barbara Baldwin, who is always willing to help proofread and who always provides me with research sites and information; Stewart Redwood, whose contribution in the proper use of grammar, along with Barbara, makes the narrative flow much smoother; and Bob Karrer who never fails to add more zip to the work by providing unique photos long forgotten.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND PHOTOS

1. *Acta de Fundacion del Cuerpo de Bomberos, Epocas, November 1984*
2. *El Cuerpo de Bomberos de Panama, Epocas, November 1985*
3. *Historia – Benemerito Cuerpo de Bomberos de la Republica de Panama*
4. *Conmemoracion del Polvorin, Educa Panama, May 5, 2012*
5. *La Plaza 5 De Mayo, La Prensa, Harry Castro Stanziola, 2002/05/26*
6. *The El Polvorin Disaster, The Silver People Chronicle, November 2010*
7. *El Polvorin, Dia A Dia, 05042005*
8. *Drama de El Polvorin no repetira, La Prensa, V. Arosemena, 2005*
9. *Parakeet Voyager, Blanquita McNatt Schield, BHS '54, October 20, 2002*
10. *Cuando Exploto El Polvorin, La Prensa, October 19, 2003*
11. *Bob Karrer*
12. *Museo de Bomberos – Panama, museobomberos.blogspot.com*
13. *Bomberos Remember the Fallen . . . www.participa.gob.pa/*
14. *El Polvorin, Redaccion / DIAaDIA www.diaadia.com.pa/*
15. *Paseo de Antorchas, www.bomberosdepanama.gob.pa/*
16. *Historia, www.bomberosdepanama.gob.pa/nosotros/historia.html*
17. *Cuerpo de Bomberos de Panama – 1924, Epocas, Noviembre, 1985*
18. *My apologies for not remembering exactly where many other photos came from.*

Luis R. Celerier
Longview, Texas
February 2014