

How I Watched World War II From The Top Of A Mango Tree

By Louie Celerier, November 2014



Watching WW II from my mango tree.

From the day I became aware of my environment, I learned there were airplanes. And since that day, they became a passion, particularly their "Golden Era" of the 1930s and 1940s. The reason for this was simply due to the fact that Paitilla airport was only a walking mile from my house and its flight pattern took the airplanes around my house.

Prior to World War II, my father and I would walk over to see the little planes take off and land. I remember he would converse with a young mechanic named Ventura, who had been his pupil at the Escuela de Artes Y Oficios, while I roamed around the half empty hangar. One plane in particular would catch my eye; a red biplane, which I guess must have been a WACO open-cockpit, that, once in a while, would be seen from my house doing aerobatics. My cousins Luis Carlos and Frank would also notice the little Piper Cubs fly over my house as we played in the back yard, and we could recognize each by their colors. I know there was one we called "The Coffin" (El Ataud) because it was painted black.

Then came December 7, 1941, and civilian operations at Paitilla ceased while the U.S. Air Corps took over the field. Soon, three sided sand bag revetments appeared along the western side of the field with camouflage netting over them. From the road on the northern end of the field, I could see the pointed noses of Curtis P-40 fighters sticking out. Records of the 6th Air Force indicate that these were seven P-40C and three P-40E models belonging to the 28th Pursuit Squadron. Armed guards, naturally, kept everyone out of the field, but, still, lots could be seen from the road looping around the northern edge of the field. We could see or hear some of the P-40s as they warmed up and took off and they would be seen climbing as they passed above my backyard.

As I remember, the field did not remain active very long and by the end of 1943, or so, the small group of fighters was gone and, in its place, a firing range was installed on the southwestern coast of the field. By then, I had built a tree house on the big mango tree in my backyard, with a little observation platform on the highest branches. From this vantage point, I could watch clearly the Douglas A-20 aircraft towing a sleeve at which all sort of caliber weapons would shoot. With my grandfather's old, but



Left: Curtiss P-40C. The C model, powered by a 1040 HP Allyson, had a small air scoop a bit far back under the nose. It also had two .50 caliber machine guns on the nose and four .30 caliber on the wings. Right: P-40E. The E model had a larger air scoop closer to the nose and was powered by an 1150 HP Allison. It did not have nose guns, but carried six .50 caliber machine guns on the wings.

powerful, binoculars I had a front seat to all the action. When the exercise was over, the A-20 would release the sleeve and fly almost right over me as it headed home. I would wave and was convinced that they could see me. Later, a big red drone took over as target. I never saw it blown out of the sky, but saw it parachute to the ground several times on completion of its work. One time it headed straight towards me, as if out of control, until the parachute opened. I could have sworn it was coming down near my house and I hurried down the tree and headed down the road in the direction I thought it had come down. I left the road at a certain point and headed into the brush but, after getting worn out cutting through that mess of vines and underbrush, I gave up the chase.

During this target practice period, my father and I used to go to the site, which was no longer under guard, and collect empty shell casings after the soldiers left. Even though they policed the area before leaving, there would always be some casings. I had a multitude of .50 cal. empty casings, 4 live .50 caliber shells, one live .30 cal. and even a nice large caliber brass casing.



My cousin Frank Azcarraga at Paitilla with surplus Piper J-3 Cub around 1946-47.

When the airport was finally returned to Panama in December of 1945, my father and I made one last visit to the firing range and we salvaged large quantities of telephone wire that had been left behind. With that last act of military operations, my part in the conflict we know as World War II was over. Civilian planes, all surplus military stock from Piper Cubs to Fairchild trainers, soon filled the airport and Paitilla was really humming with activity for quite some time. In 1946 I flew in a surplus Piper L-4 for ten minutes with Marcos Gelabert. It cost my father \$10, representing ten hours of private tutoring students in mathematics at our house. It would be another 25 years before I would be able to afford flying lessons and get my license. But I never forgot Paitilla, my part in the war from a mango tree and my first flight there.