

PANAMA FEVER

The Battle to Build the Canal

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PREFACE

The Battle to Build the Canal

'You here who are doing your work well in bringing to completion this great enterprise are standing exactly as a soldier of the few great wars of the world's history. This is one of the great works of the world.'

– President Theodore Roosevelt to the American canal workforce, 1906

Every year, on the anniversary of the opening of the Panama Canal on 14 August 1914, there is a special celebration. A small motor launch takes a group of about twenty-five on a short boat ride from a dock near the top of the Pedro Miguel lock. In August 2004, almost everyone is of Antillean descent, mainly from Jamaica or Barbados. The commemorative trip has been organised by Panama's British West Indian community. All ages are represented, and the vast majority are Panama-born. The others are from the islands, and one visitor with her young daughter has come all the way from Boston.

As the boat sets off from the dock, huge container ships loom past. One is a giant German carrier on the way to the US East Coast crewed by Philipinos. Another is transporting car parts from China to Brazil. We are floating in one of the world's key commercial arteries. Since the opening of the canal, over a million ships have used it to travel between the great oceans, some fourteen thousand a year, now passing through twenty-four hours a day. In places the sides of the canal consist of sheer rock, in others there are elaborate terraces of crumbly, reddish soil mixed with dark boulders. Where the ground is flat lie neat, clipped lawns, the rich tropical jungle kept at a respectable distance. As it is before noon, the container-carriers are heading from the Pacific to the Atlantic (travelling in a northerly direction). They have sailed past Panama City and ascended the double

locks at Miraflores, crossed the small lake and climbed the single lock just behind us at Pedro Miguel. They are now at the top of the 'bridge of water', 85 feet above sea level. Beyond the narrow and windy stretch ahead, the canal opens up into the huge man-made Lake Gatún, created by the damming of the River Chagres with a massive earthen structure. At the other end of the lake, the vessels will descend through the spectacular triple lock at Gatún, and thence out into the Caribbean Sea and away.

Within a few minutes we are approaching the infamous Culebra Cut, the site of the maximum excavation for the canal. Here, for up to twenty years, thousands of men, the vast majority British West Indians, laboured in torrential rain or in burning heat to break the back of the Continental Divide, the rocky spine that links the great mountain ranges of North and South America.

The occasion is a celebration of the contribution made to the canal by the Antillean workers, but also a solemn memorial of their sufferings and losses. Between the two highest mountains of the Cut, where the sides of the canal rise almost vertically, the boat stops for petals and flowers to be thrown on the water. With all the passengers crowded out on the small deck, prayers are said by several of the rectors present, and hymns are sung as the warm tropical rain starts pouring down.

Bahamas-born Albert Peters was twenty-years old when, in 1906, he and two friends decided to head for the Isthmus. 'We were all eager for some adventure and experience,' he wrote. 'My parents were against the idea. They told me about the Yellow Fever, Malaria and Small Pox that infested the place but I told them that I and my pals are just going to see for ourselves.'

He was in for a shock. Seeing the working conditions, and the 'heavy rain and mud', he wanted to be back at home, but having spent all his money on the trip, he had no choice but to stick it out. Within a month he had malaria, and was hospitalised. 'The first night in there the man next to me died,' he writes, 'and that's when I remembered my parents' plea and wished I had taken their advice.'

'Death was our constant companion,' remembered another West Indian worker, Alfred Dottin. 'I shall never forget the trainloads of dead men being carted away daily, as if they were just so much lumber. Malaria with all its horrible meaning those days was just a household word. I saw mosquitoes, I say this without fear of exaggerating, by the thousands attack one man. There were days that we could only work a few hours because of the high fever racking our bodies – it was a living hell. Finally typhoid fever got me . . .'

Although the hardships of the construction period were shared in part by all the numerous nationalities who built the canal – French, American, Spanish, Italian, Greek and many others – the West Indian workers were three times as likely as the others to die from disease or accidents, and their startling accounts are dominated

by stories of appalling conditions and dangerous work. The loss of life was astronomical. With safety precautions incredibly primitive by modern standards, accidents 'were numberless'. Constantine Parkinson, a Jamaican born in Panama, lost his right leg and left heel when the spoil-carrying train he was working on crashed off its rails. He was taken to hospital and operated on. 'After coming out of the operation in the ward,' he writes, 'I noticed all kinds of cripples around my bed without arms foot one eye telling me to cheer up not to fret we all good soldiers.'

'Some of the costs of the canal are here,' wrote a sympathetic American policeman in his account of visiting the main hospital's black wards, which were always situated on the least favourable side of the building. 'Sturdy black men in pyjamas sitting on the verandas or in wheel chairs, some with one leg gone, some with both. One could not help but wonder how it feels to be hopelessly ruined in body early in life for helping to dig a ditch for a foreign power that, however well it may treat you materially, cares not a whistle blast more for you than for its old worn-out locomotives rusting away in the jungle.'

Certainly the West Indians were treated as cheap and expendable by both the French and the Americans. The working conditions were described by one as 'some sort of semi-slavery', and, particularly under the Americans, there was a rigid apartheid system in place throughout the Canal Zone. Nonetheless, in spite of obvious resentments, the West Indian accounts are full of pride in knowing they were part of a great, heroic and civilising achievement. 'Many times I met death at the door,' wrote one worker fifty years after the completion of the canal, 'but thank God I am alive to see the great improvement the Canal had made and the wonderful fame it has around the world.' Another commented: 'We worked in rain, sun, fire, gunpowder, explosions from dynamite . . . but our interest was to see the Canal finished because we came here to build it . . . most of us came here with the same spirit as a soldier going to war, don't dodge from work or we will never finish it.'

The men who built the canal did indeed go to Panama as soldiers to a great battle and the fight to build the canal can be compared with an armed conflict. It has been estimated that three out of four of the French engineers who set out to be part of Ferdinand de Lesseps' heroic dream were dead within three months of arriving on Panama's 'Fever Coast'. Yellow fever and a mysterious and particularly vicious form of malaria known as 'Chagres Fever' accounted for thousands. Many others were carried off by accidents, pneumonia or sheer exhaustion. The most conservative estimate of the death toll is 25,000, five hundred lives for every mile of the canal. Many, many more were maimed or permanently debilitated by disease. Even in 1914, when the Isthmus was supposedly 'sanitised' by the Americans, over half the work force was hospitalised at some point during the year.

Apart from actual wars, it was the costliest project ever yet attempted in history, as ambitious a construction as the Great Pyramids. Hundreds of millions of francs

were invested – and lost – during the ten-year struggle by the French in the 1880s, and the Americans spent nearly four hundred million dollars between 1904 and 1914, in the days when a couple of dollars a day was a good working wage. Although much shorter than the canal at Suez, it cost four times as much and required three times the amount of excavation. Mountains, literally, had to be moved. One observer called it the ‘greatest liberty ever taken with nature.’

And ‘nature’ was not going to be conquered easily. In the way of the path between the seas were huge, geologically complex mountains, thick jungle teeming with deadly creatures and seemingly bottomless swamp. For eight months of the year there was almost continual rain. Because of the peculiar geographical configurations of the Isthmus it is one of the wettest places on earth. Two inches of rain have been known to fall in one hour. This made the Chagres River, which lies along the path of the waterway, a powerful and unstable force to have as a bedfellow to the canal. Rising up to thirty yards in an hour, it would regularly burst its banks, sweeping away men and materials. Vast mudslides buried workers, supplies, and machines. And in the swamps and puddles, fever-carrying mosquitoes bred in their millions to launch themselves on the toiling labourers.

What impresses now about the story of the canal is not just the extraordinary number of ‘firsts’ its achievement entailed – financial, technical and medical – but the astonishing, almost arrogant ambition of it all. Nothing like it had ever been attempted in the tropics before. The leaders of the project, be they French or American, simply believed they could do anything, that innovation and technology – the forces of Progress, of the Industrial Revolution and the great Victorian Age – were able to conquer any challenge.

The French effort, in particular, powered as it was by private capital and a sublime belief in emerging technology, sees this Age overreach itself, with tragic consequences. The Americans were driven less by idealism than by national, racial and military ambition, but they too would be humbled by the challenges that the jungles of Panama presented. The US construction project succeeded because of state funding, local political control and access to scientific and technical expertise beyond the reach of the French. But it also opens the door to a new era where the efforts of individuals would be controlled and channelled by the state for its own purposes, the machine age that was ushered in by the industrial slaughter of the Western Front.

In both cases, and throughout the history of the canal dream, almost everyone involved with the project, from the humblest pick-and-shovel man to the most venal Wall Street speculator, became gripped by the ‘great idea’ of the canal, by ‘Panama Fever’. But it is striking, too, how many enemies the canal project attracted through its history. Vested interests feared the change in the status quo that such a radical

altering of the geography of the world would usher in. The Americans, in particular, were fiercely opposed to a foreign power controlling any transcontinental waterway. The French attempt would bring heavy criticism of the 'over-optimism' of its promoter, Ferdinand de Lesseps, and its failure would see his ruin and disgrace, as well as financial and political disaster for France. The American project was even more controversial, entailing at its inception the murky activities of political lobbyists and a vivid demonstration of a new kind of United States, casting off its historical aversion to imperialism and aggression on the international stage.

The successful opening of the canal in August 1914, at almost precisely the moment when Old Europe was embarking on a ruinous war, was the climax of the United States' spectacular rise to world power. The Isthmus was the key to the struggle for mastery of the Western Hemisphere as well as to wider international commercial and naval strength. With the successful completion of the Washington-funded and dominated canal, the United States emerged as a truly global power and the 'American Century' could begin.

In Panama itself, the canal was realisation of a dream that went back four hundred years. It had been the destiny of the Isthmus ever since 1513, when the Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa ventured inland from Panama's Caribbean coast and, 'silent, upon a peak in Darien', discovered a previously unknown great ocean separated from the Atlantic by only a narrow bridge of land forty miles wide. Balboa's discovery immediately engendered a belief that a waterway could be built linking the two oceans. Thereafter, the Isthmus became of crucial strategic importance and the focus of fierce international rivalry between Spain, France, Great Britain and, as it emerged, the United States.

Panama was not only a magnet for empire-builders; its transit route – first a paved road, then a railway – had brought the world to the Isthmus even before a canal was started. An international crossroads a hundred years before the *Mayflower* landing, Panama played host at times to traders, bullion carriers, pirates, missionaries, soldiers, and then a California-bound gold rush. The canal dream would bring explorers, doctors, engineers, more soldiers (this time to stay) and, at one time, a workforce of fifty thousand from twenty-seven different countries. Many of the canal builders believed that fever was the result of vice, but that did not prevent Panama's two cities from becoming roaring dens of gambling, drinking and prostitution. All this descended on an unstable region still struggling to find political solutions to its problems. At times the canal has been an awkward destiny for Panama.

In the wider world, the great dream of the canal attracted idealists, dreamers and scoundrels from the very outset. The four hundred years after Balboa's discovery saw Panama's unique geography inspire grandiose canal schemes from each age's greatest engineers, promoters and visionaries. It was the great unfulfilled engineering challenge. But for those four centuries all efforts had ended in failure or disaster.