Across the Pacific to War: 
The Colombian Navy in Korea, 1951–1955

by Charles H. Briscoe

Since 1950, Colombia has traditionally supported the United Nations collective security initiatives. The Colombian Navy and Army provided combat elements to serve with the UN Command in Korea. Both were “showcase” forces representing the best of each service and the nation. Colombia was the only Latin American country to send military forces to support the UN effort to counter North Korea’s invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950. The professionalism developed by Colombian military leaders in Korea enabled them to turn their armed forces into a respected modern military.

This transformation also fostered social and political changes in Colombia. The purpose of this article is to show what the Colombian Navy did during the Korean War.

Just as the U.S. “first response” to Korea was its Pacific Fleet, so it was for Colombia in 1950. Within two days of the invasion, the Security Council had passed two resolutions that committed the UN to halt the aggression. The armed invasion of South Korea was deemed a “breach of peace.” Member states were asked to refrain from assisting North Korea. The second UN Security Council resolution asked the member nations to provide military assistance to South Korea to repel North Korean aggression and to restore international peace and security.

The Colombian delegation played a key role in garnering support for the resolutions. It proved most convenient that the Soviet Union delegation was boycotting the Security Council. The Soviet Union had absented itself since January 1950, to protest the seating of Nationalist China while excluding Communist China. Stopping the aggression of North Korea became a test of the UN peacekeeping ability.

In Bogotá, the editors of the Conservative newspaper, El Siglo, vied with those at El Tiempo in advocating Colombia’s obligation to furnish military forces to the UN. The decision to support the UN fight in Korea had to wait until the inauguration of Laureano Gómez Castro in August 1950. On 6 September 1950, the new president pledged a frigate to the UN Naval Command. This was quite significant because the entire Colombian Navy consisted of two 1932-vintage Portuguese destroyers captured during the war with Peru, a 1944 U.S. Tacoma-class patrol frigate (former USS Groton—renamed Almirante Padilla) purchased in 1947, and...
The authority to dispatch the Frigate Almirante Padilla overseas was by Executive Decree No. 3230 (25 October 1950) because the national state of emergency declared by Mariáno Ospina Pérez, the predecessor of Gómez, was still in effect. The suspension of all congressional activities had been imposed to stem La Violencia. On 1 November 1950, the frigate Almirante Padilla, with a crew of 190 (ten officers and 180 seamen), steamed out of Cartagena bound for San Diego Naval Base, California, for combat refitting.

Though the Colombian government hoped the frigate would be in the war zone by the end of the year, the crew left knowing that neither they, nor their frigate was ready for combat. “Much to my surprise, two hours after leaving Balboa, Panama Canal Zone, for San Diego, I asked for fifteen knots. I was speechless when my chief engineer told me that the machinery was too bad and that we could only make ten knots,” recalled Lieutenant Commander (Lt Cdr) Julio Cesar Reyes Canal. When the Korean War began, Lt Cdr Reyes Canal, a navy officer with thirty-two years of service, was in the process of combat refitting. The authority to dispatch the frigate would be in the war zone by the end of the year, the crew welcomed the New Year in California, and destroyers got the Colombians ready for Korea. On 5 May 1951, the frigate Almirante Padilla arrived at the U.S. Navy’s San Diego Naval Base, Sasebo, Japan, where it was assigned to the Patrol Group of Task Force 95.13 operating in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of North and South Korea.

The specially-organized battalion (1,080 men) was more than double the size of a typical Colombian infantry battalion. In February 1951, the battalion was still training with U.S. Army advisors in Colombia. The Battalión Colombia did not arrive in Korea until June 1951.

On 28 February 1951, the Colombian frigate sailed for Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to spend four weeks training with elements of the Pacific Fleet. Practicing the latest antisubmarine patrol tactics, antiaircraft defense, and shore bombardment techniques with U.S. Navy frigates and destroyers got the Colombians ready for Korea. On 5 May 1951, the Almirante Padilla arrived at the U.S. Navy Base, Sasebo, Japan, where it was assigned to the Patrol and Escort Group of Task Force 95.13 operating in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of North and South Korea.

At home, President Gómez had increased Colombia’s commitment to the UN by offering a battalion of infan-

Ocean Distances from Pusan in Nautical Miles

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The Island War—Korea, July 1951–February 1952.
try on 14 November 1950 (Executive Decree No. 3927). After three-months training with U.S. Army instructors, the Batallón Colombia (1,083 officers and soldiers) boarded USNS Aiken Victory at Buenaventura on 22 May 1951 for Korea, embarking on the Colombian Army’s first overseas military operation. By then, the offensive ground war in Korea was grinding down to a stalemate.

While the Batallón Colombia was sailing across the Pacific, the patrol frigate Almirante Padilla was performing coastal blockade patrols on the west coast of Korea with the British cruisers HMS Ceylon and HMS Kenya, the Canadian destroyer HCMS Sioux, and the U.S. frigate USS Glendale. Since the hydrography along the west coast restricted the movement of heavy warships, the Colombian and American frigates and the South Korean minesweepers conducted the inshore patrols. On 14 June 1951, Almirante Padilla was shifted to the east coast to join the siege of Wonsan initiated by U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Allan E. Smith in February.

This east coast siege lasted until the armistice. The North Korean cities of Wonsan and Songjin were attacked by aircraft and bombarded daily by UN naval vessels that ranged from rocket launching craft to battleships. The naval blockade extended to the far north, including Chongjin. All road and railroad bridges leading south from Chongjin received naval gunfire regularly. During its three-month patrol, the Almirante Padilla dropped off and retrieved Special Mission Group (SMG) agents and raiding parties offshore of North Korean targets. Yo-do (island) in Wonsan harbor was their forward operating base. In the midst of the fighting, a group of UN veterans were flown to Washington DC to meet President Harry S. Truman and to tour the United States.

On 24 October 1951, President Truman graciously received them at the White House. The soldiers, airmen, marines, seamen, and noncombatants represented the nations supporting the UN in Korea. The Colombians, Army Private Oscar Ramírez and Seaman Second Class Allan E. Smith in February.

Colombian Navy Gunner Régulo Farfán, a Mariachi singer from Magdalena, entertained soldiers of Batallón Colombia when they visited the Almirante Padilla in Pusan, South Korea.
USS *Bisbee* in Yokosuka, Japan, September–October 1950, before its transfer to the Colombian Navy as the *Capitán Tono*.

In his Pentagon office on 16 November 1951, Secretary of the Navy Dan A. Kimball (left) signed the Memorandum of Understanding transferring the USS *Bisbee* (PF-46) to the Colombian government. Observing are Ambassador Dipriano Restrepo-Jaramillo (center) and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Thomas G. Mann (right). The USS *Bisbee* served the Colombian Navy as the *Capitán Tono*.

The Colombian frigate *Almirante Padilla* bombarded Wonsan targets, sunk numerous contact mines with gunfire, rescued several downed UN pilots, and supported an SMG intelligence collection force sent into the island of Yang-do, near Songjin, before being relieved by the newly arrived Colombian frigate *Capitán Tono*.

Citing the difficulty of continuing routine training at home with its best ship and men in Korea, the government of President Laureano Gómez asked to buy two more naval vessels comparable to the *Almirante Padilla*. On 24 January 1952, the Colombians purchased the USS *Bisbee*, another Tacoma-class patrol frigate that had just completed a patrol tour with the UN naval forces in Korea. A Colombian crew led by Lt Cdr Hernando Berón Victoria and many of the senior officers, department heads, and petty officers who transferred over from the *Almirante Padilla* took charge of the renamed *Capitán Tono* (to memorialize another naval hero of the War of Independence) in Yokosuka, Japan, on 31 January 1952. Relieved on 12 February 1952, the *Almirante Padilla* departed for home via Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Colombian frigate arrived at Bocachica, Colombia, on 20 March 1952.

Following the standard overhaul, Lt Cdr Berón Victoria directed an extensive training period for the crew. The *Capitán Tono* sailed for Pusan on 19 April 1952, and in early May was operating off the east coast. Shore bombardment, patrolling, and supply convoy escort were the assigned missions. Wonsan was considerably north of the 38th parallel. With the land war at a stalemate, the Communists had moved heavy artillery and mortars to shore batteries around the harbor and to nearby islands. Naval gunfire duels with the shore batteries became frequent as the frigates worked inshore to protect patterned minesweepers. Because of the accurate and intense coastal artillery counter-battery fire in the Wonsan harbor area, all UN ships had to display great skill in navigation and gunnery. Vessels had to steam faster, change course more frequently, and still provide accurate gunfire on roads and railways, day and night.

“Flycatcher” missions required the Colombians to...
interdict North Korean sampans at night. These close-to-shore operations were dangerous, but reduced waterborne infiltrations of Communist agents into the South. Antisubmarine training with the U.S. Navy paid off on 9–10 October 1952, when the Capitán Tono intercepted an unknown submarine and kept it “locked” for thirty hours before it managed to escape. UN Naval Command verified that it was not an allied submarine “testing” fleet security. After that short stint of excitement, the Capitán Tono returned to the primary mission of the blockade force—shore bombardment.

The air and sea bombardment effort was focused mainly on “Package” targets—difficult-to-repair shore-line targets along the Songjin–Hungnam railroad. Using radar reflector buoys that had been placed offshore of the targets to assist navigation and gunfire accuracy at night, frigates could close to 1,500 to 2,000 meters offshore to engage targets. All patrolling ships had to fire a specified number of rounds every day and night. When bad weather prevented airstrikes, the UN navy assumed all targets. The “Derail” targets along the northeast coast were “Navy only.” These were to be destroyed solely by naval gunfire. The Capitán Tono returned to Yokosuka, Japan, for maintenance on 12 November 1952. That marked the end of its first tour of duty in Korean waters. Its relief ship, the USS Burlington (soon to be Almirante Brión), having just completed a Korean tour, was already in Yokosuka. On 12 January 1953, Lt Cdr Carlos Prieta Silva took command of the vessel. On 27 January 1953, the Capitán Tono sailed for Colombia with most of the senior Colombian naval officers, some returning after almost two years of service in Korea. Only Lt Cdr Jaime Parra Ramírez (Admiral and commander of the Colombian Navy, 1968–1974) stayed for a third tour as executive officer. The Almirante Brión, like her predecessors, required major repair work before active operations and the mostly “green” crew needed training. It was not until 18 July 1953 that the Almirante Brión sailed for Korea, arriving just a few days before the Armistice.

While the Colombian Navy maintained a frigate in Korean waters until 11 October 1955, the fighting phase of the war ended with the armistice. The Almirante Padilla and the Capitán Tono returned for second tours with the UN fleet, the last leaving Korean waters on 11 October 1955. The Batallón Colombia had left Korea almost a year earlier (29 October 1954).

Colombia’s commitment to Korea was regaled by newspapers as “a symbol of fraternal friendship” with the United States. In addition to providing naval and ground forces to the UN Command, Colombia embargoed the shipment of strategic materials to Communist China and North Korea for the duration of the war. Since Colombia’s second-ranking export was petroleum, this was a significant contribution. Both the Colombian navy and army were used as instruments of foreign pol-
The ARC F 51 Almirante Padilla.

Colombian frigates had practiced blockade operations, shore bombardment, and mine sweeping, as well as performed downed pilot rescues, escorted supply convoys, suppressed North Korean fishing, interdicted enemy coastal traffic, supported the capture of offshore islands, and delivered and recovered special operations groups. After the war, the well-trained Colombian Navy was significantly enlarged, upgraded, and fully capable of protecting national interests.

The professionalism that accompanied the acquisition of combat experience in Korea enabled veteran officers to establish a modern armed force in the postwar years. Colombian seamen and soldiers fought well in Korea, earning the respect of the United States and United Nations as well as the Latin American world. Today, a German-built FS 1500 frigate bears the name Almirante Padilla as does the Naval Academy. The UN Naval Mission in the Korean War from 1951–1955 is an important part of Colombian Navy heritage. Almirante Padilla serves as the link to that benchmark international combat service.

Endnotes


2 Carlos Horacio Urán, Colombia y los Estados Unidos en la Guerra de Corea (Notre Dame, IN: Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame, May 1986), 22–24. While military forces were offered by Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, and Ecuador, only Colombia provided them. The contributions from the rest of Latin America amounted to money, foodstuffs, and the use of military bases. Most countries applied economic sanctions.


9 Ramsey, “The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez,” 546; Crew numbers vary: 12 officers and 177 men aboard the Almirante Padilla. History of the UN Forces in the Korean War, III, 173.


16 El Tiempo (Bogotá) 17 May 1951, 1, cited in Ramsey, “The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez,” 547.


23 History of the UN Forces in the Korean War, III, 175–76.


26 Danley, “Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953,” 255–56. On 22 April 1954, the Almirante Brión left the war theater for Colombia after being relieved by the Capitán Tono on its second tour. The Capitán Tono arrived at Yokosuka on 26 March 1954, and went into repair. The Capitán Tono operated chiefly along the west coast of Korea in the Yellow Sea until relieved by the Almirante Padilla on 11 March 1955. On 11 October 1955, Almirante Padilla left Korean waters for Colombia completing the country mission to the UN naval forces. History of the UN Forces in the Korean War, III, 178.


30 History of the UN Forces in the Korean War, III, 174.