

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Stopping the aggression of North Korea became a test of the UN peacekeeping ability.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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



Coat of Arms of the  
Colombian Navy



Colombian Navy  
Surface Forces insignia



President Laureano  
Gómez Castro 1950–1953



USS Groton—renamed Almirante Padilla

ten river gunboats.<sup>7</sup>

The authority to dispatch the *Frigata Almirante Padilla* overseas was by Executive Decree No. 3230 (25 October 1950) because the national state of emergency declared by Mariano Ospina Perez, the predecessor of Gomez, was still in effect. The suspension of all congressional activities had been imposed to stem *La Violencia*.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 resigning to protest cuts in the naval forces. At the time the entire defense budget amounted to a paltry 1.1 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>10</sup>

When the *Almirante Padilla* arrived at the San Diego Navy Base on 13 November 1950, it was apparent that the fundamental systems of propulsion, communications, armament, and fire control were inadequate. With assistance from the U.S. Navy, Lt Cdr Reyes Canal contracted repair work at the Long Beach Naval Yard to begin on 12 December 1950. This overhaul made the frigate seawor-

thy but it was still not ready to fight. New guns and fire control systems were needed. That refit was so expensive that President Gomez had to personally authorize the work. Instead of fighting in Korea, the crew welcomed the New Year in California.<sup>11</sup> *Time* magazine praised the Colombian effort in its 19 February 1951 issue:

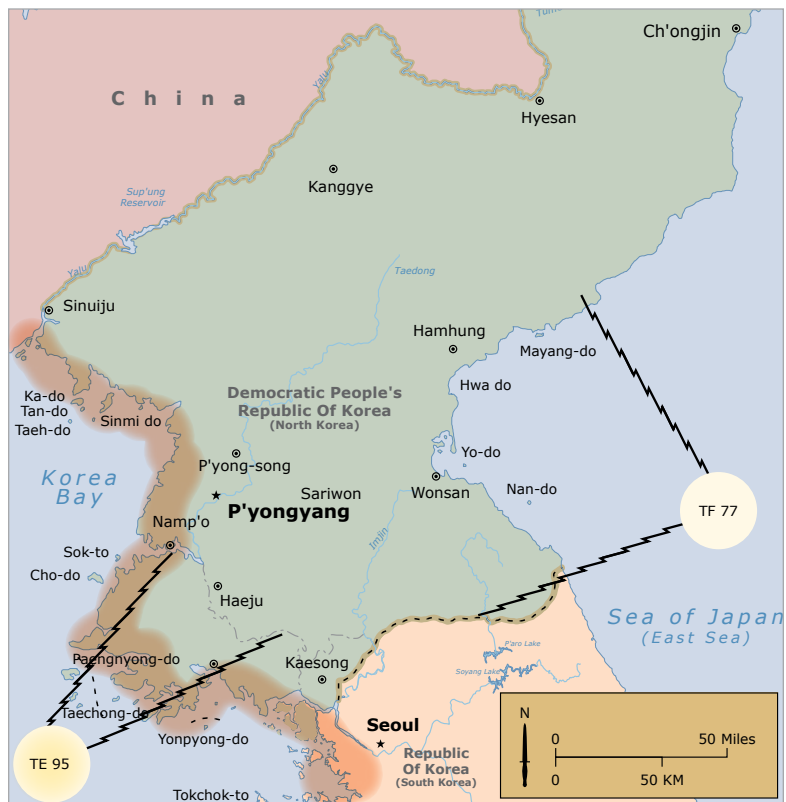
*Judged by the acid test of deeds, Colombia (pop. 11 million) understands better than any other Latin American country that the Korean War is also its war. To date, Colombia has been the one Latin American government to promise acceptable fighting help for the U.N. forces. The 1,430-ton frigate Almirante Padilla, best ship in the Colombian navy, will sail from San Diego, Calif. next week; a specially-organized battalion (1,080 men) is in training in Korea.*<sup>12</sup>

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 *Batalion 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.<sup>13</sup> operating in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of North and South Korea.<sup>13</sup> At home, President Gomez had increased Colombia's commitment to the UN by offering a battalion of infan-

### Ocean Distances from Pusan in Nautical Miles

Sasebo	165	Port Arthur	549
Wonsan	308	Yokosuka	655
Kobe	356	Hong Kong	1144
Inchon	402	Manila	1402
Shanghai	491	Pearl Harbor	3968
Chinnampo	496	San Francisco	4914
Vladivostok	514	Panama	8086



*The Island War—Korea, July 1951—February 1952.*



try on 14 November 1950 (Executive Decree No. 3927).<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> By then, the offensive ground war in Korea was grinding down to a stalemate.

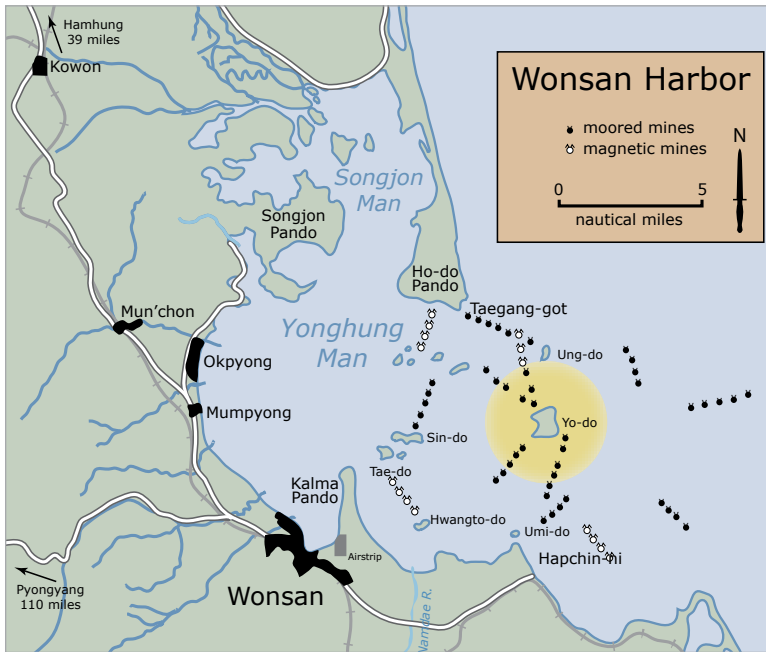
While the *Batallón Colombia* was sailing across the

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*.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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 Francisco M. Guzman, presented the American president with a flag that had flown over the frigate *Almirante Padilla* while patrolling Korean waters.<sup>19</sup>

By then, the Colombian frigate was in Yokosuka, Japan, for refit and maintenance. This was standard procedure for all warships operating around the clock at sea for sixty to ninety days, refueled by fleet tankers, and provisioned from supply ships alongside. During its final two patrol periods (November–January 1952), *Almi-*



Wonsan and its infrastructure was the focal point of the UN Naval east coast blockade.



Stalemate Phase—Korea, March 1952–February 1953.



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.



*Seaman Rodrigo Barrientos Pérez posing with soldiers from Batallón Colombia.*

rante 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*.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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 patterning 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



*USS Bisbee in Yokosuka, Japan, September–October 1950, before its transfer to the Colombian Navy as the Capitán Tono.*

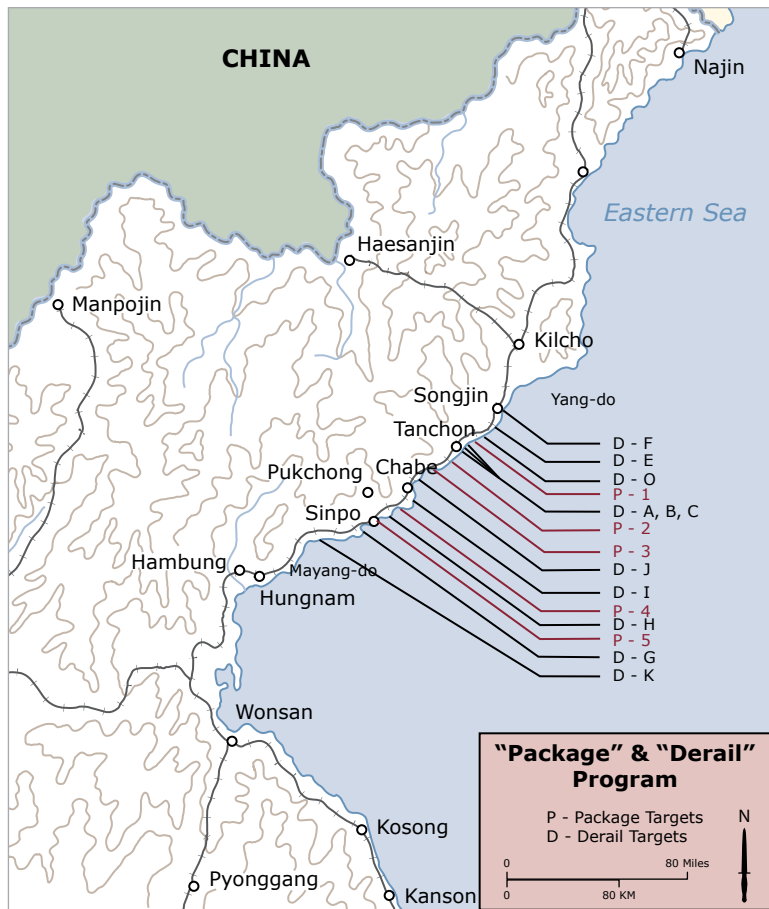


*In his Pentagon office on 16 November 1951, Secretary of the Navy Dan A. Kimball (left) signed the Memorandum of Understanding transferring the USS Bisbee (PF-46) to the Colombian government. Observing are Ambassador Dipriano Restrepo-Jaramillo (center) and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American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



*The Colombian frigate Almirante Padilla returns from Korea without fanfare. Colombia en Korea: Impresiones de un Tripulante del A.R.C. “Almirante Padilla” en Su Viaje a Korea (Bogotá, 1953) by Ernesto Hernández B.*





Specific "Package" and "Derail" targets along east coast of North Korea.

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



While a U.S. Navy band plays, the Colombian crew is assembled before boarding their new ship, the frigate *Almirante Brión*, the former *USS Burlington*, at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on 26 June 1953.

security.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

While the Colombian Navy maintained a frigate in Korean waters until 11 October 1955, the fighting phase of the war ended with the armistice.<sup>25</sup> The *Almirante Padilla* and the *Capitán Tono* returned for second tours with the UN fleet, the last leaving Korean waters on 11 October 1955.<sup>26</sup> The *Batallón Colombia* had left Korea almost a year earlier (29 October 1954).<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> Both the Colombian navy and army were used as instruments of foreign pol-



The ARC Frigate 14 *Almirante Brión*.



The ARC F 51 Almirante Padilla.

icy. President Laureano Gómez demonstrated that Colombia believed in the principle of collective security and that it should be backed by armed force.

The naval combat experience had the potential for serious implications concerning latent territorial disputes with Peru and Venezuela.<sup>29</sup> Three Co-

lombian 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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. ♣



UN Service Medal



Republic of Korea War Service Medal



Colombian Valour Star for Korea

## Endnotes

1 Daniel Davison, "The Colombian Army in Korea: A Study of the Integration of the Colombian Battalion into the 31st United States Infantry Regiment Based on the Experience of Major General Lloyd R. Moses," unpublished Masters Thesis, University of South Dakota, August 1972, 37.

- 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.
- 3 Samuel F. Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 937; Davison, "The Colombian Army in Korea," 7–8.
- 4 Davison, "The Colombian Army in Korea," 90–91.
- 5 Russell W. Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* IX (October 1967), 546.
- 6 Bradley L. Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954," *The Journal of Military History* 69 (January 2005), 1141–42.
- 7 Mark H. Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," *The American Neptune* 58 (Spring 1998), 246–47, 252. On 24 July 1823, during the War for Independence, Colombian Admiral José Prudencia Padilla defeated a Spanish squadron in the battle of Lake Maracaibo.
- 8 Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954," 1141–42; Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," 546; Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III (Seoul, War History Compilation Committee, 1974), 173, hereafter *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III.
- 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.
- 10 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 245–46, 247–48.
- 11 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 248–49; *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 173.
- 12 "Anywhere, Any Time," *Time* (19 February 1951) at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,814313,00.html?promoid=googlep>.
- 13 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 248–49; *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 173.
- 14 Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954," 1141–42, 1145–46; Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," 546.
- 15 Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954," 1146; Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," 547.
- 16 *El Tiempo* (Bogotá) 17 May 1951, 1, cited in Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," 547.
- 17 *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 175–76; Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 251.
- 18 *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 175–76; Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 251.
- 19 "The President's Day: Wednesday, October 24, 1951," <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/calendar/main.php?currYear=1951&currMonth=10&currDa...>
- 20 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 252–54.
- 21 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 252–55.
- 22 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 255.
- 23 *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 175–76.
- 24 *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 177; Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 255–56.
- 25 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 255–56.
- 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.
- 27 Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954," 1175–76; *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 170; Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," 549.
- 28 Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," 548.
- 29 Danley, "Colombian Navy in the Korean War, 1950–1953," 243, 260.
- 30 *History of the UN Forces in the Korean War*, III, 174.
- 31 Adrian J. English, *Armed Forces of Latin America: Their Histories, Development, Present Strengths, and Military Potential* (London: Jane's Publishing, 1984), 180.