

DISTRACTIONS WHILE COVERING PANAMA CANAL CRISIS

By Joe McGowan Jr.

The year 1963 began with violence in Panama between young, nationalistic Panamanians and American soldiers protecting the Canal Zone. As shooting erupted between the two sides, a group of us Miami-based reporters flew to Panama to report on the situation.

It all started at an American-operated school in the Canal Zone, where American children attended classes with children of some of Panama's elite, who were allowed to enroll in the classes.

Both the American and Panamanian flags had flown in front of the school for some time. But a movement started on the Panama side, demanding the United States leave the Canal Zone and turn it over to Panama.

In fact, the United States 15 years later negotiated a treaty calling for the gradual withdrawal of American forces with Panama taking control of the zone in 1999.

One day, Panamanian students pulled down the American flag in front of their school and torched it. The next day, American students pulled down the Panamanian flag and stomped on it. Shortly after that, bullets were flying.

I and a senior Associated Press reporter, a veteran of many revolutions and riots in Latin America, arrived to do the coverage, along with two AP

photographers. We took a suite in a hotel a couple of blocks from the street separating Panama City from the Canal Zone.

The senior reporter said he would act as coordinator for the AP coverage and that I and the photographers would channel our stories to him at the hotel for cabling to AP headquarters in New York City.

In the days that followed, I was busy interviewing Panamanian officials as well as American military spokesmen in the zone. Getting into the zone was touchy since young Panamanians with rifles were on rooftops shooting across at American soldiers behind sandbag emplacements.

The process for journalists was that you would go to a pay phone on the corner, call the Marine guard post across the street, describe your clothes and identify yourself. Then you would run like crazy and the Marines would slide a small gate open enough for you to duck through and get behind the sandbags as the bullets began to fly.

For three days I and the AP photographers could not locate our "coordinator", so we were sending stories and photos without his assistance. Late on the third day, a hotel manager informed us the coordinator was passed out behind a couch in the lobby. It turned out tropical drinks had been too much temptation!

I got little sleep during the couple of weeks we were in Panama. The overnight desk clerk at the hotel obviously didn't care for Americans.

About once an hour, he would ring my room and berate me for all the “evils” America had caused his country.

An American major had complained to me that he was running out of oats and grain for his riding horses he stabled at the U.S. Army base. That resulted in one of my many rash stunts in my reporting career.

I went to the feed store in Panama City where the major traded. I bought and loaded several bags of grain in the trunk and back seat of a rented taxi. Following procedure, I called the Marine guard from the street corner and described the taxi and assured them I was the passenger.

The driver gunned the motor and we sped through a quickly-opened gate as bullets began to fly. One bullet tore into the trunk of the taxi. But the horses had their favorite snack!

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