

The Rio Olympic Games and Brazilian Participation in World War II

The Smoking Snakes

by Norman Berdichevsky (September 2016)



The run-up to the Olympic Games in Rio was accompanied by numerous reports in the world press that were largely negative and highlighted Brazil's unpreparedness, disorganization and problems of health, crime, sanitation, hygiene and a lack of enthusiasm on the part of many Brazilians, especially the poor slum dwellers in Rio's favelas. These views typical of much American press coverage of Latin America in general and Brazil in particular were nowhere near as pronounced in the European media. By the end of week one, attitudes had changed completely and there was a marked enthusiasm on the part of athletes, spectators and organizers that the beautiful location and world-wide interest

had made the games a great success. In fact, a few days before the grand finale, many Brazilians found occasion to turn the tables on the American media when four American athletes including gold medal swimmer Ryan Lochte were found by eye-witnesses and video camera evidence to have concocted a story of being robbed at gunpoint. It was quite amazing that most of the American press was content to dig no further than that the U.S. Olympic committee had offered an apology for Mr. Lochte's conduct to the Brazilian organizers and people leading to speculation that the "robbery" must have been connected to a dispute over payment for illicit activity. Another athlete James Feigin reached a settlement with Brazilian authorities for falsely reporting a crime and agreed to pay a fine of \$11,000 to a local judo academy and sending a receipt to the judge to get his passport back.

This is not the first time that many Brazilians have felt that their country's image has been maligned, slighted or disregarded and taken for granted. Among the many short television feature stories devoted to acquainting world-wide audiences of the Olympic games with Brazil's culture and history for the benefit of tourism, there was one unfortunate glaring omission – mention of The Brazilian Expeditionary Force or BEF (Portuguese: Força Expedicionária Brasileira; FEB) which consisted of about 25,700 men who fought alongside the Allied forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of World War II from September 1944 to May 1945.

It comprised units from the airforce (a fighter squadron) and the army (a complete infantry division). In May last year, then Brazilian president, Dilma Roussef, met with veterans to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. This was an attempt on the part of the government to help stimulate Brazilian pride and lay the groundwork for future interest in the games which would portray Brazil in the best possible light as a country of be proud of as indeed they should be. The Brazilian volunteers fought in the Italian campaign while units of the Brazilian Navy as well as the Air Force also participated in The Battle of the Atlantic from the mid-1942 until the end of the war. Known by its Portuguese initials as the FEB (BEF in English), it took 20,573 Axis prisoners. Brazil was the only independent South American country to send ground troops to fight overseas, and endured both resentment from pro-Axis sympathizers in Latin America and Nazi propaganda which ridiculed "Latin Americans" confronting the "master race". The FEB lost 948 men killed in action fighting at

the Gothic Line in Central Italy and in the 1945 final offensive.

In World War I, Brazilian participation (1917–1918) was limited to naval units, although it did send a non-combative “military mission” to the Western Front. The hostility Brazil encountered, especially from its traditional rival Argentina was that aiding the Allies initially meant giving support to Great Britain and then the United States, widely regarded by many nationalist forces on the continent as historically colonialist and imperialist exploiters of Latin America’s resources.

At the outbreak of World War II, Brazil declared neutrality. Like rival Argentina, this meant a much increased demand for both countries raw materials and agricultural products. American efforts to pressure Latin America to adhere to U.S. war efforts following Pearl Harbor and respond to FDR’s proclamation of a “Good Neighbor Policy” and the hemispheric solidarity notions of the “Monroe Doctrine” were coupled with diplomatic and economic efforts to bring Brazil and Argentina onto the Allied side. Argentina sullenly resisted these efforts but Brazil under its dynamic president Getulio Vargas, a nationalist leader who had been accused by many on the political left as a “fascist,” made the fateful decision to identify with U.S. interests in spite of a “mixed” political past.

At the time, Brazil was a country that had followed an isolationist foreign policy and whose population was largely rural and illiterate. The Vargas regime had been openly authoritarian from 1937, and flirted with Nazi-fascist regimes until 1940, even copying the name of “Estado Novo (New State) from Portugal’s authoritarian ruler Antonio de Salazar. In December 1937, one month after the Estado Novo coup, Vargas signed a Decree prohibiting all political parties, including the fascist-like Ação Integralista Brasileira. Between 1937 and 1945, Vargas promoted economic nationalism and, like Peron in Argentina, encouraged the anticipation of the “masses” who regarded him as the “Father of the Poor.”

At the Pan American States Conference in Rio, President Vargas announced the decision to sever diplomatic relations with Germany, Italy and Japan on 28 January 1942. This measure was resented by these three large ethnic communities in Brazil. In reprisal, German U-boats sank 13 Brazilian merchant vessels from January to July 1942. In August 1942, a single German U-Boat sank five Brazilian vessels in two days, resulting in more than 600 fatalities and inflaming Brazilian opinion. These sinkings were the main reason that led the Brazilian

government to declare war against the Axis on August 22, 1942. Presidents Roosevelt and Vargas met on a U.S. Navy destroyer off the coast of Natal in the state of Rio Grande do Norte on January 28 and 29 January 1943 right after Roosevelt had taken part in the Casablanca Conference in Morocco.

As a result of the Axis attack on its shipping, Brazil suffered nearly 1,600 dead, including almost 500 civilians and more than 1,000 of Brazil's 7,000 sailors involved in the conflict. The Brazilian Navy helped to ensure the safety of ships sailing between the Central and South Atlantic to Gibraltar in conducting convoys that protected merchant and transport troop ships. A total of twelve Axis submarines (one Italian and eleven German) were destroyed by the Brazilian Navy.

After many delays, the Brazilian government eventually gathered a force of one Army Division with 25,000 men (replacements included), compared with an initial declared goal of a whole Army Corps of 100,000, to join the Allies in the Italian campaign. This had taken two years of preparation from the time of Brazil's declaration of war – a fact attributed to mutual suspicion between the American and Brazilian authorities. More than 100,000 combat experienced Brazilian soldiers would have massively upset the balance in Latin America. Several South American countries (especially arch-rival Argentina) petitioned Washington not to employ larger numbers of Brazilians and not to turn them into a military juggernaut. The Americans agreed.

On July 2, 1944, the first five thousand BEF soldiers landed in Italy and dedicated its first weeks in Italy to acquiring the necessary and proper equipment to fight on Italian terrain and to training under American command, but were part of a multinational hodgepodge of forces. German propaganda made much of the political aspect of the presence of the Brazilian force in Italy. They targeted propaganda specifically at the Brazilians accusing them of being American tools and part of the multiracial force that included numerous "inferior peoples" such as the segregated African-American 92nd Infantry Division, the Japanese-American 442nd Infantry Regiment and British Empire forces including Indians, Gurkhas, Black Africans, Jews from the British Mandate in Palestine, South Africans and Rhodesians, exile units – Poles, Greeks, Czechs, Slovaks, as well as anti-fascist Italians, all serving under British command. French forces included Senegalese, Moroccans and Algerians.

Unlike the BEF's Army component, the airforce personnel consisted of experienced Brazilian Air Force veteran pilots (Portuguese: Força Aérea Brasileira, or FAB). Among the 48 pilots, there was a total of 22 losses; five of the pilots were killed by anti-aircraft fire, eight had their planes shot down and bailed out over enemy territory, six had to give up flying operations on medical orders, and three died in flying accidents. The Brazilians flew American Thunderbolts (P-47s) with Brazilian markings. The XXII Tactical Air Command acknowledged the efficiency of the Brazilian Squadron by noting that although it flew only a modest 5% of the total of missions carried out by all squadrons under its control in Italy, it accomplished a much higher percentage of the total destruction wrought on the Axis forces.



Shoulder Patch of all BEF Troops

At home, due to the long delay in actual participation in combat, much Brazilian and American public opinion was originally cynical. The claim was made that the Vargas dictatorship was unwilling to get more deeply involved in the Allied war effort and had promoted Brazil's declaration of war for purely political purposes. By 1943, a popular saying was: "It's more likely for a snake to smoke a pipe, than for the BEF to go the front and fight" in the same sense as the American idiom "when pigs fly." The Allies wanted to keep the Brazilians around as occupation troops in Italy (as the most popular contingent with Italian civilians) but the Brazilian government declined the opportunity and requested the earliest possible return of their troops after Germany surrendered.

The BEF returned home to the largest parade in Brazil's history. Their uniforms, weapons, and appearance as battled hardened veterans looked alien. They were disciplined and fit veterans who took enormous pride in their appearance and military bearing. The crowds along the parade route in Rio very quickly realized these men were indeed authentic heroes and lovingly mobbed them.

The soldiers and pilots of the BEF called themselves *Cobras Fumantes* (literally, Smoking Snakes) and wore a divisional shoulder patch that showed a snake smoking a pipe. It was also common for Brazilian soldiers to write on their mortars, "The snake is smoking" ("A cobra está fumando"). They succeeded in turning public opinion around at home (like the Olympic Games today) and abroad so that after the war, the slogan meant that something will definitively happen in a determined and aggressive way. This revised meaning has endured in Brazilian Portuguese until the present although few of the younger generation realize the origin of the expression today.

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