

RUBBER FOR VICTORY

Contributed by Ozires
 Saturday, 03 November 2007
 Last Updated Monday, 10 October 2011

In 1942 when Japanese troops overrun the Malayan peninsula, the United States had been abruptly cut off all their supply of rubber. As a result 50 000 Brazilians, mostly from Northeast which suffered a severe drought were sent to the northwestern part of Amazon region to extract the badly needed rubber. The entry of Japan in the conflict determined the definitive blockade of all Asian rubber producers. Yet in the beginnings of 1942, Japan controlled more than 97% of all productive regions in the Pacific making it critical the availability of that staple to the allied war industry. When the war spread into the Pacific and Indian oceans, thus interrupting the regular supply of Asian rubber to the USA, American authorities were alarmed.

President Roosevelt ordered a commission to be established in order to evaluate the situation of the stocks of all necessary strategic materials to the war. And the results were appalling. The commission stated that, "Of all the raw materials indispensable for the war, rubber is the more critical one and that represents a real threat for the security of our nation and victory of allied cause. The present situation is so dangerous, that the lack of urgent measures will make this country face a civilian and military collapsing. The harshness of these facts is an early warning that cannot be ignored.

The attentions of the US government turned to the Amazon region, with its great natural rubber reservoir, counting 300 millions rubber trees ready to produce 800 thousand tons of the precious product, more than the double of all American needs. Notwithstanding, several obstacles might endanger the rapid increment in production. In 1942 only 15 thousand skilled workers were sent to the state of Acre through the winding Amazon river in a truly 1500 mile odyssey. Despite the joint effort the adventure was a failure once only 55 000 rubber soldiers would eventually managed to work at their harvesting fields.

To speed up the transfer of labor to the region, thus significantly augmenting the rubber production, the American and Brazilian governments made an effort to increase the shipment of people and implements through several management programs. Conditions were as hard as those faced by the hard British and American soldiers in the jungles of Burma. Many died of malaria, yellow fever, beriberi and hepatitis, but others were killed by snakes, stingrays or even panthers. They didn't have the proper medicines for diseases or snakebites there in the camps, so when someone died, you buried him right there next to the hut and kept right on working."

This lesser known chapter of WWII was known as the "Battle of the Rubber". In the end of 1941 the allied nations saw the dramatic war effort to consume their reserves of strategic raw materials. And any of those materials available was as low as the rubber.

Only 35 thousand workers (seringueiros) were in activity with a total output of less than 17 thousand tons during the harvest of 1940/41. The authorities needed to mobilize more than 100 thousand workers to increment the production and raise it to level of 70 thousand tons a year in a short period. But the reality showed much more problematic than the presented solutions.

By American side, were involved RDC (Rubber Development Corporation), the Board of Economic Warfare, the RRC (Rubber Reserve Company), the Reconstruction Finance Defense Supplies Corporation. By Brazilian side they were SEMTA (Special Mobilization for workers into Amazon) SAVA (Amazon Valley Supplying Superintendence) and BCC (Amazon Credit Bank) Even with all joint effort, only 50 thousand rubber soldiers could be drafted, some by force, and were sent to the Eldorado where the peak of production barely reached 100 000 tons during 1944.

The work routine was exhausting, dangerous and unhealthy: Rubber soldiers rose just after midnight, tramped through the jungle in the dark to cut grooves in the trees and returned later in the day to collect the latex that had dripped into cups. They would then toast the white liquid into solid balls weighing as much as 60 kilograms, or 130 pounds, a process that generates so much smoke that many of them were left blind or with impaired sight.

The long journey to the heart of Amazon jungle. 50 000 Rubber Soldiers as they were called, drafted and seduced by promises of an Eldorado embarked in a no return adventure. Many were natives from drought ridden Northeast.

The dense forest with Amazon river winding its way from the Andes in Peru to its estuary north of Belem.

War poster says "Rubber for Victory".

Rubber bales waiting for transportation to Belem harbor. Vital to US War industry, they would be converted into thousands of tires for badly needed trucks, jeeps and aircrafts soon ferried to the fronts.

Rubber tree, ripe in the state of Acre in 1942. Rubber is loaded in the Amazon port of Manaus. The vital good will soon be converted at US factories. A cargo of rubber is being transported by planes from Panair do Brazil a Pan American subsidiary over the vast Amazon region.

A great batch of rubber waits for transport by ships to Belem harbor.