

This week in history: December 15-21

15 December 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: US invades Panama

On December 20, 1989, the US launched a full-scale invasion of Panama to paralyze the country's military force and oust strongman Manuel Noriega. The invasion, dubbed "Operation Just Cause," involved almost 28,000 US troops and 300 aircraft from the Army, Marines, Navy and Air Force. The simultaneous strike on 27 targets was designed to immediately paralyze the Panamanian Defense Forces. The so-called "surgical strikes" were aimed at isolating Noriega and allowing US forces to capture him.

The US administration of George H.W. Bush had prepared the invasion for months. After the fiasco of the failed US-led anti-Noriega coup in October, both military and political preparations went ahead under the direction of Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

Noriega had been a CIA operative as intelligence chief for the previous ruler of Panama, General Omar Torrijos. He was widely suspected of engineering the death of Torrijos in a mysterious 1981 plane crash, at the behest of the US. Torrijos signed the agreement with US President Carter in 1977 providing for the transfer of the Canal Zone to Panama in the year 2000.

As head of state since 1983, Noriega carried out the interests of the US State Department, particularly in funneling funds to the counterrevolutionary Contra forces seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

As Noriega's drug corruption and state terror against opponents became a public embarrassment, the US conspired in his overthrow. US military provocation inside Panama became the pretext for the US invasion when on December 14, Noriega called for the arrest of two top US officers, charging them with "constant harassment to the communities using troops and warlike equipment." A Pentagon spokesman flatly rejected the action, declaring that

"all agencies and instrumentalities of the US government are immune from the jurisdiction of Panama."

Late on the first day of the invasion, the US installed Guillermo Endara as president of Panama, even though Noriega was not finally captured until the next month. The casualties of the assault were vastly underestimated by the Pentagon at some 500 deaths, while independent reports estimate 2,000 to 4,000 deaths and some 15,000 people displaced.

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50 years ago: Political crisis in South Vietnam

On December 20, 1964, the South Vietnamese military dissolved the civilian legislature, provoking a new and severe political crisis for the US-backed puppet government.

Air Force commander Nguyen Cao Ky was the leading spokesman for the "dissident" military officers who had the support of army chief Nguyen Khanh. They announced that the National High Council, established two months earlier as a fig leaf civilian legislature, was being abolished because of alleged plotting against the armed forces.

Eighteen opposition leaders were arrested, while sections of the new provisional constitution were abolished. The army leaders decided, however, to maintain Premier Tran Van Huong as the figurehead civilian chief of state.

The deteriorating political situation in South Vietnam caused deep concern in Washington. The Johnson administration voiced particular displeasure with General Khanh. The South Vietnamese military leader denounced US Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, in an interview with the *New York Herald Tribune*, for not acting "intelligently" in trying to restore the disbanded civilian legislature and seeking the release of jailed opposition leaders.

Khanh, who seized power in a coup in January, had been forced to temporarily step aside in August after anti-government rioting. His government survived a September coup attempt, handing power to Huong in October. Meanwhile, Ky offered a proposal to mediate with

opposition leaders to achieve “national unity.”

The intervention by the generals followed threats of renewed protests by Buddhists against the Huong regime. One of those seized by the army was Buddhist political leader Le Khao Quyen, the only member of the National High Council to be arrested.

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75 years ago: First air battle of World War II

On December 18, 1939, the first major air battle of the Second World War occurred between British and German forces. While Germany’s invasion of Poland and the declarations of war between Britain and France on one side and Germany on the other produced only the so-called “Phoney War” on land, German submarines (U-boats) were waging an effective campaign at sea against ships attempting to bring supplies to the UK from North America and the Commonwealth.

After suffering substantial losses of men and cargo the British Air Ministry decided to launch an attack upon the German naval ships used to support the U-boats in the North Atlantic. On December 18 three RAF bomber squadrons, including 24 Vickers Wellington bombers, were sent with orders to destroy a German fleet near the Heligoland Bight in the North Sea. Finding their target safely in harbor, the British bombers turned back. The German Luftwaffe scrambled fighter planes that attacked the unescorted British bombers on their return. British bombers managed only minimal damage to German shipping and at the cost of half of their formation going down in flames, with 57 airmen killed.

The clashes over Heligoland Bight contributed to the shift toward terror bombing of civilian targets. Before that point in the war, neither side in the Western theater of war had targeted civilians; the British believing that their bombers were invulnerable to fighter jets and capable of destroying military targets; the Germans, who had already unleashed terror bombing on the Poles, still hoping to draw the British to the bargaining table. The failure to achieve success on the intended military target convinced British strategists to commence bombing raids at night, when squadrons would be less vulnerable to fighter attack. It also pushed strategists toward targeting larger, and less defensible, civilian targets.

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100 years ago: France launches winter offensive against Germany

On December 20, 1914, French forces, led by the Fourth Army, launched an offensive against German positions in the Champagne region of northeast France, as part of what was dubbed the “Winter Operations” of the Allies on the Western Front. The move was one of the first offensive operations by Allied forces following the end of mobile warfare in the preceding months, and the onset of stalemated trench warfare.

The battle, involving a series of counteroffensives, lasted until the middle of March 1915. Estimates of casualties differ, but French forces suffered at least 90,000 casualties, while their German counterparts suffered over 45,000. Some researchers have argued that the battle may have claimed as many as 240,000 French casualties.

Germany’s rapid advance into French territory at the outset of the war had been slowed at the First Battle of the Marne in early September. Over the following two months, Franco-British forces and their German antagonists sought to outflank one another in the “race to the sea” which concluded at the North Sea in Belgium, with neither side having gained a decisive advantage. This was followed by the battles of Yser and Ypres (or Flanders), fought in Belgium in October-November, which resulted in nominal Allied victories and horrific casualties. After these encounters, fighting was increasingly localized, and gains on both sides minimal.

The French military command began planning the offensive at Champagne in mid-November, noting that the German advance on the Western Front had largely ended, and that some German troops fighting there were to be sent to the Eastern Front, where Russian forces had suffered heavy losses, numbering as many as one million in the first few months of the war. The initial offensive was largely unsuccessful, with a series of counterattacks resulting in neither side making substantial ground, and the French offensive was halted on January 13. German forces launched a counteroffensive, which also failed to produce a conclusive victory.

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