



***Peruvian Earthquake Relief Mission,
Crossing the Equator, and
Traversing the Panama Canal
From May to July 1970***

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Introduction

The *USS Guam* LPH-9 had a lustrous 33 year commission between 1965 and 1998. During that time the *Guam* played many different roles serving the U.S. Navy and America proudly. This article covers May 1970 through July 1970 when the *USS Guam* was called upon to assist with the Peruvian Earthquake relief mission. On May 31, 1970 at 4:23 pm EDT a 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit the small country of Peru killing upwards of 70,000 people and leaving over half a million injured and homeless. To put this into perspective, the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake had a magnitude of 7.8.

Background

On May 12, 1970 the *USS Guam* along with the amphibious cargo ship *USS Charleston* (LKA 113), the tank landing ship *USS Newport* (LST 1179) and the dock landing ship *USS Hermitage* (LSD 34) left Norfolk as part of the Caribbean Ready Group and exercise Exotic Dancer III. This was the first all 20-knot unit of amphibious ships to deploy from Norfolk in several years. In early June 1970 the *USS Guam* was ordered by President Nixon to transit the Panama Canal and steam south to Peru for disaster relief operations. On June 9, 1970 *Guam* left Balboa Panama Canal Zone early in the morning after loading supplies and medical equipment. She carried three surgical teams and 50 hospital corpsman, three operating rooms and 1,000 hospital beds, 19,000 pounds of medical supplies and 69,000 pounds of food to the injured and homeless survivors. *Guam* travelled 1300 miles at flank speed, 20.5 knots, to the Chimbote Peru destination. Officer of the Deck (OD) Gordon Fields CWO3 recalls getting approval from the Peruvian Navy after conducting a wire drag survey to verify the harbor bottom was unaffected by the earthquake. CWO3 Fields entered the harbor and found safe anchorage to conduct flight rescue operations.



The *Guam* arrived off the coast of Chimbote Peru, north of Lima, on June 11, 1970. *Guam* had been requested to concentrate her relief operations on the many small villages in the foothills of the Andes, 30 to 40 miles inland, which had been reduced to rubble. The *Guam* had 17 helicopters on board consisting of 11 CH-46s, 4 CH-53s and 2 UHI-Es. A Peruvian Air Force officer went on each helicopter flight to assist with map-reading and provide general advice. The helicopters flew medical teams, supplies, food and landed them in remote areas where help was reportedly needed. The *Guam*'s helicopters evacuated the injured, who have received some medical attention but needed more intensive care like amputations, back to the ship and fly out the medical teams. Before leaving Chimbote 6/21/70 after 11 days the *Guam* had flown more than 800 sorties into the remote mountains.

The *Guam* transported over 1,500 passengers and nearly 200 tons of relief supplies to and from devastated areas. Most of the sorties were flown in a hazardous environment, due to the unusually high altitudes, rugged mountain terrain and dust-filled basins.

Impact on the Peruvian People

In the ship's hospital, on Sunday afternoon a 10 month old baby lay on a bed crying, his left hand a red, shapeless mess. His father, Victor Zevallos, who had been in Chimbote at the time of the earthquake and was unharmed, said a heavy adobe brick had fallen on the child's hand as he was crawling across the floor. His wife was in the next room along with another son and daughter. All had fractures and multiple contusions. Mr. Zevallos had walked for two and a half days, from where the roads ended to reach the village of Huacrayoc where he had left his family. He had waited with them nine days before the helicopters arrived. He was allowed to stay with his family on the ship until they were fit to leave. Most of the injured brought to the ship had serious fractures, infected wounds, or gangrene. One woman brought in on the 13th had a fractured spine, another a dislocated hip, and a little girl had a fractured leg. On the 15th a woman was brought in with a broken back.

Hospital Corpsman Nicholas Aluotto said "The people were frightened and confused at first, at being flown aboard a helicopter," he said, "but early arrivals helped us get newcomers more relaxed. As many regained strength, they tried to help out in any way they could. Some offered to clean the ship."

The small mountain town of Mato is located at 8,500 feet above sea level. Inhabited by about 800 Inca Indians, the town was 40% destroyed by the earthquake. Three days after the quake, Romuolo Trejo was able to dig his daughter Aliva out of the rubble that had been their home. His wife and three other daughters were killed when the house crashed in on them. For two weeks, little Aliva lay immobile in a ditch with a head wound, two broken legs and a fractured pelvis. A medical team found the girl and her father, a request for help went out to the *Guam*. A Marine helicopter picked them up, flew them to the *Guam*, and Aliva was rushed to the hospital.

A Peace Corps nurse, Renee Romanko, gave Avila a bath and prepared her for X-ray studies. When the extent of injuries was determined, the youngster was taken to the cast room for application of a body cast covering her legs and hips. After two days on the *Guam*, she and her father were flown to a hospital in Chimbote where Aliva remained until she was able to walk again.



a: Captain Richard R. Renaldi

Gala Celebration

Upon completing the Chimbote relief, the *Guam* sailed south to Lima at invitation of the grateful Peruvian government for a festive two day celebration June 23-24, 1970. There was music, food, drink and entertainment for all to enjoy. More than 5,000 visitors toured the *Guam* to see firsthand the men and equipment used to help their injured countrymen.

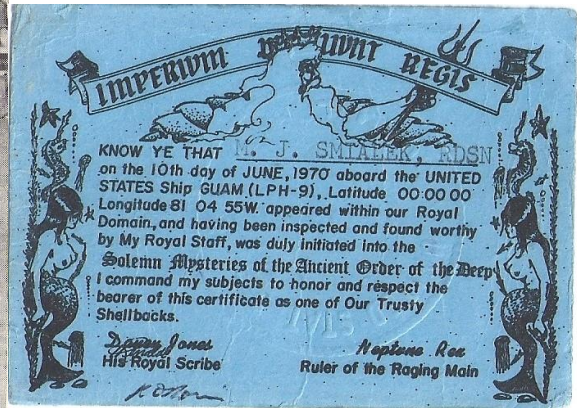
Guam Receives Big Peruvian Reception



WAITING LINE—Hundreds of Peruvians wait in a line over 200 yards long to tour the amphibious assault ship Guam during her recent port visit to Callao, the port for the capital city of Lima. Thousands of Peruvians visited the ship during the open house hours June 23-24. The Peruvians heartily expressed their gratitude for the Guam's disaster relief aid to their country's earthquake victims.

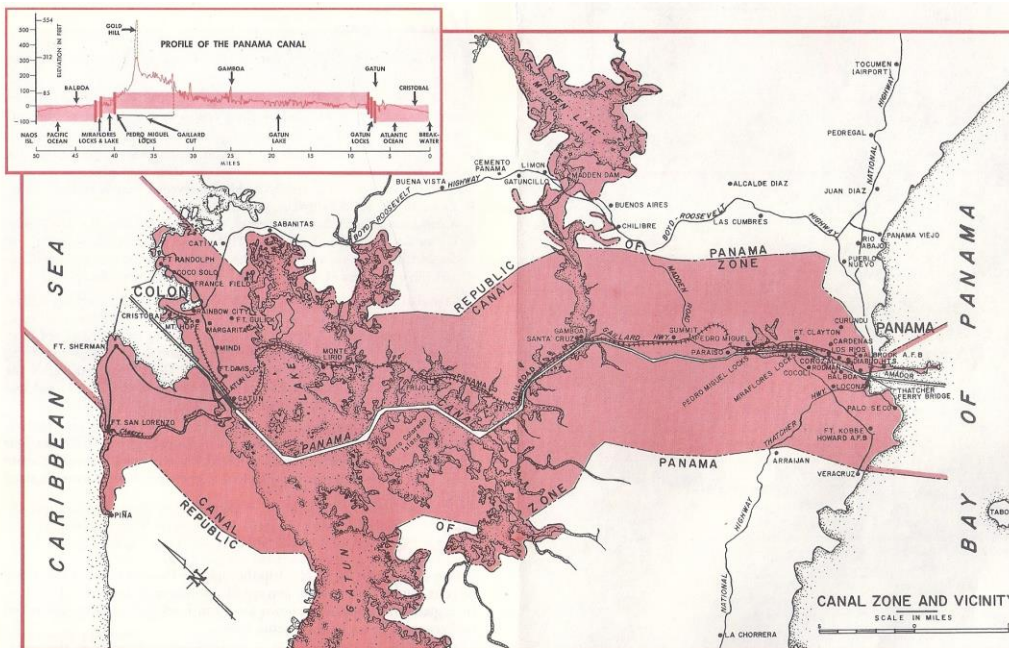
Crossing the Equator

The *USS Guam* crossed the equator for the very first time June 10, 1970 with a crew of “polleywogs” on its way to Peru but the traditional Navy “shellback” ceremony was not conducted until June 27, 1970 on the way back from Peru. The *Guam* crewmembers crossed the equator at Latitude 00:00 00 Longitude 81:04 55W and were initiated into King Neptune’s *Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep* as trusty and honorable shellbacks. Yes we had to crawl on the flight deck and kiss the fat greasy belly of the Royal Baby BM1 Archie Byrd but being shellback makes you a member of a very exclusive club. Allan Getter stated the *Guam* also crossed the Equator December 1976 enroute to Mombasa, Kenya.



Traversing the Panama Canal

The *USS Guam* took the 50 mile trip through the Panama Canal the first time 0600 June 10, 1970 and made the return passage on June 28, 1970. The passage takes between 8-10 hours as the ship is raised or lowered 85 feet at the Caribbean Sea entrance by entering 3 sets of Gatun locks. Although the *Guam*'s hull was not too wide to fit through the locks, the width of the flight deck made it necessary to remove part of the gun mounts and fueling rig and to fold the elevators so that no damage to canal buildings would result. Later in the day, the ship was lowered back to sea level on the Pacific side via the Pedro Miguel and Miraflores Locks. By late afternoon, *Guam* was moored at Balboa and began taking on relief supplies, food, fuel and medical supplies.



Note of Thanks

A special thank you goes out to the officer and enlisted men of the *USS Guam*, the Marine and Navy pilots, doctors and Hospital Corpsman for the extraordinary efforts made during the Peruvian Relief Mission. Their dedication, knowledge and persistence was an excellent example of team work reflecting the highest standards of naval service and commitment to duty. This may have been *Guam*'s finest hour. Author in berthing compartment 1970 when I had dark brown hair and lots of pens in my shirt pocket.



Awards and Recognition

Guam's efforts were cited by the Peruvian government, the U.S. Ambassador to Peru, Secretary of State William Rogers and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. On November 24, 1970 *Guam* and her crew were awarded the Navy's Meritorious Unit Commendation for participation in the Peruvian earthquake relief operations. In addition the ship was awarded the Admiral Flatley Memorial Award for outstanding achievement in all aspects of Naval Aviation Safety for fiscal year 1970. The ship conducted over 4,400 safe landings during the year and observed her 23,000th consecutive accident-free helicopter landing July 5, 1970.

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