

219th Anniversary

“Battle of San Diego Bay”

June 11, 2022

Keynote speech by Maj. Aurelio Hinarejos Rojo

Captain, Honorable Sr. Cónsul General, Honorable Sra., Mr. Benayas, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the kind introduction, Mr. Benayas. As a Spanish military officer posted in San Diego, it is an honor for me to have the opportunity to participate in the commemoration of the Battle of San Diego Bay in its historical venue.

It is a pleasure for me to be here and to talk, yet briefly, not only about Fort Guijarros but also about the military engineer who is believed to have been its inspirer and designer, captain Alberto de Córdoba, from the Spanish Royal Corps of Engineers.

I am also a military engineer from the Corps of Polytechnic Engineers of the Spanish Army, which is a contemporary descendant of that 18th century Royal Corps of Engineers, and I work at the MIDS International Program Office, dealing with military technology, which is key for the defense of today and tomorrow, now in a collaborative context.

I am thus very pleased to be in the position to continue, more than two centuries later, the tradition of Spanish military engineering in California. It started with the voyage of exploration commanded by Gaspar de Portolá in 1769 with the aim to initiate the settlement of a region that, at the time, was unknown territory situated north of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, but just eighty years later would become the 31st state of the Union.

Personally, I became interested in the history of this part of the country years ago, when I was living in Pasadena, next to Los Angeles. I then discovered that the Bancroft Library, and also the Huntington Library, held a huge amount of old Spanish material written in 18th century Spanish. This discovery awakened my interest in the early Spanish military engineers in California, and in particular in two of them: Miguel de Costanzó and Alberto de Córdoba. I became even more excited about these predecessors when I started to find connections between my readings in the archives and the historical landmarks that can be found all over the Californian Coast. This includes, for instance, the landmark in Morro Bay, which remembers the

camping of Gaspar de Portolá, father Crespí and the engineer Miguel de Costanzó while trying to reach Monterrey in the year of 1769.

However, today, at the historical landmark where we are standing now, I am not going to talk about Miguel de Costanzó, who enjoys more appraisals in scholarship, but about the very capable yet uncelebrated Alberto de Córdoba, who is believed to have been the designer of Fort Guijarros.

He stayed less than three years in California, from 1795 to 1798, and from the beginning he was recognized by the Governor Borica as man of ability, reason why he was tasked with the important duty of improving the defense of the Coast of California, from San Diego to San Francisco, an impossible task taking into account the general shortage of resources. In spite of these difficulties, his achievement was impressive. Without doubt, Alberto de Córdoba is one of those engineers that extended the dominion of man over his physical environment.

The performance of Alberto de Córdoba has to be understood in the larger context of the political concern regarding the defense of California against possible invasion by foreign powers in the mid 1790s, like the Russian Empire, the British Empire, and also the Revolutionary French Republic.

When we think about the Spanish presence in 18th century California, what foremost comes to our minds are the missions. However, the missions were just one part of a general strategy to settle the territory. It was necessary to make the region attractive for settlers and this could only be accomplished by creating a basic infrastructure in order to improve the quality of life, which generally required the execution of public works. Streets needed to be built, bridges needed to be constructed, and dams have to be erected, in order to facilitate commerce, transportation – and public life - in those areas. At the time, there were no civil engineers, so that military engineers were in charge of these works. Building such an infrastructure was key to the larger goal – to settle the land. In the end, no defense of the territory could be possible without population.

As a matter of fact, a similar process would take place just a few years later on the East Coast, where the Corps of Topographical Engineers and also the Corps of Engineers of the US Army would play a significant role in the process of nation-building of the young American republic.

Let's go back to the West Coast, to California and San Diego, where we are today to commemorate the battle of San Diego Bay in the year of 1803, when the American brig *Lelia Byrd* was detained in San Diego Harbor by the Spanish authorities for smuggling otter skins; the ship crew managed to head out of the harbor, and an exchange of artillery fire took place between Fort Guijarros and the American vessel. Admittedly, it was a small battle, rather a skirmish. However, the so-called Battle of San Diego Bay is significant for its symbolism within the historical context. 1803 is an important year in the history of the US because of the Louisiana Purchase, which was another cornerstone for the the weakening of the Spanish Empire in

America. In 1803, the President of the United States was Thomas Jefferson, a strong advocate of the westward expansion of the United States, who at that moment was preparing a series of expeditions to explore the trans-Mississippi West, which would begin with the Lewis and Clark expedition the following year. In this context, the Battle of San Diego Bay symbolically depicts an old Empire in decline being challenged by a thriving expanding nation.

Matters could have gone worse for Spain, were it not for the effort of those military engineers who thoughtfully applied their scientific and technological knowledge to both, the betterment of the military defence and also the improvement of quality of life for the incipient population.

In brief, military engineering was important in the past and still so is in the present, though now takes place in a very different setting, in the frame of international collaboration. Military engineering set the basis for what California is today. It is therefore an ideal coincidence that the same place where this Spanish-American battle took place – San Diego – is now the home of large European-American collaborative projects. Military engineering in the present is a way of connecting forces on an international level, for today and tomorrow, and I am proud to be a part of it.

Studying the past is not only interesting, but it is also important in order to understand the present and define strategies for the future, define where society heads to. It is therefore certainly gratifying to observe how our two nations, the United States of America and Spain are bound by a common past.

I am very pleased to be here in San Diego, to continue this legacy and carry on this path of collaboration between our two nations.

In this sense, I would like to specially thank Jesús Benayas, president of the House of Spain, for his relentless effort in pursuance of this aim.

Thank you all for your attention.