

**Speech for the commemoration of the 220th anniversary of the Battle of
San Diego Bay at Navy Base Point Loma - 13th of May, 2023**

Captain Franklin,

Madame Honorary Consul of Spain,

Civilian and Military Authorities,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with **emotion** that I address you today, **as we are gathered here**, to commemorate the 220th anniversary of the Battle of San Diego Bay.

Two centuries ago, **Spain controlled California**, and its influence is best seen today in the historic missions, that stretch like a necklace up the state's coast.

But the **Spanish footprint locally goes deeper**. Today we commemorate the anniversary of the Battle of San Diego Bay, an obscure clash between an upstart American merchant ship (the Lelia Byrd) and a tiny fort of the declining Spanish empire (Fort Guijarros – Guijarros stands for Ballast or Pebbles, in English).

Nevertheless, it was the **only ship-to-shore fight** between America and Spain on the Pacific Coast. This site was designated as a California Registered Historic landmark.

The American merchant ship was the Lelia Byrd, which came seeking to **buy otter pelts**. But the Spanish commander of Fort Guijarros (Manuel Rodriguez) **had forbid such trade**.

The Lelia Byrd was trying to escape under the cover of darkness, with some highly coveted otter pelts, and the Spanish embargo on foreign trade didn't seem to allow it. **So they began to exchange cannon shots.**

Some chronicles described the commander of Fort Guijarros (Manuel Rodriguez) as an **honest man who believed in enforcing the rules.** The Spanish soldier who discovered the pelts on board the Lelia Byrd (Sergeant Arce) was described as an **intelligent young petty officer.**

To my understanding, they were only **two good men, two honorable soldiers** serving to the Crown of Spain, with a mission to be accomplished. They didn't know any other way of living. Some smugglers, some crooks, were fighting the law, and the **law had to win, come hell or high water.** A quarter-century passed before anyone dared to attempt a similar episode.

We always know how these things begin, but we will never know how it will all end. Fortunately, **nobody died** during this battle. There were no injuries, no casualties and no significant damage.

Of course, this is all about **History**, where everything comes to end. Finally, the Spanish troops abandoned the Fort, and the Lelia Byrd **was sold to the King Kamehameha of Hawaii**, made three voyages to China and at length, worn out, and after being for a time a **receiving ship for opium**, she was broken up and **sunk** by the China shore.

To conclude, I would like to remind some words written by the renowned American poet **Walt Whitman**, about the influence of the **Spanish Element** in the American Nationality.

By the nineteenth century, many Americans held strongly **negative views of Hispanic Americans**. Much of this sentiment stemmed from the **Texas War of Independence against Mexico and the subsequent Mexican-American War**.

As a result of this “**Hispanophobia**”, many of the legal and social institutions, established by Spain during the colonial years were **replaced with Anglo-Saxon practices**. Spanish names were removed from institutions and cities, and replaced with anglicized versions.

Whitman said that “...we Americans have yet to really learn our own antecedents, and sort them, and unify them. We are largely blinded by a **common misperception that Americans descended from Northern European stock**, only fashioned solely in the British manner, as a second England, an idea that is a very great mistake...”

“...**Hispanic influences can help supply some of the most needed parts to establish a national identity, citing elements of the Spanish character, such as religious piety, loyalty, courage, honor and patriotism...**”

Hispanic culture significantly influenced especially the American Southwest and California, and Whitman argued that such influence should not be ignored or replaced.

Thus, Whitman urged the American people to take note of the many non-British influences, that helped to shape the unique national identity of the United States. **It was time to discard old notions of Spanish tyranny, cruelty or superstition, for Spanish culture shared many exceptional qualities with the flourishing United States** character, he said.

And here we are today, very close **allies**, the United States of America and Spain.

I believe this is what the Historic Landmark, where Fort Guijarros was placed a long time ago, is inviting us to do, and **what makes this place so unique**.

Thank you.