

STAMP STORIES

Jack R. Congrove, BU1424

I want to use this edition of Stamp Stories to introduce a new historical series that will reprint updated versions of articles published in past editions of the Biology Unit journal. This story begins with a series of entries that appeared in Volume 6 of *Biology Tid-Bits* in 1956. The chain started with a “Can You Tell Us” request about a Brazilian stamp.

“What is the real significance of the snake smoking a pipe—the insignia of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, as shown on Brazil Sc#636–639? There must be a story here.”

This answer appeared in the next edition shown with the editor’s comments in italics.

“Concerning the ‘Smoking Snake’” (Brazil Sc#636–639)

The following letter is from a non-member who wishes his name withheld. We appreciate his reply and are intrigued by how he saw the question.



“I believe here’s the story back of the ‘Smoking Snake’ shoulder patch used by the Brazilian Expeditionary Forces during World War II.

“The final action which brought Brazil into the war was the sinking, by submarines, of a large part of Brazil’s commercial fleet, largely coastwise vessels.

“After these sinkings there was, understandably, considerable bitterness against the Germans. A Brazilian, conversing with a German, was told that all the Brazilians were capable of doing was to make a lot of noise verbally, which bothered none. The Brazilian replied that if Germany’s attacks on neutral Brazilian shipping continued, the day would come when Brazilians would be in the trenches in Europe and the Germans would see for themselves that Brazil could fight physically as well as verbally. The German replied that when that day came, the Germans would also see snakes smoking pipes.

“I was in Brazil during the entire war and heard this story many times; naturally, in Para the hero was Paraense, in Rio a Carioca, etc., but the foregoing paragraphs will, I believe, correctly answer your question.”

However, that was not the end of the story, for in the following edition another explanation was presented.

“That Smoking Snake Again”

In the September 1st issue of Western Stamp Collector, editor William W. Wylie, in his “Worth Mentioning” column, mentioned the new Biology Tid-Bits and requested information on Brazil’s “Smoking Snake,” as requested in that issue.

Mr. Wylie has kindly forwarded a letter from Lt. Cmdr. George F. Thometz of the U.S. Coast Guard. That part directly concerning the smoking snake is reproduced below:

“During 1944, I served aboard the USS General M.C. Meigs, one of two U.S. troop transports engaged in transporting Brazilian troops from Rio de Janeiro to Naples, Italy. The most popular song of the Brazilian troops was one entitled *Cobra Esta Fumando*, meaning ‘the snake is now smoking.’

“It seems that the Brazilian people are very adept at training animals, birds, and all pets to do all kinds of tricks and stunts, but no one had ever been able to train a snake to smoke. When Brazil declared war on Germany, they had no transports to send troops to the fighting area and people were beginning to believe that, although Brazil was at war, they would never have a chance for their troops to participate in the actual fighting.

“The saying in Rio was that the troops would go overseas when snakes started smoking, in other words, never. However, when the United States made provisions to transport Brazilian troops to

Italy aboard the USS Meigs and the USS General Mann, the Brazilian troops made up the song, *Cobra Esta Fumando*, meaning the snake is now smoking and we are going to participate in the fighting. It was quite a popular marching song comparable to the marching songs of our troops in World War I.

“...This history of the picture of the snake smoking can be verified, I’m sure, through any Brazilian Consul or Embassy...”

We are grateful to both of these gentlemen for their interest and their courtesy, which has made possible the sharing of this version of the smoking snake with you. We will follow up Commander Thometz’s suggestion of consulting Brazilian officials and report our findings in these pages.

Unfortunately, it appears that either there was no follow-up, or the results were negative, because the journal contains no further explanations regarding this stamp issue.

Few people today know that, of all the South American countries, only one provided troops that saw overseas combat during WWII. The other countries remained officially neutral, or joined the Allied side only late in the war. This stamp honors the troops of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (FEB) that fought in the invasion of Italy as part of the U.S. 5th Army under General Mark Clark.



The Smoking Snake is the second lowest denomination in a set of five issued on 18 July 1945 (Sc#635–39). The other values in the set were 20 centavos and 1, 2, and 5 cruzeiros. The four remaining stamps show the 5th Army shoulder patch and the three high values also show the Smoking Snake patch.

This set was printed by lithography on paper watermarked CASA+DA+MOEDA+DO+BRASIL and perforated 11. Some imperforate and un-gummed examples also exist.



Earlier, on 8 May 1945, Brazil had issued another stamp that also shows the smoking snake, although you almost need a magnifying glass to see it. It appears on the highest value of a set of five stamps (Sc#628–32) issued to celebrate the Allied victory in WWII. It was printed by photogravure, also on watermarked paper and rouletted 7.



This stamp recognized international cooperation and showed the South Atlantic air ferry route traveled by military flights between the U.S. and Europe. This round-about path was necessary to enable short-range aircraft to fly across the Atlantic under their own power using a series of intermediate airfields and obviating the need to transport them by sea. My father, the crew chief of a C-47 aircraft, flew on part of this route during his return from Europe at the end of the war.



Brazil issued another stamp showing the Smoking Snake division patch on 8 September 1970 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Allied Forces victory in WWII. Whereas the previous set showed significant U.S. influence, even going so far as to depict an American flag, this stamp reflected more independence by showing only Brazilian military symbols. It was printed by lithography on unwatermarked paper and perforated 11×11½.

The 25,000 troops that Brazil sent to fight in Europe were completely integrated into the U.S. command structure. Brazil was also the only South American country to send air force units to fight overseas.

(See *Stamp Stories*, page 90)

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Like a lot of slang (and urban legends), it is difficult to determine how these stories actually got started, and often no one really knows the answer. However, after doing some subsequent research on this topic, I was able to find out some details that are actually documented.

Brazil was neutral until 1942. Getúlio Vargas, the Brazilian dictator, was unwilling to become more involved in the Allied war effort, but permitted the U.S. to use some Brazilian airfields to stage maritime patrols in exchange for the promise of future U.S. industrial assistance. The Germans took issue with this policy and began actively attacking Brazilian ships. After experiencing extensive losses to its commercial shipping, popular support turned against the Germans forcing Vargas to side with the Allies. However, he was reluctant to send forces and using a popular saying, told a government session, “it’s more likely for snakes to start to smoke now than for the BEF to set out.” (“*Mais fácil uma cobra fumar do que a FEB embarcar.*”)

Until the BEF entered combat, the expression “*a cobra vai fumar*” (the snake will smoke) was often used in Brazil in a context similar to “when pigs fly.” Ironically, the soldiers of the BEF called themselves *Cobras Fumantes* (literally, Smoking Snakes) and wore the divisional shoulder patch depicted in the stamp that showed a snake smoking a pipe. It was also common for Brazilian soldiers to write on their mortar shells, “the Snake is smoking...” (“*a cobra está fumando...*”).

After the war, due to its usage by the Brazilian soldiers, the meaning became reversed, signifying that something will definitely happen and in a furious and aggressive way. With that second meaning, the use of the phrase *a cobra vai fumar* has been retained in Brazilian Portuguese until the present time, although few in the younger generations realize the origin of the expression.