

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – THE CARIBBEAN DEFENSE COMMAND

Despite being a seemingly naval asset, which you would have thought would be protected by the US Navy, as with seaports in the Continental US and overseas bases such as Pearl Harbor, responsibility for the defence of the Canal lay primarily with the Army and its Panama Canal Department. However, on the eve of World War 2, it was felt that something more was required, to coordinate the Army, Army Air Force and Navy assets,¹ not just in Panama but also the greater Caribbean area, and for liaison with governments of the region.

Created in 1941 and existing until 1947, the Caribbean Defense Command (CDC) was tasked with protecting the Panama Canal, the Canal Zone, and all its access points, as well as defending the larger region from Axis aggression and setting up a series of US bases throughout the Caribbean (and parts of South America) from which to project US military power after World War 2. Combining the Panama Canal and Puerto Rico Departments², its headquarters were at Quarry Heights, near Balboa (“capital” of the Canal Zone) and Panama City, and would be located in the underground facility built into the side of Ancon Hill.³ Its

¹ The 15th Naval District, headquartered at Balboa in the Canal Zone, was responsible for "*the waters adjacent to the Canal Zone exclusive of the area between the inner limits of the defensive sea areas established at the Atlantic Entrance and the Pacific Entrance of the Panama Canal*". A Naval District was a shore-based command and administrative centre and was headed by a Commandant. It was disestablished on 31 December 1975, and its responsibilities were transferred to the Panama Canal US Naval Station: <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/lists-of-senior-officers-and-civilian-officials-of-the-us-navy/district-commanders/fifteenth-naval-district.html>

² These two areas had retained the obsolete term “Department” for what might otherwise be called an Army Corps or later a Command. The Panama Canal Department was so named because the description “Department” was the term given to all military commands before World War 1. In 1920, all “Departments” in the Continental US had been redesignated as “Corps Areas”, but the Hawaiian, Philippines and Panama Canal Departments retained the title (with a Puerto Rico Department added in 1941). Even after the Panama Canal and Puerto Rico Departments were combined in the new Caribbean Defense Command in 1941 the Army continued to refer to them as “Departments”): http://www.niehorster.org/013_usa/41_usarmy/41_us-army.htm

³ In March 1940, plans were approved for a bombproof, reinforced concrete structure “*for use in case of emergency and vital to the security of important data*”, and this Command Post structure 200 feet (61 metres) under the Hill of native porphyry rock, with the entrance cut into the solid rock face of the old Ancon Quarry, and was built using reinforced concrete was completed in January 1942 at a cost of \$400,000. The Joint Operations Post featured a 269-feet by 52-feet (82 x 15.8 metres) main building and a 302-feet by 7½-feet (92 x 2.3 metres) tunnel. The facility was later used as a secure intelligence, communications, and joint operations command post centre for the unified command until 1997. http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/gh_legacy_report.htm
<http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread110919/pg1>

formal establishment on 10 February 1941 was a preparation to the obviously imminent war, and the need for it resulted from the presence of the Canal and the Canal Zone.

As it turned out, the new Command had less military significance during World War 2 than originally thought. Another part of the planned mission of the Command, establishing a series of bases which would serve to project US power in the region in the postwar period, never really came about either.⁴ Indeed, the Roosevelt Administration had hopes of not only defending the waterways, but of establishing a base from which US power could be projected throughout the region, and so as to deter any possible hostility.

However, the Command proved that it was possible to run a regionally-based joint combatant command outside of the territorial US and have it contribute to a major war effort. In this sense, the Caribbean Defense Command anticipated the roles that such combined commands would play in the future.

A reaction to the growing tensions, its establishment preceded US entry into World War 2, but only by a matter of weeks. It was both a military and a diplomatic effort, liaising not just with the host country, but also providing a means whereby other foreign governments could communicate with the US. Like the combatant commands that would come after it, it would also oversee various subordinate commands, Army and Navy, brought together to produce a comprehensive and consistent military plan for the region as a whole.

However, after early successes, the decline in U-boat activity in the Caribbean, as well as the general progress of the war, saw to it that the original main mission of the Command was quickly rendered moot.⁵

In 1940, the War Plans Division at the US War Department had recommended the establishment of a theatre command structure for the Caribbean, one of which would be

⁴ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016):

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

⁵ Ibid.

centred on the Canal Zone and take in Jamaica. The plan was approved in January 1941 and the Caribbean Defense Command was officially activated in February 1942.⁶

The announcement in early 1941 of the creation of the Caribbean Defense Command simply referred to it as a national defence organisation for –

“those islands in and bordering on the Caribbean Sea, all such parts of French Guiana, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Central America less Mexico and the seas adjacent thereto as may be required for Army and Navy operations”.

This centralised military command was to be the –

“number one outpost of the United States...and directly controlling all sea lane access to the Mexican gulf frontier on the south-east”.

It was tasked with guarding the Panama Canal which was simply described as *“the vital artificial waterway connecting the two oceans”*.

More than half a billion dollars was expended in the immediate pre-war and wartime periods in the Caribbean Defense Command area, with \$234 million under the direct supervision of the Panama Canal Department.⁷

Within the Caribbean Defense Command (divided into a Puerto Rican Sector⁸, a Panama Sector, and a Trinidad Sector) were located not only the Panama Canal, Puerto Rico, and the West Indian bases acquired in the bases-for-destroyers deal of September 1940, but also such valuable resources as the bauxite mines in Surinam and the oil refineries of Curacao and Aruba. Some of the Caribbean bases also provided landing fields for the air ferry route between the US and West Africa, which continued to Natal in eastern Brazil.

⁶ For more detailed information on the history of the Command 1941-47, see *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A Vasquez, 2016. FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 2458: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ On 1 June 1943, the Puerto Rican Department was redesignated the Antilles Department and the latter's jurisdiction was extended to cover the areas formerly encompassed by the Puerto Rican and Trinidad Sectors.

In December 1941, the Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall, appointed General Frank Andrews as theatre commander — the first airman to hold such a position — giving him responsibility for the Caribbean Defense Command.

He had served as Marshall's G-3 officer⁹ for a little more than a year before being directed to take command of US Army Air Corps (USAAC)¹⁰ assets located within the Canal Zone in 1940-41.¹¹ He undertook an extensive 6,000-mile (9,656 km) inspection of air facilities throughout the theatre and conferring with area commanders, finding that while construction of bases remained on schedule, there were problems with communication and conflicts among the various sectors.¹² He submitted his report to Lt Gen Daniel Van Voorhis, the theatre commander, on 18 February 1941.¹³

In his 1941 report, Andrews listed seven principles –

1. deny establishment of hostile bases in the Western Hemisphere.
2. defeat adversaries by air action against their air assets and establishments.
3. oppose the operation of any hostile air force through the use of airpower.
4. operate against hostile land and naval forces that threaten vital US interests.
5. operate in close coordination with ground forces.
6. operate in close coordination with naval forces.
7. operate in lieu of or in support of naval forces when the fleet is not situated to operate effectively against enemy forces.

⁹ Staff officer for operations and plans.

¹⁰ In 1941 the USAAC became the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) and then, in 1947, the independent US Air Force.

¹¹ In October 1940, the Panama Canal Air Force had been created to command the expanding air assets in the Canal Zone. In August 1941, it was redesignated as the Caribbean Air Force and, in September 1942, the Sixth Air Force, as the controlling command authority for USAAF activities in the Caribbean, as well as in Central and South America. It was redesignated again in July 1946 as the Caribbean Air Command.

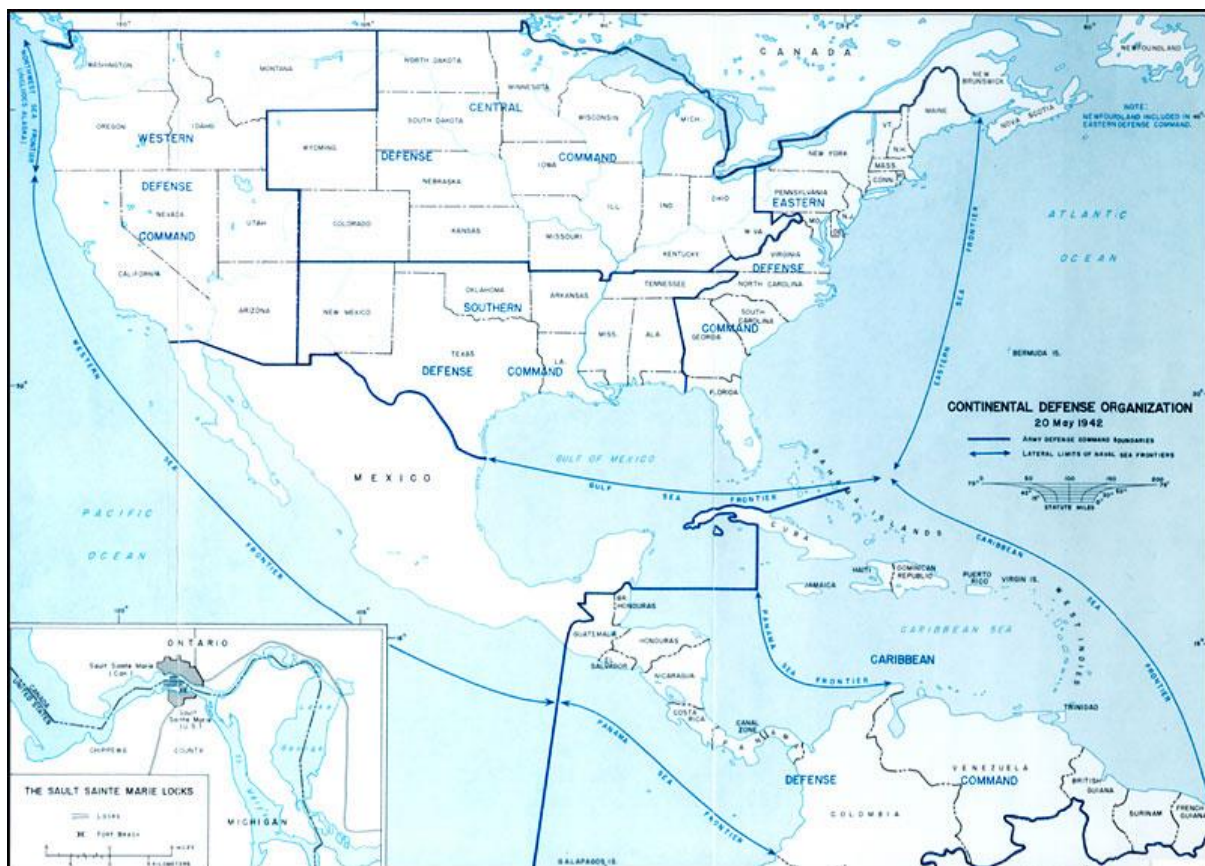
¹² He submitted his report to Lt Gen Daniel Van Voorhis, Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department, on 18 February 1941.

¹³ He went on to become US Theatre commander in the Middle East 1942-43, and overall commander of the US European Theatre of Operations in February 1943. However, he died in May 1943 in the crash of a B-24 Liberator along the Icelandic coast. Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland is named in his honour:

<https://www.nationalaviation.org/our-enshrinees/andrews-frank/>

The report envisaged a need for a unified command and control all Army air assets in the Caribbean, and he based the new Caribbean Air Force on the RAF model in the Battle of Britain. He also established the Army's first air-mobile strike force, combining infantry with air transport to respond instantly with a substantial force to any attack.¹⁴

However, Andrews and Van Voorhis did not have a good working relationship, and Marshall requested that the latter relinquish command early and promoted Andrews to theatre commander of the new Caribbean Defense Command, of which Andrews took over command on 19 September 1941.¹⁵ At the same time, the role of the Command was expanded to be *"to defend the Panama Canal and all outlying bases and stations in the Panama Sector for attacks by land, sea and air"*.¹⁶



¹⁴ See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/09/15/panama-the-striking-force-martinique-and-gliders-in-the-jungle/>

¹⁵ He was also Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department, as would be his successors. This helped in coordination and some bureaucracy, as some of his authority flowed from being the Commanding General, rather the head of the Caribbean Defense Command.

¹⁶ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

When created, the new Command was the largest to involve both ground and air troops. In addition, the appointment of Andrews marked the first instance of the policy of grouping all forces' elements under an officer of the part of the armed forces most likely to bear the brunt of operations in that area (in this case, the Army Air Forces or USAAF, which the USAAC had by then become). Furthermore, the new Command marked the first time that the US had defensive operations that included expansion to foreign countries.

However, entire Caribbean Defense Command, including those in the Canal Zone, numbered only 66,000 troops in December 1941. In large part, these troops were engaged in the development of air and other facilities required to support larger defence forces at a later date. They lacked much equipment for a major defensive operation, and the defence was at first dependent upon naval strength and later upon air power.¹⁷

Andrews restructured the Command by dividing it into three sectors: Panamanian, Puerto Rican, and Trinidadian. Each sector commander was responsible for defence and training in their respective areas.

As one might expect from an airman, and in the light of perceived threats to the Canal, he saw the need for a strong air defence. Aircraft patrolled frequently, especially on the Pacific side of the Canal Zone, where he believed that any attack on the Canal would come from that direction (from the Japanese).¹⁸ He ensured the presence of anti-aircraft batteries on all the islands in his Command and requisitioned additional radar sets to cover the Pacific and to monitor air traffic in Colombia.

¹⁷ *Logistics in World War II: Final Report of the Army Service Forces - A Report to the Under Secretary of War and the Chief of Staff by the Director of the Service, Supply, and Procurement Division, War Department General Staff (Center of Military History US Army, Washington DC, 1993):*
https://history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-29/CMH_Pub_70-29.pdf

¹⁸ Of course, there would be no enemy activity on this side of the isthmus during the war; all real threats came from the Caribbean.

The communications problem was rectified so that area commanders could speak to one another and with headquarters. This action established a communications grid encompassing the distant islands, and including countries in Latin America.¹⁹

However, there were ongoing problems in coordinating operations between the Command (an Army entity) and the Navy (the 15th Naval District covering the Canal Zone and adjacent waters, and being part of the 10th Fleet, when that “paper” fleet was formed in 1943) – with coordination expected by means of “mutual cooperation”. with the Caribbean Air Force, also an Army command²⁰ established at the same time. The Panama Sector was one of three distinct sectors²¹ that made up the new Command and included the Panama Canal Department, (which was also then responsible for Ecuador, Colombia, and Central America south of Mexico). The Caribbean Air Force also had responsibilities across all three sectors.

In fact, it was only after Pearl Harbor that unity of command was established, at least in the higher echelons, with the problem in some ways being transferred to lower levels.²²

One of the complaints made by commanders in Panama was that the higher command in 1941 appeared more interested in fortifying the outer defence shield in the newly acquired Caribbean bases than in Panama itself, including the Pacific side.²³

Notwithstanding the real, but relatively temporary, threat from German U-boats in the Caribbean in 1942-43, the new Command would have less military significance during the war than military leaders had originally imagined. Indeed, as the tide of war began to turn, it was being increasingly marginalised militarily, with less resources and personnel numbers

¹⁹ *Air & Space Power Journal* (May-June 2013):

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-27_Issue-3/F-Alert.pdf

²⁰ As the independent USAF was not established until 1947.

²¹ The others were the Puerto Rico Sector (Puerto Rico Department – formed in 1939 and with headquarters in San Juan, Virgin Islands, and the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Antigua Base Commands) and the Trinidad Sector (Trinidad, St Lucia and British Guiana Base Commands). In June 1943, the Antilles Department was established, with its headquarters at San Juan, which replaced the Puerto Rican Department, as such, and placed the Puerto Rican and Trinidad Sectors on an equal footing within the new administrative unit. This continued into 1944, when the 2 subordinate sectors were in turn eliminated and all posts in the Antilles came under the direct control of Antilles Department Headquarters.

²² <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-WH-Guard/USA-WH-Guard-13.html>

²³ *Ibid.*

reduced, and defences mothballed – though other roles, including training²⁴, grew in importance.²⁵

However, while it would never quite function as intended, it would serve as a prototype unified command which would deal jointly with the different branches of the services (mostly Army and Navy) in a manner that would later be adopted throughout the US military.

Furthermore, the presence of the Command helped the US in its dealings with its neighbours by providing a centralised authority within close proximity to the South American continent which could communicate quickly with decision-makers in Washington.²⁶

In the latter role, the lack of hostile activity in the Caribbean led to the Command being restructured several times throughout 1943, with its commander spending much of his time working on political-military relations with those Latin American neighbours rather than purely military issues.²⁷ It is said that, towards the end of 1943, the Command had already begun functioning as a more bureaucratic entity than a purely military one.

A Harbor Entrance Command Post (HECP) was established to give control of all passage to Army and Naval personnel through the Canal and its accessways, and some fixed harbour defence batteries were assigned the dual duties of defending against both motor torpedo boats and submarines. This was one of the earliest examples of the joint inter-service nature that would define the Caribbean Defense Command. The purpose of HECP was to act as a localised intelligence section to disseminate information of activities in defence sea areas and take decisive action to “*operate elements of harbor defense against the enemy in those defensive coastal areas*”. They were originally approved by General Marshall in June

²⁴ In November 1944, CDC began to establish additional training resources to assist the efforts of Latin American republics to “*mold their individual military groups into well-functioning and efficient organizations patterned after the general principles of the United States Army*” (per CDC Training Memorandum Number 1, Training Directive Training Year 1945).

²⁵ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

1941, but not given the final go-ahead and put in place in February 1942, after the US entry into the war.²⁸

In April 1943, the War Department reduced the alert status of the Command, from Defense Category "D"²⁹ to Category "B" (Category B - Coastal frontiers that may be subject to minor attacks).³⁰ Then, in September 1943, the War Department told its commander that it was expected that the entire Command would undergo the same reduction in alert status as had already been given to the Antilles Department³¹, that is to Defense Category A (the pre-war alert status),³² indicating an area of least military concern. This downgrading took place in 1944.³³

In 1943, another USAAF general assumed command, when General Howard Brett replaced Andrews.³⁴ Under him, the politico-military role expanded.

²⁸ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

²⁹ Category D - Coastal Frontiers that may be subject to major attack.

Under this category, the coastal defence areas should, in general, be provided with the means for defence, both Army and Navy, required to meet enemy naval operations preliminary to joint operations. All available means of defence would generally find application, and a stronger outpost and a more extensive patrol, inshore and off shore, than for Category C, would be required. Under this Category, certain defensive sea areas and maritime control areas would be established. In addition, an anti-aircraft gun and machine gun defence of important areas outside of harbour defences should be organised; general reserves should be strategically located so as to facilitate prompt reinforcement of the frontiers; and plans should be developed for the defence of specific areas likely to become theatres of operations. Long range air reconnaissance would be provided and plans made for use of the GHQ Air Force (Located in the Continental US pre-war, and established on 1 March 1935, the General Headquarters Air Force (GHQ Air Force) comprised of bomber, attack, and pursuit (fighter) aircraft under its control to provide coastal defence).

³⁰ Whereas Category C signified that minor attacks were anticipated "in all probability," and required a full installation and manning of harbour defences and the provision of other ground and of air defence forces in accordance with strengths available and the immediate outlook along the frontier.

³¹ Like the Panama Canal Department, this was an administrative sub-area of the Caribbean Defense Command and had been established on 1 July 1939, originally as the Puerto Rico Department, being renamed on 1 June 1943, when it was assigned responsibility over a much larger area, encompassing such places as Cuba, Trinidad, and the British West Indies.

³² Category A - Coastal frontiers (sea frontiers and defence commands) that would probably be free from attack, but for which a nominal defence must be provided for political reasons in sufficient strength to repel raids by submarines, by surface vessels operating by stealth or stratagem, or isolated raids by aircraft operating chiefly for morale effect.

³³ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

³⁴ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA459938.pdf>

General Brett personally “adopted” a B-17D Flying Fortress bomber³⁵ called *The Swoose*, as his own private transport. The *Swoose* would fly him around the region, and he was able to use it effectively as a means of propaganda by allowing foreign leaders to travel with him, and reportedly even allowing the Presidents of Cuba and Nicaragua to fly as co-pilots during “good neighbour” visits.³⁶ He also commandeered a rescue boat (of which a number were based in the Canal Zone)³⁷ to host fishing parties, and spent so much that an official inquiry was set up to examine his spending habits.³⁸

1942 was arguably the busiest year for the Command and its assigned area of responsibility as an active theatre of war, with the need to protect shipping during the U-boat offensive of Operation *Neuland* from February became the major concern.³⁹ This was not just in the immediate region of Panama and the Panama Sea Frontier, but throughout the Caribbean.

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³⁵ The B-17B was an early model, not by then suitable for combat operations.

³⁶ The *Swoose* would be slated for disposal after the war, but through the efforts of Colonel Frank Kurtz, who as a Captain had first selected it to serve as General Brett’s transport, it was eventually transferred to the care of the National Museum of the United States Air Force. Kurtz, who was the *Swoose*’s pilot throughout its career at the CDC, would later go on to name his daughter, actress Swoosie Kurtz in honour of the aircraft: *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016):

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

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³⁷ See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/09/29/panama-at-war-blimps-crash-boats-peashooters-and-herman-the-german/>

³⁸ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016):

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

In November 1945, a report by the Inspector General to the Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall, said that most of the charges were distortions of mission-related events and expenditures, and that “*the remaining allegations were found to be without a basis in fact...I concur in the reporting officer’s recommendation that no further action be taken in this matter*”: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA459938.pdf>

³⁹ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

See also <http://raytodd.blog/2022/11/08/panama-and-the-u-boats/>

⁴⁰ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

See also <http://raytodd.blog/2022/11/08/panama-and-the-u-boats/>

The Panama Sea Frontier patrol and threat area covered both Pacific and Caribbean regions. It stretched from the Mexico/Guatemala border out to the Galapagos Islands and down to a point at 5° of latitude on the coast of South America. On the other side, it stretched from the Mexico/British Honduras border to Punta de Gallinas in Colombia on the north coast of South America, and around 90 miles (144.8 km) west of Aruba. In doing so, the Panama Sea Frontier encompassed the coastlines of British Honduras, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia.

Until as late as 1943, the US maintained a long-distance striking force established by Andrews as part of the Command (comprising parachute troops and airborne infantry), intended for potential use elsewhere in the Central or South America or in the Caribbean.⁴¹ This force also undertook training in Panama.

In January 1943, Major General HC Ingles of Army Staff produced a major study on the organisation of the Caribbean theatre and one of the recommendations was that the Caribbean Defense Command be disbanded. Then, a review by an officer from the Office of the Inspector General from 4 to 29 March 1943 found that there was a multiplicity of headquarters and overlapping commands. This, it said, could have been justified when the Command had been created, but the strategic situation had now changed, and therefore a reduction of both troops and proposed installations was justified.

AN ODDITY OF COMMAND

⁴¹ <http://raytodd.blog/2022/09/15/panama-the-striking-force-martinique-and-glidiers-in-the-jungle/>

Because of the way the Caribbean Defense Command had been established, its commander exercised control, where it related to the actual Canal Zone, only in his capacity as Commanding General of the Army's Panama Canal Department, and not by virtue of his position as commander of the Caribbean Defense Command.

While, in many cases, this was a "*distinction without a difference*" it caused several unexpected consequences. In one example, while the CDC commander was nominally in charge of the Antilles Department, it meant that his dealings with this Department could only be done through CDC personnel instead of the more numerous Canal Zone personnel, causing manpower problems as the number of troops was reduced toward the end of the war.

Unity of command continued to be a major problem as naval anti-submarine units within the Caribbean Sea Frontier were under command of Commander Caribbean Naval Sea Frontier, not under the direct command of the Commander, CDC. This situation continued until July 1943, when the 10th Fleet was established to provide a "paper" command to coordinate US Navy anti-submarine operations during the Battle of the Atlantic.⁴²

In November 1945, the War Department made clear that the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department had control of the 15th Naval District based in the Canal Zone, but once more emphasised that this was by virtue of his being Panama Canal Department Commander, and not by virtue of being CDC commander.

However, this meant that a commander of naval forces in the Panama Sea Frontier served three superiors (the Caribbean Defense Command, the local 15th Naval District and the theatre-wide 10th Fleet).⁴³

⁴² <https://www.fcc.navy.mil/ABOUT-US/US-TENTH-FLEET-HISTORY/#:~:text=Upon%20its%20entry%20into%20the,for%20a%20unity%20of%20effort>.

⁴³ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>



One of the first changes in the structure of the Command occurred in May 1943, when the Puerto Rico Department was changed to include the Trinidad Sector and Base Command and became the Antilles Department, thus merging three separate sub-commands into one. Also in May, the air component of the Caribbean Defense Command, the Sixth Air Force, was then split roughly in half with one portion being placed in the Antilles Department and becoming the Antilles Air Command.

It was also considered possible to eliminate the long-distance striking force, which had not been needed and, with Axis aggression in the region either receding or never having materialised, it did not appear that the striking force would be needed.⁴⁴

BLACK TROOPS IN THE COMMAND

While there were black troops serving within the Caribbean Defense Command area, their assigned duties were very restricted. A 1947 memo reiterating racial policy at the time drew a response that there were no “*continental negroes*” (this is to say, those from the Continental US) in the Command, but that many negroes of Puerto Rican or Virgin Island origin had been “scattered” throughout the Antilles Department.

The reason given was that it would be “*highly undesirable to utilize continental negro personnel at any place in this command for the reason that Latin negroes and continental negroes will not mix without resentment due to racial characteristics which are entirely different and the large differential in pay scales between military personnel and native negroes*”.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

⁴⁵ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

PUERTO RICAN TROOPS

In addition to the deployment of black troops, the question of the use of Puerto Rican troops also displayed racial sensitivities. Puerto Rican troops were increasingly being sought to supplant forces being removed from the Caribbean Defense Command and the increased use of Puerto Rican troops exposed an attitude that is at odds with modern sensitivities. Although all involved acknowledged that they were US citizens, it was felt that they were lacking in “*mental, tactical and technical ability*” as well as in proficiency in English. The requirements for the Puerto Rican troops were that they be at least 8th grade graduates, speak English, be above the minimum weight and height levels, and receive a rating of Class 3 or higher on the Army General Classification Test (the AGCT was an early means for attempting the assessment of intelligence or other abilities). One report attributed some of the claimed deficiencies as being due to their “*...being of Latin temperament, [making it] safe to say that most Puerto Ricans are in general temperamentally unstable*”.⁴⁶

In March 1943, the CDC Deputy Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General McNarney, and the Commanding General, General Brett, discussed the possibility of using Puerto Rican troops in the Command and a study was commissioned. Then the War Department set the 90,000-manpower ceiling for the Command with the stipulation that the Command utilise 30,000 Puerto Ricans. This sparked concerns that this would mean that one in three Command personnel would eventually be Puerto Rican.⁴⁷

It should be remembered that it was not only the US authorities that displayed discriminatory attitudes. It was said at the time that “*the use of Puerto Rican troops in Cuba is entirely out of the question*” due to possible racial animosities between the peoples of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and that the Panamanian Government was reluctant to accept Puerto Ricans, and unnecessary additional health checks were imposed.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

Note that official orders for the recruitment of Puerto Ricans requested that all such Puerto Rican troops be white.

⁴⁷ The AGCT was an early means for attempting the assessment of intelligence or other abilities. For further information, see: *Psychology, Society, and Ability Testing (1859-2002)* by Paul F Ballantyne. The Puerto Rican Induction Report in 1945, said that an Puerto Rican inductee “*admittedly, was not generally suited for front line duty*” but would be valuable for other duties and “*thousands of potential actual combat US Continental personnel would thereby be released from secondary services*”: https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/pr-military/mobilizing-puerto-ricans#_ftn8

⁴⁸ For more on this subject, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/11/17/panama-war-discrimination-and-segregation/>

On 29 May 1944, the entire region was re-defined as being a “non-combat area”, and six days after the D-Day landings in June, the Navy’s 10th Fleet was dissolved.⁴⁹ Then, on 28 June, the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington directed that all the Lend-Lease bases except Trinidad be reduced to caretaker status.

The change from a wartime footing continued throughout the entire area of responsibility for the latter half of 1944. On 14 August, plans were requested from all sectors for the complete deactivation of defences and reduction to normal status upon cessation of hostilities in Europe. By VE Day on 8 May 1945, no enemy forces had threatened the area for over 10 months.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945 the Caribbean Defense Command strength was down to 67,500,⁵⁰ where garrison strength in Panama alone had once reached a peak of 119,000.

The reduction in strength, and the redeployment of troops continued as the war ended, with a start made on a reorganisation being begun in 1946, the aim being to have just 20,000 Canal Zone troops by 1 March 1946.⁵¹ The reduction continued after the war, despite the Cold War and the Korean War of the early 1950s⁵² and, by 1959, troop levels reached their lowest level, with just 6,600 being present.⁵³

⁴⁹ Established on 10 May 1943, this was a “paper” fleet, without ships or aircraft, its mission the directing and coordinating all Navy anti-submarine activities worldwide.

⁵⁰ <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-i/>

⁵¹ In order to concentrate resources for occupation duty in Austria, Germany, Korea and Japan, the new Army Chief of Staff, Eisenhower, wrote to General MacArthur in Japan in January 1946 saying that garrisons in places such as Panama were being “cut to the bone”: *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008.

⁵² The Korean War 1950-53 saw security increased, Army guards assigned, anti-aircraft units (which were those left from World War 2) were stood up and used to supplement harbour defences, “hostile” foreign nationals were detained and the control of ships was tightened.

⁵³ Using Decree No.631 of 18 August 1951, the Panamanian Government barred ships of the Panamanian flag merchant fleet to enter ports of Communist China and other communist ports in Asia: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v07/d169>

The closing of military and naval bases throughout the region was complicated by the tenuous nature of many of the agreements that had been reached with host countries following the US entry into the war. Many of the countries in the region had been eager to join the war effort and had allowed the US to set up bases within their territories. Though most Latin American republics had remained supportive of the US throughout the war effort, the lack of detailed agreements regarding rights to these bases now began to cause complications – Panama being a prime example, and where the closure of bases in the Republic followed protests.⁵⁴

The host states began to see a US military presence within their borders in a different light than had been the case in the face of wartime threats. In addition, several regime changes had taken place throughout the region, with the resulting in more populist administrations that were less inclined to favour a continued US presence.

As in Panama, the situation involving Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands went awry, although, fortunately, not all relations went as badly as the Galapagos handover.⁵⁵

In September 1947, when the USAAF was separated from the Army to become the independent US Air Force, the ground and service organisation had been renamed the US Army, Caribbean. The War Department emphasised that an Army officer would be in charge of overall defence and security of the Canal and Canal Zone, while the Canal Zone Governor would continue to be subject to this Army officer in any emergency.

In November 1947, the US adopted a national security plan that saw the wartime Caribbean Defense Command become the US Caribbean Command. It was initially tasked with responsibilities over Canal and access points and approaches to the Canal as well as all military forces throughout the region. Following a reorganisation, in addition to defending the Panama Canal, it assumed broad responsibilities for inter-American security cooperation

⁵⁴ For more, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/08/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

⁵⁵ <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/16/panama-advance-bases-and-the-rock/>

in Central and South America. General Crittenger, then commanding the CDC, took over as commander of the new Command.⁵⁶

The change of mission that the establishment of the Caribbean Command (aka, in the lexicon of US military jargon, as CARIBCOM) would see it eventually become a framework for a postwar hemispheric security system had begun to take shape throughout the mid-1940s involving international cooperation and multinational institutions.

The Pan American Union⁵⁷ had begun the process of establishing norms in security cooperation which would ultimately lead to the Rio Pact of 1947⁵⁸, and the establishment of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1948. A mutual security zone in the region was declared, with a declaration that an attack by any other member would result in defensive action by all.⁵⁹

The Cold War (1947-1991) saw the new Command not only oversee the security of the region, but increasingly to fighting growing communist influence throughout the region. This involved diplomatic activity, military training, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and to bring the armed forces in line with US military norms, and to encourage military to military cooperation.

During the 1950s, the area of responsibility of the new Command was reduced, with the Caribbean basin removed from the area. In the event of a global war, US Atlantic Command, based in Norfolk, Virginia, would control the Caribbean basin as part of its mission to conduct hemispheric anti-submarine operations.

⁵⁶ The USAAF Sixth Air Force was removed from the Panama Canal Department and reorganised as the Caribbean Air Command, and in 1947 the new, separate US Air Force took over responsibility from the former USAAF.

⁵⁷ Originally established, as the International Union of American Republics, in 1890 to establish agreements on various common commercial and juridical problems among the countries of the Americas. Following the Rio Pact of 1947, it was reconstituted as the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1948.

⁵⁸ The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (aka the Rio Treaty, the Rio Pact, the Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, or *Tratado Interamericano de Asistencia Reciproca* or TIAR) was signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1947. It came into force in 1948.

⁵⁹ This, of course, has been breached by several of the signatory states, and on multiple occasions. For example, the US invasion of Panama in 1989 was condemned by the OAS, and the US sided with the UK over the Falklands War in 1982.

By 1960, the Caribbean Command was not engaged in the Caribbean and the Kennedy administration changed the name to US Southern Command on 6 June 1963. US Southern Command was headquartered in the original CDC headquarters at Quarry Heights, and only moved to Miami in 1997, in anticipation of the handover of the Panama Canal and Canal Zone back to Panama at the end of 1999.⁶⁰

COMMANDING GENERALS DURING WORLD WAR 2

Major General David L Stone	(12 April 1937 – 7 January 1940);
Lieutenant General Daniel Van Voorhis	(7 January 1940 – 17 September 1941)
Lieutenant General Frank M Andrews	(17 September 1941 – 9 November 1942)
Lieutenant General George H Brett	(November 1942–October 1945)
Lieutenant General Willis D Crittenberger	(October 1945–November 1947)

Of the above, General Brett was quite possibly the one most responsible for turning the Command into what it and its successor commands would eventually become - vehicles for diplomacy and military cooperation with the nations of the area of responsibility.

On 15 October 1945, General Crittenberger replaced Brett and, as we have seen, would remain in post for the remainder of the Command's existence, and would transition to the role of Commander of US Caribbean Command following the reorganisation in 1947.



The Caribbean Defense Command insignia was on 3 May 1944, and was subsequently applied to the US Army Caribbean in February 1948, and US Army Forces Southern Command in 1963. It was reassigned to US Army South in 1987.

⁶⁰ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>



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