

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – WHAT HAPPENED WHEN

1941

As the US only formally became a combatant in World War 2 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, one might think that any detailing of wartime events for that year would be rather thin. However, from at least the mid-1930s shortcomings in the defences of the Canal had begun to be recognised, and plans to improve them put in place. Once fighting actually broke out in Europe in 1939 the tempo quickened. That said, in December 1941, and for months after that, there remained inadequacies in many areas – but gradually matters improved. Ironically, by the time the new and reinforced defences, including in bases outside the Canal Zone and in nearby countries, were up and running, the tide of the war had turned and moves began to cap troop numbers, redeploy units, and scale down defences once more.

For other reasons too the year was notable. President Arnulfo Arias Madrid, who had only taken up the office the previous year, was deposed (not for the first time in his long career) in 1941 in a bloodless coup led by the National Police¹. There was also a new Constitution which he had introduced, which remained in force. The new Administration focused on cooperation with the US, abandoned the nationalist policy carried out by Arias Madrid, and concentrated largely on the defence of Panama and the Canal.

Before he was deposed, the Arias Madrid government introduced a new Law² which instituted a four-tier licensing system (first class, second class, general and professional). This was aimed at squeezing out non-Panamanians and/or undesirables from business in the Republic. Within a year or so, nearly 90% of retail establishments with a capital of less than \$500, and more than 75% of larger businesses, were being operated by Panamanians, and large numbers of Chinese, Japanese and others were forced to liquidate their business, and many had to leave the country. The enforcement of the Law was later relaxed somewhat,

¹ The National Police were also behind the appointment of Arias Madrid's successor, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia in 1941, and then Enrique A Jimenez Brin in 1945. Neither of these had their own tenable bases of support, or popular support, which became crucial when opposition to them grew. Hence, they needed to support of the National Police to continue.

² Law No 24 of 1941.

and did not appear to be applied generally to US citizens (the administration that replaced that of Arias Madrid being noticeably less anti-American).

In 1941, the population of the Canal Zone was 42,346, a figure which omitted the enlarged military and naval garrisons).³

As tensions rose, from mid-Summer 1941, the Aircraft Warning Stations and anti-aircraft defences were on continuous alert, and bomber units and some fighter units were on 24-hour alert, with air patrols (as availability of aircraft permitted) supplementing the continuous surface patrols undertaken by the Navy⁴. Locks and other sensitive areas were placed under armed guard and military transit guards travelled on vessels transiting the Canal⁵. The Rio Hato Gunnery Camp was established for practice firing of anti-aircraft guns in 1941.

Summer 1941 also saw the start of work on the development of a new naval operating base on the west bank at Balboa which, with further expansion impossible along the congested eastern waterfront, became the centre of major war construction effort in the Canal Zone⁶.

As early as 1934, then President Harmodio Arias had raised the need for a bridge over the Canal with President Roosevelt, and in 1941 President Arias Madrid included the requirement in the list of 12 conditions that he wanted attached to an agreement for the expansion of US military presence outside the Canal Zone.⁷

In 1941, 185 ships used the dry docks facilities in the Canal Zone, this would rise to a peak of 546 in 1945.

³ *Report of the Health Department of the Panama Canal for the calendar year 1941* (The Panama Canal press, 1942).

⁴ <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-WH-Guard/USA-WH-Guard-13.html>

⁵ The soldiers used would later in the war be replaced by US Marines.

⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

The peak of construction activity was reached in Summer 1943, and three of the four major contracts were terminated during the Autumn, followed in April 1944 by several smaller lump-sum contracts were awarded for minor additions and improvements and to cater for ongoing needs.

⁷ Aside from small bridges across the locks at Gatun and Miraflores, it would be 1962 before a significant road bridge would finally be built. See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40898> for more on the bases outside the Canal Zone.

The possibility arose that US troops from the Canal Zone might be needed to be sent to intervene when an undeclared war broke out between Peru and Ecuador in July over a century-old boundary dispute. However, Peru soon prevailed, and a peace agreement was signed in January 1942, with no evidence of Axis involvement or influence.⁸

There was frequent congestion at the port of Cristobal throughout 1941, but this affected the commercial shipping lines rather than the Army Transport Service. Army cargo had priority discharge, and no undue delay was reported despite the scarcity and reported inefficiency of dock workers. At the time, movements within the Canal Zone, along the line of the Canal, were performed chiefly by the Panama Railroad. Use of air transport was limited to emergency shipments, and the Trans-Isthmian Highway, connecting Colón to Madden Dam in Panamanian territory, completed in 1941, was to provide an alternate means of travel to the Panama Railroad in the event of bombing or sabotage⁹.

Before the end of 1941, an agreement with Ecuador saw permission obtained for the US to build bases in the Galapagos Islands.

The National Police (*Policia Nacional*), as that force existed during the war, was first established as an independent organisation by Law No 79 of 1941. It had originally been created as an institution in 1905, after the disbanding of the military in 1904. It would be renamed the National Guard in 1953¹⁰, and would continue to maintain and grow its power, power that it had first exercised from behind the scenes during the war years. Arias Madrid had attempted to build a loyal sector within the Police by creating the National Secret Police in 1941.¹¹

⁸ This was the “War of ‘41” (*Guerra del 41*), but the dispute rumbled on, with a further short conflict in 1981 and 1995, before a definitive peace agreement was signed in 1998.

⁹ <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/candc/candc2016.pdf>

¹⁰ Law 44 of 23 December 1953 refers.

¹¹ *We Answer Only to God. Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

The US Office of Price Administration operated in the Canal Zone. This Office had been established in 1941 to control rents and prices during the wartime period. It had the power to place ceilings on all prices except agricultural commodities, and to ration scarce supplies of other items, including tyres, automobiles, shoes, nylon, sugar, gasoline, fuel oil, coffee, meats and processed foods. It was abolished in May 1947.

Interracial tensions began to rise from the 1930s and, as early as the Summer 1940, police officers had to be stationed during mealtime in a Silver Roll mess hall in Gatún, where fights ensued when “Latin” Panamanians insisted they be given their meals before West Indians. Those tensions peaked in the Summer 1941, when riots broke out at labour camps across the Canal Zone.

Out of 33,815 Canal employees in 1941, there were 460 cases of malaria, a rate of 14 per thousand. This proportion had been around this figure for most of the 1930s. There were no deaths from malaria reported in 1941, and only one in 1940 and, in fact, only three had occurred during the whole 1930s. The 1941 rate remained low, despite a significant increase in the average number of workers in the Canal Zone.¹²

Completed during 1941 were the majority of the housing developments authorised as part of the expansion construction programme.

The Fort Amador Officers' Club was constructed in 1941 as a bowling alley. A baseball field was laid out on the Parade Ground at Fort Amador.

Located on Gatun Lake, the Fort Gulick Military Reservation was established in April 1941 near Fort Davis as part of the wartime construction¹³. It later became home to the US Army School of the Americas (originally built as the Atlantic Sector Hospital in 1942, which

¹² *Report of the Health Department of the Panama Canal for the calendar year 1941* (The Panama Canal press, 1942). Rates would increase as new troops arrived.

¹³ Being named for Major General John W Gulick, Chief of the Coastal Artillery 1930-34.

operated 1943-6), and was used to train students from Central and South America from 1949¹⁴.

Located on the Bay of Panama, on the west bank of the Canal, what became Fort Kobbe, a sub-post of Fort Amador, had been expanded considerably in 1940, and from June 1941 became separate from Fort Amador as part of an independent post that also included Howard Field¹⁵, and a pair of gun batteries (Haan and Murray).¹⁶

Fort Sherman was the site of the US's first operationally deployed early warning radar in 1941.

The US Naval Station – Marine Barrack, which included 25 buildings for family housing and barracks buildings, as well as other buildings¹⁷, comprised 281 acres (113.7 hectares) on the west bank of the Canal's Pacific entrance. Originally named the Naval Ammunition Depot, Balboa, it was renamed in 1941. It housed the Marines forces in Panama.¹⁸

The Gatun Lake Military Reservation, which included the islands of Zorra and Piedras and another unnamed one in Gatun Lake, was established by an Executive Order of 12 June 1941.

US Naval Radio Station, Farfan was constructed on an 820-acre reservation in 1941- 42.¹⁹

The larger Coco Solo Hospital was constructed in the Summer of 1941²⁰. The area containing it was transferred from the civil part of the Canal Zone under Executive Order

¹⁴ With 34,000 students graduating before relocation of the School to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/55>

¹⁵ <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/43>

¹⁶ For views of the Murray Battery as it appears in 2021 see <https://mochilliando.com/2021/05/03/urbex-explorando-el-bunker-battery-murray-panama-pacifico-mochilliando/> and the area is said to provide several beautiful trails for walking or cycling...and is "highly recommended to go with your family and friends".

¹⁷ <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/47>

¹⁸ https://members.tripod.com/william_h_ormsbee/bases_summ_p03.htm

¹⁹ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/an%20american%20legacy3.pdf.pdf>

²⁰ In 1954 it was transferred to the Canal Zone authorities: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-W79-6974c7887ccf00b36992981b3cfc87de/pdf/GOVPUB-W79-6974c7887ccf00b36992981b3cfc87de.pdf>

8981 on 17 December²¹. A second 400-bed hospital was built adjoining the operating base on the Pacific side. Construction began in Autumn 1941 and it was commissioned in August 1942, although only partially completed. All the buildings were of temporary frame construction, one-story high, and well ventilated.²²

Resolution No. 1 of the Panamanian National Assembly on 8 December declared that, in accordance with the commitments under the 1936 Treaty there was "a state of war between the Empire of Japan and the Republic of Panama and that while such a state lasts, the Republic of Panama would use all the means at its disposal to cooperate in the most effective way in the defence of the national territory and the work of the Panama Canal. Moreover, this cooperation would not cease until the dangers that today threaten Panama have been eliminated and the Canal, and the principles of freedom and democracy that constitute the foundation of the free, dignified, and independent existence of the American Republics has been established". This "state of war" was extended to the other powers of the Axis, Italy and Germany, by Law No. 104 of 10 December.

Ironically, given the country's previous reluctance to be involved, Panama managed to officially declare war on Japan before the US. Panama declared war on 7 December, on the same day as the attack on Pearl Harbor, whereas the US only did so the following day²³. Panama, together with a number of other small Latin American states, then declared war on Italy and Germany on 13 December 1941²⁴.

Decree 100 on 13 December ordered the expulsion from Panama of the consuls and vice-consuls of Japan, Germany and Italy. On 22 December, immigration from countries occupied by these countries was prohibited.

²¹ <https://navy.togetherweserved.com/usn/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApp?cmd=PublicUnitProfile&type=Unit&ID=8240> <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-8981-navy-hospital-area-coco-solo-canal-zone>

²² https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²³ President Roosevelt formally requested the declaration in his well-known "day of infamy" speech, addressed to a joint session of Congress and the nation at 1230 on 8 December. The declaration was quickly brought to a vote, and it was passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives by 1310.

²⁴ Germany and Italy had pre-empted the US by declaring war on it on 11 December, the US responding the same day.

Within an hour of the news of the Pearl Harbor attack (which took place at 2 pm, Panama local time), the US Army's Mobile Force had been directed to put one company on alert to guard an alien internment camp at Balboa Quarantine Station. Just three hours later it was ordered there. By 11 December, Panama had detained 861 and turned them over to the US Army – this would be the maximum number of internees held in the camp during the war. 28 presumed enemy aliens were apprehended in the Canal Zone itself within a few days of the outbreak of war. By early February 1942, there were only 443 internees (including 35 women and 47 dependent children) remaining in the internment camp.

As was the case for the Army, the first reaction of the Navy in December 1941 was to strengthen the defences at the Pacific end of the Canal.

A blackout was imposed in the Canal Zone from 7 December, being a partial blackout until 2300, and then full for the rest of the night. Headlights were masked with red paint.

Military dependents, wives and children, were evacuated during 1941.

At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, US Navy resources in the Canal area consisted of only two old destroyers and a gunboat, plus six submarines, three converted yachts, five subchasers, a minesweeper, and 12 patrol flying boats together with their tender vessel.

PCAC and PCAN, the unofficial radio stations set up by members of the Army in the Canal Zone shut down 7 December, due to an emergency directive requiring radio stations to go quiet, but restarted on 23 December under rules that allowed low-power transmissions, capable of being received no more than 15 miles. As all Panamanian stations had been ordered to close down, the two became the only radio station available to those in both the Canal Zone and the Republic.²⁵

In 1940, the War Plans Division at the US War Department had recommended the establishment of a theatre command structure for the Caribbean, for Army and Navy assets,

²⁵ <http://www.scncz.com/PCAN%20history.htm>

and one of which would be centred on the Canal Zone and take in Jamaica. The plan was approved in January 1941, and the Caribbean Defense Command (CDC) would be officially activated in February 1942. In February 1941, the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department was also made commander of the new Command²⁶, which incorporated responsibilities in various British Caribbean possessions which the US had acquired under Lend-Lease, with the Caribbean Air Force, also an Army command²⁷ established at the same time. It also took in Ecuador, Colombia and Central America south of Mexico. On 9 September, the mission of CDC was revised, being 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".²⁸

A NEW CONSTITUTION

President Arias Madrid had presented the new draft Constitution to the National Assembly after only 16 days in office. The Constitution would see power concentrated in the hands of the President whose term, along with that of members of the National Assembly, was extended from four to six years, so that Arias Madrid's term would have ended in 1947 instead of 1945 (although he was to be deposed in October 1941).

The new Constitution contained a number of positive, progressive provisions, including voting rights for women. However, it also had a darker side. For example, it prohibited the immigration of people of "the black race whose original language is not Spanish, the yellow race and the original races of India, Asia Minor and North Africa" and stripped around 51,000 people born in Panama of their citizenship retroactively.²⁹ On 22 November, barely a month after the draft Bill had been laid before it, the National Assembly declared the new Constitution of 189 Articles to be approved. Within a week, on 26 November, Arias Madrid signed a Decree by which he granted himself "the supreme representation of the State" and called for a plebiscite on the

²⁶ 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>

²⁷ As the independent USAF was not established until 1947.

²⁸ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.ufliib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

²⁹ <https://publicandohistoria.com/2018/04/01/un-grave-problema-etnico/>

new Constitution on 15 December, which overwhelmingly backed it. On 30 December, the National Assembly formally adopted the new Constitution, to come into force on 2 January 1942.

THE CONTE BIANCAMANO

The *Conte Biancamano*³⁰ was a liner that had set out in 1940 on a voyage Genoa-Naples-Panama-Valparaiso-Panama. She was docked at Cristobal in December 1941³¹. She was being held there pending the outcome of judicial proceedings over fuel supplied at Suez (to it and other ships). It had arrived in June 1940 with 400 crew, 50 passengers and 2,000 tons of copper. On 7 June, the Italian Government ordered its vessels to neutral ports, and it entered the war on 10 June. The ship made a transit of the Canal on 25 June, with an armed guard aboard, and anchored in Limón Bay off Colón. It remained there until 7 March 1941, when it moved into dock – to avoid it leaving without clearance, or causing some sabotage or other damage.³² After being seized by the US, she was subsequently converted in Philadelphia into a troop transport, accommodating up to 7,000 men, and commissioned into the US Navy in March 1942 as USS *Hermitage* (AP-54).

THE DEPOSING OF PRESIDENT ARIAS MADRID

In 1941, Life Magazine carried an article in which it was said that, after his election in the previous Autumn, Arias Madrid had adopted a strong nationalist, "Panama for Panamanians" policy, and it said that he did not seem disposed to help the US³³. Meanwhile, the President's policies and attitudes had alarmed the US, concerned over possible risks to the security of the Canal.

In 1941, an official memorandum sent by the US Ambassador described the situation in Panama under Arias Madrid as follows –

³⁰ Launched in Glasgow in 1925, she carried 180 passengers in first class, 220 in second class, 390 in economic class and 2,660 in third class.

³¹ On 30 March 1941, President Roosevelt had ordered federal authorities to take possession of foreign vessels lying idle in US waters, to prevent damage to the ships or their machinery.

³² <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

³³ <http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Lifemag/lmindex.htm>

“what has developed in Panama is about as near an approach to Hitlerism as the characteristics of Latin Americans and the peculiar circumstances affecting Panama could be expected to permit”³⁴.

The President’s policies and attitudes had alarmed the US, concerned over the security of the Canal. The US Government concluded that Arnulfo Arias Madrid would have to go. In May 1941, the Office of naval Intelligence (ONI) concluded that –

“the present conditions are considered dangerous to the security of the canal and it is believed that they should be corrected as soon as possible. A local revolution to throw out the crooked pro-Axis officialdom would be preferable to intervention by US forces”.³⁵

On 7 October, after Arias Madrid had left the country on a Pan American flight to Cuba³⁶, allowing his opponents (including Remón Cantera of the National Police) to involve Article III of the Constitution to depose him. The conspirators then appointed the pro-American businessman, and Minister for Government, Ricardo de la Guardia as President. This appointment received rapid approval from the US.³⁷ To the US the new President proved much more amenable and negotiations over additional bases in the Republic were soon concluded successfully³⁸.

To the relief of the US, the new President reversed much of what Arias Madrid had begun, and on 11 December, a US official in Panama reported that –

The new administration...immediately set about tearing down the totalitarian-like institutions set up by his predecessor...The Arias-inspired organizations and

³⁴ <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2131&context=masters-theses>

³⁵ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

³⁶ Although travelling incognito, the airport was at Albrook Field in the Canal Zone and US officials recognised him and notified others in the Panamanian administration.

³⁷ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

³⁸ However, he too was forced from office in 1945, by the National Assembly. Popularly known as the “Cojo” (“limping”), he was President from 9 October 1941 to 15 June 1945. He thus held the post during almost the whole of the US involvement in World War 2. For more on the wartime Presidents see <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41597>

*innovations, such as the Cacahorros de Urraca and the Civic Service Law, were done away with, while freedom of the press was completely restored. The Civil Attaché of the German Legation, undoubtedly the most dangerous Nazi element in Panama, was expelled; the pro-Nazi Panamanian Minister in Berlin was dismissed; the pro-Nazi propagandist, Julio Argain, was expelled; and other Nazis...left the country, ostensibly of their own accord.*³⁹

An initial appropriation of \$15 million was made for the Third Locks Project expansion plan for the Canal by Congress, allowing excavation to begin, and dry excavation at Gatun on 19 February 1941. On 23 December, the Governor reported to the Secretary of War that the schedule, which called for completing the project by 30 June 1946, could be met only by assigning high priority to the construction.⁴⁰

JANUARY

In January, the Army and Navy began to plan for intervention in Latin American states to help avert Axis-inspired movements (the anticipated intervention in the Peru-Ecuador war mentioned above would have been to counter any such involvement).

In January, the Secretary of War required all non-US ships passing through the Canal to carry an armed guard, and all vessels required prior authorisation from the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department to make a transit

To cater for the increase in US “Gold Roll” workers, a new site called Margarita was laid out about 2½ miles (4 km) from Cristobal, with the first buildings occupied in January 1941 – “tropical” (or “Silver” Roll) workers were to be accommodated separately near Gatun. Three new towns (Caecal, Diablo Heights, and Margarita) were required for an estimated 6,300 employees and dependents.

³⁹ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

⁴⁰ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/panama-canal-third-locks.htm>

In January, President Arias Madrid provided a list of 12 points, dealing with various grievances, which should form part of the agreement on the proposed defence sites in the Republic. This was forwarded to Washington.

During early 1941, negotiations continued and , on 5 March, the foreign ministry supplied the US Ambassador with a draft proclamation in which the President would allow the US to occupy the defence sites, on condition that this was merely for the duration of the European war, and that the US would vacate and pay compensation for use of the sites when it ended.⁴¹ The War Department said that this was unacceptable. The Commanding General said that he favoured a 10-year lease, rather than one limited to the duration of the European war. The State Department view was that the sites be made available for the duration of the “unforeseen emergency” referred to in the 1936 Treaty, or for as long as they may be needed for the defence of the Canal.

32nd Pursuit Group was activated on 1 January with the intention to equip it with P-38L Lightning twin-engine fighters in early 1942 (but, in fact, no P-38 would arrive in Panama until 1944). 53rd Pursuit Squadron was also formed at Albrook Field on 1 January.

53rd Pursuit Group was activated in the US on 15 January, training on the Seversky P-35 and Curtiss P-40 types, before moving to Panama in December. It would return to the US in November 1942 and thereafter became a training unit until disbanded on 1 May 1944.⁴²

FEBRUARY

By February, the US Army's Corps of Intelligence Police (a part of the Military Intelligence Division or MID) still had only a complement of 288 men, of which 18 agents were assigned to the Panama Canal Department⁴³.

⁴¹ This, in essence, would, of course, become the basis (and source of future disagreement in 1947-48) of the eventual Bases Agreement in 1942.

⁴² <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>

⁴³ The first two such officers had been assigned to the Canal Zone in 1922, the complement rising to three in April 1939, and four in 1940, with 12 places originally authorised in 1941. By February 1942, there were 59 officers in Panama, out of a total of 513 in the whole Corps (which had become renamed as the Counter

The 20th Transport Squadron had been activated in 1940 at France Field, but having no aircraft until February 1941. It became operational in March 1941, with its first aircraft, a single Douglas C-33⁴⁴ (making daily flights to Albroom Field and Rio Hato).

Caribbean Defense Command was formally established on 10 February. The Caribbean Interceptor Command, was the USAAF component, established on the same date, but only lasting until 17 October, when it was deactivated and replaced by VI Interceptor Command.⁴⁵

To trigger the “emergency” that, under the terms of the pre-war exchange of notes appended to the 1936 Treaty, would then justify the requirement for additional defence sites outside the Canal Zone, on 13 February, US Secretary of State Cordell Hull stated that –

“The government of the United States has... reached the conclusion that, in accordance with the terms of Article X of the Treaty of 1936... an international conflagration has broken out bringing with it the existence of a threat to the security of the Panama Canal which requires the taking of measures for the defense of the canal on the part of the Government of the United States”.

On 14 February, the National Assembly passed a Law barring aliens from the operation of retail businesses, making citizenship a prerequisite. At the time foreigners owned most of the country's retail stores, with the greatest proportion of the bars and many other establishments for the sale of liquor owned by Americans, who were also involved in other branches of the retail trade. The Law also affected foreign restaurant, hotel and store owners, with the Chinese hardest hit. The new Law also banned foreigners from operating as commission merchants and fuel distributors⁴⁶.

Intelligence Corps (CIC) on 1 January 1942). The CIC investigated reports of subversive activities, and local commanders directed these investigations: <https://irp.fas.org/agency/army/short.pdf>

⁴⁴ The military version of the DC.2 airliner, itself the predecessor of the more well-known, more successful DC.2 (Dakota).

⁴⁵ https://www.wikiwand.com/en/United_States_Air_Forces_Southern_Command

⁴⁶ <https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535>

From 16 February, the Mobile Force was given the role of protecting the locks and other facilities.⁴⁷

MARCH

As mentioned, when the 20th Transport Squadron became operational in March, its first aircraft was a single Douglas C-33, a version of the DC.2 airliner.

With the conclusion of the Anglo-American ABC-I Staff Conversations⁴⁸, Admiral Stark, Chief Naval Officer of the US Navy ordered the suspension all Neutrality Patrol operations on 15 March⁴⁹. Some Neutrality Patrols continued through 1941 but were rendered moot by Germany's declaration of war on the US on 11 December⁵⁰.

On 30 March 1941, President Roosevelt ordered the seizure of all foreign vessels lying idle in US waters, to prevent and avert damage being done to them or their machinery by their officers and crews. The largest was the Italian liner, *Conte Biancamano*, which was docked at Cristobal (see above).

In October 1940, Kaiser & Co purchased the aging freighter, the former and original SS *Ancon* (which had made the first transit of the Canal in 1914), for the Permanente Steamship Company and renamed her the SS *Permanente*, and converted it to a bulk cement carrier. The ship went into service in March 1941 under contract with the US Navy, delivering bulk, dry cement to Honolulu. She was moored at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed by the Japanese on 7 December, but the ship was not damaged and had already offloaded its cargo⁵¹.

⁴⁷ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

⁴⁸ The Report of the meeting of January to March 1941 and concluded with a report entitled "ABC-1", which was tacitly approved by President Roosevelt, and included a number of general principles of agreement including that America's territorial interest was in the Western Hemisphere; and the security of sea communications between the Allied powers was essential.

⁴⁹ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a245396.pdf>

⁵⁰ https://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=336

⁵¹ <https://about.kaiserpermanente.org/our-story/our-history/photo-of-the-week-ss-permanente-silverbow>

in March, President Arias Madrid softened his hitherto firm stance and agreed to the US terms for additional defence sites outside the Canal Zone – although it would take until May 1942 for a formal agreement to be signed

APRIL

By April, only 21 of the 27 P-36A fighters remained available (and just 17 by 11 June). Nevertheless, orders were received to select its 10 “best” P-36A (together with two B-18 bombers) for overhaul and supply to Fortaleza in Brazil, to bolster defences, and keep Brazil out of the Axis camp. Hence, by 1942, just seven P-36A were left flying in Panama. These were sent, as the 16th Fighter Group Detachment, to Salinas in Ecuador to provide air defence there.⁵²

Even before the Pearl Harbor, in April 1941, a Price Control Commission (*Comisión de Control de Precios*) had been established in the Republic, but was abolished in July 1941.

On 3 April, Chame and La Chorrera became the first new airfields outside the Canal Zone to be officially turned over to the US Army. This was followed by La Joya (4 April), David (5 April), Pocri and La Mesa (7 April), La Lajas (8 April), Aguadulce (9 April) and Jaque (12 April). With Rio Hato already occupied, this would mean that there were 10 airfields for the defence of the Canal strategically located in the Republic.

On 21 April, William Dawson, US Ambassador to Panama (until 14 July 1939 he had been merely the US Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Panama, the post only being upgraded when the 1936 Treaty came into effect), departed. He was succeeded by Edwin C Wilson on 23 May, who remained Ambassador until 23 September 1943.

⁵² *Panama Canal defenders: Camouflage and Markings of US Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command 1941-1945 – Volume 1: Single-engined Fighters* by Dan Hagedorn (Model Centrum PROGRES, 2021).

MAY

In May, the commanders of the Panama Canal Department and 15th Naval District were instructed to prepare plans which were to involve transporting an airborne infantry battalion preceded by a platoon of parachute troops from the Canal Zone to the capital of any state where urgent intervention was required – for example, if pro-Axis elements took control, while naval forces from the Canal Zone, including a small Marine contingent, were to enter strategic seaports. That month, the War Department decided that the plans needed a full parachute battalion and the 550th Infantry Airborne Battalion was activated on 1 July, made up with volunteers from combat units already in Panama⁵³. In August, the 501st Parachute Battalion arrived in the Canal Zone from Fort Benning, Georgia. Both battalions participated in a mock operation at the Rio Hato airfield on 12 September. During the Summer, as mentioned above, the possibility arose that the plans might have to be put into effect, when an undeclared war broke out between Peru and Ecuador in July. While a long-range striking force was maintained until 1943, most of the 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion, moved to the Pacific in late 1942.

The 1941 Echandi-Fernandez Treaty with Costa Rica⁵⁴ settled border disputes between Panama and Costa Rica, dating back to the 19th Century (there having been the short-lived Coto War of February/March 1921). It was signed on 1 May.⁵⁵

After President Roosevelt declared a national emergency in May 1941, the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department issued an order prohibiting Japanese shipping from using the Canal. Five Japanese ships in Balboa and Cristobal ports at the time (and despite diplomatic protests) were therefore forced to travel to Japan via Cape Horn.

⁵³ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

⁵⁴ https://second.wiki/wiki/tratado_echandi-fernc3a1ndez

⁵⁵ The treaty is also referred to as the Arias-Calderón Guardia Treaty):
<http://www.cuencariosixaola.bocasdeltoro.org/pdfs/tratado%20de%20limites.pdf>

The 37th Pursuit Group in May received about 35 P-40B and P-40C fighters, allowing it to dispose of the obsolete P-26A to the 32nd Pursuit Group. It subsequently received some new P-40E, and the unit achieved operational readiness by the end of Summer 1941.

The World War 1 US submarine R-18 was recommissioned on 8 January, she was at New London for reconditioning and fitting out into May. On 12 May, she got underway for the Canal Zone where she patrolled into September. In October, she returned to New London, whence after overhaul, she conducted training exercises in submarine and anti-submarine warfare

On 27 May, President Roosevelt issued a Proclamation of an “Unlimited National Emergency” requiring all military, naval, air and civilian defences to be put on the basis of readiness to repel any and all acts or threats of aggression. This resulted in the Canal Zone being put on a civilian, as well as military, alert.⁵⁶

JUNE

In June 1941, a US State Department memo said about Panama that *“it is very probably that a large part of the police force would revolt against the present government if promised American backing”*. Soon after, the police did just that and removed President Arias Madrid.

In what would prove to be a futile attempt to counter opposition in the police, Arias Madrid created a secret police force, the *Policia Secreta Nacional*⁵⁷, in June⁵⁸. Its charter made it independent of the National Police, answerable only to the President and the Minister of Government (who was, in fact, the future President that replaced Arias Madrid, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia). This only added to distrust and resentment in the National Police.

⁵⁶ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

⁵⁷ In 1960, President Roberto Chiari disbanded the Secret Police⁵⁷ and instead established the Department of Investigations (DENI), under the Public Ministry. It was intended that it would be a non-partisan organisation, instead undertaken the roles of investigation and evidence gathering under powers granted to the Public Ministry by the Constitution: <https://www.cnics.org.pa/resena-historica/>

⁵⁸ Law No 72 of 30 June 1941: <https://docs.panama.justia.com/federales/leyes/72-de-1941-jun-30-1941.pdf>

Photography was eventually to be prohibited in the Canal Zone from June 1941.

SS Panama was taken over by the Army Transport Service earlier than the other ships of the Panama Railroad line, in June, while in New York.

Howard Field, which was originally part of Fort Kobbe, expanded dramatically from 1940. Rushed to completion by the Constructing Quartermaster, 10,000 acres (4,047 hectares) of impenetrable vegetation at Howard were transformed into a “thriving, highly-industrialised city of 5,000 inhabitants”. The work was completed in less than a year and it became an independent installation in June 1941.

By June 1941, six emergency landing strips in the Republic were graded and ready to receive aircraft⁵⁹. Two further auxiliary fields — Aguadulce and Chame — were also under construction⁶⁰.

In June 1941, the Air Corps News Letter⁶¹ reported that a “one-man lonely hearts club and mail mart is in full bloom at France Field”. Since July 1940, Sergeant George Russell had been writing to leading US magazines suggesting that some patriotic women might make life a whole lot easier for lonely soldiers if they'd just sit down and write the boys a letter. Soon the number of letters threatened to pass the 2,000 per week mark.

In June, the first Army barrage balloon unit arrived, followed by a US Marine detachment in December.

24th Pursuit Squadron was still using the obsolete P-26A in June, but then it received nine Curtiss P-40C fighters and, with these, a number of long-range navigational flights were undertaken, one going so far as Trinidad

⁵⁹ *Leading the Way: The History of Air Force Civil Engineers 1907-2012* by R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates Inc on behalf of the Air Force Civil Engineering Support Agency, 2012:

<https://media.defense.gov/2015/Apr/02/2001329844/-1/-1/0/AFD-150402-022.pdf>

⁶⁰ https://history.army.mil/html/books/010/10-6/CMH_Pub_10-6.pdf

⁶¹ Air Corps News Letter, Vol. XXIV, No 11, June 1 1941.

The Bell P-39 would prove to be numerically the most significant fighter type in the wartime Sixth Air Force, and deliveries to the Caribbean theatre began from June 1941, and at least 447 of all major variants⁶² served with the Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command. From 7 December 1941 to August 1945, there was not a single day when the P-39 was not in front line service in the Caribbean.⁶³

XXXVI Fighter Command⁶⁴ had its origins as the Caribbean Interceptor Command, which was established on 3 June. It was redesignated as the Panama Interceptor Command on 18 September, and again redesignated as the XXXVI Fighter Command on 9 August 1942. It was assigned to the Sixth Air Force from 21 August 1942 to 30 April 1943, being disbanded on 30 April 1943⁶⁵.

The 7th Reconnaissance Squadron (Heavy), the former 7th Aero Squadron, which had been in the Canal Zone since 1921, was assigned on 4 June a single B-17B Flying Fortress, its first and the first production version of the type, which had been transferred to the command. While obsolescent as a bomber, the mission of the B-17B in Panama was long-range reconnaissance, and the aircraft retained its defensive machine guns. On 8 October, the squadron was assigned to the 6th Bombardment Group of VI Bomber Command⁶⁶ and, on 27 November, the unit moved from France Field to the newly constructed Howard Field, where it received four more B-17B by November⁶⁷. The squadron was redesignated as the 397th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) on 22 April 1942.

On 6 June, Congress passed an Act allowing the taking over of domestic or foreign merchant vessels “for urgent needs of commerce and national defense, and for other purposes”. This new Act also applied in the Canal Zone.⁶⁸ The Axis ships retained by the US were eventually allocated to the US Maritime Commission, who in turn handed them on to the War Shipping

⁶² 116 P-39D, 69 P-39K, 96 P-39N and 155 P-39Q.

⁶³ *Panama Canal defenders: Camouflage and Markings of US Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command 1941-1945 – Volume 1: Single-engined Fighters* by Dan Hagedorn (Model Centrum PROGRES, 2021).

⁶⁴ The use of Roman numerals in the designation of USAAF combat commands began in September 1942.

⁶⁵ http://zims-en.kiwix.campusafrika.gos.orange.com/wikipedia_en_all_nopic/A/XXXVI_Fighter_Command

⁶⁶ The 6th Bombardment Group was disbanded in November 1943 after its patrol mission was taken over by the US Navy – then reactivated in April 1944 in Texas as B-29 Superfortress group for use against Japan.

⁶⁷ https://www.wikiwand.com/en/6th_Operations_Group

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Administration for operation, being assigned to various US steamship companies (under what was called a General Agency Agreement) and registered under the flag of Panama⁶⁹. One example was the SS *Africander*, an Italian ship of 5,441 tons that had been built in 1921, interned in New York in September 1941 and allocated to the Waterman Steamship Company of Mobile, Alabama. It had a Norwegian master and a crew of 35. It was attacked by German aircraft while on passage from Scotland to Archangel in September 1942 as part of convoy PQ18, carrying machinery, six tanks and five aircraft as deck cargo. It was torpedoed and sunk, but all the crew and the 11-man contingent of US Navy Armed Guard manning its guns survived.

In 1999, the wreckage of an O-47 was found in the mountains of western Panama, having been lost without trace on 8 June 1941⁷⁰. It was excavated in 2002 (and the crews' remains recovered).

JULY

According to the Commandant of the 15th Naval District, in a letter to Washington in July, the transit guards on the ships passing through the Canal were "wholly ineffective and futile" (despite the Army employing 20-30 officers and 500 men "working hard but to no effect")⁷¹.

By July, anti-submarine nets had been installed to protect the outer reaches at the entrance to the Colón breakwater and in the area of La Boca at the other end of the Canal.

The Land Lease Board had been set up to handle all the necessary details for the transfers of land for new bases in the Republic. There were still delays, disputes etc and, in July 1941, two new Boards replaced the original one – Joint Lease Boards Numbers 1 and 2. The first would examine a particular site and, if no objections were raised, the Army would move in.

⁶⁹ <http://www.armed-guard.com/panama.html>

⁷⁰ <https://ww2aircraft.net/forum/threads/north-american-o-47.42542/>

⁷¹ <https://ncisahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Canal-Zone-Response-to-CNO-on-Preparations-to-Prevent-Sabotage-Jul-10-1941.pdf>

The second Board would then visit and complete the formal transfer pending the final lease being signed.

The “July Alert” - in July, the Department of the Navy in the US had warned President Roosevelt of the *probability* of a Japanese move against the Soviet Union (their forces had faced one another and fought a series of border wars 1932-39), and that the Japanese Government had begun to divert its shipping from the Atlantic – with one company being said to have told its ships to be west of the Panama Canal by 25 July, regardless of passengers or cargo. One of the threats identified was a *possible* torpedo attack against the Canal between the 1 and 15 July (said to be according to a “reliable source”). The message was relayed to the War Department and hence to the Commanding General in the Canal Zone. Japanese shipping was excluded, with other vessels allowed to pass through the Canal. The Japanese vessels were forced to reroute via Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope.

As already mentioned, the 550th Infantry Airborne Battalion was activated on 1 July, with volunteers from combat units already in Panama⁷², and in August, the 501st Parachute Battalion arrived in the Canal Zone from Fort Benning, Georgia.

A letter from the Commandant of the 15th Naval District to the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington on 10 July responded to a letter of 3 July which had asked if the measures taken by the Army and Navy were adequate to prevent sabotage. The Commandant said he did not think the measures were adequate.

Between 14 July and 1 August, five used P-40B (including the last production example) were rushed to the Canal Zone⁷³. Two of there were later modified locally at the Panama Air Depot to become P-40C, but the first new-built P-40C arrived at Albrook Field in June, just ahead of the first of the P-40B. The last P-40C delivered by air through Central America arrived on 4 August, and then the first P-40E on 2 October. Immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack, realising that the threat from the Japanese seemed greater than that from U-

⁷² <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

⁷³ Four survived to be returned to the US, after hard use, in 1944.

boats or the Vichy French in Martinique, 17 P-40C and 18 P-40E of the 36th Pursuit Group were reassigned to Panama from Puerto Rico.⁷⁴

In May, the 37th Pursuit Group received a single OA-8 amphibian, disposing of it in due course to the airfield support squadron at France Field⁷⁵. It is recorded as being lost on 26 July.

AUGUST

The first important war-related export control measure adopted by Panama was when, in August, it prohibited the re-export of all goods subject to export control, except to other countries in the Western Hemisphere with similar export controls in place⁷⁶.

The resident 19th Wing which had been renamed the Panama Canal Department Air Force⁷⁷ on 30 November 1940⁷⁸, became the Caribbean Air Force in August 1941 and then the Sixth Air Force in February 1942⁷⁹.

SEPTEMBER

Additional benefits were derived from the reciprocal aid agreements made with Britain, Australia, and New Zealand in September. Transfers were made to the US forces of British anti-aircraft and coast defence weapons for the defence of the Panama Canal.

⁷⁴ *Panama Canal defenders: Camouflage and Markings of US Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command 1941-1945 – Volume 1: Single-engined Fighters* by Dan Hagedorn (Model Centrum PROGRES, 2021).

⁷⁵ https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/37th_Operations_Group

⁷⁶ Executive Decree No 83, August 1941.

⁷⁷ There was always confusion about the correct title. It sometimes being referred to as the Panama Air Force, the Panama Canal Air Force, or the Caribbean Defense Air Force. Even its official letterhead bore an incorrect title, as “Headquarters, Panama Canal Air Force”: <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

⁷⁸ The title of 19th Wing, having been deactivated in Panama in 1941 on it being redesignated, was reactivated in the US in July 1942 and moved to Egypt as part of the 9th Air Force, as a bomber unit in the Mediterranean and European theatres, becoming in 1944 the 9th Bombardment Division (Medium) and thence the 9th Air Division: <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/101-150/AFD-090529-056.pdf>

⁷⁹ The Sixth Air Force was officially constituted on 19 October 1940 and activated in November as the Panama Canal Air Force, before being redesignated Caribbean Air Force in August 1941 and the Sixth Air Force in February 1942. It was again renamed as Caribbean Air Command in July 1946. It comprised the VI Bomber, VI Fighter and XXVI Fighter Commands and was headquartered at Albrook Field: <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/101-150/AFD-090529-056.pdf>

The 550th Infantry Airborne Battalion and the 501st Parachute Battalion participated in a mock operation at the Rio Hato airfield on 12 September.

A German-built Ju 52/3m three-engine airliner was confiscated by the Peruvian Government on 5 September, and then acquired by the US Army Air Corps (USAAC) in Panama on 13 May 1942.

The story of the unofficially-launched radio stations in the Canal Zone, PCAC and PCAN, were the subject of a “star-studded” broadcast on NBC in September.⁸⁰

In September, the Air Task Force included US Navy Patrol Wing VP-3 (less four squadrons) and all of the available PBY flying boats were attached to the Task Force for operational control. However, this still meant that patrol mission of the Navy was handicapped by a lack of aircraft, and the USAAC assigned some of its own bombers for patrols.

On 17 September, Lieutenant General Daniel Van Voorhis was replaced as commander of the Panama Canal Department by Lieutenant General Frank M Andrews, who served in the role to 9 November 1942.

On 19 September, Major General Davenport Johnson replaced Major General Frank M Andrews as Sixth Air Force commander.⁸¹

The 72nd Observation Group was activated on 26 September and moved to Panama in December 1941/January 1942. It used a mix of reconnaissance and liaison types – including O-47, O-49, Curtiss O-52 Owls, L-1, L-4 as well as B-18 bombers and P-39 fighters. It flew patrols, carried mail, carried out search and rescue and provided reconnaissance support for

⁸⁰ This also led to soldiers in Alaska setting up their own station after hearing the broadcast, in October 1941: <http://www.scncz.com/PCAN%20history.htm>

⁸¹ https://www.armyaircorpsmuseum.org/wwii_6th_Air_Force.cfm

ground forces and photographic mapping. Redesignated as the 72nd Reconnaissance Group in 1943, but was disbanded on 1 November 1943⁸².

OCTOBER

US submarine S-11 was recommissioned in September 1940 in Philadelphia, and in 1941 she was assigned to Coco Solo, arriving on 5 October. It served there into June 1943, before moving to Trinidad until February 1944, returning to the Canal Zone for overhaul before deployment to Trinidad and Guantanamo Bay.

In October, the FBI was warned about a suspected secret German airbase being built in the Amazon, and which might be used for an attack on the Panama Canal.

Quarters for military personnel and the significant number of civilian technicians that were needed to operate the Army's Panama Air Depot (PAD) at Albrook Field became an enormous problem, as housing of any kind for such personnel in the Canal Zone was very hard to come by. Indeed, the problem had become so critical by October 1941 that practically all of the civilian employees recruited from the US to work at the PAD had resigned and returned to the US because of totally unsatisfactory living conditions. Funds were eventually made available and, by August 1942, the Air Depot had 332 apartments for civilian personnel, barely adequate to meet the needs.⁸³

From October, preparations had been in hand to introduce large-scale censorship. However, planning and recruitment was slow, but by December, around 40 prospective civilian employees had been recruited and screened. These were initially principally dependents of Army or Navy servicemen and Panama Canal employees. From 8 December, the Army's Censorship Office examined both civilian and military mail, and from March 1942, the job of examining civilian mail was transferred to the War Department and reassigned to a branch of the Office of Censorship, a separate civilian agency. The military office was then

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society, Spring 2005.

redesignated the Sector Censorship Detachment under the Intelligence Service of the Panama Canal Department.⁸⁴

On 7 October, Arias Madrid had left the country on a Pan American flight to Cuba⁸⁵, allowing his opponents to involve Article III of the Constitution to depose him. Conspirators then appointed the pro-American businessman, and Minister for Government, de la Guardia as President from 9 October. This appointment received rapid approval from the US.

On 20 October, Japanese businesses in the Republic of Panama were told that they had to close after 28 October. Also in 1941, the Panamanian Government had agreed that following any action by the US to intern Japanese residents, it would arrest Japanese on Panamanian territory and intern them on Taboga. Japanese-owned businesses were common in Panama – for example, there were 47 Japanese-owned barber shops in Panama City and Colón (the cities at either end of the Canal) alone. A total boycott of Japanese goods was expected⁸⁶. The Japanese Legation considered that Japanese residents would have to travel to another country, even if only to find passage home to Japan – but noted that this would be difficult as Central and South American countries refused to grant travel permits to Japanese residents from Panama⁸⁷.

A memorandum from the US Ambassador to Panama to the Secretary of State in October described Panama's willingness to cooperate and to intern any Japanese on Panamanian territory and see them interned on Taboga Island; once the US had taken action to intern Japanese in the US.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

⁸⁵ Although travelling incognito, the airport was at Albrook Field in the Canal Zone and US officials recognised him and notified others in the Panamanian administration.

⁸⁶ The Roosevelt Administration having drawn up a boycott list of Axis businesses. See the Chapter on the Germans and the German “threat” for how the blacklist was drawn up and used.

⁸⁷ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

⁸⁸ *Justice Held Hostage: US Disregard for International Law in the World War II Internment of Japanese Peruvians - A Case Study* by Natsu Taylor Saito (Boston College Third World Law Journal, Vol.19, September 1998): <https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=twlj>

*“Immediately following action by the United States to intern Japanese in the United States, Panama would arrest Japanese on Panamanian territory and intern them on Taboga Island All expenses and costs of internment and guarding to be paid by the United States. The United States Government would agree to hold Panama harmless against any claims which might arise as a result of internment.”*⁸⁹

An Executive decree of 20 October revoked the Resolution of the Arias Madrid Government that had prohibited the arming of Panama-flag merchant ships.

Originally constituted as the 19th Composite Wing in 1929 and activated on 1 April 1931, this unit became the 19th Wing in 1937, and the 19th Bombardment Wing in 1940. It was deactivated in the Canal Zone on 25 October 1941, and then reactivated in the US and moved to Egypt, to join the Ninth Air Force in late 1942⁹⁰.

A Sixth Air Force command, the VI Bomber Command (comprising up to four bomber groups) was formed in 25 October (originally as the Sixth Bomber Command) at Albrook Field, being activated in the Canal Zone and forming a part of the Caribbean Air Force (later renamed Sixth Air Force) and was used on anti-submarine patrols until deactivated in November 1946⁹¹. On 7 December, the total personnel complement of the VI Bomber Command was 1,183 officers and enlisted men, and its assigned aircraft included 25 B-18 Bolo, two B-17 Flying Fortress, and one other aircraft⁹². By November 1942, VI Bomber Command had eight heavy bomber squadrons on its strength – but only three were based in Panama itself⁹³. The major tactical role of the bomber squadrons, from the beginning of hostilities in December 1941 until late 1943 - when the Navy took over the patrol missions - was flying aerial reconnaissance of assigned sectors of the Pacific and Atlantic approaches to the Canal to protect against possible enemy attack.

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>

⁹¹ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/101-150/AFD-090529-056.pdf>
<https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>

⁹² <http://warfare.cf/PlanesAndPilotsOfWW2/panama/vibchistorytem.htm#afhistory>

⁹³ <http://warfare.cf/PlanesAndPilotsOfWW2/panama/vibchistorytem.htm#afhistory>

NOVEMBER

Until November, the security guard role had seen each of the three infantry regiments responsible for a one-month period in turn; with three battalions involved in the Lock Guard and Utility Guard (with a further battalion employed in the Transit Guard role aboard ships). However, it was then announced that the 33rd Infantry Regiment was to be redeployed elsewhere in the Caribbean, and roles were reassigned, with the 2nd Field Artillery Battalion taking over the Transit Guard role from 12 December.

In November, Japan lodged an official complaint to Panama about the treatment of its nationals and interests, seeking compensation and asking that Panama arrange travel of those affected to other South American countries⁹⁴. The Panamanian cabinet rejected the complaints.

The Army's alien list of 14 November included nationals of the Axis countries, and persons of other nationality thought friendly to the Axis cause, classified as –

- Dangerous sympathisers;
- Dangerous German;
- Dangerous Italians; and Dangerous Japanese.

The “sympathisers” included Spanish, Colombian, Swiss, Costa Rican, Cuban, Norwegian and Panamanian nationals, as well as several naturalised Panamanian citizens and some with provisional citizenship.

On 24 November, the US Ambassador reported an attempted *coup*, said to have been led by a deputy and a businessman. Their plan consisted of taking over the police headquarters before the return of former Third Vice-President Anibal Ríos from Peru⁹⁵, where he had been in exile since Arias Madrid had been removed. No people were said to have been detained, including former police officers and the former mayor of Calidonia.

⁹⁴ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a617466.pdf>

⁹⁵ He would eventually resign on 13 December.

A memo dated 27 November from the Commandant of the 15th Naval District on which types of person should be detained was accompanied by lists of –

- dangerous Axis sympathisers;
- dangerous Germans;
- dangerous Italian aliens; and
- Japanese in the city of Colon,

and it also recommending that ALL Japanese should be interned immediately, but the detention of others should be limited to those considered most dangerous⁹⁶.

DECEMBER

Troop strength in Panama had risen from 13,451 in 1939 to 31,400 by the time of Pearl Harbor in December, 39,000 by the end of December, and grew to 47,600 by the end of January 1942⁹⁷.

By December 1941, the Army's Signals Intelligence Service had a number of new intercept stations operational, one being located at Corozal⁹⁸.

US submarine S-46 returned to the Canal Zone after the Pearl Harbor attack in December and, over the next six weeks, conducted two defensive war patrols in the approaches to the Canal. She then prepared to leave and, on 5 March 1942, she sailed for Brisbane with her division.

The submarines S-13, S-15, and S-17 began operations in the Panama Canal area from December, with the S-17 making a patrol from Coco Solo only three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The S-30, originally commissioned in October 1920, was the oldest S-boat in service.

⁹⁶ <https://ncisahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Priority-List-of-Dangerous-Aliens-in-the-Canal-Zone-Nov-27-1941.pdf>

⁹⁷ <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-i/>

⁹⁸ <https://californiahistoricalradio.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/spies9eR2006.pdf>

In the US, just six days before the Pearl Harbor attack, every member of the Duquessne spy ring had pleaded guilty or been convicted, including its ringleader, veteran spy Fritz Duquessne. One of the members of the spy ring was Erwin Wilhelm Siegler, who had obtained information about the movement of ships and military defence preparations at the Panama Canal. He and another member of the spy ring, Franz Joseph Stigler, had disguised themselves as the chief butcher and chief baker aboard the liner *SS America*, while they obtained information about the movement of ships and military defence preparations in the Canal Zone⁹⁹.

In December, the Supply Commission (*Comisión de Aprovisionamiento*) and the Cost of Living Investigating Commission (*Comisión Investigadora del Costo de la Vida*) were created in Panama to carry out studies and make recommendations.

At the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, there were still only the two radar sets in use – one at each end of the Canal, with visual sighting and sound detection also still in use. There was a SCR-270 set at each end of the Canal, operating 24 hours a day¹⁰⁰.

In December, the US Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) approved access to the Canal Zone by the airline TACA, but rejected a planned takeover by a US airline. TACA had grown out of charter operations begun in 1931 in Honduras by a New Zealander, Lowell Yerex¹⁰¹, and was to continue services to the Canal Zone, and cooperate with the US Army throughout the war¹⁰².

By the end of 1941, enough airports to be developed under the Airport Program (involving some new and improved airfields at 40 locations throughout Latin America) were sufficiently ready to permit the rapid reinforcement of the Canal Zone in an emergency, and

⁹⁹ They remained on the liner until the US Navy converted that ship into a troop transport and commissioned her as the *USS West Point* in 1941: <https://pcmc.domains.uflib.ufl.edu/uncategorized/espionage-in-the-canal-zone/>

¹⁰⁰ https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_0152_DeGering_Radar_Contact.pdf

¹⁰¹ https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258833.pdf

¹⁰² <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/framework/ch10.htm>

in 1942 to help cope with the problems caused by the U-boat threat in the Caribbean, by providing a vital air link¹⁰³.

On 7 December, the total personnel complement of the VI Bomber Command was 1,183 officers and enlisted men, and its assigned aircraft included 25 B-18 Bolo, together with two B-17 Flying Fortress and one other aircraft. At Aquadulce, the 74th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) was equipped with B-18; at France Field, the 3rd Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) and 25th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) had the B-18; and at Howard Field the 7th Reconnaissance Squadron (Heavy) had both B-17 heavy bombers and B-18 medium bombers.

Having been the standard USAAC fighter in 1939 (although even by then considered obsolescent¹⁰⁴), on 7 December, there were no less than five squadrons of P-36 in Panama, three at Rio Hato and two at Albrook Field. Concern over the inadequate air defences had seen a mass reinforcement using P-36 sent from the US in 1939. A similar concern would see them supplemented by some 80 of the better P-40 in 1941. Panama was also short of ground crews and mechanics, and so, in 1941, a mechanics school was established at Rio Hato for the purpose of training new recruits¹⁰⁵.

On 7 December, the following units were equipped with P-40 -

Chorrera	30 th Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
Albrook	28 th Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
	29 th Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
	43 rd Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters

The 33rd Infantry Regiment was formed in the Canal Zone in July 1916, specifically for use in the Canal Zone¹⁰⁶, and remained there until 7 December 1941, after 25 years of continuous

¹⁰³ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/framework/ch10.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Having a lower service ceiling, being slower and with a weaker armament than a Spitfire or Bf 109.

¹⁰⁵ Journal of American Aviation Historical Society, Winter 1988.

¹⁰⁶ War Department General Orders No 22, 30 June 1916. During World War 1, it guarded Gatun Locks, dam and spillway, the Monte Lirio and Mindi Bridges, the Chagres River Bridge at Gamboa, the Pedro Miguel and Miraflores locks, Pier 18 and the dry dock at Balboa. During the period from 1916 to 1920, the regiment was engaged in exploring and charting the jungles of Panama.

service there (and reportedly thought to be the best jungle-trained troops in the US Army¹⁰⁷), when they redeployed to Trinidad (but still within the new Caribbean Defense Command). Later detachments also went to Surinam.

7 December found construction advancing, but also saw barracks crowded to the limits of their capacity and troops living under canvas at permanent posts as well as at outposts.

On 10 December, the Caribbean Defense Command headquarters at Quarry Heights issued the following action alert to its subordinate units: "Message has been received from the War Department verifying the presence of two hostile aircraft carriers about 500 miles off Mazatlán [given in error in the original message as "Mazattan"] Mexico, at 2:00 pm, December 9, 1941". VI Bomber Command immediately launched its assorted B-17 bombers to search for these targets, which, of course, were not there although, given the reality of events in Hawaii, the Philippines and elsewhere, the USAAC units in Panama had every reason to believe that this threat was for real.¹⁰⁸

Following the Pearl Harbor attack in December, after which Germany declared war on the US¹⁰⁹, German and other Axis nationals, and potential sympathisers of other nationalities (including naturalised Panamanians), in the Canal Zone and Panama itself were rounded up¹¹⁰. Those detained by the Panamanian authorities were turned over to the US authorities in the Canal Zone for internment at a camp at Balboa¹¹¹. A committee then decided who should be permanently detained. As in the UK, some of those detained had fled the Nazi regime, and in Panama included at least one ex-Buchenwald inmate.

¹⁰⁷ Jungle warfare training had begun in Panama in the mid-1920s, focusing on "*the reconnaissance of trails and training in trail fighting*" http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/qh_legacy_report.htm and Infantry Journal, Vol. XXVI number 4 (1925).

¹⁰⁸ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2016.

¹⁰⁹ On 11th December, the US reciprocating later the same day. Italy also declared war on the US on the same day, and the US responded in kind.

¹¹⁰ <https://ncisahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Priority-List-of-Dangerous-Aliens-in-the-Canal-Zone-Nov-27-1941.pdf>

¹¹¹ Originally in tents, which was fine during the dry season in Panama, but more permanent structures would be required from early- to mid-1942, as the rains began.

To the relief of the US, the new President reversed much of what Arias Madrid had begun, and on 11 December, a US official in Panama reported that –

The new administration...immediately set about tearing down the totalitarian-like institutions set up by his predecessor...The Arias-inspired organizations and innovations, such as the Cacahorros de Urraca and the Civic Service Law, were done away with, while freedom of the press was completely restored¹¹². The Civil Attaché of the German Legation, undoubtedly the most dangerous Nazi element in Panama, was expelled; the pro-Nazi Panamanian Minister in Berlin was dismissed; the pro-Nazi propagandist, Julio Argain, was expelled; and other Nazis...left the country, ostensibly of their own accord.

The 2nd Field Artillery Battalion took over the Transit Guard role from 12 December.

On 12 December, false reports of a ship landing troops led to a bomber (with no bombsight) being sent to bomb the ship, but which instead innocent strafed small boats in a bay, causing airfield guards seeing tracer, to open fire with machine guns¹¹³.

On 14 December, the War Department was told that the Navy had sent two submarine divisions, comprising eight to 12 vessels, and a patrol squadron of 12 aircraft to Panama with orders to establish advanced bases in the Galapagos Islands and the Gulf of Fonseca (a sheltered inlet to the north, bordered by Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras)¹¹⁴.

A Joint Operations Center was established on 17 December, with an Air Task Force added on 22 December, under the Commanding General of the Sixth Bomber Command. The Air Task Force was to include all USAAC bombers in the Panama sector, plus all US Navy patrol bombers in the Panama Naval Frontier, for the purpose of aerial patrol and reconnaissance and to attack any force detected in either the Atlantic or Pacific approaches. This initially left the Caribbean areas largely to naval forces, as both USAAC and Navy aviation operations were concentrated on the Pacific approaches.

¹¹² De la Guardia reversed Arias Madrid's attempts to censure the English language press.

¹¹³ <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/I/AAF-I-8.html>

¹¹⁴ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch16.htm>

Officials in Washington, aware of the danger to the Canal, gave priority to furnishing nine additional B-17 heavy bombers, with fighter reinforcements provided from within the Caribbean Defense Command by the transfer of 25 P-40 from Puerto Rico (a movement completed on 14 December).

The US Marines Corp's 1st Barrage Balloon Squadron (designated ZMQ-I by the US Navy) saw its final training compressed and on 23 December it embarked in the SS *William J Bradley*. Arriving at Fort Randolph on 30 December, the Squadron was attached to the 15th Naval District and, while remaining under the Navy Department, it was assigned to the Army's Panama Artillery Command.¹¹⁵

By the end of December, 80 additional fighters had arrived in Panama from the US, and the critical need for aircraft warning was eased by the arrival on 26 December of four mobile radar sets.¹¹⁶ In Panama itself, aircraft were dispersed, protective revetments¹¹⁷ were built and camouflage employed wherever possible.¹¹⁸

President Roosevelt had signed an Executive Order on 13 December directing the Secretary of War to take possession (impress) of any portion of any civil aviation system required in the war effort. This was to include several civilian aircraft located in Panama.

Every 24 December since 1941 the Union Church in Balboa has seen a ceremony with candles being lit around the courtyard. In December 1941, there was the fear of air attack on the Canal Zone and a blackout was enforced, and exposed lights were not permitted.

¹¹⁵ *The US Army Barrage Balloon Program* by James R Shock (Merriam Press, 2006).

A decision of the Joint Army-Navy Board on 12 December 1940 was that while the Army was responsible for balloons at permanent naval bases, the Navy was responsible for defences on shipboard and "such advanced bases as are not defended by the Army". A Marine squadron had 10 officers and 200 men (later increased to 12 officers and 216 men).

¹¹⁶ <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/I/AAF-I-8.html>

¹¹⁷ A revetment is a parking area for one or more aircraft that is surrounded by blast walls, which protect surrounding aircraft as well as the aircraft within the revetment.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/I/AAF-I-8.html>

However, the Church obtained permission from the Governor of the Canal Zone to place candles in the lawn outside the Church¹¹⁹.

By the end of 1941, just 11 of the original 26 P-26A remained; nevertheless, they had to provide (as part of the newly-formed Panama Interceptor Command) detachments at Guatemala City and San Jose Aerodrome in Guatemala – to guard the air supply route through Central America and the upper end of the Pacific patrol arc.

On 30 December, the National Assembly formally adopted the new Constitution, to come into force on 2 January 1942.

With the changed environment in the lead up to the war, and before the end of 1941, an agreement with Ecuador saw permission obtained for the US to build bases in the Galapagos Islands¹²⁰. At the same time, negotiations for similar bases in Ecuador and Peru¹²¹ were under way, and a squadron of Army bombers had begun operating from airfields in Guatemala¹²². In this way, a semi-circle of defence similar to that provided in the Caribbean was to be constructed in the Pacific¹²³. Five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy rushed a token force of 36 men aboard a British tramp steamer to the Galapagos Islands to establish a refuelling depot for patrol aircraft and, a few days later, flying-boats were being refuelled by hand pumps from a motor launch¹²⁴.

¹¹⁹ One could perhaps contrast with the zealotry of Air Raid Wardens in Britain. It is also claimed that U-boats could sometimes see a crewman on a ship lighting a cigarette on deck. So perhaps the candles could have been helpful to an attacker – but, in reality, the real risk of air attack was extremely low

¹²⁰ Ecuador had lost a little-remembered war with Peru in July 1941, with Peru occupying parts of its territory into 1942 (with the dispute only being finally settled by a definitive peace agreement in 1998): <https://dspace.ucuenca.edu.ec/bitstream/123456789/2094/1/tli292.pdf>

¹²¹ The first B-17 Army bombers arrived from Panama in January 1942; a joint Army/Navy base being built at Salinas.

¹²² The first Army B-18 bombers were operating from Guatemala City by the end of December 1941, a small military force arriving the next month.

¹²³ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch13.htm>

¹²⁴ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

PANAMA-FLAG CASUALTIES TO U-BOAT ATTACK IN 1941

18 Aug 1941	<u>U-38</u>	<u>Heinrich Schuch</u>	<u>Longtaker</u>	1,700	
6 Sep 1941	<u>U-95</u>	<u>Gerd Schreiber</u>	<u>Trinidad</u>	434	
11 Sep 1941	<u>U-105</u>	<u>Georg Schewe</u>	<u>Montana</u>	1,549	
20 Sep 1941	<u>U-552</u>	<u>Erich Topp</u>	<u>Pink Star</u>	4,150	<u>SC-44</u>
26 Sep 1941	<u>U-66</u>	<u>Richard Zapp</u>	<u>I.C. White</u>	7,052	
17 Oct 1941	<u>U-432</u>	<u>Heinz-Otto Schultze</u>	<u>Bold Venture</u>	3,222	<u>SC-48</u>
11 Nov 1941	<u>U-561</u>	<u>Robert Bartels</u>	<u>Meridian</u>	5,592	<u>SC-53</u>
14 Nov 1941	<u>U-561</u>	<u>Robert Bartels</u>	<u>Crusader</u>	2,939	<u>SC-53</u>

At the time of Pearl Harbor on 7 December, Army forces then in Panama and the Canal Zone comprised¹²⁵ –

- 1st Coastal Artillery (Harbour Defence) Regiment
- 4th Coastal Artillery (Harbour Defence) Regiment
- 72nd Coastal Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) Regiment
- 73rd Coastal Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) Regiment
- 82nd Coastal Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) Regiment
- 83rd Coastal Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) Regiment
- 14th Infantry Regiment
- 33rd Infantry Regiment
- 87th Field Artillery (Armored) Regiment
- 2nd Field Artillery (105 mm) (Tractor Drawn) Battalion
- 500th Infantry (Airborne) Battalion
- 11th Engineer (Combat) Regiment
- 805th Engineer (Aviation) Battalion

¹²⁵ <http://navsource.org/Naval/usaaf.htm>

**US ARMY AIR CORPS UNITS IN PANAMA AND THE CANAL ZONE ON
7 DECEMBER**

Republic of Panama

Aquadulce	74 th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy)	B-18 Bolo medium bombers
Chorrera	30 th Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
Rio Hato	32 nd Pursuit Squadron	P-36 Hawk fighters
	51 st Pursuit Squadron	P-36 Hawk fighters
	53 rd Pursuit Squadron	P-36 Hawk fighters

Canal Zone

Albrook Field	HQ Caribbean Air Force	
	HQ VI Bomber Command	
	HQ 12 th Pursuit Wing	
	37 th Pursuit Group	
	16 th Pursuit Group	
	24 th Pursuit Squadron	P-36 Hawk fighters
	28 th Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
	29 th Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
	31 st Pursuit Squadron	P-36 Hawk fighters
	43 rd Pursuit Squadron	P-40 Warhawk fighters
France Field	6 th Bombardment Group (Heavy)	
	3 rd Bombardment Squadron (Heavy)	B-18 Bolo medium bombers
	20 th Transport Squadron	C-39, C-47 Skytrain and C-49 transports
	25 th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy)	B-18 Bolo medium bombers
	39 th Observation Squadron	O-47 and O-49 observation aircraft
Howard Field	7 th Reconnaissance Squadron (Heavy)	B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers and B-18 Bolo medium bombers
	59 th Bombardment Squadron (Light)	A-20 Havoc light bombers

Detachment of 20th Transport Squadron

C-39, C-47 Skytrain and C-49
transports

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

20 February 2023