

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – WHAT HAPPENED WHEN

1943

1943 marked a turning point in respect of the effects of the war on Panama and the Canal Zone, and the perception of threats they faced. The War Department reduced the Caribbean Defense Command to the status of Category "B" in April 1943 (meaning that it was considered a coastal frontier that "may be subject to minor attacks")¹.

On the one hand, the agreement to allow additional US bases throughout the Republic formally came into effect (although many of the sites had already been in use under more informal arrangements), and the various defence-related expansion programmes in the Canal Zone were more or less complete. On the other hand, the U-boat menace was in decline (in 1943, losses fell to 35 ships and 178,000 tons), having peaked during 1942, and the US began to downgrade the threat level for the region, and began removing units for use elsewhere.

The important site at Rio Hato was excluded from the bases agreement. While the USAAC had been in occupation since 1 January 1938, under a private lease, with an annual rent of \$2,400, that lease was due to expire on 31 December 1942. A renewal had been applied for, but the owner had warned of an increase in the rental fee – claiming that the site was losing \$1,700 a year due to increased taxes. Eventually, a new annual fee of \$10,000 from 1 January 1943 was agreed.

Hence, in many ways, 1943 saw a peak in wartime activity while the actual risk of any attack faded – although, unbeknownst to the US authorities, the Japanese still had their plan to attack the Canal using aircraft launched from huge submarines underway.²

¹ By Autumn 1944, all the bases in the region, except the major installations at Trinidad, San Juan in Puerto Rico, Guantanamo, and the Canal Zone, were reduced to a restricted or caretaker status.

² See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/43177>

By January 1943, the peak strength of some 67,000 air and ground forces of the Panama Canal Department (CDC) had been reached³. However, from that point, the demand for troops elsewhere, and the downgrading of the perceived threat levels, saw a decrease in both ground and air units and, by the end of the 1945, the strength of the Panama Canal Department would be reduced to below 1939 levels.

In 13 months, 54 ground units and 20,000 troops were sent to the US, four ground units and 3,800 men redeployed to the Pacific theatre, 11 cadre groups of 4,000 men returned to the US for duty with new units, and 160 sent to Puerto Rico for duty there. In fact, in the year to January 1944, troop losses for all reasons – redeployment, transfer, reassignment etc amounted to around 42,000 men.⁴

Nevertheless, until 1943, the US maintained a long-distance striking force as part of the CDC (meaning parachute troops and airborne infantry), these being intended for potential use elsewhere in the Central or South America or in the Caribbean.⁵

Martinique, which had been seen as a possible target for the striking force, changed sides to the Free French in July 1943. An armed uprising overthrew the Vichy regime there in 1943⁶, following a mutiny by troops, who barricaded themselves in a fort containing the gold reserves evacuated from France in 1940.⁷

The general lack of hostile activity in the Caribbean and the CDC being downgraded repeatedly and restructured several times throughout 1943 meant that, throughout 1943 and into 1944, its mission shifted. A new Commanding General would spend much of his time working on political-military relations with Latin American nations rather than purely military issues.

³ Having expanded from about 28,000 men at the close of 1940, to about 31,000 by December 1941, rose to a peak of over 66,000 by early 1943.

⁴ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

⁵ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40175>

⁶ This was not recognised postwar as part of the resistance movement, causing allegations of racism and double standards:

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195382839.001.0001/acprof-9780195382839-chapter-2>

⁷ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40175>

Indeed, in January 1943, Major General HC Ingles of Army Staff had produced a major study on the organisation of the Caribbean theatre and recommended among other things that the CDC be discontinued altogether. A subsequent visit by an officer of the Inspector General of the Army criticised a multiplicity of headquarters and overlapping commands, which had resulted from the original perceptions of the region's strategic importance and threats to it. The new requirement would be to see how to reduce not only the number of troops assigned to units under the Command, but also the number of personnel assigned to the Command itself. In other words, the headquarters itself would have to undergo reductions in forces and streamlining of separate different sub-commands for greater efficiency.

Panama increasingly became a training area for ground and air units. One example of this training role involved the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, which had been formed in 1943 and which undertook its combat training under the jurisdiction of the Sixth Air Force at Aguadulce in Panama using P-40 Warhawks. Whilst in Panama it was also employed as part of the air defences.⁸

The Air Force School of the Military Training Center of the Panama Canal Department, located at the Panama Air Depot (PAD), opened in 1943 to train Latin American Air Forces. The first class consisted of an officer and 10 enlisted men from Peru who signed up for three months of apprentice training⁹.

The years 1942-1944 had seen an enormous increase in construction activity in the Canal Zone, with the major effort being concentrated on fuel storage and ship-repair facilities, allied to the development of bases in the Republic and further afield to support air patrols¹⁰. The Gatun tank farm on the Atlantic side, and the Arraijan farm, on the Pacific, were started in February 1942, and a multiple pipeline connecting them was completed in 1943.

⁸ <https://www.defenseforces.com/2018/03/28/brazilian-air-force-1st-fighter-group-in-the-world-war-ii/>

⁹ <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

¹⁰ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41121>

The completion of the construction projects begun in 1940-41, providing housing and barracks, saw in 1943 an end to the large-scale use of tents to house troops, which contributed to better control of mosquito-borne diseases. Nevertheless, malaria prevention efforts continued, as part of a 10-year programme.

One of the more bizarre episodes occurred in 1943, when the “killer curtain” that could be raised to protect Canal locks from low-flying torpedo bombers claimed a victim. However, this was a US Army Air Force (USAAF) O-47A observation aircraft (which was involved in assisting the calibration of anti-aircraft batteries around the locks). The crashing aircraft fell across the 44,000 volt transmission line for the Panama Railroad, disrupting the power systems and blocking traffic. The pilot died, although the other crewman rescued from the burning wreck.¹¹

There had been 11 coastal gun batteries at the Atlantic end of the Canal, and 12 at the Pacific end in 1939¹². However, the heavy mortar batteries dating from World War 1, recognised as being virtually defenceless from air attack, were stripped in 1943 and the mortars removed¹³. Even the large guns – the 16-inch (406mm) and 14-inch (355mm) coastal artillery - were to be used rarely, even for practice, with the last firing taking place in 1944 and, after this last practice, they remained unmanned and were finally removed between 1946 and 1948. At Forts Amador and Grant, at the Pacific end of the Canal, the original gun batteries saw their guns removed and the structures buried, with the area to be used for housing. A 90mm Anti-Motor Torpedo Boat (AMTB) Battery had been installed in 1942, but it, too, would eventually be disarmed and buried in 1948.

While the big guns would be mothballed and eventually removed, other defences continued to be improved. For example, the M1 37mm anti-aircraft gun, only adopted, after a long period of testing, in 1939, to become the US Army’s main anti-aircraft gun for the first years

¹¹ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

¹² <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>

¹³ Probably the only US 12-inch mortars to ever see action were those in the Philippines in 1942.

of World War 2, was replaced from 1943 by the 40mm Bofors.¹⁴ In addition, in late 1943, both the smokescreen and barrage balloon programmes were abandoned¹⁵.

A sign of the improved air defences, as more satisfactory radar was put in place, was that, in 1943, the new CDC Commanding General, General Brett, set out to “fool” the new SCR-615 radar system with a low-level approach to the Canal Zone, but was tracked all the way to landing.¹⁶

In 1943, the XXVI Fighter Command in Panama and the Canal Zone despatched armed fighters in no less than 4,200 sorties. The Command would go on to reach its peak, in terms of aircraft numbers, in May 1944 (although it had been temporarily larger in 1942).¹⁷

In early 1943, the new 10th Fleet, in effect a command existing only on paper, was established for the overall command of all anti-submarine operations in that part of the Atlantic under US strategic control – hence, a commander of naval forces in the Panama Sea Frontier served three superiors (being under the Caribbean Defense Command, 15th Naval District and 10th Fleet).¹⁸

In the Summer, a small base was been established at Almirante on the Caribbean coast and near the Costa Rican border in the west of Panama in Boca del Toro Province to refuel PT boats.

The Rodman Naval Station, at the Pacific end of the Canal, which had been constructed 1932-37, saw in 1943 a 600-acre (242.8 hectare) expansion opened – supplying fuel and

¹⁴ The M1 was also deployed in the coastal defence role in anti-torpedo batteries alongside 90mm guns, usually composed of 4 x 90 mm and 2 x 37 mm guns. Some of these batteries were composed of 4 x 37 mm guns.

¹⁵ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>

¹⁶ *The Signal Corps: The Test (December 1941 to July 1943)* By George Raynor Thompson, Dixie R Harris, Pauline M Oates & Dulany Terrett (Center of Military History, US Army, Washington DC), 2003.

¹⁷ *P-38 in Latin America* by Dan Hagedorn (Aviation Art & History, 2022).

¹⁸ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

other supplies to military vessels transiting the Canal. With over 200 personnel, it had three docks, housing and warehouses, as well as ancillary facilities¹⁹.

The Gatun tank farm on the Atlantic side, and the Arraijan tank farm on the Pacific side, 32 miles (51.5 km) apart, were connected by a multiple pipe-line completed in 1943²⁰.

In 1943, a US State Department memo entitled “Nepotism in Panama” noted that –

“most Panamanians believe that too many Government positions are being given to members of the favored de la Guardia and Estripeaut²¹ families”.

The most visible example of this was in the National Police. Not only was its second-in-command the President’s friend and collaborator, Remón Cantera (a future President in the 1950s), the overall commander²² was another friend, Rogelio Fábrega (who was also a member of one of the country’s elite families), and the new Minister of Government, who was responsible for the force, was the President’s brother, Camilo.

The new Ambassador to Washington in 1943 was Enrique A Jiménez Brin, who had been a close ally of President de la Guardia. In the US, he was regarded as pro-American, and hence favourable. The Roosevelt Administration looked on him as an ideal future President, as indeed he would become in 1945.

Another view of the US influence on Panama came from various Mexican newspapers and magazines which, from 1940 to 1943, carried stories claiming that Mexican dancers were being taken to the Canal Zone, to work in cabaret bars and to also offer sexual service to US servicemen.²³

The after effects of the internment of enemy aliens continued to be felt. Swiss diplomats representing German interests told the US State Department that each successive wave of

¹⁹ Its US Navy use reduced in the 1960, but it remained in use until handed over to Panama in 1999, when it became the Vasco Nuñez de Balboa Naval Base: <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1999-03-11-9903100986-story.html>

²⁰ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²¹ Estrpeaut was the maiden name of the President’s wife.

²² *Comandante Primer Jefe del Cuerpo de Policía Nacional.*

²³ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/840205/pdf>

German internees reported similar complaints about their treatment, as did their letters to family members in Germany. In Panama, the removal of male internees to the US (these being seen as the greatest risk to the security of the Canal Zone), leaving behind the “non-dangerous” women and children, became a focus of anti-American propaganda and unrest – with allegations that the US was splitting up families and leaving women and children to starve. As a result, from 1943, some volunteer women and children were permitted to join their men in family internment in the US²⁴.

Panama became involved in Peru’s attempt to rid itself of all its resident Japanese and nationals of Japanese descent, as its President Prado sought US help in permanently removing all Peruvians of Japanese descent. In July 1942, the US Ambassador to Peru had told Washington that the President remained “*very much interested [in] the possibility of getting rid of the Japanese in Peru*”, and had asked about “*additional shipping facilities from the United States*”.²⁵

The admission of wives of the serving military into military commissaries, although a common practice, was something granted at the discretion of the local installation until 1943, when spouses (husbands of serving women were included) were granted universal access.

Some women gained access to the final bastions of male dominance in the Canal Zone in 1943. Until then, the police and fire departments remained wholly male. In 1943, the first Zonian women were hired as clerks by the Canal Zone Police, due to the shortage of male clerks due to the war.

The Motor Transportation Division of the Canal Zone authorities introduced a Public Transportation System in 1943, with 175 privately-owned buses on contract to the Canal Zone authorities. This provided assigned transport routes for the general public. It was intended to meet increased demand, supplement transport provided by official vehicles and

²⁴ <https://www.unive.it/media/allegato/dep/n9-2008/Saggi/Friedman-saggio.pdf>

²⁵ Ibid.

ferry labourers to and from construction sites. It also relieved some of the pressure resulting from wartime petrol and tyre rationing.²⁶

In other developments in the Canal Zone, pressure from a variety of sources after 1943 would force officials to begin dismantling its “colonialist” labour system²⁷.

In part to cope with problems faced in the war in the Pacific, the US Army School of Malariology²⁸ was established at Fort Clayton in 1943. It undertook research into prevention and treatment, as well as developing training methods for troops on the ground.

The arrival of Puerto Rican troops in Panama in 1943 raised the risk that the disease Schistosomiasis could be introduced into Panama.²⁹

In 1943, to meet the unexpectedly heavy demands for transshipment of cargo to the outlying bases, the Army’s Area Transportation Division had to charter and borrow additional vessels, adding to the fleet it had built up in 1942. However, with the construction programmes nearing an end, reductions once more became the norm.

1943 saw the USAAF finally say goodbye to the last of its obsolete P-26A Peashooter fighters, with the survivors being supplied to Guatemala.³⁰

Another type seeing the end of its time in the USAAF, but this time one which had, despite obsolescence, shown good service, was the B-18B Bolo bomber. As anti-submarine conversions with a MAD tail³¹ and SCR-517 radar in the nose, and with some fitted with

²⁶ *The Panama Canal in World War II* by James G Steese (The Military Engineer, Vol.40 No 267, January 1948), Society of American Military Engineers: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44516081>

²⁷ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/42142>

²⁸ The School continued its work into the 1960s, as part of the US Army Medical Research and Development Command, credited with devising more accurate laboratory methods for identifying, testing and treating a variety of infectious and parasitic diseases.

²⁹ In August 1944, a test was undertaken which revealed an infestation rate amongst such troops of approximately 40%. However, a 1945 report concluded that, unless the molluscan hosts were to be introduced into Panama, the disease would not be introduced via the Puerto Rican troops

³⁰ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40561>

³¹ Magnetic Anomaly Detector – used to detect submarines through distortions in the magnetic field.

“retro” bomb-racks for depth charges³², it had been used to patrol the Caribbean. It was replaced in this role by the B-24 Liberator.

In late 1943, the Navy took over the patrol missions, with aerial reconnaissance of assigned sectors of the Pacific and Atlantic approaches to the Canal to protect against possible enemy attack. This had been the major tactical role of the USAAF VI Bomber Command's bomber squadrons, from the beginning of hostilities in December 1941.

Major William H Taylor had been undertaking experimental jungle landings of troop-carrying gliders in Panama using the CG-4A in 1943-44³³, and this attracted the attention of officers seeking to establish a new Air Commando organisation, inspired by the Wingate Chindit operations in Burma³⁴, and with the original intention of spearheading such operations there³⁵.

The Canal Zone Air terminal at Albrook Field opened in 1943 (despite complaints from the Panamanian Government that such “commercial” developments were prohibited under the treaties). Commercial air activities would be transferred to the new National Airport at Tocumen in 1950,

The 20th Transport Squadron relocated to Albrook Field in 1943 (as Howard Field became congested with bombers). By 1943, it had either lost or disposed of its assortment of odds and ends of aircraft types, but had acquired another oddity – the XC-105 conversion of the pre-war experimental XB-15 bomber. It had also received its first C-47A Skytrain and its first Fairchild UC-61 Forwarder (a single-engine utility light aircraft).

³² These had a propelling charge to slow the speed of the depth charge through the air, so that they fell vertically – because the MAD gear could only detect a U-boat when directly overhead.

³³ This was the most widely-used troop-carrying and cargo glider of the war, used by both the US and British forces (the latter naming it the Hadrian), with more than 13,000 built. It was built of wood and metal and was fabric-covered, had two crew and could carry 13 troops, or a Jeep, light artillery or other equipment. It was usually towed by a C-47 Dakota transport aircraft (it was prominently featured in the film *“A Bridge Too Far”* about the Arnhem operation).

³⁴ The Long Range Penetration Groups of the British and Indian Armies undertook operations behind enemy lines in Burma 1943-44, depending on air supply and air evacuation of sick and wounded. They had been the idea of Brigadier Orde Wingate, who died in an air crash in 1944.

³⁵ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40175>

One unit which had been in Panama since 1921 left for service in Europe in 1943. The 14th Infantry Regiment had arrived in the Canal Zone in 1921, being assigned to what was then the Panama Canal Division. When that Division was stood down in 1932, the regiment was attached to Headquarters, Atlantic Sector, and latterly had been reconstituted and assigned to the Panama Canal Division's successor, the Mobile Force, in April 1940.

The US had an active chemical weapons programme in Panama from at least 1930 until 1968^{36, 37}. From 1930 to 1946, the programme had focused on use in the defence of the Canal but, from 1943 until 1968, it changed emphasis to the testing of chemical munitions under tropical conditions – although, in early 1945, consideration was being given to the possible use of chemical weapons against Japan.³⁸

An early example of such testing took place on San Jose, and the aims of the chemical warfare tests on the island (and a related test programme at Bushnell in Florida) were laid out in a 1943 report by the Canadian Chemical Warfare Inter-service Board. The project would determine just how much gas was needed to produce casualties in tropical terrain ranging from swamp to thick jungle. Scientists also wanted to study how humidity and temperature affected the potency of mustard gas.³⁹

Paraiso was a former township just north of the Pedro Miguel Locks. It had been abandoned as a settlement by 1938, but it then became a military post in November 1939,

³⁶ <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1386>

Testing continued elsewhere in Panama into the 1950s, and from 1953 to February 1957, the Tropical Test Team, a Chemical Corps unit that included 20 personnel, conducted tests of distilled mustard gas every three months in Panama. These tests were held on the mainland, not on San Jose. In 1961, the Army conducted a larger-scale exercise in the Darién in 1961, with a further exercise in 1964. Records indicate tests with nerve gas also took place in Panama in the 1960s. US military has also acknowledged "limited, controlled laboratory testing of some tear gas agents" in Panama since 1979.

³⁷ In 1999, as the US prepared to finally depart the Canal Zone, the NGO said that there are some 120,000 pieces of unexploded munitions on US military ranges in the Canal Zone, adjacent to where 60,000 people lived, and asked whether the Pentagon was prepared to assume liability for explosives found after the military leaves later this year. It claimed that abandoned explosives had already killed 21 Panamanians who entered the lands to plant crops or recycle metal, according to the Panamanian government:

<http://www.cpeo.org/lists/military/1999/msg00016.html>

A 3,000-acre Tropic Test Site was located at Fort Clayton

³⁸ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.2968/058004014>

³⁹ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40643>

housing troops guarding the Canal facilities as Camp Paraiso. It closed as a military camp in 1943 and, in 1944, the Army quarters were reused as it became a township once again.

In the following, there will be news of a number of Army units, ground forces and USAAF, being disbanded or redeployed.

JANUARY

In mid-January, the handful of Douglas P-70 night-fighters of the 53rd Fighter Squadron left Panama⁴⁰. The presence of P-70, was seen as a modest response to a concern over the lack of night fighter defences for the Canal. At the time it was still considered a strong possibility that a night attack on the Panama Canal might be attempted.

In the National Assembly in January, allegations of bribery were made, and there were fears of deputies being bribed, or new ones being appointed, to support the return of former President Arias Madrid, who had been deposed in a bloodless coup in October 1941. This crisis passed, but by the beginning of 1944 problems were piling up for the de la Guardia government, with criticism of the compromise he had reached to maintain a political truce in the Assembly, and later that year supporters of the former President would be arrested and student protests would erupt⁴¹.

The USS *Charles Carroll* (AP 58), a *Crescent City* Class transport (reclassified in 1943 as an attack transport as APA 28) serving with the US Navy, struck a mine off the Canal Zone and had to put into Balboa for repairs.⁴²

In January 1943, the commander of the Panama Sea Frontier agreed to the proposed elimination of the proposed Navy installations at Salinas in Ecuador (at the southern end of

⁴⁰ However, some sources say it had only a single example between November 1942 and 11 January 1943.

⁴¹ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41597>

⁴² As mentioned elsewhere, the only other mine casualty in Panama waters that appears to have been recorded, was the loss of a locally-based tug, which struck a mine that had come loose from the protective minefields. It is not clear if the *Charles Carroll* was damaged by a mine laid by a U-boat (the most likely explanation) or a rogue one from the Canal Zone defences (like the Panamanian tug).

the patrol arc over the Pacific approaches to the Canal) and agreed to pass the recommendation on to the Department of the Navy in Washington.

In January, the Army Special Services Division, which was tasked with forces broadcasting (the SSD became the better-known Armed Forces Radio Service, or AFRS, in November)⁴³, sent personnel to take over the PCAC/PCAN radio operation in the Canal Zone, which had begun as an unofficial operation by soldiers serving in the Canal Zone before the Pearl Harbor attack.

The 158th Infantry Regiment, aka the “Bushmasters” (seemingly named for its jungle operations in Panama), a federalised unit of the Arizona National Guard, had arrived in Panama in January 1942. In January 1943, it was redeployed to Australia, as part of a Regimental Combat Team with the 158th Artillery Battalion, for operations in South-West Pacific under General MacArthur. The 158th Artillery Battalion was a federalised Oklahoma National Guard unit.

By January, 27 barges were manned and in use to provide a smokescreen on the Canal. In total, 5,990 smoke generators were employed in the Gatun area, 3,138 at Pedro Miguel, 3,906 at Miraflores Locks and 12 at the Madden Dam. The Gatun area included 67 barges, many of which were also used to control barrage balloons. However, 1943 would see this form of defence discontinued and the equipment stored.⁴⁴

One of the advance bases established to protect the Canal was an air facility established in September 1942 at Corinto in Nicaragua (it having been begun by a civilian contractor), at the northern end of the patrol arc over the Pacific approaches to the Canal. Patrol observation aircraft were stationed there from January 1943. The original flying-boat base had been at the Gulf of Fonseca but moved to the more sheltered Corinto in 1943. Used by flying-boats and PT boats, it closed in 1946. During the year, construction work was

⁴³ <https://www.radioworld.com/columns-and-views/meet-the-mosquito-network>

⁴⁴ I have seen a 1950s video of defences of the Canal which prominently included use of such smokescreens.

completed (by Navy Seabees⁴⁵).⁴⁶ There was also an Army base on Corinto Island (*Isla Cardon*), which was begun by contractors in late 1943 and completed by the Seabees⁴⁷.

However, full use was never made of the facilities at Corinto. At most, only 1½ squadrons of patrol bombers were based there from Autumn 1943 to Spring 1944.⁴⁸

A new lease agreement for the base at Rio Hato took affect from 1 January.

On 12 January, a PBY-5 Catalina from US Navy squadron VP-24 was lost after hitting a submerged object when taking off at Coco Solo. It nevertheless managed to reach the seaplane ramp at the base before sinking, and all the crew and passengers were unhurt.

On 18 January, the submarine I-400 was laid down at Kure Naval Arsenal in Japan. This large submarine was intended as one of those intended for an attack on the Canal using aircraft carried by the submarines⁴⁹.

FEBRUARY

The 30th Fighter Squadron had received new P-40E Warhawks and achieved operational readiness by the end of Summer 1941. Moving to Aquadulce Field in February 1943, it was reclassified as an Operational Training Unit (OTU), with its mission to prepare new fighter pilots for duty in the tropical conditions of the Canal Zone.

The 108th Reconnaissance Squadron received its first B-18 Bolo bomber in February, and began missions using it (said to be along the "Pacific coast of Colombia") on 24 February. By June, the unit had been redesignated as the 108th Reconnaissance Squadron (Special), and had received further B-18, plus small numbers of L-4A, Curtiss O-52 Owls (these were

⁴⁵ The name for the US Navy Construction battalions.

⁴⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁴⁷ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁴⁸ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁴⁹ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/43177>

apparently undocumented but were later recalled by Squadron members), and even four Bell P-39N Airacobra fighters.

By 28 February, the Sixth Air Force had no less than 13 LB-30⁵⁰ and 22 B-24D versions of the Liberator bomber on charge. They were equipped with British-developed ASV Mk II radar⁵¹ for maritime and anti-submarine patrol.

MARCH

The US Vice-President Henry A Wallace, who spoke Spanish, made a tour of Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru in March-April 1943⁵².⁵³ It was reported that the Panamanian Government had asked him about 100,000 undelivered machetes (which had, in fact, been sent for use in the Solomon Islands), and had asked for machinery to manufacture concrete.⁵⁴

In March, USS *Moonstone*, classified as a Patrol Yacht (Coastal), used to patrol the Panama Sea Frontier from 1941, was one of the vessels sent to Ecuador in March-July 1943 to help train its navy. It would be lost in October following a collision whilst on passage to the US.

In March, the US demanded that the French aircraft carrier *Bearn*, which had been in Martinique (with its 106 US-built aircraft) since 1940, be disabled by the Vichy French authorities. The island's governor agreed. In May, the Vichy Government ordered him to sabotage the ship and he ultimately complied by having the ship run aground. The presence of the ship and its aircraft, and the risk they presented to passing traffic and the Canal, was one of the main reasons why the US had planned an invasion using the forces based in Panama.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ However, the commander reported that the LB-30 had inadequate armament, unreliable bomb-racks, radio and radar that could not operate simultaneously, unreliable communication and electrical systems and other problems: *B-24 Liberator Units of the Pacific War* by Robert F Dorr (Bloomsbury) 2012.

⁵¹ With antennae below the outer wings and in the dorsal position.

⁵² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0569434519827700>

⁵³ <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,790931,00.html>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40175>

In March, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Caribbean Defence Command and the Commanding General, General Brett, discussed the possibility of using Puerto Rican troops in the CDC. A study was commissioned, but then the War Department set the 90,000-man ceiling for the Command with the stipulation that it utilise 30,000 Puerto Ricans.

In March, measures to control venereal disease were strengthened, with VD control officers were designated for all regimental, separate battalion, and similar unit commands, and for all posts, camps and air bases, in accordance with a War Department Circular. While these assignments were in addition to the officers' other duties, the position of unit VD control officer was now officially recognised where previously it had been part of the general duties of one of the medical officers. In addition, the experimental use of sulfathiazole as a prophylaxis was introduced in the CDC in March 1943⁵⁶.

The Sixth Air Force had been desperately short of light transport and communications aircraft since the war had started but, in March 1943, it was to receive the first of 10 Cessna UC-78 Bobcat twin-engine light transports (although these were described as being "weary"). However, only five were allocated to Panama (the others went to Puerto Rico, where there was also a sore need). More followed, and filled a gap until the better, and new, Beechcraft UC-45F, also a twin-engine light transport, arrived in April-July 1944.

The P-39N was the major production model of the Airacobra fighter, and was the fastest version (though it had less range), and the first arrived in Panama in March. These came from a batch originally earmarked for the RAF – which had planned to pass them on the USSR. However, for some reason, the attrition rate for the P-39N was high, with only 49 on strength in March 1944, with 47 having been written off. Soon after the P-39N, the Sixth Air Force also began to receive P-39Q version, the first in June 1943.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/42208>

⁵⁷ *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).

APRIL

The War Department reduced the Caribbean Defense Command to the status of Defense Category "B" in April (meaning that it was considered a coastal frontier that "may be subject to minor attacks").

The blackout in Panama was partially lifted in April (with, for example, streetlights remaining on until 2300).

The Boeing XC-105 was a transport conversion of the experimental pre-war XB-15 four-engine heavy bomber prototype. It was assigned to the 20th Transport Squadron in Panama in April, being considered suitable for the long flights over water to supply the base in the Galapagos Islands⁵⁸. As a transport, it had a cargo hoist and had cargo doors fitted. Nicknamed "*Grandpappy*", it was used to ferry supplies to and from the Galapagos, Florida and throughout the Caribbean from June. It was also used to ferry Government passengers from Miami⁵⁹.⁶⁰

From April, Navy patrol aircraft began to gradually replace USAAF bombers on the Pacific patrols, with squadrons VP-206 (operating from Salinas in Ecuador) and VP-207 (stationed at Corinto in Nicaragua). VP-206, flying the PBM-3C Mariner flying-boat equipped with ASV Mk II radar, had transferred from the US to Coco Solo in April, sending detachments to other advance bases. However, in February 1944, the whole squadron relocated to Corinto in Nicaragua, but then left for Key West, Florida in April 1944. It would not be until October, with additional squadrons becoming available, that the Navy finally took on the entire Pacific patrol role.

By April, the Dredging Division of the Panama Canal had seen its workforce rise from 1,030 in 1939-40 to a peak of 3,173. This growth could be partly explained by work connected to the abortive Third Locks Project from July 1940.

⁵⁸ The XB-15 had been used to carry out an aerial survey of the islands in 1940.

⁵⁹ On what became known as the "Georgia Peach Run": *Grandpappy – the XB-15*, Aerospace Historian, Vol.26 No. 3, September 1979 (Air Force Historical Foundation).

⁶⁰ https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Boeing_XB-15#cite_note-AH-12

A contract had been awarded in August 1942 for a pair of 33-mile-long (53 km) pipelines, and construction had begun in October 1942. Despite an unduly severe rainy season, the pipelines were completed and used for the first time in April 1943 and, by the end of the year the entire system was completed and in full operation. Running from Rodman to Coco Solo, it was built and maintained by the US Navy. In April 1944, work began to double the capacity of the pipelines, with larger-diameter pipes.⁶¹ The Panama Canal Company would later use the pipeline, and the old pipeline still sits at the bottom of Gatun Lake and in the undergrowth today⁶².

In April, the Vichy French Governor of Martinique rejected a call from General De Gaulle to switch sides to the Free French. He had previously rejected a call from Admiral Darlan following the Allied landings in North Africa in November 1942.

On 7 April, a formation of six P-40 fighters, in two groups of three, flew into cloud on a return leg of a long-range training flight, heading for their base at Aguadulce. Emerging from the cloud at 8,000 feet (2,440 metres), one of the first group of three was missing, together with all three of the second group. A large-scale search failed to find any trace of aircraft or pilots.

On 15 April, road traffic in Panama was compelled to travel on the right. The change was heavily trailed beforehand in the newspapers and the police were given special training. Fortunately, private traffic was relatively light, assisted by wartime petrol rationing. At 0500 on zero day, sirens and fire whistles sounded, and everything changed⁶³.

The Trans-Isthmian Highway (aka the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, and a form of which still exists to this day, as *Transistmica*) was officially opened on 15 April by President Ricardo Adolfo del Guardia. At the opening ceremony he was accompanied by former President

⁶¹ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁶² <http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Pipelineproject/mlindex.htm>

⁶³ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/panama-manejo-izquierda/>

Boyd. It took the entourage an hour and 15 minutes to reach Colón from Panama City⁶⁴.⁶⁵ However, due to military requirements, the road it would not be available for public use until 1947, and it would not be until the 1950s that the Panama-Colón Bus Company would be formed as a wholly Panamanian public transport system between the cities.⁶⁶

The former Panama Railroad cargo-liner, *SS Ancon*, by now *USS Ancon*, was converted from a troop transport to an amphibious command ship (AGC). Used as an Auxiliary Amphibious Force Flagship (AGC-4) with upgraded communications equipment⁶⁷, and reclassified as such on 26 February, she had the work carried out between 16 February and 21 April, at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, Portsmouth, Virginia.

On 30 April, the XXXVI Fighter Command of the Sixth Air Force, based at Waller Field in Trinidad, was disbanded. It had its origins as the Caribbean Interceptor Command, which was established on 3 June 1941. It was redesignated as the Panama Interceptor Command on 18 September 1941, and again as the XXXVI Fighter Command on 9 August 1942, being assigned to the Sixth Air Force from 21 August 1942.

MAY

A refuelling unit for US Navy naval landplanes was established at Barranquilla, Colombia in May, using the existing Soledad Airport, whose modernisation had previously been financed by the US Navy.⁶⁸ The Avianca airline, which owned the airport, had granted permission for use of the landing field without charge and to erect necessary temporary buildings. The original naval base consisted of 15 wooden huts with canvas tops, used as barracks, dispensary, repair shop, ordnance shack, storehouses, and a water tank, all built by Avianca under contract. As strong trade winds repeatedly tore off canvas roofs, they would be replaced with tile roofs the following spring.

⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the plaque unveiled in Colón was subsequently stolen.

⁶⁵ <https://www.elistmpty.com/2021/04/la-carretera-boyd-roosevelt-o-via.html>

⁶⁶ <https://www.elistmpty.com/2021/05/la-compania-de-autobuses-panama-colon.html#more>

⁶⁷ https://history.army.mil/documents/WWII/wwii_Troopships.pdf

Amphibious command ships were fitted as flagships for the Chiefs of Combined Forces with accommodations for Marines or Army units. The *Ancon* was also fitted with elaborate radio and radar equipment.

⁶⁸ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

Until May 1943, censorship of Army mail was undertaken by Canal Zone Censor Stations.

One of the first changes in the structure of the Caribbean Defense Command occurred in May, when the Puerto Rico Department was changed to include the Trinidad Sector and Base Command and was redesignated as the Antilles Department, thus merging three separate sub-commands into one. 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.

In May, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion had been put on alert for a possible parachute landing on Martinique, with preparations for a combined parachute/glider assault to seize the island by force. Ammunition, grenades, medical supplies, and maps of the island were issued, and on the eve of the operation, the troopers headed to Howard Airfield to don parachutes and conduct their first combat jump. However, events in the island made the planned invasion unnecessary.⁶⁹

In May, the SCR-547 Height Finder Radar was received and installed at tactical positions, but proved neither effective nor popular; and all the sets were turned over to the Signal Corps in August 1944. The SCR-547, with its twin-dish antennae arrangement, came as a set consisting of an antenna trailer, tractor, and spare-parts truck – with early models also having a power van.⁷⁰

In May, the 20th Transport Squadron received the unique XC-105 (see above). It would be retired in June 1944.

The USS *Jade*, a Patrol Yacht, which had been operating in the Panama Sea Frontier since May 1941, was transferred to the Ecuadorian Navy in Salinas in May.

⁶⁹ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40175>

⁷⁰ <https://radionerds.com/index.php/SCR-547>

In May, the Governor of the Canal Zone, Major General Glenn Edgerton, sent a letter to General Brett, the CDC commander, requesting the relaxation of restrictions on travel of dependent family of Canal Zone personnel. The Governor's argument centred on the acknowledged acceptance that the threat to the Caribbean theatre had largely dissipated. He said that

“The military reasons for the restriction seems to the employees to be growing constantly less urgent and they now regard it as a rather arbitrary ruling, warranted perhaps, as the time it was imposed but no longer of much practical necessity”.⁷¹

It was reported that some wives took jobs with the Panama Canal, so that they could travel to Panama to be with their husbands, whether servicemen or employees of the Canal.

In May, the Panama-flagged tanker *Panam* was sunk by a U-boat, just one of many such losses during the war. The vessel was one of many Panamanian vessels that had been seized by the US Government following the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, and it was assigned to the Marine Transport Lines of New York, but still operated under the Panamanian flag. It had a complement of 37 merchant seamen and carried 14 US Navy Armed Guard personnel, giving a total of 51 crewmembers on board. On 1 May, carrying only ballast water, it left New York travelling in Convoy NK-53, as one of 17 vessels heading to Key West, Florida. On 4 May, it developed engine troubles causing it to lag behind the convoy and was spotted by U-129, which launched a torpedo hitting *Panam* on the port side in the engine room, killing two crew, with a second torpedo striking on the port side amidships, destroying the pump room. The remaining crew and the Naval Armed Guards abandoned ship in three lifeboats, and were later picked up by USS SC-664 and taken to Morehead City, North Carolina⁷².

The 36th Fighter Group, which had first become operational in Puerto Rico in January 1941, and had subsequently been involved in providing air defence over the Caribbean and Canal Zone, including flying anti-submarine patrols, returned to the US in May/June 1943.⁷³

⁷¹ *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>

⁷² <https://monitor.noaa.gov/shipwrecks/panam.html>

⁷³ <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>

The Navy took another step toward accepting full control of the US anti-submarine effort when, on 10 May, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral King established the 10th Fleet. However, this was a “paper” fleet, without ships or aircraft of its own. The mission of the 10th Fleet was directing and coordinating all US Navy anti-submarine activities worldwide. However, in all of its organisational charts there was no mention of the USAAF Anti-submarine Command or its 286 aircraft.⁷⁴

The 1942 Bases Agreement, that was to clear the way for the 134 additional defence sites in the Republic, only formally came into effect on 11 May.⁷⁵ On 5 May, the President of Panama had laid the Agreement before the National Assembly for ratification, a positive vote being taken on 8 May.⁷⁶

On 30 May, an anti-torpedo net installed at the Miraflores Spillway came free (two days after being installed) and went over the spillway, resulting in a recommendation that such spillway nets be abandoned due to the strong currents involved.

JUNE

In June 1943, the Antilles Department of the Caribbean Defense Command formally began operations, with its headquarters at San Juan. It 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 two subordinate sectors were in turn eliminated and all posts in the Antilles came under the direct control of Antilles Department Headquarters.

Soon after the P-39N version of the Airacobra fighter arrived in March, the Sixth Air Force also began to receive P-39Q version, the first in June.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41823>

⁷⁵ Many sites were already being used, under informal arrangements.

⁷⁶ Gaceta Oficial No.9109 of 26 May 1943.

⁷⁷ *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).

US Navy patrol squadron VP-207, with 12 Martin PBM Mariner flying-boats, relocated to Coco Solo from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba in June⁷⁸. During 1943, it flew patrols between Salinas in Ecuador and Nicaragua, via the Galapagos Islands⁷⁹. In November, it began flying patrols over the Caribbean, mainly at night.

The 40th Bombardment Group (Heavy), consisting then of four heavy bomber squadrons returned to the US early in June. It had trained in and patrolled the Caribbean region, using B-17 and B-26 bombers, operating from Puerto Rico and, later, the Canal Zone. After its redeployment to the US it became a B-29 unit.⁸⁰

Further defence proposals included, in June, a net fitted with depth charges in the approach to Gatun Locks, to allow proactive defence. This was not pursued.

In June, several barrage balloon positions had to be abandoned due to poor road conditions (it being the wet season) and repairs could not be undertaken due to the impending reduction in troop numbers.

The submarine S-11 had been assigned to Coco Solo since October 1941. 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. Most submarines based at Coco Solo during the war were S-boats, which had been originally commissioned in the 1920s, later mothballed and then brought out of retirement as the likelihood of war increased in the late 1930s.

On 1 June, the Panama Security Command was disestablished and the Mobile Force resumed responsibility for security of the Canal,⁸¹ with the 150th Infantry Regiment

⁷⁸ <https://boeingtestpilot.com/chapter-2-vp-207/>

⁷⁹ They could be anchored overnight in the bay at Salinas, Ecuador and at night a duty crew was kept aboard in case of a storm. A PB2Y was lost in such a storm whilst moored in Puerto Castilla, Honduras in October 1943, and all but two of the crew were lost – the survivors drifted with the storm for four days, and nine days after the aircraft sank were washed ashore alive.

⁸⁰ <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>

⁸¹ Ibid.

continuing its internal security role, this situation being essentially unchanged to April 1945.⁸²

On 1 June, the 53rd Fighter Squadron relocated to the US, going on to become a P-47 Thunderbolt fighter unit in England.⁸³

On 1 June, detachments from naval patrol squadron VP-206 sent detachments from Coco Solo to Salinas and the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador. The latter detachment was relieved on 1 July, with a detachment then being sent to Jamaica, with a detachment was sent to Corinto in Nicaragua on 7 September, with the rest of the unit joining it there on 5 February 1944⁸⁴.⁸⁵

The 24th Fighter Squadron flew its last P-39 Airacobra missions on 25 June, and these were then replaced on 27 June by two refurbished Curtiss P-40C and two new P-40N Warhawks on 29 June – the first of the late-model P-40N to arrive, followed by none more P-40C and, with these, several long-range navigational flights were undertaken - one going so far as Trinidad. From that point through until August, the Squadron transitioned into new P-40N, having 22 by the end of the month. However, in March 1944, it again re-equipped, this time with the P-39 again, these being the P-39Q (the major production model).⁸⁶

In the Canal Zone, the total number of Gold Roll employees was 8,357, with 28,157 Silver Roll employees. These numbers would fall by a year later, to 6,974 and 23,040 respectively.

JULY

The USS *Ancon* was present at the invasion of Sicily in July.

⁸² *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

⁸³ https://everything.explained.today/53rd_Fighter_Squadron/

⁸⁴ *VPNavy! USN, USMC, USCG and NATS Patrol Aircraft Lost or Damaged During World War II* By Douglas E. Campbell (Syneca Research Group Inc, 2018).

⁸⁵ *VPNavy! USN, USMC, USCG and NATS Patrol Aircraft Lost or Damaged During World War II* By Douglas E. Campbell (Syneca Research Group Inc, 2018).

⁸⁶ This had a 37mm cannon, with six machine guns and a 227 kg (600 lb) bombload; later batches had a four-blade propeller.

The US Navy's "paper" fleet, the 10th Fleet came into its virtual existence.

By July, 17 months after Operation *Neuland* had been launched by the Kriegsmarine, it was been said that no U-boat running on the surface in the Caribbean or in the South Atlantic was safe from attack.⁸⁷

The island of Martinique had been governed by the Vichy French authorities since the Fall of France in 1940, and had been used by German U-boats during the Battle of the Caribbean. However, Free French forces took over on the island in July. In the previous May, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion in Panama had been put on alert for a possible parachute landing on the island.⁸⁸

In July, it was announced that regularly established retail dealers in Panama would once more be permitted to distribute car tyres and inner tubes, subject to the rationing controls and subject to set maximum prices.

In Panama, the Office of Control of Imports, Prices and Supplies (*Oficina de Control de Importación, Precios y Abastás*) was set up in July, it also absorbing the role of the Import Control Commission (*Comisión de Control de Importación*) that had been established in 1942, one of three predecessor bodies.⁸⁹ The new body could fix maximum wholesale and retail prices for food staples – including rice, sugar, fish, potatoes, eggs, beef, milk and pork. However, violations are said to have been widespread.

By July, there were only 30 barrage balloons in service on the Canal, due to resupply problems.

The Coco Solo submarine base contributed to the training of not only those men assigned there, but submariners passing through on their way to the Pacific. Many crews underwent a brief but rigorous period of exercises at the Canal Zone. The USS *Puffer* (SS-268), for

⁸⁷ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41823>

⁸⁸ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40175>

⁸⁹ *Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (United States Tariff Commission, 1946).

example, spent several days at Coco Solo in July 1943 on its way to Brisbane, Australia. While there, a number of experienced torpedomen were temporarily assigned to the *Puffer* to assist with attack training and the test firing of dummy torpedoes.⁹⁰

Three experts from the US Department of Agriculture carried out a scientific study on the economic possibilities of the fishing industry in Panama (which had been dominated by the Japanese pre-war). Their July report confirmed that the country's waters had an enormous fishing wealth.

The 1st Observation Squadron (redesignated the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron in July) was reported to have on its strength an unknown number of CG-4 cargo gliders in 1943. As mentioned above, an Army major had been undertaking experimental jungle landings of troop-carrying gliders in Panama using the CG-4A in 1943-44, and was to attract the attention of officers seeking to establish a new Air Commando organisation, inspired by the Wingate Chindit operations in Burma.⁹¹

On 13 July, an engineering report stated that –

“Sixth Air Force, G-4 Engineering, is making some 150 dummy P-40 airplanes. These are for issue to the Panama Interceptor Command. We will deliver theses as soon as possible and get them out of our way”.⁹²

Also on 13 July, 12 US airmen died when their B-17 bomber stalled and crashed on approach at David.⁹³

⁹⁰ *The USS Puffer in World War II: A History of the Submarine and Its Wartime Crew* by Craig R McDonald (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008), 32–33. See also Edward L. Beach, *Run Silent, Run Deep* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955),

⁹¹ The Long Range Penetration Groups of the British and Indian Armies undertook operations behind enemy lines in Burma 1943-44, depending on air supply and air evacuation of sick and wounded. They had been the idea of Brigadier Orde Wingate, who died in an air crash in 1944.

⁹² *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).

⁹³ <https://pacificwrecks.com/airfields/panama/david/index.html>

AUGUST

No longer required for the planned Martinique operation⁹⁴, the paratroops of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion, who had been based in Panama were moved out in August, and departed Panama for Sicily, where they trained in preparation for the invasion of Southern France in 1944. Badly mauled in later fighting in Belgium in January 1945, survivors were absorbed into the 82nd Airborne Division, with the unit being formally deactivated later in January.

Before World War 2, the US Congress had mandated that the US Navy was not permitted to operate land-based combat aircraft. During the war, however, this rule was gradually modified, as the Navy sought greater control of all aspects of naval warfare – as well as better and more suitable types becoming available, particularly for the long-range maritime patrol/anti-submarine role. However, it was only in 1943 that the US Army and US Navy came to an agreement, and under an agreement in August, the Army agreed to turn over all anti-submarine operations to the Navy.

While it would take until November for all the necessary transfers to take place and the USAAF Antisubmarine Command squadrons in the UK to be replaced by Navy units, the Command had formally ceased to exist by an order dated 1 August. It would revert to become the I Bomber Command once more, being assigned to the First Air Force with effect from 23 August. Operating as a training command, it was deactivated in 1946.

The single Hamilton H.47 Metalplane, which the USAAF had designated C-89 originally and then UC-89 in 1943⁹⁵, was an eight-seat single-engine monoplane transport that had belonged to a Panamanian company, Transportes Aereos Gelebert⁹⁶. Impressed from its

⁹⁴ The French Admiral in charge of the Vichy forces on Martinique learned of the impending US operation, and promptly fled the island, turning over control to a US Navy Admiral.

⁹⁵ In USAAC parlance, “C” stood for Cargo or Cargo carrying, and denoted a transport aircraft, whilst the “U” prefix denoted a “Utility” type – usually a smaller aircraft, and not a full-size airliner.

⁹⁶ During 1930, Isthmian Airways had used it as a floatplane in its service linking the Atlantic to the Pacific between Cristóbal, Colón and Balboa, describing the 30-minute flight to be the “fastest transcontinental service in North America”. Founded by a Ralph Ernest Sexton, the first flight (from Balboa to Colón) took place on 5 May 1929. The fare was \$10, or \$14 return (the fare dropped to \$3 in 1932-33 during the Great Depression). The company also provided tourist flights to Taboga and Las Perlas. The Canal Zone Government

civilian owner in December 1942, it was found to be unsuitable for military use and struck off charge in August 1943 – the fate of all the original assortment of non-standard types used for transport role in the early months of US involvement in the war.

3 August saw the tug *Chagres* of the Canal's Dredging Division become a casualty when it struck a submerged mine in the Pacific entrance and sank. The captain and seven crewmen perished, but the chief engineer and six others were rescued⁹⁷.

On 27 August, flying their new P-40N, "A" and "B" Flights of the 24th Fighter Squadron undertook a mass cross-country flight to Costa Rica. The next day, they flew down the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama – completely undetected – and made a successful surprise mock "attack" on the Gatun Locks. "B" Flight made three dive-bombing attacks while "A" Flight made four strafing passes. Defending interceptors, finally alerted to the attack, did not show up until the attack was completely over.

As the war progressed, most of the Squadron 3 submarines at Coco Solo were transferred to more active regions, leaving only four boats in the Squadron by August. It was finally deactivated on 1 July 1945, to be subsequently reactivated on Guam on 1 October 1945.⁹⁸

SEPTEMBER

In September, there was an attempted coup led by José Pezet, an outspoken critic of the de la Guardia administration, and involving several police officers. With the tacit approval of the US Embassy (which had been informed in advance by the National Police deputy chief, Remón Cantera), the National Police used their new, US-supplied equipment to pre-empt the coup and arrest the plotters. This is said to have reassured US officials of the stability of Panama (and hence the security of the Canal), with one State Department official noting in 1943 that –

cancelled the airlines contract in 1936 and Sexton sued: https://www.tvn-2.com/variedad/Aerolinea-Isthmian-Airways-Panama-ayer_0_5012498722.html

⁹⁷ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-W79-639c8df875f36d1f1c6783139b1c6ef8/pdf/GOVPUB-W79-639c8df875f36d1f1c6783139b1c6ef8.pdf>

⁹⁸ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/navy/subron3.htm>

“no revolution is apt to succeed in Panama so long as the heads of the National Police are loyal to the Government. President de la Guardia as had nothing to worry about on this score”.

It also helped that deposed President Arias Madrid would remain in exile in Argentina until 1945.

The Oil Handling Plants of the Supply Department of the Canal saw increased activity during the war. During July 1943-June 1940, the average amount of petroleum products handled was around 10 million barrels, in the five years to June 1945 it averaged over 22.9 million barrels, with a peak of over 35.1 million barrels in the year July 1944-June 1945. The principal movement was from Atlantic to Pacific, as well as to Central and South America. The Navy’s trans-isthmian pipeline system used the plants as transshipment points from around September 1943⁹⁹.

Until September, there were 85 searchlight positions in the Pacific sector. In the general rundown level of defences that was introduced, this was reduced to just four sites, with 12 searchlights each, as the Pacific Searchlight Defense.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Panama, Archbishop Malztegui died in September.

On the island of Taboga, contractors which had been working on the base (which had been official commissioned in August 1942, although only 90% completed by the end of that year) left in July, and Seabees took over construction and repair until September. An Army telephone landline was laid, allowing communication with the mainland.¹⁰⁰

Before 1940, the Army Medical Department operated six small Hospitals and four Dispensaries in the Canal Zone, which provided the necessary medical service. The very first permanent Army Hospitals only opened in September 1943 – and in total only three

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.ptboatforum.com/cgi-bin/MB2/netboardr.cgi?fid=102&cid=101&tid=2132&st=10&nd=20&pg=1&sc=20>

new Hospitals were ever built, and temporary installations had to tackle any peak loads of patients.¹⁰¹

1943 saw the Canal Zone Police force stop using horses, and on 14 September all those owned and used by the Police were either released to other bodies or sold or retired. The new Chief felt that the horse had outlived its usefulness.¹⁰²

On 23 September, US Ambassador Edwin C Wilson, who had been in the post since the end of May 1941, left. He would be replaced by Avra M Warren in June 1944.

On 27 September, the Panama Air Depot (PAD) became an independent station, although it was always thought of as part of the Albrook Field complex.

OCTOBER

In October, with additional squadrons becoming available, the Navy finally took on the entire Pacific security patrol role. From April, Navy patrol aircraft had begun to gradually replace USAAF bombers on the Pacific patrols. However, with an upturn in U-boat activity in November, the USAAF was called on to assist once more.

From October, the smokescreen over the Canal was discontinued, with equipment being removed to store and it would be officially terminated on 1 December as troop levels were reduced. Almost 900 men (plus 200 boats and barges) had been necessary for the smokescreen defence.

In October, a minelaying U-Boat laid mines within four (6.4 km) miles of the Colón breakwater. These caused no damage, and most were swept within a month.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ <https://www.med-dept.com/articles/ww2-military-hospitals-general-introduction/>

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ The U-Boat involved went on to laid off the Gulf of Paria, Venezuela, again with little or no effect.

From 1942, work had continued on providing an uninterrupted road route to Panama from the US, in much the same way as had been done to enable supplies to be sent to Alaska using the Alaska Highway (or Alcan). At the peak of the effort, 25,000 men (including 1,500 from the US) were involved in the project. By the time the War Department cancelled the project in October, US contractors had cleared a right of way for 758 miles (1,220 km) of highway, surfacing 331 miles (532 km) of the length^{104, 105}.

October/November saw a 23-day strike, and student protests, in reaction to President De La Guardia's apparent ambition to stay in office, maintaining what was seen as an authoritarian regime, although facing mounting opposition. The Government responded by expelling the student leaders, which led to more protests.

On 14 October, a PBV-5 Catalina flying-boat from Navy patrol squadron VP-206, operating from the Galapagos Islands was lost. The PBV had been forced to land on open sea while on patrol, and a ruptured fuel tank had flooded the aircraft with fuel. As no word of the aircraft's trouble had reached the base, Navy aircraft began a search, with USAAF aircraft taking up the search the following day (a Liberator being lost when it crashed into a small mountain on the Cocos Islands). Five US Navy PBM Mariners also began a search, and one spotted the disabled PBV, with a destroyer despatched to rescue the crew. However, an Esso tanker nearby picked up the seven aircrew – but damaged the PBV in the process and it began to sink, being eventually sunk by naval gunfire.

On 14 October, Rear Admiral Harold C Train took over command of the 15th Naval District from Rear Admiral Clifford E Van Hook.

¹⁰⁴ *The Big L: American Logistics in World War II* edited by Alan Gropman (National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies Fort McNair Washington, DC 20319), 1997
<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a421840.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ The Pan-American Highway, some 19,000 miles (33,000 km) long, stretches from Alaska to southern Argentina – with a 66-mile (106 km) gap in the Darien Province in Panama, there being no road link through the jungle and mountains between Panama and Colombia. The Inter-American Highway is the name for the 3,400 mile (5,472 km) stretch between Mexico and Panama and was completed in the 1950s. The Pan-American Highway was completed in 1963:
https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pan_American_Highway

On 18 October, a PB2Y-3 Coronado flying-boat on Navy patrol squadron VP-1, on a delivery flight from San Diego to the Canal Zone, was caught by a storm when moored in Puerto Castilla in Honduras and sunk. Two crewmen escaped on a life raft but were swept out to sea by the storm. It attempted a take-off in high winds and, after taxing all night, another take-off was attempted, but the aircraft was damaged and one engine provided no power. In rough seas, the flying-boat eventually sank. Just two crew survived, being lost at sea for nine days on a life raft before being washed ashore and rescued. The 12 aircraft for the squadron were being ferried to Coco Solo between May and October.

Following the US President's proclamation of 26 October, registration for selective service was required of male citizens of the US outside the Continental US, Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, so including the Canal Zone. Those eligible for registration were men who had not previously registered for selective service and who had reached their 18th birthday on or after 31 December 1943, but had not reached their 45th birthday. Registration had to be accomplished during the period 16 November to 31 December, and the Executive Secretary of the Panama Canal was designated Chief Registrar and was charged with the responsibility of carrying out selective-service registration in the Canal Zone. A total of 2,993 persons were registered during the period, most of the registrations being accomplished during the first week.¹⁰⁶

On 25 October, the USS *Dorado* was reported lost, one of 52 submarines that were lost by the US Navy during the war. She sank with all 77 crew while on deployment from New London, Connecticut to Coco Solo, having left on 6 October. When she did not arrive, a search began on 14 October, to no avail. A subsequent court of inquiry determined that she had probably been the victim of “friendly fire”.

¹⁰⁶ *The Role of North American Women in US Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone 1904-1945* by Paul W Morgan Jr (Dissertation submitted to Department of History, Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2000): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013679/00001/images/10>

In fact, the Canal Zone had a higher percentage of volunteers than any of the 48 states – during the first 11 months of Fiscal Year 1943-44, 800 Canal and railroad employees joined the military – almost 10% of the Gold workers

NOVEMBER

The first prototype of the Seiran, the submarine-launched aircraft intended for use in an attack on the Canal, flew in November. Production began in early 1944, and the first operational example was ready in October 1944¹⁰⁷.¹⁰⁸

Naos was an island that formed part of Fort Amador/Fort Grant at the Pacific end of the Canal. It had been heavily fortified and was home to Batteries Buell and Burnside, each with 2 x 14-inch (355 mm) guns. Considered obsolete by 1943, they were last fired in November 1943 and not manned after 1944, being eventually removed for scrapping in 1947 or 1948.¹⁰⁹

Perico was another of the small islands that comprised Fort Amador and the Causeway created into Panama Bay. It housed Battery Newton, with a 16-inch (406 mm) gun on a disappearing carriage. There was also a railway to the top of the island to aid construction and then ammunition resupply. This gun was also dismantled and scrapped in 1943.

During a period of renewed U-boat threat from 23 November to 8 April 1944, the USAAF took on more of the anti-submarine work in the Caribbean. During this period, 219 four-engine and 266 twin-engine bomber missions were undertaken by VI Bomber Command, carrying out anti-submarine sweeps on behalf of the Navy.

Although, after the end of January 1943, U-boats were not seen as a serious threat in the Caribbean, November saw a concerted attack by three U-boats in the Panama Sea Frontier.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/43177>

¹⁰⁸ Aichi completed the first prototype in 1943, and the Navy ordered production to start immediately. The original production 44 aircraft was eventually reduced to 28 (including two M6A1-K trainers) due to the cost and war-driven material shortages, not to mention two major earthquakes and relentless bombing by B-29 bombers of Japan: <https://www.historynet.com/japans-panama-canal-buster.htm>

¹⁰⁹ <https://si.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=e65d5058a32a4b939965915b61aab678>

¹¹⁰ 336 ships were lost in 1942, 35 in 1943 and only three in 1944.

A source of beef was developed in Guatemala for supply to troops garrisoning the Galapagos Islands. This was necessary after it was found that troops stationed in the islands, where the climate was characterised by marked drop in temperature after sunset, which required a diet of higher caloric value than troops in the lowlands of Panama. A *rastro* (abattoir) at Escuintla was modified and the first beef was shipped in November, and the carcass beef in quarters arrived in good condition. Troops constantly doing heavy manual labour also required rations of increased caloric value, and the new source of beef ensured an adequate supply for the troops of the Panama Canal Department, with approximately 250,000 lb (113,000 kg) of carcass beef shipped each month.

At Rio Hato, from about November, road blocks of an asphalt taxiway connection across the National (by now InterAmerican) Highway, were manned by members of the Policia Nacional of Panama. It has been said that this was one of the few Panamanian contributions of armed personnel to the war effort, although the USAAF paid their \$60 per month salaries.¹¹¹

In November, a board of inquiry recommended that all P-39 fighters in Panama be replaced by P-40.¹¹² However, USAAF Headquarters proposed the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt instead, as all production of P-40 was committed to other requirements. XXVI Fighter Command countered by highlighting advantages of the P-38 Lightning – such as pilots there already familiar with tricycle undercarriage (as the P-39 had such an arrangement), use of the same Allison V1710 engines as the P-39 (and P-40), and the inherent benefits in terms of safety in having a twin-engine type operating in the region. However, it would not be until late 1944 before the Sixth Air Force received any P-38.

As part of the general reduction in defences, several USAAF units were disbanded in November.

In November, with the threat to the Canal having decreased, the 108th Reconnaissance Squadron was stood down and its personnel reassigned to other units in one of the combat

¹¹¹ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2016.

¹¹² *P-38 in Latin America* by Dan Hagedorn (Aviation Art & History, 2022).

theatres. The squadron was subsequently reactivated and redesignated as the 108th Bombardment Squadron (Light), and allocated to the Illinois National Guard at Chicago Municipal Airport on 21 June 1945.

On 1 November, the 6th Bombardment Group was disbanded in the Canal Zone. It was subsequently reconstituted on 29 June 1944 and consolidated with the 6th Bombardment Group (Very Heavy) as a B-29 unit for use against Japan.¹¹³

The 16th Fighter Group was disbanded at Albrook Field on 1 November. This unit had been activated in Canal Zone in 1932 as the 16th Pursuit Group, and had used a variety of types, from the P-12 biplane to the P-40, and been redesignated the 16th Pursuit Group (Interceptor) in 1939, before being designated as the 16th Fighter Group in 1942.

The 32nd Fighter Group, which had been activated as the 16th Pursuit Group in Panama in January 1941 (and intended then to receive the P-38 fighters which did not reach Panama until late 1944), was disbanded on 1 November.

The 72nd Reconnaissance group, which had activated as the 72nd Observation Group, and deployed to Panama in December 1941/January 1942, before becoming the 72nd Reconnaissance Group in 1943, was disbanded on 1 November. It had been involved in patrols, carried mail, carried out search and rescue, provided reconnaissance support for ground forces and undertaken photographic mapping during its time in the region.¹¹⁴

On 8 November, Brigadier General Ralph H Wooten became Sixth Air Force commander.

DECEMBER

In December, more US Navy Seabees¹¹⁵ arrived and served in the 15th Naval District. Due to the ongoing difficulty of procuring civilian labour for work in outlying areas, they, like their

¹¹³ https://www.armyaircorpsmuseum.org/6th_Bombardment_Group.cfm

¹¹⁴ <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>

¹¹⁵ US Naval Construction Battalions.

predecessors, were used mainly at the advance bases. However, some were stationed within the Canal Zone, to operate power houses and perform specialised maintenance work¹¹⁶.

In December, control over rents in Panama City and Colón was authorised.

In December, as part of the general reduction in strength of the Panama Canal Department, all barrage balloon positions were abandoned and the operating unit returned to the US for reassignment.¹¹⁷

From October, the smokescreen over the Canal had been discontinued, with equipment being removed to store. It was officially terminated on 1 December.

By December, the urgent need for transport aircraft, and particularly for a unique type like the German-built Junkers Ju 52/3m trimotor C-79, had passed and the impressed former civilian aircraft was disposed of in a transfer to the US Public Roads Administration in Costa Rica.

The 10th Bomb Squadron (Medium), having been heavily involved in the anti-submarine campaign in the Caribbean from the beginning of the war, finally re-equipped in December, replacing its veteran (and essentially obsolete) B-18B and B-18C Bolo with 15 brand-new North American B-25G Mitchells at New France Field. However, this development proved to be short-lived, as the unit returned to the US in early May 1944. This effectively ended the brief Sixth Air Force association with the “big gun” Mitchells, which looked good on paper as anti-submarine aircraft, but which in practice proved to be less effective than the obsolescent B-18B and B-18C that they replaced.¹¹⁸

On 18 December, the already extensive communications network that had spread through the Caribbean Defense Command area saw another radiotype circuit go into regular

¹¹⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

¹¹⁷ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

¹¹⁸ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2012.

operation between the War Department (codename WAR) and the headquarters at Quarry Heights (codename WVL). The International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) had developed the equipment that the company called radiotype to replace radio for secure communications – radio could be intercepted and was subject to distortion and interference. However, the system did not use the standard five-unit teletypewriter code but a special six-unit code. Like a narrow-gauge railway adjoining a standard line, this special code resulted in much extra work at conversion points where standard teletypewriter texts had to be shifted onto radiotype circuits, and *vice versa*. Moreover, the standard automatic cipher machines could not function with the six-unit system.¹¹⁹

By the end of 1943, a great portion of the coast artillery in Panama was manned by Puerto Rican troops. Among the various objections to using Puerto Ricans in the Caribbean Defense Command that had sometimes been put forth, there was perhaps one legitimate reason - reasons of diplomacy with other Caribbean nations (both Cuba and Panama itself had problems with accepting Puerto Ricans). However, by the end of 1943, nearly 5,000 Puerto Rican soldiers were based in Panama. The 65th Infantry Regiment was a segregated Hispanic unit made up primarily of Puerto Ricans, and it was sent to Panama in 1943. It was later sent to Europe, where it participated in fighting in Italy and Germany.¹²⁰

USS *Ancon* spent New Year's Eve 1943-44 in Panama with her crew enjoying liberty in Colón. The following day she passed through the Panama Canal on the way to Pearl Harbor with an intermediate stopover in San Diego.

¹¹⁹ *United States Army in World War II: The Technical Services - The Signal Corps: The Test (December 1941 to July 1943)* by George Raynor Thompson, Dixie R. Harris, Pauline M. Oakes, Dulany Terrett (Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington DC, 1957):
<http://tothosewhoserved.org/usa/ts/usatss02/index.html>

¹²⁰ <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

SHIPPING LOSSES IN THE CARIBBEAN AREA

1943

	Total for Gulf and Caribbean		Panama Sea Frontier	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>
January	6	33,150	2	9,584
February	3	16,042	2	14,032
March	8	39,226	2	9,347
April	3	15,147		
May	2	4,232		
July	6	34,806	1	1,641
November	4	13,792		
December	3	21,548		
Total	35	177,945	7	34,604

PANAMA-FLAG CASUALTIES TO U-BOAT ATTACK

1943

A total of 11 ships were sunk by U-boats, a total of 67,296 tons.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

6 March 2023