

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2

ALBROOK FIELD – ORIGINS AND AFTER

The airfield at Albrook, adjacent to both Panama City and the “capital” of the Canal Zone at Balboa, began operations in 1932, and remains in use today as the Albrook "Marcos A Gelabert" International Airport, across busy roads from the Albrook Mall, the largest shopping mall in Latin America.

During wartime years it was the headquarters of the Panama Canal Air Force in 1940¹, which became the Caribbean Air Force in 1941², and the Sixth Air Force in 1942³, and then postwar the USAF Caribbean Air Command 1948-63, USAF Southern Command 1963-76, and the USAF Southern Air Division from 1975 had their quarters there – the latter moving to Howard Air Force Base in 1978. Finally, it was headquarters of the 830th Air Division from 1989 to 1991.⁴

A commercial air terminal would be established on the south-east side of Albrook Field, relocating from France Field on the Caribbean coast, chiefly used by Pan American Airways and operating (in camouflage) throughout the war, only relinquishing its role as an international airport to the new Tocumen International Airport postwar in 1950.

Albrook was also the base of the Panama Air Depot, a maintenance and repair facility, which was relocated from France Field, at the other end of the Canal, during the 1930s.

¹ Established in November 1940 as the command for the USAAC units based in and defending the Canal Zone, 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”. Nevertheless, it was the major command for USAAC units based in and around the Canal Zone. The Panama Canal Air Force was the first-ever overseas Air Force Major Command. It was renamed as the Caribbean Air Force in August 1941.

<https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

² Established as the USAAF command – the USAAC had become the USAAF from June 1941 – in August 1941, as part of the theatre-wide Caribbean Defense Command. It was renamed again as the Sixth Air Force in September 1942.

³ The Sixth Air Force was the USAAF command for all operations in Panama, Caribbean, South and Central America, as part of the Caribbean Defense Command.

⁴ The US Army Air Corps (USAAC) became the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) in 1941, and the independent US Air Force (USAF) was established in 1947.



*Albrook Field, 1933 and
2016*

ORIGINS

Originally called the Balboa Fill Landing Field, what became Albrook Field was separated from the US Army's Curundu Military Reservation and formally established as an independent installation in 1924.⁵ It was named in honour of First Lieutenant Frank P Albrook of the US Army Air Service (USAAS), who had been killed in a flying accident while serving in Panama.

While there was already a small Army airfield, known as Miller Field, at Fort Clayton⁶, close to the Miraflores Locks and some way from Panama City and Balboa, there were concerns

⁵ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/an%20american%20legacy3.pdf.pdf>

⁶ Miller Field closed in June 1932, once Albrook Field became operational. Construction of the 2nd Field Artillery stables at Fort Clayton required the removal of the hangar facility at Miller Field and, in April 1933, some elements of the demountable hangar be dismantled and re-erected at Albrook Field.

Guarding the Gates: The Story of Fort Clayton - Its Setting, Its Architecture, and Its Role in the History of the Panama Canal by Susan I Enscoe, Suzanne P Johnson, Julie L Webster, and Gordon L Cohen (ERDC/CERL Monograph 00-01, Construction Engineering Research Laboratory, US Army Engineer Research and Development Center, September 2000).

that the only established Army airfield was at the other end of the Canal, at France Field, close to Colón on the Caribbean coast. There was an obvious need for a permanent airfield on the Pacific coast, for air defence and patrol aircraft. The administrative command for both the Canal authorities and the US Army and Navy were located at the Pacific end of the Canal.

It had also been noted that the greater rainfall on the Caribbean coast made France Field a “sea of mud” for nine months of each year.⁷ At the time, France Field had only a “coral runway” of only 2,700 feet (823 metres), thought then incapable of extension, and considered unsuitable for large or heavily-loaded aircraft. These unfavourable characteristics help to explain why Albrook rapidly become the centre of both US Army Air Corps (USAAC) and commercial aviation activities in the Canal Zone.

Construction on a new airfield as a permanent USAAC airfield was authorised by the US Congress in 1928, and \$1.9 million was appropriated. Actual construction began in 1930 and most works were completed in 1932. It was commissioned as the Albrook Army Airfield in April 1932 as an active airfield.

At the time, landing fields, other than the established ones at France Field and Albrook, were very much seen as “emergency” fields, even those municipal airfields at a number of towns in the Republic. In some cases, the landing grounds were regarded as “treacherous”.

In 1938, a new hard surface runway and a control tower building were built, by the Canal Zone’s Municipal Engineering Division, and these would come into operation on 17 April 1939. The original runway and taxiways had been considered unsuitable for all-weather flying (particularly in a place like Panama with its very high rainfall).⁸

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA388262.pdf>

⁷ As now, Panama enjoys a “dry season”, November-April, with increasing rain and severe thunderstorms from then, peaking in September/October. Whilst it does experience the side or after-effects of tropical storms, it does not suffer hurricanes in the same way as other parts of the Caribbean and Central America.

⁸ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

However, due to limits on the scope for further expansion at Albrook Field, in 1938 it was recommended that a new airfield be created on Government-owned land⁹ at Bruja Point, 2½ miles (4 km) west of Balboa (this would become Howard Field, later Howard Air Force Base).

PRE-WAR

It should be remembered that, until the opening of the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway (for military traffic only at first) in 1942, movement between the two ends of the Canal was by train, by air, or by water using the Canal itself. As late as 1939, the USAAC was still flying the mail between Albrook Field and France Field.



Albrook Field in 1939

Chemical weapons were also stored at Albrook Field. In 1930, the US Army had a chemical company of two officers and 77 men in the Canal Zone. There was also 30 tons of “persistent gas”, which had risen by 1940 to 84 tons of mustard gas, 10 tons of phosgene, 800 phosgene shells, 900 Livens projectors¹⁰, 647 chemical cylinders, and 2,377 4.2-inch (106mm) mustard-charged mortar rounds.¹¹ Some of these munitions were stored at Albrook Field although, prior to the San José Project being established in 1944¹², most were

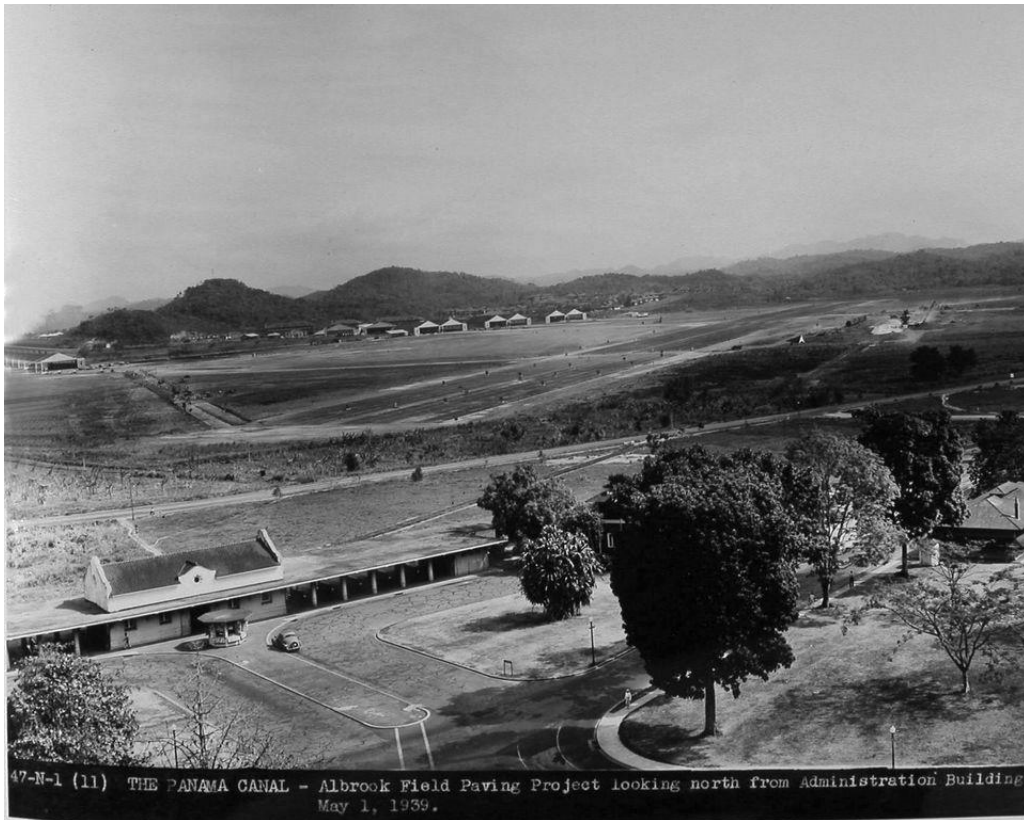
⁹ Part of it had been set aside for a naval radio station.

¹⁰ A British design of a simple mortar-like weapon that could throw large drums filled with flammable or toxic chemicals.

¹¹ <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1386>

¹² For more on this project, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/02/panama-mustard-gas-and-chemical-defences/>

stored at Cerro Tigre. However, from July 1940 until the following May, the Army's Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) acquired expanded space in Panama — in an exercise codenamed "Mercury" — and received shipments of gas masks. The space included chemical munitions storage magazines in seven bases including Albrook Field.¹³



The Albrook Field paving project, looking north from the Canal Administration Building, 1 May 1939

COMMERCIAL AIR OPERATIONS

Pan American Airways Inc commenced regular air mail service to and from the Canal Zone in February 1929. The next year, it began to provide passenger service between Panama, the US, and various points in Mexico, Central America, and the east coast of South America. Pan America-Grace Airways Inc (Panagra)¹⁴ also began service to a number of cities along South America's west coast.

¹³ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission) <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/1>

¹⁴ A joint venture involving Pan American Airways and the WR Grace shipping line for services to South America.

At that time, all commercial airmail, passenger, and cargo services used France Field, which served as Pan American's primary flying field until 1936, when commercial service moved to the recently-opened Albrook Field, where a more serviceable runway was available.¹⁵

In December 1936, another airline, Panama Airways, launched a trans-isthmian service between Albrook and France Field.¹⁶ It used Ford Trimotors, and sometimes DC.2 airliners (and DC.3 were available, it was said). It carried cruise liner passengers from coast to coast – on a 35-mile (56 km) route.¹⁷ Pan American carried out maintenance on the aircraft, and Panama Airways was one of the smallest elements of the Pan American Airways System.¹⁸ In fact, as war was beginning, of the four airlines that at the time operated in Panama, three belonged to Pan American.¹⁹

Albrook became home to the so-called Canal Zone Airport Building which, for all intents and purposes, was a Pan American Airways operation, although other airlines, including TACA²⁰, also used the facility – despite the security conscious USAAC. The USAAC had also been

¹⁵ <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

¹⁶ This replaced a local airline, which had offered a trans-isthmus service using Hamilton floatplanes, from Balboa to Colón. The 30-minute flight was described as the "fastest transcontinental service in North America". Founded by an American engineer, Ralph Ernest Sexton, it began operations on 5 May 1929. It also offered tourist flights to the Taboga and Las Perlas islands. A commercial success, growing to have a fleet of seven aircraft. However, Pan American Airways forced the small airline out of business, claiming that the concept had been stolen from their employee, the legendary Charles A. Lindbergh during an earlier visit to Panama and, in 1936, the canal Zone Government cancelled its contract.

¹⁷ In 1939, some 65 cruise ships were scheduled to call at the Canal Zone, offering plenty of potential customers for the airline, with the cruise ship season from January to March. In 1938, the season saw 43 cruise ships and 16,000 passengers in and out of Cristobal – and 3,000 flew with Panama Airways.

¹⁸ The shortest was apparently the 31-mile (49.9 km) route in California between Wilmington and Catalina Island.

¹⁹ For more on Pan Am in Panama, see <http://raytodd.blog/2023/03/16/panama-world-war-2-pan-am-and-other-airlines/>

²⁰ *Transportes Aéreos Centroamericanos*, later *Transportes Aéreos del Continente Americano*, which originated in Honduras and had been founded by a New Zealander. Until 1939, TACA de Honduras remained the principal company of the TACA System, when TACA Airways SA was formed in Panama as a non-operating holding company for the group – being renamed Inter-American Airways SA in 1943. During the war, the Panamanian Government decided to promote aviation, and entered into a contract with TACA to undertake the carriage of passengers and mail, as an alternative to, and to complement Pan American. In 1945, it moved its headquarters to El Salvador – though from the 1950s to 1980 had its corporate headquarters in New Orleans due to the civil war raging in El Salvador. In 2009, it was announced that TACA Airlines would merge its assets in a strategic alliance with Colombian airline AVIANCA, and this merger was completed by 2013.

unhappy with the presence at France Field of the Pan American Airways hub, which had been imposed on it by the US Government.²¹

As the airfield was within the Canal Zone, even Panamanians arriving on domestic internal flights were obliged to pass through passenger controls – something which was a source of irritation.

The Arias Madrid administration which came into office in 1940 had already complained about the treatment of Panamanians at Albrook, and the state of emergency and subsequent wartime restrictions only intensified the controls imposed. Not only did Panamanians, after all travelling within their own country, have to produce their passport to Panamanian immigration inspectors, they also faced US red tape – which could include the Army or Navy undertaking meticulous examinations of luggage, or even the passengers themselves. Passengers also had to comply with the Canal Zone's quarantine rules.

The quarantine restrictions, and interrogations of those passengers arriving from David in Chiriqui province violated the Panamanian Constitution, which provided that its citizens could travel freely throughout the territory of Panama. After constant demands from the Panamanian Government, the rules on interrogations at least were relaxed.

Initially, Pan American operated from the northern end of the primary runway adjoining Hangar 1, but this location soon resulted in congestion and interference with growing USAAC operations. As a result, the airline opted to build its own temporary facilities on the east side of Albrook Field. The temporary structures that it erected soon proved to be inadequate and approval was soon granted to use some discretionary funds (part of the US Government wartime Airport Development Program) to erect a modern, permanent terminal building.

²¹ A licence was issued on 13 February 1943, for the airline the use of hangar space at "Old" France Field, as well as permission to erect an additional small terminal building, pending completion of new facilities at Albrook Field.

Approval was contingent upon consent from Pan American to lease part of the finished structure to other airlines operating into the Canal Zone. At the time, these consisted of only two other airlines: TACA, operating up through Central America, and UMCA²², which was a wholly-owned Pan American subsidiary formed specifically to penetrate the neighbouring Colombian market.

Pan American, in all of its literature and in the actual route awards, listed the terminal at Albrook Field as “Balboa, Canal Zone”, rather than Albrook Field. It bolstered its image with the USAAC in the first quarter of 1940 when it flew one of its brand-new, four-engine and pressurised Boeing SA.307 Stratoliners, the “*Clipper Flying Cloud*” to Albrook - and offered excursions aboard the beautifully appointed aircraft to 30 officers and their wives.²³

Almost all wartime airmail for Panama and the Canal Zone passed through Albrook Field, as a scheduled stop for any airlines operating between North and South America, with facilities in nearby Balboa responsible for censorship – with some airmail examined at Cristobal in 1943.²⁴

In June 1941, the US had plans for a new commercial airline terminal to be located at Albrook Field. It was thought that the existing arrangements there were insufficient for the ever-increasing civilian traffic. The cost was estimated at \$2 million, and the War Department approved the recommendation of the Commanding General of the Army’s Panama Canal Department.

However, the Panamanian Government protested, through the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was in Washington at the time. The Government also presented the National Assembly with a Bill authorising the Ministry of Finance to take out a \$5 million loan for the construction of a large airport at another site.

The Panamanian objection was to –

²² Uraba, Medellin and Central Airways Inc.

²³ Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society (Spring 2005 and Fall 2009).

²⁴ <http://www.canalzonestudygroup.com/Issue60.pdf>

*“the construction of a concrete building, the foundations of which already exist, intended as an airport for Pan American Airways, Inc., an enterprise of a private character which is devoted exclusively to commercial ends, and which has nothing to do, directly or indirectly, with the use, operation, or protection of the Panama Canal”.*²⁵

In addition, the Government protested –

“that the only activities which can be carried on within the said Zone are those expressly authorised by existing treaties and which are directly and necessarily connected with the use, maintenance, sanitation, operation, or protection of the Panama Canal”.

As a result of the objections raised by Panama, the 1941 plans were initially shelved.²⁶

For its part, the US authorities pointed out that such activities had been carried out for 12 years without any complaint from Panama. It also said that the use of “aerodromes” in the Canal Zone by commercial aviation companies did not breach either the spirit nor the terms of any treaty provisions in force between the US and Panama. It argued that the improvements, including the construction of a concrete administration building, were essential in view of its then current condition, and should in no way be considered as a change in the situation which has prevailed since the establishment of the existing services.²⁷ President La Guardia was informed that the development was, in fact, a wartime emergency requirement, and that anyway Panama was ill-suited for commercial aviation.²⁸

The US State Department also contended that Pan American, despite being a private company, had made its services and facilities available to the US armed forces “in the

²⁵ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v06/d575>

²⁶ <http://www.alonso-roy.com/pn/pn-21.html>

²⁷ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v06/d577>

²⁸ *US-Panamanian Relations Since 1941* by Lester D Langley (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 3, July 1970), Cambridge University Press: https://www.jstor.org/stable/175020?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

interests of defense and security of the hemisphere”, and that it was “imperative” for the new terminal to be completed as soon as possible.

The State Department argued that –

“the strategic geographical location of the Isthmus of Panama, the progress made in the methods of modern warfare, and the recent expansion of the theater of war have made it increasingly necessary to increase the controls of the aviation system in order to govern the entry, interior navigation and departure from the Isthmus of military and civil aircraft”.

When Panama suggested that the new building be only for temporary use, the Secretary of State responded that, while no-one could be sure what the postwar situation would be with respect to the development of commercial aviation, it was considered that an administrative building at Albrook would be *“always necessary as a matter of military preparation”*.

Eventually a new Canal Zone Air Terminal at Albrook was completed in 1943.²⁹

It would be 1950 before international commercial airline operations in Panama would be transferred to the new national terminal at Tocumen. The new Terminal was constructed by the Corps of Engineers and turned over to Canal Zone Government for operations.³⁰

PANAMA AIR DEPOT (PAD)

Since 1928, there had been an air depot at France Field, but in 1931 it was proposed to relocate it to Albrook Field, where housing, supply facilities and climate were seen as more favourable. While funding was not available at the time, by 1934 the Secretary of War had approved the move (despite objections from the commander of the Panama-based 19th Wing, who recommended that it remain at France Field).

²⁹ Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal: Fiscal Year ended June 30 1946.

³⁰ Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944 (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

Originally known as the Curundu Project, the Panama Air Depot (PAD) at Albrook was initially developed by the Panama Canal Commission as an industrial area, with motor car repair workshops and a garage, the district quartermaster stores, construction quartermaster workshops, municipal division workshops and storage facilities. Initially, PAD was not officially a part of Albrook Field but, rather, part of the Curundu Military Reservation.

As well as repairs and modifications, and storing and supplying USAAC supplies, PAD also assembled newly-arrived aircraft, of which many hundreds would arrive during the war.

The PAD became a separate command of the Army's Panama Canal Department from 1936³¹, and in 1937 a reorganisation saw it come under the supervision of the 19th Wing, though it actually continued to operate as a separate command of the Department.³² The only other such organisation in the region was the Puerto Rico Air Depot.³³

In 1936, PAD employed 80% military personnel, this reducing gradually to 50% by 1946.³⁴

In 1939, it was reassigned under the jurisdiction of Albrook Field, and then it had around 700 civilian employees. Meanwhile, the old warehouses at France Field remained full of supplies, with the new buildings planned at Albrook Field not completed. The main supply warehouse at France Field was also at risk of being flooded in heavy rains. Another problem was the low morale of civilian employees, who were paid less than other employees of the Panama Canal Department – though this was remedied in December 1939, when their pay was put on the same scales as other Department employees. Meanwhile, the move to total civilianising of PAD continued.³⁵

³¹ Previously it had come under the commanding officer at France Field.

³² *Air Defense of the Panama Canal, 1 January 1939 – 7 December 1941* (Army Air Forces Historical Office), January 1946: <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

³³ *P-38 in Latin America* by Dan Hagedorn (Aviation Art & History, 2022).

³⁴ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

³⁵ *Air Defense of the Panama Canal, 1 January 1939 – 7 December 1941* (Army Air Forces Historical Office), January 1946: <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>



Albrook Field in 1943, before the large PAD hangar was built

A large new hangar was constructed at Albrook Field to house PAD, with work on the huge hangar and many ancillary buildings begun in September 1940. The main hangar remained, for many years the single largest structure in all Central America and the Caribbean. By November 1940, Army engineers and contractors had completed 95% of the PAD buildings and the 805th Engineer Battalion (Aviation) was stationed there as the operative organisational element.

Quarters for military personnel and the significant number of civilian technicians that were needed to operate the PAD became a problem, housing of any kind for such personnel in the Canal Zone was problematical at the time. Indeed, the problem had become so critical by October 1941 that practically all the civilian employees recruited from the US to work at the PAD had resigned and returned to the US due to the totally unsatisfactory living conditions. Funds were eventually made available and, by August 1942, PAD had 332 apartments for civilian personnel, though this was barely adequate to meet the needs.³⁶

On 27 September 1943, PAD became an independent station in and of itself, although it was always thought of as part of Albrook Field.

³⁶ Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society (Spring 2005).



Laying concrete paving at Albrook Field in April 1939³⁷

WORLD WAR 2

US ARMY AIR CORPS UNITS AT ALBROOK FIELD ON 7 DECEMBER 1941

Albrook Field HQ Caribbean Air Force

HQ VI Bomber Command

HQ 12th Pursuit Wing

37th Pursuit Group

16th Pursuit Group

24th Pursuit Squadron

P-36 Hawk fighters

28th Pursuit Squadron

P-40 Warhawk fighters

29th Pursuit Squadron

P-40 Warhawk fighters

31st Pursuit Squadron

P-36 Hawk fighters

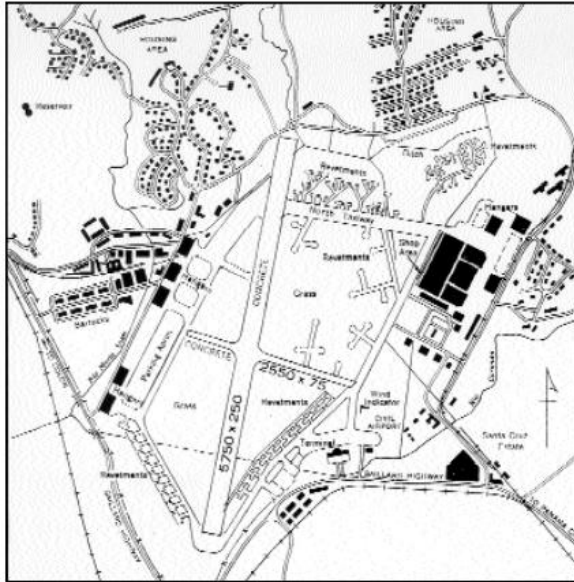
43rd Pursuit Squadron

P-40 Warhawk fighters

In addition to the above list, as late as February 1942, the 32nd Pursuit Group at Albrook Field still had some of the obsolete, pre-war open cockpit, fixed undercarriage P-26A Peashooter fighters on its strength. However, they were allocated to remote locations – three were assigned to San José, Costa Rica, where they carried out airfield defence duties. Six others were deployed to Guatemala City.

³⁷ <https://www.elistmopty.com/2021/01/de-albrook-field-airport.html>

During the war, Albrook Field was home to many fighter and bomber units, as well acting as the headquarters of the Sixth Air Force and the location of the Panama Air Depot (see above). Also known as Albrook Army Airfield, until it became Albrook Air Force Base in 1948 (with the creation of the new US Air Force).



This otherwise undated wartime map of the layout of Albrook Field shows the multitude of revetments and alert hardstands that were built. (USAF)

Albrook also saw the training of US Army Air Forces (USAAF)³⁸ weather forecasters. The AAF Weather Service had been established in 1942 by the newly created USAAF, but shortages of equipment and personnel continued for several months thereafter. Local training of forecasters at Albrook provided some relief.

In June 1945, the unique XC-105 met its end. It was stripped of anything useful, abandoned and eventually buried at the edge of Albrook Field – where it presumably still lies, beneath the area known as Diablo, the former rubbish site. The XC-105 had first flown in 1937, as the sole Boeing XB-15 very long-range heavy bomber prototype. Even larger than the subsequent B-17 Flying Fortress, it proved to be underpowered, but was used for a number of *ad hoc* experiments and special missions.³⁹ In 1943, it was converted to a long-range

³⁸ The USAAC became the USAAF in July 1941.

³⁹ Including secret tests in Panama in 1940, practising bombing attacks on the Canal locks.

transport as the XC-105, fitted with cargo doors and internal hoist, serving in this role until December 1944.⁴⁰



P-40 arrayed on Albrook Field on 7 August 1941, with barracks being constructed in the background.⁴¹

With the end of the war in Europe in 1945, Operation *Transit* was the name for the project involving the shipment of thousands of US troops through the Canal to the Far East. It comprised four different sets of arrangements, with Plan D requiring the temporary billeting of troops in the Canal Zone and, with Albrook Field being the closest installation to the docks at Balboa, many troops were taken there.

In late 1944, the USAAF opened at Albrook its Latin American Air School⁴² and, from Autumn 1944, a large number of airmen from almost all Latin American states began to attend. The first class consisted of an officer and 10 enlisted men from Peru who signed up for three

⁴⁰ For more on the XB-15/XC-105, see <http://raytodd.blog/2023/02/05/aircraft-panama-and-the-canal-zone-during-the-war-part-3-the-aircraft/>

⁴¹ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

⁴² Continuing postwar, it would become the US Air Force School for Latin America (USAFSLA) and was based at Albrook AFB (it closed briefly in the late 1940s but reopened after a year) and specialised in mechanical, medical and technical training. It subsequently became the Inter-American Air Forces Academy and, as such, still exists “for the purpose of providing military education and training to military personnel of Central and South American countries, Caribbean countries, and other countries eligible for assistance under Chapter 5 of Part II of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961”: <https://www.37trw.af.mil/Units/Inter-American-Air-Forces-Academy/>

months of apprentice training.⁴³ It continued to operate, as the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA), to 1989.



B-18 and C-47 at Albrook Field, 25 January 1943



Albrook in 1945

POSTWAR

Albrook Field became the Albrook Air Force Base under the newly independent US Air Force (USAF) on 26 March 1948;⁴⁴ and it ceased to be used as an airline terminal in 1949,⁴⁵ with commercial operations moving to the new Tocumen airport. At the same time, France Field was downgraded, with most units based there transferred to Albrook or to Howard.

⁴³ <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

⁴⁴ Department of the Air Force General Order No.10.

⁴⁵ <https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/czp.htm>



P-47N at Albrook in 1946

From the Albrook terminal, by 1949, there were three US airlines offering daily services “to all major gateways in North, Central and South America” –

- Pan American Airways to Brownsville (Texas); New Orleans; Miami; Port of Spain (Trinidad);
- Pan American-Grace Airways (Panagra) to Santiago (Chile); Buenos Aires; Lima; Corumba (Brazil);
- TACA to San Jose (Costa Rica), with connecting flights to Mexico City and Havana; and
- Urabe, Medellin and Central Airways to Medellin (Colombia).⁴⁶

Commercial air activities were transferred to National Airport at Tocumen on 21 September 1949. Although Tocumen Airport came into operation in June 1947, the transfer of international commercial flight operations did not take place until 1949 because an agreement was needed between Panama and the US, and construction of the facilities needed to be completed, which then allowed the certification of the airport by the US Aeronautics Office.⁴⁷

The former Air Terminal at Albrook saw subsequent use as a library and offices for the Canal authority.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *The Panama Canal and its Ports* (War Department, US Army Corps of Engineers, 1946) <https://dloc.com/AA00022193/00001/images/4>

⁴⁷ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/220611/aeropuerto-inter-tocumen-relato>

⁴⁸ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal: Fiscal Year ended June 30 1946*. Although Tocumen Airport became operational in June 1947, the transfer of international commercial flight operations did not take place until 21 September 1949. By this date, the US-Panama agreement and the construction of the facilities had been completed.

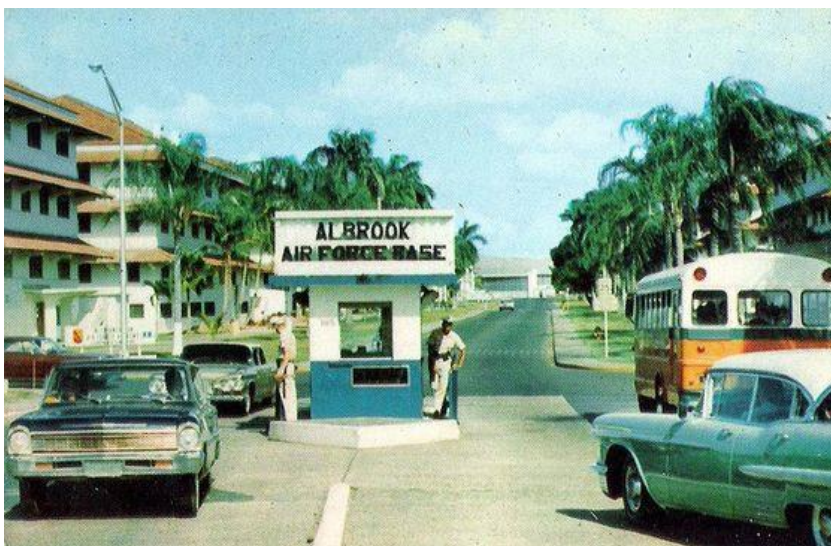
The Army & Air Force Exchange Service (aka the PX) operated an "Albrook Mall" in various buildings at the airbase, and was one of the primary shopping areas available to US troops stationed in the Canal Zone (not just USAF). Coincidentally, now there is another Albrook Mall, just across from the airport, the largest shopping mall in Latin America.

The base was home to various other units. USAF Tactical Air Command, for example, had its Tropic Survival School there.⁴⁹



Albrook Air Force Base, the former Albrook Field, close to the Canal and Panama City, in a photo taken from nearby Ancon Hill in 1956.

In 1975, the base was downgraded to become the Albrook Air Force Station when the control tower was closed and USAF aircraft and associated units moved to Howard.



The main gate in the 1960s

⁴⁹ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D301-PURL-gpo40993/pdf/GOVPUB-D301-PURL-gpo40993.pdf>

Almost half of the airport, including the largest hangars – which had been home to the Panama Air Depot, passed to Panama between 1989 and 1992, with the rest of the site transferred in 1997 and closed as an airfield. It would be refurbished and reopened in its current form as a civilian airport in 1999.

The last operational unit, 830th Air Division, Air Forces Panama had its headquarters at Albrook Air Force Station and Howard Air Force Base. It was operational during a period when USAF presence in Panama was being gradually reduced, with some of its functions and organisations being transferred to locations in the US or discontinued. After the transfer of the Canal Zone to the Government of Panama in 1999, its remaining responsibilities were taken on by the 24th Wing, one of its former components. Although chiefly focussed on representing the USAF, including providing training and supporting Foreign Military Sales (FMS), it nevertheless participated in the overthrow of General Noriega in Operation *Just Cause* in 1989-90, and provided forces in later operations in Iraq.

On the evening before the US invasion in December 1989, small arms fire just before midnight resulted in the shooting and wounding of a female US dependent at Albrook Air Force Station, and was one of the factors that caused the commanding US general to bring forward the invasion plans slightly, as it was feared that any element of surprise could be lost otherwise.⁵⁰ Albrook was also one of the places that the US forces feared could be attacked or sabotaged by the Panamanian Defense Forces during an invasion or in retaliation.⁵¹

Before the invasion was launched US Special Operations Command SOUTH (SOC SOUTH) moved personnel and the headquarters unit of 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) to Albrook, with helicopters and AC-130 Hercules gunships. This was referred to as Task Force Black.⁵²

Just prior to H-Hour, units were flown from Albrook to the Pacora Bridge, some 9½ miles (15 km) north of Tocumén Airport, to block a potential counterattack by the Panama Defense

⁵⁰ https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/Just_Cause.pdf

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1111813.pdf>

Forces. The resulting brief battle is said to have been the only Panamanian operation that could have developed into a significant threat to the invading US troops.⁵³

The former Albrook Field is now Albrook Marcos A Gelabert International Airport⁵⁴ having taken over from the other city airport at Punta Paitilla in 1999.⁵⁵ While what remained of the airbase facilities became the Marcos A Gelabert International Airport, other facilities, such as buildings, residences, and green areas, were used as headquarters of state offices, companies, other organisations, private residences and areas available for the construction of new buildings, both commercial and residential.⁵⁶ Civilian air operations began from 1 January 1999, and continue today, still using the original single runway. Despite the airport's name, its commercial airline operations at present appear to be wholly domestic in nature, with Tocumen, Howard (now Panama Pacifico International Airport) and Rio Hato airports handling international flights.

The commercial airport has a refurbished operations/control tower and a passenger terminal (near Building 446, the hangar that previously housed the former Air Force Post Office). A number of shops, markets and government agencies (including the Panamanian Red Cross, and the International Maritime University of Panama) operate out of some of the old buildings and hangars, and most of the officers' quarters were now private homes. The Civil Aviation Authority (*Autoridad de Aeronáutica Civil*) has its headquarters in Building 805.⁵⁷

Unlike many other places in the former Canal Zone which had the names given to them by the US authorities and forces replaced by their originals or a Spanish version, the Albrook area retained the name used by the US forces – even going to apply to the nearby bus and metro station and the huge Albrook Mall.

⁵³ Air Power History (Vol.55, No 4, Winter 2008).

⁵⁴ Named in honour of Panamanian aviator Marcos A Gelabert, whose contributions to Panamanian aviation included founding Panama's first airline and first school for training pilots.

⁵⁵ Punta Paitilla is now covered with luxury residences and hotels.

⁵⁶ *Old North American military bunkers located in the corners of the Panama Canal for tourist purposes* by Eva Lisary González Pinilla (Universidad de Panamá, Departamento de Historia, Panamá): <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1437-106X>

⁵⁷ https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Albrook_Air_Force_Station

THE ALBROOK MASSACRE

What became known as the “Albrook Massacre” happened in October 1989 under the rule of General Manuel Noriega, when a group of officers led by a Major Moisés Giroldi planned a coup against the dictator. Expecting support from the US, which never came, and promised they would suffer no harm, Noriega was able to defeat the rebels (despite being in their custody) by calling up reinforcements and having them arrested.

The coup attempt came at a time when civil protests against the regime were continuing, and tensions with the US forces that remained in the Canal Zone were heightened.

Giroldi had attempted to warn the US of his plans, including telling two CIA agents a couple of days before acting. The CIA agents are said to have stipulated that Noriega must stay alive, or the US could not offer any support. Giroldi asked for asylum for his family, and that US troops block roads to prevent reinforcements reaching Noriega.

In fact, the leader of the attempted coup had been promoted to major by Noriega only just over a year earlier, having put down an earlier attempt to depose Noriega in March 1988. He was also seen as a friend of Noriega, who was godfather to Giroldi’s son.

On the morning of 3 October 1989, Noriega and members of the General Staff were detained at the *La Comandancia*, the Panama Defense Forces headquarters. However, it seems that Noriega was not handcuffed or locked up, and was able to make several phone calls to alert those loyal to him of what had happened.

It is said that US Army helicopters and a C-130 (presumably a gunship version) remained in the air nearby, but US forces took no further action. The commanding general at Fort Clayton told the insurgents that he could not help unless Noriega was brought to Clayton, which the rebels refused to do.

Noriega was offered the chance to retire, and not go into exile. A proclamation was broadcast by the plotters, saying that the intention was to remove Noriega and return the country to democracy. However, not soon after, loyal forces arrived to put down the coup.

After several hours of localised fighting, and negotiations, and with Giroldi realising that the US was not going to intervene, he and the other coup leaders surrendered themselves to Noriega at around 1 pm – the coup having only lasted little more than the morning.

Having surrendered on the promise of fair treatment, Noriega in fact had them shot. Of the 11 leaders, all but Giroldi were executed in a hangar at Albrook (although this was not confirmed until after the US invasion). Giroldi was also shot, but elsewhere, after being interrogated and tortured.

It is said that this incident was one of the factors in the decision to mount the Operation *Just Cause* invasion in December 1989.⁵⁸

In 2016, a memorial was unveiled at Albrook Metro station commemorating the murdered plotters.⁵⁹

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

9 February 2024



President Roosevelt at Albrook Field, with B-18 bombers in 1940

⁵⁸ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/golpe-de-estado-moises-giroldi-masacre-albrook/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/honor-caidos-albrook-monolito-LDLE92418>