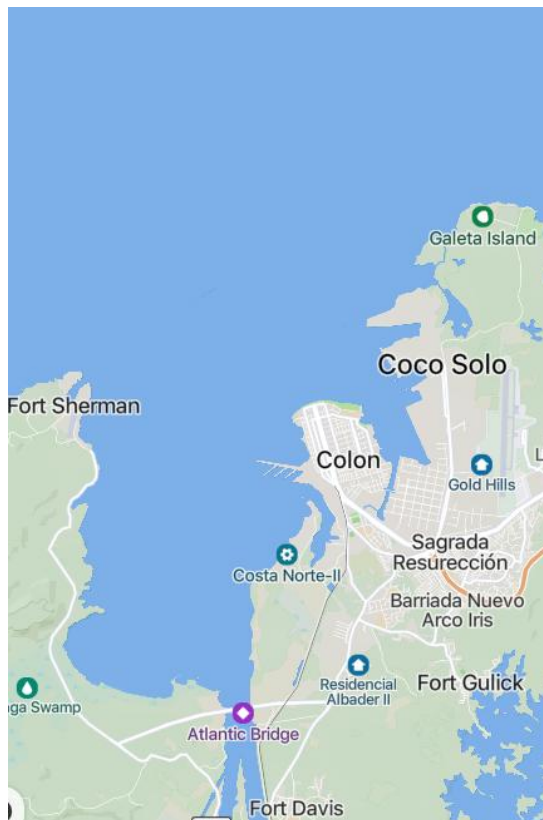


PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2

COCO SOLO

The US Army was responsible for the defence of the Canal Zone, despite it essentially existing for the operation of the waterway, and its primary strategic importance in national defence terms being to permit the US Navy to easily and more rapidly transit from the Pacific to the Atlantic, or *vice versa*. The Army even controlled the sea mines used as part of the defence of the harbours and Canal entrances, and the Panama Canal authorities ran the docks and shipyards. The only sizeable US Navy presence in the Canal Zone was the base at Coco Solo, at the Atlantic end of the Canal.¹



An important naval installation, it dated from 1917 and comprised both a Naval Air Station (NAS) and a submarine base. It was located on the east side of Manzanillo Bay, near Colón, and the Army base at Fort Randolph. It is now home to two huge container terminals.

¹ For more on the role of the Navy in Panama during the war, see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-the-role-of-the-navy/>

Over the years, the Navy's presence at the site would consist of –

- A Naval Air Station (NAS Upham or NAS Coco Solo Seaplane Base)
- A submarine base
- A US Marine barracks
- The Coco Solo Ammunition Depot
- Coco Solo Naval Hospital (on 41 acres, 16.6 hectares, some 3 miles or 4.8 km from the air station)
- The Coco Solo Annex on Galeta Island

The first naval installation autonomous from the Panama Canal Company, and for the exclusive use of the US Navy, was Balboa Naval Radio Station, which was established in 1914. However, the expansion of Navy facilities in the Canal Zone was somewhat slower than that of the Army and, prior to 1939, Navy buildings on the Atlantic side were limited to the naval air station² and submarine base at Coco Solo, a radio station at Gatun and a smaller base at Cristobal. On the Pacific side, the headquarters of the 15th Naval District (which was the Navy command in the Canal Zone) was established at Balboa (the “capital” of the Canal Zone), and there was an ammunition depot on the west bank of the Canal, and a radio station at Summit. A half dozen fuel tanks at either end of the Canal, plus a few other, minor installations had also been built.³

However, first troops to arrive in the isthmus, in 1903 and long before the construction of permanent military installations, had been a detachment of US Marines. These had kept the Panama Railroad open during while Panama sought independence. Two companies of Marines had been stationed in the Canal construction town of Empire. By January 1904, two further battalions had arrived, and the Marines were consolidated at a location designated Camp Elliott, at the construction town of Bas Obispo. The Marines stationed there provided security for the construction effort for the next 10 years, remaining until January 1914, when their role was reassigned to the

² On 1 July 1931, NAS Coco Solo was redesignated Fleet Air Base (FAB) Coco Solo. The redesignation of both the squadron and its home port indicated a change in mission from coastal defence to fleet aircraft, and its flying-boats took part in operations with the fleet in the Caribbean.

³ *Historic Resources Assessments: Department of Defense Activities 1993* (Panama Canal Treaty Implementation Plan Agency, Washington DC, 1995)

Army. In 1923, Marines returned to Panama as a continual presence with the establishment of the Marine Barracks at Coco Solo.⁴

At the time that the Canal was being completed, on the eve of World War 1, submarines were considered primarily as a coastal defence force, and so, in 1913, five C-Boats⁵ (*Octopus*, *Stingray*, *Tarpon*, *Bonita*, and *Snapper*)⁶ were deployed there, with their accompanying tenders, arriving on 22 December 1913. At the time, the 700-mile (1,100 km) voyage to Panama was the longest cruise made by US submarines under their own power.⁷

These five submarines mounted patrols, supported by the four tenders, with the submarine base at Coco Solo becoming operational in 1918.⁸ The submarines remained based in the Canal Zone until decommissioned in 1919, at which time construction of the Submarine Base had begun.⁹

⁴ *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): <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA388262.pdf>

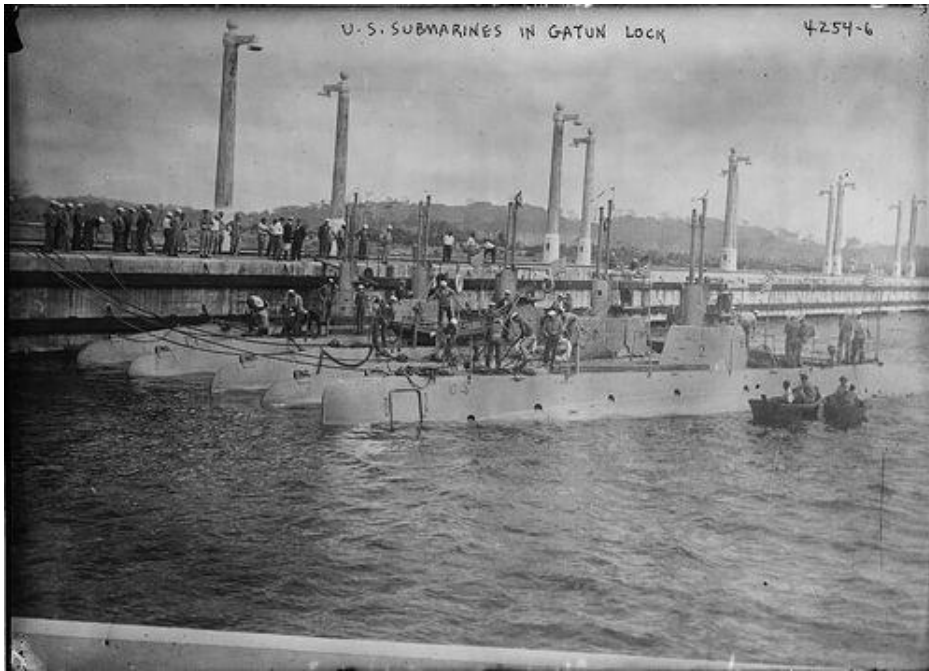
⁵ Submarines are always “boats”, regardless of their size. Only five C-class were built, between 1906 and 1909, the first solely designed by the Electric Boat Company, and remained in service until 1919, then still in the Canal Zone.

⁶ <https://pigboats.com/index.php?title=C-class>

⁷ <https://www.tendertale.com/ttd/ttd4/ttd4.html>

⁸ <https://www.tendertale.com/ttd/ttd4/ttd4.html>

⁹ https://members.tripod.com/william_h_ormsbee/cocosolo_naval_base_hist_p01.htm



The five C-class boats in Gatun Lock

On 15 August 1939, the *Panama American* carried a report about the vessels' arrival – *In December, 1913, the monitor Tallahassee, the old sloop of war Severn in tow of the tug Potomac, and five submarines, the C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4 and C-5 stood into Limon Bay and tied up at the Cristobal piers. This force, under the command of Lt. W. L. Friedell, USN, constituted the first naval defense of the yet unopened Panama Canal.*¹⁰

The submarines were later joined by seaplanes. The naval aviation facility would also be named Naval Air Station Upham by the US Navy as, apparently, the Navy did not feel that the name “One Coconut” was appropriate for one of their bases.

What would become the important US Army airfield at France Field was established close to Coco Solo, originally called Coco Walk (after the swamp on which it was built) or, more colloquially, “Camp Misery”. This site had hosted the first US Army Air Service (USAAS)¹¹ unit in Panama, the 7th Aero Squadron, which had been organised there in 1917.¹² During Spring 1918, an emergency appropriation of \$1 million from Congress

¹⁰ <https://www.tendertale.com/ttd/ttd4/ttd4.html>

¹¹ Originally the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps from 1914, the USAAS would become the US Army Air Corps (USAAC) in 1926, and the US Army Air Force (USAAF) in 1941. In 1947, the US Air Force was separated from the Army (although the Army retained aviation units and aircraft) as a distinct service.

¹² In 1914, although war had broken out in Europe, little progress had been made toward expanding the Army's infant air arm. The US Congress had created an Aviation Section as part of the Signal Corps by an

funded the construction of a landing ground at Coco Walk, which was completed by May 1918. The airfield was later named France Field, in honour of the first Army pilot killed in the Canal Zone, 1st Lieutenant Howard J France, who crashed in a seaplane in Gatun Lake in April 1918.¹³

The airfield at Coco Solo Station was established in July 1917 and commissioned as Naval Air Station Coco Solo on 6 May 1918, for use in patrol operations by seaplanes and lighter-than-air (LTA - airship or blimp) aircraft. The Coco Solo Naval Reservation was officially established by Executive Order on 9 April 1920. The air station formed the largest part of the base and occupied 185 acres of hard land.

Postwar plans to expand the naval defences of the Canal Zone were hampered by the restrictions imposed by the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty and, although the Canal remained vital to US naval policy, the reduction in spending that followed ratification of the Treaty prevented the Navy from turning facilities at Balboa, at the Pacific end of the Canal, into a major naval base.¹⁴



Coco Solo with docked submarines in 1923

Act approved on 18 July 1914, but provided little money for the new service. The Signal Corps naturally used the meagre resources to develop aviation as a means of communication, observation, and reconnaissance, rather than as an instrument for combat. The 2nd Aero Squadron was organised in 1915 and sent to the Philippines, with five more squadrons organised in 1916-17, with the 7th Aero Squadron formed in February 1917 for duty in the Canal Zone: *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* edited by Maurer Maurer (Office of Air Force History Washington DC, 1983):

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

¹³ <https://docplayer.net/53932747-Panama-s-worst-air-disaster.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2013/july/fleets-visit-panama>

Indeed, the Coco Solo site was placed in reserve in 1922.

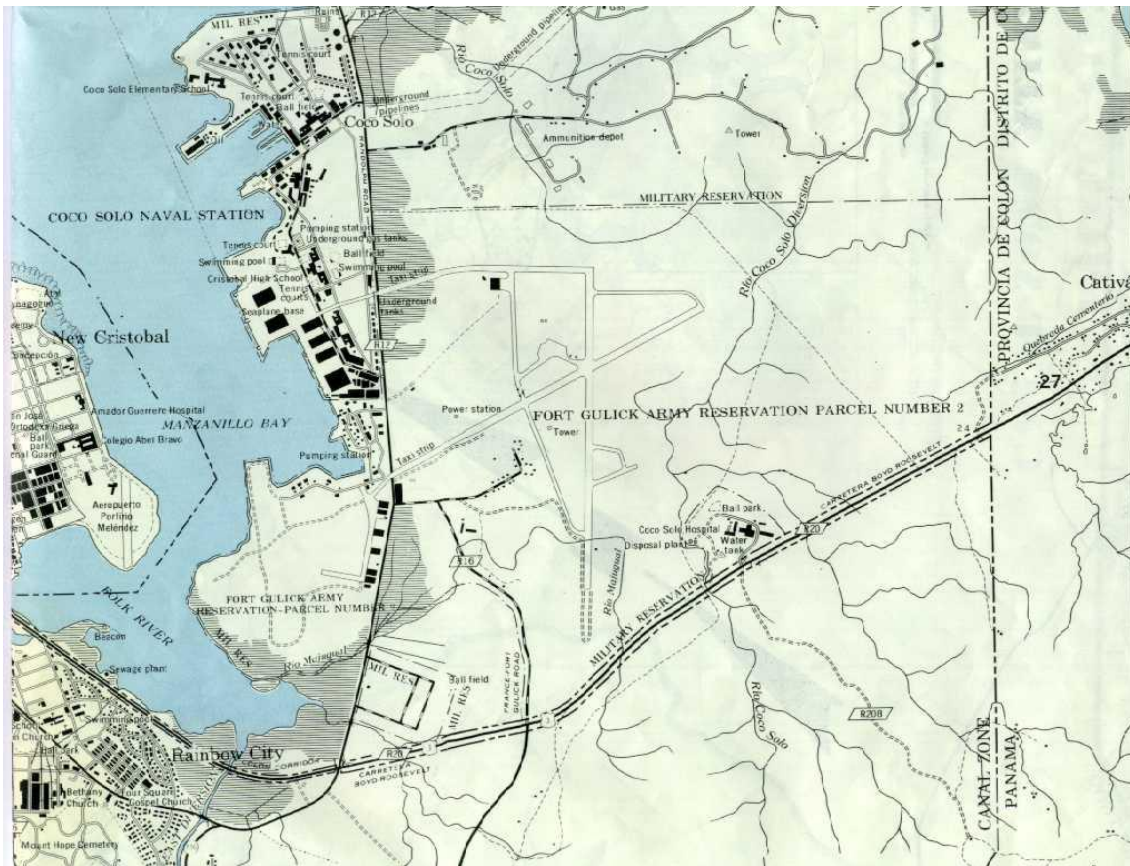
On 1 July 1931, NAS Coco Solo was reactivated and redesignated Fleet Air Base (FAB) Coco Solo. The redesignation of both the squadron and its home port indicated a change in mission from coastal defence to fleet aircraft, and its flying-boats took part in operations with the fleet in the Caribbean.

In 1935, Fleet Air Base Coco Solo was home to three patrol squadrons – VP-2F with 12 Martin PM-2 biplane patrol flying-boats; VP-3F with 12 Douglas P2D-1 biplane flying-boats, and VP-5F with 11 Consolidated P2Y-1 Ranger sesquiplane flying-boats. It also had a Utility Unit with two Boeing F4B-3 biplane fighters, a Chance Vought O2U-1 observation biplane, and one each of the RD-2 and RD-3 variants of the Douglas Dolphin twin-engine monoplane flying-boats.

The later US Senator John McCain, who died in 2018, a Republican and former Vietnam POW who ran unsuccessfully against Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential election,¹⁵ was born in 1936 at a small Navy hospital at Coco Solo Naval Air Station, his father being a naval officer, and his grandfather was commander at Coco Solo.¹⁶

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-McCain>

¹⁶ <https://navy.togetherweserved.com/usn/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApp>



The facilities at Coco Solo in 1939 included a small landing field, three aeroplane hangars and a hangar for a blimp,¹⁷ barracks, officers' quarters, three seaplane ramps,¹⁸ and a few miscellaneous buildings. A one mile (1.6 km) taxi strip connected the air station to the US Army Air Corps airfield France Field.¹⁹ Following the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, the base's fleet of Consolidated PBY Catalina flying-boats was reinforced, with 28 more from three other squadrons.²⁰

In October 1939 –

¹⁷ A non-rigid airship used for naval patrols (see the Chapter on advance bases for a little more on the use of such blimps).

¹⁸ The terms "flying boat" and "seaplane" are often used (as here) as if interchangeable. Seaplane is a more generic term that covers both flying boats (which have a boat hull, with or without floats) and floatplanes, which use floats to land and take off from water. An amphibian or amphibious flying boat also features a wheeled landing gear. Pure flying boats employed a wheeled trolley for launching and recovery from land. The famous PBY Catalina, for example, was originally a pure flying boat, while later versions were amphibians.

¹⁹ *VPNAVY! USN, USMC, USCG and NATS Patrol Aircraft Lost or Damaged During World War II* by Douglas E. Campbell (Syneca Research Group Inc, 2018)

²⁰ *Ibid.*

"The Base had several piers in between a south wall and a north wall. The [submarine] squadron consisted of six old S-type submarines, the [USS] Mallard, and the base facilities with some small motorboats. Just a little ways up from the south wall where the Mallard normally tied up was a large building which housed the Gym. This was just inside the base where the submarine base and the Fleet Air Base joined together. There was no fence between them and the flight field with runways came down to the submarine base at this point. The buildings for the air base were at the other end of the runways.

The Mallard operated with the submarines, sometimes acting as a target ship and also retrieving practice torpedoes that the submarines fired at her but never forgetting the primary purpose of a submarine rescue and salvage ship was just that. Our biggest gang aboard was the divers. Sometimes we would go outside of the breakwater into the Atlantic/Caribbean and it was all ways rough out there but we could go out in the morning and come back in the afternoon, just for one days' operation. We preferred it when we would transit the Canal and operate in the Pacific near the Perlas Islands where it was usually calm. I remember at least once, on the Pacific side, we laid a 4-point moor over one of our submarines that was laying on the bottom in about 100 feet of water and sent divers down to attach the cables from the escape bell, then sent the bell down and brought up a couple of the crew members as part of the training. When we operated on the Pacific side it was usually for at least 4 or 5 days, we would transit the Canal to the Pacific on Monday and return on Thursday or Friday".²¹

Further development of the station began in August 1940, with the approved plan contemplating expansion sufficient to serve seven patrol squadrons of flying-boats (as proposed by the Hepburn Board recommendations for naval defences expansion and under two fixed-fee contracts awarded in June and July).²² The original site, though

²¹ George O Jones, USN (Retired): <http://www.geocities.ws/goliverjones/page10.htm>

²² The work also involved administrative offices for the 15th Naval District (which Coco Solo came under) at Balboa. The Hepburn Board was established in 1938 and reviewed US national defence structure during the deteriorating international situation. The "Hepburn Board Report" was the basis for the massive shore establishment expansion that took place prior to World War 2. The Report was published

limited, was considered the most advantageous that could be found in the Canal Zone; and therefore, expansion at Coco Solo was preferred rather than construction of an additional base in another locality.²³

There was also a doubling in size of the naval magazine at Coco Solo (which had only been completed in 1937), and a 140-acre (56.6 hectares) Coco Solo Tank Farm.²⁴



US Naval Air Station Coco Solo 1937²⁵

The greatest single deficiency of the station was the lack of sheltered water for aircraft to make a full-load take-off immediately adjacent to the base. There

was a wide gap of open water between the eastern breakwater and Margarita Point, through which heavy ocean swells entered Manzanillo Bay, frequently making seaplane operations hazardous. This shortcoming was addressed first. This involved closing the 3,800-foot (1,158 metres) gap in the Margarita breakwater, using coral and rock, armoured with pre-cast concrete blocks. It was built entirely from a temporary timber trestle, without the use of floating equipment other than the hydraulic dredge used for placing the foundation and core. The dredging involved also produced coral fill for the construction of new runways at the Army's nearby France Field.²⁶

in December 1938. However, the scope of the contracts awarded was enlarged considerably during the immediate pre-Pearl Harbor period, as defence plans for the Canal were broadened and new installations authorised; and by the time of the declaration of war, several entirely new activities were well underway, with work concentrated in the Coco Solo area and on a new tract of land on the west bank of the Canal, directly across from Balboa.

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

²³ The Navy also used Army facilities for the operation of its landplanes in the Coco Solo area

²⁴ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²⁵ <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-113000/NH-113055.html>

²⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

In the 1930s, France Field was described as being a “sea of mud” for nine months (March to November, the rainy season) of each year, with a “coral runway” of only 2,700 feet (823 metres), seen as incapable of extension, and considered unsuitable for large or heavily loaded aircraft.

In addition, the station had also lacked sufficient hangars, ramps, parking aprons, housing, storage, and repair facilities.



PBY-1 Catalina from Patrol Squadron 3 (VP-3) in flight. VP-3 was one of several squadrons stationed at NAS Coco Solo

At the air station itself, the work from 1940 saw three large steel hangars, four seaplane ramps, 700,000 square feet (65,032 square metres) of concrete parking area, engine test stands, and a large aircraft assembly and repair shop added to the operating area fronting on Manzanillo Bay. To make expansion possible, 30 acres (12.1 hectares) of beach was reclaimed, with a steel sheet-pile sea wall, 2,100-feet (640 metres) long, to enclose two edges of this reclaimed area, and filled with coral dredged from the bay.²⁷ Taking the form of wide mole pier enclosed with steel sheet-piling, this was built as an extension to the original north quay wall.

Other work included new barracks, a bombproof command centre, an operations building, and a large administration building to house the administrative offices of both the air station and the adjoining submarine base. The area was paved with concrete, equipped with water, oil, and air lines, a railway spur, a large transit shed, several storehouses and shop buildings. Also added were several large warehouses.²⁸

A net depot, including a large storage building, was built along the quay, and the basin dredged to a depth of 32 feet (9.7 metres). There was an industrial area, where extensions were made to the torpedo shop, ship fitters' shop, and battery shops. A large storehouse and a three-story structure to house the machine and optical shops were erected.

²⁷ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²⁸ *Ibid.*

This part of the expanded base would later be developed as the main housing area for the station, and a chapel and library, theatre, tennis courts, and a recreation building for enlisted men and officers were also located in the area.



Coco Solo in 1941

In 1941, increased Navy housing in the Canal Zone was completed, with two developments with a total of 1,400 units for the families of

married enlisted personnel and civilian employees of the 15th Naval District, with most of the housing at Coco Solo – the largest development being called Coco Solito.

At Coco Solito (literally “little coconut”) there was a “low-cost housing” development of 824 units on 33 acres (13.3 hectares) of land,²⁹ a mile (1.6 km) south of the air station, about four (6.4 km) miles from the new, larger Coco Solo Hospital which was constructed in the Summer of 1941.³⁰ The land for the hospital had been transferred from the civil part of the Canal Zone to the Naval part after President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8981 on 17 December 1941.³¹

²⁹ Laid out on a grid pattern, it contained 91 12-unit, one eight-unit, and one four-unit apartment buildings, three stories high, built of concrete, with galvanised-iron roofing and with the ground floors available for garages and laundries.

³⁰ In 1954, it was transferred to the Canal Zone authorities:

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-W79-6974c7887ccf00b36992981b3cfc87de/pdf/GOVPUB-W79-6974c7887ccf00b36992981b3cfc87de.pdf>

³¹ <https://navy.togetherweserved.com/usn/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApp>
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-8981-navy-hospital-area-coco-solo-canal-zone>



Coco Solo in 1944

On 20 February 1942, the US Navy took over from the Army the Transit Guard functions aboard ships passing through the Canal, using Marines from the Rodman or Coco Solo.³² The Navy employed five or six

officers and around 350 marines, with 25 to 30 sailors, to form the detachments employed.

US Army Air Force (USAAF) aircraft would also use the air station, and during the latter part of the war a squadron of USAAF P-38 Lightning fighters was based there.

At the time of Pearl Harbor, there were three “V Boat” submarines³³ stationed at the base - USS *Barracuda*, USS *Bass* and USS *Bonita* (the former V-1, V-2 and V-3)³⁴.

As the three V boats were found to have a poor operational performance, with a maximum surface speed less than designed (18.7 knots, not the intended 21 knots), and a speed submerged less than planned. Renamed as the USS *Barracuda*, USS *Bass* and USS *Bonita* in 1931, they were decommissioned in 1937, but then brought back into service in September 1940, arriving at Coco Solo just before the Pearl Harbor attack. They then left Coco Solo in 1942.³⁵ Before they left, 26 crew were killed in a fire aboard the *Bass* on 17 August 1942.³⁶

³² Rodman was the smaller Navy base at the Pacific entrance to the Canal.

³³ Submarines are always “boats”, regardless of their size.

³⁴ They had been launched in 1924-25, and were decommissioned in 1937, only to be recommissioned because of the threat of war in 1940 and assigned to Coco Solo. They were used to make (uneventful) war patrols from there.

³⁵ USS *Barracuda* and USS *Bonita* were scrapped after the war, and USS *Bass* was scuttled to become a sonar target.

³⁶ Like the *Bass*, her sister, *Barracuda*, had similarly suffered a fire in its battery compartment, and urgent corrective measures were taken on all the sisters.

The term V-boat referred to nine fleet submarines built for the US Navy 1921-34, with the three based at Coco Solo being large, long-range types (the other six submarines were of varying types and/or for differing roles, and only the first three served as the type of fleet submarine the original Navy requirement had specified). These three, V-1 to V-3, were funded in Fiscal Year 1919 and laid down that year at the Portsmouth Naval Yard, and commissioned in 1924-26. They displaced 2,119 tons surfaced and 2,506 tons submerged, were 342 feet (104 meters) long. Like most submarines of the period, they had diesel and battery-powered engines. They were armed with 6 x 21-inch torpedo tubes (four forward, two aft) and 12 torpedoes, and a 3-inch (76mm) deck gun.³⁷ They were amongst the first US submarines to feature aft torpedo tubes. However, the boats were found to have a poor operational performance,

Having achieved no combat success, the V-class submarines were later withdrawn for unsuccessful modification as cargo vessels (though they were to end up being used in training) and, later in 1942, the smaller S-boat submarines then based in Coco Solo were transferred to Australia or Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians, and the submarine base was disestablished in 1944.³⁸

One of the submarines, S-26, which had only arrived in Coco Solo on 19 December 1941, was lost a little over a month later, after being rammed by one of its escorts as it headed out on patrol in the Pacific.³⁹

³⁷ Originally fitted with a 5-inch deck gun, these were replaced in 1928 in an attempt to cure handling problems and save weight.

³⁸ During the war, submarine S-26 was lost in the Gulf of Panama in January 1942 (as explained next); and USS *Dorado* was lost with all hands when in transit to Panama from New London, Connecticut in October 1943. For more, see: https://www.public.navy.mil/subfor/underseawarfaremagazine/Issues/Archives/issue_06/silent_victory.html

³⁹ For more on the sinking, see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/07/25/panama-in-world-war-2-the-loss-of-the-submarine-s-26/>



Soviet submarine L-15 at Coco Solo in 1942

The S-Class submarines (aka as “Sugar” boats) made up the bulk of the interwar US Navy submarine force, and were the first US submarines not considered to be purely a harbour or coastal defence weapon. Designed during World War 1, they were completed postwar, with a total of 51 commissioned 1920-25. By the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, the earliest example was 16 years old, but they were pressed into service, with 37 in use. 13 would still be in active use at the end of the war, with one remaining in commission until June 1946. They were 219 feet (66.8 meters) long with a surface displacement of 854 tons. They had a maximum range of 5,000 miles (8,046 km), with a complement of 38-42 men. They were armed with 4 x 21-inch bow torpedo tubes with 12 torpedoes, and a 4-inch (102 mm) deck gun.⁴⁰

A 2017 article⁴¹ put forward the observation that –

As with most US submarine operations in the Atlantic during the Second World War, those off the Panama Canal have been ignored by historians. This is not difficult to understand given that the main battles fought by submariners in the Canal Zone were against the deficiencies of their boats rather than the enemy. Despite the undoubted importance of the Canal to the war effort, the heavy demands for US submarines elsewhere meant that those boats assigned to Coco Solo tended to be the most decrepit. While submarine patrols off the Panama Canal may have contributed to a greater sense of security, they contributed little tangible against the enemy. Nevertheless, these patrols helped to train significant numbers of men for the burgeoning submarine service and laid the

⁴⁰ Interestingly, the shorter torpedo tubes of the S Class meant they could not use the problematical Mark 14 torpedo used by newer boats, but the more reliable, World War 1-vintage Mark 10.

⁴¹ *Coco Solo Submarines: Protecting the Panama Canal, 1941–1942* by Michael Sturma (The Journal of Military History, October 2017).

*groundwork for the later success of some submarine commanders. By highlighting some of the shortcomings of air patrols off the Canal, they possibly contributed to more effective air defences as well.*⁴²

Despite the loss of life among the submarine force, in the sinking of S-26 and other accidents, and the continual, largely uneventful patrols, it is said that morale among crews remained high. According to one Marine assigned to guard the submarine base before the war, it was *“the most beautiful spot on the Isthmus of Panama”*. In the mid-1930s, the recreational facilities at the base had included two swimming pools; tennis, handball, and basketball courts; and a golf course, augmented by 1939 by a fenced inlet and beach on the ocean, as well as a small zoo.

The submarines based in the Canal Zone also served an important role in training for combat elsewhere, with a high turnover in crews. In addition, as with the PT Boat crews, many submarine crews underwent a brief but rigorous period of exercises at the Canal Zone before moving on into the Pacific theatre.



*Postwar, the PBM Mariner patrol flying-boat, used from Coco Solo during the war, saw continued use there, and this photograph is of a PBM-5 off Panama in 1954.*⁴³

Operations at Coco Solo ceased on 15 February 1950, and it was disestablished on 1 July 1950, with Coco Solo Naval Base finally deactivated in 1957, and becoming

the Coco Solo Annex to US Naval Station Rodman.⁴⁴ However, in 1964, jurisdiction over nearby France Field was transferred to the Coco Solo Naval Reservation, only to be returned back to the Army by 1970.⁴⁵

⁴² <https://www.smh-hq.org/jmh/jmhvols/814.html>

⁴³ Produced from 1944, this was an improved PBM-3 with uprated engines.

⁴⁴ <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/57>

⁴⁵ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/an%20american%20legacy4.pdf.pdf>

By the 1960s the base was no longer used for Navy vessels, but it remained a housing area for civilian employees of the Canal until the 1990s. A new company/government town was established, with removals from the New Cristobal area from the mid-1950s. Plans in the late 1950s were for the new town to be one of the principal Canal Zone towns, with recreational facilities etc, with transfers from early 1958.⁴⁶

Until the mid-1990s, the town site of Coco Solo was used by the civilian employees of the Panama Canal as a residential area, although where the submarine base had been was handed over to Panama in 1979 (together with four piers, a wharf and some buildings in the former Naval Air Station) the remaining housing being retained by the Panama Canal Commission (which had taken over from the former US Government Panama Canal Company in administering the Canal). The Coco Solo Elementary school remained controlled by the US Army until its transfer to Panama in 1990, and the health clinic complex on 31 May 1992. The Cristobal Junior-Senior High School was the last facility at Coco Solo transferred to Panama, this being on 1 September 1995.⁴⁷

Otherwise, the last part of the larger Coco Solo complex was turned over to the Panamanian Government in 1982. The last of the families housed there moved out in 1984, and the remaining Panama Canal Commission housing was transferred.

The US Army did lease back a portion of the housing stock for “transfer of function” housing for former employees of the Canal Zone Government Medical bureau who worked at the Coco Solo health clinic, and who had been transferred to the Army. It provided temporary housing to many Panamanian families in the 1990s, after they were displaced by a fire. However, ownership of the land was transferred to Panama along with the Canal in 1999.

⁴⁶ *Panama Canal Townsites* (Panama Canal Museum, 2011)

<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032191/00002/pdf>

Coco Solo was also home to the Atlantic Side High School and Cristobal Junior and Senior High, which in the late 1970s was also the high school for Panamanians from Rainbow City. Also located in Coco Solo was the local commissary where Zonians would purchase food and clothing.

⁴⁷ https://members.tripod.com/william_h_ormsbee/cocosolo_naval_base_hist_p01.htm

In 2013, half of the families living there were moved to a new community when the land was sold, with the rest to be located during the rest of the decade.⁴⁸



Housing facilities at Coco Solo in 1983, restored to habitable status and used by personnel from NSGA Galeta island (see below)

Coco Solo is now the site of two major container terminals – the Colón Container terminal and Manzanillo International Terminal, while a small area that at one time was 16 residential buildings, houses poor families in buildings which have been ruined and vandalised by years of abandonment.⁴⁹

THE COCO SOLO ANNEX AT GALETA ISLAND

Galeta Island lies on the Atlantic coast, east of the city of Colón and was host to a US naval communications facility from the 1930s. Latterly, from the mid-1960s, it was shared with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), Punta Galeta having been its first marine research laboratory, and the STRI still has a separate facility there.⁵⁰

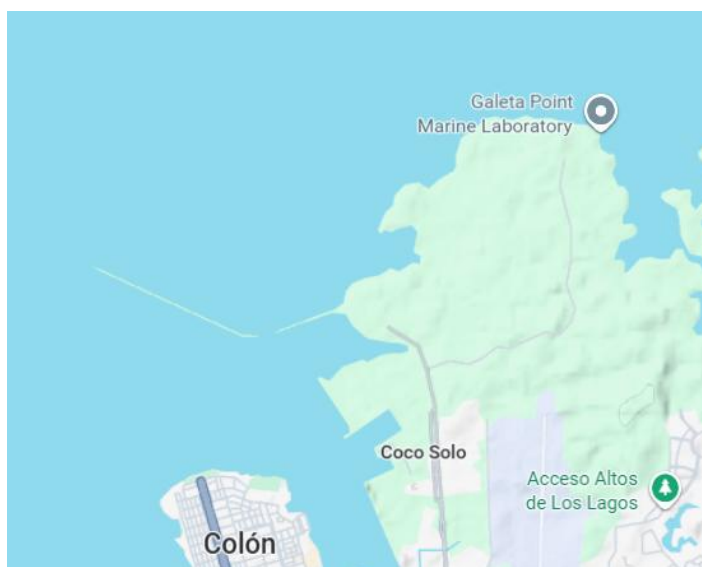
⁴⁸ <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/news/j-term-experiences-unique-story-coco-solo-panama>

⁴⁹ *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>

⁵⁰ <https://galeta-island.com/history/>

The naval site had its origins in the Toro Point Radio Compass Station, established at Toro point, further down the coast and to the west of the Atlantic entrance to the Canal. A collaboration between the US Navy and the Panama Canal Company, its mission was to provide bearings to commercial and naval ships approaching the entrance to the Canal.



In 1952, the Toro Point Radio Compass Station was redesignated Naval Communications Unit (NAVCOMMUNIT) Number 33 and moved to Galeta Point. Despite operations at Coco Solo being run down, so that they were effectively ended by the 1960s, its remaining facilities provided housing and support for Galeta Island personnel and dependents.⁵¹

It became US Naval Radio Station Galeta Island Canal Zone (NAVRADSTA), and in 1958 it was redesignated as US Naval Security Group Activity. In 1962, work began on new operational facilities, around a mile (1.6 km) west of Galeta Point, and this was commissioned in 1965 with a Circular Disposed Antenna Array (CDAA), also known as a Wullenweber antenna. In March 1966, the Naval Security Group Activity (NSGA), Galeta Island, became its own command.⁵²

⁵¹ <https://galeta-island.com/history/>

⁵² *Ibid.*



NSGA Galeta Island's own station newsletter in 1969

What had become the Coco Solo Annex of the US Naval Station Panama Canal was formally transferred to NSGA Galeta Island on 1 July 1968. The Annex had been maintained in a caretaker status by the naval base at Rodman (at the other end of the Canal) after the closing of the Coco Solo Naval Air Station in

1958. Many of the Annex facilities had been used by NSGA Galeta since 1952.



Administration building and barracks in the early 1970s⁵³

By 1973, there were 15 officers, 238 enlisted, and 51 civilians there, and was the largest US Navy facility in the Canal Zone. However, the following year budget cuts led to a reduction in numbers to just 35 personnel. That same year, support for the site from Coco Solo was being provided by the US Army, with that property having once more been transferred from the Navy. Later, most of the personnel at Galeta Island would be billeted at another Army base, Fort Davis.

⁵³ https://www.navycthistory.com/galetaisland_tobin01.html



*Galeta Island in the early 1950s*⁵⁴

When the budgetary cuts were subsequently restored by the 1980s, this also saw the involvement of US army and Marine Corps personnel,⁵⁵ and most of the personnel at Galeta Island would be billeted at Fort Davis.



*NSGA Galeta Island in the 1990s*⁵⁶

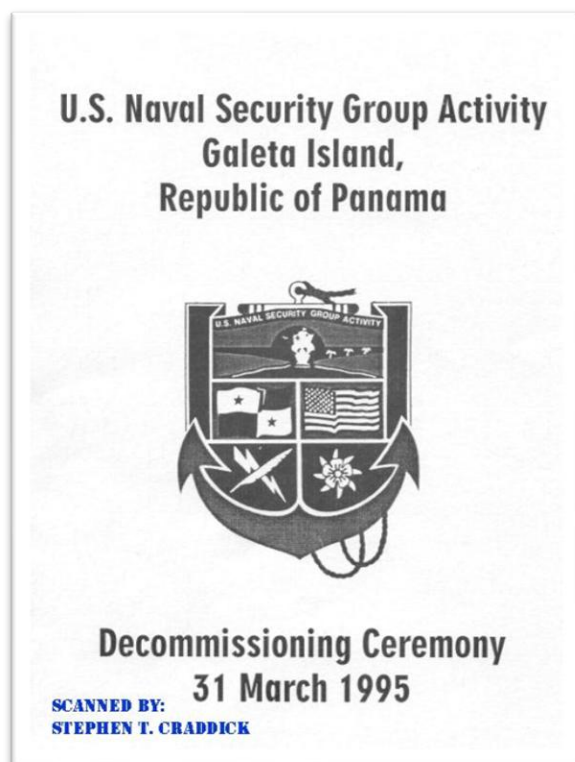
Under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977, Galeta Island was designated a US Department of Defense (DoD) contractor site for the length of the treaty (i.e. until the end of 1999), allowing continuous support until 31 December 1999. The facilities at Coco Solo were turned over to the Government of Panama in September of 1990, and NSGA Galeta Island was officially decommissioned 30 June 1995.⁵⁷ The site was formally turned over to the Panamanian Government in 2002.

⁵⁴ https://www.navycthistory.com/gi_ts_1.html

⁵⁵ Including the 747th Military Intelligence Battalion, Company D Marine Support Battalion, and the Marine Corps Security Force Company Panama, Atlantic Platoon.

⁵⁶ <https://galetaisland.com/history/>

⁵⁷ <https://stationhypo.com/2017/12/30/nsga-galeta-island-republic-of-panama-closed-june-30-1999-all-dod-depart-december-31-1999/>



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Galeta Island today

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

25 August 2025

⁵⁸ https://www.navycthistory.com/galeta_stephen_craddick.html

