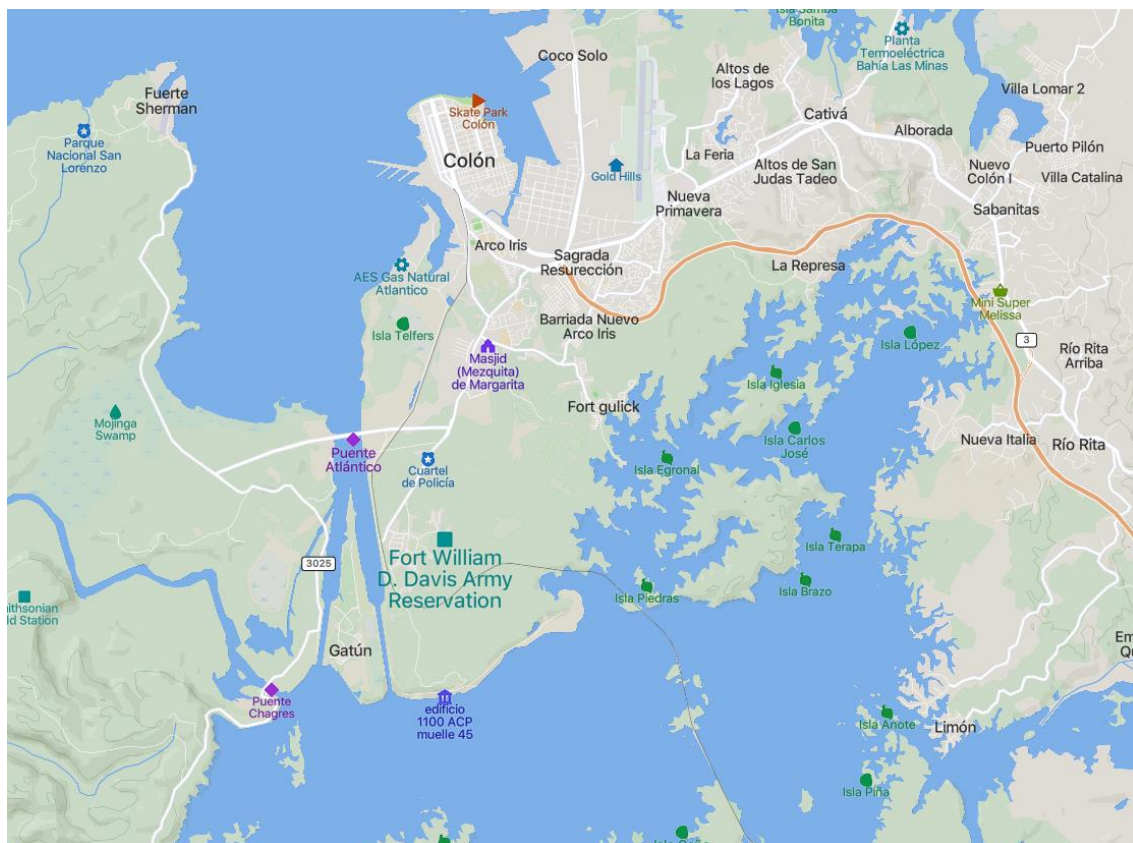


FORTS DAVIS, GULICK AND THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS

Camp Gatun becomes Fort Davis

Forts Davis and Gulick were two associated US Army posts towards the Atlantic end of the Panama Canal. Though Fort Davis was the original, and larger, site it was probably Fort Gulick that became better known, despite only being established during World War 2. The reason for its fame, or infamy, had more to do with the training facility it hosted, than the role and operation of the Fort as a whole.



Originally called Camp Gatun, Fort Davis (or, more properly, Fort William B Davis) began as an infantry post on Lake Gatun, protecting the Gatun Locks and associated power plant at the Atlantic end of the Canal, being roughly the equivalent of Fort Clayton at the Pacific end, which protected the Miraflores and Pedro Miguel locks.¹ It was officially established as Fort Davis in December 1919.²

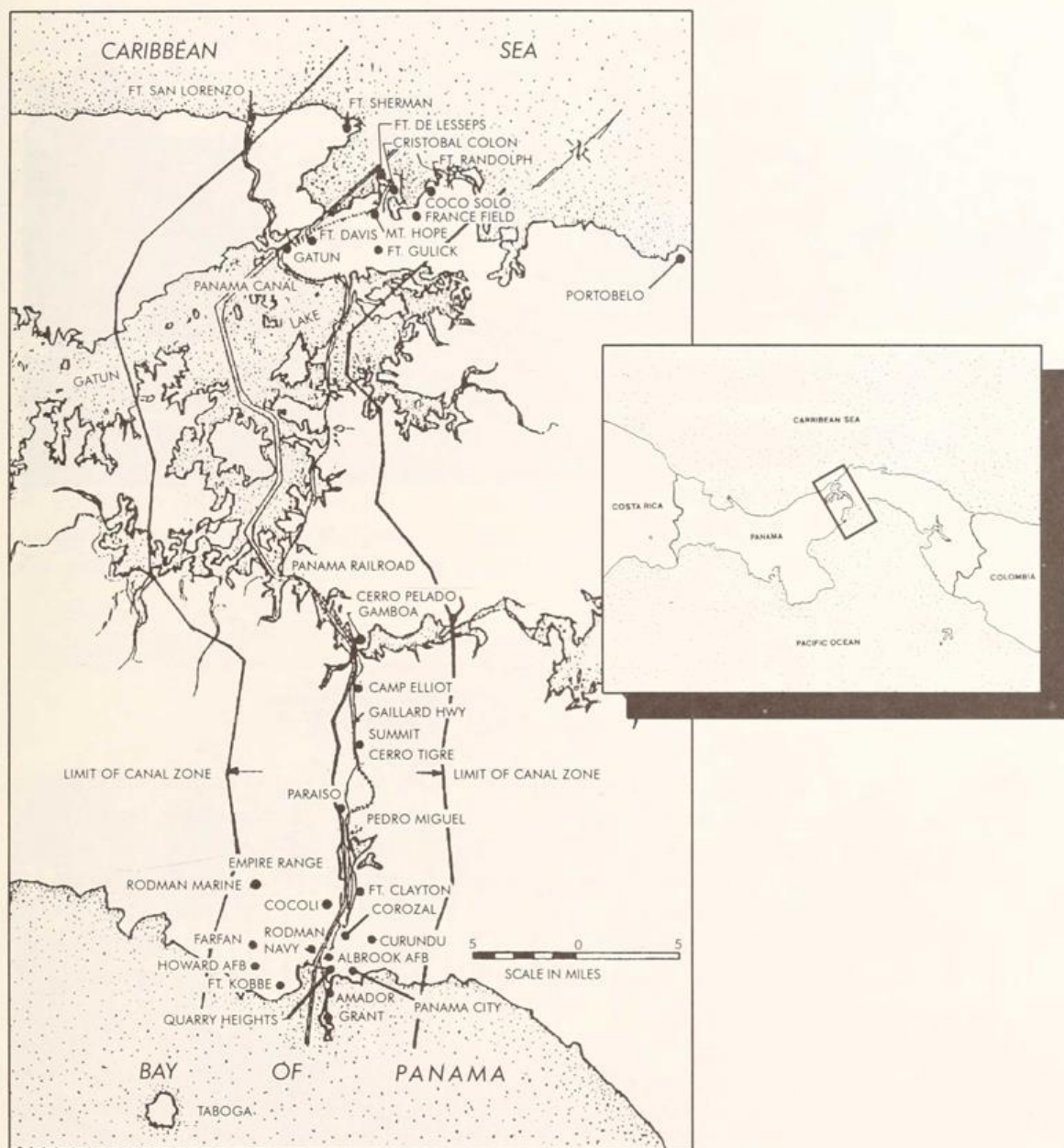
¹ See <https://raytodd.blog/2024/09/13/panama-in-world-war-2-and-after-fort-clayton-from-fort-to-city-of-knowledge/>

² Being named for Colonel William D Davis of the 361st Infantry Regiment, killed in action in France in 1918. He had served in Panama before the US entry into the war.



Camp Gatun

Map of the Panama Canal Zone



Fort Davis, located near the Canal, 6 miles inland from the city of Colon Republica de Panama, and the port of Cristobal, C. Z., is one of the most attractive posts in the Panama Canal Department. It is garrisoned by the 14th U.S. Infantry, 15th Pack Train, 38th Motor Transport Co., 19th Motor Repair Sec., and Detachments of Q. M. C., Medical Dept., Signal Corps., and Ordnance Dept., - 72 Officers, 2 Warrant Officers, and 1859 enlisted men,



Col. Campbell B. Hodges
Commanding Officer



It served as the General Headquarters of the 14th Infantry Regiment 1920-56, as the General Depot of the Atlantic Sector of the Canal defences 1939-46, as headquarters of the Canal Zone's Security Command and the Mobile Force 1941-46.³ In 1939, its facilities were expanded and improved, as part of the general expansion of Canal defences, and to cope with the increased numbers of personnel stationed there,⁴ with further improvements and construction undertaken during the war.⁵



14th Infantry Colour Guard
at the Main Gate to Fort
Davis

³ http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/bases_summ_p04.htm

⁴ <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/55>

⁵ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D-9c7ec1da44988da2a99cf78b969dc6ab/pdf/GOVPUB-D-9c7ec1da44988da2a99cf78b969dc6ab.pdf>

The initial construction programme begun in 1920 made provision were made for quarters and barracks for a single regiment of infantry, with three concrete battalion barracks constructed during 1917, joined by concrete company and detachment barracks and wooden barracks. The further wartime construction period from 1940 saw additional barracks constructed – and it was during this period that Fort Gulick was built.



Typical Army housing at Fort Davis



During several decades of use it also provided the Army with a training area for jungle warfare courses and special forces training and, by 1995, it comprised 4,075 acres (1,649 hectares) and the entire complex included 427 buildings.



The pool at Fort Davis in 1943

Until World War 2, Fort Davis was also home to the medical supply depot for the Panama Canal Department (the Army command in the Canal Zone), which consisted of 19,000 square feet (1,765 square metres) of storage space, which had been adequate for prewar years. However, in late 1940, it was realised that the (obviously) coming war might well require larger facilities. At the time, and until the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway across the isthmus opened in 1942, freight movement within the Canal Zone was chiefly handled on the single-track railroad or by via the Canal, both of which could be damaged or destroyed. Hence, it was decided to disperse stocks for safety and to provide sources of medical supply on both the Pacific and Atlantic sides of the Canal Zone. A new medical supply warehouse, measuring 40,000 square feet (3,716 square metres), was completed at Corozal (which lay between Balboa, the “capital” of the Canal Zone, and Fort Clayton) in April 1943. However, in 1944, the arrangement was changed, so that the Fort Davis Depot became merely the medical warehouse section of the Corozal General Depot.¹³



Barracks

Latterly, Fort Davis was headquarters of the 4th Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment 1962-84 and, from 1984 until the mid-1990s, the 3rd Battalion of the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), which had originally been based at Fort Gulick before that post was transferred to Panama in 1984.

In line with the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty, whereby the US was to abolish the Canal Zone and gradually turn over to Panama the Canal and installations in the Zone, Fort Davis reverted to Panama on 15 September 1995. It was subsequently being used for a residential development, being renamed José Dominador Bazan. At the time of the handover, the site comprised 4,075 acres (1,649 hectares), with a book value of just over \$145 million. The site included Community clubs, cafeteria, a swimming pool, a recreation centre, gymnasium, outdoor recreation fields, a petrol station, post office, chapel, theatre, and an elementary school.⁶

In 1997, an Export Processing Zone was established on the site involving Chinese companies, manufacturing, and exporting small appliances (such as refrigerators, televisions, air conditioners, and plastic and wood products). Also placed there was a technological university, and a rapid reaction force which was part of Canal security.⁷

Fort Gulick

Also located on Lake Gatun, “*on the western shore of the Quebrada Ancha Arm of Gatun Lake*”,⁸ the Fort Gulick Military Reservation was established in April 1941 near Fort Davis, as essentially a sub-post of Fort Davis, and as part of the wartime construction expansion program.⁹

⁶ *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>

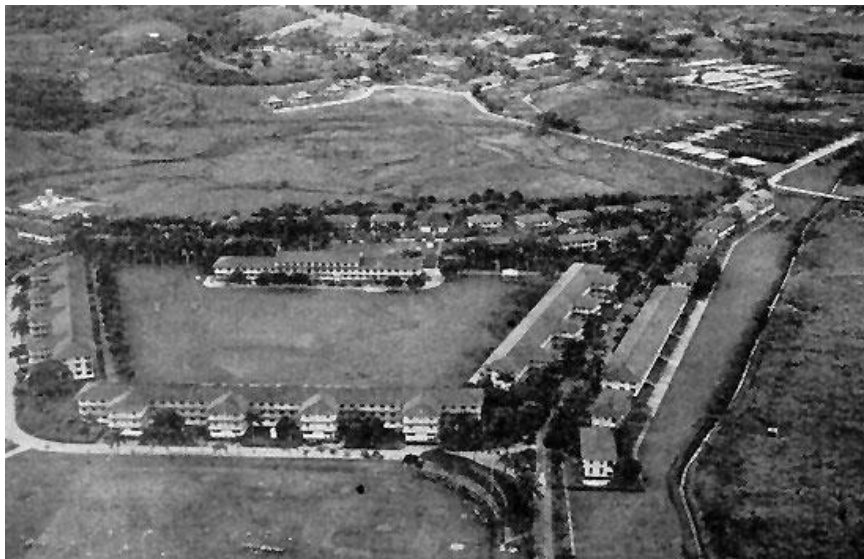
http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/milprop_transf_p05.htm

⁷ http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/milprop_transf_p05.htm

⁸ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D-9c7ec1da44988da2a99cf78b969dc6ab/pdf/GOVPUB-D-9c7ec1da44988da2a99cf78b969dc6ab.pdf>

⁹ Being named for Major General John W Gulick, Chief of the Coastal Artillery 1930-34; who had commanded a brigade in Panama 1935-36.

It would later become home to the US Army School of the Americas (in premises originally built as the Atlantic Sector Hospital in 1942, which had operated as such 1943-6). The School (which had various names over its existence) was used to train “students” from Central and South America from 1949.¹⁰



Until the new General Hospital was built, troops relied on the Station Hospital at Fort Davis, little more than a dispensary, and seen in this 1942 photograph

In 1937, a plan for two new, permanent Army hospitals in the Canal Zone was approved, with one at Fort Clayton at the Pacific end of the Canal, and another 401-bed hospital at Fort Gulick.¹¹ Funds were approved in 1938, by which time increased costs led to both having their capacity reduced by 150 beds. The War Department then approved the modified plans in 1939, but there were further delays (including that caused by a difference of opinion between the Army and Canal authorities, the Army Medical Department considering the hospitals inadequate, and the Governor considering them unnecessary).

While the delays continued, numbers of troops in the Panama Canal Department doubled between 1939 and June 1940 (by the time the hospitals were completed) Army numbers in Panama had reached its peak of around 65,000.¹² The new hospitals were finally completed in September 1943, with 251 beds available at that at Fort Gulick.

¹⁰ <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/55>

¹¹ There were also to be a 60-bed hospital (which still exists, abandoned and empty) at Fort Kobbe/Howard. Although ready for use in June 1943, this never functioned as originally intended, but served as a dispensary throughout World War 2. Until the new hospitals were completed, military personnel had to rely on Canal Zone Government for hospital space and treatment.

¹² As an expedient, temporary beds were installed in a converted barracks, while station hospitals were expanded, pending the construction of permanent medical facilities.

The design of the new hospitals followed the pattern of the Gorgas Hospital in Panama City, being constructed using reinforced concrete, with broad overhanging eaves on each floor for protection against the sun, and wide porches with jalousies¹³ to keep out the driving tropical rains.

The Army's 210th General Hospital had arrived in January 1942, with its intended base at Fort Gulick still unfinished. In the meantime, within three weeks of arrival it was admitting patients using 14 recently completed permanent barracks on the post. It finally moved into the new hospital in September 1943.

In April 1944, the hospital was redesignated as the 450-bed 368th Station Hospital, mainly due to reducing numbers of troops in the Atlantic sector, reducing further to 300 beds in December 1944, before finally closing in 1946.¹⁴

A reduction in the defences and troop numbers in the Canal Zone had begun even before the end of the war, and this accelerated when it ended. Then, there was a new alert at the end June 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea. For forces in the Canal Zone, the alert involved increased security at key critical Army installations and military guards at critical Canal facilities. Anti-aircraft artillery units were ordered to prepare for deployment, and live ammunition was issued to all troops.¹⁵ A mobile reserve was established on both ends of the Canal, at Fort Gulick and Fort Clayton.

Among the units that called Fort Gulick home in postwar years included the 8th Special Forces Group. This was the unit that trained the Bolivian Rangers that later caught Ernesto "Che" Guevara in 1967.

¹³ A blind with adjustable horizontal slats for admitting light and air while excluding direct sun and rain.

¹⁴ <https://achh.army.mil/history/book-wwii-medsvcsinmedtrnmnrthtrrs-chapter1>

¹⁵ *Panama Canal Security & Defense 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission): <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/311j>

All of Fort Gulick, except for family housing, the ammunition storage area, and some community service facilities, was handed over to Panama in October 1984¹⁶ as (eventually) Fort Espinar,¹⁷ and the rest of the site in 1995 (in the meantime, the parts of the site not handed over continued to be known as Fort Gulick), having been jointly used by the US Army and the Panama Defense Forces. It went on to become part of the municipal district of Colón, and the site of the luxury Hotel Melia from 2000¹⁸. In fact, the hotel was located on the site of the School of the Americas.

Now located at Fuerte Espinar is a *Policia Nacional* training academy, the *General José Domingo Espinar* Police Training and Specialization Center (CECAESPOL), established in 2014.

At the time of the handover, the Fort Gulick site comprised 344 acres (139.2 hectares).

The School of the Americas

Following the 1936 Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires,¹⁹ Latin American states began replacing military training contracts with European countries (Argentina, for example, had longstanding links to the German army). By 1941, US military missions existed in every Latin American country (except, for obvious reasons, Panama). These missions reported on the lack of effective training and preparedness in various armed forces, and a number asked that nationals from the Latin American states could attend service schools in the Canal Zone being used to train US personnel.

As a result, between 1943 and 1945, a total of 423 Latin Americans from 11 countries had trained as vehicle mechanics, radio operators, in artillery and other armament, as engineers,

¹⁶ Now known as *Fuerte Espinar*, it saw several name changes after transfer to Panamanian authorities – including Fort Manuel Antonio Noriega and Fort Jose Domingo Espinar.

¹⁷ It would be re-occupied by the US forces during the 1989 invasion:

<https://www.northamericanforts.com/East/cz.html>

General Espinar had been a hero of Colombia's War of Independence from Spain in 1821, fighting under Simon Bolivar in Peru, and later commanding general of the isthmus of Panama (then a province of Colombia).

¹⁸ The Melia Panama Canal was said to be the best hotel in the Colón area.

<https://www.dw.com/es/de-escuela-de-dictadores-a-hotel-cinco-estrellas/a-17857673>

¹⁹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20662819>

and as food service specialists. This activity was initially undertaken without War Department recognition – the formal training organisation only being established in 1946.²⁰

The Latin American School (or the Training Center for Latin America, Land Division, as it was established in December 1946) was located in one of the barracks at Fort Amador near Panama City)²¹ – being renamed the Latin American Land Forces School in 1948,²² and the United States Army Caribbean School in 1949 (the same year that Spanish was adopted as an official language – it would be the only official language in 1956). Located at Fort Gulick, it would eventually adopt its best-known name in July 1963, the US Army School of the Americas (USARSA). It operated at Fort Gulick from 1949, training Latin American officers, enlisted personnel, and cadets from Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean,²³ until it was transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia, on 1 October 1984.²⁴



The USARSA emblem – note the sailing ship, which was featured on Canal Zone army unit badges

From 1946, the new organisation centralised the administration of the increasing numbers from other Latin American states attending the various service schools.

Until 1954, it also had US personnel as students, but with the reduction in US troop numbers in Panama, plus increased demand from Latin American states, most of the students were

²⁰ http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/Articles/school_americas_who_84.pdf

²¹ *Centro de Entrenamiento Latino Americano, Division Terrestre*. The Center was affiliated with army training schools in Panama that included the Food Service School (Fort Clayton near the Miraflores Locks outside Panama City), the School of Motor Mechanics (Fort Randolph on the Atlantic side), and the School of Medicine (also at Fort Clayton, being part of the General Hospital there). There was also a Latin American Ground School with communications, weapons and tactics, and engineering departments.

²² *Escuela Latino Americano Terrestre*.

²³ *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*).

²⁴ *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>

In 1984, the School was again renamed, to become the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command school. In 2000, the School was formally closed, and replaced from 2001 by the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

from Latin America. This led to the change to Spanish being the official language used in 1956.

While the School was seen as a US institution, from the 1950s there was a policy of using Latin American instructors, as well as US ones and, by the 1980s, around 40% of the instructors came from Latin American states, with 41 such instructors in 1984.

After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the School increasingly concentrated on countering communist infiltration and, in 1961, President Kennedy ordered that the School focus on counter-insurgency and training Latin American military personnel against potential Cuban military interventions and communist guerrillas trained or financed by the Cuban regime.

For five years to 1967, the US Jungle Operations Training Center was part of the School, boosting US troop numbers using the facilities. Latterly, the only US Army personnel attending the School would be those attending the Command and General Staff Course prior to being assigned to USARSA or elsewhere in Latin America.²⁵



1964

In the 1960s, nation building and civic roles took on an increasing emphasis, with 23 of the School's 42 courses coming under this heading. These courses included such things as construction, drilling of wells and water purification, basic medical training etc. The courses would include practical experience, assisting rural villages on Panama's Caribbean coast.

²⁵ http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/Articles/school_americas_who_84.pdf

Despite such “hearts and mind” efforts, the presence of the School is said to have earned Fort Gulick the nickname "School of Assassins".²⁶



1975: Aerial view of Fort Gulick and United States Army School of the Americas on the left

The 1970s saw changes to the curriculum of the School. Medical technician and engineering courses, for example, were dropped, and some of the counter-insurgency courses were dropped, or merged with others. In the mid-1970s changes were made to delete military police and military intelligence training.²⁷ In 1976, USARSA was combined with the US security Assistance Office in Panama to form the US Security Assistance Agency Latin America (USASAALA).

In 1977, in the context of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties on the handover of the Canal, the US accepted the Panamanian demand to withdraw the school from Panama.²⁸ This was something of an irony, given that its best-known Panamanian pupil was Manuel Antonio

²⁶ *Drug Trafficking and Revolutionary Tasks* by N Fuentes (2000).

²⁷ This followed the passing of the Harrington Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act 1961, which limited the training only to those with no civil law enforcement responsibilities.

<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79-00957a000100040045-7>

²⁸ The Treaties allowed the US five years for the School to leave, unless the two governments agreed otherwise – and despite negotiations no successor organisation could be agreed. The five years ran from the date of implementation of the Treaties, 1 October 1979 – hence why the School relocated by 1984. Interestingly, two other US military training establishments were permitted to remain in Panama until the final US pull-out in 1999 – the Inter-American Air Forces Academy at Albrook Air Force Base, and the US Navy Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School at Rodman Naval Station. Of course, neither of these had the profile or ill-repute as the School.

Noriega, *de facto* leader and dictator of Panama 1983-89, as was General Omar Torrijos, Noriega's predecessor and co-signatory of the 1977 Treaties with President Carter.²⁹



Fort Gulick c.1978

Many Panamanians had long complained that the School and its activities had little or nothing to do with what the US was required or allowed to do in the Canal Zone under the terms of the treaties with Panama.

By 1980, due to economic and military reasons, as well as political ones, including the reputation that some graduates of the School, there were just 704 students from 10 countries, with about half of those countries eligible to send students choosing not to do so. Numbers picked up subsequently, in part due to increased funding being made available under the International Military Training and Education Program, as well as new, more targeted specific courses. At the time, it was noted that the largest users of the School had been Colombia, Panama, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, and (until 1978) Nicaragua. By 1984, it was reported that some 45,000 students had passed through the School.³⁰

²⁹ Other notable names included General D'Aubuisson of El Salvador, Augusto Pinochet of Chile, Generals Galtieri and Viola of Argentina, Bolivia's Hugo Banzer, and President Rios Montt of Guatemala.

³⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/09/24/us-army-closing-school-for-latin-officers-in-panama/5e6d8504-d337-4b9e-85fe-bc6e64ab1c5d/>



Aerial photo of the School of Americas or the former Fort Gulick Hospital and the town of Fort Gulick prior to this area being turned over to the Panama Defense Forces and being called Fort Espinar

The School of the Americas finally relocated to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984 (Building 400, in which was located, was part of the handover to Panama) and, when the School moved out the site remained abandoned for 17 years.

As mentioned above (and pictured below), the site became that of a luxury hotel in the 2000s.





Memories of Fort Gulick. A wartime 3-inch anti-aircraft gun alongside Hotel Melia

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
7 October 2024