

## GENERAL BRETT AND HIS SWOOSE – THE B-17 THAT LASTED FOR THE WHOLE OF WORLD WAR 2



### Introduction

The *Swoose* was a Boeing B-17D Flying Fortress bomber which Lieutenant General George H Brett, Commanding General of the Caribbean Defense Command<sup>1</sup> and Panama Canal Department from November 1942 to October 1945, used extensively for his personal transport during World War 2, and which he often flew himself. It survived the war, was stored afterwards, and, at the time of writing, is being restored back to its original condition at the National Museum of the US Air Force, as the only surviving example of the early B-17D model.



*CDC commander, Lieutenant General George Brett boarding his B-17D "The Swoose" in Panama in 1943*

The Caribbean Defense Command was the theatre-wide command for Central America and the Caribbean during World War 2, while the Panama Canal Department was the US Army command (the equivalent of an army command or corps) based in the Panama Canal Zone 1917-47.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-the-caribbean-defense-command/>

## **The B-17 Flying Fortress**

The *Swoose* is the oldest, intact, surviving B-17 and the only example of an early B-17D model still in existence. After being stored by the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum since the war it was transferred to the National Museum of the US Air Force in 2008.

Remembered as “the” US bomber of the war, the four-engine B-17 heavy bomber is probably most famous for its use in daylight bombing raids over Germany. Due to its heavy defensive armament, it had been dubbed the “Flying Fortress” even before the Model 299 prototype flew in 1935.

It began as an entrant in a 1934 USAAC competition for a multi-engine bomber for an anti-shipping role<sup>2</sup>, being financed wholly by company funds. Delivered to the US Army Air Corps (USAAC)<sup>3</sup> from 1935, it became operational the same year. Early models were soon obsolescent, with later models being improved and having increased armament. However, the initial production model, the B-17B, was the highest-flying and fastest bomber in the world when it first flew.

On 7 December 1941, the VI Bomber Command in the Canal Zone had just two B-17 on its strength. The first example of the type in the Canal Zone, a B-17B (a model which had first flown in 1939), had arrived for the 7<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Squadron in June 1941<sup>4</sup>, followed by four more in November. After the Pearl Harbor attack, the squadron saw its B-17B deployed elsewhere (mostly to Guatemala City Airport) for use in patrols over the Pacific approaches to the Canal from January 1942.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> With the Canal Zone being one of the main intended bases – together with Alaska and Hawaii.

<sup>3</sup> The USAAC became the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) in 1941, before the US Air Force (USAF) being established as an independent arm in 1947.

<sup>4</sup> Some sources say March 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Operating from Honduras in the north to Peru in the south, as well as to and from the Galapagos Islands, with US Navy flying-boats also used. Latterly, the B-17 would be supplanted in this patrol role by versions of the B-24 Liberator.

About 30 B-17 of various models (B-17B, D, E and F) eventually operated with the Caribbean Defense Command during the war. In Panama, examples designated as the RB-17B and RB-17D (the “R” denoting “Restricted” as being considered obsolescent) were initially supplied, primarily based at the airfield at Rio Hato in the west of the country (but with some at Albrook Field near Panama City)<sup>6</sup>. Later, B-17E/B-17F models were acquired as replacements, and David Army Airfield, near the Costa Rican border also saw B-17 based there. The useful range of the B-17 also saw the aircraft used as *ad hoc* transports for long-distance flights.<sup>7</sup>

### **The aircraft’s combat career**

In April 1941, what would become the *Swoose* began its first assignment with the 19<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group in California, and in May 1941 it took part in a mass flight of B-17 bombers to Hickam Field, Hawaii, then in September an even longer mass flight from Hawaii to Clark Field in the Philippines. This took place against the background of heightening tensions, and a build-up of US forces in the Pacific.

Assigned to the 14<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and by now named *Ole Betsy*, it took part in the first US combat mission in the Philippines after the Japanese launched their assault on the islands on 8 December 1941<sup>8</sup> and, over the following three weeks, the aircraft would go on to fly several missions against the invading Japanese forces, before the decision was made to evacuate the aircraft and crews to Java.

Fortunately, before the Japanese attacked the main airbase at Clark Field the aircraft was one of several dispersed from Clark to another airfield, Del Monte on the island of

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<sup>6</sup> On 12 November 1939, the first B-17 landed at Albrook Field, when the 7 B-17B of the General Headquarters Air Force Good-Will Mission to Brazil completed a leg of their 6,000-mile flight from Langley Field *en route* to Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>7</sup> It is reported that the F-9 photographic-reconnaissance version of the B-17 was also a frequent visitor to the region, on aerial survey and mapping missions with the 1<sup>st</sup> Photographic Group, USAAF.

<sup>8</sup> The first attack took place at Clark Field in Luzon just 10 hours after the attack on Pearly Harbor. As there, US aircraft were largely caught on the ground. 16 of the 19 B-17C and B-17D based at Clark Field were destroyed or damaged that first day (the total number of B-17 available in the Philippines had been just 35). In fact, nearly 100 aircraft of all types were lost that day.

<https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/disaster-in-the-philippines/>

Mindanao, from where it would be involved in missions for the next two months. Its last combat mission was on 11 January 1942.

On the mission on 11 January, it suffered severe damage while engaged in a 35-minute battle off the coast of Borneo with three Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighters, two of which it shot down.

In late January 1942, *Ole Betsy* departed the Philippines for Melbourne, Australia

With aircraft in short supply, it was deemed necessary to repair the badly damaged bomber, and an entire new tail section from another damaged B-17D was grafted on, and four new engines fitted at the depot in Melbourne. However, it was considered unsuitable for continued combat use and was relegated to the role of an armed transport aircraft in March 1942.

It was at this time that its new pilot, dubbed it "*The Swoose 'half swan-half goose!'*" based on a popular song of the time.



The aircraft survived and would become the personal aircraft of Lieutenant General George Brett. Brett's pilot, Captain Frank Kurtz, later named his daughter "*Swoosie*" in memory of the B-17.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://vintageaviationnews.com/restorations/boeing-b-17d-the-swoose-restoration-update.html>

### **Brett and the falling out with MacArthur**

Brett was said to have a larger-than-life personality similar to that of MacArthur, though lacking MacArthur's hypersensitivity.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a reason for him ending up in Panama was due to having (unintentionally) upset MacArthur.

Brett had been in command of US forces in Australia when the Philippines had surrendered to the Japanese in April/May 1942 and Washington had ordered MacArthur to head to Australia to become Supreme Allied Commander in the Pacific. Knowing that MacArthur was not fond of flying and would not travel in anything but the best aircraft, he tried to arrange for the best possible aircraft the Army had at their disposal, a B-17 bomber.

However, such aircraft were in short supply and, of just four that Brett was able to secure to ferry MacArthur and his party (which included his family), two had mechanical problems and were unable to make the trip, and another ran out of fuel mid-flight on its way to pick up MacArthur, forcing the pilot to ditch and costing the life of two crewmembers.

The remaining B-17 was an older, very worn unit with an inexperienced crew, and MacArthur simply refused to use the aircraft. MacArthur, already in a foul mood over being ordered to leave the Philippines, took personal offence and assumed animosity on Brett's part for MacArthur replacing him as commander in Australia.

In due course, another, nearly new B-17 was found to make the flight, but the damage had been done, and MacArthur sent a formal request to have Brett removed. However, General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, was a close friend of Brett and was reluctant to replace him. While MacArthur was eventually successful in

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<sup>10</sup> *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

getting Brett removed from the Pacific theatre, it was without any real suggestion that he had failed in his mission there.<sup>11</sup>



### **George Howard Brett**

George H Brett was born in Cleveland, Ohio on 7 February 1886. Despite not having completed high school, he graduated from the Virginia Military Institute, and then accepted a commission in the Philippine Scouts and served with them for more than two years.<sup>12</sup>



In 1911, he was appointed a second lieutenant in the US Cavalry and served in forts in the Continental US until 1916. By this time, the US Army Signal Corps had begun acquiring the Army's first air force<sup>13</sup> and, in September 1916, Brett received his pilot's wings and was assigned to the office of the Chief Signal Officer in Washington DC.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

<sup>12</sup> The Philippine Scouts were US Army units in the Philippines, with mainly Filipino and Filipino-American enlisted men and mainly American officers (from 1910 the Army began sending "outstanding" Filipino soldiers to West Point). They had been formed in 1901 to combat the Philippine Revolutionary Army and other insurgent or bandit groups.

<sup>13</sup> Until 1918, the Signal Corps was the aerial warfare service of the US Army, with an Aviation section established in 1914. In 1920, the US Army Air Service (USAAS) was established and took over the role from the Signal Corps. It would be renamed as the US Army Air Corps (USAAC) in 1926.

In September 1917, with the US now involved in World War 1, Brett was sent overseas and served in both England and France as the Assistant and, later, Chief of the Material Division of the Signal Corps Aviation Section. During the time he was promoted to major.

When the war ended in 1918 he returned to become commanding officer of the San Antonio Air Depot at Kelly Field in Texas. He then returned to Washington DC in 1919, to a position in the Office of the Chief of Air Service.

Between 1921 and 1924 he was the commanding officer of Crissey Field in California. Then, in 1927, he was assigned as Chief of the Field Service Station at Fairfield, Ohio. This was followed by time as a student at the Air Corps Tactical School at Langley Field, Virginia, and courses at the Command and General Staff School, at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.

In 1930, he was appointed commander of the First Pursuit Group at Selfridge Field in Michigan. "Pursuit" was the term used by the USAAC for what we would call a "fighter" (and the term would continue in use until the USAAC became the USAAF in 1941).<sup>14</sup> He served as commander there until 1933, when he was appointed a lieutenant colonel in 1934 as Senior Instructor in Aviation at the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth.

After attending the Army War College in 1935, he was appointed to brigadier general (temporary), and assigned the commanding officer of the Composite Wing (19th Wing) at Albrook Field in the Canal Zone until the fall of 1938 (when he reverted to his original rank). See below for more on this period.

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<sup>14</sup> However, the "P" designation persisted until the USAF was established in 1947; hence why wartime fighters such as the Warhawk and Mustang were designated P-40 and P-51.

In 1938, he was at Langley Field, Virginia as Chief of Staff at General Headquarters, Air Corps<sup>15</sup>; then Chief, Materiel Division; and later as Assistant Chief of the Air Corps, War Department. He was promoted to major general in October 1940.

In May 1941, he was selected to serve as Chief of the Air Corps. He was therefore directly involved in the procurement and maintenance of aircraft and equipment, and the training of personnel for the rapidly expanding USAAC. In August of that year, he was sent to Britain to study problems with military aviation under wartime conditions, as well to discuss lend-lease arrangements and to undertake a tour of the North African theatre.<sup>16</sup>

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, he was appointed as Second in Command of the Allies' South Western Pacific Area, known as ABDA Command (under the British general, Wavell).<sup>17</sup> He had arrived in Australia at the end of December 1941, after a meeting with General Wavell and Chiang Kai-Shek in Chungking.<sup>18</sup> He then moved to Lembang in West Java in January to join Wavell. After the collapse of the ABDA Command following the fall of Singapore in February, and the resignation of Wavell, control reverted to local commanders. Brett had already departed for Australia a few days earlier, on 23 February.<sup>19</sup>

He was then appointed Commander in Chief, US Army Forces, Australia, taking command on 24 February, having been promoted to lieutenant general on 7 January 1942, being senior to all other US officers in the Pacific theatre, except for Douglas

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<sup>15</sup> The "GHQ Air Force" was established in 1935 as a centralised command comprised of bomber, attack, and pursuit (fighter) aircraft under its control to provide coastal defence of the Continental US. Providing more independence for USAAC commanders, flying units were taken away from Army Corps commanders, put into single organisation headed by an airman, and reported to the Army General Staff. <https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/459008/1935-the-general-headquarters-air-force/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA459938>

<sup>17</sup> The American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Command, established on 1 January 1942.

<sup>18</sup> Now Chongqing.

<https://www.ozatwar.com/usaaf/generalbrett.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ozatwar.com/usaaf/generalbrett.htm>



MacArthur, and worked to build up what became the United States Army Forces in Australia (USAFIA).<sup>20</sup>

In April 1942, he was appointed Commander of Allied Air Forces in Australia. He retained the position of commander of USAFIA while he served from April to July as Commander-in-Chief, Allied Air Forces, Southwest Pacific Area under MacArthur.



*General Brett, when Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in March 1942*<sup>21</sup>

As detailed below, after being replaced by MacArthur in Australia, Brett went on to command of the Caribbean Defense Command and the Panama Canal Department, retiring from that position in the rank of major general in April 1945. He formally retired from the Army in May 1946, and died in December 1963.<sup>22</sup>

During his 35 years of service in the US Army he received many US and foreign medals and awards, and was rated a command pilot, combat observer and technical observer.<sup>23</sup>

His son, Devol (aka “Rock”) would also become a pilot, and a USAF general. He flew P-51 Mustangs in Korea and F-4 Phantoms in Vietnam. He was shot down in the latter war but avoided capture.<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Swoose and Panama***

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C31611>

<sup>22</sup> [https://generals.dk/general/Brett/George\\_Howard/USA.html](https://generals.dk/general/Brett/George_Howard/USA.html)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108029/major-general-george-howard-brett/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ozatwar.com/usaaf/generalbrett.htm>

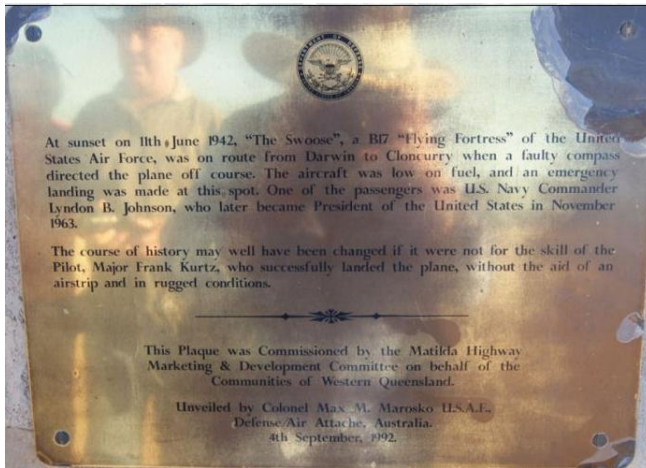
Brett had adopted *The Swoose* as his personal aircraft while in Australia (see above for more on that period).



*The Swoose at Hammer Field, Fresno, California*

In June 1942, the aircraft was almost responsible for the loss of future President Johnson. At the time, Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson

was a US Navy lieutenant commander<sup>25</sup>, and was returning to Australia from Port Moresby about *The Swoose* on 11 June. However, the pilot became lost, almost ran out of fuel, and eventually ended up landing in the bush before it did run out. The next day, the pilot Captain Kurtz flew the B-17 down the main street of the small town, to land at the local airfield, from where the passengers continued their journey.<sup>26</sup>



*Plaque erected in 1992 at Carisbrooke Station in Australia to mark the unplanned arrival of the future President Johnson*

When Brett returned to the US, departing Australia on 4 August 1942, on *The Swoose* with him, and it would continue in use as Brett's transport until both he and the

aircraft were retired in December 1945. It had had its armament removed and was fully overhauled, as well as having received a complete set of wings from a later B-17E.

The return flight to the US was, in fact, a record-breaking one, beating the late Sir Charles Kingsford Smith's trans-Pacific record, with a flight time of 36 hours and 10 minutes for the trip from Brisbane to San Francisco.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Later in June, President Roosevelt would order all members of Congress in the armed forces to return to their legislative duties, and Johnson was released from active duty on 16 June.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ozatwar.com/ozcrashes/qld47.htm>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The previous record had been 51 hours 49 minutes in 1928.

As his own private transport, *The Swoose* would fly him around the region during most of his time in command of the Caribbean Defense Command, and he was able to use it effectively as a means of propaganda allowing foreign leaders to travel with him. He reportedly even allowing the Presidents of Cuba and Nicaragua to fly as co-pilots during “good neighbour” visits.<sup>28</sup>

*The Swoose* was not Brett’s only tool in his diplomatic efforts. He reportedly also commandeered a US rescue boat squadron to host fishing parties, and spent so much money entertaining dignitaries that eventually it led to a formal inquiry regarding his spending habits.<sup>29</sup>

*Still other allegations charge that the 12<sup>th</sup> AAF Emergency Rescue Boat Squadron and its equipment were used primarily for fishing parties for senior officers; that spoilage of food valued at \$100,000 was not covered by a report of survey; that furniture was manufactured by the Panama Air Depot at Government expense for various officers and that as a result of these extravagances employees of the Panama Air Depot struck and they, as well as employees of the Panama Canal, cancelled [sic] their War Bond subscriptions.<sup>30</sup>*

However, the allegations against him were not substantiated by a report from the Army’s Inspector General, who reported to General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, on 23 November 1945 that most of the charges were, in fact, distortions of mission-

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<sup>28</sup> The *Swoose* would be slated for disposal after the war, but through the efforts of Colonel Frank Kurtz, who as a Captain had first selected it to serve as General Brett’s transport, it was eventually transferred to the care of the National Museum of the United States Air Force. Kurtz, who was the *Swoose*’s pilot throughout its career at the CDC, would later go on to name his daughter, actress Swoosie Kurtz in honour of the aircraft: *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

It is today the oldest, intact, surviving B-17 Flying Fortress and the only “D” model still in existence. It was transferred from the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum to the National Museum of the US Air Force in 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

<sup>30</sup> Military Record, Memorandum, Sultan, Inspector General to Marshall, Chief of Staff, subject: Misuse of AAF Rescue Boats and Other Irregularities, 23 November 1945.

related events and expenditures, and that *“the remaining allegations were found to be without a basis in fact. . . I concur in the reporting officer’s recommendation that no further action be taken in this matter”*.<sup>31</sup>

Remaining in continuous service from the very beginning of US involvement to the very end of the war, it also managed to avoid the mass-scrapping of redundant combat aircraft following the war. Instead, someone saw the worth of saving it for posterity and it was gifted to the Smithsonian Institution, which accepted it sometime in the late 1940s. It remained in store at the Silver Hill, Maryland storage facility of the Smithsonian Institution until 2008, when it was transferred to the National Museum of the US Air Force (NMUSAF) for restoration and eventual display.<sup>32</sup>

### **General Brett and the Canal Zone<sup>33</sup>**

Brett had previously served, from 1937, as a Brigadier General, commander of the 19<sup>th</sup> Wing based in the Canal Zone during the 1930s. Through his wife, who had attended Catholic schools in Baltimore and knew many of the wealthy Central and South American families through their daughters, the couple had connections in Latin American society that helped the Bretts to have a very successful stay in the region.<sup>34</sup>

When he had arrived to take up command of the 19<sup>th</sup> Wing he found the unit in a *“deplorable condition”*, and *“obsolete, antiquated and of practically no value of the defense of the Canal Zone against modern, up-to-date weapons, either ground or air”*.<sup>35</sup> Except for a small number of B-10B bombers (soon to become effectively obsolescent themselves, certainly by the time of the Pearl Harbor attack just a couple of years later), it was said that *“all aircraft were outmoded and obviously had been*

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<sup>31</sup> *Airpower Leadership on the Front Line : Lieutenant General George H Brett and Combat Command* by Douglas A Cox (Air University Press, 2006): <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA459938.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <https://vintageaviationnews.com/restorations/boeing-b-17d-the-swoose-restoration-update.html>

<sup>33</sup> For a useful study of Brett’s career, his rise and the problems that eventually blocked further advancement to the highest positions, including his behaviour when commander of the CDC, see *Airpower Leadership on the Front Line : Lieutenant General George H Brett and Combat Command* by Douglas A Cox (Air University Press, 2006): <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA459938.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA459938.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

*sent to the Canal Zone after having been replaced by modern aircraft in tactical units in the United States”<sup>36</sup>.*

The equipment would not see significant improvement in number and quality until the arrival of several squadrons of somewhat more modern Curtiss P-36 fighters in 1939, supplemented and replaced by the considerably better Curtiss P-40 in 1941.

On 7 February 1938, Brett personally led virtually the entire 19<sup>th</sup> Wing — including full units of 24 P-12 biplane fighters, 14 Northrop A-17 attack monoplanes, and 28 Martin B-10 twin-engine bombers — in a mass flight to Guatemala City. Brett and his staff flew in a Sikorsky Y10A-8 amphibian, with one stop at Managua, Nicaragua.



*Y10A-8 of the type flown by Brett on the mass flight to Nicaragua in 1938*

The reception for the Wing in Guatemala City is said to have probably the high-water mark of pro-US sentiment in Latin America. The flight marked the first time in aviation history that a force of its size and character had left its post of duty to make a visit of courtesy to a foreign government.<sup>37</sup>

However, in 1938, Brett, who had considerable experience flying throughout the Continental US, said that he felt that there were no conditions in the US that in any way, shape or form approached the flying hazards experienced in Panama on normal flights.<sup>38</sup>

By January 1940, now Major General Brett was the head of the Army Air Corps, and he received a report from the Panama Canal Department recommending improvements to air defences in Panama, describing the existing air defences as “worth little” and the communications system as “lousy”. A further letter to General Marshall, complained

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/1-50/AFD-090602-096.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Journal American Aviation Historical Society (Spring 1974).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

about plans for the air warning service in Panama, and saying that too many non-essential matters were being carried out by the Air Corps there.<sup>39</sup>

Brett had taken over in command of the Caribbean Defense Command and the Panama Canal Department in late 1942, and in September 1943 the War Department told him that it was expected that the entire Command would undergo the same reduction in Defense Category as had been given to the Antilles Department<sup>40</sup>, that is to Defense Category A, indicating an area of least military concern, by the middle of the following year.<sup>41</sup>

With the reduction in alert status, there was also a reduction in manpower and some of the Canal's defensive artillery was mothballed or even removed altogether.<sup>42</sup> At the same time he faced with the type of bargaining and haggling for resources, always required in more active theatres, that would characterise a good part of his time there. A study in January 1943<sup>43</sup> had even recommended discontinuing the Command altogether, though a subsequent report from the Army's Office of the Inspector General led to just a streamlining of the Command and its headquarters, as well as a reduction in the numbers of troops and units it commanded.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of the changes, Brett's time at the Caribbean Defense Command would prove to be quite different from that of his predecessor (another Army airman, Lieutenant General Frank M Andrews) who had been mostly concerned with increasing

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<sup>39</sup> *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts (Vol.12, Part 2)* by Stetson Conn, Rose C Engelman, Byron Fairchild (Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1964).

<sup>40</sup> Like the Panama Canal Department, this was an administrative sub-area of the Caribbean Defense Command and had been established on 1 July 1939, originally as the Puerto Rico Department, being renamed on 1 June 1943, when it was assigned responsibility over a much larger area, encompassing such places as Cuba, Trinidad, and the British West Indies.

<sup>41</sup> *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

When the Command had first been set up, its mission had been seen as necessitating it be placed under Defense Category "D", the highest possible category indicating actual or impending hostilities.

<sup>42</sup> The 12-inch mortars were all removed, and all the large calibre coastal artillery would be removed by soon after the war's end, with the Coast Artillery Corps itself abolished in 1950.

<sup>43</sup> By a Major General H C Ingles of the Army Staff.

<sup>44</sup> In essence, the report found that while the strategic situation had changed considerably, the Command had not sufficiently adapted or reformed.

the Command's strength and effectiveness and bringing it to something approaching full capability, while always fighting for more of the limited resources.

It is said that, of the four commanders that the Caribbean Defense Command had in its brief existence, Brett was quite possibly the one most responsible for turning it into what it and its successor commands would eventually become - vehicles for diplomacy and military cooperation with the nations of their areas of responsibility.

To test the radar network of the air defences of the Canal Zone, in 1943, Brett, set out to "fool" the new SCR-615 radar that had been installed in late 1942<sup>45</sup>, with a low-level approach, but was tracked all the way to landing.<sup>46</sup> Brett thought he had flown in unseen by the Canal Zone defences by adopting a very low-level approach.<sup>47</sup>

During this time, with the reductions in both manpower and activity in his command, Brett was much a political as a military representative, and he and his family travelled extensively throughout Central and South America. It is said that he came to understand the area, its geopolitical structure, and its military vulnerabilities. When replaced in Panama, Brigadier General Brett had to return to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.<sup>48</sup>

Postwar planning for the Canal Zone got under way even before the war had ended. In March 1945, the Plans and Operations Division of the War Department asked General Brett, Commanding General in Panama, to draw up a long-term plan for its defence in depth, including a list of the bases needed to implement it.

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<sup>45</sup> Replacing the original and inadequate SCR-271 sets.

<sup>46</sup> *The Signal Corps: The Test (December 1941 to July 1943)* By George Raynor Thompson, Dixie R Harris, Pauline M Oates & Dulany Terrett (Center of Military History, US Army, Washington DC), 2003. For more on the introduction of radar in the Canal Zone, see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-the-introduction-of-radar>

<sup>47</sup> *The Signal Corps: The Test (December 1941 to July 1943)* by George Raynor Thompson (Center of Military History, US Army, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA459938.pdf>



Brett produced a plan that called for a number of airbases throughout Panama, as well as on the Galapagos Islands and in Nicaragua and Peru (all of which had been utilised during the war).<sup>49</sup> He envisaged 99-year leases with a 20-year continuous renewal option. 30 sites, *in addition to* those obtained under wartime agreement with the Panamanian Government (of which most were to be retained), were also identified as necessary.<sup>50</sup> These were those involved in the abortive Filós-Hines Agreement of 1947, rejected by the National Assembly, with the result that all US military bases outside the Canal Zone were vacated by early 1948.<sup>51</sup>

Another proposal made by Brett, this time in October 1944, would also lead to considerable disagreement with the Panamanian Government. This came after he had insisted that any postwar agreement on civil aviation must provide for the US continuing to have *exclusive* authority over a 200-mile “defended zone”, which would completely encompass the Republic.<sup>52</sup>

## Postwar

*The Swoose* was lucky to avoid being cut up and melted down (or even dumped at sea, like many unwanted aircraft and other equipment and munitions). It ended up at the War Assets Administration in Arizona, but in 1946 its former pilot, Frank Kurtz, persuaded the City of Los Angeles to retrieve the bomber for use as a war memorial. After three years, with no suitable site for the bomber having been found, it was donated to the National Air Museum in Washington DC. After refurbishment, Kurtz himself flew the aircraft to the Museum’s storage facility in Illinois in 1949, being moved to Pyote Air Force Base in Texas the following year, for long-term storage. Its final flight was in 1953, when it travelled to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, where it remained on outdoors display until April 1961.

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<sup>49</sup> *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008.

<sup>50</sup> During the war, the US Army operated no less than 134 sites of various size and importance throughout the Republic of Panama, i.e. outside the existing bases in the Canal Zone.

<sup>51</sup> With a great deal of popular protest, and fears of creating “mini Canal Zones” throughout the Republic. See <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-and-world-war-2-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/rechazo-convenio-filos-hines>



Finally, it was dismantled and removed to a National Air and Space Museum storage facility in Maryland, staying outdoors there until dismantled and moved indoors in the 1970s.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

27 February 2025