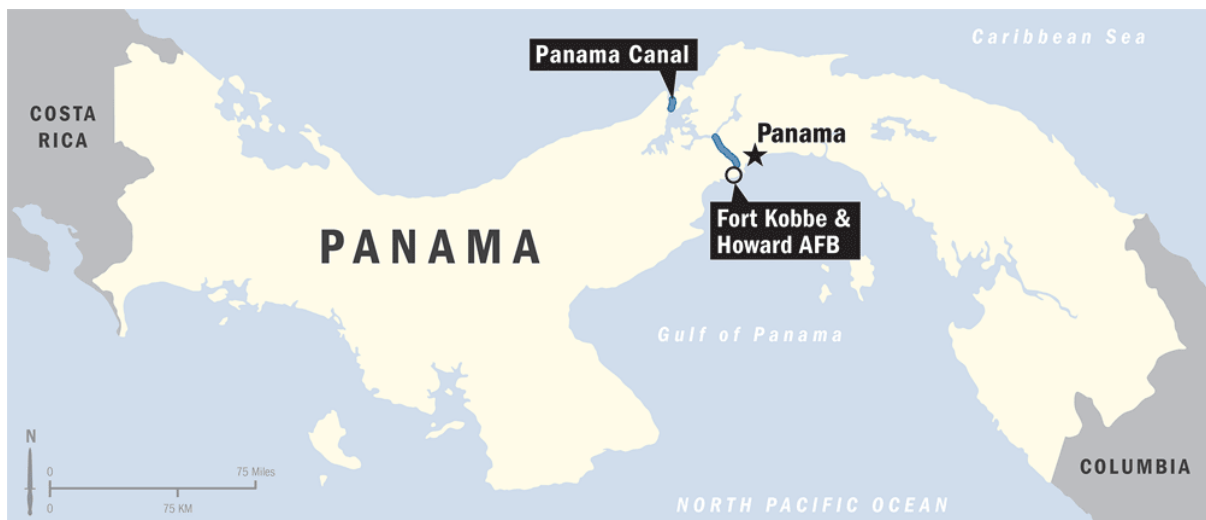


PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – HOWARD: A LAST OUTPOST?

The site which became Howard Field lies some 6 miles (9.7 km) from Balboa at the Pacific end of the Canal, and across the Canal from Panama City (which has long since absorbed Balboa). While it dates back only to World War 2, it nevertheless became, in a sense, the last US military outpost, and was only finally and fully vacated by the US military in 1999, as the last remnants departed.

Over nearly six decades it was said to have been home and work for more than 20,000 US military personnel and their families.

It was named for Major Charles Harold Howard who, as a second lieutenant had been a pioneer in Army flying operations in the Canal Zone in the 1920s. He was killed in an air crash in Texas in 1936.¹



ORIGINS

Established on 1 August 1938, construction of the airfield began on 4 September 1939, it then being called Bruja Point Airfield, this originally forming part of what was called the

¹ <https://www.thisdayinaviation.com/tag/charles-h-howard/>

In January 1926, then Captain Howard was transferred to the Panama Canal Department, the Army command in the Canal Zone, where he served for three years, serving with the 7th Observation Squadron at France Field for two years, and with the 25th Bombardment Squadron in the remaining year.

Bruja Point Military Reservation² from 1928 (this becoming Fort Bruja, a sub-post of Fort Amador, in 1929 before being renamed as Fort Kobbe in 1932). On 1 December 1939, the name of Bruja Point Airfield was changed by General Order of the War Department to Howard Field.³

A need for an additional airfield at the Pacific end of the Canal Zone had been recognised in 1937, and this had led to the Venado River Valley, part of Fort Kobbe, being identified as the most suitable.

Occupied from 26 July 1940, the first troops arrived in May 1941, and it opened as an airfield in 1942. It operated during the war as an US Army Air Force (USAAF) airfield – the independent US Air Force (USAF) not being established until 1947.

Howard Field expanded dramatically from 1940. Rushed to completion by the Constructing Quartermaster, 10,000 acres (4,047 hectares) of “impenetrable” vegetation at Howard were transformed into a “*thriving, highly-industrialised city of 5,000 inhabitants*”. As part of the high priority defences expansion process in the lead-up to US entry into the war, the work was completed in less than a year. It an independent from Fort Kobbe in June 1941. All structures were permanent buildings of concrete and steel designed to withstand the rigors of the harsh climate. The concrete runway was constructed by the NP Severin Company, a US company which provided its own equipment and labour – while the Constructing Quartermaster oversaw the grading and supplied the needed materials.

More than 85,000 square yards (71,070 square metres) of concrete were laid by Panamanian labourers in 21 days. The new concrete was first covered with water-soaked burlap, followed by a coat of black asphalt emulsion to avoid cracking caused by high temperatures and rapid evaporation during curing.⁴

² Named for a point in the Bay of Panama.

³ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/an%20american%20legacy3.pdf.pdf>

⁴ <https://media.defense.gov/2015/Apr/02/2001329844/-1/-1/0/AFD-150402-022.pdf>

"... carved out of the heart of the Panamanian jungle, in a major engineering triumph over nature... A great slab of concrete, more than- 85,000 square yards, was poured in 21 hours. From start to finish, nature interposed obstacles to the task. The thick, tangled Jungle offered every sort of impediment ... and the impending rainy season threatened to break down the work...the decision was made to survey [the intended site] from the air.

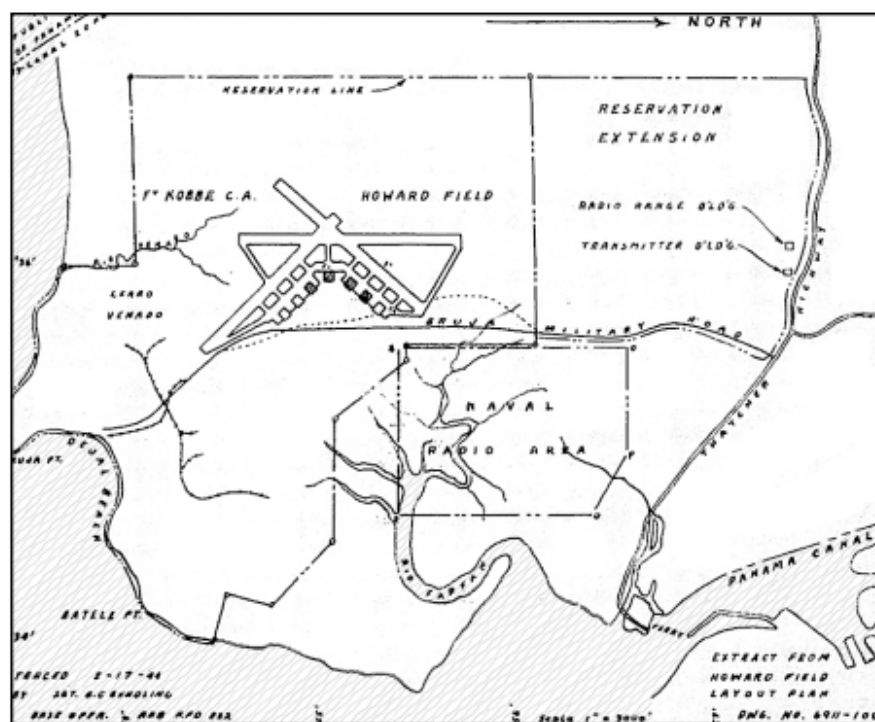
Several flights were made over the area, prevailing winds were studied and seasonal changes noted. Through the camera opening in the floor of the bomber, [100lb] bags of powdered lime were dropped at regular timed intervals. Surveying parties on the ground located the white lime-bursts...the entire contract, including aprons, runway and taxi strips, required the pouring of 180,000 square yards of concrete. The contractor furnished equipment, labor, supervision and miscellaneous materials other than cement, sand, rock and water, which were supplied by the government.

On the technical side arose the task of combating and preventing cracks or checking, in the concrete, which experts said would occur from too rapid evaporation of the water content of the cement, due to high daytime temperatures. The newly laid concrete was, therefore, cured by covering with watersoaked burlap, followed, after its initial set, by a coat of black asphalt emulsion.

Roads had been hacked out from quarry to runway sites, and from the cement plant to the work area; cement had been ordered from the States and arrangements made for its transportation from dockside via the Thatcher Ferry across the Canal and thence by truck to the storage sheds. These factors had an important bearing on the progress of the air field when the actual work was started. Among the preliminary tasks accomplished... were the clearing of about 1,000 acres of jungle underbrush; moving of 300,000 cubic yards of dirt. and the levelling of a long 27-foot hill to fill in the hollow... There were 32,000 cubic yards of rock mined at the Howard Field quarry and 14,000 cubic yards of sand scooped from the beach at Bruja Point. The task required 186,000 bags of cement...when completed having facilities to accommodate several thousand officers and enlisted men. Part of the construction program already has been completed, and some facilities are in use."

Air Corps News Letter, Vol. XXIV, No 11, June 1 1941

By 1940, the US Army had in Panama 84 tons of mustard gas, 10 tons of phosgene, 800 phosgene shells, 900 Livens projectors⁵, 647 chemical cylinders, and 2,377 4.2-inch mustard-charged mortar rounds.⁶ Some of the munitions were stored at various posts and airfields, including at Howard Field. However, prior to the San José Project⁷ being established in 1944, most were stored at Cerro Tigre. From July 1940 until the following May, the Army's Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) acquired expanded storage space in Panama — under a project code named "Mercury" — and received shipments of gas masks. The new space included chemical munitions storage magazines at seven bases, again including Howard Field.⁸



Howard Field, Canal Zone, as it was laid out as of February 1944. The Thatcher Highway shown to the right (north) was in fact the Inter-American Highway. Albrook Field was off this map to the lower right (northeast) about five miles distance. The area to the bottom of this view (east) was, and remains, a combination of low hills and swamps. (Drawing from USAFHRA)

American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Fall 2009

⁵ A British design of a simple mortar-like weapon that could throw large drums filled with flammable or toxic chemicals.

⁶ <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1386>

⁷ For more on that project, and chemical warfare in the Canal Zone, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/02/panama-mustard-gas-and-chemical-defences/>

⁸ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission) <https://original-ufdc.ufliib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/1>

WORLD WAR 2

During the war, Howard Field hosted both fighter and bomber aircraft, and was an important integral part of the defences of the Canal, Canal Zone and the larger region. From it operated such different types, such as the P-38 Lightning, P-39 Airacobra and P-40 Warhawk fighters; and the B-27, B-18 Bolo, B-24 Liberator, B-25 Mitchell, B-26 Marauder and A-17 bombers.

As the role of bases in Panama switched over increasingly to training from the mid-point of the war, Howard Field would also host the 23rd Tow Target Squadron, which was equipped with the TB-26C, a trainer variant of the B-26 Marauder medium bomber, and used to tow targets for fighter pilot training. Shortly after VJ-Day in 1945, the squadron exchanged these aircraft for three Beechcraft CQ-3⁹ and moved to Albrook Field.

US ARMY AIR CORPS UNITS AT HOWARD FIELD ON	
7 DECEMBER 1941	
7 th Reconnaissance Squadron (Heavy)	B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers and B-18 Bolo medium bombers
59 th Bombardment Squadron (Light)	A-20 Havoc light bombers
Detachment of 20 th Transport Squadron	C-39, C-47 Skytrain and C-49 transports

In 1942, an exercise including a simulated bombing run on the Howard Field runway was conducted. Explosive charges under one end of the runway were ignited without warning, to see what damage was caused and to test the station's repair crews. The 23-feet (7 metres) diameter crater was filled and other damage repaired within six hours, when the runway re-opened for operations.¹⁰

⁹ Redesignated DC-45F in 1948, these were a version of the Beech 18 twin-engine light transport designed as a director aircraft for target drones.

¹⁰ <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

In May 1943, the 551st Parachute Infantry Regiment began preparations for a combined parachute/gliders assault to seize the island of Martinique by force. Ammunition, grenades, medical supplies, and maps of the island were issued, and on the eve of the operation, the troopers headed to Howard Airfield to receive parachutes, in preparation for what would have been their first-ever combat jump.

However, the assault was not required¹¹, and the paratroops were instead moved out in August 1943 and eventually shipped to Europe, where the unit was badly mauled in fighting in Belgium in January 1945, with survivors being absorbed into the 82nd Airborne Division, before being formally deactivated later that month.



C-47A of 20th Transport Squadron in 1943 at Howard Field

During the war, the Empire Prisoner of War Camp was situated nearby, and this was actually used to detain internees from Panama (and latterly Peru). Also within the Canal Zone, this was about 6 miles (9.7 km) to the north of the airfield, in an area known later as the Empire Range.

¹¹ The French Admiral in charge of the Vichy forces on Martinique learned of the impending US operation, and promptly fled the island, turning over control to a US Navy Admiral.



Howard Field 24 December 1942

Associated with Howard were three other auxiliary airfields –

- Anton Army Airfield in Coclé Province on the southern coast, near the Pacific entrance to the Canal and Panama City, and close to Albrook. The site was adjacent to the current passenger terminal of the Panama Canal Railway at Corozal;
- Chame Airfield (aka Chame Airdrome and Chame Airfield 1) was in the Chame district of Panama Oeste, 2½ miles (4 km) inland from Panama Bay and 42 miles (67 km) from Panama City. It was used as an auxiliary airfield to Howard to 1945, with fighters based there. As late as 2021, the 1,200 feet (366 metres) runway was extant and in use, with the former hangar having been converted into a residence and advertised for sale as a “pilot’s paradise”;
- David Army Airfield (aka San Jose Field or David Field), located in the far west of Panama, near the city of David in Chiriquí Province, and close to the Costa Rican border. Built from 1941, it hosted bomber units, with the original earthen runway (surfaced with sod) later replaced by an asphalt one. It was mainly used for training, and for patrols over the south-east Pacific coastline from Honduras to Peru. In July 1943, it saw a serious incident when a B-17 bomber stalled on approach and crashed, killing 12 on board. The airfield remains in use today, renamed as the Enrique Malek International Airport;
- La Chorrera Army Airfield was on the southern side of the Canal, with mainly fighter units based there 1941-44. Originally associated with Albrook Field, it was later an auxiliary to Howard. It was about 40 miles (64 km) from Balboa, and had a asphalt

runway. Mainly used for dispersal and overflow, it was occupied by the US Navy for a short time in 1944 as a blimp base. The Navy erected portable stick masts, and special helium equipment to service its patrol blimp airships. The station was officially disestablished in November 1945;¹² and

- Poci Army Airfield (aka Poci Auxiliary Aerodrome), which was established in 1944 as a fighter base and an auxiliary to Howard. It was located on the Azuero peninsula on the eastern edge of the Bay of Panama, and is now covered by housing.



P-38 Lightning fighters of 51st Fighter Squadron at Howard



Another photo of P-38 Lightnings at Howard in 1945



Howard Field looking west in 1944

¹² https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

POSTWAR

From 1944, artillery units were withdrawn and, in August 1946, Howard Field and Fort Kobbe were officially separated, though Howard continued as a USAAF, and then USAF, base until all air units were withdrawn in 1949 – having been redesignated as Howard Air Force Base (Howard AFB) in 1948.¹³ An arbitrary line gave control of the northern end of the area to Howard Field, which Fort Kobbe (under command of the commanding officer of Fort Amador) given control of the southern end of the Military Reservation.

Following its reorganisation as USAF Caribbean Air Command in 1946, the former wartime Sixth Air Force saw its primary mission of protecting the Canal combined with additional functions in providing disaster relief in Latin American states and providing foreign military sales (FMS) support, including training and logistical and maintenance support. The latter support is said to have included the supply of surplus US aircraft to friendly Latin American air forces, with Howard Air Force Base (AFB) as a centre, and the establishment of the Inter-American Air Forces Academy which hosted officers and men from more than a dozen Latin American states.¹⁴

Operations began to draw down during the Summer of 1949, with all training activity there ending in October 1949. The base was deactivated on 1 January 1950 and the new USAF turned the site over to the Army. In 1952, a further portion of Fort Kobbe (the Bruja Point Air Base) was officially separated and made part of Howard Field.¹⁵

During the 1950s, Howard was used to reduce flying activity at Albrook AFB, with regular USAF flying operations from August 1955, following an agreement between the Army and the Caribbean Air Command.

In December 1961, flying operations at Albrook ended and all flying units relocated to Howard, with the USAF once more assuming full control of, and responsibility for, Howard on

¹³ The independent US Air Force (USAF) having been established in 1947.

¹⁴ In the 1980s, this Academy relocated to Texas.

¹⁵ <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/43>

1 October 1963, with it undergoing extensive modernisation in 1964, and improvements to aprons and taxiways completed in 1965. Throughout the 1960s it would continue to see improvements to accommodation, and the education centre, including the installation of air conditioning in hundreds of family housing units.

250 additional family housing units were constructed in 1966 on 32 acres (13 hectares) of land acquired from the US Navy. Further work at the base saw such things as a passenger terminal, chapel, repairs shops and recreation workshops added in the late 1960s, as well as repairs and improvements to the runway and taxiways, work that continued into the 1970s, as did further improvement to accommodation.

From the mid-1960s the base also hosted Navy carrier air units operating in the region, as well as supporting airlift operations (hosting USAF TAC and MAC C-130 Hercules units on rotation through to the late 1970s)¹⁶, humanitarian and other relief work following floods and earthquakes in Central and South America, as well as search and rescue operations.¹⁷ From the 1960s, the base played a central role in US military operations in Latin America, largely due to its 8,500-foot (2,600 meters) runway being the only jet-capable US airfield south of the Rio Grande, and capable of supplying fuel to US military aircraft.

On 1 September 1967, a C-46 transport crashed after take-off from Howard, killing all nine aboard. This aircraft is recorded as belonging to the USAF, but other sources identify it as an Air America aircraft.¹⁸

¹⁶ TAC was Tactical Air Command, and MAC Military Airlift Command.

¹⁷ http://www.themilitarystandard.com/afb/outside_us/howard.php

¹⁸ <https://www.baaa-acro.com/crash/crash-curtiss-c-46d-10-cu-commando-howard-afb-9-killed>

Air America was, of course, a CIA front company, notorious for its use in South-East Asia. The suggestion may be that the aircraft was involved in some covert operation in Central or South America.



Howard AFB c.1970

Between 1972 and 1982, it hosted TAC A-7D Corsair II combat unit detachments on rotation, as well as Air Force Reserve (AFRes) and Air National Guard (ANG) training units between 1964 and 1982.¹⁹

In 1975, Albrook Air Force Base was downgraded to become Albrook Air Force Station in 1975, when the control tower closed, and USAF aircraft and units relocated to Howard.²⁰ Until its closure in 1999, Howard supported operation of F-15 and F-16 fighters, as well as AFRes and ANG C-130 units.



Main entrance to Howard AFB in 1965

¹⁹ http://www.themilitarystandard.com/afb/outside_us/howard.php

²⁰ For more on Albrook, see <http://raytodd.blog/2024/02/10/panama-in-world-war-2-albrook-field/>

Howard also had an important role in the US anti-drugs war, with Colombia just across the border and the Caribbean and Pacific both having routes through which air and sea supplies of narcotics flowed. The base hosted operations of the giant E-3 AWACS, as well as Navy E-2 Hawkeye and P-3 Orion aircraft, together with US Customs (including its P-3 airborne radar station) and DEA resources deployed to support the Defense Department in detecting and monitoring suspected drugs flights.

Howard also continued to be used as the theatre airlift centre for US Southern Command. Although the Rio Hato Army Air Base in Coclé Province was returned to Panama (along with all the other US military sites outside the Canal Zone) in 1948, that other airfield would continue to be available as an auxiliary landing field for Howard until 1990.

From 1992 to 1999, Howard was home to the Joint Interagency Task Force South, a regional Defense Department counternarcotics organisation.²¹ Its mission from Panama ended on 1 May 1999, with a closure ceremony, when the unit was awarded the Joint Meritorious Unit Award for their outstanding contributions to the counterdrug operations in Panama and South America. Its role was transferred to Joint Interagency Task Force-East in Key West, Florida.²²



Howard AFB in 1975

²¹ *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>

²² <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/howard.htm>



C-27A flying over Howard AFB

THE END

The base formally became Panamanian Government property on 1 October 1979, under the terms of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties of 1977.

It was formally decommissioned on 1 November 1999.

However, in January 1998, it was announced that Panama had agreed for the US to retain 2,000 military at a counterdrug centre at Howard AFB. The agreement was reached just before Christmas 1997 to locate a new multinational counternarcotics centre (a Multinational Counternarcotics Center) in facilities in the former airbase. From 2000, the US forces there would be housed alongside Panamanian forces in military housing, but the site would no longer be considered a military base. The US personnel to be based at Howard were said to primarily be USAF.²³

Control of the Canal changed hands on 31 December 1999, but US military elements had begun a final drawdown more than a year earlier, in anticipation of the deadline established by the Panama Canal Treaties of 1977. The last of the fixed-wing US aircraft departed Howard on 1 May 1999, and many support and resident elements had moved on

²³ *Inside the Pentagon* Vol.14 No.1 (US Department of Defense, 8 January 1998)

as well, including DoD counterdrug operations, which relocated to forward operating locations in Ecuador and Curacao.



US Army and USAAF personnel paint a giant yellow cross over the runway number at Howard AFB on 16 June 1999. The yellow cross over the runway number indicates the air field is closed to traffic.

When the US Army-South lowered the flag at Fort Clayton 30 July 1999 and moved its operations to Puerto Rico, the less than 600 airmen remaining at Howard represented the final military element of US jurisdiction over the Canal. By 1 November, they too were gone.

OPERATION *JUST CAUSE*

Rotational Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve units and some special operations forces were already stationed at Howard Air Force Base prior to the decision for the US invasion of Panama in December 1989. In fact, almost 13,000 US troops were in Panama prior to reinforcement. What was called Operation *Just Cause* would be mostly launched from the in-country US bases, which were close to the targets to be assaulted – the Howard being the chief one.



In November 1989, Military Airlift Command's massive C-5A Galaxy transports had secretly delivered Army helicopters and M551 Sheridan tanks to the base, where they were concealed in hangars and under cover. More troops and supplies arrived in December. However, all efforts to preserve surprise soon evaporated - with the large C-141 Starlifter transports landing at Howard every 10 minutes, it was obvious that something was about to happen.

During the operation itself, USAF A-7 Corsair and OA-37 Dragonfly close-support attack aircraft from Howard were in the air and available for fire support, but most of that was supplied instead by Army helicopters and USAF AC-130 Hercules gunships. The AC-130 had been deployed in advance and were already in theatre as part of the rotational forces.



Noriega aboard a USAF C-130 after arrest

When Manuel Noriega surrendered on 3 January 1990, US troops took him to Howard, where agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration arrested him on the ramp of a C-130

Hercules transport, which then flew him to Homestead AFB in Florida. He was convicted in 1992 of drug trafficking and money laundering and sentenced to 40 years in prison.²⁴

TODAY



The runway and associated aviation-related areas of the former base now comprise the Panama Pacifico International Airport, while the remainder of the former base has been developed (or continues or waits to be developed) as the Panama Pacifico logistics and residential zone.²⁵

The new airport opened in 2014, and today is chiefly used by Colombian low-cost carrier, Wingo.

²⁴ AIR FORCE Magazine / December 2009

²⁵ *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>

Before it reopened, the airport was used in the 2008 James Bond movie, *Quantum of Solace*, to double for an airport in Bolivia.

In 2016, Forbes ran a spread on the developments at the former base, and the man behind the development, Jaime Gilinski Bacal, said to be the second richest Colombian (who lives in London), and his British partner in the operation. At the time, the site was valued at \$3.6 billion, and 85% of the available land remained undeveloped. In 2003, the partners had approached officials with an idea the Panamanian Government had not yet considered: selling all of the land at once to a single group, which would develop a master plan for the site. In response the Government proposed a newly-created government agency, *Agencia Panamá Pacífico*, whose job would be to cut through red tape elsewhere in government. After seeing off a rival bid by a consortium of the richest families in Panama, the partners were able to go ahead. It took time, and seeing out the global financial crisis of 2008, before the project began to take off.²⁶

In 2010, the Qatari sovereign wealth fund took a 50% stake in the project for a claimed (but disputed) \$1 billion.²⁷

The area that comprised the former airbase is a developing area for residential, commercial, and recreational uses, in addition to the new airport. Companies having premises there include Dell Computer.²⁸

²⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danalexander/2016/03/23/inside-the-most-audacious-real-estate-project-in-the-world/?sh=2235cdce196f>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ <https://coronadoconciiergepanama.com/the-history-of-howard-air-force-base-and-panama-pacifico/>



The former hospital, being taken back by the jungle



Some of the former accommodation and facilities buildings in 2023 – the airport is in the distance

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
25 February 2024