

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2: R+R



Left: PT Boat sailors visit with a local girl on a Panama City beach in late 1942 or early 1943. Note PT Boat anchored in the distance (National Archives)¹

Right: US sailors in Panama City on the 4th of July 1946²

What about R+R in Panama? Downtown Panama City became a popular spot for US servicemen during the war, and the block on Central Avenue across from the train station and Plaza Cinco de Mayo was the location of the 2 most famous cabarets in Panama City - *The Happyland* and *Kelly's Ritz*³.

"Leisure was, perhaps, the most profitable industry of the war in its different versions: cinema, radio, theater, beer gardens, canteens, bars, appointment houses, cockfights, boxing, the incomparable cabaret where people drank and danced to the sound of the fashionable rhythms executed by the great orchestras that visited Panama".⁴

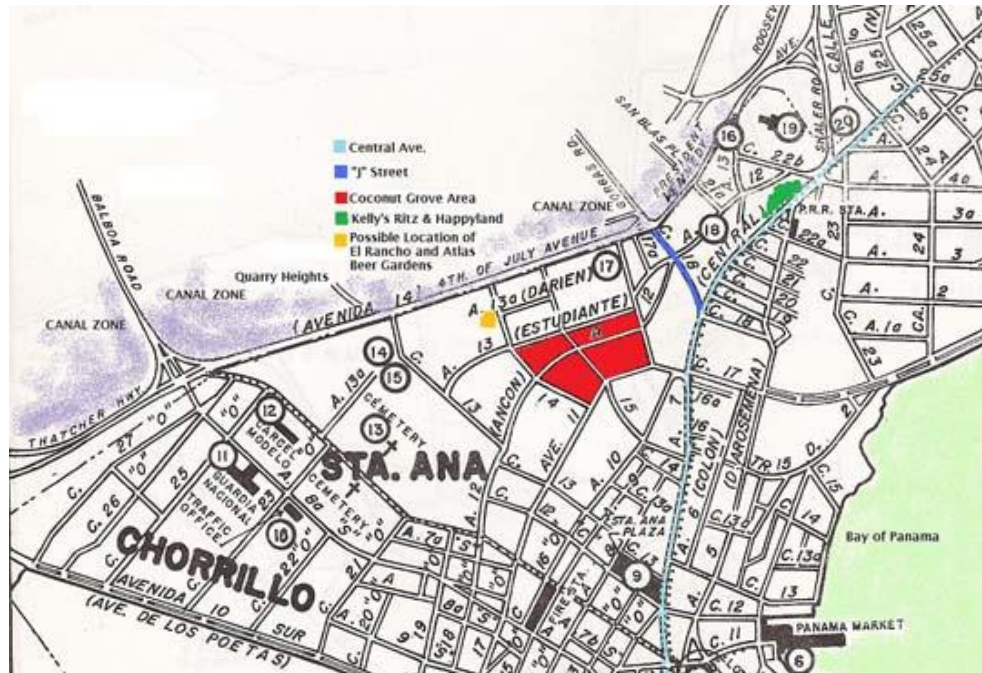
¹ <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/80-G-K-13000/80-G-K-13829.html>

² <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/alphabetical---donations0/c/ua-472-05-colette-carey-collection-.html>

³ <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/article.asp?id=2011-07-15>

⁴ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

With US Navy ships being “dry”, sailors could get drink, watch spectacular shows, shop and go on horse-drawn or taxi tours of sights – including the Rio Abajo red light district.⁵ Bars and clubs included Rice’s Bar, the Palm Terrace, Happyland and the Rialto, among others.⁶



Panama City centre in 1943. In light blue is Central Avenue, in blue is "J" Street, green is the area of the Kelly's Ritz and Happyland clubs, red is the Coconut Grove area (see below) and yellow is the location of El Rancho and the Atlas clubs.⁷



The Coconut Grove area

⁵ <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/article.asp?id=2011-07-15>

⁶ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

⁷ <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/article.asp?id=2011-07-15>

"For decent families it was a nightmare during which their daughters were forbidden to go outside. The streets were covered in white, drunk, drugged, screaming sailors, insulting anyone who crossed their path, offering scandalous and offensive spectacles, disrespecting the police, urinating the sidewalks, soiling them with banana peels, peanuts, and bottles of liquor, assaulting and raping. For newly-landed sailors, "anything local in a skirt was a prostitute"... Famous marinades⁸ were those of the USS Saratoga, named Sara by its crew; that of the aircraft carrier USS Lexington nicknamed the "blue ghost" that is currently a museum ship in Texas and that of the battleship USS Iowa. The marinades continued until the end of the war".⁹

In Panama City, bars were not limited to the city centre. They became popular in what were then peripheral neighbourhoods such as *Las Sabanas* (now *Via Espana*) where working families lived, becoming a serious problem, since they were permanent sources of "uproar and scandal" due to constant quarrels and violence, making normal life difficult.¹⁰

In Colon, there was the Coconut Grove club on Balboa Avenue, which also staged the same kind of shows as the nightclubs in Panama City. However, the term "Coconut Grove" said to apply to a whole district in Panama City, and not just one club (see the map above).¹¹

Luxurious nightclubs and cantinas in Colón included the *Copacabana*, *Molino Rojo*, **the Cotton Club**, *Trópico*, Billgray's Garden, Cantina Universal or Bottle Alley - where it was

⁸ As explained later, a term used to describe when hundreds of US servicemen landed in Panama City and/or Colón, looking for alcohol, sex etc after weeks or months at sea.

⁹ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/article.asp?id=2011-07-15>

said that the best food in the city was served. In these clubs one could find such stars as the famous Cuban-Mexican *rumbera*¹² and actress Ninón Sevilla, the Argentine baritone Rafael Falcón and the famous Myrta Silva, known as the queen of the *guaracha* of Puerto Rico¹³, among others.

However, the more risqué shows were the busiest and the most profitable, so the owners of these businesses would look for beautiful and daring girls who could perform dances or acts that threatened "public morality and good customs".¹⁴



The star performer at Kelley's Ritz in Panama City was a stripper (or "exotic dancer") called Jade Rhodora.

Her real name was Lou Elma Smith (see below for piece from her local newspaper in the US with a photo in which she seems to be a very respectable elderly lady)¹⁵, and one of her most famous performances was her "*Beauty and the Beast*" act, in

which she appeared naked on the right side of her body while on the left she was covered by a gorilla costume, during the act, that costume would fall to the floor, leaving her naked on stage.¹⁶

¹² *Rumbera* dancers used the Afro-Caribbean rhythms of Mexican cinema's "Golden Age" of the 1940s and 1950s. The term *rumbera* comes from the so-called Cuban rumba that was popular in Mexico and Latin America from the late 19th Century to the early 1950s.

¹³ <https://puertoricoresidents.com/x/topic/667-myrta-silva-the-queen-of-the-guaracha-illustrious-people/>
Guaracha is a genre of music that originated in Cuba, of rapid tempo and comic or picaresque lyrics.

¹⁴ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

¹⁵ <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/article.asp?id=2011-07-15>

¹⁶ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

Jade Rhodora Hudman; exotic dancer in 1940s

Jade Rhodora Hudman of Phoenix, an international dancer in the 1940s, died June 21, 1987, at Phoenix Memorial Hospital. She was 74.

She was born Lou Elma Smith in Marion, Ill., but at 15, she changed her name and joined a traveling circus. While with the circus, she performed aerial acts, vaudeville shows and water ballets.

As an exotic dancer, Mrs. Hudman performed in the United States, Mexico, Central and South America. She designed her own costumes, which often included an additional head figure that would sit on her shoulder. She also choreographed some of her dances, which included "Beauty and the Beast," "Venus in Furs," "Afternoon of the Faun," "Leda and the Swan" and "Oriental Fantasy."

She danced until she was 45.

Mrs. Hudman was a member of the Arizona Breakfast Club, Arizonans for National Security, the Arizona Coordinating Council of Republican Women and the National Health Federation.

Survivors include her daughter,



Jade Rhodora Hudman

Crystal Jade Burchnell; son, Rio Claro Rhodora; and three grandchildren.

A services has been held. Universal Sunset Chapel made arrangements.

Arizona Republic, 26 June 1987¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/13909516/jade-rhodora-hudman-omit/>



This poster promoted a film based on Mamie Lee Kelly, owner of the Kelley's Ritz nightclub in Panama City. Located at *Plaza Cinco de Mayo* across from the train station and the centre of Panama nightlife. One of its customers was Cole Porter, who was taken there when he passed through Panama. He later immortalised Mamie Lee in his musical '*Panama Hattie*', with Ethel Merman as Hattie, which was also made into an MGM movie in 1942 featuring Red Skelton and Ann Sothorn.¹

There were also respectable, reputable cabarets that presented morally acceptable spectacles, and both Panama City and Colón had fine orchestras such as the *Sonora Matancera*, Lecuona Cuban Boys, Francisco Canaro, among others, which Panamanians enjoyed. There was also ballet, theatre, and classical music, as well as other activities such as horseracing, cockfighting, baseball, and boxing.¹⁸



Cutting from the Baltimore Sun in 1943 about joint US Military Police/Shore Patrol and Panamanian police patrols of Panama City

¹⁸ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

In 1943, recreational facilities in the Canal Zone were greatly expanded by the development of a Special Service Program, aided by contributions from civilian organisations. Athletic and sporting equipment was provided, and “morale” radio sets were made available at all positions, day rooms and some mess halls.

From September 1943, there was a weekly distribution of national magazines sent directly from the US. Movies were also shown widely, including in jungle areas, with new ones received weekly. Trucks were made available to take men from isolated sites to movie theatres etc.

Nevertheless, entertainment and hospitality offered within the Canal Zone would always be more respectable and even genteel, when compared to that in Panama proper. For example, the Gatun Hospitality House opened in 1942 and offered dances and other entertainment, with reading material, sandwiches, and soft drinks and, on Sundays, free coffee and doughnuts. In April 1944, the Gatun Gold Clubhouse opened, providing improved recreational facilities and additional movies.¹⁹

As mentioned, during the war, Panama became famous (or infamous) for “marinades”, a term describing when hundreds of US servicemen landed in Panama City and/or Colón, looking for alcohol, sex etc after weeks or months at sea.²⁰ One description described *“Drunken soldiers routinely attacked taxi drivers, police, bartenders, waitresses, and even ordinary Panamanian shoppers”*.²¹

Catering for the US servicemen is said to have represented “commercial activity” in 1945 worth more than \$6 million “in prostitution and vice”, this being \$4 million more than the foreign aid provided by the US Government in Panama that same year. By 1951, it was

¹⁹ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission) <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/1>

²⁰ http://www.panamayestadosunidos.com/prueba_la-segunda-guerra-mundial.html

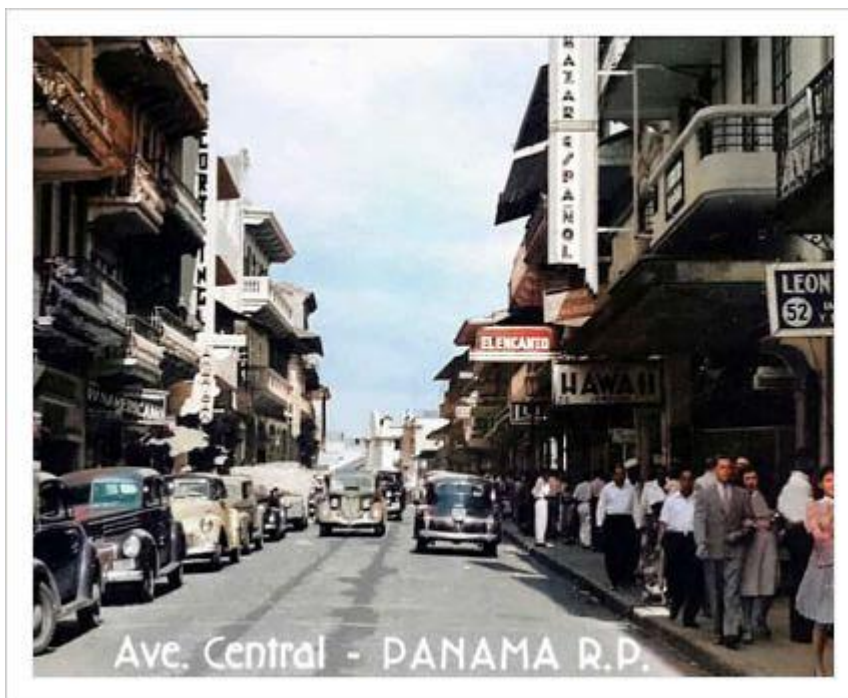
²¹ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/211218/antigua-zona-canal-region-frontera>

estimated that throughout Panama City there were more than 250 brothels, among which were famous sites such as, "*the Blue Grotto, the Villa Amor, the Ancon Inn, the Golden Key, the Tropical Coffee, the Fenix Coffee and La Gloria*", located in towns outside the terminal cities such as "*Chilibre, El Coco, Capira, Cativá, Río Abajo and La Chorrera*".

It is claimed that US authorities saw the "service" provided in Panama City and Colón:

"as an escape valve, where man could let steam escape (...) that can cause an explosion in an unventilated society like that of the Zone".²²

For some idea of what downtown Panama City might have looked like during the war, there is a short (two-minute) silent, black and white film clip on You Tube of Panama City nightlife, including its neon street signs and US sailors.²³



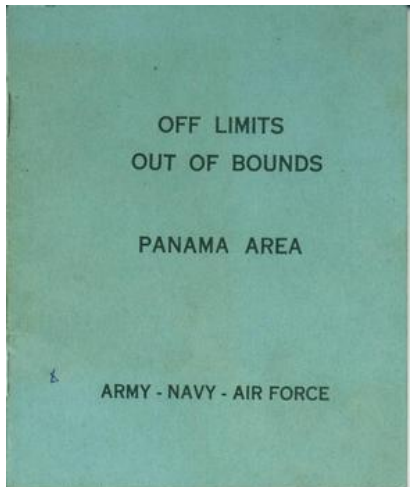
Central Avenue, Panama City in 1943

The reputation of Panama may be said to have suffered, due to the stories about the nature of the "entertainment" available in the terminal cities, although previous books

²² <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/211218/antigua-zona-canal-region-frontera>

²³ This film clip is from Thayer Soule's travelogue, "*The Road to Panama*", archived in the Human Studies Film Archives, Smithsonian Institution: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsdpcMEAUAk>

and Hollywood movies had played on the risks facing any nice American girl who might be marooned there.²⁴ Various Mexican newspapers and magazines from 1940 to 1943 carried stories claiming that Mexican dancers were being taken to the Canal Zone, to work in cabaret bars and to also offer sexual service to US servicemen.²⁵



A 26-page 1950 Manual for all servicemen "to assist you in self-guarding the welfare and the health of yourself and your fellow servicemen".²⁶

The problem of sexually transmitted diseases was something that the US military worried about in all the theatres of war, and Panama was no exception. To this end, and during both World Wars –

"the US military developed intricate spatial practices of racial and gender segregation that attempted both to contain excessive soldier sexuality and to regulate soldier contact with the multiracial population of Panamá. In their most intrusive dimensions, these programmes involved the arrest and screening of Panamanian women as "venereal disease suspects", whose purported racial proclivities for dirt, bacteria, and seduction were likened by occupation health officials to the pestilence of vermin".²⁷

²⁴ See <http://raytodd.blog/2023/11/13/panama-and-world-war-2-panama-and-the-canal-in-popular-entertainment/>

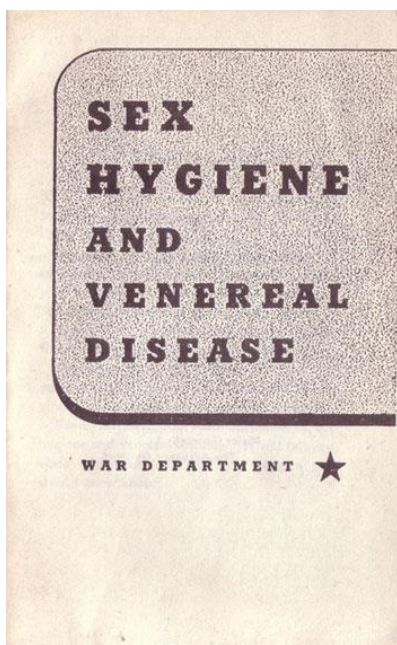
²⁵ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/840205/pdf>

²⁶ <http://gozonian.org/offlimits/index.shtml>

²⁷ *Medicalized States of War: Venereal Disease and the Risks of Occupation in Wartime Panamá* by Neel Ahuja (Duke University Press, 2016).

As usual, it was the women who were portrayed as the villains of the piece, not the men who sought them out.

During the war, the Catholic Church in Panama encouraged parishes to set up "Catholic recreational centers for servicemen" to try to lure serviceman away from the red-light districts.²⁸



The US War Department issued this pamphlet to each recruit on enlistment. Its 16 pages explains sexual hygiene and VD²⁹.

For a little more on the Army's attitude to, and treatment of VD, see <https://www.med-dept.com/articles/venereal-disease-and-treatment-during-ww2/>

Statistics from the Social Protection Division of the Office of Community War Services had shown that VD had cost the US Army seven million days of service during World War 1. As the Army did not begin the use of penicillin to cure VD until 1944, the disease continued to be a significant problem for the armed forces for much of World War 2.³⁰

Before, during and after the war, a key objective of the US military and the Canal Zone authorities was to keep prostitution out of the Canal Zone and in the Republic of Panama – thus maintaining the longstanding policy that the Zone was a site of cleanliness, health, and order, whereas Panama was portrayed as the opposite.

Disease had naturally always been a concern of the authorities in the Canal Zone, with yellow fever and malaria having ravaged the early construction crews. This extended to

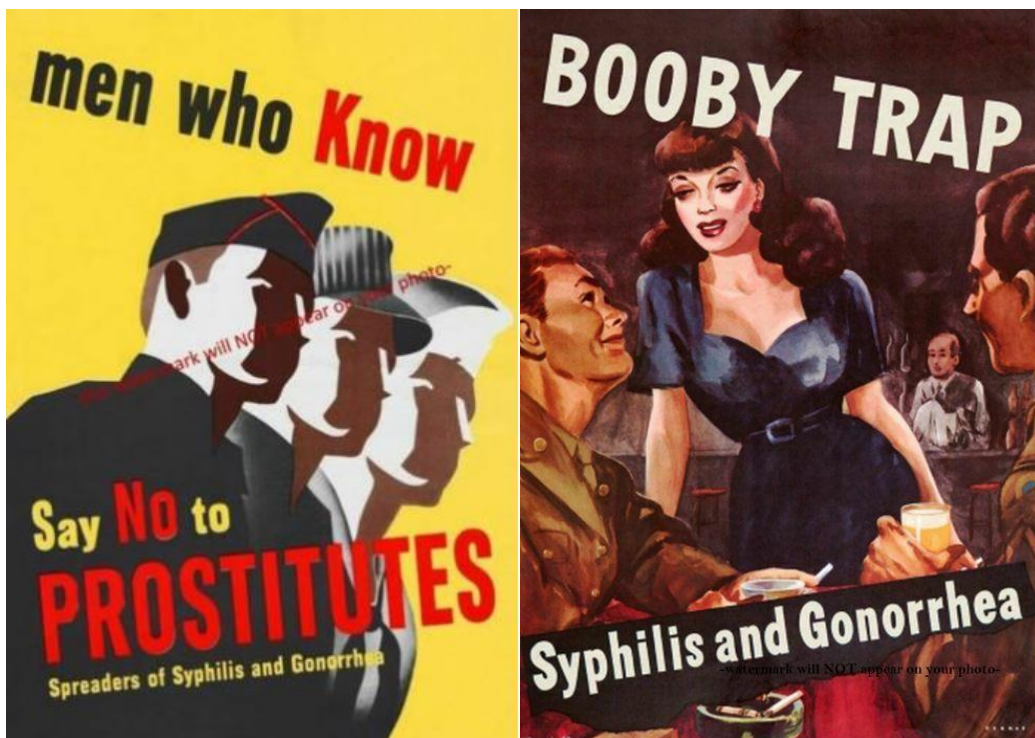
²⁸ *A History of the American Vincentian Fathers in Panama* by Robert J Swain CM (Vincentian Heritage Journal Vol 3 Issue 1, DePaul University, 1982):
<https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://en.wikipedia.org/&httpsredir=1&article=1010&context=vhj>

²⁹ <https://www.med-dept.com/articles/venereal-disease-and-treatment-during-ww2/>

³⁰ US military doctors had begun using it to treat syphilis in the Pacific theatre in 1943, and by 1947 it was to become the "gold standard" for treatment of the disease:
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1578219014002480>

barring US personnel from off-limits bordellos due to their high rates of VD – see above the guide to areas of Panama City that were out of bounds to servicemen in 1950. There were also seen to be the risks from other crimes that might be committed against Americans, particularly robbery and assault of drunken GIs or Navy personnel. From time to time, the Panamanian authorities would act to close down such establishments – a measure said to be complicated by their ownership by powerful local businessmen and *Policia Nacional* officers.³¹

Of course, not only US servicemen, Canal workers and contractors were tempted by the dubious pleasures offered in Panama City and Colón. There were also the migrant workers brought into Panama and the Canal Zone to work on such things as the Third Locks Project³², and Panamanian men attracted to the big cities from the interior and the much higher wages on offer.



³¹ *Decentering America* by Jessica CE Gienow-Hecht (Berghahn Books, 2007).

³² See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/09/26/the-wartime-panama-third-locks-project/>



Dog House Bar, Panama, 1945



The "border" between the Canal Zone and Panama City

Postwar, many bars and cabarets closed and many foreigners returned to their home country, including dancers, cabaret performers and prostitutes where immigration

authorities did not renew their permits to stay in Panama. It is said that the long decline of the city of Colón can be traced to the postwar years.³³

INFLATION AND THE COST OF LIVING

During the war, all the Central American states³⁴ suffered from the side-effects of the war, with the cost-of-living ballooning by more than 700% in Nicaragua, 200% in Honduras, 100% in El Salvador and around 75% in Costa Rica and Guatemala. This came about due to the loss of exports markets for their products, such as coffee, and reduced investment. The countries were also affected by the Caribbean U-boat campaign 1942-43³⁵, and the US requisition of the banana-carrier vessels for the war effort. There were shortages, including in petroleum products and automobile tyres.³⁶

There was also rampant inflation in Panama, at least for a time:

"There was a real 'famine for goods' and the upward movement in the prices of goods and services gathered momentum, causing the cost of living to rise rapidly".³⁷

Prices of basic consumer goods increased almost continuously throughout the war, but most markedly before official price controls were introduced. In fact, a government committee reported that the cost of living increased by 150% between the end of 1940 and July 1942, but that, between August 1942 and December 1944, with controls in place, the official cost of living index recorded just a 10% rise.

³³ *Panama 1942: Tiempo de Guerra y Emociones* by Patricia Pizzurno (University of Panama, 2022).

³⁴ Note that, in the same way that Mexico argues that is part of North America and not Central America, you will sometime find Panamanians claiming not to be Central Americans, but rather South Americans, or even to be more Caribbean...

³⁵ See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/11/08/panama-and-the-u-boats/>

³⁶ *Latin America During World War II* edited by Thomas M Leonard & John F Bratzel (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

³⁷ This led to the establishment of the Price Control Commission and the Office of Price Control being set up.

During the war only a few commodities were rationed in Panama – being limited almost entirely to car tyres (and inner tubes) – from February 1942, and petrol – from October 1942; and to assist in conservation lower speed limits were imposed.³⁸ In September 1944, the Gasoline and Tire Rationing Office was authorised to also control the distribution of other petroleum products, including kerosene, diesel oil, fuel oil and asphalt.³⁹

The Price Control Commission set up by the Panamanian Government could fix maximum wholesale and retail prices for food staples – including those for rice, sugar, fish, potatoes, eggs, beef, milk and pork. However, violations of the controls are said to have been widespread.⁴⁰

From 1942, duties on a few products were increased in Panama, the most important being alcoholic beverages, while import duty was completely removed on imports of products including canned meats, bacon, powdered milk, cheese, eggs, fresh vegetables, canned soup, soda crackers and fruit juices.⁴¹

Panama was more reliant on imports than many other Latin American countries, particularly where foodstuffs were concerned. The considerable expansion in the population of the Canal Zone, and the terminal cities (Panama City and Colón) in wartime, as well as the increased employment opportunities, higher wages etc, fuelled inflation and acerbated shortages. Food supplies from the interior suffered, as workers migrated to the cities and Canal Zone to seek better-paid employment (many more migrants were to also come from Jamaica, Colombia, Costa Rica and El Salvador). It was reported that, between

³⁸ *Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (United States Tariff Commission, 1946). Executive Decree No 39, September 1942.

³⁹ Executive Decree No 474, September 1944.

⁴⁰ *Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (United States Tariff Commission, 1946).

⁴¹ Executive Decree No 26, February 1942.

1940 and 1945, more an eighth of all those productively employed in Panama worked in the Canal Zone in some manner.

As in other countries, the government of Panama encouraged farmers to grow as much food as possible, to counter shortages and replace imports. It also acquired and parcelled out land among poor farmers – between 1942 and 1944 some 91,400 acres (37,000 hectares) was distributed. It brought seven experts from Cuba to provide instruction to the farmers, and a Government Decree was issued which required landowners to cede to farmers land that remained uncultivated.

In the Canal Zone, the Canal Zone Rationing Board dealt with tyres, automobiles, and bicycles, and the Canal Zone Gasoline Rationing Board, matters pertaining to gasoline. Each board had three members representing the Panama Canal, the US Army, and the US Navy.⁴²

However, commercial hardships were not that severe for Zonians, though there were shortages of eggs and vegetables at times. The Zone was largely self-sufficient in some things, such as dairy products.⁴³

Zonians, civil and military, also benefited from the commissaries run by the forces and the Canal Zone government.⁴⁴ During the war, the Commissary Division of the Panama Canal understandably saw greatly increased volumes, to meet the requirements of the civilian

⁴² *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

⁴³ *The Role of North American Women in US Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone 1904-1945* by Paul W Morgan Jr (Dissertation submitted to Department of History, Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2000): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013679/00001/images/10>

⁴⁴ In 1945, a new limit was imposed on Panamanian Gold Roll employees of the Canal or the US forces. This limit of \$100 per month for married couple, or \$50 for single persons, was designed to suppress the supply of goods from the commissaries as “contraband” into the Republic (a constant source of friction with Panama merchants). This was one of the conditions for the 1942 agreement on the additional US bases obtained in the Republic”. The measure had already been applied to some 5,000 US citizens living in the Canal Zone but who were not employed by the Canal authorities: *Studies in Public Administration (Vol.1): Government-Operated Enterprises in the Panama Canal Zone* by Marshall E Dimock (University of Chicago Press), 1934.

personnel employed by the Army, Navy, the Canal and the Panama Railroad, as well as contractors.

THE FRANCE FIELD LONELY HEARTS CLUB

In June 1941, the Air Corps News Letter⁴⁵ reported that a *“one-man lonely hearts club and mail mart is in full bloom at France Field”*⁴⁶. It was reported that attention was first called to Sergeant George Russell in July 1940, when a puzzled postmaster investigated after the one soldier received over 200 letters in just two days.

The postmaster found that:

“a once-lonely sergeant had sat down and wrote a letter or 2 to leading US magazines suggesting that some of Uncle Sam's patriotic daughters might make life a whole lot easier for Uncle Sam's patriotic sons if they'd just sit down and write the boys a letter. The result was staggering. Within a few weeks 48 letters from patriotic daughters arrived in one mail. The next day 153 arrived. Sergeant Russell, who had offered his services as a clearing house where letters could be distributed to interested soldiers, was swamped -- but undaunted. He sat down, rolled up his sleeves and began the colossal task of indexing and distributing his correspondence”.

The index created by Sergeant Russell grew to astounding proportions. Each card showed a young lady's name and address, the type of correspondent she was interested in, her occupation, and her special interests. These ladies were college students, clerks, stenographers, models, and almost every other type of occupation imaginable. The file contained letters from every US state, as well as from Canada, Alaska, Cuba, Hawaii, and

⁴⁵ Air Corps News Letter, Vol. XXIV, No 11, June 1 1941.

⁴⁶ France Field was the Army airfield and base near Colón.

the Canal Zone. The largest representation was from California, with New York close behind.

The response among France Field's soldiers was described as “*enthusiastic*”, and that not one letter had gone unanswered, and that outgoing mail from the base was keeping pace with the incoming, which, at the time, threatened to pass the 2,000 per week mark.

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
13 November 2023