

## THE CANAL AS THE WAR ENDS

As mentioned elsewhere, it took until mid-1943 for the US to obtain permission for the total of 134 additional bases in Panama but outside the Canal Zone, the 1942 Bases Agreement only formally coming into effect in May 1943.<sup>1</sup> The irony would be that this construction programme got under way just as the apparent need for the bases was to soon reduce. In fact, in April 1943 that the US War Department reduced the status of the whole Caribbean Defense Command<sup>2</sup> to Defense Category "B", meaning that it was considered a coastal frontier that only "may be subject to minor attacks". Later in the year the alert status was downgraded further, to Category "A" – and it was lifted completely on 8 June 1944.<sup>3</sup>

By early 1943, the major features at each base around the Caribbean designed to defend its sea lanes and the Canal had been completed and were being fully used by the occupying forces. However, the reduction in the threat and associated reducing involvement of the region in the war saw all except the major installations at Trinidad, San Juan in Puerto Rico, Guantanamo, and the Canal Zone reduced to a restricted or caretaker status by Autumn 1944<sup>4</sup>.

1943 had seen the tide of the war start to turn conclusively in the Allies favour and, from January 1943, troop numbers in Panama had been progressively run down as air and ground units were transferred to Europe and the Pacific. In fact, by January 1943, it was apparent that any immediate threat there may have been to the Canal had diminished (although, ironically, a planned Japanese attack using submarine-launched aircraft was still under consideration at the time, with both the submarines and aircraft intended for the attack

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<sup>1</sup> <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/08/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

<sup>2</sup> Established in 1941 as a theatre command, including responsibility for tactical control of the Panama Canal. The Commanding General of the Army's Panama Canal Department was also made commander of the Caribbean Defense Command, which incorporated responsibilities in various British Caribbean possessions which the US had acquired under Lend-Lease:  
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd#:~:text=The%20CDC%20was%20a%20prototype,precipitated%20by%20World%20War%20II.>

<sup>3</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>4</sup> [https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building\\_Bases/bases-18.html](https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html)

under development<sup>5</sup>). The “Battle of the Caribbean” against the U-boats was effectively won, with these never again being a major threat, though sinkings continued<sup>6</sup>, and the Japanese military and naval forces were busy far away across the Pacific. There was a final period of renewed U-boat threat from 23 November 1943 to 8 April 1944, with the USAAF once more taking on more of the anti-submarine work for the Navy in the Caribbean, but that was the last such period of concern<sup>7</sup>.

In October 1943, a minelaying U-Boat laid mines within 4 miles (6.4 km) of the Colón breakwater on the Caribbean coast, but these caused no damage, and most were swept within a month<sup>8</sup>. Then November saw three U-boats present in the Panama Sea Frontier.

In Panama and the Canal Zone, as the US began gradually downgrading the threat level and the forces level, troop numbers steadily reduced and some defences (such as the big guns of the coastal artillery) fell into disuse, or were even be removed. In just over two years the war would be over and the would be another set of fraught negotiations between he US and Panamanian authorities, this time culminating in an abandoned agreement and the rapid withdrawal of US forces from the defence sites in the Republic.

It was only in 1943 that the peak strength of some 67,000 air and ground forces of the US Army’s Panama Canal Department had been reached<sup>9</sup>, and the major construction projects within the Canal Zone begun from 1939 were completed or were nearing completion (except for the abandoned Third Locks Project<sup>10</sup>). In the Canal Zone, base construction had peaked in 1942, with military construction expenditures in July of that year alone exceeded those spent during the entire period of 1920-1938.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.historynet.com/japans-panama-canal-buster/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41336>

<sup>7</sup> 336 ships were lost in 1942, 35 in 1943 and only three in 1944.

<sup>8</sup> The U-Boat involved went on to lay mines off the Gulf of Paria, Venezuela, again with little or no effect.

<sup>9</sup> Having expanded from about 28,000 men at the close of 1940, to about 31,000 by December 1941, rose to a peak of over 66,000 by early 1943: <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40438>

In May 1943, elements of the Striking Force of paratroops and airborne infantry began preparations for a combined parachute/gliders assault to seize the Vichy-controlled island of Martinique by force (which proved unnecessary).<sup>11</sup> No longer required for the planned Martinique operation<sup>12</sup>, the troops were instead moved out in August 1943, and departed Panama for Sicily, where they trained in preparation for the invasion of Southern France in 1944.

Road construction had become a major undertaking during the war, with the first seven-mile-long stretch of the Trans-Isthmian Highway opening in January 1942<sup>13</sup>, and being completed in December 1944 (but with traffic limited only to authorised military traffic)<sup>14</sup>. It was officially opened on 15 April 1943 by President Ricardo Adolfo del Guardia. At the opening ceremony he was accompanied by former President Boyd and Canal Zone Governor Colonel Edgerton. It took the entourage an hour and 15 minutes to reach Colón from Panama City<sup>15, 16</sup>.

Many access roads were built, and were essential. In early 1942, there had been few roads in jungle areas, even in the Canal Zone, and the road from the Gatun Locks to Fort Sherman near Colón had then only been in the planning stage. This was only completed in July 1943, and included a timber bridge over the old French canal.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://raytodd.blog/2022/09/15/panama-the-striking-force-martinique-and-gliders-in-the-jungle/>

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Until the Highway was built, aside from the Canal itself, only the Panama Railroad provided transportation between the two coasts.

<sup>14</sup> This was the first transcontinental highway in the Americas, albeit that Panama is only around 40 miles across at its narrowest point. The Trans-Isthmian Highway (will still exists to this day, as *Transistmica*) arose from the agreement that led to the Arias-Roosevelt treaty in 1936. It had been agreed to build a highway between Panama City on the Pacific and Colón on the Caribbean. Construction began in 1939, and the road was named the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, although the actual agreement had been signed by Acting President Dr Augusto Samuel Boyd and the Governor of the Canal Zone, Colonel Glen E Edgerton. Due to military requirements, the road it would not be available for public use until 1947, and it would not be until the 1950s that the Panama-Colón Bus Company would be formed as a wholly Panamanian public transport system between the cities: <https://www.elistmopt.com/2021/05/la-compania-de-autobuses-panama-colon.html#more>

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the plaque unveiled in Colón was subsequently stolen.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.elistmopt.com/2021/04/la-carretera-boyd-roosevelt-o-via.html>

The blackout in Panama was partially lifted in April 1943 (with, for example, streetlights remaining on until 2300). On 21 August 1944, the Commanding General issued new instructions, with unrestricted lighting allowed during normal periods of alert, but during a “complete” blackout no lights should be visible, although the power was not turned off and it was for individuals to ensure that lights were shielded or extinguished.

On 1 June 1943, the Panama Security Command was disestablished<sup>17</sup> and the Mobile Force<sup>18</sup> resumed responsibility for security in the Canal Zone, with the 150<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment continuing its internal security role, this remaining essentially unchanged until April 1945.<sup>19</sup>

In December 1943, as part of the general reduction in strength of the Panama Canal Department, all barrage balloon positions were abandoned and the unit involved returned to the US for reassignment.<sup>20</sup>

The 10<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron (Medium), having been heavily involved in the anti-submarine campaign in the Caribbean from the beginning, finally re-equipped in December 1943, replacing its veteran, and long obsolete, Douglas B-18B and B-18C Bolos with 15 brand- new North American B-25G Mitchells at New France Field. This was a short-lived arrangement, as the unit returned to the US in early May 1944. This effectively ended the brief Sixth Air Force<sup>21</sup> association with the seemingly formidable “big gun” Mitchells, which looked good on paper as anti-submarine aircraft, but which in practice proved to be less effective than the obsolete B-18B and B-18C that they replaced.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On 15 April 1942, the then new Security Command had taken over responsibility for the Lock Guard and Utility Guard functions along the Canal, with the Mobile Force sole responsibility being land defence of the Canal up to the lock enclosures.

<sup>18</sup> The Mobile Force had been activated on 16 February 1940 and had consisted of four infantry and an engineer regiment, plus two artillery battalions. The plan was for it to conduct a mobile defence of the Canal Zone in depth beginning at the beaches and not by the preparation of static defence positions.

<sup>19</sup> *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>20</sup> *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>21</sup> The Sixth Air Force was established in September 1942 and served as a Major Overseas Command for all USAAF operations, not only in Panama, but throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America. In July 1946, it was redesignated the Caribbean Air Command.

<sup>22</sup> American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2012.

As the danger of air attack had become the primary concern, it had been felt that the heavy mortar coastal batteries dating from World War 1 were virtually defenceless from such an attack, and in 1943 these sites were stripped and the mortars removed<sup>23</sup>. The open-top emplacement design left the mortars open to air and high-angle artillery attack (and the latter was effective against the mortars on Corregidor in the Philippines). Of those heavy mortars in place during World War 2, only those in the Philippines saw any action, this during the Japanese invasion in 1942. In 1944, all but four of those remaining in the US and those in the Canal Zone had been removed.

With the obsolete coastal mortars deactivated, the last firing of the large coastal artillery – the 16-inch and 14-inch (355 mm and 406 mm) guns - took place in 1944 and, after this last practice, they remained unmanned and were finally removed between 1946 and 1948. In 1944, about two-thirds of the proposed new gun batteries, such as those designed to better combat small surface craft or attacking submarines, had been completed. However, by then, most practical naval threats to the Canal had been neutralised or removed, and hence work even on the new batteries was halted, as well as the larger guns removed, with the Coastal Artillery units reduced in size (regiments being broken down into battalions).

By 1948, almost all the harbour gun defences had been scrapped and, with only the anti-aircraft mission remaining, the US Army's Coastal Artillery Corps was disestablished in 1950<sup>24</sup>.

The changes in the gun defences of the Canal Zone might be illustrated by those that took place at Fort Amador, on the breakwater causeway formed from linked islands and used to defend the Pacific entrance to the Canal. Initially armed with two batteries, each with two 6-inch (152 mm) artillery pieces capable of being withdrawn under cover<sup>25</sup>, these batteries (named Birnie and Smith) were begun in 1913 and completed in 1917. The 6-inch guns remained in place until 1943, when they were removed and the structures that had housed

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<sup>23</sup> Probably the only US 12-inch (304 mm) mortars to ever see action were those in the Philippines in 1942.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/United\\_States\\_Army\\_Coast\\_Artillery\\_Corps](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/United_States_Army_Coast_Artillery_Corps)

The Corps was also responsible for the harbour defence mines, this role and the associated "mine planter" vessels became a responsibility of the US Navy.

<sup>25</sup> Being mounted on the so-called "Panama mounts".

them were buried. A battery equipped with 90 mm guns replaced the 6-inch guns, being intended for use against motor torpedo boats<sup>26</sup> - but even these were subsequently removed in 1948, and the site buried over<sup>27</sup>.

Given the lack of threat, preparations were begun on 31 March 1944 to remove even the anti-aircraft defences in many areas of the Caribbean Defense Command, although San Juan, Guantanamo, Trinidad, and Aruba-Curaçao were designated as “Important Harbors” and would be excluded.

In April 1944, the Secretary of the Navy ordered routine inshore and offshore patrol, mine sweeping and patrol craft escort of shipping in inactive threat areas be discontinued, except again in the case of the aforementioned “important harbors”.<sup>28</sup> Then, on 29 May 1944, the entire Caribbean Sea area was designated a “non-combat area”.<sup>29</sup>

By 1944, as the war progressed, and seemed to move even further away, Panama had appeared to become something of a backwater; with the Canal Zone being increasingly used primarily as a training zone for jungle warfare. By 1 January 1944, the USAAF Sixth Air Force in Panama had become virtually a large-scale training organisation.

It was not until the last months of the war that the USAAF in Panama finally received the fighter type that had been considered ideal for use there, the twin-engine Lockheed P-38 Lightning. Local commanders had lobbied for the P-38 since 1941, seeing such a twin-engine fighter as ideal for use in the Panama theatre, with its extensive jungle and missions over the seas, providing the twin-engine safety and range required.

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<sup>26</sup> AMTB (Anti-Motor Torpedo Boat) Batteries - complete AMTB batteries were composed of two 90 mm M1 guns on fixed M3 mounts, two 90 mm M1 guns on mobile M1 mounts and two 37 mm (later 40 mm) automatic guns but some AMTB would not be completely armed with full complement of the mobile guns. Many positions were armed only with mobile guns (some 90 mm, but mostly 37 mm sections).

<sup>27</sup> Postwar, the Causeway would see HAWK surface-to-air missiles batteries.

<sup>28</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>29</sup> Ibid.

After numerous problems and delays, large-scale deliveries of the intended P-38 Lightning do not appear to have taken place until April 1945, very close to the end of the war, with over 120 arriving in April alone. However, by then, the Sixth Air Force was reporting that it was now 33 aircraft over its intended strength (which was then set at 186), with the Commanding General of the Department asking for the movement of fighters to (and from) the Sixth Air Force to cease, due to the problems with maintenance and supplies that these were causing. Nevertheless, by June 1945, it had no less than 199 P-38 on strength, far more than were actually required by then<sup>30</sup>.

In any event, the “ideal” P-38 was to be quickly replaced after VJ-Day, as the type was to be removed from the USAAF inventory by November 1945. In 1946, the first Republic P-47N Thunderbolt, another single-engine type, arrived, as the P-38 were declared surplus and disposed of. The P-47N (which were redesignated F-47N in 1947 under the new US Air Force) would be the last propeller-driven fighter aircraft to be stationed in the Canal Zone and started arriving in numbers in March 1947.

Even before the problems caused by the supplies of P-38, on 23 September 1944, the War Department had told the Caribbean Defense Command to store all “excess” aircraft that the Sixth Air Force had waiting for disposal at the Panama Air Depot at Albrook Field.<sup>31</sup> In October 1944, a conference was held at which the Caribbean Defense Command, the Foreign Economic Administration (FEA) and the USAAF were represented and which defined the role of the FEA. This was that –

- It would certify to the USAAF what aircraft had no market life and should be salvaged (that is scrapped);
- The local FEA members could acquire the market needs for aircraft but could not act on the disposition of the aircraft until notifying Washington;
- The FEA would report to the USAAF what happened to aircraft that were already declared surplus; and

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<sup>30</sup>[https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/bitstream/handle/mtsu/4729/Bitzer\\_mtsu\\_0170N\\_10471.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/bitstream/handle/mtsu/4729/Bitzer_mtsu_0170N_10471.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>31</sup> <https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content>

- Any tactical aircraft would be referred to the FEA if initially regarded as salvage material<sup>32</sup>.

From 15 November to 16 December 1944, the Sixth Air Force waited for approval for the disposal of its excess, unwanted aircraft by sales or salvage. In January 1945, some of the aircraft in question, and identified as excess material, included B-24 Liberator heavy bombers; B-18 Bolo and RA-20A Havocs light bombers<sup>33</sup>; P-39D, P-39K and P-39N Airacobra fighters<sup>34</sup>; RP-40C<sup>35</sup>, and P-40E and P-40N Warhawk fighters; C-78 Bobcat light transports; BC-1 Texan trainers; UC-92 Silvaires<sup>36</sup>, L-4A and L-4E Grasshopper light aircraft; PQ-8A targets<sup>37</sup>; and UC-61 Forwarder utility transports. In fact, at that time there was a total of 237 aircraft identified as excess that were waiting for the disposal through sales or salvage<sup>38</sup>.

As mentioned, training became an increasingly important role and, in November 1944, the Caribbean Defense Command began to establish additional training resources to assist the efforts of Latin American republics to “mold their individual military groups into well-functioning and efficient organizations patterned after the general principles of the United States Army”<sup>39</sup>. Indeed, General Crittenberger (who had replaced General Brett as Commanding General of both the Panama Canal Department and the Caribbean Defense Command in October 1945) was to be quoted as saying that the major mission of the Command was to help train the militaries of South America in US style of warfighting.<sup>40</sup> After May 1945, for a fairly short time, the Command became a major training and staging

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<sup>32</sup> <https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content>

<sup>33</sup> The “R” prefix denotes “Restricted” (obsolete).

<sup>34</sup> The head of the USAAF was adamant that no P-39 be returned to the US:

<https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> These were two aircraft impressed from local civilian owners in 1942.

<sup>37</sup> A radio-controlled target drone version of the Culver Cadet light aircraft.

<sup>38</sup> <https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content>

<sup>39</sup> As per *CDC Training Memorandum Number 1, Training Directive Training Year 1945*.

<sup>40</sup> Willis D. Crittenberger, interview by Hardy Burt and William Bradford Huie, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), 1953, <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?AHIV;777338>



command for the retraining and deployment of Army troop units released from Europe for combat duty in the Pacific<sup>41</sup>.

In late 1944, the USAAF opened in Panama its Latin American Air School<sup>42</sup> and, from Autumn 1944, large numbers of airmen from almost all Latin American countries began to attend. This might be seen to be part of the growing diplomatic role played by the Caribbean Defense Command and the Commanding General, a role that grew during the tenure of General Brett<sup>43</sup>, who commanded from October 1943 to October 1945<sup>44</sup>.

Having reached a peak of 67,000 during 1943, by January 1944, 38,751 of the forces previously on the strength of the Panama Canal Department had been redeployed, some outpost installations were abandoned, and the heavy artillery batteries had begun to be deactivated.

The peak of construction activity on behalf of the Navy in the Canal Zone had been reached in Summer 1943, after which three of the four major contracts were terminated. After this, in April 1944, the Navy awarded only several smaller lump-sum contracts were awarded for minor additions and improvements and to cater for ongoing needs.<sup>45</sup>

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<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>

<sup>42</sup> Continuing postwar, it would become the US Air Force School for Latin America (USAFSLA) and was based at Albrook AFB (it closed briefly in the late 1940s but reopened after a year) and specialised in mechanical, medical and technical training. It subsequently became the Inter-American Air Forces Academy and, as such, still exists “for the purpose of providing military education and training to military personnel of Central and South American countries, Caribbean countries, and other countries eligible for assistance under Chapter 5 of Part II of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961”: <https://www.37trw.af.mil/Units/Inter-American-Air-Forces-Academy/>

<sup>43</sup> General Brett had personally “adopted” a B-17B Flying Fortress called “The Swoose”, as his own private Transport, and this would fly him around the region, with him being able to use it effectively as a means of propaganda allowing foreign leaders to travel with him, and reportedly even allowing the Presidents of Cuba and Nicaragua to fly as co-pilots during “good neighbour” visits. The aircraft eventually transferred to the care of the National Museum of the US Air Force.

<sup>44</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>45</sup> [https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building\\_Bases/bases-18.html](https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html)

A lighter-than-air (in other words, airship<sup>46</sup>) base was established by the Navy in 1944 at Mandinga, on the Caribbean coast, 75 miles (120.7 km) west of Coco Solo, for use in aerial patrols of the eastern approaches of the Canal. It was constructed by the Army on land leased from the Panamanian Government, and the airfield was transferred to the Navy in February 1944. However, in September 1944, the blimp and its equipment were transferred to Barranquilla on the coast of Colombia, and the Navy vacated the site, which was returned to the Army.<sup>47</sup>

The submarine base at Coco Solo was disestablished in 1944. Then, on 12 June 1944 the 10<sup>th</sup> Fleet, created to coordinate anti-submarine efforts in the Caribbean, was dissolved, and the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington directed that all Lend-Lease bases in the region, except Trinidad, be put on caretaker status. Gradually other bases and installations in the Caribbean region were downgraded. By VE-Day no enemy forces had threatened the area at all for over 10 months and, from VE- to VJ-Day reductions and deactivations continued at an even faster pace.

By early 1945, forces in Canal Zone were submitting plans for postwar scenarios and, by the end of the year many defensive emplacements had already been abandoned or removed<sup>48</sup>. In March 1945, official records of US service personnel overseas showed that at the time there were 37,017 in the Panama Canal Department (with a further 35,993 in the Antilles Department elsewhere in the Caribbean theatre).

The end of the war in 1945 saw civilian watchmen being reinstated on the Canal, with a new force comprising 30 guards and two sergeants under the Superintendent of the Panama Canal's Locks Division. This had responsibility for lock security, and was backed up by the Canal Zone Police. The military was to temporarily return to the security role during 1950-52, during hostilities in Korea.

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<sup>46</sup> Strictly speaking, being a "blimp" or non-rigid airship, lacking an internal structural frame or keel and relying on the pressure of their lifting gas to maintain their shape. The iconic Goodyear blimp, as seen at sporting events etc in the US in a modern example of the form.

<sup>47</sup> [https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building\\_Bases/bases-18.html](https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html)

<sup>48</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>

Despite the fight against the U-boats (and the risks from malaria), in many ways, service in Panama during World War 2 had been one of the safest overseas deployments one could hope for. However, the war had had an effect on Panama in many ways (even on the side of the road that people could drive – given the forced change in 1943), even though it was not directly attacked.

For example, early in the war, the freighter and passenger ships belonging to the Panama Railroad Company had been transferred to the US Army or Navy<sup>49</sup>, with the shipping line services suspended until 1947. Rationing and censorship had been imposed across the entire country, and blackout restrictions imposed.

It seems an incontestable fact that, despite the move to having a two-ocean navy, without the Panama Canal it is unlikely that the US transport network (road, rail, seaport and river traffic) could have accommodated the flow of men and materials required for the two-theatre war in which the US found itself in 1941. Between 7 December 1941 and VJ-Day in September 1945, over 6,400 warships and 10,300 other vessels passed along the Canal. The trans-isthmus railway, and the later oil pipeline, had also played an important role.

Many of the fears that had been expressed about Japanese attacks, Axis infiltrators, or fifth column saboteurs either never materialised or were dealt with quickly at the beginning of the war effort<sup>50</sup>. Even the U-boat campaign, chiefly concentrating on the oil and bauxite traffic further out in the Caribbean, had not had as great an effect on Panama and the Canal as might have been feared.

As detailed elsewhere<sup>51</sup>, the bases outside the Canal Zone would be hastily vacated in the immediate postwar, with all closed by early 1948, following a failure to reach any

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<sup>49</sup> The original Panama Railroad was begun in 1847 by 3 New York entrepreneurs and opened in 1855, as the first transcontinental railway in the western hemisphere. Originally initiated to take advantage of a US mail contract, it was then used by many hundreds of would-be goldminers making their way to take part in the California gold rush – both they and the mail making the journey (despite sea journeys before and after crossing the isthmus) faster than trying to cross the continental US.

<sup>50</sup> <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

<sup>51</sup> <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/08/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

agreement on the continued use of even some of them. It would take a further treaty in 1955 for the US to once again obtain the ability to operate outside the Canal Zone, including a 15-year agreement over the use of the Rio Hato airbase<sup>52</sup>.

The reduction in strength, and the redeployment of troops, from the Panama Canal Department and the Caribbean Defense Command as a whole, which had begun in 1943, continued apace to December 1945. A start was made on a reorganisation in 1946, with an aim of achieving a target of just 20,000 Canal Zone troops by 1 March 1946. In order to concentrate resources for occupation duty in Austria, Germany, Korea and Japan, the new Army Chief of Staff, Eisenhower, wrote to General MacArthur in Japan in January 1946 saying that garrisons in places such as Panama were being “cut to the bone”.<sup>53</sup> The reduction in numbers continued after the war, despite the Cold War and the Korean War of the early 1950s<sup>54</sup> and, by 1959, troop levels reached their lowest level, with just 6,600 being present.

At the end of the war, the Coast Artillery Command (already largely redundant) and the Mobile Force were discontinued (as we have seen the Coastal Artillery Corps itself was abolished in 1950), and on 1 December 1946, the Panama Canal Department was divided back into Atlantic and Pacific sectors.

The USAAF Sixth Air Force was removed from the Panama Canal Department and reorganised as the Caribbean Air Command, and in 1947 the new, separate US Air Force took over responsibility from the former USAAF.

Then, in September 1947, the Army command in the Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Department, was deactivated and replaced by the new US Army Caribbean (USARCARIB), still commanded by General Crittenger, and which retained its headquarters in the Canal

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<sup>52</sup> Only to lose access once more, when the Panamanian leader, Omar Torrijos Herrera (who negotiated the treaty that saw the eventual handover of the Canal), refused to renew the lease.

<sup>53</sup> *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008.

<sup>54</sup> The Korean War 1950-53 saw security increased, Army guards assigned, anti-aircraft units (which were those left from World War 2) were stood up and used to supplement harbour defences, “hostile” foreign nationals were detained and the control of ships was tightened.

Zone. The Army, Navy and USAF components (the latter now separated from the Army as a separate fighting force in its own right) in Panama were reorganised under the overall, forces-wide Caribbean Command in November 1947, again under General Crittenger<sup>55</sup>.

While defence of the Canal remained the primary concern of USARCARIB<sup>56</sup>, it also acquired other, broader responsibilities across Latin America<sup>57</sup>. Despite the changes, the War Department<sup>58</sup> reiterated that an Army officer would be the man in charge of Panama Canal operations and Canal Zone, while the Governor of the Canal Zone would continue to be subject to this Army officer.<sup>59</sup>

Since late in the war, as the threat of attack was beginning to recede, the main Canal Zone airbase at Albrook Field had begun a training role that it continued to perform until 1989. The Air Force School of the Military Training Center of the Panama Canal Department, located at the Panama Air Depot (PAD) at Albrook, opened in 1943 to train Latin American Air Forces. The first class consisted of an officer and 10 enlisted men from Peru who signed up for three months of apprentice training<sup>60</sup>. Albrook ceased use as a terminal for civilian airline operations in 1949.<sup>61</sup>

In 1946, a Carnival of Victory was held in Panama City (said to have been the best in the history of carnivals in the country)<sup>62</sup>. Christened “*La Victoria*”, President Jimenez Brin later issued a Decree giving the pre-Lent carnivals official status, to be celebrated annually

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<sup>55</sup> Which was to become US Southern Command in 1963.

<sup>56</sup> In 1963, USARCARIB became US Army Forces Southern Command, part of US Southern Command.

<sup>57</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>

During the 1950s, the Caribbean basin was removed from the new Command's area of responsibility, and in 1963 it was renamed US Southern Command. During the 1960s, its primary mission involved defending the Panama Canal, contingency planning for Cold War activities, and the administration of the US foreign military assistance program in Central and South America. It later expanded its responsibilities to encompass the Caribbean, but relocated to Miami in 1997, as the treaty for the handover of the Canal took effect: *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>58</sup> The War and Navy Departments would be absorbed into the new Department of Defense in 1949.

<sup>59</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>60</sup> <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/czp.htm>

<sup>62</sup> <https://portal.critica.com.pa/archivo/03022000/opiayer.html#TOP>

through the country. *La Victoria* also involved communities from the Canal Zone, the US forces and other clubs, societies and groups, with an estimated 56 floats taking part in the parade<sup>63</sup>.

It might be noted that, until 1958, US forces also participated in Panama's independence parades held each November, and certainly did so in the parades of November 1946. This participation was to end after protests by students and others were repressed after the 3 November 1958 parade<sup>64</sup>.

It was not only the US forces that saw a drawdown in numbers with the end of the war. An increase in number of employees of the Canal and railway had begun in 1938 when the (abortive) construction of a third set of locks began. Even after the US entered the war and despite that project being suspended, wartime requirements still demanded a continued increase of personnel.

The workforce, that had numbered 13,800 in 1938, reached a peak of 38,000 by 1942. Once the war was over, it was impossible to maintain this level and a reduction began. By May 1950, it had been reduced to some 19,600 employees (figures used include those on both the US-rate and local rate pay scales – the so-called “Gold” and “Silver” Roll - employees<sup>65</sup>), and what were described as fundamental organisational changes were made in 1951 - followed by the introduction of income tax for employees in the Canal Zone, and an \$80 million project to replace obsolete and substandard housing, completed by 1956.<sup>66</sup>

In December 1950, the New York Times marked the first passage of a Japanese ship through the Canal since July 1941, when a vessel loaded with scrap metal made a transit on 10 December.

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.elistmpty.com/2020/02/escenas-del-carnaval-de-la-victoria.html>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.elistmpty.com/2021/11/desfile-de-noviembre-de-1946.html>

<sup>65</sup> The terms “Gold” and “Silver” were only officially dropped during the 1950s and a single pay scale for American and Panamanian workers was established. This change had been promised during treaty negotiations in 1936, a promise which was not honoured. See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/11/17/panama-war-discrimination-and-segregation/>

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/htmlfiles/2014-08-14P.pdf>

In retrospect, the 1940s were seen, regardless of the impact of World War 2, in many ways as a decade of progress for Panama. It saw the first Panamanian airlines (including COPA, which continues to this day), the start of the Colon Free Zone, the Social Security system, women receiving the vote, Panama winning its first Olympic medals (a Panamanian of Jamaican origin, Lloyd La Beach, who won two silver medals in the 1948 London Olympics), and the Baseball major League was founded. On the other hand, it was from then that the National Police (later the National Guard and increasingly militarised) began to effectively run the country from behind the scenes<sup>67</sup>.

In the 1940s, Panama also enjoyed an economic boom as a result of military expenditures on Canal security and construction projects. However, following the end of the war, the economy entered a period of recession that lasted until 1947.

Despite the Army's earlier position, and following the (forced) withdrawal from the bases outside the Canal Zone, it appeared that, in fact, the military establishment was far from displeased by the turn of events. The Department of the Army was reported to feel "no dissatisfaction over the evacuation" and the Army's Plans and Operations Division stated that the US Air Force was interested only in acquiring certain sites for radar stations, the right (at no cost) to use Rio Hato for transit and technical stops, and the right to keep small bodies of troops there and elsewhere - all considerably less than had been demanded in the abortive 1947 negotiations with the Panamanian Government<sup>68</sup>.

### **OPERATION *TRANSIT***

After the German surrender in May 1945, there was seen to be a need for a massive redeployment of men and materials from the European to the Pacific theatres, this being christened Operation *Transit* by the Panama Canal Department. However, after Japan

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<sup>67</sup> For a useful summary of the rise of what became in 1953 the National Guard, see the briefing from the US Library of Congress: <http://countrystudies.us/panama/13.htm>  
Between 1948 and 1952, the National Police commander José Antonio Remón Cantera installed and removed Presidents seemingly with ease. Among his behind-the-scenes manipulations were the denial to Arnulfo Arias of the Presidency he had apparently won in 1948, the installation of Arias in the Presidency in 1949, and the engineering of his removal from office in 1951. In 1952, Remón Cantera became President himself.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

surrendered, 17 ships then underway, including one already in the Canal, were rerouted to US East Coast ports instead.

Operation *Transit* was to be the final flurry of military and naval activity in Panama during the war. The first redeployed troopship to pass through the Panama Canal was the USS *Uruguay*, which docked at Cristobal on 20 June with 4,400 men aboard, direct from Leghorn, Italy. Altogether, 36 troopships passed through the Canal Zone carrying approximately 125,000 troops being redeployed from the European and Mediterranean theatres. The last redeployment vessel, the USS *Hawaiian Shipper*, arrived on 14 August 1945, just in time for its passengers to get news of the Japanese surrender and to find their destination changed to New York.

Operation *Transit* was formally initiated on 5 July 1945 and consisted of four different Plans, which differed depending on the time that any vessel would stop while in transit and if any of the troops aboard were able or required to disembark.

The project was placed under the direction of the Deputy Commander, Panama Canal Department, and the Department chief of transportation was assigned responsibility for the technical phase, which included servicing, repair, and transit of the ships.

Plans A and B dealt with situations where short stays were involved, and troops did not disembark, except into the immediate dock area for a few hours of recreation, with temporary facilities to provide refreshments, souvenirs etc. Plan C included arrangements for troops to be transferred to other areas for more extended rest and recreation away from the ships<sup>69</sup>. Plan D involved having to billet troops in the Canal Zone temporarily.

Obviously, troops travelled in both directions, returning home from service in the Pacific as well as being deployed there. Similar arrangements to those put in place for Operation *Transit* could be employed for returning servicemen. In both directions, injured or ill troops

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<sup>69</sup> Such as at Balboa High School stadium.



would be removed to hospitals in the Canal Zone, with several hundred being removed to the hospitals during Operation *Transit*.

Every possible facility, including religious, USO, Red Cross, and post exchange services, were made available to make the short stay in the Canal Zone pleasant (and profitable).

One unusual incident occurred in August 1945, when the USS *General DE Aultman*, returning from the Pacific ran aground in the Canal about a mile (1.6 km) south of the Miraflores Locks. The troops were disembarked, but had to be found alternative accommodation, as the more usual places had been earmarked for troops aboard two Operation *Transit* vessels. Alongside the 3,209 officers and men there were also 84 nurses and five Red Cross women. At one of the sites used, at Fort Clayton, the visitors were welcomed with \$7,000 worth of Coca Cola, 180 gallons of ice cream and 35 kegs of beer, with more to follow in the subsequent days. Those who wanted to, five busloads in all, were even taken on a sightseeing tour of historic sites in Panama. After nearly a week in Panama, the ship and troops finally departed on 13 August 1945.

On 12 September 1945, the Commanding General formally ended Operation *Transit*. Despite only lasting a few months, during the operation ships had taken on 410,000 barrels of fuel oil (with 124,725 complimentary pints of ice cream also being provided)<sup>70</sup>.

Ray Todd  
Panama City  
Republic of Panama  
13 December 2022

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<sup>70</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>