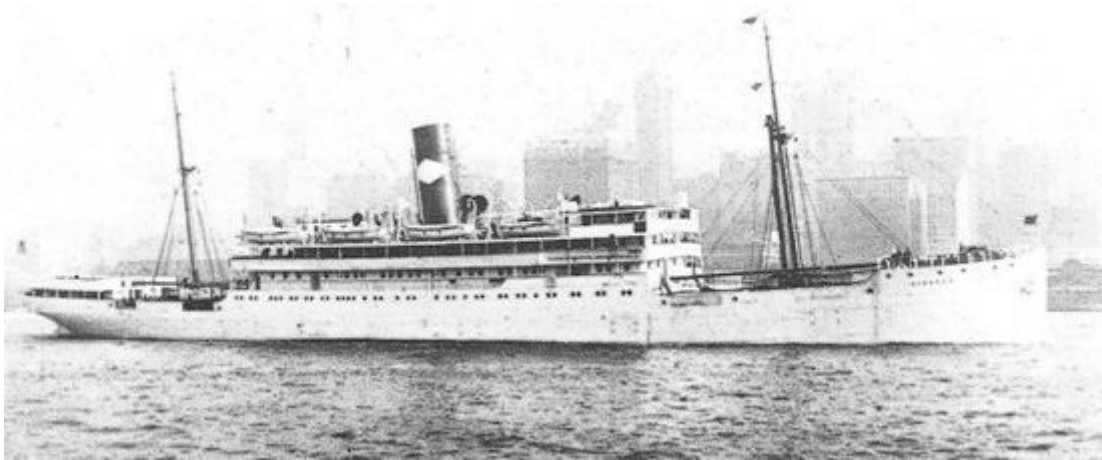


THE LOSS OF THE SS SIXAOLA



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The *Sixaola* was just one of 20 vessels of the “Great White Fleet” of the United Fruit Company to be lost during World War 2. She was also a victim of the bad days of the thankfully short-lived U-boat offensive in the Caribbean. Each loss would have its own story, lost to history, each unique. Perhaps the story of the loss of the *Sixaola* could stand as an example and tribute. There was considerable loss of life, and many of the survivors had to endure several days in an open lifeboat before reaching safety.

By World War 2, the United Fruit Company had built up a considerable fleet of ships to service its fruit trade in the Caribbean and Central America. The ships not only carried bananas back to the US, and necessary supplies from the US, some also became a byword for luxury cruising – and the *Sixaola* was one of these.

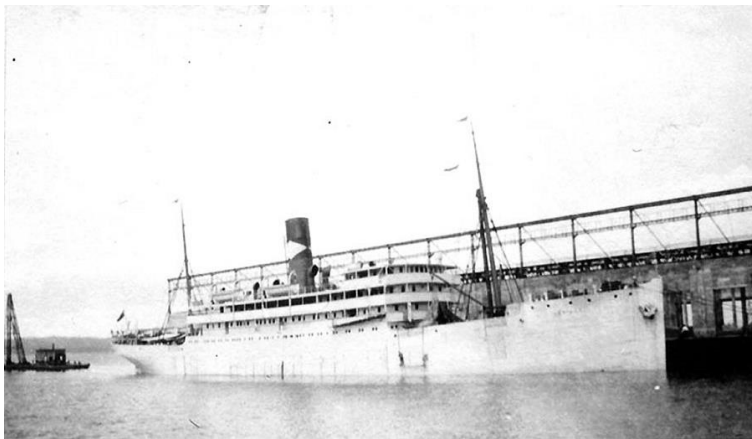
A refrigerated cargo-liner, built to carry bananas to the US, and cargo from the US, as well as fare-paying passengers, she was named for the river that forms the border between Costa Rica and Panama on the Caribbean side of the countries.

¹ Photo credit: John H Melville.

Completed by Workman, Clark & Co Ltd of Belfast in 1911², the *Sixaola* was 4,693 tons, owned by the United Fruit Steamship Company and flew the US flag.³ 394-feet long (120 metres), with a beam of 50-feet 4-inches (15.3 metres), and a draught of 25-feet (7.6 metres). Her maximum speed was said to 14 knots, and propulsion came from a vertical triple-expansion steam engine of 2,500 horsepower, driving a single propeller.⁴

She had served with the US Navy during World War 1, and had even sunk previously, albeit partially, in 1919. She had been taken up by the Navy on 19 September 1918 and commissioned as a unit of the Naval Overseas Transportation Service as USS *Sixaola*. She made three return trips between the US and France before tragedy struck.⁵

While tied up at a pier in Hoboken, New Jersey on 23 February 1919, a fire had broken out in which two men died, including her executive officer, whilst investigating the fire. The cargo, already mostly loaded, was also a total loss. However, she was refloated and taken to a nearby shipyard for repairs. She would eventually be decommissioned in June 1919, transferred to the War Department, but only returned to the United Fruit Company in 1922 (actually to Carillo Steamship Company, a United Fruit Company subsidiary).⁶



SS Sixaola prior to her service with US Navy in World War 1 (US Navy photo)

² It would be 1932 before the company ordered its first US-built ships – spurred by new subsidiaries introduced by the US Government. *Sixaola* was one of three similar vessels ordered at the same time, only one of which would survive World War 2, the *SS Carillo*. The *SS Tivives*, operating under an Army Transportation Contract, was sunk by German aircraft whilst in convoy off Algeria in 1943 with the loss of one member of the 48-man civilian crew and one of the 25 man Naval Armed Guard.

³ She had transferred to the US flag in 1914. In 1914, following the outbreak of war in Europe, the US Congress had passed a law allowing foreign-registered, foreign-built ships belonging to US companies to register under the US flag which the United Fruit Company had previously lobbied for unsuccessfully.

⁴ <https://www.navsource.org/archives/12/172777.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

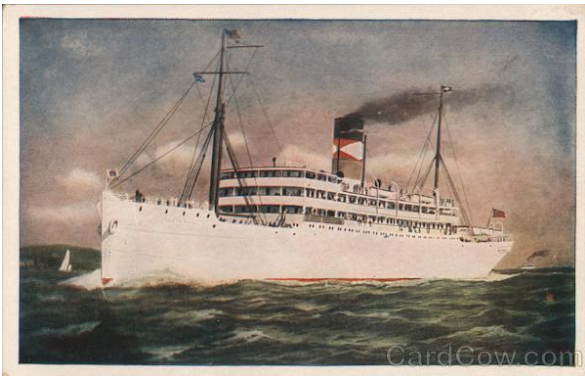
Photo # NH 103142 USS Sixaola in harbor, circa 1918



Camouflaged Sixaola c.1918 (US Navy photo)



The Sixaola sunk at her moorings in 1919 (US Navy photo)

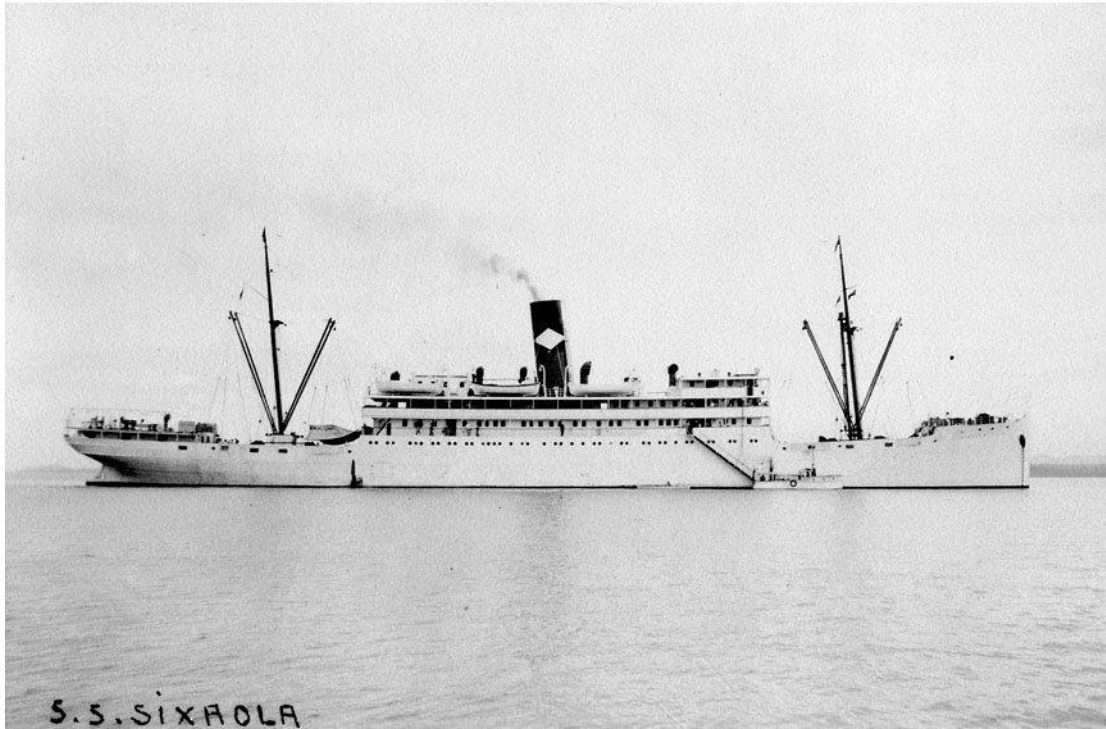


Postcard of the Sixaola in the 1920s⁷

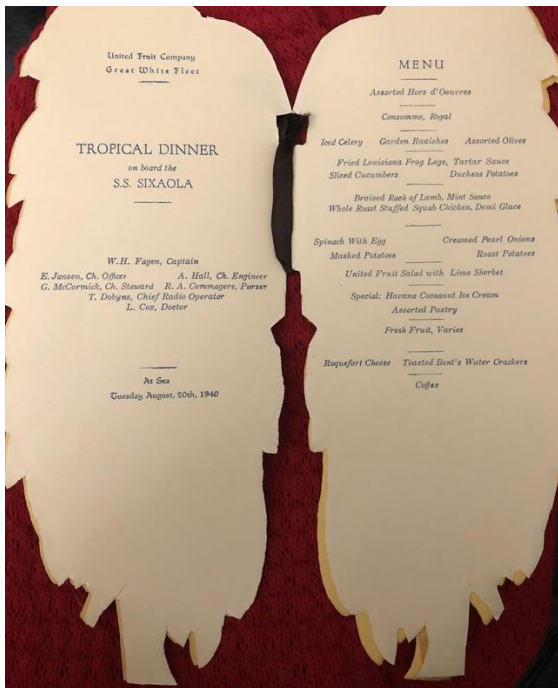


⁷ <https://www.cardcow.com>

S.S. Sixaola circa the 1920s



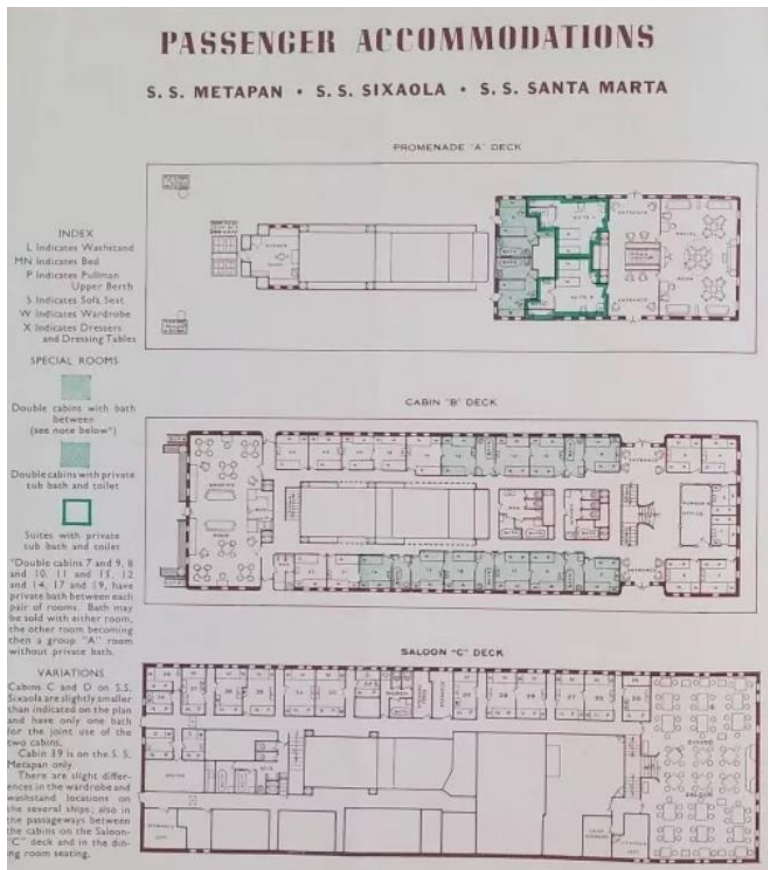
A fine photograph of SS Sixaola in the 1920s (US Navy photo)



Menu for a "tropical dinner" on Sixaola in August 1940⁸



⁸ https://www.reddit.com/r/VintageMenus/comments/y5i7bs/1940_ss_sixaola_cruise_dinner_menu_bananas/



Deck plan of Sixaola and sisters from 1936 brochure

During World War 2, the US War Shipping Administration requisitioned many of the company's ships for the war effort, while allowing the remainder of the fleet to continue in their peacetime activities. Even so, the trade of bananas was severely affected. In any case, the banana-import ports, such as New Orleans and Mobile, had more important war cargoes to deal with.⁹ The company's officers and men stayed with their ships throughout the war unless called into Navy or Coast Guard service.¹⁰

The fleet lost its first ship in February 1942, sunk by a U-boat, and during the U-boat offensive in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico during 1942 there were heavy losses, with six vessels sunk in May, six in June, and four in July. Even after this onslaught losses continued, with two more gone before the end of the year. In 1943, two more ships were sunk, one being lost far away off the west coast of Scotland in October.¹¹

⁹ <https://www.houmatoday.com/story/news/2003/07/20/going-bananas-united-fruit-ripened-in-wwii/26811055007/>

¹⁰ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1976/december/pictorial-banana-navy>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In February 1942, it was reported that the *Sixaola* had seemingly already had a close call with a U-boat, or rather two U-boats. The War Diary for the Eastern Sea Frontier¹² contained the following entries –

0328 SS SIXAOLA chased by two submarines in 33-40N, 77-15W. Course 060 T speed 14 knots. She is a US passenger vessel, 4693 tons, and belongs to United Fruit Company.

0700 SS SIXAOLA resumed course and ended alert.¹³



Promenade deck on Sixaola

At the time of its loss, the *Sixaola* had a complement of 8 officers, 79 crew¹⁴ and six gun crew, the latter supplied by the US Navy Armed Guard.¹⁵ The Navy sailors manned the ship's single 3-inch (76mm) gun and two 0.5 inch machine guns.

It was on 12 June 1942 when the SS *Sixaola* was torpedoed and sunk by U-159¹⁶ while 50 miles off the Bocas del Toro. Under Captain William H Fagan, she had been sailing from

¹² The Panama Sea Frontier patrol and threat area covered both Pacific and Caribbean regions. It stretched from the Mexico/Guatemala border out to the Galapagos Islands and down to a point at 5° of latitude on the coast of South America. On the other side, it stretched from the Mexico/British Honduras border to Punta de Gallinas in Colombia on the north coast of South America, and around 90 miles west of Aruba. In doing so, the Panama Sea Frontier encompassed the coastlines of British Honduras, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia.

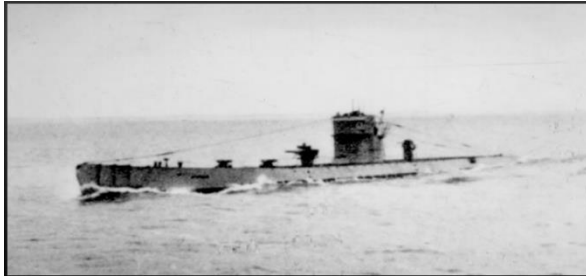
¹³ <https://www.uboardarchive.net/ESF/ESFWarDiaryFeb42CH2.htm>

¹⁴ Details of at least 30 of the crew may be found at <https://uboard.net/allies/merchants/crews/ship1795.html>

¹⁵ These were trained sailors provided by the US Navy Armed Guard to man defensive guns mounted on merchant vessels (later in the war, radar operators would also be provided). During the war, over 144,000 men of the US Navy Armed Guard served on 6,200 ships.

¹⁶ Commissioned in October 1941, one of 54 Type IX C boats built, and commanded by Korvettenkapitan Helmut Friedriche Witte, she sank 119,554 GRT of shipping on two Caribbean operation patrols, by was lost

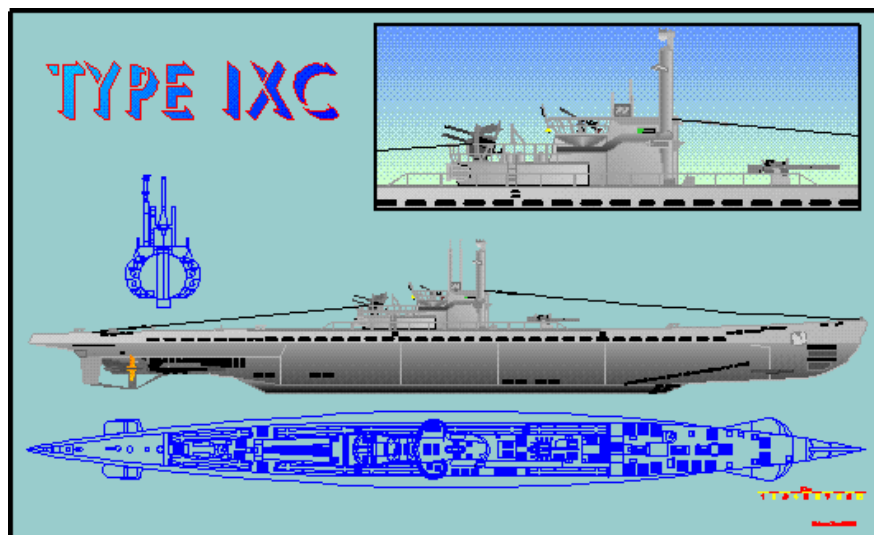
Cristobal, and heading for Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, and New Orleans. She was carrying a cargo of 900 tons of US Army supplies¹⁷, including trucks, trailers, clothing, and foodstuffs. There were also 108 passengers.



A rather poor photograph said to be of the U-159.



Location of the attack on the Sixaola



with all 53 crew, after being attacked by a US Navy PBM Mariner flying-boat south-east of Haiti on 28 July 1943: <https://uboat.net/boats/u159.htm>

See also <https://www.u-historia.com/uhistoria/historia/huboots/u100-u199/u0159/u159.htm>

¹⁷ Including that of the 805th Engineer Battalion, Aviation (Separate) on its way to Guatemala (see below).

¹⁸ <https://uboat.net/types/ixc.htm>

The vessel was struck by two torpedoes, one in the bow and the other on the centre Number 2 hold. The Captain ordered abandon ship and, after being abandoned, a third torpedo struck the ship on the port side and she sank around 0615.

In a gesture seen all too rarely during the war, and perhaps indicating how relatively safe the U-boat captain felt – with the US anti-submarine air and sea effort nowhere near as effective as it would become¹⁹ - before leaving, the U-boat took time to question the survivors, offer medical aid, give exact course and distance to the nearest land and two packages of German cigarettes, before leaving the area.

29 of the 87-man crew were lost in the initial attack. The 58 surviving crew, together with 108 passengers, and the six men of the Armed Guard, took to five boats and six rafts.

In due course, the SS *Carolinian* (a large freighter owned by the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company) rescued 32 survivors from one lifeboat, transferring them to the gunboat USS *Niagara* (PG-52)²⁰, with the *Niagara* rescuing a further 75 in two other boats after these had been spotted by aircraft. All these survivors were landed in Cristobal in the Canal Zone. The US Army tug *Shasta*²¹ picked up 23 more, whose boat had landed in Bocas del Toro.

The remaining 42 survivors eventually made landfall in their lifeboat in the delta of Calovebora River after four days at sea, were then recovered and brought to Cristobal by the submarine chaser USS PC-460.²²

¹⁹ As if to demonstrate the change, the U-159 itself would be sunk by a patrolling aircraft in July 1943.

²⁰ A prewar yacht, launched in 1929, and bought from its owner in 1940 for conversion into a coastal minelayer in New York. In November 1940, she was renamed USS *Niagara* and reclassified as a patrol gunboat, being commissioned in January 1941. At the time she had been returning from Pearl Harbor via the Canal and had been assigned to serve as a tender to motor torpedo boats and help patrol the approaches to the Canal.

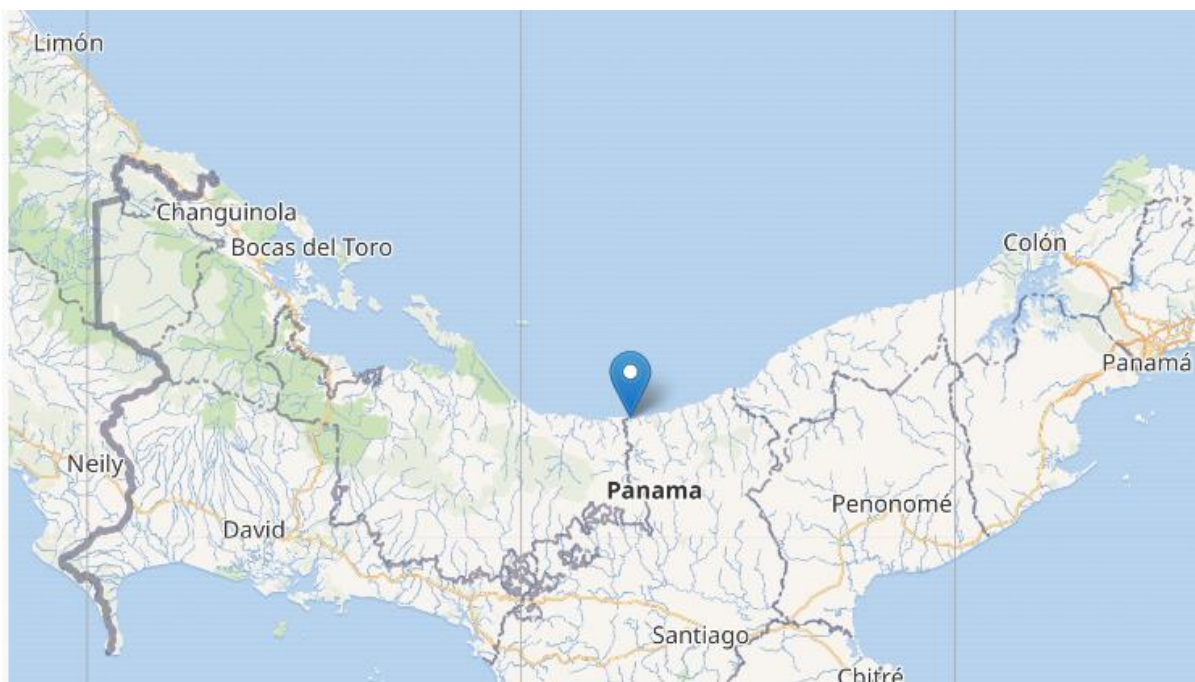
²¹ This was, in fact, a prewar tuna clipper fishing boat, being one of three taken over by the Army for use in the Panama Sea Frontier, two as “tugs” and one as a supply vessel. These were among 10 tuna clippers that had entered the Canal Zone in December 1941 and taken over for temporary patrol use:

<https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=52350>

²² <https://www.usdeadlyevents.com/1942-jun-12-us-cargo-passenger-ship-sixaola-sunk-by-sub-50m-off-bocas-del-toro-panama-29/>

Like the tug *Shasta*, this was a prewar yacht, completed in 1930 and subsequently taken over by the US Navy and commissioned as USS *PC-460* and assigned to Balboa in the Canal Zone, operating from there from

Included aboard the *Sixaola* when she was torpedoed was a detachment of the 805th Engineer Company, Aviation (Separate) on its way to Guatemala. The unit lost a large amount of construction equipment when the ship sank.²³



Location of the landfall of 42 survivors from the SS Sixaola



PC-460

November 1940. She was the vessel that had attacked and sank submarine S-26 (which it was supposed to be escorting) in January 1942, after missed signals.

²³ Created from the inactive 2nd Battalion, 28th Engineers, Aviation of the US Army. It was a part of the 21st Engineers (Aviation) Regiment, which had been formed as a special engineer unit to work with the US Army Air Corps. Its roles were to repair bomb-damaged airfields, to camouflage airfields and if necessary, to defend airfields, as well as being capable of constructing light duty airfields in forward locations. The unit was in Panama from 26 March 1941 to 30 March 1943, having constructed numerous airfields in Panama, Guatemala, Ecuador, and the Galapagos Islands.

One of the survivors was Mrs Edna T Johansson, a stewardess, who became the first female recipient of the Merchant Marine Combat Bar with Star.²⁴ It was said that she had displayed exceptional bravery and leadership, and so helped to save 148 lives. The Merchant Marine Combat Bar was awarded members of the Merchant Marine who served on a ship when it was attacked or damaged by an enemy or an instrument of war, such as a mine. The decoration was established by Act of Congress in May 1943.



Even today the coastline around the Calovebora River has a wild appearance

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
10 August 2024

²⁴ <http://www.usmm.org/women.html>
It is not recorded how she was rescued.