

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2

GALAPAGOS, OR “THE ROCK”

Since putting together something in October 2022 about the advance bases in surrounding countries and islands used to protect the Panama Canal and its approaches during World War 2¹, I have come across a variety of additional information on one aspect – the US base on the distant Galapagos Islands. So, I thought I would provide a new version, concentrating on just that one place.

Nowadays, the Galapagos archipelago, out in the Pacific Ocean and some 621 miles (1,000 km) from South America, comprise 19 islands surrounded by a marine reserve and now seen as a prime ecological tourism site, chiefly to see the wildlife that inspired Charles Darwin and his theory of natural selection in the 19th Century - iguanas, giant tortoise, and the many types of unique finch.

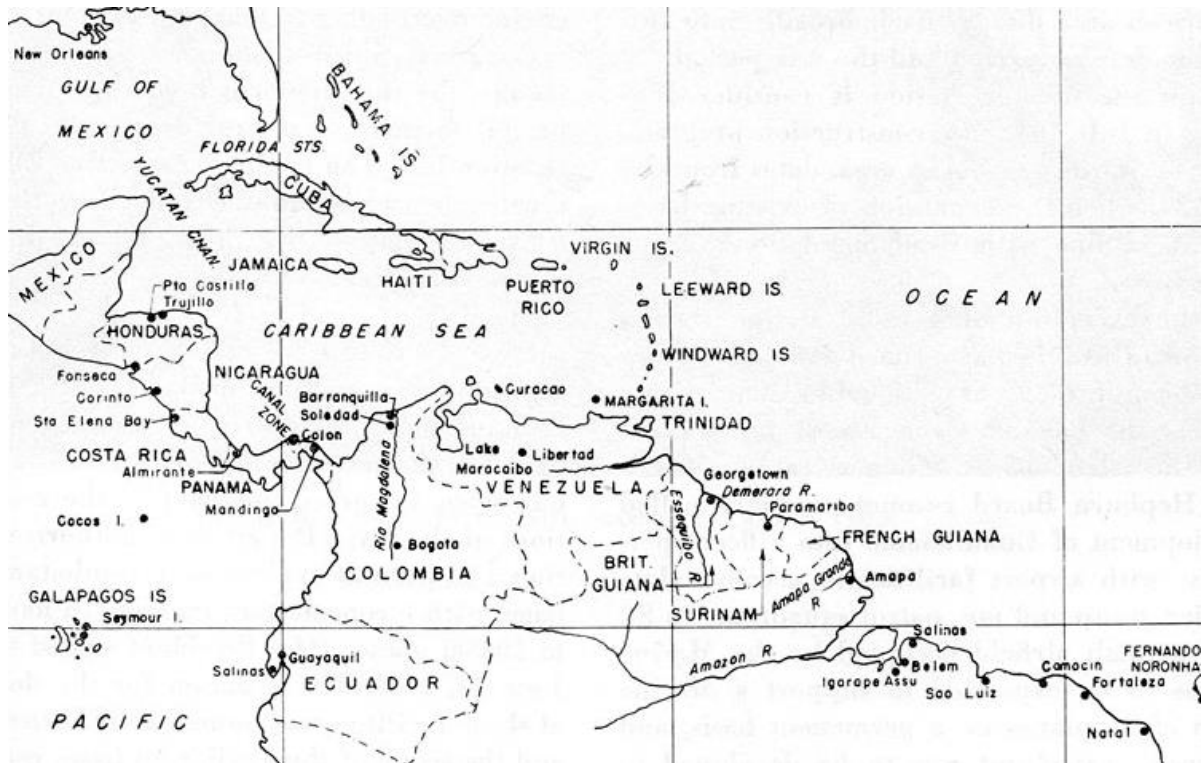
Base Beta in the Galapagos Islands – which was nicknamed “The Rock” by US military personnel sent there – would be an essential part of the network of bases established to protect the western approaches to the Canal.² Whereas the other approaches could make use of bases in the northern coastline of South America and the many Caribbean islands, there was a lack of suitable sites on the Pacific side. With a naval and air base in the Galapagos, patrol aircraft could cover a wide arc, operating from Nicaragua and thence on to mainland Ecuador.

In 1939, the Commanding General of the Army’s Panama Canal Department had argued that an attacking enemy carrier force would have to be detected at a minimum distance of 1,000 miles (1,609 km), so that defending bombers would have at least 10 hours to reach the carriers and break up the attack.³

¹ See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/16/panama-advance-bases-and-the-rock/>

² <https://guerrade1941.blogspot.com/2018/08/los-roosevelt-estados-unidos-y-el.html> and <https://guerrade1941.blogspot.com/2018/09/los-roosevelt-estados-unidos-y-el.html>

³ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/51-100/AFD-090601-032.pdf>



Ecuador's Galapagos Islands had long been in the minds of some US military planners. In 1911, the US had suggested a 99-year lease of the archipelago for \$15 million.⁴ A US Army review in the 1930s had suggested that the islands could be used as an advanced airbase and warning station.⁵ In 1940, the General Board of the Navy and the Army-Navy Joint Board had studied the subject of the defence of the Pacific approaches to the Canal, and among its recommendations were for patrol seaplanes to be based in the islands.⁶ Aviation equipment for a seaplane base in the Galapagos Islands was procured and stored at Balboa.⁷

With the changed environment as the threat of war was obviously coming closer, before the end of 1941, an agreement with Ecuador saw permission obtained for the US to build bases in the islands. The attack on Pearl Harbor hastened things further, with Ecuador concerned

⁴ A proposal that the US acquire both the Galapagos and Cocos Islands had been put forward in 1917.

⁵ In 1939, two Resolutions came before the US Congress recommending purchase of the Galapagos and Cocos Islands, and in 1938 it had been rumoured that Ecuador was willing to sell the Galapagos Islands.

⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁷ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/index.html#vol2

for the security of its islands. However, facilities there had to be constructed from scratch, and it was May 1942 before the first operational Army bombers reached the base.⁸

In addition, in September 1941, a Dutch ship sank near the Galapagos as did an Australian ship in early December and there were extensive reports of a German surface commerce raiders in the region and that these raiders were thought to have been responsible for the sinking of both ships.⁹

Just five days after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, troops arrived and began building a small refuelling station for naval patrol flying-boats. A British tramp steamer was used to rush the 36 sailors from Balboa and, in January 1942, a seaplane base was begun. At the same time another base was begun in Salinas on the coast of Ecuador, and which would be the southern end of the patrol arc.¹⁰ The northern end of the patrol range was to be at Corinto in Nicaragua.¹¹



Aeolian Cove

⁸ Ecuador had lost a little-remembered war with Peru in July 1941, with Peru occupying parts of its territory into 1942 (with the dispute only being finally settled by a definitive peace agreement in 1998):

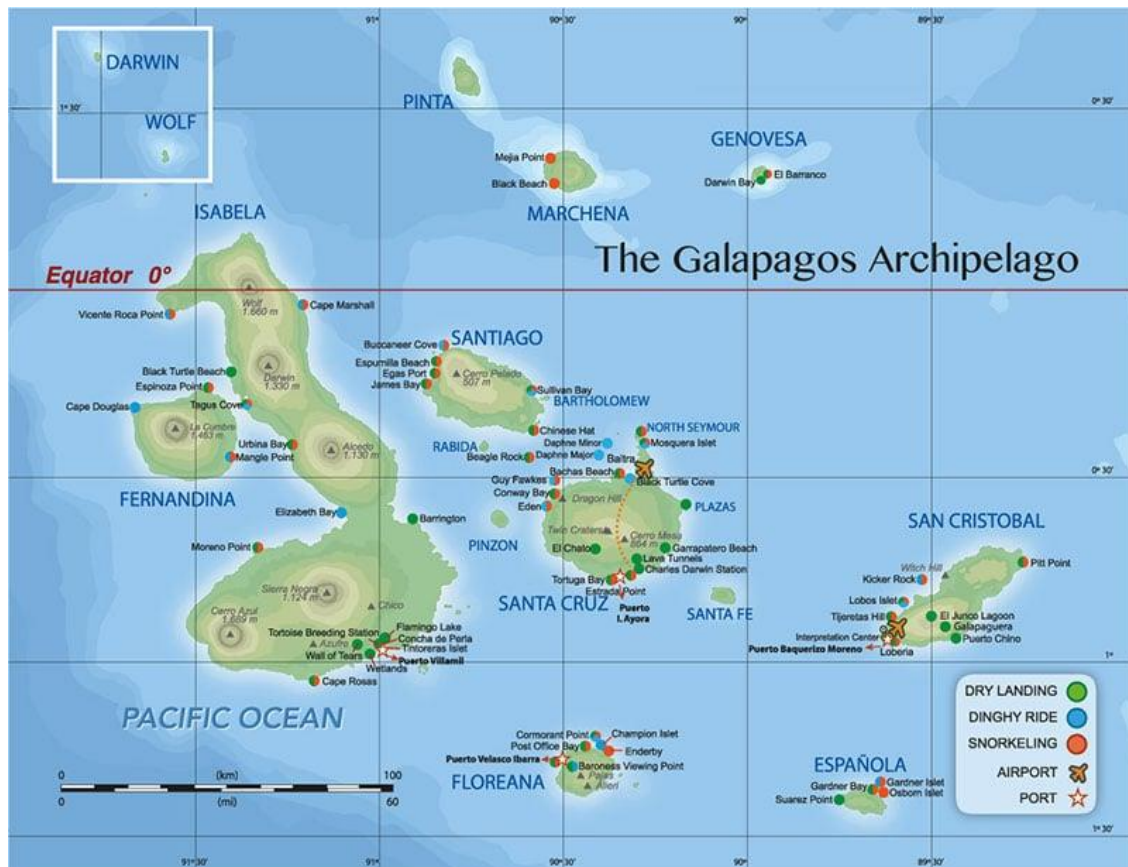
<https://dspace.ucuenca.edu.ec/bitstream/123456789/2094/1/tli292.pdf>

⁹ <https://galapagosonline.wordpress.com/2011/12/20/building-of-the-top-secret-base-at-baltra/>

¹⁰ Salinas is a peninsula on the western tip of Ecuador, fronting on Santa Elena Bay.

¹¹ *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: A History of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, 1940-1946, Volume 2* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1947).

The seaplane base was established at Aeolian Cove on the western side of South Seymour Island, which had sheltered anchorage. Hand pumps would be used from a motor launch.¹² A timber pier was built and a 70-feet (21.3 metres) timber seaplane ramp was planned, this later being replaced by a concrete ramp. The base would accommodate 125 officers and 1,050 men. The site contained anchorage space in which refuelling ships could be hidden.¹³



Meanwhile, on 6 January 1942, a board appointed by Commanding General of the recently established and Panama-based Caribbean Defense Command, General Andrews, recommended the establishment of a joint Army/Navy base on Seymour Island, with auxiliary fighter bases on other islands in the archipelago (to provide protection during construction of the main base). War Department approval was subsequently received on 14 January, and the US Minister to Ecuador consulted with officials there, finding them favourably disposed to the idea.

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

¹³ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html



A draft agreement for use of the islands, similar to that for a base at Salinas on the mainland¹⁴, was agreed with the Government of Ecuador. However, a final agreement would have to be delayed until a settlement was achieved on Lend-Lease matters. As was the case of the bases outside the Canal Zone in Panama, the Ecuador Government raised questions of sovereignty if the US military were given unfettered control of the islands as a whole. Again, as in Panama, the US military proposed a 99-year lease arrangement. While negotiations continued during 1942, the US continued to use the islands under the pre-existing informal arrangements.¹⁵

In January 1942, the US Army surveyed a site for a 8,000-feet (2,400 metres) runway. On 24 January, Ecuador granted permission to proceed with construction on the islands. Construction got underway in April, with works continued by mid-1943.¹⁶

¹⁴ Initially, the Salinas peninsula was scheduled have a base for patrol boats; but it was changed to a seaplane refuelling base before construction was completed, and it was subsequently developed into a naval auxiliary air facility, servicing and housing a complete patrol squadron. Aviation activities were removed in May 1944, leaving an emergency refuelling unit with rescue boat service. It was eventually handed by to Ecuadorian authorities in February 1946: https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

¹⁵ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/51-100/AFD-090601-032.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>

Because of its flat landscape and location at the centre of the archipelago, South Seymour Island (aka Baltra Island) was chosen, and construction of the US Army Air Force (USAAF) airbase began. The island is low, dry, barren, and volcanic, covered with just two to four feet (0.6 to 1.2 metres) of rocky soil, from which grows only sparse vegetation. No streams or lakes existed on Seymour Island, nor was there any ground water supply. It was therefore necessary to convey water in steel barges from an island about 50 miles (80.4 km) away where there was spring.¹⁷ It was necessary to import all materials, water, and provisions, as well as Ecuadorian labour.

The water situation was described as “critical” by the then Panama District Engineer, Colonel Young who, on 10 March 1942 said that –

*“The situation as regards the construction at base Beta is critical on account of the failure to provide water transportation”.*¹⁸

Civilian contractors were used for much of the work, but a unit from US Navy Seabee Detachment CBD 1012¹⁹ was sent to the Galapagos on 27 September 1942 to undertake further construction work and install equipment. Their work included building two tank farms, for diesel, fuel oil and gasoline, with pumphouses and an underground pipeline. They also installed a water storage and supply system, but after unsuccessful attempts to drill wells, the Army resorted to importing fresh water by barge. Within months there would be two airstrips, about 200 buildings, housing 2,400 servicemen and 750 civilians, including a heavy bombardment squadron, a reinforced infantry company, a coastal artillery battery, a seacoast searchlight platoon, and an airbase detachment. The base included a church, a movie theatre, a beer garden, and a bowling alley.²⁰

¹⁷ *Prevention of disease in the United States Army during World War II : the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945* edited by Wesley C Cox (Department of the Army, Office of the Surgeon General, Historical Division, 1946):

<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/ext/dw/101705278X1/PDF/101705278X1.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?t=150312>

¹⁹ US Naval Construction Battalions. These were developed and used as replacements for civilian construction companies in combat zones after the Pearl Harbor attack.

²⁰ <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>



At the time, the runway on Baltra was the longest in South America.²¹

In January 1944, CBD 1012 was relieved by CBMU 555, which continued overhaul and maintenance work until the end of the war.²²

Even after a water supply was provided it was far from ideal. When the barges arrived, water was pumped through rapid sand filters into a clear well where chlorine was added. This system suffered from there being insufficient quantity at the distant source, inadequate filtration, and inadequate chlorination facilities – in addition to the water having to be brought from another island. It was anticipated that a new supply from another island closer to the base would have been developed if the US had been able to retain the base after the war.²³

“We were supplied almost monthly by the US Army Ship which brought supplies from the Canal Zone and by US Navy aircraft, if the priority was high, from Miami or the

²¹ In 1941, the civilian population of the Galapagos Islands was 810. The arrival of so many people increased the demand for water, fish, and agricultural products, and threw a lifeline to the people eking out a livelihood on the islands. Base crews constructed a water pipeline from the highlands to Wreck Bay, in San Cristóbal, and used barges to transport water to Baltra Island. The availability of water in Wreck Bay made San Cristóbal more attractive to immigration and meant that people could move down to live in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. When the US closed the air base in 1946 residents dismantled the structures left behind, using the components to build many of the early houses in Puerto Ayora and Puerto Baquerizo Moreno:

https://www.galapagos.org/about_galapagos/history/

²² <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>

²³ *Prevention of disease in the United States Army during World War II : the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945* edited by Wesley C Cox (Department of the Army, Office of the Surgeon General, Historical Division, 1946):

<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/ext/dw/101705278X1/PDF/101705278X1.pdf>

air base at Banana River, Fla. All the water on the Navy side of Baltra was piped over from the US Army airbase side".²⁴

Outposts were set up in Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Bartolomé and other islands, where it is said that some remnants can be seen.²⁵ Airstrips were begun but subsequently abandoned on two other islands.



The US forces brought several changes to the islands. This included building an aqueduct from El Junco to El Progreso, in San Cristóbal Island, to supply drinking water for arid Baltra. Radar stations were built at Point Albemarle and Webb Cove on Isabela Island, and on the south side of Española Island, and several machine gun nests were placed on the northern coast of Santa Cruz Island.²⁶

As for the patrols themselves, the objective to provide –

"... complete physical coverage during daylight hours of an area larger than that which an enemy task force could transit in a 24-hour period".

It was assumed the enemy could steam at 27 knots; hence the minimum width of the approach area to be covered was 648 nautical miles (1,200 km). Since an radar-equipped aircraft could cover a band of water 50 miles (80.4 km) wide, this meant that each day's operations would involve seven "sweeps" across the entire breadth of the western approaches to the Canal. For the northern sector this meant seven round trips to the

²⁴ <https://www.naturalist.net/baltra/>

²⁵ <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>

²⁶ <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>

Galapagos; and, for the southern sector, four of the required flights were flown between Salinas and the Galapagos, with another three flights originating from Talara in Peru, some 1,000 miles (1,609 km) south of Panama City.²⁷ The pre-dawn and early morning searches started on the landward side of the patrol arc, with subsequent flights methodically extended seaward as the day wore on, sweeping the area out to the required distance. The next morning the pattern would be started all over again.²⁸

It is said that morale was low at the base - it was hot and barren, and the men had next to nothing to do in their free time, spending much of their time deep-sea fishing, and keeping wild goats as pets – and so tours of duty were limited to just six months.



President Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor, visited the base

In the Autumn of 1943, there was a move in Ecuador to change the status of the islands, from a territory to a province, with this causing the Commanding General of the Caribbean Defense Command (by now, General Brett) to fear this would affect any long-term base agreement. However, on 28 May 1944, a revolution in Ecuador removed the ruling Arroya del Rio Administration. By early June, the US had recognised the new government of Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra.

The War Department informed the provided the State Department of postwar requirements for retaining military facilities on the Galapagos Islands, as in the case of some of the bases in Panama outside the Canal Zone, this would be on a more long-term basis. However, the

²⁷ In September 1942, the base at Talara was in full operation: *Journal American Aviation Historical Society*, Spring 1974.

²⁸ *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Spring 1970.

State Department considered that it was the wrong time to seek a permanent agreement, instead proposing a five-year term. However, no such agreement, or any agreement to replace the original informal verbal authority obtained from the Ecuadorian Government in 1941, was achieved – and use of Seymour Island for the rest of the war relied on that informal authority.²⁹

Once more, as in Panama, national sentiment as the war came to an end was against any extension of permanent US military or naval presence in Ecuador. Its National Assembly had resolved that their national interests required the US to leave Ecuadorian territory after the war and, in November 1945, the US was asked to vacate Salinas. However, the US remained eager to acquire a 99-year lease for the existing bases in the Galapagos Islands which were seen as necessary for the future defence of the region, particularly the Canal.

Initial negotiations for the retention of bases in the islands in 1944 had centred around the US granting Ecuador several loans for improvements, but US planners considered the continued US presence as beneficial to Ecuador in itself,³⁰ and felt the bases should simply be seen as Ecuador's contribution to regional defence. As a result, discussions came to an impasse which eventually led the Ecuadorian Government to simply request that US forces leave the islands.

When forced to close the bases on the islands, the US forces dismantled and destroyed facilities and equipment and, when finally removing its personnel in 1946, took with them several water barges and equipment without which the Ecuadorians were unable to maintain the airfield leading them to eventually close it down. The whole incident was to sour diplomatic relations between the two countries for the next decade.³¹

²⁹ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/51-100/AFD-090601-032.pdf>

³⁰ There is probably some justification in this point. The bases in Panama had contributed considerably to the economy, and the government had been inclined to allow continued US use of at least some of the sites, until nationalist feeling – expressed in considerable popular unrest – caused a change of plan. See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/08/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

³¹ <https://www.galapagosislands.com/blog/galapagos-islands-during-second-world-war/>

However, the inhabitants were able to make use of what came to be called "Baltra pine". This became the most popular building material on the islands, displacing adobe, logs and thatched roofs, which until then had been the most common.³²

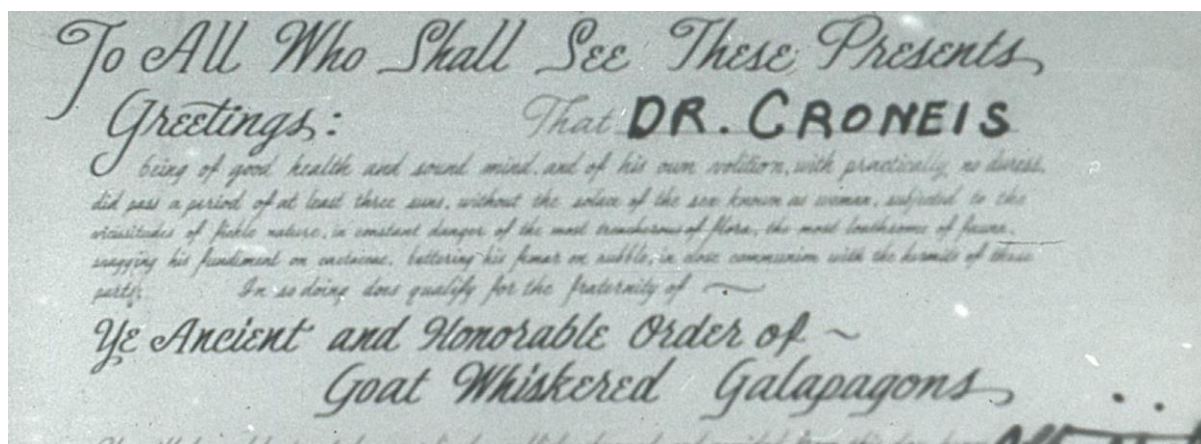
The presence of the US bases had seen the population of the islands increase from 810 in 1941 to over 3,200 individuals, with significant and lasting consequences for the islands. The demand for fish, agricultural products, and water increased considerably and, while this was excellent news for the civilians, it also caused problems. More land was required for farming, and travel to and from the islands increased significantly, thus increasing the threat of introduced animals and the movement of native species between islands. Furthermore, after the water pipeline was built to carry water from the highlands to Wreck Bay in San Cristobal (from which point it was transported in barges to Baltra Island), the increased availability of water also increased immigration, which was even more prominent following the construction of the airfield, the first in the islands, which was to become is the main entry point for the majority of travellers to the islands.³³

Now Baltra is not part of the Galapagos National Park, although some effort was made to protect the local environment, including the reintroduction of the island's marine iguanas. The airport was modernised and moved, though the old airfield and the foundations of buildings from the US base remained visible. Until 1986, Seymour Airport was the only one in the islands, but then San Cristobal Island Airport was opened.

³² <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003d.html>

³³ <https://www.metropolitan-touring.com/blog/culture/rock-us-army-base/>

**YE ANCIENT AND HONORABLE ORDER OF GOAT WHISKERED
GALAPAGONS (YAAHOOGWG)**



This was a humorous "Order" created among the military stationed at Baltra Island. In a ceremony, recipients were given a diploma which read –

To all who shall see the presents greetings:

That X, being of good health and sound mind, and of his own volition, with practically no duress did pass a period of at least three suns without the solace of the sex known as woman, subjected to the vicissitudes of fickle nature, in constant danger of the most treacherous of flora, the most loathsome of fauna, snagging his fundament on cactaceae(?), battering his femur(?) on rubble, in close communion with the hermits of these parts. In so doing, does qualify for the fraternity of Ye Ancient and Honorable Order of Goat Whiskered Galapagons. He will be rudely treated accordingly, publicly shunned, and avoided from this day hence.

Done by my hand this X day of X, 1943.³⁴

POSTSCRIPT

In 1944, as the war was reaching its end in Europe, the Ecuadorian government established a prison on the island of Isabela in the Galapagos. In 1946, 300 prisoners and 30 wardens landed at the southern end of Isabela, living in abject conditions (very poor housing and

³⁴ <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003c.html>

food) and the prisoners were tasked with constructing what was termed the “Wall of Tears”. As there was little else to do, this building task was intended purely to fill the time of day and keep the men out of trouble. The remains of this futile effort can still be seen close to Puerto Villamil. In 1958, the endless moving of rocks, in conditions so poor, led to a rebellion with the guards being killed and many prisoners also dying. The Ecuadorian authorities closed the Isabela penal colony a year later.³⁵

POSTSCRIPT 2

In 2010, fishermen found a cache of 12 bombs on Bartolone Island, the by-product of USAAF training exercises during the war.³⁶

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

1 January 2024



Wartime US guns on San Cristobal Island, near a popular surfing spot³⁷

³⁵ <https://www.discoveringgalapagos.org.uk/discover/human-history/permanent-settlement/floating-prison/>

³⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ecuador-galapagos-bombs-idUSTRE69Q08F20101027/>

³⁷ <https://www.galakiwi.com/blog/war-cannons-of-the-galapagos-islands/>