

THE CANAL AND THE KOREAN WAR

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 saw the Panama Canal affected, indirectly. In the Canal Zone itself, security would be tightened at key military and Canal installations and sites, anti-aircraft defences deployed, and live ammunition issued to all troops.

Despite the reduction in the defences, and troop numbers (something which had already begun in January 1943, months before the actual end of World War 2),¹ the Canal Zone still hosted important Army bases,² and those of the new US Air Force (which had only been created in 1947).³ However, all of the big guns that were formerly the bedrock of the fortified defences had long gone, with the Coast Artillery Corps itself disestablished in 1950. There were also important US Navy installations, including US Naval Station Rodman at the Pacific end of the Canal, and the base and air station at Coco Solo at the Caribbean end. Nevertheless, it did not have the nature of the armed camp that it had formerly assumed, certainly during the early years of World War 2.⁴

After the rapid demobilisation following the end of World War 2, and with the Cold War only in its early days, the US military initially found difficulty in finding the necessary assets to deploy in defence of the Republic of Korea. An infantry regiment

¹ In January 1946, a reorganisation was initiated, with an aim of achieving a target of just 20,000 troops in the Canal Zone by 1 March 1946. It had peaked during the war at around 67,000. The reduction continued after the war, despite the Cold War and the Korean War, and by 1959 troop levels reached their lowest level, with just 6,600 being present. After this, numbers rose once more to around 10,000 – a level that was generally maintained until the final withdrawals began in the 1990s (though, for obvious reasons, numbers spiked at the time of the US invasion in 1989-90).

² And was an important training centre, including for the later notorious School of the Americas, established in 1946, initially as the Latin American Center - Ground Division, and later renamed the US Army Caribbean School, and based from 1949 at Fort Gulick.

³ In September 1950, commercial air traffic would be relocated from Albrook Air Force Base, near Panama City but inside the Canal Zone, to the new National Airport at Tocumen in the Republic.

⁴ While, in 1947, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff had concluded that there was “*little likelihood of attack on the canal within the foreseeable future – ten years*”, by 1950, the vulnerability of the Canal to nuclear attack in the future was already being acknowledged. The USSR had conducted its first test of an atomic bomb in August 1949. One “solution” was to construct a sea-level canal, using nuclear weapons, on the grounds that this would be less vulnerable. This idea, thankfully, came to nought.

See <https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/sealevel.htm> and/or <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-after-world-war-2-plans-for-a-nuclear-canal/>

which had spent over two decades in the Canal Zone until redeployed during World War 2, and only reactivated in the Canal Zone in 1946 saw part of its establishment sent to Korea as part of the 65th Infantry Regiment.

The Korean War came as a shock and surprise, when the North – equipped with weaponry and other equipment, tanks and fighter aircraft when occupying Soviet forces had withdrew - invaded the ill-prepared and poorly equipped South on 25 June 1950, sweeping through to eventually hold all but a small corner in the south-east of the peninsula. It would be the first full-scale military engagement for US forces after World War 2, with these forming the bulk of United Nations forces⁵ that also included contributions from 16 countries, including Britain and its Commonwealth.⁶

In the Canal Zone, on 28 June, the Commanding General of the US Army Caribbean (USARCARIB), headquartered in the Canal Zone,⁷ placed his command in the Zone on a modified alert status. This involved increased security at key critical Army installations, and military guards at critical Canal facilities. Anti-aircraft artillery units were ordered to prepare for deployment, and live ammunition was issued to all troops.

Ironically, the Executive Order to revoke a 1939 one which had transferred control of the Canal and Canal Zone from the Governor to the Commanding General had only been signed by President Truman in February 1950 (although the transfer itself would only take effect from 1 July 1951).⁸ The organisation of the Canal was also in a state of flux at the time, with a far reaching reorganisation underway, unifying its operation

⁵ Following UN Security Council Resolution 83 of 27 June 1950 recommending member states provide military assistance to the Republic of Korea – with no Soviet veto possible, since the USSR was boycotting the Council in a dispute over which China should be on the Council.

⁶ The troops also included 5,100 from Colombia, suffering 689 casualties.

⁷ This had replaced the Panama Canal Department, the Army command in the Canal Zone since 1917. The new entity, with the Navy and USAF components would be reorganised under the overall, forces-wide Caribbean Command (which became US Southern Command in 1963).

⁸ During both World Wars, control of the Zone and Canal was transferred from the civilian government to the military, with the Commanding General in overall command.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10107-revocation-executive-order-no-8232-september-5-1939-relating-the>

<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/143/539/1417672/>

In another sign that one war had been replaced by another, “cold” one, December 1950 saw the first transit of a Japanese ship since July 1941.

under a single new Panama Canal Company, a Government corporation, which would eventually see it also take over the Panama Railroad Company.⁹

Bear in mind that, by June 1950, US forces had withdrawn from all of the bases and sites outside the Canal Zone and in the Republic of Panama. Failure to agree arrangements for at least some of the former bases (in the face of fierce nationalist resistance, and large-scale public protests), had seen withdrawal complete by the end of January 1948.¹⁰

On 30 June, defence security was further enhanced, with all Army installations placed under guard, and anti-aircraft units deployed to tactical positions (those occupied during the recent war).¹¹ A mobile reserve was established on both ends of the Canal, mustered at Fort Gulick at the Caribbean end, and Fort Clayton at the Pacific end. By the end of July, all necessary controls were in place.

The mobile reserve comprised 102 officers and men from C Troop of the 45th Mechanised Cavalry at Fort Gulick, and 107 from Troop B at Fort Clayton.

The Army was called in to assist in controlling entry and exit to the Canal Zone (including by sea), with the Canal Zone Police also tightening controls on movements into and out of the Zone. Any enemy aliens had to be identified, and any that were so identified to be detained, together with any known subversives.¹²

The air defences were instructed to be alert for the approach of unidentified formations of *“three or more aircraft violating restrictions on flight within Canal Zone military airspace, and any aircraft committing a hostile act”*. However, although the

⁹ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10102-transfer-certain-business-operations-facilities-and-appurtenances>

¹⁰ For more on the failure to preserve access to the sites, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

¹¹ This in addition to checkpoints etc manned by the Canal Zone Police.

¹² *Panama Canal Security & Defense 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission): <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/311j>

anti-aircraft sites would be the same as those used until 1945, many needed remedial work, with accommodation repaired (or tents erected) and gun emplacements rebuilt. Initially, conditions for the troops involved were described as “primitive”. It would be the end of the year before all the necessary improvements had been completed.

As during (and before) World War 2, sabotage was a distinct fear (and a far more likely risk in the circumstances). Through into 1952, practice alerts would involve anti-sabotage training.¹³ The Operational Plan for USARCARIB¹⁴ in December 1950 summarised the anti-sabotage plans as follows -

The political, social and economic aims of the USSR clash sharply with those of the United States. The present international situation presents the possibility of open military conflict. Such a conflict might result from a miscalculation by the USSR or from its decision that the most opportune time to initiate hostilities had arrived. Little or no warning can be expected. Soviet capabilities include the employment of a huge land army, strategic bombardment and greatly improved submarines. Soviet Russia is capable of conducting radiological, biological and chemical warfare. The maximum use of espionage, sabotage, and subversive methods may be anticipated. The USSR, supported by Russian-dominated countries, possesses a potent organization for subversive activity and sabotage. Sabotage activities might include using tramp steamers or fishing vessels to transport heavy explosives or bombs into or near critical canal points. Sabotage was considered more likely against canal vital installations and military establishments and might arise out of control of organized labor and hostile attitudes in Latin America orchestrated by the Soviet Union against the States.”¹⁵

As the war dragged on into 1951, the Governor of the Canal Zone restated the necessity for military guards at the vital installations of the Canal. However, later that

¹³ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

¹⁴ Operation Plan USARCARIB 10-50, dated 14 December 1950.

¹⁵ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

year it was revealed that these guards at the locks would be removed or replaced the following year, with a civilian force being trained to provide the necessary security.

1952 saw the Army's role modified, from "internal surveillance" to "perimeter surveillance" of the locks areas to prevent unauthorised entry. The civilian guards assumed the internal security role. Even though the war continued, this year also saw the numbers of troops on 24-hour "combat ready" alert reduced, from three rifle companies to three platoons. The reduced level of alert reflected the situation in the Korean War itself, which had descended into a stalemate.

While troops numbers on constant alert were reduced, the US Marines continued to provide guards to travel on ships transiting the Canal and which were deemed to be of a hazardous nature. This had happened during World War 2, with what was termed the Transit Guard introduced in 1939. Sabotage was still the fear, but now Soviet and eastern European vessels were seen as the greatest threat.

The new civilian Lock Security Guard formally took over security for the Canal's locks on 11 July 1952, its mission stated as being for "*protection of the locks against wanton damage, espionage, sabotage, or any situation which might prove detrimental to the normal and efficient operations of the locks or units in the locks enclosures*". The force consisted of carefully selected veterans, 58 in all, to provide 24-hour protection for the three sets of locks. However, the Army criticised the performance of the new force, and complained that it could not perform its anti-sabotage mission as it did not now have complete control of lock security.¹⁶

The war, which had continued in a form of stalemate since July 1951, finally ended with the armistice of 27 July 1953.

Also in 1953, a review of vital installation in the Canal Zone was completed by the Canal Zone Government, including classification criteria for each installation in relation

¹⁶ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

to how critical they were to the operation of the Canal and resistance to damage or destruction.

In 1954, the Panama Canal Internal Security Office was established.¹⁷ This was to advise the Governor and his staff on all intelligence and security matters, and the administration of internal security in the Canal Zone. As the Cold War continued, and as the political situation in the Republic remained unsettled, and nationalist and anti-American sentiment became stronger, this office was clearly necessary. Since September 1952, the Canal Zone Government had seen its civil intelligence branch redesignated as an internal security office. Its work, continued by the new body, included the investigation of every civilian employee of the Canal Zone, clearly a symptom of the Cold War mentality of the time.¹⁸

The Canal's real role in the Korean War, aside from those troops redeployed to the war itself, was to facilitate the passage of some 54 million tons of cargo and 22 million tons of petroleum products through the Canal to UN forces in Korea. This reflected the fact that the function of the Canal in US national security had become, since the wartime advent of the "Two Ocean Navy",¹⁹ more important as a logistical conduit. It was no longer vitally important for a fleet to be able to travel from one US coast to the other, and in any case the newest, largest US warships would not be able to use the Canal's locks.²⁰

¹⁷ Pursuant to Executive Order 10450, see below.

¹⁸ This investigation of civilian employees was required by Executive Order 10450 of 27 April 1953: Security requirements for Government employment. This required that all such persons should be "*reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and of complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States*". This applied to all US Government employees, not just those in the Canal Zone. <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/10450.html>

¹⁹ Implemented following the Two Ocean Navy Act 1940, which had increased the size of the US Navy by 70% by adding 257 ships.

²⁰ *Guarding the Crossroads : Security and Defense of the Panama Canal* by Charles Morris Brooks (2003). Commissioned on 10 September 1945, the aircraft carrier USS *Midway*, the lead ship of this new class of large carriers, was the first US warship too big to use the Canal.

(PART OF) THE 33rd INFANTRY OFF TO KOREA

Created in July 1916, the 33rd Infantry Regiment had been formed in the Canal Zone (from elements of two existing regiments) and was resident in the Zone until December 1941, when it was redeployed elsewhere (initially to Trinidad). After its wartime service it had been reactivated once more, in the Canal Zone, in 1948.

During the Korean War, its 3rd Battalion was transferred to the 65th Infantry Regiment (a Puerto Rican unit, which is now part of the Puerto Rico National Guard) for service in the war. Arriving in Pusan, Korea in September 1950, it took part in the breakout from the Pusan perimeter (the small corner of the country where the invaders had forced the defenders into), and then faced the onslaught of the Chinese “volunteers” after Communist China entered the war in October 1950.²¹

MEANWHILE IN PANAMA

US forces in the Canal Zone would have been forgiven for having one eye on events in the rest of Panama. The postwar years had been turbulent ones in the Republic, including a rise in nationalist sentiment and protests – evidenced by the reaction to the suggestion that the US could retain some of the bases outside the Zone which it had occupied during the war.

The *Policia Nacional* were playing an increasingly important role in Panamanian politics, behind the scenes as well as suppressing protests (at least those it did not support). In 1945, it had backed then President de la Guardia, resulting in a rival being sent into exile. Then, in 1946, it supported a provisional President, Enrique Jiménez, when the National Assembly tried to depose him. The subsequent elections in 1948 were marked by violence and fraud, with the *Policia Nacional* once more crucial in deciding the eventual winner. However, the new President died in August 1949, and

²¹ <https://history.army.mil/Research/Reference-Topics/Hispanic-Americans-in-the-US-Army/The-65th-Infantry-in-Korea-Information-Paper/>

For a little more on the 33rd Infantry Regiment and the Canal Zone, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-in-world-war-2-the-army-in-the-canal-zone/>

the head of the *Policia Nacional* manoeuvred to have the First Vice-President replaced by another former President, Arnulfo Arias Madrid, on the grounds that he had, in fact, won the election. Arias Madrid would only hold office from November 1949 until 1951, then being deposed in a coup (the second time he had been deposed in this way, the previous one having been a bloodless one in 1941), with street violence and gun battles. With the *Policia Nacional* continuing to make the decisions, another President stood in until the 1952 elections which saw (inevitably perhaps) the former leader of the *Policia Nacional*, José Antonio Remón Cantera, becoming President himself in October 1952.²²

Remón Cantera proved an acceptable leader to the US Government. An ardent anti-communist, he aligned himself closely with US policies during the Cold War, clamping down on left wing parties, and enhancing the power of the *Policia Nacional*, which transformed into the *Guardia Nacional* in 1953. His closeness to the US helped in negotiating the 1955 treaty that saw some of the continuing complaints of Panamanians regarding the Canal and US activity addressed.²³

However, the assassination of Remón Cantera in January 1955 would leave a power vacuum that would once more plunge Panama into a deep political crisis.²⁴

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1 November 2025

²² It would be 1960 before Ernesto De la Guardia became the first postwar President to finish a full four-year term in office.

²³ It also saw the US regain control of the important Rio Hato base in the Republic, which it had not wanted to give up at the end of World War 2, and would retain until 1970.

²⁴ https://mcnbiografias.com/app-bio/do/remon-cantera-jose-antonio#google_vignette