

WORLD WAR 1 AND THE PANAMA CANAL

AN INTRODUCTION

It was an unfortunate coincidence that the opening of the Panama Canal in August 1914 came in the same month of what would turn out to be a four-year world war. However, although the Canal was officially opened to shipping on 15 August 1914, in fact the official celebration had to be postponed due to the start of the war a few weeks later, and official recognition of its completed construction was not celebrated until March 1915 at the San Francisco Exposition.¹



The SS Ancon in the Gatun locks in August 1915²

However, it is perhaps true that the outbreak of the war did serve to justify the US decision to fortify the Canal – something that had been in doubt, and that some doubted was lawful, or permitted under the treaty with Panama. That said, the fortifications themselves, and their large calibre artillery, would not be fully ready for several years.

Fortunately, by the time the US became a belligerent not only were the defences in a better state, but any threat of the sort that the fortifications were designed to counter had receded to the extent of being effectively non-existent. That threat might have been the Imperial German High Seas Fleet, but since the Battle of Jutland in 1916 this had been effectively bottled up in harbour and would only emerge in strength in order to surrender to the Royal Navy. The future major threat at the time of World War 2, Imperial Japan, was, during World War 1, one of the Allies.³

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/panama-canal>

² <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/panama-and-panama-canal/>

³ Technically, the US was not one of the “Allies”, but rather an “Associated” belligerent. However, potential conflict with Japan had become a possibility at least since the end of the Spanish-American War of 1898, as a result of which the US had obtained control of the Philippines and Guam, and had been seen as more of a possibility following Japan’s success in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. For more on Japan and war plans, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-in-world-war-2-us-war-plans-and-the-panama-canal/>

Due to its obvious strategic value to the US,⁴ the Canal attracted the attention of foreign powers for its undeniable strategic value, and even before its completion, in the 1890s, Germany's *Operationplan III* (the plan for war against the United States) had the Imperial German Navy planning to occupy Puerto Rico and Culebra Island (about 30 km or 18.6 miles east of Puerto Rico), as bases. This, it was seen, could serve as a barrier, separating the Atlantic from the Caribbean, and could also be used to control the eastern exit of the planned Canal.⁵ During World War 1, there were reports of Germany seeking to obtain neutral Dutch cargo ships in the Far East for use in sabotage attempts on the Canal.

The Canal Zone through which the Canal bisected the isthmus and the country of Panama, quickly became a sort of "Little America", something that would become increasingly the case between the wars. The US had introduced discrimination, backed by the Gold and Silver Roll system of differing wage structures for US and non-US employees during the Canal construction period, and this continued. It also extended to different standards of accommodation and health care, and even separate entrances at buildings.⁶ The commissaries for Canal workers and the US forces further separated those in the Canal Zone from the Panamanians.



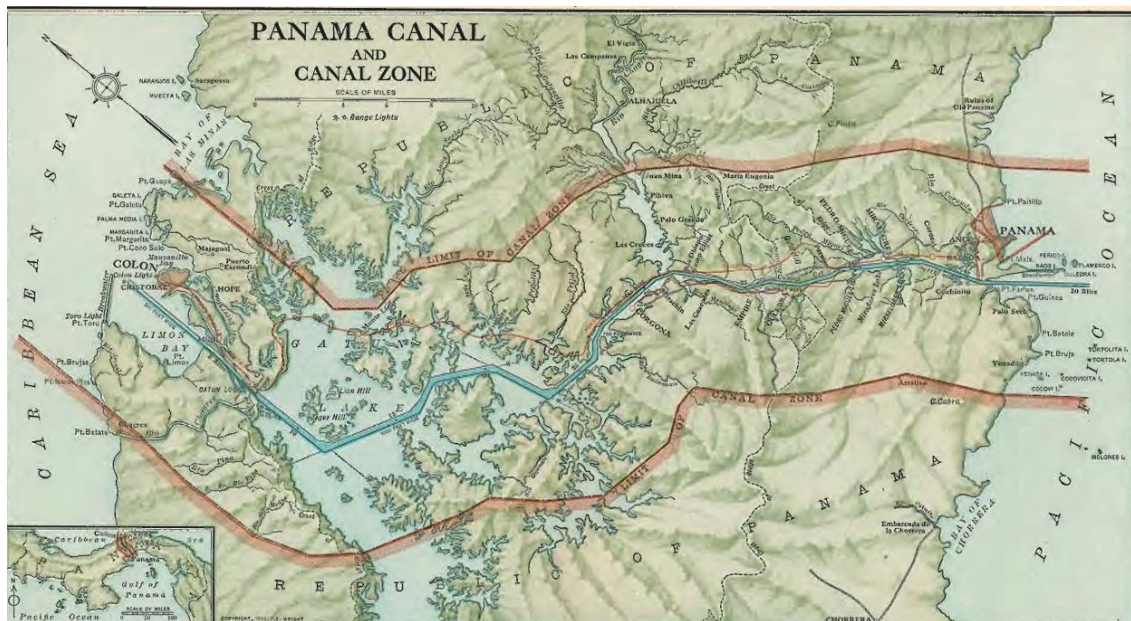
George W Goethals, Chairman of the Isthmian Canal Commission and first Governor

⁴ It is said that the famed naval strategist, Admiral Mahan, prized it so highly as to forecast that if ever Germany dictated peace terms to a defeated US, the surrender of the Canal would be first on the list.

⁵ *The First War Plan Orange and the First Imperial Japanese Defense Policy: An Interpretation from the Geopolitical Strategic Perspective* by Fumio Takahashi (National Institute for Defense Studies, Security Reports, No 5, March 2004)

https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/bulletin_e2003_4.pdf

⁶ In 1909, President Taft officially closed the Gold Roll to non-Americans, with the exception of Panamanian nationals. However, under pressure from US unions, the Canal only hired a relative handful of Panamanians for Gold Roll jobs.



The Canal in 1914

SHOULD IT BE FORTIFIED?

The Canal was originally conceived as a peaceful waterway for commerce. However, from the start, the US Government recognised the uses of the Canal and its vital role as a cornerstone of national defence.

The Hay-Pauncefote Treaty 1901⁷ allowed that, when actually engaged in war, the US had the right to protect the Canal from all damage and injury, and to defend itself in the waters adjacent to the Canal. This did not necessarily mean one should be permitted to fortify the Canal. Indeed, it would seem that the US had been careful not to assert any right to *fortify*, only to *police*.⁸ However, it could be argued that, by not forbidding fortification this implied a right to do so.

The Suez Canal had been intended, under the Constantinople Convention of 1888, did not involve any right of fortification, or to treat it as part of a mainland or coast, or to

⁷ The 1901 Treaty with Britain allowed the US to build, fortify, and control an isthmian canal, and British vessels to be granted access to the canal on equal terms. An earlier one, the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 (which had failed to be ratified by the Senate) had provided that neither party would erect or maintain any fortifications “*commanding the canal or the vicinity thereof*”, if any such canal were constructed.

⁸ *Fortification of the Panama Canal* (American Journal of International Law, 1911).

assert sovereignty. The concept had been, in effect, for the possessor or operator of the canal to be, in effect, a sort of trustee of an international waterway for the benefit of all nations. This was thought to be the same basis expected for the Panama Canal and, to be fair, the US did largely operate it as a neutral international channel except in exceptional circumstances.⁹



The Gatun locks in October 1913¹⁰

Regardless of whether or not the Canal *should* have been fortified in the way it was, the fact remains that this is what happened. As it transpired, none of its defences were

ever tested, and perhaps the people of Panama who protested and campaigned for decades to remove the US from the Canal Zone can at least take some satisfaction from the immense of money that the US therefore wasted on building the defences.

It can be argued, of course, that the Canal had to be defended, and this would have to be done by the US - in 1904, at the request of President Manuel Amador, the US had disarmed the small army that had participated in the independence movement of the previous year, keeping only a force of 250 men, including officers.¹¹

An Act of Congress, the Spooner Act 1902,¹² had included a requirement for the US President to make provision for the defence of the Canal, and a first plan was drawn

⁹ This principle of neutrality is written into the operation of the Canal today, by virtue of the 1977 Neutrality Treaty, one of two treaties that saw control pass from the US to Panama.

¹⁰ <https://www.defensemmedianetwork.com/stories/history-of-army-corps-of-engineers-projects-part-i/>

¹¹ *Fiscal Capacity and Subjugation: Panama Between 1903-1945 (Part One)* by Solomon Kalmanovitz (Center for Latin American Studies "Justo Arosemena", 2016)
<https://www.redalyc.org/journal/5350/535055491002/html/>

¹² This Act provided for the purchase of the French canal company and "to cause to be constructed" a trans-isthmus canal.
<https://www.czbrats.com/Builders/spooner.htm>

up in 1905 by the National Coast Defence Board (aka the Taft Board),¹³ which had been established by President Theodore Roosevelt in the wake of the Spanish-American War to review and advise on US seacoast defences.¹⁴

The 1903 Treaty with Panama had provided that –

- “the Canal, when constructed, and the entrances thereto shall be neutral in perpetuity...in conformity with all the stipulations of, the treaty entered into by the Governments of the United States and Great Britain on November 18, 1901”.¹⁵

Crucially, it also provided that –

- *“If it should become necessary at any time to employ armed forces for the safety or protection of the Canal, or of the ships that make use of the same, or the railways and auxiliary works, the United States shall have the right, at all times and in its discretion, to use its police and its land and naval forces or to establish fortifications for these purposes”*.¹⁶

In October 1909, the Army/Navy Fortification Board (aka the Taft Board), established by the Secretary of War arranged for a study into those defences required in Panama. The Panama Fortifications Board would visit the Isthmus and conduct an on-the-ground survey during March/April 1910. The final recommendations were for a two-part defence consisting of strong and heavily-armed positions at the Canal entrances,

¹³ <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008912239>

¹⁴ *The American Defences of the Panama Canal* by Terrance McGovern (Nearhos Publications, 1999).

¹⁵ The Hay–Pauncefote Treaty of 1901 had been a legal preliminary to the US involvement in construction of the Panama Canal, overturning previous treaty agreements dating from the 19th Century that had provided that no one country should have control of such a canal. Britain, it should be remembered, had interests at that time in the nearby Mosquito Coast (then a protectorate), British Honduras (now Belize), and the Bay Islands off northern Honduras.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Hay-Pauncefote-Treaty>

¹⁶ <https://www.dipublico.org/100531/panama-usa-convention-for-the-construction-of-the-isthmian-ship-canal-1903/>

The Hay-Pauncefote and Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaties implied, but did not specifically give, the right for the US to fortify the Canal Zone. However, central to America’s decision to fortify was Article 3 of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty, which gave the US all powers, rights, and authority in the Zone:

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA319357.pdf>

<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-i/>

with field works established in the vicinity of locks and other vital installations to provide for defence against any attackers who might succeed in making a landing. The land defences were thought to need four regiments of infantry, three batteries of field artillery, four troops of cavalry, and supporting units. The total number of troops was estimated at 5,000.



Col Goethals visiting the USMC at Camp Elliot in July 1911

In January 1911, Congress approved a revised version of the plans¹⁷ and long-term expenditure of \$12.4 million for Canal defences, and work began in August 1911. In the end, the fortifications would be somewhat stronger than that originally recommended by the Taft Board.¹⁸

The US Army Corps of Engineers (which would also supply the Canal Zone's Governors) was to be responsible for the design and construction of fortifications, although initial works were undertaken by the Isthmian Canal Commission.

In any event, as we shall see, in 1917, the President would invoke section 13 of the Panama Canal Act 1912 (see below and appoint the Commanding General in Panama to take control of the Canal and government of the Canal Zone, with the Governor subject to his orders and direction.

After extended diplomatic discussions, the boundaries of the Canal Zone were fixed by the Price-Lefevre Boundary Convention of September 2, 1914.¹⁹ However, further land

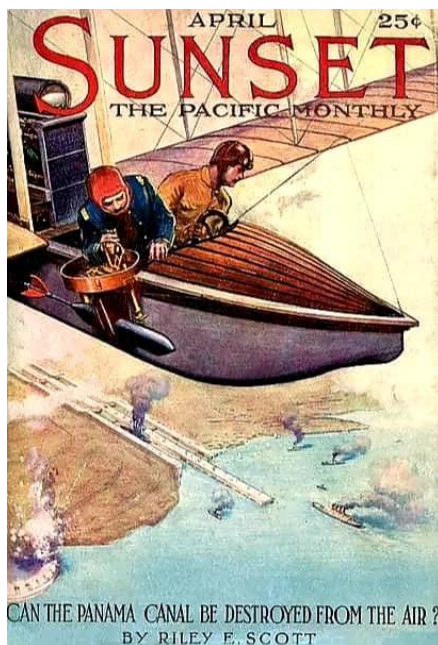
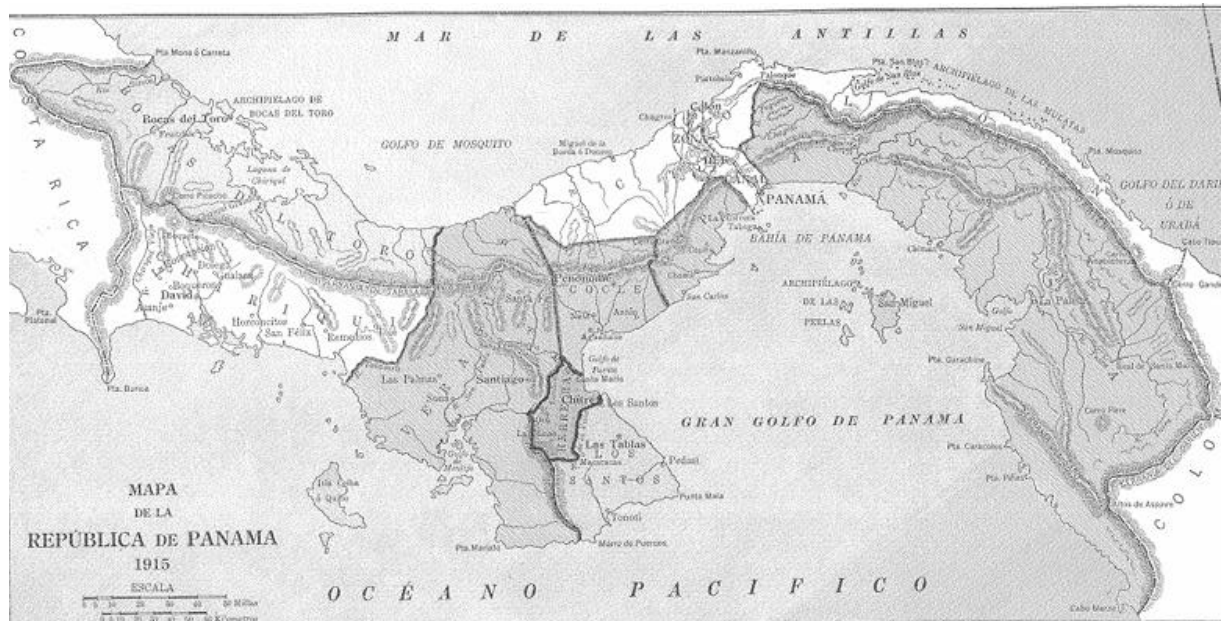
¹⁷ The President had told the board to reduce costs with a revision of its plans; and a revised plan was produced, representing a reduction of about a third of the original projected cost.

The American Defences of the Panama Canal by Terrance McGovern (Nearhos Publications, 1999).

¹⁸ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/44e0b1e30a71455987b4f179d709b5d4>

¹⁹ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/march/isthmian-canal-policy-evaluation>

in the Republic was requisitioned, mostly for assisting defence of the Canal, between 1914 and 1918.²⁰



Riley E Scott, described as a “bomb specialist”, and a West Point graduate, was the author of this article in Sunset magazine in April 1914

PROTECTION FROM THE BIG GUNS

The chief protection for the Canal, from any attack from the sea, were the artillery and mortars of the several “forts” constructed at either end. These were manned by the Coast Artillery Corps. The first gun batteries were begun between 1912 and 1914, but

²⁰ This included a large area of land at the mouth of the Chagres River, and 123 acres at Punta Paitilla on the other side of Panama City for a military post.

it would be the end of 1916 before most of the original large calibre guns, and 12-inch mortars, were in place.

The basic principle behind the defensive system was to protect the guarded area from invasion and capture, as well as to protect it from bombardment, or submarine or surface torpedo attack. Protection of the harbours and anchorages was to safeguard Navy vessels, that could then emerge and counter enemy warships.²¹



Fort Amador in 1915

The defences at Fort Grant/Amador²², which covered the Pacific entrance to the Canal, were constructed between 1914 and 1917 and included batteries on a string of islands that stretched out into the Bay of Panama and connected by a causeway made from material in making the Gaillard Cut (which also provided a breakwater protecting the Canal entrance). It also included several nearby, offshore islands, including the large, inhabited island of Taboga, some 12 miles from Panama City. A hotel on Taboga, a former sanatorium called the Hotel Aspinwall, owned by the US authorities, closed in 1916 due to financial losses and increasing competition from the mainland, and would be used to house interned Germans when the US entered the war.

²¹ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/coastal-forts-ww2.htm>

²² Although officially designated as Fort Amador (after the first President of Panama) by a War Department order in 1911, the entire area was commonly referred to as Fort Grant (after the former general and President U S Grant) for a number of years. An official order from the Panama Canal Department in October 1917 directed that the Fort Amador name be used. Fort Grant (taken to mean the connected islands) and Fort Amador (the area built on an area of recovered mainland) were designated by the War Department GO No 153 (25 November 1911) as a single military reservation. <https://armyhistory.org/fort-grant-and-fort-amador-panama-canal-zone/>

was the primary Caribbean-side infantry base and considerably the largest.²³ Begun in 1912, Fort Sherman was named after the Civil War Union general. The smallest of the trio was Fort De Lesseps²⁴, which consisted of just a single battery of two six-inch guns, which were located adjacent to the Hotel Washington at the northern end of the city of Colón itself.

A typical Canal Zone gun battery, termed a “1912 Type battery”, consisted of two guns on “disappearing” carriages²⁵ in an emplacement made of reinforced concrete, with a magazine on the same level to facilitate loading. There would be a variety of rooms, magazines, and quarters, including those for observation and plotting.

As well as artillery guns, the defences would also employ 12-inch mortars, in fact a short-barrel breech-loading rifle, designed to fire its projectiles in a high arc that would plunge onto and penetrate the decks of an attacking ship. The defenders would also employ minefields in the approaches to both ends of the Canal.

Aside from the coastal forts, there were other major military installations inland. These included Fort Clayton, which served to protect the important locks at Miraflores and Pedro Miguel, and Fort Davis²⁶ which served the same role in relation to the Gatun locks near the other, Caribbean end of the Canal. There were other Army sites, such as Camp Elliott, a former construction camp near the Gaillard Cut, handed over to the

²³ It was also considered to be the most isolated of Canal Zone military posts, particularly in the days before improved roads were built and, bounded by Limon Bay, in early days access was only by water, with a rail link later added – it only being much later in its use that access by road was possible.

²⁴ This had been acquired by the Army from the Panama Railroad Company, although it seemed that jurisdiction was never officially ceded to the US, and it would be the first military installation in the Canal Zone (technically it was actually outside the bounds of the Zone) surrendered to Panama after World War 2.

²⁵ The disappearing carriage was developed in the 19th Century, and the theory was that the gun could crouch behind 20 feet of concrete, with another 20-30 feet of hard packed earth in front of that, it would rise up to fire, then return to crouch down behind its barrier, and thus be invisible from the sea.

Between the wars, it was recognised that plunging long-range fire from attacking warships negated the advantage of disappearing carriages. In addition, by World War 2, the vulnerability of many positions to attack from the air was recognised, one of the chief defences had been by having them dispersed.

²⁶ Its full name being Fort William D Davis.

Army in March 1915.²⁷ Another former construction camp was Camp Empire, a township near Balboa used during both the French and US construction periods, then abandoned but taken over by US Marines, passing to the Army in November 1914. Despite having been designated as a National Monument since 1908, the area around the 16th Century Fort San Lorenzo was originally incorporated into the Fort Sherman Military Reservation, in 1911. Lying east of Colón, and built to guard the entrance to the Chagres River, during World War 1 a radio listening post was established there.

The first Coast Artillery unit to man the guns arrived on 22 December 1913, with more arriving so that by 1917 there was an eventual allocation of nine companies.²⁸

In 1915, the Scott Board review of US coastal defences (including the Canal and US insular possessions) made a number of recommendations on how to make the defences more effective.²⁹ These included the need for 16-inch guns and mortars, offering greater range. Given the lack of such weapons, an alternative proposed was to use spare 12-inch guns and a lighter projectile. However, it would be 1921 before any of the proposed 12-inch guns were available, and 1923 before the first 16-inch gun was installed (on Long Island, New York).

When the US entered the war the coastal defences of the Canal were under what was called the Panama Coast Artillery District, as a distinct part of the Coast Artillery Corps.³⁰ In 1920, with the running down of US forces after the war, the Canal Zone defences were designated as a Coast Artillery district within the Army's Panama Canal Department.

²⁷ Camp Elliott incorporated the former Camp Gaillard, one of the original US Marine bases in 1904. Camp Elliott would be renamed in honour of Colonel Gaillard, who had been responsible for construction of the Cut that bore his name (until renamed after its location by Panama, as the Culebra Cut).

²⁸ *Panama Canal Security & Defense 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission) <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/5>

²⁹ <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/103316164>

³⁰ The Corps was created in 1907, when Congress split field and coastal artillery into separate organisations.

In Spring 1917, the Army decided to assign the anti-aircraft mission to the Coast Artillery Corps. Of course, at that time there was even less danger from an enemy air attack than a naval one.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

The war in Europe broke out on 4 August 1914. However, it would take until 13 November for President Wilson to issue a proclamation declaring the neutrality of the Canal Zone.³¹ This neutrality allowed belligerents' warships to use the Canal, albeit time limited to 24 hours, and with limits on total numbers at any time. There were also conditions on the repair of belligerents' vessels, and their supply and refuelling. The far-sighted proclamation also prohibited aircraft from landing or taking off in the Canal Zone, overflying the Canal.³²

There was already a Protocol in place between the US and Panama concerned with restricting use of Panama and Canal Zone waters by belligerents. This Lansing-Morales Protocol of October 1914 signed between the US and Panama provided any vessels undertaking or aiding hostilities whilst in the Canal Zone could be barred for three months.



SS Kroonland, a US ship in the Gaillard Cut in February 1915, en route from New York to San Francisco, and then the largest passenger ship to have transited the Canal³³

As a non-belligerent there would seem to be no immediate threat to the Canal, although foreign agents could be employed to carry out acts of sabotage – with this danger thought to be at its greatest at the

outbreak of the war, and while the US remained neutral (and with the defences not yet

³¹ Under the terms of the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty 1901 and the Hague Convention on the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War. The 1901 Treaty with Britain allowed the US to build, fortify, and control an isthmian canal, and British vessels to be granted access to the canal on equal terms.

³² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2212567?seq=1>

³³ <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/panama-and-panama-canal>

in a satisfactory state). As it was, in Europe Germany expected a quick success, and its navy was more concerned with the Royal Navy across the North Sea. The closest that substantial German forces got to Panama was when the East Asia Squadron evaded pursuing British warships crossed the Pacific, heading for the South Atlantic – where they were sunk by superior British forces.³⁴

Naval forces in the Canal Zone at the outbreak of war in Europe consisted of just five old, C-Class submarines.³⁵ By December, the naval defences consisted of the same submarines, the monitor USS *Tallahassee*, and the old sloop USS *Severn* (towed there by the tug *Potomac*). The submarines patrolled in and around the Canal Zone, operating from four tenders, until the submarine base at Coco Solo became operational in 1918.³⁶

In August 1914, the US obtained unconditional jurisdiction over the operation of radio, not just in the Canal Zone, but the whole of Panama.³⁷ A Decree would grant the US absolute and permanent control over any type of wireless communication in the Republic.³⁸ In December 1914, a vessel transiting the Canal was detected sending coded messages to warships, and was boarded by Canal Zone Police, who dismantled the radio.

³⁴ Only one of its ships, the cruiser SMS *Leipzig*, passed Central America, on its way to join the Squadron, and the closest it got to Panama were the Galapagos Islands, some 1,000 miles to the south-west.

³⁵ Arriving in 1913, these were *Octopus*, *Stingray*, *Tarpon*, *Bonita*, and *Snapper*, with tenders arriving on 22 December 1913. At the time the 700-mile voyage to Panama was the longest cruise made by US submarines under their own power.

³⁶ <https://www.tendertale.com/ttd/ttd4/ttd4.html>

³⁷ President Belisario Porras complied on 29 August.

US President Taft had assigned the US Navy sole responsibility for radio communications in the isthmus in 1911. By 1917, there would be three high-powered naval radio stations p at Colón, Balboa and Darién (despite the misleading name, the latter was not in the Darién proper, i.e. in the region of the Republic bordering Colombia, but rather within the Canal Zone, roughly midway across the isthmus).

³⁸ This would become a longstanding bone of contention in the years between the wars, only really addressed in the changes proposed as part of negotiations over what became the 1936 Treaty, although the Senate refused to ratify the agreement on radio.

A NEUTRAL US AND PANAMA

In January 1915, the US Army units in the Canal Zone were consolidated as the United States Army in the Canal Zone, with a general in command, but coming under the Eastern Department of the US War Department, initially with headquarters in the former Isthmian Canal Commission building in Balboa,³⁹ moving in November 1916 to the Quarry Heights Military Reservation, on the western side of Ancon Hill and adjacent to Balboa, used by the military from 1903.⁴⁰

The Canal was closed for seven months between September 1915 and April 1916 due to landslides in the Gaillard Cut.⁴¹ This, and concerns about a possible two-front war with both Japan and Germany led to consideration in Congress of plans for a two-ocean navy, in case one could not rely on the Canal to move vessels from one side of the US to the other. A plan evolved for a suitable battle fleet by 1919, but came to nought and, with the parsimonious budgets of the interwar years, it would be 1940 before Congress would pass a Two Ocean Navy Act.

While the US remain neutral, both the Hague Convention on the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval Wars and the 1901 Hay-Pauncefote Treaty were referred to in proclamations made by the US President which imposed restrictions. These restrictions included requirements that a belligerent's vessel could only remain in Canal waters for 24 hours, and that the total number of belligerents' vessels was limited to six at any one time (with a limit of three for any one belligerent and its

³⁹ The first Isthmian Canal Commission had been during the French attempt to build the Canal, the second was established following a 1902 Act of Congress to direct construction of the Canal and to govern the Canal Zone. This second Isthmian Commission was dissolved in 1914, with George W Goethals, who had overseen construction, as the first Governor, and replaced by the Panama Canal Organization.

⁴⁰ The name derived from the area being used to quarry rock from 1909 for use in the construction of the Pedro Miguel and Miraflores locks. the quarry closed after five years, and Canal officials transferred it to the Army in 1915 for use as a command post. The barracks etc were originally intended for marines, but these would then be despatched to Mexico. After the war, 100 additional acres were added to the reservation, and the Commanding General established his headquarters there in 1920.

⁴¹ Now the Culebra Cut.

allies). There were also imposed conditions for refuelling, supplies and repairs, as well as a general prohibition on the use of the isthmus as a base for acts of war.⁴²

When the war in Europe began there were four vessels of the Hamburg-America Line which sought refuge at the port of Cristobal, remaining there with their German officers and crew – some of whom were naval reserve. The officers and crew were removed and accommodated ashore, and watched, to prevent the vessels being used to sabotage the Canal. There would be later attempts to restore the vessels to operational condition for use by the US.

Fort Sherman was the site of the first US Army Air Service (USAAS)⁴³ installation in Panama, from March 1917, operating from within the Fort. The first element assigned for duty in Panama arrived on 29 March, commanded by the then Captain Henry H "Hap" Arnold, who later became General of the Army and General of the Air Force. It first operated with two Curtis R-4 biplanes from the parade field, as there would be no airfields in the Canal Zone until construction of the Army airfield at France Field was completed in 1922.⁴⁴

Work began on what would become France Field (at a location, essentially a swamp, then known as "*Camp Misery*" or Coco Walk) in October 1917, but would not see operations until January 1919.⁴⁵ The airfield would eventually be named France Field after the first Army pilot killed in the Canal Zone, 1st Lieutenant Howard J France, who crashed in a seaplane in Gatun Lake in April 1918.⁴⁶

⁴² *Panama Canal Security & Defense 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission)
<https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/5>

⁴³ Predecessor of the US Army Air Corps, later US Army Air Force and, from 1947, US Air Force.

⁴⁴ Arnold's chief task was to locate a suitable airfield but no-one in authority — Army, Navy, or Panamanian — could agree on the site, and Commanding General Edwards suggested Arnold return to the US and get further instructions from the Chief of Staff. However, on his voyage home the US entered the war, and he was reassigned.

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_185_Copp_A_Few_Great_Captains.1.pdf

⁴⁵ During Spring 1918, an emergency appropriation of \$1 million from Congress funded the construction of a landing ground at Coco Walk, which completed by May 1918.

⁴⁶ <https://docplayer.net/53932747-Panama-s-worst-air-disaster.html>

Between 15 August 1914 and 30 March 1917, 2,216 foreign and 1,033 US vessels had transited the Canal.

THE US JOINS THE WAR

The relationship between the US and Germany had deteriorated long before the US finally declared war on 6 April 1917.⁴⁷ Diplomatic relations had been broken in the February, and President Wilson had ordered the arming of US merchant vessels in March.

The proclamation of war extended and applied to *“all land and water, continental or insular, in any way within the jurisdiction of the United States”* and, as the Canal and Canal Zone were clearly within the jurisdiction of the US, the Canal and Canal Zone must be regarded *“at war”*, regardless of the US having proclaimed its neutrality in 1914.

On 10 April, Wilson invoked section 13 of the Panama Canal Act 1912.⁴⁸ Section 13 provided that, in time of war in which the US was engaged, or when, in the opinion of the President, war was imminent, an officer of the Army should be appointed to assume and have exclusive authority and jurisdiction over the operation of the Canal and control and government of the Canal Zone, with the Governor subject to the orders and directions of such officer.⁴⁹ The same thing would occur in World War 2.

Unlike World War 2, Panama did not declare war on Germany. However, a day after the US proclamation, on 7 April, President Valdez issued a *“Proclamation of Cooperation with the United States Against Germany”*, saying that it was the duty of Panama to act as an ally for protection of the Canal and national territory. It would not

⁴⁷ It would 10 December 1917 before the US declared war on Germany's ally, Austria-Hungary, and it never declared war at all on the other major ally, Turkey.

⁴⁸ Which provided for the opening, maintenance, protection, and operation of the Canal, and the sanitation and government of the Canal Zone: Pub.L. 62-337, 37 Stat 560, H.R. 21969, enacted August 24, 1912.

⁴⁹ This being Brigadier General Clarence Ransom Edwards, who would command all US forces in Panama until April 1917, departing in the following months to organise and lead the 26th Infantry Division to war on the Western Front.

be until January 1920 that any vessels flying the German flag were allowed to transit the Canal.

It was in May 1917 that the US authorities received reports that Germany were seeking out neutral Dutch ships in the Far East, to load with cement for use to block the Canal. It was these reports that led to the placing of troops aboard ships in transit. In addition, any enemy alien had to disembark and cross the isthmus by rail, reembarking at the other end of the Canal.

May 1917 also saw 4,000 men of the Porto Rico Regiment sent from Puerto Rico to help defend the Canal, where they would remain until 1918.⁵⁰ Many drafted Puerto Ricans also served with the 42nd Infantry Regiment in Panama guarding the Canal.⁵¹

On 1 July 1917, the Army in the Canal Zone was reorganised as a separate geographical command in own right, rather than a part of the Eastern Department in the US. The new Panama Canal Department was to be a self-sufficient organisation, capable of independent action if support and resupply from the US were cut off. It would exist until 1947.

As for the Canal itself, the ports at either end were closed from sunset to sunrise, and all navigational lights extinguished, to forestall any attempted night-time attack.

On 23 May, President Wilson ordered a tightening of regulations, so that enemy vessels could not use the Canal without the approval of the Canal authorities. In addition, no merchant vessel could enter except after inspection. Troops supplemented the canal Zone Police by guarding the locks and other vital installations and, as mentioned, also provided a guard carried upon ships in transit.

⁵⁰ <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

⁵¹ *The 65th Infantry Regiment in Korea 1950 -1954 Korean War* by SGM Jose R Perez (2005). The US Government had extended the draft law to Puerto Rico in May 1917.

While within Canal waters, radio sets on ships were required to operate on low power, to handle all ship-to-ship, or ship-to-foreign stations traffic, via the US Naval Radio Stations located along the Canal, and to cease entirely all operation of radio when directed.⁵²

Breach of any of the regulations could result in seizure and forfeiture of the vessel.⁵³

Between 1917 and 1921, enemy vessels, or those of an ally of such enemy, were, by proclamation, to be allowed to use the Canal and the territorial waters of the Canal Zone, but only with the consent of the Canal authorities. As already mentioned, in fact no ship flying the German flag would transit the Canal until 1920 (and then in slightly unusual circumstances).⁵⁴

The Trading with the Enemy Act was also enforced, which allowed for the interception and censoring of mail and cable messages, control of exports, taking control of enemy property, and import restrictions.

As in World War 2, enemy aliens in both the Canal Zone and the Republic were detained and interned (the latter being those of “suspicious character and behaviour”). Until detained, German and Austrian residents in Panama had already been required to register and make weekly reports to the police. When detained the relatively small number were kept in the US Government-owned hotel on the island of Taboga, 12 miles off Panama City until, in 1918, an Act of Congress legalised the detention and removal of enemy aliens, following which those held in Taboga were transferred to Ellis Island in New York. They were to eventually return to Panama in 1919, after the Versailles Treaty was signed.

A temporary submarine base had been established at Coco Solo on the Caribbean side of the isthmus in April, only a few days after the declaration of war, and a new unit,

⁵² *The Panama Canal in Time of Peace* by Norman J Padelford (The American Journal of International Law, Vol 34, No 4, October 1940).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Naval Forces Canal Zone, was established, initially having just the five submarines and three torpedo boats.

In July 1917, the Navy established an airfield at Coco Solo, close to Camp Randolph and the city of Colón.⁵⁵ It was commissioned as Naval Air Station Coco Solo on 6 May 1918, for patrol operations by seaplane and lighter-than-air (LTA - airship or blimp) aircraft. A permanent submarine base would also be constructed here, but this would not be until 1919.⁵⁶

The Pacific Fleet did make use of the Canal, but did not go to European waters, instead deploying in the South Atlantic, off Brazil.⁵⁷ As already mentioned, by the time the US entered the war, the German High Seas Fleet, the main naval threat, had been bottled up in port by the Royal Navy.

In 1918, the France Field Reservation was constructed, as *“the first real air base in the Canal Zone”*, on Manzanillo Bay, near Fort Randolph and Fort DeLessups. However, it would only be formally established and named in an Executive Order in 1920. In February 1918, the 7th Air Squadron was the first unit assigned to France Field, with the unit employed in patrolling the waters coastal areas of the Atlantic in the final weeks of the war. The unit started with just two pilots and 51 enlisted men.⁵⁸ From 1 June 1918 to 15 November 1918, the 7th Aero Squadron conducted anti-submarine patrols *“against possible German submarine raiders or any hostile activities from the sea”* from France Field. It coordinated these *“tri-daily patrols of the coastal waters adjacent to the Atlantic”* with the Coast Artillery Corps and Navy.

⁵⁵ Using an emergency appropriation of \$1 million from Congress.

⁵⁶ https://members.tripod.com/william_h_ormsbee/cocosolo Naval base hist p01.htm

⁵⁷ <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Panama+Canal%3a+75+years+of+security+history.-a08011543>

⁵⁸ <https://afhrafromthestacks.wordpress.com/2025/03/25/panama-series-part-1/>



U.S. Army seaplane prepares to take off for first local airmail flight, October 18, 1918.

At the other end of the Canal, Miller Field, situated within Fort Clayton may have been functional as early as 7 March 1919, when a request was made by the Panama Canal Department to Canal authorities to construct a "*temporary shelter for an airplane at the southeastern end of the Miraflores Lake near the railroad tunnel*". However, the field was only used for emergencies and aircraft were not normally present.

Between 1 April 1917 and 30 June 1920, 4,453 foreign and 2,682 US vessels transited the Canal. Its main role during the US involvement in the war was described as being to quickly and efficiently transport troops and materials from the East Coast to the West Coast, and *vice versa*.



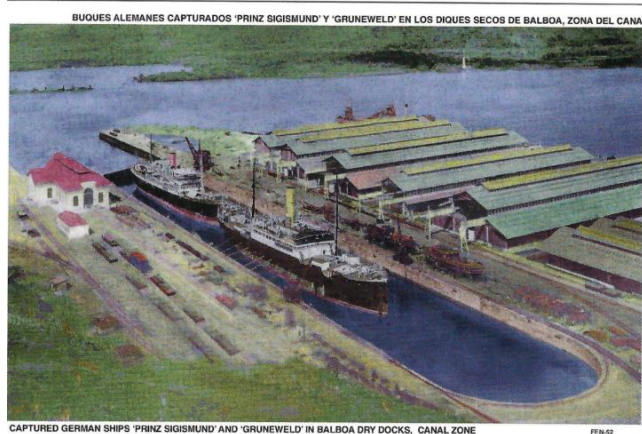
Two US soldiers in the Canal Zone during the war

Before the war ended the US had deployed troops outside the Canal Zone. President Ramón Valdez suddenly died and factions within the government declared the indefinite postponement of the election due on 7 July 1918. The troops were deployed to ensure that the election took place, and Panama elected a new legislature under US supervision.

The war saw shortages of staple foodstuffs in Panama, such as rice, butter and sugar. With the Canal Zone itself strictly policed, the US also pressured Panama to impose tight controls at its ports of entry, screening all passengers and detaining those thought to be suspect. There was censorship of newspapers, with any pro-Central Powers tendencies suppressed, and private correspondence was also censored.

Panama made all of its territory, including its territorial waters and airspace, open to the US without restriction, allowing, for example, the movement of US troops across its territory. However, the highhanded attitude of the US authorities during the war is said to have increased resentment amongst ordinary Panamanians.

US “Liberty Bonds”, sold to finance the war effort, were sold in Panama, and their purchasers included every member of the National Assembly. In October 1918, a staged event saw the deputies buying their bonds.



FOR MESSAGES ONLY

CAPTURED GERMAN SHIPS IN BALBOA DRY DOCKS

Two captured German ships are seen at Balboa dry dock. The docks were built to handle any ship that could transit the canal, being 1000 feet long, and 110 wide (identical to a lock-age). On May 12th 1917, Congress passed a Joint Resolution allowing the US to take possession and title of any vessel of an enemy state operating within its territory. On June 30th 1917, the order was given to seize four German steamships at the Atlantic terminal of the Panama Canal. Both vessels shown on this view were formerly owned by the Hamburg American Packet Company. Their new owner was the Panama Railroad Steamship Co. Nearest is the Grunewald. She emerged as the SS General G.W. Goethals. The Prinz Sigismund is behind her and emerged as SS General W.C. Gorgas. Both vessels carried troops and cargo between Europe and the US, helping the American war effort during and after WWI. This view was also used for Canal Zone stamp Scott #58 shown above right.



Two SC-1 Class submarine chasers in the Canal Zone in 1918⁵⁹

⁵⁹ <https://www.navsource.net/archives/12/150289.htm>

THE END OF THE WAR

While the Armistice ended the fighting on 11 November 1918, it would be 25 January 1919 before the Commanding General handed control of the Canal and Canal Zone back to the Governor.⁶⁰

Panama was one the signatories to the Versailles Treaty that formally ended the war, despite it then being only 14 years old and having less just 500,000 inhabitants.⁶¹

Following the war, there was hope in Panama that joining the new League of Nations would provide an opportunity to seek international mediation over interpretations of the 1903 Treaty, seemingly made unilaterally by or for the US authorities.⁶²

During the war, aside from the closure caused by the landslides, the Canal and its facilities, docks, harbours etc had operated without being harmed and without undue delay to vessels. As in World War 2, there were no hostile acts directed against the Canal and, unlike, World War 2, there were not even any U-boats attacks in its vicinity (and German commerce raiders never ventured near).

In June 1919, the majority of men and aircraft of the 7th Aero Squadron were sent home by sea, leaving a small flight for duty at France Field. Although the 7th Aero Squadron was reduced in size after the war, the unit remained active in the Canal Zone, undergoing several redesignations in the 1920s and 1930s.⁶³

The Puerto Rican troops returned home, with regular troops from the Continental US forming the garrison for the next 20 years or so.

⁶⁰ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission): <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/1>

⁶¹ It was also present at the last formal meeting of the League in April 1946, when it was closed.

⁶² <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/220424/panama-conferencia-paz-paris-palacio>

⁶³ https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/France_Air_Force_Base



German U-boat UB-88, sent to the US after surrender. Refurbished she visited New York in 1919, then transited the Canal to tour the US West Coast. Seen here alongside USS Bittern by the Pedro Miguel Locks in August 1919

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

14 November 2025

APPENDIX

ABANDONED GERMAN SHIPS REPAIRED IN THE CANAL ZONE IN WORLD WAR 1

After entering World War 1 in 1917, the US, short of shipping, negotiated with Peru to acquire several German ships which had sought refuge in the neutral ports there. 3 of these, which formerly traded between Germany and South America, were towed to Panama to be repaired at the workshops that had been established in the Canal Zone. The ships had been extensively damaged by their crews, hence the need for repairs. The dredger *Culebra* towed 2 of the ships from Peru in September 1918, with the third ship following some 2 months later.

The largest of the ships was the 8,226-ton *Sierra Cordoba*, only completed in 1912, and seemed an ideal troopship, having had a peacetime capacity of 115 first-class and 1,572 third-class and steerage passengers, as well as 4 large cargo holds. Work on this ship began at Balboa, at the Panama Canal workshops. However, on further examination, it was found that the condition of the vessel was worse than thought. In addition to the damage wrought by its crew, no maintenance had taken place since August 1914. Nevertheless, repairs were undertaken, ironically aided by the German-built heavy-lift crane, *Ajax*.

It was April 1919 before the ship could be handed over to the US Shipping Board as the SS *Callao*. 2 days later she sailed in ballast for New York to take up transport duties. She would be disposed of in 1922, and ended her days being sunk by Japanese aircraft in the East Indies in 1942.

The other vessels were the 6,848-ton *Rhakotis*, completed in 1907, which departed Balboa for New York in March 1919; and the *Uarda*, completed in 1899, was handed over to the US Shipping Board in New York in July 1918.

In early 1920, 2 small German-built tugs, under British Admiralty orders, passed through the Canal, together with other British salvage vessels, on the way to assist in the towing of further disabled German ships from Chile to Liverpool. One of these, the

Schelde, became the first German-flagged vessel to transit the Canal (5 minutes ahead of the other tug) on 2 January. A number of recovered war prizes would later pass along the canal on their voyages to Britain.

One German vessel marooned in Chile was not handed over to the Allies. This was a sailing ship considered too small, and was thus allowed to continue her voyage to Germany which she had begun in 1914 – using a crew sent from Germany.