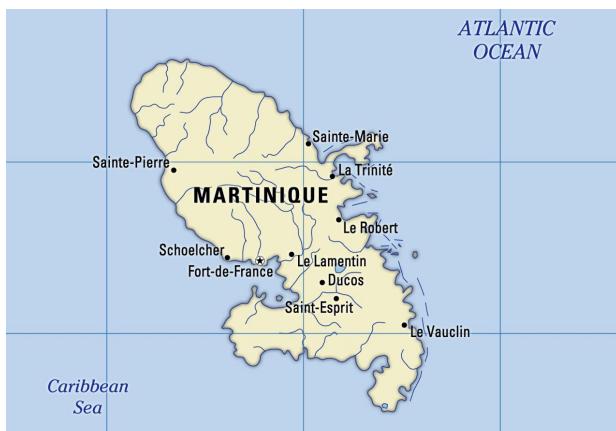


MARTINIQUE

Martinique was a French colony,¹ and the colonial administrative centre for the West Indies. It lay in the Antilles between the British islands of Dominica and St Lucia, and was, and is, tropical and mountainous. It was perhaps most famous before World War 2 as having been the scene of one of the world's worst natural disasters in the Western Hemisphere, when Mount Pelee erupted in 1902, killing 35,000 people.



The capital of the island is Fort de France, where there was a large bay, with a harbour of 13 square miles in area, a natural anchorage into which, it was said, the entire US Navy of 1942 could have fitted. The entrance was wide and deep, and there were

numerous coves and inlets with sufficient depth of water for ships of all sizes.

It has been said of the island that –

Martinique had a larger White population than Guadeloupe and a larger planter class whose descendants, by the twentieth century, clung tenaciously to the old planter class elitism and prejudice that had buttressed their domination over the Black slaves since the seventeenth century. The remnants of this class wielded considerable influence in the early decades of the twentieth century...[and] remnants of this class and their allies controlled the Martinique Governing Council.²

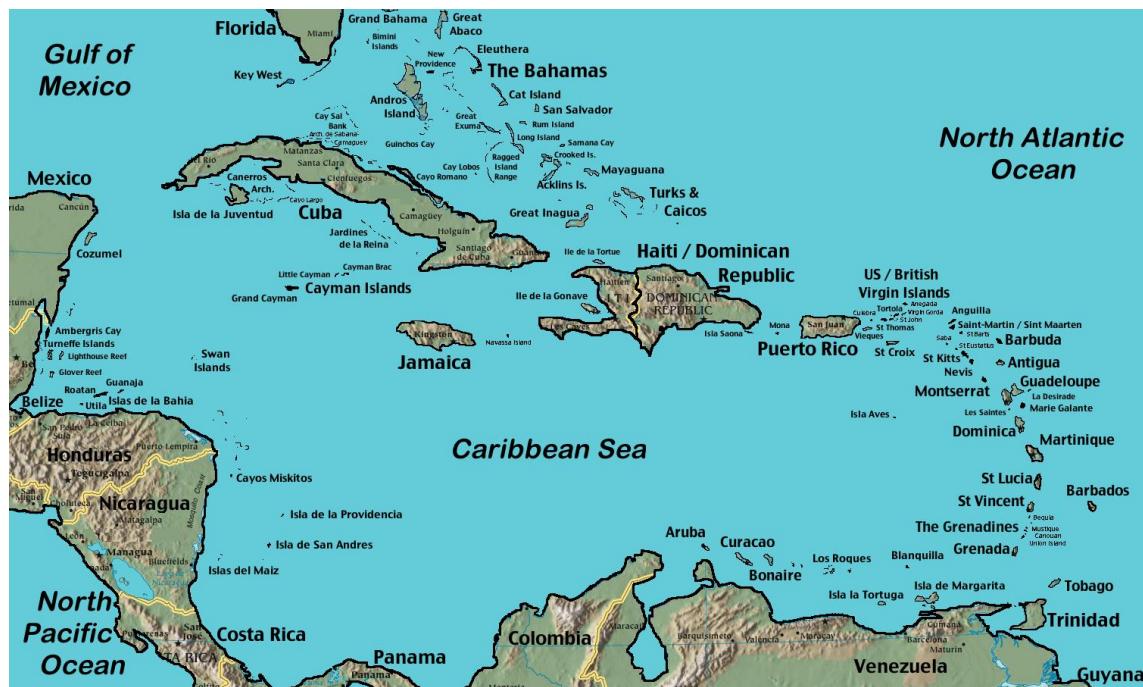
¹ It only became a *Département* in 1946 (and a *Région* in 1974). On 14 September 1939, the French government subordinated the Governor of Guadeloupe Admiral Robert, as the High Commissioner for the Republic in the Antilles.

<https://www.ourhistory.org.uk/the-history-of-martinique/>

² *How Dominica Helped to Save Guadeloupe and Martinique During World War 2* by Dr Irving Andre (2002).

Before the Fall of France, the British, Dutch and French possessions in the Caribbean offered some security to the US, allowing for effective control of the sea, and screening the approaches to the vital Panama Canal. However, this situation was to change in June 1940.³

After France surrendered on 20 June 1940 Martinique was to adhere to the Vichy government that ruled the unoccupied parts of the country until November 1942, after which, with the Germans occupying all of France, it became even more a German puppet regime.



At the time, the cruiser *Emile Bertin* had arrived there,⁴ carrying gold bullion evacuated from the Bank of France and worth \$384 million.⁵ This had been on its way for safekeeping in Canada when France had fallen. It arrived in the island on 22 June. On 24 June, the 28,000-ton *Béarn*, the French Navy's only aircraft carrier, arrived. It was carrying 106 US-built combat aircraft,⁶ also intended for delivery to bolster French (and

³ The Governor of French Equatorial Africa was only governor in all of France's colonies to declare his support of General de Gaulle's Free French Forces after the Fall of France.

⁴ The *Bertin* had fought in Norway, and had the best fighting record of any French warship at the time.

⁵ The presence of the gold, and the risk that it might fall into German hands, would be one of the main reasons for the US considering an invasion of the island. Admiral Robert hid this gold in Fort Desaix and at various secret locations in Martinique.

⁶ These included six Brewster Buffalo fighters of dubious value, 27 Curtiss Hawk 75 fighters and 44 Helldiver biplane dive-bombers, as well as 25 Stinson Voyager light aircraft (a type that would be

Belgian) defences.⁷ Very soon, the fleet to be found in the harbour also included two 6-inch gun light cruisers (the *Emile Bertin* and the *Jeanne d'Arc*),⁸ two auxiliary cruisers (effectively armed merchant vessels),⁹ six tankers and nine other merchant ships (totalling around 80,000 tons).



The Béarn's aircraft parked in Martinique in 1941

The gold ended up in Martinique because, on 16 June 1940, the French government had ordered all gold reserves in the Bank of France,

which included those of occupied Belgium and Poland, to safety in Canada. Initially, the French Prime Minister Reynaud had wanted a neutral US cruiser to carry out the task. Instead, the *Béarn* and *Emile Bertin* had been used. However, by the time the *Emile Bertin* had arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia with its cargo of gold, this was after Petain had been installed and the Vichy government was in power in France. Despite Canada's pleas (and the British desire to prevent the ship from leaving), the cruiser

rejected for the artillery observation role by the US Army). When Admiral Greenslade inspected the aircraft in August 1944, he found there were some 112 in all, about 44 of which were the Helldivers.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v02/d586>

<https://laststandonzombieisland.com/2015/10/21/warship-wednesday-oct-21-2015-the-humble-yet-resilient-frenchman/the-six-belgian-buffalos-aboard-the-french-aircraft-carrier-bearn-during-the-journey-which-would-end-on-martinique/>

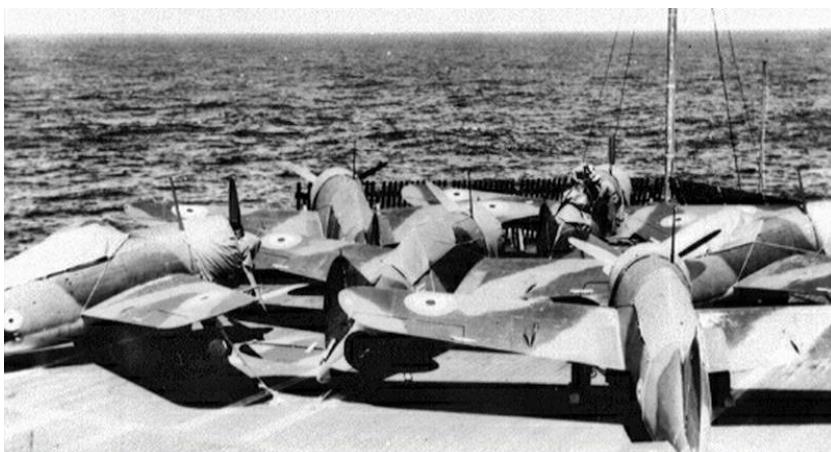
⁷ Six of the Buffalo fighters, a version of what turned out to be a disappointing US Navy carrier fighter, were intended for Belgium, which had ordered 40 just before the war, but only one had reached France before the German invasion in 1940.

⁸ The *Jeanne d'Arc* was a training cruiser, equipped as both a training ship and a fully capable warship. Commissioned in 1931, she had also been used to transport the gold reserves to Canada in 1940, before joining the *Béarn* and sailing to Martinique. Joining the Free French forces in August 1943, she was refitted and modernised in Algeria. After operations in Corsica and the invasion of Southern France in August 1944, she then transported part of the provisional French government to Normandy in September 1944 before returning to the Mediterranean. Postwar, she resumed her role as a training ship, continuing in use until replaced (by a new ship of the same name) in 1964.

⁹ The *Barfleur* and *Quercy*.

managed to get away and sailed for Martinique (trailed by a British cruiser all the way).¹⁰ There it joined the *Béarn*, which had been joined by the *Jeanne d'Arc* in mid-Atlantic.

In charge in Martinique was Admiral Georges Achilles Marie Joseph Robert, then 68 years old and who bore the title of High Commissioner for the French Antilles.¹¹ Appointed on 14 September 1939, he was also French Naval Commander in Chief for the Western Atlantic.¹² Robert had served during World War 1, and ended the war as a lieutenant. In 1921, he was promoted to captain, continuing then a steady rise in rank, becoming a vice-admiral by 1930. He retired in 1937, but requested to return to active duty in June 1939. He sailed from France to arrive in Martinique on 15 September 1939 to take up his new role.



The Belgian Buffalo fighters aboard the Béarn

Robert is said to have seen Vichy leader, Petain, as the “incarnation of Eternal France”, and

saw “Anglo-Saxons” and Gaullism as the primary enemies of France. He disliked what he saw as British “dishonesty...untrustworthiness and treachery”.¹³

Following the Fall of France in June 1940, the General Council of Martinique had initially called for continuing the war on the side of the Allies, adopting a resolution to this effect on 19 June; but Admiral Robert had instead enforced the Armistice

¹⁰ *Long Night of the Tankers: Hitler's War Against Caribbean Oil* by David J Bercuson and Holger H Herwig (University of Calgary Press, 2014).

¹¹ The other components were Guadeloupe and French Guiana.

¹² *How Dominica Helped to Save Guadeloupe and Martinique During World War 2* by Dr Irving Andre (2002).

¹³ *Long Night of the Tankers: Hitler's War Against Caribbean Oil* by David J Bercuson and Holger H Herwig (University of Calgary Press, 2014).

conditions.¹⁴ Support for the Vichy regime was largely concentrated among French expatriates, descendants of the old planter class and more wealthy residents - Martinique had a larger white population than Guadeloupe and a larger planter class aware of their status, and this led to Robert having to impose repressive measures to keep the general population under control.



French Aircraft Carrier Béarn Martinique Feb 1941 LIFE David E. Scherman

Robert also adopted for Martinique the so-called “National Revolution” (*La Révolution nationale*), this was a propaganda campaign that the Vichy government presented as its official ideology.¹⁵ This program was a right-wing, nationalistic, xenophobic, antisemitic, and authoritarian one which promoted “traditional values” (and not those inspired by the original French Revolution, with the Bastille Day commemorations being banned). It seems that the idea of the program was to provide hope to the French people affected by the defeat and the occupation that followed it, and to show the way forward and the values on which to rely in order to restore France and French pride.¹⁶

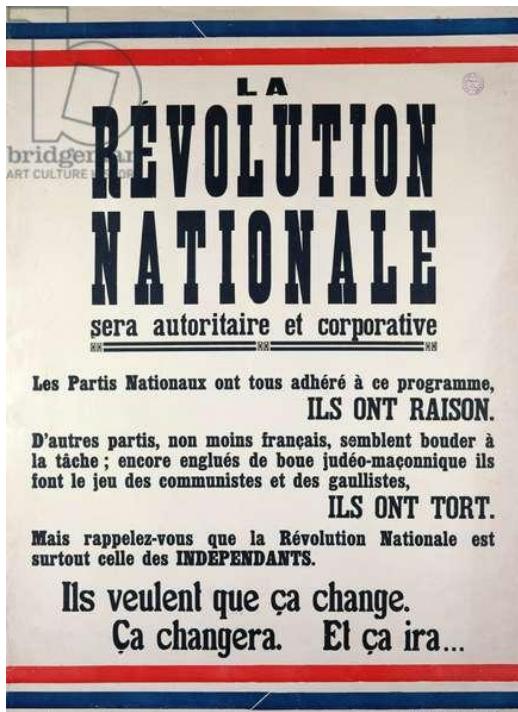
¹⁴ The Governor on Guadeloupe publicly declared in the General Council that he would not collaborate with the Germans; causing Admiral Robert to despatch Admiral Rouyer and the cruiser *Jeanne d'Arc* to ensure Guadeloupe's loyalty to the Vichy regime. The Governor then performed a *volte face* and began prosecuting those opposed to collaboration.

¹⁵ However, as we shall see, on 28 June, he also began negotiations with the neutral US for essential supplies.

¹⁶ <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/regime-de-vichy/3-la-revolution-nationale-une-revolution-culturelle/>



The Emile Bertin in 1940



Propaganda poster of the Vichy Government for the "National Revolution"

Of course, the new “revolution” also sought to persecute those seen as “anti-France”, particularly members of the former regime, and those who had supported the Popular Front in the 1930s (communists in particular), and the new French regime would align with the Nazi occupiers in its antisemitism. In Martinique, tight press censorship and racist policies were implemented by Admiral Robert. Laws stripped citizenship from non-

French descendants and people of colour not born of a French father, and anti-Black racism (which had existed since the days of plantation slavery) was heightened.¹⁷ There was no high court, and the police could summarily arrest and imprison anyone deemed undesirable.

The Vichy Jewish statute was enforced in the island, with 16 residents registered in Fort de France. This Law on the status of Jews was promulgated in October 1940 and created a new category of underclass of French Jewish citizens. It excluded Jews from public administration, the armed forces, entertainment, arts, media, and certain

¹⁷ This was despite Martinique having developed from the late 18th and 19th Centuries a large black class who in taste, values and loyalty to France, were the same as members of the planter class, with “gradations of “White” with those who were the fairest in complexion generally occupying the highest positions on the social ladder while the darkest complexioned individuals languished at the bottom”.

professions, such as teaching, law, and medicine. Another law followed, authorising the detention of foreign Jews. Restrictions increased from February 1942, including a curfew.

The repressive measures adopted in Martinique, allied to the deprivations and shortages endured,¹⁸ would cause what has been described as widespread flight from the island to Dominica,¹⁹ the British island which lay between Martinique and Guadeloupe.



Photograph from The Washington Post

Turned Back on the High Seas, United States Planes En Route to France and Belgium Reach Journey's End on Martinique
One hundred Curtiss and Brewster fighters and Curtis pursuit planes, some formerly the property of the United States Army and Navy, line the slope overlooking a lagoon. They were aboard the French aircraft carrier *Bearn*, sailing from Halifax to a French port, when France capitulated last June. The *Bearn* put about and steered into Martinique, to keep her cargo from German hands. (page 47).

On 23 June, three days after France had signed the armistice with Germany, two Royal Navy cruisers arrived, and the British Governor of Trinidad attempted to persuade Admiral Robert to turn over the island to the British, without success.²⁰

In July 1940, the British placed three warships offshore and blockaded the island for the next six weeks.

¹⁸ The time of shortages was known in the Island by the creole term “An tan Robé” (“The time of Robert”).

Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean by Kirsten Stromberg Childers (OUP, 2016).

¹⁹ These included the then well-known psychiatrist and revolutionary author, Frantz Fanon. He would go on to fight in the Free French Forces in North Africa after having received training in Dominica:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frantz-Fanon>

²⁰ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/february/martinique-world-war-ii>

In August 1940, a US Navy admiral, Vice Admiral John W Greenslade,²¹ arrived and submitted a four-point agreement which he invited Robert to sign. While, of course, the US was still neutral, the agreement called on the French to –

- Guarantee that the naval vessels then at Martinique would not leave the West Indies;
- Notify the US Government beforehand of intentions to move any ship within waters of the French West Indies, and, in particular, 48 hours advance notice of any proposed movement on the part of the larger units — *Bearn, Emile Bertin, Jeanne d'Arc*.²²
- Receive a US naval observer who would be given every facility for inspection and observation; and
- Return to the US the 106 warplanes brought to the island by the *Bearn*.²³

Robert was prepared to agree with the first three points, but argued that the last would violate the armistice with Germany, and that they had been bought and paid for by the French government and were thus French property. Of course, this raised the fear that there were plans to use the aircraft. In fact, the island lacked any suitable airfield from which the aircraft could be used.²⁴

As a result of the agreement, Robert would only move the warships at Martinique for maintenance purposes, and only after giving the US notice. However, one small warship could move freely to maintain communications with other French colonies in the Caribbean.²⁵

²¹ Greenslade was Commander, Western Sea Frontier from December 1941 to February 1944. Created in 1941, each Sea Frontier was a geographic area, usually comprising a number of Naval Districts but including in addition the outer shipping lanes in its sea area. The Western Sea Frontier was responsible for the sea defence of the Pacific coast of the US and Mexico. However, it was the Caribbean Sea Frontier, and the Panama Sea Frontier which were responsible for the Caribbean and the Atlantic coast of South America.

²² At the time, the last-named was actually in Guadelupe.

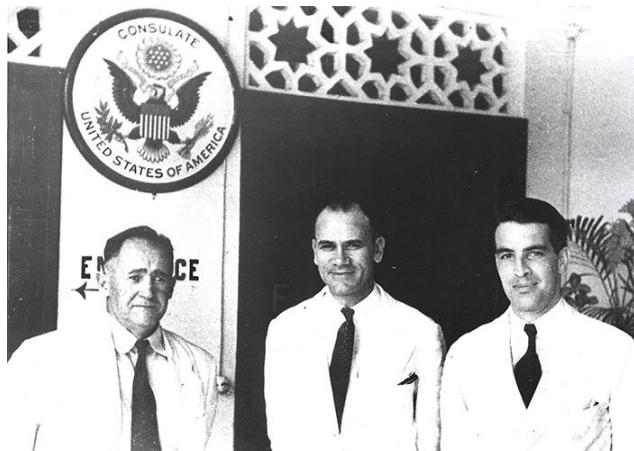
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v02/d586>

²³ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/february/martinique-world-war-ii>

²⁴ Operation Asterisk existed as a plan to provoke an uprising on the island if Admiral Robert had refused to negotiate a neutral settlement after accepting the armistice.

²⁵ *Golden Journal No. 36 (Atlantic Marines)* by Mike Bennighof (Avalanche Press, 2021).

This agreement, known as the Greenslade-Robert Accords, also required prior notice of any shipment of gold from the island, and would allow for the controlled release of funds in the US to purchase essentials. It was portrayed as being necessary for the maintenance of neutrality in the region, and in line with the neutrality limitations established by the Pan American Security Zone on the part of the US.²⁶



The naval observer in Martinique (Commander E J Blankenship), the departing US Vice-Consul (Vinkler Harwood Blocker) and his replacement (Robert Sheehan) at the Consulate on 18 July 1941²⁷

In the last week of October 1940, President Roosevelt asked the Navy to develop a plan to occupy Martinique that could be executed at three days' notice.²⁸ The initial 1940 plan would have put the burden of the attack on the Atlantic Fleet's brigade of US Marines, to be followed up by the US Army's 1st Infantry Division.²⁹ The Navy intended an amphibious assault by the 2,800 Marines of the 1st Marine Brigade, supported by an artillery unit, a Marine Engineer Battalion, a light tank company and service and support units. At sea there would be two battleships, two aircraft carriers, four cruisers and 16 destroyers. The Navy's planners estimated that the French could field 7,000 or 8,000 men, including armed sailors from the warships stranded in Fort-de-France, and that they would offer only token resistance.³⁰ The main intention was to secure the French ships, the airfield and the US warplanes brought to the island by the *Béarn*.³¹

²⁶ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v02/d586>

The Security Zone was established by the Declaration of Panama of October 1939. For more on the Neutrality and Security/Neutrality Zone, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-in-world-war-2-neutrality-and-preparation-for-war-to-1941/>

²⁷ <https://afsa.org/once-upon-time-us-consulate-martinique>

²⁸ *Golden Journal No. 36 (Atlantic Marines)* by Mike Bennighof (Avalanche Press, 2021).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ However, the Army thought differently, recalling the resistance offered at Dakar to a British and Free French attack in September 1940. It considered 25,000 troops would be needed – men it simply did not have – on paper the 1st Infantry had 15,000, but not in reality at the time. Hence, it planned to use its best trained men for actual combat, relegating other, essentially untrained, ones to non-combat roles.

³¹ *Golden Journal No. 36 (Atlantic Marines)* by Mike Bennighof (Avalanche Press, 2021).



Marines practice for the Martinique landing. The Higgins boat had not yet been adopted, and the landings would have been made from Navy-supplied boats.

32

However, with the US still neutral an attack on the colony would look bad, might make other French commands elsewhere to side with the Axis, and it might fail anyway.

Hence the planned Operation *Bungalow* was shelved in December 1940. In the event, in January 1941, the new US Ambassador to Vichy France received assurances from Vichy chief of state Philippe Pétain that his rump state would not collaborate directly with the Axis, and that the French fleet would be scuttled before it fell into German hands.³³

In November 1940, US Navy destroyers operating out of St Lucia,³⁴ began patrolling off Fort de France. Later, this would be replaced by daytime patrols by PBY Catalina flying-boats, with destroyers patrolling at night.

Following the armistice, all French funds in the US had been frozen. However, in November 1940, the French Embassy in Washington DC³⁵ sought \$1.25 million per

³² *Golden Journal No. 36 (Atlantic Marines)* by Mike Bennighof (Avalanche Press, 2021).

³³ *Golden Journal No. 36 (Atlantic Marines)* by Mike Bennighof (Avalanche Press, 2021).

³⁴ Where a base was being established following the “bases for destroyers” deal with Britain.

³⁵ The neutral US maintained diplomatic relations with the Vichy French government.

month to be released to meet the needs of the Caribbean colonies. By this time, stocks of food in Martinique were running short, and it had been without bread for a week. After negotiation, the US Treasury agreed a figure of \$1 million a month. Once a month, a merchant ship would travel from New Orleans bringing food and medical supplies.³⁶

On 8 December 1940, while conducting an inspection cruise in the West Indies aboard the USS *Tuscaloosa*, President Roosevelt approached within about three miles of the coast of Martinique. He summoned the US Vice-Consul and the naval observer in Martinique to inquire about the situation in Martinique and Guadeloupe, and to relay specific requests to Admiral Robert. Roosevelt insisted, on this occasion, on the need to prevent any Nazi control and influence in these French territories.³⁷

In July 1941, a memo from the Dominica Superintendent of Police provided a picture of conditions in Martinique, compiled from information provided by those fleeing the island –

*“..all heads of government departments were German. No persons were allowed to own radios let alone listen to broadcasts from the BBC. The Vichy administration controlled all the newspapers. There was no High Court; the police summarily arrested persons deemed undesirable and dispatched them to prison”.*³⁸

By July 1941, there were only five small shops and a drug store remaining open in Fort de France, and such staples as rice, flour, tobacco and matches were unobtainable. Nevertheless, Robert continued to extort money from estate owners, business owners and local government officials to send to France in support of the Vichy regime.

³⁶ It travelled under a guarantee of safe conduct from Germany – although the U-boat offensive in the Caribbean would only start in 1942.

³⁷ <https://afsa.org/once-upon-time-us-consulate-martinique>

³⁸ *How Dominica Helped to Save Guadeloupe and Martinique During World War 2* by Dr Irving Andre (2002).

Even though still neutral, in January 1941, the US Army and Navy had begun to plan for intervention in Latin American states to help avert takeovers by Axis-inspired movements.

Already, in August 1940, the then Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department (the Army command in the Canal Zone) had suggested how much easier it would be to help maintain a friendly government in power than to oust a pro-Axis government once it was established, and proposed that a few hundred infantrymen and a battery of pack howitzers transported by air from the Canal Zone could probably handle a situation in nearby countries, at least until additional forces could be dispatched from the Continental US.³⁹

Even before this, in July 1940, plans were finalised by the joint US/British planning committee for a US expeditionary force to invade the island, citing fears that the three French warships stationed there could be turned over to the Germans and threaten US and British shipping in the Atlantic.⁴⁰

In the event, an Army/Navy Joint Board recommended Army units to be based in the Canal Zone on 48 hours' notice, with their reinforcement, if necessary, by an Army expeditionary force sent from the US. The plan assumed that the assistance of US forces would be requested by a recognised government while it was still in control of the situation, that the forces would not encounter organised opposition on their arrival, and that no more than one such operation would have to be undertaken at a time among the eight Latin American republics for which detailed plans were to be drafted.⁴¹

³⁹ *United States Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere – The Framework of Hemisphere Defense* by Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild (Center of Military History, US Army), 1989: <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

⁴⁰ <http://www.schudak.de/timelines/martinique1502-1947.html>

Of course, on 3 July, the Royal Navy had attacked French warships at a naval base near Oran in French Algeria to neutralise or destroy them to prevent them from falling into German hands.

⁴¹ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>
Of course, US forces had experience of such interventions between the wars, in the so-called “Banana Wars”, where it repeatedly intervened between 1898 to 1934 in support of, or to defend, US interests in Central America, most famously perhaps involving the “occupation” of Nicaragua by US Marines until as late as the early 1930s.

In May 1941, the commanders of the Panama Canal Department and 15th Naval District (which was also headquartered in the Canal Zone) were instructed to prepare plans which were to involve transporting an airborne infantry battalion, preceded by a platoon of parachute troops, to the capital of the country involved, while naval forces from the Canal Zone, including a small Marine contingent, were to enter any strategic seaports.

Also in May, the War Department decided that the plans needed a full parachute battalion, and the 550th Infantry Airborne Battalion⁴² was activated in the Canal Zone on 1 July 1941, comprising volunteers from combat units already in Panama.⁴³ In August 1941, the 501st Parachute Battalion arrived in the Canal Zone from Fort Benning, Georgia, and it and the 550th Infantry Airborne Battalion then participated in a mock operation at the Rio Hato airfield in Panama on 12 September 1941.

In January 1942, a War Department directive formally called for the formation and training of combat units for potential use either in Panama or elsewhere in the Caribbean,⁴⁴ and until 1943 the US continue to maintain units to form a long-distance striking force as part of the Caribbean Defense Command.⁴⁵ The units and their presence in Panama was classified as Top Secret.

The plan was for paratroops to land at the airfield at Fort-de-France, secure the runway, and then the air landing battalion would join them there, landed by C-47 transports. Meanwhile the ground element – from the independent 33rd Infantry

⁴² The 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion was an independent airborne forces unit, having been formed at Fort Kobbe in Panama - originally as an air landing unit, rather than a parachute or glider landing unit. It was associated with the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion, that would have normally preceded it in any assault.

⁴³ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

⁴⁴ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6i>

⁴⁵ This was the theatre-wide overall command created in February 1941 with headquarters in the Canal Zone. It was the forerunner of such commands, and historic antecedent of the present-day Southern Command.

Regiment, usually part of the Canal Zone garrison - would land on the beaches and join the airborne forces in securing the capital.⁴⁶

However, the Striking Force, as it came to be known, was never to be used for its planned role.⁴⁷ In any case, until later in the war, there would have been a severe lack of aircraft enabling all the parachute and airborne landing troops to be delivered in a single movement,⁴⁸ and initially the Commanding General reluctantly allocated half of his B-17 and B-18 bomber strength to be employed if such an operation was required.⁴⁹

Even after the US entered the war the situation remained the same. Only in April 1942, when Pierre Laval became French prime minister, did the US send a State Department representative and the admiral in command of the Caribbean Sea Frontier for further discussions with Robert.⁵⁰ It was agreed that the warships in Fort de France would be immobilised.

Another safeguard put in place saw the US Consul in Martinique inspecting the manifest of every ship entering the harbour, able to board any ship he wanted to for the purpose of inspecting cargo. The US Consulate was located in the heart of Fort de France, and the Greenslade-Robert Accords considerably strengthened its role, to which a naval observer was now attached. The consular mission was also very busy with the European refugees who arrived in Martinique (see below) and wished to immigrate to the US or Canada.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Golden Journal No. 36 (Atlantic Marines)* by Mike Bennighof (Avalanche Press, 2021).

⁴⁷ In Summer 1941, the possibility arose that the Striking Force might actually be needed, when an undeclared war broke out between Peru and Ecuador in July over a century-old boundary dispute. However, Peru soon prevailed, and a peace agreement was signed in January 1942, there having been no evidence of Axis involvement or influence in any case. This dispute, the "War of '41" (*Guerra del 41*), rumbled on, with further short conflicts in 1981 and 1995, before a definitive peace agreement was eventually signed in 1998.

⁴⁸ When formed in 1941, the 20th Transport Squadron, based in the Canal Zone, had just a single aircraft. Another snag was that none of the landing fields in the capitals of the various countries likely to have been involved could have handled the number of aircraft required.

⁴⁹ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

⁵⁰ The mission was backed up by a naval task force cruising close by.

⁵¹ <https://afsa.org/once-upon-time-us-consulate-martinique>

By this time, the so-called “Battle of the Caribbean” was underway, with U-boats attacking shipping, including the vital oil and bauxite trade to the US.⁵² There were rumours that the U-boats were being aided by Martinique,⁵³ or at least were able to hide in its waters.

On 16 February 1942, a U-boat, U-156, entered Fort de France and asked to land its second-in-command, who needed urgent medical treatment.⁵⁴ Under international law, this request could not be refused.⁵⁵ When a U-boat later attacked shipping in St Lucia it was assumed that this was the same submarine which had visited Martinique – though, in fact, it was not.

Interestingly, when U-156 called at Fort de France the war diary of its commander noted that he was not “*full certain*” that he could “*trust the loyalty*” of the supposedly Vichy French colonial authorities that were “*far from Vichy*”. He took precautions, ordering the boat’s emblem to be covered up, to ensure anonymity, and for the experimental radar detector to be stowed below decks.⁵⁶

On 25 May 1942, the destroyer, USS *Blakely* was torpedoed while on patrol 3½ miles (5.6 km) off Martinique. Though badly damaged, and with six crew killed, she managed to limp into Fort de France, leaving two days later after emergency repairs.⁵⁷ It was established that the attacking U-boat must have been operating in the island’s territorial waters (its 3-mile limit) at the time.⁵⁸

⁵² There were also a number of larger Italian submarines operating in the Atlantic edge of the Caribbean.

⁵³ It certainly could not assist them with fuel, as the island was desperately short – the “petrol” being used consisted of 10% gasoline and 90% rum. As we have seen, the island was already desperately short of food and other essentials itself.

⁵⁴ The U-boat had been involved in shelling oil refineries on Aruba.

⁵⁵ After having a leg amputated, he was interned.

⁵⁶ *Long Night of the Tankers: Hitler’s War Against Caribbean Oil* by David J Bercuson and Holger H Herwig (University of Calgary Press, 2014).

⁵⁷ As with the U-boat in February that year, combatants’ warships had rights to enter neutral ports to seek medical treatment or undergo urgent repairs (that did not improve their fighting capabilities).

⁵⁸ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/february/martinique-world-war-ii>

As a result, Admiral Robert was told that the Greenslade-Robert Accords no longer applied (they would be formally abrogated in March 1943 and a new blockade imposed), and the US demanded that the French warships at Martinique should be immobilised.

A US Navy officer sent to replace the naval observer in mid-1942 said that he found that the island was “*about 95% pro-American*”, although almost equally anti-British. At the time, there were just 3,202 troops on the island, together with 2,111 naval personnel. There were two defending forts –

- Fort Tartenson – which had four 160 mm guns, two 80 mm mortars, two 75 mm anti-aircraft guns, four 47 mm, and eight 12 mm machine guns; and
- Fort Desaix (where the bulk of the bullion was thought to be stored) – which had two 95 mm guns, five 80 mm mortars, one 75 mm gun, a battery of four 47 mm, and four 12 mm anti-aircraft machine guns.⁵⁹

Towards the end of 1942, the US warplanes brought by the *Bearn* were in poor condition, and probably unserviceable. In any case, confusion during an alert when it was feared the US were about to attack had seen many of the warplanes damaged or even set on fire.⁶⁰

The steady trickle of refugees to Dominica increased to a flood in 1942 and 1943.⁶¹ Another problem for Martinique (and to Dominica) was that smuggling from Dominica to Martinique, with rum being traded for essentials needed in the latter, had already become such a problem by December 1941 that the Superintendent of Police in Dominica said that it was increasing at “*an alarming rate*”, and 12 additional constables had to be hired.⁶²

⁵⁹ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/february/martinique-world-war-ii>

⁶⁰ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/february/martinique-world-war-ii>

⁶¹ *How Dominica helped to save Guadeloupe and Martinique during World War Two* by Dr Irving Andre.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Following the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 tensions on the island rose. The US, which until then had continued to have diplomatic relations with the Vichy government, now severed those relations and would transfer to the alternative Free French administration being established in North Africa by de Gaulle and others. The consulate in Fort-de-France nevertheless remained open and was entrusted to a consular officer whose activities, according to a State Department note, were to be strictly limited to “*the protection of American interests*” and excluded “*any negotiations of a political character*”.⁶³

However, the State Department informed Robert that the US would continue to respect the territorial integrity of the French West Indies, assuming that there were no untoward acts on his part.⁶⁴ For his part, Robert rejected calls from Admiral Darlan to switch to the Free French cause⁶⁵ – also rejecting a call from de Gaulle to join the Free French in April the following year.

Preparations for a possible invasion of the island continued and, despite the shortage of suitable aircraft, in November 1942, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion had been formed at Fort Kobbe in the Canal Zone,⁶⁶ intended for use in landings on Martinique. The nucleus of this new unit came from the 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion, most of which had redeployed to the Pacific theatre in late 1942. The new unit began training in the jungle of Panama in January 1943.⁶⁷

On the island itself, resistance to the Robert regime continued, and during 1943, the Martinique Committee for National Liberation (CMLN) was formed and this helped

⁶³ <https://afsa.org/once-upon-time-us-consulate-martinique>

⁶⁴ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/february/martinique-world-war-ii>

⁶⁵ Darlan had been commander-in-chief of the French Navy at the outbreak of the war, later served in the Vichy regime, but did a deal with Eisenhower as the Allies invaded French North Africa, being recognised as France’s High Commissioner for North and West Africa, and ordered the Vichy forces to end resistance – thus changing sides. He was assassinated on Christmas Eve 1942 by a young anti-Vichy monarchist.

⁶⁶ Although its parachute training took place at Fort Benning in the US.

⁶⁷ https://dothaneagle.com/eufaula_tribune/news/history-of-the-551st-parachute-infantry-and-their-demise-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/article_03b2b41e-d314-11e8-8776-bb24e86db10f.html

organise the protests that would erupt later that year. It nominated a French diplomat called Henri Hoppenot as a prospective leader.⁶⁸

Also in March, French Guiana changed its stance, and switched to support the Free French movement. However, Martinique declared its support for Giraud, not de Gaulle.⁶⁹

In April 1943, the US suspended supplies to the island and the Vichy government in France, which no longer had diplomatic relations with the US, ordered the ships scuttled and the gold somehow disposed of.

In May 1943, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion began preparations for a possible combined parachute/glider assault to seize Martinique by force. Ammunition, grenades, medical supplies, and maps of the island were issued, and the troops moved to Howard Airfield, ready to take part in what would have been their first combat jump, only for the operation to be called off.

On 18 June 1943, the mayor of Fort de France encouraged the local population to protest and, on 24 June, 15,000 demonstrated, marching through the city, singing *Le Marseillaise* and crying "Vive de Gaulle".⁷⁰ When the police attempted to intervene rioting broke out, lasting for two days. The head of the island's gendarmes confined his men to barracks, and Robert, fearing a total breakdown of law and order, felt compelled to order the release of two men, including the mayor, seen as leaders of the protests.

⁶⁸ At the time the Ambassador for Free France in Washington DC. He would arrive in the island, appropriately perhaps, on 14 July, to take over from Robert the following day.

⁶⁹ <https://www.histclo.com/essay/war/ww2/cou/island/car/w2c-mart.html>

As Giraud was, at the time, the Free French leader favoured by the US administration, I feel that this cannot be a coincidence.

Seen as a rival to de Gaulle, Giraud had famously escaped from German captivity in 1942 (he had done so in World War 1 as well), having been captured during the Battle of France in 1940. He first fled to Vichy France, went into hiding and contacted the Allies. He was favoured as Free French leader by the Roosevelt administration and, following the Allied invasion of French North Africa, became High Commissioner for North and West Africa. Despite attending the Casablanca Conference with de Gaulle, and the pair jointly establishing the Committee of National liberation as a form of unified French (Free French) government as co-presidents, de Gaulle managed to sideline him and he resigned.

⁷⁰ Ironic, given that Martinique initially came out for his rival, Giraud, in 1943.

Then, on 29 June, the garrison at one of the camps near Fort de France joined the protests, and Robert took refuge aboard the cruiser *Emile Bertin*, which was then in drydock, taking part in several days of negotiations with dissident leaders and representatives of the US.

On 30 June 1943, Admiral Robert asked the US to send a representative to replace the Vichy administration in Martinique, and a delegation travelled to Dominica on 2 July to say the island had switched to the Free French and to ask for a new Governor. That day Robert formally handed over his command to a US Navy admiral, and 13 days later left for Puerto Rico and then Lisbon.

In 1943, with the need for the Striking Force having apparently diminished, the 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion was redesignated the 550th Glider Infantry Battalion and departed Panama for Sicily, where it trained in preparation for the invasion of Southern France (*Operation Dragoon*) in 1944. The 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion also departed Panama in August 1943, being no longer required for any assault on Martinique.⁷¹

Henri Hoppenot arrived in Martinique on 14 July 1943, this being ironic given that the Vichy regime had banned the celebrations that would normally be held throughout French territories on that day. Hoppenot appointed a new Governor, René Ponton, previously a colonial administrator and Free French officer in French Equatorial Africa. He formerly took over from Robert on 15 July.

Something resented in the island postwar was that, despite having liberated themselves, or at the least contributed substantially to it, the people of Martinique were not recognised as part of the French Resistance after the war.⁷²

⁷¹ It was eventually shipped to Europe, and badly mauled in fighting in Belgium in January 1945, with survivors being absorbed into the 82nd Airborne Division, and the Battalion being formally deactivated later that same month.

⁷² *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean* by Kirsten Stromberg Childers (OUP, 2016).

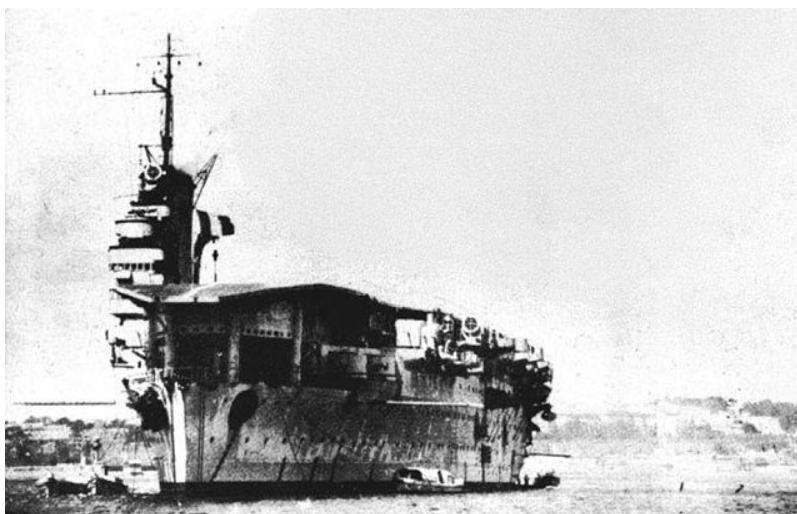
After the war, Admiral Robert was put on trial in Versailles in 1947, accused of being a collaborator. Sentenced to 10 years hard labour, he was released after six months, and eventually pardoned in 1957. He also suffered “national degradation” for life,⁷³ dismissed from the Navy and placed in the permanent custody of his son.⁷⁴

POSTSCRIPT – THE BÉARN



The Béarn seen outside of Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico after undergoing temporary repairs in November 1943

The *Béarn* had been laid down in 1914 as a *Normandie* Class battleship but was left unfinished in the shipyard in Toulon, only being launched in 1920, and then only to clear the slipway for other work. Still incomplete, work eventually got underway in 1923 to convert her into the French Navy’s first aircraft carrier. Completed in 1927,



Béarn off Martinique in 1942⁷⁵

⁷³ *Indignité nationale* was a legal offence in French law, created to deal with wartime collaborators, as something distinct from treason. It ceased to be a criminal offence in January 1951, and the punishment of *dégradation nationale* was abolished in August 1953. *Dégradation nationale* involved such things as losing the right to vote, being barred from public office, and dishonourable discharge from the armed forces.

⁷⁴ Apparently, his son had been in the resistance and had interceded on his behalf.

⁷⁵ *All Hands Magazine* (January 1948).

she could accommodate up to 40 aircraft, using a 180-feet (54.9 metres) flightdeck.

She entered service in 1928-29 and spent most of the 1930s in the Mediterranean, but was considered too slow at 21 knots to be used in fleet operations with faster vessels, such as cruisers. In 1936, she redeployed to Brest (as she was due to be replaced by two new carriers in the Mediterranean in 1939, though these were never built), and her own replacement was due in 1948, with work to begin in 1943.

She took no part in the defence of France in 1939-40, even during the German invasion her air group operated from land bases. Instead, she would be despatched to collect US-built aircraft, making several such trips. This found her in Halifax in May 1940, sailing on 16 June for France but being diverted to Martinique.⁷⁶

After the Free French authorities took control in Martinique, she was to be repaired and again used as an aircraft transport, the same role she had performed before her exile in Martinique. Partly repaired, she sailed to New Orleans on a floating drydock for substantial modifications, before proceeding to Norfolk, Virginia, where her refit was completed.

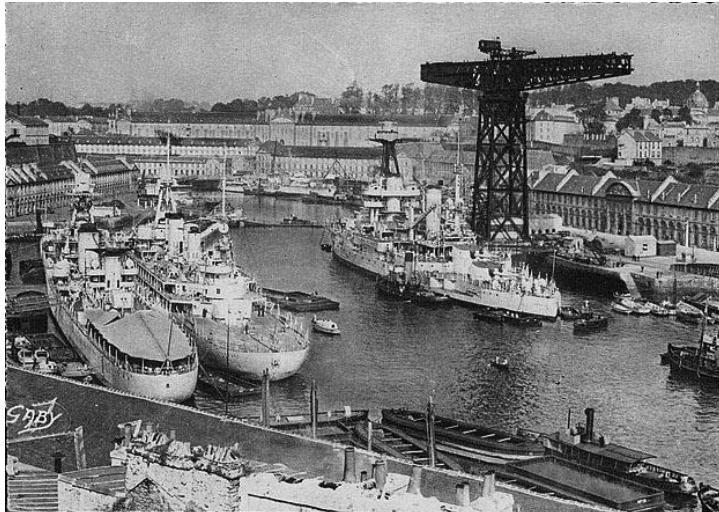
It was not until 3 March 1945 that she was ready to resume operations, carrying aircraft to Britain. However, on 13 March, she collided with a US troop transport and had to receive temporary repairs in the Azores, then more substantial repairs in Casablanca, staying there until July, after the end of the war in Europe.

Postwar, she transported a French expeditionary force to Indo-China in October 1945, remaining in support there until June 1946. She returned to France in July, decommissioned and mothballed until December 1948, then undergoing a short refit to serve as floating barracks for submarine crew in Toulon, finally being scrapped in 1967.

⁷⁶ Some sources say that she carried some of the gold bullion sent to Martinique.

POSTSCRIPT 2 – THE *EMILE BERTIN*

Named after a famous French marine engineer, this light cruiser with a main armament of nine 6-inch (152 mm) guns and a complement of 550 officers and men.



Emile Bertin and Jeanne d'Arc together in Brest before the war, with the battleship Lorraine close by

Launched in 1933, this fast cruiser was designed to operate as a destroyer flotilla leader and minelayer. Her high speed saw her used for a secret mission to collect the

Polish gold reserves from Lebanon in September 1939, and would later carry the same gold, plus that of France and Belgium, accompanied by the cruiser *Jeanne d'Arc* and the *Béarn* to Canada. She also took part in the failed Anglo-French operations in Norway in the Spring of 1940.

After the change of regime in Martinique, she joined the Free French forces in August 1943 and underwent a refit and modernisation in Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. She then joined Allied warships in the Mediterranean, and took part in the landings in the South of France in August 1944.

Following a postwar refit, she deployed as flagship to Indo-China in July 1946, later returning to France in December 1947, carrying the ashes of Free French war hero, General Leclerc, who had been killed in an air crash in Algeria. After serving in Toulon as a gunnery training ship, a floating barracks, and finally a target ship, she was decommissioned in 1952, and sold for scrap in 1959.

FINAL POSTSCRIPT - THE MARTINIQUE ESCAPE ROUTE

While the wartime story of Martinique has a Panama connection, albeit relatively slight (as the planned assault was never undertaken), another little-known fact about the island during the war was its role as an escape route for Jews and other refugees fleeing Vichy France.

As we have seen there would be many people fleeing from Martinique, to escape deprivation and repression, but in early 1941 no less than six ships left Marseilles for Fort de France carrying Jewish refugees, with one vessel carrying as many as 215. French Interior Minister, Marcel Peyrouton, had used the initiative as the "*last legal avenue out of Vichy France in the winter of 1940 and the spring of 1941*",⁷⁷ being an advocate of Jewish emigration. This effort came between the official emigration schemes which had operated from 1938 to 1942, and the change which would then see Vichy complicity in deportations to German death camps in 1942-44. Until October 1941, Germany's official solution to the "Jewish problem" was emigration.⁷⁸

Assistance for the refugees was provided by Varian Fry, a representative of the American organisation, the Emergency Rescue Committee, and the Vichy Government suspected the involvement of a Guadeloupean deputy, Maurice Satineau.

The French Minister of the Colonies was opposed to allowing such emigration, as did the governors of the individual colonies. For example, in January 1941, Admiral Robert, as High Commissioner for the Caribbean, told the Governor the Antilles as a whole could only accommodate some 400 refugees. Nevertheless, the program proceeded, and in February to March 1941 the six ships left France bound for

⁷⁷ *Ordinary Sailors: The French Navy, Vichy and the Second World War* by Alexander John Upward (Dissertation, 2016):
<https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=7893&context=etd>

⁷⁸ On 18 October 1941 the policy changed and borders closed.

Martinique. It appears it was the insistence of the Vichy Interior Ministry that overcame local reluctance.

Some ships are said to have made repeat trips, returning to France loaded with rum and bananas.

To get a place on a ship required a “deposit” (presumably never to be seen again) of between 10,000 and 25,000 francs, as well as the fare itself (paid in US dollars). Even then, a German commission checked the passenger lists and reserved the right to block any would-be emigre, or even demand that they be handed over.

In April 1941, the Minister for the Colonies complained that the Antilles and Guiana were being overrun by “*large numbers of stateless peoples and Jews*”.⁷⁹

A local police report on 22 April 1941 said that, of “*the 222 passengers on board the Paul Lemerle*”, who had arrived on 20 April, only three were to be allowed to settle on the island, with the others either interned in a camp, or released pending their departure for elsewhere.



Refugees on their way to Martinique

In total, perhaps more than 3,000 refugees made it to Martinique. This included not just Jews, but also other anti-Nazi elements and Spanish political dissidents (many

Spanish Republicans had fled to France at the end of the Spanish Civil War).

⁷⁹ *Ordinary Sailors: The French Navy, Vichy and the Second World War* by Alexander John Upward (Dissertation, 2016): <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=7893&context=etd>

Whilst the escape of so many people that would no doubt have suffered under Vichy, and the Germans, the route came to an end by May 1941. Part of the reason for it stopping is said to have been US resistance – as many of those involved would ultimately be intending to get to the US. There were also the opposition of the authorities in the colonies, as well as Anglo-American concerns over the program being used to mask other activities under the guise of apparent Vichy neutrality.⁸⁰

Another route to Martinique had been via Casablanca, in Vichy-controlled Morocco, but this too closed in May 1941. It restarted in the following August, but with the British allowed to vet passenger lists, and effectively this ended a refugee flow using that route.

As one can imagine, given the situation in Martinique, the refugees did not find their position ideal. They were subject to ill-treatment, with many imprisoned for using actual or assumed false identities or documents. Almost all were interned in two camps outside the capital (created in 1939-40 and run by the Army, used for enemies of the Vichy government). One was on the site of a former leper colony.

These camps also housed stranded Czech troops who had managed to escape from France (a 1939 law had made Czech troops “French”, and as French troops they were barred from leaving French territory). These were to remain on the island until it changed side in 1943.

Having already paid to get out of Europe, they had to also pay for their internment – a 9,000 francs “deposit”, with another 1,500 francs in “costs”. Hanging over all their heads was the fear of being repatriated back to whence they came.⁸¹

Some were able to leave the island fairly quickly, to the US, Brazil or St Lucia, with most eventually reaching the US.

⁸⁰ In May 1941, Allied warships are said to have intercepted two ships heading for Martinique, with Dutch intelligence reportedly fearing German agents being amongst the passengers.

⁸¹ *Last Exit from Vichy France: The Martinique Escape Route and the Ambiguities of Emigration* by Eric Jennings (University of Chicago Press: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 74, No. 2; June 2002): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/343409>

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
14 February 2026