

THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS – “THE ROCK”

By the late 1930s, it was clear that the threat from attacks by carrier aircraft in particular, given the advances in carrier aviation between the wars, would require more early warning than ships and aircraft based in the Canal Zone could supply. Even bases in the rest of Panama would be insufficient.



However, the need for outlying bases to also establish a worthwhile screen from submarine attack on shipping using the Canal does not seem to have been prominent in the thinking of pre-war planners.¹

The Pacific approaches were seen as the more vulnerable, despite a degree of safety being provided by the far greater distance any potential enemy would have to travel to pose a threat.² They lacked the suitable and potential island and mainland bases available in the Caribbean.

Early in 1940, the General Board of the Navy and an Army-Navy Joint Board both studied the problem, reaching the conclusion that preparations must be made for the operation of constant air patrols over a wide area to the west of Panama. They recommended that patrol seaplanes, supported partly by tenders and partly by shore

¹ German U-boats (and some Italian boats) did attack shipping in the Caribbean, the former getting very close to the Canal Zone (and in one case, into a harbour in Costa Rica). However, the distance that a submarine would have had to travel to threaten the Pacific approaches, whether from Germany or Japan were vastly greater. That said, Japanese submarines did menace the US West Coast (though even that was far from Panama), and by the war's end Japan was building large aircraft-carrying submarines, specifically to attack the Canal.

For more on the U-boat war threat, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-and-the-u-boats/>
For more on the planned Japanese attack, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-in-world-war-2-the-genuine-threat-the-planned-japanese-attack-on-the-panama-canal/>

² And, until victory in the Spanish-American War in 1898 it had no obvious enemy on the Pacific front. After gaining the Philippines, Guam and the Mariana Islands the Japanese became a potential enemy, as reflected in successive war plans. By the 1930s, Japan was the main and obvious likely opponent.

installations, be based near Guayaquil on the Ecuadorian coast, in the Gulf of Fonseca in Nicaragua, and on the Galapagos Islands.³

Eventually, advance bases would be established to protect the Pacific approaches to the Canal, from Nicaragua in the north to Peru in the south. Aircraft operating these bases could provide the degree of warning that would provide the Canal defences a fighting chance of an adequate defence. Patrols from such bases would also provide welcome protection of shipping travelling to and from the Canal.⁴

In the Pacific, only the Cocos and Galapagos Islands offering suitable sites for basing patrolling aircraft and vessels in or near the Canal approaches, the latter being some 900 miles or 1,448 km south-west of the Canal Zone.⁵

Before the end of 1941, an agreement with Ecuador saw permission obtained for the US to build bases in the Galapagos Islands.⁶ At the same time, negotiations for similar bases in Ecuador and Peru⁷ were under way.

The Galapagos would see a major airbase established on South Seymour Island (aka Baltra Island) – perhaps mistakenly then, and later, just called “Seymour” (see note below) - in the middle of the archipelago and with a suitable flat landscape, chosen as

³ <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/building-the-navys-bases/building-the-navys-bases-vol-2.html>

The program was further expanded during 1942, with the development of bases in Ecuador, on the Gulf of Fonseca in Honduras, at Corinto in Nicaragua, and at other bases in Panama but outside the Canal Zone.

⁴ For more on how and where such advance bases were obtained, see

<https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-in-world-war-2-advance-bases-and-the-rock/>

⁵ Further north, the Cocos Islands (*Islas del Coco*) were Costa Rican territory, and about 500 miles (805 km) west of Balboa. While small and lacking a good harbour, it was thought they could accommodate an aircraft early warning station. Only around 1,000 feet (305 metres) high at the most, a USAAF B-24 nevertheless later managed to crash into it during the war.

⁶ Incidentally, Ecuador had lost a little-remembered war with Peru in July 1941, with Peru occupying parts of its territory into 1942 (with the dispute only being finally settled by a definitive peace agreement in 1998): <https://dspace.ucuenca.edu.ec/bitstream/123456789/2094/1/tli292.pdf> Ecuador had hoped that the need for a base or bases in its territory would mean the US applying pressure on its behalf.

⁷ The first B-17 Army bombers arrived from Panama in January 1942; a joint Army/Navy base being built at Salinas. (*Journal American Aviation Historical Society*, Spring 1974).

the main site. Construction began in January 1942. There would also be a US Navy presence, with patrol flying-boats and PT Boats operating from the islands.



The islands would represent the apex of a patrol arc, with long-range flying-boats operating from Nicaragua in the north to Ecuador in the south.

On 24 January 1942, Ecuador granted permission to proceed with construction of bases in Ecuador, at Salinas on the mainland, and on the Galapagos Islands, with more specific agreements intended to be signed after Lend-Lease details had been settled.



US troops in the Galapagos

NOTE

According to a 1947 USAAF report, references to the base and the island it was on often refer to it being just “Seymour”. However, construction was on Baltra Island, aka South Seymour Island. An official engineer map, produced in 1943, had labelled the airfield as “Seymour Island”. When the mistake was later discovered, the word “Seymour” was crossed out and the island instead labelled as being “Baltra”.

The initial description of the location as being on Seymour Island was probably due to the lack of knowledge of (and, frankly, prior interest in) the archipelago. and accurate maps of it.

It is suggested that the base continuing to being referred to as being on Seymour Island may be due to the desire to prevent confusion, since that is the name that the US Army used from the start of the project.

Prior to World War 2, most maps showed two islands as North and South Seymour. The 1943 Army map labelled them as North Seymour Island and Seymour Island, omitting “South” from the larger of the pair. It appears that the Army subsequently consulted one of several maps of the Pacific Ocean produced by the National Geographic magazine with an inset of the Galápagos Islands. One of these, in 1936, was thought to be the first to label the islands as Seymour and Baltra, and this was repeated in 1937 and 1942 publications. This led the Army to conclude, wrongly, that the Seymour name applied to the northern island only.⁸

WHERE AND WHAT ARE THEY?

The Galapagos Islands, famous for having helped Charles Darwin come up with his theory of evolution, lie about 600 miles (1,000 km) west of Ecuador, the country to which they belong. The archipelago consists of 127 outcrops, of which 19 could be called islands, with only four currently inhabited. The group of islands comprise a total

⁸ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947)
<https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

area of around 135 square miles (350 square km). Now best known as a controlled tourist site, they became a national park in 1959, and are surrounded by a marine reserve created in 1986 (and nearly doubled in size in 1998).

They were officially “discovered” in 1535 by the Bishop of Panama, by accident it would seem, as he travelled from Panama to Peru (the reverse of the route taking the conquistador booty to Spain). Not the most attractive place to settle,⁹ it nevertheless attracted a variety of visitors over the centuries – pirates, whalers, fur sealers, fishermen, scientists and, in modern times, tourists.

In the 19th century there were a series of attempts to colonise the islands, having by then having been annexed by the new country of Ecuador in 1832. Despite these, and later attempts, the population always remained small, though it was found useful as a penal colony.¹⁰ Prior to the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, the archipelago played a significant role as a refuelling location for transoceanic freight transport ships.¹¹

As was the case for areas in the Caribbean, acquiring the right to build a canal in Panama saw the US take an interest in the islands. It had already seen them as a potential coaling station for its growing navy, having unsuccessfully negotiated with the Ecuadoran Government for such a station in 1899.¹² In 1911, the US had suggested taking a 99-year lease for them for \$15 million, later also discussing with Ecuador renting or buying the main island or the whole archipelago. It was also proposed that the US acquire both the Galapagos and Cocos Islands during World War 1, in 1917.¹³

⁹ The first permanent resident, at the start of the 19th century, and very briefly, was an Irishman.

¹⁰ The last was established in 1944, with the first prisoners arriving in 1946. It finally closed in 1959. The islands’ importance might be assessed by the fact that the first visit by a President of Ecuador was only in 1917.

¹¹ <https://www.lapintagalapagoscruise.com/blog/the-rock-us-army-base/>

¹² *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

¹³ <https://www.usserie.org>

It is said that, during World War 1, the islands were used by German warships to avoid British ships. Certainly, Graf Spee’s Pacific Squadron would have at least passed by in its attempt to get home to Germany.

The largest and most important islands in the archipelago were –

- the easternmost, San Cristobal (aka Chatham Island), which would be the source of fresh water used at the US base;
- Santa Maria (aka Floreana Island), around 50 miles (80 km) south-east of San Cristobal – a 1938 survey had found beaches suitable for seaplane ramps, and level ground where airfields might be constructed. Water was also available;
- Santa Cruz (aka Indefatigable Island), a large island south of Baltra, which was said to only offer a good anchorage for small craft;
- San Salvador (aka James Island), to the north-east of Santa Cruz and Baltra, had been found by the 1938 survey to offer the best location for an airbase using seaplanes, with its sloping beach, and flat land on which airfields might be built. There was also fresh water in the hills on the island.
- Isabella (aka Albemarle Island), although the largest in the archipelago was said in 1938 to offer little or nothing as a base location, and even decent anchorages suffered from prevailing heavy swells.
- North Seymour and slightly larger South Seymour (the latter aka Baltra)¹⁴ would be where the large airbase would eventually be built – leading to some confusion over the correct name for the location and the base (see note). These lay off the north-west corner of Santa Cruz.¹⁵

In 1941, only a small detachment of around 25 Ecuadorian soldiers were stationed on San Cristobal, with a handful dispersed to other islands.¹⁶

¹⁴ Baltra is a Spanish surname and is particularly common in Chile. It is thought that the alternative name for South Seymour comes from a Chilean naval officer, Lieutenant Humberto Baltra Opazo, who was aboard a corvette that spent three weeks in the Galapagos conducting a hydrographic survey. It was the British Admiralty, to which the results of the survey were sent, that adopted the name Baltra for the island in its maps and publications.

¹⁵ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1942/may/galapagos>

The islands were named in honour of George Francis Seymour, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy's Pacific Station 1844-47 (the Seymour Narrows in British Columbia is also named after him).

¹⁶ *The Galápagos: Pacific Guardians of the Panama Canal* By Lieutenant Richard W Mindte USNR (US Naval Institute, May 1942)
<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1942/may/galapagos>



Photo believed to show Ecuadorian troops in the Galapagos. 1942

An article by a US Navy Reserve officer in 1942 suggested that there was no doubt that this “potential Helgoland of the Gulf of Panama”¹⁷ (as he described the archipelago) had been appraised by the pro-Axis powers. He called for the US and Ecuadorian governments to act and secure a most strategical outlying base for the protection of the Canal.¹⁸

THE BEGINNING

US plans for the Galapagos were hardly a secret. In 1939, two resolutions had come before Congress recommending purchase of both the Galapagos and Cocos Islands, it having been rumoured in 1938 that Ecuador had been willing to sell the Galapagos Islands.¹⁹

In November 1938, Major General David L Stone, was directed by the War Department (and with the consent of the relevant governments) to undertake a reconnaissance of the Galapagos and Cocos Islands, and recommended their purchase with a view to establishing Naval Stations and air bases.²⁰

In 1938, President Roosevelt visited the islands, aboard the cruiser USS *Houston*, and on his way to visit the Canal Zone.

¹⁷ *Heligoland* had been acquired from Britain (in exchange for Zanzibar) in 1890 and subsequently turned into a German naval fortress in both world wars.

¹⁸ *The Galápagos: Pacific Guardians of the Panama Canal* by Lieutenant Richard W Mindte USNR (US Naval Institute, May 1942)

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1942/may/galapagos>

¹⁹ <https://www.usserie.org>

²⁰ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947)
<https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

In March 1940, local Galapagos residents reported seeing of German U-boats in the Galapagos Islands.²¹ This was extremely unlikely, given the range of early war U-boats. Commerce raiding at such distances from Germany at that time would have been by converted commercial vessels (*Hilfskreuzeren*) – which did venture into the Pacific²² - or its “pocket battleships” (such as the ill-fated *Graf Spee*, which did not venture into the Pacific). Japanese commerce raiders did operate in the Pacific.

Again, despite later descriptions of the base on the Galapagos as being “secret”, numerous reports in US newspapers had reported on discussions regarding the placement of air defences on the Galapagos Islands and Cocos Island and, on 5 September 1940, the press announced that Costa Rica had formally offered the US a long-term lease of the latter for use as a naval air base.²³

During 1939 and 1940 there had been border skirmishes between Peru and Ecuador (not for the first, nor the last, time) and, in July 1941, Peru invaded Ecuador. The larger and better equipped Peruvian forces soon occupied a large part of Ecuador. At the time, negotiations with the US over a base in the Galapagos were continuing, and Ecuador tried to have included sanctions imposed by the US against Peru to compel return of occupied land. Following a ceasefire agreement in October, the Rio Pact of January 1942 confirmed the substantial loss of territory.²⁴

In September 1941, a Dutch ship sank near the Galapagos Islands, with an Australian ship following in early December. There were extensive reports at the time of a German commerce raider in the region, and it was thought at the time that these could have been responsible for the sinking of both.²⁵

²¹ <https://galapagosonline.wordpress.com/tag/wwii/>

²² At least one travelling out via Cape Horn, and one returning to Germany via Cape Horn. Incidentally, for the tale of a Panama-flag tanker that fought such a commerce raider, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-in-world-war-2-the-tanker-that-fought-a-commerce-raider/>

²³ <https://www.usserie.org>

²⁴ <https://warhistory.org/article/ecuador-and-peru-1941>

²⁵ <https://galapagosonline.wordpress.com/tag/wwii>

However, whilst there were German and Japanese commerce raiders in the Pacific, I have found no reference to either country's raiders making attacks so close to the Canal.

On 12 December 1941, just five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US Navy sent 36 men, on a British tramp steamer, to the Islands to establish a refuelling depot for patrol aircraft (flying-boats) and, within a few days, its seaplanes were being refuelled there by hand pumps from a motor launch.²⁶

The day before, the Army Headquarters, Army Field Forces, had advised the Commanding General, Caribbean Defense Command (CDC),²⁷ that Ecuador had made available both the islands and the Ecuadoran Coast for “*the establishment of such military bases as may be necessary*”. The following day, the Commandant, 15th Naval District (the US Navy command in the Panama region), had issued orders directing that a temporary advance air base be established at “Seymour Island”.²⁸

On 28 December 1941, the Commanding General of the Caribbean Air Force²⁹ presented a detailed list of materials that would be required, quoting an initial garrison of 76 officers and 676 enlisted men for an air component.³⁰

In December 1941, the requirements for the airbase were set out as –

- a runway, initially of 5,000 feet (1,524 metres) for temporary use by heavy bombers - to be increased to 8,000 feet (2,438 metres) as rapidly as possible;
- facilities for one pursuit (i.e. fighter) squadron and one heavy bomber squadron;

²⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²⁷ Headquartered in the Canal Zone, and established in 1941, the CDC was tasked with protecting the Panama Canal, the Canal Zone, and all its access points as well as defending the region from Axis aggression and setting up a series of US bases throughout the Caribbean. See <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-in-world-war-2-the-caribbean-defense-command/>

²⁸ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

²⁹ Created in 1940 as the Panama Canal Air Force, being renamed in 1942, then renamed once more the same year as the Sixth Air Force. It formed a part of the Caribbean Defense Command.

³⁰ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

- a water supply, with evaporators to supply 10 gallons per man per day, covered reservoirs for a 30-day supply, with test wells, and with immediate needs to be supplied by barge from island or mainland sources;
- a fuel supply, with dispersed storage tanks for 1,000,000 gallons storage, while for immediate use, floating or drum reserves would be maintained;
- building construction materials for light tropical Theater of Operations portable type buildings;
- other utilities, laundry, bathing and sanitary facilities (using sea water), plus an ice plant capable for manufacturing a minimum of 2½ tons per day;
- camouflaged and splinter-proof emplacements for defensive weapons (to be built by the troops manning them), with “Panama mounts” for the 155-mm guns.³¹
- warehousing and refrigeration storage capacity, on the basis of having a 30-day reserve.³²

On 6 January 1942, a board appointed by the Commanding General of the Caribbean Defense Command, General Andrews, recommended the establishment of a joint Army/Navy base on “Seymour Island”, with auxiliary fighter bases on other islands in the archipelago (these were intended to provide protection during construction of the main base). War Department approval was received on 14 January, and the US Minister in Ecuador consulted with officials there, and found that they were disposed to accept the proposal.

On 22 January 1942, General Andrews directed the establishment of a base on “Seymour Island” in conjunction with a Navy air base at the same location. His estimate was for a military garrison that would consist of approximately the following officers and men: 350 of the Coast Artillery, 150 infantry, 750 USAAF, and 100 other.

³¹ The Panama mount involved circular concrete gun emplacements, with small wheels on the trail arms of the gun which ran in a track that encircled the gun, allowing it to swing through 360° that allowed rapid traversing of the gun to track moving targets. It was so named because it was first developed for the Canal Zone defences.

³² *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

The Commandant of the 15th Naval District, assisted by officials of the Panama Canal organisation, would furnish the necessary water transportation, mooring facilities, and protection for getting the supplies and equipment to the base.³³

A draft agreement, similar to that for Salinas on the Ecuadorian coast,³⁴ was agreed, with a final version to await settlement of matters relating to Lend-Lease supplies to Ecuador (as we shall see, no final agreement would be put in place).

As had happened in Panama, the Ecuador Government raised questions of sovereignty if the US military were given unfettered control of the islands, the US military having proposed a 99-year lease arrangement (as it did for some bases in Panama).



The base at Baltra used by the Navy

In March 1942, contractors from Ecuador began construction of a military base on Baltra, the work later being completed by Seabees, together with additional facilities.³⁵

Baltra was low, dry, barren, and volcanic, covered with just two to four feet (0.6 to 1.2 metres) of rocky soil, and only sparse vegetation. It was necessary to import all materials, water, and provisions, as well as Ecuadorian labour for construction work. However, one thing which may have been welcomed by troops sent from Panama was the arid areas of Baltra lacked the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ A 1,000 miles (1,609 km) south of Panama, it is a peninsula on the western tip of Ecuador, fronting onto Santa Elena Bay. The base at Salinas was ready from April 1942, around a month before the first USAAF combat unit reached the Galapagos. Due to potential adverse weather at Salinas, an alternate base began operations in September 1942 at Talara in neighbouring Peru. These would be the southern end of the patrol arc running from Corinto in Nicaragua and out to the Galapagos Islands.

³⁵ Navy Construction Battalions, authorised in February 1942 to meet the wartime need for uniformed men to perform construction work in combat areas. The first Seabee unit was activated in December 1942.

mosquitos and other insects that could be a pest, or worse, in Panama and the Canal Zone. However, some damp areas of other islands did have swarms of insects.³⁶



In due course, a naval flying-boat base would also be established at Aeolian Cove, on the western side of the island, with an anchorage in which refuelling ships could be hidden.³⁷ In 1941, Seabees

of US Navy Construction Battalion Detachment 1012 arrived to set up a more permanent seaplane base on Baltra with fuel tanks, pontoon docks, and a water-supply system.



Liberators over Baltra

THE BASE IS ACTIVATED

On 18 April 1942, troops and equipment were ordered to the new base, arriving in May. The initial forces comprised a one heavy bombardment (i.e. bomber) squadron, a reinforced infantry company, a coast artillery battery and a sea coast searchlight platoon, and an air base detachment.³⁸ Radar stations would also be subsequently

³⁶ *The Galápagos: Pacific Guardians of the Panama Canal* By Lieutenant Richard W Mindte USNR (US Naval Institute, May 1942)

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1942/may/galapagos>

³⁷ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

³⁸ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947)
<https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

established at Point Albemarle and Webb Cove, on Isabela Island, and on the south side of Española Island, with several machine gun emplacements on the northern coast



of Santa Cruz Island (heavier anti-aircraft weapons would follow, as evidence by the remains of their gun emplacements that can still be seen).³⁹

The first aircraft landed on the new airfield in early April 1942, only two months after the start of construction, and the runway continued to see use from then until its final completion in July 1943.⁴⁰

From the start of the project there were two major problems – obtaining sufficient water supplies, and shipping supplies from the Canal Zone to the islands. It was the latter that is said to have had a more longer-term effect, causing delays to completion of the base facilities and in receiving regular supplies.

Attempts were being made to dig artesian wells on Baltra, but these proved futile. The solution was to have fresh water brought by sea from the largest island in the archipelago, San Cristobal Island, 75 miles (120 km) from the air base.⁴¹ An aqueduct was built from El Junco to El Progreso on San Cristóbal, solely to supply drinking water to arid Baltra.⁴² The water pipeline ran from the highlands of San Cristóbal, to Wreck Bay, and barges were used to transport the water to Baltra Island to supply the airbase. At Baltra, the water was pumped from the barges through rapid sand filters into clear wells where chlorine was added.⁴³

³⁹ <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>

⁴⁰ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² <https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org/en/contents/cont003a.html>

⁴³ *Prevention of disease in the United States Army during World War II : the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945* edited by Wesley C Cox (Department of the Army, Office of the



US Army boat at the dock at Baltra

As regards the movement of supplies, the Navy had planned to continue to use the steamer, *Ferncliffe*, which had unloaded around 1,000 tons on the islands on 20 February, some five weeks after General Andrews had issued the original orders. However, by 10 March, the ship had still not returned to Balboa, and 2,700 tons of supplies and equipment were waiting on the docks there for delivery. Subsequently, supplies arrived “almost monthly” using an Army ship or boat from the Canal Zone, or by US Navy aircraft, if the priority was high, from Miami or the air base at Banana River, Florida.⁴⁴



The control tower and administration building

Nonetheless, the work progressed, with labourers, principally from Ecuador, brought to the islands, being and housed and messed at a labour camp adjacent to the new runway. However, it was reported that the quality of this labour force was generally poor; with a rapid and constant turnover in personnel. Two units of Seabees would be sent to Galapagos (and Salinas on the coast of Ecuador) to complete construction work begun by civilian contractors, and to install equipment.

On the islands, Seabees built two tank farms for diesel oil, fuel oil, and aviation gasoline, complete with concrete pump houses and submerged pipelines, a radio building, and a pontoon pier. They repaired the concrete seaplane ramp, and assisted

Surgeon General, Historical Division, 1946):

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

It was anticipated that a new supply from another island closer to the base would have been developed if the base had been retained postwar by the US.

⁴⁴ <https://www.naturalist.net/baltra/>

with a pier used by the Army⁴⁵ and later used to land all supplies. Also installed was a water-supply system, distillation units, and storage tanks for 75,000 gallons (284,000 litres) of fresh water and 75,000 gallons of salt water.⁴⁶



There were also 32 miles (51.5 km) of asphalt-surfaced roads on Baltra. There was fuel storage for 1.3 million gallons of aviation-grade gasoline, 150,000 gallons of petrol, and 168,000 gallons of diesel.⁴⁷

Despite all the difficulties, two runways, 38 hardstanding sites for parked B-24 Liberator bombers,⁴⁸ together with the necessary parking aprons and taxiways were constructed on Baltra.⁴⁹

As well as the two runways (of 8,000 and 6,250 feet - 2,438 and 1,905 metres),⁵⁰ there were hundreds of buildings, including barracks, offices, hangars, a cinema and beer garden. It became home to over 2,400 servicemen and 750 civilians, with Navy flying boats and US Army Air Force (USAAF) bombers using the islands as a patrol base, as

⁴⁵ 102 feet (31 metres) wide and 252 feet (76.8 metres) long, consisting of a single concrete slab with timber facing.

⁴⁶ Subsequently, another unit continued overhaul and maintenance work throughout the war <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/building-the-navys-bases/building-the-navys-bases-vol-2.html>

⁴⁷ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

⁴⁸ The very long-range B-24, including in its LB-30 form, and equipped with air-to-surface radar, was a stalwart of the Panama Sea Frontier defences from 1942. For a little more about these types, see <https://raytodd.blog/2026/08/13/aircraft-panama-and-the-canal-zone-during-the-war-part-3-aircraft-types-revised/>

⁴⁹ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

⁵⁰ Runway 1 had a crushed stone base and asphalt surface. The shorter Runway 2 had an asphalt-stabilised aggregate surface). Approval was granted for an extension to Runway 2 in 1943, but it would see little use, having proved “unsatisfactory” (for reasons not recorded), and its maintenance would be discontinued by early 1945.

part of the large, outer patrol arc. Defences of the base included five Air Warning Stations (radar), with one on Baltra, with the others on other islands.



Liberators over Baltra

At this time, the airstrip on Baltra was the longest in South America. The US also had installations on the island of San Cristobal, and airstrips were begun but subsequently

abandoned on two other islands (Española and Isabela, that on Española was abandoned before completion). The decision had been made to concentrate forces on Baltra.⁵¹

The Seymour air base occupied just over 6,329 acres (2,561 hectares), described as waste land, and furnished by the Ecuadorian Government without cost. The total cost of the installation to the US was stated in 1947 as being, as of 31 July 1945, \$9,723,000.⁵²



⁵¹ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947)

<https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

⁵² Ibid.

From May 1942 until the end of the year discussions continued over a formal written agreement covering the occupation and use of the islands, but no such agreement was ever achieved, it continuing to be used under the original informal arrangements.

In Autumn 1943, there was a move in Ecuador to change the status of the islands, from that of a territory to a province, causing the Commanding General of the Caribbean Defense Command (by now, General Brett) to fear that this would affect any long-term base agreement. This came after the Ecuadorian Senate adopted a proposal, in a secret session on 9 September, to change the status. It caused General Brett to recommend that the War Department again re-open the question of obtaining a written agreement for permanent operational control of the islands – but to no avail, with proposals and counter-proposals from the two parties continuing through 1944 and 1945.⁵³

On 28 May 1944, a revolution in Ecuador removed the ruling Arroya del Rio Administration and, by early June, the US had recognised the new government of Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra. Meanwhile, following discussions with the War Department, the US State Department stated that it considered that it was the wrong time to seek a permanent or long-term agreement (as proposed by the military), instead proposing a five-year term (this proposal too going nowhere).⁵⁴

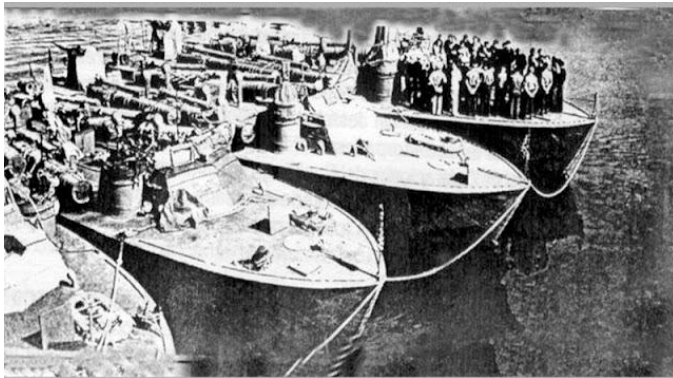
The air patrols undertaken by both the Army and the Navy were coordinated by the Joint Command Post of the Panama Canal Department.⁵⁵ When the question of authority arose, and the Commanding General asked Washington for clarification. The US Navy Commander in Chief responded that “*Under the principles of Unity of*

⁵³ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

⁵⁴ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/51-100/AFD-090601-032.pdf>

⁵⁵ The Panama Canal Department was the US Army command in the Canal Zone – “Department” being an obsolete term. Elsewhere, except in Hawaii and the Philippines (and Puerto Rico in 1941), such commands had been redesignated “Corps Areas” in 1920.

Command,” the Commanding General was responsible for the performance of Navy as well as Army tasks in the Panama Sea Frontier.⁵⁶



PT Boats at the Galapagos Islands

PT Boats also operated from the islands, utilising a small floating dock. The journey from their base on Taboga Island off Panama, was around

1,000 miles (1,607 km) across open, often rough, ocean in flimsy wooden-built boats, accompanied by a seaplane tender. Refuelled on the way from a seaplane tender, USS *Pocomoke*, six boats from Squadron 5 were first deployed to Baltra in November 1942.⁵⁷



It is said that morale was low at the base - it being hot and barren, and the men had next to nothing to do in their free time, spending much of their time deep-sea fishing,

and keeping wild goats as pets. Some recreational facilities were built and, to try to improve morale, tours of duty were generally limited to a maximum of just six months.

⁵⁶ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

On 8 December 1941, the jurisdiction of the 15th Naval District was extended 1,000 miles (1,609 km) out in all directions from the Canal, and named the Panama Sea Frontier (PSF).

<https://www.usserie.org>

The Panama Naval Coastal Frontier was established 1 July 1941, and renamed the Panama Sea Frontier on 6 February 1942. It was responsible for the defence of the Pacific and Atlantic sea approaches to the Canal and for naval shore facilities in the Central America region. It was headquartered in Balboa.

⁵⁷ <https://ryerecord.com/remembrances-of-world-war-ii-lost-in-the-galapagos/>



Eleanor Roosevelt during her visit to the base (US signal Corps photo)

In February 1942, the magazine of the Sixth Air Force, based in the Canal Zone, boasted of athletic and educational facilities of –

*“every description are planned and made available to all. Bowling alleys, two changes of motion pictures every night and the only States beer available within two thousand miles offer some compensation for the lack of towns and civilization”.*⁵⁸

As mentioned, in an attempt to alleviate boredom, the US forces provided facilities, including a church with services on Sundays, a cinema with current releases, a beer garden, and bowling alley. College courses were offered, and fishing would be a popular pastime. Some men even made pets of the island’s native iguanas and feral goats.⁵⁹



PBM-3C Mariner flying-boat at Baltra and control tower

The original Navy seaplane base has been described as a pioneer of the type of mobile units assembled for shipment to various

locations outside the US, the term “*Galapagos units*” being coined. Depots were

⁵⁸ *Breeze* magazine of the Sixth Air Force, 28 February 1942.

⁵⁹ <https://galapagosonline.wordpress.com/tag/wwii/>

established in November 1940, at Charleston, near San Francisco, and at Balboa in the Canal Zone, at which warehouses were constructed by the Navy's Bureau of Yards and Docks to house stockpiled materials.



Construction work on Baltra reached its peak in 1943, with the major features completed and being fully used. At the time, the USAAF alone had 2,474 servicemen and 750 civilian labourers on the islands – part of what was the largest “population” that the islands had seen to that date.⁶⁰

Because of unseasonable rains and the inadequate drainage, plus heavy normal usage, the runways had to be resealed in early 1945. A 2,000-foot (609.6 metres) extension to the shorter of the runways was authorised by General Brett in April 1943, to permit its use by the bombers. However, this runway proved to be unsatisfactory, was little used, and its maintenance was discontinued before March 1945.⁶¹

Despite the presence of the base being trailed in the pre-hostilities US press, and the subject of negotiations with Ecuador, the servicemen sent there thought it a “secret” base. One from the US Navy is quoted as saying –

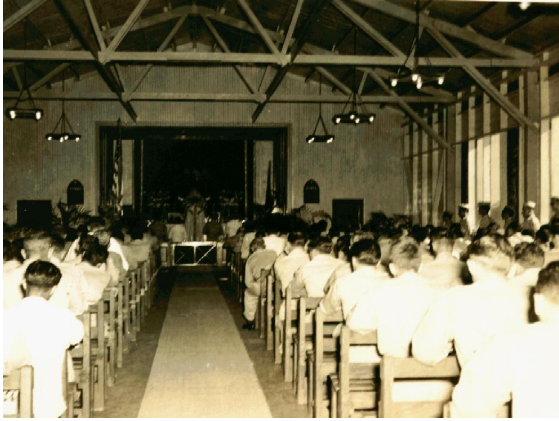
“On arrival in CZ (Canal Zone), I was asked to volunteer for duty on an island in the Pacific, I did not know or was told what island. I was told it was for only six months, and when it was up I could return to the CZ.

We left the first week of January 1944 via seaplane to arrive at our new base. On the flight we were told we were going to Galapagos, which was 600 miles off of South America.

⁶⁰ https://www.galapagos.org/about_galapagos/history/

⁶¹ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

All messages were censored and all mail would be censored. On arrival on Baltra we were assigned to our departments and were told the Sea Bees were still in process of building we could only stay on the Navy side of Baltra, as the US Army Air Corps occupied the other side".⁶²



A church service

However, as was the case with the defences in Panama and the Canal Zone, by 1944 it was determined that the threat had reduced to a degree that parts of the defences built to protect the Canal could be reduced, or even dismantled or put on a caretaker basis – just as they reached their full effectiveness.⁶³

Hence, during the first three months of 1944, the garrison on the Galapagos was reduced, with the War Department ordering another reduction in 1945. In February 1946, the infantry based on the island were withdrawn, leaving just medical and signals (radar) personnel, quartermaster and aviation service troops by March. By April 1946, there were just 95 officers and men present.⁶⁴

The increase in the population of the islands from 810 in 1941 to almost 3,200 people was bound to have an adverse effect on the fauna of the islands, and the US forces had laid many miles of concrete and roads spread over Baltra.

⁶² <https://galapagosonline.wordpress.com/tag/wwii/>

⁶³ <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/building-the-navys-bases/building-the-navys-bases-vol-2.html>

Ironically, this more or less coincided with the special submarines designed by Japan to attack the Canal being ready, the first being completed in December 1944.

⁶⁴ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

It seems that base commanders complained from time to time that the base was used as a dumping ground for untrained and undesirable personnel, with instance of men being returned to Panama because they considered unsuitable or unfit for service in the islands. This applied not just to enlisted men, but some officers too. In a memorandum in October 1942, General Andrews made reference to 60 USAAF personnel, detailed to augment the infantry necessary for ground defence but being almost completely untrained in Infantry minor tactics.⁶⁵



It is claimed that the name attached to the base by US servicemen, “The Rock”, came about when a serviceman told the visiting First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, that if you moved one rock, you would find two more underneath it.⁶⁶



The seaplane base at Aeolian Cove on Baltra

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ <https://www.lapintagalapagoscruise.com/blog/the-rock-us-army-base/>



Another photo of Aeolian Cove

THE NAVY PATROL AIRCRAFT

As mentioned, the first patrol aircraft to visit the islands had been US Navy flying-boats, and these would continue to operate from a base also on Baltra, described as a Naval Auxiliary Air Facility (NAAF). Being flying-boats, the aircraft were supported by seaplane tenders, large vessels that could undertake maintenance, as well resupply fuel and ammunition.⁶⁷

In 1942, the seaplane tender USS *Fulton* (AS-11) had established bases at both the Gulf of Fonseca in Nicaragua and at Baltra.⁶⁸



PB2Y-1 Coronado of VPB-1 at the NAAF in the Galapagos c.1945 with beaching gear in use

Like the B-24 Liberator bomber, these flying-boats possessed a long-range capability. The famous twin-engine PBY Catalina and the even larger, four-engine PB2Y Coronado would operate from Baltra (as well as having detachments at NAAF Salinas on the coast of Ecuador). There were also detachments of twin-engine PBM-3C Mariners. One of the units involved in this work was Patrol

⁶⁷ There had been a longstanding dispute since the 1920s between the Army (which controlled the Air Corps) and Navy over the operation of land-based “bombers” by the latter, only finally resolved in 1943.

⁶⁸ <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/us-navy-ships/alphabetical-listing/f/uss-fulton--as-11-0.html>

Squadron VP-1 (Patrol Bombing Squadron VPB-1 from October 1944), another was VP-15 (later VPB-15), as well as VP-206 and VP-207, and VP-209.

During the early part of the war, the Army was convinced that the greater danger came from the Pacific and thus there was a need to concentrate forces on the Canal approaches to the west. However, the Navy considered the submarine threat on the Atlantic approaches and Caribbean sea routes to be greater (and would be proven right by the events of 1942, in particular).⁶⁹ In any event, when the US entered the war the Navy was handicapped by a shortage of suitable aircraft. However, in May 1942, the Navy Department informed the 15th Naval District that it would allocate no less than 180 aircraft to the Panama area, allowing for the expansion of operations in the Pacific approaches. In August 1942, a Navy squadron began to participate in Pacific patrols, although for a time these continued to be largely undertaken by USAAF aircraft – it remaining the case that the Navy considered that its patrol aircraft were urgently needed to combat a growing U-boat threat in the Caribbean.

It was only from April 1943 that Navy patrol aircraft began to gradually replace USAAF bombers on the Pacific patrols, and in October, with additional squadrons becoming available, the Navy finally took on the entire Pacific security patrol role.



Downed PBY-5 Catalina of VP-52 with a boat from the cruiser USS Richmond attempting to salvage it in January 1942. The PBY had landed eight days earlier after running out of fuel and had been abandoned⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

⁷⁰ After the US entry into the USS *Richmond* patrolled off the Pacific approaches to the Canal. Early in 1942 she was used to escort convoys going to the Galapagos and Society Islands, then patrolled the west coast of South American, before leaving for an overhaul and subsequent reassignment in December 1943.

https://www.historyofwar.org/articles/weapons_USS_Richmond_CL9.html

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PATROLS

The objective of the patrols to and from the islands was to provide "*complete physical coverage during daylight hours of an area larger than that which an enemy task force could transit in a 24-hour period*"; and thereby provide something like adequate early warning, particularly of an intended airstrike by an enemy.



PB2Y Coronado at Aeolian Cove

It was assumed the enemy could steam at 27 knots; hence the minimum width of the approach area to be covered was 648 nautical miles (1,200 km). Since a radar-equipped aircraft at

the time could cover a band of water 50 miles (80.4 km) wide, this meant that each day's operations would involve seven "sweeps" across the entire breadth of the Pacific approaches. For the northern sector this meant seven round trips from Guatemala or Nicaragua to the Galapagos. In the southern sector, four flights were to be flown between Salinas and the Galapagos, with the other three flights originating from Talara. The pre-dawn and early morning searches started on the landward side of the patrol arc, with subsequent flights methodically extended seaward as the day wore on, sweeping the area out to the required distance. The next morning the pattern would be started all over again.⁷¹



PBM-3C Mariner in the Galapagos

⁷¹ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Spring 1970.

THE US NOT WANTING TO LEAVE

As with the additional defence sites in Panama outside the Canal Zone,⁷² as the war ended the US Army felt it would be wise to retain the base in the Galapagos Islands. As early as June 1942, the commander of the Sixth Air Force had stated that *“the establishment in the Galapagos will of necessity become a permanent one as it is essential to the defense of the Canal”*.

In March 1943, the former Commanding General in Panama, General Andrews, now the Army Assistant Chief of Staff, visited the Caribbean Defense Command and indicated to his successor there, General Brett, that he thought the Galapagos base would become more or less a permanent base either under a 99-year lease, or as the permanent property of the US.

In April 1944, a Joint Army-Navy Air Mission carried out an inspection and concluded that –

“It is recommended that, if action has not already been initiated, immediate steps be inaugurated to acquire the Galapagos Islands for the permanent use of the United States, either by lease or by purchase. (While this recommendation is not strictly within the functions of the Mission, it is one about which the members of the Mission feel strongly and it is a recommendation in which the Commanding General, Caribbean Defense Command, concurs)”.

In early 1945, General Brett had plans to convert the base for stationing B-29 bombers. However, on 4 March 1946, the new Commanding General in the Canal Zone, General Crittenberger, was notified by the War Department that *“for reasons of highest political considerations”* the base on the Galapagos Islands was likely to be returned to Ecuador.

⁷² After a draft agreement for some to be retained was abandoned, following widespread public protest in Panama, all such sites were rapidly evacuated by early 1948. For more on this subject, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

THE END

In November 1945, the Ecuadorian National Assembly voted to require the US to leave Ecuadorian territory. However, as we have seen, the US military had been eager to acquire a 99-year lease for its existing bases in the Galapagos Islands, which it saw as necessary for the future defence of the region.

Initial negotiations in 1944 had centred around the US granting Ecuador several loans for improvements in return for use of the islands. However, US planners considered the continued US presence as economically and politically beneficial to Ecuador in itself, and felt the bases should simply be seen as Ecuador's contribution to regional defence. The resulting impasse led the Ecuadorian Government to simply request that US forces leave the islands.



Photo believed to show the visit of General Brett in 1943, with a PB2Y Coronado in the background

On 15 April 1946, the War Department informed the Commanding General in Panama that notes exchanged with Ecuador confirmed the fact that the Galapagos base would be reduced to

minimum operational level by 1 May, and that the US forces there would all be withdrawn by 1 July. The Sixth Air Force had already, on 8 April, been instructed to proceed with the evacuation of the Galapagos base (this being designated Operation *Mango*).

Operation *Mango* required the evacuation of all Army and Navy personnel, the return to the Canal Zone of all serviceable property, and of all unserviceable property having a salvage value sufficient to warrant return, and evacuate to the Ecuadorian mainland all Ecuadorians employed in the Galapagos by the US Army or Navy.⁷³

⁷³ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

However, on 6 June, the US Ambassador in Ecuador notified the Commanding General that he had advised the State Department that instructions should be issued by the War Department ordering immediate suspension of evacuation proceedings at Galapagos. This followed a conversation which the Ambassador had had that day with the Ecuadoran Minister of Defence at which the Minister had stated that he hoped to arrange some means whereby the US could maintain the airbase.⁷⁴ Two days later, on 8 June, the War Department did order a suspension pending further instructions.

On 14 June, the State Department directed the Ambassador to see the President of Ecuador and leave with him a memorandum arranging for operation of the Galapagos base after 1 July, proposing that the governments should exchange notes containing the following terms -

- the base would be Ecuadoran, hence sovereignty would remain with Ecuador;
- either country would exercise immediate command and jurisdiction of its own personnel stationed at the base;
- the base would be jointly operated by the US and Ecuador;
- a joint technical commission, composed of equal numbers of Ecuadoran and US representatives, would determine the details of participation of each side in the operation of the base. (Permission was given to Ambassador Scotten to informally assure the Ecuadoran President that the US would be willing to assume the major share of the maintenance responsibility so long as US troops were stationed there);
- US technical personnel stationed on the Galapagos could be made available through Army and Navy missions for the training of Ecuadoran air and naval personnel;
- US service aircraft and naval vessels would be authorised to freely use the base; and
- these arrangement would remain in effect for a period of 10 years, beginning 1 July 1946, with provisions for renewal by mutual agreement.

⁷⁴ In Panama, the government had similar hopes for bases outside the Canal Zone, but were thwarted by a popular protest against the continued occupation.

The Ambassador was directed to try for a 10-year agreement, but to also insist to accept no less than five years. Use of the base for an extended period was seemingly the only way that authorisation for the necessary funds, personnel, and equipment could be justified.

As a sweetener, the Ambassador was to be able to informally assure the President that the US would be willing to assume the major share of the maintenance responsibility so long as US troops were stationed in the islands.

On 19 June, the Ambassador notified the Commanding General that the Ecuador Government desired that US personnel remain at the Galapagos base after 1 July, i.e. the date set for the handover to Ecuador, until a definite agreement was reached between the two parties.

However, this development created a new problem for General Crittenberger. If the Government of Ecuador did not release the information, the result would be that on 1 July the US Army would be obliged to turn the base over to Ecuador, lower the US flag which would denote evacuation of all personnel. This would be an important event in the eyes of Latin American states, and there could be expected coverage by various news agencies. It would thereby show the US Army in a bad light, as it would appear to be a pantomime - if US forces actually appeared to be retaining use of a base they were apparently returning to Ecuador. It was feared that this could result in repercussions that might destroy all the good which the Army had spent years accomplishing in Latin America during the war.

General Crittenberger was notified a few days before the ceremony was due to take place that the Foreign Minister had promised to announce to the press on 30 June that the handover ceremonies would take place on 1 July, with the US turning over the base, that Ecuadoran forces would take charge, but that some US "technicians" would remain on the base to train the Ecuadorans to ensure the facilities remained in a

serviceable condition. As promised, such notices appeared in newspapers on 30 June and 1 July.

The formal ceremonies took place on Baltra on 1 July, with the airbase formally turned over to Ecuador. However, a US detachment remained under a Lieutenant Colonel.

It appeared that the administration in Ecuador had been concerned about the loss of income resulting from the US withdrawal, hence the proposal to extend US involvement at Baltra. However, the government was also conscious of how its stance might be interpreted by other Latin American states. In the event, as in Panama, popular opposition to the continued US military presence on Ecuadorian soil resulted in the failure of the plan to continue some US presence and ostensibly share responsibility for the base.⁷⁵

Hence, the base was finally abandoned and, as the US forces took with it several water barges and equipment, without which Ecuador was unable to maintain the base, it was to close down for good. The whole incident soured diplomatic relations between the two countries for the next decade.⁷⁶

The airfield built by the US would be restored and modernised postwar, and now is the point of arrival for most visitors to the islands.

⁷⁵ *Galapagos Islands: A Brief Study of Their Occupation, Evacuation and Present Occupation by United States Military Forces* (Caribbean Air Command, October 1947) <https://whalesite.org/GT/TEXTS/USAF1947.htm>

⁷⁶ <https://www.galapagosislands.com/blog/galapagos-islands-during-second-world-war/>

THE US RETURN

In 2025, Ecuador's President suggested the possible siting of a foreign military base in the Galapagos archipelago. This came as the Trump administration in the US was involved in a heightened anti-drugs offensive in the Pacific. This was despite such a foreign military presence having been prohibited by the country's constitution since 2008.⁷⁷

According to President Daniel Noboa, the base would be on Baltra, with US forces returning to the same island they used during World War 2.

The President listed the uses of the proposed base as being to combat illegal fishing, drug trafficking, and for control over fuel trafficking. He argued that it would also generate not only security, but benefits to the population of the Galapagos.⁷⁸

The first US vessels were to arrive in December 2024, a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to permit the US to deploy ships, aircraft, and military personnel to the archipelago having been finalised on 10 December (and was used by the Constitutional Court to justify allowing the seemingly limited deployment).⁷⁹

POSTSCRIPT

In February 2026, the US magazine, *Popular Mechanics*, published an article about the remains of the US base, and how scientists had been able to create a 3D digital version of the base.⁸⁰ The project produced a 3D digital reconstruction of the Baltra base as it existed during the war using photogrammetry, remote sensing, and archaeological research, the authors wrote that they had “*digitized and georeferenced historical aerial photographs and maps, reviewed archival documentation, and processed remote sensing data*”.⁸¹

⁷⁷ The Constitution was amended under pressure from the President, who was backed by the Constitutional Court.

⁷⁸ <https://www.prensa.com/mundo/ecuador-propone-una-base-militar-extranjera-antinarco-en-galapagos/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.telesurenglish.net/whats-behind-the-new-u-s-military-base-in-galapagos/>

⁸⁰ <https://isprs-archives.copernicus.org/articles/XLVIII-3-W4-2025/71/2026/>

⁸¹ <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/archaeology/a70226377/galapagos-ww2-base/>



Baltra in 2022

At that time, only around 3% of original structures remained on Baltra.⁸² Much of the modern development is concentrated around the civilian Seymour Galapagos Airport and the Ecuadorian Air Force Base, two elements converted from the US presence, but most of the 1940s buildings had been lost to time.⁸³



Remains on Baltra, including the main runway, and the base of one of four heavy (90 mm?) anti-aircraft guns



Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

28 August 2026

⁸² <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/archaeology/a70226377/galapagos-ww2-base/>

⁸³ <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/archaeology/a70226377/galapagos-ww2-base/>

ANNEX

USAAF UNITS WHICH USED THE AIRBASE INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING

52nd Fighter Squadron (June – December 1942);⁸⁴ and 51st Fighter Squadron (December 1942 – March 1944)⁸⁵ of 32nd Fighter Group; both with P-40 Warhawk fighters.



Loading bombs into Liberators on Baltra

3rd Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) (May 1942 – March 1943);⁸⁶ 29th Bombardment Squadron (May 1943 – April 1944);⁸⁷ 45th Bombardment Squadron (February-May 1943);⁸⁸ 74th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) (August 1944 – February 1945);⁸⁹ and 397th Bombardment Squadron (April 1944 – February 1945);⁹⁰ all equipped with LB-30 or B-24 Liberator bombers.⁹¹

⁸⁴ The former 52nd Pursuit Squadron (when the US Army Air Corps became the USAAF it began calling its fighters as fighters, rather than “pursuit” types. The unit had been in Panama since 1941, and was disbanded in May 1944.

⁸⁵ This unit had also been in Panama from 1941, remaining operational until 1946. Detachments from both fighter units also deployed to Ecuador and Peru to March 1943.

⁸⁶ It had previously operated the smaller B-18 bomber from Panama from 1940. It was deactivated in November 1946.

⁸⁷ Originally formed as a medium bomber unit in November 1940, using B-18 and single-engine A-17 attack bombers, being activated in April 1941. It was deactivated in November 1946.

⁸⁸ This had previously operated B-18 bombers to 1942, and later received B-17 in 1943.

⁸⁹ Originally reconstituted in 1936 as a attack bomber squadron, becoming the 74th Attack Squadron in 1937, and redesignated as a bomber unit in 1939. Having used the B-18 to 1942, it also acquired B-17 bombers in 1942, but only used B-24 from the islands.

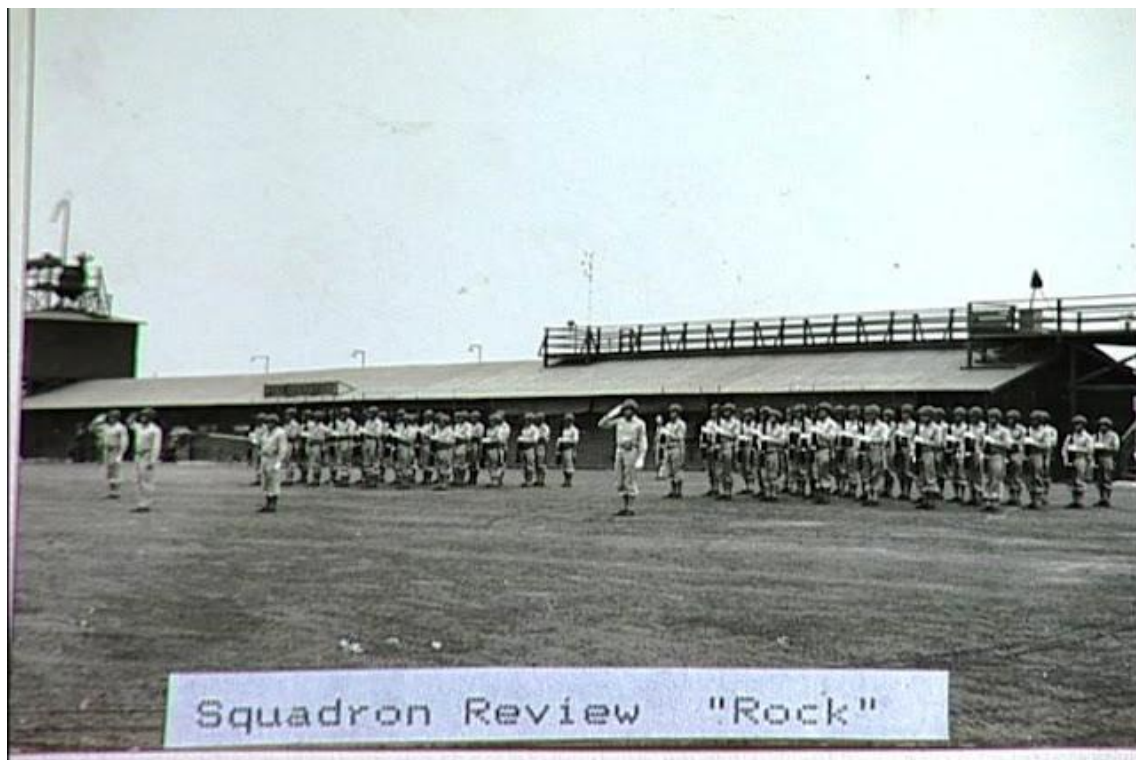
⁹⁰ A unit that dated back to World War 1, it had been a prewar B-10 and B-18 unit, receiving B-17 in 1941, before transiting to LB-30 in 1942, and then B-24. It took on a training role from 1944.

⁹¹ All these units continued to operate into 1946 from Panama.

Despite these being *bomber* squadrons, they were exclusively used from the islands in the maritime patrol role, as they were in Panama.

Records appear to show 25 crashes, forced landings and other incidents involving USAAF aircraft 1942-47, unsurprisingly with the majority (15) on Baltra. Baltra-based aircraft were involved in another 7 incidents. Most of the incidents involved P-40 fighters, or Liberator bombers, both types which were known to be based at Baltra. However, a surprising number (12) involve P-39 Airacobra fighters.⁹²

There were also Navy aircraft losses. For example, one photo from 1942 shows a PBY-5 Catalina based at Baltra in the sea, with a boat from a US warship attempting to salvage it.



A parade, possibly during the visit of General Brett in 1943

⁹² <https://whalesite.org/GT/WW2/CRASHES.htm>