

PANAMA: ADVANCE BASES AND THE ROCK

The Panama Canal Zone was a small area, nominally only five miles wide on either side of the centreline of the Canal (with a few variations). To provide any sort of defence, or even just adequate warning, it was clear that bases outside the Zone would be needed. As the most expected type of attack was by using aircraft launched by aircraft carriers, possibly linked to troop landings, or perhaps from covert bases in neighbouring states. 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.

After prolonged negotiations, and a President being deposed, the US acquired the 100 plus sites in the Republic of Panama that it felt necessary to guard the Canal and its immediate approaches.

However, for sufficient warning of approaching enemy naval force (probably the only credible option at the time) air and sea patrols operating out of Panama would not be enough. In particular, aircraft operating from more distant bases could provide the degree of warning that would provide the defences a fighting chance. Patrols from such bases would also provide welcome protection of shipping travelling to and from the Canal, something that became vital during the Caribbean U-boat campaign of 1942-43.

While the Caribbean appeared to offer a number of possible bases on islands along the likely route of any attacking force, as well as the north coast of South America and the east coast of Central America, the situation on the Pacific side was different. It was primarily a matter of controlling the approaches to the Gulf of Mexico through the Florida Straits, the approaches to the Caribbean through the Yucatan Channel, and the navigable passes of the Greater and Lesser Antilles.

The prewar Greenslade Board divided plans for naval defence in the Caribbean into three areas, focusing major strength at Puerto Rico, Guantanamo, and Trinidad, each major operating base being supplemented by secondary outlying air bases to supply essential air surveillance.

A US Army review in the 1930s had recommended extending the Canal's defences westwards into the Pacific. The review suggested that the Galapagos Islands, about 1,000 miles (1,609 km) south-west from Balboa port (and belonging to Ecuador) could be used as an advanced airbase and warning station. The proposal that the US acquire both the Galapagos and Cocos Islands had been put forward as long before as 1917. In 1939, two Resolutions had gone before Congress recommending purchase of the Galapagos and Cocos Islands, and in 1938 it had been rumoured that Ecuador was willing to sell the Galapagos Islands;

Also considered was Cocos Islands (*Isla del Coco*), about 500 miles (805 km) west of Balboa and belonging to Costa Rica. Despite only being around 1,000 feet (305 metres) high at the most, a US Army Air Force (USAAF) B-24 Liberator bomber nevertheless managed to crash into it during the war. While small and lacking a good harbour, it was thought they could accommodate an aircraft early warning station.

Then there was Clipperton Island (*Île de Clipperton* or *Île de la Passion*), essentially, by the late 1930s, an uninhabited rock, being a coral atoll 2,000 miles (3,219 km) to the north-west of Panama, and 670 miles (1,078 km) south-west from Acapulco. This was French territory¹. It would only be in late 1944 that the US installed a weather station on the island, although on 12 April 1942, a cruiser, the USS *Houston*, was sent to look for signs of enemy activity, finding none. On 4 December 1944, the patrol yacht *Argus II*, left San Francisco and reached the island in January 1945 to establish the weather station. Later, two US supply ships managed to go aground on the island. By establishing a weather

¹ The French ownership was only finally confirmed by arbitration in 1931.

station, the US both prevented use of the island by the Japanese, and were better able to monitor incoming Pacific storms. The US left after 1945, and the island once again were left uninhabited.

However, the War Department had felt unable to recommend or urge that the above proposals to acquire these protective bases be pursued². President Roosevelt had decided that the acquisition of any territory belonging to another of the American Republics would not be in the public interest³. This was similar to the attitude adopted in respect of Panama where, under the terms of the new 1936 Treaty, which had replaced the original 1903 Treaty, it was agreed that, in all matters relating to the operation, maintenance, sanitation and protection of the Canal, the US and Panama would proceed on a partnership basis, and that they had a joint and vital interest which would cause them to consult together and adopt by common accord the measures necessary to protect that common interest⁴.

Early in 1940, the General Board of the Navy and the Army-Navy Joint Board had considered the defence of the Pacific approaches to the Canal and concluded that preparations must be made for the operation of air patrols over a wide area to the west of Panama. The recommendations made included that patrol squadrons of Navy flying-boats be based near Guayaquil on the Ecuadorian coast, in the Gulf of Fonseca in Nicaragua, and in the Galapagos Islands, with the latter identified as the key installation. These bases were to be fortified by both the Army and the Navy, under a programme directed by Army engineers⁵.

² <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch12.htm>

³ This was a product of President Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy of 1933 which emphasised cooperative relations with the countries of Latin America. For example, the 1936 revisions to the original Treaty with Panama saw the US surrendering many rights, including the right of the US Army to intervene in Panamanian affairs (as it had done several times since 1912) to restore civil order or to ensure fair elections.

⁴ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v09/d467>

⁵ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

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 Cocos Island for use as a naval air base.⁶ In September 1940, Costa Rica formally offered the US a long-term lease of Cocos Island for use as a naval air base.⁷

One of the results of pre-war diplomatic moves by the US, intended to counteract any potential Axis (particularly German) influence or sympathies in Latin America, was the Declaration of Panama of September 1939, which aligned Central American nations (a number of which, including Panama, had leaderships with known or suspected pro-German sympathies) with the US in the creation of a maritime security zone. An unstated element of the Declaration was a willingness to accept US leadership in the defence of the region.⁸

The Declaration of Panama was the outcome of the Panama Conference (more correctly, the First Meeting of Consultation among the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the American Republics) held, as the name suggests, in Panama City in September 1939. In the Declaration the participants –

- reaffirmed their own neutrality in the war that had just broken out in Europe;
- prohibited belligerent submarines from using their ports;
- demanded the cessation of subversive activities by foreign agents; and
- proclaimed a maritime security zone of 300 miles (480 km) around both coasts of the American continents - except for the waters of Canada and the colonies and possessions of European states (this would be the Neutrality Zone, chiefly patrolled by the US Navy's Neutrality Patrol).

⁶ <https://www.usserie.org>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

The meeting also established The Inter-American Committee on Neutrality, pursuant to Paragraph 5 of the General Declaration of Neutrality of the American Republics approved at the meeting⁹.

As far as the approaches to the Atlantic end of the Canal was concerned, the situation improved considerably in June 1940 with the acquisition by the US of bases in Jamaica, Antigua, St. Lucia, Trinidad and in British Guiana. 50 old US Navy destroyers had been recommissioned into the US Navy in 1939-40, and these were transferred to the Royal Navy in exchange for 99-year leases to establish US bases on British possessions in the Western Hemisphere. These bases were to form parts of the ring of defences guarding the Atlantic end of the Canal¹⁰. The rights for bases in Trinidad were seen as an important element of the “bases for destroyers” deal, the justification for these facilities being coverage of the southern routes through the Caribbean islands toward the Panama Canal. In Autumn 1940, the Corps of Engineers were given the job of constructing air bases in the string of British Atlantic territories from Newfoundland to British Guiana.¹¹

By Autumn 1940, bilateral military staff conversations had occurred between the US and almost every Central American, South American, and Caribbean republic, with 20 out of 21 countries involved being willing to provide the US support to resist Axis-inspired subversive elements¹². Panama was not part of these from these arrangements, it being suggested that this was because it would deal directly with the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department (and, in any case, had no army or navy of its own)¹³.

⁹ <https://www.dipublico.org/101648/comite-interamericano-de-neutralidad-comite-juridico-interamericano/>

¹⁰ <http://navsource.org/Naval/deal.htm>

¹¹ This was part of a move to transfer military construction responsibilities from an overtaxed Quartermaster Corps to the Corps of Engineers. Eventually, in December 1941, Congress transferred to the Corps the responsibility for real estate acquisition, construction, and maintenance for Army facilities, including training camps, government-owned munitions plants, air bases, depots, and hospitals:

<https://www.usace.army.mil/About/History/Brief-History-of-the-Corps/Combat-and-Military-Construction/>

¹² This could sometimes be to serve local political or economic interests, such as with the detention and deportation of the Peruvian Japanese.

¹³ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

The first result of these discussions was an agreement in August 1940 for US military aircraft to overfly Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and the Central American republics, and to land if necessary, whilst on training flights. Such agreements were more straightforward and easier to reach than for the lease or purchase of bases in the countries.¹⁴

Before the end of 1941, an agreement with Ecuador saw permission obtained for the US to build bases in the Galapagos Islands¹⁵. At the same time, negotiations for similar bases in Ecuador and Peru¹⁶ were under way, and a squadron of Army bombers had begun operating from airfields in Guatemala¹⁷.

Real progress on the additional bases was only made following the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, as Nicaragua immediately offered its territory for US use for the duration of the war, and Cuba and El Salvador giving the US permission to fly aircraft over their territory in early 1942. Colombia was to offer part of its territory for a base for US patrol flying-boats after Axis submarines sank a Colombian vessel¹⁸. Around the same time, the Peruvian government asked for US assistance in fortifying its coastal defences and was offered supplies via Lend-Lease agreements. Even Chile, which had a traditionally poor relationship with the US and a significant population sympathetic to the Axis cause, was

¹⁴ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

¹⁵ 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>

¹⁶ The first B-17 Army bombers arrived from Panama in January 1942; a joint Army/Navy base being built at Salinas.

¹⁷ The first Army B-18 bombers were operating from Guatemala City by the end of December 1941, a small military force arriving the next month.

¹⁸ In June 1942, a Colombian Navy Schooner, the *ARC Resolute* was torpedoed, and the U-boat crew proceeded to machine-gun the survivors in the water¹⁸. In August 1942, another Colombian Schooner was sunk by an Axis submarine preventing the Colombian Government from being able to transport goods between the mainland and its base at St. Andrews Archipelago.

eventually persuaded to break with the Axis, despite its strong ties to both Germany and Italy.

In fact, within a few weeks of the Pearl Harbor attack, oral or written agreements were in place for 11 bases in Central and South America (but not in Panama, that agreement was only signed in May 1943)). The most important were those of the “outer defense net” at –

- Guatemala City (700 miles, 1,126 km, north-west of Panama);
- Salinas, a coastal city in Ecuador (1,000 miles or 1,609 km to the south);
- The Galapagos Islands (900 miles or 1,448 km to the south-west)¹⁹; and
- Talara in Peru (also around 1,000 miles to the south)²⁰.

These sites enabled a wide patrol arc out over the Pacific approaches to the Canal, with a ring of defence bases similar to that provided in the Caribbean²¹. While the attack on Pearl Harbor had hastened things, including Ecuador becoming concerned for the security of its islands, facilities had to be constructed from scratch, and thus it was May 1942 before the first Army bombers reached the base in the Galapagos.

Due to weather conditions that could affect Salinas and Talara it was decided that both were necessary in order to offer an alternative to weary patrol crews if one or the other were unavailable. Work on these bases began, as in the Galapagos Islands, in January 1942. However, with the first USAAF combat unit having reached the Galapagos and began operations in May 1942, facilities for the northern end of the patrol arc were usable several weeks before operations began at the Salinas field.²²

¹⁹ The first Army planes arrived at Salinas on 16 January 1942, encountering *what have been described as “austere” conditions, being four B-17 Flying Fortress bombers from Panama: Journal American Aviation Historical Society*, Spring 1974

²⁰ In September 1942, the base at Talara was in full operation (*Journal American Aviation Historical Society*, Spring 1974).

²¹ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch13.htm>

²² *Journal American Aviation Historical Society*, Spring 1974.

An inner net of bases was also established that was to involve –

- Sixaola, on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, just across the border from Panama:
and
- bases in the Republic of Panama (Anton, Penonome, Chorrera, Jaque, La Joya, Chame, Aguadulce, the Perlas Islands, Pocri and David), together with Madden Dam in the Canal Zone,

and other smaller bases and refuelling places were later also used in Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Guatemala²³.

In Guatemala, where both fighter detachments and patrol bombers operated, it was found that it was hazardous for bombers to attempt to take off from Guatemala City with a full fuel and ordnance load. Therefore, San Jose Aerodrome, just south of the town of San José on the Pacific coast, was made an alternative. Patrol bombers would leave Guatemala City, fly to San Jose and top up there with additional fuel before setting off on southbound patrols²⁴.

The first base that the US Navy established in Nicaragua was at Fonseca, intended to be the northern terminus for patrols on the northern arc, to and from the Galapagos Island. It was first established on the shores of the Gulf of Fonseca at Money Penny Anchorage in Spring 1942. However, surveys of the site had been carried out in the calm season at the start of the year, and the site proved too rough for seaplanes for the remainder of the year. Activity was therefore transferred to Corinto, where a river flowed into a bay^{25, 26}. Here there could be constructed excellent harbour and docking facilities, with a deep-water anchorage and dock – together with a railway siding, commercial warehouses and fuel tanks. It was to become a sizeable operation, with good facilities for both aircraft and ships, as well as accommodation and a 22-bed dispensary and surgery

²³ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

²⁴ *P-38 in Latin America* by Dan Hagedorn (Aviation Art & History, 2022).

²⁵ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²⁶ <https://boeingtestpilot.com/chapter-3-patrol-flying/>

On the other hand, ships bringing supplies to the Fonseca base had to anchor more than a mile from shore, and unload their cargo using lighters, which were emptied manually. Transportation was limited to air, water, or horseback, with no road or railway facilities being available. It was a 40-mile journey by boat to Port Morazon, where train services were available to Managua, the capital. After the move to Corinto, it continued as an emergency landing base until October 1943, when it was decommissioned.²⁷

Corinto, which was actually a large island, was about 1,000 miles (1,609 km) from Balboa, was intended to accommodate two squadrons of flying-boat patrol aircraft, as well as two squadrons of PT boats (although none were to be based there). Although a Navy facility it was defended by an Army coastal artillery unit. Nearly all of the land used for the base was on former mudflats, mangrove swamps and reclaimed shore.

The air facility at Corinto was established in September 1942, being begun by a civilian contractor and completed by Seabees²⁸ during 1943²⁹, with patrol aircraft stationed there from January 1943.

However, full use was never made of the facilities at Corinto. At most, only one and a half squadrons of patrol aircraft were based there from Autumn 1943 to Spring 1944. When the squadrons were moved to the Galapagos Islands, a few observation aircraft remained and two patrol aircraft made daily reconnaissance flights out to the Islands. Nevertheless, until the end of hostilities, Corinto continued to supply numerous small naval units with diesel oil, water, and fresh provisions, but it saw a gradual reduction in use and, by Spring 1944, the aircraft units and Army had been withdrawn and surplus equipment transferred to Balboa in the Canal Zone. In June 1946, the naval air station was disestablished and all fixed installations were turned over the Nicaraguan government³⁰.

²⁷ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

²⁸ The Seabees was the name given to US Navy Construction Battalions.

²⁹ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

³⁰ Ibid.

In Colombia, Barranquilla was the largest city and third port in the country's Caribbean coast region. It also had nearby a US naval base for patrols by both patrol aircraft and lighter-than-air craft (blimps) operating over the Caribbean shipping lanes leading to the Canal and to the Colombian oil ports³¹.

Its Soledad Airport was shared by the US Navy (which had financed its modernisation³²) and Pan American and was the property of *Aerovias Nacionales de Colombia* (Avianca – the former German-run SCADTA airline³³). It lay inland from the Caribbean, along the Rio Magdalena, six miles (9.7 km) south of the city of Barranquilla and just south of the town of Soledad. The strong, prevailing trade winds at this location are so such that light construction was undesirable.

The tempo of construction activity increased steadily, reaching its peak in the early months of 1943. By that time the major features at each base had been completed and were being fully used by the occupying forces. Any contractors' forces were withdrawn before the year ended. Station maintenance, as well as minor items of new construction necessary for more efficient operations, was henceforth accomplished by Seabees or by local labour.³⁴

In August 1944, equipment was transferred to Soledad from the blimp base at Mandinga in Panama. Development of the base were completed in October 1944, with the facilities were being fully used, but then, the following month, patrol operations in the Atlantic were curtailed, and both patrol bomber and blimp detachments were withdrawn. The base then continued on a maintenance status until its disestablishment in March 1945³⁵.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ SCADT

³⁴ <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>

³⁵ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

In Ecuador, in January 1942, flying-boat bases were begun on both the Galapagos Islands and the Salinas peninsula, a peninsula on the western tip of Ecuador, fronting on Santa Elena Bay.

A refuelling base for flying-boats and small surface craft was also established at Puerto Castillo in Honduras in November 1942.

As mentioned, by November 1944 patrol operations were curtailed in the Caribbean and Central American areas, at which time these advance bases either had been or were, placed in a caretaker status.

In Ecuador, in January 1942, seaplane bases were begun on both the Galapagos Islands and the Salinas peninsula, a peninsula on the western tip of Ecuador, fronting on Santa Elena Bay.

In January 1942, Ecuador had granted permission for essential construction in Salinas and on the Galapagos Islands (of which see more below), with specific agreements to be signed after Lend-Lease details had been settled³⁶.

Initially, the Salinas peninsula was scheduled to be a base for patrol boats; but this was changed to a seaplane refuelling base before construction was completed, and it was developed into a naval auxiliary air facility, servicing and housing a complete patrol squadron. Aviation activities ended in May 1944, leaving just an emergency refuelling unit with a rescue boat service³⁷. In November 1945, the Ecuadorian Government asked the US to leave (as mentioned below, the US wished to retain a base on the Galapagos islands only).

³⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

³⁷ It was eventually handed by to Ecuadorian authorities in February 1946:
https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

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By the end of the conflict, nearly every nation in Latin America had entered the war on the side of the Allies, many of them lending material support, though only Brazil sent a significant military presence to take part in combat in other theatres³⁸ (with Brazilian fighter pilots trained in, and briefly being involved in the air defence of, Panama).

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HOW THE PACIFIC PATROLS OPERATED

The objective of the air patrols using the advance bases 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".³⁹

It was assumed the enemy ships could travel at 27 knots (31 mph, 50 kmh), and that the approach area to be covered was around 648 nautical miles (1,200 km) wide. Since a radar-equipped patrol aircraft could cover an area 50 miles (80.4 km) wide, this meant that each day's operations would involve seven "sweeps" across the entire breadth of the western approaches.

For the northern sector, this meant seven round trips from Guatemala City to the Galapagos. In the southern sector, four of the flights were flown between Salinas and the Galapagos, with the other three flights operating from Talara. The pre-dawn and early

³⁸ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

³⁹ *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Spring 1970.

morning searches started on the landward side of the patrol arc, with subsequent flights methodically extended seaward throughout the day. The next morning the pattern would be started all over again.⁴⁰

As it was, there were no attempts made to attack from the Pacific side of the Canal, nor did Japanese submarines venture that far – although later in the war there was a plan to use large, aircraft-carrying submarines to attack the Canal. Hence, unlike in the Caribbean, which saw considerable action involving German U-boats over many months (see below), there was little to alleviate the boredom and monotony of the long patrol flights over the Pacific approaches.

GALAPAGOS AND “THE ROCK”⁴¹

Base Beta on the Galapagos Islands – nicknamed “The Rock” by US military personnel – was the official name for the USAAF installation on these remote islands⁴².

South Seymour Island (aka Baltra Island), having a suitable flat landscape, and in the middle of the archipelago was chosen as the main site and construction began in January 1942.

In December 1941, just five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy had rushed a token force of 36 men aboard a British tramp steamer, to the Islands to establish a refuelling depot for patrol aircraft and, a few days later, seaplanes were being refuelled there by hand pumps from a motor launch.⁴³

⁴⁰ *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Spring 1970.

⁴¹ For much more on the Galapagos Islands base (including the confusion over what it was called), see <https://raytodd.blog/2026/08/30/panama-panama-canal-and-ww2-the-galapagos-islands-the-rock/>

⁴² <https://guerrade1941.blogspot.com/2018/08/los-roosevelt-estados-unidos-y-el.html> and <https://guerrade1941.blogspot.com/2018/09/los-roosevelt-estados-unidos-y-el.html>

⁴³ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

On 24 January 1942, Ecuador granted permission to proceed with essential construction in Ecuador (Salinas and Galapagos), specific agreements to be signed after Lend-Lease details had been settled.⁴⁴



The seaplane base at Aeolian Cove

Within months of construction starting, the base had two airstrips and 200 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 USAAF bombers using the Galapagos Islands as a patrol base, as part of

the large, outer patrol arc. 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.

The forces on the islands included a USAAF heavy bombardment (bomber) squadron, a reinforced infantry company, a coastal artillery battery, a seacoast searchlight platoon, and an airbase detachment. 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. To try to improve morale, tours of duty were limited to just six months.

⁴⁴ <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>

Baltra was low, dry, barren, and volcanic, covered with just two to four feet (0.6 to 1.2 metres) of rocky soil, with only sparse vegetation. It was necessary to import all materials, water, and provisions, as well as Ecuadorian labour for construction work. The naval seaplane base, at Aeolian Cove, on the western side of the island, had an anchorage in which refuelling ships could be hidden⁴⁵.

The Galapagos islands were the focal point for a wide arc of aerial patrols protecting the western approaches of the Canal. From these island, 800 miles from the Pacific Coast, Navy flying-boats flew north-east to Corinto, Nicaragua, and south-east to Salinas, Ecuador. USAAF landplanes assisted in covering the southern route until the Navy was able to take on the patrol function entirely by 1944.⁴⁶

In November 1945, the Ecuadorian National Assembly voted to require the US to leave Ecuadorian territory. However, the US was 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. However, US planners considered the continued US presence as 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.

The installations were dismantled or destroyed and, when it finally removing its last personnel in 1946, the US took with it several water barges and equipment without which Ecuador was unable to maintain the base, leading them to eventually close it down for good. The whole incident soured diplomatic relations between the two countries for the next decade⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁴⁶ <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 <https://www.galapagosislands.com/blog/galapagos-islands-during-second-world-war/>

THE CARIBBEAN

While Japanese submarines proved no threat in the Pacific approaches, it was to be the Caribbean that saw the worst threats to the Canal and its traffic during World War 2, in the form of the German U-boat campaign there.

Between February and August 1942, no fewer than 330 vessels were sunk by U-boats and Italian submarines in the Caribbean (the Italian submarines, larger than the U-boats, did not venture deep into the Caribbean⁴⁸), its approaches and the Gulf of Mexico. They came close to cutting off vital supplies of oil from Venezuela and bauxite ore (for making aluminium) from British and French Guiana⁴⁹. There were also serious food shortages that affected Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, and the British and French West Indies. There were also shortages in the Central American states including Panama, which was more reliant on imports, particular of foodstuffs, than its neighbours, and this was allied to a great increase in the wartime population of the Republic and the Canal Zone.⁵⁰

On 22 December 1941, a Panama Air Task Force was created for anti-submarine patrol work, under the supervision of the Panama-based Caribbean Defense Command. However, there shortages in the number of available and suitable aircraft.

The Germans began to focus attacks on the Caribbean from February 1942, with the resulting struggle being labelled as the Battle of the Caribbean by the US and Operational *Neuland* by the Germans. By the end of February 1942, the U-boat efforts in the

⁴⁸ *The U-Boat War in the Caribbean* by Gaylord TM Kelshall, US Naval Institute Press, 1994.

⁴⁹ *Panama Canal defenders: Camouflage and Markings of US Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command 1941-1945 – Volume 1: Single-engined Fighters* by Dan Hagedorn (Model Centrum PROGRES, 2021).

⁵⁰ In addition, food supplies from the interior suffered, as workers migrated to the cities and Canal Zone to seek better-paid employment: *Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (United States Tariff Commission, 1946).

Caribbean had seen 10% of shallow draft tankers operating out of Maracaibo, Venezuela to Aruba sunk⁵¹. From March to June 1942, 173 ships were sunk with the rate increasing until August and U-boat activity was greatest in the Trinidad sector.

In fact, over the first six months of Operation *Neuland*, U-boats sank 965,000 tons of Allied shipping in the Caribbean, of which an 57% were tankers, and the area between Guiana and Trinidad was being nicknamed “Torpedo Junction”⁵².

However, until June 1942, U-Boats had only entered the outer reaches of the Panama Sea Frontier⁵³, which was as well as, at that time, a single gunboat⁵⁴ was the only active escort vessel available in the area. There were four destroyers engaged in offshore patrol but these lacked radar and did not detect any U-Boats.

After August 1942, things changed, with defences substantially increased and improved. USAAF bases in the Canal Zone were vital and shipping was much more thoroughly protected. US anti-submarine tactics improved, benefiting from British experience, and with radar being fitted to USAAF Douglas B-18B and B-18C Bolo bombers saw them become more effective weapons. There was a ring of defences designed to protect the Canal and its approaches in the Caribbean, with bases on the mainland of North and South America, as well on many islands and, in time, a ring of airfields and flying-boat bases encircled the Caribbean basin.

⁵¹ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ The Panama Sea Frontier patrol and threat area covered both Pacific and Caribbean regions. It stretched from the Mexico/Guatemala border out to the Galapagos Islands and down to a point at 5° of latitude on the coast of South America. On the other side, it stretched from the Mexico/British Honduras border to Punta de Gallinas in Colombia on the north coast of South America, and around 90 miles west of Aruba. In doing so, the Panama Sea Frontier encompassed the coastlines of British Honduras, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia.

⁵⁴ USS *Erie*.

The improved aircraft, equipment and tactics were combined with inter-island human intelligence, long-range and land-based radar, and a command-and-control system sited on Panama, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad. By July 1943 – 17 months after Operation *Neuland* had begun – it has been said that no U-boat running on the surface in the Caribbean or in the South Atlantic was safe from attack.

In October 1942, for the first time in six months, there were no losses to U-Boats in the Gulf of Mexico and Panama Sea Frontier areas⁵⁵. In fact, after January 1943, U-Boats were never again seen as a major threat in the Caribbean. Attacks continued, and losses continued, but by now the *Kriegsmarine*⁵⁶ regarded the Caribbean as a difficult or dangerous place to operate, with its submarine command war diary noting the presence of strong to very strong air patrol, and with convoys and independent vessels protected by radar-equipped air and surface escorts.

As the progress of the war in Europe became more favourable to the Allied cause and the U-boat threat diminished in the Caribbean during 1944, each of the Caribbean bases diminished in importance; consequently, all except the major installations at Trinidad, San Juan, Guantanamo, and the Canal Zone were reduced to a restricted or caretaker status by Autumn 1944.⁵⁷

POSTSCRIPT - OTHER LATIN AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE ANTI-SUBMARINE CAMPAIGN

Even with the bases it acquired in the other countries and islands of the region, the US did not act alone in the battle against the U-boats in the Caribbean. When it came to aircraft deployed to meet the threat, while the US certainly contributed the largest contingent,

⁵⁵ However, in November, losses to U-Boats rose again in the Trinidad area

⁵⁶ The name of the German navy at the time.

⁵⁷ <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>

there was also a British contribution, as well as from the various Latin American states bordering the sea.

It is said that the main given reason for most Latin American republics declaring war (aside from the allure of the *Lend-Lease* programme and US diplomatic pressure), was the effect of German U-boat warfare in the Caribbean. As elsewhere, many neutral merchant ships were sunk alongside Allied vessels.

While the US appeared to view the anti-submarine campaign in the Caribbean as a backwater (albeit a potentially important one, given the flow of oil and other vital materials involved), Latin American countries saw the attacks differently, it was a more direct and personal threat to them and their shipping and supplies. Therefore, in the early years of the war, Mexico and other countries bordering the Caribbean engaged in efforts to combat the U-boats, leading to a motley assortment of rather unlikely aircraft being employed for anti-submarine patrols.

While it would be very easy to dismiss their efforts, but one should take into account the number of attacks that may have been deterred by the mere presence of aircraft – even if the aircraft, and their available armament, was of little real threat⁵⁸.

Even for the USAAF, at least in the early years, the aircraft that were initially available in the Caribbean area for use in anti-submarine patrols were largely obsolescent and not specifically designed or equipped for such work. While the US Navy was able to deploy the excellent Consolidated PBY Catalina flying-boat from the start of the war, albeit in limited numbers, for the Army the Douglas B-18 Bolo bomber, though effectively obsolete, became relatively well-known as an anti-submarine aircraft. Other, more surprising types

⁵⁸ For example, on 4 July 1942, a Mexican Air Force AT-6B Texan trainer, engaged on anti-submarine patrol, spotted and attacked U-129 near Veracruz using its two 100 lb (45 kg) bombs – which were unlikely to do much, if any, damage unless by sheer luck. The U-boat, which had recently sunk two Mexican tankers nearby, was driven off but escaped without damage.

it employed in 1941-42 included the single-engine Douglas O-47A and O-47B and the Curtiss O-52 Owl observation/reconnaissance types – seen as the last the heavy, multi-crew observation designs⁵⁹. The O-52 served in the in-shore patrol role from Puerto Rico and Trinidad, while the B-18 and O-47 types operated from Panama.

The most unusual type employed in the Caribbean to combat U-boats was probably a large Fokker F.XVIII three-engine monoplane airliner, dating from 1932 and formerly of KNILM airlines in the Dutch colonies of Aruba and Curacao. The Netherlands West Indies Defence Force had converted it to an *ad hoc* “bomber” in 1940, the “bombs” being modified naval shells that were merely dropped by hand through a hole cut in the cabin floor.

Hence, if the rich and powerful US had to use aircraft like the O-47 and O-52 to patrol the Caribbean, one cannot criticise too much what other, smaller air forces had to use. These even included small biplane trainers, sometimes in versions adapted for light ground-attack (or for use against rebels or bandits). Later in the war, as Lend-Lease supplies from the US became available⁶⁰, aircraft better suited to the anti-submarine patrol saw use⁶¹.

POSTSCRIPT 2 - VENEZUELA

In the first six months of 1941, Venezuela (among a number of other South American countries) sought to strengthen itself militarily via closer ties with various branches of the US military. In addition to inviting the US to escort its tankers, to establish bases and an aviation mission, Venezuela signed (in late March 1941) an agreement to allow a US Navy mission to be established in the country. The purpose of the mission was to enhance Venezuela's naval training and to assist with dockyard construction and the equipping of naval vessels.

⁵⁹ They being replaced in their roles by small, light aircraft based on commercial lightplanes, such as the Piper Cub.

⁶⁰ Note that Panama was never a recipient of Lend-Lease aid, and had no army, navy or air force.

⁶¹ *The Latin American Anti-Submarine Campaign During WWII* by Chuck Acree (Latin American Aviation Historical Society, December 2020): <https://www.laahs.com/latam-anti-submarine-campaign/>

A US Navy team arrived in Caracas on 25 April, and the previous day, the USS *Sumner*, USS *Empire State* and USS *Erie* entered La Guaira harbour (the outlet for Caracas). Aboard the USS *Erie* was Rear Admiral Frank H Sadler, Commandant of the 15th Naval District. Over the next three days, the Admiral and officers were hosted at a variety of social functions (at the US Embassy and the home of Florencio Robles) and they sought to enhance relations between the US and Venezuela.

After its initial review of Venezuelan naval affairs, the US Naval Mission recommended that Venezuelan officers be placed on US Naval vessels, to enhance whatever formal training they had received. The USS *Erie* took aboard two Venezuelan officers in June, and over the next year four other Venezuelan ensigns served six-month-long tours of duty aboard the ship.⁶²

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⁶² <https://www.usserie.org>