

PANAMA AT WAR: BLIMPS, CRASH BOATS, PEASHOOTERS AND HERMAN THE GERMAN

Despite earlier fears of air attacks or the landing of saboteurs or raiding parties, in fact the greatest threat to Panama and its Canal Zone during World War 2, albeit largely an indirect one, came from the German U-boat campaign in the Caribbean. The peak of the U-boat campaign was between February and August 1942, when 330 ships were lost to German and Italian submarines in the Caribbean¹ – although the number of U-boats in the Caribbean never rose above 10. While there was some disruption from time to time, and ships were lost in passage to and from the Canal Zone, the direct impact on the Canal and its operations from U-Boats was relatively minimal². Given the extensive harbour defences at the Atlantic end of the Canal, while a daring German attack could not be ruled out entirely, and U-boats did lay mines in the approaches, it was unlikely that there would be an attack like the one which saw a U-Boat enter the less well protected Port Limon in neighbouring Costa Rica and sink a merchant ship, the SS San Pablo, in the harbour³.

An example of the disruption that could be caused followed the sinking of two merchant vessels near the Canal in June 1942, at which time there were four U-Boats active in the immediate area. The US Navy stopped outbound traffic from the port of Cristobal at the Atlantic end of the Canal and organised a “hunter-killer” group consisting of two destroyers, three motor torpedo boats (or “PT Boats” in US Navy parlance) and PBY Catalina patrol flying-boats.

One might have imagined that a similar threat might have come on the other side of Panama, from Japanese submarines in the Pacific approaches. Certainly, in the immediate aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, there was thought to be a real

¹ The Italian submarines did not enter the Eastern Caribbean; although from June 1940, operating from Bordeaux, a total of 32 boats operated in the Atlantic, actually equalling numbers of U-boats at the time: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA613508.pdf>

² For information on shipping and U-boat losses in the Caribbean 1941-45: <https://uboat.net/maps/caribbean.htm>

³ The U-Boat involved, U-161, was lost with all hands off Bahia, Brazil three months later, after an attack by a US Navy patrol bomber.

danger of submarine attack on the West Coast of the US, and the same might have been expected of the Pacific approaches to the Panama Canal. However, a review in 1994⁴ pointed out that the Japanese submarine fleet never presented much of a threat to merchant shipping, given that Japanese strategic policy limited submarines primarily to attacks on enemy naval forces, with merchant shipping being a purely secondary target. In fact, in December 1941, there were just 20 Japanese submarines that were capable of reaching the US West Coast from Japan, and a small number of these (the maximum number at any one time was nine boats) did operate off that coast during 1941-42, reappearing again in late 1944 but only claiming two victims. On at least three occasions in 1942, Japanese submarines did make attacks on shore installations, although this caused little damage⁵.

To counter the U-boats, a convoy system was introduced –

CP	Curacao to Panama Canal	1942	Tanker convoys
CT	Cristobal to Trinidad	June 1942	Single convoy (CT.1)
CZ	Curacao to Cristobal	September 1942 to February 1943	
GP	Guantanamo to Panama Canal	July-August 1942	
NE	New Zealand to Panama Canal	1942-45	
PG	Panama Canal to Guantanamo	July-August 1942	
ZC	Cristobal to Curacao	September 1942 to February 1943	

Escort vessels were provided, and from Panama and the Canal Zone US Army Air Corps (USAAC – becoming the US Army Air Force, or USAAF, after 1941) and US Navy aircraft mounted patrols. Pressed into service for these air patrols were not just the obvious – the Navy employed the famous Consolidated PBY Catalina flying-boat, for example – and the obsolescent (such as Douglas B-18 Bolo medium bombers, which did a good job, especially

⁴ *The Battle Against the U-Boat in the American Theater December 7, 1941-September 2, 1945* by Timothy Warnock (Air Force History Support Office, 1994): <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/24/2001329771/-1/-1/0/AFD-100924-006.pdf>

⁵ The Spielberg movie “1941” satirised the fears of a sneak Japanese attack in 1941, and included a submarine shelling the shore.

when later equipped with air-to-surface radar), but also any other available aircraft, even if not obviously suitable⁶. The latter included obsolete single-engine Douglas O-47 reconnaissance aircraft, and even the Bell P-39 Airacobra fighter, which was to form the main fighter force in Panama during the middle of the war, and was thought particularly suitable for use to Panama, as its heavy armament for the time was thought likely to be effective against surfaced U-boats⁷.

Another weapon used against the U-boats was the blimp.

THE BLIMP

The non-rigid airship, or “blimp”, was used by the US Navy for anti-submarine patrols, and to protect convoys⁸, during World War 2. A blimp lacks the internal structural frame or keel (seen on airships, such as the legendary Zeppelins) and rely instead on the pressure of their helium lifting gas to maintain their shape⁹. The iconic Goodyear blimp, as seen at sporting events etc in the US in a modern example of the form. The chief model employed was the Goodyear-built K-ship, which was the backbone of the US Navy airship fleet and had the largest production run of any airship type operated by the Navy or, in fact, of any in the world¹⁰.

⁶ The same can be said of other countries bordering the Caribbean, at least until more suitable Lend-Lease types arrived from the US: <https://www.laahs.com/latam-anti-submarine-campaign/>

⁷ The armament consisted of a 37 mm cannon firing through the propeller hub, plus two nose-mounted and two wing-mounted 0.50-inch heavy machine guns.

⁸ It was also used to assist in rescues involving many vessels, aircraft and persons in distress.

⁹ Helium being an inert, and therefore much safer, gas – unlike the hydrogen famously used in the Hindenberg.

¹⁰ The K-2, which became the prototype for the wartime K-series, was procured under a contract on 11 August 1937, and made her first flight on 6 December 1938. It was delivered by Goodyear to the Navy on 16 December 1938 and, at that time, she was the largest non-rigid airship in the Navy’s inventory, with an envelope capacity of 425,000 cubic feet (12,043 cubic meters).

Subsequently, the blimps would be equipped with air-to-surface radar and MAD gear¹¹ to assist in detecting both surfaced and submerged U-boats. Its armament normally included four torpex-filled Mk 47 350 lb (159 kg) depth bombs - two on external bomb racks and two in a bomb-bay. A single 0.50-inch (12.7 mm) Browning machine gun was mounted in a turret in the forward part of the control car, which measured 40-feet (12.2 metres) and carried the crew, armament, power plants and most of the equipment. It was powered by a pair of Pratt & Whitney R1340 Wasp radial aero-engines of approximately 425 hp each. The overall length of the airship was 251 feet 8 inches (76.73 metres).

During the war, a blimp's flight crew normally consisted of 10 people. This included a senior or command pilot (flight captain), two co-pilots and a navigator who also was a pilot. Enlisted personnel comprised an airship rigger, an ordnanceman, two mechanics and two radiomen. The latter operated any radar, MAD equipment and Loran radio-navigation equipment, as well as the standard radio transmitters and receivers.

For escort and patrol, K-ships possessed the advantages of hovering and making slow-speed searches at altitudes of 100 feet (30.5 metres) or less for extended periods of time. These long-endurance, low-altitude, slow-speed searches also proved useful in locating and assisting in the rescue of crews of vessels and aircraft. The ability to operate successfully in conditions of reduced visibility also made it possible for airships (particularly K-types) to perform their anti-submarine missions when low ceilings and poor visibility grounded other types of aircraft. The K-ship's normal endurance was over 26 hours at cruising speed.¹²

¹¹ The Magnetic Anomaly Detector gear depended on the submarine's hull causing disturbance in the plant's magnetic field. It was developed in the US under Project Sail under the auspicious of the Naval Ordnance Laboratory and the National Defense Research Committee. Tests using a B-18 bomber on 10 June 1942 were successful and resulted in orders for 200 sets: *The Airship in World War II: Assessing a Unique Element in Naval Air Power* by Martin L Levitt (Air Power History, Vol 39 No 3 Fall 1992, Air Force Historical Foundation).

¹² Ibid.

The US Navy began the war with only two blimp squadrons, ZP-32 and ZP-12, but by 1945 it had blimps stationed in several bases in the US, as well as in Jamaica, Trinidad, Suriname, Brazil and Guantanamo Bay, as well as Gibraltar and even French Morocco. Goodyear produced more than 150 airships for the Navy between 1942 and 1945, and eventually 1,400 pilots would be trained, along with thousands more air and ground crew.¹³ In 1942, the Navy carried out 2,617 operational missions using blimps, 17,546 the following year and 27,559 in 1944.¹⁴

During the war, Panama saw detachments from blimp squadrons ZP-15, ZP-21 and ZP-22. Suitable locations included the Coco Solo naval base at the Atlantic end of the Canal. This establishment, which dated from 1917¹⁵, included a blimp hangar in 1939, although it does not appear operations were undertaken from the base during the war.

In 1944, a base for blimp operations was established by the Navy at Mandinga¹⁶, on the Caribbean coast, 75 miles (120.7 km) west of Coco Solo, for use in patrols of the approaches of the Canal. Built by the Army on land leased from the Panamanian Government, the airfield was transferred to the Navy in February 1944, its three asphalt 3,000-feet (914.4 metres) runways having been used by the USAAF as an emergency fighter field. Fuel was stored in drums, and there were a few temporary buildings on what had been jungle cleared by the Seabees¹⁷. There was a portable mooring mast, a helium storage building, and a small radio station. However, in September 1944, the blimp and its equipment were transferred to Barranquilla (see below), and the Navy returned the site to the Army.

¹³ *The Airship in World War II: Assessing a Unique Element in Naval Air Power* by Martin L Levitt (Air Power History, Vol 39 No 3 Fall 1992, Air Force Historical Foundation).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ It had been commissioned as Naval Air Station Coco Solo on 6 May 1918, for patrol operations by seaplane and lighter-than-air (blimp) aircraft. It was reactivated as a Fleet Air Base on 1 July 1931, and NAS Coco Solo was re-established on 30 September 1939:

<https://www.navycthistory.com/NSGStationsHistory.txt>

¹⁶ With detachments from US Navy Fleet Airship Wing 2, Headquarters Squadron 2.

¹⁷ US Naval Construction Battalions.

For a short time in 1944, the Navy also operated from the USAAF airfield at La Chorrera, on the other side of the Canal, outside the Canal Zone and to the west, being about 40 miles (64 km) from Balboa. The Navy here set up two portable stick masts, together with special helium equipment.

As mentioned, blimps also operated from one of the advance bases established in neighbouring countries, in Barranquilla, capital of the Atlántico Department on Colombia's Caribbean coast (operating here alongside landplanes), patrolling the Caribbean shipping lanes leading to the Canal and to the Colombian oil ports¹⁸. In August 1944, the necessary equipment had been transferred from the blimp base at Mandinga in Panama. Soledad Airport was shared by Navy and Pan American Airways, with modernisation of the airport¹⁹ having been financed by the US Navy, having a patrol aircraft refuelling facility first established there in May 1943, being designated as a naval auxiliary air facility. It was enlarged to cater for patrol bombers and a blimp in May 1944²⁰. However, in November 1944, patrol operations over the Caribbean were curtailed, and both landplane and blimp detachments were withdrawn, with the base continuing on a maintenance status until its disestablishment in March 1945²¹.

The mere presence of airships over a convoy was often enough to keep enemy submarines at bay. During the course of the war, US Navy blimps provided cover to an estimated 89,000 convoy vessels. Only one ship under the protection of the blimps was ever sunk by a U-boat — on 25 May 1942, a Panama-owned and flagged oil tanker named

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

¹⁹ Avianca (who owned the airport) had granted permission to use the site without charge and to erect necessary temporary buildings. The original naval base consisted of 15 wooden huts with canvas tops, used as barracks, dispensary, repair shop, ordnance shack, storehouses, and a water tank, all built by Avianca under contract to the US Navy. However, as strong trade winds repeatedly tore off the canvas roofs, these were replaced with tiled roofs in Spring 1944.

²⁰ <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>

²¹ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

the *Persephone*²², was lost off the New Jersey coast while on a voyage between Aruba and New York, torpedoed by the U-593²³.

Only a single US Navy blimp was lost in combat during the war. On the night of 18 July 1943, off the coast of Florida, K-74 attacked the U-134 while surfaced. A malfunction prevented the airship from dropping its depth charges, which allowed the German gunners the chance to fire on the slow-moving target. The damaged blimp was forced to land on the water, but its crew were picked up at daybreak by a patrol aircraft, but not before one of them was attacked and killed by a shark. The U-134 went on to be sunk on its homeward voyage by British aircraft off Spain.²⁴

In August 1943, the US Navy LTA (Lighter Than Air) programme found itself in the middle of a turf war between the USAAF and Navy for control of land-based air anti-submarine warfare²⁵. As a result, the blimp programme was stopped; orders for new airships were cut back, thereby ending production of the new, larger M-type after just four units, and production of the K-series ended at 135 (plus spares and 22 training examples). Ironically, by this stage in the war the blimp was finally getting effective sensors, and was becoming a useful weapon. While the 1943 cutbacks hit LTA development, blimp use was also affected by other factors, including the failure to score a single clear-cut U-boat kill.²⁶

²² Completed in 1925 by Friedrich Krupp Germaniawerft AG in Kiel, for the Baltisch-Amerikanische Petroleum Import GmbH of Danzig. In 1935 she transferred to the Panama Transport Company. She was of 8,426 tons displacement. Of her 37 crew, 9 were lost. She had been carrying 80,000 barrels of oil

²³ <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1705.html>

²⁴ <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1705.html>

²⁵ There was eventually an agreement between the two over operation of land-based bombers by the Navy – after earlier disputes in the 1920s, the US Congress had mandated that the US Navy was not permitted to operate land-based combat aircraft. During the war, however, these rules were gradually modified, as the Navy sought greater control over all aspects of naval warfare, and the Army needed all its units for combat operations in Europe and the Pacific. In August 1943, the two sides came to an agreement, and in mid-1943, the Army agreed to turn over all anti-submarine operations to the Navy:

https://uboat.net/allies/documents/usaaf_asw3.htm

²⁶ *Forgotten Weapon: US Navy Airships and the U-boat War* by William T Althoff (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009).

Incidentally, blimps also played a role in the “beach defense” implemented in the Continental US because of the fear of saboteurs being landed by submarine.²⁷ From 1942, measures to prevent such landing were put in place, with observation posts and beach patrols augmented by ship and patrols by small-boats and Civil Air Patrol light aircraft²⁸ and, from late 1943, patrols by Navy blimps. The US Coast Guard also increased its surveillance, with the number of observation stations between Oregon and Washington State doubled by April 1942, alongside 13 new lifeboat stations – supplemented from 1943 by horse patrols (using animals borrowed from Army cavalry units).

CRASH BOATS

Based in Panama during World War 2 were rescue boats (which performed a similar role to the air-sea rescue launches operated by the RAF in the English Channel and North Sea during the war). These were officially designated Air Rescue Boats (ARB)²⁹ by the Army. In the early 1930s, the US Navy had stopped using the term “crash boat” for such rescue craft in favour of “aircraft rescue boat”³⁰, but the Army appears to have preferred “air-sea rescue boat”.³¹

The Air Rescue Boats were manned by USAAF³² personnel and used to save aircrew who had crashed or had to ditch their aircraft. During the war, they were organised by the USAAF Emergency Rescue Boat Service into Emergency Rescue Boat Squadrons (ERBS),

²⁷ On 13 June 1942, U-202 landed four German agents on a beach on Long Island, and, on 17 June, U-584 landed four more near Jacksonville, Florida. However, all were captured by the FBI within two weeks, and these were the only instances of agent landings by submarine prior to 1944, but they provoked both the Army and the Coast Guard to undertake a much more active “beach defense”. The fear was also the chief reason for the wholesale internment of those of Japanese origin.

²⁸ https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_0168_BLAZICH_AN_HONORABLE_PLACE_I_N_AMERICAN_AIR_POWER_CIVIL_AIR_PATROL_COSTAL_PATROL_OPERATIONS_1942_1943.PDF

²⁹ <https://uscashboats.org/cpage.php?pt=19>

³⁰ The US Navy also operated rescue boats, organised within its air wings, these being in addition to US Coast Guard rescue vessels operating in the Continental US.

³¹ However, the term “crash boat” reappeared postwar, when the new US Air Force renamed the USAAF Emergency Rescue Boat Service as the USAF Crash Boat Service, with Crash Rescue Boat Squadrons operating during the Korean War.

³² Postwar, from 1947, USAF crewed the boats. The USAAC had been reorganised as the USAAF in 1941.

and the 12th ERBS covered the Western Caribbean, including all of the coast of Panama and the surrounding waters of the Pacific, and part of South America.³³

Like the Navy, the USAAC had employed rescue boats for several years prior to World War 2, but these had been the result of the efforts of local commanders of bases that were located near water. However, after the Battle of Britain the US Army had sent a team to Britain to study the experiences of the British rescue boat system (known to the British as Air-Sea Rescue or ASR) and to report on RAF methods etc. The team was impressed by the use of the armed, high-speed launches, manned by RAF crews.³⁴

Despite going to the trouble of studying the British experience - and with General Henry ("Hap") Arnold, then Chief of the USAAC, upon receipt of the report, having requested that the War Department provide a similar water rescue capability at relevant bases - USAAF high-level planning for air-sea rescue operations did not get under way until late 1942, despite operations, of necessity, having in fact been underway for months³⁵. As usual, it seems, there were inter-service problems, with the Navy wanting the responsibility, and also proposing that the US Coast Guard should carry out the role in US waters. However, the latter could not provide adequate coverage and, in any case, the Army wanted both control of the assets and the responsibility of rescuing its own aircrew. Another reason for delay was that the USAAC lacked the experience, and the necessary equipment, to perform the role. As well as sourcing suitable vessels, the Army, at the start of the war, had difficulty finding officers with any marine experience, with suitable men going into the Navy, Coast Guard, or the Merchant Marine.

Discussions among the Joint Chiefs of Staff eventually led to it issuing a ruling in July 1943 that stated that each service should be primarily responsible for the rescue of its own

³³ The 11th ERBS covered the Eastern Caribbean.

³⁴ In 1942, an agreement was to lead to the RAF assuming responsibility for rescues of US 8th Air Force aircrew, this later being extended to other theatres of operations.

³⁵ The US program began formally in 1941 with the first rescue boat school being opened at the New Orleans Yacht Club on Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana: <https://www.woodenboat.com/unsung-heroes>

aircrew and, by Summer 1943, USAAF planning for air-sea rescue had reached the point that definite recommendations could be made, with rescue operations assigned to the Water Transport Division of the Army Quartermaster Corps.

The majority of the USAAF air rescue boats were used in the Pacific theatre, but with others on the US West Coast, in support of the training centres there. Most were lightly armed or unarmed.

It should, of course, be remembered that the rescue boats were only a part of the overall air-sea rescue resources available. Aircraft played an equal, if not greater, role, with amphibious versions of the PBY Catalina flying-boat (designated OA-10 by the Army) as the most common type involved for the task. According to official USAF histories, while the Sixth Air Force based in Panama had responsibility for rescues in the Canal's Pacific approaches, the major burden of actual rescue activities was borne by PBY Catalina flying-boats of one of the US Navy's patrol wings with aircraft stationed both at Coco Solo in the Canal Zone, as well as in the advance bases, such as in Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands. It was stated that the Sixth Air Force would receive no dedicated air-sea rescue aircraft until Spring 1945.

The 12th ERBS was only formally activated in June 1944, with a complement of 200 officers and men and, initially, equipped with what were described as "antiquated" 104-foot (31.7 metres)³⁶ boats, and also described as being "hardly suitable for their rescue

³⁶ The largest of the crash boats, and also known as Class I or "104s", they had three engines and a crew of 12, and was large enough to be sent into the open ocean. They were built by seven companies in the US.

duties". The later allocation of 63-feet (19.2 metres)³⁷ and newer 85-feet (26 metres)³⁸ boats was said to greatly increase the unit's effectiveness.³⁹

Also in use in Panamanian waters were the smaller 42-feet (13 metres)⁴⁰ boats – or "The 42-foot AAF Rescue Boat, Design 221-D", as it was officially described in the operating manual issued by the USAAF.⁴¹ Also built by boatbuilding companies in the US, and based on pre-war recreational craft designs, these were unarmed, all-wood and had twin petrol engines⁴², being intended for, and only really suitable for, close inshore rescue.⁴³

In Panama, the rescue boats were also used to ferry personnel and provide connections to San Jose Island in the Pearl Islands, about 50 miles (80.5 km) off the mainland, and where the Army was conducting chemical warfare tests.

At least one of the 42-feet boats based in Panama saw service in the US postwar. In the early 1950s, the former P-258 was thought to be one of two 42-feet launches being used as a ferry boat, used by the Ferry Service with a 50-passenger capacity to cross the Potomac, taking staff officers from Washington DC to the Pentagon.⁴⁴

³⁷ Also known as Class III or AVR (Auxiliary, Vessel, Rescue) Boats. Constructed by five boatbuilders in the US, these could be armed with a pair of 0.50-inch machine guns and had a crew of seven or eight. The same design was also used as "sub-chasers", and even supplied to the USSR as patrol boats.

³⁸ Also known as Class II of ASR (Air Sea Rescue) Boats, these could be armed with two 0.50-inch machine guns or a 20 mm Oerlikon cannon (though some remained unarmed), and had a 12-man crew. 14 boatbuilders in the US constructed this design, which was capable of being used to rescue aircrew far out to sea, having a range of around 2,500 miles (4,023 km).

³⁹ *Air-Sea Rescue 1941-1952* (USAF Historical Division, Air University, 1954):
<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/AAFHS/AAFHS-95.pdf>

⁴⁰ Actually, 42 feet 4 inches (12.9 metres), according to the operational manual.

⁴¹ https://uscrashboats.org/upload/42_Ft_Operator_s_Manual/42-foot_AAF_Rescue_Boat_cu_1497987907.pdf

⁴² Either a Kermath Sea Raider 6, or a Hall-Scott Invader 6 Marine Engine.

⁴³ There were five different types, of varying sizes, the 42-feet boats being the second-smallest (there were assorted types of 35-feet – 10.7 metres - or less).

⁴⁴ <https://uscrashboats.org/cpage.php?pt=18>

PEASHOOTERS

First flown in 1932, the Boeing P-26A, commonly called the “Peashooter”, looked archaic even at its first flight. A small, single-seat fighter⁴⁵, with an open cockpit, fixed tail undercarriage and wire-braced wings, it looked more of a throwback than a modern fighter design⁴⁶. It was armed with two rifle-calibre machine guns.

Begun by Boeing as a private-venture, production deliveries to the USAAC had begun in 1934 and at its peak it equipped five USAAC squadrons, with some 135 being delivered. The first of 26 P-26A arrived in the Canal Zone, still wearing their colourful paint schemes, to replace the last of the resident 19th Wing’s P-12 biplanes in late 1938. However, even by then the youngest was already five years old and had already seen hard use in the Continental US.⁴⁷

It was the last US Army fighter with an open cockpit, the last with externally-braced wings, and the last with fixed landing gear. Although nominally retired from frontline use by the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, a few remained in use with the USAAC in the Philippines, and the Philippine Army Air Corp⁴⁸ also had 12 machines which saw some action during the Japanese invasion. However, by 1942, the only P-26A still in operational service were nine that were based in the Canal Zone⁴⁹.

⁴⁵ Until 1941, the USAAC referred to fighter aircraft as “pursuit” types, the terminology changing with the establishment of the USAAF. The “P” in the designation refers to “Pursuit”.

⁴⁶ Despite being as old fashioned nowadays, for many young pilots of the 1930s, the P-26A was their first monoplane, and its relatively high landing speed, combined with (to say the least) Panama’s indifferent runway surfaces such as at France Field, led to many landing accidents.

⁴⁷ *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).

⁴⁸ Created in 1935.

⁴⁹ The Sixth Air Force in Panama would be the last USAAF command to operate P-26A in unit strength, long after elsewhere had confined them to become operational trainers or instructional airframes.

With the much more modern Curtiss P-36A Hawks arriving from August 1939, the P-26A was very much seen as a transitional type and, with the subsequent arrival of the even better Curtiss P-40B Warhawk, the P-26A were definitely surplus.

By the end of 1941, just 11 of the original 26 remained, but they continued in use. Incredible as it might seem, even in February 1942, those assigned to the 32nd Pursuit Group at Albrook Field were still being considered as first-line equipment and conducted tactical missions regularly, albeit while assigned to remote locations. They were used to provide (as part of the newly-formed Panama Interceptor Command) detachments at Guatemala City and at San Jose Aerodrome in Costa Rica. Their role at these outposts was to protect the air supply route through Central America and to provide cover for the B-17 bomber force that patrolled the waters of Central America and northern coast of South America, as well as the Canal.

Woefully outdated and no match any modern fighter (or, indeed, many modern bombers) employed by an enemy⁵⁰, by early 1942, the P-26A was also suffering from maintenance problems, so that only two or three were usually airworthy at any one time at La Aurora airport in Guatemala City, and only a single example at Port San José.

The USAAF was anxious to get rid of the remaining, obsolete Peashooters. It offered them to Panama, but the offer had been rejected. However, Guatemala agreed to take them. The Guatemalan Government became interested in acquiring some for the Guatemalan Army Aviation Corps – which was then using 11 Ryan ST-A monoplane trainers as its “fighter” component. However, at this time there remained a US Congressional prohibition, under the neutrality laws, on transferring “lethal” military supplies to Latin American countries - except for Brazil and Mexico - and the request was turned down.⁵¹

⁵⁰ At least pre-war, it might have been a match for anything that a neighbouring state might have had.

⁵¹ Guatemala actually already had two unarmed examples, imported in the late 1930s.

Since the Congressional ban did not extend to trainers, the USAAF temporarily redesignated the P-26A on paper as “trainers” (which, to be fair, any survivors in the US would have been by then), and they became Boeing PT-26 Primary Trainers prior to be handed over.⁵²

Nine were delivered, with two having been written off as non-airworthy, and another was supplied only as a source of spares – although the Guatemalans were to rebuild the “spares” example into an airworthy example.

Though of virtually no practical use, some survived to take a limited part in a CIA-backed “war” in the 1950s, and by 1954 just two remained airworthy, but these were only officially phased out in 1957. By then their value as “warbird” collectibles meant that they were both imported into the US for restoration, with one going to the Smithsonian and the other for air show display.

HERMAN THE GERMAN

'Titan' was one of the four large floating cranes built in 1941 for the Kriegsmarine by Demag Cranes AG in the port of Bremen. As Schwimmkran No. 1, it operated in the Baltic Sea, mainly being used in connection with U-boats.

At the end of the war, the victorious Allies, as a form of compensation, seized the surviving cranes, including the Schwimmkran No.1. This was taken for the US, redesignated YD-171 (and nicknamed “Herman the German”)⁵³. It was dismantled and transported to Long Beach in California, where it was reassembled and operated at a

⁵² <https://www.laahs.com/guatemalan-peashooters/>

⁵³ Others went to the Soviet Union and the British. The crane seized by the British served for a time in Denmark; it was then sold to France, where it later overturned and ended up sunk in the North Sea. The crane seized by the Soviets was sent from Germany in parts and rebuilt in Leningrad where it was temporarily used as an artillery observation tower. Not much was known about this piece until 2015, when it was sighted at the Admiralty Shipyards in what is now St Petersburg in Russia.

shipyard there from 1946 to 1994. Then, in 1994, following the closure of the shipyard, the US Government decided to sell the crane to the Panama Canal Commission, which wanted to replace its Ajax and Hercules cranes.

So, in 1996, the 112 meters (367.4 feet) high, 5,000-ton crane, able to make lifts of up to 340 tons, was transported to the Panama Canal, unloaded off the island of Taboga at the Pacific end of the Canal and, from there, it was towed to the base of the Dredging Division in Gamboa, a town 30 minutes inland from Panama City along the Canal. It was used for the maintenance of the locks, being employed for heavy lifts of gates, cranes and even a bridge which was removed in several sections - each section of the bridge weighing about 220 tons.

The crane has had to be repaired several times, and much of its Nazi symbols or original German texts have been removed or replaced. There is almost nothing left of that era, although the anchor (which weighed 2,500 kg and had a swastika on the iron handle) and some engine parts continued to bear some German lettering, but everything else was changed to English.⁵⁴

When the retirement of the crane was being reported in 2023, it was revealed that it had been transferred to the Panama Canal Commission for just \$1. However, \$16 million had to be invested in updating the equipment so that it could be used in the Canal.

In 2023, the local media in Panama marked the planned retirement of the crane, and the debate on what to do with this piece of history (Panama not having a good record of preserving historical sites and artefacts, despite the fact that this would aid the tourist industry the country then wanted to boost). There was also an interesting video on YouTube showing the history and the use of the crane.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ <https://www.dw.com/es/titán-la-grúa-nazi-del-canal-de-panamá/a-46529975>

⁵⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_gBoPhb1fg&t=4s



In mid-2025, the crane remained afloat, alongside the depot at Gamboa. A newspaper article raised concerns that it could be dismantled, and a researcher who had campaigned for it to be preserved warned that Canal personnel have begun to take parts of the crane to repair other machines. He described it as an asset with enormous historical and technological value. It was reported that, in 2022, he had presented a proposal within the framework of the "*research residency program of the Center for Historical, Anthropological and Cultural Research (CIHAC AIP)*", an initiative promoted by the Ministry of Culture. The project proposed a rigorous registration of Panamanian industrial heritage, starting with the case of the *Titan* crane. The proposal was supported by the German-Panamanian Chamber of Commerce, the German Embassy and CIHAC itself. The creation of a legally constituted foundation or board of trustees was even proposed to receive the crane and assume its restoration, but nothing happened. It was proposed that the *Titan* could be a tourist attraction or a historical interpretation centre.

In 2024, the Panamanian Canal Authority (ACP) issued a Request for Information (RFI) on the Titan III crane to explore its possible "*sale and transfer through international public bidding*". When asked about the status and future of the crane in 2025, ACP said that it had other priorities, and that after completing its useful life cycle, the *Titan* crane was removed from operations and placed in the reserve fleet. It also said that, while it valued

<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/cafe-estrella/cultura/230416/230417-investigador-propone-destino-responsable-legendaria>

proposals made for securing the crane's future, any implementation would require a significant investment in structural adaptations, specialized personnel and maintenance, while considering the costs associated with the safety of visitors and the provision of the space for recreational purposes.⁵⁶

As I write in late 2026, the crane remains floating alongside Gamboa.



A photo by the author
of the crane *in situ* in
2021



*"Herman" remains awaiting its fate in
2026 (author's photo)*

⁵⁶ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/vida-y-cultura/cultura/la-grua-titan-patrimonio-industrial-o-chatarra-LE14988298>

A SURVIVOR: THE STORY OF P-26A 33-123

P-26A serial number 33-123, construction number 1899 was accepted by the USAAC on 16 July 1934, two years after the prototype's first flight, at Boeing Field in Seattle. On 26 July, it was assigned to the 1st Pursuit Group, at Selfridge Field, near Mount Clemens, Michigan. On 21 September 1934, whilst en route to Texas for Winter manoeuvres the aircraft nose over on landing at a refuelling stop, caused by a fault in one of the brakes. Damage to the aircraft was limited to the lower cowlings, propeller, and left wingtip. The damaged fighter was sent to be repaired at the Fairfield Aviation General Supply Depot at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, before returning to service with the 27th Pursuit Squadron at Selfridge Field. With newer, and better fighters being delivered, in 1936 the 1st Pursuit Group transferred much of its P-26A, including 33-123, to the 20th Pursuit Group at Barksdale Field, Louisiana, which became the last Pursuit Group in the Continental US to fly the type.

In August 1938, 33-123 was overhauled at the San Antonio Air Depot before being transferred the following month to the air depot at Rockwell Field, San Diego. From there, 33-123 was disassembled and loaded into an Army transport ship bound for the Canal Zone.



33-123 (tail number 23) with 94th Pursuit Squadron at Selfridge Field

Upon arriving at Albrook Field in October of 1938, 33-123 was assigned to the 16th Pursuit Group. By 1940, more modern fighters such as the Curtiss P-36 began to arrive, and the remaining Peashooters were essentially being restricted to reserve duties through the designations RP-26A (for "restricted") and eventually ZP-26A (the Z denoting an obsolete type).

When surviving P-26A were transferred to Guatemala 33-123 became serial number 43, and was painted in an overall olive drab scheme but with the figure of a helmeted soldier on the rear fuselage. Later the fuselage was later stripped of paint entirely, save for the green cowling ring and the new serial number, 0672, being applied to both sides of the fuselage.



Guatemalan Air Force officers next to the former 33-123 at la Aurora Airfield



By 1954, only three P-26A survived, amongst them 33-123. In that year it found itself up against far faster and more modern P-38 and P-47 flown by US mercenaries in a US-backed uprising that saw the President ousted.

By 1956, there were just two P-26A left, with 33-123 now bearing the serial number 0672, but they were decommissioned in 1957.

In 1957, Edward Maloney was looking for a P-26A for his growing aircraft collection, and was able to obtain the former 33-123.

Around this time, the Smithsonian National Air Museum (now the National Air and Space Museum) had also learned of the last Peashooters in Guatemala and purchased the other remaining P-26A, serial number 0816 (formerly USAAF 33-135), which was loaded into the cargo hold of a Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar transport aircraft and flown back to the US. This aircraft was later loaned to and restored by the National Museum of the USAF at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio where it was displayed until 1975. From there, 33-135 moved to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC and displayed suspended from the ceiling.

33-123 was shipped by sea to Los Angeles in July 1957, then being trucked to a former lumber yard that was the site of what Maloney then called The Air Museum (later renamed the Planes of Fame collection), located on Route 66 in Claremont, where it was displayed for two years in its Guatemalan colours.

In 1959, the museum received a request for the aircraft to be present at an airshow in Long Beach. The aircraft was trucked to the airport and was repainted in the colours of the 34th Pursuit Squadron (*The Thunderbirds*). In 1960, the aircraft was displayed at an airshow at March AFB in Riverside. In between displays it was kept at the museum in Claremont.

In Spring 1962, former World War 2 and Korean War ace, Walker “Bud” Mahurin, who was also a pilot for The Air Museum, spearheaded efforts to restore the aircraft to airworthiness. Mahurin worked for Autonetics, a division of North American Aviation, and was able to arrange for the aircraft to be brought to Autonetics’ Flight Test Facility at Los Angeles International Airport for a complete overhaul by a team of volunteers. The team was also able to secure a sponsorship from Pratt & Whitney, the original manufacturer of the aircraft’s R1340 Wasp radial engine, to fund a rebuild of the engine.



33-123 at The Air Museum in 1969

The received a civil registration from the FAA as NX3378G, and the aircraft was assembled in preparation for static engine runs and flight-testing, making its first flight, piloted by Mahurin, on 16 September 1962.

It was subsequently flown at numerous airshows in in California, often alongside the museum's Boeing P-12E and the Seversky AT-12 Guardsman to demonstrate the interwar aircraft of the USAAC.

By the early 1980s, the P-26A was largely relegated to being placed on static display due to its rarity, along with the P-12. But by 2006, the museum decided to restore the Peashooter to the air once again for that year's airshow. It was given a new paint scheme, this time representing the 95th Pursuit Squadron (*The Kicking Mules*), which had also flown the P-26A. It flew once more on 9 May 2006, and subsequently became a hit at airshows again.

In 2014, it was shipped to the UK for the 2014 Flying Legends airshow (although high cross winds grounded the P-26A for all but one day of flying).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ <https://vintageaviationnews.com/aviation-museum-news/history-of-the-planes-of-fame-air-museums-p-26-peashooter.html>



33-123 in its eventual appearance with Planes of Fame

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

29 September 2022



33-123 in its eventual appearance with Planes of Fame