

## PANAMA - THE STRIKING FORCE, MARTINIQUE AND GLIDERS IN THE JUNGLE

Although, during World War 2, coastal defences came to be seen as being far less effective, between the wars they remained a key and widely-supported US Army mission. Hence, fortifications and the associated seacoast artillery continued to play a part in the defence of port cities and naval bases, including the two ends of the Panama Canal. However, it was recognised that they had to be supported with defences against forces landed at unfortified places, as well as from an increasingly possible air attack. Hence, one of the main requirements of the defence arrangements for the Panama Canal was protection from a ground attack, by forces landed by sea (or perhaps by air – at least by the time of World War 2, although given Panama’s geographical position such forces would likely be more in the form of a small, commando attack, rather than anything on a larger scale). Such an attack could be made from either within the Canal Zone or (more likely) the surrounding Republic of Panama.

The defence of the Canal using mobile units of troops was informed by the methods of countering landings that followed the wide acceptance of Brigadier General William G Haan’s 1920 proposal of a flexible mobile defence-in-depth doctrine<sup>1</sup>. This, and the Army’s 1923 Field Service Regulations, reflected experience of the Western Front in World War 1, and the realisation that it was not enough to sit behind fixed defences and the coastal artillery.

Haan’s proposal addressed the problem of protecting the coastal areas between the forts that had been constructed and house the large-calibre guns, and recognised the similarity between crossing No Man’s Land during World War 1 and mounting an amphibious assault. His idea was for a flexible defence in depth, and to channel attackers into killing zones, pinning them on the beaches, and then hitting them with overwhelming firepower.

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<sup>1</sup> *Positive System of Coast Defense* (JUSA, Vol. 53, December 1920).

This would be the role of the Panama Canal Division, a force of troops and light mobile artillery that existed until 1932.

The Panama Canal Department, as the US Army command in the Canal Zone was called<sup>2</sup>, was responsible for the defence of the Zone - including the land areas, coastal defences, harbour, air and sea defences within medium bomber range. It was meant to defend against landings at either end of the Canal, in coordination with forces of the US Navy, and a Mobile Force of troops with light artillery was created for close-in defence and to counter any such landing. In part, the successor to the Panama Canal Division, it operated from 1940, but the tactics and techniques it employed had continued to be practised after the Panama Canal Division had been reassigned to the headquarters of the Atlantic Sector of the Department.

The budgetary restraints of the inter-war years had hampered the training and field experience of the bulk of the US Army (and had also limited numbers and equipment available). It was only the frontier forces and overseas garrisons, such as that in the Canal Zone, that are regarded to have received any training or field experience above the small-unit level. In this regard, the units in the Canal Zone could be regarded as better prepared than those in the Continental US. One example of this may be in jungle warfare. Despite having practical experience in both the Philippines and in Panama (and Panama had considerably greater rainforest coverage between the wars), and the Army having published its first doctrinal manual on jungle warfare on the eve of the war, it is said to have nevertheless displayed serious shortcomings in the early months of the war. It has also been commented that it was not until 1941 that jungle warfare seems to have

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<sup>2</sup> The Panama Canal Department was created as a separate command of the US Army in June 1917. It was so named because the description "Department" was the term given to all military commands before World War 1. In 1920, all "Departments" in the Continental US had been redesignated as "Corps Areas", but the Hawaiian, Philippines and Panama Canal Departments retained the title (with a Puerto Rico Department added in 1941). Even after the Panama Canal and Puerto Rico Departments were combined in the new Caribbean Defense Command in 1941 the Army continued to refer to them as "Departments".

attracted the attention of anyone outside the Philippines and Panama<sup>3</sup>. In Panama, jungle warfare training had begun in the mid-1920s, focusing on “*the reconnaissance of trails and training in trail fighting*”<sup>4</sup>. After all, if the defending mobile troops were to counter any landings, this could well involve moving through and fighting in the surrounding jungle. By the late 1930s, it seemed that experience in jungle manoeuvres was beginning to make a myth of the impenetrability of tropical forests<sup>5</sup>.

The Mobile Force was activated on 16 February 1940. In line with the Haan doctrine, the plan to defend the Canal Zone included use of the Force in a mobile defence in depth, beginning at the beaches, and not preparing and holding static defence positions. The Atlantic coast was considered the least likely invasion route because the few landing areas there were thought too small to allow the discharge of numerous forces simultaneously<sup>6</sup>. The Pacific side of the Canal was geologically different and seen as needing different solutions<sup>7</sup>. The possibility of hostile forces establishing a beachhead and moving overland to the Canal was not entirely discounted, but the absence of suitable landing places on the Atlantic side and the thick jungle of the Pacific lowlands were thought to discourage any attack of this sort and forces were disposed accordingly<sup>8</sup>.

It has to be said that US defence plans made only marginal reference to the Panamanians. Panama had possessed no army since 1904 and its police force was not taken seriously by the US as a fighting unit. With no army, the country (which, until treaty revisions that took effect in 1939, had the status of a US protectorate) relied on the US to provide defence of both Canal and the Republic. The US Army had a continuing low opinion of the quality and dependability of its only “defence” force, the National Police, which was to

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<sup>3</sup> As late as 1939, a then-new edition of the top-level US Army doctrine publication did not contain the word “jungle”.

<sup>4</sup> [http://william\\_h\\_ormsbee.tripod.com/gh\\_legacy\\_report.htm](http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/gh_legacy_report.htm) and *Infantry Journal*, Vol. XXVI number 4 (1925).

<sup>5</sup> <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch12.htm>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panama\\_Canal\\_Department](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panama_Canal_Department)

<sup>7</sup> <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-WH-Guard/USA-WH-Guard-12.html>

number around 1,500 men by 1942. A US Army assessment in 1942 judged that the men of the National Police had little confidence in their officers and that “if a battle were to turn against them, the majority would run...”. Recommendations for their equipment showed that it saw them only as an internal security force, and there was no suggestion that they should be trained to participate in Canal defence alongside US troops<sup>9,10</sup>

In September 1939, there were 13,451 troops in the Panama Canal Department. This figure steadily increased as tensions rose - by 1 January 1940 it had risen to 19,500, then to 31,450 by the time of the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, with 39,000 by the end of that month, and 47,600 in the following January. By November 1942, there were 68,000 men. The total Panama garrison strength would reach a peak of 119,000 by the end of 1943, but Army numbers had dropped to 91,000<sup>11</sup>. In any case, in July 1942, the War Department had announced a curtailing of assignments to the Department, setting a ceiling for ground forces at 47,000 – despite the Commanding General of the Caribbean Defense Command, which was headquartered in the Canal Zone, stating that this reduced troop levels below that required to guarantee the safety of the region. The new ceiling made units available for transfer out to more active theatres and, from January 1943 to the end of the war, 54 ground force units and 20,000 men were sent to the US for reassignment to combat units (and 4,000 more for duty with newly-activated units), with four units and 3,800 men reallocated to the South-West Pacific, and another 160 men returned to Puerto Rico for duty there.

At the time of the Pearl Harbor attack on 7 December 1941, US Army ground force units in the Canal Zone (excluding engineers and coastal artillery units) consisted of the 14<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>9</sup> *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008.

<sup>10</sup> At Rio Hato, from about November 1943, road blocks of an asphalt taxiway connection across the National (by then the InterAmerican) Highway, were manned by members of the *Policia Nacional*. It is said that this was one of the few Panamanian contributions of armed personnel to the war effort, although the US Army Air Force paid their \$60 per month salaries (American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2016).

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

33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiments<sup>12</sup>, the 87<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery (Armored) Regiment, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery (105 mm) (Tractor Drawn) Battalion, and the 500<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Airborne) Battalion.

Security in the Canal Zone had been tightened considerably from 1939 onwards and, while even the threatened areas of the Continental US operated under the lower Defence Categories B or C<sup>13</sup> immediately before, and during, the war, Panama and the Canal Zone operated under the higher Defense Category D, until this was downgraded in April 1943 to "B" status -, meaning it was considered that it "may be subject to minor attacks".<sup>14</sup>.

By 1944, as the war progressed, seemingly moving even further away, Panama appeared to become something of a backwater. The large coastal artillery guns were effectively mothballed and/or removed, and the Canal Zone began being used primarily as a training area, including for jungle warfare. In fact, the main military casualties among troops in Panama itself during the war were the result of malaria, with more than 10% of the forces stationed in the country being affected<sup>15</sup>.

The end of the war in 1945 saw civilian watchmen on the Canal being reinstated, replacing troops, and backed up by the Canal Zone Police. The military was to only temporarily return to the security role in 1950-52, during hostilities in Korea.

## THE PANAMA MOBILE FORCE

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<sup>12</sup> Formed in the Canal Zone in 1916, it remained there until 7 December 1941, fulfilling 25 years of continuous service there (and reportedly thought to be the best jungle-trained troops in the US Army).

<sup>13</sup> Defense Category B meant that they might be subjected to minor attacks, and Category C areas were those in which what were still categorised as minor attacks were anticipated "in all probability", and it required a full manning of harbour defences and the provision of other ground and air defence forces in accordance with strengths available and the immediate outlook for that region. Under the US Army's RAINBOW 5<sup>13</sup> plan as revised to November 1941, it had been specified that the defence commands in the Continental US should operate in wartime under Defense Category B: *United States Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere, Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* by Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman, and Byron Fairchild (Center of Military History, US Army), 1961:

<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-WH-Guard/USA-WH-Guard-4.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2019/11/18/panama-canal-zone-defences-ii/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://history.army.mil/html/books/panama/panamacanal/CMH-70-115-1-PanamaCanal.pdf>

After the Panama Canal Division<sup>16</sup> was stood down in 1932, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, which had been assigned to the Division in 1921, was instead attached to Headquarters, Atlantic Sector, but on 10 April 1940, the regiment was assigned to the Mobile Force.

The 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment was present in the Canal Zone from 1916 until 1944, and had been first activated there in 1916. During World War 1, it had guarded the locks, bridges and other vital facilities, as well as the harbours and the dry dock at Balboa (as well as exploring and charting the jungles of Panama). In September 1941, one battalion had been sent to Trinidad, with elements later transferring to Surinam to guard bauxite<sup>17</sup> mines, protect the Dutch government in exile, and watch the border of Vichy French Guiana. Later two other battalions were sent to Trinidad, and one to Aruba. In March 1944, the regiment departed for the US (with many members volunteering for service in Burma with Merrill's Marauders), but returned again to Fort Clayton in the Canal Zone in February 1946 (and remained in the Zone until 1956).

As mentioned, it was considered that the Caribbean coast did not offer suitable places for landings of any size. On the other hand, pre-war studies had determined that a landing in strength on the Pacific coast could be made in the Neuva Gorgana-San Carlos sector west of the Canal, or in the Pacora River-Chepo area east of the Canal, both being in the territory of the Republic. These were both around 30 to 50 miles (48 to 80 km) from the Canal and this was thought to allow the Mobile Force enough time to react.

The Local Joint Board (an Army/Navy/Canal authorities joint board) in 1939 considered that an attack by 5,000 enemy troops stood a good chance of success, by at least putting the Canal out of action, preventing movement of the US fleet, and that this was likely before any formal declaration of war. On the other hand, small-scale raids were thought

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<sup>16</sup> Authorised in 1920, and set up in 1921, with its function to defend the Canal Zone. There were similar Divisions in Hawaii and the Philippines.

<sup>17</sup> From which aluminium is made.

less likely to succeed due to the presence of concentrations of defenders around the locks and other vital installations.

From 16 February 1941, the Mobile Force was given the additional role of protecting the Canal locks and other important facilities<sup>18</sup>, and a new Commanding General of the Mobile Force instituted a period of testing and tightening of security arrangements. On 17 February, a mock attack was carried out using elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments, with only the Canal Zone Police notified in advance (and live ammunition withdrawn from troops as a precaution). While seen as a success, the exercise highlighted the need to defend the high ground surrounding the locks, or the use of tanks as an alternative<sup>19</sup>.

On 7 December 1941, within an hour of the news of the Pearl Harbor attack (which took place at 2 pm, Panama local time), the Mobile Force had been directed to put one company on alert to guard an alien internment camp to be established at Balboa Quarantine Station, and three hours later it was ordered there.<sup>20</sup>

Following the Pearl Harbor attack there was a natural enhancement of security and the Mobile Force was augmented in early 1942 with additional federalised National Guard units - the 150<sup>th</sup> Infantry<sup>21</sup> and 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry<sup>22</sup> Regiments, the 158<sup>th</sup> Artillery Battalion<sup>23</sup>, a

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<sup>18</sup> *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>19</sup> *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> This was a unit of the West Virginia National Guard, mobilised on 17 January 1941 and sent to Panama in March 1942. After a brief period of training, this new unit took on the Lock and Utility Guard roles. It stayed in Panama until the end of the war – being deactivated at Fort Clayton on 1 February 1946; although it also provided detachments for service in the Galapagos Islands, in Ecuador, Guatemala and Peru: *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>22</sup> Aka “*Bushmasters*”, because of its Panama jungle operations, this was a unit of the Arizona National Guard that was federalised on 16 September 1940. After training it was sent to Panama, arriving on 2 January 1942. It transferred to Australia in January 1943 for service in South-West Pacific:

<sup>23</sup> An Oklahoma National Guard unit. It and the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment were combined as a Regimental Combat Team (RCT), and later was to serve in the South-West Pacific under General MacArthur from

squadron of the 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (a light armoured unit), as well as detachments of medical and engineer troops. Training camps were established at Pacora, Chorrera (which covered a natural approach from the suitable nearby landing beaches and was occupied from 3 August 1942) and at Rio Hato, close to another suitable landing site.

Until November 1941, the security guard role protecting vital Canal facilities saw each of the three infantry regiments of the Mobile Force responsible for a one-month period in turn; with three battalions involved in the Lock Guard and Utility Guard (with a further battalion employed in the Transit Guard role aboard ships). However, it was then announced that elements of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment was to be redeployed elsewhere in the Caribbean, and roles were reassigned, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion taking over the Transit Guard role from 12 December 1941<sup>24</sup>.

Work undertaken by troops of the Utility Guard included guarding the enemy alien camp at the former Camp Empire at Balboa during 1941-42, and providing temporary guards for the detained Italian liner *Conte Biancamano* and its crew and the French vessel *Nemour*.<sup>25</sup>

On 15 April 1942, a new Security Command took over responsibility for the Lock Guard and Utility Guard functions, with the Mobile Force's instead having responsibility for land defence of the Canal up to the locks enclosures at either end of the Canal<sup>26</sup>.

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January 1943, the RCT also using the "*Bushmasters*" name. An RCT was a provisional major infantry unit formed by augmenting a regular infantry regiment with smaller combat, combat support and combat service support units. The US Army had first adopted the RCT concept just prior to World War 2:

<https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entryname=OKLAHOMA%20NATIONAL%20GUARD>

<sup>24</sup> A Transit Guard detachment initially consisting of an army officer and number of men (depending on the nationality or risk assessment of the vessel), plus two US Navy personnel (who oversaw the helm and telegraph – engine – controls). After 1940, the rules and procedures were revised, with additional personnel and tighter controls imposed. From 1942, the US Navy took over responsibility, using Marines.

<sup>25</sup> *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

<sup>26</sup> Miraflores and Pedro Miguel Locks at the Pacific end, and the Gatun Locks at the Atlantic end.

Invasion scares and panic over perceived attacks were to occur in December 1941 (and such panics affecting the US West Coast were parodied in the Spielberg film, *1941*), with reports of hostile vessels, and even aircraft carriers approaching Panama, as well as reports of a Vichy French vessel from Martinique being at sea<sup>27</sup>. On 12 December, false reports of a ship thought to be landing enemy troops saw a bomber (with no bombsight) being despatched to bomb the ship, but which instead strafed innocent small boats that it found in the bay. This caused guards at a nearby airfield, seeing the tracer fire, to also open up with their machine guns.<sup>28</sup>

On 1 June 1943, the Panama Security Command was disestablished and the Mobile Force resumed responsibility for the security role<sup>29</sup> - such as at the Miraflores Locks and associated facilities; at Pedro Miguel Locks (including its smoke generators); at Gatun Locks (again including operating smoke generators), and supplying men for the Transit Explosive Guard).

## **PLANS FOR REINFORCING THE CANAL ZONE BY AIR**

Experiments with the use by the US Army of aircraft to transport troops and equipment to reinforce the Canal Zone are said to have dated from 1931, when a field artillery battery was transported to Panama for manoeuvres, and in 1933 a full division of soldiers were deployed there by air in an exercise said to demonstrate “hemispheric defense”<sup>30</sup>.

The airline industry in the US had also carried out studies showing how, in theory, the Canal Zone could be reinforced by air (albeit at the cost of effectively closing down all other operations in the US).

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/I/AAF-I-8.html>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0299carriers/>

However, it is said that it was the success of German airborne forces early in World War 2 inspired the US (and British) armies to invest in their own airborne resources.

In 1939, an Air Transport Association of America (ATA)<sup>31</sup> plan proposed the massing of aircraft and crews to meet operational emergencies, reinforce a critical point in US continental defence, or, possibly, strengthen the defences of the Canal. For such missions, the airlines' entire inventory of transport aircraft might be diverted temporarily to the movement of forces, before being then returned to commercial service.

As early as 1936, the ATA, working on conjunction with the US Army Air Corps (USAAC) and the Army War College, had formulated a plan for the mobilisation of the airlines in case of war. The plan was kept up to date during the intervening years, and after Pearl Harbor it provided a basis for the wartime utilisation of the civil aviation resources of the country<sup>32</sup>.

The ATA war plan also assigned responsibilities for onward movements related to hemispheric defence to various sectors, with Sector #2- assigned to Braniff – being Panama and South America<sup>33</sup>. This being despite the domination of US mail and passenger routes by Pan American, and its Panagra associate, throughout Latin America.

President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order on 13 December 1941 directing the Secretary of War to take possession (or impress) any part(s) of any civil aviation system required in the war effort. A number of aircraft would be impressed in Panama, including the C-79, the only USAAC German-built Junkers Ju 52/3m trimotor (as used by the Luftwaffe). These would be allocated to local use by Army units, including the nascent 20<sup>th</sup> Transport Squadron (which used the C-79 for a while), which was to grow into a substantial force, with some aircraft allocated for the airborne troops of the Striking Force mentioned below.

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<sup>31</sup> Founded in 1936 as an airline trade association, it is now called Airlines for America (A4A):

<https://www.airlines.org/who-we-are/history/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/I/AAF-I-9.html>

<sup>33</sup> <https://media.defense.gov/2013/Sep/16/2001329866/-1/-1/0/AFD-130916-006.pdf>

Early in 1941, the ATA revisited the issue of mobilising the air transport industry and contemporary estimates suggested that the airlines could move up to 6,700 men per day for a limited period from bases in the US to points as far away as the Panama Canal. However, executing such a plan would have required the termination of all scheduled commercial operations and the use of all airline transports<sup>34,35</sup>. During the war, the bulk of men and equipment would continue to reach Panama and the Canal Zone by sea.

## **MISSOURI MULES**

As opposed to the “mules” used at the Canal locks, which were actually locomotives that guided vessels through the locks, the Missouri Mules were the actual animals used by the Mobile Force (and the Panama Canal Division before it) in the Canal Zone. Given that much of the area along the Canal, and indeed the interior of Panama, was still rainforest, with few roads and poor tracks, the mule proved invaluable. Contemporary pre-war newsreel shows troops travelling with mules and pack howitzers (see below) during exercises, and they remained in use in Panama until at least 1941.

Legend has it is that these large, intelligent draft mules were bred in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to be able to efficiently pull pioneers’ wagons over the Santa Fe Trail as the US expanded westwards.

The typical Missouri Mule was described as a cross between a mare of a draft breed and a mammoth jack (a male). This is said to produce a stout, strong animal that is more easily managed and more agile than a draft horse. The major mule centres in Missouri supplied

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<sup>34</sup> A History of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet by Theodore Joseph Crackel ( Air Force History & Museums Program), 1998: <https://media.defense.gov/2013/Sep/16/2001329866/-1/-1/0/AFD-130916-006.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> In 1941, the USAAC and US Navy impressed 200 of the 360 airliners in service in the US, as well as most of the employees: <https://simpleflying.com/pan-ams-role-in-world-war-ii/>

both domestic and foreign markets, including an exclusive contract with the British Army to provide over 350,000 Missouri mules and horses for service in World War 1<sup>36</sup>.

## **PACK HOWITZER**

The Mobile Force made use of pack howitzers, which could be broken down and carried on the backs of its mules. A pack howitzer is an artillery weapon designed for portability due to its reduced weight and the ability to be broken down into separate loads. Pack artillery is capable of being deployed by pack animals or human porters. The name “howitzer” is derived from an old Czech word, *haufnice*, which was a catapult that could fire many stones, and the term refers to an artillery piece having a comparatively short barrel, and used especially for firing shells at a high angle of elevation, such as to reach a target behind cover or in a trench.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery, which had arrived in the early 1930s and was the only major unit stationed at Fort Clayton prior to the war, was equipped with 75 mm (2.95-inch) mountain howitzers, with all the components capable of being carried on mules. The meant stabling was required (where the motor pool would be located during the war). The handlers were called “mules skimmers” and, as mentioned, with their mules still in use until at least 1941, although the unit was later to be deployed to Italy<sup>37</sup>.

## **THE STRIKING FORCE**

In January 1941, the Army and Navy had begun to plan for intervention in Latin American states to help avert takeovers by Axis-inspired movements. In August 1940, the then Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department had suggested how much easier it would be to help maintain a friendly government in power than to oust a pro-Axis

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<sup>36</sup> The US Military Academy at West Point, New York has kept mules as the official mascot since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the mule was made the state animal of Missouri in 1995.

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Fort\\_Clayton/FC\\_index.htm](http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Fort_Clayton/FC_index.htm)

government once it was established, and proposed that a few hundred infantrymen and a battery of pack howitzers transported by air from the Canal Zone could probably handle a situation in nearby countries, at least until additional forces could be dispatched from the Continental US<sup>38</sup>.

Proposals from an Army/Navy Joint Board were for Army units on 48 hours' notice to be despatched from the Canal Zone, and for their reinforcement, if necessary, by an Army expeditionary force from the US. The plan assumed that the assistance of US forces would be requested by a recognised government while it was still in control of the situation, that the forces would not encounter organised opposition on their arrival, and that not more than one such operation would have to be undertaken at a time among the eight Latin American republics for which detailed plans were to be drafted<sup>39</sup>.

Of course, US forces had experience of such interventions between the wars, in the so-called “Banana Wars”, where it repeatedly intervened between 1898 to 1934 in support of, or to defend, US interests in Central America, most famously perhaps involving the “occupation” of Nicaragua by US Marines until as late as the early 1930s.

In May 1941, the commanders of the Panama Canal Department and 15<sup>th</sup> Naval District were instructed to prepare plans which were to involve transporting an airborne infantry battalion, preceded by a platoon of parachute troops, from the Canal Zone to the capital of the country involved, while naval forces from the Canal Zone, including a small Marine contingent, were to enter strategic seaports. That month, the War Department decided that the plans needed a full parachute battalion and the 550<sup>th</sup> Infantry Airborne

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<sup>38</sup> *United States Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere – The Framework of Hemisphere Defense* by Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild (Center of Military History, US Army), 1989:

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

<sup>39</sup> <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

Battalion<sup>40</sup> was activated in the Canal Zone on 1 July 1941, being filled with volunteers from combat units already in Panama<sup>41</sup>.

In August 1941, the 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion arrived in the Canal Zone from Fort Benning, Georgia. It and the 550<sup>th</sup> Infantry Airborne Battalion then participated in a mock operation at the Rio Hato airfield in Panama on 12 September 1941.

In Summer 1941, the possibility arose that the Striking Force might actually be needed, when an undeclared war broke out between Peru and Ecuador in July over a century-old boundary dispute. However, Peru soon prevailed, and a peace agreement was signed in January 1942, there having been no evidence of Axis involvement or influence in any case<sup>42</sup>.

However, a major problem for the Striking Force was the lack of adequate air transport on hand or in prospect to carry all of the airborne and parachute troops in a single movement. Even if the War Department had been able to furnish enough aircraft, none of the landing fields in the capitals of the various countries could have handled the number of aircraft required.

Until more transports could be provided for the then nascent 20<sup>th</sup> Transport Squadron (which spent all of the war in Panama, and which grew from just having a single aircraft in 1941 to become a sizeable, and well-equipped unit, mostly using the ubiquitous Douglas C-47 Skytrain), most of the troops in the initial movement would have to be transported in heavy and medium bombers, and the Commanding General in the Canal Zone reluctantly allocated half of his B-17 and B-18 bomber strength for this purpose – although the

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<sup>40</sup> The 550<sup>th</sup> Airborne Infantry Battalion was an independent airborne forces unit, having been formed at Fort Kobbe in Panama - originally as an air landing unit, rather than a parachute or glider landing unit. It was associated with the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion, that would have normally preceded it in any assault.

<sup>41</sup> <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch08.htm>

<sup>42</sup> This was the “War of ‘41” (*Guerra del 41*), but the dispute rumbled on, with a further short conflict in 1981 and 1995, before a definitive peace agreement was signed in 1998.

execution of any of the plans would have cut heavily into the air protection of the Canal, albeit temporarily<sup>43</sup>.

In January 1942, a War Department directive called for the formation and training of combat units for potential use either in Panama or elsewhere in the Caribbean<sup>44</sup> and, until 1943, the US continue to maintain units to form a long-distance striking force as part of the Caribbean Defense Command (comprising the Panama-based parachute troops and airborne infantry) and intended for potential use elsewhere in the Central or South America or in the Caribbean.

However, as threats in the region diminished, in 1943, the 550<sup>th</sup> Airborne Infantry Battalion was redesignated the 550<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry Battalion and departed Panama for Sicily, where it trained in preparation for the invasion of Southern France (Operation *Dragoon*) in 1944, as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Task Force. It was later transferred to England and took part in the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944, before being disbanded in Belgium in March 1945.

The 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion had been formed at Fort Kobbe in Panama in November 1942 (although its parachute training took place at Fort Benning in the US), as part of a plan to land in Vichy-controlled Martinique (see below). When most of the 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion moved to the Pacific in late 1942, its Charlie Company had been detached from the Battalion and stayed in Panama, forming the nucleus of what then became the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion at Fort Kobbe, before the main element arrived by troopship in early 1943, and thus provided a base of experienced officers and NCO from which to start training in the jungles of Panama in January 1943<sup>45</sup>.

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

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

<sup>45</sup> [https://dothaneagle.com/eufaula\\_tribune/news/history-of-the-551st-parachute-infantry-and-their-demise-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/article\\_03b2b41e-d314-11e8-8776-bb24e86db10f.html](https://dothaneagle.com/eufaula_tribune/news/history-of-the-551st-parachute-infantry-and-their-demise-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/article_03b2b41e-d314-11e8-8776-bb24e86db10f.html)

The unofficial motto of the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion was “GOYA”, which stood for “*Get Off Your Ass*”, and which came to be a symbol of their independence and fighting spirit. It took six weeks of physical training, classes on parachute packing, and successful completion of five jumps from a C-33 or C-47 aircraft for a soldier to become a US Army paratrooper.<sup>46</sup>

In May 1943, the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion began preparations for a combined parachute/glider assault to seize the island of Martinique by force. Ammunition, grenades, medical supplies, and maps of the island were issued, and on the eve of the operation, the troopers headed to Howard Airfield to don parachutes and conduct their first combat jump, only for the operation to be called off.

When it was no longer required for the planned Martinique operation (see below)<sup>47</sup>, in August 1943, the unit left Panama and eventually shipped to Europe, where it was badly mauled in fighting in Belgium in January 1945, with survivors being absorbed into the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, and the Battalion being formally deactivated later in January.

## **MARTINIQUE<sup>48</sup>**

A French colony<sup>49</sup>, following the Fall of France in 1940 the island had adhered to the Vichy Government, and was only to change sides and support the Free French cause in 1943. It and Guadeloupe had been ruled by Admiral Robert, a Vichy supporter, who had taken up the post of High Commissioner of the Republic to the Antilles<sup>50</sup> and Guiana, and Naval Commander in Chief for the Western Atlantic, in September 1939.

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<sup>46</sup> [https://dothaneagle.com/eufaula\\_tribune/news/history-of-the-551st-parachute-infantry-and-their-demise-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/article\\_03b2b41e-d314-11e8-8776-bb24e86db10f.html](https://dothaneagle.com/eufaula_tribune/news/history-of-the-551st-parachute-infantry-and-their-demise-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/article_03b2b41e-d314-11e8-8776-bb24e86db10f.html)

<sup>47</sup> The French Admiral in charge of the Vichy forces on Martinique learned of the impending US operation, and promptly fled the island, turning over control to a US Navy Admiral.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.schudak.de/timelines/martinique1502-1947.html>

<sup>49</sup> It only became a *Département* in 1946 (and a *Région* in 1974).

<sup>50</sup> That is to say, Guadeloupe and Martinique (plus Saint Martin – though the southern half if the Dutch Sint Maarten - and Bathélemy).

Following the Fall of France in June 1940, the General Council of Martinique had initially called for continuing the war on the side of the Allies; but Admiral Robert had enforced the Armistice and launched the Vichy so-called “National Revolution” (*La Révolution nationale*) in the island<sup>51</sup>. This was a right-wing, nationalistic, xenophobic, antisemitic, and authoritarian programme which promoted “traditional values” (and not those inspired by the original French Revolution)<sup>52</sup>.

There were US concerns about the French gold reserves, taken to Martinique from the Bank of France<sup>53</sup>, which it was feared could fall into German hands, and this one of the reasons (some suggest the main reason) why plans for an invasion were prepared. However, under the Greenslade-Robert Accords<sup>54</sup>, the US instead agreed to provide the islands with necessities in return for their neutrality. Despite this, the islands endured a period of deprivation, as well the racist policies implemented by Admiral Robert.

In July 1940, plans were finalised by the joint US/British planning committee for a US expeditionary force to invade the island, citing fears that the three French warships stationed there (including the aircraft carrier *Bearn*, carrying 107 US-built aircraft that had been on their way for delivery to France) could be turned over to the Germans and threaten US and British shipping in the Atlantic<sup>55</sup>. While the original plans were dropped in September, the Royal Navy began a short-lived blockade in October, and President Roosevelt issued a request for plans for an assault on the island.

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<sup>51</sup> However, as we shall see, on 28 June, he also began negotiations with the neutral US for essential supplies.

<sup>52</sup> Support for the Vichy regime was largely concentrated among French ex-patriates, descendants of the old planter class and more wealthy Martiniquans, so that Admiral Robert had to impose repressive measures to keep the population under control:

[https://www.academia.edu/44906614/GUADELOUPE\\_AND\\_MARTINIQUE](https://www.academia.edu/44906614/GUADELOUPE_AND_MARTINIQUE)

<sup>53</sup> 286 tons of gold had arrived on the cruiser *Emile Bertin* in late June 1940. It had originally been destined for safekeeping in Canada: <http://www.schudak.de/timelines/martinique1502-1947.html>

<sup>54</sup> Negotiated by Rear Admiral John W Greenslade USN, this guaranteed free movement of French vessels, required prior notice of any shipment of gold, allowed for a US naval observer on the island and daily air and sea patrols, and allowed the controlled release of funds to purchase essentials.

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.schudak.de/timelines/martinique1502-1947.html>

After a U-boat offloaded a wounded crewman on 16 February 1942<sup>56</sup>, the US demanded closure of Martinique and Guadeloupe ports to Axis shipping. In May 1942, Admiral Robert was told that the Greenslade-Robert Accords no longer applied (they were formally abrogated in March 1943 and a new blockade imposed), and the US demanded that the French warships should be immobilised. In November 1942, Admiral Robert rejected calls from Admiral Darlan to switch to the Free French cause following the Allied invasion of North Africa, and then also rejected calls made by a representative of De Gaulle in April 1943.

However, after months of growing unrest, an armed uprising overthrew the Robert regime in 1943<sup>57</sup>, this following a mutiny by troops, who barricade themselves in a fort containing the French gold. On 2 July, Admiral Robert formally surrendered his command to a US admiral, leaving 13 days later for Puerto Rico and then Lisbon.

In 1947, Admiral Robert was put on trial at Versailles and sentenced to 10 years hard labour (but being released six months later at the request of the High Court) and “national degradation” for life (but was pardoned in 1957).

## **EXPERIMENTS IN JUNGLE GLIDER LANDING**

Something that was being experimented with in and over the jungle of Panama was eventually to prove of value in combat on the other side of the world.

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<sup>56</sup> The U-boat had been involved in shelling oil refineries at Aruba.

<sup>57</sup> This was not recognised postwar as part of the resistance movement, causing allegations of racism and double standards:

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195382839.001.0001/acprof-9780195382839-chapter-2>

Major William H Taylor had been undertaking experimental jungle landings of troop-carrying gliders in Panama using the Waco CG-4A Hadrian in 1943-44<sup>58</sup>, and had attracted the attention of officers seeking to establish a new Air Commando organisation, inspired by the British Chindit operations behind enemy lines in Burma<sup>59</sup>, and with the original intention of using the gliders to spearhead similar operations.

Part of the plans involved using gliders to fly in artillery and other heavy equipment into jungle bases. Taylor was selected to be commander of the glider detachment and travelled to Kentucky to help form and train a new unit<sup>60</sup>, which was to take part in actual operations in Burma in 1944.

## **PANAMA AND PUERTO RICAN TROOPS**

One interesting sidelight on the attitude of the Panamanian Government during the war (whose nationalist and sometimes racist tendencies endured after President Arias Madrid was deposed in 1941) was its reluctance to accept, without at least prior screening, US troops coming from Puerto Rico<sup>61</sup>. At the start of 1943, there were approximately 17,000

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<sup>58</sup> This was the most widely-used troop-carrying and cargo glider of the war, used by both the US and British forces (the latter naming it the Hadrian), with more than 13,000 built. It was built of wood and metal and was fabric-covered, had two crew and could carry 13 troops, or a Jeep, light artillery or other equipment. It was often towed by a C-47 Dakota transport aircraft (it was prominently featured in the film “*A Bridge Too Far*” about the Arnhem operation).

<sup>59</sup> The Long Range Penetration Groups of the British and Indian Armies undertook operations behind enemy lines in Burma 1943-44, depending on air supply and air evacuation of sick and wounded. They had been the idea of Brigadier Orde Wingate, who died in an air crash in 1944.

<sup>60</sup> The 5318<sup>th</sup> Provisional Air Unit, whose men included former child film star Jackie Coogan. Its large force of aircraft included 150 cargo gliders, transport aircraft, smaller types, and even a handful of the new YR-4 helicopters: *Silent Skies: Gliders at War 1939-1945* by Tim Lynch (Pen & Sword), 2008; and *Gliders of World War II: The Bastards No One Wanted* by Michael H Manion (Pickle Partners Publishing), 2015; *Project 9: The Birth of the Air Commandos in World War II* by Dennis R. Okerstrom (University of Missouri Press), 2014.

<sup>61</sup> One has to remember that the Arias Madrid administration had been particularly nationalistic and had adopted racist and antisemitic overtones and policies – most of which continued to be adopted by the successor administration.

Puerto Ricans in the US Army, including the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and all of them were stationed either in Puerto Rico itself or in the US Virgin Islands<sup>62</sup>.

Puerto Rican troops had, in fact, already served in Panama during World War 1. In May 1917, the Porto Rico Regiment was sent to Panama for the defence of the Canal Zone<sup>63</sup>.

The question of the use of Puerto Rican troops involved racial sensitivities, both US and local. Puerto Rican troops were increasingly being sought to supplant other “American” forces being reassigned away from the Caribbean Defense Command and the increased use of Puerto Rican troops exposed an attitude toward these troops that would not be compatible with modern sensitivities. Although all involved acknowledged that they were US citizens, at the time the Army took the view that they were lacking in “mental, tactical and technical ability” as well as in proficiency in English. The requirements for the Puerto Rican troops were that they be at least 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduates, speak English, be above the minimum weight and height levels, and receive a rating of Class 3 or higher on the Army General Classification Test (the AGCT was an early means for attempting the assessment of intelligence or other abilities).

Nevertheless, by the end of 1943, a great portion of the coast artillery in Panama was being manned by Puerto Rican troops who served with distinction. Among the various objections to using Puerto Ricans in the Caribbean Defense Command that were

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<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, in 1917 the US had hurriedly acquired the Danish Virgin Islands, to counter a possible flaw in the Canal's defences, by ensuring they were not obtained by Imperial Germany. The US paid \$25 million in gold. President Woodrow Wilson and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing had feared that Germany might annex Denmark and launch attacks from the Islands.

During World War 2, it has been estimated by the Department of Defense that 65,034 Puerto Ricans served in the US military; and as the induction of Puerto Ricans into the armed forces increased many were assigned to units in the Canal Zone and the British West Indies to replace the Continental US troops serving in regular Army units. The military did not keep statistics with regard to the total number of Hispanics who served in the regular units of the Armed Forces, only of those who served in Puerto Rican units.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

US Citizenship had been imposed upon Puerto Ricans as a result of the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act (the Puerto Rican House of Delegates had rejected US citizenship) and were expected to serve in the military: [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Puerto\\_Ricans\\_in\\_World\\_War\\_II](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Puerto_Ricans_in_World_War_II)

sometimes put forth, there was perhaps one legitimate reason - reasons of diplomacy with other Caribbean nations (for example, that “the use of Puerto Rican troops in Cuba is entirely out of the question” due to possible racial animosities between the peoples of Cuba and Puerto Rico).

When the US War Department proposed to send the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment to Panama as a replacement for Continental US troops that were to be withdrawn for service in the Pacific, the Panamanian Government insisted on a careful screening of the unit - despite the fact that it was a Regular Army regiment and was to be stationed only within the Canal Zone.

However, the performance of the Regiment led the US War Department to decide upon a general replacement of Continental US troops not only in Panama, but in the bases on British islands throughout the Caribbean Defense Command region as well, at least to the extent permitted by the availability of trained Puerto Rican units. Eventually, it was hoped, 20,000 Puerto Rican troops could be made available<sup>64</sup>. By the end of 1943, nearly 5,000 Puerto Rican soldiers were based in Panama.

The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was a segregated Hispanic unit made up primarily of Puerto Ricans (with white officers from the Continental US), and it was sent to Panama in 1943, being later sent to Europe, where it participated in the battles of Naples-Fogis, Rome-Arno, central Europe and Rhineland and suffered 23 soldiers killed in action.<sup>65</sup> Its nickname was the “*Borinqueneers*”, a combination of the original name of Puerto Rico (*Borinquen*) and the word buccaneers<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Guard-US/ch16.htm>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.latinbusinesstoday.com/honor-and-fidelity-the-65th-infantry-regiment/>

The 295<sup>th</sup> and 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments followed the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment to Panama in 1944.<sup>67</sup> The 296<sup>th</sup> would return to Puerto Rico in 1945 and the 295<sup>th</sup> in February 1946, with both being subsequently deactivated later in 1946<sup>68</sup>.

Postwar, one would see Puerto Rican troops make up to 30% of US service personnel in the 1950s. When in Panama, anecdotal evidence is that these men often served as mediators and translators for white troops, although there was tension between the two groups. Speaking Spanish and appreciating the Caribbean culture of Panama, one white serviceman is quoted as saying that, “A Puerto Rican soldier was the best friend you could have in Panama. They spoke the lingo, could show you the ropes, introduce you to the girls, and teach you the dances, the whole nine yards”.<sup>69</sup>

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

15 September 2022

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/974518/puerto-ricans-represented-throughout-us-military-history/>

<sup>69</sup> *Decentering America* by Jessica CE Gienow-Hecht (Berghahn Books, 2007).