

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – WHAT HAPPENED WHEN

1944

By 1944, as the war progressed, and seemed to move even further away, Panama appeared to have become something of a backwater. The large coastal artillery guns were effectively mothballed and/or removed, and the submarine base at Coco Solo was disestablished, and the Canal Zone began being used primarily as a training area, including for jungle warfare. Its defence threat status was downgraded, to Defense Category “A”¹, and then, on 8 June, lifted altogether. Many of the defences, not just the big guns, were reduced or removed entirely.

There was a last scare, and during a period of renewed U-boat threat from 23 November 1943 to 8 April 1944, the USAAF took on more of the anti-submarine work in the Caribbean. During this period, 219 four-engine and 266 twin-engine bomber missions were undertaken by VI Bomber Command, carrying out anti-submarine sweeps on behalf of the Navy.

As the perceived threat receded, so troop numbers declined, and by January 1944 there were only 42,000 men present, and by 1945 numbers had fallen to below 1939 levels². From January 1943 to January 1944, troop losses for all reasons – redeployment, transfer, reassignment etc amounted to around 42,000 men

In 1944, the last three ships (a total of 15,000 tons) were lost to U-Boats in the Caribbean.

While circumstances were changing for the US forces in Panama, there were also developments in the Republic – developments that signalled greater unrest that would come to a head as the war ended and, in the years immediately afterwards.

¹ Defense Status Category A – the lowest category – “Coastal frontiers (sea frontiers and defence commands) that would probably be free from attack, but for which a nominal defence must be provided for political reasons in sufficient strength to repel raids by submarines, by surface vessels operating by stealth or stratagem, or isolated raids by aircraft operating chiefly for morale effect”.

² In August 1943, the War Department decided that the Caribbean Defense Command should prepare for further reductions and set the new troop ceiling at 75,000 to be effective from 1 July 1944.

One must bear in mind that unrest in the country had been rising. President Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia Arango, who had been in office since his predecessor had been deposed in 1941, would be removed in the wake of student protests in early 1945. He had been ruling increasingly by decree and dissolved the National Assembly on 31 December 1944, and would then suspend the 1941 Constitution. He had rejected repeated calls for a Constituent Assembly to approve such a new Constitution, but was now back the drafting of a new one. Constitution.

The administration had weathered a crisis, backed by supporters of the deposed former President Arias Madrid, in 1943 but, by the beginning of 1944, opposition to the government was widespread. It was alleged that President de la Guardia wished to keep himself in power, and there was criticism of the compromise that had achieved a political truce in the National Assembly the previous year. In September 1944, five followers of Arias Madrid were arrested and accused of subversive activities and the Government also faced a series of student protests.

The plan to draft a new Constitution was widely welcomed, although there were fears that the President was simply manoeuvring to stay on in the office³. In due course a new Constitution would be produced and would enter into force in March 1946. By that time, de la Guardia would have been removed, and replaced by another temporary President, who would serve until 1948 (and survive the protests over the planned extension of leases for US bases in the Republic).⁴

As the year ended, on 30 December, a general strike was called, with students from the university also participating. Tensions would increase further after it was reported that bombs had been planted in the cars of some US army officers, and that an explosive device had been discovered at the house of the President's brother (and Minister of Government and Justice). The Governor of the canal Zone would issue a statement prohibiting residents

³ It should be borne in mind that, by deposing Arias Madrid, the interests that had ruled the country since independence until a populist coup in 1931, had effectively regained power.

⁴ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41597>

of the Zone from taking sides in Panamanian politics, or providing accommodation in their homes to people who were not their relatives.⁵

There were extensive reorganisations in the Caribbean Defence Command region throughout 1943 and the first part of 1944, and its mission changed. Alongside the force reductions, a new commander, General Brett, spent much of his time working on political-military relations with Latin American countries rather than purely military issues.

From 1944, there were few changes or additions to the Caribbean Sea Frontier, though there were many base closed or deactivated. There were changes in command, reduction or ending of some activities, and changes in limits and boundaries.

In fact, the closing of military and naval bases throughout the region grew toward the end of 1944, complicated by the tenuous nature of many of the agreements that had been urgently reached after US entry into the war. Many of the countries in the region had been eager to assist – for their own protection or benefit, as much (if not more) than out of a desire to help the Allies - and had allowed the US to set up bases within their territories. The lack of detailed agreements regarding rights to some of these bases now began to cause complications. In addition, looking forward to a strengthened US postwar, some Latin American states began to see US military presence within their borders in a different light.

However, this does not mean that the US forces had entirely stopped their expansion into the Republic of Panama. For example, Paitilla Point Army Airfield, overlooking Panama Bay on the Pacific, was established in 1944 as another base for fighters for the defence of the Canal. Poci Auxiliary Aerodrome was also established in 1944 as a fighter base and an auxiliary to Howard Field⁶. The latter was located on the Azuero peninsula on the eastern edge of Panama Bay (and is now covered in housing). At Chorrera Army Airfield, for a short time, the Navy moved in, setting up portable stick masts, together with special helium equipment to service submarine patrol blimps.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ It no longer exists, having been built over.

⁷ The station was officially disestablished in November 1945:
https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

As an illustration of the move towards the Caribbean Defense Command switching to more of a training function, in late 1944, the US Army Air Force (USAAF) opened in Panama its Latin American Air School⁸ and, from Autumn 1944, a large number of airmen from almost all Latin American states began to attend.

In 1944, the censorship of private photographs taken by military personnel was added to the workload of the Sector Censorship Detachment, and by May 1945 it was examining more than 20,000 negatives a month⁹.

In 1944, a new studio was built at Albrook Field for the use of forces radio in the Canal Zone

Claims made by the Japanese government in 1944 about the treatment of the detainees in Panama¹⁰. The Japanese note also referring to an alleged lack of medical care.¹¹ In fact, in Spring 1944, when the US lodged a formal protest against Japan for its treatment of American captives, Japan responded in a letter to the Swiss Legation in Tokyo denying ill-treatment of prisoners, and complaining of the treatment of Japanese nationals in US custody, and citing the treatment of detainees in Panama in particular¹² -

During the war, as in other countries, the Panamanian Government had urged farmers to plant as much as possible, to substitute for missing imports. Improvements included irrigation projects and cooperatives were set up, the Government acquiring land to parcel it out among poor farmers. Between 1942 and 1944, 91,400 acres (37,000 hectares) were

⁸ Continuing postwar, it would become the US Air Force School for Latin America (USAFSLA) and was based at Albrook AFB (it closed briefly in the late 1940s but reopened after a year) and specialised in mechanical, medical and technical training. It subsequently became the Inter-American Air Forces Academy and, as such, still exists “for the purpose of providing military education and training to military personnel of Central and South American countries, Caribbean countries, and other countries eligible for assistance under Chapter 5 of Part II of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961”: <https://www.37trw.af.mil/Units/Inter-American-Air-Forces-Academy/>

⁹ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

¹⁰ <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

¹¹ Which, given the treatment of prisoners of war, and interned civilians, by the Japanese during the war, appears hypocritical, to say the least.

¹² <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

distributed, with experts from Cuba coming to instruct farmers. There was even a Decree compelling landowners to cede uncultivated land to farmers.

Inevitably, prices of basic consumer goods in Panama increased almost continuously throughout the war, most markedly before official price controls were introduced. In fact, a committee appointed by the Government reported that the cost of living increased by 150% between the end of 1940 and July 1942. With controls introduced, between August 1942 and December 1944, an official cost of living index recorded just a 10% rise.

On the health front, the rate for primary malaria for the calendar year 1944 was 7.7 per thousand, the lowest in the history of the Panama Canal Department. The rate for recurrent malaria was 6.8 per thousand, giving combined rate for primary and recurrent malaria of 14.5 per thousand, which was also the lowest rate ever attained.¹³ Meanwhile, to combat the threat from bedbugs, from 1944, DDT was used and proved effective.

As the Army did not begin the use of penicillin to cure VD until 1944, it continued to be a significant problem for the armed forces for much of World War 2¹⁴.

THE PANAMA CANAL GOVERNMENT

Following Glen E Edgerton in 1944, Major General John C Mehaffey, another Army engineer, became the new Governor, serving until 1948. Having already served in the Canal Zone in 1911-12, Mehaffey had been assigned to the Panama Canal Zone again in 1941 as maintenance engineer, have replaced Edgerton in that role¹⁵. Whilst Governor, Mehaffey conducted the Isthmian Canal Studies in 1947, producing what was called the Mahaffey Report, which proposed dispensing with the locks and constructing a sea-level canal.

¹³ Ibid.

The rates continued to fall in 1945, the rate for primary cases falling to 4.9 per 1,000 in the early months.

¹⁴ US military doctors had begun using it to treat syphilis in the Pacific theatre in 1943, and by 1947 it was to become the "gold standard" for treatment of the disease:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1578219014002480>

¹⁵ It was the accepted custom for the Governor's successor to be the serving maintenance engineer.

The peak of construction activity in the Canal Zone on behalf of the US Navy had been reached in Summer 1943 and, after this, from April 1944, the Navy awarded only several smaller lump-sum contracts for minor additions and improvements and to cater for ongoing needs.¹⁶

In his annual report for 1944, the Governor said that the large program of defence construction initiated several years previously had neared completion during the past year, with a consequent gradual reduction in the demands placed on the Panama Canal authorities resulting from those construction activities.¹⁷

The Governor said that there had been a sharp increase in the use of the Canal during 1944, and the use of its facilities by US Navy vessels. Consequently, it had become necessary to make available on a greatly enlarged scale all types of services to transiting ships, including hull and machinery repairs and the supplying of oil, water, provisions, and ship chandlery. He went on to say that it was expected that the number of such vessels would increase still further in the future (presumably as the war in the Pacific reached a climax), and that the general level of Canal war activities would continue to be high until after the cessation of hostilities in the Pacific theatre.¹⁸

Commercial transits fell from 5,903 in 1939 to 1,562 in 1944 – a decline of around 75%. The decline affected local merchants as well¹⁹.

Nevertheless, with the decline in construction activities. the total number of Gold Roll employees on 30 June 1944 was 6,974, compared to 8,357 on 30 June 1943. The total number of Silver Roll employees was 23,040, compared to 28,157 on 30 June 1943.²⁰

¹⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

²⁰ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

This Report said that factor which probably had the effect of keeping employee turnover in force at a high figure in 1944 was the application during 1944 of Selective Service Registration to male citizens residing in the Canal Zone.

The Governor's annual report for the year said that a total of 879 employees had terminated their services specifically to join the military forces in 1944. It also said that while many employees had no doubt resigned for this purpose in 1943, the exact number was not known; but it was believed that the number was considerably lower than in 1944.²¹ The US draft did not extend to the Canal Zone until June 1944, and even then only men aged 18-25 were registered, with many classified as critical or essential due to their role in operations of the Canal. However, the Canal Zone had a higher percentage of volunteers than any of the 48 states – during the first 11 months of Fiscal Year 1943-44, 800 Canal and railroad employees joined the military – almost 10% of the Gold workers.²²

Despite the Third Locks Project having been abandoned, contracts for excavation of the New Gatun and Miraflores locks sites were carried to completion. Other features carried to completion included construction of the bridge over the existing Miraflores Locks, the relocation of various utilities and construction of emergency electric power plants. However, the force working on the project was reduced from 367 to 88 at the end of June 1944, and four consulting engineers were employed on a contract basis to advise on a special foundation problem.²³

In 1944, the Panama Canal's Mechanical Division was established as the operating repair base for the 300 War Shipping Administration tankers of the Pacific Fleet. Balboa was the terminal for all Pacific Ocean tanker operations, and for any required dry docking and repair. At its peak during the war there were some 300 tankers using the facilities at Balboa.²⁴

The Oil Handling Plants of the Supply Department of the Canal saw increased activity during the war. Whereas, between 1934 and June 1940, the average amount of petroleum

²¹ Ibid.

²² *The Role of North American Women in US Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone 1904-1945* by Paul W Morgan Jr (Dissertation submitted to Department of History, Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2000): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013679/00001/images/10>

²³ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

²⁴ *The Panama Canal in World War II* by James G Steese (The Military Engineer, Vol.40 No 267, January 1948), Society of American Military Engineers: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44516081>

products handled was around 10 million barrels, in the five years to June 1945 it averaged over 22.9 million barrels a year, with a peak of over 35.1 million barrels in the year July 1944 to June 1945. The principal movement was from the Atlantic to the Pacific, as well as to Central and South America. The Navy's new trans-isthmian pipeline system used the plants as transshipment points from around September 1943²⁵. After a year of operation, in April 1944, work began to double the capacity of the pipelines, with larger-diameter pipes. It would be capable of handling a daily flow of 265,000 barrels of fuel oil, 47,000 barrels of diesel-oil and 60,000 barrels of gasoline²⁶. The Panama Canal Company would subsequently also make use of it. The old pipeline still sits at the bottom of Gatun Lake and in the undergrowth today

1944 saw the birth of two new airlines in Panama, one of which was to continue until the present day, becoming the country's flag carrier.²⁷ Meanwhile, the new Canal Zone Air Terminal, adjoining Albrook Field and constructed by the Corps of Engineers, was turned over to the Canal Government for operations.²⁸

In 1944, data showed that there were 37,006 incoming and 39,840 outgoing passengers using Albrook Field and France Field, involving 2,586 aircraft movements.

Paraiso, a town on the north bank of the Canal had been abandoned by 1938 but had become a military post in November 1939, housing troops guarding the Canal facilities as Camp Paraiso. It had closed as a military camp in 1943 and then, in 1944, the Army quarters were reused as it became a township once again.

²⁵ Ibid.

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

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

The Panamanian Government objected to the *commercial* operation in the Canal Zone, arguing that such an operation was prohibited by the Treaty.

SPIES AND SPYING

Operation *Bolivar* was the codename for German espionage operations in Latin America during World War 2. However, it was effectively closed down in mid-1944 when the authorities in Argentina arrested most of the German agents operating in the country.

A secret mission carried out by 12 C-47 Skytrain of the 20th Transport Squadron transported 220 German, Japanese and Italian prisoners from La Paz, Bolivia, to Panama in May 1944.

They were thought to be the remaining agents of the Nazi Abwehr military intelligence network in South America²⁹, and had been apprehended by the FBI with the help of the Bolivian and Chilean governments and it is believed that some were imprisoned for the duration in Panama while others were sent to prisoner of war camps in the US.³⁰

Outrageous and outlandish as the story had seemed, the story of the alleged German spying in Panama involving, it was said, nightclub owners and Colón cabaret girls, along with British Honduras' leading businessman, "Captain" George Gough, described as the so-called "King of Belize"³¹, was referred to in an official US House of Representatives Committee report in 1944 (into the activities of the Federal Communications Commission) The report referred to the story being sourced from the Headquarters of the Caribbean Defense Command in Panama on 2 July 1942.³²

Following Edgerton in 1944, Major General John C Mehaffey, another Army engineer, became the new Governor, serving until 1948. Having already served in the Canal Zone in

²⁹ Abwehr – meaning “defence” in German (a cover given to this counterintelligence group in order to disguise its espionage functions) began as an intelligence arm of the German Army which, in 1928, merged with the German Navy’s espionage unit under the Ministry of Defence. It later evolved into a department under the OKW (the High Command of the Armed forces), and the military espionage agency of World War 2

³⁰ <https://www.historynet.com/book-wings-over-the-canal-dan-hagedorn-avh.htm>

³¹ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40077>

³² The Report said that the operation was uncovered following radio signal monitoring by the FCC at its stations in the US, which then passed the information on to the FBI, US Coast Guard, ONI and the State Department.

1911-12, Mehaffey had been assigned to the Panama Canal Zone again in 1941 as maintenance engineer, have replaced Edgerton in that role³³. Whilst Governor, Mehaffey conducted the Isthmian Canal Studies in 1947, producing what was called the Mahaffey Report, which proposed dispensing with the locks and constructing a sea-level canal.

DISCRIMINATION IN THE CANAL ZONE, AGAIN

At the beginning of 1944, three circulars issued by the Engineering Division of the Panama Canal were said to contain clear discriminatory measures were established against Panamanian workers who worked on the Canal and railway. These measures involved such things as the payment of overtime, salary rates and annual leave and sick leave. The Panamanian Government maintained that this violated both the "democratic principles that inspired relations between the peoples of America, as well as what was stated in the exchange of notes of March 2, 1936".

Initially, the US Government was evasive, the US Embassy saying that "a complete study of the problem is now being made". In October, a joint commission announced new measures for the civilian employees of the Canal Department, both US and Panamanian. Employees earning more than 48 cents an hour, \$1,000 a month and \$12,000 a year would have the right to annual leave credits. No agreement on the other points was achieved and, in any case, the new agreement would apply only during the wartime. It would be 1955, and a new Treaty, before the problem of discrimination would be addressed – though forms of *de facto* discrimination would persists nevertheless.

It was not surprising that, at the 1944 meeting of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Philadelphia, the Panamanian Government condemned the "principles of frank racial discrimination" undergirding the Gold-Silver system in place in the Canal Zone, seeking to highlight the irony that the US would treat an important ally in such a manner. This, of course, opened Panama to accusations of hypocrisy, given the discriminatory legislation

³³ It was the accepted custom for the Governor's successor to be the serving maintenance engineer.

(including on the ownership of businesses) introduced following the election of Arias Madrid in 1940, and largely continued by the subsequent administration.³⁴

THE END OF THE BIG GUNS

In 1943–44, with most of the new defences completed, the numerous older weapons of were retired or scrapped³⁵.

The obsolete 12-inch (304 mm) coastal mortars had been deactivated in 1943, and the last firing of the large coastal guns – the 16-inch and 14-inch (355 mm and 406 mm) coastal artillery - took place in 1944 and, after this last practice, they remained unmanned and those remaining would finally be removed between 1946 and 1948.

In 1944, about two-thirds of the proposed new gun batteries had been completed but, as most practical naval threats to the Canal had been neutralised or removed, work on new batteries was halted, with the Coastal Artillery units reduced in size (regiments being broken down into battalions). By 1948, almost all of the harbour gun defences would have been scrapped and, with only the anti-aircraft mission remaining, the Coastal Artillery Corps itself would be disestablished in 1950³⁶.

THE SIXTH AIR FORCE

By the 1 January 1944, the Sixth Air Force in Panama had become virtually a large-scale training area. However, the strength of the Panama Sector on 1 January was reported to comprise of the following aircraft –

- 46 four-engine bombers (B-17E Flying Fortress, and B-24D and LB-30 Liberators);
- 234 single-engine fighters (P-39D/P-39N Airacobra, and P-40B/P-40C/P-40E Warhawks);
- 11 transports (C-47 and C-49 Skytrains)

³⁴ Ibid. This hypocrisy was partly offset by the suspension of the discriminatory 1941 Constitution in 1944. See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/41597>

³⁵ https://www.wikiwand.com/en/United_States_Army_Coast_Artillery_Corps

³⁶ Ibid.

25 others (L-1, C-47A, P-39N).

It was announced in 1944 that the Sixth Air Force would transition from use of the single-engine P-39 fighter to the twin-engine Lockheed P-38 Lightning. However, the first due to arrive were former Seventh Air Force examples from Hawaii, likely to be well-used examples that the latter was keen to dispose of. When the aircraft did arrive in Panama in November 1944 their condition was said to be a shock and disappointment – with the maintenance man-hours per aircraft increased from the budgeted 300 to an actual 650. Deliveries were also hampered by a lack of spare parts, so that by the end of January 1945 only six of the 26 aircraft due to be received, by sea, from Hawaii had been delivered to XXVI Fighter Command. At the time there were just 36 P-38 in service in Panama, and no single squadron had its full complement of P-38.

There were also two-seat TP-40 trainer versions of the P-40 fighter in use in Panama, these being locally conversions. Four of these were later converted back to single-seaters by the Panama Air Depot in 1944.

By 1 January of the next year –

- a former training unit B-17G Flying Fortress bombers would have arrived at Rio Hato;
- as mentioned, at least some P-38J and P-38L twin-engine fighters would have finally arrived to replace the single-engine P-39 and P-40;
- there would still be seven of the older B-24D Liberators, nearly 30 P-40 and the modified experimental XB-15 bomber, the XC-105, on strength; and
- there were also single examples of the B-25 Mitchell and B-26C Marauder bombers, these being used as high-speed transports and for airways survey work.

In 1944, it began receiving the more advanced B-24J Liberator³⁷, and at least eight B-24L³⁸, and at the end of the war some B-24M³⁹ would have been added. These belonged to the 6th Bombardment Group, consisting of the 3rd, 29th, 74th and 397th Bombardment Squadrons. As an example, the 29th Bombardment Squadron had received its first three B-24D on 17 April 1943 and used them on maritime patrols reaching Peru and Ecuador. It moved to Howard Field on 10 April 1944 and re-equipped with B-24J and B-24L.

From December 1944, 18 A-25A Shrikes (subsequently redesignated RA-25A, denoting their “restricted” status) – the USAAF version of the navy’s SB2C Helldiver dive-bomber - were delivered to the Sixth Air Force for use in target-towing. All 18 were to end up at New France Field.⁴⁰

As late as 1944, at least one pre-war Northrop RA-17 attack bomber (the “R” denoting an obsolete type or “Restricted”) was in use as a “hack” by the 24th Fighter Squadron. The last examples in the USAAF were retired in 1944. In addition, a number of Douglas RA-20 Havoc twin-engine light bombers also appeared on the list of “excess” aircraft awaiting disposal by the Sixth Air Force⁴¹.

By the end of the war, the Sixth Air Force would have more trainer and liaison types on hand (AT-6, PT-19, BT-13A, L-4) than it had had combat aircraft at the start of the war.⁴²

³⁷ Developed from the B-24H, this had the nose turret and improved tail turret of that model (though early models lacked the latter or the improved waist gun positions). It was built by Ford, Douglas and North American, as well as Consolidated.

³⁸ A variant of the B-24J with a new tail gun position designed to reduce weight. The majority were built by Ford.

³⁹ Another variant of the B-24J, and the last production model from 1943. New lightweight tail turret. Built by Consolidated and by Ford.

⁴⁰ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2012.

⁴¹ <https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content> p.32

⁴² Journal American Aviation Historical Society, Spring 1974.

The 24th Fighter Squadron is shown as having at least one AT-6 Texan advanced trainer on hand in March 1944 and March 1945. This was most likely used for proficiency flights, instrument training and for general duties⁴³.

New airfields continued to come into use. Paitilla Point Army Airfield was established in 1944, located on Bay of Panama, as another base for fighters for the defence of the Canal. Pocri Army Airfield (aka Pocri Auxiliary Aerodrome) was also established in 1944, as a fighter base and an auxiliary to Howard Field. From 22 February to 2 August, the 28th Fighter Squadron flew P-39 fighters from the airfield.

The airfield at Chorrera was occupied for a short time in 1944 by the Navy, who set up two portable stick masts, together with special helium equipment to service blimps. This station would be officially disestablished in November 1945⁴⁴.

THE CHEMICAL WARFARE TESTS

These tests began on 6 January, the Panamanian Government having given its go-ahead for "chemical warfare tests" on San Jose⁴⁵ – an island that was uninhabited and relatively isolated, yet close enough to mainland Panama, some 60 miles away, to be easily resupplied.⁴⁶ Army engineers had arrived on the island to clear roads and an airstrip and to construct the many buildings needed for operations and for housing. More than 400

⁴³ North American AT-6D and AT-6F Texans and at least one Vultee BT-13A Valiant, all tandem two-seat trainers, were assigned to the Sixth Air Force to provide additional blind-flying and instrument training – as pilots operating the Panama region required more training than the Air Training Command had provided.

⁴⁴ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁴⁵ On 20 December 1943, the US Consul proposed to conduct "certain chemical warfare tests under existing jungle conditions" for 60-day renewable periods on San José Island. The agreement had to be made with both the Panamanian government and the island's private owners, a Panama City company called Huertematte & Co. A rental fee of \$15,000 a year was agreed. The US also sought the Government's consent to build trails and wharves and to incorporate the agreement into the 1942 Bases Agreement:

<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226122899.pdf>

⁴⁶ *Canada and Chemical Warfare 1939-1945*, a thesis by Christopher R Paige (Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Saskatchewan), 2009:

<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226122899.pdf>

Colonel Robert McLeod of the CWS, with a geologist from the University of Chicago had searched the coasts of Central America and the Galapagos islands looking for a suitable site in October 1943. Interestingly, he had rejected the use of the penal island of Coiba in Panama as the presence of prisons might have "complicated our problems" (my wife's uncle, an officer opposed to General Noriega, escaped from the island in the 1980s, when it was still a feared place – it only closed as a prison in 2004, and is now a nature reserve).

enlisted men would be stationed on the island by mid-1945, as well as nearly 200 officers and civilians from the US, Panama and other countries⁴⁷. Some 31,000 mustard gas and phosgene bombs and other chemical weapons were detonated or dropped on the island as part of a test programme code-named “The San Jose Project”.⁴⁸ Many of the US Army troops were Puerto Rican soldiers⁴⁹.⁵⁰

By July 1944, the installation’s organisation involved an administration director, a technical director, an intelligence officer, an advisory council and the chief of the Army Pictorial Division, Signal Corps, which made films of the project.⁵¹

By August 1944, 300 buildings, some three miles of 20-foot roadway, 109 miles of 10-foot roadway and 14 miles of foot trails by the Corps of Engineers. In addition to US Army personnel, representatives were also present from the US Navy, British Army, Canadian Army, RCAF and the US National Research Development Committee (NRDC).⁵²

In May 1944, Canada’s director of chemical warfare had, not for the first time, raised the issue of obtaining human subjects for tests – these being in short supply, and the medical chief of the US Army Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) confirmed that such human tests were essential for evaluating the effects of liquid and vapour agents. If no human subjects were found, the Canadian insisted, then its military participation in the project at San José would be withdrawn. Aware that the Americans had difficulty in carrying out casualty tests on their own soldiers, the Canadians offered 100 of their own soldiers as “volunteers”.⁵³ The general heading the CWS consulted the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department, General Brett, and they came up with idea of using the Puerto Rican troops then in Panama⁵⁴.

⁴⁷ <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1386>

⁴⁸ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.2968/058004014>

⁴⁹ , *The Chemical Warfare Service: Organizing for War* by L P Brophy, and G J B Fisher (Washington), 1959: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226122899.pdf>

⁵⁰ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40643>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Canada and Chemical Warfare 1939-1945* a thesis by Christopher Robin Paige (University of Saskatchewan, April 2009): <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226122899.pdf>

⁵⁴ *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama* by John Lindsay-Poland (Duke University Press, 2003).

In August 1944, scientists wanted to determine if different races would react differently to mustard gas. Military officials believed the skin of non-whites might be tougher than that of Caucasians and better able to resist the effects of mustard. If that were proven, then non-white troops would be used during gas attacks. Because African-Americans were not allowed in front-line combat units at the time, it was decided to conduct tests on Hispanics and, between 9 and 15 August, several tests were done to "determine if any difference existed in the sensitivity of Puerto Rican and continental US troops to H [mustard] gas". Both groups suffered equally and their skin was burned.⁵⁵

JANUARY

By January 1944, some 38,751 of the US forces previously on the strength of the Panama Canal Department had been redeployed, some outpost installations had been abandoned, and heavy artillery batteries began to be deactivated.

In January, the 20th Transport Squadron was redesignated as the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron (Special), and the year saw some increased standardisation of types used, with the Douglas C-47A Skytrain and some of the larger Curtiss C-46A Commando transports being received, so that it could largely standardise on these types.

397th BG - On 1 January, the 397th Bombardment Group received orders to deploy four of its LB-30 Liberators to France Field to participate in the search for several marauding U-boats which were causing considerable alarm in the Caribbean. While at France Field, the aircraft also flew navigational and bombing exercises.

From January 1944, jungle was cleared by Seabees at Mandinga, on the Caribbean coast, 75 miles (120.7 km) west of Coco Solo, to host a blimp station, and a portable mooring mast, helium-storage building, and a small radio station were erected.

⁵⁵ *Canada and Chemical Warfare 1939-1945* a thesis by Christopher Robin Paige (University of Saskatchewan, April 2009): <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226122899.pdf>

US airline Braniff had been given a contract to operate a military cargo flight between Brownsville, Texas, and Panama City/Balboa in the Canal Zone. The route was called the “Banana Run” because pilots made agreements with the banana producers in Panama to take bananas to the US to sell. The official name for the Banana Run was the Contract Air Cargo Division of the Air Service Command, and used DC.3 airliners. With the U-boat threat in Gulf of Mexico it was sometimes the only way to resupply the Caribbean and Central American bases. When the flights ceased on 8 January 1944, Braniff had flown 4,840,517 air miles (7,790,056 km), carried 6,494,181 lb (2,945,710 kg) of cargo, 16,890 passengers and made over 2,300 flights without loss of life or cargo.⁵⁶

The US Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) granted approval for Braniff to serve South America in 1942 out of Texas to Mexico, Cuba, Panama and South America, adding Miami as its “gateway” airport to South America in 1944. It also acquired other airlines, as well as owning and operating Aerovias Braniff in Mexico 1943-46.

VP-1 -From 5 January to 15 February, three PB2Y Coronado flying-boats from Navy patrol squadron VP-1, plus a PBY Catalina, were detached to Salinas in Ecuador to operate patrols over the Pacific approaches to the Canal. The unit operated up to four PBY, but these were gradually replaced in March as additional PB2Y were received from the US.

The following is an excerpt from an article in the journal *Nature* and dated 15 January 1944:

More than 300 Anopheles breeding places in the towns of the interior are regularly kept under control by weekly inspection and identification of the larvae. The methods most' favoured include the use of oil and Paris green. Paris green, which destroys only the larvae, is preferred owing to the economy in use and facility of transportation.

⁵⁶ Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society, Fall 2001.

FEBRUARY

A lighter-than-air (blimp airship⁵⁷) base at Mandinga was for use in aerial patrols of the eastern approaches of the Canal had been constructed by the Army on land leased from the Panamanian Government, and the airfield was transferred to the Navy in February.⁵⁸

However, in September, the blimp and its equipment would be transferred to Barranquilla on the coast of Colombia, and the Navy vacated the site, which was returned to the Army.⁵⁹

Navy patrol squadron VP-206 had transferred from the US to Coco Solo in April 1943. It had sent detachments to other advance bases, but in February 1944 the whole squadron relocated to Corinto in Nicaragua, but then left for Key West, Florida in April.

The Federation of Students of Panama was reconstituted in February 1944, with chapters in all the schools in the country, with an aim to be a civic force to “combat reactionary forces that are invigorated by ignorance, perpetuated by political corruption and ferment social injustice”.

In Chile, in February, important espionage rings in Chile were broken up, but some of the Germans managed to escape to Argentina, where they continued operating for a time.⁶⁰

MARCH

New Marine Railway No.2 at Cristobal began docking operations in March.⁶¹

In March, Bob Hope and Frances Langford visited Panama.⁶²

⁵⁷ Strictly speaking, being a “blimp” or non-rigid airship, lacking an internal structural frame or keel and relying on the pressure of their lifting gas to maintain their shape. The iconic Goodyear blimp, as seen at sporting events etc in the US in a modern example of the form.

⁵⁸ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Operation_Bol%C3%ADvar?file=Operation_BOLIVAR_World_War_II_Latin_America.png

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/80-G-219000/80-G-219902.html>

By March 1944, a single Vultee BT-13A Valiant basic trainer had also been added to the strength of the 24th Fighter Squadron, to augment the instrument training programme. One was still on the books in March 1945⁶³.

A house-to-house census of the civil population of the Canal Zone was made by the police force during March 1944. This canvass included civilian employees of the Army and Navy, and members of families of Army and Navy personnel, but omitted commissioned, warrant and enlisted personnel.⁶⁴

The following is a summary of the population by districts:

	Americans			All others			Total
	Men	Women	Children	Men	Women	Children	
Balboa district.....	6,580	4,902	2,928	9,689	3,515	3,840	31,454
Cristobal district.....	1,655	869	782	6,201	2,949	3,664	16,120
Prisoners.....	16			183	2		201
Total inhabitants, March 1944.....	8,251	5,771	3,710	16,073	6,466	7,504	47,775
Total inhabitants, June 1943.....	11,159	5,462	3,585	23,543	6,239	7,402	57,390

The population in March 1944 was 16.8% percent less than that shown by the count taken in June 1943. The Canal Zone population had been at abnormal levels in the previous four years because of the large number of persons brought to the Isthmus to work on construction projects of the Army, Navy, and Panama Canal. Most of these projects had been completed since the 1943 census, and the sharp decrease in the population figures reflected the repatriation of a considerable number of the persons who had been brought to the Isthmus in the previous few years.⁶⁵

The 24th Fighter Squadron had flown its last P-39 missions in June 1943, these were then replaced by two refurbished Curtiss P-40C and two new P-40N Warhawks. From that point

⁶³ North American AT-6D and AT-6F Texans and the BT-13A Valiant, all tandem 2-seat trainers, were assigned to the Sixth Air Force to provide additional blind-flying and instrument training – as pilots operating the Panama region required more training than the Air Training Command had provided.

⁶⁴ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

through until August, the Squadron transitioned into new P-40N. However, in March 1944 it again re-equipped, this time with the Bell P-39Q (the major production model)⁶⁶. By 1944, the P-39 was the predominant fighter type in Panama.

Calzada Larga (“Long causeway”), later renamed Madden Army Airfield, in the province of Panama, was used 1942-44, including for the training of glider transport pilots. It was used by the 29th Fighter Squadron from 17 May 1942 to 25 March 1944, including for flying anti-submarine patrols using Douglas A-24 Banshee dive-bombers⁶⁷.

Navy bomber squadron VB-141⁶⁸ deployed six of its Lockheed PV-1 Ventura to Coco Solo from Puerto Rico in March. However, in July, all the unit’s aircraft redeployed to NAS Beaufort in South Carolina.

Redesignated as the 32nd Fighter Squadron (Single Engine) on 10 February, by the end of March, it had 13 P-39N, 17 P-39Q fighters, plus an AT-6D Texan trainer and a Piper L-4A Grasshopper as support aircraft. These were joined in May by a BT-13A Valiant basic trainer. By June, it had around 25 P-39Q, and during October 1944 a Cessna UC-78 Bobcat light twin was acquired, capable of carrying four passengers and used as the squadron “hack”.

On 14 March, a Martin PBM Mariner flying-boat from Navy patrol squadron VP-209 was lost at Salinas in Ecuador after it crashed on take-off and was so badly damaged that it had to be written off.

Navy patrol squadron VP-15 started its operations from NAS Bermuda, undertaking anti-submarine and convoy escort duties from 15 March, transferring to Coco Solo on 21 April, with a detachment to Corinto in Nicaragua and another to the Galapagos Islands. It would transfer to NAS San Diego on 15 October, to prepare for transfer to the South Pacific.

⁶⁶ This had a 37mm cannon, with six machine guns and a 227 kg (600 lb) bombload; later batches had a four-blade propeller.

⁶⁷ The USAAF version of the Navy’s SBD Dauntless.

⁶⁸ Later redesignated VPB-141 on 1 October 1944.

On 23 March, President Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor, made a goodwill visit to Panama. Her visit include meeting with nurses and auxiliaries at the entrance to Santo Tomas Hospital in Panama City.⁶⁹

On 31 March, preparations were underway to begin eliminating anti-aircraft defences in many of the areas where they had been emplaced across the Caribbean Defense Command region. The designation of the Defense Category to "A" status late the previous year had meant that reductions were imminent.

APRIL

Navy patrol squadron VP-206 left Corinto for Key West, Florida in April 1944.

In April, Navy patrol squadron VP-15 was transferred to Coco Solo, with a detachment deployed to Corinto in Nicaragua and another to the Galapagos Islands. It would return to the US in October.

SCR-545 radar sets were received in April to replace the SCR-268 and SCR-547, although it suffered from the same ground clutter problem, albeit to a lesser degree. Both the SCR-268 and SCR-545 were unable to detect targets over land and below 1,000 feet (305 metres) altitude. Due to the problems, the M-1 Height Finder device was used to determine the range of low-flying aircraft which could not be tracked by the SCR-545. In addition, by 1944, daily tracking missions formed part of the training required to improve and maintain the efficiency of the crews of the radar sets.

The 397th Bombardment Group began its deployment to the Galapagos Islands with the ground echelon starting movement to Balboa via truck for the transfer. The air element received four additional B-24J Liberators and, alongside these, it flew the existing two B-24J and two B-24D to the Galapagos Islands. In February 1945, the unit was relieved from duty in the Galapagos Islands and returned to Rio Hato, where the unit ended the war.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ <https://www.elistmopty.com/2021/03/un-23-de-marzo-de-1944.html>

⁷⁰ https://www.wikiwand.com/en/397th_Bombardment_Squadron

On 22 April, the Secretary of the Navy ordered that routine inshore and offshore patrol, mine sweeping and patrol craft escort of shipping in inactive threat areas be discontinued except in the case of “important harbors”.⁷¹

In the Canal Zone, rationing of typewriters was discontinued by the Office of Price Administration on 22 April.⁷²

On 29 May, the entire region was re-defined as being a “non-combat area”. Two days after the D-Day landings, Defense Category “A” was lifted altogether, and four days later, the 10th Fleet was dissolved. On 28 June, the Chief of Naval Operations would direct that all Lend-Lease bases except Trinidad be put on caretaker status. Overall, the lifting of wartime footing continued throughout the entire Caribbean Defense Command region for the latter half of 1944. On 14 August, the Combat Service Support Element requested plans for complete deactivation of defences and reduction to normal status upon cessation of hostilities in Europe from all sectors and activities. By VE Day on 8 May 1945, no enemy forces had threatened the area at all for over 10 months.

On 30 April, all police services provided for the Division Engineer ended, with the substations at Curundu, Camp Chiva and Camp Harrison turned over to the military police.⁷³

MAY

Marine Railway No.1 at Cristobal was first used in May.⁷⁴

In May, all SCR-268 radar sets were moved from anti-aircraft gun sites to searchlight positions, as the new SCR-545 sets arrived. In the Pacific sector, there would be 15 SCR-268 operating with searchlight positions and 12 SCR-545 with gun positions; in the Atlantic sector there would be 18 and 12 respectively.

⁷¹ San Juan, Guantanamo, Trinidad, and Aruba-Curacao.

⁷² *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

In May, the surviving seven LB-30 Liberators were flown back to the Consolidated facility at Nashville, Tennessee, where they were completely overhauled and converted to C-87 transport configuration, except one which, although converted to carry cargo, was not given the new designation.⁷⁵

An Army base situated on Corinto Island (*Isla Cardon*) in Nicaragua was begun by contractors in late 1943 and completed by the Seabees, who continued to supply it until May⁷⁶.

Full use was never made of the facilities at nearby Corinto. At most, only 1½ squadrons of patrol bombers were based there from Autumn 1943 to Spring 1944. When the squadron based there was moved to the Galapagos Islands, a few observation aircraft remained and two patrol aircraft made daily reconnaissance flights to the Galapagos Islands. However, until the end of hostilities, Corinto continued to supply numerous small naval units with diesel oil, water, and fresh provisions, but it saw a gradual reduction in use, and by Spring 1944, the aircraft units and Army had been withdrawn and surplus equipment transferred to Balboa.⁷⁷

In January 1942, Ecuador had granted the US permission to proceed with essential construction in Ecuador (Salinas and Galapagos Islands), with specific agreements to be signed after Lend-Lease details had been settled⁷⁸. The flying-boat refuelling base on the Salinas peninsula, later developed into a naval auxiliary air facility, servicing and housing a complete patrol squadron saw its aviation activities removed in May, leaving just an emergency refuelling unit with a rescue boat service⁷⁹.

⁷⁵ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Spring 1970.

The LB-30 was a version of the B-24, originally ordered for supply to the RAF, but retained for USAAF use.

⁷⁶ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁷⁷ Ibid.

In June 1946, the naval air station was disestablished and all fixed installations were turned over to the Nicaraguan government

⁷⁸ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

⁷⁹ It was eventually handed by to Ecuadorian authorities in February 1946:
https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

In May, the Brazilian Air Force fighter group was declared operational and active in the air defence of the Canal. However, it left in June to travel to the US to join the First Air Force at Suffolk Army Air Field, New York and re-equip with P-47D Thunderbolts. The unit then left the US in August for the Mediterranean theatre, where it served as an element of XXII Tactical Air Command, being deployed to Italy later in the year^{80, 81}

In May, the base at Barranquilla in Colombia was designated a naval auxiliary air facility and enlarged to care for patrol bombers and a blimp⁸². It was thought that existing structures should be replaced by permanent ones, but that plan was abandoned and more temporary buildings were added to those already in use. Expansion was completed in October. However, the following month, patrol operations in the Atlantic were curtailed, and both landplane and blimp detachments were withdrawn. The base then continued on a maintenance status until its disestablishment in March 1945.⁸³

In May, Navy patrol squadron VP-207 left Panama for Key West in Florida and thence to Bermuda, its next base of operations.⁸⁴

Navy patrol squadron VP-84 transferred to Coco Solo under FAW-3 on 11 May from NAS Quonset Point, Rhode Island – where ASV Mk III radar and LORAN navigation equipment had been fitted to its aircraft. Detachments were deployed to Barranquilla in Colombia for anti-submarine sweeps of tanker routes. Redesignated VPB-84 on 1 October, the detachment re-joined the unit on 4 November at France Field.⁸⁵

On 16 May, Brigadier General Edgar P Sorensen took over command of the Sixth Air Force but was subsequently replaced by Major General William O Butler on 21 September.

⁸⁰ <https://www.defesanet.com.br/aviacao/noticia/695/Dia-de-Aviacao-de-Caca---Parte-1/>
<https://media.defense.gov/2010/Nov/05/2001329891/-1/-1/0/AFD-101105-019.pdf>

⁸¹ <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Nov/05/2001329891/-1/-1/0/AFD-101105-019.pdf>

⁸² Equipment being transferred in August 1943 from the blimp base at Mandinga in Panama.

⁸³ On 1 February 1946, the US vacated its naval base, surrendering all permanent installations to Ecuador.

⁸⁴ <https://boeingtestpilot.com/chapter-4-convoy-coverage/>

⁸⁵ *VPNavy! USN, USMC, USCG and NATS Patrol Aircraft Lost or Damaged During World War II* By Douglas E. Campbell (Syneca Research Group Inc, 2018).

The Panama Canal Department appointed an Anti-Biological Warfare Officer on 27 May. Notwithstanding the job title, his main role was to prevent any potential contamination of food and drink, including water supplies, presumably by hostile actors. This officer’s work included inspections of food and drink producers and suppliers that provided or delivered products to the Department locally – including that imported from other Latin American states (many products, including much of the fresh vegetables, came from the US). Water supplies were also monitored. One of the chief efforts made by the Department was prevent and eradicate rat infestations. The Officer also liaised with other agencies in the Canal Zone and the Republic over any disease among animals.

SIXTH AIR FORCE FIGHTER STRENGTH

Unit	P-39Q	P-39N	P-40E	P-40N	RP-40B	RP-40C	Total
24 th FS	25						25
28 th FS	26						26
30 th FS			17		2	22	41
32 nd FS	21	3					24
43 rd FS				27			27
51 st FS	20	6					26
HHS, XXVI FC					1	5	6
PAD & base units	33	15		3		6	57
Total fighters	125	24	17	30	3	33	232

On 28 May, a revolution in Ecuador removed the ruling Arroya del Rio Administration and, by early June, the US had recognised the new government of Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra.⁸⁶

On 29 May, the entire Caribbean Defense Command was re-defined as being a “non-combat area”, and four days later, the 10th Fleet was dissolved. In early 1943, the new 10th Fleet had been established for overall command of all anti-submarine operations in that part of the Atlantic under US strategic control – including the Panama Sea Frontier.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/51-100/AFD-090601-032.pdf>

⁸⁷ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

JUNE

The Sixth Air Force did not condemn and scrap its last two obsolete Curtiss RP-36A Hawks (as they were redesignated when classified as obsolete) until June, these then probably being the longest-serving USAAF P-36.⁸⁸

USS *Ancon*, the former Panama Railroad cargo-passenger liner, now a command and communications ship, was at Normandy, as part of Task Force 122, Assault Force Q, for D-Day.

In June, three aircraft from Navy patrol squadron VP-1 were sent on detachment to the Galapagos Islands, with one aircraft and five crew being lost in a crash there on 17 July.

The 12th ERBS and its rescue boats (aka “crash boats”) was only formally activated in June, with a complement of 200 officers and men and, initially, equipped with “antiquated” 104-foot (31.7 metres)⁸⁹ boats, described as being “hardly suitable for their rescue duties”. The later allocation of 63-foot (19.2 metres)⁹⁰ and newer 85-foot (26 metres)⁹¹ boats was said to greatly increase the unit’s effectiveness.⁹²

On 8 June, the threat status for the Command, Defense Category “A”, was lifted altogether.

On 10 June, Captain Ellis S Stone took over command of the 15th Naval District. He would be replaced by Rear Admiral Howard F Kingman on 3 November.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ 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.

⁹⁰ 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.

⁹¹ Also known as Class II of ASR (Air Sea Rescue) Boats, these could be armed with two 0.50-inch machine guns or a 20mm 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).

⁹² [Air-Sea Rescue 1941-1952 \(USAF Historical Division, Air University, 1954\):
http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/AAFHS/AAFHS-95.pdf](http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/AAFHS/AAFHS-95.pdf)

On 11 June, Avra M Warren took up his post as US Ambassador.

On 12 June, the 10th Fleet was formally dissolved, and the Chief of Naval Operations having directed that all Lend-Lease bases in the region, except Trinidad, be put on caretaker status, and gradually other bases and installations in the Caribbean region were downgraded.

On 12 June, the Canal Police Division adopted a radio-telephone system, allowing communication using UHF radio between patrol cars and stations and between stations. There were 13 radio patrol cars (including seven in Balboa District and three in Cristobal District).⁹³

On 21 June, *Compañía Panameña de Aviación SA* (or COPA) was formed with a 40% shareholding by Pan American, the other 60% being owned by Panamanian investors. It was to go on to become the country's leading, and national, airline^{94,95} It began operations in 1947, on internal routes previously served by Pan American under cabotage privileges⁹⁶.

The next day, 22 June, *Compañía Chiricana de Aviación SA* was formed. This was authorised to operate between David (in Chiriqui Province, hence the company name) and Puerto Armuelles using a single-engine Fairchild 24 monoplane, and subsequently from David and La Chorrera using a twin-engine Avro Anson.⁹⁷

On 28 June, the Chief of Naval Operations directed that all Lend-Lease bases in the Caribbean, except Trinidad, be put on caretaker status.

As on 30 June, there were a total of 767 navigation aids in service in the Canal and its approaches, maintained by the Lighthouse sub-division – 110 being powered by acetylene

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ <https://www.aeronautica.gob.pa/recursos/index.php?c=historia>

⁹⁵ For a history of COPA, see: <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/historia-de-copa-airlines/>

⁹⁶ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-S-dae74a31ce03269f4dc99454c183598c/pdf/GOVPUB-S-dae74a31ce03269f4dc99454c183598c.pdf>

⁹⁷ Ibid.

gas, 343 electric and 314 unlighted. This included two lighthouses at Morro Puercos and Jicarita Island on the Pacific coast, maintained for the US Coast Guard. Each was visited once yearly by USS *Favorite*, to inspect and service equipment.⁹⁸

EMILIA ISABEL PACHECO

A Panamanian nurse, Lieutenant Emilia Isabel Pacheco, was part of an Infantry group that landed on D-Day on the beaches of Normandy. She had been ordered to establish a liaison coordination point with the naval attack team.

Joining the US Army at the age of 23, she trained at the Valley Forge Hospital in Philadelphia before sailing on the British troopship *Arundel Castle* for the UK. After the Normandy campaign she continued to serve in the European theatre to the end of the war.

After the war, Pacheco returned to Panama with the rank of Captain. She is said to be the only Panamanian woman to participate in the war.

The public transportation system of privately-owned busses was under the supervision and control of the Panama Canal Motor Transportation Division, and had been made essential by gasoline and tyre rationing and the resultant curtailment in the operation of privately-owned vehicles. 141 busses were operating in this service as of 30 June.⁹⁹

As of 30 June, the total area of the Canal Zone comprised 362.01 square miles (937.6 square km). Military reservations comprised 87.23 square miles (225.9 square km), and naval reservations 12.02 square miles (31.1 square km) – a total of 99.25 square miles (257 square km). At that time, the Canal Zone townships and associated areas in active use comprised 15.69 square miles (40.6 square km). What were termed “Miscellaneous assigned land areas” made up 54.14 square miles (140.2 square km)¹⁰⁰. Remaining “usable land” was

⁹⁸ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Comprising Barro Colorado Island (5.71 square miles), forest preserve (5.47 square miles), cattle pastures (41.8 square miles), commercial leases (0.44 square miles) and the Third Locks Project (0.72 square miles).

177.77 square miles (460.4 square km) and “swamps” 15.16 square miles (39.2 square km).¹⁰¹

JULY

Navy bomber squadron VB-141¹⁰² had deployed six of its PV-1 aircraft to Coco Solo from Puerto Rico in March. However, in July, all the unit’s aircraft redeployed to NAS Beaufort in South Carolina.

In July, the Coastal Artillery Command ordered surveys for possible sites for 120 mm anti-aircraft guns, with Camp Chiva, Albrook Field, Empire and Cocoli found to be suitable, and excellent radar sites. By December, Battery 80 at Camp Chiva and Battery 81 near the Empire Range had been approved (the others had been rejected, with alternatives sought).

During the second week of July, the 32nd Fighter Squadron executed a simulated attack on the Miraflores and Pedro Miguel Locks. The tactics to be employed were well-planned, and mechanics worked late into the night to prepare as many aircraft as possible for the mission, and managed to get 23 out of 25 P-38 Lightnings ready. The mission was a definite success and anti-aircraft crews were unable to “shoot down” a single aircraft.

In July, the 24th Fighter Squadron was also tasked to make mock attacks on Panama Canal installations and, later in the same month, conducted very intensive interceptor exercises against various VI Bomber Command elements. By the end of that month, 23 P-39Q were on hand, of which 21 were combat ready.

The Salinas base in Ecuador was redesignated Naval Air Detachment, Army Air Base on 24 July. Aircraft operations had ended in May, leaving just an emergency refuelling unit and a crash boat rescue service

¹⁰¹ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

¹⁰² Later redesignated VPB-141 on 1 October 1944.

AUGUST

The arrival of Puerto Rican troops in 1943 had raised the risk that schistosomiasis¹⁰³ could be introduced into Panama. Therefore, in August, a test was undertaken which revealed an infestation rate of approximately 40%. Consequently, snails were collected throughout the area occupied by the Panama Canal Department and sent to the School of Tropical Medicine in San Juan, Costa Rica, but all samples were found to be negative for infection. The 1945 report concluded that, unless the molluscan hosts were to be introduced into Panama, the disease would not be introduced via the Puerto Rican troops¹⁰⁴.

Mandinga in Panama had been a blimp base, with detachments from US Navy Fleet Airship Wing 2, Headquarters Squadron 2. In August, the equipment was transferred from Mandinga to Barranquilla in Colombia.

In May 1943, the SCR-547 Height Finder Radar was received and installed at tactical positions, but these proved neither effective nor popular; and all were turned over to the Signal Corps in August 1944.

Overall, the lifting of the wartime alert status continued throughout the entire Caribbean Defense Command region during the latter half of 1944. On 14 August, the Combat Service Support Element requested plans for complete deactivation of defences and reduction to normal status upon cessation of hostilities in Europe from all sectors and activities. By VE Day on 8 May 1945, no enemy forces had threatened the area at all for over 10 months

On 15 August, the 24th Fighter Squadron moved, this time to France Field and, by October, the unit had reached perhaps its highest state of combat readiness, with 23 of 24 P-39Q airworthy, the highest percentage in XXVI Fighter Command at the time.

¹⁰³ Aka bilharzia, a disease caused by parasitic worms and, in terms of impact, said to be a disease which is second only to malaria as the most devastating of parasitic diseases.

¹⁰⁴ *Prevention of Disease in the United States Army during World War II: the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945 (Volume 1)* via the US National Library of Medicine.

On 21 August, the Commanding General issued new instructions, with unrestricted lighting allowed during normal periods of alert, but during a “complete” blackout no lights should be visible, although the power was not turned off and it was for individuals to ensure that lights were shielded or extinguished.

SEPTEMBER

In September, the Caribbean Defense Command reverted to a pre-war alert status.

In September, the Gasoline and Tire Rationing Office was authorised in Panama to control the distribution of other petroleum products, including kerosene, diesel oil, fuel oil and asphalt¹⁰⁵.

On 1 September, the last armed mutiny in the Royal Navy took place aboard HMS *Lothian* while she lay in Balboa. This would lead to the court martial of three sailors, held on 27 October to 19 December.¹⁰⁶

For the duration of the war in Europe, the former Panama Railroad cargo-passenger liner SS *Cristobal*, now being used as an Army transport, made trips back and forth to the Mediterranean, North Africa and Italy with occasional trips to England and Iceland. After D-Day, she landed elements of the 104th Infantry Division at Utah Beach on 7 September, and other units later at Le Havre; Marseilles; and Port Said - the Mediterranean entrance of the Suez Canal.

On 9 September, a PBM-3S Mariner flying-boat of VP-209 was damaged on take-off from Coco Solo, when departing for a night patrol. It struck the seaplane ramp and sea wall, causing major damage. However, it was repaired and was flying again by 17 September.

On 17 September, a PBM-3S of VP-209 (the same one damaged on 9 September) was damaged once more while taking off from San Blas Bay off Panama’s Caribbean coast. It

¹⁰⁵ Executive Decree No 474, September 1944.

¹⁰⁶ See <https://wordpress.com/post/raytodd.blog/40369>

was on a training flight. An engine cowling came away and was lost, but the aircraft landed safely with minor damage.

On the same day, 17 September, a PBM-3C from the same VP-209 squadron was also damaged in San Blas Bay, hitting a coral reef during a forced landing. The damage was extensive and it was recommended that the aircraft be written off.

On 23 September, the War Department told the Caribbean Defense Command to store all “excess” aircraft that the Sixth Air Force had waiting for disposal at the Panama Air Depot (the arrival of large numbers of P-38 fighters at this time was causing storage problems, and hampering necessary maintenance operations).¹⁰⁷

Then on 30 September, the Sixth Air Force reported that it had only 161 aircraft and with an attrition rate of five aircraft a month, the command’s availability for missions would be considerably short of its target of 189 aircraft. If the P-38 were not available, it requested that P-47 fighters be sent earlier than planned. USAAF responded that the P-47 were required in Europe and so would not be available in October, but that P-38 production had increased and hence they would be available after all.^{108 109}

OCTOBER

In October, the Sixth Air Force was advised that 20 RA-25A¹¹⁰ would shortly be allotted to the command – a type that had not been requested, and which was apparently being assigned responding to a much earlier plea that the command had made for dedicated, high-speed tow-target tugs. In the event, they were dumped on the base engineers at New

¹⁰⁷ <https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content>

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Sixth Air Force responded that acceptance of P-38, meant that maintenance on twin engines would require an increase of 162 men.

¹¹⁰ The A-25 was the USAAF version of the Navy’s SB2C Helldiver dive-bomber. The “R” prefix it was “restricted”, in other words obsolescent of otherwise non-operational.

France Field, parked, and very seldom flown. Unconfirmed reports are that they were bulldozed off into the scrub at the east side of the field at the end of the war.¹¹¹

Up to the time that expansion was completed in October the facilities at the blimp base at Barranquilla in Colombia were fully used but, the following month, patrol operations in the Atlantic were curtailed, and both landplane and blimp detachments were withdrawn. The base then continued on a maintenance status until its disestablishment in March 1945¹¹².

Navy patrol bomber squadron VPB-1 returned to the US in October.

On 1 October, a number of Navy squadrons were redesignated. The PB2Y-3 Coronado unit VP-15 became a patrol bombing squadron as VPB-15. VP-84 was redesignated VPB-84.¹¹³ VP-209 was redesignated as VPB-209, and that month saw its strength reduced from 12 to nine aircraft, with the other three crews transferred to VPB-99.

VP-1 became VPB-1 on 1 October, then, on 15 October, it received the three additional PB2Y-2 from VPB-15. Later, on 20 October, the unit relocated the Galapagos Islands, returning to Coco Solo in February 1945, to be relieved by VPB-209.¹¹⁴

In October, in Panama, a Constitutional Studies Commission composed of three renowned jurists was appointed. They would draft a Constitution that would serve as the basis for the National Assembly's discussions¹¹⁵. The 1941 Constitution would be suspended by President de la Guardia Arango on 3 January 1945, and the following day he would call a national election to elect members of a Constituent Assembly.¹¹⁶

Already, in October, the Commanding General, General Brett had insisted that any postwar agreement on civil aviation in Panama must provide for the US continuing to have *exclusive*

¹¹¹¹¹¹ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2012.

¹¹² https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

¹¹³ *VPNavy! USN, USMC, USCG and NATS Patrol Aircraft Lost or Damaged During World War II* By Douglas E. Campbell (Syneca Research Group Inc, 2018).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/210627/reglas-juicio-planifico-constituyente>

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

authority over a 200-mile “defended zone”, which would completely encompass the Republic¹¹⁷.

The last ship transporting Japanese Peruvians out of Peru landed in New Orleans on 21 October.¹¹⁸

In October, the final transport taking internees from Panama to the US carried twice as many women and children as adult men, a stark contrast first group in April 1942. These "voluntary internees", as the women were called, hoped to reunite with their families in the US.

NOVEMBER

In November, the Caribbean Defense Command began to establish additional training resources to assist the efforts of Latin American republics to “*mold their individual military groups into well-functioning and efficient organizations patterned after the general principles of the United States Army*”.¹¹⁹

By November, the Airport Program, which was constructing or developing airports at strategic locations across Latin America, was said to have built or improved airfields at 40 locations.¹²⁰

On 1 November, a US Army training directive for 1945 stated that the “successful” progression of the war (a strange turn of phrase given that the war was still ongoing) had allowed a re-focusing with gradual troop reductions the past 12 months, though it did warn against complacency and claimed that the Canal Zone was still vital to the War Plans. More importantly, the directive added an instruction to assist the Latin American republics in

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ <https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1186&context=twlj>

¹¹⁹ As per CDC Training Memorandum Number 1, Training Directive Training Year 1945.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

modelling their military into well-functioning units based on the US model. It also emphasised the importance of maintaining high morale.

On 3 November, Rear Admiral Howard F Kingman replaced Captain Ellis S Stone as commander of the 15th Naval District.

On 24 November, a PB2Y-3 Coronado four-engine flying-boat of Navy patrol bomber squadron VPB-1 was damaged at lake Managua in Nicaragua. Operating from Corinto in Nicaragua, the PB2Y took off with a liberty party bound for Managua. It landed in adverse weather and gusty wind and was damaged, and then sank during an attempt to beach, having also been damaged by offshore underwater obstructions. It took a 10-wheel truck, a caterpillar tractor and two of the aircraft's own engines in reverse pitch to pull the PB2Y off the rocks.

The Sixth Air Force would have received 199 P-38 fighters at the end of the war. 6 to 15 November, saw 10 more P-38J coming from Hawaii, plus nine brand new P-38L, coming direct from the Lockheed factory. There would also be a pair of a two-seat version for training purposes¹²¹, and these would arrive in December.¹²²

DECEMBER

The Trans-Isthmian Highway, having officially opened in January 1942, was finally completed in December 1944 (but with traffic limited only to authorised military traffic)¹²³.

In December, the Imperial Japanese Navy organised the 1st Submarine Flotilla and 631st *Kokutai* (Air Corps). The force consisted of the large, new submarines *I-400* and *I-401*, together with two smaller AM-class submarines, *I-13* and *I-14*. The force could carry a total of 10 Seiran bombers for the planned attack on the Canal. The

¹²¹ Most likely TP-38J, an unofficial designation for two-seat modified P-38J.

¹²² <https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/25d785ba-305a-4781-8a47-015a9951b1f0/content>

¹²³ This was the first transcontinental highway in the Americas, albeit that Panama is only around 40 miles across at its narrowest point. In the modern form of the *Transistmica*, it continues in use today.

force was commanded by an officer who had been in charge of the (failed) midget submarine attacks at Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

In December, the US Navy reconnoitred Clipperton Island by air and landed a small (armed) observation and meteorological unit. President Roosevelt told the Mexican Ambassador that he wanted the island put under Mexican sovereignty rather than returned to French control following the war.¹²⁴ Aka *Île de Clipperton* (or *Île de la Passion*), this was an uninhabited rock, a coral atoll, 2,000 miles (3,219 km) to the north-west of Panama, and 670 miles (1,078 km) south-west from Acapulco and, at the time, was French territory^{125, 126}

After at least two fires and mechanical and electrical problems, the XC-105, the transport conversion of the pre-war experimental heavy bomber, was retired in December, and its engines, internal components and the fin and rudder were removed. Its formal scrapping was ordered in June 1945 and the remaining airframe was abandoned at a landfill site south-west of the runway at Albrook Field (called the Diablo dump), where it slowly sank beneath the surface, where it remains, after being built over – first by squatters, and latterly by industrial units¹²⁷. During its use by Sixth Air Force, it carried 5,300 passengers, 100,000 lb (45,359 kg) of freight and 50,000 lb (22,679 kg) of mail.

Known locally as the “Redbird” (this name may have had wider use) and operated from New France Field, 10 PQ-14 radio-controlled target aircraft were assigned to the Sixth Air Force in December.¹²⁸

At Battery Warren on Flamenco Island, the two 14-inch (355 mm) guns on “disappearing carriages” were fired for the last time. They would be removed and scrapped in 1948.

¹²⁴ https://media.defense.gov/2017/Mar/31/2001725262/-1/-1/0/B_0097_CONVERSE_CIRCLING_EARTH.PDF

¹²⁵ The French ownership was only finally confirmed by arbitration in 1931. The island was abandoned by the end of World War 2 after being briefly occupied by US forces 1944-45. On 4 December 1944, the patrol yacht *Argus II*, left San Francisco and reached the island in January 1945 to establish a weather station there. Later, two US supply ships went aground on the island. By establishing a weather station, the US both prevented its use by the Japanese, and were better able to monitor incoming Pacific storms.

¹²⁶ On 12 April 1942, a cruiser, USS *Houston*, was sent to for signs of enemy activity, finding none.

¹²⁷ https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Boeing_XB-15#cite_note-AH-12

¹²⁸ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2012.

The Federation of Students of Panama had been reconstituted in February 1944. The Federation organised the First Youth Congress in December, with more than 200 delegates from various sports, religious, cultural, political, professional and worker groups. Denouncing the “corrupt and undemocratic” Government, rising tensions led to the secret police being sent to arrest those seen as the ringleaders but, after a scuffle, they withdrew. The students then took to the streets, assembling in the Plaza de la Cathedral in Casco Viejo, calling for the overthrow of the Government. The Congress went on to call to the replacement of the President and new elections.

In response, on 29 December, using an Executive Decree, the President suspended the 1941 Constitution, called for a Constituent Assembly and declared the country to be in a “state of alert”. The President then dissolved the National Assembly on 31 December.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/160529/1946-golpe-catalizo-constituyente>

SHIPPING LOSSES IN THE CARIBBEAN AREA 1944

In March, one ship of 3,401 tons was lost in the Panama Sea Frontier; one of 1,516 tons in the Caribbean Sea Frontier (West) in June; and one of 9,887 tons in the Caribbean Sea Frontier (West) in July.

PANAMA-FLAG CASUALTIES TO U-BOAT ATTACK IN WORLD WAR 2

There were 82 Panamanian ships that became casualties due to U-boats during World War 2¹³⁰ - 78 ships sunk (416,682 tons) and four ships damaged (38,456 tons).

On 7 March, the 3,401-ton *Valera* was sunk by U-518; on 26 April, the 6,225-ton *Colin* was sunk by U-859 while being in convoy SC-157; and on 5 June, the 1,516-ton *Pillory* was sunk by U-539.

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
12 March 2023

¹³⁰ <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/search.php>