

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

The Air Fields of the Sixth Air Force

HOWARD FIELD

by Dan Hagedorn

This is the third in a series of short histories of the air fields of America's "Forgotten Air Force," the Sixth Air Force, which commenced in the Summer 2003 (Vol. 48, No. 2) issue of the Journal describing France Field, Canal Zone, followed by that for Albrook Field, Canal Zone, in the Spring 2005 (Vol. 50, No. 1) issue. These have been prepared with materials collected for the author's definitive history of Army aviation in defense of the Panama Canal and the Caribbean, 'ALAE SUPRA CANALEM: The Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command' (Turner Publishing Co., Paducah, Ky.), which were too extensive to be included in that title, and thus they are presented here as a memorial to the men and women who served in that far-off land where there was truly "No Ground to Give." There is no memorial, no marker, no surviving symbol to commemorate their service in the former Canal Zone and the Caribbean.

In the era when large coastal defense guns still dominated military planning for the protection of the then new Panama Canal, it had been recognized almost from the start that the guns at Fort Amador and Fort Grant on the Pacific approaches to the Canal entrance were utterly unable to bring their guns to bear on the waters behind the 1,000 foot height of Taboga Island, leaving what amounted to a dead space in the defense planning that any potential aggressor would be unlikely to neglect.

The Early Years

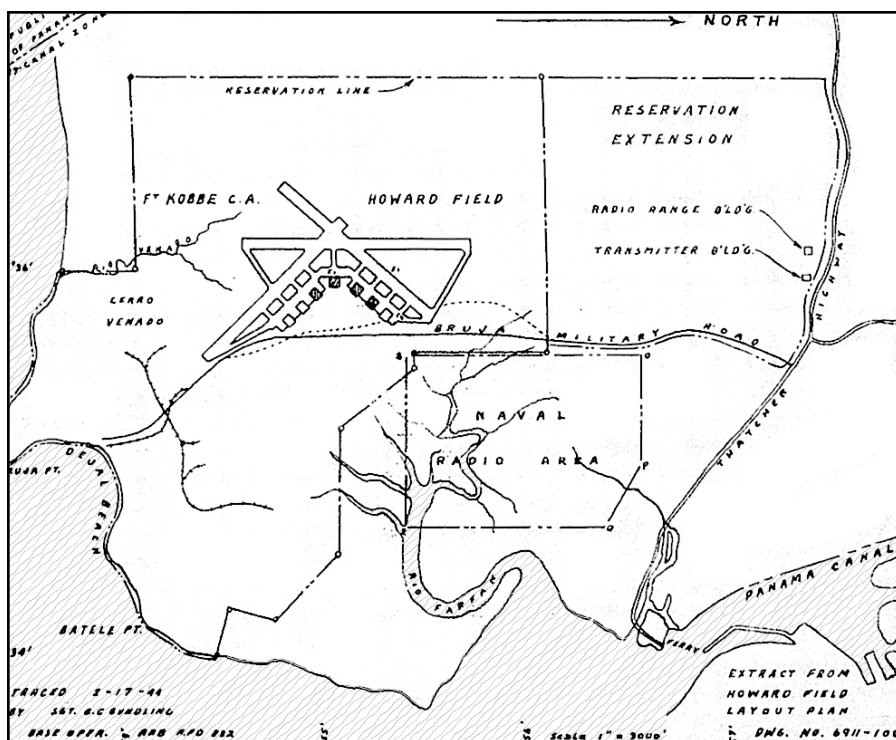
Measures were initiated in September 1925 to correct that gap when Maj. Gen. William Lassiter, then Commander of the Panama Canal Department, informed the Governor that the Army wished to install coastal defense guns near Bruja Point, on the west bank of the Canal's Pacific entrance.

That area was selected for its command of nearly all of the Bay of Panama. Although a small beach defense position had been established in that vicinity as early as 1918, the Bruja Point area was still very much a quagmire, extremely unhealthy, and infested with malarial mosquitoes. Despite opposition from the Governor, due to a large coconut plantation at Venado Beach in the same

general area, first construction on what was then termed the Bruja Point Military Reservation commenced in 1925, with the installation of a 16-inch gun battery. By 1929, the fortifications, which still exist today, were completed, with four 16-inch naval-type rifles on barbettes (fixed mounts) in place. These consisted of the west battery, consisting of guns one and two, and named Battery Murray, in honor of Maj. Gen. Arthur Murray. The east battery, guns three and four, was named Battery Haan in honor of Maj. Gen. William C. Haan. Both of these officers had served as members of the original Joint Army-Navy Panama Canal Fortifications Survey Group in 1910.

So matters remained until April 15, 1932, when Fort Bruja was renamed Fort Kobbe, in honor of Maj. Gen. William A. Kobbe, in recognition of that officer's major contributions as an instructor in the development of tactical doctrine on the employment of artillery.

In spite of this considerable expenditure, the installations there were not regarded as a totally active installation until



Howard Field, Canal Zone, as it was laid out as of February 1944. The Thatcher Highway shown to the right (north) was in fact the Inter-American Highway. Albrook Field was off this map to the lower right (northeast) about five miles distance. The area to the bottom of this view (east) was, and remains, a combination of low hills and swamps. (Drawing from USAFHRA)



One of the earliest known aerial photos of Howard Field, Canal Zone, with the four large and very prominent hangars still under construction, and Fort Kobbe barracks and family housing in the lower foreground. The jungle areas at the top of the image were honeycombed with revetments. (Photo from the Jerry Casius collection)

inauguration of the huge Coast Artillery Augmentation Program and the concurrent Aviation Expansion Program of 1939. Under the latter, plans were drawn up to build an airbase on the reservation as well.

This plan received emphasis when, in the late 1930s, Canal defense planners expressed a fear that the vital installations there could potentially be hit by either a German attack across the African bulge or, more significantly, by a Japanese naval attack, and it was these fears that prompted plans for the airfield. As early as May 1937, a survey had been ordered of several locations within the Canal Zone to determine a location for a new field to replace the inadequate original airfield, France Field, described in the first installment of this series Summer 2003 (Vol. 48, No. 2, pp.129-137). One of the sites surveyed, and the one finally selected, was the original Bruja Point Air Base at the Venado River Valley. When the survey was ordered, it was thought that it would be necessary to relocate France Field in its entirety to the Pacific side; subsequently, however, the War Department decided to retain France Field and to develop Fort Kobbe as an airdrome as well as a ground-forces station. Had it not been for the decision to locate the air base within the boundaries of the existing military installation, there would not have been a development of the station into anything comparable to the importance that it subsequently enjoyed.

On January 27, 1938, Brig. Gen. George H. Brett, then Commanding the capper 19th Wing in the Canal Zone, outlined what he viewed as the first units that would be stationed at what was then known simply as the "...proposed Air Base at Venado River Basin." They were to be the following:

Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, 6th Bomb Group
2nd Bombardment Squadron
3rd Bombardment Squadron
25th Bombardment Squadron
Base Headquarters and 16th Air Base Squadron

These units, combined, were to have an establishment of 129 officers and 770 NCOs and enlisted ranks, and be equipped with 46 aircraft. All existing documentation clearly establishes that it was Air Corps planners' intent to designate the new station as the "Bomber Base" for the entire Canal Zone defense establishment.

On December 1, 1939, the Bruja Point Air Base, a very primitive and very short sod field, which was incorporated within the Fort Kobbe complex, was formally renamed Howard Field, in honor of Maj. Charles H. Howard, who had been a pioneer in the Air Service and Air Corps operations in the Canal Zone in the 1920s. Howard was born in Ashland, Ore., December 29, 1892, and served during WWI with the 322nd Field Signal Battalion and the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps from November 23, 1917, until November 7, 1918, when he accepted an appointment as a 2nd Lieutenant, Air Service, Regular Army. Between 1926 and 1929, he served in the Canal Zone and, upon returning to the U.S., served with the 11th Bomb Squadron at Rockwell Field, Calif., and, later, in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps. While in the latter assignment, he was one of the officers who flew B-10s to Alaska between July and September 1934. He died October 25, 1936, near Bryan Mills, Texas.

Initially, the Howard Field runway was located so as to conform with the very rugged topography of the reservation. The approach, from the southwest, was generally over the small town of Camaron, and over Hill 110 and then along the Rio Mabutela, along the Balboa Docks in the direction of Albrook Field. There was virtually no choice of location, because surrounding hills – which are etched into the memory of any pilot who ever flew into the field – were so situated as to afford a single-valley for approach. As planned, the initial 7,500 foot runway lay along the length of that valley, and was quite different from the primary that most Howard veterans recall from years later.



One of the earliest known wartime photos of a tactical aircraft taken at APO#832, Howard Field, this 31st Fighter Squadron Curtiss P-40C, 41-13468, Squadron Number 91, is shown in one of the west-side revetment areas at Howard Field in December 1942. This aircraft had arrived in Panama July 1, 1941. It was lost to an accident in a mountainous area north of La Joya Auxiliary Aerodrome, Panama, April 7, 1943, while being flown by 1st Lt. R.E. Dunbar in very bad weather. (USAF photo 6325)

The fact that the runway could, at least initially, be located in only one place, and that its direction was pre-determined by topography, greatly complicated the planning of base facilities for both Howard Field and the adjacent Fort Kobbe. At first, both installations were under the jurisdiction of the commander at Fort Kobbe, but in later years, an arbitrary division was made between the two, which were set up – permanently as it transpired – as Fort Kobbe (Coast Artillery and much later Infantry) and Howard Field (Air Corps).

The first Air Corps units moved to Howard Field on May 15, 1941, followed by the next about a month later, and the garrison – and its role in Canal defense – grew steadily from that point on. However, only 5,000 feet of the North-South oriented runway had been paved, and only one very large hangar had been completed by May 1941, a severe handicap in the torrential tropical rainfall for maintenance crews during the lengthy rainy season. Fort Kobbe and Howard Field were, until June 20, 1941, regarded as sub-posts of Fort Amador, across the Pacific entrance to the Canal to the east but, after that date, Howard Field, comprising the greater part of the Fort Kobbe Military Reservation, was commanded by an Air Force officer, since he was almost always the ranking officer on the joint installation. The original units actually stationed at Howard Field, which, predictably, were the base operating units, were the wartime expansion units cited in the plans originally set down by Gen. Brett in 1938, cited earlier. They included:

- Headquarters and Headquarters, 16th Air Base Group (Reinforced)
- 15th Air Base Squadron
- 20th Materiel Squadron
- 21st Materiel Squadron
- 46th Signal Platoon (Air Base)
- 261st Quartermaster Company (Air Base) (but inactive)
- 744th Ordnance Company (Aviation) (Air Base)
- 10th Quartermaster Company (Truck)
- Detachment, Station Hospital
- Detachment, Quartermaster Corps



Curtiss P-40s and Bell P-39s constituted the primary interceptor aircraft defending the Canal Zone for much of the war. This Bell P-39K-1, 42-4266, Squadron Number 91, was photographed in a revetment area at Howard Field around August 1942. A total of at least 76 P-39Ks were assigned to the Sixth Air Force. This aircraft is known to have been flown by a Capt. Johnson, but unfortunately the operating squadron is unknown. (Photo from Bob Karrer, ICC)

The first aircraft to be actually assigned to Howard Field, so far as can be determined, were four Douglas B-18As of the 6th Bomb Group (AC38-602, 38-603, 38-604 and 38-608), the last of which arrived on November 24, 1940. These aircraft were there only briefly, however, (AC38-603 appears to have had the honor of being the “first” Air Corps aircraft to land on the new base, on November 17) and soon departed for the remote Rio Hato Aerodrome to the west in the interior of the Republic of Panama – one of the best kept secrets of prewar U.S. defense plans for the defense of the Canal.

The 16th Air Base Group (not yet at full strength by any means) moved to Howard Field, across the Isthmus, from France Field on May 15, 1941, but more than a month was to pass before any additional units arrived. By June 1942, the 16th Air Base Group (Reinforced) at Howard consisted of the subordinate 15th Air Base Squadron, and the 20th and 21st Materiel Squadrons. Plans were materially changed by the decision to station the Ground Forces 550th Infantry (Airborne) Battalion and the 501st Parachute Battalion at Howard, but at the same time, the decision to move the entire 9th Bomb Group to the Trinidad area (as a result of the U.S.-British “Destroyers for Bases” deal) released space and prevented overcrowding that was so common at other stations on the Isthmus, and which has been described in the earlier installments in this series.

In the five months following July 1, 1941, units began arriving at irregular intervals: the four companies of the 550th Airborne Battalion on July 1, as noted above; and units of the 501st Parachute Battalion on July 7. Seven Curtiss P-40Cs were assigned to Howard between June and July 1941 for station defense, although the operating unit has not been identified, and they were joined by the 44th Reconnaissance Squadron on July 8, 1941, and the 74th Bomb Squadron (H) on July 14, both units moving across the Canal from nearby Albroom Field. These units were reinforced, as war warnings were being announced, on October 28, 1941, by the Douglas A-20A-equipped 59th Bomb Squadron (L), which arrived from Rio Hato.

As base facilities at the spanking-new aerodrome became completed, yet more operational units reported to Howard Field in November and December 1941. The station was described in the official history for this period as “...developing in an orderly fashion, unlike Albroom Field.” Since it had been decided long before that the new base would become the home for all elements of the 19th Bombardment Wing, the basic plan for its occupancy naturally were drawn up under the direction of Gen. Netherwood, at that time the Commander of the 19th Wing, who urged the importance of delaying the movement of tactical units to the new field until construction had advanced sufficiently to permit operations without interfering with further construction. The 7th Reconnaissance Squadron arrived November 26, 1941, the envy of the command, with eight nearly new Boeing B-17Bs, replacing the hapless B-18 equipped 44th Reconnaissance Squadron, which departed on very secret orders for Atkinson Field, British Guiana. A Detachment of the 20th Transport Squadron also arrived, between November 2 and February 19

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from France Field, giving the station some modest cargo and personnel movement capability, and the 74th Bomb Squadron (H) deployed to Aguadulce, Republic of Panama, a “war alert” position.

World War II

The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, resulted in a whirlwind of deployments and movements to dispersal stations at Howard Field, and the local air defenses were augmented by the 51st Pursuit Squadron (F), with a mix of Curtiss P-40Cs and the first P-40E to grace the Howard ramp. The unit had arrived from Rio Hato, but stayed only briefly, until December 23, when it moved to France Field.

Sixth Bomber Command (as it was known as of December 15, 1941, later VI Bomber Command) had every reason to believe that, with the Japanese attack on the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines, that the Canal would be next. Accordingly, they issued some very interesting orders effective December 15, and which are related herewith verbatim:

“In case of a surprise air raid, every aircraft (except certain Command or Courier aircraft especially designated) in this Command will take to the air at once. They will rendezvous at points to be designated by the Group Commanders and await orders. In general, all B-17s will search for and destroy aircraft carriers. B-18s will be withdrawn to an out-of-the-way aerial spot until

a definite objective within their radius of action is located. If advanced definite or somewhat indefinite notice of any enemy fleet of any description is obtained, two or more B-17s will be equipped with two belly-tanks and sent on a reconnaissance mission with machine guns but no bombs. This search may be general only when ordered by this Headquarters. All other airplanes will be fully loaded and prepared to sink, first, aircraft carriers; second, capital ships; third, and for B-18s, principally auxiliary naval vessels and fourth, transports. Every aircraft commander must be imbued with the desire and the will to carry out his mission. This Headquarters will endeavor to assign missions which will ensure the return of the attacking aircraft to shore bases. However, if sea landings must be made, radio positions should be sent in order that the survivors may be rescued. The enemy vessels must, if so ordered in the considered judgment of the Commanding General be destroyed, and the loss of aircraft will be weighed against its destruction to be accomplished before any such drastic orders are issued. All aircraft should be equipped with life rafts stocked with food and water. The 6th Bombardment Group of the Sixth Bomber Command is faced with a very probable attempt to destroy the Canal. If we can discover and destroy the enemy before an air attack is launched, we have accomplished our mission. If an air attack is launched before we can prevent it, we must ensure that



One of the resident units at Howard Field was the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron, which operated an amazing array of aircraft, including this Consolidated OA-10 – the very first one accepted by the USAAF, 41-18772, shown here at Howard Field in June 1942. Capt. Chuck Larson is probably puzzling out exactly how an Army Air Force pilot came to be flying a Navy patrol bomber! (Photo from Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)



One of the most astonishing aircraft to serve at Howard Field was the one-and-only USAAF Hamilton UC-89, assigned to the aircraft-starved 20th Troop Carrier Squadron as of August 1942. This was the former Panamanian Transportes Aéreos Gelebert Hamilton H-47 R-12, msn 56. It remained with the unit until June 1943. (Photo from Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)



Only two units of the Sixth Air Force operated Douglas A-20As. These were the 59th Bomb Squadron (L) which received 13 aircraft in May 1941 and the 23rd Tow Target Squadron, the latter inheriting the surviving aircraft of the former RA-20A, 40-120, shown here with the 23rd TTS, had been scrubbed free of her wartime camouflage after March 1944, and was stationed at Howard Field. The pilot is 1st Lt. W.H. Craig. (USAFHRA collection)



Permanent party of units assigned to Howard Field enjoyed the relative comfort of the massive concrete barracks constructed there, nearly identical to those at other Canal Zone installations. This is the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron barracks and mess hall. The buildings were not air conditioned until the 1960s, and of course paved streets were added later as well. These buildings still existed when the base was turned over to the Republic of Panama. (From the Woodson Van Osdol collection)

no enemy aircraft are saved – this we can do by destruction of carriers. Further, we must accomplish such secondary missions as possible in the destruction of other naval vessels and transports. In the unlikely event that the enemy establishes themselves on shore, either in the Republic of Panama or in neighboring countries, advance notice will undoubtedly be received. Aircraft on the ground and aircraft carriers are our first targets. The idea that aircraft can be unloaded from other than carriers, assembled, and flown from neighboring countries is improbable but, in this fantastic war, should be considered. Also, there may be hidden German or Japanese aircraft in neighboring countries; however, with all our northern neighbors friendly, these aircraft would have to come from South American countries and, it is believed even these would be reported before arrival. Be prepared for any orders and keep your lines of communications open.” The message was signed by Brig. Gen. Lyon, Sixth Bomber Command CG.

Needless to say, in the days and weeks immediately following Pearl Harbor, a very large number of false alarms and alerts ensued, and Sixth Bomber Command aircraft did in fact deploy repeatedly as outlined in the message. Indeed, Sixth Air Force documents reveal that sober, experienced men in leadership positions felt strongly that a Japanese strike at Panama was not only highly probable, but, from a military standpoint, vital to their entire Pacific-wide plans. It became necessary, therefore, to establish a system that provided top-to-bottom coverage of the western approaches far out to sea. Albrook and Howard Field became the focal points for this scheme. On December 18, the 6th Bombardment Group was ordered to dispatch six of its Douglas B-18As from Howard to Guatemala City (supported by three Douglas C-49s of the 20th Transport Squadron Detachment) as a standing reconnaissance task force. This *ad hoc* force consisted of 18 officers, one



Although hard-pressed operationally, day-to-day service life at Howard Field provided rare “creature comforts” seldom enjoyed by Sixth Air Force crews. This is a view of the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron Day Room at Howard Field in 1942 or early 1943. (From the Woodson Van Osdol collection)

Aviation Cadet, 52 enlisted men – and no money whatsoever. They carried with them six 300-pound demolition bombs each and, curiously, four .30-caliber machine guns each with 6,000 rounds of armor-piercing rounds per aircraft. Exactly how the fourth gun was to be engaged remains a mystery. This in hand, it then became imperative that systematic reconnaissance be made of the areas considered the greatest sources of danger to the Canal. It was observed that the coastal areas on the entire Pacific side of the Isthmus might well be used as bases for sneak attack or for submarines. To meet this threat, starting on December 14, the Howard Field-based 59th Bombardment Squadron (L), with its Douglas A-20As (the only examples in the Command) and a number of venerable Northrop A-17s, was directed to make daily, low-level reconnaissance of the Perlas Islands, the entirety of San Miguel Bay, and the entire length of the Republic of Panama Pacific coast, for the express purpose of locating and reporting any enemy activity in that area. During one of these lonely flights, an A-17 flown by Lt. Smith crashed on January 2, 1942, on the mud flats on Parita Bay, northeast of Chitre when the engine failed. Lt. Smith was killed when the aircraft went over on its back, but the gunner survived. Although home-based at Howard Field, the aircraft had been flying out of the Aguadulce auxiliary aerodrome at the time.

The first “modern” B-17E arrived December 18 and the 20th Transport Squadron Detachment was operating two Fairchild UC-61s. The 7th Reconnaissance Squadron moved to its dispersal location at David, in the far west of the Republic of Panama on December 11. The 59th Bomb Squadron (L), took its A-20As to Aguadulce on December 11 after a very brief stay at Howard.

By 1942, and the entry of the United States into what had become World War II, little additional growth in the station infrastructure had been experienced at the field, as nearly all energy was being exerted into strengthening defensive positions, handling newly arrived units and personnel, and



North American O-47As assigned to the 1st Observation Squadron stationed at Howard Field rendered excellent service as in-shore anti-submarine patrol aircraft in the Sixth Air Force virtually throughout the war. Note the camouflage pattern on these aircraft, unique to the Sixth Air Force. (Photo from the David Ostrowski collection)

conducting actual defensive patrols and anti-submarine arcs. Some projects, such as air raid shelters, sentry posts, extensive camouflaging and construction of a much-needed warehouse were completed. Permanent construction of a post engineer warehouse, ordnance buildings, and bomb and fuse storage magazines were started but not completed that year.

The entire 53rd Pursuit Group (Interceptor) arrived at Howard commencing early in January with but 12 Bell P-39Ds to share among the subordinate 13th, 14th and 15th Pursuit Squadrons (I), deploying by air, and by July 1942 not fewer than 39 additional P-39D Airacobras had arrived for the subordinate squadrons, with more following. In fact, only the Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron remained at Howard Field with two P-39Ds, the subordinate squadrons being deployed to outlying aerodromes. These were joined around January 18 by the entire 72nd Observation Squadron, which was equipped completely with 18 North American O-47A, three O-47B and six Stinson O-49 (later L-1) short-range observation aircraft. This is believed to have been the only USAAC Observation Squadron, equipped entirely with these exotic aircraft, to have actually carried out armed, in-shore reconnaissance flights as a unit in a war zone in WWII. The aircraft proved almost ideal for the vital coverage of the Bay of Panama and the Pacific approaches to the Canal, relieving the longer-ranged B-18s and B-17s for the very long over-water patrols farther out to sea.

The first known accident at Howard Field occurred March 12, 1942, when a 53rd Pursuit Group P-39D, AC41-7046, flown by 2nd Lt. Clyde Vaughn, executed a wheels-up landing, although the aircraft was later repaired and returned to service. A week earlier, on March 6, 1942, the Caribbean Air Force was formally redesignated as the Sixth Air Force, a major element of the Caribbean Defense Command.

The large P-39 defense and interceptor force was

augmented in April 1942 by four more nearly brand-new B-17Es, as well as four brand-new Douglas C-47s for the enlarged detachment of the 20th Transport Squadron (AC41-7762, 41-7770, 41-7761 and 41-7785, which, respectively, received Squadron Numbers 12, 13, 14 and 18). The entirety of the Squadron moved to Howard from France Field shortly thereafter starting around February 19.

The first known fatal accident involving a Howard Field-based aircraft occurred in April 1942, when a 72nd Observation Squadron O-47A, AC37-262, crashed a mile south-east of Campana, in the Republic of Panama, killing pilot 2nd Lt. Willard Hendrickson and his observer under unknown circumstances. Ironically, another 72nd Observation Squadron O-47A, 37-286, went missing entirely on May 14, 1942, and was never found – raising alarms throughout the command. The crew of four remains unaccounted for to this day. However, this loss was also reported by the Command as occurring on June 1, 1942, on a night mission while being flown by Lt. A. C. Doub and one crew member!

In June 1942, the station complement was further strengthened when the Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron of the 40th Bomb Group arrived from Puerto Rico, and squadron-sized units resident at the base by this time included the 44th Bomb Squadron (H), the 1st Observation Squadron, the 108th Observation Squadron, the 39th Observation Squadron (which had moved from France Field on March 20), the full 20th Transport Squadron, the full 53rd Fighter Group and the 13th Fighter Squadron.

The first Piper L-4A (AC42-36728) to arrive in the Canal Zone was assigned to the Howard Field-based 108th Reconnaissance Squadron and gave the station its first, limited liaison aircraft capability, which was in great demand, due to the difficulties of transiting the Canal area because of the huge increase in the number of personnel and wheeled traffic. The 44th Bomb Squadron departed for Guatemala City that same month and, in mid-August, when all civil aviation in the neighboring Republic of Panama was suspended, Howard Field became home to the “impressed,” exotic and very elusive Akron-Funk UC-92 (AC42-79548). It is not clear what operating unit this liaison size aircraft was assigned to there. It was apparently operated out of Howard Field after acquisition in May 1942 and referred to simply as “B-75L 24171” (the commercial designation and numerals in its former U.S. civil registration number) until the Materiel Command issued a designation and USAAF serial for it. The month also saw the departure of the O-47A-equipped 39th Observation Squadron for distant Waller Field, Trinidad, where they were to aid in the very intensive anti-submarine operations being staged from there.

The first Consolidated B-24D Liberators (AC41-23815, 41-23916 and 41-23951) arrived at Howard on October 31, 1942, and needless to say, became the subject of much curiosity on the station, as they were equipped with the radical new “Top Secret” ASV radar arrays. They were joined by seven more in November, and others into early 1943, and although home-based at Howard with units of the 40th Bomb Group, they were almost immediately sent on detached duty to



The flight line at Howard Field was initially on the war west side of the field, close to the jungle and revetment area. Here, Douglas C-49D, 41-7717, of the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron sits the line some time after May 27, 1942. The aircraft was lost on take off from Howard Field in January 1943 with 1st Lt. J.M. Mulvehile at the controls, with the loss of all five on board. The relaxed officers in the unit jeep are West and Woodson Van Osdol. (Photo from the Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)



Another 20th Troop Carrier Squadron aircraft at a very early stage in the units deployment to Howard Field. This is Douglas C-49C, 41-7721, which had arrived in Panama October 12, 1941. It eventually gained Squadron Number 11 and was configured as a VIP transport for Gen. Gilkeson. It returned to the U.S. in June 1944. (Photo from the Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)



Howard Field as it appeared as of Christmas Eve, December 24, 1942. Note the revetments alongside the primary runway and the taxiways leading to the revetments in the jungle to the right. The Pacific Ocean can just be seen at top (south). At least six 20th Troop Carrier Squadron aircraft can be seen, as well as P-39s in the revetments. (Photo from the USAFHRC collection)



Late in the war, commencing in November 1944, the Sixth Air Force was finally able to commence re-equipping the P-40 and P-39 equipped fighter units with twin-engined Lockheed P-38s. Here, a lineup of 43rd Fighter Squadron (TE) Lockheed P-38L-5-LO, including 44-26825, wear the unique unit identifiers, a "triangle red H" at their Howard Field home station. (Lt. Gen. Winton W. "Bones" Marshall, USAF (Ret.))

Lockheed P-38L-5, 44-25171, was the second Lightning to arrive in the Sixth Air Force on Monday, November 6, 1944, and was immediately assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, XXVI Fighter Command, and wears the "Lazy S" in a diamond on its fin. Although normally based at Albrook Field, it spent most of its service life at Howard Field. (Photo from Ole Griffith)





Like USAAF tactical units everywhere, Sixth Air Force fighter squadrons quickly personalized their aircraft, such as this P-38L of the 32nd Fighter Squadron which was named "Windy City." (Photo from Watchdogs With Wings USAF)

Guatemala City and Talara, Peru, to begin the endless series of extremely long Pacific patrol arcs to the Galapagos and back.

November 1942 saw the departure of the P-39D equipped 13th Fighter Squadron from Howard, returning to Dale Mabry Field on November 10, as the immediate crisis and supposed threat of a Japanese attack on the Canal seemed to have diminished, and they were replaced by the 31st Fighter Squadron, which was still at Howard into early 1943. Veterans stationed at Howard during 1942, however, reported that the station was never without the sound of high-performance aircraft engines, around the clock, during most of the year.

Some veterans of Howard Field may recall that, in 1942, the runways there were used for a simulated bombing test in which actual explosives were employed to test and develop runway repair techniques. For these tests, a mine was constructed under one end of the runway with a 160-pound charge of 60 percent dynamite. No advance preparations were made to organize repair crews, but when the explosion took place, essential workmen and equipment were "field requisitioned" from construction crews at work on the reservation. The explosion created a crater 23 feet in diameter, with a six-foot center depth, and heavy debris was thrown more than 50 yards in all directions. The concrete surface was badly cracked over an area of 48 feet from the center, and bulged as high as 16 inches above the ground. The repairs were carried out within six hours. Such was the secrecy of these tests that, to this day, a number of the veterans swear that the field was either attacked or sabotaged by the Japanese!

The substantial fleet of Bell P-39Ds that had been assigned to Howard began to be replaced by P-39N variants commencing in March 1943, when the first known example, 42-5022, arrived on March 18. These were probably assigned to the 31st Fighter Squadron, the sole fighter unit at Howard as of January 20, 1943. The P-39Ds were flight-returned to the U.S. in twos and threes throughout the remainder of 1943. The base also hosted the first Cessna UC-78 Bobcat to be stationed there, 42-58504, a sorely needed light transport to aid communications and transfers of personnel to some of the outlying auxiliary aerodromes. This aircraft had formerly been assigned to the VI Bomber Command.

The 25th Bomb Squadron continued operating from

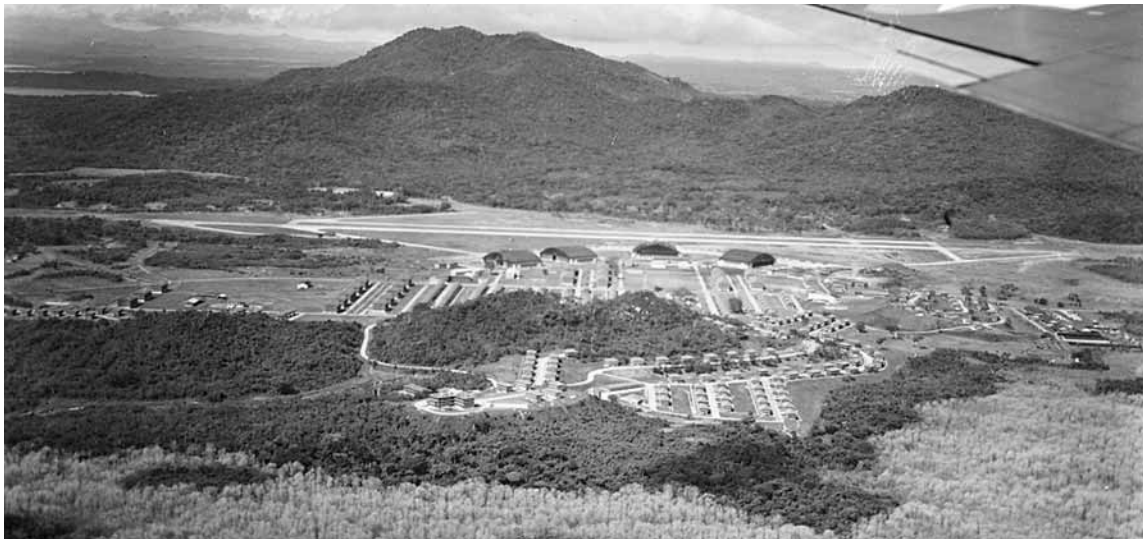
Howard into May 1943, when it was joined by the 45th Bomb Squadron (H). The 25th was relieved from assignment to the Sixth Air Force the following month, and returned to CONUS, and was followed in July by the 45th BS (H). That same month, June, the entire 20th Troop Carrier Squadron departed Howard and returned to Albrook Field to make room for the bombardment units. The 24th Fighter Squadron was also transferred to Howard from Albrook that same month.

By October 1943, Howard was home to a varied assortment of units but, notably, was without any bombardment units whatsoever – a far cry from its original role within the Sixth Air Force as the dedicated "bombardment base" as originally projected. Units on station consisted of:

- Headquarters, 72nd Reconnaissance Group (Special)
- 1st Reconnaissance Squadron
- 108th Reconnaissance Squadron
- Headquarters, 37th Fighter Group
- 31st Fighter Squadron
- 24th Fighter Squadron
- A Detachment of the 28th Fighter Squadron
- A Detachment of the 30th Fighter Squadron
- A Detachment of the 32nd Fighter Squadron

Of these units, however, the HHS 72nd Reconnaissance Group and the 37th Fighter Group ended their assignments to the Command the following month, November 1943.

An increase in the amount of new construction at Howard had taken place in 1943, in the midst of all of the unit reassignments, and continued into 1944, by which time the station had been designated as APO#832, and slowly but surely Howard Field became the most heavily used air station on the Isthmus, as crowding and runway surface problems at the much older France Field and Albrook Field stations had compelled USAAF leaders to transfer most of the heavy operations to Howard. Roads, formerly either dirt or gravel, were paved, and a dispensary, school building, theater, gymnasium, bowling alleys, chapel and, finally, an officers club were completed. A large barracks building was converted to serve as a Post Exchange. The existing runway and very large taxiways and hard-standings were also expanded. This included two runways, No.1 and No.2, the original No.1 and No.2 the new North-South runway, forming an elongated "X" (most folks who flew into Howard in later years would not recognize the "western" and shorter "runway" as it had disappeared, replaced by a long, parallel hard-standing), as well as four very large hangars, permanent housing for 30 bachelor and 296 family quarters for officers, 3,950 bachelor and 247 family quarters for NCOs, and temporary housing for 120 officers and 1,000 enlisted men – and a total of 21.9 miles of hard-surfaced roads and eight 18,500 gallon underground fuel tanks. The sub-grade of the runways was built with weathered volcanic rock, which was compacted, and then surfaced with concrete, rendering a strength estimated at 3,500 psi. It remained, without questions, the most durable and long-lasting set of runways within the Canal Zone for years to come.



Howard Field looking west circa 1944. Fort Kobbe occupies the left third of the cantonment, with officer's family quarters and the station hospital in the lower foreground. (Photo from the L. Derick collection)

Also included in the Howard Field construction were three positions for the so-called Panama Mobile Force, which included three small installations designated as Observation Posts No.20 (near La Chorrera), No.23 (near Bejuco) and No.31 (near Chame), all of which eventually also gained grass strips for fighter and smaller aircraft. These were all outside the confines of the U.S. controlled Canal Zone itself, and were on property leased from Panamanian owners. Howard was also surrounded by not fewer than 25 gun positions, for 40mm and smaller, all manned by one platoon of anti-aircraft personnel. All of these were within the Canal Zone, however, and the author located some of these very isolated sites in the mid-1960s, deep in the jungle. One can only imagine the isolation – especially at night – that Air Corps personnel must have felt while stationed there 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the war years. These were supplemented by 12 separate anti-aircraft positions, all within the Canal Zone. These were all manned by the 767th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Gun Battalion. In addition, there were two defensive Harbor Defense searchlight positions, known as S/L No.2 and S/L No.7, which were manned by one-fourth of a platoon (about 10 men), and 24 aerial Searchlight locations, 18 within the Canal Zone and 8 within the Republic of Panama. These were

all oriented towards detecting enemy approaches from the west or south (Pacific side). It is not generally recalled that Howard Field during the war was also the location of the so-called Empire Prisoner of War Camp, to the north of the field about six miles, and within the Canal Zone.

In January and February 1944, the first examples of the Vultee BT-13A, 42-42723, and North American AT-6D, 41-34486, arrived at Howard via XXVI Fighter Command to be attached to the line fighter squadrons there, as it had been noted that new pilots arriving fresh from Training Command required additional navigation training before being set free in dedicated fighter aircraft in the theater. They arrived concurrently with the 43rd Fighter Squadron, which moved in from the remote auxiliary aerodrome at La Joya, making way for the 24th Fighter Squadron to move to the critical Madden Dam auxiliary on aerodrome March 8. The 43rd FS remained only briefly (probably to re-equip) before departing April 6 to the La Chorrera auxiliary aerodrome. The 3rd Bomb Squadron (H) arrived from David, in the far west of the Republic of Panama, on April 6, followed by the 29th Bomb Squadron (H) which returned, with relief, from the distant and very isolated



Sixth Air Force fighter units commenced receiving seven North American AT-6F Texan trainers to aid under-the-hood navigational training for newly assigned pilots, and the nearest, colorfully marked example was assigned to the HHS, XXVIth Fighter Command. (Photo from the Robert L. Taylor collection)



A veteran of a number of units of the Sixth Air Force, Stinson L-1, 40-3137, arrived in Panama in November 1943, and before moving to HHS XXVIth Fighter Command, with whom it is shown here in December 1944, it had served with the 23rd Tow Target Squadron at Howard Field. Note that the aircraft has the same two-color checkered cowling as the AT-6F of that unit pictured. (Photo from the Ole Griffith collection)



1. Large numbers of Bell P-39D, P-39F and P-39K Airacobras served Sixth Air Force fighter units through most of the war, until replaced with P-39N-5s, such as 42-18512, Squadron Number 7 of the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron (Special), which arrived on May 25, 1943. It returned to the Continental United States (CONUS) May 16, 1944. This unit was assigned to Howard Field from mid-1943 on and flew an amazing array of aircraft types, from L-1s, and O-47As to B-18s and P-39Ns. (Photo from the USAFHRA collection)
2. This Bell P-39D, "The Little Devil," 41-6931, was assigned to the little-known 13th Fighter Squadron at Howard Field between January 2, 1942, and November 10, 1942, when the unit returned to CONUS. This is one of the few known photos of one of their aircraft taken while in Panama, and this aircraft was flown by a Lt. Hickey. P-39Ds suffered badly from the poor auxiliary aerodromes in Panama, with many nose-gear collapses. (Photo from the Ernest R. McDowell collection)
3. With many far-flung and dispersed units, the Sixth Air Force clamored incessantly for light transports to ease spare parts delivery and communications. This need was partially answered commencing in April 1943 with the assignment of at least 13 Cessna UC-78 Bobcats to the command. This example apparently suffered a ground loop just off the west side of Howard Field's main runway September 23, 1944, and the main hangar line can just be seen in the background. This aircraft, 43-7810, was assigned to "R" Flight of the Howard Field-based 23rd Tow Target Squadron and served as a "mother ship" for Culver PQ-8 target drones which flew out of Rio Hato. (Photo from the USAFHRA collection)
4. Rarely illustrated, this Culver PQ-14B drone, 44-21859, was photographed here in the Panama Air Depot at Albrook Field, but was usually flown by controllers based with the 23rd Tow Target Squadron and successor organizations at Howard Field. It was assigned to the Caribbean Air Command on April 30, 1947, and was attrited on June 30, 1949. (Photo from the Richard Kamm collection)
5. The first four C-46As were assigned to the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron of the Sixth Air Force on March 31, 1945, and included "Gravy Train," pictured here at Howard Field alongside P-39Ls that year. C-46s did not reappear in the Canal Zone until 1968. (Photo from the James L. Jenkins collection)

Galapagos Islands. The 51st Fighter Squadron arrived from La Joya on June 10 and by July 1, 1944, Howard Field was host to the following aircraft types:

Consolidated B-24D and B-24J Liberators = total of 16
 Bell P-39Q Airacobras = 24
 North American O-47A and O-47B = 5
 North American BC-1A = 1
 North American AT-6D = 1
 Vultee BT-13A = 2
 Cessna UC-78 = 5
 Douglas RA-20A Havoc = 1
 Stinson L-1 = 1
 Taylorcraft L-2 = 1
 Piper L-4 = 1
 Beech C-45 = 2
 Douglas RB-18 = 2

As the war ran down, and the likelihood of an enemy attack dissipated, Howard Field was designated as part of Fort Kobbe effective July 10, 1944. As of December 1944, units at Howard Field consisted of the following:

29th Bomb Squadron (H)
 (moved there on December 8th from Rio Hato)
 43rd Fighter Squadron
 (with 23 P-40N, 1 BT-13A, 1 AT-6D, 2 UC-78s)
 51st Fighter Squadron
 (with 18 P-39Q, 1 BT-13A, 1 AT-6D, 1 UC-78 and 8 P-38Ls)
 29th Bomb Squadron
 (with 4 B-24J and 8 B-24Ls)
 23rd Tow Target Squadron
 (with 10 TB-26C, 3 RO-47A and 2 RA-20As)
 Base Flight
 (with 1 RO-47A, 1 UC-45F)
 Base Repair Unit
 (1 UC-78)

By January 1945, the war had all but passed the Canal Zone by, and for the first time, the station and the Sixth Air Force began enjoying aircraft which had been sought since



By July 1949, the Caribbean Air Command's 4th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron had 14 Lockheed RF-80A-LOs, including "Little Joe," 45-8455, pictured here in one of the WWII era revetments at Howard AFB in 1949. (Photo from the Richard Kamm collection)

much earlier in the war. The first Noorduyn UC-64A Norseman arrived January 29, and was assigned to the 15th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron, at long last filling the need for a courier and small-parts supply vehicle. The 32nd Fighter Squadron arrived from France Field that month and, for all intents and purposes, Howard became the concentration point for the remaining fighter units in the Sixth Air Force, and re-equipment with P-38s and training continued into March 1945.

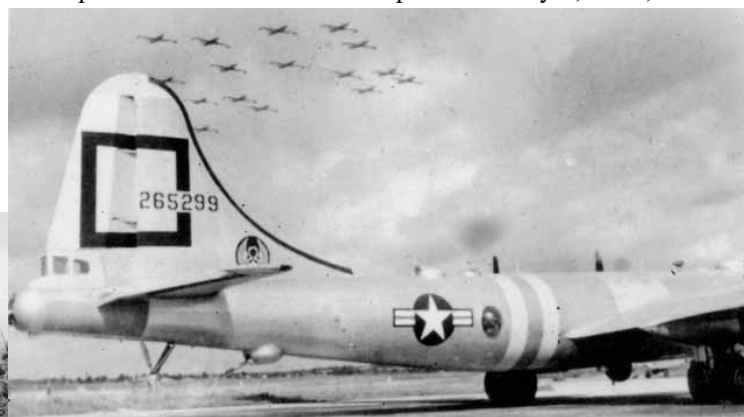
Shortly after V-J Day, the 23rd Tow Target Squadron, still stationed at Howard with Martin TB-26C Marauder high-speed target tugs, exchanged these for three far more sedate, but practical, Beech CQ-3s and moved to Albroom.

Post WWII

With the end of the war, and the virtual inactivation of the large USAAF Sixth Air Force on July 31, 1946, Howard Field came directly under the control of the Caribbean Defense Command and the Sixth Air Force itself was renamed as the Caribbean Air Command. Slightly later, on August 15, Howard Field and Fort Kobbe were once again subordinated to Fort Amador again. As of October 15, 1946, the following units – although at much reduced personnel strength – were stationed at Howard Field:

22nd Fighter Squadron (SE)
 23rd Fighter Squadron (SE)
 39th Communications Squadron (Wing)
 Headquarters & Base Service Squadron, 582nd Air Service Group
 1043rd Air Engineer Squadron
 1058th Air Materiel Squadron

The Caribbean Air Command welcomed the advent of jet aviation shortly after the formation of the Provisional Composite Reconnaissance Group on February 1, 1948, which



It is seldom recorded that, for a brief postwar period, Boeing B-29s were assigned in a temporary duty (TDY) status to the Caribbean Air Command and these flew almost exclusively from Rio Hato, but some were in and out of Howard Field occasionally, including fully armed B-29-25-MO, 42-65299, shown here with 8th Air Force markings, being over flown by nearly the entire 4th Tactical Recon Squadron RF-80A complement. (Photo from the Richard Kamm collection)



Aerial view of Fort Kobbe looking toward the northwest to Howard AFB as the station appeared in 1965. Aside from landscaping improvements, the base looks almost identical as it appeared in 1944. (Photo by the author)



Looking down one of the "main" streets of Howard AFB in 1966 toward Hangar 3 and the flight line. The barracks on the right had once been used by the 20th Troop Carrier Squadron, pictured earlier, in 1942 and aside from the addition of closed windows and air conditioning, was essentially unchanged. (Photo by the author)

included the 4th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, mounted on Lockheed RF-80s, together with the 161st Liaison Squadron and the 319th Fighter Squadron (All Weather), all assigned to but based rather fluidly between Howard Field and New France Field on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus. The 4th Tactical Recon Squadron was redesignated as the 4th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (Photo Jet) on July 1, 1948. All of these units fell under the operational control of the 6th Fighter Wing, also based at Howard, effective June 1, 1948. Both this organization and the Provisional Composite Reconnaissance Group were formally disbanded, however, on July 28, 1948. On September 30, 1948, the 5620th Composite Wing was formed, and the 319th Fighter Squadron (All Weather), flying Northrop F-61C Black Widows, together with the 161st Liaison Squadron, with mostly Stinson L-5Es, were assigned to it. The 391th's deployment in Panama was short-lived, however, and the unit was transferred to McCord Field, Wash., on April 27, 1949, while the little-known 161st Liaison Squadron, with the every shrinking status of the post-war Air Force establishment, was merged into the 5620th Headquarters and Air Base Squadron on April 26, 1949.

The 1950s and 1960s

With the commencement of the Korean War in 1950, the Department of Defense finally separated Fort Kobbe directly to the Army and the now renamed Howard Air Force Base was, for all intents and purposes, inactivated to merely a caretaker status on January 1, 1950. Between the end of the war and this inactivation, Howard AFB had been home to small USAF units, as noted above. By 1952, however, Howard was reactivated and, within a short period of time, still, oddly, under Army control, became the only "active" USAF base in all of Latin America for a time, and the single most important military installation in the Canal Zone. General Order No.95, October 28, 1952, effectively changed the boundaries between Fort Kobbe and Howard AFB, however, and allocated the stations, as appropriate, to the Army (Fort Kobbe, 1,622 acres) and Air Force (Howard AFB, 4,087 acres). Venado Drop Zone,

located just to the west of Howard AFB, was included in the Air Force parcel, and was then, and remained, the only dedicated airborne drop zone in the entire Canal Zone.

As noted earlier in this series, safety concerns resulted in the halt of all flying by fixed-wing aircraft into Albrook AFB and, as a result, the USAF upgraded Howard's facilities, and the primary North-South runway was extended to 8,500 feet. These upgrades resulted in the redesignation of the USAF element in Panama as the U.S. Air Forces Southern Command (USAFSO) on June 6, 1963, and the reassignment of the Army's 71st Aviation Company from Fort Kobbe to Albrook AFB, since it was equipped with helicopters and light Army aircraft only. By December 1961, virtually all USAF flying operations in Panama had been relocated to Howard AFB.

By 1966, Howard AFB had nearly all of the sights and sounds of a WWII era active-duty station, as the USAF had garrisoned the 605th Air Commando Squadron, the major flying element of the 24th Special Operations Wing, at the base. The 605th ACS flew a most interesting array of aircraft, including seven of the Douglas (On Mark) B-26K Invader conversions, North American T-28D-5s, a large number of assorted Douglas C-47Ds, Helio U-10 Couriers and, for a brief



By August 1968, propeller-driven tactical aircraft had returned to predominate at Howard AFB once again, and the sights and sounds were reminiscent of the war years. This North American T-28D-5, 51-3607, was assigned to the 605th Air Commando Squadron. Hangar 1 is in the background. (Photo by the author)



When first assigned to the 605th Air Commando Squadron, the Douglas (On-Mark) B-26Ks wore a curious solid green upper surface and light gray lower surfaces, but by April 1968 had been redesignated as A-26As and repainted with Southeast Asia style camouflage as shown on 64-17655, shown here with the very rarely seen "glass" nose. (Photo by the author)



Yet another retrogression were 15 Curtiss C-46D aircraft refurbished after storage by Air International in Miami in June 1966 and assigned to the 605th Air Commando Squadron at Howard AFB. 44-77650, msn 33046, shown here in flight over the Pacific, approaches Howard AFB in 1968. All were withdrawn quickly after a tragic accident with one as described in the text. (Photo from the William R. Davis collection)

period, reconditioned Curtiss C-46 transports. Indeed, the aircraft assigned to the unit probably witnessed the last large, operational employment of these types anywhere in the world by the USAF. Your scribe frequently watched as, at the end of a training day, echelon formations of T-28Ds and B-26Ks would return to the field, make a low pass, a tactical formation landing break, and taxi in smartly to their hard-standing areas. It must be remembered that the rebuilt B-26Ks were not redesignated as A-26As until May 1966, as a direct result of the war in South East Asia, when Thailand would not permit the basing of "bombers" on its territory, and the USAF seized upon the "amiable deception" of simply redesignating the B-26Ks into the old "Attack" category to facilitate their basing. At least seven B-26Ks are noted as having served with the 605th until about April 1968, when the survivors underwent pre-transfer inspections and reassignment.

Howard AFB was an exciting place to watch during the 1960s. Besides the resident, largely propeller-driven tactical aircraft stationed there, the array of transient aircraft from all over Latin America provided a virtually never-ending cavalcade of fascinating visitors. Some were there for joint exercises with the "model" 605th ACS, such as *Exercise Savage Trojan* in July and August 1966, a two-week training and demonstration exercise with Ecuador. Four 605th T-28Ds

and two supporting Curtiss C-46Ds deployed to Quito, Ecuador, where they demonstrated live-fire, skip-bombing and field operations to a similarly equipped T-28D unit of the Ecuadorian Air Force. Ecuadorian T-28s then traveled to Howard, where they practice similar weapons delivery at the Balboa West Range at Gamboa in the Canal Zone, flying some 40 sorties. Other foreign visitors, which ranged from a pair of Brazilian SB-17Gs to the occasional Venezuelan Air Force B-25, were mostly transport aircraft, although tactical aircraft also arrived from time to time.

In April 1968, the U.S. Air Forces Southern Command's major tactical organization, the 24th Composite Wing, was redesignated as the 24th Air Commando Wing, and all subordinate units, which had hitherto been designated in the "5700th" range, was similarly renamed. These included the 24th Supply Squadron, 24th Field Maintenance Squadron, 24th Air Transport Squadron, 24th Civil Engineering Squadron and the 24th Security Police Squadron.

The 605th Special Operations Squadron flew its final Sikorsky H-19 flight on H-19B 52-7508 in October 1968 and, not long thereafter, the unit received the first Bell UH-1F followed later by twin-engined UH-1Ns.

Howard-based USAF units, especially the reinforced 605th SOS, probably operated one of the last great



Immaculate in VIP configuration, Douglas VC-118A, 53-3260, was detailed to the U.S. Air Forces Southern Command and the AFCS for use by the Commander, but also made occasional flights known as "Andes Runs" through Latin America with diplomatic mail and supplies. (Photo from Mercier)



The 605th Air Commando Squadron exchanged its last Sikorsky H-19Bs for new, armed Bell UH-1Fs in 1968 and 1969. 65-7948 is pictured here at Howard AFB in front of Hangar 3 in June 1969. (Photo by the author)

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By November 1969, it was not all unusual to see as many as 25 assorted Douglas C-47 variants sitting on the main ramp at Howard AFB, CZ. Most of these were assigned to the 605th Air Commando Squadron, but 0-49280 (43-49280) was assigned to unspecified “diplomatic duty” with “United States of America” titles as of this image, and was a VC-47D. She was last reported in June 1971. (Photo by the author)

concentrations of Douglas C-47 variants through the 1960s, augmented briefly, to the astonishment of this observer, by at least 15 refurbished Curtiss C-46Ds in late June 1966. After a tragic loss of one of the latter (44-77552) at Howard in August 1967, with the loss of nine crewmen, the remaining aircraft were grounded and then quietly flown back to Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz. The 605th also gained a number of Helio U-10As between June 1966 and 1969, at least 10 seeing service with the unit during that time. In late 1969, the 605th exchanged its well-worn T-28Ds for Cessna A-37Bs.

Howard also served as home station for the Douglas C-47s and C-54s which were assigned to the various USAF missions to nearly every Latin American air force, and these invariably wore a rather non-standardized array of titles and flags attesting to their unique status. The distance from Howard to the USAF Mission generally dictated whether the Mission aircraft was a C-47 or a C-54, but not always.

The 1970s to Closure

By late 1970, USAF units at Howard were operating Sikorsky HH-3Es and a number of Fairchild UC-123 and VC-123s were also assigned for a time.

Consolidation of military resources during the Carter administration resulted in the inactivation of USAFSO on January 1, 1976, and its redesignation as U.S. Air Force Southern Air Division, a direct reporting unit to the Tactical Air Command (TAC).

On the so-called “Treaty Day,” October 1, 1979, both Fort Kobbe and Howard AFB as well as the nearby Farfan Navy Area, became a Defense Site for the exclusive use of the United States Forces for the life of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty. Service members were no longer assigned to the “Canal Zone;” they were assigned to the Republic of Panama.

By October 1986, following the advent of Initiative No.17, which was the joint Army/Air Force directive that aligned rotary-wing (helicopter) aviation under the Army and fixed-wing aviation under the Air Force, the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD) became the first forward-deployed Army Special Operations Aviation



Starting in 1969, Cessna A-37B light attack aircraft were assigned to Howard AFB such as 68-10817 shown here on Christmas Eve, 1969. The U.S. was, at this time, making A-37Bs available to many Latin American nations under MAP, and the Howard-based aircraft served as a “model” unit. (Photo by the author)

(ARSOA) element to be based overseas – at Howard AFB. The 617th was in fact formed out of the former 129th Special Operations Aviation Company (SOAC), and replaced five USAF Bell UH-1Ns that had been in the Canal Zone for some time. To these were added five of the 129th’s Sikorsky MH-60 Black Hawks, these arriving on station in September 1987. For the first 18 months of the Detachment’s existence, a platoon from the 129th deployed to Howard on a 180-day Temporary Duty (TDY) rotation to man the unit from Hunter Army Air Field, Georgia. These continued until March 1989, when the 617th accepted the transfer of the five aircraft and stood on its own. In July 1994, the 617th became D Company, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. The mission of the 617th was to provide helicopter support to Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), at that time based in the Canal Zone. The unit was under the operation control of SOCSOUTH, and it participated very actively in *Operation Just Cause* in December 1989.

Yet another change came on January 1, 1989, when the remaining U.S. Air Force organization within the Canal Zone became the 830th Air Division. A little more than two years later, on February 15, 1991, the 830th AD was reorganized and simply redesignated as Air Forces Panama. The primary aircraft operating organization, the long-serving 24th Composite Wing, was inactivated and the Wing’s operating units were transferred to the Air Forces Panama at Howard AFB. In a move which has confused many students of the subject, the Air Forces Panama was then inactivated, and the 24th Wing became the senior USAF organization in Panama. One of the last aviation organizations to operate from Howard AFB by this time, oddly enough, was the U.S. Army’s 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment.

After the inactivation of Air Forces Panama, Howard was subordinated to the USAF Air Combat Command until inactivation. During its final years, the station was temporary home to many U.S. Air National Guard units and on any given day fighters, cargo aircraft, tankers, airborne warning and control aircraft, “executive” aircraft, search and rescue – and even a few “gray” operator aircraft could be seen there. This



Although by 1969 most Canal Zone-based U.S. Army aircraft operated at Albrook AFB on the east side of the Canal, they occasionally made stops at Howard, including this rarely seen Bell UH-1C, 65-9446, undergoing open-air and rather intensive maintenance in typical rainy season weather in December 1969. (Photo by the author)

exotic mix of service and governmental personnel tracked drug traffickers out of Latin America – a role that the WWII Sixth Air Force veterans could have little imagined 50 years earlier. The only organic aircraft stationed there, at the end, were the exotic Alenia C-27A Spartan transports (nicknamed *Chuck* by their USAF crews), which were operated exclusively in Panama from entry into the inventory in 1990. One of the primary missions of these aircraft was the so-called “MOMEPE” operations (Military Observation Mission Ecuador Peru), a peacekeeping operation to help settle a border dispute between those two nations. The airfield used by these aircraft in the region was only capable of handling C-27s. These unique aircraft retired, along with their home station, Howard AFB, in 1999, due to the financial burden of operating them. The final seven USAF C-27As were flown to Davis-Monthan AFB in January 1999.

Veterans of WW II and other generations of “Zonians” could have never imagined that the strong defensive positions established in the former Canal Zone to repel foreign invaders saw their only combat during the December 1989 military action to depose Panamanian dictator General Manuel Antonio Noriega, known forever more as *Operation Just Cause*. The U.S. Army’s A and B Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry, conducted air assaults from Fort Kobbe to Fort Amador, to



The USAF augmented its Canal Zone-based helicopter fleet significantly by December 1970 with the first of a number of Sikorsky HH-3Es, including 65-12781 shown here at Howard (and which had been built as a CH-3C). (Photo by the author)

secure Fort Amador for element of the Panama Defense Forces (the former *Guardia Nacional*) stationed there. Fort Kobbe and Howard AFB subsequently made history as more than 26,000 soldiers were fielded from the Continental United States within 48 hours of the initial assault. Howard AFB had, at last, become a combat station in earnest.

Originally, the USAF planned to retain the Fort Kobbe/Howard AFB complex until December 31, 1999. Howard AFB remained on the so-called “closure list” longer than any USAF base in history. However, when the final U.S. installation in the former Canal Zone changed hands at last effective December 31, 1999, all U.S. Department of Defense elements finally stood down – most of them actually a year earlier. In fact, the last U.S. fixed-wing aircraft departed Howard AFB on May 1, 1999. Large numbers of Department of Defense “counter-drug” operations, which relocated to forward operating positions in Ecuador and Curacao, had also relocated. When U.S. Army-South lowered the U.S. flag at nearby Fort Clayton July 30, 1999, and moved its operations to Puerto Rico, the less than 600 USAF personnel still at Howard represented the final military element of U.S. jurisdiction over the Canal. By November 1, 1999, they too, were gone.

The former Howard AFB became Panama’s largest municipal airport, while the magnificent base housing and



By January 1970, the first of the Army’s new Bell UH-1Ds started appearing at Howard AFB, but were actually based at Albrook AFB, most with the 193rd Aviation Company, and wearing spectacular tropical color schemes such as 65-10048 shown here. Cerro Cedra hulks in the background, something never entirely out of the minds of aviators flying into Howard. (Photo by the author)



Helicopters assigned to the Inter-American Geodetic Survey (IAGS) were fairly frequent visitors to Howard AFB, and while the H-23F in the background (61-3225) is readily identifiable, the aircraft in the foreground, marked as “1513” is something of a mystery, as no such Army serial for an H-23 is known. This may be the Manufacturer’s serial number for H-23G, 63-12732. (Photo by the author)

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Besides heavy tactical aircraft, the 605th Air Commando Squadron based at Howard also used at least 10 Helio U-10As, including 62-5919 pictured here on October 28, 1970, with the 24th Special Operations Wing badge on the vertical fin. (Photo by the author)

many other structures there were sold to private and corporate buyers.

Other than some of the familiar buildings, hangars and the unique runway layout, there is not a solitary marker commemorating the thousands of U.S. airmen that lived – and died – while stationed at Howard from 1941 on. Today, it is referred to as Arraiján, and even before the U.S. forces moved out, Panamanian squatters had started to infiltrate the formerly pristine jungle surrounding the installation. More than 60,000 Panamanians now live there.



By November 1970, the 24th Wing had received a number of Fairchild C-123 aircraft, including VC-123B, 56-4375, nicknamed “White Whale” and configured, uniquely, for VIP transport tasks. This aircraft was alleged to have been assigned to Gen. William Westmoreland in Vietnam prior to coming to Panama. (Photo by the author)



By February 1971, U.S. Air Forces Southern Command had started to receive a number of very capable, twin-engine Bell UH-1Ns, 69-6635 being shown here at Howard AFB resplendent in camouflage reminiscent of Sixth Air Force colors of 1942 and 1943. (Photo by the author)



The VC-123B assigned to Howard AFB was accompanied by at least one other named aircraft, in this instance, UC-123K, 54-607, named “Thunder Chicken” as of January 1, 1971. These were very tired aircraft. (Photo by the author)



Among the last USAF aircraft assigned to Howard AFB before the historic installation was turned over to the Republic of Panama were, ironically, Italian-built Alenia C-27As – which had been acquired by the USAF exclusively for use in Panama and Latin America. The two shown here, including 91-0103 nearest, were awaiting the scrap yard at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., on November 4, 2004, still bearing their “Howard” fin band. (Photo by Dr. Joseph G. Handelman)

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