

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

The Air Fields of the Sixth Air Force

RIO HATO

By Dan Hagedorn

This is the fourth in a series of short histories of the Journal describing France Field, Canal Zone, followed by that for Albrook Field, Canal Zone, in the Spring 2005 issue (Vol. 50, No. 1) and Howard Field, Canal Zone, in the Fall 2009 issue (Vol. 54, No.3). 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, Kentucky), 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.

When I arrived at Howard AFB, Canal Zone (CZ), in a torrential rain aboard a USAF Douglas C-118 in 1965 – 20 years to the month since VJ Day – and checked in with the Army liaison at the terminal, the very first question the duty driver asked me was “Are ya’ headed to Rio Hato?” I learned very quickly that, although it was properly called “Rio Hato,” U.S. service personnel in the Canal Zone referred to this mysterious place invariably as “Rio Hata.”

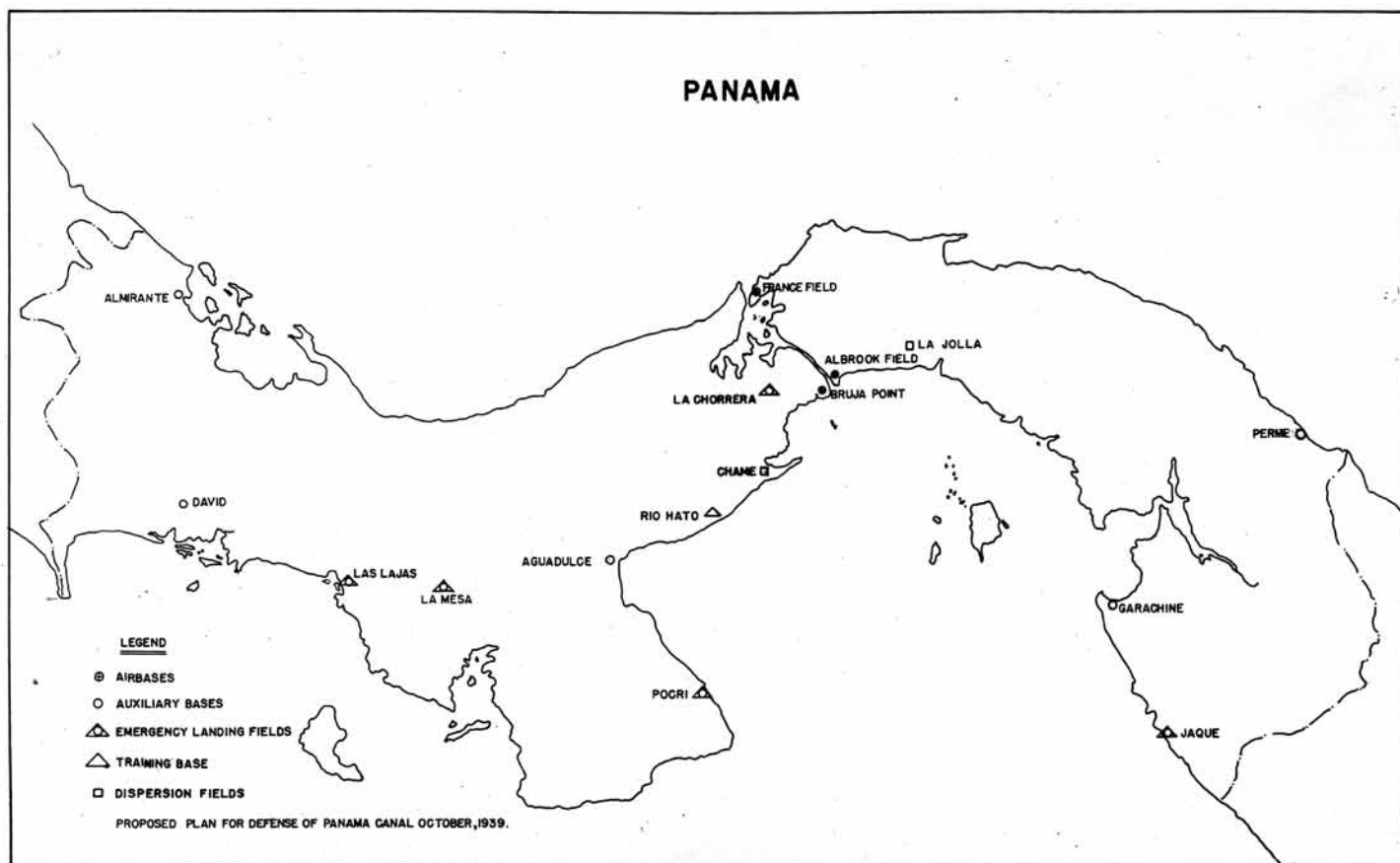
Although I subsequently visited Rio Hato on many occasions by air and did a bit of exploring, thereby demystifying the destination, I will never forget the first expedition to the exercise location there as a member of the headquarters staff of the 193rd Infantry Brigade, based at Fort Kobbe, CZ. We wound our way some 80 miles west via convoy over the WWII-built Pan American (sometimes cited as Inter-American) Highway through terrain that ranged from tropical jungle to twisting mountainous precipices to semi-flat terrain that seemed very much like parts of West Texas. Upon arrival in the lead vehicle with Maj. James E. Bopp, the Brigade’s adjutant, I was struck by the fact that the highway neatly bisected the main runway of this legendary airbase, a fact which resonated through my subsequent historical investigations. As I drove slowly across the breadth of the primary runway that hot afternoon, I had no idea of the history of the base, or the role it played during WWII.

Early Beginnings

The site of what became the Rio Hato aerodrome lies some 55 to 60 air miles (about 80 by land) southwest of what was Albrook Field (Balboa), CZ. Located on one of the few plains in the Republic and relatively free of the pervasive jungle

often associated with this area of the tropics, one of Rio Hato’s primary allures has been its nearly year-round flying weather, which for the region could be described as exceptionally good. The subsequent “discovery” of this area contributed greatly to the safety of flights to the Canal Zone. Its almost sea-level, flat approaches and prevailing visual-flight-rule (VFR) weather conditions prevailed almost 100% of the time – even during Panama’s notorious rainy season – a quality in the area beyond value for countless airmen. As events unfolded, by 1945, more than 40 auxiliary aerodromes were established throughout Panama and the region to aid in the defense of the vital Canal; however, Rio Hato was the very first outside the Canal Zone itself to gain Army attention.

As early as 1916, the U.S. Army’s Panama Canal Department operated a disciplinary camp in the Rio Hato area, the first known instance of military interest in the area. As the Inter-American Highway was still more than 25 years in the future, access must have been torturous and via surface vehicle up the Pacific coast from the Canal. The majority of the land in the area was actually owned by a Danish citizen, Peter Hans Kierluff, doing local business as the Cia. Agricola La Venta, S.A. When he realized that his inability to transport produce to the closest market, Panama City, limited his dream of creating an agricultural empire in the area, Kierluff established a primitive airstrip on his land as early as 1923. Although the area is known to have been used as an artillery range as early as 1924, Kierloff, being something of an entrepreneur, recognized in short order that the destination was nearly ideal for U.S. Army Air Service and U.S. Navy pilots on local training flights from France Field and the Coco Solo Naval Air Station on the Atlantic end of the Canal. Furthermore, Kierluff correctly anticipated that cold,



This map shows the locations of Airbases, Auxiliary Bases, Emergency Landing Fields, Training Bases and Dispersion Fields (a total of 16) of the 53 Sixth Air Force stations completed and used through the area of Caribbean responsibility by the end of the war. This map makes clear that the Isthmus of Panama actually runs east-and-west, and that the Atlantic (Caribbean) entrance of the Canal, near France Field, is actually farther west than the Pacific terminus near Bruja Point (which became Howard Field). Rio Hato is almost dead-center on the south coast and, in the circa 1940 map, is still designated as a Training Base. (USAFHRA)

liquid refreshments and a semi-dry environment near the Pacific beaches there could prove financially rewarding. Indeed, other than his ocean front property, the remainder of his land was used infrequently, if at all.

The first known U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC) aircraft accident on the primitive airstrip occurred on July 20, 1928, when L.W.F. NBS-1 AS68465, piloted by Lt. Don Hutchins, crashed upon landing and was a total loss. The aircraft, which was assigned to the Panama Air Depot at the time, had arrived in the Canal Zone on June 20, 1923. The exact reason for such a large aircraft attempting to land at such a remote and crude field has eluded verification.

By March 1931, Rio Hato and the Kierluff enterprise had become a fixture within the rather small and tight-knit U.S. service aviation establishment in the Canal Zone, and Army and Navy aviation leaders recommended to the department commanders in Balboa some sort of formal arrangement with Kierluff for the use of his property. Although extant records are contradictory and vague, an agreement was apparently reached to rent the airstrip each year for initially a six-month period, including the entirety of the months of the "dry season" and those encompassing the advent of the "rainy season." Indeed, it was an USAAC officer, 16th Pursuit Group commander Maj. R. L. Walsh, who recommended to 19th Wing commanding

officer Lt. Col. W. C. McChord that consideration be given to Rio Hato as a base of operations for both ground and aerial gunnery as well as for field maneuvers. From an insurance and



Among the earliest transients at Rio Hato, the Boeing P-12Es of the 24th Pursuit Squadron, like AC32-38 shown here, were also some of the first victims of the primitive facilities there. A P-12E of a sister unit, the 78th Pursuit Squadron, crashed there April 12, 1935. Altogether, 12 P-12Bs, 30 P-12Es and 13 P-12Fs served in Panama between 1931 and 1939. (Bob Cavanagh via Warren Bodie)



Debuting in the Canal Zone starting in 1931, the 7th and 44th Reconnaissance Squadrons operated 25 Thomas-Morse O-19Cs and one O-19D and one soldiered on, as a ZO-19C into 1939. This aircraft, Field Number 102, was a 44th Recon Squadron example pictured at Albrook Field, a frequent visitor to Rio Hato. (via Ev Cassagneres)

safety standpoint, the agreement did not happen a moment too soon. On March 4, 1931, Lt. Louis E. Hobbs of the 24th Pursuit Squadron suffered a landing accident at Rio Hato, while flying Boeing P-12B AC30-41. Although USAAC and Navy aircraft had certainly frequented the facilities on many occasions prior to this accident, Hobbs' P-12B was the first military aircraft that can be conclusively linked to the airstrip there.

Beginning January 1, 1935, the USAAC formalized the 1931 arrangement via an actual lease with Asger Kierluff, son of the elder Kierluff, who had died in the meantime. The lease was renewable annually until June 30, 1937, at nearly no expense to the government, if extant records are correct. This was not entirely magnanimity on the part of Kierluff, however, as he had constructed a substantial inn at Santa Clara, known as the La Venta, which quickly established a reputation for excellent food, beach and fishing facilities, and accommodating staff.

On April 12, 1935, a Boeing P-12E of the 78th Pursuit Squadron flown by Lt. Charles Phillips, suffered the second accident there but was subsequently repaired. USAAC use was still only sporadic, however, as indicated by the fact that the next incident did not occur until February 10, 1936, when a venerable 7th Observation Squadron Thomas-Morse O-19C, AC31-284, flown by Lt. John A. Feagin, crashed and was totaled. Subsequent accidents involved P-12E AC32-12 of the 29th Pursuit Squadron, which became a complete write-off in a March 19, 1937, takeoff accident while flown by Lt. Peter J. Prossen, followed on July 29 by a 44th Observation Squadron Thomas-Morse O-19D, AC31-279, which was the solitary "D" variant to serve in the Canal Zone. Three more accidents followed in 1938, involving O-19C AC31-343 of the 44th Reconnaissance Squadron (as it had been redesignated by then) on February 8, another P-12E, AC32-75, of the 24th Pursuit Squadron) on April 11. The utility of the airstrip now firmly established; and with the world situation growing more unstable, yet another lease with essentially the same provisions became effective on January 1, 1938. The parties included a



Three sturdy and reliable Bellanca C-27As (AC33-22 – later redesignated as a C-27C, 33-23 and 33-27) served the 19th Wing very well between 1935 and 1940 and were the primary means of quick transportation between the Canal Zone and Rio Hato during most of the pioneering period. This one, at Albrook Field, has had some very unusual gear affixed aft of the engine cowl. (Maj. Jesse W. Miller, USAF (Ret.))

renewability clause effective through December 31, 1942 – without knowing of course what was coming in August 1939 and December 1941.

From 1916 until November 1939, the auxiliary airstrip at Rio Hato administratively came under the responsibility of the Panama Canal Department, but this changed to the commander of Albrook Field in November 1939. It reverted to a Department asset by April 1940. By this time, it was firmly understood that although "discovered" and improved by the USAAC, the nearly 19,000 acres under lease were an invaluable maneuver and live-fire training location for the field artillery, coast artillery, and anti-aircraft artillery—in addition to the aerial gunnery and bombing ranges crudely assembled there. This multiple use was reflected in the appointment of the first commander for Rio Hato, Col. Harry J. Kelley, who was significantly an infantry officer.

Shortly after December 7, 1941, U.S. officials in the Canal Zone concluded a sweeping treaty with the government of Panama regarding defense sites throughout the Republic. The 19,000-acre area fronted what was widely regarded as one of the finest beaches in Panama, and was relatively level and slightly rolling in nature for some four miles inland. Further inland, the elevation climbed to the Continental Divide along the mountainous "spine" of the Republic. Early reports that the area was free of malaria-bearing mosquitos combined with use of off-shore artillery ranges as well with minimal interference to low-rate coastal trading vessels made the area attractive. The USAAC itself was interested in the fact that in addition to the original airstrip, a number of landing areas as well as gunnery and bombing ranges could all be accommodated with a bare minimum of filling and grading. USAAC engineers calculated that Rio Hato could provide up to three miles of runways suitable for any aircraft type in the inventory – a luxury that could not be realized within the confines of the Canal Zone



At least 25 Boeing P-26As and P-26Cs replaced their biplane brethren, the P-12s, in Panama's three pursuit squadrons. Here, 24th Pursuit Squadron Field Number 28 sits the line at Rio Hato next to a ZP-12E, a North American BC-1 and a Martin B-10B shortly after arrival. (Maj. Jesse W. Miller, USAF (Ret.))



Part of the original tent city (left background), not far from the sod and grass 'runway' at Rio Hato, showing a lineup of 32nd Pursuit Group P-26As, their cockpits protected from the sun and weather by locally fitted tarps. There were no hangars yet by August 1941. (John H. Peck)

itself, as has been noted in the previous three studies covering Canal Zone-based installations.

Before the urgent completion in 1940 of Howard Field (often cited as the "Department Bomber Field"), the USAAC establishment in the Canal Zone, known in turn as the 19th Wing and then the Caribbean Air Force (not redesignated as Sixth Air Force until March 6, 1942), had been very confined to the older stations at France Field on the distant Atlantic entrance to the Canal and Albrook Field near the Pacific terminus. Neither field possessed the space or facilities for actual thorough training programs related to the late-1930s buildup of the USAAC.

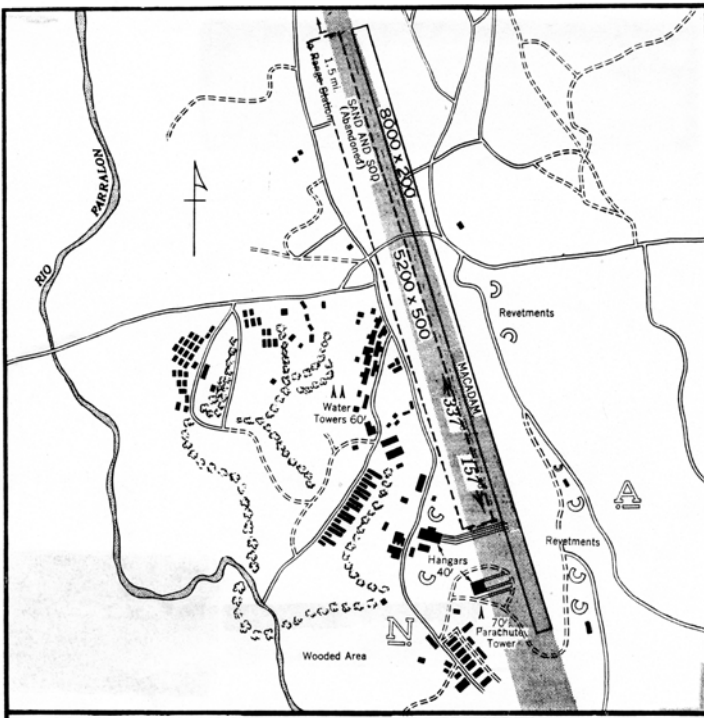
That very build-up was the impetus behind the rapid increase in interest in Rio Hato. Besides its utility as a training location, its proximity of only about 25 miles from a resort area known as El Valle, noted for its relatively cool climate and natural beauty, offered the Army leadership a means of easing the constant strain of daily life in the hot, humid confines of the Canal Zone. Faced with almost constant morale problems inherent with duty in the tropics, and the off-duty diversions of Panama City and Colon, the promise of rest and recreation, mixed with training at Rio Hato, proved to be a positive incentive. Unfortunately, the road from the Canal Zone – the

primitive trail that eventually became the hard-surfaced Inter-American Highway – had actually acted as a deterrent to service men and their families with only a few days of leave. Consequently, most of the customers were pilots and crews, who often developed supposed mechanical difficulties that required them to remain in the Rio Hato area overnight! By 1936, however, the situation had changed for the Cia. Agricola La Venta S.A., and the company had sold many of its ocean-front lots for a good price and hoped to sell additional lots inland. Rumors that the nationalistic Panamanian government might authorize a gambling concession at the La Venta Inn and definite assurances that the highway from the Canal Zone would be paved combined to create problems for what had previously been a nearly exclusive arrangement for the U.S. Army. The younger Kierluff, realizing his advantage, modified his terms and expected compensation if the Army wanted to lease or purchase outright up to 7,500 hectares (18,525 acres). He stipulated a sale price of \$18.00 per hectare, or a 10-year lease (with an option of an additional 10 years).

In any event, additional land was eventually leased, and by 1938, a second well was drilled, which alleviated what had become a water shortage for the growing garrison and transient



About half of the 37th Pursuit Group, a motley collection of P-26As, P-26Cs, Curtiss P-36As and a solitary Grumman OA-9, bake in the mid-day sun at Rio Hato in 1940. Note the wide variation in colors and markings. (From the author's collection)



This circa 1942 schematic shows the Rio Hato Air Base and some of the principal facilities, including some of the bomber revetments. Note the National Highway intersecting the primary about 1/3 of the way from the north runway. (USAF)

trainees. In addition, a number of semi-permanent buildings had been erected, including one 100-man barracks, visiting officers' quarters, a mess hall and several small out-buildings. None other than Maj. Gen. H. H. ("Hap") Arnold, then Chief of the USAAC, visited Albrook Field between May 29 and 31, 1939. During staff conversations with Brig. Gen. H. A. Dargue, then 19th Wing commander, the subject of Rio Hato was known to have been high on the agenda. Arnold reportedly urged the acquisition and development of an area sufficient for the training of one of his new, expanded group formations, as well as a number of other auxiliary aerodromes in the Republic.

With the USAAC chief's backing, money materialized in the budget for construction of yet additional facilities at Rio Hato; and appropriately, the 11th Engineers (Aviation) became the first USAAC organization to actually be assigned there. After making the torturous, overland move in mid-1939, the 11th Engineers immediately commenced construction of three more temporary barracks, a recreation hall, a bachelor officers quarters (BOQ) and to the rejoicing of the permanent party there, a theater. Veterans of the time recalled that although the engineers did most of the heavy and detailed work, the rank-and-file troops performed nearly all of the "grunt" work – quite a different outcome than what had been painted as a "relaxation" destination! They also cleared additional land for a mile-long primary runway extending from the 100-foot cliff overlooking the beach on the Pacific just to what was then termed the National Highway. An extension of the runway was planned from the Highway to the north for another 5,000 feet. By "bending" the runway slightly to the right, yet a third 5,000 feet could be added at a later date. Also planned on the acquired

acreage were three auxiliary strips, which were necessary to support the extensive aerial gunnery and bombing ranges being crafted. Finally, the construction of a temporary hangar was authorized as well as storage facilities for fuel and ordnance. The hangar, which was the first outside the Canal Zone in Panama and destined to be the only one ever erected there, was in fact not a new-build structure at all. Rather, it had been dismantled at France Field, transported by barge through the Canal and up the southwestern coast of Panama, where it was unloaded, piece-by-piece, entirely by hand. The hangar was then re-erected in Rio Hato over a freshly laid concrete floor. A pier had been constructed by the engineers to facilitate this effort but was subsequently seldom used.

Not surprisingly, the USAAC's energy in expanding the "secret" Rio Hato enclave did not escape the notice of the other branches of the Army, which in those days still held sway in virtually every sense to that of the aviators. Early in 1939, the Panama Canal Department commanding general had proposed that a Department recreation camp be established adjacent to the landing field itself; and, General Dargue anticipated correctly that encroachment on USAAC prerogatives at Rio Hato would follow. General Dargue held a trump card, however, and arranged to have Rio Hato designated as a subpost of Albrook Field on November 25, 1939, which essentially ensured that the USAAC ruled what did and did not happen there.

Guy F. Hix

A very senior USAAC captain, Guy F. Hix, reported to Rio Hato sometime in 1940 via the Canal Zone, having transferred to Panama from Hawaii. Captain Hix was a pursuit pilot and epitomized the between-the-wars officer who managed to shrug off most of the officer corps stereotyping so prevalent at that time. Even in the usually staid surviving late 1930s documents about this period in Rio Hato's history, Hix was described as *"...the most singularly dynamic, if strange, personality in the history of the station."*

His first assignment upon reporting was as operations officer of the vital, new Department Technical School, and it was through his efforts that a rest camp (called "R & R" in the Vietnam era) was established at El Valle for his school's enlisted students. He made it very clear: those with the highest grades during an academic week were given the privilege of spending the weekend at El Valle – rather than on post duty, KP or "beautification." Within a year, he became the school's commander, replacing Colonel Ashton, an infantry officer. Described as "blustering, and rather sloppy in appearance," Hix was not a "desk jockey," and he used a primitive, home-made motorcycle to move around his domain. He was aided in his duties by his adjutant and executive officer, Ray W. Alford., (Alford entered active duty August 1940, arriving at Rio Hato in November 1941, where he became Adjutant for the Gunnery and Bombing Range Detachment, and was finally promoted to Captain in 1942.)

Hix left a lasting imprint on Rio Hato. It was his drive that saw the completion of the single base engineering hangar, the post exchange, an ice cream parlor, the recreation center (called the Constellation Center for reasons not clear), a beer garden,



An immaculate Douglas B-18 bearing the insignia of the veteran Canal Zone 44th Reconnaissance Squadron running up at Rio Hato in early 1941. The B-18 was the principal long-range defense aircraft for the Canal at the time, sharing that responsibility with just 11 Consolidated PBY-2 Catalinas of Patrol Wing Three's VP-31, flying from the solitary naval installation in the Canal Zone, the Atlantic-side Coco Solo NAS. (Jim Dias)

the first story of Cody and Lee Halls, an officer's club, and of course the El Valle rest camp. He endeared himself to his NCOs by establishing what was described as the finest NCO club in the entire Caribbean theater. Throughout all of this, Hix had one central idea: to make Rio Hato, which had often been described from afar as a remote and hardship assignment, livable for his troops. One of his strokes of genius was in identifying enlisted men with talent and then empowering them to take action. One of these men was Pvt. Vincent Lasprogato, who drew both the architectural and working plans for the enlisted men's day room and who took active part in its construction.

With the opening of hostilities, Hix, like many of his pre-war career officer brethren, rocketed through the grade of major to become lieutenant colonel by February 13, 1942. He subsequently moved on to command several stations in the U.S.

Expansion

In the midst of all of this effort by USAAC troops, the Department commander issued orders on April 10, 1940, directing that Rio Hato be severed from the subpost status from Albrook and be designated instead as a subpost of Quarry Heights--sometimes referred to locally as the Gibraltar of Central America. That same month, Rio Hato was officially designated as the Department Training Center. The basic idea was that Rio Hato would serve as a training center for all branches, which in retrospect was what brought this scribe to that remote location nearly 30 years hence. While all of this was beneficial from the U.S. perspective, the original owner's son, Kierluff, entered a protest, stating that he had leased the area to the USAAC and had never imagined that an exceptionally annoying coast artillery battery would be placed in close proximity to the La Venta Inn!

The USAAC wasted no time in taking advantage of the base's facilities, in particular the aerial gunnery camp, which was in almost constant use. On July 6, 1940, the USAAC formally established the Panama Canal Department Air Force Technical School at the station. The first class of 100 recruits,



This 16th Pursuit Group, 29th Pursuit Squadron P-36A served with the unit clear through 1941 and into early 1942 when the unit started receiving P-40Cs and P-40Es, eventually re-equipping with Bell P-39s in 1943. (Jim Dias)

who had made an epic journey from New Orleans via U.S. Army transport vessel to Cristobal, thence via the Panama Railroad across the isthmus to Balboa and finally via a bone-jarring truck convoy the 80 miles to Rio Hato, felt like they had truly ended up at the ends of the earth!

No sooner had instruction commenced when General Arnold announced the reassignment of entire 9th Bombardment Group from Mitchel Field, N.Y., to Rio Hato, and the organization did indeed arrive around November 12, 1940. It was not the first tactical unit assigned there, however. After a lull in flying activity since 1938, after the new runway was nearly complete, Canal Zone-based crews could not wait to be the first to make use of the new runway -- the longest runway in Latin America -- after it was nearly complete. As near as can be confirmed, the first to make use of it -- to the surprise of 11th Engineer crews still doing grading -- was Boeing P-26A AC33-89 of the 28th Pursuit Squadron, flown by 2nd Lt. Jack M. Malone, who obligingly ground looped the aircraft there on March 6, 1940. This aircraft was repaired and in May 1943 transferred under Lend-Lease to the Guatemalan Air Force. The first official landing on the new runway was credited instead to Douglas B-18 AC36-269 of the veteran 25th Bomb Squadron, which apparently caught a main gear in a rut upon landing and was substantially damaged, to the embarrassment of pilot Lt. Henry Mooney. The bomber was repaired and went on to serve in the anti-submarine war in the Caribbean islands until September 1942, when it was lost to an accident at Benedict Field, St. Croix, British Virgin Islands.

The first tactical units to be assigned to Rio Hato were the understrength 28th and 30th Pursuit Squadrons, which moved up from a crowded Albrook Field on October 5, 1940, -- some said, in part, to assert the USAAC's claim to the station! There may have been some truth to this assertion, as both pursuit units moved back to Albrook on November 13 -- much to the annoyance of the cadre -- upon arrival of the comparatively huge 9th Bombardment Group (BG), consisting of some 1,000 officers and men, together with their equipment and primary mounts, B-18s. While the runway, taxiways and hangar were ready for the 9th BG, barracks for the organization were not, and the organization found itself residing in a tent city until an

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The first major tactical organization to be stationed at the expanding Rio Hato Air Base was the 9th Bomb Group, partially by land via "Deuce-and-a-Half" trucks, part by barge, and the envied air echelon – all from the relative luxury of Mitchel Field, Long Island, N.Y., in November 1940. (Richard W. Spencer)



Some of the oversize gear of the Douglas B-18-equipped 9th Bomb Group arrived via barge, which some hapless enlisted men thought would be a breeze as opposed to the torturous 80-mile drive at 15mph up the so-called National Highway – until they got through the Canal, outside the Pacific Canal entrance breakers and got violently seasick for hours on end! All of this gear was off-loaded, for the most part, by hand, although the engineers eventually built a pier – after the heavy gear had arrived. (Richard W. Spencer)



"Home" of the 9th Bomb Group at Rio Hato from November 1940 until they moved, to great rejoicing, to the brand-new barracks at Howard Field, CZ, starting after the outbreak of war. Note the water pipe lying atop the "main drag" at lower left. (Richard W. Spencer)



The "facilities" shared with other Air Corps troops at Rio Hato around Christmas 1940, not bad during the dry season, but when the torrential rains of the rest of the year arrived, it became a quagmire almost instantly. (Richard W. Spencer)



The pier constructed with some difficulty by the 11th Engineers looking south near the end of the Rio Hato Air Base primary. The beach dropped off to great depth very quickly near Rio Hato. Once constructed, it was actually rarely used – except for swimming, diving and fishing. The small island in the distance had a Spanish name, but was universally known, well into the 1960s, as "Bird Shit Island," and when the prevailing winds were just right, the smell was truly amazing! It was the object of frequent Coast Artillery and Aerial Bombardment training, much to the enjoyment of personnel garrisoned there. (Richard W. Spencer)



One of the most frequented facilities on the station, the Base Theater, also doubled as a classroom for the Training Center and permanently assigned units. The concrete walkways were a Godsend. (Richard W. Spencer)



One of the haciendas sold by the land baron close to the perimeter of Rio Hato, complete with Panama civil Piper J3F-60 R7E handy for the easy commute to Panama City's Aeropuerto Nacional Marcos A. Gelabert. This aircraft was owned by the Turner, Arias and Hearn Flying School but was demolished by a student after August 1940 and replaced by a J5A with the same registration! (Richard W. Spencer)



The local major land owner, who had made the aerodrome facilities available to the USAAC at very reasonable rates, wasted little time in attempting to develop the surrounding area and, by 1940, it included the Llano Restaurant and numerous higher-end home sites. Note the ubiquitous chiva minibus at left. Only officers and some NCOs were welcome, and usually by invitation, to the restaurant. (Richard W. Spencer)

emergency allocation of \$175,000 was made available within nine weeks of their arrival for the construction of barracks. To add insult to injury, the cadre of the 9th BG was informed that with the aid of the hard-pressed 11th Engineers, they would have to build their own barracks – for which the necessary lumber had to be laboriously transported all the way from the Canal Zone! On top of everything else, they were turned out to combat dust being generated by their fleet of B-18s making nearly constant use of the freshly completed runway. According to the 9th BG history for the period, “...life at the ‘tropical paradise’ named *Rio Hato* wasn’t too pleasant at first,” as the 9th BG, as well as some 920 additional USAAC personnel, were quartered in floorless, screenless tents.

Laundry took up to four weeks to make a complete cycle. While they enjoyed a theater and recreation center when off duty, provisions for a laundry had not been included in the construction plans. Dirty clothes for nearly 2,000 officers and men had to go all the way to the Canal Zone and back for servicing. All of this put a severe strain on the generators causing almost constant power failures, which necessitated the use of Coleman lanterns, and this historian can attest that there is no darker nighttime than the interior of Panama! Spare parts for the unit’s B-18s also had to come from the Canal Zone. The runway, under heavy training use by the heavy bombers, was not standing up well. The 9th BG crews were bedeviled during the dry season by the constant dust called *caliche* and attendant sand, which permeated everything. When the rains came – although moderate compared to the more tropical Canal Zone region – the *caliche* instantly dissolved, and the runway and taxiways become a quagmire and unbelievably slippery, leading to a completely different set of problems. In the face of all of this, in addition to the theater and recreation center that always operated at full capacity off-duty, the local commanders also created a beer garden and library. Nevertheless, the primary off-duty entertainment remained the excellent local beaches and fishing.

As if all of this were not enough, Panamanian politicians in the capital seized upon the enormous expansion of Rio Hato as a violation of treaty provisions, perhaps with some justification, claiming that the burgeoning base had been built on the strength of a private lease, rather than via government-to-government agreements. The storm of nationalistic protest that followed hit the local press, thus ending forever any notion that Axis agents known to be at large in Panama might have missed the expansion 80 miles to the west of the Canal Zone. Some minor acts of sabotage were reported at Rio Hato, where local Panamanian citizens demanded unfettered access, and the U.S. uniform did not always meet with courtesy in the interior.

With the tremendous expansion of the USAAC establishment in Panama as the world situation deteriorated in early 1941, several new organizations were activated there as their initial station. The headquarters of the 32nd Pursuit Group (Interceptor) and one of its subordinate units, the 51st Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor), were activated there effective January 1, 1941, along with the Douglas A-20A equipped 59th Bomb Squadron (Light). Nevertheless, after their nearly one year working-up period at Rio Hato, they deployed to other stations after Pearl Harbor.

By November 4, 1941, with storm clouds in evidence at every point of the compass, the majority of the work on what was now termed Field No.1 was complete. Shortly to be renamed South Field, the field had been the location of the Department Training Center. Its north-south sod-surface runway, measuring 1,000 feet by 4,500 feet, was fully operational. The solitary hangar, 140 feet by 120 feet, was in use, and two 25 by 300 feet concrete parking aprons, were almost completely full at all times. Field lighting, consisting of one portable flood light and two rows of Dietz kerosene pots, restricted nighttime flights and made them very hazardous. The station boasted its own airway and weather station, as well as full radio and teletype systems; and a field hospital – with Army Nurse Corps officers, who became overnight sensations – had been garrisoned.

Rio Hato Air Base Order of Battle January 29, 1942

Unit	As of December 7	As of December 9	As of December 10	Type and Number of Aircraft on Hand
59th Bomb Squadron (L)	Rio Hato	Rio Hato	Aguadulce	Douglas A-20A (12) Northrop A-17 (9)
HHS, 6th Bomb Group	France Field	Aguadulce	Rio Hato	Northrop A-17 (9) Douglas B-18 (2)
3rd Bomb Squadron (H)	France Field	Rio Hato	Rio Hato	Douglas B-18 (4) Douglas B-18A (2) Northrop A-17 (1)
25th Bomb Squadron (H)	France Field	Rio Hato	Rio Hato	Boeing B-17E (9)
74th Bomb Squadron (H)	Aguadulce	Aguadulce	Rio Hato	Boeing B-17B (1)* Douglas B-18 (4) Douglas B-18A (1)
7th Reconnaissance Squadron (H)	Howard Field	David	David	Douglas B-17B (8)* Northrop A-17 (2)

**NOTE: For the record, these nine B-17Bs were AC38-219 to 38-222, AC38-266, AC38-264 to 38-265 and AC39-4, the entire B-17B force in the Caribbean at the time. The CAC had taken the measure, as early as September 1941, to keep all guns installed in these aircraft at all times and one normal tactical load was kept at readiness for each aircraft.*

North Field, which had been the site of the long-standing gunnery camp, had not been developed much at all. It was regarded as having two runways, although the word “runway” was rather loosely interpreted with both having sod surfaces and natural drainage. The northwest-southwest runway measured 140 feet by 1,200 feet and the northeast-southeast runway 200 feet by a mere 700 feet. Only Dietz kerosene pots were available for very limited nighttime operations.

December 7, 1941

The Japanese onslaught in the Pacific brought all of the local politicking and rancor to an immediate cessation. Indeed, the Republic of Panama declared war upon Japan even before the United States and immediately undertook to fulfill Panama’s obligations to defend the vital Panama Canal.

The common wisdom was that the Japanese almost certainly would make an attempt on the vital Canal next. Rio Hato and the other remote U.S. outposts throughout Panama went on immediate alert, and the few officers living off base were moved into base quarters at once. Even at that, there were not enough commissioned officers to man all wartime functions. With Department regulation requiring at least one officer to be on duty at all times in each key functional unit and department, nearly all officers slept at their stations for several months following December 7. Slit trenches were dug, weapons and ammunition issued and an interlocking perimeter guard mounted -- with some difficulty -- around the huge facility. Long range patrols from Rio Hato and the other isthmian stations were almost constant, as were in-shore patrols along virtually the entirety of both the Caribbean and Pacific coast lines of Central America south of Mexico. The National Highway was patrolled for some distance both east and west of the base, and special emphasis was placed on a constant watch along the beach for miles in either direction. To ease the strain on USAAC personnel, who were trained for aviation duties, the 501st Parachute Battalion was moved to Rio Hato from the

Canal Zone to assume most of the security duties.

Seldom mentioned were the three Air Warning Stations (Radar), No. 42, No. 54 and No. 44, which were genuinely remote and entailed very lonely duty. The jurisdiction of Rio Hato also included the Las Margaritas radio station and the emergency landing field at Limon.

Equally obscure – and not appearing on any Caribbean Air Force order of battle, at least seven ancient Douglas BT-2s converted to target aircraft were based at Rio Hato by March 1942. These consisted of three BT-2BG/A-4s (AC31-38, 31-55, 31-77, 31-83 and 31-145), one BT-2BR (AC31-132), and a single BT-2CR (AC31-448). The BT-2s had the exclusive purpose of providing “live” targets for Rio Hato’s hard-training coast artillery batteries, which had responsibility for anti-aircraft defenses.

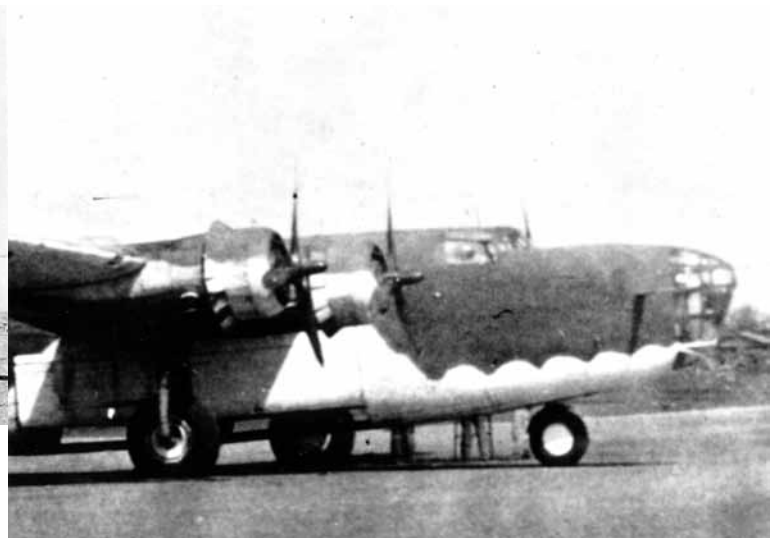
By this time, the trauma experienced by the “pioneer” units at Rio Hato had started to bear fruit. A survey of the base revealed that by Pearl Harbor, the creature comforts of the base had been improved immeasurably in comparison to those as recently as the summer of 1940. The water situation had improved, although conservation was still exercised during the dry season, and all Air Corps personnel were finally quartered in barracks – although the transient infantry and coast artillery units, whom the flyers still regarded as transgressors, were still in tents.

The Caribbean Air Force order of battle for January 29, 1942, showed the following units stationed permanently at Rio Hato but must be observed with the understanding that units from the three “permanent” stations in the Canal Zone operated in and out of the station throughout the emergency period following the Japanese attack. The order of battle looked like this (see table above):

The intelligence that started pouring into the Canal’s leadership from Washington painted a grim picture of the lessons learned from the tragedies at Hickam and Clark Fields in Hawaii, and by the morning of December 9, the first moves



Douglas A-20A AC40-93 of the 59th Bomb Squadron (L) that arrived, along with 12 others at Rio Hato in late May 1941. This aircraft was long-lived and had passed to the 23rd Tow Target Squadron (Special) by March 1944. The 59th BS was designated "fire brigade" unit of the Sixth Air Force, and spent most of the war living out of tents, making images of their aircraft and activities very rare. The last four of the original 13 A-20As was declared surplus in November 1944. (via Jerry Casius)



Although of low resolution, this ASV-equipped Consolidated RLB-30 was probably assigned to the 397th Bomb Squadron when photographed, and displays the non-standard anti-submarine color scheme approved exclusively for Sixth Air Force patrol aircraft. (via Alan Griffith)

outward from the fixed and well known, stations in the Canal Zone – France, Albrook, and Howard – were ordered. HHS, 6th Bomb Group, was initially ordered to Aguadulce, but this destination was quickly changed to Rio Hato, when facilities at the former were found to be simply not yet well enough developed.

The 9th Bomb Group, to the rejoicing of its members, finally moved to Howard Field and was replaced by the 3rd and, before too long, the 25th Bomb Squadrons (Heavy) of the 6th Bomb Group from France Field, which were rapidly re-equipped with the only nine Boeing B-17Es in the command. They joined the 59th Bomb Squadron (Light) with its Douglas A-20As, the only such aircraft in the command. These units operated intensively from the base until June 27, 1942, when they were replaced by a reinforced 395th Bomb Squadron (Heavy) (equipped with B-18s and a solitary Northrop A-17). The 395th Bomb Squadron in turn gave way to the 397th Bomb Squadron (Heavy), with its exotic ASV radar-equipped Consolidated LB-30s assigned to the Sixth Air Force. The

shuffle that took place with VI Bomber Command assets – the units best equipped to deal with a Japanese attack on the Canal was actually more complex and rapid than can be reflected in this brief summary, but the table below may shed some light on just how hectic the moves were actually.

The field orders moving these strike units stressed security measures, and with the Hawaii experience clearly in mind, the necessity of getting unit aircraft off the ramps in front of available hangars was emphasized. Furthermore, all units were ordered to camouflage, conceal and disperse.

The command was electrified, given the heightened state of alert, on December 10, 1941, when the Caribbean Defense Command (CDC) headquarters at Quarry Heights issued the following action alert to its subordinate units: "Message has been received from the War Department verifying the presence of two hostile aircraft carriers about 500 miles off Mazatlán [given in error in the original message as "Mazattan"] Mexico, at 2:00 pm, December 9, 1941." VI Bomber Command immediately launched its assorted B-17s to search for these

Movements of VI Bomber Command Units from December 7-10, 1941

Unit	Aircraft Assigned		Officers on Hand	Enlisted Strength
	Type	Number		
Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron (HHS), 6th Bomb Group (Heavy)	Northrop A-17	9	21	222
	Douglas B-18	2		
3rd Bomb Squadron (Heavy), 6th Bomb Group	Douglas B-18	4	23	191
	Douglas B-18A	2		
	Northrop A-17	1		
Det, 6th AC Sq, Communications	None			18
Det, 6th AC Sq, Weather	None			4
Det, Gunnery and Bombing Range	None		5	177



A testament to its overseas, remote theater status, Rio Hato enjoyed numerous USO shows, including the legendary Bob Hope troupe, including Jerry Colona, Vera Vagne and Frances Langford. Here, they deplane from a rare 20th Troop Carrier Squadron Douglas C-49B, AC41-7692, none other than the Sixth Air Force's commanding general's aircraft in March 1944. (Raymond A. Glorioso)



targets, which as we now know in retrospect were not there. But given the reality of events in Hawaii, the Philippines and elsewhere, the USAAC units in Panama had every reason to believe that this threat was for real.

No sooner had this target been investigated when another alert, this time from the commandant of the Fifteenth Naval District (headquartered at Balboa) was sent to all U.S. units in the region: *"Enemy Information: radio direction finder bearings on 7200 and 8350kcs from Cheltingham bearing 212 time 1130GCT 11 December. Also strong phone signals on 8300kcs have been heard vicinity Galapagos Islands. These are both definitely from Japanese units and this indicates the increased probability of a concentration near Galapagos."* Once again, USAAC units launched fully armed for what this time seemed like genuine targets, but again found nothing. The source of these signals has never been fully explained but may have been the result of atmospheric propagation from Japanese radio traffic much farther west in the Pacific.

These alerts and the reactions to them were exacerbated on February 6, 1942, when CDC headquarters issued yet another warning to its far-flung units. Besides the statement that Japanese attempts on the Canal *"...may be expected within a short time,"* the harried search units were stunned by the final paragraph, which read, *"It may be expected that Japanese airplanes will be disguised as friendly planes and will bear the U.S. insignia. All visual observation stations ashore or afloat will be advised of this and instructed to report all airplanes sighted."* Needless to say, hardly a single U.S. aircraft moved in the region from the date of this report and into some days following without some surface or Army unit reporting it as "suspicious" and an "enemy" aircraft. Confusion reigned supreme.

On February 9, 1942, the Department Training Center, which had served the Caribbean Air Force very well indeed, was discontinued and the station was officially designated as Rio Hato Air Base (APO 838), on an equal footing with the

'permanent trio of stations in the Canal Zone. Furthermore, as elsewhere in the USAAC establishment, the operation of the base was turned over to an airbase group, in this case the HHS, 336th Air Base Group, along with the 365th Materiel Squadron, in March 1942.

The LB-30 Liberators operating from Rio Hato on the extremely long, solitary patrol arcs to the distant Galapagos Islands highlighted the seasonal weaknesses of South Field. By late 1942, a contract had been let to construct a longer, paved main runway. Pan Pacific Construction Co. was granted the job and went to work on a new, 8,000-foot paved runway with additional taxiways to the solitary hangar. This new runway was open and ready for use on April 8, 1943. The longest runway south of the Rio Grande, it immediately resulted in even more intensive use of the station; and, bomber/interceptor training and a number of huge combined exercises were conducted from there. By then, the "front line" and "endangered target" status of the Canal and its environs had eased somewhat after Midway. Tactical units, however, continued on a full-armed, wartime footing, watching for the Japanese surface forces that never materialized. Construction on the station, in fact, continued well into 1944; and by March 1944, 12 hard-standings were being built along the entire length of the primary runway, one of which this writer set up camp within in 1966.

Rio Hato witnessed the passage at one time or another of nearly every one of the mix of airplanes that abounded on the Sixth Air Force order of battle. A chronological examination of known accidents and incidents there during the war years is illuminating in this respect.

In spite of all of the work on the primary runway, by December 1944, the large number of arrivals and departures by untold numbers of heavy aircraft had taken a toll, and the primary runway was suddenly ruled unserviceable to heavy bombers. Indeed on December 10, the primary runway was closed to all traffic so that repairs could be effected. The old

1941 Incidents

Aircraft Type	Air Corps Serial	Date	Unit	Pilot in Command
Douglas B-18	AC36-282	January 5	3rd Bomb Squadron	Charles W. Bogan
Boeing P-26A	AC33-29	February 10	30th Pursuit Squadron	Joseph F. Kowack
Boeing P-26A	AC33-57	February 5	30th Pursuit Squadron	Joseph F. Kowack
North American BC-1	AC38-261	April 10	HHS, 37th Pursuit Group	Joseph F. Kowack!
Boeing P-26A	AC33-79	May 2	53rd Pursuit Squadron	Unknown
Curtiss P-36A	AC38-175	May 22	43rd Pursuit Squadron	William A. Jones
Boeing P-26A	AC33-115	June 2	53rd Pursuit Squadron ¹	Max Chenowith
Boeing P-26A	AC33-79	June 2	53rd Pursuit Squadron	Unknown
North American O-47A	AC37-289	June 8	39th Observation Squadron	Augustus J. Allen
Boeing P-26A	AC33-32	June 27	53rd Pursuit Squadron	Herbert K. Anderson
Curtiss P-40C	AC41-13495	July 24	Unknown	Donald K. Mumma
Douglas A-20A	AC40-115	July 7	59th Bomb Squadron	Unknown
Douglas B-18	AC36-295	July 24	Unknown	Richard Jones
Boeing P-26A	AC33-57	August 5	Unknown	Unknown
Curtiss P-36A	AC38-43	August 17	Unknown ²	2nd Lt. F. Dresser
Curtiss P-36A	AC38-140	August 17	Unknown	2nd Lt. R. King
North American O-47A	AC38-319	November 2	Unknown ³	2nd Lt. J. N. Reynolds

1942 Incidents

Douglas A-20A	AC40-95	January 20	59th Bomb Squadron	Charles W. Countz
Douglas A-20A	AC40-97	February 3	59th Bomb Squadron	Richard B. Humphrey
Stinson L-49	AC40-274	April 1	108th Observation Squadron (actually 6 miles NE of Rio Hato)	Andrew P. Rebori
Curtiss P-40E	AC40-630	August 15	31st Fighter Squadron	Bruce G. Boylan
Curtiss P-40B	AC41-13298	September 7	51st Fighter Squadron	Thomas W. Cotton
Northrop A-17	AC35-84	September 16	HHS, 6th Bomb Group	Richard S. Morrow
Boeing B-17B	AC38-221	October 8	395th Bomb Squadron	H. M. Hansen
Douglas B-18B	AC37-578	November 19	16th Ferry Squadron	J. B. Redwine
Luscombe UC-90A	42-79549	December 4	HHS, 40th Bomb Group	D. Sylvan Hand

North strip, now relegated to “emergency strip” status, was used on a temporary basis by smaller administrative aircraft and the omnipresent 20th Troop Carrier Squadron. After extensive patching, the field was reopened on January 27, 1945, and besides its USAAF and U.S. Navy traffic, was also utilized by large number of various aircraft types heading to South American nations under Lend-Lease. Besides transiting the welcome base, ferry crews were held over there, much to their amusement, as many of them were crews from Latin American nations who had never ventured outside their native lands, while the aircraft underwent 25-hour inspections.

Additional improvements to the primary runway were

continued throughout the first half of 1945, and new plane parking areas were planned, with two additional taxiways specifically for fighter aircraft. Other projects included paved connecting strips between Taxiways A and B, the construction of a new control tower -- and not a moment too soon, and an asphalt taxiway connection across the National (by now Inter-American) Highway, still in heavy and daily use on the east side of the field.

The National Highway was the source of never-ending problems, especially during times of high alert, which happened fairly frequently during 1942 and early 1943. Gates had been placed on the road in order to close off vehicular traffic during

1943 Incidents

Aircraft Type	Air Corps Serial	Date	Unit	Pilot in Command
Consolidated B-24D	41-23676	January 4	395th Bomb Squadron	1st Lt. G. C. Dease
Curtiss P-40C	41-13376	January 7	30th Fighter Squadron	George B. Robbins
Curtiss P-40E	40-631	January 7	30th Fighter Squadron	John R. Gring
Piper L-4F	42-79551	January 10	Unknown	2nd Lt. James R. Willis
Curtiss P-40C	41-13468	January 11	30th Fighter Squadron	Alvaro J. Hunter
Curtiss P-40C	41-13468	January 17	Unknown	Lynn R. Moths
North American O-47A	AC37-322	January 19	1st Observation Squadron (Special)	Perry B. Griffith
Curtiss P-40C	41-13468 (or -13488)	February 3	51st Fighter Squadron	Julian Gilliam
Curtiss P-40C	41-13327	March 16	30th Fighter Squadron	Billy C. Hemming
Fairchild UC-61	41-38799	March 27	Probably 20th Troop Carrier Squadron	Harold A. Hoffman
Consolidated LB-30	AL543	April 1	395th Bomb Squadron	Charles A. Roberts
Curtiss P-40E	40-632	April 7	30th Fighter Squadron	James R. Packard
Consolidated LB-30	AL618	April 9	395th Bomb Squadron	Paul J. Ferguson
Boeing B-17E	41-2569	April 10	395th Bomb Squadron	J. M. Seeley
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13474	April 28	30th Fighter Squadron	Leroy G. Crockett
Bell P-39D	41-7088	April 29	31st Fighter Squadron	Albert E. Gale Jr.
Vultee YA-19	AC38-552	May 6	HHS, 72nd Observation Group	Francis H. Dresser
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13327	May 11	30th Fighter Squadron	Ellis C. Wallace
Consolidated LB-30	AL539	June 8	397th Bomb Squadron	John Lemond
Bell P-39N-1	42-18447	June 10	31st Fighter Squadron	Clarence Mills
Consolidated RLB-30	AL604	July 15	397th Bomb Squadron	Clem Telep
Consolidated RLB-30	AL605	July 17	397th Bomb Squadron	Unknown
Curtiss P-40E	40-546	July 20	30th Fighter Squadron	T. Hardeman
Bell P-39N	42-18448	July 29	31st Fighter Squadron (20 miles west)	Gerald Kelly
Piper L-4A	42-38442	August 15	31st Fighter Squadron	Robert Porter
Piper L-4E	42-79555	August 26	397th Bomb Squadron	W. Touchton
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13335	September 3	30th Fighter Squadron	Roy J. Thomas
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13498	September 3	30th Fighter Squadron	Carl J. Grabher
Bell P-39N-5	42-18886	September 15	52nd Fighter Squadron	William S. Miller
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13475	September 15	30th Fighter Squadron	Richard L. Vroman
Curtiss P-40E	40-631	December 20	30th Fighter Squadron	Merwin D. Hennings
Curtiss P-40E	40-552	December 22	30th Fighter Squadron	Harris B. Yates Jr.

landings and take-offs, and command of these had been vested in the control tower operators. From about November 1943 the actual road blocks were manned by members of the legendary *Guardia Nacional* of Panama. This was one of the few Panamanian contributions of armed personnel to the war effort, although the USAAF paid their \$60 per month salaries. While

no fatalities had resulted from the situation, which in itself was nearly miraculous, the installation of electronically operated gates that could be controlled from the tower was planned. These gates would have minimized the danger of faulty coordination between the tower and gates and would have also resulted in a manpower savings by relieving the need for *Guardia* officers

1944 Incidents

Aircraft Type	Air Corps Serial	Date	Unit	Pilot in Command
Curtiss P-40E	40-547	January 17	30th Fighter Squadron	Richard S. Truex
Curtiss RP-40B	41-13298	January 31	30th Fighter Squadron	Gerald R. Ensby
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13488	February 2	30th Fighter Squadron	Charles W. Olson Jr.
Curtiss P-40E	40-560	February 10	30th Fighter Squadron	Charles H. Lewis Jr.
Lockheed C-59	41-29625	February 22	Probably HHS, 6th AF	Willis R. Taylor
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13474	March 11	30th Fighter Squadron	John A. Williamson
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13482	March 20	30th Fighter Squadron	Frederick A. Keller
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13434	September 23	30th Fighter Squadron	Harold J. Coulbourn
Curtiss P-40E	40-546	October 13	30th Fighter Squadron	Virgil R. Lerch
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13478	October 15	30th Fighter Squadron	Edwin W. Pike
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13376	October 26	30th Fighter Squadron	James R. Paley
Bell P-39Q	42-20872	November 20	24th Fighter Squadron	Charles H. Stones
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13443	November 24	30th Fighter Squadron	Jack Wagner
Beech C-45F	43-35772	November 30	Base Headquarters	Harold E. Grant
Curtiss P-40E	40-557	December 3	30th Fighter Squadron	Olaf L. Jorgenson
North American AT-6D	42-85789	December 3	Lend-Lease to Peruvian Air Force	Tte. Juan Trivelli
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13335	December 7	30th Fighter Squadron	Arthur B. Cummings Jr.
Curtiss RP-40C	41-13516	December 7	30th Fighter Squadron	Mario Maldonado (Brazilian)
Bell P-39N	42-18874	December 12	Unknown but probably the 24th Fighter Squadron	Hugo W. Swanson

at the roadblocks and military police on the gates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. A sense of this situation's ominousness may be found in the statistics for crossings of the primary just during the period January 31 through February 7, 1943. During this period, no fewer than 3,266 U.S. military vehicles alone crossed the runway, as well as substantial numbers of civilian vehicles and pedestrians. The idea of constructing a tunnel for the Highway under the runway was considered, but the cost of approximately \$290,000 quickly put an end to that concept. The urgency of uninterrupted heavy bomber traffic trumped the convenience of a bypass or tunnel, and very frequently traffic was backed up for miles on either side while air operations took place. By June 1945 – some said far too late – the new tower had been completed, and the installation of the necessary communications equipment was in process. All of these improvements were completed, ironically, on June 18, 1945, – after VE Day and only a short time before VJ Day.

Post-War

With the end of the war, like every overseas theater, the Sixth Air Force was inactivated as rapidly as possible. On July 31, 1946, the new Caribbean Air Command (CAC) was established with the redesignation of the Sixth Air Force, Rio Hato, and the skeletonized units still stationed there were assigned to the new command. At that time, resident

units consisted of the veteran 3rd Bomb Squadron (H), 29th Bomb Squadron (H), 74th Bomb Squadron (H), 397th Bomb Squadron (H) (all equipped with a mix of 16 B-24Js, eight B-24Ls, and two rather tired B-24Ds, including 41-23950)), the resident 2117th Service Unit (Aviation), and the 1013th Signal Company. Additionally, Rio Hato was responsible for the administration and logistical support of a number of wartime auxiliary and emergency airfields in the western extremity of Panama, including Aguadulce No.1 and No.2 (often cited as



Consolidated B-24D 42-63800 Miss Kisma Fanny of the 3rd Bomb Squadron at Rio Hato looking pretty spiffy for an aircraft that had many, many hours on lonely patrol duty since arriving in Sixth Air Force in late November 1942. The unit moved to Rio Hato in August 1944 from Howard Field. (via Jerry Casius)



LEFT: Virtually every tactical aircraft in Sixth Air Force acquired 'nose art' during the war and many were unique, such as Little Lass, a Consolidated RLB-30 of the 397th Bomb Squadron that by June 1943, had seven of these venerable ex-British-order Liberators, two ancient Northrop RA-17s, two Cessna UC-78s, and single examples of the Piper L-4A and L-4B. (Raymond A. Glorioso) **RIGHT:** Pin-up art was not restricted to aircraft. As early as the 1940 arrival of the 9th Bomb Group from New York, their open-air "tent city" accommodations, as with this 4-man tent, had the obligatory reminder of what it was we were contending for. Note the essential mosquito netting. (Richard W. Spencer)

"Defense Site No.6" for security reasons), La Mesa Landing Strip (Defense Site No.5), and Anton, most of which were in care-taker status.

Between January and the end of February 1946, no fewer than 34 virtually brand-new Boeing B-17Gs were ferried to Rio Hato, although the ultimate fate of these aircraft remains something of a mystery. They may have been intended to replace the relatively low-time B-24J and B-24Ls of the few, understrength bomb squadrons still nominally assigned to Rio Hato. By November 13, 1946, these B-17Gs had been supplemented by a small number of Boeing B-29s.

Besides the heavy bombardment units cited earlier, other organizations stationed at Rio Hato both late in the war and into the post-war period included the seldom celebrated 23rd Tow Target Squadron, which conducted vital tracking and target-tug missions for the coast artillery and associated anti-aircraft installations defending the Canal and the aerodrome. This very unusual unit had grown out of what was originally designated as the Sixth Air Force Tow-Target Detachment. Among its amazing array of aircraft types, "R" Flight of this diverse squadron was operating at Rio Hato by February 1944 with three Cessna UC-78s (43-7809 to 43-7811), although precisely how these aircraft were rigged to tow targets remains a puzzle. By April 30, 1947, at least two Culver PQ-14Bs (44-21872 and 44-21904) were at Rio Hato; the operating unit, however, has eluded identification.

Post-war, the 4th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (LR/Photo) was there from August 20, 1946, until December 1, 1947, as well as the Northrop P-61B *Black Widow*-equipped 414th Night Fighter Squadron (from March 24 through September 1, 1947) and the 319th Fighter Squadron (All Weather) (from September 1, 1947, until January 14, 1948). Boeing B-29s

are known to have used the aerodrome post-war, but it is not clear from where they originated or what operating units were involved.

The government of Panama, which had been nearly 100% supportive of U.S. defense measures to protect the Canal, realized that with VJ Day, a vast array of facilities and infrastructure could very suddenly become a burden rather than assets. These installations, numbering no fewer than 34 outside of the Canal Zone proper, had been essentially turned over to



Immediate post-war images taken at Rio Hato are very rare, but this 414th Night Fighter Squadron Northrop P-61B, *High Flyin' Helen*, although photographed at France Field, moved – for reasons that defy explanation – to Rio Hato in March 1947 with these aircraft. Buzz Number PK-316 is most likely P-61B-20-NO 43-8316 from the last P-61B production block of 84 aircraft. (Gabriel G. O'Doherty)



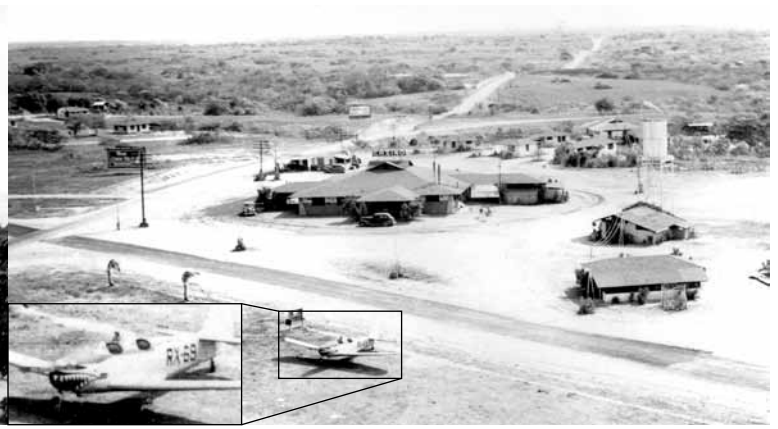
Although taken in late 1941, this view of "Bird Shit Island" in the distance, with the five buildings in the foreground, were the only buildings remaining on the station when your scribe arrived there in 1965-66. (Jim Dias)

the U.S. via the Defense Site Agreements. According to that document, the facilities were to be returned to Panama's control effective September 1, 1946. Perhaps to no one's surprise, these installations and their value became a political issue when a Panamanian presidential hopeful raised the question of the country's national sovereignty. In short, Panama demanded the nearly immediate return of all of these installations.

The U.S. State Department, pointing out that no definitive peace treaty had in fact been signed, wanted the problem solved via consultations. These consultations proved to be exceedingly slow, and the local press and aspiring politicians inflamed the issue. The State Department, perhaps without sufficient forethought, asked for a 99-year lease (similar to the language granting the original Panama Canal Zone treaty), then reduced the requested time to 50 years, then 30, then 20. Rio Hato, in particular, was such a jewel that a longer period was requested for it, while the other, lesser facilities were negotiable. The anti-American press, political opportunists, and student groups launched an almost constant barrage of criticism, making negotiations extremely difficult.

A quiet settlement was near agreement by the end of 1947, whereby the U.S. agreed to five-year leases for other bases but held out for at least 10 years for Rio Hato with the option for an additional 10 years. The sitting foreign minister, Ricardo Arias, balked at these terms, especially as they pertained to Rio Hato. He pointed out – probably quite rightly – that the nationalists would never accept them and that the U.S. was demonstrating a lack of confidence and friendship for a government which had proven to be a staunch ally in its hour of need. During the temporary absence of Arias, the U.S. proposal was presented to President Jimenez, who promptly signed an agreement whereby the U.S. would retain 13 of the bases at an annual rent of \$180,500. Upon his return, the foreign minister promptly resigned, and the agreement signed by the president was sent to the National Assembly, where it was certain of acceptance. When riots and huge demonstrations broke out all over Panama City, all 51 National Assembly Deputies voted to reject the treaty!

The December 22, 1947, rejection came as a complete



The famous – or infamous "Casino La Venta" just east of Rio Hato on the National Highway, as it appeared in 1947-48. Off-and-on during the war, it was placed "Off Limits" to permanent party due to "health and welfare" issues. Note the Panama civil-registered Fairchild PT-19A-FA RX-69 (formerly 43-33725), complete with sharks-mouth (!) in the foreground, owned by Actividades Aéreas SA, who often rented the aircraft to USAF pilots for off-duty journeys to the Canal Zone, taking off from the adjacent taxiway!

surprise to the CAC, which had not been privy to the negotiations for some reason, and ironically to the people of the Panama's interior, especially those benefitting from Rio Hato Air Base, who very much favored its continuation. Faced with the situation on the ground, the CAC ordered on the next day that Rio Hato be evacuated completely and without delay.

Virtually overnight, all equipment, supplies, and movable installations were prepared for shipment to the Canal Zone. The base was in fact turned over to the Republic on January 31, 1948 – although evacuation was not totally completed until February 18.

Facilities presented to Panama consisted of 88 temporary warehouse and storage units amounting to some 76,850 square feet; 13 temporary recreational units; four industrial units; 121 barracks and administrative buildings; 70 housing units; two steel tank farms with a capacity of one million gallons; a complete system of roads and sewers; a distribution system for power and water; and of course, the recently renovated longest runway in Latin America at the time.

The last known U.S. flying incident at the Rio Hato Air Base occurred August 3, 1947. A venerable Northrop P-61B Black Widow, 43-8309, based there went down about 30 miles south of the station while being flown by Charley A. Mayo, probably of the 414th Night Fighter Squadron.

1955 Revival

It is not precisely clear what the Republic did with the infrastructure between 1948 and 1955, when Panama and the U.S. signed a new Treaty of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation, which renewed U.S. interest in Rio Hato. Article VIII of the new treaty, however, stipulated that Panama would reserve Rio Hato exclusively for military maneuvers and military training and that it would permit the U.S. to use the area without cost for those purposes for 15 years, subject to extension. The agreement included free access to, egress from,



A type long-sought by Sixth Air Force to aid communications throughout its far-flung area of responsibilities, the first Beech C-45s did not finally arrive until July 1943. This UC-45F, 43-35715 is pictured at Rio Hato after October 1944 and was probably assigned to the Base Engineer at the time. (Col. Ole Griffith, USAF (Ret.))



One of the earliest known color photos of the Rio Hato tarmac and primary, this view must have been taken after November 15, 1944, as the first Lockheed P-38L's were received then. Natural metal B-24L's, now apparently also devoid of their distinctive black undersides common in Sixth Air Force, also date the image after that time. (USAAF)

and movements within the Rio Hato area.

Existing records do not clearly show exactly what the U.S. found when it at last returned to Rio Hato, other than a few buildings, some concrete foundations, the runways, taxiways, and revetments. When this writer arrived there in 1965, 10 years into the new agreement, he could count only six structures, all single-story, including a small post exchange; three barracks buildings, each of which could accommodate about a platoon (41 men); and a flag pole. Of the nearly 19,000 hectares that had made up the base as of 1945, less than 7,757 remained available – but included the vital runway.

From 1955, the base was clearly utilized primarily by the U.S. Army South (USARSO), the principal maneuver unit, which was comprised of the 193th Infantry Brigade and the 193rd Aviation Company. However, in both 1955 and 1957, the

base was used as the site for joint exercises BARRACUDA and CARIB-EX, in which airborne troops (using large numbers of Fairchild C-119s from the U.S.), troop carrier units, and fighter-bomber units from the U.S. supplemented the relatively small locally assigned U.S. Army and USAF units. Douglas C-124s, as well as Boeing B-50s, are known to have utilized the primary runway. By 1965, the 605th Air Commando Squadron, a large and unusual organization stationed at Howard AFB made frequent use of the Rio Hato facility while flying a truly amazing assortment of piston-engine aircraft, including North American T-28D-5s, Douglas (On Mark) B-26Ks (redesignated A-26As by 1969), Douglas C-47s, Curtiss C-46s and Helio U-10s. These aircraft frequently used Rio Hato both as “aggressor” elements pitted against units of the 193rd Infantry Brigade on maneuvers there (with some memorable, low-level strafing approaches



By the mid-1960s, propeller-driven tactical aircraft still predominated within the USAF establishment in the Canal Zone, principally the 605th Air Commando Squadron which, among other types, boasted a large section of North American T-28D-5's such as 51-3486 (O-13486) shown here Christmas Eve 1969, at Howard. They frequently exercised at Rio Hato and, in particular, acted as Aggressor forces for U.S. Army defenders on the bluffs overlooking the surf! (Author)



Frequent but always distant visitors to Rio Hato during the late 1970s were rather distinctively marked Helio U-10As of the Army's 352nd Aviation Detachment, supporting the activities of the 8th Special Forces Group. Here, 63-13178, msn 631, is pictured at Albrook – among the last fixed-wing aircraft to operate from that legacy station – May 3, 1969, prior to a flight to Rio Hato and onward. Although cited in most sources as type U-10B, the aircraft is clearly stenciled 'U-10A' on the data block! (John Mercier)



Ironically, by October 1966, among the last wartime structures still owned by the U.S. Army at Rio Hato included the Headquarters Building, at left, and a small chapel, at right. Note that both the U.S. and Panamanian flags fly in front of the headquarters! (Author)



"Down range" at Rio Hato in October 1967, looking north-west towards where the former aerial gunnery and bombing ranges were located in the 1930s and 1940s. Searches of the area for possible wartime "targets" and relics were disappointing, as the entire area had been cleaned up. The mud (caliche) is very evident at this point. (Author)

from seaward along the bluffs overlooking the beaches) as well as demonstrations for visiting delegations from Latin American air forces, which were often equipped with the same or similar types of aircraft. It also appears clear that Rio Hato was used as a temporary operating base during this period for non-traditional operations, as well as for the occasional transient civil aircraft looking for a friendly, long runway in foul weather.

In the midst of all of this, just why was Panama amenable to the new 1955 Treaty and its provisions? A collateral agreement granted a number of concessions, including the complete transfer of the water works in Colon and Panama City to the Republic, which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Canal Zone government had operated free of charge for Panama for decades; the modernization and extension of the Trans-Isthmian Highway; complete assumption of the cost of a road from Chorrera to Rio Hato; the construction of a vehicle bridge across the Canal (which became known as the beautiful Thatcher Ferry Bridge); and a number of other grant and long-term loan concessions. Classified sections of the agreement also provided for certain equipment and training for the *Guardia Nacional*, which at the time was for all intents and purposes the Panamanian armed force.

The Last 60 Years

Although the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) continued to make the Rio Hato enclave available to its subordinate tri-service elements from 1955, its use had fallen off to an average of about two exercises annually between 1965 and 1970, because of thriving Panamanian nationalism. A small care-taker garrison tended the ranges and small cantonment area.

With the accelerating rush towards the end of the original 99-year lease for the Canal and its environs in sight, the U.S. finally ceded transitional control of the Canal and its operation to Panama starting in 1979, with joint control being exercised from then through December 31, 1999. These included provisions for the Rio Hato presence, which was turned over during this period to the Panama Defense Force (PDF), the paramilitary

organization born out of the historic *Guardia Nacional*. The PDF recognized the value of the Rio Hato location and facilities – especially the lengthy and relatively isolated airfield – and almost immediately stationed two of its premier maneuver elements there, the 6th and 7th Rifle Companies.

However, this methodical and measured process was abruptly truncated by the events of December 1989. In 1983, a ranking officer of the PDF, Col. Manuel Noriega, essentially became dictator of the nation. Besides the rampant corruption and international drug trafficking that ensued under his watch, Noriega artfully fanned the flames of nationalism amongst his brutal surrogates. Assorted, contrived incidents and atrocities followed; and incredibly, Noriega's trump National Assembly actually passed a resolution on December 15, 1989, proclaiming that a state of war existed between Panama and the U.S. Noriega then designated himself as maximum leader.

The U.S. response was Operation *Just Cause*. Its aim was protecting U.S. citizens and interests and collaterally addressing the huge, state-enabled drug trade being funneled through Panama. Rio Hato figured prominently in all of this, not only because the two PDF rifle companies (amounting to some 400 trained troops) were garrisoned there, but also because these units had been the very same formations that had rescued Noriega during a previous coup attempt against him. Thus, they were deemed fiercely loyal to him personally.

And so it came to pass that the Rio Hato grounds and facilities experienced at the most unlikely of hands the very occurrence that it had been established to prevent. Furthermore, the occurrence took almost precisely the form that had been feared throughout the WWII years: an air attack and airborne assault.

The detailed U.S. plan to topple Noriega had originally envisaged an attack on Rio Hato's PDF garrison by six Lockheed F-117As, with the intention of stunning rather than killing members of the 6th and 7th Rifle Companies there. This attack was to be followed by Task Force Red, a daring nighttime parachute assault on the base by U.S. Army Rangers.

Alerted by an informant to the possibilities of some form



The author crewed on this U.S. Army USARSO Aviation Detachment Bell OH-13H, 57-1871, on a truly memorable early morning flight from Fort Kobbe, CZ, to Rio Hato in December 1968. When we arrived, we were the only aircraft – and the only troopers – on the installation, a far-cry from its halcyon days of WWII a mere 23 years prior. (Author)



A bit earlier, in August 1968, the author flew into Rio Hato aboard this Army Aviation Detachment Beech L-23F-BH, 62-3845 and, again, it was the solitary aircraft on the installation. We parked atop the 193rd Infantry Brigade's "zapping" of the hard-standing area, their "Circle U" emblem of the period, emphasizing personal responsibility towards Panamanian nationals. (Author)

of attack, the PDF sent an urgent message to their units at Rio Hato to "...draw your weapons and get out on the airfield; start shooting when they come over and block the runways." And this is almost precisely what happened.

Around 0045 hours on December 20, 1989, two F-117As attacked Rio Hato, each dropping one 2,000-pound precision bomb within 150 yards of the PDF barracks, followed by the mass Ranger paratroop at 0100 hours from a mere 500 feet or below. To its credit, the two PDF units fought for five hours before about 250 surrendered to the Rangers, another 150 or more fleeing into the surrounding countryside.

Although seldom mentioned, a Lockheed AC-130H Spectre of the 16th Special Operations Squadron also participated in this assault, and this writer has seen actual aerial nighttime footage of a PDF vehicle being destroyed at Rio Hato by the AC-130H's 105-mm gun. Ironically, the 16th Special Operations Squadron was awarded the coveted MacKay Trophy in 1989 for this and related actions during Operation *Just Cause*, a circumstance that could not possibly have been foreseen during the halcyon days of the U.S. presence there.

Rio Hato Today

It is not clear what the reconstituted Panamanian armed forces did with the Rio Hato base following the subsequent national reconciliation. Nevertheless, as Panama slowly became recognized as an affordable vacation and retirement destination in the interim, Rio Hato slowly but surely became civilianized and commercialized.

Today, to the likely astonishment of U.S. service personnel who served at that remote location during WWII, the base is known today as the Scarlet Martinez (Rio Hato) International Airport, named for the copilot of an Aeroperlas de Havilland DHC-6-300 Twin Otter that crashed on March 22, 2000, killing all eight aboard. Martinez, only 20 years old at the time and yet having had amassed some 800 flight hours, is believed to have been the first Panamanian female commercial pilot lost in the performance of her duties. The government has radically improved the former USAF runways and taxiways in a \$53-million-dollar expansion. Cars now drive under

the runway (yes, they finally solved the problem of the Pan-American Highway crossing the primary!). A Canadian low-budget airline, Sunwing Airlines, makes non-stop flights to this and a number of other tropical destinations using 38 Boeing 737-800ERs. When the smiling Canadians descend the ramp at Rio Hato, they do not find an airport like those found in most cities. It consists of only modest facilities for arrivals and transients. The airport has no jetways. Passengers merely walk down steps into the Panamanian sun.

No memorials or plaques commemorate the history that led to this tourist destination and practically none of the former air base remains. Arriving tourists suspect little that the ground upon which they tread was once home to Warhawks, Liberators, Lightnings, and the great grandfathers of their Boeing 737, Flying Fortresses. ➔



A completely unexpected visitor to Rio Hato in June 1967, was a rare Martin RB-57B (possibly "the" solitary NRB-57B) that appeared on final out of nowhere late one afternoon. We were politely invited not to investigate further. (Author)

Summary of USAAF Units Stationed at Rio Hato Air Base

Unit	Date Assigned	Date Departed
9th Bomb Group (H) 1st Bomb Squadron 5th Bomb Squadron 99th Bomb Squadron	November 1940	November 1942 (in increments prior to this date)
59th Bomb Squadron (L)	January 1941	December 1941
805th Engineer Group (Avn)	March 1941 and again October 1946	January 1942 and again January 1948
Rio Hato Gunnery and Bomb Range Detachment	October 1941	August 1943
6th Bomb Group (H) 3rd Bomb Squadron 29th Bomb Squadron 74th Bomb Squadron 395th Bomb Squadron (from September 1942)	December 1941	Group HHS to Albrook January 1943 but individual squadrons in-and-out until 1946
25th Bomb Squadron (H)	December 31, 1941	February 1942
HHS, 365th Materiel Squadron, 336th Air Base Group	March 1942	October 1944
381st Quarter Mater Platoon Class III (Avn)	May 1942	Unknown
608th Quarter Master Platoon (LM)(Avn)	May 1942	Unknown
350th Air Base Squadron	January 1942	Unknown
175th Cmp Platoon (Aerodrome)	June 1942	Unknown
860th Signal Service Company	July 1943	Unknown
85th Service Squadron	August 1943	Unknown
1046th Signal Company Service Group	Unknown	April 1944
HQS 1013th Signal Company Service Group	April 1944	November 1946
6th Airways Squadron (Det)	July 1944	Unknown
2117th Service Unit (Avn)	October 1944	November 1946
First Provisional Group	July 1945	Unknown
4th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron	August 1946	December 1947
23rd Tow Target Squadron	August 1946	October 1946
290th Medical Dispensary (Avn)	October 1946	January 1948
2301st Engineer Maintenance Platoon (Avn)	October 1946	January 1948
5th Base Complement Squadron	November 1946	January 1948
2rd WAC Provisional Detachment	January 1947	January 1948
Detachment "D" 326th Engineer Service Battalion (Avn)	March 1947	January 1948
414th Night Fighter Squadron (redes ignated as 319th Fighter Squadron (All Weather)	March 1947	September 1947
Air Warning Station No. 59	May 1947	February 1948
60th Airways Detachment	October 1947	unknown