

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

The Forgotten Air Fields of the Sixth Air Force

Airdromes and Auxiliary Airdromes in the Republic of Panama

By Dan Hagedorn

This is the sixth 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 followed by Howard Field, Canal Zone (Fall 2009, Vol. 54, No. 3), New France Field, Canal Zone (Winter, 2012, Vol. 57, No. 4) and Rio Hato Airdrome, Republic of Panama (Winter 2016, Vol. 61, No. 4). 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, 1995), which were too extensive to be included in that title, and thus they are presented here, in this series, 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 in Panama to commemorate their service in the former Canal Zone and the Caribbean.

The previous installments of this series in the Journal described the "big five," principal Army Air Service/Army Air Corps/Army Air Forces semi-permanent airfields that, with the exception of Rio Hato, were situated within the confines and former borders of the Panama Canal Zone itself.

Army planners realized early-on, however, that these "permanent" stations, with their excellent station facilities and hard-surface runways, had by the end of the 1930s become exceptionally well-known to potential adversaries and, being situated for the most part very near major population centers near either end of the Canal on the Pacific and Atlantic entrances, provided highly recognizable and easily targeted objectives – not only to intruding aircraft but, indeed, to large-caliber naval guns that might be brought to bear by attacking surface fleets or submarines.

As early as the 1920s, when the Air Service was operating from a solitary, permanent station in the Canal Zone – France Field – the crews of the far-ranging bombardment and observation aircraft, as well as a smattering of early amphibians that operated from there, quickly located suitable landing areas elsewhere in the Republic. The location and qualities of these landing areas, fixed with some precision, soon became a part of the patrol and cross-country training regimen of the units. One of the criterion the crews apparently engaged was whether the landing area offered even the briefest of respite from the torrid tropical environment at the home stations in the Canal Zone!

The truth is that, through most of the 1920s, Army aircraft alighting at these locations did so with scant regard for Panamanian sensitivities or ownership, and in most instances, worked out arrangements with local municipalities or land-owners, if they could be identified. So isolated were some of these landing areas, however, that even assigning a proper geographic name to them often took some time to sort out, as

the Army crews often called them one thing, while the local Panamanian citizenry had no idea what they were talking about.

As the 1920s and 1930s played out, however, defense plans for the vital Canal soon required that some formal arrangements for the use of these locations beyond a hand-shake or verbal agreement was required, and thus a truly astonishing array of base leasing agreements were slowly but surely hammered out between the Army hierarchy in the Canal Zone and the often indignant and suspicious central government of Panama, a sovereign nation, in spite of the rather casual regard for this status often voiced by U.S. military personnel stationed in the Canal Zone enclave.

As the WWII inevitably approached, the importance of these stations, which in most cases the Army very much wished to keep confidential, became ever more central to mobilization dispersal planning.

Mere hours after Pearl Harbor, and the lessons learned there and in the Philippines, these dispersal airdromes (sometimes cited in official parlance as "Aerodromes" or "Auxiliary Aerodromes") were very quickly engaged in what might well be described, in retrospect, on a very nearly crisis basis.

From December 7, 1941, through to V-J Day, nearly all of the stations described in the narrative that follows became very familiar indeed to USAAC Caribbean Air Force and USAAF Sixth Air Force crews. These men, and a few women, enjoyed a rather peculiar wartime existence, however, that was seldom replicated in other overseas locations. While they indeed "roughed it" in primitive conditions at many of the airdromes described in these pages for extended, fixed periods, they soon realized that the training value of such deployments also earned them a reprieve at one of the pre-war, permanent installations in the Canal Zone proper, at the end of these deployments. Thus, performance "in the field" soon came to be recognized as the key to once again being able to enjoy hot showers, clean sheets



By May 1944, the 30th Fighter Squadron was the largest "squadron" in the Sixth Air Force, with more than 22 Curtiss RP-40Cs, two RP-40Bs, 17 P-40Es and a Cessna UC-78, stationed at Aguadulce Auxiliary Airdrome. Devoid of the jungle terrain that was a fixture at most Sixth Air Force outlying fields, it was in effect an OTU for the Command. (Col. Delmore E. John collection)

in proper bunks, an exquisite Officers or NCO Club, bowling alleys and the attractions offered during off-duty excursions into either Panama City or Colón.

Our survey of these all-but-forgotten stations, every one of which was walked (or over-flown) by your scribe between 1965 and 1969, a mere 20-some-years after V-J Day, are arranged in a simple alphabetic order for convenience, regardless of size, duration of utilization, or present-day circumstances.

AGUADULCE AUXILIARY AIRDROME No. 1 and No. 2 (Defense Site No. 6) (08°15N - 80° 34'W)

The official occupancy authorization for this Auxiliary Airdrome was dated April 8, 1941, one of not fewer than 16 such dispersal stations authorized for urgent development by the Command of the Caribbean Air Force. The idea was to provide basic facilities at these stations to accommodate one fully-equipped operational squadron at each, with sufficient dispersal space to prevent the loss of any considerable number of aircraft should an attack on the Canal Zone area actually materialize.

However, the first mention of Aguadulce in official USAAC documents was around October 1940, when the local Air Corps hierarchy listed it as an Emergency Field. It also noted that "... limited funds had been expended for clearing and maintenance. An identifying circle and wind-sock have been placed on this field at intervals during the last five or six years."

When this writer visited the former site in late 1966, a little over 20 years since P-38s, A-20s, B-18s, A-17s and B-24s, amongst other types, had operated there, it required imagination and a working-knowledge of how the station had appeared between 1941-1945 to understand what remained. Nearly every trace of the station had been taken right down to bare ground, and the remains of the primary, macadam runway had been almost completely overtaken by the incipient tropical growth. Although it had apparently been used following the war as an ad-hoc "airfield" for the local community of the same name (the primary enterprise of any instance there at the time being a Wrigley Chewing Gum factory, taking advantage of the namesake characteristic of the area – "sweet water") and a temporary crop-dusting base, there wasn't a single trace of the former USAAF presence.

Prior to April 1941, Aguadulce had been on USAAC charts as an "emergency landing field" but, effective December 7, 1941, it was named as a "Distributing Point" under the control of the Rio Hato Air Base some distance to the east.

For Panama, the terrain and climate at Aguadulce was admirably suited for aircraft operations. The field proper was a plateau, which was elevated 30 to 50 feet above the surrounding country, with a recorded field elevation of 137 feet. The soil was a mixture of volcanic ash and clay, which precluded the probability of large vegetable (read: jungle) growth, and allowed relatively rapid runoff of rain water.

The plateau was frequently swept by winds originating in the mountains some 20 miles to the north, and these factors resulted in a relatively low annual rainfall (for Panama) and a moderate average temperature.

The site was bordered, very closely, by the Panama National Highway, itself a component of the Inter-American Highway (originally known as the Pan American Highway), a key defense asset. By road, the managing installation, Rio Hato Air Base, was 60 miles distant. Five miles from the airdrome, via a rather crude dirt road, lay the so-called Port of Aguadulce, which was accessible at the time to shallow-draft, sea-going vessels and barges.

The small village of Aguadulce itself, much larger in recent years, was two miles from the airdrome. As of 1942, it boasted a population of some 2,000 Panamanian nationals, supported by a modest public school and a small dispensary.

On December 8, 1941, the U.S. entry into the WWII ordained that Aguadulce be designated as an operating base for bombardment aircraft. The situation also dictated that a Japanese attack was all but imminent. Accordingly, the quickly developed installations at Aguadulce were designed to take maximum advantage of both dispersal and concealment.

The Panama Department District Army Engineers maintained a construction crew at Aguadulce from early January 1942 clear through June 1943. They constructed all of the installations there, including barracks, warehouses, revetments, magazines, administration buildings, wells, power lines, etc. The engineers eventually constructed a NNW/SSE 5,000 foot by 300 foot, a NW/SE 4,500 foot by 280 foot and a NNE/SSW 4,500 foot by 250 foot impacted earth set of runways with natural drainage. Despite its decent climate, compared

with other areas of Panama, however, it was not usable by heavy bombers during the lengthy rainy season, which largely dictated occupancy. The engineers also installed underground tanks for 100 octane fuel (believed to still be there), radio facilities and towers, a 24-hour weather service detachment as well as boundary, approach and portable flood lights – a relative set of luxuries outside of the Canal Zone stations. A hangar of 120 feet by 70 feet by 20 feet was built to enable third echelon repairs but, as of 1966, there was no evidence of this or any other structure.

In March 1942, the first Distributing Point Detachment was sent from Rio Hato to Aguadulce, consisting of the 350th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron, the 365th Service Squadron, and the Gunnery and Bombing Range Detachment, 336th Service Group, of Rio Hato.

As the need evolved, additional personnel were dispatched to Aguadulce from Rio Hato, the missions assigned to these semi-permanent party AAF troops could be roughly likened to those of a Headquarters Squadron at a permanent facility.

The first tactical unit to arrive did not take long in doing so. The 59th Bomb Squadron (Light) sent a detachment of four of its highly-prized Douglas A-20As in mid-January, following shortly by six venerable Northrop A-17s – all fully armed and regarded as tactical aircraft, perhaps the only such instance outside the Continental United States, but the A-17s had been further dispersed by mid-February and the four A-20As were the only aircraft operating from there through February 15, 1942.

Between March and June 16, 1942, the full 29th Bomb Squadron (Medium), outfitted with Douglas B-18As, moved in from distant Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico, and all supplies incidental to their rather intensive patrol flights into the Pacific and up-and-down the isthmus, searching for the expected Japanese fleet that never materialized, as well as the feeding and housing of their crews, were met by the Distribution Point Detachment.

The early stay of the 29th BS (M) came to be regarded as a case-study for the Caribbean Air Force of how to meet the local needs of both the tactical and base organizations. It was quickly determined that adequate communications with higher headquarters, supply warehousing, maintenance personnel and off-duty recreational activities – of any sort – were seriously lacking. Much of this, of course, following the frantic mobilization and dispersal operations, was unavoidable, but it is worth noting that not a single tactical mission laid on for the A-20As or the B-18s was scrubbed for any reason.

During the second half of 1942, after Midway, the tactical situation very gradually changed – to the extent that the high value of this and the other dispersal stations for training became almost as important as their defense value. The quartet of 59th BS (L) A-20As departed for Aruba and Curacao by July 3, where their firepower was needed to combat the significant submarine warfare blazing in that area.

By the end of 1942, the now well-ensconced 29th BS (now “H” for “Heavy”) received warning orders for a forthcoming change of station, and that replacing them would be a School of Transitional Flying for fighter pilots assigned to the (now)



This P-40E, 40-568, unit number “40” of the 30th FS had originally been assigned to Puerto Rico in September 1941. Here, after a belly landing in October 1944 with Maj. Blanchard standing atop the aircraft and (then) Capt. Delmore John astride the nose, the aircraft appears to have a P-40B or C prop. Although stationed with the unit at Aguadulce, it bellied in at la Joya No.2 while being flown by Lt. James R. Paley. Note that only two guns were mounted in each wing. It was not repaired. (Col. Delmore E. John collection)

Sixth Air Force, recently graduated from the State-side flying training establishment. This came in the form of the 30th Fighter Squadron assigned to Aguadulce February 10, 1943, which, eventually, became one of the largest “squadrons” in the Sixth Air Force, both in terms of aircraft assigned, but in terms of personnel assigned as well. The 30th FS formed the nucleus of what was soon renamed as the XXVI Fighter Command Training Center School. The 29th BS (H) moved to Anton, Republic of Panama (q.v.).

Attached to the 30th FS were additional instructors, ground crews and the equipment necessary to train the influx of students that eventually included the pilots of the legendary 1st Brazilian Fighter Squadron, which saw action in Italy in 1944 and 1945.

The average class of students at the 26th Fighter Command Training Center School included 44 pilots. They were trained for tropical operations in a mix of older, weary Curtiss P-40Bs, P-40Cs, and at least one veteran North American BC-1. The normal course lasted four weeks, and they were then assigned to fully operational fighter units throughout the Sixth Air Force.

The operations of the unit were not without incident. On April 7, 1943, a mix of six P-40Bs and P-40Cs from the Center launched from Aguadulce on a long-range navigational training flight, the plan being to do a triangular interception track from there to France Field, Madden Field (q.v.) and return. Being the rainy season, the six aircraft were seen to enter a cloud bank at about 8,000 feet in two elements of three aircraft each. When one of the elements emerged, one of the aircraft was missing – as were all three of the aircraft in the second element. The four, missing aircraft and their crews have not been found, to date.

While the efforts of the Center were intensive, it was soon realized that its activities could really not efficiently take full advantage of the existing installations, which had been designed from the outset for bombers operating in what was at the time regarded as an “active” theater of operations. The dispersed barracks and revetments were soon abandoned, in favor of a more compact area. Tents were erected on wooden frames, and situated in the form of Company Streets. Aircraft were parked, literally, on the edges of the three runways, for greater convenience and accessibility. The Distribution Point Detachment grew, accordingly, to more than 500 officers and men.

Aguadulce also gained the reputation within Sixth Air Force as a “disciplinary” station, and morale emerged as a major problem. There were simply not sufficient recreational facilities and local civilian “amusements” were either extremely small and primitive – or Off Limits. Due to transportation issues, passes for good performance or achievement were highly prized, as they enabled some men to escape, if for only a weekend, to the heady pleasure of the distant Canal Zone or Panama City. It was no secret that a significant number of the enlisted men assigned to Aguadulce included some who had been unable to perform satisfactorily at other stations. Further exacerbating the issue was the fact that the Permanent Party at Aguadulce were actually on Detached Service from their actual parent units, located elsewhere, which made the routing functions of promotions, furloughs and other administrative details extremely difficult when the appropriate Orderly Room was more than 100 miles distant.

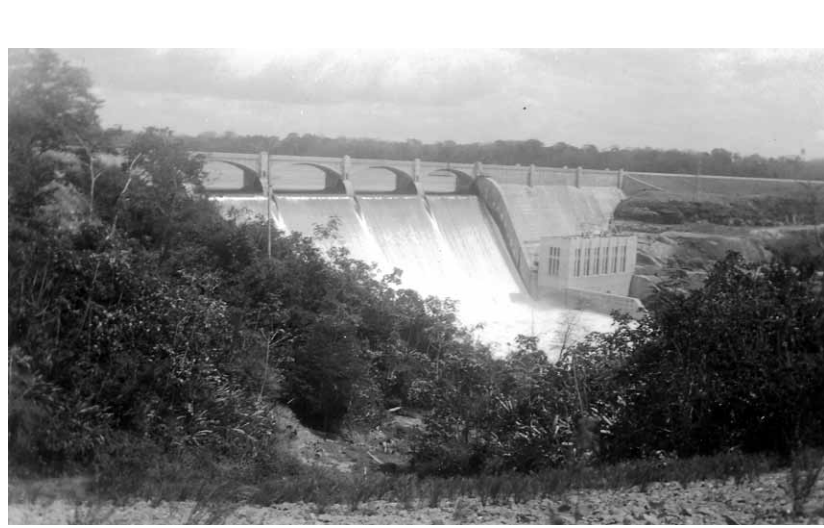
By October 31, 1943, besides the burgeoning 30th FS, there were also detachments of the headquarters of both the 32nd and 37th Fighter Groups resident, and various detachments of the 24th and 51st Fighter Squadrons as well.

In November 1943, to alleviate at least some of the morale issues, Sixth Air Force finally authorized troops stationed at Aguadulce (other than students) to replace the tents with the long-empty but dispersed barracks that had been built in 1941. A dedicated recreation hall, a fully-stocked post exchange and an NCO club were also built and staffed in record time.

In December 1943, Sixth Air Force approved the merger of the staff of the Distribution Point Detachment into the 18th Service Squadron Detachment, with a concurrent reduction in troops-on-hand to just 96 officers and men.

Starting in March, by April 1944 nearly all of the Brazilian 1st Fighter Squadron officers (46) and men (265) had arrived at Aguadulce, and the unit that would deploy shortly to Italy was at nearly full strength. Interestingly, the unit then assumed the “tactical” duties of the 30th FS and became, for all intents and purposes, a unit of the Sixth Air Force. The unit was actually activated on May 11, 1944, witnessed by the Sixth Air Force Commander, Lt. Gen. George H. Brett, ranking officers from both the USAAF and Brazil, as well as dignitaries from Panama and the U.S. Government.

By July 1944, daily activity at Aguadulce had diminished tremendously. A total of 27 aircraft were stationed there, consisting of five Bell P-39Ns, 18 assorted P-40B, P-40C and P-40E variants, two North American AT-6s (and one



Although the Canal and its lock system were key targets for anyone intent on disabling the vital strategic asset, the real prize was Madden Dam, and Sixth Air Force created the Casa Larga Auxiliary Airdrome, which became Madden Field, specifically to defend the dam. (Author's collection)

long-suffering BC-1) and a solitary Cessna UC-78 for communications, of which 15 were airworthy. This strength remained fairly constant through December 1944, when the resident 30th FS could count 11 P-39Qs, 11 P-40Es, the UC-78, two BC-1s and a coveted Beech UC-45F.

The 30th FS was supposed to be relieved from its long sojourn at Aguadulce in January, 1945, and move back to Howard Field in the Canal Zone, although it is not clear if this happened all, at once or in increments. The 74th Bomb Squadron (H) arrived from the distant Galapagos on February 13, 1945, with its two elderly Consolidated B-24Ds and 10 fairly late-model B-24Js, while the resident 2107th Service Unit had a North American RO-47A on strength, almost certainly the very last such aircraft in the active USAAF inventory. It did not take the 74th BS (H) long to seriously damage the three runways at Aguadulce, and the unit was transferred to Rio Hato on May 1. Thus, the very last aircraft to depart the station at the end of the war was the lowly RO-47A.

ANTON AUXILIARY AIRDROME

(Defense Site No. 11)

(08°23' N - 80° 17' W)

The Panama Area Service Command of the Caribbean Air Force was issued instructions as early as February 21, 1942, to secure land owned by the Republic of Panama approximately two miles northwest of the small village of Anton that, is about 20 miles WNW of the major airdrome at Rio Hato - for the purpose of establishing what was initially described as a dispersal station.

This former station, which rather oddly was administratively listed as a sub-post of Fort Kobbe (a ground-forces post) proved to be exceptionally difficult to locate in 1966 and, while the coastal station at Rio Hato was at 75 feet Field Elevation, Anton was at 150 feet. Although surviving records state that it possessed a single north-south dirt runway of some 5,280 feet in length and 150-foot width, including a smooth gradient of about 5% to the south and natural drainage, no trace of the



Chame No.1, Republic of Panama, as it appeared on final approach. The Pacific coast can just be seen in the distance, and the Pan American Highway curves around the field on the left. (USAAF photo)



Chame No.1 viewed looking South, with the Operations buildings and control tower on the roof near the center of the image and a large "tent city" off to left. The field could accommodate any Sixth Air Force type aircraft. (USAAF photo)

former runway could be found. The station also was equipped with a bulk-storage for 100 octane fuel, boundary and approach lights, a floodlight and wind cone, boundary markers and a single barracks. These, likewise, had utterly disappeared.

Utilization was very limited. The 30th Fighter Squadron was there for a brief 15 days, between January 3 and 18, 1943, followed by the 29th Bomb Squadron, which arrived from Aguadulce on March 29, 1943. This unit did not stay long, either, and departed for the Galapagos on May 13. Aside from the occasional flight that may have visited or landed due to weather, these were the only two units to actually occupy the station, and then only briefly.

CASA LARGA AUXILIARY AIRDROME

This name for what was quickly renamed as the Madden Auxiliary Airdrome (q.v.) appears only briefly in Sixth Air Force documentation, and has led to some confusion. Apparently, this name was used for less than two months before the first unit to arrive there, the 29th Fighter Squadron, which moved to the primitive, under-construction facilities on May 17, 1942, started calling it Madden Field, due to its proximity to the lake of the same name and key defense asset, Madden Dam. It should be noted that this airfield was also described in a number of period documents as "Cayo Larga" Airdrome. Construction of this key station, in any case, commenced almost immediately following Pearl Harbor – one of the first – on January 17, 1942. It was dedicated 100% to the protection of Madden Dam and the lake that the annual rainfall created behind it, without which the entire Canal lock system would have been useless.

CHAME AUXILIARY AIRDROME NO. 1 and NO. 2 (Defense Sites No. 13)

(08° 35N - 79° 53W)

This site, for what eventually became three separate and rather closely situated airfields, had, like a number of the wartime Auxiliary Airdromes, been used as an emergency field for some time before the war. It, too, had been marked

with an identifying white-washed circle, and a wind-sock was maintained there. Only limited funds had been invested prior to Pearl Harbor, however, which mainly involved hiring locals to keep the jungle grasses to a minimum acceptable level.

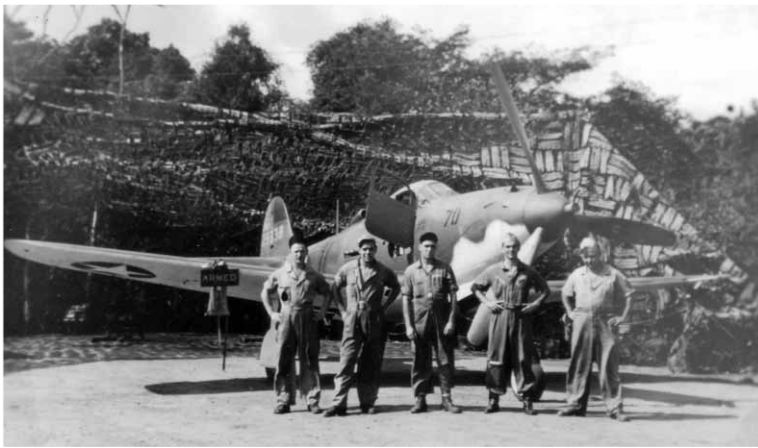
Initially cited as the Chame No. 1 Supplementary Landing Field, the base was at 111 feet field elevation and located about one mile north of Chame, just off the Pan American (National) Highway. Initially, the field had a 4,400 foot by 300 foot runway, with a 65 foot wide asphalt strip down the center of the runway but, prophetically, the field at No. 1 was described as "...soggy when wet." Construction of the runway and facilities had commenced on May 5, 1941, but was not described as 99.5% complete until May 31, 1943. It had tanks for 100 octane fuel, radio, weather reports, three portable floodlight, boundary lights, the resident staff could perform minor repairs, there was both a wind cone and a tee, and there were semi-permanent quarters and messing facilities.

The mowing was apparently inadequate, as the first known use of the field involved a Curtiss P-36A (AC38-106) being flown by 2nd Lt. Ernest J. Ensbehren, who taxied his fighter into a drainage ditch when he could not discern the route to a dispersal on January 4, 1942. His aircraft was recovered and repaired. Just a week prior, the 14th Fighter Squadron, 53rd Fighter Group, equipped with Bell P-39D¹ Airacobras had arrived at Chame No. 1 on January 2.

By the end of June, units garrisoned at Chame, in addition to the 14th FS, included "C" Detachment, 805th Engineers, a Detachment of the 6th Chemical Company (Service) Aviation, a Detachment of the 325th Signals Company (Air Warning) and a small Detachment of the Sixth Air Force Weather Squadron.

The 14th FS's brief tropical sojourn – it had been a hasty reinforcement unit for an expected Japanese assault on the

¹ P-39Ds known to have operated with this unit at Chame included 41-6885, 41-6888, 41-6946, 41-6969, 41-6981, 41-6987, 41-6992, 41-7003, 41-7008, 41-7009, 41-7012, 41-7012, 41-7089, and 41-7090. These P-39Ds started to return to the Continental U.S. around June 6, 1943, after P-39Ks and P-39Ns arrived to replace them.



The very first Bell P-38N-1 assigned to Sixth Air Force, 42-9338, unit number "70", arrived March 18, 1943, and is seen here standing alert (with armed guns, note the flags) at Chame. It was surveyed following an accident September 1, 1943, at Chame, although it was based at the time at Howard Field with either the 24th or 31st FS (via Bab Karrer, ICC)



Sixth Air Force had received 10 brand-new Fairchild UC-61s on a priority basis on December 17, 1941, including 41-38795 (20th Troop Carrier Squadron (TCS) Number "5"), and these extremely hard-working aircraft were the life-line of units stationed at such remote locations as Chitre and elsewhere. The aircraft bears the unique camouflage scheme common to most Sixth AF aircraft by May 1943. This aircraft was reclassified to Category IV status at the Panama Air Depot in January 1945. (Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)

Canal – ended on November 10, 1942, when it departed for Dale Mabry Field, Florida, lock, stock and barrel, but without its coveted P-39Ds, which were left behind to augment Sixth Air Force tactical units.

Meanwhile, the pitiful operating conditions of Chame No. 1 led to the construction of Chame No. 2, which was also described as a Supplementary Landing Field (at grid coordinates 08° 35N-79° 52W) but at only 75 feet field elevation. No. 2 was located slightly east and across the Pan American Highway from No. 1 and 3,000 feet east of the town itself. It had a north/south runway of 3,000 feet by 250 feet made of simple red clay that, despite the best efforts of the engineers who

compacted it endlessly, also became soggy when wet – and cracked when dry! It had its own wind sock, and barracks, but otherwise shared all other facilities with No. 1. The 24th Fighter Squadron apparently operated briefly from No. 2 (on detachment from France Field) in March 1945, when it sported 11 Lockheed P-38Js, an AT-6D and a Vultee BT-13A.

The 28th Fighter Squadron took up residence at Chame No. 1 November 10, 1942, leaving the pleasures of Albrook Field behind and operated for a time with a mix of Curtiss P-40Cs and P-39Ds (as well as a solitary North American BC-1), apparently inherited from the 14th FS. The 28th FS traded in its P-40Cs and P-39Ds for the first of the P-39Ns



This Piper L-4A, 42-38449 arrived in Panama July 18, 1942, joining at least 29 others that served the extremely dispersed airdrome and Air Warning Service (AWS – radar) installations of the Command. Here, the aircraft sits amidst typical jungle terrain, not far from Madden Field after engine failure March 30, 1943, while being flown by Lt. Henry N. Pedigo. It was declared a total loss the next month. (via Robert L. Cavanagh)



Sixth Air Force also received, as partial equipment of the 72nd Observation Group, nine highly-prized Stinson O-49s in January 1942 (not redesignated as L-1s and L-1As until April). Here, 40-0233 of the 20th TCS prepares for another regularly scheduled trip to one of the many outlying sites in Panama. It suffered an accident July 25, 1943 at Albrook while being flown by Lt. James Willis. It was repaired and served through the end of the war in the Caribbean. (Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)

that began to arrive in early May 1943. It remained the sole tactical unit at Chame No. 1 through July 1944, when the unit counted 24 P-39Ns, the venerable BC-1, a Vultee BT-13A and an exotic Taylorcraft L-2F. This strength remained essentially unchanged through December 1944, but the P-39Ns had been exchanged for 24 P-39Qs, and the BC-1 had been exchanged for an AT-6D and the L-2F for a prized Cessna UC-78. The 28th essentially owned Chame, aside from small detachments that were sent from time to time to Pocrí and elsewhere, the unit ended the war there in September 1945.

CHITRE AIRPORT, PENINSULA DE AZUERO, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

The small village of Chitre, Republic of Panama, is located on the eastern side of the *Peninsula de Azuero*, which juts out from the southern side of the Isthmus into the Pacific.

Prewar Panamanian pioneer airlines used the very primitive strip there on occasion as a sort of aerial flag stop, as travel between the village and Panama City and the Canal Zone was, at the time, little short of an ordeal.

Although the USAAC and USAAF are known to have made use of the airstrip at Chitre, it was not developed as an Air Corps facility, and thus did not enjoy wartime improvement.

The solitary USAAF incident involving Chitre was when the one-and-only Piper L-4F (42-79552) assigned to Sixth Air Force and being flown by 1st Lt. C.G. Johnston was written off there while attempting to take off on February 14, 1943. Exactly why the aircraft was visiting Chitre in the first place remains unknown. The L-4s, Fairchild UC-61s and other exotic aircraft owned and operated by the far-ranging 20th Troop Carrier Squadron (Sp) were the life-blood of the widely scattered and isolated airdrome system, and the even more isolated Air Warning Service (AWS) sites. They delivered mail, small supplies, evacuated the injured and delivered new arrivals on a nearly daily basis throughout the Command.

CHORRERA No. 1 and No. 2

(Defense Sites No. 16 and 107)

(08° 51N - 79° 47W and 08° 52N - 79° 46W)

Usually referred to in Sixth Air Force documents as Chorrera No. 1 Supplementary Landing Field (and sometime as La Chorrera), this initial field, followed by No. 2 later, was also termed as an Auxiliary Airfield, while No. 2 was described as an Emergency Landing Field. They were, for most of the war, regarded as sub-posts of Fort Kobbe, CZ, and located on the southern side of the Isthmus of Panama about 17 air miles west of Howard Field (“over the hill”), two miles SSW of the village of La Chorrera itself, with an elevation of 310 feet.

No. 1 sported a north/south runway of 3,500 feet by 300 feet, and an east/west primary of 4,500 feet by 300 feet, both formed from local sod on a sandy, clay base. No. 1 had bulk 100 octane fuel, 24-hour weather services and the primary had lights, with two wind cones and crew accommodations.

Chorrera was occupied April 3, 1941, and actual construction had commenced May 1, but was not declared complete until May 31, 1943.

The first Air Corps unit to take up residence was the 30th Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor), moving to the site from Albroom Field November 24, 1941. The field clearly required adjustments on the part of pursuit pilots, as the very next day, Capt. John R. Ulrichson nosed up there in Curtiss P-40C 41-13481, much to his embarrassment, when “brake failure” was laid to blame. The squadron possessed eight P-40C and a highly prized P-40E by the end of January 1942.

Pearl Harbor saw the rapid deployment of the 31st Pursuit Squadron (I) to Chorrera as well on December 9, although they happily returned to Albroom on the December 27.

The 30th PS was joined on January 2, 1942, by the 15th PS, a reinforcement unit from the Continental United States, with a full complement of Bell P-39Ds. By the end of February 1942, the 30th PS had once again been joined by the 31st PS (with



Chorrera Auxiliary Airdrome No.1, Republic of Panama, as it appeared December 1, 1942, from about 1,000 feet. At least 19 revetments can be seen around the periphery of the primary near the top of the image, from left to right. Concrete foundations for additional barracks have been set down near the large buildings. (USAAF photo)



Chorrera No.2 as it appeared June 10, 1942, showing the scattered barracks, service areas (amongst the jungle growth) and fuel storage areas. A number of large tents have been erected not far from the runway at the upper right. (USAAF photo)

its seven P-40Cs), and the 15th PS had 10 P-39Ds, making for a rather crowded and very active interceptor station. Between February and the end of June 1942, aircraft stationed at Chorrera had suffered nine accidents – a testament to the intensity of operations, day-and-night. The accidents involved five P-40Cs (three of which were total losses) and four P-39Ds. By the end of June the 31st FS had again returned to Albroom – much to the chagrin of the long-suffering 30th PS – and the station personnel included the two fighter units plus a detachment of HHC, 805th Engineers, an infantry guard composed of men from the 150th Infantry, a detachment of the 6th Chemical Company (Service) Aviation, a detachment of the 325th Signal Company (Air Warning) and a detachment of the 6th AAF Weather Squadron. Both No. 1 and No. 2 employed camouflaged revetments and dispersal areas, and No. 1 had a number of sheds and small buildings to facilitate maintenance out of the rain.

The 15th Fighter Squadron returned to the CONUS November 10, 1942, leaving the 30th FS as the sole tactical unit at the station, but it was replaced by January 7, 1943, by the 53rd FS, which moved up from France Field, and, as noted earlier, the 30th FS moved to Aguadulce, RdeP, where it became the *defacto* Sixth Air Force OTU. The 53rd FS stayed at Chorrera until June 8, when it departed the Sixth Air Force for CONUS.

The 43rd FS was moved to Chorrera from Howard Field on April 6, 1944, with its 16 organic Curtiss P-40Ns, and stayed until August 29, when it returned to Howard.

Chorrera No. 2, sometimes described as Supplementary Landing Field (but also as XAD#2), had a listed field elevation of 290 feet and was just east of No. 1 and two miles SE of the village of the same name, both of which were convenient to the Pan American Highway. It, too, had two runways, the north/south of 4,525 feet by 225 feet, and the northeast/southwest of 5,000 feet by 275 feet, also sod, but with a slight rise in the center, which was described as disconcerting for crews arriving there for the first time. It was also noted as being suitable for two-engined aircraft during the relatively brief dry season, and had only limited 100 octane fuel service.

Although No. 2 had clearly been constructed to alleviate the pressure of constant use on No. 1, it was the first to be declared surplus to requirements, on December 6, 1943. No. 2 claimed at least one P-40C (41-13491 on April 7, 1942, a write off) and a P-39D (41-7016) on May 4, 1942, when the undercarriage folded upon landing.

When visited in 1967, this writer could find only one very eroded revetment and no other remaining vestiges of either No. 1 or No. 2. This airfield must be regarded as extinct. Local enthusiasts in the area contacted this writer in 2017, attempting to establish the perimeter of one of the fields, but aside from a manual earth roller they found, which they surmised may have been used by engineers to smooth the endlessly rutted runway, they had been stymied.

Chorrera was also the location of AWS No. 52, also known as Defense Site No. 87.

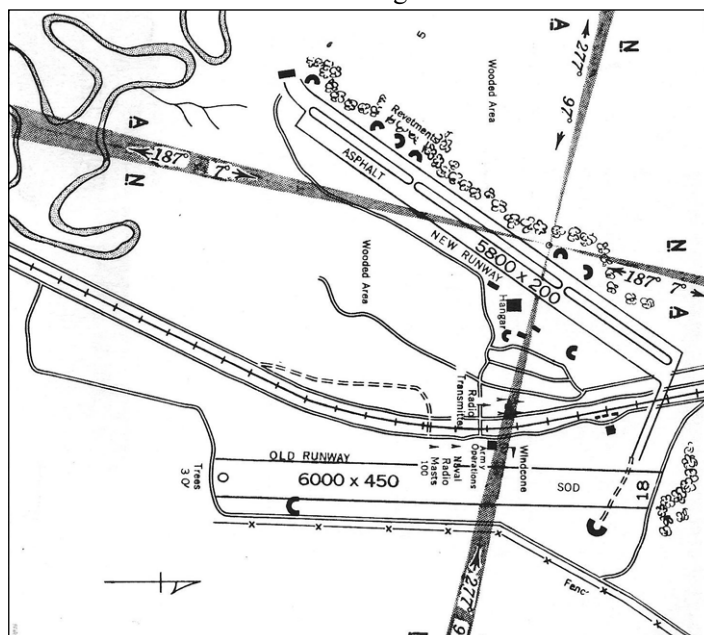


One of the nine highly-valued Boeing B-17Bs dispatched to Panama early in the war, "Expectin' B" was pictured at new France Field with either the 25th or 74th BS but had, along with eight others, been deployed on December 11, 1941, to David, at that time assigned to the 7th Reconnaissance Squadron (L.L. Prince collection)

DAVID (ENRIQUE MALEK) NATIONAL AIRPORT, CHIRIQUÍ PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

(08° 22'30"N - 082° 26'00"W) (APO New Orleans 841)

The third of the three largest cities in Panama as of 1941 (the others being the capitol, Panama City, and the other Colón), the commercial field at David (pronounced "Dah-veed"), at the extreme western end of the country was built years earlier and maintained by the Republic. It had frequently been used by Air Corps aircraft, as well as serving as a point of entry and service station on flights to and from central America and long-distance training flights from the Canal Zone. David, and Rio Hato also, witnessed significant numbers of Lend-Lease aircraft transiting south from the United States during the war.



This schematic describes the "new" and "old" runways at David, Republic of Panama, in the far West of the Republic. Note the 11 scattered revetments, located near both the strips. It was one of the few dedicated bombardment stations outside of the Canal Zone in the country. (USAAF photo)



LEFT: The ASV-radar equipped Consolidated B-24Ds Liberators of the 3rd BS, including "Built for Action" seen here, were frequent tenants at David. Crews were forbidden to photograph the antennae array on their aircraft early in the war, but were allowed to snap the numerous examples of nose art that proliferated. (Chuck Meketa collection) RIGHT: Sixth Air Force received at least 22 B-24Ds (as well as LB-30s) early in the war, mainly to conduct the lonely patrol arc between David, Panama or Guatemala City to the distant Galapagos, and then on to Talara, Peru or Salinas, Ecuador. 41-23800, seen here devoid of her earlier camouflage (and ASV gear) again with the 3rd BS, survived into 1945, by which time she had been named "Miss Kisma Fanny" and flew many missions from David. (Col. Ole Griffith collection)

Pan American Airways maintained a small staff there, as well as emergency supplies of fuel for use by Army aircraft as early as October 1940, and the Caribbean Air Force designated it as an Auxiliary Airdrome effective April 5, 1941.

The original runway, built in a rather inexpensive manner by the Republic of Panama over the span of several years, was a sod, 6,000 foot by 450 foot north/south strip, which the Army replaced with a new 5,800 foot by 200 foot asphalt runway, complete with seven protective revetments, early in the war. The airport was one of only two dedicated bomber and patrol aircraft bases outside of the Canal Zone, the other being, at the time, Rio Hato.

One of the best fields in Panama outside the Canal Zone as of Pearl Harbor, it came as no surprise that the Caribbean Air Force deployed its highly-prized 7th Reconnaissance Squadron, with all eight of its Boeing B-17Bs (of a total of nine assigned to the Command), to David on December 11 from Howard Field, from whence they immediately commenced sweeps out over the Pacific between David and the Canal Zone, in search of the anticipated Japanese fleet. The B-17Bs didn't stay long, however, and the disappointed 7th RS surrendered them to have them piecemealed out to other units around the Caribbean area of responsibility of Caribbean Air Force. They were replaced by the end of January 1942 by four Douglas B-18s. By the end of February, a very understrength 7th RS was the solitary tactical unit at David, and had single examples of the Douglas B-18, B-18A and Northrop A-17. One of their former B-17Bs (now coded as an RB-17B) rejoined the unit briefly in March 1942, before moving on to Guatemala City on the March 22 and, when the unit was redesignated as the 395th Bomb Squadron (H) on April 22, it gained two of the newly delivered Boeing B-17Es, 41-9038 and 41-9039. These, too, did not stay long, departing soon thereafter for Rio Hato and Howard Field.

By June 30, 1942, the 395th BS (H) remained the sole tactical unit based at David but, by that date, had been joined by a station complement consisting of the 208th Quartermaster

Platoon (Service) Aviation, a DP Detachment, a detachment of the 486th Ordnance Company (Aviation, Bomb), Company K of the 150th Infantry for airfield security, a detachment of the 6th Chemical Company (Service) Aviation, a detachment of the 6th AAF Weather Squadron, a detachment of the 6th AAF Communications Squadron, a detachment of the 360th Signal (Service) Company (Aviation), and a detachment of Company A, 805th Engineers.

A significant aircraft which joined the permanent party just after August 14, 1942, was Piper L-4F 42-79552, which was used to help service the extremely isolated Aircraft Warning Sites (Radar), Defense Sites Nos. 1, 4, and 95, as well as isolated installations in nearby Parita, Costa Rica (Defense Sites 3, 11 and 128). It and successor aircraft (a Fairchild UC-61, probably 41-38792, and , a Stinson L-1 equipped with floats in March 1944) made the regularly scheduled and eagerly anticipated relief flights to a small U.S. Army detachment maintained on Coiba Island, the largest island in Panama, where, since 1919, the Panamanians had maintained a brutal penal colony. Although unconfirmed, it is believed that this is where Panama interned German and Japanese citizens at the start of the war, in a separate facility. Ironically, the island is now a tourist destination.

The 395th BS (H) departed David on August 18, 1942, for Talara, Peru, at the extreme opposite end of the long Pacific patrol arc but was finally replaced at David by the 45th Bomb Squadron (H) November 13, 1942 (with exotic, ASV-equipped Consolidated LB-30 *Liberators*), arriving from France Field, CZ. This unit did not stay long, however, as it too shipped out for the pivotal station in that arc, the Galapagos Islands on February 18, 1943. The 3rd Bomb Squadron (H) arrived on March 12 to fill the gap, changing places with the 45th.

The 3rd BS (H) assignment was brief, too, and it left David for Talara, Peru, on April 1, 1943, then on to Salinas, Ecuador, and finally back to David again on June 11. These sudden shifts of tactical units were a characteristic of Sixth Air Force, where

small, compact and mobile tactical squadron-size units were moved throughout the command in response to intelligence alerts and the general world situation. The 3rd BS (H) was joined at David, for the first time in the war, by a fighter unit – a detachment of the 52nd Fighter Squadron (apparently equipped with rare Bell P-39K-1s), which arrived on June 16, 1943. The density of aircraft on the field, plus transient traffic, resulted in the assignment of a Cessna UC-78 (42-58429) from VI Bomber Command on July 22.

By October 31, 1943, the 52nd FS Detachment had departed back to its parent unit, leaving the 3rd BS (H) as the sole tactical unit on the station. It remained there until April 6, 1944, when it was moved to the pleasures of Howard Field, CZ, much to the vast relief of its weary personnel.

By July 1944, David was without any tactical units, and the base was populated only by single examples of the UC-61, UC-78, L-1 and L-4F, which remained unchanged through October, by which time the L-4F and UC-61 had departed. The 3rd BS (H) made a quick return to David around the end of December 1944, with its 11 ASV-equipped Consolidated B-24Ds, increased to 12 by March 1945. By then, the base was being managed by a caretaker unit, the 2109th Service Unit, which received a brand-new Beech UC-45F at the end of that month, joining the Stinson L-1 and an ancient North American RO-47A, one of the very last in service with the USAAF anywhere.

After the war, the two old runways – the one built by the Republic and the asphalt runway built by the USAAF – were renewed and gradually modernized and is now named the *Aeropuerto Internacional Enrique Malek*,² often experiencing as many as 900 operations monthly – few of whom have the slightest idea that the ground they trod once was regarded as a vital component of the defense establishment of the Canal.

FORT AMADOR, CANAL ZONE (8.93806°N – 79.54778°W)

Known during its final days as the Headquarters for U.S. Army Southern Command, with well-kept lawns and carefully manicured shrubs and trees, Fort Amador was built up near the Pacific terminus with waste cut from the Culebra and Gaillard Cuts – and, indeed, was originally known simply as the Balboa Dump.

Although the post had a large parade ground (upon which this scribe was paraded and decorated in late 1969), by 1914 the islands of Naos, Culebra, Perico and Flamenco – originally not connected by the delicate causeway to the station – were being very heavily fortified as part of the huge coast artillery defenses of the canal. The island bastions, named Battery Merrit, Newton, Buell and Smith, mounted a mix of 16-inch, 14-inch, 6-inch guns and 12-inch mortars. The batteries on the three islands, taken together, were known as Fort Grant, and work on these installations was completed in 1915. A total of 21 large caliber guns were eventually installed in the bunkers and redoubts of Fort Grant, with ranges varying from 14,500



Built to service the Coast Artillery emplacements near the Pacific entrance of the Canal, and later a headquarters post for the Army, Fort Amador, seen here September 14, 1932, also apparently had two grass runways and what appears to be a balloon hangar near the center of this image. Panama City is off to the right (not visible) and Albrook Field was constructed at the upper right quadrant, just below Quarry Heights. (USAAF photo)

to 24,000 yards. In 1928 and 1929, positions for two 14-inch railway guns were also constructed on Culebra Island, and those had a range of an incredible 48,000 yards. By 1947, these were all gone, although their emplacements and redoubts remained through at least 1969.

This writer was totally unaware of any aviation activity whatsoever at Fort Amador, other than – by the 1950s and 1960s – the occasional 193rd Aviation Company Bell OH-13 or UH-1B landing.

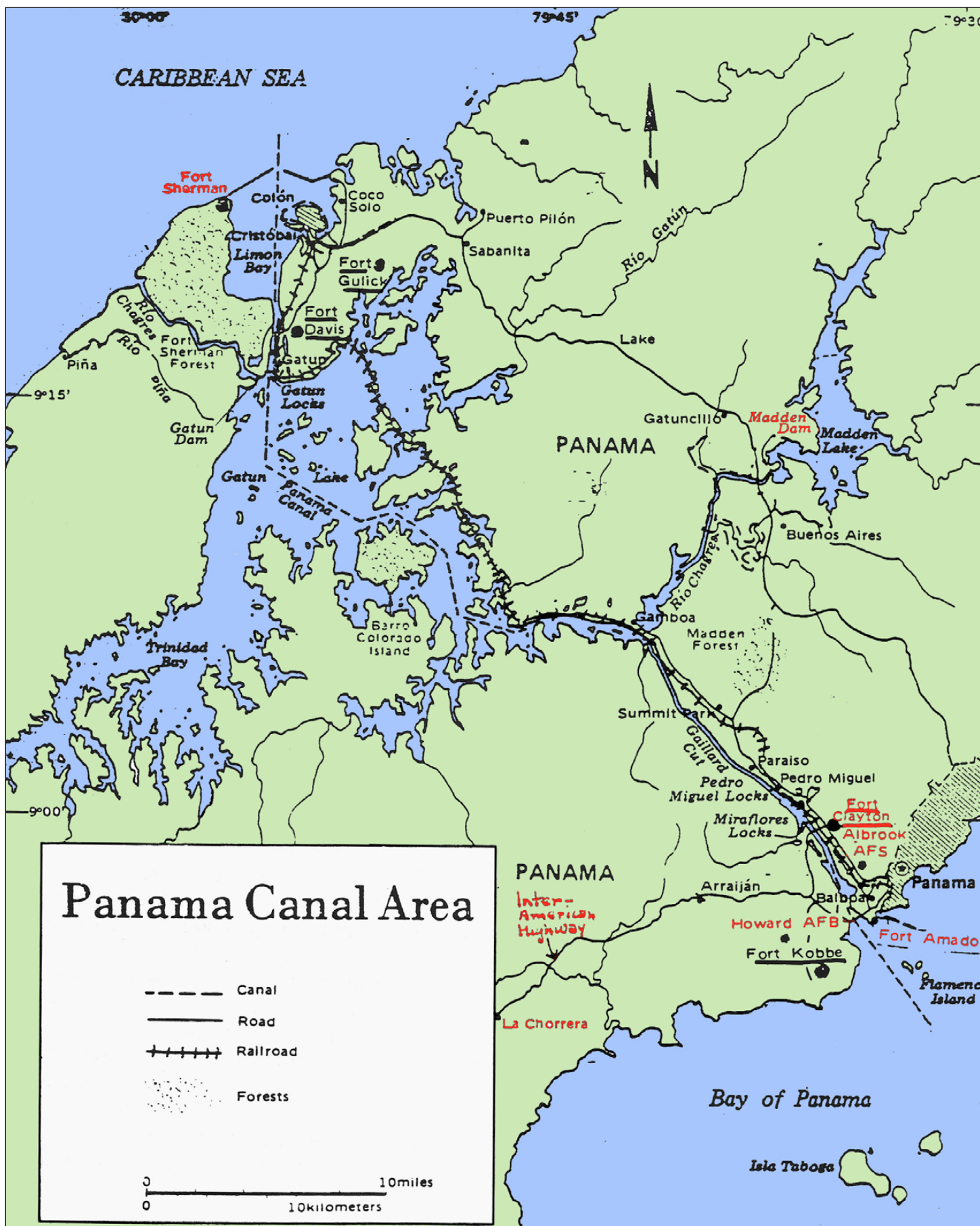
However, while conducting photo research on a completely unrelated subject, the accompany photo was located that clearly shows - about dead-center of the image - two grass landing areas, and what appears to be a small blimp or barrage balloon hangar. Dated September 14, 1932, no additional information has been located which speaks to this mysterious facility.

FORT CLAYTON, CANAL ZONE (9.017°N – 79.567°W)

Adjacent to and just north of Albrook Field, Fort Clayton was designated as part of the Curundu Military Reservation December 30, 1919, and originally was essentially the station of all horse-mounted troops in the Canal defense establishment. It was so large that, eventually, it accommodated an entire infantry regiment, an artillery battalion and a horse cavalry squadron.

The original, rather generous layout of the post included a large, relatively flat athletic field known as Miller Field. This

² Enrique Malke was an early aviation and airline pioneer in Panamanian aviation history.



This map depicts the Canal Zone itself and the primary, fixed installations located at or near either terminus. The Inter-American (Pan American) Highway can be seen in the lower quadrant, and the first outlying airfield to the west, La Chorrera. It also displays (highlighted in red) the locations of Fort Amador, Fort Clayton, Fort Sherman, Howard and Albrook Fields and their relative locations. (USAAF photo)

field also doubled, until the construction of Albrook Field, as the Pacific “air base” for the Panama Department – although careful coordination of arrivals and departures was necessary to ensure that landing aircraft did not conflict with troops engaged in Physical Training (PT)! Aircraft as large as Keystone B-3A biplane, twin-engine bombers of the resident, France Field-based 25th BS, routinely landed there as late as 1935. The actual designated landing area was a narrow strip between the westerly row of NCO quarters, and extended as far as the 1960s-era entrance to the post along the Panama Railroad right of way. There was no fence and, since the extremely busy Gaillard Highway during most of the 1930s and war years passed through the post, the landing strip – which stretched between the present Gaillard Highway and the front line of Building 95, was wide enough for observation and liaison aircraft.

No tactical units were ever stationed there, but frequent liaison aircraft landings were made during the war years to convey ranking officers to remote defense locations.

FORT SHERMAN, CANAL ZONE

(9.36302°N – 79.953035°W)

One of the earliest Army posts in the Canal Zone, Fort Sherman, on the extreme northern most approaches to the Caribbean (Atlantic) entrance to the Canal, was named in November 1911, and construction commenced in 1912.

From activation until shortly after WWII, Fort Sherman was a very heavily fortified coast artillery installation. Indeed, the first Air Service element to arrive in the Canal Zone, commanded by a young captain named Henry H. Arnold, operated the first two Curtiss R-4s, that they assembled after arrival, from the Fort Sherman parade field, and can thus lay a viable claim to being the oldest operating air field in Panama. The unit moved to Coco Walk (which became France Field), across the bay and to the south, in 1922. The parade field was used during WWII by liaison aircraft of the Sixth Air Force on an occasional basis, thus perpetuating the aviation connection of the installation.

During WWII, Fort Sherman also was home, in the form of two outlying sub-posts, to Balloon Camps No. 1 and No. 2, which dealt with the barrage balloons that protected the Atlantic entrance to the Canal and its vital Gatun lock system there.

Much later, during “Operation Just Cause,” a single, hard-surface runway had been built on the post and USAF C-27 aircraft utilized the facility, but so far as can be determined, this strip was built after WWII.

GAMBOA LANDING FIELD, CANAL ZONE

As early as 1938, a small, sod landing field had been carved out of a fill area right next to the Canal itself, just north of the small, manicured community of Panama Canal Company employees known as Gamboa.

Although apparently used sporadically sometime prior to 1938 by light civil aircraft owned by “Zonians,” and which were on the little-known Canal Zone Civil Register, it was seldom used by Army or Navy aircraft. The strip survived into the war years and occasional use cannot be discounted.

It was not listed on any Sixth Air Force documents as a Command asset, but its sheer proximity to the Canal itself certainly must have been cause for the Army to take more than a casual interest in it. One veteran of the Canal Zone suggested that it had been briefly used as a station for a barrage balloon unit, but no supporting evidence has been located.

GARACHINE AUXILIARY AIRDROME, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

The Caribbean Air Force had studied this extremely remote location in the impenetrable Darien Province as early as October 1940 as a potentially desirable location for an Auxiliary Airdrome - and had in fact expended \$400 of Army money to build exploratory trails to the site - it was finally concluded that it would have required enormous effort to develop the site, and the idea was abandoned.

JAQUÉ AUXILIARY FIELD (XAD L.A.4), REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

(7° 31'05" N - 78° 09'25" W) (Defense Site No. 21)

I well remember the first time I visited the airstrip at Jaqué, as a guest aboard an Aerovías Darienitas S.A. (ADSA) Cessna 180F. After rolling out and shutting down, I have never heard such an utterly silent location on solid ground in my life.

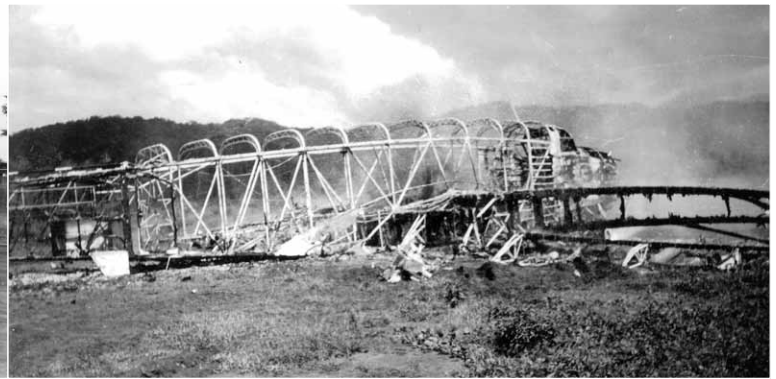
The flight from Paitilla Airport (q.v.) in 1968 had also put me very much in touch with the forbidding, trackless reaches of the huge Darien Province. Indeed, to this day, the *only* way to get to Jaqué, is either by air or by boat.

The earliest mention of this location was in a 1933 document, which noted that the airstrip was in fact on ground leased by the Panamanian Government to one Simon Mong for farming. As a result, the USAAC was obliged to pay Sr. Mong the princely sum of \$600 per year for the occasional use of his rental, and rather unpredictable “maintenance” of the strip.

By October 1940, the strip was noted as being designated as the Jaqué Supplementary Landing Field, with a field elevation of but 15 feet, located a scant 38 kilometers west of the border



Jaqué Auxiliary Field, Republic of Panama, within about 100 yards of the Pacific Coast, looking South. An extremely remote site, accessible – even today – only by air or boat, was not far from the border with Colombia. (USAAF photo)



LEFT: Your scribe visited Jaqué in 1968 aboard this ADSA Cessna 180F. It is one of the very few Sixth Air Force outlying stations that remains, essentially, in use and at the same location as the wartime site. (Author's collection) RIGHT: The arrival of the second "Axis" aircraft in Panama did not end well (the first had been a Junkers Ju 52/3m, which became the USAAF sole UC-79, detailed in the Fall 1992 issue, Vol.37, No.3, in "The Trek of the Aconcagua" by this writer). Here, we see the burned-out remains of former Italian LATI Savoia-Marchetti SM.76, I-CILE, which was in fact inbound for duty with the less-than-enthusiastic, but transport-poor 20th TCS, when it crash-landed and was destroyed by fire at Jaqué Auxiliary January 19, 1943, while being flown by Capt. Jack N. Neal. (Col. Roy P. Whitton collection)

between Colombia and Panama, in the extreme east-southeast portion of Panama, just north of the village of the same name and not far from the Pacific coast.

It eventually enjoyed a 4,500 foot by 200 foot hard-surface (black top) runway, installed with considerable difficulty by the Corps of Engineers, who made use of a small jetty they constructed to get equipment and supplies ashore. It was capable of taking twin-engine aircraft, as evidenced by Martin B-10B AC34-69 of the 44th Reconnaissance Squadron which had its main gear collapse after landing June 17, 1938. Ironically, an elderly Keystone B-6 (AC32-154) was dispatched to recover the B-10B crew and determine what would be required to repair the Martin. While also landing there under the control of Lt. Shores, itself turned over onto its back and was damaged beyond repair. The remains were burned there.

The Caribbean Air Force regarded Jaqué as a strategically important station, and staged reconnaissance flights from there to cover the pivot to the distant Canal, about 135 air miles

away. A corresponding field was also constructed at Pocri (q.v.) on the opposite side of the Bay of Panama. It was also used for frequent training flight for units based in the Canal Zone (and was regarded as a Sub-Post of Albrook Field for administrative purposes) and elsewhere in the Republic throughout the war, but no tactical units were ever stationed there. Wartime occupancy was authorized on April 12, 1941 and by June 19, the landing strip had been marked, a wind cone installed, and a caretaker hired – presumably the same Sr. Mong.

**LA JOYA NO. 1, NO. 2 AND NO. 3
(ALSO CITED AS "LA JOLLA" AND
PACORA NO. 1 AND NO. 2)
(9° 07N - 79° 20W) (Defense Site No. 19)**

Although it may be at least in part apocryphal, the story goes that, just a few years before 1940, a small grass airstrip near Pacora, Republic of Panama (almost invariably cited by veterans, in error, as "Pecora"), about 17 air miles east of



Looking like a runway in the middle of nowhere, La Joya No.1 (originally known as Pacora), the revetments and station facilities were all effectively hidden in the jungle areas at the distant eastern end of the runway, with the vast Darien Province jungle lost into the horizon. (USAAF photo)



There were eventually three airfields at La Joya, as described in the text, and this was No.2 and No.3, which were side-by-side, the one on the left shorter and sod only. Note the almost complete lack of visible ground facilities, hidden in the surrounding jungle areas. (USAAF photo)

Albrook Field, CZ, somehow gained the day-to-day name “La Jolla” – possibly from the locals. Although used infrequently before the war, the need for Auxiliary Fields to relocate tactical aircraft accelerated use, and construction on what were initially called Pacora No. 1 and No. 2 commenced January 10, 1942 (although the occupancy authorization was dated April 4, 1941), and was 99.3% complete – by which time the fields there were known as La Joya No. 1 and No. 2 – by May 31, 1943. The story goes that maps and references to the fields were finally changed to La Joya due to acclamation, mainly because the Yankee airmen could not pronounce or remember “La Jolla” properly!

The eventual total of three fields were within two miles west of the town of Pacora, and conveniently, just three miles off the truncated end of the Pan American Highway, which abruptly ended at the onset of the Darien jungles near Chepo, about five miles further east.

La Joya No. 2, which appears to have been the most used of the trio, is further confused by the fact that most USAAF documents also cited it, early on, as Pacora (1)!

Three companies each of the 11th and 805th Engineers constructed the airfields at Pacora, as well as the facilities there, on a priority basis, although the urgency required that the 11th be augmented by civilian workers, who proved problematical. It should be noted that a key consideration of the engineers while constructing these various Auxiliary Fields was to purposely avoid geometric shapes that could be recognized as airfields by practiced eyes from above. This proved to be rather challenging, especially when trying to factor in workable water supply and drainage - vital in the tropics of Panama – entered into the planning. Apparently, the work on No. 1 (which commenced September 20, 1941) and No. 2 included provision of hard surfaced runways, with each being 5,000 feet by 300 feet, although Caribbean Air Force had authorized the engineers to reduce this to 4,000 feet by 200 feet for stations that were to host pursuit planes exclusively. The Panama Canal Department Engineers were also assisting with this, and in fact were considering putting down a concrete runway at Pacora, which would have then been only the third such runway in Panama, outside of the Canal Zone.

So urgent was the requirement to disperse the tactical assets of the Command that the 43rd Pursuit Squadron, 16th Pursuit Group, took occupancy of La Joya No. 1 between February 4 and 28, 1942, although it was drastically understrength, initially with six veteran Curtiss P-36As, but replaced by six Curtiss P-40Cs by the end of February. The 43rd was joined on March 15 by the veteran 24th Pursuit Squadron (which stayed until September), as well as a detachment of the 28th Pursuit Squadron, which arrived from Albrook between March 26 and May 2, 1942.

The 24th Fighter Squadron (Pursuit Squadrons had been redesignated throughout the USAAF by this time) returned to La Joya No. 1 January 10, 1943, from Albrook, rejoining the 43rd FS, which was essentially the garrison unit. It departed again to Albrook on May 28, 1943, leaving the 43rd FS as the solitary tactical unit there through the end of 1943.

On March 4, 1944, the 51st Fighter Squadron arrived at La

Joya (probably No. 2) from the distant Galapagos Islands, but moved on with relief to the creature comforts of Howard Field June 10 and, by July 1, 1944, use of No. 1 effective came to an end.

La Joya No. 2 had a 4,000 foot by 180-foot N/W concrete runway by June 1942 – a genuine luxury, as noted above, courtesy of the Panama Canal Department Engineers. Units resident by that time included the 24th FS (less one Flight, which was at No. 1), a detachment of Company B, 805th Engineers, and a detachment of the 6th Chemical Company (Service) Aviation.

By June 16, 1943, the entire 24th FS had been concentrated on No. 2, and this rather confusing series of assignments between No. 1 and No. 2 can be explained by the simple reality that, even with her nice concrete runway, No. 2 could only be used safely during the dry season. Once off the concrete, all bets were off!

Little is known about La Joya No. 3, aside from the fact that it was declared surplus by October 1943, and in fact may not have been completed.

LA MESA LANDING STRIP, VERAGUAS PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA (Defense Site No.5)

Described by October 28, 1940, as an “emergency strip,” USAAC aircraft had apparently made only a few landings there in 1939 and 1940, and no U.S. government funds had been devoted to its improvement.

Located on the Pan American Highway about 50 air miles west of Aguadulce, by August 27, 1941, it was designated as an Emergency Landing Field by the Caribbean Air Force.

No USAAC/USAAF units are known to have been stationed there.

LA YEGUADA (CHITRA-CALOBRE), REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

Located about 25 miles west-northwest of Aguadulce, on the mountainous central spine of Western Panama, this area, close to the massive stratovolcano of the same name, probably did not have a functional air strip, but was apparently used as a recreational area for AAF personnel stationed at Aguadulce and Rio Hato during the war. There may have been a number of liaison aircraft visits as a direct result.

LAS LAJAS EMERGENCY LANDING FIELD, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

About 47 miles east of David in far western Panama, and about five miles from the Pacific coast, the USAAC received an occupancy authorization for this very beautiful beach area April 9, 1941, and regarded it, as early as October 1940, as an “available” emergency field. A few landings had been made there prior to that time (probably to avail crews of a little swimming in a very isolated locale), and a wind-sock, identifying white-wash circle were emplaced there in 1939. No tactical units were ever stationed there.



LEFT: One of many Emergency Landing Fields in the Republic of Panama administered by Sixth Air Force, Las Lajas is typical. Close examination of the rather poor original reveals a large number of tracks left by landing aircraft, in all directions! With Pearl Harbor, the distinctive, pre-war white washed circle put down in 1939 was obliterated. (USAAF photo) RIGHT: Noted earlier as having been briefly designated as Casa Larga Auxiliary, the interceptor station at the vital Madden Dam and Madden Lake, just Northeast of the central area of the Canal Zone, became simply Madden Supplementary Airfield, and is seen here from 1,000 feet as though on final approach looking directly North on January 18, 1943. On the original, revetments and services can be seen located throughout the surrounding jungle. (USAAF photo)

**LIMÓN LANDING FIELD, COLÓN PROVINCE,
REPUBLIC OF PANAMA
(Defense Site No.9)**

Although there was indeed a small landing area at this location not far from the Caribbean (Atlantic) entrance to the Canal, its only function was to support the otherwise isolated (by land) Air Warning Site (Radar) No. 44, and thus saw only liaison and single-engine light cargo types visit on a periodic basis.

**MADDEN (LAKE MADDEN) SUPPLEMENTARY
FIELD, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA
(LATER MADDEN AUXILIARY AIRDROME)
(9° 11'N - 79° 34'W)
(Defense Site No. 26)
(Shared APO 825 with Albrook Field)**

Noted earlier, the location of this key defense installation was originally known as Casa Larga (q.v.). With a field elevation of 365 feet – the highest in Panama – the original site known as Casa Larga was located two miles south of Lake Madden itself and Madden Dam, the actual keys to the entire workings of the Canal and its lock system. This placed the station about midway between Panama City and Colón.

When completed, the main and definitive Madden Field was five miles south, and had a 4,000 foot by 600 foot hard surfaced runway. Construction on the definitive set of fields commenced soon after Pearl Harbor, in January 1942, and was declared complete in May 1943 at a cost of some \$1,059,400.

On May 18, 1942, a young Air Corps captain, William J. Morgan, assumed command of the field, and took occupancy with 18 NCOs and men from the 19th Materiel Squadron, proceeding to the station (still known only as Casa Larga) after a rather adventurous truck convoy from Albrook Field (they got lost three times en route). No sooner had they arrived, with the strip still under construction, than the Curtiss P-40Cs and P-40Es of the 29th Fighter Squadron (it had been redesignated

from Pursuit Squadron effective May 15) started arriving, landing amidst the actual earth moving equipment, such was the haste to get organized.

The field, as far as the personnel stationed there were concerned, may as well have been on the moon, and the leadership quickly installed facilities to ease the demands of the remote jungle location. A theater was opened in late July 1942 and in October, the first of a series of USO shows presented there, featuring the Ritz Brothers. An officer's club and NCO club opened in October as well.

The explicit, and sole purpose of Madden Field, was the dedicated protection of the Canal itself, but more importantly, the dam and its spillways. Training exercises, always of a



A large number of Bell Airacobras served in Sixth Air Force, where their low-altitude, Canal protection qualities – the large caliber cannon in the nose, an effective weapon against submarines – made it nearly ideal for the theater. This P-39Q-5, 42-20407, had arrived in Panama August 7, 1943, and is pictured here at Madden Supplementary Field. It survived in Sixth Air Force until May 31, 1945, when it was surveyed. Note again the distinctive Sixth Air Force camouflage pattern. (Author's collection)

‘scramble’ interceptor nature, were frequent and very realistic. Like all of the stations in the Canal Zone and Republic of Panama during 1942 and most of 1943, aircraft were fully armed and bombed-up, and each fighter unit kept at least one Flight on around-the-clock readiness. Though built as a fighter/interceptor station, aircraft as large as B-17s landed there routinely.

The field enjoyed the usual runway boundary lights (electrically operated), but had no flood lights, like some of the Auxiliaries in the interior. It did have a wind “T” and night landings were routine. The ground crews operated entirely in the open, as there were no hangars, just 25 revetments with hard-standings for the fighters, well hidden in the jungle forestation around the perimeter of the field. One of the revetments was outfitted with equipment necessary for servicing up to, and including, engine changes and minor repairs.

One of the handicaps of Madden Field was the almost daily, nearly awesome fog bank that routinely rolled in each morning off the Pacific during all of the rainy season. As can be noted on the accompanying photo, a 2,000-foot extension was under construction on the north end, but it is not clear if this was actually completed. The photo, when studied, also reveals that nearly all facilities were camouflaged and located in the jungles adjacent to the southwest end of the runway. The station had two splinter-proof buildings as refuge against air attack, as well as two gas-proof shelters and scattered slit trenches as well.

As the 29th FS settled in, they were joined at Madden by the end of June 1942 by a Department Police (DP) detachment, a vital detachment of the 6th AAF Weather Squadron, a detachment of the 6th Chemical Company (Service) Aviation and a detachment of Company B, 805th Engineers. Oddly, Madden was regarded for most of its existence not as a sub-post of Albrook Field, with which it shared an APO, but of Fort Kobbe, CZ.

The 29th FS (which had become the 29th Fighter Squadron (SE) by that time), the solitary unit there from the beginning, was finally relieved on March 8, 1944, when the 24th FS (SE) arrived from Howard Field. The 29th had averaged a personnel strength of 275 NCOs and enlisted ranks, and 30 officers during its tenure there. By July, the newly arrived 24th FS possessed 24 Bell P-39Qs, single examples of the North American BC-1 and AT-6D and a Vultee BT-13A. The 24th departed for France Field the next month, August 1944, and was replaced by the 30th FS in January 1945.

The only aircraft known assigned to Madden by March 1945 was Cessna UC-78 42-58341.

Madden witnessed the disappearance of a startling number of fighter aircraft during the war. More than a dozen P-39 and P-40 aircraft stationed there simply took off on interceptor scrambles and disappeared. One of these was P-39K 42-4251 flown by 2nd Lt. Paul W. Neely (also given in some documents as Neeley). He had taken off from Madden on July 3, 1943, and, although reported going down for unknown reasons near the Chico River, only 35 miles northeast of Albrook Field, his aircraft and remains were not found until November 1946 by campesinos in the marshlands near the Chico River. Lt. Neely’s remains were interred in the Army Cemetery at Corozal, CZ.

MANDINGA AUXILIARY AIRDROME

(Defense Site No. 25)

Located about 48 air miles north-northeast from Albrook on the Caribbean (Atlantic) Coast of Panama, little is known about this, yet another of the isolated coastal villages that hosted a Sixth Air Force air field.

Like Pito, this field was established and maintained not by Sixth Air Force, but rather by the Miami (Florida) District Army Engineers.

No Sixth Air Force units were stationed there, and it was probably only visited irregularly.

PACORA NO. 1 AND NO. 2

(9° 4’48”N - 79° 16’48”W) (Defense Site No. 108)

As noted above, Pacora was the original name assigned to the first two stations which became the La Joya airfields complex, and at which was also located an infantry camp, and was regarded as a sub-post of Albrook Field.

Also sometimes cited by the ground forces as Camp Pacora, the complex was located some 30 miles east of Panama City proper, and the camp was completed (for ground forces initially) in 1942, although the area had been used by the Panama Canal Department forces for many years as a maneuver area.

While still known as Pacora No. 1, and during the construction phase of the airfield at the Camp there, Curtiss P-40C 41-13410, under the control of ground crewman Cpl. Gordon L. Wright, gained the dubious distinction of suffering the first accident at the new base, when he taxied the precious fighter into a newly finished concrete floodlight stanchion that, he pleaded, “...*wasn’t there yesterday!*”

The 43rd Pursuit Squadron was the first tactical unit associated with the name Pacora, and was there with six Curtiss P-36As by mid-February 1942, one of which, AC38-5, was taxied into a pile of rocks by 2nd Lt. William E. Burton on February 10. A unit of the so-called Panama Interceptor Command, the 43rd PS (I) had arrived on February 4.

PAITILLA POINT

(MARCOS A. GELABERT NATIONAL AIRPORT), REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

(08° 59’N - 79° 31’W))

Unique in being, as of December 7, 1941, the solitary concrete runway actually in the Republic, Paitilla (as it was almost universally known, even though later named for the national aeronautical luminary, Marcos Gelabert) was essentially the airfield just two and a quarter miles east of downtown Panama City and the cradle of Panamanian aviation, as well as the official port-of-entry to the Republic itself.

Charles Lindbergh had landed on the field, while still just plowed sod, and the first known USAAC experience with the field did not end well. Atlantic (Fokker) C-2A AC28-124, under the command of Capt. David M. Schlatter, badly misjudged the conditions on the ground on September 4, 1929, and made a mess of the trimotor. It was recovered and repaired, only to be lost in a flight back to the Continental United States at Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, on March 9, 1930. It had been based in both instances at France Field on the Atlantic



The first known USAAC aircraft to suffer at accident at Panama's National Airport, Paitilla Point (later Marcos A. Gelabert) was this Atlantic (Fokker) C-2A, AC28-124, on September 4, 1929. Note the extremely rough and muddy landing area. (Author's collection) RIGHT: Paitilla Point Airport in 1942, after being occupied by the USAAF. Note the revetments, at least seven visible, and the solitary hangar just to the right of the farther end of the runway. It was the only concrete runway in the Republic itself by December 7, 1941. The sole hangar was where nearly all of the civil air fleet was locked up, until August 1942, when the aircraft-hungry Sixth Air Force acquired most of them from civil owners. (USAAF photo)

side of the isthmus.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, civil aviation in Panama was immediately suspended by presidential decree, and the vast majority of the small Panamanian civil air fleet – most of which was actually impressed into the USAAF in August 1942 – was idled. The entire fleet of *Transportes Aéreos Gelabert* (TAG) had their props removed and were crowded together and locked inside the sole hangar on the field, until August 1942, when the USAAF actually purchased nearly all of them, so desperate was the need for support aircraft capable of operating in-and-out of airfields in the interior. Often cited as having been “impressed,” this was true only to the extent that the owners had no other customers: the USAAF actually paid fair-market-value for the truly amazing array of aircraft.

Early on the morning of December 8, U.S. Army troops occupied Paitilla Point Airfield and by the very next day, the 28th Pursuit Squadron took up residence with seven Curtiss P-40Cs, deployed in nine hastily erected sand-bagged revetments, shielded by camouflage netting, located on either side of the primary, as can be noted in the accompanying photo.

By the end of February, the remaining P-40Cs (two had been wrecked) were joined by two P-40Es and the rather short runway at the field soon took an even greater toll on the P-40Cs of the 28th PS. By the end of June 1942 not fewer than six of the aircraft had suffered ground loops, wheel locks, or engine failure!

As with other outlying fields, the fighter unit was not alone at Paitilla. There was a small DP detachment for guard duty, a detachment of the ever-present 6th Chemical Company (Service) Aviation, and yet another detachment of Company B, 805th Engineers, who labored to keep the muddy areas around the concrete runway serviceable almost continuously.

With the victory at Midway in the distant Pacific, the immediate threat of a Japanese attack on the canal was



One of the aircraft acquired by Sixth Air Force in August 1942 as a single former *Transportes Aéreos Gelabert* Hamilton H-47, civil registration R-12 (msn 56), which is seen here as the solitary UC-89 as 42-79546. The Sixth Air Force bought a total of 16 aircraft, ranging from an Akron-Funk to a Stinson Model A, for a total of \$30,000. The UC-89 served with the 20th TCS (Sp) until August 24, 1943, and the expression in the USAAF pilot seen here can only be interpreted as relief! (Col. Kenneth E. Marts collection)



LEFT: Sixth Air Force begged Headquarters Army Air Forces, for utility and light transport aircraft throughout the war. These entreaties were finally answered, starting in March 1943, by the first of at least 15 to reach the Command. Although they suffered from the wet, tropical environment and required intensive maintenance, 43-7347, seen here at Albrook Field, arrived in June 1943 and, like all Sixth Air Force aircraft, was camouflaged – but with yellow engine cowlings added! Barely visible on the fuselage is a roach, standing erect, a commentary not only on the most numerous residents of Panama, but perhaps of the crews' attitude towards the aircraft. (Col. Ole Griffith collection) RIGHT: The station facilities at the Penonomé Auxiliary Airdrome, another field accessible via the Pan American Highway, served primarily as a Command Bombing Range during the war, and this may account for the relative visibility of some of the buildings. In this view, looking East-North-east, the runway area is in the lower left quadrant. (USAAF photo)



substantially reduced, and the 28th PS departed for the far reaches of the Galapagos, leaving the off-duty delights of Panama City behind.

Paitilla continued to be in USAAF hands through the end of the war and the field was used as an anti-aircraft training site, with almost continuous daily firing – seaward – towards targets being towed and, late in the war, dedicated Culver PQ-8 target aircraft ranging up-and-down the coastline to the south. Everything from .30 caliber machine guns to at least 40mm guns were rotated through Paitilla.

Oddly, although controlled by the USAAF from day one of the war through V-J Day, no Defense Site Number for the station has been located, nor was it designated as a sub-post of any Canal Zone installation, although Albrook Field seems to have had nominal responsibility.

**PENONOMÉ AUXILIARY AIRDROME
AND BOMBING RANGE,
REPUBLIC OF PANAMA
(Latitude 8.50383 – Longitude 80.3602982)
(Defense Site No. 10)**

Located about 10 road-miles further along the Pan American Highway, west from Anton, at a field elevation of 400 feet, your scribe walked this ground as well in 1966 and, aside from a concrete bomb shelter, no trace whatsoever could be found of the former site. Much later, after my sojourn in Panama, the area was developed and a small airfield installed, and the grid coordinates noted above are for it, although it appears this field is slightly south of where the wartime station was located.

Never having anything more than a sod runway, Penonomé served principally as a dedicated bombardment training range for Sixth Air Force bomber units, as well as fighters training for air-to-ground ordnance. Throughout its existence, it was a sub- post of Albrook Field.

As the war progressed, live-fire training shifted to off-shore, uninhabited islands for safety reasons and, on November 3, 1943, Penonomé was abandoned – thus earning the distinction of being the first Sixth Air Force wartime airfield to revert to nature.

**PITO EMERGENCY LANDING STRIP,
DARIEN PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA
(Defense Site No. 103)**

Seldom mentioned in Sixth Air Force documents, the small emergency airstrip on the Caribbean coast at extremely remote Pito was actually not a Sixth Air Force facility but, for reasons that have not been discovered, was established and maintained by the Miami, Florida District Engineers. It may have been visited by light Sixth Air Force aircraft on occasion, but was not occupied or maintained by the Command.

**POCRÍ AUXILIARY AIRDROME,
REPUBLIC OF PANAMA
(Defense Site No.7, Landing Area 9 (LA-9))
(APO 838, Shared with Rio Hato)**

One of the most remote and inaccessible Auxiliary Airdromes within Caribbean Air Force and Sixth Air Force Republic of Panama stations, Pocrí, on the Gulf of Panama coast of the *Peninsula Azuero* was, by October 1940, regarded as an emergency field, and had witnessed infrequent visits by USAAC aircraft as early as 1932.

The Air Corps had invested small sums for local maintenance of the airstrip including, characteristic of the area, the leveling of giant ant hills as well as the smoothing of ruts raised by pigs, which wandered the area constantly and which, taken together, made the station exceptionally unpopular. Air Corps personnel had marked the field with the usual circle and hoisted a wind-sock that was stolen with annoying regularity.

The USAAC received authority to occupy the station as an Emergency Landing Field, on April 7, 1941, but, oddly, the first tactical unit did not deploy there for an extended tour until Flight "E" of the 28th Fighter Squadron was dispatched by May 1, 1943. This was probably because of the difficulty experienced by engineers in reaching the station delayed the start of construction until February 3, 1942. It was not ruled ready for occupancy until May 31, 1943.

The field consisted of a 4,000 foot asphalt runway and sufficient revetments to shelter 12 fighters, the solitary reason for existence of the station being identification and interception of unknowns over the Bay of Panama approaching the southern entrance to the Canal. The fighter units posted there stood endless daily alerts.

To the enormous relief of the detachment of the 28th FS, they were soon replaced at Pocrí June 11, 1943, by Flight "E" of the 31st FS and, on December 9, 1943, Sixth Air Force officially designated the station as Airdrome, Pocrí, R.P. It is interesting to note that, during most of 1943, the station never averaged more than 100 officers and men present, consisting of about 60 from the fighter detachments, and 40 with the long-suffering DP Detachment. Sixth Air Force, by this time distinctly aware of the morale issues associated with being posted to Pocrí and even though never hosting more than 100 personnel, had authorized the construction of a movie theater capable of seating every one of them, and films being flown in (by the priceless UC-78) for showings three nights each week. They also shortly constructed a PX and a combined service club. The hard-working UC-78 was pressed in to service to ferry Red Cross and USO ladies to the field for brief visits.

The 28th FS Detachment was renewed again between February 22, 1944 and August 2, 1944, moving from Chame, to which they returned. The difficulty in reaching this remote station resulted in the allotment of a prized Cessna UC-78 (serial number 43-78) to facilitate communications and enable at least a few troops to be evacuated for medical reasons and reward furlough without having to suffer the torturous road journey back to the Canal Zone. In addition to the 28th FS, a detachment of the 16th Fighter Control Squadron (attached initially to the 31st FS) also served at the field starting May 1, 1943. The station also had, from time-to-time, a detachment of the 350th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron, the far-ranging 6th AAF Weather Squadron, the 1046th Signal Company (Aviation), the 926th QM Boat Company (crash boats), a Medical Detachment and a post Engineer Utility Detachment.

By March 31, 1945, Sixth Air Force use of Pocrí persisted, and by then, it was the turn of the 51st FS, which to the relief of all, remained garrisoned at Howard Field, with Pocrí their deployment field. They maintained the UC-78 and a solitary Vultee BT-13A at the field as the sole permanent aircraft.

Pocrí, despite its isolation, holds one other unusual distinction in Sixth Air Force history: Not a single accident involving an aircraft was registered at the station during the war years.

Incredibly, and no doubt due to its isolation, young PFC Sidney Sampson, a member of the 1046th Signal Company Detachment, started a post newspaper on his own initiative

around February 1944. To date no copies (or even the name) of this allegedly scandalous and gossipy 'media' have not been located.

PUERTO OBALDÍA EMERGENCY LANDING FIELD, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

(8° 40'01"N - 77° 24'14.3" W) (Defense Site No. 23)

If Sixaola (q.v.) was as far as you could get from the Canal to the extreme northwest in Panama, the remote AWS No. 7 site at Puerto Obaldía, was the most northeastern, not far from the border with Colombia.

Then, as now, the remote village could not be reached by surface transport – only by sea or, during WWII, by air. The small field there, although designated as an emergency field, was in fact primarily used to relieve the hapless radar crews stationed at the AWS site, where the arrival of a liaison or light cargo aircraft was the occasion of much rejoicing.

The station was regarded as a sub-post of France Field.

REY ISLAND AUXILIARY AIRFIELD, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

(Defense Site No.32, including Air Warning Sites No.43 and 66)

The southern-most of the famed Perlas Islands deep in the Gulf of Panama, about 70 air miles almost due south of Panama City, Rey Island ("Island of the King"), at 90 square miles, is the largest in the archipelago. The islands are perhaps best-known as the location for not fewer than three seasons of the popular TV reality show, *Survivor*.

It does not require extraordinary powers of intellect to examine a map and conclude that these islands, perhaps above all else but the distant Galapagos, presented defenders of the Canal with a nearly perfect position from which to scan and patrol the approaches.

One of the most highly classified of all Sixth Air Force installations, the army engineers, after enormous effort, not



The highly strategic (and classified) Rey island Auxiliary, deep in the famous Perlas Islands, and at nearly dead-center, a single barrage balloon can be seen, with anti-aircraft installations to the left. (USAAF photo)



The very first Bell P-38N-1 assigned to Sixth Air Force, 42-9338, unit number "70", arrived March 18, 1943, and is seen here standing alert (with armed guns, note the flags) at Chame. It was surveyed following an accident September 1, 1943, at Chame, although it was based at the time at Howard Field with either the 24th or 31st FS (via Bab Karrer, ICC)

least because of the difficulty in landing the heavy earth-moving equipment on the island in 1942, finally completed a single runway on the vital island in time for Flight "E" of the

24th Fighter Squadron to take up temporary residence October 31, 1943, the only Sixth Air Force tactical unit to be stationed there, if only briefly.

Regarded as a sub-post of Albrook Field, it was a highly prized assignment, as the beaches and off-duty opportunities on the island were exceptional.

SAN JOSÉ ISLAND (ISLA SAN JOSÉ), REPUBLIC OF PANAMA ("SAN JOSÉ ISLAND PROJECT")

If Rey Island in the Perlas Archipelago was highly classified, San José Island, about 20 miles to the west-northwest, was off the charts.

Although there is no record of an actual airstrip on the island, evidence suggests that liaison aircraft may have alighted on the island (probably on the beaches) from Albrook or Rey Island during the war.

About 60 air-miles from Albrook Field, it is the second largest island in the group and, as recently as the 2000 census, the entire population was 10. Now privately owned, it measures about 17 square miles, and is home to thousands of wild pigs and deer, and therein lays the story.

The U.S. Army Chemical Corps used the island during the war not only as a depot for chemical weapons held in store, should the Japanese ever deploy the same during the war in the Pacific, but also as a test location for aerial bombs dropped by B-24 units of the Sixth Air Force alleged to have contained phosgene and cyanogen chloride, and smaller weapons



The Sixaola Auxiliary Airdrome in far Northwestern Panama, not far from the border with Costa Rica, and on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus. Douglas B-18s are known to have landed there. (USAAF photo)

containing mustard gas. Pigs and deer intentionally introduced onto the island during the war were the 'target population.' Most of the aerial delivery tests were conducted between February 1 and May 1, 1944, almost certainly as a prelude to a possible invasion of the Japanese home islands, where the Japanese were predicted to make use of such weapons on landing Allied forces.

Unexploded ordnance on the island (and, reportedly, dumped off-shore) is estimated to be in the thousands of units. Today, there is a small airfield on the island that was not there during the war.

SIXAOLA AUXILIARY AIRDROME, REPUBLIC OF PANAMA (09° 31'N - 82° 38'W)

Sixaola, in the extreme northwestern corner of Panama in Limón Province, is about as far away from the Canal Zone as you can get within the borders of the country without crossing into neighboring Costa Rica. [Editor's note: Today's maps place Sixaola in Costa Rica with the Rio Sixaola being the border line with Panama]

About 23 miles northwest of Almirante and seven miles from the Caribbean coast, this field was bordered by the Rio Sixaola on the South and a very rare, banana railroad on the north side. The field elevation was a mere 26 feet, and the grass and loam runway was East/West at 4,200 feet in length, and 200 feet wide. There were radio facilities at the field, and a limited supply of 100 octane fuel, but absolutely no structures or accommodations.

Although the Sixth Air Force designated this as an Auxiliary, it was more likely a small, privately-owned airstrip serving the small community there, and was one of the very few facilities on the Caribbean (Atlantic) coast of Panama every frequented by Sixth Air Force aircraft.

No units were stationed there, and there are scant references to the location in Sixth Air Force records, probably confirming minimal use. ➔