



LONG NIGHT OF THE TANKERS: HITLER'S WAR AGAINST CARIBBEAN OIL

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“RUM AND COCA-COLA”: THE YANKEES ARE COMING!

Allied antisubmarine warfare defenses in the eastern Caribbean were anchored on two islands – Puerto Rico and Trinidad – and the American air and naval base at Guantánamo Bay on the eastern tip of Cuba. By 1940, the Americans had become familiar enough with Guantánamo – which they referred to as “Gitmo” – and Puerto Rico, having taken possession of both with the Treaty of Paris (1898), ending the Spanish-American War. But Trinidad was another matter. Though a small contingent of British troops and seamen were based there, they and much of the island’s population would soon encounter thousands of American troops – some 16,000 by October 1941, many more thousands after Pearl Harbor – who knew little or nothing of Trinidad’s unique history, culture, government, or social institutions.

Although most middle- and upper-class Trinidadians were loyal to Britain and the anti-Nazi war effort, they soon found that the irritation arising from life with their new ally was almost more than they could bear. That, combined with dashed expectations that Britain would reward Trinidadians for their war service, gave way to cynicism, if not bitterness. In 1943 the much-respected and highly educated physician-mayor of Port of Spain, Tito P. Achong, wrote in his annual report:

We, West Indians, are passive onlookers of the great game of power politics. We are not supposed either to think or to express any opinion on what is going on. The role assigned to us, in the British Colonial Empire, is to shout hosannas at the amoral exploits of the mighty Aryans [*sic*] into whose hands

Jehovah has delivered us for safe-keeping, and then to get back to our natural task of hewers of wood and drawers of water.¹

Before the war, Trinidad, in the words of the journalist and labor activist Albert Gomes, “was a remote and forgotten back-water of the world. It lay deep and still in its sweaty sleep.”² Sugar, cocoa, and oil were Trinidad’s major exports; ownership was mainly in British, French, American, and South African hands. Wages were low, poverty a way of life. Malaria, hookworm, tuberculosis, and venereal disease were rampant in parts of the island. Trinidad’s racial make-up was a colored patchwork of white and black, East Indian and Chinese, East Indian Creole, and Chinese Creole, Syrian and Jewish, and people of “mixed” heritage, referred to as “colored.”

There had always been high demand for cheap labor in Trinidad, first by the Spanish, then by the French, and finally by the British plantation owners. Black slaves had been brought in from Africa, and on the eve of World War II their descendants constituted about 46 per cent of Trinidad’s population of half a million.³ The British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the formal emancipation of the slaves on Trinidad in 1834 prompted plantation owners to turn to India for cheap labor. From 1845 to 1917, about 143,000 indentured laborers, both Hindu and Muslim, were imported to the island. In 1939 the “East Indian” population on Trinidad stood at 158,000.

Trinidad’s few cities were served first by a small Portuguese commercial class, and then by the Chinese, who soon controlled its many general stores, leaving the Portuguese to run the lucrative rum business. In the 1930s the Chinese community, the so-called “Coolies,” numbered about 5,000; not quite 1,000 Syrians came after the Chinese. There was also a small Jewish contingent, mainly engaged in banking and business. Finally, there was a substantial South American migrant population. Distinct and apart from these social groups, and almost autonomous in every way, stood the White, powerful, and largely foreign oilfield communities. The overnight demands for cheap labor occasioned by the arrival of the first American military and civilian authorities in the spring of 1941 resulted in the further influx of thousands of West Indian migrant workers, raising the black contingent on Trinidad to just over half the total population.

As was to be expected, given this patchwork of races and cultures, socio-economic and racial relations were both ambiguous and complex. The dominant European cultural – as opposed to business – community on Trinidad contained Spanish, French, and British elements.⁴ While the operative language was English, the French Creole dialect, known as *patois*, was widespread, especially among the poor, mostly black population. Spanish and French forms of Catholicism remained the near universal religion, although large segments of the black and the black Creole populations had turned to religious syncretisms such as African Shango or Ori-sha and Shakerism (Shouting Baptists). Roughly, the racial composition of Trinidad during World War II broke down as follows: white 2.7, black 46.8, “colored” 14.1, and East Indian 35.1 per cent.

The locals had a permissive attitude toward assimilation. As a result, Trinidad’s social elites were an “association” of white, black, and “colored” communities. “Miscegenation, acculturation, and assimilation,” in the words of one scholar of Trinidad’s “plural society,” established “a single continuum in racial, cultural, and social terms.” That “continuum” was simply labeled “Creole.” Consisting of people born within the West Indies, but excluding East Indians, the term generally refers to white, black, and mixed white-black ancestry. These groupings, along with mainly British businessmen and a small “mulatto bourgeoisie,” coexisted – sometimes uneasily, and largely free from external pressures.⁵

The most obvious symbol of authority – and for many, of colonialism – was the British administration, from the august figure of the governor down to the most junior civil servant. In the early years of the war Sir Hubert Young ran Trinidad aristocratically, almost as a feudal fiefdom handed him by his liege in London. He was there to exploit the island for the Crown, not to develop and much less to enrich it. He had little sympathy for its chronic fiscal, labor, political, and social problems as well as injustices and was mainly interested in upholding the dominant financial, political, and social position of the planter aristocracy. Sir Hubert and the ruling white elite patronized the swank Union Club on Marine Square, which offered billiards and cards as well as lager beer and crab-backs. They took tea at St. Benedict Monastery. They shot birds in the Caroni marshes.

The British upper crust viewed the indigenous population with what can only be called disdain and arrogance. The governor's wife, Lady Margaret, in 1940 expressed the feelings of many of the British ruling elite in a private letter to Secretary of State for the Colonies Malcolm McDonald:

Local white creoles have no conception of manners, loyalty or any other civilized virtue. They simply do not live in the same box as ordinary human beings ... they are as strange and remote morally as the African and low-caste Indians.⁶

The war merely validated Governor Young's aristocratic inclinations – and gave him a splendid opportunity to clamp down on the few freedoms that the native Trinidadians enjoyed. And he was not about to share power, graciously or otherwise, with the Americans who arrived in early 1941 and to whom the government of Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill had given 99-year leases on parts of his fiefdom. The Americans would ultimately conclude that “Trinidad proved to be the most difficult of all the British colonies to deal with.”⁷

Poverty defined Trinidad. It was the glue that held the poorer segments of its society together. Gomes put it thus:

Poverty in Trinidad is not an extremity of coldness. On the contrary, it is suffocatingly hot and humid, bug ridden and flea-infested. Its olfactory characteristics consist in the main of emanations from the ubiquitous cesspits, stale piss and the aromatic goat flavour of sweating, unwashed bodies.⁸

Wages, whether in the oil patch, on the sugar and cocoa plantations, or in the small service sector, had been kept at bare subsistence levels. Wild fluctuations in the global sugar market in the 1930s and a precipitous plunge in 1940 in the price of raw sugar to below one cent per pound had brought more economic misery and uncertainty. Overpopulation made an already bad situation even worse. Last but not least, most food staples such as rice, wheat flour, salt fish, and lard had to be imported by ship. With the arrival of the U-boats of Operation New Land, Trinidad's

huddled poor literally lived from ship to ship bringing food, mainly from the United States.

Labor unrest had shaken the island just before World War II in what Gomes called “a crude surgery of murder, riot and arson.”⁹ On June 19, 1937, police officers had attempted to arrest the labor activist T. Uriah Butler while he was addressing a large crowd of workers of Apex (Trinidad) Oilfields Ltd. at Fyzabad. Butler was born in Granada and had seen service in World War I with the West India Regiment. He had come to Trinidad after the war to seek employment in the oil fields; he was badly injured on the job and left with a permanent limp, but received no compensation. It is not known whether it was this experience that set him off on a second career as the “Chief Servant” of Trinidad and prompted him to establish the British Empire Workers and Citizens Home Rule Party, but he quickly became a central figure on the island, combining religious fervor, showmanship, and anger at social injustice at his public meetings. As he drew larger crowds, his oratory grew angrier and more violent, possibly even seditious. On this particular afternoon, warrants were issued for his arrest and the bungling police decided to serve these at a large public meeting where Butler was speaking.

The mob rushed the police and gunfire broke out; the police chief was shot dead and another constable was severely beaten and burned to death.¹⁰ Within 48 hours, the wildcat strike had spread to the other oil fields and refineries on Trinidad, most notably the United British refinery at Point Fortin and the Trinidad Leaseholds plant at Pointe-à-Pierre. From there, the labor unrest had moved to the sugar mills and asphalt works. Stevedores and lighter-men in the ports had refused to report for work, thereby disrupting shipping of vitally needed food. Over the next weeks, the violence and looting had escalated and spread to the sugar and cocoa plantations. By early July, about 15 people had been killed and 45 seriously injured in the riots.

British authorities reacted swiftly and forcefully, for Trinidad’s three refineries provided 63 per cent of the Empire’s fuel oil. HMS *York*, a heavy cruiser with 8-inch guns and flagship of the Royal Navy’s America and West Indies Squadron, had been dispatched from Bermuda to Trinidad at once, as had troops of the Sherwood Foresters. They, along with about 200 hastily armed civilian guards, had helped to put an end to the violence and

to provide security for the oilfields and refineries. As war clouds gathered over Europe, London had been developing plans to build massive plants on Trinidad to produce high-octane aviation fuel for the Royal Air Force and hence had been in no mood to tolerate organized unrest in the oilfields. To ameliorate its heavy-handed military response, the Government had agreed to raise the pay for non-skilled, non-agricultural laborers in the cities, and it had promised to regulate the price of food for staples such as rice, coconut oil, salt fish, and flour.

A Royal Commission established to examine the causes of the 1937 unrest placed most of the blame on the island's appalling living conditions:

Fyzabad, a village which has grown up on the edge of the oilfields without any apparent regulation or control or observance of elementary rules as to structure, space or sanitation ... forms a suitable rendezvous for all the undesirable elements which congregate in the neighbourhood ... similar examples of the worst housing conditions adjacent to the oilfield exist at Frisco Junction, Point Fortin and Cochran Village Guapo.¹¹

In addition, lack of machinery to promote collective bargaining and a general belief that it was time for greater representation for the islanders in their government all combined to create conditions ripe for social explosion. Although improvements in living conditions and labor relations slowly followed, little was done about the political situation until well after the war.

Wages on Trinidad in 1939 remained abysmal¹² by any standard.¹³ What made the lot of Trinidadian workers utterly unbearable was the fact that the British colonial administration had set up a taxation system designed, in the words of the journalist Arthur Calder-Marshall, who visited the island in 1938–39, “to spare the rich and to soak the poor.”¹⁴ Additionally, colonial authorities had established a network of nefarious customs tariffs – at an *ad valorem* rate of 10 to 20 per cent – on imported building materials, clothing, coffee and tea, condiments, flour, household utensils, meat, medicines, shoes, and oils of every kind. A vast array of exemptions – for the Colonial Government, the Church, the diplomatic

corps, and even the Constabulary Sports Club – made perfectly clear the thrust of the legislation.¹⁵

In September 1939, Trinidad was automatically sucked into the vortex of war against this backdrop of fiscal and labor inequity. Not surprisingly, for many Trinidadians – and especially the well-to-do who had been educated in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania – the United States was a beacon of liberty and enlightenment. They found American society, especially in the North, to be more open, less class-ridden, and not as patronizing as that of Britain. They listened to American short-wave radio, kept up with American sports, read American magazines, saw Hollywood movies, and dreamed of someday owning a second-hand Ford, Chevrolet, or Pontiac. Many spoke openly of “secession” (from Britain) and of “union” (with the United States).

Trinidadians showed their pro-American and anti-British sentiments in numerous ways before the war. They cheered at the cheap movie theaters when newsreels showed photos of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. They refused to stand for “God Save the King,” their small way of “getting the better” of their British overlords. And they openly welcomed American visitors to Trinidad. The “Yanks” spent their money freely, more of them (than British) came to the Island, and when there, more of them hired taxis and tipped handsomely.¹⁶ They swayed to the music of Trinidad’s famous calypso singers, such as “Attila the Hun,” “The Lion,” “Lord Invader,” and “Radio.” They enjoyed their sojourns in the island paradise.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s stirring announcements of the Four Freedoms (of speech and worship, from want and fear) and of the Atlantic Charter (the rights of all peoples freely to choose their form of government) resonated in Trinidad. The historic “destroyers-for-bases” deal of September 1940 stirred many hopes for better days ahead in Port of Spain – for the inevitable clashes between the brash Yanks and the crusty Governor Young could only play into the hands of Trinidad’s political activists. Broad sections of the population anticipated that there would be the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Washington initially estimated the costs for military bases in the Caribbean basin at roughly \$200 million, with almost half earmarked for Trinidad.¹⁷ There would finally be jobs, real jobs at good American wages. New highways

would crisscross the island. New docks would bring the world's commercial traffic to Trinidad. New airfields would connect it to the rest of the Americas.

Thus, hopes ran high in the fall of 1940 when the first United States mission arrived in Trinidad on the light cruiser USS *St. Louis* and immediately made it clear that its members were coming, not to defend the British Empire or enrich the locals, but to advance American security needs. Not surprisingly, a bureaucratic "cold war" broke out at once among Governor Young, the US War Department, General Frank M. Andrews, chief of the Caribbean Defense Command, and Rear Admiral J. W. Greenslade, who headed the mission.¹⁸

Governor Young officially welcomed his "guests for such a long time" – 99 years, to be exact – and then launched into a plethora of concerns about what he believed the Americans wanted, including a significant expansion of the fleet anchorage and bases "dotted about in different localities all over the Colony." He claimed that the Americans seemed to leave no role at all for Britain concerning ASW measures to be taken. They viewed Trinidad alone as being worth "forty out of the fifty destroyers that had been handed over by the United States Government" as part of the September 1940 deal. They intended Trinidad, rather than being the center for the fight against German U-boats, to be the primary "jumping-off ground for operations by the United States Army in South America." Given that the U-boat attacks in the Caribbean were still a year and a half away, there was no doubt much to this, but then Young had no better foreknowledge of the U-boat campaign than did the Americans.

The US mission demanded vast tracts of Trinidad as sites for air bases. The testy governor at first offered what the Americans deemed to be a "large, miasmic swamp" between Port of Spain and San Fernando.¹⁹ Greenslade rejected this outright and insisted on the greater part of Trinidad's northwest peninsula, and especially an area known as the Cumuto Reserve west of the town of Sangre Grande, for the US Navy. In effect, Young had offered the Americans some of the worst land on the island and the Americans insisted on some of the best.²⁰ Young would have none of it. On December 4, he flew to Washington for discussions with US Secretary of State Cordell Hull and the British Ambassador, Lord Lothian. President Roosevelt then appointed a special commission to resolve

the base sites problems and sent them to Trinidad. The commission sided with Greenslade, but Young dug in his heels. On December 20, the president announced that the Trinidad bases question was to be a matter of direct negotiations with Prime Minister Churchill.²¹ The Americans carried their case in March 1941 – in part because Roosevelt let it be known to British authorities that if he “leaked” the details of these desultory negotiations, the result might be defeat of the Lend-lease Bill, then before Congress.²²

Thus, the Americans acquired the Cumuto Reserve, where they built Waller Air Field and the Fort Reid army base on 18 square miles. They also received the entire northwest peninsula east of Arima, the five “quarantine islands” off Port of Spain for their fleet anchorage, a small recreation strip on Trinidad’s eastern coast, “supply and gun wharf facilities” in the capital itself, and an auxiliary airfield east of Longdenville. As well, Rear Admiral Greenslade insisted that the US Navy occupy and arm the islands of the Dragon’s Mouth and the Serpent’s Mouth to protect the entrances to the Gulf of Paria.

The Americans selected Port of Spain to be their primary naval base and materials shipment center. Although its harbor had to be dredged regularly, it provided good docking facilities at King’s Wharf, which, in turn, had a decent rail connection to the city. But the vast amount of men and materials scheduled to garrison Trinidad against the U-boat threat soon overtaxed Port of Spain’s facilities, and hence the Americans established a second base, Docksite, adjacent to King’s Wharf. Extending along the Gulf of Paria for some 1,000 meters, Docksite in 1941 was an undeveloped, tidal mudflat of about 28 acres. It would eventually be expanded to include 183 acres and to reach as far west as Chaguaramas.

Preparations for the site of the US Navy base at Chaguaramas began March 1, 1941; on the 31st the Americans formally took possession; on June 1, they commissioned the base. Under the existing Defense Regulations and the Trinidad Base Agreement, they expelled local residents to construct the naval base. By mid-March, the last 25 families had been given notices to leave their homes at Nicholas. By mid-December, residents at Staubles Bay, Saline Bay, and Tetron Bay had received similar notices. Their homes were demolished and, to add insult to injury, they were denied use of their former beach clubs and holiday homes.

The first American contingent of six officers, 995 enlisted men, and ten civilians arrived on May 5, 1941.²³ Within months, contractors at Port of Spain and Chaguaramas threw up a plethora of buildings: general depots, warehouses, repair shops, seaplane hangars, administration buildings, a theater, a hospital, and even a new, large army wharf. Concurrently, work gangs labored around the clock to dredge deep channels through the mudflats for use by ocean-going tankers, bauxite carriers, and merchant steamers. Local black labor had long worked the mudflats. British journalist Calder-Marshall left a vivid description: "Fivepence an hour, ten hours a day.... Nightshift, dayshift, nightshift. Ten hours on, fourteen off.... The noon sun blazing, rain like gravel on the back, the sudden cold, the steam of drying."²⁴

According to island legend, the Americans at Chaguaramas gave birth to the steel band. Base personnel threw out garbage in empty steel (mostly oil) drums and burned the contents at noxious dump sites. Trinidadians working on the base observed that as the drums heated up in the fire, they gave off peculiar sounds, "and so began the long and laboured experimentation that resulted in the unique music from empty steel containers."²⁵

The dramatic expansion of port facilities between Port of Spain and Chaguaramas did not sit well with Trinidad's educated elite. Eric Williams, the future first prime minister of an independent Trinidad and Tobago, lamented both the length of the leases (99 years) and the United States' selection of Chaguaramas, the natural site for any future expansion of Port of Spain, for its major naval base.²⁶ He argued that no formal deed of lease had been registered at Port of Spain. He remonstrated that many residents of Chaguaramas had received inadequate compensation when the US Army expropriated their homes for base construction. He complained that islanders had suffered from the spiraling inflation brought about by this massive infusion of "Yankee dollars" – the cost of living had escalated from a base of 100 in 1939 to 170 by 1942.²⁷ Yet, in the end, "wartime necessity" overruled such considerations.

Having been rebuffed by Washington on the matter of strategic bases, Governor Young turned the discussions toward the environment. The Aripo River at best supplied 4 million gallons of fresh water a day. He offered the Americans 20 to 25 gallons per man per day; they demanded 100 gallons because Americans "were accustomed to take shower-baths." With

as many as 40,000 soldiers, sailors, contractors, and construction crews expected to arrive soon, Young calculated that the Aripo River reserves would be totally exhausted.²⁸ His argument fell on deaf ears.

Young then returned to his earlier offer of the Caroni Swamp. His “naval, military and air advisers,” he allowed, had calculated that this vast site south of the capital would permit the Americans to place all their air and naval assets in one central area; would obviate the need to punch new roads through the mountainous terrain of the Northwest; would permit use of existing shore batteries to protect the oil refineries; would facilitate the building of two airfields; and would “eliminate the possibility of constructing any form of British naval base in Trinidad for the next hundred years.” The last argument, especially, was hardly attractive to Greenslade. The admiral’s consulting engineers countered that reclamation of the Caroni Swamp would “be quite impractical for military purposes” as it would “take 15 years to complete,” given that the swamp would have to be built “up to a height of 10 feet on the shore line and 15 to 20 feet inland.” More, the mud of the Caroni River would not support “the heavy weights necessitated by military requirement.” In short, any military development of the swamp would “be fighting against nature.”²⁹ Greenslade insisted that his naval base be sited at Chaguaramas. It was.

The indefatigable Governor Young then shifted his diplomatic offensive to the fiscal and customs privileges extended to the American forces as well as to military and civil jurisdiction on the bases. He demanded that British laws and taxation prevail. He lost the battle on all fronts: the Americans simply were unwilling to place base security in British hands or to recognize British civil courts. They insisted on (and received) complete extra-territorial rights at all base sites. The final settlement between Washington and London was clear on the matter. “His Majesty’s Government agree that the United States may exercise ... all such rights, powers and authority as may be necessary for conducting any military operations deemed desirable by the United States.”³⁰ The document left no room for Anglo-American “joint” efforts, or even for mutual consultation.

Governor Young’s final gambit was to demand that British contractors be allowed to bid for construction of the American bases. In this, too, he lost. The Eastern Division, US Corps of Engineers, made certain that contracts went to American firms on a negotiated cost-plus-fee basis. It

also decreed that most of the construction materials had to come from the United States. Its commander, Colonel Joseph D. Arthur, Jr., dispatched the first construction crews to the Docksite area at Port of Spain in March 1941. As for Governor Young, continued labor unrest combined with deteriorating Anglo-American relations on Trinidad prompted London to recall him (on grounds of “ill health”) in June 1942 and to replace him with the more diplomatic Sir Bede Clifford. Eventually the US Corps of Engineers spent roughly \$82 million (\$993 million in 2010 dollars) on construction in Trinidad, second only to what was spent defending the Panama Canal.

By mid-May 1941, construction was well underway at all the base sites. Barracks and mess halls, hangars and runways, taxiways and control towers sprang up as local labor was hired and construction workers poured in from the United States. By the end of June, temporary runways were in use on St. Lucia, Antigua, and British Guiana. Heavy rain delayed construction on Trinidad, but a 5,000-foot runway was completed there by October. Almost immediately, labor problems erupted on Jamaica and Trinidad when local trade unions protested wages and working conditions and the lack of housing for domestic workers. The American commander of the Trinidad sector attributed the labor troubles to “Nazi sympathizers and Fifth Columnists in the Guianas.” No evidence was ever found to substantiate these charges. Most of the friction that arose from time to time between the islands’ peoples and the American military stemmed from the completely different cultural backgrounds of the two groups, the boisterousness of young men far from home seeking drink, women, and a howling good time when off duty, and the military’s failure to foresee the immense social strains that would arise. As the official history of the US Army in World War II concluded:

Too little cognizance was taken of the incapacity of Americans generally to adapt their ways to those of strangers or to take comfort or serious interest in unfamiliar surroundings. Too little attention was given to preparing the men for the antipathy of a local populace, however friendly, toward any foreign garrison, however well-intentioned.³¹

Despite the difficulties of climate, distance, differences of culture, and differences of nationality, the base construction went remarkably quickly. On Sunday, April 20, 1941, US infantry and coast artillery units arrived in Bermuda; four days later the men of the 1st Bomber Squadron arrived in Trinidad from Panama. Their aircraft were flown in eight days after that. Then, on May 5, infantry and artillery units arrived from New York. On all the islands and in British Guiana, base airstrips were completed, coastal defense installations were manned, radar stations were put into operation, and planes – Navy Catalinas and Army bombers and fighters – arrived by the score. Great Exuma and Antigua hosted air strips while a small army base was established on Jamaica. St. Lucia had an extensive base capable of housing an entire army division along with a large air base. British Guiana hosted a small US Army unit that guarded the Georgetown airport where both American and British military aircraft were based. Trinidad was home to Fort Reid, a major army base and a large airfield. In all, 189 bombers and 202 fighters³² were based across the islands, backed by a handful of Royal Navy ships and United States Navy destroyers. In August 1941, discussions began with the Dutch government-in-exile and the British to station US troops on Aruba and Curaçao, to replace the two British infantry battalions that had been stationed there the year before and to establish a US garrison in Suriname. Close to 1,000 US soldiers began to arrive in Suriname in late November 1941 with artillery, bombers, and fighters. By December 1941, several squadrons of Army reconnaissance and bomber squadrons, equipped primarily with twin engine B-18 “Bolos” and A-20 “Havocs,” were deployed around the Caribbean as well as some Navy patrol squadrons equipped with twin engine Catalinas.

The sporadic air patrols carried out by these aircraft were better than nothing, but the planes were not equipped for antisubmarine warfare, the crews were untrained in spotting or attacking subs and, quite simply, there were not enough of them. A number of old World War 1-era US Navy and Royal Navy destroyers plied the Caribbean and the odd Dutch naval vessel. But as one major study by the US Army on the antisubmarine war in the Caribbean later recorded:



Douglas B-18B (S/N 37-530, originally a B-18A) with the Magnetic Anomaly Detection (MAD) tail boom. B-18s were frequently used for anti-submarine warfare in the Caribbean theatre (U.S. Air Force Photo). Source: National Museum of the US Air Force, <http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil>.

That the U-boat menace would grow to gigantic proportions in this area was not predicted in the War Department or in the Caribbean Defense Command, and extensive development of procedures and materials to offset any underwater campaign was not included in the early preparations. The problem of antisubmarine measures at that time concerned the Caribbean Defense Command primarily as it should affect the Canal, although enemy U-boat operation in the whole Atlantic area had already begun to cause concern.³³

Beginning shortly after the United States entered the war, air and ground forces were dispatched to key islands in the Caribbean (Trinidad, Panama, Puerto Rico). Trinidad had the largest contingent of US forces: 12,000 ground troops and 4,000 aircrew and command and maintenance personnel. One bomb group of 55 aircraft, one pursuit (fighter) group of 130, and



Douglas A-20A of the 58th Bomb Squadron over Oahu, Hawaii, on May 29, 1941. The United States Army Airforce deployed several A-20 “Havocs” for anti-submarine patrols in the Caribbean (U.S. Air Force photo). Source: National Museum of the US Air Force <http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil>.

one reconnaissance squadron of 13 were also based there. In the Panama Canal Zone, the US Navy operated Patrol Wing Three composed of 26 PBY Catalina flying boats while the Army Air Forces’ 59th Bombardment Squadron consisted of 12 A-20 “Havocs.”

The aircraft operated by the US Navy and the Army Air Forces in the Caribbean theater were not well suited to the job of hunting and killing U-boats. The PBY was first flown in 1935 as an amphibious naval reconnaissance aircraft. It was originally designed as a torpedo bomber but was almost never used in that role. The main armament on early models was two .50-caliber machine guns in large waist blisters, one .50- or .30-caliber machine gun in the nose, and one .50-caliber in the bottom rear aft of the hull step. Early PBYs had no searchlights or purpose-built depth bombs. They were slow, with maximum speed less than 200 miles per hour, but did have a maximum range of 3,100 miles. The B-18 was a military version of the Douglas DC-2 transport with a thicker forward



Consolidated PB5Y-5A Catalina in white camouflage for hunting submarines.
iStock photo.

fuselage and a glassed-in nose. It carried only three light machine guns but could accommodate up to 4,000 pounds of bombs or depth charges in its bomb bay. It was about 20 miles per hour faster than the PB5Y but had half the range. The A-20 was by far the newest and best of the aircraft, far more heavily armed with a crew of three and a maximum bomb (or depth charge) load of 4,000 pounds and at least 100 miles per hour faster than the PB5Y or the B-18. Unfortunately, the A-20 light bombers were in great demand in all theaters of the war, and in this early period only very limited numbers were available to Caribbean Defense Command. Moreover, the bulk of the new four-engine B-17s and B-24s, with much longer ranges and carrying capacity than the navy planes or the B-18s and A-20s, were used to patrol the Pacific side of the Panama Canal.

The available ASW aircraft were dispersed throughout the Caribbean, with a squadron each at Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Saint Croix, Antigua, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Georgetown, and Paramaribo – when Brazilian permission was obtained. Each base was to mount regular air patrols

in seaward sweeps while naval vessels in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, supplemented the coverage. As usual, competition between the army and the navy hindered a joint defense; less than a week after Pearl Harbor, the commanding general of the Caribbean Air Force refused to assume responsibility for long-range reconnaissance since “that was the mission assigned the Navy forces.”³⁴

Prolonged and somewhat difficult negotiations between the Dutch government-in-exile and the United States – at one point the Americans began to prepare for an invasion of the Dutch islands from Trinidad – delayed the arrival of American aircraft on Aruba and Curaçao until mid-January 1942, when units of 59th Bombardment Squadron arrived in the Netherlands West Indies from the Canal Zone. One flight was stationed at Dakota Field, Aruba; the other at Hato Field, Curaçao. These were the first US combatants on the Dutch islands and they found the facilities less than perfect. Dakota Field (today Queen Beatrix International Airport) was on the west side of the island, about 15 kilometers from San Nicolas harbor and the Lago refineries. Its 2,500-foot gravel runway, like that at Hato Field, was too short for the A-20s and had to be doubled in length and paved. In the early days, officers and men lived in temporary wooden barracks; flight crews slept in tents near the aircraft; and almost all had to do with saltwater showers.³⁵ The land defenses of the two Dutch islands in January 1942 consisted of Royal Netherlands Marines and Dutch military police, shored up by a British infantry battalion on each island. Little joint training was undertaken and almost no preparations were made for any possible invasion. As one US report put it, “British troops were anxious to leave and Dutch troops were equally anxious to have them do so.”³⁶ American troops began to arrive on the islands on February 11.³⁷ Their first task was to move into the facilities that the British had left.

In the Caribbean as elsewhere, the German victory over France forced a rapid and thorough reconsideration of local defense measures and heightened American concerns about the security of the Panama Canal. This turn of events, along with Churchill’s desire to entice the United States to take more of the burden for the defense of shipping in the Battle of the Atlantic, led to a rapid buildup of US forces from Suriname to the Bahamas to Bermuda. When the U-boats arrived in Caribbean waters,

there was at least some defense in place to meet them. It was ironic, however, that the U-boat threat against the UK that had largely prompted the British to offer up the leased bases in the first place was so little considered in US defense planning for the Caribbean. When the United States went to war in early December 1941, its troops and aircraft were ready to take on the nonexistent German aircraft carriers but were completely unready for German submarines.

* * *

Back in Lorient, the U-boat crews wasted not a moment in preparing for their departure. As soon as the work details at the Kéroman bunkers had completed repairs to *U-161* on January 20, Albrecht Achilles took his boat northward into the Scorff River. The technical gang stowed 25 torpedoes, 15 below and ten in pressurized tubes under the upper deck's wooden planks. Next, they hoisted on board 110 rounds of 10.5-cm shells for the deck gun as well as 2,625 rounds for the 3.7-cm and 4,250 for the 2-cm anti-aircraft guns (FLAK). It was hard work in a wet, cold January. Then *U-161* bunkered 214 tons of fuel oil, six tons of lubricating oil, and five tons of drinking water. Finally, it took on food supplies for the long journey by a crew of 49 officers and men. It was an awesome sight.³⁸ Below decks disappeared literally mountains of crates with canned goods: beef, pork, lamb, ham, sausages, sardines, herring, lentils, cauliflower, spinach, sauerkraut, asparagus, kale, mixed fruit, apple sauce, as well as an abundant supply of salt and sugar, coffee and milk. The arrival of 50 tropical pith helmets aroused a good bit of conjecture among the seamen. Last but not least, *U-161* took on board 15 bottles of "medicinal" cognac, to be rationed out by Achilles for persistent "colds" among the crew.

Finally, the moment of departure was at hand. *U-67*, *U-156*, and *U-502* were first to put to sea on January 19, 1942, followed five days later by *U-161* and *U-129*. On *U-161* Werner Bender reported: "All hands present and accounted for! Engine room crew ready! Upper and lower decks cleared for departure!" Achilles snapped a brisk, "Thanks. Heil *I WO*."³⁹ Then to the crew: "Eyes front! At ease!" Bender ordered, "Let go all lines!" The fenders were hauled in, hawsers cast off from the old hulk *Isère*. A military band struck up the navy's unofficial anthem, *Wir fahren*

gegen England. Officers waved good-bye and wished the Kaleus “Good Hunting!”

“Engines ahead one-third!” The electric motors began to hum. Slowly, *U-161* glided into Lorient’s main harbor channel. The water was a turgid dark brown, a nauseous mix of oil, seaweed, tar, and sewage. An armada of dilapidated tugs and fishing boats, prams and ferries, lighters and oil barges, flitted about. A blast from the submarine’s “Typhon” signal horn summoned one of the patrol boats from the so-called “bedbug flotilla.” “Starboard engine slow ahead! Rudder hard to port!” The nine-cylinder MAN diesels roared to life, spewing out their gray-blue exhaust fumes.

The hull and deck plates began to vibrate. Cold sea spray greeted the watch on the bridge. It was just past 1 p.m., January 24, 1942.

Off the starboard side, the deck crews could make out a small number of Vice Admiral Karl Dönitz’s staff officers waving their caps from the bunker roof of the Villa Kerillon.⁴⁰ As *U-161* passed the narrows between Kernével and Port-Louis, it picked up its escort boat, a minesweeper. Then it headed for Rendezvous Point *Luci-2*. The day was gray and overcast. Force 4 winds. Moderate sea swells. Achilles gave the order to shape a course: “Destination San Miguel (Azores).” It was the first rendezvous point. Ahead lay what the Kaleus joyously referred to as the “Golden West.”

