



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

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THE ALLIES REGROUP

In the U-boat war in the Caribbean, the German force was united and operated at the direction of one commander, Admiral Karl Dönitz. He daily sized up the course of the campaign, evaluated Allied successes and failures, estimated Allied strengths and weaknesses, and deployed his forces accordingly. By contrast, the Allied defense was about as disunited as it could be. In the United States, army-navy rivalry was as old as the Republic and had contributed, at least in part, to the debacle at Pearl Harbor. The United States and its Caribbean Allies – the United Kingdom and the Netherlands government-in-exile – agreed on the overall aim of the war and the Caribbean campaign, but disagreed on details. Central and South American nations drawn into the fray controlled all of the western and southern shore of the Caribbean; they had a long and troublesome history with their powerful northern neighbor. Unity of command would not be easy to achieve, but victory would not be possible without the help and cooperation of all the anti-Axis forces in the theater.

Unity of command among US forces was the first obstacle to be overcome. Secretary of War Henry Stimson discovered on December 12, 1941, that no scheme for establishing unity of command existed for Panama, which was then considered the most likely target for attack by Japan. He asked Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall to draw up a directive placing all US forces in the Panama Coastal Frontier, except for fleet units, under army command. When Stimson laid the plan before the Cabinet later in the day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved the idea by the simple expedient of taking a map and scrawling “army” over the Panama Canal Zone and “navy” over the Caribbean Coastal Frontier, and then adding “O.K. – F.D.R.” When General Leonard T. Gerow

later took the papers to a meeting of high-ranking naval officers including Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief Atlantic Fleet, only one man – Admiral Richmond K. Turner – opposed the unity scheme. He was overridden by the argument that if the army and the navy did not work together effectively, the president might establish a new Department of National Defense to which both the army and the navy would be subordinate. By December 18, Roosevelt’s directive had been instituted. The army assumed command of the defense of Panama, the navy that of the Caribbean; units of each service in either area would be at the disposal of the service commander in that area.¹

In the weeks following the Pearl Harbor attack, reinforcements were sent to both Panama and the Caribbean as quickly as possible. The Canal Zone came first with two infantry regiments, two barrage balloon units, one field artillery battalion, and 1,800 artillery replacements. Anti-aircraft guns as well as fighter and bomber reinforcements were also dispatched, raising the total garrison to 47,600 combatants by the end of January 1942. The buildup on Puerto Rico was impeded both by the flow of supplies to Panama and because it seemed to lie far beyond any enemy’s grasp. Thus, only about 800 men were added to the island in the two months following America’s entry into the war. US naval defenses in the Caribbean were wholly inadequate for the job. There, Rear Admiral John H. Hoover’s force consisted of two old “four stacker” destroyers, three small “S” class submarines, two World War I vintage sub-chasers and twelve patrol planes. Trinidad, which was to play a key role in the battle, was covered by two converted yachts, two small patrol craft, and four patrol planes.²

The overall defense plan for the area, RAINBOW 5, called for armed assistance to “recognized governments” in Latin America and for the “protective occupation” of colonies belonging to allied European powers to alleviate those Allies of the burden of defending their colonies – and also, no doubt, to shore up the defenses of the Panama Canal. Washington shortly entered into discussions with the Dutch government-in-exile concerning the defenses of the Netherlands Antilles. The discussions were somewhat sticky – the Dutch were appalled at the prospect, wholly theoretical, that Venezuelan troops might defend Aruba and Curaçao – but were concluded on January 26, 1942. Eventually, a combined Dutch-American

headquarters was established. In the meantime, six A-20 attack bombers flew to the islands in mid-January. A British garrison of 1,400 troops was pulled off and sent back to the United Kingdom; 2,300 American soldiers equipped with 155-mm coastal guns were sent from New Orleans in early February. The U-boats struck before those troops were ready.

Local Combined Defense Committees were set up to coordinate between the military and civil authorities. They consisted of the colonial governor as chair and convener, the senior officers of the local military (American and British in most cases), and other local bureaucrats. Only on Trinidad was there significant trouble, as the governor, Sir Hubert Young, insisted on his authority as local commander, a position the senior American officer refused to accept. Eventually, the Americans replaced the local commander with a man of higher rank; London fired its governor and dispatched a more reasonable man.³

* * *

The attack on Aruba brought home to all Caribbean nations that German submarines were suddenly a clear and present danger to the lives, property, and livelihood of any whose existence depended on the commerce of the Caribbean Sea. Even so, the independent Latin American republics of the region had a long and troublesome relationship with the United States and, in some important cases, the mistrust generated thereby did not disappear overnight.

Between 1890 and 1932, US military forces intervened in the Latin American republics 19 times. They occupied Cuba in 1906–8, and then returned twice after that. They intervened in Haiti in 1891 and in 1914 returned for nine years. They operated in Nicaragua five times before virtually occupying that country for 20 years starting in 1914. The United States also used troops to protect its interests in Argentina, Chile, Panama, Honduras, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. As well, Washington played a heavy hand in enforcing debt collection, backing major American-owned enterprises such as the United Fruit Company, intervening in elections, protecting allied dictators, or installing friendly regimes. Roosevelt declared a “Good Neighbor” policy toward these republics shortly after he was inaugurated

in 1933, and three years later relinquished the “right” of the United States to intervene in Panama – a “right” which the United States had declared in 1903 when its intervention against Colombia had “allowed” Panama to declare independence.

In 1936, Anastasio Somoza García seized power in Nicaragua. On the night of December 7, 1941, the pro-American Somoza threw his country’s support on the side of the Allies and placed Nicaragua’s entire territory, including sea, air, and land, at the service of the United States until the Axis was defeated. The airports at Managua and Puerto Cabezas were operated by US Army personnel and the US Navy built a sea plane base at Corinto. In 1943, a medium-range radio loop station was opened at Managua airport and the runway was extended to facilitate long-range bombers flying antisubmarine sweeps between Managua and Guatemala City. Nicaraguan cooperation, combined with the considerable US air and naval contingents in the Panama Canal Zone, allowed the Americans to establish a formidable air presence over the southwestern stretches of the Colombian Basin and the northern approaches to the Panama Canal.

Honduras began to mount its own antisubmarine sweeps on the Caribbean coast in July 1942 but did not notify the Americans. It also authorized the use of Puerto Castillo as an advanced naval air base for sea planes near the Strait of Yucatán.

Mexico had cooperated with the United States in counterespionage and intelligence since before Pearl Harbor. President Manuel Ávila Camacho, elected in 1940, took an increasingly pro-American position as Axis military triumphs mounted. On April 13, 1941, Mexico and the United States signed an agreement calling for reciprocal use of air bases for mutual defense, and nine days later Mexico closed all German consulates and expelled Berlin’s diplomatic corps in response to its perceived interference in Mexican politics.⁴ The Mexican government had little to offer in air and sea forces at the start of the Caribbean campaign, but its army and air force gladly accepted American weapons and training. Mexico granted permission to the United States to build an airfield on the island of Cozumel from which sweeps were conducted across the Yucatán Channel. On May 25, 1942, Mexico declared war on the Axis in the wake of the sinking of the Mexican-flagged tankers *Potrero del Llano* (by *U-564*) and *Faja de Oro* (by *U-106*).

Cuban cooperation was vital to guarding the entrances to the Gulf of Mexico – the Yucatán Channel and the Straits of Florida. Both were easily patrolled by air from western Cuba, southern Florida, and Mexico. Cuba, in the words of the official US Army history of World War II, “promised a great deal as a cobelligerent,” but its “participation in definite activities was small.” The Cubans took little interest in protecting their coastline from submarine threats. After James L. Collins, Commanding General of the Puerto Rican Department, pressed Cuba in late September 1942, Havana promised “the fullest Cuban cooperation.” Nonetheless, on a visit to the island a month later, Collins came away convinced that the Cubans were still dragging their heels in patrolling “certain designated deep water shorelines” to deny their use by German submarines.⁵ Nevertheless, Havana granted Washington permission to build airbases near San Antonio de los Baños and at Camagüey, both of which allowed US aircraft to patrol the Bahamas Channel as well as the Strait of Yucatán. The US Navy also operated airship bases at San Julian on the western tip of the island and at Caibarién and the Isle of Pines.

Cuba’s initial reluctance vanished quickly after signing a naval and military cooperation agreement with the United States on September 9, 1942. The old cruiser *Cuba* was modernized, along with the school ship *Patria*. Cuba’s small flotilla of gunboats and patrol craft were also modernized, while 12 patrol craft were transferred from the US Navy to the Cuban Navy. In May 1943, a flotilla of Cuban patrol aircraft in conjunction with a US Navy Kingfisher aircraft sank *U-176*, which had destroyed 11 Allied ships of 53,307 tons. By the end of the war, Cuban air and naval units had escorted close to 500 ships and rescued 221 shipwrecked sailors.⁶

Colombian President Eduardo Santos Montejó in August 1938 had campaigned on a foreign policy that favored improved relations with the United States. His position stemmed partly from his distaste for the racism of the Nazi government and partly because protecting the approaches to the Panama Canal was a fundamental Colombian national interest. Thus, throughout 1939 and 1940, US air and naval missions began to work more closely with Colombian armed forces to concert defensive arrangements for the canal. But Colombia insisted on limiting just what Americans would be allowed to do from its territory or airspace. It extended no invitations to the Americans to establish bases prior to Pearl Harbor. On

March 17, 1942, after the first wave of submarine attacks in the Caribbean began, Bogotá and Washington signed a lend-lease agreement providing for some \$16.5 million of military assistance.⁷

When a Colombian schooner plying the waters between the mainland and the San Andrés Archipelago was sunk by a U-boat in August 1942, and four of its survivors were machine-gunned in the water, Bogotá granted the Americans permission to establish a base at Cartagena. Subsequently, the US Navy set up a PBY base near Cartagena and used the civil airport at Barranquilla as a base for army patrol bombers.⁸

Venezuela was, without question, the most strategically important of the Latin American republics bordering the Caribbean. Its northern coastline constituted the longest shoreline of any Caribbean nation; the key islands of Trinidad and the Netherlands Antilles lay within easy flying reach of its shores; and the oil fields of Lake Maracaibo were a major petroleum asset to the Allies. When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, Venezuela declared strict neutrality and continued to trade with both sides. Right after Pearl Harbor, Venezuela's new president, General Isaías Medina Angarita, reaffirmed its neutrality, but then froze Axis accounts, impounded Axis ships, and severed diplomatic relations with the Axis countries.⁹

Following the Third Conference of the foreign ministers of the American Republics held at Rio de Janeiro beginning on January 15, 1942, Venezuela and the United States agreed to exchange information concerning western hemisphere defense, but little progress was made. Venezuela's hesitant approach to Caribbean defense continued even after the February 16 U-boat attacks on Aruba and the lake tankers. On the one hand, Caracas and Washington concluded arrangements regarding black-outs of tankers, shutting off Venezuelan coastal navigation aids at times of danger, and placing the movements of the lake tanker fleet under the voluntary control of the Royal Navy on Curaçao. On the other hand, a US initiative to work collectively in defense planning essentially led nowhere. In March, military representatives from Venezuela and Colombia arrived at General Frank M. Andrews' Caribbean Defense Command headquarters in the Canal Zone to coordinate defense planning with the United States. The Colombian officers appeared to be operating with a considerable degree of executive authority, but not those from Venezuela,

who referred almost everything to President Medina – which was virtually useless for planning purposes. In mid-May, two of the three Venezuelan officers returned home; Colonel Centano, the leader of the delegation, stayed in Panama until early 1943 but “performed hardly any service in his liaison capacity.”¹⁰

Venezuela’s armed forces – like those of all the Central and most of the South American states – were obsolete, under-equipped and poorly trained. The country eventually acquired a handful of gunboats and aircraft from the United States under Lend-Lease, but its greatest defense potential for the Allied war against the U-boats was its ports and airfields. Until the submarine attacks of February 16, President Medina refused to allow US military aircraft to fly over Venezuelan territory without 24 hours’ advance notice; eight days later he relented. The Americans constantly pushed for greater cooperation but with little success. As one US Army account of the period concluded, there was considerable discrepancy “between [Venezuela’s] expressed desire to cooperate with the United States on mutual military measures and her reluctance to take the necessary steps therefor.”¹¹ In June, Medina allowed the US Sixth Air Force to station a small detachment at Maracaibo to service and refuel American antisubmarine aircraft, and gave US warships permission to enter Venezuelan waters. In mid-March, a detachment of 283 US soldiers was admitted to set up coast artillery units at Puerto de la Cruz and Las Piedras, about 150 miles east of Caracas.¹²

The attack on Aruba galvanized the British, the Dutch, and the Central American Republics to cooperate far more fully with the United States in mounting a defense of the Caribbean. What mattered most was both the willingness of these Allies to give US forces virtually unlimited access to their air space and coastal waters and to allow the United States to set up bases for either land or sea-based antisubmarine aircraft. Once sufficient antisubmarine resources – particularly aircraft – were marshaled, the ring of bases around the Caribbean promised to turn it into an Allied lake.

* * *

The first layer of defenses against the U-boats consisted of antisubmarine nets, searchlights, sea mines, and coastal artillery. The entrances to the

Panama Canal were well guarded by all three by mid-February 1942, but little else was in the Caribbean or Gulf of Mexico. The US Army laid sea mines in the approaches to the Panama Canal, but none in the Puerto Rico or Trinidad sectors. The US Navy mined the entrances to the Gulf of Paria in Trinidad – over the objections of the Royal Navy, which maintained that the fast flowing currents through the Serpent’s Mouth and the Dragon’s Mouth would render them ineffective. The Royal Navy’s predictions proved all too true. The water flow pulled many of the 350 mines well below the surface and ships drawing up to 22 feet were able to pass safely over them. That included surfaced U-boats running the passages by night. Later, some of the mines broke from their moorings and began to drift, some as far as the waters around Curaçao and Aruba, posing a severe hazard to shipping.¹³ After the war, a US study of antisubmarine measures in the Caribbean theater concluded that “the effectiveness of the minefields was extremely doubtful.”¹⁴

The buildup of coastal artillery around the Caribbean began shortly after the fall of France in June 1940. The gun batteries had two purposes – to protect minefields in those few places where they were laid, and to deny surfaced submarines (or other vessels) the ability to enter or even approach important harbors and chokepoints. Many US coastal artillery units were built around the 155-mm “Long Tom” howitzer, which threw a 95-pound shell some 15 miles with high accuracy, or the 90-mm anti-aircraft or anti-torpedo boat guns, which fired high-velocity rounds with a flat trajectory up to 12,600 yards. Dutch and British artillery were also emplaced.

In March 1941, the 252nd Coast Artillery Regiment, training at Fort Moultrie, South Carolina, was ordered to send its headquarters and “C” and “D” batteries to Trinidad, where it set up on Chacachacare Island. The unit was directed to guard the entrance to the Serpent’s Mouth. The unit’s “A” and “F” batteries were sent to Aruba. They began to arrive in early February 1942 but were not properly emplaced or ranged when Werner Hartenstein and *U-156* attacked and thus were unable to return fire.¹⁵ In July 1942, a composite field artillery battery of 121 men and four 155-mm guns was sent to Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala. The men languished there. There was constant friction between the Americans and the locals. The GIs suffered high malaria and venereal

disease rates and had to be relieved after six months. Eventually, the battery was turned over to the Guatemalan government.¹⁶

This was the pattern throughout the islands. American troops were sent in small garrisons to Haiti, Antigua, St. Lucia, St. Croix, St. Thomas, Jamaica, Trinidad, Aruba, Curaçao, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico, where they saw virtually no action – the vast majority of their guns were never fired in anger. The islands may at first have seemed like small Gardens of Eden, but everything was different from the life the men had known and they were far from homes and families. The opportunity for bored and pissed-off soldiers to get into trouble was everywhere, from too much island rum to too many island girls. In many cases, the Americans could hardly wait to turn these garrisons over to local forces.

Nowhere was the problem more intractable than on Trinidad. In the fall of 1941, Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf took command of the Trinidad Sector and turned Chaguaramas into a formidable naval station for six US Navy and three Royal Navy destroyers, six gunboats, one submarine, 14 patrol boats, and a host of smaller craft. Over the coming year, “Oley” Oldendorf and his staff greatly built up their forces to face the expected third wave of U-boats: some 50 US Navy and Coast Guard, 26 Royal Navy and two Royal Canadian Navy escort vessels; 13 sea-gray Martin PBM Mariners (VP 74); and 12 PBY Catalinas (VP 53).¹⁷ The first American advance ground elements consisted of the 11th Infantry and the 252nd Coast Artillery, whose 155-mm guns were sited on Chacachacare and Monos islands at the northern entrance to the Gulf of Paria. It was these units Albrecht Achilles and *U-161* had outwitted after their daring raid on Port of Spain in February 1942.

The pace of base-building in the interior of the island was frenetic. The Walsh Construction Company and the George F. Driscoll Company first removed a thick canopy of jungle vegetation over a 17,000-acre tract and then built a temporary gravel runway – followed in January and June 1942 by two mile-long concrete runways. At a cost of \$52.4 million (\$717 million in 2012 dollars), the most expensive Atlantic base ever built by the Corps of Engineers, Waller Field (and the adjacent Army post of Fort Reid) eventually housed 8,500 men and 51 aviation-fuel storage tanks. But even this gigantic complex was inadequate for the massive air assault being organized against the U-boats, and in December 1941 work

began on new 5,000-foot runways at adjoining Xeres Field and Edinburgh Field, about 12 miles southwest. Seasonal summer rains brought much delay, with the result that Waller Field's temporary runway was not ready for operation until October 1941. The first American airmen – 432 officers and men of the 1st Bomber Squadron based on Panama – arrived at the end of April and had to be housed in a tent camp at the commercial airport, Piarco Field.

Over the next year, fleets of new aircraft such as the PV-1 Lockheed Venturas, the North American B-25 Mitchells and the Consolidated B-24 Liberators arrived. Edinburgh Field alone received the PV-1 Venturas of US Navy bomber squadron VB-130, the B-25s of the US Army 7th Anti-Submarine Squadron, the B-25 Mitchells of the 59th Bomber Squadron, the Douglas B-18 “Bolos” of US Army 10th Bomber Squadron, the 23rd Anti-Submarine Squadron, and a host of reconnaissance dirigibles. It was a far cry from the days of the first German wave of submarine attacks, when only the 1st Bomber Squadron had been stood up on Trinidad.¹⁸

* * *

The dramatic scale of construction virtually wiped out Trinidad's chronic unemployment overnight. But it also upset the delicate wage scales on the island and became a major source of trouble. While President Roosevelt had expressed a desire that local workers be paid “top-scale prevailing rates rather than average-scale prevailing rates,”¹⁹ in reality wages paid to local workers – especially the unskilled – remained based on low local rates. Overall, the war brought little enhancement to wage scales – 17 to 57 per cent in skilled industries, 3 to 7 per cent in the skilled agricultural sector, 1 to 11 per cent in sugar mills, and none for stevedores and lighter men.²⁰ The concurrent 70 per cent increase in the cost of living more than wiped out all of these minuscule gains.

American labor, on the other hand, was paid United States union scale – plus an added “differential” for increased cost of living and overseas service. The sight of many American construction workers setting up black mistresses in fine homes, supplied with electric stoves and refrigerators “liberated” from base stocks, infuriated black Trinidadians.²¹ Still, the prospect of work on the American bases brought about an uncontrolled

influx of workers from Caribbean islands without US bases as well as an unwanted exodus of workers from local sugar estates and oilfields to the bases. All this caused further anxiety and ill-feeling.

Perhaps most offensive for many Trinidadians was the vast swath of destruction that the American contractors brought to their island. Armies of workers armed with chainsaws razed entire stands of poui and palm and cocoa trees. Thereafter, fleets of bulldozers leveled country homes and shanties alike. The novelist Ralph de Boissière left a vivid picture of the beehive of activity swarming around Chaguaramas:

Endless streams of military trucks, long trailers carrying bulldozers or tanks, moved between Docksite and Cumuto; planes roared overhead in such numbers that it seemed they bred like mosquitoes in the swamps of Caroni.... Out of the mud of the foreshore, out of the inland forests, arose complete American towns.

He chronicled the effect of this feverish construction activity on one family estate: “The land lay naked, cut up like a corpse, and black workers swarmed all over it, like flies. The hill had disappeared, pushed into the swamp.... Huge and unfamiliar machines were everywhere at work, wiping out the past.”²² Yet, thousands of West Indians, he noted, continued to flock to Trinidad “as barnyard fowls who rush for the corn that is scattered by a lavish hand at sunrise,” attracted by the lure of high pay.

Trinidad’s laborers reacted to pay inequity in various ways. Many worked excessive hours of overtime. Others overstated their qualifications. One of the characters in Samuel Selvon’s short story “Wartime Activities,” when asked by an American female clerk (“a good-looking sport sitting behind a desk”) what his “line of work” was, blurted out: “The first thing that come in my head is mechanic, so I say that.” He signed up at “twenty bucks a week.”²³ Still others resorted to making off with base equipment – from flats of beer to food to construction tools – and selling it on the black market. Peremptory firing of these culprits brought a sharp rise in labor unrest and violence, and it soured relations between American military personnel and contractors, on the one hand, and local black workers, on

the other. In time, even the “better-class” houses on Trinidad closed their doors to American soldiers, sailors, and construction workers.

* * *

In May 1942, 2,484 black soldiers of the 99th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment landed on the island. While the regiment would eventually constitute but 12 per cent of the total US force of 20,000 military personnel on Trinidad, its presence caused significant problems for Trinidad’s British colonial regime and for the United States. From the start of the US presence, Governor Young had expected Washington to deploy only white troops to Trinidad; when the 99th arrived, he expressed his “very indignant” reaction to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.²⁴ He told London that the men of the 99th were “recruited from the lowest types of American Negro and are having an extremely bad influence ... debauching [local black] people and their family life.” The American black soldiers had caused a crime wave to break out on the island, the Governor claimed, and he suggested they be replaced with Puerto Rican troops as the lesser of two evils. “Though neither are wanted here, Puerto Ricans would be preferable to United States Negroes.” Whatever London thought of the governor’s remarks, it could not afford to alienate the United States on such a sensitive matter.

Official Washington had, of course, been alert to concerns about transplanting American black troops onto the heterogeneous Trinidadian society. The State Department as well as the War Department had been well informed by both the British colonial authorities and the Island’s local white and white Creole populations that they opposed such a move. They feared labor unrest among the local blacks due to the higher rates of pay that American black troops received. In particular, Governor Young had been apprehensive lest the delicate balance of colonial administration (wage scales, taxation rates, and customs tariffs) be disturbed by the arrival of well-paid and well-clothed American “Negro” soldiers. The quickly ensuing social unrest on Trinidad only confirmed such fears.

The black soldiers of the 99th Anti-Aircraft Regiment manned the batteries on the Laventille Hills overlooking Port of Spain as well as the hills protecting Waller Field and at the Army Air Forces complex, Fort

Reid. A rickety railroad linked Fort Reid to Port of Spain; later on, these two points were connected by the new Churchill-Roosevelt Highway that cut across the base of Trinidad's Northern Range. The men of the 99th Anti-Aircraft Regiment thus had ample opportunity to seek out the pleasure spots in the capital.

The US Army did almost nothing to prepare American troops of either color for duty on Trinidad. A seven-page mimeograph entitled "The American Soldier's Guide Book to Trinidad" explained almost nothing of the Island's history, its social structure, or its multicultural population and their local taboos. Instead, there was a map of Port of Spain, a recreation of a poster showing a drowning sailor with the exhortation "Somebody Blabbed ... Button Your Lip," and very brief sections on security, dangerous insects, the basic geography and weather of Trinidad, shopping, sports, recreation facilities, and diseases, especially VD. American soldiers were told that the Island's economy depended heavily on the export of pitch, but not a word about the oil fields or the refineries. It was a half-hearted effort, to say the least, and probably had little or no impact on the GIs.²⁵

The worst fears of the critics of the policy to garrison Trinidad with black soldiers were soon realized. Race relations, both between American white and black soldiers and between American black soldiers and local blacks, quickly broke down. US black troops resented their segregation from white troops, their deployment in what they deemed to be "less desirable" sites, and the Army's unstated assumption that only whites could command black troops. Their work often was boring and the hours long. They resented food rationing due to the rapacious activities of the U-boats. The only cheer seemed to come from readily available cheap liquor – and from indigenous black females.

The inevitable clashes between American and Trinidadian blacks were not long in coming. In the words of historian Annette Palmer, "American soldiers were accused of manslaughter, indiscriminate shootings, armed robbery and assaults against the members of the local population."²⁶ Few, if any, of the soldiers accused of such crimes were tried in local courts, and US Army military courts proved hesitant to convict American soldiers of crimes against local black civilians. As well, the "sight of white Americans engaged in manual labour or drunken white sailors shattered the image of white racial supremacy."²⁷

Port of Spain became the focal point of much of the racial unrest. Already overpopulated at the start of the war, the situation was exacerbated by the 20,000 new American military personnel and by the uncontrolled migration of black labor from the other West Indian islands, especially Barbados, seeking work on the bases. The nightly arrival of the black soldiers of the 99th Anti-Aircraft Regiment based in Queen's Park barracks, just outside Port of Spain, and from Waller Field, set the stage for confrontation. Transportation was not a problem: buses charged three cents for a ride, trams four cents.

The capital offered the soldiers an exotic alternative to the drab (and segregated) conditions that prevailed on the bases. Again, journalist Albert Gomes provided a rich portrait.²⁸ Especially on weekends, the city's streets bore witness to a "prosperity of swank American cars, traffic strangulation and neon signs." The culinary odors of such local delicacies as black pudding, *souse*, *acras*, and *floats* wafted through the streets, as did the smell of warehoused sugar and nutmeg. Fresh markets bustled with vendors hawking bananas, plantains, pawpaws, green vegetables, and pork as well as shark meat. Peddlers spread before the foreigners their notions – pencils, sunglasses, lace, ribbons, combs.

Away from Port of Spain's commercial and administrative core, the air was filled with "the sulphurous stink from the nearby mangrove swamps, the flies and the incessant, suffocating, eye-smarting smoke from the burning mounds of fresh refuse," as well as from the "foetid and suffocating stink" of the city's open cesspits. In Shanty Town, dead dogs, cats, and birds added to the pungent aroma. So-called "pharmacies" doled out exotic potions such as "Spirit of Love," "Confusion Powder," "Man You Must," and "*Vinaigre Sept Voleurs*" as good "magic" to encourage romantic encounters. The halls run by the Shouter Baptists and the Shango Dancers, as well as the magic parlors of the Scarlet Sisters and Mother Holy Ghost, offered the soldiers a heady concoction of chants, drumbeats, prayer, ritual dances, and superstitions. Chinese opium dens vied with Portuguese rum shops for the "Yankee dollar." In the colorful language of the novelist Robert Antoni, "half the whores in Venezuela" crossed the Gulf of Paria "in salt-fish crates" to get their piece of the action.²⁹

Unsurprisingly, fights, both among black and white sailors and soldiers and among them and the local blacks, became the weekend norm.

Crime and corruption were commonplace. Natives cheekily spoke of their island as “Trickydad.” Common diseases carried by the anopheles mosquito, by the small vampire bat, and by hookworm as well as venereal disease from unprotected sexual encounters ran rampant. Soon, the US Army had no choice but to build the Caribbean Medical Center to control the “alarming” spread of VD.

The spark needed to trigger a racial fire was struck at Arima, near Fort Reid, in April 1942, when an American soldier was charged with the murder of a Trinidad civilian.³⁰ The local black population poured out into the streets to demand justice. The police intervened. Some 33 persons were arrested, most of them Barbadian migrant workers. As one of his last acts as governor, Sir Hubert Young immediately raised the matter of jurisdiction, demanding that the accused American soldier be handed over to the British colonial administration. While Young and the State Department in Washington exchanged lengthy diplomatic memoranda on this thorny issue, General Ralph Talbot, Jr., commanding US troops in Trinidad, ordered a military court-martial to proceed with the case. The soldier was acquitted of the charges against him. Anglo-American relations on Trinidad hit their nadir.

All of this was grist for the mills of local satirists, the calypso singers. For, in the competition for female company, the American black soldiers were the clear winners. They had hard currency, the glamour of a crisp uniform, and the attraction of being outsiders. One calypso singer, complaining as a victim, commented: “I was living with me decent and contented wife/Until the soldiers came and broke up my life.” Another noted that while local blacks offered only “love and misery,” American black soldiers held out “romance and luxury.” Yet another lamented that the local young girls had become “frisky frisky” upon the arrival of the Yanks. “They say the soldiers treat them nice/They give them a better price!”³¹ Of course, the classic social comment rested with “Lord Invader”:

Since the Yankee come to Trinidad
They got the young girls all goin’ mad
Young girls say they treat ’em nice
Make Trinidad like paradise.

Drinkin' rum and Coca-Cola
Go down Point Koomahnah
Both mother and daughter
Workin' for the Yankee dollar.³²

Behind the musical satire existed a harsh climate of racial tensions and open hostility. For, in the words of the US Caribbean Defense Command, American troops “conducted themselves in a manner more in keeping with the occupation of a captured country.”³³

The incident at Arima forced official Washington to take action. Under-Secretary of State Sumner Wells appreciated that the entire issue was “most explosive,” and Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall considered it “too dangerous to be handled on paper.”³⁴ He therefore suggested that closed discussions be held to resolve the issue. These apparently took place both within the Washington establishment and with the British Colonial Office. The upshot was that the War Department ordered the soldiers of the 99th Anti-Aircraft Regiment home – “at night on secret orders.” But nothing was ever secret in Trinidad. The railway line from Arima to Port of Spain, used for the regiment’s embarkation to the United States, was “thronged with women waving goodbye.” By the end of 1943, “white Puerto Ricans with a knowledge of English and high educational standards” garrisoned the Trinidad bases.³⁵ All the while Admiral Karl Dönitz’s “gray sharks” continued to ravage the Caribbean sea lanes.

The US descent onto Trinidad had brought much unrest. The hopes of well-educated Trinidadians that President Roosevelt would extend the Four Freedoms to their island never materialized. Nor did those that Prime Minister Churchill would apply to Trinidad the Atlantic Charter’s provision for peoples to freely choose their form of government. Moreover, wages rose but modestly and the sharp rise in the cost of living erased what few gains were made. An Anglo-American Caribbean Commission, established jointly by Roosevelt and Churchill in March 1942, brought about some improvement in methods of agriculture, housing, education, and public works, but it was largely viewed by local activists as another colonial administration in new garb.

The hard reality was that Trinidad was but one small part of a global struggle. The US military and contractors had arrived in spring 1941 to

throw up army, navy, and air bases to meet the mounting German submarine threat; they had little interest in rearranging the island's labor, political, or social relations. The Germans had pierced the Caribbean basin with but one aim, to disrupt the Allies' vital flow of oil and bauxite out of the region. They had no interest in native populations; their racial doctrines held no appeal to Trinidadians; and their amateurish spy network operating out of the Panama Canal Zone found no fertile soil on Trinidad. The character "Cassie" in Ralph de Boissière's novel *Rum and Coca-Cola* perhaps best captured the great-power reality: "So now you hear, Friends, the English not givin' us anything, the Americans not goin' to give us anything, nor the Germans."³⁶ Albert Gomes echoed the feelings of many fellow political activists during the war when he stated, "Whenever we pass into other hands, both hands must be our own."³⁷

