

AIR MISSION LATIN AMERICA

By Dan Hagedorn



During the Second World War, military aviation in Latin America experienced a radical transformation and – it may be fairly said, via the largesse of the highly successful Lend-Lease programme – nearly every established air arm in the region was modernised, trained to something near a common standard, and professionalised.

As early as 1941, several Latin American nations, prior to the galvanising news of Pearl Harbor, had actively sought assistance in training their largely heterogeneous military air arms. Some turned to France and Italy for such assistance, while three (Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador) formally requested direct US military assistance with shaping their military aviation establishments.

Learning from these initial experiments, with the Allied victory, USAAF wartime commander General Henry H 'Hap' Arnold, traveling extensively in Latin America shortly after V-J Day, recognised that –

even with the success of Lend-Lease and modest US training opportunities offered to Latin American airmen in US schools during the war – the post-war USAAF had an opportunity to help shape US interests in the region.

Thus it came to pass that, largely due to the impetus provided by the USAAF Commander-in-Chief himself, the USAF, making use of its establishment in the US-enclave of the former Panama Canal Zone, created what was at first known as the USAF School for the Americas, an equipment programme called the American Republics Projects and, not least, a

Heading: VC-47D 43-49404 of the nearby USAF Mission to Colombia takes on essentials from a BX run at Howard AFB, Canal Zone, on 9 December 1966—undoubtedly, a Christmas shopping expedition. Two Brazilian C-54Ds lurk on the distant taxiway in the left background. This aircraft passed to the Colombian Air Force in January 1970 (all illustrations via Dan Hagedorn Colln)

system of USAF Missions which, with but one exception (Costa Rica, which at that time had no military aviation), influenced every air arm in the region.



Above left: On a typical rainy-season day, C-47B-25-DK 44-76448 of the USAF Mission to Honduras gets ready to be pulled back from light maintenance at Howard on 9 December 1966—another suspected Christmas shopping excursion. Note the subtle differences in the markings and positioning of the national insignia on the various Mission C-47s. This aircraft was acquired by the Ecuadorean Air Force by March 1972 as HC-AUQ/76448. Above right: By June 1969, the Mission aircraft were getting new, simplified paint schemes, featuring a US flag on the vertical fins, replacing the USAF Southern Command distinctive insignia. VC-47D 43-49887 is seen here at Howard in June 1969 and later passed to the Paraguayan Air Force as T-69



Above: Although most of the USAF Mission aircraft were C-47 variants, several made use of C-54s due to the distance from the Canal Zone and logistic expectations of the host air force. Here, C-54G-1-DO 45-549, which had served as the personal aircraft of MG William Tunner during the Berlin Airlift, wears the titles of the USAF Mission to Bolivia at Howard AFB, Canal Zone in August 1969. It was retired to MASDC in March 1970



VC-47D 45-1128, of the Joint Brazil-United States Military Commission was at Howard AFB, CZ, for maintenance on 20 February 1967 and later passed to civil marks as N62102. Her days in Latin America were not over, however, as she was converted to a Basler BT-67 for the Guatemalan Air Force (as FAG-560) with which she was still in active service as late as January 1998

Left Hand vs. Right Hand

The USAF initiative in these three programs was often at odds with the sitting US administration and, by extension, the US State Department, and therein may most certainly be found the subject for several Doctoral dissertations.

Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the often halting, but necessary, co-operation of the State Department and its diplomatic corps "on the ground" at the more than 20 Latin American capital cities involved, the tedious process of hammering out Mission Agreements gradually proceeded.

While each Agreement shared a similar template, every one of them was different in detail. Each host nation, recognising the inherent value of such on-the-ground

lapses in the selection process, the officers and NCOs chosen for assignment to each of the Missions over the years were very carefully vetted, trained, and more importantly, approved individually by the host nation before setting foot in their assigned country.

The USAF placed enormous confidence in the personnel selected for Mission duty for, besides the mundane, day-to-day routine of providing direct advice and assistance to the local air arm they were accredited to, the officers and NCOs – and their families – found out very quickly that they had bought into diplomacy as well, at a very fundamental, practical level. The USAF expected them to serve not only as advisors and instructors but, furthermore, as role models of impeccable stature.

much different to what had been expected. Hollywood stereotypes notwithstanding, one NCO posted to Asuncion, Paraguay, in the late 1940s, wrote to his wife – excited about the prospect of an exotic tour in the remote and mysterious nation – that she needed to be prepared to deal with the fact that there was no electricity after 5 PM: period.

At first, the USAF dispatched the Mission teams with the understanding that transportation needs would be provided by the host air arm. Without exception, it was quickly realised that this would simply not work. So, as early as June 1945 (when C-47B 43-16148 was assigned to the USAAF Mission in Colombia), the practice commenced of assigning at least one, dedicated aircraft – usually a C-47 variant – to each Mission. The aircraft was to provide a means not only to liaise properly with their hosts, who were often dispersed across an entire nation, but also to conduct the vital resupply and personnel needs of visits on a periodic schedule. C-47's were the lifeline back to the "land of the Big BX" in the Canal Zone, which came to be a coveted expedition for all concerned, even in nations with well-established infrastructures. There was simply no substitute for a milkshake and 'burger at the BX or 'O' Club Cafeteria at Albrook AFB.

Although the Mission personnel were strictly cautioned to avoid becoming embroiled in local politics, this was often all but impossible and, on numerous occasions,



This smartly polished C-54G-1-DO, 45-476, was assigned to the USAF Mission to Ecuador, and thus had to operate in and out of high Quito. Pictured at Howard in May 1968, her lengthy and varied career came to an end 28 months later in August 1970 when she was retired at MASDC, Davis-Monthan AFB

assistance, naturally wanted to dictate the precise conditions under which the Mission and its assigned personnel would function, while preserving national pride and prerogatives.

To its credit, although there were early missteps and some truly monumental

Lacking Home Comforts

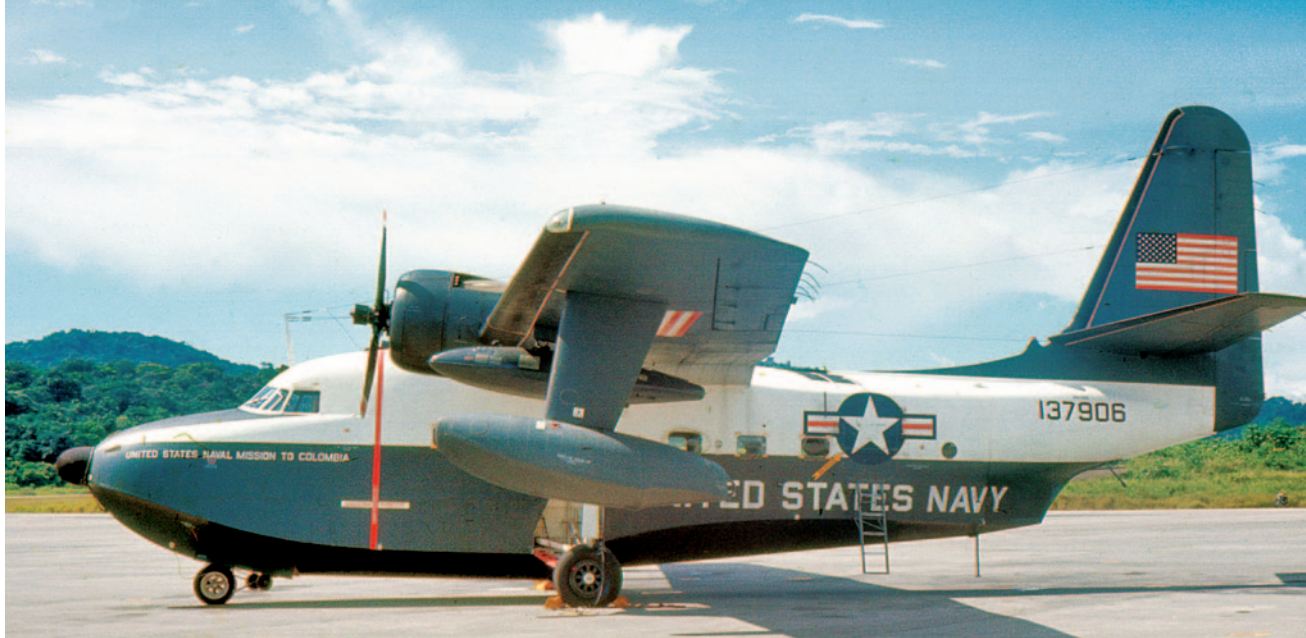
Despite making some attempt to train and brief the USAF personnel assigned to each Mission before deployment, the officers, NCOs and families often found that the reality of conditions in the host-country to which they had been assigned was

Mission personnel were drawn into local intrigues, civil strife, revolutions, and border skirmishes.

The Missions were also cautioned against any appearance of being "intelligence assets" although, on a quarterly basis, they provided the USAF Mission leadership in the Canal Zone and the State Department in Washington, with highly detailed Mission



The aircraft assigned to the USAF Mission to Guatemala experienced numerous adventures, and an earlier C-47 had actually been implicated in the CIA Operation PBSuccess in 1954. Her replacement, C-47D 45-967, seen here at Howard in June 1969, ended up at the Inter-American Air Forces Academy as GC-47D G-19



US Navy aircraft assigned to the few Navy Missions in Latin America were rarely seen. This Grumman HU-16D, BuA137906, visited Howard AFB, CZ, on 13 October 1967 and she eventually ended her days with the Philippine Air Force

THEY ALSO SERVED

Besides those in the accompanying illustrations, the following aircraft are known to have been assigned to the various USAAF and USAF Missions in Latin America

Country	Type	USAAF/USAF Serial	Date Range
Argentina	Douglas C-47B-50-DK	45-1111	This same aircraft also operated with the Joint Brazil-US Military Commission, the USAF Mission to Paraguay and passed to Uruguay as FAU-511
Bolivia	North American AT-6A	41-16094 to 41-16096	1942–1945
Brazil	Douglas C-47D	44-76455	February 1961–
Brazil	Douglas C-47B-45-DK	45-916	?
Brazil	Douglas C-47B-45-DK	45-1128	?
Chile	Douglas C-47D	43-16381	1960s
Colombia	Douglas C-47B-1-DL	43-16148	June 1945–
Cuba/Haiti	Douglas C-47A	42-23346	1950s
Dominican Rep.	Douglas C-47B-45-DK	45-1032	1960s. To FAH-308 August 1970
Ecuador	Ryan PT-22 (ST3-S)	41-15174 to 41-15176	1942–1945
El Salvador	Douglas C-47B-5-DK	43-48799	September 1954–
Mexico	Beech F-2B	44-87256, 44-87257	December 1945. To the FAM January 1949
Mexico	North American AT-6C	41-32768, 42-4181, 42-44143, 42-48940, 42-48988, 42-49001	December 1945. To the FAM January 1949
Mexico	North American B-25J	44-86712, 44-86717, 44-86718	December 1945. To the FAM January 1949
Nicaragua	Douglas VC-47D	43-49110	1960s
Paraguay	Douglas C-47B-15-DK	43-49556	?
Peru	Douglas VC-47D	43-49887	1960s
Uruguay	Douglas VC-47D	43-48275	1960s
Venezuela	Douglas C-47D	45-1132	

Reports which documented the success – or failure – of their efforts, the local conditions on the ground and within the host air arm, and, invariably, the latest demands for more and newer equipment from the host air arm's leadership.

Besides the USAF, the US Navy also occasionally used aircraft to support its more limited Mission establishments in Latin America and they, too, frequently staged into and through the former Canal Zone.

The Mission aircraft and their assigned personnel often overlapped the accredited Air Attache assigned, from the 1930s, to many Latin American US Embassy staffs. Some of these also had aircraft assigned, but aside from the occasional demonstration or courtesy jaunt, were used principally for the expected duties of

Rare US Navy Douglas C-47M, BuA 99830, was assigned to the use of the small US Navy Mission to Ecuador, and visited Howard AFB, CZ, in July 1969. Her subsequent fate is unknown

an Attache, which everyone understood included intelligence activities. These should thus not be confused with the Mission structure, which had a completely separate role to play.

With but few exceptions, the very successful USAF Mission system in Latin America is now gone and, since the elaborate structure of the system of the 1950–1980 period, has become but a shadow of its former stature and influence in the region—as has the Canal Zone itself, and its fixed Albright and Howard Air Force Base bastions.

So, with this all-too-brief overview, presented herewith are a few snap-shots of the Halcyon days of the Mission system, and some of the aircraft which supported these splendid men and women in their extremely worthwhile efforts, which reverberate to this day.

Dan is a student of all things relating to aviation in Latin America, and if you served there, he would like to hear from you at hagedorn_dan@comcast.net

