

Guarding the United States and Its Panama Canal Outpost in WWII:

Staff Sergeant David Clark Glass

David Clark Glass enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps in Richmond, Virginia, on February 20, 1940. He was the son of Mr. and Mrs. John Joseph Glass of Scottsville, Virginia. The Army Air Corps built on the mechanical skills that David had developed with family farm equipment and trained him to become an airplane instrument mechanic. On April 24, 1940, David departed for his first assignment: maintaining Army Air Corps planes stationed in the Panama Canal Zone.



Naval Vessel Transiting Panama Canal, 1941

The Canal was strategically important to the United States because it provided a manmade ditch across Panama and linked the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The Panama Canal provided mobility to the U.S. fleet, which was the United States' reason for acquiring land across Panama and completing the Canal in 1914. Keeping the Canal open was the major aim of American military planners thereafter. Stationed on the Canal in 1940 were U.S. Artillery Regiments and Infantry units. In addition, the 19th Air Wing pro-

tected the Canal from hostile attack from land- or carrier-based enemy planes.



Sgt. David Glass, Panama Canal

By the end of April 1940, over 21,000 U.S. soldiers guarded the Canal. The new arrivals far outdistanced construction, and a serious housing shortage existed. At some fields, enlisted men slept in the hangars or under canvas. Tropical rains and the continued influx of troops added to the difficulties. And no effective method of containing mosquito breeding in lakes, jungle streams, pools or swamps had been devised. Quinine was used as a prophylactic drug but with indifferent success. And since the Air Corps were living under field conditions, away from established posts or sanitation areas, the attack rates for malaria more than doubled (56.8 cases per annum per 1000 average strength). The con-

tainment of malaria did not start to succeed until 1943 when malaria control orderlies sprayed each barrack and hut twice daily with insecticide. David Glass was lucky to avoid a malaria infection during his time in the Canal Zone. However, he received many immunizations for tropical diseases, including smallpox, cholera, and yellow fever.



Sgt. Glass kneels outside his screen-enclosed barracks on Panama Canal

David received additional training in his military occupation specialty (MOS) at the Base Engineering Instrument School at France Field, Canal Zone. This training taught David how to use testing devices to locate mechanical malfunctions and to calibrate airplane instruments. By November 1941, a total of 183 planes (as opposed to an authorized strength of 396) were assigned to bases in the Canal Zone and tasked with destroying enemy vessels attacking the Canal and defending against air attacks. By Thanksgiving 1941, David was attached to the 53rd Pursuit Squadron of the

(Continued on page 2)



Sgt. David Glass in mechanic's coveralls

Army Air Force, which was equipped with P-39 aircraft for operations as part of the Canal's defense force. There was plenty of repair work for a good instrument mechanic like David Glass.



Bell P-39 Airacobra

By mid-1941, an increasing number of reports of Axis vessels in Caribbean waters led the local Navy commandant to request assistance from the Army Air Force in the Canal to assume 50 per cent of all search operations in the Caribbean. By late November 1941, Japan was regarded as the primary potential enemy to the Canal, and a carrier-based attack was considered 'not an improbable feat.' Existing forces in

the area were regarded as sufficient to repel any probably initial attack on the Canal provided they were given timely warning of the approach of hostile forces. The planes David helped maintained in the Canal also conducted 50 per cent of all search operations in the Caribbean. For the Army, defense of the Atlantic seaboard resolved itself into protection of the nation proper. And defense of the Panama Canal Zone was secondary only to that of the continental United States because of the importance of the Canal to the Navy.

Much of what is known about David's posting in the Canal after the U.S. declared war on Japan in December 1941 results from David's photographs: a photo of David standing with his fellow mechanics in front of a US Army Air Force plane, David in dress uniform with a palm tree in the background, David with a group of Panamanians with his hand on a willing oxen's head, David kneeling outside his screened barracks circa 1943. After forty-six months of service in Panama, David departed for a state-side posting on 24 February 1944.



David Glass (center) with hand on oxen's head just outside his Canal Zone airbase

David was temporarily stationed at Daniel Field, Augusta, Georgia, at the Replacement Depot for the Air Service Command through much of 1944. By spring 1945, David was stationed in Wright Field, Dayton,

Ohio, as part of the 4000th Army Air Force Base Unit. There he met a wonderful young WAC in his unit's mess hall. Her name was Alice Black, a WAC in the 4000th AAF from Albion, Indiana, and



Corporal Alice Black, Women's Army Air Corps

they fell in love and became engaged. David was discharged from the Army of the United States as a Staff Sergeant on 26 July 1945 after 5 years, 5 months, and 7 days of active military service.

David Glass and Alice Black married in January 1946, and when Alice was discharged from the U.S. Army in February 1946, the couple moved back to Scottsville, Virginia. They both worked in the Glass family poultry farm 3 miles east of Scottsville and raised three children. David Glass died on November 25, 1982, and is buried at Scottsville Cemetery.

