

XXVI FIGHTER COMMAND

LINEAGE

XXVI Interceptor Command constituted, 28 Feb 1942
Activated, 6 Mar 1942
Redesignated XXVI Fighter Command, May 1942
Inactivated, 25 Aug 1946
Disbanded, 8 Oct 1948

STATIONS

Albrook Field, CZ, 6 Mar 1942-25 Aug 1946

ASSIGNMENTS

Sixth AF

COMMANDERS

BG Adlai H. Gilkeson, 6 Mar 1942
BG Russell E. Randall, 17 Aug 1942
Col Willis R. Taylor, 16 Oct 1943
Col Robert T. Cronau, 15 Jun 1945-unkn

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

American Theater

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Engaged in patrol operations in the defense of the Panama Canal.

XXVI Fighter Command

The XXVI Fighter Command grew out of the seeming chaos of the Caribbean Air Force's pursuit organization, spread from Puerto Rico to Panama, that existed prior to the U.S. entry into WW2. XXVI Fighter Command can trace its direct lineage to the 12th Pursuit Wing which was assigned as the senior pursuit headquarters for the Caribbean Air Force on 8 May 1941. This organization was, essentially, expanded to a Command status less than a month later when it became the Panama Region, Caribbean Interceptor Command. It then evolved, in succession, into XXVI Fighter Command through the following distinct stages:

- Panama Region, 6th Interceptor Command (25 October 1941)
- Panama Interceptor Command (PIC)(13 December 1941)
- XXVI Interceptor Command (6 March 1942)
- XXVI Fighter Command (4 June 1942)

The units assigned remained, with but few changes, essentially the same throughout this period, aside from alterations to their designations brought about by changes in Air Corps policy. The organization of the 12th Pursuit Wing as of 9 May 1941 gives a good picture of the pursuit aviation forces in the region from that point forward for some time to come. They were:

On 7 December 1941, many officers of the Panama Region, 6th Interceptor Command were enjoying a picnic at Far-Fan Beach, a few miles to the west of Albrook Field. On that fateful day, COL A. H. Gilkerson was the Commander, and, when word finally reached him of the events at Pearl Harbor, he ordered full alerts, battle stations and blackouts within his Command. Bomb shelters for civilians in the Canal Zone were also hastily thrown together. The official history of the Command states simply that "...a patrol was flown at dusk of that evening; we could muster about 80 fighters of all types."

All units of the Command were detached on 13 December and were directed to operate directly under Caribbean Air Force which, concurrently, changed the overall designation for these units from Panama Region, 6th Interceptor Command to simply Panama Interceptor Command (usually known by the acronym "PIC"). That same day, the 36th Pursuit Group (then stationed in Puerto Rico) dispatched 27 of its pilots and aircraft to reinforce the Canal Zone's units (26 of which arrived; one was lost enroute). Their immediate value was somewhat questionable, as they arrived completely devoid of ammunition and, in almost all cases, it was discovered that their guns wouldn't even fire!

Although many of the individual squadrons of PIC were almost immediately dispersed, this also extended to Group headquarters in one case, when the HHS, 32nd Pursuit Group was moved from their permanent billets at France Field to Rio Hato on 30 December.

Washington realized that reinforcements for the aerial defenses of the Canal could prove crucial, and so rushed the men of the 53rd Pursuit Group (I) to the Canal Zone, where they arrived in some confusion on 31 December, with their aircraft and most pilots to be ferried down later.

The first 13 Bell P-39D's of the 53rd finally arrived from CONUS 19 January 1942, followed by two increments of 12 each on 9 March and 21 March. The relatively brief deployment of the 53rd to Panama ended on 10 November 1942, when the entire Group was reassigned to Dale Mabry Field, Florida, as the emergency situation in the Caribbean eased.

Air Force Order of Battle

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Sources