ACCESS is the name of the game for security in the Pacific. For airmen, this access hinges on Guam.

Guam is an American possession—US soil. While there are many other desirable basing locations in the western Pacific, Guam—nearly 220 square miles of sovereign American territory about 3,900 miles west of Hawaii—is the only one where basing rights will never be an issue.

Andersen Air Force Base, at the northern tip of the island, is a historic installation. The main runway is famous for its dip in the center, an ocean cliff at the end, and its white color—radiating from crushed coral mixed in the concrete. Andersen hosted US combat aircraft in World War II and throughout the Vietnam War and the Cold War.

For the last 10 years, USAF has been increasing its presence on Guam. So has the Navy, which homeports submarines there, and plans call for some Marine Corps aviation and ground units from Okinawa to move to a new home on the island. The strategic importance of Guam extends to other territories in the Marianas island chain such as Tinian and Saipan.

President Obama’s Asia-Pacific rebalance leans heavily on Guam for access, transient staging, and presence.

“What many people do not realize is that it sits at the tip of the spear for the defense of our nation and is woven into the strategic fabric of the Pacific theater,” noted Rep. Solomon Ortiz (D-Tex.) in 2009.

The Guam Hub

Before airpower, the Northern Marianas were the site of Spanish imperial stopovers and Japanese occupation. A small contingent of marines built the first strip there at Orote Peninsula and kept it in use from 1921 to 1931, when the naval air station was abandoned to cut costs.

Guam was seized by imperial Japan on Dec. 13, 1941. Later in the war, Guam, Tinian, and Saipan were the scenes of ferocious battles. US success on the lava and limestone island led to huge air bases, as Navy Seabees and US Army construction battalions built airfields for the B-29 Superfortresses of Twentieth Air Force.

After V-J Day, Tinian, Saipan, and what is now Guam’s Northwest Field closed. Operations on the main field at Guam continued, providing air interceptors and famously hosting B-52s during the Vietnam War. But the other white, crushed coral airstrips disappeared beneath tropical foliage.
The Growth at Guam

By Rebecca Grant

A B-52 leads a formation of USAF, Navy, and Japanese aircraft from Andersen AFB, Guam, during a Cope North 2012 exercise.

USAF photo by SSGT Angelita M. Lawrence
Nearly 70 years later, the battle for access and influence in the Pacific has led the Air Force and joint partners back to the long-quiet strips. They now resonate with the sounds of RED HORSE bulldozers, C-130 propellers, and fighter jets. Guam’s Northwest Field is in limited use again, and expeditionary operations are focusing on Tinian and Saipan, too.

One of the first to predict a new role for Guam was James H. Webb. Back in 1974, the future Navy Secretary and senator wrote a study of the region speculating, “It is quite conceivable that in 10 to 20 years the entire US Pacific presence will be centered on a Guam-Tinian axis.”

Webb’s prediction was premature, but not by much. China’s expanding military presence and ongoing tensions with North Korea have made Guam essential to America’s Pacific air and sea power projection.

“The US military faces a major basing disadvantage in the western Pacific,” wrote Jan van Tol in his 2010 study of AirSea Battle for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. According to van Tol, “Bases and facilities on US territory in the western Pacific comprise a small number of very large and effectively undefended sites located on a handful of isolated islands, all within range of PLA [China’s People’s Liberation Army] weapons systems.”

Guam falls within what China calls the second island chain, a notional line running from the Kurile Islands in the north through Japan, the Bonins, the Marianas, the Carolines, and down to Indonesia.

RAND Corp. analyst Roger Cliff explained that, for China, denying an adversary access to the region “implies attacking the adversary’s transportation, bases, and other facilities and systems besides its main combat forces.” By this thinking, “preventing the adversary from deploying its combat forces into the region will in turn enable China to avoid a direct confrontation with the adversary’s forces.” Holding Guam at risk would be a major coup.

Up the Ante

USAF has been steadily increasing its missions out of Guam for more than a decade, and the 36th Wing at Andersen is structured to host forces arriving in a hurry. The 36th has no permanently assigned aircraft. The whole function of the wing is to support detachments from the many aircraft units that deploy to the Pacific.

Best known of these is the continuous bomber presence. Short-term rotations of bombers to Guam began officially in 2004 during a period of tension with North Korea.

“The ability to project force from Guam is very valuable to us,” commented Gen. William J. Begert, who was commander, Pacific Air Forces, at the time. Bombers have since flown sorties to all points of the compass to reinforce partnerships with allies and show resolve throughout the theater. In recent years, B-52s and B-2s have taken turns deploying to the island.

In 2010, a trio of Global Hawk Block 30s joined the mix. F-15Cs, F-22s, and other fighters also rotate through Guam as part of formal theater security presence operations. Guam’s 36th Wing also has the ability to stage a contingency response group in support of expeditionary deployments.

Although the air operations center on Guam consolidated to Hawaii, Guam remains very much a forward perch for theater command and control.

“I was there when the President and Secretary of Defense walked in and said, ‘We’re pivoting to the Pacific; this is our new focus,’” said Gen. Herbert J. Carlisle, head of Pacific Air Forces, who was serving in the Pentagon at the time.

The rotational bomber presence through Guam will continue. PACAF is also considering a rebalancing of its own with more permanent change of station slots taking over for some of the temporary duty rotations. That option might give airmen “a little bit more of an opportunity” to “spend a couple of years” on Guam, according to Carlisle.

Guam’s rotational role is set to expand along with other bases in theater.

Carlisle explained, “We’re not going to build any more bases in the Pacific.” Instead, planned unit rotations will resemble the Checkered Flag exercises in Europe during the Cold War days. “Every 18 months or two years, every unit would go and work out of a collateral operating base,” Carlisle explained. Looking ahead, “the most capable platforms will be rotated into the Pacific.”

As for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability, the Global Hawks will stay at Andersen. “The best capability will go to the Pacific as it’s developed and brought on line,” Carlisle said.

A Target, Too

As a major power projection asset, Guam is also a likely target, according to rhetoric from adversaries in the region. In theory, China’s ballistic missiles are capable of reaching Guam. China could
also hit Andersen with cruise missiles launched from its H-6 bombers.

In 2009, Army Lt. Gen. Walter L. Sharp, then commander of US Forces Korea, told Congress, “North Korea is now fielding a new intermediate-range ballistic missile capable of striking Okinawa, Guam, and Alaska.”

North Korea directly threatened Guam during the spring 2013 crisis. “The moment of explosion is approaching fast,” the North Korea news agency ranted early this year.

Reports from South Korea stated that North Korea appeared to have moved an intermediate- or mid-range Musudan missile to a coastal site. The Musudan missile has a reported range of more than 1,800 miles, putting Guam potentially within reach.

That was enough for DOD. In a swift response, the Defense Secretary confirmed Guam’s important military role. “As they have ratcheted up [their] bellicose, dangerous rhetoric, ... some of the actions they’ve taken over the last few weeks present a real and clear danger,” Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said.

Tinian Again

Guam’s growing role has also enhanced the strategic value of its neighbors in the Northern Marianas. Two tiny islands, Tinian and Saipan, have come out of the historical mists to take up serious new missions in the Pacific rebalance.

Tinian is about 100 miles north of Guam. Spain, the US, and Germany all controlled the 39-square-mile island prior to the international mandate after World War I ceding it to Japan. Although its strategic importance dated back centuries, World War II put Tinian in the spotlight.

The US took Tinian from Japanese forces on Aug. 1, 1944. Massive construction began almost immediately. “A great coral ridge was half-leveled to fill a rough plain and to build six runways, each an excellent 10-lane highway, each almost two miles long,” recalled Philip Morrison, who helped assemble the first bomb, in Richard Rhodes’ 1986 history The Making of the Atomic Bomb. The result was a busy bomber base laid out to resemble lower Manhattan.

At its peak Tinian hosted 269 B-29 bombers. Crews faced daunting missions. The distance to targets in Japan averaged 1,500 miles, one-way. As a result, Tinian also became a massive fuel dump.

Spanish, US, and German military buildings are of Japanese origin. They date back to the early 1940s, when Japan used the island as a regional air command center and transit point for forces deploying south.

During World War II, runways covered 11 miles on the northern end of the island. From Tinian, Twentieth Air Force launched the most fearsome military operation of all time when the specially modified B-29 Enola Gay took off to deliver the first atomic bomb on Aug. 6, 1945.

The two devices—“Fat Man” and “Little Boy”—were differently shaped, but each was too bulky for standard bomb loading. Pits were dug to hold the bombs. The B-29s were then backed over the pits with doors open to receive them.

The pits remain on Tinian and are now glassed over, a striking memorial.
In August 2013.

The capability to rapidly execute establish
setup of humanitarian relief operations.
Japanese, and US forces practicing rapid
2012, this year’s exercise saw Australian,
ong on experience from Cope North
North to Tinian in February 2013. Build
training needs.” DOD’s leased holdings
leased lands on Tinian for additional
of Defense to make further use of their
been pitching to the US Department
monwealth of the Northern Mariana
East-West Center in Hawaii, the Com
Islands Development Program of the
MV-22 Ospreys, and CH-46 helicopters.
marines offload 87,000 gallons of aviation
World War II,” said Schouten, according
out the feasibility of bare base operations
based at Iwakuni in Japan deployed to test
on Tinian and to “conduct repairs to the
facilities that won’t fit on Guam. One
example, suggested in a 2010 feasibility
study, is a training range for marines.
Then there is Saipan. USAF may favor
the island as a future divert and
deployment airfield site. The idea behind
another site is to make notional target-
ing of Guam’s airfields a more difficult
tactical problem. Practical reasons favor
a divert site, too. In 2012, an Air Force
F-16 made a forced landing on Saipan
after an in-flight mechanical emergency.
The Air Force completed a full study of
environmental impact and options in the
Northern Marianas in 2012. At 44 square
miles, Saipan is also the most developed
of the CNMI chain. But USAF may have
to purchase additional acreage on Saipan
to construct an adequate divert field.

Another big advantage favoring Saipan
lies in access for ships bringing fuel,
according to the study. To augment Guam’s
fuel capacity, Saipan could in theory assist
with additional reception of fuel from
ships. Guam hosts one of the largest fuel
farms in USAF. However, contingency
requirements for strike and transient
aircraft could draw down fuel fast.

Meanwhile, the Marines are going
forward with more plans for exercises
on Tinian. Either way, additional USAF
presence in the Northern Marianas is
seen as a win-win by local leaders.

“Whether it’s built on Tinian or
Saipan, the revenues generated from
those expenditures will go to the general
fund. It is of benefit to the CNMI,” Don
Farrell of the Tinian mayor’s office told

Into the Future
Guam has its own World War II relic
at Northwest Field.

Operations there stopped in 1949.
Over time, tropical vegetation advanced
up to the taxiway, and winds eroded the
berms between parking stands. The
airfield was all but invisible to those
driving along the road.

Northwest Field got back in action
during the Cope North exercises. USAF,
the Royal Australian Air Force, and
Japan Air Self-Defense Force personnel
used it to practice humanitarian relief
operations. This included setting up a
command center, perimeter security, and
receiving C-130 flights and airdrops.

Guam is due for further expansion.
The US Navy’s Joint Guam Program
Office plans envision a USMC aviation
area for the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing on
a section of the main field at Andersen.

Northwest Field could well open up
as a contingency or transient site. The
waterfront at Apra, Guam, could receive
more submarines, destroyers, cruisers,
and amphibious ships if a new deep
water pier is completed there.

The total cost of relocating upward
of 5,000 marines to Guam could run
$8 billion, and Congress has most of the
plan on hold, pending fiscal and
environmental reviews. Some Navy
work on upgrades for Marine Corps
aviation units is continuing. Other po-
tential concepts could even include a
missile defense task force for the Army
and facilities for a transient nuclear
aircraft carrier for the Navy. Yet to be
resolved are questions about where to
locate auxiliary training such as live-
fire ranges.

However, the priority of Guam as an
aviation hub is beyond dispute. It remains
the sovereign option as US airmen rein-
force their Pacific posture.

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AIR FORCE Magazine / December 2013