

Honduran Air Power

LT COL HÉCTOR DANIEL RÍOS MARTÍNEZ, HONDURAN AIR FORCE

The Honduran Air Force was founded in 1931 after a period of great social, governmental, and military unrest. This unrest highlighted the need for a robust force capable of taking rapid, flexible, decisive actions and gave rise to the founding of the Honduran Air Force (*Fuerza Aérea Hondureña*, FAH).



Figure 1. Bombs rain down on Tegucigalpa from a Bristol F2B Fighter aircraft in 1924. The Honduran capital becomes the first Latin American capital to be bombed from an aircraft.

Source: Jurgen Hesse¹

At the beginning of the 1920s, Honduras was experiencing political instability, facing problems such as the lack of political representation, socioeconomic inequalities, and power disputes. In 1923, just after the presidential election declared General Tiburcio Carias Andino as the president elect, the incumbent president, General Rafael López Gutiérrez, declared that there was no clear winner, decided to remain in power and reassumed the office in January 1924. This immediately led to the rise of rebel groups that were fervently opposed to the self-proclaimed government. Additionally, the leaders of both the main liberal and nationalist political parties united to express their discontent. This led to the Second Honduran Civil War in 1924.²



Figure 2. Bristol F-2b Fighter aircraft

Source: Jurgen Hesse³

The revolutionary movement comprised a broad coalition of forces, including liberals, conservatives, progressives, and nationalists, led by General Tiburcio Carias Andino (the president elect) and Gregorio Ferrera, who managed to take control of several cities and regions across the country. General Carias was versed in the strategic advantages of aviation and hired three airmen, experienced WWI aviator captain Lowell Yerex from New Zealand, American captain Dean Lamb (who participated in first armed aerial combat in history in November 1913), and

Capt Clarence H. Brown, an experienced US Army Air Service pilot.⁴ In addition to dropping on bombs on the capital, these aviators also dropped thousands of leaflets to convince General López Gutiérrez's troops to lay down their weapons. This psychological operation generated strategic results during the conflict, leading to a peaceful resolution and creating a favorable environment for the birth of the Honduran Air Force.

After a period of national stability, the FAH established the Military Aviation School in 1924, in accordance with the precepts of the main airpower theorists of that time, Italian general Giulio Douhet, US general Billy Mitchell, and British general Hugh Trenchard. "Earning dominance in the air means victory; being hit in the air means defeat," asserted General Douhet.⁵ Meanwhile, General Mitchell once said: "Nothing can stop the attack of aircraft except other aircraft."⁶ British General Hugh Trenchard also assured: "No war can be won without having obtained air superiority."⁷ Additionally, Douhet, Mitchell, and Trenchard all advocated for the need of an independent air force as an armed force with the same status as ground and naval forces.⁸ These theoretical precepts of air power shaped the nascent Honduran Air Force as an independent force, flexible and strategic, with diverse capabilities to respond to the defense of the nation.



Figure 3. Captain Fernando Soto Henríquez, who flew three bombing runs in the 1969 war with El Salvador

Source: Jurgen Hesse⁹

Many decades later, these fundamental underpinnings proved decisive during the 1969 war between El Salvador and Honduras (also known as the 100-Hour

War or the misnamed Soccer War), providing a clear example of the effective use of airpower.¹⁰ During this war, the Salvadoran Air Force (FAS) strafed and bombed a FAH airfield in Toncontín with little damage nor loss of life.¹¹



Figure 4. F4U-5N Corsairs of the FAH after a strategic attack mission (1969)

Source: Jurgen Hesse¹²

Meanwhile, the FAH had established its Northern Command two days before the conflict erupted, located at what is now known as the Col Armando Escalón Espinal Air Base, to plan for the strategic deployment of air assets. It was there that the FAH commanding general, José Enrique Soto Cano, analyzed possible courses of action and determined that the runways used by the FAS and the Acajutla and Cutuco fuel refineries were attainable strategic objectives. Within a few hours of deployment, FAH aircraft and pilots destroyed these targets, paralyzing El Salvador.¹³

The objectives of the Honduran Air Force counterattack were carefully chosen to create a strategic paralysis and successfully halted the advance of the Salvadoran army troops in the community of Llano Largo in Ocotepeque in Honduras. General Soto Cano had a clear vision of the strategic role that the FAH would serve in the conflict and implemented a strategic plan in line with the precepts of the five concentric rings of strategic attack that USAF Col John Warden would advocate for years later: leadership, essential systems (in this case fuel), infrastructure (in this case runways), population, and military forces.



Figure 5. F-5 E Tiger II of the FAH

Source: Jurgen Hesse¹⁴



Figure 6. José Enrique Soto Cano, Commanding General of the FAH in 1969

Source: Jurgen Hesse

The Honduran Air Force continues to maintain regional hegemony. The high degree of expertise of its pilots and on-board crews and the coordination, planning, and support from its ground teams were a resounding factor in FAH's success responding to natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and hur-

ricanes Eta and Iota in 2020, when the FAH deployed aircraft throughout the country and in Central America to distribute humanitarian aid in conjunction with international organizations such as the World Food Program. Additionally, the forest and Guanaja Island fires were smothered and extinguished by helicopter pilots, whose training included operating the Bambi Bucket to save natural resources and human lives. No less important and challenging is the effort fighting organized crime and drug traffickers, who flee at the sound of FAH aircraft, thus creating a deterrent and coercive effect.

Independent since its inception, the FAH continues to develop by strengthening its doctrine, improving its resources, and increasing the operational readiness of its personnel to guarantee national defense in an efficient and timely manner. Its strategic performance during armed conflict and disaster response has been decisive to Honduras's national defense and has established the FAH as a regional airpower leader. □

Notes

1. Flight Lieutenant Jurgen Hesse Joya, Interview, 2010.
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3. Flight Lieutenant Jurgen Hesse Joya, Interview, 2010.
4. Tony Reichardt, "The First Aerial Combat Victory," *Smithsonian Air & Space Magazine*, 4 October 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/air-space-magazine/first-aerial-combat-victory-180952933/>.
5. Diego Porzio de Angelis, "II GM en el Pacífico: El pensamiento de Douhet" (WWII in the Pacific: The thinking of Douhet), *Revista Marina*, 2022, <https://revistamarina.cl/es/articulo/ii-gm-en-el-pacifico-el-pensamiento-de-douhet>.
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10. Oscar García, "La Memoria de la Mal llamada Guerra del Fútbol" (The Memory of the misnamed Soccer War), 2019, <https://iberoamericana.se/articles/10.16993/iberoamericana.420>.
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12. Flight Lieutenant Jurgen Hesse Joya, Interview, 2010.

13. Walter López Reyes, “Alas Doradas en la Historia” (Golden Wings in History), *La Alta Voz*, 16 July 2019, <https://enaltavoz.com/alas-doradas-en-la-historia/2019>.

14. Flight Lieutenant Jurgen Hesse Joya, Interview, 2010.

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Graduate of the USAF Air Command and Staff College. He is currently the Commander of Col Hector Caraccioli Moncada Air Base. In 2014 he completed the naval captaincy course and obtained international certification in the Super King Air B200 airplane by Flight Safety International. Throughout his career, he has served as chief of Base Operations and as chief of training. He has served as a flight instructor and has flown approximately 3,750 hours on the Cessna 152, Cessna 172, Cessna 210, Maule MXT-7-180, T-27 Tucano, and the Super King Air B200 aircraft. In 2023 he graduated with a master's degree in airport operations from EADIC (Open School of Development in Engineering and Construction) and UDIMA (Distance University of Madrid). In 2004 he graduated in quality in education from the Catholic University of Honduras and human talent development from the Defense University of Honduras. He has participated in combined air exercises with the Colombian and Guatemalan air forces as well as in operational missions with the United States Air Force, US Navy, and anti-drug trafficking agencies. In 2007 he graduated with a bachelor's degree in aeronautical sciences from the Defense University of Honduras and a bachelor's degree in business administration from the National Autonomous University of Honduras.