

# **The Agreements for the British and American use of Bases in The Azores in WWII and the role of Portuguese Timor**

*By Curtis Stewart*

## **Introduction**

The BHS library recently acquired a copy of a 1946 publication of the Ministério do Negócios Estrangeiros, entitled, *Documentos Relativos aos Acordos Entre Portugal, Inglaterra e Estados Unidos da América para a Concessão de facilidades nos Açores Durante a Guerra de 1939-1945*, (Documents Related to the Agreements between Portugal, England and the United States of America for the Concession of Facilities in the Azores during the War of 1939-1945). This article is intended to provide a brief overview of the contents of the book.

This short book is a collection of the exchange of correspondence between Dr. Salazar, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the British and American Ambassadors and provides an insight into the legal justification of the granting of permission for the use of two bases in the Azores. The document shows that while the granting of the base on Terceira island to the British was relatively straight forward and linked to the ancient Anglo-Portuguese Alliance, Salazar's granting of approval for the Americans to operate a base on Santa Maria island was a separate matter and was, perhaps surprisingly, linked to the recovery of Portuguese Timor from the Japanese.

## **Context**

In the Second World War, access to the Azores was essential for the Allies in the battle against German U-boats, which posed a deadly threat to the convoys bringing essential supplies across the Atlantic and were sinking up to 20% of Atlantic shipping. When the USA entered the war, the islands were seen as potential staging posts for cross-Atlantic air traffic and, in time, this came to be more important for the U.S. than controlling U-boats. The Allies sought access to the Azores early in the war, but Portugal was engaged in a difficult balancing act of maintaining its neutrality. Initially, Salazar waited to see the direction of the War but even when the Allies proved victorious in North Africa, he continued, as one historian put it, to "obfuscate, evade and obstruct".<sup>1</sup> The British and Americans became increasingly frustrated and, by mid-1943, were making plans to invade the Azores. Salazar, a known procrastinator, was slow to grant access. At this stage in the war, as the German army was still in the French Pyrenees there was a possibility of retaliation, which could have been through a land invasion, a bombing campaign against Lisbon and Oporto, or through German U-boat attacks on Portuguese shipping.

## **Exchange of correspondence**

When, in June 1943, the British Government made a formal request via diplomatic channels for the use of facilities in the Azores to conduct military operations against the Axis, it was within the context of the long-standing Alliance. The first note reproduced in the book is a diplomatic note, labelled "Most Secret" from the British Ambassador in Lisbon, Sir R.H. Campbell, to Doctor Salazar, Presidente do Conselho e Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros, stating:

*"His Majesty's Government have, therefore, decided, in the name of the Alliance which has existed between Portugal and Great Britain for six hundred years, to ask the Portuguese Government to extend to them their collaboration by according to them the facilities of which they stand in need in the Azores. They most earnestly trust that the Portuguese Government will in principle agree to this, leaving for further discussion and mutual agreement the precise conditions governing the grant of such facilities."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neill Lochery, *Lisbon: War in the Shadows of the City of Light, 1939-45* Hachette, UK

<sup>2</sup> Note from Sir Ronald H. Campbell to Doctor Oliveira Salazar, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1943. *Documentos Relativos aos Acordos Entre Portugal, Inglaterra e Estados Unidos da América para a Concessão de facilidades nos Açores Durante a Guerra de 1939-1945*, p.1.

In August 1943 further notes were exchanged with the Portuguese acceding to the request and laying out the 'precise conditions' of British use of facilities in the Azores.<sup>3</sup>



**A Vickers Warwick antisubmarine aircraft of RAF Squadron No. 269 flies above Lajes Airfield, Terceira.<sup>4</sup>**

Although the United States did not have the benefit of a treaty with Portugal, the Americans nevertheless obtained permission, from neutral Portugal, to use the airfield on Santa Maria island several months later. The United States was in the position of needing a base in the mid-Atlantic, but also needing a legal justification with which to make the request to Portugal. This problem was resolved by drawing on the Anglo-Portuguese alliance and linking the situation in Portuguese Timor to the need for an American base in the Azores. In a note dated November 1944, nearly 18 months after the note above, the British Ambassador once again wrote to Salazar, suggesting the granting of facilities in the Azores to the United States.<sup>5</sup>



**Lajes airfield during the Second World War**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/2018/01/25/covering-the-azores-gap-in-world-war-ii/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

Note from Sir Ronald H. Campbell to Doctor Oliveira Salazar  
British Embassy, Lisbon, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1944

*His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, conscious of the legitimate desire of the Portuguese Government to put an end to the Japanese occupation of Timor and recognizing that this Portuguese territory lies with the large area of operations undertaken in the Pacific by His Majesty's Government and other allied government, accepts and agrees to the participation of Portugal in such operation as may be conducted eventually to expel the Japanese from Portuguese Timor in order that that territory may be restored to full Portuguese sovereignty. It recognizes that such participation can be effected in direct and indirect forms: direct participation, by the use of Portuguese forces, concerning which detailed plans will be worked out as a result of the studies conducted in staff conversations in Lisbon; indirect participation, by the concession to the Government of the United States of facilities for the construction, use and control of an air base on the island of Santa Maria, for the purpose of facilitating the movement of American forces to the theatre of war in the Pacific or thence to the United States under conditions to be set forth in a special agreement between the Portuguese Government and the Government of the United States.*



**Amb. Ronald Campbell**

*I avail myself of this opportunity to renew to Your Excellency the expression of my highest consideration.*

(R.H. Campbell)

An identical note was sent from the American Embassy in Lisbon to Salazar on the same day, 28<sup>th</sup> November.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, on the same day, an agreement entitled *Acordo entre o Governo Português e o Governo dos Estados Unidos estabelecendo a forma de participação indirecta de Portugal em operações do Pacífico* was implemented by an exchange of notes.<sup>7</sup> The notes reflect negotiations which had been carried out among the Portuguese, British and Americans.

Reading through the notes provides a logical progression of the agreements: first, the British request made in the context of the alliance, then the subsequent granting of permission to the Americans, linked specifically to the liberation of Timor. The series of diplomatic notes show that the British, the ancient allies of Portugal, requested the use of a base in the Azores for use by the Americans, providing a logical connection for the request to the existing alliance.

### **Reasons for publication of the correspondence**

This book, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is interesting in a number of ways. The first and most striking is the personal involvement of Salazar. The documents reproduced are high-level correspondence between Salazar and the British and American Ambassadors. The diplomatic notes and memoranda are dated between 16 June 1943 and 30 May 1946 and are from the British and American Embassies. Nearly all of the notes contained in the publication are from or addressed personally to Salazar, underlining the direct role he played. Another interesting point is that most of the documents reproduced are published with English translations alongside the Portuguese texts. This implies that the target audience of this book was the British and the American governments. Another characteristic of the correspondence is the recurring theme of the guarantee of Portuguese sovereignty over its territories.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

Several of the notes are labelled “Secret” or “Most Secret”, so their release in 1946 further emphasizes the desire of the Portuguese government to make the documents available. From this perspective, the conclusion can be drawn that Salazar wanted this book published in order to document and record the logic and the justification for the use of the bases in the Azores. This would help to establish Portugal’s role in supporting the Allies in the war. It would be useful in protecting claims to Portuguese sovereignty in its colonial possessions. Salazar was shaping the historical narrative by releasing this diplomatic correspondence.

### Footnote

As an interesting footnote, the American Chargé d’Affaires in Lisbon writing to Salazar in October 1943, giving the guarantee of the colonial territories, was George Kennan<sup>8</sup>. He would later play a key role in formulating the U.S. containment policy toward the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>



**George Kennan**

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Curtis Stewart is a retired American diplomat living in Portugal. He enjoyed overseas assignments with the Department of State in more than a dozen countries, primarily in Africa. His posting in the Azores and Canberra, Australia, helped in research for the articles appearing in this newsletter. In the course of his career he worked in the areas of economics, energy, mineral resources and science. He met his wife while serving in the Azores and has lived in Portugal since 2002.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_F.\\_Kennan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_F._Kennan)