

ALAMEDA NAVAL AIR STATION

(The following is an excerpt from Alameda – The Island City, written in 1941 as part of the United States Federal Government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) Writer’s Program. This chapter, found between pages 114 and 120 of the original work, describes the genesis for what ultimately became the Alameda Naval Air Station.)

THE NAVAL AIR STATION

A one-dollar check, neatly framed, hangs in a place of honor in the office of the City Manager of Alameda. This check, paid to the City of Alameda by the United States Government, purchased the site of the largest air base in the Nation. Construction of the Alameda Naval Air Station marks another step in aviation history. Once again focusing the eyes of the world on the Island City, which in 1935 was front-page news when the China Clippers made their first epic flights from the Alameda Airport.

Long before intrepid airmen telescoped time and space in their flights across the Pacific to the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, and Midway, the Navy Department had considered Alameda as a desirable location for a Navy Yard. On August 10, 1913, the California Legislature provided for the transfer to Alameda of all State-owned tidelands within three miles of the city’s outer boundaries, with the stipulation that the property be improved by the City to the extent of “200,000” ⁽¹⁾ within the next five years. Although the city had not complied with the terms in 1917, Alameda was given power to make public grants of the tidelands or any portion thereof. On December 7 of that year a dispatch arrived from Washington announcing that a commission headed by Admiral J.M. Helm had submitted a report to the navy Department suggesting Alameda’s several thousand acres of tidelands as an appropriate and desirable location for the establishment of “necessary additional Navy Yards on the Pacific Coast of the United States”.

Although on August 11, 1923, Alameda presented to the United States a deed of 5,340 acres of tideland for a Naval base, no immediate action was taken by the Navy. Meanwhile the San Francisco Bay Industrial Committee, comprising representatives of several Bay Area communities, suggested the submission of plans to Congress by any community possessing a suitable site for a naval base. A commission headed by Mayor Murray and E.G. Ryder, president of the Alameda Chamber of Commerce, presented Alameda’s specifications to the Naval Affairs Committee.

In 1930, the Navy still having taken no advantage of Alameda’s proposal, the city voted to donate a piece of land between the Alameda Airport on the west and The San Francisco Airdrome on the east to the Federal Government for an Army air base. Two more parcels of land were donated in 1932, making a total of 1,100 acres for Benton Field, which was to be developed as one of the links in a system of air bases designed for the Western States, Canal Zone, and the Insular Possessions.⁽²⁾ Congress appropriated \$743,000 for construction of an air depot on the 178-acre upland portion of the tract; the remainder of the 1,100 acres, including lowland and tidelands, were to be reclaimed as needed.

(1) No unit of measure is referenced in the document.

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Despite the Army's prior claim, subsequent Government action determined that, after all, Alameda would have a Navy rather than an Army base. As a result of a resolution introduced in the House of Representatives by Congresswoman Florence P. Kahn suggesting a reconnaissance of the Bay Area, the attention of the Navy Department was once more directed to Alameda's tidelands. On Friday, July 19, 1935, the Naval Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives visited the Bay Region. Shortly thereafter, Commander F.B. Connell, chairman of the Committee, announced to the San Francisco Bay Industrial Commission that the Alameda site had been chosen. On November 20, formal notification of the Naval Affairs Committee's choice was presented to the City of Alameda by Rear Admiral E.H. Campbell, Commandant of the Twelfth Naval District.

The site under discussion consisted of two parcels of land. The first, 1093.74 acres constituting Benton Field, which belonged to the Army, was transferred to the Navy by executive order in October 1936; the second site of the Alameda Airport, Inc. had an area of 929.337 acres. The Benton Field property was held inadequate for the Navy's purposes, and the City of Alameda was asked for additional land which would include the entire Alameda Airport property and submerged acres still to be reclaimed by dredging between Alameda and Benton Field to the city bulkhead line.

January 28, 1936, Alameda granted the desired property with the proviso "that the United States of America will start the actual work of developing said Naval Air Base at the earliest possible moment... that it will expend at least \$1,000,000 on said lands in said work of development by December 31, 1939."

The Secretary of the Navy was authorized to purchase the site for the United States Government at a cost not to exceed \$1.00. Subsequently, the City of Alameda received a one-dollar check from the Government, making the transaction legal. It is this check, which has been framed and hangs in the City Manager's Office.

On March 15, 1938, nearly two years before the time limit set, work on the Naval Air Station on Alameda's tidelands was officially started. Commander E.C. Seibert of the Navy's Bureau of Yards and Docks took charge of contract construction work, and Captain Walter R. Allen, public works officer for the Twelfth Naval District, was placed in charge of construction details of the \$15,000,000 project.

The station now occupies an area of one and one-third square miles to which an additional 100 acres are to be added in the near future. Nine hundred acres have been added to the property by dredging. The land has an average of 10 feet above low water level, with a sloping area of 13,000 square yards. This allows a depth of one foot for over a square mile for drainage. A breakwater

two and a half miles long, in which 900 tons of rock was used in construction, provides adequate protection against the tides. During dredging operations an almost forgotten link in the chain of transportation history was unearthed – the old trestle and ferry slip of the Cohen railroad and

(2) The term "Insular Possessions" refers to a United States territory that, at the time, was not part of the forty-eight states or part of the District of Columbia.

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ferry line, built more than 75 years ago. Plans and specifications for the buildings were awarded a medal by the Building Association of Washington, D.C. for their combination of modern architectural beauty and simplicity of line with maximum efficiency. Because of the location of the land, piling foundations were specified; and fireproof construction, including steel-encased windows, was provided throughout.

The year 1941 sees a new city-within-a-city on what once were tidelands. The Administration Building faces the main entrance across a park leading from the gate. At the right is a sweep of long, streamlined buildings housing the station's recreation hall, offices, barbershop, stores and barracks. The barracks are light and airy, many-windowed, with accommodations for 288 men to a building, 144 to a floor. Three mess halls nearby have a seating capacity of 1,500 to 2,000 men an hour. A cafeteria has been provided for civil service employees, and a modern galley, complete in every detail, assures the personnel nutritious and appetizing meals.

To the left of the station's main gate is a settlement of homes, comprising 21 sets of officer's quarters, 13 sets of non-commissioned bachelor quarters, and bachelor officer's quarters with accommodations for 350. A clubhouse for officers is in process of construction. A large movie theater within the vicinity provides entertainment, and a firehouse and dispensary protects the station and its inhabitants. Floodlights will provide night illumination to the exterior of the buildings, and when the landscaping of the grounds is completed, the tress that once adorned Treasure Island will have taken root in their permanent home.

Beyond the barracks are the hangars for land planes, the original specifications providing space for eight. An assembling and repair building covering two and three-fourths acres is equipped with every machine and tool necessary for the repairing of planes. Behind the administration building are the general supply building and the aircraft storehouse; adjacent to these, two seaplane hangars face southward on the lagoon and two more are being completed. A bituminous asphalt landing field with three ramps leading from the seaplane lagoon, is equipped with submerged oils and gas tanks to facilitate the fueling of planes. Nearby is a building equipped with silencing devices in which the engines are tested; three large motors running simultaneously and at full speed within the building cannot be heard from the outside.

The seaplane lagoon measuring 3,000 by 1,500 feet, is enclosed by bulkheads, walls and jetties. On the east side, a dock stretches to the south for 725 feet, then veers southwest another 1,000 feet. water alongside the dock is 30 feet deep, providing safe berthing for ocean-going ships. Accommodations for two aeroplane carriers are on each side of the docks, and all small craft and officers' barges are moored here.

The station went into commission November 1, 1940, with 16 officers, 390 enlisted men, a marine guard of one officer and 76 enlisted men, and some 200 civil service employees. In July, 1941, there were about 750 enlisted men, 750 civil service men, and a thousand contract workers. The monthly payroll is averaging \$1,300,000, an annual expenditure of \$16,000,000 being provided for. By 1942, the number of officers is to be increased to 300; enlisted men to 4,500, civilians to 2,000 - a total of 6,800 on active duty. A full complement of 11,450 including 450 officers, 8,000 enlisted men and 2,000 civilians will have been attained by 1943.

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Construction of the Naval Air Station, ultimately to be the most powerful base of fleet aircraft on the Pacific Coast, entails also the building of homes nearby for the housing of the stations' huge and increasing personnel. As two great housing projects are being rushed to completion, as Marines of the United States Navy arrive to reinforce the armed forces already at the Station, Alamedans are aware that a new element has entered their city - a winged element of the future which roars across the sky above 2,000 acres of improved land that once lay beneath the waters of San Francisco Bay.

Catalog Number: ANAM.DOC.07.12.001

The Naval Air Station (excerpt)

Source: *Alameda - The Island City*

Author: Unknown

WPA Writers' Program - 1941

Contributing Editor: Kin Robles

December 27, 2007