

A Brief History of the Bolsa Chica Military Reservation 1941-1948

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The first defenses to guard the entrance to Los Angeles harbor were built during the years 1915-1919 at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro. These defenses remained in use for the next 20 years. With the beginning of the fighting in Europe in 1939, the United States Army began to implement plans to replace the outdated coastal defenses around the nation, including those at Los Angeles.

Previous to December 1941, there were no military defenses south of San Pedro. In December 1941, the Army brought in mobile 155-millimeter and 75-millimeter guns in addition to 3-inch anti-aircraft guns to guard the vulnerable beaches around Los Angeles, protecting the Los Angeles area from possible raids or invasion by the Japanese. The Army sent Coast Artillery units to Orange County beaches along with these guns. One unit moved into the buildings of the Bolsa Chica Gun Club on the Bolsa Chica Mesa. Two 155 mm GPF tractor drawn guns were sited in field emplacements along the shoreline of the estuary. Beginning in December, two permanent circular concrete "Panama" mounts were built near the gun club for mounting the 155 mm guns. The construction was completed on February 1942.

The United States Army received authorization to modernize the harbor defense of the major harbors of the United States and its territories in 1940. It was also the most uniform program, in that two basic battery designs, one two gun battery design for the large caliber guns (mostly 16-inch but some 12-inch) and one two gun battery design for the medium caliber guns were used with little variation for all the new gun batteries to be built.

Under the 1940 Program, the Harbor Defenses of Los Angeles was to receive two 16 inch gun batteries and three 6-inch gun batteries, along with their supporting fire control stations and the newly developed radar fire control stations. As the new defenses were designed to protect a much larger area than the original defenses built at Fort MacArthur, the new gun batteries were dispersed along the coastline to afford protection to the approaches to the Los Angeles harbor area. One 6-inch battery was located at Point Vicente to the north on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, one 16-inch battery was located on the hillside above White Point in San Pedro, another 6-inch battery was built above Point Fermin on the Upper Reservation of Fort MacArthur and the final 6-inch battery and 16 inch battery were built on the Bolsa Chica mesa to guard the southern approach to the harbor area.

The construction of the Bolsa Chica batteries began on April 17, 1943. Each battery had been assigned a construction number based on a numbering system used to describe the entire modernization program which was being implemented. The 16 inch battery was assigned Construction Number 128 and the 6-inch battery was assigned Construction Number 242. Construction proceeded apace for the rest of the year. In addition to the gun batteries, a separate underground structure, containing plotting and switchboard rooms (PSR) was built for Battery 128. Disguised as a oil rig, a large tower containing four fire control stations was built near the battery, and a radar installation was constructed near the PSR.

By the beginning of 1944, it was apparent that the threat of a possible Japanese invasion had vanished. Other military construction and supply programs were given priority and the construction of the new defenses was slowed. On January 21, 1944, the completion of Battery 128 was deferred. The concrete work was allowed to continue, but the delivery of the guns, carriages, and power equipment was canceled by the War Department. Work continued on Battery 242, however. The guns were installed and proof fired sometime in late 1944. General Order #51, issued on June 10, 1946, officially renamed Battery 242 as Battery Harry J. Harrison, after Major Harry J. Harrison who had been killed in action in Europe in 1944. Harrison had been stationed at Fort MacArthur during the years just prior to the beginning of World War II.

The end of the war brought a general reevaluation of the need for big seacoast guns to defend the nation's harbor. By 1948 the Army decided that the guns were no longer needed. The coastline would be better defended by airplanes and the new missiles. That year, a memorandum from the Army detailed the decommissioning of most of the remaining coastal defense batteries remaining around the nation. Battery 128 would never be completed and Battery Harrison was declared surplus and disarmed. The Army property at Bolsa Chica was returned to the original owners. The concrete bunkers, built to defend against an enemy that never came, were left empty and unused.

Map of Bolsa Chica Military Reservation on previous page— Fire Control Site #11 & SCR-296 #5, Bolsa Chica, Exhibit 12-B, Annexes to Harbor Defense Projects, Harbor Defenses of Los Angeles, California, copy provided by R.D. Zink.

References:

- The Harbor Defenses of Los Angeles, a Reference Manual, by Mark A. Berhow, Fort MacArthur Military Press, San Pedro, CA 1992.
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