UNITED STATES NAVY AND MARINE CORPS BASES, DOMESTIC

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With structural construction completed, the station was given the mission to engage in operational training for landplanes and reduced seaplane facilities. The usual training devices and buildings for celestial navigation and other subjects were provided, as well as gasoline storage, a photographic laboratory, and other facilities. The first Women Marine Reserves reported on 4 August 1943 and by 6 September were 415 strong. While the runways were being completed (with three of them being asphalt-covered and 6,000 feet long), Marine Fighter Squadrons 413 and 423 came on board for training, and then many others, until they completed the training syllabus and were deployed overseas. Training was undertaken by an Operational Training Squadron for officers and men who would fly twin-engine aircraft. By October 1944 there were on board 26 Marine officers, 332 men, 11 Women Marine Reserve Officers, and 212 women. In addition, there were 15 naval officers, 6 WAVES, and 26 Navy and Marine women. Twenty-two Coast Guard enlisted men and one woman provided security with dogs. There was a headquarters squadron for the men and two Aviation Women Reserve Squadrons for the women.

During the early days, station employees ate in Edenton. The base cafeteria opened in November 1942 and was shortly followed by a mess hall and galley that could feed 250 officers and 1,900 enlisted persons daily. By the spring of 1943 there were on board the guard section, traffic control, brig, fire department, communications department, Navy disbursing and paymaster departments, post office, public works, malaria control, ground maintenance, quartermaster department, supply department, and medical department. During 1943 monthly expenditures for enlisted personnel amounted to $119,000; public vouchers were issued for $7,000; and the supply department received 600 tons of supplies a month. Safety and rescue was the task assigned to a crash boat facility completed on 15 May 1943; recreation was provided in part by athletic events, boating, and bowling. There were also parties and dancing at an old barn that was rebuilt and at various clubs. There were chaplains on board, and through Public Relations a station newspaper entitled the *Chowan Leatherneck* was issued, the last growing from three sheets with a circulation of 650 to seven sheets and a circulation of 1,850. Between January and October 1944, 90,543 flight operations occurred, and in March an outlying field was acquired at Emporia, Va., to serve for "bounce drill," that is, training for pilots who would have to operate from aircraft carriers.

Among the problems encountered were the character of the soil; in the early days, a lack of sufficient grading equipment with personnel qualified to use it; and unfavorable weather. The very flat land presented a serious drainage problem also. Major overhaul work was accomplished at the Norfolk Naval Base (q.v.), until the Marine Corps Air Station opened at Cherry Point, N.C.

On 24 February 1943 the Director of the Planning Division in the Bureau of Aeronautics called for a temporary diversion in the use of Edenton from glider training to two-engine landplane operations, with Operational Squadron Eight to use thirty-six PV-1 *Venturas* and eighteen SNB-1s for the purpose. The change called for an addition to the gasoline storage supply and various other projects that amounted to more than $2 million, but the cancellation of various other projects reduced costs by $600,000.

Edenton was placed in caretaker status on 1 July 1946 and inactivated and disestablished on 1 August 1946. On 2 August 1955, however, it was reestablished as a naval auxiliary air station, only to be disestablished on 31 December 1958 and decommissioned on 1 January 1959. With another turn of the wheel of fate, it was redesigned as an outlying field for MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., on 9 January 1959. Within three months, however, it was disestablished again on 31 March 1959. Given the cost of modernization, about $48 million, it was decided to close the facility; with the laying off of 1,294 military and 138 civilians, this would account for an annual saving of $810,000. The 3,283 acres of land on which it sat were declared surplus with the right of recapture.

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EL CENTRO, CALIF., MARINE CORPS AIR STATION, 1943–1945, AND NAVAL AIR FACILITY, 1949–

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy approved the request of the Marine Corps for the establishment of five air stations on the West Coast. Site selection devolved upon Lt. Col. William Fox, USMCR, with directions to find sites in the Imperial Valley of California. One of the sites Fox chose was at El Centro, at the southern end of the valley not far from the Mexican border 125 miles east of San Diego, seven miles west of Imperial and El Centro, Calif., and fifty miles west of Yuma, Ariz. It was an excellent choice because the floor of the valley, at a mean elevation of minus fifty-two feet, is flat, sandy, and extends for many miles. Although summer temperatures reach 105° F, the air is dry, and winter weather runs between 75° F and 90° F. With an average wind speed of only ten mph, flying is possible 92 percent of the time. El Centro was thus ideal for all types of precombat training, for the solution of tactical problems, and for gunnery practice.

On a property acquired by the Navy (943 acres leased and 949 purchased, later expanded to 2,300 acres), the Civil Aeronautics Administration had already constructed two 4,500-by-150-foot runways. Additional construction began on 15 May 1942, and limited operations were possible only seven months later. Construction and improvement costs reached about $11.5 million. Beyond the station area were skeet and rifle ranges, malfunction and turret ranges for gunnery practice, a rabbit range, a rocket range, and a rocket ground school. The first

air unit to report aboard, on 1 January 1943, was Marine Air Base Defense Aircraft Group 43, soon redesignated Marine Air Group (MAG 43) and still at the base at the end of the war. Commissioning occurred on 23 July 1943, Lt. Col. Thomas J. McQuade commanding.

Many were the trained squadrons that left El Centro for forward operating areas in the Pacific, and as the desirability of the base for training purposes became increasingly evident, the construction of a second area was authorized. Work began on 10 April 1944 and was completed for occupancy in December, with MAG-35 and a transport training group the first groups to come on board. The initial allotment for construction under a cost-plus-fixed-fee contract was $6,014,671. The final expenditure for the first area was $8.5 million; for the second area, $3 million. To the end of 1944, sixteen squadrons of fighter, bomber, and transport aircraft pilots and aircrewmen were trained at El Centro.

Soon after the end of World War II, El Centro was greatly reduced and on 1 May 1946 was commissioned as a naval auxiliary air station. On 15 October 1946 its status was that of modified maintenance. On 6 January 1947 the Bureau of Aeronautics established there a storage pool for TD2 *Devastator* torpedo aircraft and on 20 March authorized Western Air Lines to operate two flights daily. Its condition when inspected by the staff of the Commandant of the Eleventh Naval District had been found to be "good to very good." Inspected again on 3 June 1947, the report read "very good." In November 1947 the Parachute Experimental Division from NAS Lakehurst, N.J. (q.v.), moved to El Centro. On 9 June the Joint Parachute Test Facility was established; it consisted of the Naval Parachute Unit and the 6511 Parachute Development Test Group. Also, from 1947 to 1964, the Air Force cooperated as part of El Centro's test organization. The Naval Aerospace Recovery Facility commissioned in 1964 was combined with the Naval Auxiliary Air Facility on 1 July 1973 to form the National Parachute Test Range. When the last was transferred to the Naval Weapons Center, Inyokern/China Lake (q.v.), on 1 July 1979, El Centro again became a naval air facility.

Soon after the end of World War II, El Centro was used to provide support to various fleet squadrons. In 1949 there was established the Fleet Gunnery Unit, which for ten years provided support for squadrons that came to conduct gunnery, bombing, and carrier landing practice. In addition, a permanent detachment from Attack Squadron 174 beginning in 1979 provided maintenance support for East Coast A-7 pilots who fly out to use the range area. The expanded Desert Test Range is a modern inert target complex that utilizes remote TV and acoustical and laser scoring systems. The current mission of NAF El Centro is to support operational fleet units that come for bombing and gunnery practice or to use the simulated carrier deck landing area. In use are four runways, the longest of which is equipped with a permanent mirror landing system at each approach end. El Centro is the winter home for training for the Blue Angels Demonstration Team.

At the nearby town of El Centro is a general hospital, eleven public and parochial elementary schools, two junior high schools, one high school, and two schools for higher education: Imperial Valley (two-year) Community College, and the San Diego State College extension at Imperial Valley Center, Calexico. There are two man-made lakes nearby, and mountain areas and the former site of a naval seaplane base at Salton Sea, Westmorland, Calif. (q.v.) are but an hour's drive away. The usual range of station facilities is available, with quarters for 29 officers and 141 men, and off-base housing located in three suburban areas located within two miles of El Centro. Word about station affairs is passed in part through *The Sand Paper*. In addition to Attack Squadron 174, a second tenant command is U.S. Air Force Space and Missile System Organization (or SAMSO), which works with NAVSTAR, a naval satellite navigation system useful to all branches of the armed forces.

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EL TORO (SANTA ANA), CALIF., MARINE CORPS AIR STATION, 1944–

On 15 September 1944 Col. William J. Fox, USMCR, who during World War II served as a representative with Army and Navy people on a site selection board to choose sites for air stations in southern California, became the aviation assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. In this billet his mission involved the military direction and administrative coordination of Marine Corps aeronautical activities in the Eleventh Naval District. In addition to subordinate units at Marine Corps Air Stations (MCAS) at Santa Barbara (Goleta) (q.v.), Mojave (q.v.), and El Centro (q.v.), he had charge of the Marine Corps Air Department at Miramar (q.v.); the Headquarters Squadron, Marine Corps Activities, Naval Air Bases, Eleventh Naval District; and Marine auxiliary air stations at Gillespie, Ill.; Chino Field, Ontario; and Ryan Field, Hemet, Calif., all outlying fields for El Toro.

Since Naval Air Station (LTA) Santa Ana (q.v.) is covered separately, a brief resume of El Toro's beginnings must suffice.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States direly needed aviation training areas. Because of the mountainous terrain and limited air space in southern California, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps became involved in numerous conflicts. A particular problem was that the Army, responsible for coast defense, might send up aircraft to intercept naval or Marine aircraft and thus disrupt training schedules, and the Marines were under the pressure of knowing that their squadrons would soon be sent to engage in combat in the South Pacific. In early 1942 Marine aviation had only two wings, the First and