

Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center Los Angeles

by Bruce R. Lively

WHEN THE NAVAL AND MARINE CORPS ARMORY in Los Angeles, California, was completed in 1940, it became the largest facility designed for reservists in the United States. Soon similar reserve centers were erected across the nation to meet the needs of America's wartime and "cold war" defense. Mobilization readiness for possible intervention around the globe became the watchword of these reserve facilities. The history of the Los Angeles reserve center has since its founding mirrored the ever-changing foreign policy of nine United States presidents.

Long before the historic groundbreaking, the Chavez site had echoed the sounds of America's past. Originally a Yang-na Indian village and burial ground, in 1769 it was a campsite for the famous Gaspar de Portolá expedition from Baja California to Monterey.¹ A nearby monument marks the stopping off place of this party which was dispatched to explore Alta California.²

The ravine was named later for Julian Chavez (1810-1879), who arrived in the area from Abiquiu, New Mexico, in the 1830s and lived in the ravine sometime after 1844. Over the years of Mexican and United States rule, he served variously as assistant mayor, councilman, judge, and county supervisor. The 1850 census lists him as a farmer with thirteen in the household and holdings estimated at an impressive \$800.³ Another inhabitant of the ravine was José Andrés Sepulveda who owned a small reservoir. The quiet of the beautiful area may have been destroyed in the late 1800s by vigilante hangings on a large tree near the corner of the present center building.⁴

When the Hebrew Benevolent Society founded the first charitable society of Los Angeles in 1854, it asked the city for some

land on the upper plateau of the current center property to establish a cemetery. The land was granted by the city for \$1.00. The first Jewish child to die in Los Angeles and the only Jewish mayor, Bernard Cohen, were buried there. The mayor received the most elaborate funeral in city history. At the time of his death, Cohen was worth in excess of \$300,000. John Jones, the father of Mrs. James B. Lankershim, who died of smallpox in 1876, was also interred in the same burial grounds.⁵ Ironically, this future site of a military training center was at the time called the "Home of Peace Cemetery."⁶

Between 1902 and 1910 the cemetery was moved by the Congregation B'nai B'rith of the Wilshire Temple to the Mid-Wilshire area. The cemetery had become, one critic observed, "almost inaccessible because of the oil wells, derricks, tanks, brickyards, and kilns nearby, the smoke from which discolored the shrubbery" and made the monuments "black and unsightly." When the bodies were moved, the city used the land to enlarge the nearby smallpox isolation hospital and improve the sewer line to Bernard Street.⁷

The brickyard was owned by "Irish Joe" Mullally, a councilman and local politician. His double kiln fired more than a half-million bricks in the month of October 1869 and some nine million in the boom year of 1888. Bricks from the Mullally yard built Ross House, the Bryson Building, the city's first schoolhouse, and shops in the Arcadian block.⁸ Just a short distance down from the brickyard at the mouth of the ravine, Angelenos attended bullfights and cockfights as well as bull and bear baitings for entertainment, eight decades before the arrival of Walter O'Malley and his trolley-car Dodgers from Brooklyn.⁹

An early Jewish settler, Harris Newmark, described how smallpox epidemics visited Los Angeles about every two years after 1850. "The effect was exceedingly bad, . . . [with] the whole population on such friendly footing with death. The smallpox wagon, dubbed 'Black Maria,' was a frequent sight" on its morbid journey from the homes with yellow quarantine flags to the "awesome and crowded" pesthouse in Chavez Ravine.¹⁰ The smallpox isolation hospital had been constructed by authority of an ordinance dated January 24, 1862, which placed it within the supervision of the city board of health.¹¹ The pesthouse opened

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in July 1868 under the leadership of Dr. Henry S. Orme. Orme was a former Confederate medical officer from Philadelphia by way of Oglethorpe University in Georgia. He earned \$10 per day and depended heavily upon the nursing aid of the Catholic Sisters of Charity.¹²

Nearby Elysian Park, containing 532 acres of hills and valleys, was set aside as a recreation area in 1886. A decade later, in the panic of 1896, the businessmen of the city raised \$20,000 to pay laborers \$1 per day for clearing land and building new roads.¹³ One part of the park was a botanical garden beginning in the 1890s. In 1920 the city dedicated its first “free automobile campground” nearby. Pistol competition and housing for the 1932 Olympics were provided in what four years later would become the Los Angeles Police Academy. Thereafter, the police and naval reservists generously shared facilities in a relationship which benefits both to this day.¹⁴

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During the 1930s the smallpox epidemics abated with the widespread use of a new vaccine. The old pesthouse site was used for a time as a garbage dump because no one had any money to improve real estate during the Depression.¹⁵ However, by late 1934 the city began to covet funds from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). First, a citizens’ group proposed the pesthouse tract along with several other sites as the possible location for a unique facility called a “reserve training armory” for sailors. Roosevelt, a sailing enthusiast and former assistant secretary of the navy, backed the idea as a unique facet of his national preparedness campaign. The navy selected Chavez Ravine in January 1935 from a list of 40 suggestions for its natural defense position “inconspicuously nestled in the hills where raiding bombers in a possible attack by enemy air forces will be least likely to damage it.”¹⁶

On December 13, 1935, the city council voted to donate the necessary land. The county promised \$300,000 in materials if the WPA would provide the labor. By fall 1937 the proposed navy armory was the center of a swirling political whirligig.¹⁷ Cost, timing, and political backbiting all played their roles. Still, WPA application number 25298 and registry number 324538-9

were filed before year's end to request construction of a "Navy and Marine Corps Reserve Armory" in the ravine. But on January 14, 1938, the documents were withdrawn at the insistence of a group which argued the training building would interfere with a proposed 200-acre Mercado Pacific Exposition devoted to improving trade with Asia. The Navy, however, was not willing to abandon the site.¹⁸

Secretary of the Navy Claude A. Swanson and Deputy Administrator, Major Lee S. Dillon, of the Army Corps of Engineers, lobbied for the training building, though Swanson was careful to add that the sea service had no funds to spare for the effort. Dillon answered the Mercado backers by insisting that the armory required only 4½ of the 200 acres needed for the exposition. Both sides argued that the projects had first claim on Chavez Ravine and counseled opponents to select from any of a myriad of alternative sites.¹⁹

The chief engineer of Los Angeles supported the Navy as did a prestigious citizens committee. Admiral William D. Leahy openly backed funds for the armory, and a bill was introduced by Representative Charles Kramer to procure the federal money.²⁰ Navy and Marine Corps reserve officers joined American Legionnaires to request that Senator William G. McAdoo speak with the President. On the other side, a former president of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, William Simpson, and the chief engineer of the Bureau of Light and Power, William Scattergood, carried the Mercado party line to Washington, D.C., with a flurry of long-distance calls and telegrams.²¹

The founding fathers of the Los Angeles Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center included Lieutenant Commander John W. Considine, Jr., George Hearst, Herman Spitzel, Captain Claude B. Mayo of the Eleventh Naval District, Marine Corps Major Victor F. Bleasdale, and Captain William F. Fox. These men told a committee of the city council in February 1938, that "a million dollar building is bound to be good looking and good for the community. We are appealing to all good citizens to back up our request of immediate action." They then pointed out that the city had approved the project in 1935 and that the county and WPA were waiting only for city approval to release the money

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and begin work. The Navy and Congress had voiced support so that the President's signature and city approval would assure an exciting new addition to the area.²²

The next day the Los Angeles *Times* told of "enthusiastic reports on . . . a magnificent Naval Armory" heard by the City Council Committee on Finance amidst an audience that included representatives of some 170 American Legion posts. Simpson and D.W. Pontius countered that their group had spent in excess of \$110,000 on Mercado plans, and they promised to work vigorously for a presidential veto of any funds voted for the naval armory project. Captain Mayo complimented the armory concept as a precedent for the nation and a monumental contribution to national preparedness. He described the plans and specifications as nearly complete. Commander Russell W. Starr of the American Legion promised to expend every effort to prevent future hostilities in the world through national defense and the training of reserves. Little did he know that his words would describe America's international military policy through the next half century.²³

Congressman Jerry Voorhis, who later became known as the man Richard Nixon defeated in his first congressional election of 1946, called the Army Corps of Engineers on February 10 to check on progress in the city council. Lieutenant Colonel F.C. Harrington responded that the Mercado protests were falling on deaf ears and that the WPA was going to lobby Mayor Frank Shaw on the morrow.²⁴ On the 11th, the mayor, who was facing serious political issues elsewhere, was hesitant, but on February 16 the council and mayor approved the plan to "a roar of applause" from several hundred Navy and Legion members. Reserve Captain William F. Fox, who was selected project coordinator for the county, promised that the grading and construction of the base for a 180-by-800-foot structure would be completed by July 1 to meet federal funding deadlines. Simpson and Scattergood fought to the end, which occurred when their council contingent lost a delaying vote by a tie.²⁴

The final vote on the armory land gift was unanimous with the stipulation that the grant deed "contain a provision that in the event said real property shall cease at any time to be used for said armory purposes," it should revert to the city. The county

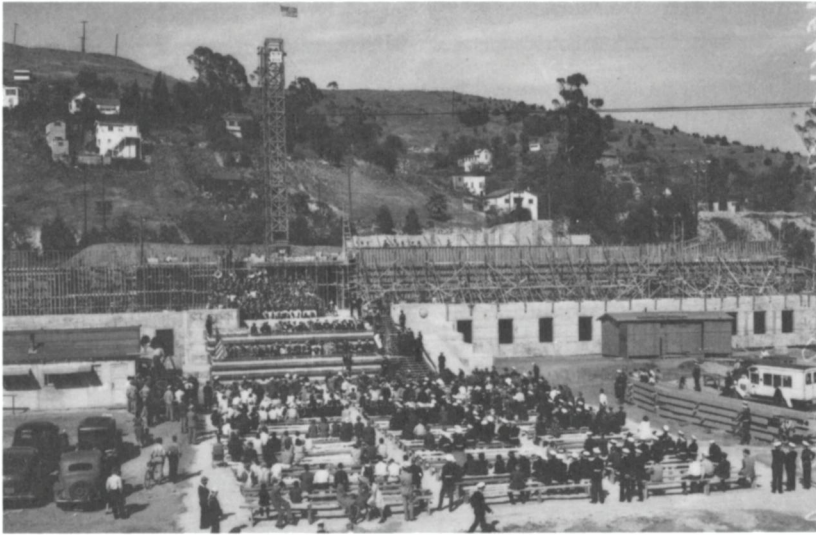
and WPA formalized their commitments shortly thereafter for labor and building materials. The *Times* predicted groundbreaking by May 15. At last the old converted garage at 1615 South Los Angeles Street seemed destined for retirement as a reserve meeting hall.²⁶

Captain Mayo was the Navy liaison and the renowned Stiles O. Clements served as chief architect. Mayor Shaw and Roger Jessup, chairman of the board of Supervisors, signed the joint city-county agreement on March 22. The next day, the Council instructed the city attorney to rule if a popular vote would be necessary before approving the armory. Representative Lyland Ford of Los Angeles introduced a bill to appropriate \$3 million for the Mercado project which evidently had not died. The eight remaining pesthouse buildings were fumigated and sold for salvage at \$4000. Actual construction of the armory began April 1, when the Los Angeles *Examiner* reported that the facility would be able to train a full 1,000-man battalion. The drill facility had a German design with a massive honeycombed skylight. The hanger-like structure was said to be the largest enclosed space without columns in the world.²⁷

Ground was broken for the ambitious reinforced concrete structure on April 22, 1938 at 3:00 p.m. Front page stories in every Los Angeles newspaper bragged that the city would have the largest naval armory in the world. Captain Fox arranged the ceremony with Marine Major Joseph R. Sproul, a judge of Los Angeles County Superior Court, as master of ceremonies. Jessup made the principal address. Rear Admiral Sinclair Gorman, commandant of the Eleventh Naval District, spoke for the Navy, and Major General Louis McCarthy Little, commander of the Marine Base in San Diego, held forth for the "leathernecks." Mayor Shaw, Dr. Starr, and the head of the state Veterans Bureau also attended. Diving Navy bombers furnished a "roaring obligato" to the "staccato rhythm" of the clacking power shovel. The Navy was underway in Chavez.²⁸

The facility was designed to drill two regiments simultaneously with twin galleys, a rifle range, an indoor swimming pool, and plush quarters for visiting flag officers and dignitaries. The bomb-resistant structure could even house up to 3,500 refugees in case of a major natural disaster.²⁹ The *Times* called it a

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An unknown ceremony was held at the Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Armory sometime in the Fall 1939 as the facility was half-completed. *Los Angeles Daily News* Collection, courtesy Department of Special Collections, Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (hereinafter cited UCLA).



The Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Armory from the southwest about the time of its dedication in October 1940. Courtesy UCLA.

“mammoth structure” of “first importance to Los Angeles, Southern California and the Pacific Coast.”³⁰

The only delay in the construction schedule occurred in July 1939. About 260 of the 400 WPA workers threw down their shovels and walked off the \$1.1 million project as part of a one-day strike over the new 130-hour-per-month requirement for WPA workers passed by Congress in an effort to raise national productivity.³¹ Lieutenant Edward L. Rimpau became the first officer assigned to the armory on August 8, 1939. In the spring of 1940, supervisors William S. Smith, Gordon L. McDonnough, John Anson Ford, and Oscar Hauge inspected the project with construction coordinator Fox.³²

When the war in Europe heated up in 1940, the supervisors reaffirmed southern California’s unwillingness to join in the hostilities by formally asking the new Eleventh District Commander for assurances that the armory would be used exclusively for reserve training unless there was a national emergency. Reservists were already starting to meet at the unfinished armory as well as at the old centers on Main and Los Angeles streets.³³ But international events were overtaking the reluctant pacifism of the Southland. New seafaring battalions were being formed with some individuals activated as early as November 1940.³⁴ On behalf of the Navy, the *Times* invited musicians to join the Navy Reserve Band at the Los Angeles Street facility. The article guaranteed immediate ratings transferable if the unit were called to active duty.

That same month Captain Benjamin Perlman of the Eleventh Naval District officially accepted the \$1.3 million armory as its new commanding officer. Oddly enough, architectural historians would later insist the striking finished structure would have fit perfectly in the imperialist Berlin skyline of Hitler’s Third Reich. By late 1940, peacetime was drawing to a close, and the Navy anticipated training some 1,200 signalmen and radio operators per year at the Los Angeles center in classes of 300 per quarter. Mayor Fletcher Bowron, Supervisor John Anson Ford, and recently elected Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz attended the dedication where Captain Perlman described the center as the “finest edifice for reserve training” he had ever seen. The opening was

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The Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Armory dedication, October 24, 1940. Those in attendance included Mayor Fletcher Bowron, Commanding Officer Captain Benjamin Perlman, Supervisor John Anson Ford and Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz. Courtesy UCLA.

an “elaborate military and religious program” to coincide with Navy Day, October 24, 1940.³⁵

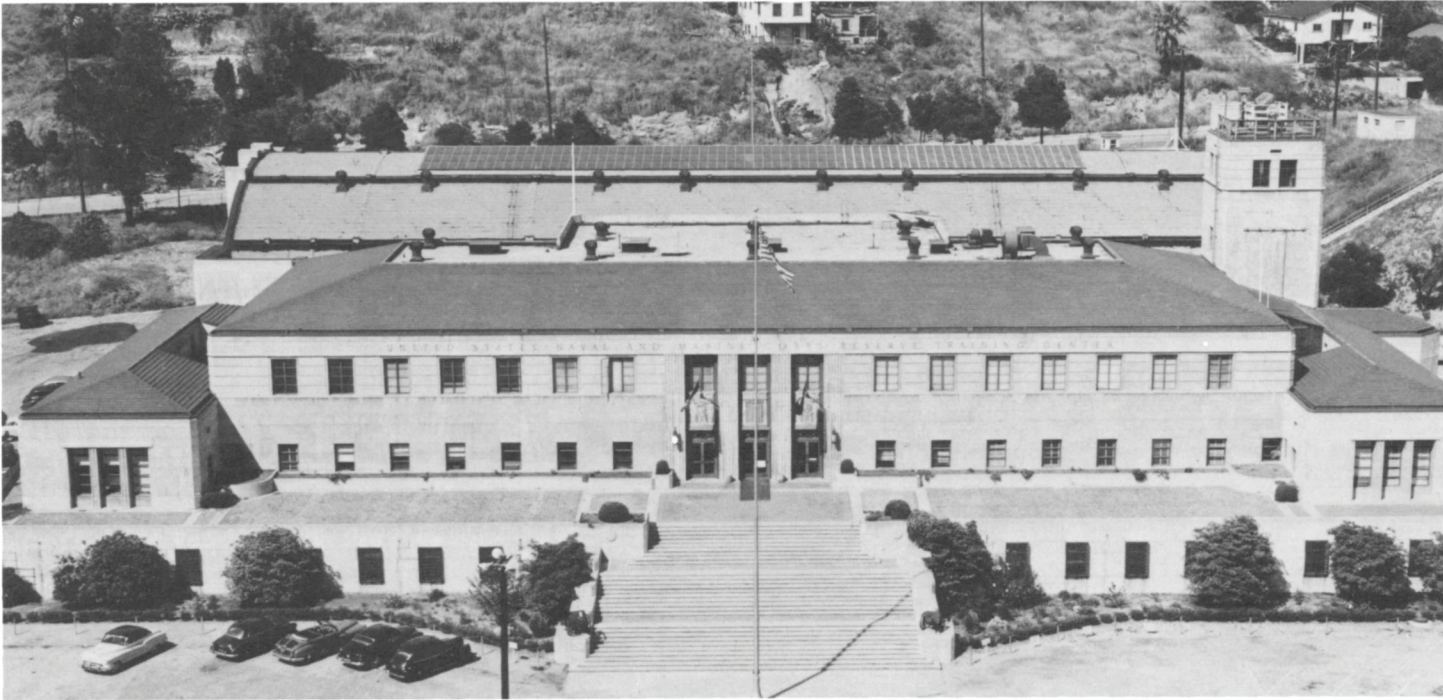
In November 1940, Congressman Ford reported that President Roosevelt had approved another \$255,549 for the new armory to be used on a public address system, utilities, flag poles, gates, paving, and landscaping. About the same time the president’s son, Captain James Roosevelt brought a company of Marines to drill at Lilac Terrace, as the armory was often called. Within nine months, an additional \$75,000 would be allocated.³⁶ Then came Pearl Harbor, and thoughts of peacetime training centers gave way to “30-day wonders” who would join in the fight against Hitler and Mussolini. As a sign of the times, Rear Admiral Isaac C. Johnson, director of Navy Officer Procurement, flew his flag at the center in 1941 and early 1942. Before another year was out, *Westways* reported that “Something New Had Been Added” at Chavez Ravine. The United States Navy was

making men out of “green boys” at the new Radio and Signal School in the armory building. Top graduates could receive and send continental code at 25 words per minute, type 60 words per minute, grasp radio theory, perform wigwag and flag hoist, and fire a rifle.³⁷

The average age of enlisted recruits was 20 years, and the average weight gained during training was 12 pounds. Some classes swelled to 600 men. Besides a site for communications training, the Los Angeles armory served as a recruiting station, receiving center and basic training facility. According to one reserve officer who later commanded the center, “virtually everyone [from the West Coast] who joined the Navy during the war went through the building.” Hundreds of would-be soldiers slept on cots along the drill deck.³⁸ Others bedded down in tent houses erected across the upper center area where the cemetery once had been.³⁹

All the trainees “lived in.” They rose at 5:30 a.m., heard lectures, drilled, “swilled chow,” swam in the basement pool, and went to class some more. Evening sessions lasted until 9:00 p.m. The armory was designed like a destroyer, and Commander Martin Dickinson insisted on proper Navy courtesy throughout drill areas, classrooms, labs, hospital areas, ship stores, and various officer and enlisted clubs. Commander Dickinson, like his predecessor, Captain Mayo, was a World War I veteran. He had enlisted during an administration of Theodore Roosevelt and had received training on what was once the famed Admiral David Farragut’s flagship, the *Hartford*.⁴⁰

Ensign Rocky Spicer recalled the general confusion of the first day at Chavez. A few weeks after enlisting on September 4, 1942, he pulled into the “vast gravel parking lot” to enter his training cycle as an “instant officer.” With pants too tight and a jacket that flapped over his ample posterior, he glanced about at the other candidates for clues to what he should do when the bugle sounded and the flag rode up the mast. They were not much help. One ignored the bugle completely while tying his shoe. Another placed his cap over his heart. A third saluted smartly, but admitted later that he had used the Boy Scouts’ three-fingered salute. Navy acronyms baffled and amused Spicer who considered the exercise as a brief wartime parenthesis in



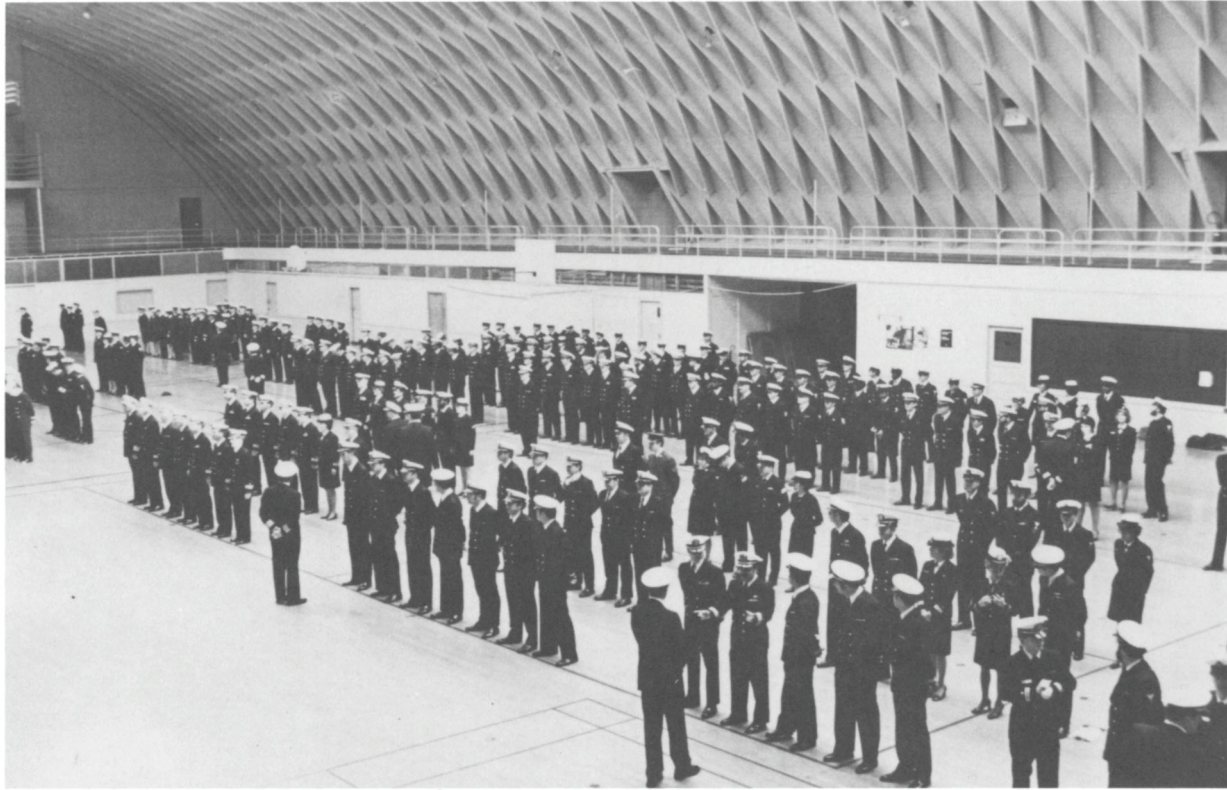
The armory as it appeared at the end of World War II. All illustrations which follow are courtesy the Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center.

his civilian career. Little did anyone know that the war would continue for nearly five years and become the worst conflagration in world history. Spicer and thousands of his fellows would bleed Navy blue for the rest of their lives as active duty and reserve sailors.

In October 1942, Spicer's hero was a "Chief Petty Officer with enough hitches to hash him from the wrist to shoulder." With "an avuncular" attitude toward the "boots" this CPO spouted Navy lore, signal flag and blinker, and the manual at arms with steady assurance. Like militiamen since colonial times, Spicer practiced drilling at home with a broomstick. Daily the undaunted chief forced them to disrobe in the basement swimming pool and churn 100 yards to the opposite side — "presumably the requisite distance" to save oneself if the ship was shot out from under. The chief was "father confessor, mentor and cheerleader — always ready with encouragement and gentle criticism." Spicer's class of 40 trainees provided men to take the watches on ships and advance island bases, skippers of LSTs and other craft, flag lieutenants, legal aides, public affairs officers, personnel experts, and unit leaders of island invasions.⁴¹

Celebrities dropped by on occasion to boost morale and pose for the traditional public relations photos in support of the war effort. Some offered greetings on the communications school's daily radio broadcast heard around the world over the armed forces radio network. Jack Benny's sidekick Dennis Day toured the armory during Ensign Spicer's training.

While Spicer trained, a Stanford University alumna named Rebecca Stribling became the first local graduate of the new Women of Annapolis program. Ensign Stribling's first job after the U.S. Naval Academy was at the Los Angeles Naval Reserve Armory as assistant to Lieutenant Frances E. Shoup, the officer in charge of recruiting WAVES (Women Appointed for Voluntary Emergency Service). Ensign Stribling pretended not to be bothered by the "many out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye glimpses" of the men. Hardly a women's liberation proponent by modern standards, she seemed grateful that the WAVES received "pay equal to men of equal rank." Nevertheless, she did joke with reporters that the women were not allowed gold braid because "the men used it all up" on themselves.⁴²



Cited as an architectural miracle at the time of construction as the largest enclosed structure without columns in the world, the armory owned this achievement to an unusual honey-combed wooden skylight based on a German design. The interior is still the same today.

Meanwhile, reservists continued to drill on Washington Street opposite the old Knudson Creamery. One young sailor remembers visiting the radio school at Chavez to pick up some supplies. But the rest of the citizen sailors had to wait to occupy their training centers. Uncle Sam still needed trained active duty sailing men. On November 30, 1942, the United States government placed a "lis pendens" on the rest of the vacant land owned by the Jewish benevolent group. Eminent domain was executed in August 1943, leaving only subsurface oil rights to the former cemetery sponsors.⁴³

From 1943 to 1945, the armory popped out "trained" swabbies like the automatic toasters that had become the rage in the shops along Hollywood Boulevard. One local historian believes that the center also may have been used as a command post for police during the "zoot suit riots" of 1943, when Latin and Anglo residents battled in the streets of Los Angeles.⁴⁴

Navy reserve training centers continued to appear around the country. A contingent of reservists from Los Angeles, including Commander Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., were honored at the February 17, 1945, groundbreaking of the Pasadena Naval Reserve Center. Fairbanks preceeded a great procession of honored guests which over the years included Omar Bradley, Earl Warren, Arnold Palmer, Walt Disney, Bob Hope, and Billy Graham, as well as astronauts, presidents and heads of state who toured the facility when it became known as the "Anchor of the Tournament of Roses Parade."⁴⁵

After V-J Day the Los Angeles Armory served as a separation center for some 20,000 men, as much of the nation checked out of uniform and returned to civilian life. The postwar scene was utter confusion. Paper work and old gear stacked from the basement to the rafters. In most cases processing took two to three days. Homecoming sailors came by troop ship from Asia to San Francisco, via Hawaii, then by train to Los Angeles or Long Beach separation centers. Some 1,500 men per day slept in hammocks or on the ground outside, ate in the 24-hour mess hall, and enjoyed free transportation to minor league baseball at Wrigley or Gilmore fields, boxing at the Pan Pacific, or dancing at the Hollywood United Service Organization (USO). The gravel parking lot was filled with automobiles, and the sailors made

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good use of the obstacle course and softball diamond in the nearby area presently occupied by the Los Angeles Dodgers advance ticket offices. Actor Robert Stack and bandleader Alvino Rey were a couple of the notables to receive their \$100 "Mustering out" checks at Chavez ravine.⁴⁶

Not everyone forsook the Navy. In August 1946 while the separation action was still in full swing, President Harry S. Truman signed legislation authorizing \$24.5 million per year to train naval reservists and "assure an adequate number of officers for America's peacetime Navy." Memories of the devastation from Flanders Field to the Philippines were not quieted by the allies' ill-planned split of Western Europe with the Russians.⁴⁷

By late summer of 1946 reservists started to filter back into the Los Angeles Armory to claim it for the intended purpose. At first, many of the units drilled off-site while the facility was co-occupied by the busy active duty demobilization staff.⁴⁸ Then Ensign Robert Bollinger described the number of sailors at the armory in March 1947 as "utterly awesome." Endless training films occupied the hours, while everyone waited for someone else to get organized. The quarterdeck was filled morning until night because some units chose evenings, and others preferred weekends. Vets dropped by, signed up for uniforms, and then disappeared for months. Supply officers finally stacked all the articles of clothing by size and handed them out to the most faithful. America refused to be caught unprepared this time. The bulging decks of the post-war reserve center symbolized the local zeal for the "cold war."⁴⁹

The first organized weekend cruise did not leave Terminal Island until late spring 1947, bound for Catalina. Following form, the ship returned "sans anchor" having ventured too close to some rocks. The first Marine Corps summer training was at Camp Pendelton in August 1947. This also was the era when the Los Angeles Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center established a reputation as the wardroom for celebrities. Officers such as Fairbanks, Glenn Ford, Jackie Cooper, director John Ford, and future ambassador John Gavin invited friends such as Ronald Reagan, Buddy Rogers, and Mary Pickford to gala events or for just a visit. Ensign Bollinger remembers Rogers phoning the armory regularly to secure lifeguards for his swank Holly-

wood parties at the Pickfair Mansion. World War I Navy veteran, Rudy Vallee, and his band entertained at the 1946 Navy Reserve Ball. Red Skelton, Bob Crosby, and Janis Paige shared the programs for Marine Corps balls in 1947 and 1948 at the Ambassador Hotel and elsewhere. Obviously, the military had come very much into style, and celebrities jumped at any chance to demonstrate their patriotism by helping the local reservists.⁵⁰

In November 1948, the Navy established volunteer public relation units which included many outstanding names in the communications world. The Los Angeles companies featured James Bassett, a distinguished public affairs aide to Admiral "Bull" Halsey and author of the classic novel *In Harm's Way*; future Nixon Communications Director Herb Klein; Ford Administration Chief of Staff Robert Hartmann, and such newspaper writers as James Bacon, Erwin Baker, Hank Osborne, and Ferdinand Mendenhall. The first reserve public affairs flag officer in the Navy, Rear Admiral Robert M. Garrick, mustered then as a green lieutenant. These units were nonpay and offered only 24 drill opportunities per year.

By the time the Navy was promising a "reserve retirement" program for those who could garner 50 points per year over a 20-year career. Pay billets were virtually nonexistent because so many former officers were willing to serve for free. Frequently, young men who barely missed the war would attempt to "prove themselves" by drilling for months in "civvies" while they waited for their majority or for a billet to open up in an organized unit.⁵¹

In 1950 during a 30-day training cruise to Panama and Ecuador, the Korean War broke out. One sailor remembers worrying that the annual cruise would be mobilized to guard the canal. In July the first 31 pharmacists, boilertenders, and sailors with other needed rates who had served in World War II left Chavez Ravine for the Far East and what the *Times* warned might "well be World War III."⁵² Once again the Los Angeles armory became a recruiting, processing, and training center. Thousands of sailors and junior officers were called back.⁵³ One retired brigade commander estimated that 50 percent of the drilling reservists were recalled for Korea. Additional drills were scheduled in the evenings to free the quarterdeck for new recruits during the day.⁵⁴

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The Korean conflict inspired a rash of Hollywood films about World War II. Navy movies such as Gary Cooper's "Task Force" (1949), "Operation Pacific" with Ward Bond (1951), "The Frogmen" with Richard Widmark (1951), and "Cry For Happy" (1954) with Donald O'Connor and Glenn Ford focused attention on the Navy exploits in the war against the Axis powers and provided work for reservists who were close to the armory. One teen-age recruit recalls Joan Crawford showing up at the armory in January 1951 to cheer on the Marines before they shipped out.⁵⁵ Future Rear Admiral John Ford and Andy Devine also visited Chavez regularly. Once when the Navy spurned Ford's offer of money to pay for using the armory in a film, he sent out a crew to hang brand new doors at one of the front entrances as a token of his gratitude.⁵⁶

As the Korean War wound on in January 1952, the distinguished World War II veteran Captain Herbert E. Claudius assumed command of the center. His watch saw another demobilization effort and re-emphasis on mobilization readiness. On May 17 he posed with a budding starlett to highlight a grand Armed Forces Day parade. Captain Forrest R. Bunker took over the center in January 1954 and remained until October 1955. At the time 2,500 officers and men drilled at Chavez Ravine in six surface divisions, two construction battalions, one submarine division, and 18 other units. Captain Bunker was a 1924 Naval Academy graduate and survivor of a kamikaze attack aboard the USS *California* in the Philippine campaign of World War II. He was succeeded in 1955 by a 1927 Annapolis graduate, Captain Malen Durski, who came from the staff of the supreme commander of the Atlantic fleet.⁵⁷

The romance between the motion picture industry and the Navy continued to blossom under Captains Bunker and Durski. Actor Jeff Chandler and his Hollywood producers were so pleased with Navy assistance provided by the reservists in making the classic film "Away All Boats" that they sent buses to Chavez and picked up hundreds of uniformed sailors to attend the opening at Grauman's Chinese Theater.⁵⁸ Navy Surface Division 11-9 commander, Captain Frank Geiser, made national news when he invited pretty actress Yvonne Lime to be "Sweetheart of the Division Ball." There was nothing odd about an all-



Remembrance of 35 years ago when a shapely starlet joined Center Commander Captain Herbert G. Claudius to celebrate Armed Forces Day.

American girl with a couple of screen credits showing up at an armory dance. Not until a rumor broke that her former leading man, a “B”-movie singer named “Elvis,” had proposed marriage. It was a Hollywood publicist’s dream. At the news the press nearly crowded the officers off the drill deck. No one knows who masterminded the scam, but Yvonne Lime and Captain Geiser spent the evening denying the rumor. The fabrication made the wires and newspapers from California to Chicago and became a perfect example of the symbiotic relationship between Chavez and Hollywood.⁵⁹

The recession of Eisenhower's second term was not without impact on the reserve center. Federal cutbacks reduced pay billets and made for much tighter reporting procedures. The nightly meetings ended in "abandon ship drills" as sailors crowded the exits. Everyone had to be verified by signing out on a muster sheet, and no one could endorse until the official termination of the meetings. In October 1958, the Navy instituted a new recall policy "that those who are in a Naval Reserve unit will be the last called to active duty. Those reservists who are not a member of a unit will be among the first recalled to active duty in the event of an emergency." Also, those who left the Navy without joining the reserves would lose rate in case they were activated for another national emergency. Predictably, these warnings proved ineffective for coaxing a war-weary pool of veterans to affiliate with the reserves.⁶⁰

Toward the end of Captain Bunker's command an obscure New York lawyer named Walter O'Malley became impressed with the successful relocation of the hapless Boston Braves baseball team to Milwaukee. The wheels began to turn on the engine that would change the history of Los Angeles and link it with the rest of America in ways that could never have been imagined by the dwindling cadre of veterans at the obscure Chavez armory. During the 1956 World Series, Los Angeles Mayor Norris Poulson pitched O'Malley and his faltering Brooklyn Dodgers that transcontinental air service and a booming population in Los Angeles provided the ideal environment for a successful major league baseball franchise. The huge crowds watching the recently transmigrated Cleveland Rams added credence to his argument.

Ironically, the same unlovely Chavez area that played such a vital part in Poulson's election triumph over incumbent Fletcher Bowron in 1953 and brought his greatest claim to fame in 1958, eventually spelled his defeat at the hands of Sam Yorty in 1960. The story begins with President Harry S. Truman who was an advocate of public housing to improve a postwar shortage caused by returning vets and the resulting baby boom. Truman aides worked with Bowron to condemn the shacks and old houses on the hills overlooking the armory, in favor of new federal housing. A 1952 referendum showed that an increasingly conservative

Los Angeles electorate was cool to the idea. So did Bowron's defeat at the hands of the Republican Poulson who shared the Eisenhower distaste for public housing.⁶¹

Quietly Poulson borrowed \$5,000 from the reclusive baseball fan Howard Hughes to fund a survey of Sulphur Ravine just over the hill from the Chavez Ravine site of the armory. On the suspect excuse of visiting the armory to review the sailors on a day when the reserves were not drilling, the mayor conferred with Captain Bunker and looked over the area. Shortly thereafter, a "blue-ribbon" citizens committee on parks recommended a grant of \$2 million and 185 acres for the construction of major baseball stadium. Even Democratic Councilwoman Rosalind Wyman believed the "hilly, unsightly scarcely populated . . . ravine site would be suddenly transformed into a taxpaying paradise." Plans were drawn in 1958, when comedian Joe E. Brown chaired a celebrity committee which screened a telethon to benefit the baseball movement. Movie stars Ronald Reagan and Debbie Reynolds hosted the show and raised money to fight a ballot initiative designed to block the Dodgers' move to Los Angeles.⁶²

When Reserve Center Commander, Captain John C. Martin, arrived in August 1957, he decided to rally this rekindled interest in the ravine to aid recruiting. His reservists were mobilized for an ambitious recruiting campaign entitled "Who is the Man from Chavez Ravine." Posters were spread about the city, and a "Hollywood-type" reception with celebrities was staged at the center. The outstanding reservist was dubbed "The Man from Chavez Ravine." A motorcade followed over to a nearby theatre for a movie preview and party. Many people hate the Dodgers to this day for what they regard as sharp financial dealings in obtaining the ravine, though the Los Angeles victory over the White Sox at the Memorial Coliseum in the 1959 World Series placed the detractors in a hopeless minority. The stadium was completed in April 1962 at a cost of \$15.5 million.⁶³

Initially, O'Malley offered to buy the armory site and construct another elsewhere. The Navy might have jumped at the plan to relocate in modern facilities with better access to public transportation, except that their deed allowed the city to reclaim the property if it ever was used for private purposes. So O'Malley

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promised Captain Roger Miller, who was center commander from September 1958 to July 1962, that he would build the Navy the most impressive backyard in America. Retired reservists have mixed remembrances of the stadium construction period. One officer said it caused little disruption, but Captain Miller cannot forget the choking dust and incessant traffic caused when some 15 million cubic yards of Sulphur Ravine was moved by the "big blue crew." For the entire time the Dodgers played at the Coliseum sailors in uniform were admitted free. After the opening of Dodger Stadium reservists reported that sailors still did not pay, and the center often provided bands and color guards for games. One former division commander remembers that groups of sailors would go to the stadium after drills to see the last innings of a day game or take in a hot dog before a night event.⁶⁴

Through it all Captain Miller had a reserve center to run. Enlistments were down in the postwar years, so he made recruiting and public relations a high priority. In 1960 he enlisted a Hollywood newcomer named Connie Stevens as a celebrity judge for the first annual Reserve Center Auto Show attended by 5,000 local car buffs. The "big T.Q." (Ted Quillan) of rock-and-roll giant KFWB radio helped judge tuck-and-rolled '57 Chevys and whale-finned Plymouths from several western states. A year later, Navy veteran Robert Stack returned to the center with his wife Rosemary, a former Miss America, to help at the Auto Show. The Navy was calling on its old celebrity allies and the new teen crazes of hot cars and rock music to carry on the never ending battle for recruits.

Captain Miller worked with Revell Company about the same time to foster an ingenious competition among reserve centers for building elaborate model ships to exhibit in high schools and for other recruiting opportunities. He also made numerous speaking engagements and marched center units in the 1960 and 1962 Veterans of Foreign Wars parades down Spring Street. His Marine counterpart at the center, Colonel John Hopkins, opened the drill hall as storage to help the Toys-for-Tots. A Navy Reserve color guard raised the American flag on opening day at Dodger Stadium. Captain Miller saw the Dodgers' arrival as a benefit to "recruiting and [the] community status of the Training Center."⁶⁵

Dean Martin and Eddie Albert used the center for a film and donated \$150 toward the enlisted recreation fund. But the sailors never received the money. It seems that Captain Miller's relief died after arriving to take over his new assignment. The movie money was used to pay some high telephone bills and personal expenses of the widow not covered by the Navy. Commander Kenneth P. Huff eventually succeeded Captain Miller in July 1962. At the time approximately 36 units with 1,000 officers and 1,000 enlisted men drilled at Chavez Ravine.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, another historical footnote dotted the pages of the Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center. It began many years before when newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst started keeping company with movie actress Marion Davis. Hearst had been a staunch advocate of the armory in the 1930s. After Hearst's death, Miss Davies inherited his cavernous Beverly Hills home before marrying the one-time stunt man and World War II merchant mariner "Captain" Horace Brown. "Captain" Brown became a leader in the Beverly Hills Council of the Navy League, which consisted of Hollywood celebrities and business people who met in his mansion as a civilian support group for the "cold war" effort. When Brown remodeled the meeting room, he ordered an enormous inlaid conference table with elegant leather padded chairs. On the backs were the members' names — Governor Pat Brown, Freddie de Cordova, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., John Ford, Clark Gable, William Holden, John F. Kennedy, Tyrone Power, Ronald Reagan, Buddy Rogers, Robert Taylor, and others.⁶⁷

Subsequently, "Captain" Brown decided to adopt the local reserve center as his home away from home. Eventually he moved the conference table to Chavez Ravine along with a life-sized portrait of Miss Davies which hung above the fireplace in one of the most spectacular wardroom complexes of the United States Navy. He also tried to donate a classic 1942 Buick limousine to the Navy for chauffeuring admirals and other top brass. When the Navy turned him down, he gave the automobile to a newly established Sea Cadet unit. The special room was appointed with a number of Davies-Brown memorabilia and became a favored meeting place and fading reminder of more glorious years.⁶⁸

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Movie makers occasionally shot a scene at the Chavez reserve center, but anti-war movies were more popular than World War II action films during the turbulent late 1960s. A succession of reserve center commanding officers had to deal with "Captain" Brown, including Commander Kenneth P. Huff and Captain George M. Conkey, a boxing champion at the Naval Academy and World War II veteran. It was probably during the early 1960s that Lockheed donated the Polaris missile still standing at the entrance to the center.⁶⁹

The Vietnam years dawned quietly for Navy reservists. As military advisors made their earliest estimates of rebel strength, the center staff enlisted the buxom blonde Abby Dalton to serve as queen of another Naval Reserve Ball. As late as 1966, a *Times* article called the former armory "almost a ghost building" with "obsolete" and "inoperative" equipment. But by the end of 1966 fear of the draft had built a waiting list of 700 with an average of about five men departing per month. Captain Curtis L. Tarbell, already a veteran operations officer for the Seventh Fleet off Vietnam, lived in the center's "sea cabin" during his ten-month command of the facility ending September 1967. When a permanent chapel was built to serve sailors of all faiths at the center, the *Times* described it as a symbol of the full circle of revitalization for the reserves.⁷⁰

As during all other periods of high U.S. military activity, the Vietnam War years spurred increased action at the center. In April 1967 some 1,500 drilled there. Rate training classes had increased from four to 32 per month in what was still the largest of the Navy's 620 reserve training centers.⁷¹ Classes included everything from barbering to anti-submarine rocketry. Some \$500,000 in improvements were scheduled by 1968. The commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman Jr. and Vice Admiral Isaac Kidd reviewed the units in spring 1970. UCLA held NROTC graduation there two months later and a Scout-o-rama attended by 5,000 people occupied the drill deck and parking lot during the first week of June.⁷²

About this same time some enterprising public relations type dreamed up an elaborate reward for the center's "sailor of the quarter." The culprit enlisted Miss Los Angeles, a shining new convertible, and some local merchants. In the middle of the full

dress inspection the convertible drove through the double doors to the front ranks. The beauty queen got out of the back seat and walked to the third rank of one unsuspecting unit. As the podium announced the name of a shocked petty officer as "sailor of the quarter," she planted a kiss on his lips and pulled him out of line. Off they sped in the convertible for an afternoon on the town, while a drill deck full of sailors decided to take the award more seriously during the coming quarter. In other events of note, on May 25, 1970, Captain William Marion became the first center commanding officer to be married in the chapel, and six months later, Assistant Secretary of the Navy James D. Hittle was the main speaker at Navy Day ceremonies.⁷³

As the 1960s ended, something completely foreign to reservists happened. Vets of World War II remembered saving the world for democracy and the victorious returns of overseas veterans amidst cheering crowds. While the Korean War had done little to tarnish the invincible image of the American fighting man, it left bitterness and bewilderment. By the late 1960s, a new generation had grown up knowing nothing of the "great war" and being less than impressed with the Korean showing of their elementary school years. A professor in Palo Alto insisted that the holocaust had not even happened, and some civil rights leaders were calling Vietnam a race war. These peace protestors rejected the domino theory that supported U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia and considered the prevailing South Vietnamese regime just as corrupt as Ho Chi Minh's communists of the North. The protestor ranks swelled with the body count and continuing racial tension. Across America uniformed military reservists became easy targets for violent pacifists. The Los Angeles reserve center was no exception.

Captain Bob Bollinger remembers his astonishment when the first protestors demonstrated at the 1969 armed forced parade in Torrance. He had viewed them on television and been amused by their outlandish hairdos and attire. Now it sickened him to see young people degrade the flag of a nation that had risked its collective life to protect freedoms they so blatantly misused. "I was not a warmonger," he insisted. "But I took their bizarre insults personally because I believed we were the only force supporting democracy in Southeast Asia." Within a couple of years the protests had gotten so extreme that the center

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employed an armed guard to police the grounds for bombs.⁷⁴ Occasionally, protestors would pose as enlistees to gain entrance at the center. Then they would perform protest acts. Pacifist or irresponsible sailors who avoided drills were referred to the commandant of the Eleventh Naval District and often activated.⁷⁵

War brought increased expenditures at the aging facility which was painted in October 1972 at a cost of \$36,000. Its use for community service also was heightened. Underprivileged children, the YMCA, law enforcement officers and various professional groups were invited to enjoy the classroom, basketball and swimming facilities.⁷⁶ Sometime around 1972, a resident in nearby White Knoll remembers a swarm of helicopters and Secret Service agents descending on Chavez Ravine when President Richard M. Nixon landed his entourage there for a motorcade to the Dorothy Chandler Pavillion and a political fundraiser. The FBI cordoned off the entire area and dotted the surrounding hills with sharpshooters.⁷⁷

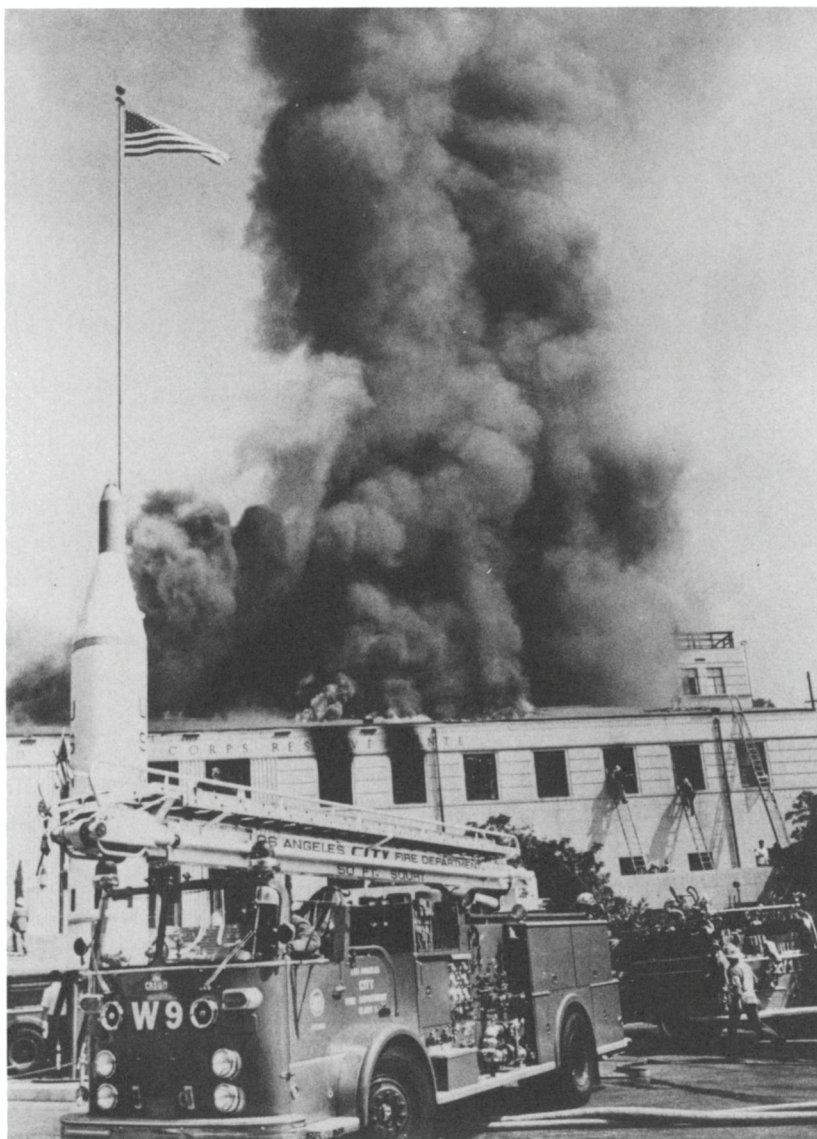
The mid-1970s were especially quiet at the Los Angeles Center. In January 1978 a field inventory was made by the Government Services Administration. It catalogued an administration and training building, carpenter shop, gardener shop, service station, classrooms, vehicle repair shops, and various storage facilities. Some 35 military and five civilians served an average of only 915 reservists per month on 10.79 acres. The main building measured 113,484 square feet with about 15,000-plus square feet in auxiliary buildings. The Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers also used the facility and its parking for 500 cars. Twenty-eight units were aboard with the Pasadena Center under Los Angeles jurisdiction. The value of the physical structures was estimated at \$1,545,828, with the land worth substantially more.⁷⁸

Two and a half years later, on September 27, 1980, between 9:30 and 11:30 a.m., a major fire broke out in the administration building of the center that required 160 firefighters to extinguish. At first the damage was estimated at a half million dollars, but later appraisals placed the loss at well over one million dollars.⁷⁹ Fireman Frank Hotchkin of Newbury Park became the first uniformed fatality at the Los Angeles Naval Reserve Center, and four firefighters were treated for injuries at a nearby hospital.⁸⁰ The fire gutted a 39,260—square-foot concrete shell along with



Disaster struck the center on September 27, 1980, when it was engulfed in flames. Damage was extensive.

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the swimming pool, senior officers' sleeping quarters and priceless wardroom memorabilia.⁸¹ Under the direction of Captain Albert Catriz and Captain William Haushalter (who commanded from 1980-1987) the center was slowly rebuilt. Reservists had to make do with trailers and temporary partitions on the drill deck until the main building was reopened on August 16, 1986, at a cost of nearly \$5 million dollars. To compound the crowding problem, newly elected President Ronald Reagan coined the term "One-Navy" to describe the expansion and integration of the reserves with the regular Navy. In addition to the new recruits, many "category-B," one-day-per-month units were upgraded to "category-A" two-day-per-month drilling, and training was intensified.⁸²

The Navy waffled for several years over whether to repair the old structure or rebuild elsewhere. A 1982 report from a Navy auditor suggested that much of the surrounding land was excess and that the government could realize about \$5 million by not rebuilding. The cost avoidance was broken down into \$4.1 in building costs and the sale of the remaining land at about \$3 per square foot. The improvements had been estimated as worth in excess of \$15.3 million before the fire and \$13 million thereafter, on land valued at about \$4.1 million.⁸³ But the newly remodeled Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center in Chavez Ravine was estimated to be worth more than \$17 million at its reopening in August 16, 1986. If its future experiences in any way parallel the event-filled past, the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve Center in Los Angeles will continue to be associated with some of America's most significant personalities and historical events.⁸⁴

Though the militia concept dates back hundreds of years, Franklin D. Roosevelt added a corollary which might be called the "professionalism of the reserve military." Thereafter, the emphasis on the term "citizen soldier" moved decidedly to the second word. Phrases such as "mobilization readiness" and "One Navy" were applied with increased frequency to reservists. The Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center in Los Angeles developed a special relationship with the historically significant motion picture and professional baseball industries not shared by other similar facilities. Yet all the while, the history of this local facility was a microcosm of U.S. military policy and its effects on a specific area of the country.



Following the devastating fire, the center was renovated at a cost of five million dollars and was rededicated in August 1986.

Historical Society of Southern California

NAVAL AND MARINE CORPS RESERVE CENTER LOS ANGELES

COMMANDING OFFICERS	TENURE
Captain Claude B. Mayo	22 April 1940-15 June 1940
Captain Benjamin Perlman	15 June 1940-
Rear Admiral Isaac C. Johnson	1941-
Lieutenant Commander W.H. Roberts III	01 July 1947-
Captain Herbert G. Claudius	18 January 1952-25 January 1954
Captain Forrest R. Bunker	25 January 1954-31 October 1955
Captain Malen Durski	31 October 1955-August 1957
Captain John C. Martin	August 1957-04 September 1958
Captain Roger F. Miller	04 September 1958-02 July 1962
Commander Kenneth P. Huff	02 July 1962-02 May 1964
Captain George M. Conkey	02 May 1964-30 June 1965
Commander Kenneth P. Huff	30 June 1965-
Captain Curtis L. Tarbell	November 1966-01 September 1967
Captain Robert D. Marion	01 September 1967-21 July 1969
Captain William Martin	21 July 1969-29 June 1970
Captain Eric T. Seibert	29 June 1970-29 June 1971
Lieutenant Commander Jack E. Richardson	29 June 1971-03 August 1971
Captain William P. Ferguson	03 August 1971-19 June 1974
Captain James A. Zimmerman	19 June 1974-24 September 1977
Captain Thomas A. Davis	24 September 1977-27 October 1978
Captain Richard E. Flynn	27 October 1978-28 June 1980
Captain Albert G. Catriz	28 June 1980-18 August 1984
Captain William H. Haushalter	18 August 1984-15 October 1986
Captain Thomas R. Woodrum	15 October 1986-present

The official seal for the Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center.



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