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The Genesis of Hamilton Field

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It is the late 1920's. With the probability that the next foreign war of the United States would be fought in the Pacific area, the defenses of the Pacific Coast become of paramount interest to every thinking American.

While we already had defenses scattered from Alaska to Panama, it was the opinion of most military and naval experts that our fortifications were antiquated and our armament obsolete, leaving the western coast very vulnerable to attack by any well armed and modernly equipped foreign foe.

The majority of our coast cities were within easy range of the big guns of any fleet, and should our first line of defense (the Navy) fail to hold back the onslaught of an enemy, we would be exposed to the full fury of a belligerent foreign invasion.

This brings our attention to the third important arm of our defense forces, the Aviation Corps. Supporting both land and sea forces, the Aviation Corps would undoubtedly be one of the strongest units in our national defense. In the late 1920's, every effort of the government had been toward the development of this branch of the services, as it was seen as extremely mobile, with modern planes having a wide radius of effectiveness. Aviation bases had been established at all strategic points. Even a survey of the Alaskan Islands had been made, with the idea in view of building bases in that region, it being the closest to the Asiatic mainland, where our next attack would likely originate.

Crissy Air Field was established around 1915 along the bay in San Francisco as part of the Presidio. The field faced a number of problems which left it obsolete after a brief existence of a decade, although it would last for part of another. First, there was no room for expansion. Second, Crissy Field suffered from

high winds off the Pacific Ocean channeled through the Golden Gate. Finally, the proposed Golden Gate Bridge, if constructed, would place two tall bridge towers in a position dangerous to Crissy pilots.

The bridge project seemed more and more certain as time passed. Consequently, in 1929 a Board of Officers was assembled to survey the whole Bay Area for a more suitable location for a major airfield.



First landing at Marin Meadows, February 1929, Colonel Brant and his squadron of five planes from Crissy Field.

The history of the securing of a base for Marin County is an epic of dogged determination, unselfish labor, and civic determination. Early in 1929 the Federal Government desired to establish an Army Bombardment Supply Depot in California to serve three proposed Pacific Coast bombing bases.

The San Francisco Junior Chamber of Commerce asked the co-operation of all San Francisco Bay communities in securing this depot for the Bay region. "Marvelous Marin" (aka Marin County Chamber of Commerce) immediately appointed a committee, of which Robert Carson Jr. was chairman, and a like committee was appointed by the Marin County Board of Supervisors. These two committees were merged in to one large body known as the Carson-Devoto Airport Committee.

Early in February 1929, Robert Carson Jr. and a delegation from Marin County appeared before the San Francisco Junior Chamber of Commerce and urged that Marin County be considered as a site for the proposed depot. Three locations were suggested: one at Reeds Ranch on Richardson Bay; one on the Larkspur-Corte-Madera tide flats; and the third at Santa Venetia, a few miles north of San Rafael.

It soon appeared that Alameda would secure the coveted depot, so the Carson-Devoto Committee determined to wage an

aggressive campaign to secure one of the three proposed bombing bases for Marin. From this time forward all efforts were concentrated on the bombardment base idea in preference to the supply depot plan.

On Feb. 20, 1929 Lt. Col. C.G. Brant, commander of Crissy Field, made a survey of the Marin County sites. One week later a squadron of five planes from Crissy Field landed at Marin



Railroad spur track on far right was completed September 9, 1932 at a cost of \$19,395.

Meadows (now Hamilton Field). A perfect landing on the grassy fields was made in the presence of hundreds of Marin County citizens, who had gathered to welcome the fleet.

Col. Brant and his officers and pilots were met with automobiles and driven to Novato, where a splendid chicken dinner was served in the Community House under the auspices of the Novato Business Men's Club and the Chamber of Commerce. Seventy-four guests sat around the tables in the main auditorium. The dinner served was furnished by Sal Galli, a caterer in



Construction of the first barrack #422, completed July 31, 1933 at a cost of \$131,644. Hangars 8 and 9 under construction in the background. (Pictures taken from the Hamilton Story "Mission Completed." DVD for sale at the museum.)

Ignacio, and was a spread to be proud of. The chicken and all the accessories were cooked to the queen's taste, making a dinner acceptable to the most demanding epicurean.

Col. Brant, in a cheery speech to the group, reviewed the aerial service since the war, and the need for an airport on the

Pacific coast. He spoke of the different sites offered to the government and designated the 500 acres at Marin Meadows as "wonderful." The Colonel spoke as an individual saying he had no authority to speak for the government, but he was profoundly impressed with the site offered by Marin County, stating that it had the most natural advantages of any he has ever seen.

The meeting ended. The visitors returned to the field accompanied by 214 automobiles and about 1,200 people, all of whom were interested in seeing the Colonel's plane take to the air.

The follow-up reports of the Army flyers were favorable and efforts were redoubled to have the Marin County field named by the government as one of the three proposed bombing bases. Shortly after the visit of the Army flyers, word was received from Washington that, F. Trubee Davison, Assistant Secretary of the Army, would soon visit the Pacific coast to inspect the various proposed bombing base sites. He arrived May 18, 1929 and was greeted by more than 5,000 Marin County citizens in one of the greatest demonstrations ever seen in this county. At 11:30 a.m. the big tri-motor Fokker aircraft was sighted. Tension was in the air. The great air ship, flown by Lieut. Lester Maitland, sailed directly to the south end of the field and landed as gracefully as a bird. Accompanying Secretary Davison were Major D.E. Emmons, the air chief's aid, and Col. G.E. Brandt.



First hangars completed were numbers 8 and 9 on July 31, 1933 at a cost of \$230,832 for the pair.

A garden barbecue was held in the Secretary's honor at McNear's in San Rafael at which Marin's claim for recognition was skillfully presented. This meeting undoubtedly was the turning point of the fight. On July 2, word came from Washington that the War Department had selected Marin Meadows (the name by which the California Packing Corporation property was known) as the site for the air base and Alameda as the site of the supply depot.

In a meeting of the Marin Business Men's Club in August 1930, Robert Carson gave a history of the bombing base proceedings from the very start, and served notice on the business men to prepare for the greatest achievement which has ever fallen to Marin County. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. played an important part by agreeing to clear the field of electrical wire, which would be done just as soon as the government gave notice that it was ready to begin development. The removal of the poles and wires required an expenditure of approximately \$100,000 (approximately \$1.3 million in today's dollars), the sum of which was borne in full by the company. The San Rafael Water

Company extended water mains to the field, furnishing a million gallons of water a day. The railroad company also did its part by building a branch line in the fields and establishing a depot.



Construction of Hamilton Field on July 15, 1933.

Next, the matter of financing the purchase of the land for the base faced the Committee. The Government wanted 765 acres of the California Packing Co. land, which was offered to the County at \$175.00 per acre. To raise these funds the Marin



Headquarters building—left top Air Corps barracks #420 completed October 26, 1934 at a cost of \$149,301.

County Board of Supervisors at their meeting of August 28, 1929 added 44 cents to the county property tax rate.

Then the Government decided they needed an additional 161 acres of land. The only property available was that owned by Mrs. Julie C. Bodkin which adjoined the Marin Meadows property. Here the Committee ran into a snag. They offered Mrs. Bodkins \$100.00 per acre for her land, but she demanded \$600. As this price was out of reason, and as every effort to have Mrs. Bodkin meet the Committee on a reasonable basis failed, a decision was made to start condemnation proceedings.

On June 30, 1930 the Kahn Bill providing for Marin Meadows Air Field base passed the House, on July 2 passed the Senate, and was signed by President Hoover on July 3rd, which provided the initial appropriation of \$1,412,117.87 for construction. During this period, negotiations had been carried on with the Bodkins through their attorney Maurice E. Harrison but to no avail and on March 19, 1931, condemnation proceedings were filed in the Federal Court of San Francisco.

On March 20, 1931 the California Packing Corporation made a formal offer to Marin County to sell 665 acres of its land to Marin County for \$ 121,975. This offer was later officially accepted.

Capt. H.B. Nurse, U.S. Army arrived in San Rafael on April 28, 1931 to act as Construction Quartermaster for the field. Everything then looked rosy and construction work was expected to start at once, but politics again intervened and delay after delay occurred. However, as we know today, these obstacles were eventually overcome.

The Bodkins, after considerable pressure, agreed to the appointment of an arbitration committee consisting of three members. One was to be appointed by the Bodkins, one by Marin County, and the third to be an outsider to be chosen by the original two members. The Bodkins choose Fire Chief Charles J. Brennan, of San Francisco; Marin County chose William M. Rutherford, of San Anselmo; these two choose George McNear, of Petaluma. This Committee filed an award of \$49,500 for the Bodkin property, and \$1,650 for the lease of J. Mattos. The U.S. Court then handed down a decision based on these figures.

Finally on March 17, 1932 the payment was made on the land and the deed handed to Colonel J.R. Hannay, U.S. Army, who in a gracious speech accepted the land in the name of the



Air Corps barracks #442 completed October 26, 1934 at a cost of \$149,301. Fire Station/Guard House completed August 18, 1934 at a cost of \$37,789. Hangers 1 thru 6 completed November 12, 1934 at a cost of \$259,358 for each pair.



Hospital completed November 16, 1934 at a cost of \$108,87. Swimming pool completed September 17, 1934 at a cost of \$9,108.

U.S. Government. Early in April confidential reports from Washington reached Marin that it was the plan of the Administration to allow money already appropriated for construction of Hamilton Field to revert to the Treasury Department



Fred Sand, a carpenter stands in front of the original main gate of Hamilton. The sentry house was completed march 17, 1934 at a cost of \$900.

General Fund at the end of the fiscal year. This would automatically mean an indefinite delay in the start of work on the base.

Once again Marin developed a spurt of civic enthusiasm which produced a barrage of letters, telegrams, phone messages, and personal calls on Washington persuading the Administration to understand that Northern California would resent any delay in making the appropriation of the money already allotted for the project. These actions produced the desired result. On May 20,



Picture of Fire and Guard house on Nov. 2, 1937. The Fire house was completed August 18, 1934 at a cost of \$37,799. The fire house is now without the 3-cell brig.

1932 Capt. Nurse was authorized by Washington to call for bids for expenditures of approximately \$1,250,000. These bids were opened on June 20th. Major General L.H. Bash, the Quartermaster General, made a special trip from Washington so he could be present to award contracts and to give the project its initial incentive. A few days after his arrival, contracts for about \$1,000,000 of work were awarded to various contractors.

The first load of lumber for the construction of a field office was unloaded May 23, 1933. Millions of dollars were spent in construction, grading and landscaping until Hamilton Field became one of the most beautiful Army posts ever built in the United States.

On June 25, 1933, Captain Don L. Hutchins reported as the first Commanding Officer of the new post. Of course he had very few men and his officers were all working with the Constructing Quartermaster who was just in the midst of the construction work, but Captain Hutchins had the job of preparing the post for occupation by Air Corps troops.

On September 26, 1933 another incentive was given to the construction program when \$3,462,184.41 was provided under the Public Works Appropriation.

A majority of the land on which the base is situated is reclaimed salt march. This land was diked and drained and presented a vast level surface making it an ideal landing field. The balance of the land is broken by low decomposed sandstone hills. These areas were used for quarters, hospitals, clubs etc.



Construction of Headquarters Building, building #500, completed November 16, 1934 at a cost of \$82,292.

Hamilton Field comprised a total of 928 acres. Approximately 160 acres lie in the form of a low range of hills which made for an ideal residential section. On these hills were approximately one thousand full grown beautiful trees. In preparing the plans, particular attention was given to the arrangement of buildings so as not only to avoid the destruction of these trees, but also to take advantage of their charm and setting.

After 43 years of service, on January 11, 1976 an agreement was finally reached to close Hamilton as part of the post-Vietnam War drawdown of the military.



The War Department Theater completed April 7, 1938 at a cost of \$54,387.