



The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the
Novato Historical Guild and the Novato History Museum
Preserving Novato's History

Feature Section

Contents © 2006 Novato Historical Guild, Inc.

March 2006

The Novato Historian

Volume 30, Number 1

The Birth of an Air Base

By Margaret A. Coady

What do Marin's Hamilton Field and Hawaii's Hickam Field have in common?

Both beautiful—architecturally and horticulturally—bases were designed by the same man. Captain Howard B. Nurse. Those who have been to Hickam will remember the housing area streets, each with trees of one variety—Pink Tecoma, Gold Shower, Royal Poinciano, Monkey Pod.

Like Hickam, Hamilton is a “horticulturist’s dream-come true.” Like Hickam, Hamilton’s housing was beautifully planned.

During the months that Nurse was waiting for formal acceptance of the Marin site he had completed plans to make Hamilton not only the best operational air base in the Air Corps, but also one of the most beautiful. Wherever functionally suitable, the buildings were to reflect California’s Spanish and Mexican heritage. The buildings were to be placed in beautifully landscaped surroundings. The rolling hills and magnificent native oaks of the residential area were to be an important part of the unique beauty of the field.

The San Rafael Independent reported on July 13, 1931, that “landscaping of the grounds at Hamilton Field . . . has begun.”

The plans were to start cuttings and slips so that when the grounds were graded the government would have its own trees, shrubs and plants close at hand to set out. In addition to these plants, thousands of trees and shrubs were donated.

In October, 1963 and June, 1964, articles about the plant life at Hamilton were published in the Lady Hamilton, the officer’s Wives Club newspaper.

At that time the base was participating in an Air Force-wide conservation program. Part of the program

was to identify the many trees and shrubs at Hamilton. The assistance of Mrs. Calvin K. (Elizabeth) Terwilliger of Mill Valley and Mrs. Glenn Ensign of San Rafael, both noted conservationists, was solicited. These two women with the help of members of the Officers’ Wives Club Garden Club began to identify what had been planted.

The women learned that garden clubs from all over California had contributed to the landscaping. They also learned that contributions included plants found in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the Mediterranean countries, Chile and elsewhere.

In the living quarters areas are Canary Island Pines, canary Island Date Palms, Cryptomeria, Coastal Redwoods, several varieties of Eucalyptus and pines of Japan. Hamilton has the only known grove of Giant Sequoias located in a dry area at sea level, the article stated.

A then 40-foot Cedar was transplanted to Hamilton from Mather Field, near Sacramento. During the re-planting, Captain Nurse’s wife, Mary, was present. That tree became known as “Mary’s Tree.” Captain Nurse had wiring brought to the tree for Christmas lights that became a cherished part of Christmas at Hamilton.

The Nurses’ son, David, said in a recent letter that this tree is located in the large landscaped circle below the Officers’ Club.

Thus, it was not surprising to learn that the variety of trees and shrubs at Hamilton is second only to the state capitol for an arboretum.

In the period following World War I the general public could see little reason for supporting a strong military establishment. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, there was even less concern for strengthening of the armed services. Mortgage foreclosures, bank failures,

unemployment, were dangers that overshadowed that more distant threat from dictators abroad.

World War II was a decade away; hunger and despair were already present.

That Hamilton Field was ready when World War II came was the result of economic pressures rather than military foresight. Jobs, not defense, motivated the Marin County Board of Supervisors when they offered to buy 776 acres of land and give it to the army for an air base site. The land in question was known as "Marin Meadows," and owned by the California Packing Company (CPC). It could be bought for \$175 an acre.

For once, military and civilian interests coincided perfectly. With the voters back of the plan for an air base, Florence P. Kahn, member of Congress from San Francisco, introduced a bill to secure funds for construction. The bill passed and was signed into law by President Herbert Hoover in 1930.

The people of Marin County were asked to raise the \$121,000 to obtain the acreage from the CPC. They voted to increase their taxes.

By 1931 everything seemed to point to an early start of construction — with all the economic benefits anticipated by the county. There was only one problem: the Army wanted an additional piece of ground for the base, about 161 acres of pasture land belonging to Dr. and Mrs. P. Bodkin. The Bodkins valued their land at \$600 an acre, compared to the \$175 CPC was willing to sell at.

Some people were incensed by what they considered an excessive price but no one anticipated any great delay in securing title to the land. After all, the government could condemn the land and force its sale.

F. Trubee Davison, the first assistant secretary of war for aeronautics, shared this optimism. During a visit to the Bay Area he announced that the Army had \$1,250,000 available and that work would start just as soon as the condemnation suit was settled — "just a question of a few weeks."

Captain Nurse had arrived in San Rafael in late April, 1931. He was notified on May 29 that an initial \$258,000 was available to him to begin work at the base,

again, as soon as the title to the land was obtained.

On May 1, 1931, an Independent article said: "Official declares prosperity will follow construction."

Captain Nurse, who had just arrived from Austin, Texas, where he had constructed Randolph Field, stated to the Marin newspaper that "during peak building activity the monthly payroll will range between \$15,000 and \$20,000," and "as high as 800 men will be employed." He planned to use as much local labor and purchase as much local material as possible.

Nurse further declared that the 200,000 population of Austin was "totally unaffected by the depression.

Business went ahead and prosperity was on every hand" during construction of Randolph Field.

"Marin will benefit in the same manner from operations at Marin Meadows," he pledged.

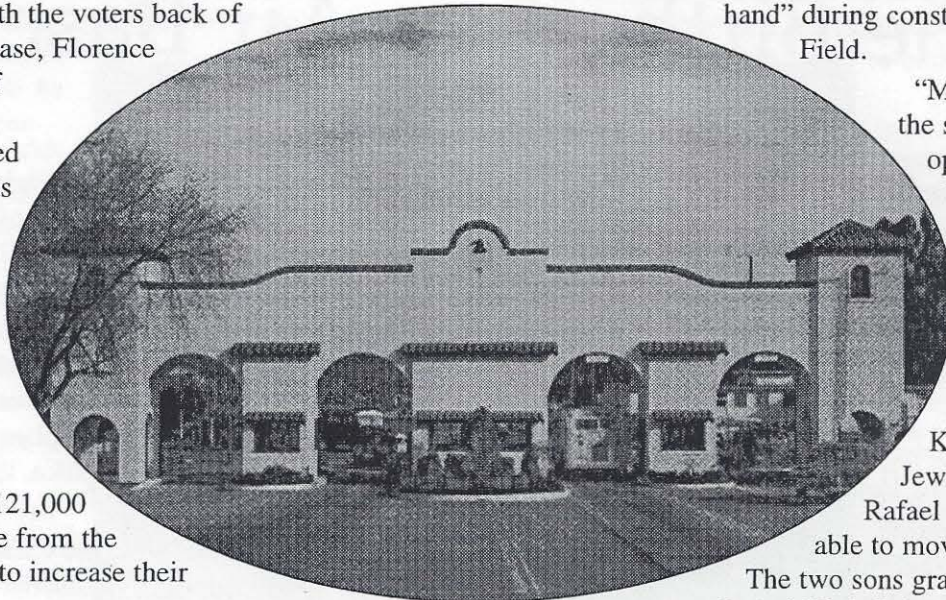
When Captain Nurse came to Marin with his wife, Mary and two sons, David and Kenneth, they lived on Jewell Street in San Rafael until the family was able to move onto the base.

The two sons graduated from San Rafael High School. David married Elizabeth Lutgens, daughter of Harry Lutgens, a strong supporter of having the base at Marin Meadows, and publisher of the San Rafael Independent.

The notice Captain Nurse received in May, 1931, announcing the funds were available used the name Hamilton Field. On that same day Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley told the press that the field was to be named in honor of Lt. Lloyd A. Hamilton, a native of Troy, N.Y. He was an Air Corps pilot killed August 24, 1918.

There was some disappointment over the choice of the name. Some local people felt that someone associated with the Bay Area should be given the honor. Suggestions were voiced but all were ignored.

Hamilton had enlisted on April 28, 1917, with the Royal Flying Corps. On March 2, 1918, he was assigned to the front with the British Third Aero Squadron. Lieutenant Hamilton was the first American officer to fly with the RFC and the first in his squadron of 150 men to shoot down enemy aircraft. It was on a combat mission over Belgium that he was killed. He was awarded,



Hamilton Air Force Base Main Gate

posthumously, the British Distinguished Service Cross for "extraordinary heroism in actions."

Any concern over the naming of the base evaporated when a more serious problem arose. The early optimism regarding settlement of the Bodkin land problem proved to be ill-founded. But when there was serious danger that the base might be lost to Marin County, Dr. Bodkin agreed to abide by the decision of a three-man arbitration board as to the price for his land. That board finally made its decision on November 30, 1931. A price of \$300 an acre was announced.

Negotiations were finally completed on all aspects of the land problem and the way seemed to be cleared for work to get under way.

But, three months were to elapse before the land was accepted by the government. The reason for the delay, this time, was the need to raise the money to pay for the increased cost of the Bodkin land — a total of \$53,400.

Everyone agreed that the Marin County taxpayer could not be asked to do more. The additional money would have to come from the surrounding communities who also stood to profit by

having the air base built. Each group or city was asked to raise a relatively small amount, but that did not make raising of the funds any easier in those depression days.

Fear of losing the field led the Marin County Board of Supervisors to enter into a secret agreement with a San Francisco real estate promoter. This man promised to get the San Francisco Downtown Association to make a donation — for a fee for himself. There was a storm of anger and recrimination following the disclosure of the "deal," but eventually the matter was generally forgotten.

After all the effort and problems of raising the money for the land, the community had a right to celebrate when the checks were handed over on March 17, 1932, and the deeds were sent to Washington.

Henry Greer, Marin county district attorney, who had labored unceasingly for the base had the privilege of

handing over the checks. Formal acceptance of the site by the Army came in April.

Since the base was to house the operations of a bomber group and its support units, plans were made for every phase of the operation. In addition to the operational buildings there would be miles of paved streets, and gas, electric, and water systems to support base needs.

One requirement that surely must have been unique was a pumping station to lift drainage water over a dike into San Pablo Bay. This facility was necessary because the operational portion of the field was below sea level.

Bids for the first projects were called for and were opened June 20, 1932. On May 28, the Novato Advance carried a picture of the flight line area showing only muddy fields with not a structure in sight.

The paper wrote: "Hamilton Field . . . is situated three miles south of Novato, the right distance to make Novato the most logical residential district. The whole county and bay cities will profit from this permanent enterprise, but Novato is acknowledged to hold the best position and a strong pull should be made to place it



The enlisted personnel barracks circa 1940. This particular area has been preserved and looks the same in 2006.

in the class to which it rightfully belongs. People will come here for homes . . . we are not as optimistic as many who know the advantage the community has, but certainly Novato will experience a substantial growth, and we must welcome and treat fairly all who come within our borders." The article concluded with exhortation "Novato Onward."

The Army had announced that it had \$1,250,000 for the project, after the land was purchased. The five million dollars needed to complete the base had not all become available because of the hard times the country was experiencing. In fact only two million dollars had been allocated for construction by 1933.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, shortly after his election, initiated a public works program to provide jobs. A portion of the appropriation was to be used to improve

military bases, and the Hamilton Field project got an additional \$3,698,302.

By the end of 1933, the payroll had reached about \$30,000 weekly.

Although the wages paid to individuals were small — 50 cents an hour for unskilled labor — the income meant hope to individual families and the civilian economy generally. Also at the time major needs — hangars, roads, water and gas systems, boundary fence, sewage system were nearly completed. The final portions of the officers' quarters and the headquarters building were being started.

During an interview in 1964, Nurse, by then a colonel, told the base historian that before the concrete steps to the headquarters building were in place, he had put a large box containing a variety of mementoes of the field under those steps. He felt sure that the box is still there as it could not be reached without removing the steps. It is not known what that box contains.

Even before major facilities for the field were completed, the 93rd Squadron from Crissy Field initiated training at Hamilton. The men began gunnery training Feb. 21, 1933.

Once when the squadron tried to conduct bombing practice they ran into an unusual problem. Razorback hogs were found to be eating the targets before the squadron could make use of them.

A newspaper article reported: "The Army deployed and advanced into pig attack formation. The pigs adopted scatter-defense methods. Presently the Army was all worn out chasing pigs and the pigs were back eating targets again. A fresh attachment of soldiers was ordered out and after an hour's hard work the hogs, owner unknown, were chased off the field and the business of war proceeded."

The War Department ordered the 7th Bombardment Group from March Field in Southern California to Hamilton on Nov. 30, 1934. On Dec. 1, 1934, a flight of 24 Martin B-12 bombers from March arrived.

The new occupants of the Field were warmly wel-

comed by the local people. A Dec. 12, 1934, editorial in the Independent concluded with "San Rafael intends to do her part in making your residence at Hamilton Field enjoyable. We are happy that you are here and we trust you will find your stay in our Marvelous Marin one of happiness for today and pleasant memories for tomorrow."

Even before the arrival of the 7th Bombardment Group a problem of housing for the military came up. The base commander wrote the San Rafael Chamber of Commerce asking the chamber to "kindly contact various real estate agencies in your community to submit rental lists of unfurnished and furnished homes available, the prices for these quarters should be within the range of \$10 to \$25." (Pay for a private in the late 1930s was \$21 a month.)

All problems had been overcome — from hogs to housing, with land acquisition and funding in between. So on March 3, 1935, the American Legion, Fifth District, dedicated a bronze plaque honoring Lieutenant Hamilton. The plaque was set in a large boulder and placed at the then main gate. In 1944 the plaque was reset at the base of the flag pole in front of the headquarters building.

However, in all the haste to build the base and get the bombardment group settled, no one

had thought about formally dedicating the field. This oversight was remedied on May 12, 1935, when official ceremonies were held.

A new era for what had been Marin Meadows began — 40 years ago.

All of the material for this article, except where indicated, came from "Hamilton Air Force Base — It's First Thirty Years," second edition, dated March 17, 1965, prepared by Ruth Wampler, historian, 28th Air Division. Also, special thanks go to the following for their cooperation in supplying material on the history of the field: Maj. Gen. Rollin B. Moore, former commander Western Air Force Reserve Region; Brig. Gen. William C. Hathaway, commander 452nd Airlift Wing and base commander; Herbert S. Greer, lieutenant colonel USAF (ret.), information officer; 2nd Lt. Keith Mitchel, information officer; and Mark Deckert, base photographer. The photos used in this reprint of Peg Cody's article were obtained from the internet by NHG editor Mike Clancy.



Aerial view of HAFB 2005. Photo shows what's left of the runways, taxi ways, hangars, barracks and some of the new residential areas.