
South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

October 2018

Issue No. 21

REAM FIELD 100TH ANNIVERSARY

LATE BREAKING NEWS

All SBHS members are invited to the Ream Field 100th anniversary ceremony this Friday, October 5, at 10 am. Helicopters from HSM-30 and HSM-41 will land at Ream Field at 10 am and the mayor of Imperial Beach will read a proclamation. We only just today received approval to allow the SBHS to attend this event, so if you want to attend, please email to ses@sandiego.edu your name and address to be added to the list of guests who will be admitted through the gate on Friday morning.

RSVP today to visit Ream Field on Friday!

Ream Field, A History

by Steve Schoenherr

One hundred years ago, the Great War transformed the South Bay. Farms and lemon groves covered most of the sparsely populated area. Only a few hundred people lived in the area between the border and the bay. Imperial Beach was just a small strip of land three blocks wide along the ocean. Hollis Peavey raised hay and barley on his 115-acre ranch on the north bank of the Tijuana River that had been

part of the short-lived boom town of Oneonta in the 1880s. One advantage of the area was good weather. Aviation enthusiasts could experiment with their machines all year, taking advantage of the gentle ocean winds and the occasional gusts from the inland deserts in the fall. John Joseph Montgomery was the first American to design and fly a controlled glider, making his flight in 1883 from a hill on Otay Mesa above his father's ranch at the southern end of San Diego Bay. In 1910 Charles Walsh built a biplane in Imperial Beach and made his first public flight on



Charles Walsh at Aviation Field in 1910. Note the South San Diego School in the upper right that was built at Elm and 10th Street in 1889.

April 10, cheered on by a crowd of about a hundred spectators. In the following weeks, similar flights were made at Imperial Beach by Walsh and his friend Bernard Roehrig.



In 1911 Glenn Curtiss moved his flying school from New York to North island and began training naval pilots. Curtiss wanted to sell planes to the Navy, and the first order for a "Hydroaeroplane" on May 8 marks the official birthday of naval aviation. Curtiss

wanted to give his flying school to the Navy, but in 1912 the Army took up his offer instead.

The Army's Signal Corps Aviation School was given the responsibility to train the hundreds of young men that came to San Diego to join the new Army Air Service. After the U.S. declared war in 1917, the federal government took over North Island and the Army's school became Rockwell Field. In 1918, Rockwell Field established three auxiliary air fields in the South Bay to handle pilot training. The Aerial Acrobatic Camp was added to Camp Hearn at Imperial Beach in March, a new East Field (Brown Field after 1943) on Otay Mesa began April 7, and Ream Field on the previous site of the Oneonta Gunnery School began October 5. All three fields were named after Army officers. Major Lawrence J. Hearn was an officer in the 21st Infantry Regiment. Major Whitten Jasper East went to France in 1917 with the First Aero Squadron. Major William Roy Ream was the first flying surgeon in the Army and the first flight surgeon to be killed in an aircraft accident.



In 1918, Ream Field was only a small collection of rectangular buildings next to a large grove of Eucalyptus trees. There was no paved runway, only a dirt strip used for practice landings and takeoffs. One of the instructors at Ream Field was Jimmy Doolittle who had graduated from flight training at Rockwell Field March 5, 1918, but was denied a chance to go overseas. As an instructor, he was known to shoot ducks around Ream Field from his "Jenny" biplane. Clarence Helm trained at Ream field and put his mechanical skills to good use after the war at his Helm Brothers garage on F Street in Chula Vista.

There were many like Clarence Helm who took advantage of wartime training. The Hercules Powder Co. paid good wages to hundreds of South Bay young men to work in the plant on Gunpowder Point. The concrete shipyard built in National City during the war became the Naval Destroyer Base in 1922 and later the 32nd St Naval Station. Henry

Fenton's gravel company in the Otay Valley supplied the material to North Island in 1918 for paving new runways and hangars.



Jimmy Doolittle at Ream Field in 1918.

Ream Field and East Field began as Army bases but passed to the Navy after the war. San Diego became the home base for the Pacific fleet, with a Naval Training Center, Naval Hospital, Supply Depot and Naval District Headquarters. The role of Rockwell Field was diminished to supply and maintenance, and the Naval Air Station took over all aviation and pilot training functions. During the 1920s and 1930s Ream was a Naval Outlying Landing Field (OLF) used for dive-bombing and gunnery target practice. The Navy also acquired 245 acres nearby in the Tijuana River estuary that became the Border Field Auxiliary Landing Field.

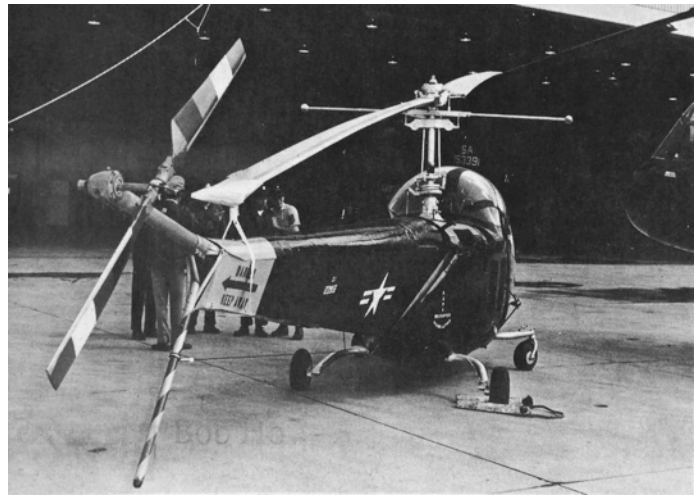
During World War II the base expanded dramatically. In 1943 it was designated as a Naval Auxiliary Air Station (NAAS Ream Field) and its purpose returned to training pilots. New runways and buildings were constructed and the size of the base increased to 631 acres. In 1945 a system of electric runway lights was installed, replacing the 150 flarepots that had to be lit individually, and adding a 51-foot rotating electric beacon tower that could be seen for 20 miles in all directions. During the war 1950 personnel were stationed at the base, and 5000 men and officers were trained in 23 squadrons for fleet duty in the Pacific war.



A Sikorsky HO3S1 at F Street School Apr. 1, 1949.

The first helicopters came to Ream Field shortly before the Korean War. The Navy formed an Experimental Squadron 3 (VX-3) and started adding

helicopters to some warships in 1946. These early "helos" replaced the small seaplanes carried by cruisers and battleships. The Navy's first Helicopter Utility Squadron One (HU-1) was organized at Lakehurst on the East Coast in 1948. Some of the helos from HU-1 were sent to NAAS Miramar and Pearl Harbor and Ream Field in 1948 and 1949. These were the HO3S1 built by Sikorsky, and the HTL-2 built by Bell. In 1949 a Bell and a Sikorsky from Miramar made a visit to the F Street School in Chula Vista, after returning from a rescue mission of 11 sailors from the cold waters off Alaska.



This HTL-2 (above) was originally built in 1948 and was restored at Ream Field by Al Monahan and members of the Navy Helicopter Association that he helped organize in 1976. The pioneering Bell helicopter had only two rotor blades that made a "chop-chop" noise, giving the nickname "chopper" to early helicopters. Monahan was one of the Navy's first helicopter pilots, joining the Navy in 1942 and flying in the first squadrons at Lakehurst.

Navy helicopters proved successful operating from aircraft carriers in search and rescue as well as combat missions. In April 1950 the Navy purchased ten Sikorsky HO4S models for antisubmarine warfare on aircraft carriers. The Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron One (HS-1) was established at NAS Key West, Florida in October 1951. Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Two (HS-2) was established at Ream Field on March 7, 1952, the first antisubmarine warfare helicopter squadron on the West Coast.



A Sikorsky SH-34J Seabat flies over the Ream Field control tower in 1957.

During the early 1950s, Ream Field became the home base for all helicopter squadrons in the Pacific fleet. HS-4 was formed in June 1952; HS-6 and HS-8 were commissioned in June 1956. Under Col. Arthur. A. Geisser who took command of the base in 1955, Ream Field was officially designated Naval Auxiliary Air Station, Imperial Beach. Unofficially, it became known as the "Helicopter Capital of the World."



Arthur Geisser in 1957.

Geisser was a genius at publicity and promotion. He encouraged ensign Burt Metcalf to start the "Miss Angel" beauty contest in 1957. Anna Alford won the contest and represented Ream Field at the annual South Bay Frontier Days parade and festivities. Metcalf went on to become a noted television and film producer, director, actor, and writer.



Anna Alford, center, was Miss Angel in 1957.

Randy Sparks was a guitar-strumming seaman at Ream Field when Geisser took him to the first West Coast concert of Elvis Presley April 3, 1956, held on the aircraft carrier USS Hancock, docked at the 28th street Naval Station. Sparks went on to found the New Christy Minstrels who sold millions of records and performed on television and in concert.



Dean Jones (above) was with VU-3 Squadron at Ream Field and lived at 1167 Del Mar Avenue in Chula Vista. Geisser encouraged him to sing on local

radio and television shows and Jones went on to movie career with Walt Disney films. After leaving Ream Field, Geisser was assigned as a Navy technical adviser and liaison with Hollywood and TV studios. He arranged for episodes of *Border Patrol*, *Navy Log*, *Whirlybirds* and *On Guard* to be filmed at Ream Field or using Navy helicopters.

Ream helos took part in the expeditions of Admiral Richard E. Byrd to Antarctica to establish the Little America base. In 1955, a unit from HU-1 joined the attack cargo ship USS Wyandot for Operation Deep Freeze I, and again in 1956 for Operation Deep Freeze II. In 1957, a detachment of two helicopters, four pilots and ten enlisted men from HU-1 went on the icebreaker USS Atka for the Antarctic and Little America. The detachment was commanded by James A. Meadows, Jr., of 891 Date Avenue, Chula Vista, and stayed at the South Pole for six months performing ice reconnaissance, cargo and personnel transfers and rescue work.



Ream Field in the late 1950s, before the extensive building program began during the Vietnam War.



Helicopter 66 from Ream Field's HS-4 "Black Knights" recovered the Apollo 11 capsule July 24, 1969. The pilot of this Sikorsky Sea King SH-3 was Commander Donald S. Jones, who would later command the U.S. Third Fleet.

The base entered the Space Age in the 1960s when its helicopters retrieved astronauts of the Mercury and Apollo missions that landed in the Pacific. Squadron HS-4 in particular became well-known for the recoveries of the Apollo 8, 10, 11, 12 and 13 missions. Its famous "Helicopter 66" gained world-wide recognition as the most photographed helicopter from Ream Field.

During the Vietnam War, the base underwent another expansion. In 1964, the dirt parking lots were paved with 37 acres of concrete. In 1965 a mess hall was built capable of feeding 1,000 men, along with an enlisted men's barracks for 500 men. In 1968, a new aircraft control tower and operations building were built, along with a new enlisted men's club and several large hangers for the 200-plus helicopters in five squadrons stationed at the base. These squadrons rotated on deployments off Vietnam with aircraft carriers such as the USS Kearsarge and USS Midway.



Bill Zidbeck flew with HS-6 on the USS Kearsarge 1964-66 (photo from raunchyredskins.us/)



Ream Field today looks very different from the 1950s photo on the previous page. (Google Earth image)



SH-3A Sea Kings of HS-6 fly over USS Kearsarge (CVS-33) in 1963. (Photo from raunchyredskins.us/)

The Vietnam service of Ream Field squadrons was impressive. HS-4 in 1966 saved 24 downed airmen, received two Silver Stars, three Distinguished Flying Crosses and seven Air Medals. HS-6 flew a record 1292 hours during a 30-day period following the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. HS-6 in 1966 rescued more than 16 downed pilots shot down on missions over North Vietnam, and earned a presidential unit citation.

As the Vietnam War came to an end, Ream Field was no longer needed to train and maintain large numbers of helicopters for the Pacific fleet. In August 1974 it was reduced in status to Naval Auxiliary Landing Field, Imperial Beach, and then in November 1975 became an Outlying Landing Field of Naval Air Station, North Island. The helicopter squadrons all were moved to NAS North Island; the last seven from HS-6 departed at 10 am on Jan. 4, 1977.

In 1979 the Jobs Corps took over half the base east of Lexington Street under lease with the Department of Labor.

In 1985 the Border patrol built its Imperial Beach Station at the east end of Ream Field. It did not use the field for any aircraft, although Peter Grootendorst recalls using the field for about a year when he flew a Cessna for U. S. Customs. Previously he flew from Brown Field where Customs still maintain a station today, but in 1970 he used Ream Field because it had better maintenance facilities. His Cessna was the only fixed wing craft at Ream Field at that time.



In January of 1968, the base was elevated to the status of full Naval Air Station.

Although it is no longer a "Helicopter Capital," Ream field continues to be a vital naval base. It is the primary site for all naval helicopter training on the West Coast, where approximately 235,000 operations are conducted every year. In 2006, Ream Field became the home of Naval Coastal Warfare Squadron Five, the first such squadron since the Vietnam War. Its mission is to provide anti-terrorism and force protection, harbor defense and port security. Also, the Coastal Riverine Group is now homeported in Imperial Beach, Calif. with squadrons located in San Diego at the Naval Amphibious Base.

In 2008, a Maritime Civil Affairs Squadron was commissioned at Ream Field to work directly with civil authorities and the civilian population during military operations, providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. "The future of the Navy is changing; now, we are focusing on civil affairs and humanitarian missions," said team chief John Romero. "It's a new part of the Navy that is moving forward on the war on terrorism."



Family members of fallen explosive ordnance disposal technicians that were assigned to Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 11 unveil a memorial at Ream Field in 2011.

In 2011, the 152-member Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit 11 was stationed at Ream Field. The base has plenty of room that allows the unit to practice its skills and bomb removal on both land and sea. "We built a memorial in front of our building to recognize the six fallen heroes of Mobile Unit 11," said Lt. Cmdr. Cameron Chen, executive officer of the unit. "Back in 2007, we were deployed as a battalion staff in Iraq and we had a period where we lost six of our technicians. It was a huge blow to us."

It was thought that Ream Field would disappear when the last helicopter squadron left in 1977. Instead, it has been growing and flourishing.

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Join Us!
The South Bay Historical Society Hosts:
A Tour and History of the

Bill of Rights Schooner

Thursday, October 18th 2017 at 5pm

604 Marina Parkway
 Chula Vista, CA 91910



We'll enjoy wine & cheese, a tour of the schooner and learn about the ship & the CV Bay history.

Free Event • Space is limited.
RSVP to our Events Coordinator Barbara Zaragoza:
barbarazaragoza@ymail.com

PosterMyWall.com

HERITAGE MUSEUM

“FRONTERIZOS: A History of the Spanish-Speaking People of the South Bay, San Diego” is the SBHS exhibit currently open in the Chula Vista Heritage Museum. The exhibit is free and open to the public 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Civic Center Library, 365 F St., Chula Vista. In the introduction to the exhibit catalog book, available for purchase on opening day, exhibit author Barbara Zaragoza writes, “This project is a general history of a community that lives along the San Diego-Tijuana border. The historical narrative relies on oral histories of residents living on the American side of the line in a region known as the South Bay, San Diego. Some residents of Spanish speaking heritage in the South Bay can trace their families back eight generations to the Native Americans and ancestors who came with the Spanish colonial expeditions.

SPEAKER DECEMBER 13

Richard Carrico will speak to us about the "Kumeyaay in the South Bay" on December 13, 2018 at 6:00 pm in the Chula Vista Civic Library Auditorium. We'll also enjoy our Christmas Party. Bring a dish to share.

South Bay Historical Society
 Bulletin No. 21, October 2018

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For more information, see our
 new web page at

southbayhistoricalsociety.org

“BILL OF RIGHTS” SHIP TOUR & HISTORY AT THE CHULA VISTA MARINA Oct. 18

The South Bayfront Sailing Association is teaming up with the South Bay Historical Society on Thursday, October 18th starting at 5pm for a Bill of Rights tour & history. We'll have wine & cheese on the schooner located at the Chula Vista Bayfront. Owners Susan and Don Johnson will provide a tour of the schooner and then a brief history. After that, you'll be able to meet other members of the historical society and learn about our upcoming museum exhibit. RSVP to barbarazaragoza@ymail.com