Our Ocean Backyard

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The War Changes Santa Cruz

Although our lives are all different these days, and may be for some time to come, the World War II years also brought major changes to the Monterey Bay area. Japanese-Americans were taken to relocation camps scattered across the western states, mostly in desolate and undesirable locations and most of these people lost their homes and farms. The Italian-Americans had curfews placed on them, and those who did not have U.S. citizenship were forbidden from being on the coast side of Highway One. The arrival of the two-hundred African Americans of the 4th Coast Artillery Army Regiment at Lighthouse Field on Easter Sunday 1942 increased the black population of Santa Cruz ten-fold overnight.

Interestingly, there was also a unit of the 250th Coast Artillery Regiment in Santa Cruz 16 years earlier. In 1926, the regiment moved to an area on the bluff just east of Capitola and inland from Park Avenue, not far from where New Brighton Middle School is today. The facility, Camp McQuaide, was named after Major Joseph McQuaide who had graduated from Santa Clara University, and who served as Chaplain of the California National Guard in both the Spanish American War and World War I.

There was also a Santa Cruz-Capitola Airport immediately north of what was to become Camp McQuaide. The airport opened in the 1920s with two unpaved runways. It was the first airport in Santa Cruz County, and while initially listed as a municipal/commercial airport, it was also used by the military at adjacent Camp McQuaide.

Noise from the target practice at Camp McQuaide began to annoy the residents of normally peaceful Capitola, however, so in 1938, the military located to a more remote 400-acre site on the bluffs due west of Watsonville. The federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) then built San Andreas Road for better access to the site.

The new Camp McQuaide became the training center for the 250th Coast Artillery Regiment, as well as the 76th Field Artillery Battalion, 54th Signal Battalion, 154th Medical Battalion and also a Naval Radar Unit. A small landing strip was built on the bluff so airplanes could take off and practice dropping bombs on offshore targets. During coastal defense training, the camp’s two stationary Panama Mounts (and remnants of the foundations for these large rotating guns are still in place on the bluff top, 77 years later) and several tractor-drawn 155mm (6 inch diameter) seacoast guns, which would fire at target barges offshore.

As a result of American success at the Battle of Midway, the threat of coastal invasion was believed to be significantly reduced, and the camp was converted into disciplinary barracks housing a combination of stateside army deserters and other troublemakers, as well as about 2,000 American prisoners of war. In July of 1946, after the war ended, there were still 1,700 prisoners at the camp of which about 600 tried to escape by setting fire to some of the tent cabins. The fire reportedly destroyed about 36 temporary structures, but no prisoners were hurt or escaped. This incident did lead to the closure of the prison camp, however.

Shortly afterwards, in 1948, Camp McQuaide was determined to be surplus and was decommissioned. Although the 400-acre site was considered for a junior college and there was local support, the location and highway access weren’t ideal and building refurbishing was going to be costly. Instead Cabrillo College was located in Aptos along Soquel Drive.

With no interest in the former military camp site from any federal, state or local government entity, which would have had first priority, the Seventh-Day Adventists, who subsequently founded the Monterey Bay Academy, purchased the 400 acres of ocean view land for one dollar! As part of the transfer, there was an agreement that the original airfield would have to be maintained for any emergency landings. And between the rows of cut flowers grown on the Monterey Bay Academy site today, the original dirt air strip remains as do the Panama Mounts for the 6-inch guns.