OC held largest World War II flight-training center

The United States' entry into World War II after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 resulted in a remarkable military transformation in Orange County, which had been a sleepy agricultural community with a population of about 130,000.

No fewer than six military installations emerged in the county, including the US Naval Ammunition and Net Depot in Seal Beach, the US Naval Reserve Aviation Base in Los Alamitos, the Santa Ana Naval Air Station with its two huge blimp hangars, the US Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro and a Coast Guard station in San Clemente.

But the installation that dominated the county's landscape and brought in the most people was the Santa Ana Army Air Base, which eventually sprawled over 1,300 acres of farmland. Today that area is occupied by Orange Coast College, the Orange County Fairgrounds, Costa Mesa City Hall, Costa Mesa High School, Tewinkle Park, Southern California College and the College Park and Mesa del Mar housing tracts.

In its four years of operation, the base trained flight cadets, became a processing point for returning veterans and trained about 125,000 people.

Floyd Ritter, who was a surveyor with the US government, supervised the massive job of laying out the base, including the streets, barracks, sewer lines and telephone lines. Ritter, now 72 and living in Santa Ana, remembered how rail lines were laid so that huge amounts of lumber could be hauled in. He also recalled how popular the men of the base were among local women.

"I remember the girls would line up like bees at the gate, waiting for the men to come out on Friday nights," he said.

Plans for the base began before the Pearl Harbor attack as part of a national effort to train more pilots. At first known as the Air Corps Cadet Replacement Training Center and later renamed, the base opened Feb. 20, 1942, and became the largest of three flight-training centers around the nation.

Construction could not keep up with the steady influx of cadets and most lived in tents in the early days. The base eventually had 145 buildings, including a 1,500-bed convalescent hospital for Army Air Corps personnel.

The orange and white water tower, the base's tallest structure, was a landmark until it was torn down in 1964.

Trainees included singer Tennessee Ernie Ford, actor Jimmy Stewart, Gene Autry, baseball star Joe DiMaggio, TV newscaster Jerry Dunphy and football star Tom Harmon. DiMaggio, who left the New York Yankees to volunteer, played on the base's sterling baseball teamand had a 27-game hitting streak in 1943.

The days were long. Cadets arose at 5 a.m. and went to bed only after 17 rigorous hours of training.

All that is left of the base are about 12 buildings and a memorial garden on the county fairgrounds. But those who served at the base still meet annually at Orange Coast College, through the Costa Mesa Historical Society. This year's reunion was held Saturday.

— John Westcott/The Register

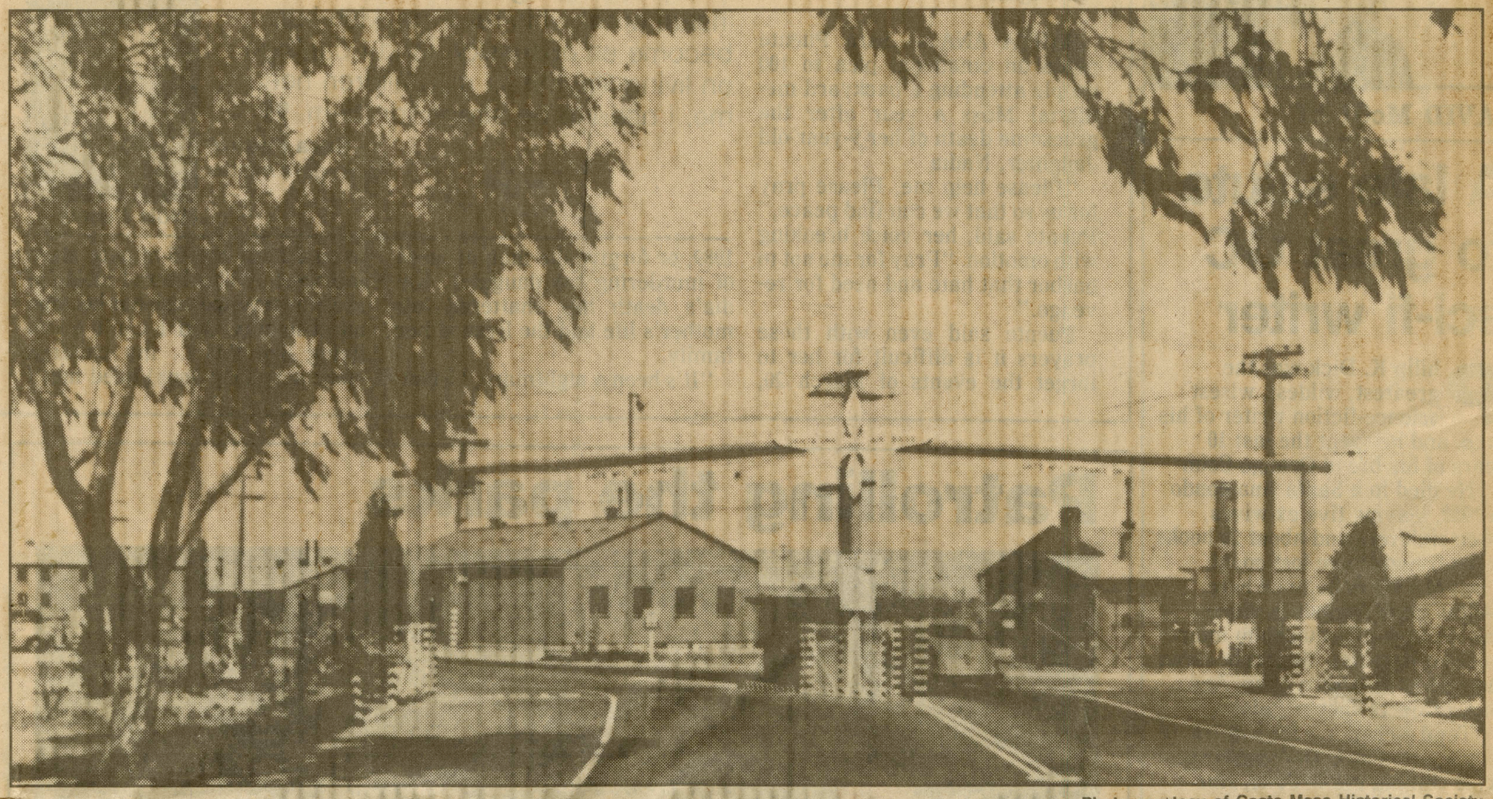
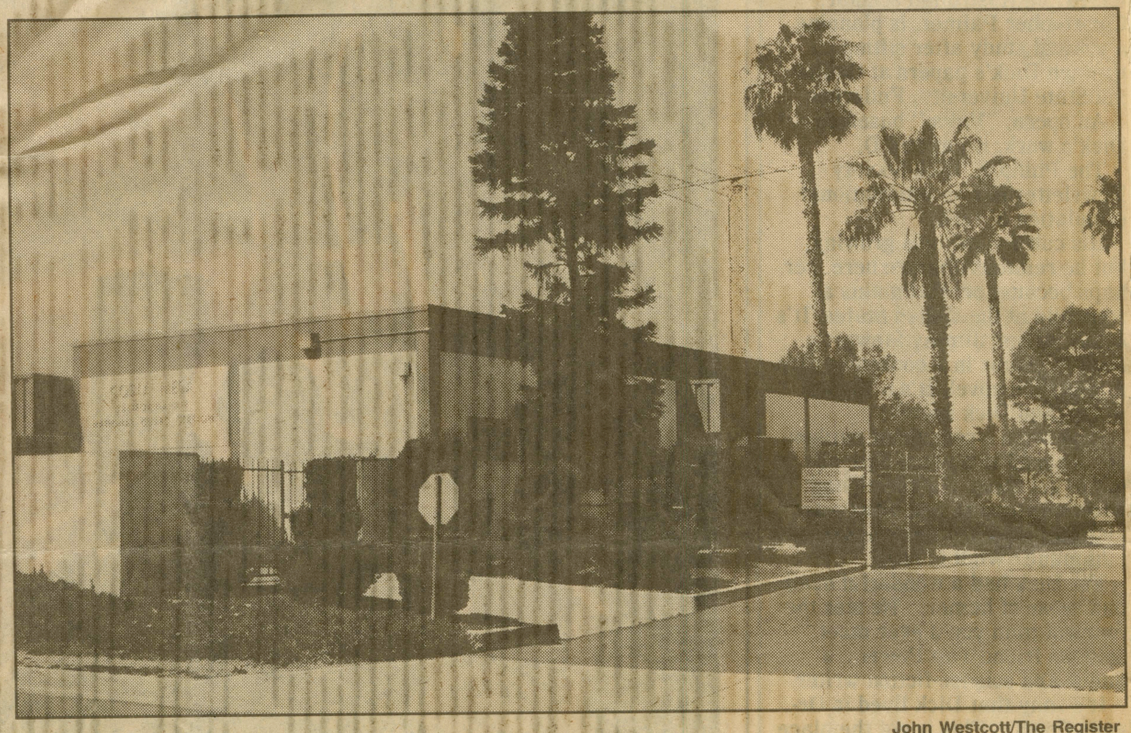


Photo courtesy of Costa Mesa Historical Society

1943: The main gate to the Santa Ana Army Air Base was one of its four entrances. The base was on the west side of Newport Boulevard, opposite the north corner of the Santa Ana Country Club, said Betty Jean Beecher of the Costa Mesa Historical Society. As the tide of the war turned, the training program at the base gradually was cut back. Near the end of 1944, the base became a processing center for returning veterans. It closed in 1946.



John Westcott/The Register

Today: As the years went by, vestiges of the base disappeared and most of the area was developed. On the land near the old main gate, another base emerged. On Jan. 18, 1964, the 222nd Squadron of the Air National Guard moved into a new facility, built the year before for $272,000, according to Lt. Charles Woods, base historian. The squadron's mission is to provide communications support for national disasters and, if needed, in wartime.

U. S. Trains Bombardiers To Make It Double Tough on Axis Enemies

Vital Technicians Mass-Produced at Rate Of 25,000 Per Year

MIDLAND ARMY FLYING SCHOOL, Texas, June 24. (NEA)—Blitzkrieg . .. Tokyo . . . Cologne . . . Essen . the Miditerranean . . . the Coral Sea . . . Midway . . . Rumania—yes, and even Pearl Harbor. If all these have one thing in common it is that they are signposts on the road to one conclusion: this is the day of the bombardier.

Uncle Sam knows it—and that's why he has here the world's largest bombardier training center, with a program that calls for a minimum production of 25,000 skilled bombardiers in one year.

On the broad plains of west Texas, he is turning out trained "egg layers" on a mass-production basis, with a new class graduating every three weeks and heading for tactical units.

Get Plenty of Practice

For months now cadets, flying in relays on practice bombing missions, have maintained a ceaseless day and night barrage over target ranges greater in combined area than the entire state of New Jersey.

Lt. Col. Richard W. Smith, director of training here, has estimated that in this continuous aerial blitz the daily average number of bombs dropped rivals that which the Luftwaffe was able to keep up for only three weeks during the devastating raids on London in the fall of 1940.

United States military leaders are taking great pains in choosing just the right men for the exacting task of dropping bombs. Obviously not everybody can be a bombardier. The man who will have the personal satisfaction of blasting a Berlin rail center, a Tokyo munitions dump or softening up German coastal fortifications for the long-awaited invasion of Europe must have special qualifications. He is chosen as carefully as the British pick their famed Commandos.

To understand the necessity for such careful selection, visualize the bombardier in action.

He sits in the glass-walled nose of the bombing plane in front of the pilot. Between his knees is the mysterious bombsight, with its maze of dials and knobs. He is bundled in fleece-lined clothing, fur-lined boots on his feet, a fur-lined cap on his head and an oxygen mask clamped on his nose, for his mission takes him miles above the earth in the freezing substratosphere.

Coordination Must Be Tops

Yet encumbered as he is by this heavy clothing, he must be able to execute delicate manipulations with the bombsight controls swiftly and precisely. He must have perfect muscular control for this exacting job. His mind must be clear ,and his attention must not falter for an instant as he approaches the target.

To maintain perfect health, the bombardier's diet is supervised carefully. They cannot afford to be airsick. They cannot become logy or drowsy while on the job.

But in addition to his physical attributes, the bombardier must also possess certain mental and emotional traits.

"In probably no other branch of the service," says Brigadier General Isaiah Davies, commander of the Midland school, "is greater emphasis placed upon personal integrity and moral character. For to the bombardier the United States intrusts one of its most precious secrets—the famous bombsight."

When a man enters the AAF as an aircrew cadet, he first takes a series of tests which determine the type of work to which he will be assigned. These examinations, prepared by a group of eminent psychiatrists, serve as a sort of screening process.

The amazing accuracy with which these examinations can single out potential bombardiers from any group of youths, regardless of previous experience or background, is attested by the training records of cadets at this field.

In these preliminary tests the emphasis is again on fundamental character traits rather than special education or former occupation.

Here is how Lieutenant Colonel Smith sums up the requirements of this work:

A good bombardier is a man who is not easily rattled, directed or terrified. Crouched in the nose of his ship as it hurtles through space, he has a ringside seat at the air battle raging on every side.

High Requirements

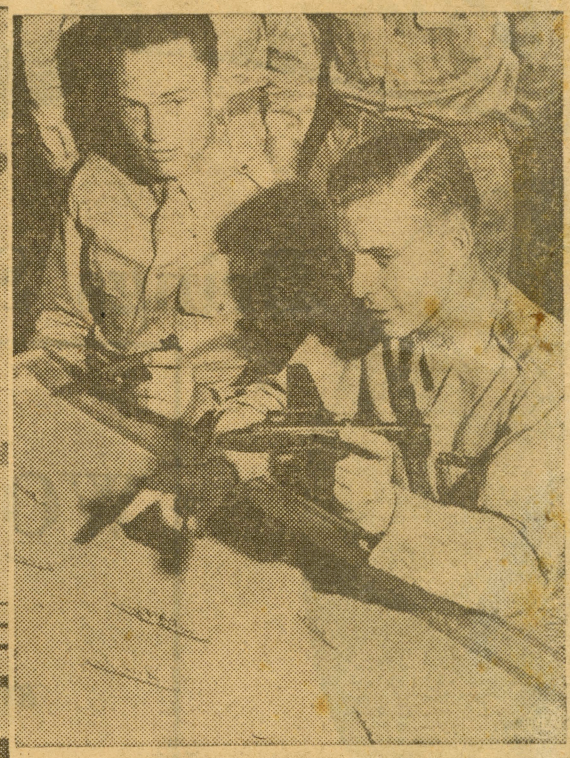
"In plain view are the torrents of shell fire and the vicious enemy fighter craft rocketing out of the clouds in the attack. Yet he must disregard the whole show and concentrate on a delicate problem that involves trigonometry and a series of precise observations. He has no more than a few seconds to get the right answers—and he doesn't have any pencil and paper.

"Should he fail, the entire mission has been a failure—precious time and effort wasted, one opportunity to smash the enemy gone forever. He can't afford to worry about that possibility. He can't afford to get impatient or nervous as the crucial moment approaches. He's got to keep cool. He's got to be right."

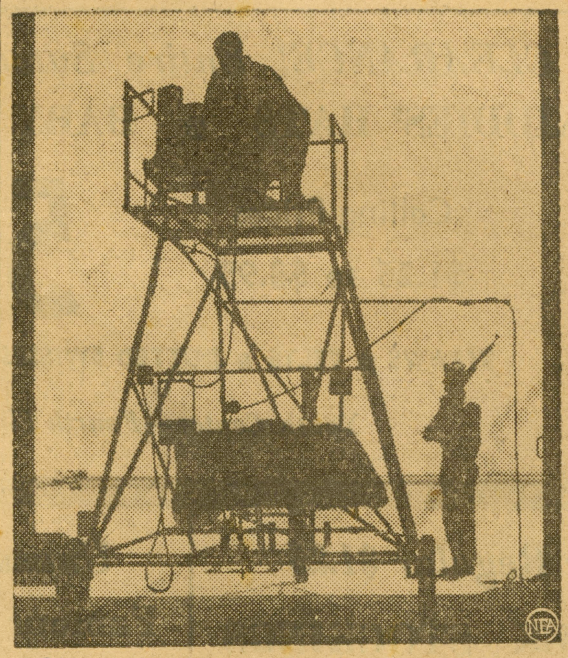
Sounds like a big order. But according to Lieutenant Colonel Smith, it isn't. There are plenty of young men in the United States who can do the trick, he says, and in proof points to the steady stream of bombardier lieutenants pouring out of Midland Army Flying School with their wings and their gold bars.

An analysis of cadet questionnaires shows that these men come from every corner of the country, that in civilian life they may have been soda jerkers, college students, gas-station attendants, machinists or office clerks.

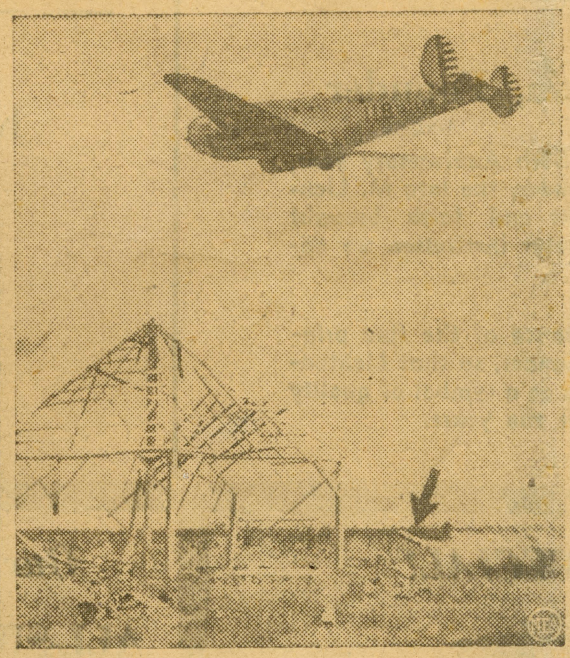
WEIGHT LIFTERS—Prime physical condition is essential for an Air Corps bombardier. These bombardier cadets at the Midland Army Flying School, Texas, use bombs in setting-up exercises.



FRUITFUL LESSON—Those model ships represent a Jap task force. Instructor, right, holds model plane as he makes a point. Bombardiers put classroom theory into action in Pacific.



BOMBSIGHTING — Bombardier students learn to use the famous bombsight on the animated "high chair" seen silhouetted between the doors of a hangar. Hits and misses are accurately recorded.



TRICK SHOT—Skimming in over the top of a 30-foot pyramid target "shack," the student bombardier drops an "egg" a few feet short so that, as arrow indicates, it hits ground and ricochets.