

A Rose by Any Other Name

By JO1 Joshua Hudson

All good things must end . . . or at least get a new name. On 5 February 1999, Naval Air Station (NAS) Norfolk, Va., ceased to exist as it was currently known. As part of the Navy's regionalization and consolidation efforts, the NAS Norfolk name was retired from active duty and the air station facilities incorporated into the existing Naval Station Norfolk.

After eight decades of faithful service, however, the air strip, Chambers Field, will continue to function as one of the busiest airports in the world. Under regionalization, the Air Operations Program Manager, who is also Commanding Officer of NAS Oceana, is now

responsible for both locations. The new NAS Oceana Detachment Norfolk will be the direct liaison for operating Chambers Field.

The former air station's history predates its establishment. On 14 November 1910 Eugene Ely, a pilot employed by the Curtiss Exhibition Company, accelerated his 50-horsepower Curtiss pusher down a 57-foot wooden ramp on the cruiser *Birmingham* (CL 2) anchored in Virginia's James River. The plane's speed wasn't sufficient to provide enough lift, and the wheels grazed the river. Water splashed the land-

ing gear and splintered the propeller, but Ely recovered the plane and flew it two miles to Willoughby Spit, Va.

Six years later, Naval Air Detachment Curtiss Field, Newport News, Va., was established. In September 1917 a seaplane site was developed at Naval Operating Base Hampton Roads, which later became NAS Hampton Roads. The seaplanes were flown from the James River and moored to stakes in the water until canvas hangars were





constructed. It offered an ice-free harbor with a good beach front from which to access the hangars.

During WW I, Norfolk's 37,000 enlisted personnel and officers took on the duties of training aircraft mechanics and pilots. As the base grew and its mission expanded, its name changed many times until July 1921, when it became NAS Norfolk. That same year, air station personnel

Douglas DT-2 torpedo-bombers of VT-1 line up for inspection beside the water at NAS Hampton Roads.



Above, the beach crew of VP-56 follows one of their P5M *Marlins* into the water for takeoff. Right, A-4 *Skyhawks* were used by the Navy and Marine Corps at the Naval Air Reserve Training Unit aboard NAS Norfolk in the 1960s.



developed arresting gear to be used aboard *Langley* (CV 1).

Between WW I and II, the Navy struggled to find a focus for its peacetime budget. Even though funding and manning were reduced, NAS Norfolk expanded by more than 1,000 acres, taking over Breezy Point for a seaplane base. By 1941, the air station was directed to maintain facilities to support five aircraft carrier air groups, seven to nine patrol squadrons, the fighter director school, the Atlantic Fleet operational

training program, and facilities for British aircrews from HMS *Illustrious* and HMS *Formidable*.

During WW II, flight operations recorded an average of 21,073 flights per month and 700 flights a day—which equals a takeoff or landing every two minutes, 24 hours a day. In 1943, another 400 acres was added to accommodate the workload, as well as outlying airfields at Chincoteague, Franklin, Oceana, Pungo, Fentress, Monogram and Creeds, Va.; and Elizabeth City,

Manteo and Harvey Point, N.C. The base also finished building the largest airplane hangar in the world.

Throughout the years, Norfolk never lost sight of its purpose: supporting the fleet. The air station has grown and kept pace with the changing face of Naval Aviation. In 1968, the base assumed a major role in putting a man on the moon when it became Recovery Control Center Atlantic, providing command, control and communications support to all the ships and aircraft involved in

(continued on p. 14)

JO1 Joshua M. Hudson



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Top left, an E-2C *Hawkeye* of the VAW-123 *Screwtops* spreads its wings, while an MH-53 *Sea Dragon* (left) of the HM-14 *Vanguards* taxis to the flightline, and a visiting C-130 *Hercules* (below left) powers its engines after refueling. Norfolk Detachment has assumed control of operations for Chambers Field (below) as well as air traffic control from the tower (above).

JO1 Joshua M. Hudson



(continued from p. 12)

the recovery operations of Apollo 7. Today, Norfolk conducts more than 100,000 flight operations a year, or one flight every five minutes, making it one of the busiest military air terminals in the world.

Although the name of the air station has changed, its mission remains. With more than 150,000 military passengers transiting the terminals and 264,000 tons of mail and cargo departing each year at a pace of almost 275 flights per day, the base provides invaluable service.

Whatever the name, Norfolk's legacy continues. ✈

The newly consolidated Naval Station Norfolk owns a sizable portion of the Hampton Roads coastline.



