

“Crossroads of the Pacific” Closed



PH3 Terry Vick

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The Navy's last naval air station in the Hawaiian Islands was disestablished during a 1 July ceremony, closing out 57 years of service. NAS Barbers Point—“Crossroads of the Pacific”—carved out of brush and coral on the leeward side of Oahu early in WW II, was turned over to the state of Hawaii.

Barbers Point was named for Henry Barber, master of *Arthur*, a 100-foot British brigantine that ran aground on the point of Oahu during a storm in 1796. During the 1930s the Navy leased a section of the James Campbell estate, building a 1,500-foot outlying field (OLF) near the mooring mast that had been erected for use by U.S. Navy airships, none of which ever cruised to Hawaii. In September 1940 an additional 3,500 acres were acquired from the Campbell estate for the enlargement of the OLF, which became Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Ewa. Construction of an airfield west of Ewa began in November 1941, but was temporarily suspended after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor so

that construction crews could rapidly complete Ewa. Barbers Point—originally intended as an OLF for NAS Ford Island in Pearl Harbor—was still not complete when it was established as a naval air station on 15 April 1942 with 14 officers and 242 enlisted personnel.

The new air station quickly became a hub of aviation activity as the Navy amassed forces in Hawaii to carry the war across the Pacific. Base operations centered on working up carrier air groups and squadrons for deployment to combat operations farther west. Carrier Air Service Unit 2 was assigned to the station to support the hosted squadrons.

Barbers Point's level of activity grew steadily during the war. By the end of WW II, the NAS was home to almost 13,000 personnel. The station hosted a combat aircrew training unit which instructed pilots in aerial gunnery and a repair department that overhauled thousands of aircraft engines.

With the end of WW II, Barbers Point served as a demobilization cen-

ter for more than 6,000 personnel leaving for civilian life. During the late 1940s, the station was the beneficiary of a consolidation of naval aviation facilities on the leeward side of the island. Barbers Point absorbed MCAS Ewa in 1952 as Marine Corps units were shifted to Kaneohe Bay, which had been closed as an NAS in 1949. NAS Honolulu was reduced to an OLF for seaplanes and operations at Ford Island were reduced. The Coast Guard aircraft at Kaneohe Bay were moved to Barbers Point.

The outbreak of hot war in Korea in 1950 and the chills of the cold war increased activity at Barbers Point. Patrol Squadron (VP) 6, which brought the first P2V *Neptune* patrol planes to Hawaii, deployed to Japan and engaged in combat. The mid-1950s brought WV-2 (later EC-121K) *Warning Stars* to Barbers Point. These aircraft were operated by Airborne Early Warning Squadrons 12 and 14, which were merged in 1960 to form Airborne Early Warning Barrier Squadron, Pacific. These aircraft maintained a continuous distant early

warning barrier patrol over the Pacific until June 1965.

From 1949 until 1977, Barbers Point was the home of Fleet Logistics Support Squadron (VR) 21, "Pineapple Airlines," which flew all over the Pacific in long-range transport aircraft and, until 1965, with carrier-onboard-delivery aircraft. VR-21 also began strategic communications missions in the Pacific with C-130G *Hercules*, the first Take Charge and Move Out (TACAMO) aircraft. In 1981 Barbers Point again became the center of Pacific Fleet TACAMO operations when Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron (VQ) 3 moved from NAS Agana, Guam, with its EC-130G/Q aircraft. In 1990 VQ-3 upgraded to the E-6A *Mercury* and two years later moved to Tinker Air Force Base, Okla.

From 1951 until 1992, Utility Squadron (later Fleet Composite Squadron) 1 operated out of Barbers Point in support of fleet exercises in the Hawaiian area, providing threat simulation, target tug, photographic and radar

calibration services to the fleet.

In 1975 a helicopter squadron took up residence at Barbers Point to provide Light Airborne Multipurpose System detachments to surface warships based at Pearl Harbor. Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron Light (HSL) 37 operated the SH-2F *Seasprite* until 1992, when it upgraded to the SH-60B *Seahawk*.

Since the 1950s Barbers Point has been most famous for its "Rainbow Fleet"—the patrol squadrons under Fleet Air Wing (later Patrol Wing) 2, and later directly under Patrol Wings, Pacific—that routinely deployed with P-2 and later P-3 aircraft to the northern and western Pacific, Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf. These squadrons tracked Soviet submarines patrolling off the western coast of the United States and supported operations in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and most recently the NATO air campaign over Kosovo. Of the squadrons present during the 1960s and 1970s, VPs 6, 17, 22 and 28 were disestablished by the mid-1990s, leaving only VPs 1 and 4. During the mid-1990s, however, two squadrons, VPs 9 and 47, transferred to the Rainbow Fleet from NAS Moffett Field, Calif., when it was disestablished. VP-1 later moved to NAS Whidbey Island,

Wash. The Rainbow Fleet also was the home of Special Projects Patrol Squadron (VPU) 2 since 1982.

The end of the cold war, in which Barbers Point figured so heavily, eventually brought about its closure. Congress accepted the recommendation of the 1993 Base Realignment and Closure Commission that Barbers Point be closed. Commander Patrol and Reconnaissance Force, Pacific; VPs 4, 9 and 47; VPU-2; and HSL-37 were moved to Marine Corps Air Facility (MCAF) Kaneohe Bay, part of Marine Corps Base Hawaii, located on the lush windward side of Oahu. The return to Kaneohe is a homecoming of sorts for the patrol squadrons, as Kaneohe was a prominent patrol aviation base before and during WW II.

The Coast Guard Air Station, a tenant of the NAS, remains at Barbers Point, which now serves general aviation on Oahu and hosts units of the Hawaii National Guard. The Navy has retained 1,100 acres for military housing and family support facilities. The 2,150 acres ceded to Hawaii is now the Kalaeloa Community Development District. 

Rick Burgess is Managing Editor of the Navy League's *Sea Power* magazine.



Facing page, personnel at NAS Barbers Point watch two P-3 *Orlons* fly overhead during the disestablishment ceremony on 1 July. Here, Diamond Head provides the backdrop as A-4 *Skyhawks* of Fleet Composite Squadron 1 fly in formation off Honolulu.