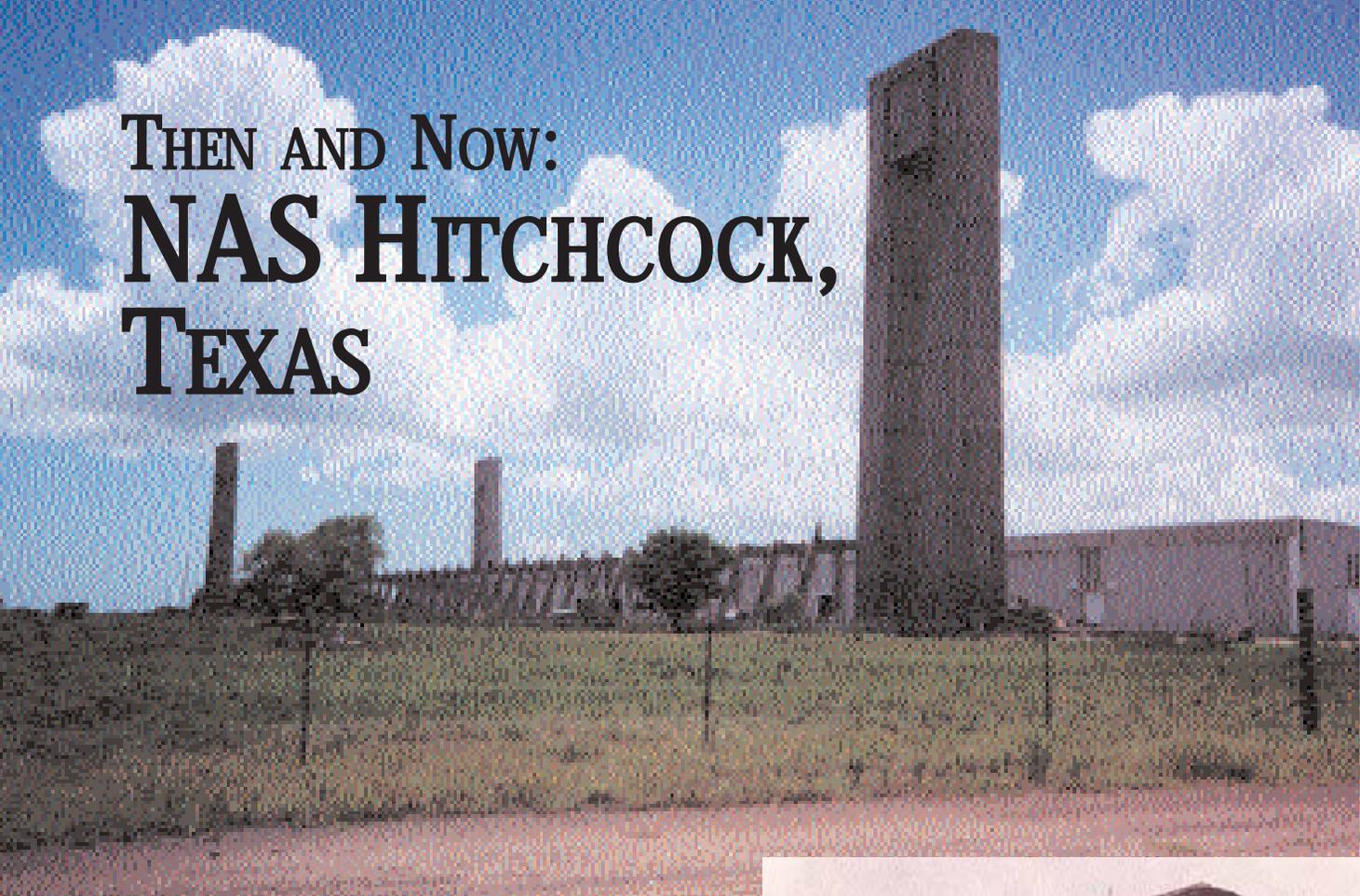


THEN AND NOW: NAS HITCHCOCK, TEXAS



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Amid the grasslands and brush of the Texas coastal plain near Galveston, four mammoth monoliths stand as reminders of days gone by. When viewed from the distant highway at twilight, the giant silhouettes bear a strange resemblance to Stonehenge. In reality, they are relics of a brief but exciting period of Naval Aviation history that took place on the Texas Gulf Coast during WW II.

The pillars are the prominent remains of Naval Air Station (NAS) Hitchcock, a short-lived lighter than air (LTA) base built in the wartime hysteria over German U-boat threats in the Gulf of Mexico. Known to locals as “the blimp base,” NAS Hitchcock once encompassed 3,500 acres and housed nearly 150 personnel. Numerous buildings were erected for staff who operated the base during its 1943–1944 heyday. Today, aside from the distinctive pillars, only a handful of structures and namesake streets serve as reminders of the Navy’s former presence. Lost to both progress and neglect, the story of NAS Hitchcock is nearly forgotten.

In early 1942, America was gearing up for its wartime defense. In those anxious days, German U-boats stalked the country’s coastlines awaiting the unsuspecting freighter or tanker. In Texas, concern mounted for the safety of the many large oil refineries and petrochemical plants that dotted the shoreline of Galveston Bay. Various



Top, today, prairie grass has reclaimed much of the tarmac and former roads which had surrounded the blimp hangar. Above, in this 1943 photo, construction continues on the blimp hangar at NAS Hitchcock, Texas, as a tractor grades the adjacent grounds for an 80-acre landing mat. Opposite, an airship is maneuvered into the hangar on 30 November 1943.

vessels utilized the bay’s ports during the war, and protection from submarine attack was critical. The area was therefore selected for a naval air station to patrol the bay and gulf waters.

In the doctrine of the day, blimps were considered strong deterrents against submarine activity. From high above the sea, crews could spot submerged vessels and provide advance warning to friendly ships. With their hovering ability, blimps were thought ideal for dropping depth bombs on targets. K-type blimps used in submarine patrols could cruise up to 75 mph and had a range of

2,000 miles. When war came, Navy officials worked to establish a chain of blimp bases along the entire U.S. coastline. LTA stations were located on the West Coast at Moffett Field and Santa Ana, Calif., as well as Tillamook, Ore. On the East and Gulf coasts, the chain was more extensive, with stations at South Weymouth, Mass.; Lakehurst, N.J.; Glynco, Ga.; Richmond, Fla.; Houma, La.; and ultimately Hitchcock, Texas.

Situated close to open water yet remote from urbanized development, Hitchcock proved an ideal site. A rural farming community, the town straddled both a railroad and a state highway linking it with nearby Galveston. To the town's west lay acres of prairie land suitable for development. The area was selected in July 1942 but because a large number of individuals owned the acreage, obtaining the land was complicated. To facilitate the transaction, the Navy filed a "Declaration of Taking" in the local U.S. District Court acquiring all 3,500 acres for just under \$143,000, and construction of the base began. Rapidly, a total of 47 buildings were completed at a cost of \$8.5 million.

The centerpiece of the base was its gigantic blimp hangar. Built in the shape of a bread loaf, the massive garage was 1,000 feet long, 300 feet wide and more than 200 feet tall. With 300,000 square feet of open floor space, the hangar housed up to six K-type blimps. A rail spur, extending the entire length of the hangar's interior, linked the facility to the town's railroad about two miles away. The entire structure was built of wood anchored on each end by two concrete double pillars. Outside its massive hangar doors lay a 2,000-foot asphalt circular landing mat. Other base facilities included workshops, vehicle garages, barracks, administration buildings, a 40,000-square-foot brick warehouse and a recreation center equipped with auditorium, gymnasium and swimming pool.

NAS Hitchcock was established on 22 May 1943.

Commander Charles W. Roland was installed as base commander and 133 personnel were assigned to the station. The first airship arrived on 13 June, and base manpower expanded with the establishment of Blimp Squadron (ZP) 23. Later, detachments arrived from ZPs 21, 22 and 24. During the ensuing year, numerous patrols were made over Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Despite the blimp crews' aerial vigilance, no submarine sightings were reported in the Galveston area, and the operational life span of NAS Hitchcock was shortened. After only 17 months of service, the base was redesignated a naval air facility on 18 October 1944 and took on a heavier than air mission. By that time, the U-boat threat in the Gulf of Mexico had diminished and blimp patrols were no longer necessary.

In retrospect, it could be asked if NAS Hitchcock was really a necessity. While hindsight has the proverbial 20/20 vision, one must consider the events of the period. Between April 1942 and March 1943, 24 German U-boats entered the Gulf of Mexico, sinking 56 ships and damaging 14 others; thus, at the time of NAS Hitchcock's construction, the threat was real and the perceived need high. U-boat activity actually continued in the Gulf of Mexico through December 1943. While the blimps of NAS Hitchcock may not have engaged any actual enemy, their very existence served as a deterrent for attacks on shipping in the Galveston area.

After the war, NAS Hitchcock was sold as surplus and much of the surrounding property was bought for rice storage, cattle grazing and residential use. A state highway now bisects the former base compound. The hangar's remains and a light industrial zone stand on the highway's south side. To its north, where most of the base housing once sat, one-acre home sites have been developed. Over the years, most of the base's original buildings have vanished—some were demolished for redevelopment, others crumbled from neglect. The large

hangar survived until 1961 when a tropical hurricane severely damaged the building, necessitating its demolition. The hangar's massive support pillars were too strong to be razed economically and were allowed to remain. They stand today as monuments to a once busy blimp base in Naval Aviation's history.



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