

## A History of Miramar

Adapted from *United States Naval Air Stations of World War II* and *United States Marine Corps Air Stations of World War II* by M.L. Shettle, Jr.; *Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar* by [globalsecurity.com](http://globalsecurity.com); and *Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar*, by MCAS Miramar Public Affairs, all from the MCAS Miramar website.

Over 150 years ago, there was an enormous rancho owned by Don Santiago Anguello, the former Mexican Army commandante of San Diego's presidio. In 1846, the United States declared war on Mexico and eventually annexed the territories of California and New Mexico. Edward Scripps, a wealthy newspaper publisher, arrived in San Diego in 1890, seeking to escape the pressures of life on the East Coast. He is credited with naming the mesa Miramar, which loosely translated from Spanish means "an area from which there is a view of the sea from every vantage point." Scripps established a 2,000-acre ranch. The land later was purchased by the Jessop family. In the vicinity, a post office, general store and one-room schoolhouse served the Miramar settlement of cowboys and ranchers.

### The Naval Air Station

In 1917, during World War I, the U.S. Army purchased the 2,130-acre Miramar Ranch for an infantry-training center. It named the facility Camp Kearny in honor of Brigadier General S. W. Kearny, who was Commander of the Army of the West during the Mexican War and a former military governor of California. Construction costs totaled \$1.25 million, but few permanent structures were built. Most of Camp Kearny's soldiers lived in tents, as more than 65,000 men trooped through the camp on their way to World War I battlegrounds. Army aircraft occasionally landed on the camp's parade ground, but an official airfield was not established.

After the war, the camp was used as demobilization and convalescent center before closing on October 31, 1920. The U.S. Public Health Service then used the camp for a time. The government retained the property as an airfield for military and civilian use. The Ryan Company weight tested Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis* here in 1927. In 1929 and 1930, the facility was operated as Airtech Field by the San Diego Air Service Corp.

In 1932, a mooring mast, relocated from North Island, was built at the camp for the dirigibles USS Akron and USS Macon. On May 11, 1932, 25,000 spectators watched as the USS Akron's first mooring attempt ended when a gust of wind carried the airship upward, taking four ground handlers with it. One jumped to the ground and suffered a broken arm; two other men lost their grips and fell to their deaths. Within a few years, both dirigibles crashed at sea, and Camp Kearny was quiet again.

World War II began in Europe, and the U.S. military began a precautionary buildup. In December, 1940, the Navy began to improve and expand the airfield. On December 21, the First Marine Air Wing arrived and set up a tent city, remaining until August, 1942, when it moved to Guadalcanal. Meanwhile, the Navy began the construction of an air station at the camp and commissioned NAAS Camp Kearny on February 20, 1943, as an auxiliary of San Diego. The station was also known as Kearny Mesa. The primary Navy mission at Camp Kearny was training in Consolidated PB4Y Liberators, supervised by the Transition Liberator Unit. The asphalt runways began to deteriorate under the PB4Y's weight, and two concrete runways were added in 1943. Camp Kearny now had one 3,000 x 500-ft. asphalt runway, used mainly for aircraft parking, and two 6,000 x 200-ft. concrete runways. In mid-1944, station personnel numbered 611 officers and 4076 enlisted men. After VJ-Day, the Navy used the station as a separation center, returning 25,000 men to civilian life.

On May 1, 1946, the Navy departed Camp Kearny, and the station became MCAS Miramar. A year later, the Marines closed the base and moved all units to El Toro.

On June 30, 1947, the Navy commissioned NAAS Miramar. In July 1949, the Navy began a project to improve the runways and establish a Master Jet Base. The station upgraded to an NAS on April

1, 1952. Following the Korean War, the Navy embarked on a cutback and offered the Miramar airfield to the City of San Diego for \$1. The city turned down the offer.

The Navy decided to keep Miramar open and built the station into one of the Navy's biggest bases. In 1961, Miramar was designated for fighter squadrons only and became known as "Fightertown USA." During the Vietnam War, Miramar trained fighter jet crews in air combat maneuvering and fleet air defense through the creation of Top Gun, a graduated-level training school. Camp Elliot and other government properties were eventually added to Miramar, and the station grew to almost 24,000 acres.

The 1993 Base Realignment and Closure Commission caused major changes. The first Marine squadrons, support units, and their F/A-18 Hornets began making the move from MCAS El Toro in August 1994. The Navy F-14 Tomcat and E-2 Hawkeye squadrons moved to Oceana, Virginia, and Top Gun was transferred to Fallon, Nevada, in 1996. On October 1, 1997, Miramar once again became a Marine Corps Air Station. The Marine Air Museum also moved to Miramar. On July 2, 1999, the closing ceremony for MCAS El Toro and MCAF Tustin marked an end to a 52-year Marine presence in Orange County.

With the move complete, all of Miramar's fixed-wing F/A-18 and KC-130 Hercules squadrons, as well as its CH-46E Sea Knight and CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters, are in place. Additionally, the support commands Marine Wing Support Group 37 and Marine Air Control Group 38 have been established. The station averages 250 aircraft aboard on any given day, with up to 200,000 flight operations per year. With near completion of approximately \$400 million in construction, MCAS Miramar has become the home of the Marine Corps' West Coast air power.

### **The Marine Corps Air Depot**

In 1934, Marine ground forces from San Diego leased part of the former Camp Kearny for maneuvers and gunnery ranges. During the first part of 1940, the Marines commenced work on a facility, initially known as Camp Holcomb, on 19,298 acres purchased by the government. On June 14, 1940, the name was changed to Camp Elliot, in honor of the former Commandant of the Marines, MGen. George F. Elliot. By October 12<sup>th</sup>, barracks and mess halls had been completed. Camp Elliot became the home of the 2nd Marine Division.

On December 7, 1941, the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) was headquartered at North Island, with all of its squadrons deployed in the Pacific. MAG 11 was rushed from Quantico to San Diego to assist in the area's defense. North Island quickly became saturated with aircraft and personnel, and several squadrons of MAG 11 were sent to Camp Kearny. Initially, the Marines set up a tent city. Camp Kearny was the center of West Coast Marine flying operations for the first year of the war. A major construction program was undertaken to upgrade the airfield and build support facilities for 250 officers and 2,000 men. The runways were extended hurriedly to 5,000 ft. at minimum cost, to accommodate a squadron of Army P-38s. MAG 11 became the nucleus for four new MAGs. By June 30, 1942, twenty-four enlisted barracks, eight BOQs, a dispensary, administration building, mess halls, and other miscellaneous support buildings had been completed. A nose hangar, operations building, and improvements to the airfield were under construction. In spite of all this activity, Camp Kearny remained part of NAS San Diego. The runway improvements began to deteriorate under heavy use and, during 1942, all runways had to be resurfaced.

After the completion of its training in January, 1943, VMF 124 departed for Guadalcanal. VMD-154 moved from San Diego on September 15. VMD-154, redesignated VMD-254, moved to the Solomons in November 1942. Most of the other Marine units at Camp Kearny departed for the South Pacific by January, 1943. The exception was MAG 15, a transport training group. The majority of Marine flying transferred to new bases in California, and Camp Kearny became mainly a Navy operation. By the beginning of 1943, most of the construction reached completion. Along the way, the misspelling "Kearney" fell into common use, and the base was commissioned as NAAS Camp Kearney on February 20, 1943.

All Marine aviation units en route to and from the South Pacific passed through NAS San Diego. Service Group, Marine Air Wings Pacific was formed for this purpose on August 20, 1942. The Service Group consisted of a Headquarters Squadron, four Air Regulating Squadrons (to process personnel to and from overseas) and Supply Squadron Five. The commander, Col. Merritt, realized that a larger facility would be needed to process the Marine Aviation units. He obtained a \$2.255 million appropriation to build accommodations for 5,000 men on a 324-acre tract north and adjacent to OLF Camp Kearney. A railroad spur and nine warehouses were also provided. In February, 1943, part of the Headquarters Squadron, part of Supply Squadron 5, and the four Air Regulating Squadrons moved in. The facility commissioned as Marine Corps Aviation Base Kearney Mesa on March 1, 1943. The base's mission was the equipping, supplying, medically examining/treating, and indoctrinating Marine aviation units en route to and from the South Pacific.

When confusion arose between NAAS Camp Kearney and MCAB Kearney Mesa, the base's designation was changed to Marine Corps Air Depot Miramar on September 2, 1943.

Air Warning Group 2 commissioned in October and trained, supplied, and sent eleven Air Warning Squadrons to the Pacific during the war. The same month, the first women Marines arrived. A separate housing area was provided for the women Marines and Waves (780 by September, 1944). Air Training Squadrons were formed to evaluate and assign Marines out of boot camp to various aviation schools. On June 1, 1945, Marine Fleet Air, West Coast moved aboard from NAS San Diego.

The Navy and the Marines at Kearney Mesa had a very unusual relationship. The Navy owned and operated the airfield. Marine squadron aircraft passing through the Depot were apparently treated as transients by the Navy; however, several Marine transport and photographic squadrons were assigned to the NAAS. From Miramar's inception, virtually every Marine aviation unit going to or returning from the South Pacific passed through the Depot. Peak strength occurred in December 1945 with 12,271 personnel aboard. Total investment in the base and its 260 buildings reached approximately \$6 million.

In 1946, the Navy swapped Camp Kearney for the Marine's El Centro. On May 1, 1946, Camp Kearney and Miramar became MCAS Miramar. The Marines remained at Miramar for one year and then moved to El Toro.

## **Environmental Issues**

NAS Miramar is divided into four land use sectors: Main Station, South/West Miramar, East Miramar, and Sycamore Canyon. The native vegetation on NAS Miramar is classified into thirty-two different vegetation types, such as riparian woodland, oak woodland, perennial grasslands, coastal sage scrub, mixed chaparral, chemise chaparral, and freshwater marsh. MCAS Miramar shares some of the environmental concerns that face MCB Camp Pendleton. The installation lies primarily on a plateau, but backs to the foothills of a number of mountains. The nearby valleys offer habitat to endangered species, and the Marine Corps is underwriting extensive field research regarding habitat retention and nesting success in a high noise environment.

Highest on the list of local issues faced by MCAS Miramar is aircraft noise. Introduction of the HH-53 heavy lift helicopter at the base has significantly complicated the noise situation (fighter activity at Miramar had long been a matter of community concern, but development of least-impact departure and arrival routes has defused the worst of this concern). Anticipated traffic pattern congestion issues do not appear to have materialized. MCAS Miramar and COMCABWEST managers have evaluated a variety of alternative ground tracks to satisfy operational requirements while minimizing noise impacts, and several adjustments to helicopter flight patterns have been made. These include the prioritization of flights over-water, and when flying the I-15 route is necessary due to mission or weather, the highest possible Visual Flight Rule altitudes are maintained. While this number may fluctuate depending on weather and mission requirements, helicopter flight operations on the I-15 are being kept to a minimum.